

him. Whatever the nature of Santino's cruelty, it was all too obvious how much it still haunted Armand five centuries later. So much for time healing all wounds. But then, what good would time do on its own, if he'd never had anyone to really talk to about it?

Jesse realized she wanted to be that person. It wasn't just her curiosity and desire to know the full story. Of course, that was part of it, she couldn't deny that; some part of her would always have that archaeological impulse to know the full history. How could she not be a little compelled by the idea of hearing about things that happened 500 years ago from someone who directly experienced them? But it was not *only* that. She wanted to be Armand's friend, for him to trust her with the awful, ugly things he couldn't tell anyone else. She wanted it for his sake but also, selfishly, for her own. It would feel good, she thought, to be that close to someone who clearly reserved his intimacy for a select few.

How greedy she was; she'd made one friend and already she wanted another. But also... it was nice to have something she wanted for her future—not just an outcome to be avoided, but a goal. She didn't know yet what her future might look like or what kind of person she would be in it, but she wanted that person to be someone Armand could trust.

She didn't rush him, and after a while he began to speak again.

"Rashid can guess and infer around the gaps. Like you, no doubt, are guessing and inferring now. But no guess or inference can begin to—can come close to what Santino really—"

Armand's breath caught. He must have heard it, the raw vulnerability in that tiny hitch of breath, because his demeanor shifted at once. He stopped rubbing his thumb and sat up straight, shoulders back, chin high. He opened his eyes, and the emptiness was gone.

He concluded briskly, declaratively, "Rashid knows that Amadeo did not survive what Santino did to him. There was only the coven master's new protégé, Armand. Origin, French. Meaning, 'the army's man.'" It was easy for Jesse to see, now, that all that cool self-possession and dignified poise of Armand's—which had intimidated her so much upon first meeting

him—was not natural. She'd just watched him pull it on like a costume. Like a shield. She wanted to learn how to do that as well as he did.

"I want to address something I overheard in your thoughts earlier," he declared, an abrupt change in topic that did not surprise her in the least. He was done talking about Santino.

"Okay?" Jesse ignored the squirming dread in her stomach, trying not to be preemptively defensive.

"You became concerned that I may use my powers on Rashid, the way your aunt has used hers on you."

Ah. Yes, she had wondered that, hadn't she? Not a very flattering thought, even if she had been having a panic attack at the time. It was uncharitable at best and downright bigoted at worst. Painting Armand with the same brush as Maharet, simply because they were both vampires? Especially when Armand had done so much to help her.

Jesse winced, but before she could apologize, Armand added, "It is an understandable fear. In all honesty, I'm surprised it didn't cross your mind earlier. You have experienced a lifetime's worth of profound betrayal by someone you loved and trusted, all in under 48 hours. I can hardly fault you for some amount of reflexive suspicion, when dealing with a near-stranger who shares her abilities."

She shifted closer to him on the couch. Slowly, tentatively, she leaned over to rest her head against his shoulder. He did not tense up or move away, so she stayed like that.

"You're not a stranger, you're my friend."

Jesse wanted it to be as simple as that. Easy lines of allegiance: the people she could not trust, and the people she could. A childish longing and she knew it.

"I am your *new* friend, about whom you still know very little," Armand pointed out, and Jesse could not argue with that, no matter how much she wanted to. "I offer you my word—whatever that is worth—that I neither compel him nor edit his memory. Very challenging to prove a negative, as they say, but it is the truth. I hope that you can believe that."

She did believe it—mostly. If they'd had this conversation two days ago, that belief probably would have been total. Jesse wasn't sure she was ever going to

memories, Jesse, I finally understand why. I had not realized how incomplete the process was. He must have been like you—experiencing things he could not understand. Distressing gaps. Emotions and reactions with no source he could identify. It must have been—frightening. Isolating."

Armand sighed, "So. That is what happened. A mistake of titanic proportions that caused untold damage to the man I love." After a beat, he added, "Do you still want to be my friend?"

She wasn't sure if it was supposed to be a joke or not. She wasn't sure if Armand knew, either. The raw edge of vulnerability in it was, she assumed, accidental.

Jesse took her head off his shoulder, but only so she could turn and throw her arms around him. A quick, tight hug, made awkward by the angle.

"Yep," she declared, popping the 'p', "Because I do believe you, that he asked, and everybody makes mistakes. Who knows, maybe I'd be judging more if my one point of comparison wasn't, y'know..."

Easy to look like a saint, next to Maharet acting like it didn't count, whatever she did to Jesse, as long as she couldn't remember it after.

Jesse gave one last squeeze before letting Armand go and getting up to join Rashid. Over her shoulder, she added, "Plus, you offered to mercy kill me, and if that's not friendship, I don't know what is."

She and Rashid both pretended to not notice as Armand silently blinked back tears.

They all agreed that the last two memories of Sonoma could wait for the next morning. Armand left on an undisclosed errand; Jesse tried not to let herself fixate on the irrational fear that Maharet somehow already knew everything they were doing and would be lying in wait to kill him. Some of it must have shown on her face when he reached the door, because he paused, turned back, and said (as if it were a great novelty to do so), "I'll be careful, Jesse. I promise."

Once Armand was gone, Rashid asked for Jesse's permission to read through the messages between her and Maharet on her original phone, so he could get a sense of their conversational patterns before attempting to copy them. Jesse handed it over, faintly surprised

that she still had it in her to feel self-conscious about anything at all.

Rashid sat on the couch, silently reading, scrolling back and back with his thumb. At some point he re-settled his posture so that he was covering his mouth with his other hand. He was subtle about it, made it look like he was merely concentrating, but Jesse suspected there was some attempt to conceal his own reactions involved. She had her laptop open in her lap and was trying to concentrate on Clive and Nigel's translation dispute, but it was hard to focus when she was alert to Rashid's every inhale and exhale and tiny movement.

At one slightly louder-than-the-rest sigh, she dared to ask, "Is it bad?"

"No, not on the surface," Rashid replied quietly, not looking up, "Except... you apologize so much."

"Oh."

Jesse tried to return her thoughts to her work, but she couldn't. The marks on the clay in the picture wouldn't resolve into words. She couldn't bring herself to care. Jesse knew the importance of archaeology and what could be gained by understanding the past. It was fascinating work, valuable work; Clive and Nigel were both men who had an uncanny knack for existing within that worthwhile field and finding the least urgent, least interesting ways to contribute to it. Most of the time it merely irked Jesse; right now, she had no patience for it at all.

When she continued glancing up at Rashid every few moments, he turned to her and asked, "Do you truly want to know how it reads to me?"

"Yeah."

"I was actually quite jealous of you, when you first described your relationship with your aunt and said you talked all the time and told her everything. I couldn't imagine being like that with someone in my family. More like a friendship—open and equal."

Rashid lifted the phone, gesturing with it. "This? Is not open and equal. You're terrified to contradict her over the tiniest things. You don't argue, but in a way that's worse than arguing would be, if you ask me. She doesn't ever criticize you. When you do or say something she doesn't like, she tells you that she

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Louis's younger brother killed himself right in front of him, back when he was still human. It damaged him greatly. And there were many other factors. We'd had a fight, just before. Said unforgettable things to one another. Louis was haunted by all of it."

Armand's hands were restless in his lap, as he moved his thumb across the knuckles of the opposite hand, back and forth.

"He asked me," Armand insisted. More than a hint of pleading in his voice, like he was sure she wouldn't believe him. "He knew I could do it. He'd seen me use it on humans before. Once he was healed, he came to me and told me he wanted me to take it away."

Armand paused, giving her time to respond, but Jesse didn't know what to say. It had never crossed her mind that someone might *want* their memories erased. She thought of that very first memory Armand had unburied—how she'd flattered and lied and begged just to be allowed to remember.

"I shouldn't have done it," Armand whispered, "It's so clear to me now. But at the time, I believed—"

He paused to laugh, soft and humorless.

Underneath it, Jesse heard the soft beep of the car reader as Rashid returned. She didn't know whether Armand had not heard or he simply didn't care.

"—so many foolish things. I believed that if I did not agree, he would leave me, and I could not bear the thought of being alone. I believed it was my duty to— to do what he asked of me. I believed that I owed him, since it was my cruel words that drove him to such desperate actions. I believed that he truly would be happier without the burden of it. I believed it would be mercy—I only wished I could do it to myself, too. I can't, you see. There are so many things I would—"

Armand broke off, shaking his head.

"But I was wrong. I may have thought I was doing the right thing, but I should never have agreed to it. A few months ago, when Louis became aware that his memories had been tampered with, he experienced it as a profound violation, the same way you have. It didn't matter that it was his idea... that he had convinced me in spite of my misgivings. He couldn't remember any of that. It shook his trust in me severely, and— and, forgive me, but after what I have experienced in your

isn't upset with you. And...it would seem, based on consistent patterns in your responses, that she's trained you very well to know that means you've done something terribly wrong, and she is simply too kind to point it out, and it's your job to become very upset with yourself and beg for her forgiveness."

"Oh."

"And...given the broader context, the requests for selfies are—"

"Yeah," Jesse cut him off, her face flooding with heat. Queasily, she remembered Maharet calling her while masturbating. Had she done that with any of those later pictures she solicited? How had Jesse been so stupid, thinking it was normal and innocent that any time she was headed off on a date, her aunt demanded to see a snapshot of whatever hot little outfit she'd put on...

She shut the laptop with a decisive snap.

"I give up. Clive and Nigel are just gonna have to kill each other this time."

Rashid didn't miss a beat.

"Hmm, tragic. Well, it was bound to happen eventually. Although, personally, I've always thought a little 69ing might do wonders for their working relationship."

"You really think they're still limber enough for that?"

"I have to confess, I've not pictured it in great detail. Perhaps an activity requiring a little less flexibility, then."

"Mutual handjob?"

"Sure, one can never go wrong with—"

"I love you," Jesse blurted, interrupting him, "I don't think I've ever said that before and...yeah. I love you."

Rashid's throat bobbed. He didn't respond. She had kind of ambushed him with that; Jesse didn't blame him. She was just about to pick back up their banter and give him a conversational out when he managed to rasp, "I love you, too, Jesse."

totally believe anyone's word about anything ever again. How could she?

Jesse gnawed her lower lip; she wanted that simplicity back so badly. *Yes, I believe you* and the conversation done. But it would have been a lie of omission.

"Back when Rashid was first starting to suspect something was wrong with me, he said it was because he'd seen this kind of thing before. Recently. Someone who had had their memories changed. And then later he said you were the one who'd done it."

"Ah."

Jesse didn't ask the question; she didn't have to. It hung in the air between them, heavy despite being unspoken.

"You don't have to tell me," Jesse said. Reflexive kindness. Then, more honestly, she admitted, "But if you don't, I might—I might have a hard time not imagining it's something really bad."

Armand nodded; Jesse felt it through the minute movements of his shoulder.

"I use that facet of the Mind Gift very rarely. Most often, it has been on morals who saw too much and were putting themselves in danger by talking about it. It is an old habit. I realize that in this age of skepticism and CGI and what I believe they call 'click bait', few humans would even bother to listen to someone claiming they'd discovered evidence of the existence of vampires. But there are other vampires out there who are old-fashioned and who might take offense."

Armand sighed; his breathing had become shaky. He was working his way up to it, she could tell.

"The...incident Rashid was referring to was different. Personal in nature and motivation."

"Whose memory was it?"

"Louis's."

Jesse's stomach sank; it was the answer she'd been expecting—or maybe the right word was *draining*. But she suspended her judgment as much as she could, waiting for him to explain.

"This was almost fifty years ago. 1973. After—after his attempted suicide, Louis was deeply ashamed.

have a number of detailed historical records about the Children of Darkness. That is the name of the religious cult of vampires which Santino led back in the 16th century, when I came to know him. I have no doubt that Rashid has read descriptions of their—" Armand hesitated, flexing his hands. His voice was hollow when he finally finished, "—customary recruitment methods."

Another time, another place, Jesse would have been all over a pretentious, try-hard name like 'the Children of Darkness'. But something had changed about Armand's face as he was talking. His expression had gone vacant, his eyes fixed and distant. It was unsettling to look at. She suspected he wasn't in the right frame of mind for dark humor right now. She wondered if maybe she shouldn't have broached this topic without Rashid here.

"I am not aware if any of those accounts include specific details about the things that were done to Amadeo while he was their captive in Rome, but I am sure the fundamentals are covered. The destruction of Marius's palazzo. The sparing of Amadeo from the bonfire that dispatched the other boys. The...generous invitation to join them in their worship."

Armand's eyes fluttered closed and he knitted his hands together in his lap, rubbing at the base of one thumb with the other in hard, repeated swipes. It was transparently a self-soothing gesture. Why was his quiet blankness so much worse than tears or rage would have been?

"The interval of twenty or so weeks, until Amadeo finally accepted their offer and Santino gifted him a new name."

The first time Armand had referred to himself in the third person, Jesse had assumed it was simply because he was discussing primary historical sources. She was becoming less and less convinced of that with every detached, vacant 'him'.

"Even if the Talamasca's files do contain firsthand accounts, I imagine there are many details that Santino would not have disclosed even to his closest acolytes. His methods with Amadeo were, at times... unorthodox."

He fell silent once more; Jesse's heart ached for

strong hands pinching her nose shut, holding her mouth  
tongue, water flooding in after them. The monster's  
Eventually, a memory of pills pressed onto her  
"I love you, Jesse. I love you. I love you."

free.  
she sobbed. She'd been so close. She'd almost gotten  
kissing her, frantic presses of its mouth against hers as  
monster with red on its cheeks, touching her face,  
Sounds, sounds—meaningless sounds. The

*high up we are? The fall would kill you!*  
"What are you doing, Jesse? Don't you know how  
cold fingers and hauled her back inside.

way out, by the time the monster caught her arm in its  
and over and over in her head. She had one leg all the  
window, got it open, just like she'd pictured doing over  
it. That didn't matter, because she got all the way to the  
very badly; maybe she'd broken part of her hand doing  
from the rope the monster had used to tie her. It hurt

long enough that Jesse managed to work her wrist loose  
voice talking to it—and walked out into the hall for  
monster got distracted by some sounds—that other

She almost got free, in one of the memories. The  
*need you. I'm sorry I frightened you so much. I  
shouldn't have lost my temper. Please, I need you.*

"You can't do this to me, Jesse. Come back to me. I  
wasn't optional.

screamed at the same time and the screaming simply  
spattered and choked, because she couldn't drink and  
water to her lips and tried to make her drink. She

The monster was so strong; in flashes Jesse saw  
moments where it held her head still, forced a glass of

trick."  
"Well, don't ask me. You know I can't do that little

never happened before."  
"It keeps coming undone, every time. This has

once more.

the wet sounds—and then the screaming would start up  
dark chamber underneath, Maharet's perfume; the rope;  
The door in the library; the iron spiral staircase; the  
immediately unstuck, and the memory flooded back.

green eyes, the glue in her mind could come  
monster. As soon as she caught sight of its face, its  
turn a corner, or open a door, and she would see the  
screaming. She felt calm, she felt happy. She would

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subterfuge only extended so far.

"Ready to finish this?" she asked Armand.

"Extremely."

Two more memories. No matter how bad they  
were, there were only two of them. Jesse could do that.

They settled themselves in their now-familiar  
positions, and Armand once more worked open the  
stitched-up seam in her mind. Even if he had not  
warned about these two memories being buried more  
thoroughly, Jesse would have been able to tell. He had  
to wrench and pull, to brute force it more than he had  
with the others. It wasn't painful, precisely, but it felt  
*wrong*. Just when she was not sure she could bear it any  
longer, they fell in.

It was not, it turned out, just one memory, but a  
knot of disconnected, fragmented moments so tightly  
clumped together they were indistinguishable from a  
single one. In all of them, Jesse was screaming. In some  
fragments her screaming was full-lunged and primal, in  
others little more than a pitiful ragged wail. The  
monster was always there, making sounds at her over  
the screaming. It petted her hair, in the memories where  
Jesse curled and cowered; it pinned her still, in the  
memories where she thrashed and fought like a wild  
animal in a snare. Its eyes were bright bright green and  
blood came out of them sometimes, sliding down its  
cheeks as it cornered her again and again.

*"You're calm, Jesse. You're calm. It's me, your  
aunt Maharet. You are safe."*

Jesse did know that they were words; she felt them  
pressing against her mind, trying to worm their way  
inside. They didn't make it past the barrier of her terror,  
which distorted all the sounds into nonsense. It didn't  
matter that the thing could mimic human speech, the  
same way it mimicked the appearance of a woman with  
long red hair and a sad mouth. She knew what it was,  
now—not a human, no matter how flawless its  
disguise. It was a monster out of a nightmare and  
nothing existed except her desperate, animal need to get  
away from it, to run, run, run, she had to run—

*"Please, my darling, you're going to hurt yourself.  
You're not afraid. Can you hear me? You're happy and  
safe and there's nothing to be afraid of."*

In one or two fragments, she did not start off

understand—not on a personal and emotional level—  
unimaginable to her. Jesse had never been able to

Strange, how quickly things could change. A few  
days ago, this conversation would have been

subject. "Yes, I promise."

reply. He hadn't been kidding about it being a touchy

face was so serious, searching hers, waiting for her

Jesse was tempted to make a joke, but Armand's

"I have your word?"

"Okay. I won't."

just didn't want her acting impulsively.

matter the cost to her—he'd even offered to kill her. He

ask. And it wasn't like Armand wanted her alive no

make any concessions. But it was a reasonable thing to

Jesse didn't want to agree to it: she didn't want to

find another way."

take your life before we have at least endeavored to

thoughts, if you will swear to me that you won't try to

"I will make an effort not to listen to your

car crashes.

own way, because of the pervasiveness. Like cancer or

even if you knew it was statistically likely. Awful in its

hundred years. It probably didn't make it any easier

majority of vampires committing suicide after a few

Jesse remembered what Armand had said about the

subject remains. . . taught, for me."

several moments, he finished, "It would appear that the

He trailed off, looking down at his hands. After

was. . ."

thoughts of suicide. He only attempted it once, but it

amended, "my former companion, was prone to

"Louis, my companion," Armand caught himself,

It did not.

assumed it would remain until he returned.

to wait. A heavy silence filled the room. Jesse had

After Rashid left, they made their way to the couch

*out of my head, please?*

*—In the nicest way possible, can you get the fuck*

roles were reversed; it didn't stop her from hating it.

she would probably do the exact same thing if their

thoughts still, she realized. Even now. She knew that

wondering if he'd heard it. He was listening to her

but Jesse knew. He had heard it, and he had heard her

Armand's eyes slid over to her, just for a moment,

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how anyone could *want* to die. Now, well. She was  
imagining and understanding lots of new things.

"Were you around, when he tried?" she asked.

Armand looked away, curling in on himself. Jesse  
remembered Rashid's warning about bringing up  
Armand's ex. That had been in the context of her  
teasing him, though, and this is anything but that.  
Besides, she and Armand are friends now.

"He would have succeeded, had I not—" his throat  
bobbed. Something in his eyes had deadened—like he  
wasn't seeing Jesse or the room around them, but some  
other time, some other place. He let out a slow, very  
shaky breath and concluded, "Yes."

Jesse could take a hint; the memory was clearly an  
extremely painful one. It would be the height of  
hypocrisy to force him to linger in it, when he had not  
pestered her to discuss any of the things he'd felt and  
seen in her head.

"Have you ever tried?" she asked.

Armand smiled, small and wretched.

"Yes. When I was very young. I refused to eat.

Like you, I believed it to be my only means of escaping  
a life I found intolerable."

Jesse recalled, in sudden and vivid detail, how thin  
Armand had been in those fragments of his memory  
that she witnessed. The way his bones had jutted out;  
she hadn't realized it was because he was trying to die.  
What an awful way to go starvation must be. Slow,  
agonizing. The exact opposite of an impulse. How old  
could he have been, back then? His body had been a  
child's. It was appalling: a child, resolutely choosing  
death day after day after day, over whatever else he was  
suffering.

"What made you change your mind?"

Armand gave her a long, steady look. She realized,  
with one of those flashes of insight she got on occasion,  
that he was assessing her. The reason he was choosing  
his words with such care was not self-protection, but  
consideration for *her*. Deciding what she could  
withstand hearing at the moment and what she could  
not. Handling her delicately, the same way he did  
Rashid. Did she seem fragile to Armand?

Stupid question. Of course she fucking did.

"I didn't change my mind. My circumstances

changed. If I had remained at the brothel, I would have found a way to die, by one means or another. But I was purchased, and life with my new master was not one that I felt the need to escape.”

There was something so awful about the matter-of-fact way that he said all of it. Dropping phrases like *the brothel* and *I was purchased* as if they weren't abhorrent. Maybe to him they weren't. Would she ever be able to talk about her own life like that? How many years would it take, until she could manage a blunt conversational *my aunt, who used to rape me?* Not much chance of it, until they found a way to make that past tense a guarantee.

“So was that where you met Santino? At the brothel?”

Armand blinked a few times, as if the question surprised him. “No, he came later. I had already been turned when I met him.”

“Did he—” she faltered, still unable to make herself say it. If she couldn't even bring herself to say ‘rape’ out loud about someone else... yeah, it was going to take a number of years, “—hurt you?”

She thought of the way Santino had smiled, when he realized Maharet was going to punish Jesse in front of him. She remembered the speed and ferocity of Maharet's violence towards her. Surely, some of that must have been because of him. Saving face? Or playing it up for what she knew would be an appreciatively sadistic audience?

When Armand still hadn't spoken almost a minute later, Jesse prompted, “Rashid gets very tense, any time his name comes up. I take it he's not a fan?”

It was an offer—a question he might find less daunting to address than her first one. Apparently, she'd been correct, because his answer came at once.

“I've never spoken to Rashid about Santino. Before today, I don't believe he had ever heard me say his name. I very rarely discuss him or that time in my life.”

Not once in four years, apparently. And yet Armand was trying, for her sake. She could see the effort it took, how he had to pry each word from himself with great struggle.

“But Rashid did a great deal of research in preparation for his posting in my home. The Talamasca

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trends simply to pass the time.

Rashid was clearly trying to convince Armand; there was a stubborn set to his jaw and he didn't take his eyes off him.

“I'm great at lying. You know how great at lying I am.”

The corner of Armand's mouth pulled down into a brief grimace, but he nodded. Jesse knew what it meant, that Rashid had been willing to invoke his betrayal as proof. Just to spare her a little pain.

In the end, they decided that the lost phone excuse was the simplest and most convincing. Rashid proposed going out to a shop and buying a cheap phone and contacting Maharet with it. They were supposed to be off in Barton-upon-Humber; plenty of people forgot their phones on the train. That way, if Maharet was in contact with anyone else in the Talamasca—a terrifying thought that never would have occurred to Jesse on her own—they would confirm the story. It would explain her delay in finding a replacement, too, if she was away from home.

“Anyway, you get really focused when you're in the middle of an investigation. I'm sure your aunt knows that about you,” Rashid pointed out.

“Maharet knows everything about me,” Jesse said, dully.

It welled up again: that paralyzing fatalism. This wasn't going to work. They wouldn't get away with it. Maharet would see through it; she would *know*, the way she always knew everything. She would find Jesse and kill Rashid and probably Armand, too, and it would be Jesse's fault. And then Maharet would have her and she'd never, never, never, never get away. She shouldn't take the risk. She should—

“I am going to stay here with Jesse,” Armand announced, getting to his feet, “While you go and purchase your ‘burner’ phone.”

Rashid and Armand exchanged a look. Jesse, struggling to her feet with considerably less elegance than Armand, joked, “Geez, what? Are you worried about leaving me alone? It's not like I was contemplating suicide fifteen minutes ago or anything.” Or fifteen seconds. Armand might not have heard that, though.

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Jesse did not need Armand's help getting to sleep that night. She waited up for Armand to return safely. He shipped back into the hotel suite after a couple hours carrying a messenger bag he hadn't had when he left. He conspicuously did not explain where he'd gotten it or what was in it. Jesse was too tired to even wonder; she got in the bed and was unconscious in what felt like seconds.

By the time she awoke the next day, Rashid had clearly been up for at least a few hours. The morning was half gone already.

“I'm not usually this lazy,” she murmured into her coffee.

“Jesse,” Armand said, not looking up from whatever he was doing on his tablet, “You are putting your brain through an extraordinary ordeal. I would not be surprised if you require a great deal more sleep than your usual for at least a few weeks while it recovers and rebuilds whatever pathways Maharet bulldozed over the years.”

Once she'd eaten, and showered, and dressed (borrowed clothes from Rashid, this time, pleasantly oversized and unfamiliar), Rashid showed her the text he'd sent to Maharet pretending to be her. It was good: Jesse had to admit it. Just the right amounts apologetic, devoted, and distracted. He'd even included a mention about only buying texts on this temporary phone, to prevent Maharet trying to call. Rashid's powers of

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## chapter thirteen monster

closed until she swallowed it all down. A sluggish torpor spread through her and filled her limbs with lead. It pressed the terror down low, suffocated it underneath a thick blanket of pharmaceutical tranquility, and Jesse stopped screaming. Maharet bent low over her, cupping her cheek, her expression stark with desperate hope. Her eyes were a rich, warm brown, rimmed in red that had not yet spilled over in tears.

“Jesse?”

“Please let me go, aunt Maharet,” she pleaded, or tried to. Her throat was so torn that it came out cracked and squeaky.

“There you are, my darling. Oh, Jesse, I've been so worried.” Cold lips, kissing her unmoving ones. Cold fingers tucking the hair behind her ears. Cold forehead pressed to hers. Cold breath against her face as Maharet exhaled a shuddery sigh.

“Please, I won't tell anyone. I'll be good. I won't say a word. Let me go.”

She was lying. The moment she had cell reception, she was going to call 911 and plead for somebody to help her, please, anybody, there was a woman living out in the woods who wasn't a woman, she only looked like one. She wasn't even living. She was a dead thing, an evil thing, a monster, a *monster*—

“You weren't ready, little one,” Maharet said, her voice so very, very gentle. She brushed the tears from the corners of Jesse's eyes with her thumbs. “I thought you were, when I asked you to come stay here, but you're too young. I should've known. It was wrong of me, wanting to sweep you away from your life before you had a chance to live it. I'll do it right, next time. I'll bring you back here, once you're the age we were when Khayman came to us and shared the blood. It was only a few months into our forty-fifth year. I'll try to get it as close as I can. Won't that be nice? We'll match.”

It was so hard to make Maharet's words into meaning in her mind, through the smothering fog of whatever drugs she'd been given. But she understood the answer to the only question that mattered to her right now: Maharet wasn't going to let her go. Jesse's face crumpled.

“Please. Please, I want my mom. Please.”

“I am your mother, Jesse. I'm the mother of your mother's mothers. I am the deepest root of our Great

- Queen of the Damned

*Something else had happened; something she had never really wanted to recall. Was there another hallway? She knew for certain that there had been a curving iron stairway which took her down into lower rooms with plain earthen walls. Tiny bulbs were fixed in old porcelain light sockets. She had pulled chains to turn them on.*

*Surely she had done that. Surely she had opened a heavy redwood door...*

the fact that you were walking with me and I appeared to her to be... extremely gay, I believe it was—there was a possibility.”

“Are you? Gay, I mean. Obviously, you like guys, but...”

“I find many of your modern labels to be narrow, baffling, and largely inapplicable to my experience of the world.”

“Hey, they’re not *my* labels.”

“Of course, of course.”

Jesse brushed her fingers over one of the tattoos. She hadn’t thought about how much more visible they would be without her hair falling over them.

“Do you think there’s any way she can track me, because her blood is in these?”

“I doubt it. While I am no expert in the capabilities of ancient vampires... well. Surely if she had that kind of ability, she would’ve found Mekare by now, wouldn’t she?”

“Okay, true.”

She kept rubbing over the place where the ink and blood were embedded into her skin. Maharet’s name, on her body. Claiming her as property.

“After I completed my... errand, last night, I took a brief detour by the nearest hospital,” Armand said conversationally. “I helped myself to a few items that will not be terribly missed. If you decide you would like me to remove them, I can do so. If I use my blood to heal the area, you won’t even need to worry about falling harder, now. Jesse watched the splattering droplets of it, through the clear plastic of the umbrella. “No. Although, in this case, it would be strictly platonic.”

Rashid had tea waiting for them when they got back, and another mug of blood for Armand.

“You’re using your powers so much and you need the extra fuel,” he said mulishly the moment Armand’s eyes fell on the mug. Clearly, he was anticipating

forehead pressed to hers, now. The ceiling of the hotel, not her room in Sonoma. Rashid’s hand, warm in her own.

“She was waiting,” she said. It shocked her, how normal her voice sounded, until she remembered that all that screaming had happened fifteen years ago, now, “This whole time. She’s only been waiting.”

They took a pause before the final push. Jesse, feeling claustrophobic after those blurry memories of her terrified captivity, went for a fifteen-minute walk around the streets surrounding the hotel. Rashid elected to stay back, carefully composing his reply to the flurry of texts Maharet had sent. But Armand joined her, a silent and reassuring presence, his hands in his pockets as they strolled. Jesse was a little nervous, at first, when she noticed how people’s eyes gravitated towards the pair of them and lingered as they walked by. Then, with a small jolt of understanding, she remembered that Armand was beautiful. He was, in fact, stop-and-stare-at-a-stranger-in-the-street beautiful.

“Is it like this everywhere you go?” she asked, when a man in a suit very nearly collided with a lamppost a few feet away from them.

“Does it come across as bragging if I say yes?” Armand asked, “Because the answer is yes. And it is only sometimes a brag.”

“If I ask something, will you answer me honestly?”

It began to rain softly; Jesse hadn’t even realized Armand had brought an umbrella until he was opening it up, holding it over both their heads as they continued to walk.

“Unwise to make that kind of guarantee without hearing the question, first.”

“Am I ugly, without my long hair?”

That was enough to make Armand’s steps falter, just for a moment. An unintentional but reassuring piece of evidence that he was no longer deliberately eavesdropping on her thoughts.

“No, Jesse. You’re not ugly.”

He smiled, a small but genuine thing.

“In fact, that girl with the green boots we passed two streets ago was looking at you, not me. She was wondering if you might be gay. She thought, between your very short hair, your tattoos, and the fact that you are wearing men’s clothes that do not fit you well—and

had panic attacks often confused them with real medical emergencies like heart attacks. They went to the hospital about it, gave their families a fright. She’d learned that from an A&E nurse she dated for a while. Had Maharet killed her, too? No, probably not. It had flamed out so quick: good thing for the nurse. So that was probably what was happening to her, wasn’t it? A panic attack. That was why she couldn’t seem to get any air, why her hands hurt with cold, why she was shaking so much her teeth were chattering.

Too bad. It would be so convenient if she had been dying. A way out. But then, there were ways of making that happen. Could she ask Armand to do it for her—would that be imposing too much? No, that would probably hurt Rashid’s feelings a lot. It was going to hurt his feelings no matter what, but she shouldn’t get Armand mixed up in it just because she was feeling lazy. Plenty of people managed on their own without vampires to help. What would be the best way? A fingertip beneath Jesse’s chin coaxed her into looking up; when she met Armand’s eyes, her gaze got stuck there. She couldn’t look away. Nothing in the world but his eyes, bright as tangemes. She couldn’t even blink, she realized. How had she not noticed before how utterly hypnotic his eyes were?

“Jesse, I’m going to assist you in calming down, alright? I am using my powers to show your body how to stop being so frightened. Hearing my voice is going to make it easier for you to breathe. See? It’s happening already. And your heartbeat is going to slow down, too, little by little. Like you’re cooling down after a run. It’s okay not to hold yourself so tightly. You can let your muscles relax, one by one. There. Is that a little better?”

“Yes,” Jesse croaked. It was still there—the despair, the fear, the certainty of her own helplessness—but he’d stopped her from slipping completely outside herself. His voice blunted the sharpest edge of her panic.

Eventually, when he gauged her to be recovered enough, Armand said, “I have no intention of allowing you to fall into Maharet’s hands. If necessary, I will give you the mercy of a swift and painless death rather than leave you to become her plaything once more. I

will not willingly abandon you to that fate. She will never touch you again, if I have anything to say about it. Do you understand?”

Jesse nodded, too overwhelmed with gratitude to speak.

“But there are many, far less permanent alternatives that we can attempt before it comes to that. Your only options are not Maharet or death.”

Numbly, Jesse nodded once more. She couldn’t bring herself to feel offended that Armand had been eavesdropping on her thoughts. They had been, in all likelihood, extremely loud.

She wanted Armand to be right. She wanted it so badly. She believed that *he* believed it. But belief didn’t mean something was real, and she couldn’t conceive of any way out of the snare. What hope did they have against such a formidable enemy?

“Oh, you’d be surprised,” Armand replied to her unspoken doubt, “what a little theatre can accomplish. I believe that you are correct: Maharet will never allow you your freedom while you live. But it occurred to me...”

“...you could fake her death,” Rashid finished for him. He had settled himself on the floor near to both of them, she realized. Now that she was no longer entranced by Armand’s gaze, she could look at him. Her little breakdown had undone all of Armand’s hard work; he was tense and frowning again. What a shame. It had been nice to see him happy, for a few moments.

“Precisely.”

Fake her own death? It sounded absurd.

“Do people actually do that, outside of Shakespeare plays?” she asked, her voice small and wavery.

“Very infrequently, in my experience,” Armand said, “But your circumstances *are* rather unusual, don’t you think?”

Jesse opened her mouth to argue that it was impossible. There was no way out for her, no escape. But... was that true? *Could* they do it?

“How—”

Armand held up a hand to stop the question.

“Obviously, we will need to do a great deal of discussion over the particulars of any plan before we

Jesse opened her eyes. It was Armand's cool

“Again...”

redwoods. I was so safe and happy there.”  
“It was paradise. That summer in Sonoma was the happiest of my life. I remember reading in the library, and going down to the creek, and walking through the

nothing.  
The darkness crept in further and further; Jesse could feel it happening inside her mind. One by one, the memories vanishing, leaving only a slick, blank

“Good, again.”  
redwoods. I was so safe and happy there.”  
and going down to the creek, and walking through the

“It was paradise. That summer in Sonoma was the happiest of my life. I remember reading in the library, and going down to the creek, and walking through the redwoods. You were so safe and happy here.”

“Say it with me, Jesse. It was paradise. That summer in Sonoma was the happiest of your life. You remember reading in the library, and going down to the creek, and walking through the redwoods. You were so safe and happy here.”

“Please—please, no—”  
“I’ll be ready when that day comes. You will forget this. You will remember nothing. And next time, I’ll get it right.”

“When you’re ready, I’ll bring you back here. I’ll give you the blood, make you like me, and then I’ll teach you about our kind. I’ll be your mentor, the same way I have your whole life. Guiding you, just like you’ve always craved. You were always such a good girl for me.”

The edges of Jesse’s vision began to grow dark. She could feel something happening in her mind. A sort of tugging pressure, working things loose. It felt wrong. She wanted it to stop.

“I’ll be ready when that day comes. You will forget this. You will remember nothing. And next time, I’ll get it right.”  
Jesse. My companion-to-be.”  
taught me how special you are. My precious, sweet daughter’s. We are opposite ends of the very same vine. When I found you at that hospital, I knew you weren’t going to be just any other child. I knew you were going to be special. But I didn’t know how much, yet. You’ve

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objections, “And I’ve already bled it, so it’s just wasteful if you don’t.”

They finished their drinks and returned to their places on and around the bed. A twenty-minute break, almost down to the second.

“Shame this is the last one, huh? We’ve got this shit down to a science.”

It was a bit feeble compared to her usual jokes. Jesse let out a slow breath. Just one more. She could do just one more. She kept telling herself that, right until Armand began to bend down to touch his forehead to hers.

“Wait, wait, stop.”

Armand froze; Rashid’s hand tightened around hers.

“Whatever this is... it was enough to make me lose my marbles back in Sonoma. What if that happens again? What if we come out and I start screaming and you can’t get me to stop?”

She saw the pair of them exchange a glance. They didn’t immediately dismiss it as a non-concern, which was considerate. Maybe she did have good taste in people. Maybe Maharet was the exception and not the rule.

It was Armand who answered her, “While I approve of your caution, I believe it was your aunt’s presence and not the memory itself which caused that reaction. At least, that was how it felt to me.”

Jesse exhaled shakily, nodding. He was right... probably. But it still frightened her, thinking of how disjointed and incoherent her thoughts had been. What had Maharet done to her, to make her like that? What was she about to re-live?

“Okay. Okay, yeah, you’re right. Just—I’m sorry, in advance, if I freak out.”

“We’ve got you, Jesse,” Rashid reassured, squeezing her hand, “We’ve got the after part down to a science now, too, remember?”

“Oh, of course. I forgot, we’re experts.”

She shut her eyes, and said, “Last one.”

“Last one,” Armand echoed.

It took him almost a full minute to unseal the memory. Jesse understood why; she’d seen how it kept slipping loose, back in Sonoma. Maharet had taken

sat on that sofa, texting her beloved aunt about fashion she’d been two days ago. Her entire view of herself had shifted tectonically—irreversibly. It was unimaginable to her, the gap between herself and that woman who’d them spoke to Maharet. Jesse wasn’t the same person would be an impersonation no matter which one of

Yes, that was it, wasn’t it? That was the problem. It at the moment. Don’t you agree?”  
“Listen. I’m going to do a far better job pretending to be Jesse from two days ago than Jesse is

first time he met her.  
made a new friend. Hell, he’d been in danger since the since the moment she texted Maharet and said she already done that, hadn’t she? He’d been in danger thought of putting him in danger. But then, she’d not to do it, not to get involved. She couldn’t bear the Armand looked unsure; Jesse wanted to tell him

as Jesse.”  
both turned towards him in surprise. “I’ll text her back as Jesse.”  
“Let me do it,” Rashid broke in. Armand and Jesse sorry, I can’t.”

“I can’t,” she breathed, her voice tiny, “I can’t, I’m into a blind, uncontrollable panic.  
But the thought of speaking to Maharet sent her memories and then properly coordinate their next steps.

more time to operate—to access those last two possible and allay her concerns. It would give them knew it was a good idea to contact Maharet as soon as hands cupping her face that she had started to

Jesse didn’t realize until she felt Armand’s cool voice. *Will you let me show you something nice?* Maharet’s voice. *Will you wear it for me? Maharet’s Maharet’s voice. Let me help make it feel better.* throughout her life. Maharet’s voice. *It’s a good dream.*

phone, the way Jesse had so many many times her. Hear her familiar low voice coming through the her. Lie to Maharet. *Talk to Maharet.* Text her or call Offer her an excuse. By that, Armand meant: lie to mild illness...”

there are a variety of explanations. A mislaid phone, a excuse for your absence these last two days? Surely, best to stall. Can you offer your aunt some plausible set it in motion. For the present, I believe it would be

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“Jesse, you’re okay, everything’s going to be okay”

But Rashid shouldn’t say that to her, because it wasn’t. Maharet was untouchable. Immutable. She wanted Jesse and she would have her. Jesse wouldn’t even be able to fight it, in the end. Her body would succumb, just like it always did. She would tremble, or puke, or come, or cry—whatever Maharet chose. And her mind would succumb, just like it always did. She probably wouldn’t even remember trying to resist in the first place.

It wasn’t hard to guess the outcome, based on precedent. She’d submitted to Maharet so many times before that it had been programmed into her, down to the marrow. Like muscle memory. *Like riding a bike*—once you learned you never really forgot. Never forgot. Bit of irony there. Jesse wanted to laugh at it, but that would’ve required air in her lungs.

There were black spots swimming across her vision. Maybe she was going to pass out. That would be nice. Take a little break. Or maybe she was dying. That would be nice, too. It wasn’t something Jesse had ever wanted before. But then, she’d never consciously come toe-to-toe with a fate-worse-than before, had she? Much less one so clearly inescapable by anything less than death.

It would be nice to die here on this hotel floor. The suite really was quite pleasant. Jesse was glad Rashid had splurged on it, since it was Armand’s favorite or whatever he’d said when Armand was under the bed. She was glad Armand had such good taste in hotels. A nice place to go. It wasn’t fair, that Rashid would have to watch her die. She did feel bad about that. But maybe Armand would turn his face away. Or maybe he could just erase it from Rashid’s memory later. Oh, Jesse hoped not. She hoped Armand didn’t ever do that to Rashid—bury anything inconvenient, reshape him this way and that. No, no. He didn’t do that, did he? She didn’t think he would. But then, she wasn’t the best judge, was she? How many times in those memories had she thought: *no, no, she wouldn’t do that to me*—It was honestly getting repetitive, how fucking wrong she was every single time.

But she wasn’t really dying, she knew. People who

(It was nice to make someone laugh. Aunt Maharet didn't really get Jesse's humor. She tried to explain, sometimes, but the gap in cultural context was often big enough that Jesse merely muttered a "nevermind.") But that day, instead of answering her, Graciela only asked, "Jesse... how are you doing?" And Jesse remembered at that moment, with a rush of embarrassment, the last time they'd run into one another. Graciela had been cleaning the bathrooms on the upper floors of the house, and she'd come across Jesse sobbing in one of them. Strange. Jesse couldn't remember anymore what she'd been crying about. She'd been very, very drunk and only wearing her underwear. The floor tiles had been so cold against the backs of her thighs. They must have been very cold, for her to have been shivering as much as she remembered shivering. Graciela had helped her to her feet and asked her what was wrong, hadn't she? What had Jesse said back? "I can't tell you, I can't tell you, I can't tell you..." "I'm good," Jesse lied, feeling cold all over. How had she forgotten Graciela finding her like that? Why couldn't she remember what she'd been crying over? "I'm gonna lay off the wine for a bit, I think. I've been going way overboard. I've got the house all to myself, my aunt's out of town. Hey, can I, like, I don't know... help you with dishes or whatever? That's not against the rules, right?" So she helped with dishes, and Graciela talked to her about the bad TV show, and her younger brothers, and the classes she was planning on taking during her next semester at college. She asked Jesse questions, too. Most of them were frivolous, but some felt... different. Probing. Jesse skirted around more than a few, giving evasive non-answers. Maharet called that night to check on her. Jesse badly she missed her and meant it. She told Maharet she was going to have her work cut out for her, making up for so many missed kisses. She didn't drink any wine with dinner that night; she lay in bed, jittery and nauseous, for hours before she could sleep. Graciela did not have work the next day. Jesse took

Mael was going to be gone for the rest of the month, off to visit someone named Eric who Jesse thought was either her aunt's ex or Mael's ex or perhaps both. So she was alone in the big, empty house—apart from her aunt's domestic staff, of course. That first day of having the house to herself, Jesse went and found Graciela. She'd memorized her schedule by now and knew she would be around that day. She was probably making a nuisance of herself and she knew it. This was just a job to Graciela; she was probably only nice to Jesse because she was afraid she'd get fired if she wasn't. Jesse knew that. She tried not to be a pest. But she was so lonely. It wouldn't hurt to chat with her for just a few minutes, would it? Jesse found her in the kitchen, working her way through the dishes from last night's dinner. Graciela smiled when she saw her. (Was it bad, that Jesse found her braces kind of cute? Was she an awful person, for secretly thinking Graciela's green eyes were beautiful? Jesse was with Maharet. She was happy; they were in love. It was everything she'd always wanted. She shouldn't even be noticing that anyone else existed, let alone wondering what it would be like to kiss them. It was only a little crush. Just a harmless, meaningless flutter in her stomach any time she caught sight of Graciela. She was never going to act on it, obviously.) Jesse hopped up onto the counter beside the sink, asked, "So what's the new drama?" For a month now, once a week, whenever they ran into one another, Graciela would launch into an explanation of everything that had happened on the newest episode of some medical drama she was obsessed with. It was, from the sound of it, utter garbage. Cheap melodrama served up in a hospital where the doctors seemed to mostly make out in elevators and have personal crises at work. Graciela gave Jesse humorous rundowns on all the backstabbing and drunken hookups and tearful confessions. Jesse didn't really care about the show; she couldn't remember the name of a single character. But Graciela's summaries were so funny, so irreverent, so mean. How could she not hang on every word? How could she resist joining in, cracking jokes?

She'd hit the nail on the head, judging by the way Rashid turned his face away and began chewing on his lower lip. Rashid was always coming to everyone's rescue, wasn't he? Coaxing Armand out from under the bed. Bringing Jesse changes of clothes, holding her hand. Noticing when no one else did that something was wrong and she needed help. When did anyone else ever rescue him? He'd said it, in his own oblique way, when he talked about how things were between him and Armand. How rare it was for anyone to treat him like he was at all soft or capable of being damaged. "Apparently, Director Talbot likes to—how'd you put it?—'corner him and try to cop a feel'? See, my memory's actually pretty good when it's not being fucked with. And, knowing Rashid, that's probably an understatement. He told me he's handling it, but I'm pretty sure that's code for 'I'm acting like it isn't happening because I don't know how to ask for help.' " "Hmm," Armand said, low and considering. His posture remained loose, but his irises had gone electric orange. He shifted to face Rashid and asked, "Were you concerned I would consider it unfaithfulness?" Rashid closed his eyes and gave a single nod. There was a furrow between his brows, a tightness around his eyes as if he were trying not to cry. "Jesse," Armand said, never taking his eyes off Rashid, "Would you mind giving me a few minutes alone with my lover, please?" "I think for me to go buy some hair dye," she announced, getting to her feet. As she walked by, she paused to squeeze Rashid's shoulder. "Sorry," she whispered, earnestly, "I just—you deserve better." When she returned half an hour later, Armand was sitting at one end of the couch with Rashid curled up on the rest of it, his head in Armand's lap. Armand was petting his hair; he seemed to be looking for every single gray hair mixed in with the black. Whenever he found one, he would trace it with the pointed tip of his fingernail, just barely touching. Jesse rubbed at her chin, an unconscious gesture, remembering just how sharp those nails were. She saw—and felt a little guilty and voyeuristic for it—how Rashid shivered at each featherlight touch. Armand, this tender monster of

Rashid's, petting him so carefully with those deadly claws. It had all been abstract to her, what Rashid said about the appeal of knowing how much damage Armand could do to him, and being sure he would not do it. But Jesse got it a bit more, now. She had a far more concrete sense of what it felt like when a vampire did *not* restrain themselves. She could see why this would be so important to him: for someone with that much power to hold it all back and simply cradle him. "Director Talbot wants you to turn your phone on," Rashid announced, not opening his eyes. "What?" "Your phone. It's been off for two days, apparently." Jesse's first reaction was to think that that couldn't be right. She so rarely turned her phone off. But she cast her mind back... when *had* she last used it? She'd been texting with Maharet as she waited for Rashid to bring Armand from the airport. When she'd heard them at the door, she'd been so nervous and distracted that—yes—she'd not just silenced her phone, but shut it off completely. And she hadn't glanced at it since. When would she? For the last two days, Jesse hadn't been a part of the world. She was on pause. Down for maintenance. Back soon. "Apparently Clive and Nigel have been bickering over how to translate some section of some ancient tablet and your remote services as impartial tiebreaker are urgently required or bloody civil war is going to break out in the halls of the Motherhouse." There it was: Rashid's sense of humor, back again. Jesse didn't know what they'd talked about while she was out or how Armand had managed to comfort Rashid. She didn't need to know. She could tell he was doing better than he had been for at least a day, she thought. Probably longer. "The things I do for world peace..." she muttered, tracking down her phone and switching it on. It took a moment for it to restart, and when it did— Nine missed calls: two from Director Talbot, and seven from Maharet. Thirty unread messages: four from Director Talbot,

extra care that that would not happen again, had tucked it away deep inside the knot of all those other hidden memories. The tiniest doll of the matryoshkas.

Jesse was alone.

Maharet had needed to leave unexpectedly; a crisis in the Los Angeles branch of the Great Family. She'd told Jesse many times about her duties to the Great Family. She kept the records. She facilitated visits and correspondence across the globe. She arranged career connections and mentors and even marriages to unite different branches. The rarest of these duties—but one of the most essential, she said—was her offer of intervention. In times of crisis, members of the family knew they could reach out to her to rescue them from trouble. The origin or depth of the trouble did not seem to matter: once Maharet was called on, she would descend and fix everything. That was her role.

She didn't say exactly what it was she was leaving to do, but Jesse overheard enough to put together a fairly complete picture in her head. A cousin a few years older than her, whom she'd never liked very much; party drugs and tequila; a blue Mercedes; a crash; an arrest for DUI; an old man in another car who died from his injuries; an enraged widow. Jesse listened to the way Maharet talked about it on the phone (convenient, how it had begun to work again just when Maharet needed it). An unfortunate, practically unpreventable accident. Hardly more than a misunderstanding, if looked at from the right angle. Tragic, but nothing that couldn't be handled outside of court. A few soft words, a few zeroes on the end of a check. She was on the way. She would talk sense into those silly lawyers working for the DA. She would make it right.

(Jesse thought of Miriam. She knew only a little about the car crash that had killed her mother. She hadn't lived long enough to tell anyone what happened, but there were signs another car had collided with hers. An impact in the wrong place, chips of paint that didn't match her car. No one was ever caught, of course. Had that driver been under the influence? Did they know they'd killed someone? Did they know she'd been born while her mother bled out in the wreckage? Did they know what they'd taken from Jesse, before she drew her first breath?)

painkillers with her breakfast and did not drink all day. She drifted from room to room in the house, trying to read, trying to work on the quilt, but nothing held her focus. She was, she realized, *bored*. It was boring here. How hadn't she noticed that before now?

Again, that evening, a call from Maharet. Again, the overwhelming feeling of relief, as soon as Jesse heard her voice. Jesse asked how soon she would be home; Maharet did not know. A few more days, at least.

That night, as she was tossing and turning and waiting for sleep, Jesse realized she hadn't had sex in two whole days. She'd been a virgin, when she got off the plane in San Francisco, and every day since then she'd had sex at least once. More, most days.

(But it was odd, wasn't it? Jesse thought back to that first night here. Her first time with Maharet. Candles everywhere; rose petals on the giant bed, pink and white and yellow. The way they got caught in Maharet's hair. Like something out of a music video. Romantic and soft and perfect.

Except.

When Jesse had warned—in halting words, her face burning hot with embarrassment—that she was still a virgin, Maharet had laughed. A low, hot, mean little laugh that had made a muscle deep inside Jesse clench. What had Maharet meant by that laugh? By her words after it: "*Of course you are, sweet little thing?*"

Why had it felt so familiar, Maharet's cool tongue sliding against her clit? The feel of her fingers indenting into the soft flesh of Jesse's thighs, as she parted them to make more room for herself? It should have felt new. Why didn't it?)

The third day, Graciela was back. She came to find Jesse this time—out on the terrace, drinking her morning coffee.

"Is your aunt still gone?" she asked. Something urgent about her tone.

"Yes, why?"

Graciela had something held between her hands. She was nervous, Jesse realized. Scared, even.

"I told you, my program at school is pre-law. I want to be a lawyer, do advocacy work. I want—to help people who need help."

"Yes?" Jesse was baffled by the seeming

one each from Olive and Nigel, and the rest from Maharet.

She didn't mean to drop her phone. It was simply that her hands had gone so numb that she didn't have the strength to grip it, and it fell away.

Jesse might have felt as if she was on pause since Armand took that first peek inside her brain and declared her *untitled*, but the world had continued turning. It had kept on, and it had noticed her absence. She had noticed. She wouldn't have called and texted so much if she wasn't suspicious.

She already knew something was happening. Jesse had hoped she would have more time, but Maharet knew already. She was going to find it all out. When had it ever been possible to keep anything from her? Any secret? Any little corner of her self, her life? She'd never once managed it. It was all open to Maharet; all laid out, bare and vulnerable, for her to do with it whatever she liked.

"Jesse?"

Maharet was going to find her. She was going to crack her open and see all of it. Jesse's disobedience; Jesse's betrayal. Maharet was going to be so, so mad at what she'd done to her hair. Considering what she'd done to Jesse simply for talking back, surely it would be worse, whatever punishment she decided on for this deliberate act of spite, depriving her of one of her great pleasures.

"Jesse?"

Jesse didn't have anything within reach to hold onto, and she was pretty sure standing wasn't going to be an option for much longer. She cased herself down as gracefully as she could, and that was a good call. It was a little better on the floor. She still couldn't breathe, but at least she wasn't going to fall.

There was no escape. That was the truth she'd been avoiding this whole time. Maharet was never going to let her go willingly, and there was nothing that she or anyone else could do about it. What could prevent it? No human law or organization. No plea from Jesse, no matter how eloquent. No act of self-defense, no matter how desperate. She would continue to do whatever she wanted with Jesse, with perfect impunity.

It was hopeless.

the end for the morning, when she hoped her own future would feel a little less bleak?

Before she could ask their thoughts about postponing, Rashid's phone buzzed. A rare thing—he habitually had his notifications turned off, with exceptions programmed in for a few work contacts. He pulled it out to look.

"It's from Director Talbot." His grimace was so fleeting that Jesse almost missed it. She remembered all in a rush what Rashid had told her in the pub a few weeks back. It felt like lifetimes ago: everything before she walked into this hotel suite did. But it hadn't been. It was recent. It was *current*. He had probably talked to David this morning when he stopped by the Motherhouse for her things.

Before Rashid could even open the text, Jesse turned to Armand and asked in a rush, "Has Rashid told you about him?"

Armand's eyes slid over to Rashid and then back to Jesse, "Told me what about him?"

It was probably a dick move, what she was doing right now. Maybe she shouldn't have said anything at all. She wasn't a great liar, but there was still time to bail out. Come up with something half-true and plausible that would preserve Rashid's privacy. But what if what he needed right now wasn't more privacy? He'd said he was handling it, but that honestly sounded more like a tactic to get her to drop the subject than it was any indication of a real plan in the works.

Jesse couldn't stand it, knowing and not saying anything. Rashid looked profoundly unhappy: his shoulders were tight and he was staring unseeing down at his phone, a dark flush on his face. Miserable, and silent, and full of shame. She didn't want anything in the world to make him look like that ever again.

Understanding slotted into place in her mind. She was never entirely sure if these intuitive leaps she made were her powers at work or simply a combination of insight and luck. Either way, a theory occurred to her and she voiced it immediately.

"You haven't told Armand because you're afraid it might upset him, right? Little too close to home? So you just—put up with it and don't tell anyone because you don't want to trouble them?"