

closer once more. Jesse's breath hitched in hope, when they reached for her, but they only rubbed their thumb over the tattoo, wiping off the faint sheen of saliva they'd left on it.

"Yeah, it is. Don't take it personally, though. You're almost cute enough to change my mind, but I don't mess around when it comes to creating drama. Sorry, kitten. You're gonna have to find somebody else to cheer you up, tonight."

A pat on her shoulder, a last grab at her ass for good measure, and the stranger was walking away. By the time Jesse thought of a mean enough comeback and turned to hurt it at them, they had vanished.

This time was not like the others: Jesse tilted directly from one memory into the next. She was on the street, turned on and miserable and trying not to cry again as the snow started to come down harder; she was sitting in David Talbot's office at the Motherhouse, listening to him talk with her hands folded in her lap. Jesse recognized it as the first time that she met him. She'd just finished being inducted into the order. The mundane parts—change of address forms, direct deposit setup, waivers to sign—and the esoteric parts—the old vows and ceremonies and pomp.

It was clear that David relished giving this prepared speech to new members of the order, and Jesse was doing her best to pay attention to it. She'd tracked it for about the first ten minutes, but then her thoughts had begun to wander. She was hungry, and his office was too cold, and she still had so much cleaning to do in the flat she was leaving behind in Chelsea.

Then she tucked her hair back, an automatic gesture, and David caught a glimpse of one of the tattoos. His speech ground to an immediate halt.

"May I see that?" he asked.

A jolt of anxiety in her chest. "I, um. Is it... not allowed? No one said anything."

Oh fuck. Was she going to lose this amazing job, just because she'd gotten some dumb tattoos when she was in college?

"No, no, nothing like that, I am merely intrigued by the design."

"Oh! Oh, sure, yeah..." Jesse held back her hair, tilting her head to let him see the tattoo a little clearer.

kissed back.

It was great, the kissing. Hard and urgent and immediately filthy. A strangely cold tongue running along the backside of her teeth, hands helping themselves to whatever soft squeezable parts of her they could reach. Jesse melted into it, boneless and easy, the relief of someone else making the decisions for her. As she was thinking that, hazy and well on her way to being cheered up, another little shard of memory. Maharet's voice, the stirring of air against the shell of her ear. *You've always responded so well to personal direction. It's what you need, right? What you crave, even if you can't admit it out loud...*

The stranger was kissing her neck, now. Nuzzling at the wispy curls of hair at the base of her skull. Jesse felt a scrape of teeth—so strange, how sharp they felt! Then, out of nowhere, the stranger froze. Not just their mouth: their whole body. Jesse turned her head to look, saw them staring at the small tattoo behind her ear. One of a matched set, mirrored on the other side.

When the stranger leaned in and licked a stripe across the tattoo, Jesse assumed it was a sign that things were getting back on track. Who knows, maybe they'd done some drugs and the spiky knot of nonsensical ancient writing had looked like a bug on Jesse's skin or some other freeze-worthy sight.

But the stranger pulled away from her, panting hard and disheveled. Their teeth looked weird in a way that made Jesse's head hurt, but she blinked and then they were normal again.

"You're Maharet's," the stranger said, bluntly, "Why didn't you say?"

"What? I—you know my aunt!?"

This was just *fantastic*. Here she thought she'd lucked out, stumbling into a gorgeous older dyke who was willing to shove her up against a wall and kiss the self-pity right out of her. Jesse had already been looking forward to the part where they stumbled off somewhere private and she got her brains fucked out. Now that wasn't going to happen, just because this person had met her aunt?

"That a problem?" Jesse asked, folding her arms tight across her chest.

The stranger huffed a soft laugh, coming a step

inconvenience, to go around it, and yet there were pale tracks carved into the lawn along the shortest possible route to cross it. Simple human laziness, defying social pressure in favor of efficiency.

She chose her words carefully, avoiding anything that would imply she actually believed Maharet was responsible. "What makes you say it was easier?"

Armand gestured between the two of them.

"When I have used this power in the past, I have required both close proximity and some form of touch, or at the very least sustained eye contact. I still need finding it much easier to slice a closed wound back open than it is to sew a neat and sturdy stitch—"

"I gotta say, not really loving the surgical metaphor, but... yeah, I get it."

Armand gave a liquid sort of shrug that may or may not have been an apology.

"That's not all. I had to repeat the edited version dozens of times before it covered all traces of the real memory. Your aunt—"

Jesse could not restrain herself, this time, "Or whoever's framing her."

Rashid shifted his weight, looking away; Armand did not dignify the interruption with a response.

"—only spoke once, and the erasure was total. She must be an ancient."

Jesse did not miss that Armand had not said 'be ancient' but 'be an ancient', as if it were some recognized rank. She wanted to know more, of course, but it was only the newest question on top of a pile of far more urgent and personal ones. Perhaps there would be time to grill Armand about the finer points of vampire lore after she'd unraveled the mystery of her own life.

"Let's do another one."

"They made their way back to their places. Before she laid down, Jesse asked, "Why not do the summer in Sonoma, next? That seems important. It's the part that's the most..."

"...she struggled, searching for the right way to describe it," I can *feel* it missing. Like a sinkhole in the middle of my head. If there are answers to be found about who would want to put a bunch of lies in my head to turn me against Maharet, that seems like the

best place to look. I know there were other people there, it wasn't just the two of us. Someone else living at the compound and also guests, I think. Maybe it was one of them that did all this."

Armand and Rashid exchanged a look, but said nothing.

When Armand gave his answer, he avoided all mention of her aunt, and any denial that might or might not be happening. "Jesse... your memories from the summer in Sonoma are so twisted together. If I may?"

Jesse had no idea what he was asking permission for, but she shrugged to allow it.

An image nudged gently into her mind: a bristling tangle of what looked to be about a dozen different skeins of yarn, hopelessly twisted and knotted together in a chaotic, parti-colored snarl. Jesse realized that this was Armand, communicating with her nonverbally, trying to illustrate his meaning.

"Confident as I am in my abilities, I have never actually done this before. I'm not entirely sure how I'm going to separate the memories out well enough to expose them one at a time. I am afraid that simply cutting the Gordian knot, as they say, might be dangerous for you."

Jesse opened her mouth to remind him that he'd said on the phone there would be no danger to her. But he hadn't, had he? He'd said *probably* no danger, and after all, that had been before he knew how extensive the damage was. She closed her mouth again.

"I am, however, hopeful that if I gradually work my way closer to it, the tangle will begin to naturally loosen. The more memories I unearth, the more likely it is that others will begin to emerge independently, without my assistance."

A small furrow formed between his brows, and he reached out, touching the pads of two fingers to her temple.

"There are other, smaller clusters. Groups of four or five memories from different times, linked by—"

Armand paused, met Jesse's gaze, and actually smiled. She only realized at that instant it was the first time she'd seen him do it, "—if you'll pardon another surgical metaphor, by something like adhesions. Perhaps I can undo a cluster all at once, and we can

gauge whether that experience is within your limits, and proceed accordingly?"

Dimly, Jesse thought that this was not her smartest idea. Certainly, it was going against the training she'd received when she joined the order. Anyone with even a trace of psychic ability knew how risky it could be, dabbling with anything untested.

Then again, she'd been working there for three years now and no one had noticed that her brain was miscalcual, so maybe their expertise was not all it was cracked up to be.

"Alright," Armand echoed and gestured for her to lay down.

Jesse could feel the difference right away. With the first two memories, there had been only the briefest feeling of a catch before the binding released. This time, it took longer, hurt more. She gasped without meaning to at the awful *ing* inside her mind. She did not sink into the memories so much as plunge in, like a dive from a great height.

The first of the memories was very recent. Earlier that year, in fact; Jesse was wearing the coat that Maharet had given her at Christmas. It was tailored to her body's measurements, hand-stitched and luxurious. Lined on the inside with mink fur. And that note that came with it! *I know how much you love the feeling of fur and how self-conscious you get about what narrow-minded people think of you. Do you like my little compromises? This way can have the thing that gives you pleasure and nobody else needs to know except you and me...*

The memory began banal, and sad, and unremarkable. Walking home dispirited from a predictable breakup, wondering why she had even bothered wearing her prettiest, most uncomfortable shoes. Why had she wasted another night trying to get a cute stranger to laugh at her jokes, to like her? She could have been learning to crochet. She could've been doing something, anything, that might last.

And she should know better by now, shouldn't she? No one was ever going to want her. Not really. Not for more than a few weeks. Not after they'd satisfied

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Jesse didn't remember any of it, but she must've tried to write something in cuneiform and been so wasted that she fucked it up spectacularly and left the poor tattoo artist to do their best. It didn't say anything in any language she recognized, anyway, and she recognized a lot of them.

David leaned in, straightening his glasses. Then he pulled his phone from his pocket and honest-to-God snapped a picture. Which... was pretty weird and a little invasive, but this was her new boss, and she wasn't going to make waves. Besides, he probably just wanted to try to figure out what language it was. She could've told him it didn't mean anything, but he hadn't actually asked, and she didn't feel like offering since he was so free with the camera app.

"Interesting," David said, to himself more than to Jesse. Looking up from the phone screen back at her. Tucking it away in his pocket, nothing else said.

Tilt, another memory.

In a Jeep, driving towards the dig site in Jericho. Bright sun, deep blue sky with huge cumulus clouds; the kind of sky that made you understand why people used to think gods lived up there. Some professor's new research assistant riding shotgun. Weedy little guy, kind of quiet. It made people think he was weird, but Jesse was pretty sure he just didn't know how to make friends. She didn't know how to make friends, either. Maybe the two of them could be friends.

"What's with the tattoos?" he asked.

"Oh, these?" Jesse touched one absently before returning both hands to the wheel. The road wasn't exactly in good repair. "Honestly, couldn't even tell you. I was so drunk when I got them. Like, blackout drunk."

"That's crazy," the guy said. His name definitely started with an M. Marcus? Martin? Mason? "Are you serious? That's like...really illegal."

"What?" Jesse scoffed, thinking it was a joke.

"Listen, my mom used to work the front desk at a tattoo place for years. Trust me. There's release forms you have to sign before an artist can tattoo you, and they're void if you're underage or impaired. If you were drunk enough that you don't remember *any* of it? They definitely should've known you couldn't give

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her curiosity that she was a natural redhead. Not after they got what they wanted.

She stopped, leaning against a streetlamp to adjust her stocking, where it had gotten all bunched in her shoe. Smirking, pretending it was just from the cold. Snow had started to come down, soft tiny sparkling particles illuminated in the glow from the lamp.

"Now... what idiot made a pretty little thing like you cry and then let you get away, huh?" the stranger said.

Jesse hadn't noticed them there, leaning back against the front of some new gay bar she couldn't remember the name of. Hard to see them back in those shadows, apart from the red glow at the tip of their cigarette. Faint hint of an accent, though Jesse couldn't place it. Italian, maybe, or French. Their voice sounded like it was naturally high and being pitched lower on purpose. Which tracked with the rest of the details, when she took a few steps closer. Fine-bones and small, feminine features, but with a butch-as-hell undercut in that yellow hair; generous curves, artfully disguised by an outfit that Jesse would call almost confrontationally masculine. They looked like they were in their late 20s, maybe early 60s. Great skin, must take care of their health. Blue eyes that were bright, bright, so bright, they set off a kind of confused chemical reaction in Jesse's body: a queasy, wriggling fear in her gut; a hot, almost painful throbbing of interest in between her legs.

She was feeling low, and pathetic, and the sleaze was working on her at the moment. She reached for the stranger's cigarette, plucking it away and taking a long drag. Jesse let her head fall back and blew the smoke up at the falling snow, knowing it would make her neck look nice, feeling the stranger's piercing eyes on her.

"You gonna cheer me up, or what?"

Her back was up against that brick wall in an instant. Too fast, in fact. A blur her eyes couldn't track. For a moment, Jesse was confused. She remembered- didn't remember someone else moving her like that, too fast, not *right*, someone else's hand pushing her back into something solid... But it was only a moment of panicked disorientation. When the stranger started kissing her, Jesse shoved that sick feeling of déjà vu to the furthest corner of her mind, just like always, and

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Jesse stopped.

"I don't have any more time for this silliness today. You're going to stop looking into this. It doesn't matter where the money's from. Does it?"

Such an extraordinary and yet uncannily familiar sensation, in the memory: words pulled from her lungs and lips without any prompting from her own mind.

"It doesn't matter where the money's from."

"You're going to stop wondering about it. You're going to feel grateful and content, knowing that it is being used well, and you will forget this."

"I'm grateful."

"That's right. And?"

"And I will—"

Jesse blinked. She was in her flat in Chelsea, the phone pressed against her ear, Maharet's familiar breathing coming through. The silence stretched; Jesse blushed, glad they were not on a video call. How embarrassing. Why was she always fucking doing this?

"Sorry, I'm having a total...brain moment. Again! What, um, were we talking about?"

When they broke apart, Armand looked far more unsettled than Jesse would've expected. Rashid was, of course, terrified, glancing between both of them for signs of distress. Jesse gave a little reassuring wave of her hand in his direction and then asked Armand, "What is it?"

"Your aunt must be incredibly powerful." He stared at Jesse, clearly fascinated. "Perhaps it is easier with such an established link between your minds. I do not know. I've never interfered with a mortal's mind to the degree that she has with you. So many times, over so many years. And who even knows how many smaller suggestions and commands, in between the erasures. Perhaps it accumulates. A pathway worn into the grass."

Jesse didn't love the idea of a shortcut carved into her brain by the sheer repetition of intrusions. She thought of the quad near her dorm, her first semester at Columbia (before Maharet bought a gorgeous townhouse just off campus, 'as an investment' and asked if Jesse wouldn't mind living there and looking after it for her). The quad had just been a stretch of grass, bordered by neat paved paths. Not so much of an

her brain, since she realized where they were. Finally, with effort, she got the thought to coalesce. "Tattoos are really cool. I don't think I'm ever gonna get one, though. I've been sooo scared of needles, ever since I was a little kid."

"I know," Maharet's cool fingers, petting her hair back from her forehead. "Maria told me how much you cried, getting your shots as a baby. I wish so badly I had been there to kiss them all better."

A buzzing hum of the tattoo gun turning on, and Jesse's body stopped working. She could still breathe and she felt her heart beating, but the rest of her seemed to have turned to stone. She couldn't move. She could curl a single finger. She couldn't open her mouth. She couldn't even blink.

Maharet seemed to realize this last thing at the same moment Jesse did, because she slid Jesse's eyelids down over her eyes with reverent gentleness. "You have to be still now, my darling. If you move you could hurt yourself, so I'm going to help, okay? I'll help you be good until it's over."

The buzzing sound got very very loud in one of her ears, and then everything else was gone: there was only pain and blind animal terror at her inability to move away from it. She couldn't even flinch. The pain itself was not awful, but it was magnified exponentially by her utter helplessness, as her body failed to react to the signals her brain was trying to send. She couldn't move. She couldn't move. She couldn't move. The pain went on and on and she could only breathe through it, thin frantic hyperventilating gasps as the rest of her body lay lax and unresponsive.

"I know it hurts. I'm sorry, Jesse. I wish there were a better way, but this is the best thing I can do to keep you safe. I couldn't bear it if anything bad happened to you, you know that, right? I love you too much. It would destroy me." Maharet ran her hand up and down along the top of Jesse's thigh, petting the still, useless limb. "You're being so brave for me. Let me help make it feel better."

And Jesse knew, without any sense of how she knew it, what Maharet was going to do. Her body knew, and her heart raced rabbit-quick, like it could beat its way free of her ribcage. But her body was limp

"Right in the eyeline of anyone looking to take something that isn't theirs."

The man with the tattoo gun looked as glazed as Jesse felt. Something wrong about his eyes. Not the same thing that was wrong with aunt Maharet's eyes. So bloodshot. She didn't sound like she'd been crying, though.

"What's going on, aunt Maharet?" Jesse asked, as Maharet helped her down into the chair.

"I'm keeping you safe, little one," Maharet said and kissed her forehead.

Jesse shut her eyes, leaning back into the chair as she accepted the truth of it. It was so nice of Maharet to look after her. She was so lucky. When she blinked her eyes open again, Maharet had the cartridge of the tattoo gun in her hands. It was open at the top and she was holding her other hand above it, letting the blood run down her index finger to drip into the ink. Drip, drip, drip.

"Oh no, you're bleeding. Do you need a bandaid? I have bandaids in my purse."

Jesse looked around, but she didn't see her purse. She noticed, then, that she was in her pajamas, too. There were shoes on her feet, though. Fluffy socks she only slept in, never wore out of the house, shoved into her hiking boots, laced up differently to how she did them.

"That's so sweet, honey, but I'm okay. It'll stop in a minute, I don't need a bandaid."

Drip and drip and drip and drip. Maharet was right; when the cartridge was all full up, her finger stopped bleeding.

The man had fancy paper he used to transfer the thing Maharet had drawn onto Jesse's skin in the spots she had indicated. It tickled as it went on. Jesse squinted at the original, trying to figure out if it was words or a drawing.

"It's my name," Maharet said, "My name, my blood, my protection. So everyone will know you're mine, and they'll know not to lay a single finger on you. Isn't that lovely? You're about to become the safest girl in the entire world."

It sounded pretty lovely to Jesse. But there was something she should mention. It had been itching at

because he was being so very careful not to brush against her even a little. At that thought, fury erupted inside Jesse's chest, ugly and corrosive. "Would you stop? I'm not going to freak out if you touch me. I said I'm fine. Stop acting like I'm not." Her throat ached, raw and awful from the leftover burn of stomach acid. "Nothing's different now."

"I'm sorry," Rashid said, and she could tell he meant about all of it, and it made her want to punch something. People did that in movies: got angry and broke a mirror or put a hole in the wall. It always looked so satisfying. She was pretty sure if she tried she would just hurt her hand. But it was fine. Later, once she found the proof she needed to show she was right, Rashid was going to apologize for ever doubting her. That would be better than any broken mirror could be.

Rashid left and Jesse could hear him talking to Armand, their low voices too quiet to understand. They seemed to talk for a long time, before she heard footsteps approaching again. She didn't realize they weren't Rashid's until Armand's voice from above her said, "You're not going to find what you're looking for."

She lifted her head. Armand's hand was outstretched, offering her a little travel-size bottle of mint mouthwash.

"Did you read my mind?" she snapped, taking it from him. Her arms shook as she hauled herself up to her feet; she unscrewed the cap and poured half of it into her mouth, rinsing vigorously.

"I hardly needed to."

He leaned his shoulder against the door jamb, arms folded over his chest, and watched her calmly. It was weird that he wasn't shaking or sobbing or losing his shit, right? No way should he be this blasé right now. Jesse was grateful for his severe underreaction, in any case; it made it easier for her to stay calm, too.

"Whatever proof you think you'll find to discredit what you've just recalled, it does not exist. You know that already."

Jesse spat the frothy green liquid into the sink, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand.

"What makes you so sure, anyway? What do you know about it? It's not even your life. You don't know

her."

Armand appeared utterly unfazed by the anger in her voice; she saw no signs of Rashid's solicitous anxiety, no pity, no disgust. Only a quiet certainty and understanding.

"You were very sure, while it was happening."

The words were like a knife sliding between her ribs. She froze, unable to breathe, plunged back into the feeling of knowing, how she'd repeated that frantic manta in her mind: *this is real, this is happening, I'm not dreaming, this is real*—

For a moment she thought she would be sick again, but she breathed, and breathed, and the feeling passed.

He's right, she thought, and then hoped he had not heard.

"I want to keep going," she gritted through her teeth.

"Then we will keep going."

Jesse did not feel nearly as brave as she was pretending to be as she settled herself back on the bed. Easy enough to insist on her intention to relive every stolen memory: following through was another matter. What if they were all as bad as the last one? What if some were worse? How much could she actually endure before her resolve crumbled?

But the next memory was disturbing only by implication rather than actual experience.

Jesse—spurred on by some documentary she'd seen—called up Maharet and asked about the source of her wealth. How could she afford to buy Jesse so many wonderful things? Cars, houses, vacations around the world, artifacts and luxuries, the very finest things? Where did it come from, all that money she'd used to underwrite Jesse's archaeological work in Jericho? It must be inherited; Maharet did not have a job, she never had for Jesse's entire life. And inherited wealth of that magnitude didn't spring from nowhere: in what places had it begun, and whose blood had fed its roots?

Maharet deflected. At first, she listed all the worthy and noble things she did with that fortune: catalogued charitable causes she contributed to, foundations she had helped to create, random unfortunates she had

consent. Anyway, it's not good for the tattoo. Alcohol things your blood. You bleed more, it messes with the design." Marcus/Martin/Mason leaned closer, squinting at the tattoo.

"Yours looks alright, though. Where'd you get it done, anyway? So I can warn my friends it's shady as hell."

Jesse tried to recall. Strange, how completely all the information was missing. Not just the finer points, but all of it. She didn't remember where any tattoo parlors near Columbia were. Had she even been in New York when it happened? Could she have been on vacation? What year had it even been?

"I.. I don't know."

Her chest felt tight; she couldn't breathe. She pulled the Jeep hastily to the side of the dirt road and parked. Her heart was beating so fast, she must be having a heart attack. Jesse pressed a hand over it as if she could calm it down through her skin and muscle and bone. She set her forehead against the steering wheel; there was sweat at the small of her back, under her arms, on her face. Pouring off her, even though it was only 65 degrees out.

"I.. I don't know. I don't know—"

Tilt.

A tattoo parlor. The shutters were down, the door locked. 2:14 AM on the digital clock. A man in his early 40s was prepping his station. He had pajamas on and a vivid bruise was darkening across one of his cheeks. On a scrap of paper, Maharet traced out spiky characters in a script Jesse didn't know.

"There. I want it exactly like that, just here, on both sides." Her cold fingertip pressed down on the sensitive dip of flesh behind Jesse's ear, right at the top of her neck.

Jesse shivered. Her head felt wrong. Not alcohol, not any drug she would recognize (an admittedly limited list). It was more like extreme sleep-deprivation. No change in her heart-rate or breathing or mood, it was simply hard to focus, hard to process information, hard to care. The world thick and glibly and confusing all around her.

as a ragdoll. Soft inert cage for her panic.

It was worse than anything she could think of, to be able to feel everything and do nothing. Jesse felt the tiny needles stabbing through her skin, relentless, burying the blood and ink deep into her flesh, so deep nothing could ever wash it out. She felt the moving air from the overhead heating system. She smelled rubbing alcohol and warm metal from the tattoo gun. She heard the buzz of the gun, the breathing of the hypnotized artist marking her as her aunt's property. She heard fabric rustling. She felt Maharet's hand slip inside her sweatpants and beneath the band of her underwear. She felt every single second.

taken under her wing and rescued from their circumstances. So many good things she had brought into the world, through the careful distribution of funds. Didn't Jesse know by now about her particular passion for women's causes? How much she had given to encourage literacy in places where girls were denied educations; to assist battered wives trying to get free; to support and advocate for survivors of sexual violence? A dazzling display of virtue, compellingly arranged in order to make Jesse stop asking questions.

When it did not do that, Maharet's rhetoric became more personal. She asked, with such gentleness in her voice, if Jesse was feeling guilty for the advantages she'd been given. It was unfair, of course: so much poverty and deprivation in the world, and Jesse had never wanted for anything. Never once, after that day when Maharet had taken her from that hospital as a newborn. Was all of this unearned about the origins of their family's money really just displaced shame about her inability to ever pay it back? Did her insistence on this topic spring from her painful consciousness that without Maharet, she would have had nothing, been nothing? Maharet had given her everything—even her name—but she didn't have to say thank you, of course not. She didn't owe Maharet anything back.

It nearly worked. In the memory, the more times Maharet graciously reassured her that there was no debt, the more indebted Jesse felt. After a few minutes her stomach was in knots with it, her throat so tight she could barely speak. How spoiled she was, to even ask! To act entitled to answers from the person who had given her everything she'd ever had.

"I'm so, so, so grateful, aunt Maharet. There aren't words for—I could never thank you enough for what you've done for me. I know that you saved me. My whole life is—everything beautiful in it is from you, because of you."

She inhaled a shuddering breath, and kept trying. "I just—I like knowing where things come from. I like being able to look at it all together. I guess it's the part of me that's an archaeologist. I want to see how it fits, how I fit, into the pattern of history—"

"Jesse," Maharet interrupted, voice firm. Not a request: an order. "Stop."

asked him to, and he had felt that happening to him from inside her body. How was that any different to the regular way? Didn't matter that she hadn't meant to. Didn't matter that she'd felt it, too.

"No, he isn't. But he's pretending to be, and I'm pretending I believe him."

Same as me, Jesse thought.

"Are you—"

"I'm fine," she cut him off. "I'm completely fine. I shouldn't have eaten right before getting my head fucked with. Amateur mistake. Now I know better for next time."

A long pause, and then Rashid said, "I guess it is like an intense workout, but for your mind."

"Exactly."

Jesse sighed and pushed her hair out of her face in frustration. She wanted a hair tie. Why hadn't she brought one? She wanted a hair tie, and some mouthwash, and to go back in time and stop Armand from saying it out loud, because she could tell Rashid thought she was delusional and he was only humoring her. She wanted to call Maharet and hear her voice; that would make her feel as certain on the inside as she was pretending to be on the outside about what was real and what wasn't. She wanted a magic button that could give her back all the rest of her memories without anyone else seeing them or knowing what they were.

But since she wasn't getting any of that, she settled on what she could have.

"Is it awful if I say I want to keep going? I know it's selfish. I don't know what else Armand might have to—to see. I shouldn't ask him to do it. But somewhere in everything that's still hidden, there's going to be something that explains all this. It's a hoax. It's *fake*. I know it. Getting upset about it is a waste of time, because it's not even real. That—" her voice cracked and she had to pause, swallow, recalibrate, "—that didn't happen to me. Somewhere in my memories is the evidence to prove it. Maharet wouldn't. She *wouldn't*, Rashid."

"Okay," he repeated. "I'll ask if he's willing to keep going."

Jesse nodded. Rashid got to his feet. It was an awkward process, in that cramped little bathroom,

remembered having a really good feeling about it. About her. Bel liked hearing about all the complicated interecine squabbling and rivalries amongst archaeologists; she made the best pancakes Jesse had eaten in her life; she saw a therapist once a week and she quietly forthright about what she liked and what she didn't like. They watched a lot of movies together; streaming was just getting big at the time and Bel was shocked by how few classics Jesse had seen. They'd broken up over a movie; or, rather, Jesse had broken up with Bel. A rarity in her dating history to name of the film any longer. Just that it had been some period piece, that she had settled in on Bel's couch expecting a nice piano soundtrack and pretty people in pretty costumes and maybe a few overly earnest on-the-nose speeches. What she'd gotten was a depressing slog about a teenage girl at a boarding school being groomed, drugged, and violently molested by her female teacher, and her classmates murdering her so she couldn't tell anyone. Most of Jesse's short relationships had ended not with a bang but a whimper—this one was a bang. Jesse had waited until the end of the credits before she could hardly get the words out. Bel had said it was a re-watch for her; she'd known in advance what the film was about, what happened in it. What had made her think that *that* was a good date movie? What kind of sick person even wanted to watch stories about that sort of thing once, let alone twice? It was disgusting. Walking beside Rashid in silence, Jesse couldn't remember the details of how Bel had sounded, how she had looked. She remembered what she'd said, though. She had apologized—just once, but without any excuses or deflection—and asked Jesse if the movie had triggered her. If somebody had hurt her like that, and that was why she was so upset. At the time, Jesse had thought Bel must be mocking her. It was unthinkable that anyone would ever even ask that earnestly. Of course not. *Of course not.* She wasn't upset, she was *offended*. This wasn't about her; it was about not wanting to see gross things when she came to her girlfriend's apartment for a nice

the months that they worked together? Saved her from forgetting her phone at the counter of a café, or brought an umbrella big enough for the both of them, or made sure that she ate lunch? She used to joke with him about how scatter-brained she was; she'd forget her own head if it weren't attached to her neck.

Scatter-brained. But her brain wasn't just scattered, was it? It was full of holes. Perforated. No, what was the word Armand had used? Mutilated.

Jesse took the coat from him. It was the one with the mink lining. She didn't put it on, even though it was cold enough that she could see her own breath in front of her face. She stood on the sidewalk and ran a hand through the fur, the lush softness of the slippery hairs bunching between her fingers.

Armand had warned her that other memories might start returning on their own, now that she'd begun the process of unravelling, so she was only confused for a moment when she remembered running her hand through different fur. In the memory her nails were painted aquamarine; the hairs of that fur were darker, shorter—a rug, yes, she'd had a rug like that on the floor of her room in Sonoma. She must have been very, very drunk, because Jesse remembered the room spinning so much that she didn't even dare to lift her head. It was alright, though, the spinning, because something heavy was on top of her pinning her down, keeping her from being flung anywhere by the centripetal force.

"Jesse, what can I do?" Rashid asked, and the sound of his voice dispersed the memory. Jesse realized she didn't know how long she'd been standing there, staring at her coat, petting the lining. Lost in time.

Jesse was cold. She pulled on the coat and started to walk; Rashid kept pace alongside her.

Of all the things she could be thinking about right now, Jesse's mind kept going back to her breakup with a woman she'd dated 6—no was it 7 now?—years ago. She'd been Annabelle, at work; Bel, to her friends. Jesse didn't remember any longer how the two of them had met. Should she be suspicious of that? How was she supposed to know if something was regular forgetting or not?

She and Bel had dated for three months; Jesse

So much relief in his voice. When neither of them responded, Rashid went on, "And it would explain why there are so many edits. I mean, she's practically your mom, right? Lots of opportunities for her to slip up and then have to erase it. Obviously... not an *ideal* handling of the situation, but... not so bad, I guess." Jesse heard the sharp intake of breath from Armand, and she knew what was going to happen, as sure as if she were clairvoyant. "Hmm. No, that would not be so bad." Armand sounded so careful, so measured. She couldn't bear it. There was that feeling in her chest again, just like in the memory. A howl lodged inside her ribcage, stuck, unable to get out. Lacerating her insides. "Except, in the memory I just saw, she did feed on Jesse and rape her, so I would argue it still qualifies as fairly bad." Jesse didn't make the decision to stand up and cross the room. Her legs moved all on their own. She wobbled, nearly fell, made it to the bathroom. It was a little easier to breathe when the door was closed behind her. She didn't even understand why she'd done it, until she was bent over the toilet and thought with the first retch, oh, that's why.

chapter five possession

"My darling," the woman said. "It's Maharet." Jesse had rushed into her arms. But Maharet had caught her, gently holding her apart as if to look at her. Then she'd covered Jesse with kisses, as if she dared not touch her in any other way, her gloved hands barely holding Jesse's arms. It had been a lovely and delicate moment. Jesse had stroked Maharet's soft thick red hair. So like her own.

"You are my child," Maharet had whispered. "You are everything I had hoped you would be. Do you know how happy I am?"

- Queen of the Damned

The thing about not having any friends and not being close with her parents was that it had always been very difficult for Jesse to check if the odd things that sometimes happened to her were normal or not. Perhaps if she'd been born a few years later she could have gone online, made inquiries anonymously. But she was already 19 by the time Matthew and Maria caved to the pressure of modern times and had their house hooked up for wi-fi, and by that age she'd learned how not to think too much about certain things.

She had Maharet, of course, who always said Jesse could come to her with any troubles, no matter how small or how embarrassing. But sometimes she was too shy even to put things in a letter. Her aunt was so busy, so important, traveling all over the world. There had to be a limit even on Maharet's patience.

Anyway, sometimes the questions were about her.

Every now and then, Jesse would sit down and write out the things she wondered. She didn't know why, exactly. It didn't make her feel much better. She would always tear the paper up into teeny tiny shreds before she threw it away, in case her parents ever decided to look through her trash. Secrecy was just part of the routine by then; an automatic reflex.

Is it normal to get really really strong déjà vu sometimes? Like to go to a museum and you know where everything is and you sort of recognize it, but

How many times had she dropped her keys, as she was scrambling to gather her things on her way out the door? Her hands had been shaking so much. Her whole body had been. She had yanked her arm away when Bel tried to touch her wrist. Jesse had stormed out and forgotten her scarf; when Bel texted the following morning asking if she wanted to come by and get it, Jesse had told her to throw it out and blocked her number.

"I think," she said, and then had to pause to swallow. Rashid glanced over at her and then away again. He was listening, though. Jesse could tell.

"I think maybe Maharet—" She made it further, this time, before she had to stop. It was a big choice, the next word she said, "—hurt me."

Rashid didn't say anything, but he slipped his hand into Jesse's, lacing their fingers together. She squeezed; he squeezed back.

"May I?" Armand asked, with a nod at Jesse's neck.

The three of them were reunited in the suite again; by the time they got back, Armand had tucked away his prayer rug and was sitting on the bed, flicking through the channels on the TV.

Jesse wasn't exactly surprised by the request. She nodded, held back her hair, and tilted her head to let more light fall on the tattoo. An unnecessary gesture, as it turned out: Armand didn't look at it. Instead, he leaned in, close enough that his nose was almost touching her skin, and inhaled. No, not inhaled. Sniffed.

"There *is* vampire blood in it," Armand announced. A touch defiant, as if he were expecting her to contradict him, say he was wrong or lying. Reasonable expectation, all things considered.

"I know," she said. Rashid had not said 'I told you so' and she doubted Armand would, either, but that didn't make this part any easier. She wished she could joke—*duh, Armand, denial is so 20 minutes ago, catch up!*—but who would she be fooling? Jesse didn't have the energy to be cute about it. She went with the simple, unadorned truth instead.

Whatever Rashid saw in their faces when they emerged this time, it must have told him plenty. He didn't ask how it had gone or what they had unearthed. He merely walked over and set a hand against the back of Armand's neck, massaging the knob at the top of his spine.

"Your phone went off," he said.

A statement that meant little to Jesse, until Armand crossed the room and knelt by his suitcase, unzipping it and pulling a neatly-rolled prayer rug from the inside. She got to her feet; it was so strange, being able to move her body. Like being on a boat too long and then coming ashore, feeling the solid land dip and roll. The lack of paralysis felt foreign, now.

"I'm gonna get some air. Back soon."

Privacy and quiet were important for daily prayers, she knew. Jesse had no idea how she was going to react once it all caught up with her, but she suspected she might get fairly loud and disruptive. Better to take a few laps around the block and do whatever dry heaving or screaming she might need to do where it wouldn't bother him.

The navigated her limbs to the door of the hotel suite. It wasn't until she went to shut it behind her that she noticed Rashid had followed her; she accepted his presence without comment. Together, they made their way through the corridors of the hotel, to the elevator, through the lobby, and out onto the street.

When he nudged her shoulder, Jesse turned to see Rashid had grabbed her coat for her on his way out. How many times had he done something like this, in

chapter six
patterns

evening.

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But Jesse was so happy! These things seemed of no consequence! Maharet's answers would banish Jesse's doubts in an instant. Yet how unusual that Jesse would change her mind like that. Jesse was such a confident person. Her own feelings were often known to her at once. She was actually rather stubborn.

- Queen of the Damned

Rashid waited for a few minutes after she was done before he knocked softly on the door. When Jesse didn't say anything, he waited a little longer before he came in anyway. She hadn't locked it; she didn't look up as he slipped inside and closed the door behind him. After a short period of deliberation, he sat down on the floor with her. Near, but not touching. Jesse waited for him to talk. When he didn't, she eventually said:

"It's not true."

"Okay," Rashid agreed. Didn't argue, didn't question.

Jesse pulled her knees tighter against her chest.

"Is Armand okay?"

She'd felt a little better after she threw up. Jesse didn't even know if vampires *could* throw up. It would be pretty awful if Armand felt like he needed to but his body simply wouldn't do it. He should at least get to have that relief.

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your parents say they never took you there?
Is it okay to be best friends with somebody in your family?
Is it bad to find bruises in weird places and not remember where they came from?
Is it okay to have dreams about kissing someone that you know you shouldn't ever want to kiss in real life?
Is it normal to wake up sometimes feeling sore in private spots?
How much is it normal to forget stuff if you're 16?
A sad little hobby. What a lonely, unusual teenager she'd been, even apart from the ghosts and the visions. Jesse had entirely forgotten how she used to do that; it came back to her, as she rested her flushed cheek on the cool, sleek plastic of the closed toilet lid. The memory must have gotten knocked loose while Armand was in her head. But it didn't mean anything, of course. It was just one of those little coincidences. A non-sequitur that her mind was trying to shove into a pattern where it didn't fit. It didn't mean anything.

The only information in her memory came from her own senses. What she saw, what she heard, what she felt.

Everything she'd just seen, he had seen. Everything she'd just heard, he had heard. Everything she'd just felt, he had felt.

What a terrible mess.

She managed to work her way through all the steps in order to say, "It isn't what it looks like."

It was Armand's turn to remain silent. She couldn't bring herself to turn and face him, to see how he must be looking at her. A mess, a mess, an awful mess. He'd been through that, had it forced into his brain from hers, and he didn't have enough of the context to realize it couldn't possibly be real. And now he would be assuming all kinds of completely mistaken things, simply because he didn't know any better.

"Someone made that up and then put it in my brain. Or it was—a shapeshifter. Maybe an illusion spell. Witches can do that, right? Witches can do a lot."

Silence from Armand. Silence from Rashid, too; his eyes kept darting from her to the vampire behind her and back. Jesse couldn't look at him anymore, either. She crossed her legs and stared down at her hands in her lap.

"It's not what it looks like," she repeated, hardly louder than a whisper, "I promise."

"What did it look like?" Rashid asked, his worry so extreme now that it was tipping over into frustration.

The silence stretched, on and on. Jesse wished her heart would stop beating so fast. It was all a mistake, a terrible mistake, but she was too upset to properly explain it to them both so that they could just understand. She had to get a handle on herself. Stop being so fucked up over a stupid disgusting lie someone had put in her head.

When Armand spoke, his voice was back to some approximation of normal. Cool, crisp, matter-of fact. "It would appear that Jesse's aunt is the vampire responsible for tampering with her memories."

"Well. Well, alright. That makes sense. It fits. That explains the stuff you said about her being so paranoid about the Talamasca, Jesse. She didn't want the order to figure out what she was and expose her," Rashid said.

And then Jesse forgot—until the next time. In a way, this cycle was a comfort to Jesse. It made Jesse feel dumb, and unworthy, and very small. (How many times had this worked? How many times had she hung up the phone seconds before the tears came, berating herself for every word, pathetically grateful that at least she had someone like Maharet to be gentle with her when she acted so stupid.) If neither of these worked, Maharet would quickly lose patience and her attempts to divert and pacify would give way to the same command: *you will forget this.*

Other people didn't understand about spirits or visions. Other people wouldn't be able to sensitively handle a complicated, special girl like Jesse. They would judge her, try to take advantage of her, use anything she disclosed to them against her in the end. Maharet was her safest harbor, her only harbor. Of course, she was the one who Jesse called. Maharet's responses to Jesse's inquiries followed an alarmingly uniform script. First: attempts at distraction and deflection. (How many times had it worked? How many phone calls had not ended up buried memories because Jesse allowed herself to be steered?). If this failed, Maharet moved on to her second tactic: digging her fingers into all Jesse's emotional soft spots. In memory after memory, Maharet said things that sounded so patient and fair; things that made Jesse feel dumb, and unworthy, and very small. (How many times had this worked? How many times had she hung up the phone seconds before the tears came, berating herself for every word, pathetically grateful that at least she had someone like Maharet to be gentle with her when she acted so stupid.) If neither of these worked, Maharet would quickly lose patience and her attempts to divert and pacify would give way to the same command: *you will forget this.*

why she loved archaeology, why she loved her work with the order.

It was all too complicated, too deeply felt for her to put it into words. So, she simply said:

“Bullshit. I want to keep going.”

They kept going.

As they did, two patterns emerged: patterns that left Jesse's head spinning with the weight of everything that they forced her to reconsider about herself and her life.

The first pattern seemed to account for nearly half of her erased memories: over and over, Jesse called Maharet with questions.

She called because she became curious about Maharet's background, her life, her health. Too many unknowns, no good reason why she shouldn't have the answers. Wasn't it her responsibility, as a loving and devoted niece, to know the name of her aunt's doctor and the last time she'd gotten her routine cancer screenings?

She called because noticed discrepancies in the things Maharet told her—about the Great Family, about herself, and especially about the history between the two of them. When had they first met? When had they last met? How did Maharet know things about Jesse that she could not ever remember telling her or anyone?

She called because she repeatedly discovered the gaping holes in her own memory and became suspicious of their source. Could it be neurological? Supernatural? Could Maharet help her figure it out? Could Maharet help her, please? It was so frightening, remembering too much and not enough all at the same time. Years of her life with almost nothing there; at the same time, fragmentary impressions of places she had never been, conversations she had never had, things that could not have happened to her.

Every time, without fail, Maharet was her first call. Hadn't she been telling Jesse for her entire life that she could make any problem better, if Jesse was only brave enough to tell her about it? Hadn't she reassured Jesse that she would always believe her, no matter how far-fetched the story—convinced her, as well, that no one else would? Under the guise of protection, of course.

love this dream.”
“You're dreaming, Jesse. It's a good dream. You and in to her hair. She shook her head from side to side, face crumpling. It wasn't true. This was real, it was happening, and she was going to hold onto that, she wasn't going to let herself be convinced, not again. “No, I'm not, I'm not, I'm not dreaming, I'm awake, I—” Her protests choked off into silence as she came, waves. Maharet worked her through it, steady, inescapable. It felt so good, that was the worst part. Jesse shivered and shivered, a delicious deep throbbing inside her, going on and on. After it was over she lay limp and unmoving, a marriage with its strings cut. No point in struggling anymore. She hadn't been able to stop Maharet. She hadn't been able to stop her body from welcoming it. Worse still, she knew—without knowing how she knew

could barely lift them from her sides; just how much of her blood had Maharet drunk? She tried to push at Maharet's shoulders, her head, anything she could reach to shove her away.
“Stop. Stop. Please, stop.”
Her voice was small, hoarse with tears. Maharet didn't stop. Jesse dug her heels into the bed, trying to get leverage to scoot away, but Maharet had her pinned so neatly. Like a butterfly on a specimen card. “Shhh shhh shhh, it's alright, you're alright.” She should scream. This was exactly the kind of time when people were supposed to scream. She could feel the explosive sound building inside her, bigger and bigger with every slick slide of Maharet's fingers against her walls. Why couldn't Jesse get it to move outside her? Why could she only whisper, shaky and pleading?
“Get off me, please, please, I don't want—”
“Don't you?”
“Something happened inside her. A surge of electricity through her nervous system, triggered by a signal sent from outside. Jesse's mouth fell open around a breathless, delighted moan; she arched up off the bed, shuddering and tense all over, her feet curling with pleasure as she barely held herself back from the edge. “You're dreaming, Jesse. It's a good dream. You

it—that something else was coming. She wouldn't be able to stop that, either. She never could.

Jesse twitched as Maharet pulled her fingers free; it set off a shimmery little aftershock that ran all the way up her spine. Maharet smiled down at her fondly, petting her hair back from where it was stuck to her face with sweat and tears. Maharet had always loved her hair. Loved to brush it, to braid it, to put their heads together so that Jesse's hair blended with Maharet's hair and they were impossible to tell apart. *See? Just like mine. Exactly like mine.*

“There you go. Feeling quieter now? That's good, my darling. You needed that badly, didn't you? I'm sorry. I shouldn't go so long between visits. Time moves so much faster for you.”

And Jesse understood the truth, then. She'd known it already, in a wordless way—her skin had known, her blood had known, her guts had known, her bones had known. But now her mind knew, too, for a moment at least. This was not the first time. This was not the second or third or fourth. This was something that kept happening to her.

Jesse stared at the ceiling, the tears sliding now and then from the corners of her eyes, sluggish and warm. One of the screws in her light fixture didn't sit quite straight. How had she never noticed that before? It stuck out a few centimeters, off-kilter. The whole thing could come crashing down on her at any moment. She felt Maharet touch the punctures on her thigh, fill them with a brief itching heat. She remained boneless and unprotesting as Maharet tugged her underwear back on, fussing until it sat right. Then her pajama pants, then the warm wool socks that her parents had sent as a Christmas present a month before. Putting everything back in order. Covering her tracks.

“You don't have to erase it.”

Useless, to plead. Jesse knew that. But she had to at least try.

“I won't tell anyone. I won't even mention it to you.”

If only she could have this one thing. Make this one choice for herself. If only she could at least hold onto the knowledge of what her life was. She made herself say the words she thought might work.

“I know it happened. I know it was her. You don’t need to try to convince me anymore.”

“Ah.”

She climbed on the bed beside him, laying down in her usual spot. Armand made no move to return to the chair he’d been using.

“Might I make a suggestion?”

Looking at him from such a different angle, his curls illuminated by a halo from the overhead light, Jesse was struck again by how unearthly and beautiful Armand was. She could see why some Renaissance guy had picked him as a model. Had it been a favor for a friend of his? Or was that his job when he was alive? It would be pretty funny if Rashid was dating a 16th century supermodel or whatever the equivalent was at the time.

Jesse shrugged, not really a yes or a no. Armand took it as permission.

“You should stop.”

“Stop?”

“Now that we agree there is no grand conspiracy to be uncovered, you shouldn’t put yourself through any more of this. Some memories will likely resurface on their own after tonight. Others, doubtless, will not, and that may be for the best.”

Jesse sat up.

“You think I should just... what? Leave it how it is? Not fill in the gaps, even though I know they’re there, and I know it’s possible to do it?”

Armand tilted his head to the side, eyes sliding over to the tattoo behind Jesse’s ear. He was quiet long enough that she thought maybe he wasn’t going to answer.

“It can be a great mercy,” he said at last.

“Forgoing.”

Jesse flopped back down again, tugging and adjusting the pillow beneath her head. Making a show of it as she settled in to unearth the next memory. She couldn’t imagine actually believing that, though Armand sounded earnest enough. It went against everything she believed, both personally and professionally. Ignorance was not bliss; you had to understand things to be able to appreciate them properly. Context mattered; history mattered. This was

her first girlfriend after she moved to London. Judith. She’d been a shy, soft-spoken receptionist at Jesse’s gym. She was 6’9” and had a thick black braid that went all the way down to the backs of her thighs. How Jesse had enjoyed watching her brushing her hair. It always made her want to bury her face in the glossy mass of it.

The date took place in summer, which made no sense; they’d started going out in February and Judith had ghosted her by mid-April. Same story as always—done with her after a few months. Except here it was: a memory of the two of them in tank tops, walking through the Sir John Soane’s Museum holding hands. They got gelato afterwards and Jesse laughed so much at Judith’s terrible puns that her sides ached. When they said goodbye that evening, Judith set her finger under Jesse’s chin, tilting her face up to kiss it, and Jesse thought: *I’m in love. This is what being in love feels like.*

In the brief moment between one memory and the next, Jesse wondered how this moment had gotten mixed in with the rest. Could it be just an accident—the memory buried because of its proximity in her mind to something else? Why had she been so sure she stopped seeing Judith months before she did? Had she gotten the dates wrong? Was it all a coincidence?

Except that the next memory was similar. A different woman (Neda) and a different year (2018), but still another relationship Jesse had believed was over months before the memory took place. Such a simple scene: a memory of lying in bed with her cheek against Neda’s thigh, planning—in a half-joking, half-earnest way that filled her stomach with butterflies—how they might decorate a flat if they both lived in it together. There was a similar texture to her feelings present: exhilaration, attraction, fondness, love, *hope*. Above all else, hope. The sense that this might be *it*, finally, after she had almost given up. Someone who would stick around to see all the parts of her she’d never been able to show. Someone who would weave themselves into her life, change her, be changed by her, be a part of who she was, even if it wasn’t forever...

Another memory of Judith. Both of them sprawled out on the hardwood floor of Jesse’s apartment, a little

“It was so nice. Thank you. I—enjoyed it. Can I please remember? It was so nice, I—I want to remember. Please.”

It wasn’t working. She had never been a very good actress. She couldn’t make it so her chin didn’t wobble. Couldn’t drain enough of the horror from her voice for the last to sound even halfway real.

She was just begging, now, like she always begged, “You don’t—you don’t have to.”

Maharet draped the blankets back over her and sat beside her on the bed. She bent low and kissed the center of her forehead. Jesse closed her eyes, tried to burn the feeling of that kiss into her memory, a thread she could pull on to find her way to the rest, like Theseus in the labyrinth. If she could just tuck the memory of that kiss away somewhere deep deep deep where Maharet wouldn’t notice it when she came to tidy up the rest...

“Oh, little one. I wish that were true.”

Then a roaring in her ears, a pressure in her head, and nothing nothing nothing.

Jesse opened her eyes. Back to the hotel. Back to the present.

Armand must have emerged a moment before her, because his forehead was no longer touching hers. She sat up. Rashid was right where he’d been before, worried and eager, glancing between the two of them. Little to no time must have passed on the outside because he asked, “Wait, did it not work?”

He looked at Jesse for confirmation. Jesse froze, unable to remember the first thing about the process of speaking. Breath in the lungs, vocal cords, lips and tongue and teeth moving in coordinated patterns; words arranged in an order that lined up with a meaning that lined up with what was in her head. An impossibly complex technique.

“It worked,” Armand said. His voice sounded very strange. That made sense, though. He’d said from the start that he would witness her memories as he unburied them. Jesse hadn’t stopped to worry about that, before, or even consider the mechanics of it. It couldn’t be like something in a movie: standing off to the side, observing the action from some other angle.

tucked up inside her, snug and deep.

Now that she saw, Jesse realized she’d been feeling it the entire time. Maharet’s hands were always so cold, but right now her fingers felt warm—warmer than the thumb rubbing lazy circles against her clit. They must have been inside her long enough to fully soak up her body heat. The fingers curled, flexed, curled, flexed; Jesse’s cunt gave a hungry involuntary clench around them. So much blood concentrated in the area, she felt the throb of it, felt herself all soft and plump and hot and slick. That was the sound she’d been hearing, over and over and over: Maharet fingering her, slow and relentless. Jesse’s thighs and stomach were tremble and tense; her hips rocked themselves into the contact without asking her permission. She was close, she was so close, when had that happened?

What was *happening*?

“That’s it, Jesse, just like that, go ahead, good girl, make yourself feel nice.”

Her cunt gave another fluttery spasm at the words, filthy words from a voice that shouldn’t be saying them, Maharet’s voice, her *aunt’s* voice. Her aunt, who was in her bed and in her body and bending over her once more, lapping up the blood that was oozing down her thigh from two neat puncture wounds. She sank her teeth in again and the jolt of pain was just enough to jumpstart Jesse’s brain.

“Oh God. Oh God, what’re you doing?”

Jesse tried to pull her knees together and shut her legs, to get free. Maharet grabbed one knee and held it down to the bed, kept her spread open. She did it so easily, so carefully. As if Jesse had no more strength in her muscles than a baby.

“Shush now, it’s only a wicked little dream. A harmless little fantasy in your head while you sleep. You can just let yourself enjoy it.”

Jesse’s breath hitched: was it on a moan, or a sob? Maharet’s thumb started to rub at her clit faster, just the way Jessie usually did it when she was getting herself off. Like Maharet knew her body by rote. Like she’d done this many, many times before. The feeling was too much; she was going to come, she couldn’t help it, she couldn’t hold it off much longer.

Her arms were heavy and so hard to move. Jesse