This story follows the development of the relationship between Alec and Magnus as they confront a new enemy that puts their love to the test. It borrows some elements from both the Books and the TV series but also offers completely original content.

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"I Don't Think I Can Live Without You"

Chapter Summary

And now with this simply statement – “I don’t think I can live without you” – Alec had broken through the last of Magnus’ defenses. It was more than a simple “I love you” or “I need you”. It was a declaration of a life offered freely and decisively, an oath to put his very life on the line for Magnus.

“I don’t think I can live without you,” Alec told Magnus outside the Hunter’s Moon, his face full of conviction, and not a trace of hesitation in his voice. It was not an explanation, a plea, an apology or a peace offering. Neither was the statement offered as part of a transaction, as something one offers hoping to receive something of equal value in return. Rather, the words came out as an offering of love, a gift that, like the omamori charm he gave Magnus after their night in Tokyo, Alec offered freely and unconditionally.

The words seemed to float in the air for a few moments, light and luminescent like white feathers caught in the freeze. Unable to speak and feeling his heartbeat suddenly speeding up, and a surge of energy raising from the center of his chest, Magnus looked into the eyes of the tall and striking looking young man that only months before walked into his life full of innocence and wonder. What he saw in that face and in those eyes surprised him even more. There was not a shred of doubt in Alec’s face, not a hint of hesitation or resentment. He simply shook his head as if to emphasize even more the truthfulness of his confession: “I don’t think I can live without you.”

When Alex had asked him whether they could talk, Magnus had agreed with a simple but nervous ‘yeah’. Before following Alec out of the bar, however, he had drained the contents of his glass, hoping that the alcohol burning down his throat would embolden him and calm the energy he felt surging through him every time that Alec was nearby. He had followed Alec out of the bar then, his hands shaking and his breathing shallow. Magnus was afraid: afraid of this conversations that he knew he could not avoid; afraid of the outcome; afraid that the events of the last couple of weeks had caused a damage that couldn’t be repaired; afraid of losing this man, the first one to truly pierce through the barriers he had erected around his heart since the death of his mother all those centuries ago.

When Alec stopped a few meters outside the bar, Magnus had readied himself for a long-drawn rehashing of the painful last two weeks. He steeled himself to hear, not only Alec’s explanations, apologies and perhaps justifications, but also, Magnus feared, his resentment and recriminations. Deep down, Magnus knew his decision to walk away from Alec had felt like stab in the young man’s heart. Magnus had felt betrayed and, hurt, he had wanted to hurt Alec, to make him feel what not being trusted felt like. Now, Alec had asked that they talk and Magnus expected the conversation to be painful, perhaps even more painful than the miserable last couple of weeks in which the memory of Alec had felt like a weight on Magnus’ shoulders, a weight that slowed him down and that took all his magic to disguise.

But rather than apologies, justifications or recriminations, Alec had simply turned and, looking at Magnus with the full force of his big brown eyes that tonight looked like deep pools of rich dark honey, had uttered the simple words: “I don’t think I can live without you.” The words felt like an incantation or a spell, working their magic on Magnus, reaching with invisible tendrils to the
deepest corners of his heart, melting the last of his defenses, and demolishing the last remnants of the wall that he had erected around his heart.

In the hundreds of years that he had walked the earth, Magnus thought he had seen and experienced everything; that nothing and no one could surprise him anymore. Yet, since the very first time they met, this young man, now standing in front of him with his own heart in his hands, offering it to Magnus without expecting anything in return, had constantly surprised him. First, it was the painful way in which Alec battled with his own loneliness; his stout loyalty to his family despite the sacrifice that such loyalty required; the battles he waged with himself to hide the truth of who he was from himself and the world; and later, his bravery to publicly declare his identity and his feelings for Magnus. When Magnus had thought that Alec couldn’t surprise him anymore, Alec had offered him his innocence and inexperience without excuses or explanations, and then he had put himself in Magnus’ hands without hesitation, allowing Magnus to show him what love is like, not just love between two men, but any love.

Alex’s innocence had first surprised and then frightened Magnus. That innocence that Alex had showed him without shame had made Magnus reconsider his original onward flirtatiousness. He had understood the responsibility that came with Alec choosing him to be the one to walk with him the risky path of self-discovery. Magnus’ own journey had been so painful and so many people had taken advantage of his own innocence, hurt him in unimaginable ways, that he could not bear ever causing a similar pain to someone with such as open heart as Alec. The young’s man innocence and inexperience had softened Magnus’ heart and he felt an intense desire to protect him.

Knowing that he would never forgive himself if he ever inflicted on Alec the pain that others had inflicted on him, Magnus had decided to take a step back and slow things down. He had decided to allow Alec to decide the terms of their relationship, giving him the freedom to walk away if he wanted to, and to go only as far as he felt comfortable. Magnus had understood that he needed to be gentle, and let Alec be in the driver’s seat of their relationship. Yet, by slowing things down and without knowing it, Magnus had also created the opportunity and time for Alec to make his way into his own heart.

Alec had, once again, surprised him, disarming him with big and small gestures of care and affection: the way in which he cared for Magnus when bad memories kept him awake at night, checked on him when he drained too much of his magic, and looked at him from across the room as if he was the only person there. Alec, with his manly cargo pants and black t-shirts, his tough soldier’s exterior, and his protective nature that so strikingly contrasted with his fragile mortality, had turned out to be a caring, warm and gentle man. With every gesture, he had broken through Magnus’ tough and glittery exterior and touched the fragile abandoned child he carried within and fought so hard to hide.

Since the very beginning, Magnus had felt each of Alec’s gestures as unexpected gifts: the way in which Alec had kissed him, declaring his feeling publicly and for all to see; the way he reached to touch Magnus’ hand; the innocent way in which he had told Magnus he was ready to take things to the next level and had then taken him to bed; the sincerity with which he had told Magnus that his warlock mark was beautiful; and, the way he had compensated for his own inexperience by letting Magnus guide him, allowing him to introduce him to the act of lovemaking –for, from the very first time, theirs had been an act of love, not just sex. Before Alec even declared that he loved him, Magnus had felt his love through these big and small gestures which, like stepping stones across a pond, Alec had walked resolutely to get closer and closer to Magnus.

And now with this simply statement –“I don’t think I can live without you” –Alec had broken through the last of Magnus’ defenses. It was more than a simple “I love you” or “I need you”. It
was a declaration of a life offered freely and decisively, an oath to put his very life on the line for Magnus.

Magnus struggled to control the temptation to reach across the distance and touch Alec, run his fingers through his hair and down his face because, at that moment, the words —“I don’t think I can live without you” —threatened to break the control he always kept on his magic. He could feel the current of magic powers spilling from the center of his chest, and he feared that if he lifted his hands and reached for Alec, sparkles of electricity would shoot from his fingertips. He wondered for a moment whether his eyes had changed from the deep brown of his glamour to the cat yellow green eyes that were the sign of his true condition as a warlock and an old feeling of shame came over him, shame for not being able to control himself, shame for being an abomination.

For centuries, Magnus had fought to tame and subdue the demon in him, and to master his magic forcing it to obey him. He always thought of his demonic blood as a stain that he needed to conceal. Although he had endeavored to use his magic for good, the demon still felt like a dark enemy presence always lurking under the surface of his carefully crafted image, threatening to betray him, fighting with his human side in a never-ending and hopeless battle. Yet at this moment, the two parts of himself –human and demon –were surprisingly more in agreement than ever before in his immortal life. He loved and yearned for Alec with every fiber of his being: the human and the demonic.

“...Magnus said after a few moments in which he struggled for his own self-control. “But I don’t.”

It was Alec, once again, who surprised him by crossing the distance between them to kiss him tenderly and passionately, his hands running up Magnus’ arms and then resting on his cheek, each touch feeling like a maddening mixture of fire and ice. Magnus tried to master every ounce of self-control so his magic didn’t escape him and engulf them in a whirlpool of blue fire and wind, the kiss becoming more intense because of the war Magnus internally waged with himself.

“I am all into parties,” Magnus said once they broke their kiss, his voice playful, though he wondered whether Alec could perceive the tension underneath the innocent words. “But, what do you say we get out of here?”

They walked through the quiet and dark streets of New York, talking quietly and casually, their bodies close, but not touching, a field of magic energy building between them. When they finally got to his penthouse, Magnus opened the door with shaky hands, and let Alec in. They were just inside the door, when Alec turned and grabbing Magnus by the lapel of his jacket closed the distance between them. Magnus became lips, then, and Alec tongue, and he explored Magnus with a certainty and passion that left Magnus breathless, dizzy and fighting for control. Alec’s strong and muscular body seemed to mold to Magnus’ equally strong muscles, both becoming softer and gentler somehow, as they fit together in a harmonious whole.

Moving in unison and almost by instinct, they made their way to the bedroom. There, they became entangled in a sea of red silk as they rediscovered each other’s bodies, exploring each other with their fingers, lips and tongues, expressing with each touch and each caress all the desire accumulated in the long and lonely days of absence and longing. They made love slowly and without haste, rejoicing in the way in which they each responded to the touch of the other. There were few words; rather, they let their bodies speak in the ancient language of love and passion, each offering himself to the other unconditionally. If Alec had let Magnus guide him before, this time, he was the one guiding Magnus, slowly enticing him to give himself fully and without reservation to the love they shared.
“You are beautiful,” Alec said once again when Magnus’ eyes turned into the yellow green eyes of a cat, a sign that revealed that the demon inside him wanted to free itself of the shackles in which Magnus kept it prisoner. Afraid of his own magic, Magnus tried to pull away just enough to regain his self-control, but Alec stopped him with a gentle but certain shake of his head.

“I am not afraid of your magic, warlock,” Alec whispered, his forehead touching Magnus’. “I want to be with all of you, see all of you, feel all of you.” Alec kissed him again, a deep and passionate kiss that felt like gentle tendrils reaching deep inside Magnus for the demon and inviting it to come out once and for all.

A surge of energy exploded within Magnus when he let go of the last of his self-control and the magic began to spill freely from deep within him reaching towards Alec. The magic engulfed them in a cloud of green, blue, and purple energy that exploded like tiny fireworks around them, sending multicolor shooting stars across the room. Free of his self-imposed constrains, Magnus allowed himself to feel Alec with every part of his body and soul, reaching with his magic towards the very center of Alec’s being. Energy began to flow between them like it had that night that Alec had offered his strength to help Magnus heal Luke. This time, however, the magic flowed in both direction, a shared energy that became compounded the more their desire and passion increased.

As they began to build towards a shared climax, Magnus’ skin began to glow, his veins becoming like golden luminescent lines and his skin irradiating tiny shocks of electricity that Alec felt in every inch of his being. The flowing magic felt on Alec’s skin like the light touches of feathers, cold and warm at the same time. The sensations were so intense that neither of them seemed to notice the energy engulfing them in a gentle freeze that lifted them almost a foot off the bed, where they remained suspended in time and space, unaware of their defiance of the laws of gravity.

As Magnus run his fingers over Alec’s skin, they left luminescent traces of blue, gold and green that became momentarily edged on Alec’s skin in beautiful circular lines that briefly obscured his runes. With each touch, Alec felt jolts of magic enter him and mix with his own desire, multiplying the pleasure and increasing his love for this beautiful old soul that had taught him that it was okay to give oneself fully and completely to another. When they could no longer contain all the magic building between them, Alec and Magnus finally let themselves go and something in each of their hearts exploded in the most powerful of torrents, leaving them floating in midair above the bed, untethered to this world, somewhere between heaven and earth, and linked just to one another in an unbreakable bond.

Afterward, it was Magnus who came to his senses first. Aware of the energy still lingering between them and of their defiance of gravity, he made a small gesture with his hand and gently deposited them back on the bed, Alex head resting on the pillow, his eyes closed, and Magnus’ head resting in the crook of Alec’s arm. With another gesture, he conjured the duvet to cover them.

After a moment, Alec took a deep breath and opened his eyes to look at Magnus. “Forgive me,” he said, tears in his eyes. “I didn’t mean to hurt you and I promise that I will never keep anything from you ever again.”

Magnus looked at him with an expression of surprise because, at this moment, he couldn’t remember anymore the anger and hurt he had felt.

“You are forgiven,” he said and kissed him gently.

They remained silent in their embrace, each in their own thoughts but still aware of the presence of the other. After a while, Magnus felt Alec’s breathing slow suggesting that he was asleep. His own body began to relax then, more comfortable and sated than he had ever been before in his very long life.
“I don’t think I can live without you either,” Magnus whispered as his eyes began to close, and his last memory before sleep finally claimed him was of Alec wrapping his arms even more tightly around him, a sight of deep contentment escaping his lips.
Chapter Summary

Four weeks after the death of Valentine, Alec and Magnus are on vacation when something goes terribly wrong.

It is not Enough

Alec was floating, weightless and unmoored, just Magnus' firm arms holding him steady, as if to stop him from flying away while the most powerful waves of pleasure washed over him, exploding in exquisite bursts of energy that pulsed throughout his whole body; making the hair in the back of his neck stand on end and shivers run up and down his spine. He thought he saw swirls of golden and purple lines glow on his skin, but the effect quickly disappeared and he wondered whether his eyes were playing tricks on him. In any case, he wasn't concerned, engrossed as he was in the aftershocks of a powerful climax. He closed his eyes and exhaled loudly as the last of the waves moved through his body. Magnus held him, like he, Alec, had held Magnus a few moments ago as the man Alec loved more than he ever thought possible to love anyone also came undone.

With his head resting against Magnus' chest, Alec could hear his lover's heartbeat pulsating rapidly and, feeling his own heart drumming against his chest, thought that their hearts were beating in harmony, as if they were part of the same melody; as if they complemented one another.

"Were we floating just now?" he asked, in a sleepy voice, opening his eyes and noticing that they were lying on sheets so white that the morning light streaming from the window seemed to bounce off them adding to the soft brightness of the room.

"I don't know," replied Magnus, his voice low and soft. "I guess I was a little distracted and I didn't notice."

"You are very easily distracted, aren't you, warlock?" asked Alec, looking him in the eyes, a broad smile that showed two perfect rows of white teeth.

"It is your fault, Shadowhunter," Magnus said, a seductively coy expression on his lovely face. He then kissed Alec gently and softly, first on the lips and then on his forehead, the gesture almost paternal.

When they were in public, Magnus called him by his full name –Alexander– a name that no one else used and that in Magnus' lips sounded to Alec like a public acknowledgement of their relationship, as if Magnus was claiming him as his. In the intimacy of their bed, however, Magnus sometimes called him Shadowhunter and Alec called him warlock, and the names became secret code words, seductive and sinful, like slowly melting chocolate in their lips. Occasionally, one of them used these secrets names when they were not in bed or in their room, though always in a whisper and never in front of others, and the names sounded like an invitation, or a reminder of the intense and intimate moments they shared. Thus, the words that had originally marked their difference and their belonging to different worlds, had in their lovemaking acquired different meanings, and become part of the new vocabulary they used to tell their love story.

Alec brought his nose to the crock of Magnus' neck and inhaled in the aroma of forest and fresh
mountain air that he always associated with Magnus. Not for the first time, Alec was surprised that Magnus, barely six feet tall and slimmer than Alec, could so comfortably and securely cradle his six-foot-four-inch frame. He wondered whether his feeling of security had less to do with height and physical prowess and more with Magnus' magic, and with the certainty that Magnus could and would protect him against any danger.

As Nephilim, Alec was very aware of his limitations as a human and a mortal; a mortal with advanced fighting and weapons skills, but a mortal, nonetheless. Magnus was another kind of creature, half human and half demon, with powers that Alec was still getting to know and that surprised him every day, like the spell he used the other day when they were in the bathtub to fill the room with music even though there was not a stereo in sight.

Alec’s body relaxed in Magnus’s arms and, for a second, he dozed off, safe, contented and fulfilled, but then his stomach growled loudly and Magnus' stomach joined in, sending them both into bursts of laughing.

"I guess love is not enough to sustain us," Magnus said between chuckles.

"I guess not," replied Alec reaching to brush a strand of hair away from Magnus' face, and noticing how young he looked with his hair in disarray.

Magnus turned and reached for the phone, and after dialing, he spoke in perfect Catalan to someone on the other side of the line. Alec could make up words such as coffee and espresso, but very little else.

"What should we do today?" Alec asked when Magnus got off the phone, and he turned and laid back on the bed, one arm bent under his head, the other reaching for Alec's hand.

"I have all kinds of ideas, some of which involve never getting dressed or leaving this room," Magnus replied with a playful and seductive smile.

"Magnus," said Alec in a soft and serious tone. "I thought I heard you pacing about the room last night. Did you have trouble sleeping?"

"It is nothing," said Magnus with a warm smile that although sincere, Alec thought, concealed a mixture of sadness and something else he couldn't identify. Almost instinctually, Magnus brought his hand to his chest and grabbed the amulet he always wore around his neck hanging from a silver chain. The amulet looked like an old arrowhead, its edges and surface uneven as if it had been chiseled by hand or with some rudimentary tool. It appeared to be very old and it shined with dull silvery sheen.

Magnus always wore jewelry – earrings, necklaces, bracelets and rings –but he usually took all of them off before bed. Never this amulet though; it always hung around his neck and Alec was accustomed to seeing Magnus holding it in his hand when he was deep in thought or something troubled him.

"Are you sure? You would tell me if something is bothering you, wouldn't you?" he asked Magnus with an intent expression in his eyes.

"Of course," replied Magnus, turning and getting out of bed, as if he wanted to end the conversation before Alec asked any more questions. Alec saw him walk towards the bathroom and, for an instant, thought that Magnus's shoulders were slumped, as if he was carrying a heavy burden.

Half an hour later, Alec came out of the shower, wearing a grey t-shirt and black jeans, and found
Magnus standing and looking out the window, in a silk robe the color of deep red wine that contrasted with the dark brown of the curtains and that made Magnus' skin appear even more luminescent and golden. Magnus seemed to be lost in thought, his eyes on the plaza down below, but apparently not really looking at anything. Seeing him standing by the window, a coffee cup in his hands and an absent expression on his face, Alec felt something tugging at his heart, and knew that he would never love anyone like he loved this man, with all his contradictions, eccentricities and scars.

This morning, Magnus wore none of the make-up or glitter that usually decorated his face and hair when he was out and about, and without it, he looked boyish. He was still strikingly handsome with almond shape eyes, high cheek bones and a soft golden glow on his skin. However, his features appeared less sharp. He also looked vulnerable somehow, as if with the make-up, glitter and jewelry, he also took off the armor with which he usually protected himself against any attacks, downworldly or otherwise. His eyes were a dark chocolate brown this morning and his hair, which was very short on the sides and the back, and longer and slightly asymmetrical on top was still wet from the shower and fell across his forehead in strands that were so black that they reminded Alec of the darkest of nights.

Alec loved the public Magnus, with the multicolor hair, the jewelry and the makeup. That Magnus was strong, fierce and unconcerned about what people thought of him. But, he also loved this Magnus, the one that came out only in the intimacy of the time and space the two of them shared. This Magnus was gentler somehow, more vulnerable, softer and loving. Alec thought that sometimes he could get a glimpse in this Magnus of the abandoned and wounded child he once was hundreds of years ago.

Alec stood behind Magnus and wrapped his arms around his waist resting his chin atop Magnus’ shoulder. Immediately, he felt Magnus' body soften and lean against his. The gesture and the position felt familiar and Alec marveled at the fact that they had become so comfortable with each other, despite their relationship being relatively new. He felt at home with Magnus, as if he had always belonged with him, as if they had always meant to be together, and couldn't imagine never having Magnus in his life, never being able to hold him the way he held him now.

Another thought quickly followed: in time he, Alec, would age and die, and it would be Magnus the one to remain in this world, in a world without Alec. The thought was unpleasant and not new. In fact, it was something that Alec thought about all the time since he first understood what he felt for Magnus. He had told Magnus outside the Hunter's Moon that he couldn't live without him; but in truth, it would eventually be Magnus the one who would have to live without Alec. The thought awoke old feelings of inadequacy and Alec couldn't help thinking that he was not good enough for Magnus; that Magnus deserved someone with whom he could share centuries and not just decades. Deep down, Alec wondered whether he, a simple mortal, someone with such limited life experiences, let alone life expectancy, could ever be enough for someone as powerful and ageless as Magnus. Determined not to spoil this moment, however, Alec pushed the thoughts out of his mind.

They stood in silence for a long while, Magnus leaning against Alex. They looked out onto the already buzzing Catalunya plaza. From their vantage point in their luxury suite on the top floor of an exclusive hotel, they could see people walking between the imposing statues and water fountains that adorned the plaza. From this distance, Alec could not tell whether the people were mundanes, Shadowhunters or Downworlders. There were obviously no vampires down there this morning, because of the bright sun that hung in a cloudless summer sky and shone over the square, but Alex wondered whether any warlocks, werewolves or Shadowhunters were going about their business, perhaps heading for work, or on a mission. From up here, the people down in the square looked small and indistinguishable, and Alec thought that, for a moment, he could forget that there
were more than one world and more than one species of human sharing the earth. Most importantly, he could forget that his job was to kill demons and guard both the mundane world and the Downworld.

"What should be do after breakfast Alexander?" Magnus asked interrupting Alec's thoughts, as he turned and briefly placed a hand on Alec's chest before walking in the direction of the table on which the food he had ordered earlier awaited under silvery domes. "Is there anything you would like to see while we are in Barcelona?"

"I would like to see the Gothic Quarters," replied Alec. "I have been told that one cannot come to Barcelona and not see them."

"Okay, sounds like a plan, but I should mention that, except for the ruins of a Roman temple and the palace that used to house the court, almost everything else dates to the late nineteen-century, at least two hundred years after the Gothic area. The Quarters were rebuilt as a tourist attraction" said Magnus.

"I would still like to see it, and I suspect you have lots of stories to tell me about the downworlders in the city and about the previous times you were here."

After the death of Valentine and the celebration at the Hunter's Moon four weeks ago, Alec spent several days in between meetings and writing reports to The Clave. His days were long and exhausting, and went in a blur of discussions, explanations, and countless hours in front of a screen reading or writing mission reports. No matter how late he finished for the day, Alec always made his way to Magnus' penthouse where the warlock waited for him, always smiling, a drink in his hand. They spent long hours entangled in each other's arms, engrossed in the discovery of new love and the building of a new relationship.

However, after two weeks of long days and nights with little sleep, no energy rune was sufficient to keep Alec from falling asleep in the middle of meetings, or at his desk, and Jace kept commenting on the dark circles under his eyes, a knowing and humorous expression on his face.

When Magnus suggested that they take a trip as soon as things settled down, Alec was reluctant. He had an institute to run and, Valentine may be dead, but the threat of demons was not over. There were also so many issues to resolve with the Downworld, now that they were part of the Council. Magnus had insisted, however, and had even enlisted the help of Izzi, Jace and Clary who told Alec that they were perfectly capable of keeping things running for a few days. At the end, Alec had agreed to do what he never thought he would ever do: take a three-week vacation and go to Europe with Magnus.

He had one condition: as much as possible, he wanted to travel like a mundane, no portals, magic or no contact with any of the Institutes or Downworlders in the cities they visit. Alec wanted a complete holiday, away from everything having to do with Shadowhunters and Downworld politics and few reminders of the events of the last few months.

At first, the condition proved hard to meet. As a citizen of Idris, a country concealed by wards and unknown to the mundane world, Alec had no passport, or travelling documents of any kind. He had no identification that tied him to the mundane world, not even a driver license or a birth certificate; it was as if he didn't exist. Magnus had to use magic to produce a passport for him, and Alec was worried that at some border crossing someone would figure out that the passport was a fake, despite Magnus reassuring him that the document was as real as any other.

Despite being a soldier and a warrior, Alec had almost no experience living among mundanes or doing any of the things mundanes usually do, like getting on a plane, reading a map, or making
hotel reservations. Except for trips to Idris, he had never really left New York. But he was determined that he wanted to see Europe for the first time without the conveniences of magic or Shadowhunter support. At the end, he and Magnus portalled to London, where they spent a few days wondering through Portobello Market, Soho, and along the Thames. They then took the train under the English Chanel to Paris because Alec wanted, not only to see the different cities in which they were staying, but also the countryside, the landscape in between.

Magnus, who went everywhere by portal, was at the beginning dubious about the plan, concerned that spending too many hours on a train, with only cheap wine to drink, and in the company of mundanes would test his patience and possibly result in a him conjuring up a portal to transport the whole train to its destination, hours ahead of time. But in time, he too began to enjoy the slower pace of train travel and, along the way, he regaled Alec with countless stories and historical anecdotes of the times he had been in Europe in the previous three hundred years: the time he attended Queen Victoria's coronation glamoured as a Dutch diplomat; the assistance he lent to a certain Pope of dubious reputation and virtue to ensure his appointment; and the services he lent the warlocks of Venice to keep the city from sinking during a nasty storm.

Thus, in the last two and a half weeks, Magnus and Alec had taken pictures of themselves against the background of the Eiffel tower, walked along the corridors of the Louvre and visited Notre Dame in Paris; seen the Coliseum and the Vatican Museum in Rome; eaten pizza in a small pizzeria near Ponte Vecchio and seen the David in Florence; and taken a gondola ride and taken an evening stroll through Plaza San Marco in Venice. Yesterday, they arrived in Barcelona, and from here they were going to Granada to visit the Alhambra before going home to New York.

So far, Barcelona was Alec's favorite city, not only for its history which was visible in its architecture and its historical sites, but also because the city was vibrant and had an air of freedom and tolerance that he had not experienced in any of the other places they had visited. He had felt it the night before when he and Magnus were walking along the Rambla –the pedestrian only street surrounded by bars, restaurants and theatres that was the city's gathering center. They had been talking about their plans for the next three days when Alec noticed several same-sex couples walking near them, holding hands, hugging and even kissing in public. The scene had surprised him because it had seemed so natural and unguarded.

Alec and Magnus rarely touched more than necessarily when they were out in public or with other people. Alec, who had been trained as a soldier since he was a child, and who had grown up doing all he could to go unnoticed and hiding his identity, was by nature reserved. Despite mundane and Downworld society becoming more tolerant of different sexual identities, sometimes he could still see the look of surprise that quickly turned into rejection and disgust that some people gave those who didn't conform with their ideas of normality and morality. This was specially the case with Shadowhunter society who still existed in a world dominated by tradition and family. It wasn't that he was ashamed or wanted to hide, and he never denied his relationship with Magnus. Rather, he felt protective and wanted to spare Magnus the disdain of others despite knowing that Magnus didn't need his protection. One of the things he admired the most about Magnus was his courage and determination to show himself to the world just as he was.

In the intimacy of their bed or their room, however, the two men were affectionate and expressive towards each other. They sat together, one leaning against the chest of the other; they held hands when they watched television or talked; or, they held each other in gentle and loving embraces. Theirs was a loving and expressive relationship as much as it was a relationship built on trust.

Yet, that first night on the streets of Barcelona, Alec had reached for Magnus' hand and interlaced his fingers with his as they walked along the Rambla following the crowd out for a night on the town. Magnus had first looked at their interlaced hands and then at Alec with and expression of
astonishment, as if Alec had suddenly grown a second head. But Alec had simply smiled and, placing his other hand against Magnus' cheek, had kissed him gently on the lips, unconcerned about the crowd walking past them. They had gone back to their hotel shortly after and made love with a tenderness and abandon that surprised them both.

Since the beginning of their vacation, they had stayed in fancy hotel suites, Magnus' only condition for the trip. They had made love in each of those hotel rooms as much as their energy and desire allowed, sometimes slowly and unhurriedly, at other times overtaken by such an uncontained desire that they were barely able to make it through the door before peeling off each other's clothes.

After a leisurely breakfast, they set out on foot along the Rambla, which in the light of day, was packed with street vendors, people wearing swimming suits under t-shirts and carrying beach towels heading to the beach, and tourists who, like Alec, looked a little lost. Magnus, on the contrary, looked perfectly at ease in dark jeans, a cobalt blue shirt, and his usual jewelry and glitter, as if he belonged in this city, the way that he had belonged in Paris, Florence, Rome and Venice. That was not surprising because Magnus had not only visited these cities before, but had also lived for different periods of times and for different reasons in all of them, and had gotten to know them and their histories.

After a few hundred meters, they turned on a narrow street and, just like that, they found themselves in one of the entrances to the Gothic Quarters, with its narrow cobble stone alleys and ancient buildings, fountains and squares, arches and passageways, antique stores and old churches. Despite knowing that the Quarters didn't really date to the Middle Ages, Alec stills felt transported to an ancient time in history, and the Quarters reminded him a little of Alicante with its narrow roads, alleys and picturesque storefronts.

He noticed that despite the Quarters being in the middle of a buzzing city, the city noises didn't penetrate it and its streets seemed to be covered in a veil of silence. People walking about also spoke in quiet tones as if they were in a church or a sacred place. Perhaps it was the closeness between the old buildings that acted as sound proof, or perhaps it was a spell designed to enhance the experience of having travelled back in time. The sun didn't seem to penetrate the Quarters either, and despite the summer heat, the temperature here seemed to be few degrees lower than in the rest of Barcelona.

They walked aimlessly through the narrow alleys, talking about history and architecture, until they emerged onto a slightly wider street crossed by a covered bridge decorated in the most intricate of designs.

"This is Carrer del Bisbe," explained Magnus. "Can you believe that the architectural style is called flamboyant?" he asked Alec with a playful smile.

"Really," replied Alec. "I think the name is appropriate."

Just at that moment, Alec felt a shiver run down his back and couldn't help turning abruptly. It was as if suddenly the temperature had dropped a few degrees, or as if a pair of icy eyes had settled on his back. His hand went instinctively for his stele -the only weapon he had been carrying during his vacation -and he wondered whether they were being stalked by a demon. He was sure Magnus felt it too because he stiffened, and Alec thought he saw an expression of terror briefly pass across Magnus' eyes.

The sensation passed quickly and when he looked at Magnus again, Magnus gave him a warm and unguarded smile, and for a moment, Alec thought that perhaps he had imagined the feeling. However, a few minutes later, Alec took a turn on one of the narrow passageways and when he
looked back Magnus was gone. He experienced a sudden panic, and went back retracing his steps, momentarily disoriented in the confusing labyrinth that was the Quarters in which all streets seemed to look the same, and no architectural design seemed to have guided its planning.

He found him a few minutes later, and Magnus told him that he had stopped at a store to admire a piece of art and hadn't noticed that Alec had continued walking. But Alec thought he saw a troubled expression in Magnus' face, an expression of concern, or perhaps fear, that was not there before. After that and for the remainder of the day, Magnus was quieter than usual, more subdued, and lost in thought, but when Alec asked him, he replied that nothing was wrong, that he was hungry and that it was time for dinner and a drink.

Alec willed himself to push the concern he felt for Magnus out of his mind, and told himself that he would give him time. He knew his boyfriend well and, thus, was certain that Magnus would eventually tell him what was going on.

They walked along of the Quarters' alleyways for a while longer, stopping to look at some of the souvenir and arts stores, and to listen to the street musicians performing in the plazas, but Magnus was less eager to share any more anecdotes, or gossip about the historical figures he had met in the previous times he had been in Barcelona. After a while, they began to make their way back to their hotel, as if, by silent agreement, they had decided their outing was over.

They stopped for dinner at a busy tapas restaurant overlooking Catalunya Square, and they shared a bottle of wine and several small dishes, each coming out fresh and fragrant with the aroma of spices and saffron. They talked about trivial things, but Magnus seemed distracted and a couple of times, Alex had to repeat his question before Magnus answered. Alec told himself that Magnus was just tired, so he suggested they go back to their room after dinner.

By the end of the night, however, Alec had grown concerned for Magnus who was not only quieter and more subdued than usual, but also seemed to be sad and perhaps afraid. A few times, he thought he saw a look of despondency in Magnus' eyes when he thought Alec wasn't looking. So, he decided that he would ask Magnus the next morning what was going on, and would not let it go until Magnus told him. 

Alec was the first one to fall asleep, Magnus' even breathing in the darkness sounding like a soothing lullaby that took him deeper and deeper into a restful slumber.

In the small hours of the night, Magnus reached for Alec in the darkness, and Alec's body instantaneously responded to the warlock's touch, coming alive as if a fire had been lightened in the center of his chest, a fire that woke up his body even before his mind was able to catch up. Alec searched for Magnus' lips and kissed them deeply, passionately and even desperately, his own breathing coming out raggedly and rapidly.

"Make love to me, Shadowhunter," whispered Magnus in Alec's ear, his sensual voice sending shivers down Alec's spine.

"As you wish, warlock," Alec replied and then kissed Magnus passionately, exploring his mouth with his tongue openly and without restrain, determined to do everything in his power to do as Magnus asked.

They became lost to the world then, entangled in each other's arms, not only their bodies, but their souls linked in an unbreakable bond. In the past, Alec had let his instincts take over and had at one point or another, lost sense of his surroundings, becoming lost in the intensity that was the experience of making love with Magnus. This time, however, he endeavored to remain present, to consciously give Magnus all the pleasure he was capable of. He knew, of course, that this was
futile; that Magnus was stronger and more experienced than him; that he loved and trusted Magnus so implicitly that he couldn't help giving himself over to him.

They made love unhurriedly but passionately, and at one point, time seemed to stop, stretching almost to infinity as their bodies slowly built towards an intense climax. It was Magnus that cried out first, calling Alec's name in the most exquisite exclamation of pleasure, and the sound finally pushed Alec over the edge and he too exploded in a torrent of ecstasy that left him disoriented, dizzy and breathless. Afterwards, Alec held Magnus tightly against his chest and fell back to sleep almost immediately, comfortable in the certainty of Magnus' presence, his body relaxed and satisfied.

Alec didn't know what time it was when he woke up the next morning and, as had become normal since they had been staying in so many hotels, he was momentarily disoriented about his whereabouts. It took him a moment to remember that he was in a hotel in Barcelona. The room was bathed in a soft morning light filtering through windows, suggesting that the sun had already come out. Otherwise, the room was quiet and cool. He quickly realized that, except for him, the bed was empty, the side where Magnus had been laying was cold but still impregnated with his scent.

"Magnus," he called, his voice a little hoarse from sleep. He wondered whether Magnus had gotten up and was sitting by the window reading the paper, as he sometimes did. However, for a reason he could not explain, as soon as he called his name, Alec knew he would receive no reply. The room felt too quiet and cold, as if the sunshine filtering through the window could not reach it.

With a sudden and yet unexplainable feeling of apprehension, Alec got out of bed, and walked towards the table where him and Magnus had enjoyed breakfast the day before. There he found the arrowhead amulet Magnus always wore around his neck, its silver chain coiled on top of a white sheet of paper on which a note had been written. Even before he read it, Alec knew that something terribly wrong had happened.

Just four words were inscribed on the white sheet of paper, four words written in the neat handwriting of Magnus Bane, High Warlock of Brooklyn:

"It is not enough."
A dark stooped figure walked along the Rambla under the cover of night, his face concealed under the hood of his jacket and his eyes intent on the ground at his feet. Only the odd drunk and the last of the restaurant employees sweeping floors and cleaning tables was all that remained of the revelry and the festive atmosphere that had overtaken the street just hours before. None of them paid any attention to the stranger as he made his way towards the Gothic Quarters.

With resigned but definite steps, the stranger walked along the narrow alleys in the direction of the Plaça del Rei, one of the last true Medieval public squares left in the Quarters. His hand rested against his heart where the recent self-inflicted burn still throbbed, a reminder of both what he left behind and what he carried within. He entered the square walking along the side of the Santa Agatha Chapel, avoiding the street lights that bounced off the rose and grey of the stonewalls. A few meters into the plaza, he stopped in front of a massive arched wooden door, decorated with an intricate bronze knocker in the shape of a ram, its horns curling upwards and its eyes open in an eternally blind stare. He knocked twice and straighten, bringing his arms down to his sides, and imbuing his posture with self-assurance and an air of arrogance. As he waited, he noticed the bronze door knob decorated with a six-point star surrounded by an intricate and swirling design. Flamboyant, he thought and smiled, the pleasant memory fresh but all too brief.

A few moments later, the door opened slightly and a horned dark-skinned face with a black goatee peered through the gap before opening the door wider to let the stranger in.

“Magnus Bane,” said the horned warlock, a mixture of recognition and feigned disbelief in his expression. “You are sure a sight for sore eyes.”

“Not as much as you are,” replied Magnus, pulling back his hood and stepping inside. “How long has it been Gwydion?”

“Seventy-two years; since Berlin. Where are your buddies Catarina and Ragnor? She is not going to be pleased that you didn’t bring them.”

“Dead,” replied Magnus tersely, making his way past Gwydion, and entering the enormous foyer of the palace that used to be the residence of the Kings of Aragon.

The interior of the building was not much different than its exterior. Thick stone walls devoid of decorations or ornaments sustained an enormous vaulted ceiling that stood at least forty feet at its highest point. Iron chandeliers hung at regular intervals, illuminating the room with a yellowish light. At least two dozen warlocks stood along the walls, in groups of two or three, speaking in whispers to one another. They turned and went silent as soon as Magnus walked in and stared for a moment, some with curiosity, surprise and derision, others with apprehension and even fear, before returning to their whispering, that now sounded more animated.

Magnus wore no make-up, jewelry or glitter, and his apparel of black pants and grey button down
shirt under his hooded jacket was unusually severe, emphasizing his youthful features and making him appear not older than a boy. His hair fell asymmetrically and in disarray down his face, covering half of his forehead and reaching almost to his eyes.

“She has been expecting you,” said Gwydion, “and you know how much she detests waiting.”

“I would have come sooner, except that until yesterday, I thought you were all dead,” replied Magnus, in a casual tone.

“I bet you did. Still, she expected you hours ago.”

“I had some matters to attend to first, not that it is any of your business,” stated Magnus looking around the room.

“I bet you had,” replied Gwydion, a knowing and sardonic smile drawing on his face. “That was a pretty boy you were with.”

“No one of importance,” said Magnus, his tone even and disinterested. He knew most of the warlocks in the room and despised most of them for their treachery, cowardice, blind ambition and arrogance. None of the warlocks felt it necessary to glamour themselves. Even though only the strongest of glamours would work with this crowd, Magnus suspected that even if they could disguise their marks, most of them would choose to show themselves plainly and openly no matter who was in the room. Warlocks, like mundanes and Shadowhunters, were not immune to the sin of superiority, and warlock racial supremacy was especially rampant in this group.

Magnus saw and gave a nod to Edbert, a warlock with long blue hair leaning against a wall, looking nervous and, perhaps, scared. Magnus had had a run-in with him in New York a couple of decades ago over the selling of cocaine-spiked blood to vampires, and Magnus had finally managed to expel him from the city. Rufus, who just until a few weeks ago had been imprisoned in Idris under suspicion of helping Valentine was also there, his long cat whiskers, twitching as much as his eyes were. He suspected that neither Edbert nor Rufus were particularly happy to be here.

He was about to walk further into the room, when two other warlocks, unfamiliar to Magnus, barred his way.

“What is going on gentlemen? I thought this was a friendly gathering,” said Magnus, forcing his mouth into a casual smile and imbuing his tone with sarcasm.

“We have instructions to take you down to the basement,” said one of the warlocks, a tall bald man with greyish skin and gills along the side of his neck. “She wants you to cool your hills for a while.”

“Of course, she does,” said Magnus with a knowing and unsurprised expression.

The two warlocks escorted him down a winding set of stairs, its stone steps becoming more slippery and their surrounding more silent the lower and deeper into the humid bowels of the building they went. Magnus didn’t remember the last time he had been in the Royal Palace. It had certainly not been when it housed the royal family; he was not that old despite of what he sometimes said. Likely, it was during the time in which Barcelona was building the Quarters. He had a faint recollection of being hired to use magic to reinforce the foundations of some of the buildings, and he clearly remembered having been introduced to Gaudi and seeing the Sagrada Familia Church when it was just a design in the architect’s drawings.
He knew that the building was used nowadays by mundanes to house a historical society of some sort, and he could see paper covered desks, computer screens and water coolers as they passed through open office doors. For some reason, seeing historical buildings like these being repurposed to accommodate offices, meeting rooms, restaurants and museums always made him sad, as if the installation of office dividers, elevators and air conditioners constituted a violation of the spirit and soul of a place. That is what happens, he thought, when one gets to live so long: the shadow of memory extends longer and longer into the past, while those around you do not live long enough to remember.

Magnus wondered what kind of glamour or spell the warlocks had created to keep the mundanes away. Perhaps they simulated a gas leak; or enchanted the building to appear to be under renovations; or spell bound the employees to believe that they had all been given vacations at the same time. He suspected, nevertheless, that this were just temporary headquarters and that soon they would be moving to a more permanent location either here in Spain or somewhere else in Europe. After all these years, he doubted she would consider carrying her campaign from anywhere else in the world. Europe was where the Clave resided and it was here where she had been defeated all those decades ago.

They finally arrived at the bottom of the stairs and after walking along a vaulted stone corridor with a low ceiling, they reached a closed arched wooden door. The bald warlock produced a big brass key with which he unlocked the door and gestured Magnus to go in.

“Is this how you treat old friends?” said Magnus in a contemptuous tone.

“You are not friend of ours. We haven’t forgotten Berlin,” said the bald warlock, a hateful expression in his eyes as he pushed Magnus inside the dark room and closed the door behind him. Before walking away, the warlock told Magnus that it was futile to try to escape; that the door had been enchanted to resist any attempts to break free, magical or otherwise.

“There is nowhere else I would rather be,” replied Magnus, in an unconcerned and almost casual voice.

As soon as he found himself alone, Magnus leaned against the wall, lowered his head and brought his hand to his chest, placing it over the still throbbing burn, glad that no one could take away the only thing he brought with him to this horrid place, the only thing he truly cared about. He resisted the urge to recall the memories from the last year and find comfort in the moments of bliss and completion, in the joy of giving and receiving love, and in the innocence with which he had believed that his past would never catch up to him. There is no use, he thought, to hold on to what cannot be. He was a warlock, ancient and immortal; a warlock with a duty to his people, and it was that duty that on this dark night brought him to this dark place to confront his past and fight for the future.
Four short words, just thirteen letters, inoffensive, even benign, but with the power to cut so deeply, to open Alec’s chest and scoop out his entrails, leaving only an empty cavity where his heart had once been, only skin and dry bone, his soul gone with the man whose hand had scribbled those thirteen letters in the darkness of the night: “It is not enough.”

Alec felt like all the air and the light had been instantly sucked out of the room, and the world went deathly silent, a silence so deafening and high pitched that it pierced his ears and rattled inside his skull. His heart skipped a few beats before beginning a frantic drumming against his chest with a painful urgency that squeezed his lungs and made it impossible to breath.

It was as if an evil hand had just pulled the rug from under his feet just to reveal that there was nothing there but a bottomless abyss that now swallowed him. He stood motionless, the note and the amulet in his hands, staring at the words on the white page for several moments, stunt as if the same someone that had pulled the rug had also hit him over the head with a baseball bat, rendering him incapable of fully grasping the content and significance of the note. He silently repeated the words – “it is not enough” – asking himself what possibly could be not enough; hoping that, perhaps by repeating the words, hearing them in his own voice, he would recognize their significance or read between the lines a message that was not immediately legible but that he was meant to see.

As a drowning man grasps at straws, Alec recounted in his mind the last few hours, trying to recall whether he had heard Magnus get out of bed. Perhaps he had told him that he was going out, possibly to see a client, or to the store, but that he would come back soon. Perhaps he was hiding behind a door and would jump out at any moment laughing and reaching for Alec’s hand, saying that he had just wanted to scare him, and then, realizing that the prank had gone too far, apologizing for frightening him. Yet every speculation crushed against the words on the note, breaking into a million pieces. For the note was uncompromising in its four simple but sharp words: “It is not enough.” This, what Magnus and Alec had; this life; this love; the embraces they had shared; the way with which they had looked at each other; the way Alec had brushed the hair away from Magnus’s youthful face; the feeling of Alec’s fingers running along Magnus’ skin; this small, finite, and terribly mortal life of a Shadowhunter were not enough.

Four short words, just thirteen letters, inoffensive, even benign, but with the power to cut so deeply, to open Alec’s chest and scoop out his entrails, leaving only an empty cavity where his heart had once been, only skin and dry bone, his soul gone with the man whose hand had scribbled those thirteen letters in the darkness of the night: “It is not enough.”

“Make love to me Shadowhunter,” Magnus had asked him and Alec had, with all his heart, body and soul, but that too had not been enough. He is gone, Alec thought, the realization final and unbending, yet so hard to accept, so hard to believe, so hard to endure, so hard. Alec dropped down on the sofa because his knees threatened to buckle under him. And still, the four words kept replaying over and over in his head, becoming permanently edged in his mind like an unwelcomed and indelible rune.
“Magnus,” he whispered, clutching the note and the amulet in his hand, a despondency so profound spreading over him that he thought he would never again be able to breathe without this pain that pierced his chest and threatened to rip him apart.

Disoriented and lost, he looked around the empty room that now felt enormous, colorless and cold despite the sunshine filtering through the windows. There was no sign of Magnus ever being here, of ever having been standing by the window with a cup of coffee in his hand. There was no echo of his laugh; there were no shoes or the red silk robe he had worn the day before; no espresso cup or the martini glass from which he drank last night; no jacket or the clothes that he usually left strewn around. Nothing, except for the unbearable weight of his absence.

At that same moment, thousands of kilometers away at the other side of the ocean, in the middle of the night, Jace abruptly sat up in bed, his hand reaching for the spot in his lower abdomen where his parabatai rune burned with an intensity like no other he had ever experienced, a hollow feeling settling in the pit of his stomach. He looked around in the dark, disoriented, and thought, for a moment, that he had been in two places at once: in this dark but familiar room and in an unfamiliar sunbathed but cold room. The burning in his side was spreading, reaching with unyielding tendrils across his abdomen and chest, as if cutting him with thousands of searing knives.

Blindly, he fumbled for the bedside lamp and turned it on, throwing a soft white light onto the room. He looked around trying to get his bearing and saw Clary, lying on her stomach beside him, her long red hair spilling like a cascade across the pillow, her naked shoulders round and beautiful showing where the bed sheets did not cover her.

Jace tried to breath, willing his heartbeat to slow down and trying to rein in his self-control before panic got the better of him. He attempted to turn and get out of bed, determined not to disturb Clary, but quickly gave up because the pain in his parabatai rune was intensifying, and a loud gasped involuntarily escaped him.

“Jace? What is going on?” asked Clary, her eyes opening and then blinking a few times as they adjusted to the light; her voice low and heavy with sleep; her red curls shifting and catching the light from the lamp as if they were made of the most exquisite and old bronze.

“I don’t know; I think it is Alec; he is in trouble,” replied Jace, his voice straining from the pain. An unexplainable and irresistible desire to hold Clary, to keep her close and never let her go took over Jace, a feeling that, although not uncommon in him, he understood at this moment as not his own. It was a longing that no amount of closeness could appease, for what he felt was Alec’s longing, not his own.

“What?” Clary asked as she ran a hand through her face, trying to brush the cobwebs of sleep from her brain. “How do you know?”

“My parapatai rune, it is burning; something terribly wrong is happening to him.”

“But just yesterday, he sent us a picture with Magnus in Barcelona. He looked fine and happy,” Clary tried to reassure him, sitting up and placing a soft hand on Jace’s shoulder. Still, she could barely disguise her increasing concern.

Alec had been okay, thought Jace. Better than okay, in fact, smiling and happy for the first time since Jace knew him, as if he had found, not only someone to love and who loved him, but also someone who completed him; someone who, with all his unique idiosyncrasies, had managed to reach deep inside Alec for the true soul that hid underneath his apparently immutable exterior. Jace had sensed Alec’s happiness, felt it as if his brother’s joy was contagious. He had felt it in the same place that now burned with blinding and painful incandescence.
Giving up on the idea of getting out of bed, Jace reached for his cellphone charging on the night table on the side of the bed where Clary had been sleeping just a minute ago. Like all knew couples, he and Clary were still getting used to spending nights in the same bed and they hadn’t yet determined which side would each one claim. Thus, most mornings, they woke up in the opposite side from which they had gone to bed.

Jace fumbled with his phone, his mind racing and his fingers clumsy from disorientation and pain. In all their years as brothers, Jace’s parabatai rune had never hurt in this way. He knew that Alec had borne the effects of Jace’s reckless behavior, the pain that his bond with Jace had required him to endure every time Jace was close to dying or in agony. But Alec had always been a constant and stable presence in Jace’s life, the one to endure the pain and the punishment, never the one to cause it; the one to stand silently by Jace, never the one to ask for anything. Alec was the one to worry, never the one to cause others to worry. Yet, now somethings horrible was happening to Alec, something that caused him such agony, a pain so intense and unyielding, so uncontainable and unbearable that it had overflowed, spreading and reaching across an incalculable distance, in search of someone else, Jace, to bear it.

Jace felt such an uncontainable and physical need to see and talk to Alec, to make sure he was alright, to hold him and comfort him. It was a primal need, instinctual like breathing or blinking, a need that made Jace feel disoriented, aimless and anchorless, and he knew nothing would be okay until his parabatai was back, secured and safe under his same roof.

“Do you want me to do it?” asked Clary realizing that Jace was having trouble holding the phone in his shaking hands.

“It is okay, I can do it.” With trembling fingers, Jace tapped a short text message: “Are you okay buddy?” He tried to convey all his concern and love in the words, but quickly understood that it was impossible for something so impersonal as words on a screen to communicate what Alec meant to him. As soon as he hit send, Jace second-guessed his text. Perhaps, he shouldn’t alarm Alec just in case the pain had nothing to do with him.

Jace waited for a few interminable moments, his eyes glued to the screen, but nothing happened. All he got was a message indicating that the text was undeliverable due to a failure in the network and to “try again.” He did, but the phone always returned him the same reply: “unable to send text due to network issues, try again.” After several attempts, Jace gave up on the text and dialed the number instead just to receive a busy tone, another message flashing on the screen: “call failed.”

“Magnus, what did you do?” Alec asked louder than before and the empty room returned him just the echo of his own despairing voice.

Suddenly standing, Alec walked towards the side of the bed where just a few hours ago Magnus had laid, Alec’s arms wrapped securely around him. He picked up the pillow where Magnus’ head had rested and sniffed in the lingering aroma of Magnus, as if wanting to reassure himself that his lover had in fact been there, real and solid, asking him to make love to him, calling his name. Magnus’ familiar smell of forest and fresh mountain air seemed to infuse Alec’s denial with new energy. No, it was not possible that Magnus would leave him; it just couldn’t be; something else must have happened. Perhaps he was in danger, lost somewhere, taken against his will.

With determined movements, Alec donned the jeans and grey t-shirt he had been wearing the day before, determined to go after Magnus, to walk the streets of Barcelona and not return until he found him.

At that moment, and as if their movements had been coordinated across the vast distance, Jace was also getting out of bed, slipping into jeans and a white shirt, determine to call Alec from the
landline in the library, Clary following suit behind him. As he was reaching for the door knob, a loud alarm abruptly went off throughout the institute and red lights flashed in all the rooms and hallways, instantly awakening the Shadowhunters currently in residence and alerting those on guard duty.

Alec was putting Magnus’ note and the arrowhead amulet in his pants’ pocket, and reaching for his room key, when a blinding red hot ball of energy exploded somewhere outside his hotel, breaking the glass from the windows in a million pieces that were carried by a shockwave that sent Alec across the room as if he was as light as a feather. Only one conscious thought was all that Alec had time for before darkness took him: the world is ending.

At that precise moment, similar explosions went off simultaneously at the institutes in New York and Paris, sending the three cities—and the rest of the world—into chaos, and causing the death of countless mundanes, Downworlders and Shadowhunters. The explosions left the cities covered in a thick red cloud of leftover magical energy that had one important side effect: it plunged the mundane inhabitants into a permanent and unnatural state of apathy and indifference, turning them into easy preys. By a similar act of magic, the explosions also projected on the sky, now tinted red, the clearly identifiable images of the face of a woman, eyes the color of deep red rubies and hair falling in long dark curls around her face, and the unmistakable face of Magnus Bane, slit yellow green eyes shining down on the destruction.
Where it All Began

Chapter Summary

This is the legend of Lilith that Magnus heard hundreds of years ago, the legend that once explained his origins and the reason for his existence.

The legend of Lilith is perhaps as old as time itself; perhaps as old as language and as the first stories shared by human voices around newly discovered fires; or as old as man’s greed and hunger for power, or as the necessity to rebel against that same greed and hunger. For there can be no power without a resisting force, no creation without destruction, no virtue without temptation, and power, creation and virtue carry within the seed of their own defeat.

Some say that Lilith was there at the very moment when the thought popped into God’s head of separating light from darkness to create the universe; the sky, sun, moon and stars; the world with its oceans and land; the animals that walk the earth, fly through the sky and swim in the sea; the forests and plants; and, finally, a people to love, enjoy, and sometimes destroy all that God created. Lilith might have even whispered the idea in God’s ear in a voice so soft and sweet that God couldn’t help to later recall it as he created the nectars in the flowers from which bees make honey.

Others say that Lilith was God’s first mistake, and thus, the first mistake ever made. A mistake so enormous and unforgivable that all eternity would not be enough for God to redeem himself.

For others, Lilith was the first of God’s earthly creations who loved him unconditionally; the first to challenge God; the first on whom God turned his back. And, faced with God’s rejection, Lilith became the first to rebel against his power, pride and arrogance, to test the limits of free will, and become the seed of all that tempts and threatens humanity.

In any case, this is the legend of Lilith that Magnus heard hundreds of years ago, the legend that once explained his origins and the reason for his existence:

“By the sixth day of creation, God had already made the universe; the day and the night; the sun, moon and stars; and, the earth with land and oceans, animals that walk, crawl, fly and swim, and plants and trees that bear fruit and cover the earth in a mantle of lush colors. He then decided that it was time to attempt his most ambitious project: the design of a race of beings to guard and love all that he had created.

Cautious –for the creation of a people to inherit the earth and continue his work is no small matter –God started with a small idea, a seed, a simple design. He would fashion the new beings after his own image and he would begin with just two people; two people from whom a whole species would sprout; two people to become the mother and father of a whole race and the first guardians of all of God’s creation.

With his hands, God moulded out clay two figures, likenesses of himself, self-portraits of sorts, but with just a fraction of his creative power. He was, after all God, and nothing can be as creative and powerful as God. He called one man, and named him Adam, and the other woman, and named her Lilith, and willed the clay to morph into flesh, tendons, heart, bones and blood. When he thought that his creations were sufficiently perfect, though, of course, not as perfect as God, he
whispered their names in their newly formed ears and breathed life into them. He then watched in amazement as Adam and Lilith drew their first breath and opened their eyes in wonder, conscious for the first time of their own place in God's kingdom.

God told Adam and Lilith that they were equals, partners in the task of safeguarding and caring for his creation and populating the earth, and he sent them out into the world to enjoy the fruits of his labor.

Pleased and still reluctant to be apart from all that he had made, God gazed on his handiwork, marvelling and congratulating himself on all that he had accomplished. Like a proud father that cannot see fault in his children, God didn’t see that Adam was ambitious and power-hungry. Having recognized in himself a likeness to God, Adam thought himself superior and entitled to rule over God's creation as well as over Lilith. Neither did God see that Lilith was unusually cunning and crafty. He didn’t see that she was more interested in silently walking along the paths of the garden, in smelling the flowers and eating the fruits from the trees, in caring for the garden and all in it, than she was in Adam. Truthfully, Lilith thought that Adam, with his grandiose and foolish ideas about his own place in the world, was dull, and more concerned with who was to rule over the earth than with loving and caring for it.

Adam tried in vain to assert his dominance over Lilith, and to bend her to his will. But when Lilith refused to obey or even acknowledge him, a frustrated and angry Adam went to God to issue a protest.

‘Why did you, God, creator of all that is beautiful and good, gave me this woman who refuses to obey me and who ignores each of my desires?’ Adam asked God in a despairing voice. ‘Am I not made in your image? Should I not have power to rule over your creation as your rightful heir?’

‘I made you and Lilith equal, so you would populate the earth with descendants that would also be equals,’ God reasoned with Adam. In all his wisdom, God had envisioned a world without injustice, wars or inequality; a world in which no one, except God, would have power over anyone else; a world without judgement or bigotry.

‘But how can I populate your kingdom when Lilith does not care for me?’ whined Adam, in a voice that God couldn’t help thinking was annoying and petulant. ‘I insist you give me a different companion, one that would be more docile and willing.’

Concerned about the future of his creation, God offered to speak with Lilith on Adam’s behalf. He then went in search of her and when he found her, Lilith was sitting on a patch of grass under a tree, holding a beautiful pink rose in between her graceful fingers, her long dark wavy hair adorned with lilies in all colors, and her perfectly formed lips tinted with the ruby red of sweet cherries. Lilith’s beauty took God’s breath away; for she was the most perfect representation of his ingenuity and artistry: delicate and strong, canning and creative, loving and independent, beautiful and without vanity.

When God asked Lilith why she refused Adam, Lilith’s face remained impassive, as if she felt no need to concern herself with Adam’s feelings or needs. Lilith simply replied that she found the man uninteresting and petty, more concerned with power than with the task of guarding and loving the creation with which care they had been charged. ‘I have no desire to engage in his petty squabbles over who will rule and who will obey.’

‘I made you and Adam so you would populate the earth I created for you,” said God. “Can you not indulge him if only to please me?’

‘I am sorry, father,’ replied Lilith. ‘I cannot. When you made me, you also gave me free will, and
it is this free will that I now exercise when I choose to love you for what you have given me. But because of this free will, I cannot be commanded to love and obey someone for whom I care not.’

‘But how can you say you love me and still deny my request?’ asked God, feeling a sudden anger and resentment towards this willful child who defied him. One thing is for Lilith to be equal to Adam, thought God; another is to feel entitled to defy the God that created her.

‘Precisely because I love you and I love the gifts you have given me is that I must say no,’ said Lilith, her voice unyielding, as she turned her attention back to the rose in her hand.

Overcome by the kind of blind rage that only a disobedient and defiant child can awaken in a parent, God unleashed all his wrath. He called on a strong dusty wind that picked Lilith up, lifting and spinning her in the air, knotting her hair and covering her face in a thick layer of grey grime. With a flicker of his wrist, he ordered the wind to take Lilith away, throwing her out of the world, vanishing her to the darkness and emptiness of an unrelenting void, to a place where he would not have to look at her; a place where the mortality and humanity he had first bestowed on her couldn’t touch her anymore; a place known as pandemonium.

Afterwards, God made Adam fall into a deep sleep and then removed one of his ribs. From it, he fashioned a woman and called her Eve, and God told her she was to obey, help and follow Adam. Eve was a gift to Adam to replace his rebellious first wife. It was also an attempt –albeit, some may say, a failed one –to replace the daughter that had loved God despite and because of her willfulness and defiance.

Many would say that God’s first mistake was to create Lilith and Adam as equals. Yet, perhaps God’s mistake, the first mistake ever made, was to be quick to anger, to let pride overpower his love for the child into whom he had breathed life. For in a fit of rage, God created something he never intended: the first exile, the first to be displaced and condemned to wander away from home, lurking at the borders of the world, peering at it from a distance, but without ever being allowed to return. At that moment of rage, God allowed pride, ambition, inequality, injustice, envy, and vengeance into the world he had created; a world that was a little less perfect, a little less gleaming because of it.

That unintended act of creation had an effect that God didn’t foresee. Rejected and disillusioned, Lilith, who had unconditionally and freely loved God, who had loved and valued his creation more than Adam had, grew hateful, envious and vindictive. Those dark and malevolent feelings settled in her wound and grew into new kinds of demon, soulless monsters that, once born, she sent into the world to tempt and spoil humanity; to destroy the purity of what God created; to plant Lilith’s seeds amid those still allowed to live on the earth from which she had been vanished. Those demons impregnate women, descendants of Adam and Eve, usurping Adam’s parentage and throwing the legitimacy of his lineage into question. From those conceptions, warlocks, the children of Lilith, are born: creatures that remain young while the earth grows old; creatures that can call on the power of nature to perform magic; creatures that being in this world, remain apart from it.”

On an enchanting night hundreds of years ago, Magnus heard this legend from Annaliese Fen, an enchanting warlock with rubies for eyes, and a musical voice that reminded him of rain falling on the dark forest of his childhood. She told this story to a group of young warlocks with the purpose of uniting them under the common goal of reclaiming what she thought was rightfully theirs. For a while, Magnus, who was still new in the world, didn’t yet know love, and was full of self-hatred and self-loathing, allowed himself to be seduced by Annaliese’s dream of building a world in which he would finally feel that he belonged. Later, he would understand that eternity would not be long enough to atone for the role he played in the destruction that, in Lilith’s name, Annaliese and her
followers brought down on the world.

Some of the Nephilim, who also knew this legend, believed that Lilith’s children with their magic and their immortality were abominations born from rebellion, revenge and ire. They also believed that warlocks were deceitful and filthy creatures, incapable of love or moral judgement, sent into the world to tempt and corrupt the Nephilim, to turn them against their own people, to make them forget their allegiances and their mission to protect the world against demons. No matter how much some warlocks tried to prove them wrong, Annaliese Fen would always be the example the Nephilim would use to confirm this belief.

Hello everybody, I would appreciate any comments you can offer on how this story is developing and maybe even make suggestions. Thanks,

Alex.
“Magnus, what did you do?” whispered Alec, looking at the image projected against the red sky, a mixture of desperation and disbelief in his voice, and a feeling of foreboding settling in his stomach and threatening to send him into a fit of nausea.

“Shadowhunters know no fear,” said the clear and firm voice of his father. His tone was stern, barely concealing the disappointment that Alec had learned to recognize in the way in which Robert Lightwood always spoke to him. Reflexively, Alec shrank back, trying to make himself small, stooping his shoulders and bending his head down, his eyes intent on his boots and on the patch of grass on which he was standing. To stop his hands from shaking, he tightly interlaced them behind his back.

In the memory, Alec was no more than seven years old; small and slim; scrawny and mouse-like; too scrawny, in fact, for a Nephilim; “a wisp of a child,” as his grandmother used to say. His Shadowhunter jacket felt heavy on his small frame, and almost fell off his shoulders, its sleeves so long that Alec had to roll them up so they wouldn’t cover his hands and impede his movements. The gear that most of his kind wore so naturally, as a second skin, felt foreign to Alec, too heavy, too rough, too big, too cold. I am not a Shadowhunter, he thought, and I may never be one.

Alec and his father were standing by the edge of a pond, in a park near the Institute. The morning was sunny but cool. Although summer was not officially over, Alec could already smell the approaching Fall that soon would dress the trees in a kaleidoscope of colors and turn the ground into a blanket of brown and ochre. The damp and cold morning air clang to his face, and chilled his fingertips even under his gloves.

He could feel his father’s eyes on him, their judgement like sandpaper scratching his cheeks, peeling layers off to reveal the small and scared child that Alec tried in vain to conceal. His father could always see deep into him, as if his eyes could illuminate the deepest of his insecurities and anxieties. Alec avoided those intense eyes that always saw too much, and whose stare seemed to burn on his skin as if they were shooting fire.

“Shadowhunters conquer their fear, even the fear of death. Do you understand me Alec?” his father asked.

“Yes, father,” replied Alec in a small voice that came out no louder than a whisper. His voice lacked all the strength, certainty and assertiveness that characterized Shadowhunter voices. How could his voice ever command anyone? Alec asked himself.

“Look at me,” ordered his father, his voice booming. “You are a Lightwood, and Lightwoods are meant to be leaders, and leaders do not look at their boots.”

Alec forced his eyes away from the ground and up towards the serious and severe face of his father. His father, tall, strong and imposing in his Shadowhunter gear, was angry. Alec could tell in the way his brown eyes shined as if a fire was burning behind them, the low brow, and in the set line of his mouth. Alec wondered what he had done and how he had disappointed his father this time. A familiar feeling of dread and self-doubt settled in the pit of his small stomach; an old fear,
old even considering how young Alec was; a fear that seemed to have found a permanent home in his gut. The feeling was mixed with the certainty that nothing he did would ever be good enough for his father; that no matter how much he tried, he would never be the kind of Shadowhunter his father wished for. His father would never look at him the way he looked at his younger sister who seemed to have been born immune to fear, weakness or insecurity.

Alec knew that as the older child, he was expected to follow on his father’s footsteps and live up to his family’s reputation and tradition as an old family of leaders and warriors. One day his father would send him on missions, and he would have to kill demons and become a soldier, and perhaps even be sent to die like so many Lightwoods before him. One day, he may even be called to lead an institute. Yet, he feared that he would never be worthy; that when the time came, his father would look past him and instead bestow the honor on his sister, a worthier and fiercer warrior than Alec. He could feel the fear and insecurity growing like vines, digging their roots deeper and deeper in his heart becoming a certainty, a prediction of his future, a fulfilled prophesy.

Alec still remembered sitting on his father’s lap – it had not been that long ago – laughing with his father at a story they were reading; his father’s strong and protective arms around him; the feel of his stubbly chin against his forehead; the soft touch of his father’s lips kissing him good night, and his face smiling proudly. Since he began his Shadowhunter training, Alec didn’t get to see his father like that anymore, as if as soon as Alec turned six and began to train, his father turned into a different man, a scary and cold man, a commander and no longer a father, someone to obey and to call sir.

“I do this for your own good,” said his father and with surprising strength, certainty and speed, he picked Alec up, as one picks up a child to cradle him against his chest. But instead of cradling him, his father threw him with startling force, into the deepest part of the pond, as if Alec weighed less than a pebble.

Alec felt himself float for an instant, hovering in the cool air, before his stomach dropped and he hit the water with a force that took his breath away. He immediately went under and the pressure forced water into his mouth and nose, and down into his lung. His nasal cavity stank as if a hot knife had been introduced through his nose all the way into his brain. For a moment that felt like an eternity, he was completely submerged in the dark and green waters of the pond, and his first reaction was to panic. He began to frantically kick his legs, desperately pushing himself up until, thankfully, his head broke through to the surface. As soon as he felt air against his cheeks, Alec sucked in a breath that sent him into a coughing fit, water pouring out from his mouth and nose.

“Shadowhunters are expected to know how to battle in water,” Robert Lightwood said. “And, as a leader, you will be expected to be the first one to jump. You will swim to the edge, and use runes to dry and warm yourself. I will be waiting for you at the Institute. Do you understand me?”

“Ye, ye, yes sir,” stuttered Alec, his voice not louder than a whisper, his teeth shattering and panic spreading throughout his body. From the water, he saw his father turn and walk away, his back receding at a speed that was almost inhuman.

Alec called on every ounce of strength he had to control his panic and to get his legs moving to avoid going under once again. Alec knew that if he submerged, he would be unable to bring himself back up and he would drown. What’s worse, no one would help him, for no one would see him under the glamour that concealed Shadowhunters and the Downworld from the mundane world. He would die alone in a park full of mundanes sitting on benches and enjoying the morning sun. He would die struggling for air but inhaling water instead, and his body would sink to the bottom, the pond entombing him in a grave of green water, leaves and rocks. The thought brought on another surge of panic and he began to thrash his arms about, trying desperately to swim to the
edge of the pond, which seemed to be farther and farther away, the more Alec tried to reach it.

He should have suspected the reason why his father had woken him at the crack of dawn, instructing him to dress in his Shadowhunter gear and to follow him out of the institute and towards the park. Alec should have expected this test; he should have known it would come when he saw his father standing by the swimming pool during water combat training the day before.

The rest of the children had been eager to jump in the pool and Izzi had even been the first one in. Yet, Alec had hesitated, and had lingered too long by the edge of the pool, looking intently at the water, knowing that if he jumped, he would be unable to keep his head above the surface, let alone defend himself against the children on the other team.

Alec couldn’t help it: he was afraid of water, terrified of being pulled under and not being able to breath, afraid of drowning in the dark and deep silence of an ocean. The thought and the fear had paralyzed him, and he had hesitated and lingered too long. Before even turning in the direction of the pool deck, Alec had felt the disapproving eyes of his father on him, burning between his shoulder blades.

Now he was losing this battle to stay afloat and he felt like roots were sprouting from the depth of the pond, wrapping themselves around his feet and pulling him under. He didn’t have time to take another breath before he felt the water overtake him and he sank once again, too tired and terrified to kick his legs anymore.

Suddenly, the image of the pond disappeared and the sensation of drowning was replaced by the sensation of choking. Instead of water, his lungs breathed in thick smoke that burnt as it passed through his throat. He no longer heard the splashing of water from the memory. Instead, screams, groans and other sounds of panic and despair filled his ears. He willed his eyes to open, but they resisted, his brain reluctant to relinquish the oblivion in which it had found refuge. After a few attempts he managed to open his eyes slightly, and flickers of light entered his pupils, red and blurry as if a red scarf was covering his eyes.

Alec willed his throat to open and allow air into his lungs once more, and he breathed through the burning that the hot air caused as it made its way down his throat and chest. He rolled his head slowly, feeling with each small movement that a thousand needles were piercing his skull. His hand instinctually reached for the back of his head where he felt a sticky wetness. When his pupils finally focused on his surroundings, he thought that he was hallucinating. It was as if the world had suddenly been bleached of all color except for red and orange, as if he was seeing through lenses that tainted everything around him, or as if the air had caught fire and turned the color of ambers.

He struggled to his feet holding on to the wall for balance, fighting against dizziness and nausea, trying to get his bearing and to remember where he was and what had happened. The room around him was unrecognizable. It looked like a tornado had passed through, throwing the room in complete disarray. Chairs were laying on their side, the lamps had been knocked from the side tables, and wind gusting in through the broken windows blew the curtains about as if they were golden flags. Shards of glass blanketed the carpet and every surface, and when he shook his head, pieces of it came loose from his hair and face.

He felt that every single muscle and joint in his body hurt, as if he had been crushed by a gigantic foot that had miraculously not broken any major bones. He coughed trying to soothe the burning sensation from his tight chest, and his hand went to the spot over his hipbone where his parabatai rune burned with throbbing intensity. Jace, he thought, what happened? But he couldn’t hold on to the thought long enough to formulate an answer or a plan. Everything was too confusing, too strange, too noisy, too foggy.
He walked towards the broken window and shading his eyes against the red glare that seemed to permeate everything, looked out towards the sky and the scene below. What he saw could only be compared with a scene conjured up directly from the depth of hell.

The plaza where just a few minutes before, people had been walking among water fountains and statues was a sight of complete confusion. Some people ran around in a panic, aimless and in circles as if they didn’t know in which direction to go, or where safety could be found; others just stood still looking around in confusion. Their collective screams, calls and moans came to Alec as a low and constant murmur that joined the groans and laments filtering in from the hallway outside the room.

A cloud of red and orange fog covered everything, and the sun in the sky looked like a ball of deep red fire. The city that just this morning shone under the summer sky, was now covered under a cloud of red magic energy that made the air feel brittle and electric, and smell of brimstone, gunpowder and something else that Alec couldn’t pinpoint but that reminded him of demons.

Alec looked towards the distance and noticed that the red fog became thicker and more concentrated, settling like a red dome over a spot above the Gothic Quarters, where the air had acquired the deep color of blood. Above that spot, projected in the sky by some magic spell, the fading but still recognizable image of Magnus, his green-golden eyes gleaming against the red sky, his face impassive. Beside him, a woman with intense red eyes fixedly looked down on the destruction, a faint smile in her lips.

“Magnus, what did you do?” whispered Alec, looking at the image projected against the red sky, a mixture of desperation and disbelief in his voice, and a feeling of foreboding settling in his stomach and threatening to send him into a fit of nausea.

Alec struggled to get his bearings, looking for recognizable markers in the landscape below, to pinpoint the location where the darker sky marked the explosion’s epicenter. Unless he was mistaken or more disoriented than he was willing to recognize, he knew the place. He and Magnus had walked through that part of the Quarters the day before, and Magnus had pointed the glamourd building attached to the Basilica de Santa Maria del Pi that housed the Barcelona Institute.

Turning away from the window, Alec picked up his leather jacket and grabbing his phone and his stele, walked out of the room, determined to make his way to the Barcelona Institute in search of answers and, if possible, to lend assistance. The scene in the hallway was surreal. The power had gone out and only emergency lights were on, which shone an eerie orangy glow on the walls and the guests peering or walking out of their rooms. Some guests wondered along the corridors looking dazed, some cried and called out names in pain or panic, but most looked like they were sleepwalking, aimlessly and futilely searching for an exit that on one seemed to see.

Suspecting that the elevators were not safe, Alec took the stairs two at the time, ignoring the pain in his head, side and legs, trying to breathe in through the nausea and burning in his throat, sweat dripping from his brow, and soaking his back and chest. Half way down, he took out a handkerchief from his jacket pocket and brought it to his mouth to keep some of the heat and the smell away from his lungs. A few minutes later, he was walking out onto the street, and then he was running along the Rambla in the direction of the Quarters, retracing the steps he and Magnus had leisurely walked the day before, using the fading image of Magnus in the sky to guide himself.

He saw some people running around in a state of disorientation; others sitting on the sidewalk, looking up at the sky as if searching for an explanation for their confusion or for what they were
seeing. Some looked around with vacant expressions as if the explosion had released a drug into the air that had left them in a state of semi-consciousness. Cars had collided with each other on the road, bringing the traffic to a complete halt and drivers had gotten out and now looked dazed at the destruction that surrounded them. Glass and paper from offices and apartments above rained on the street, falling to the ground, and making crunching sounds under Alec’s boots as he half run and half walked in the direction of the center of the explosion.

Half way there, he had to stop to catch his breath, and try to calm his beating heart. He took his phone out to call Jace, but when he looked at his screen, he realized that there was no signal, no bars whatsoever. Likely, the red fog was interfering with communications. He could still feel the burning in his parabatai rune, but when he looked down, he saw that it was still there. At least Jace is alive, he thought. He put his phone back in his pocket and began to run again.

As soon as he entered the Quarters, he experienced a change in the air pressure as if he had walked through an invisible barrier. The wind died down, and the temperature dropped a few degrees, though the smell of brimstone, gunpowder and demonic energy was stronger. The streets were deathly silent, even more so than the day before, as if all sound had been sucked out of the air. The red fog was thicker, but he could see the shadowy figures of people walking around. As the shadows drew closer, the look of confusion and disorientation on the faces was even more pronounced and many seemed to not even be able to hear him when he told them to start walking out of the Quarters. Perhaps, the explosion had caused temporary deafness. Perhaps the red fog was affecting them in other ways, confusing their thoughts, dulling their senses.

Alec slowed down to a walk as he begun to negotiate the confusing narrow passages of the Quarters, looking for familiar points of reference from the day before. Every so often he looked up at the sky as the red fog got even thicker and the air more electrified. The atmosphere was brittle and dry causing his throat to feel parched.

As he neared the plaza that flanked the Basilica de Santa Maria del Pi and the adjacent Barcelona Institute, the destructive power of whatever caused the explosion became more painfully evident. Not only glass from broken windows and disoriented people could be seen, but also an increased number of bodies lying around, either dead or badly injured. He yelled instructions to people, telling them to leave the area or call an ambulance, but they didn’t seem to understand him, either because he didn’t speak Spanish or Catalan, or because they were just too confused and disoriented.

As he entered the plaza, he began to see the bodies of Shadowhunters, some in full gear, others wearing regular clothes, their runes clearly visible on their arms and necks, laying immobile on the ground. He stopped when he saw a Shadowhunter child, not older than ten or eleven, sprawled on his back, is eyes wide open and his mouth set in a silent scream. He leaned down and touched the child’s neck searching in vain for a heartbeat. When he didn’t find one, he closed the child’s eyes and said a silent “hail and farewell.”

The plaza in front of the Institute, which the day before had been buzzing with artists showing and selling their work and strolling tourists, was now a scene of silence and destruction. To Alec’s surprise, he saw that there were no fires burning, despite the air feeling hot and dry, as if itself had caught fire. He saw more bodies, mundanes and Shadowhunters, strewn around, as if they were no more than pieces of clothing that someone had thrown on the ground. He also recognized the bodies of Downworlders, werewolves –the only ones likely to be out during this time of day –in different stages of transformation, their faces a surreal mix of animal and human, pointy ears on human heads, muzzles protruding from human faces, claws and long nails at the end of perfectly smooth hands. A seelie with arms covered in vines and flowers in his hair sat with his back against a wall, his eyes closed, his chest still.
Among the bodies, shadows moved, silently and with the movements of sleepwalkers, checking on the dead, likely looking for survivors.

Alec willed his eyes away from the bodies and up towards the building that housed the Institute. He had seen it the day before, through its glamor and had found it beautiful, a perfect representation of Gaudi’s design and architecture, contrasting with the Mediaeval character of the old Basilica with its grand rose window, bell tower and archways. He had commented to Magnus that he felt sorry that mundanes couldn’t see and appreciate its beauty, its spires like bone structures pointing to the sky and decorated with stones in multiple colours, its mosaics glimmering like jewels.

The image in front of him now was a stark contrast from the image in his memory. The Institute’s façade, now scarred and semi-destroyed, seemed to be appearing and disappearing in patches, as the wards that disguised it flickered and began to fail. Part of the front wall was completely blown away, showing the ruins of what appeared to be an operation room, parts of it still hidden behind glamour, others completely exposed. One of the spires had collapsed and now laid, like a broken limb across the plaza. Every window in the Institute as well as in the Basilica were blown and pieces of color glass blanketed the cobble stone. All doors had been blown open, and now looked like gaping mouths frozen in a last attempt to catch a breath.

With cautious but determined steps, Alec made his way towards the point where the entrance had been, and that now was just a pile of rubble marking the spot where the wall had been blown away. The fog was at its thickest here, a deep and unrelenting red, that not only stained the air, but also the ground. Two badly burned bodies laid a few meters from where the wall used to be, their skins blackened as if they had been consumed by an intense, fast and flameless fire. A strong smell of burn flesh competed with the smell of brimstone and gunpowder, making Alec’s eyes stink and his throat close. As he approached the bodies, other shadows became visible: Shadowhunters in full combat gear, their seraph blades at the ready, their posture menacing.

“Alec Lightwood, head of the New York Institute,” stated Alec with as much strength as his burning throat allowed. “I was in Barcelona on vacation.” He pulled the sleeve of his jacket up so his runes were visible and took his stele from his pocket. He noticed the hand holding the blade was shaking and hoped whomever was holding it would not panic and cut his throat by mistake.

“At ease, Ashflaw” said another voice, this time the voice of a woman, speaking English with a clear Spanish accent. The Shadowhunter named Ashflaw lowered the blade and Alec turned in the direction of the second voice.

“I am Marite Acquaclara. I guess I am now the acting head of the Barcelona Institute,” said the voice belonging to a willowy woman with long black hair, and dark brown eyes on a thin and slightly long face. “I have heard of you,” she added, a look that, Alec thought, was of disapproval and contempt evident on her face.

“How can I help?” Alec tried to ask, but for some reason, the words refused to form in his mouth, and all that came out was a cry. His hand reached for his parabatai rune, now burning as if flames were spouting from it, as if a volcano was exploding in his entrails. The ground began to spin, and his head felt heavy atop his shoulders. Alec stumbled to the ground, his knee hitting the cobblestone hard and sending new stabs of excruciating pain through him. He tried to steady himself with his hand, but dizziness overtook him and he collapsed on the ground, his head spinning, his lungs struggling for air, his vision blurry.
The last thing he saw before he lost consciousness was Magnus’ fading face painted on the red sky, his cat eyes looking down on him with a dead and unconcerned stare. How could things have gone so wrong, Alec thought as he sank into oblivion.
A Life Time in a Second

Chapter Summary

“Magnus, you don’t have anything to worry about,” Alex had said, a smile lifting the corners of his mouth, a smile that didn’t erase the look of determination from his face.
“Let me love you, show me, teach me how to love you. I am a quick learner, I promise.”

As soon as the door closed, Magnus was immersed in complete darkness and after the receding steps of his two escorts stopped echoing in the hallway, an eerie silence deepened the sensation that he was floating, suspended somewhere outside time and space, somewhere outside reality. With cautious steps, he felt his way around, his hands outstretched to avoid walking into a wall, and when he found one, he leaned on it and then slid down to sit on the cold stone floor, his back against the equally cold wall. His chest still feeling the throbbing aftereffects of the spell he had worked on himself before leaving the hotel was the only reminder of the reality from which he now felt so completely removed. Soon he lost sense of time and would eventually not be able to tell whether he was locked in that room for a few hours or for a few days.

Funny thing, time, Magnus thought. Mortals measured it with a keen awareness of its finitude, knowing that each second, each minute, each day inexorably brought them closer to an unavoidable end, to a death that for some is a beginning and for others is simply oblivion, nothingness, emptiness. But, can time mean the same when one is immortal? Magnus asked himself, not for the first time. How is the passage the time measured when one is not counting down towards an unescapable end and one feels he has all the time in the world?

For the last three hundred years, Magnus had measured time according to the changes he saw around him, the way humanity advanced, made new discoveries, achieved now wonders. He was aboard the RMS Lusitania when it made its first transatlantic crossing, a feat at the time, and he clearly remembered the day mundanes invented the airplane and flew for the first time. He was, in fact, standing by the side of the makeshift airfield, cheering enthusiastically, as the Wright brothers took to the sky in their flying machine and had himself tried the machine soon after. Less than seventy years later, he witnessed man’s first landing on the moon. Each new advance coming faster and faster – the shuttle missions, the internet, the mapping of the human genome, the particle accelerator – as if mundanes were in a race against time; a race against their own mortality; eager to leave a mark, sometimes not caring whether the mark was of creation or destruction.

Magnus had also begun to measure time by the rhythms and changes of the human lives around him. In his three hundred years, he had befriended many mortals – mundanes and downworlders – some of whom had been lovers, and with whom he had briefly shared life and adventures. He had met many of them when they were barely out of childhood and he had eventually seen them age and die. In time, those friendships had become for Magnus a way to measure both the passage of time and the worthiness of his life, and for a while he had inhabited those mortal lives and those mortals had inhabited his.

The memory of his friend Joshua Pineshade suddenly popped into Magnus’ head. Joshua had been barely ten the first time that Magnus saw him, legs thin and long under the short pans that denoted his condition as a child, his hair a deep mahogany and his eyes a chestnut brown framed by a
freckled face. They had met at the Paris Institute when Magnus was hired to reinforce the wards in anticipation of the gruesome carnage that was the First World War. The two bonded over a game of chess, which they continued playing every time they saw each other over the years, Joshua getting better and better until he could defeat even Magnus. In time, Magnus had seen Joshua become a man, meet the girl that would eventually become his wife and with whom he had three children. As he grew older, Joshua became a respected Shadowhunter; yet, he never lost his idealism, sense of loyalty and innocence.

Joshua, who years later came to Magnus’ aid in Berlin, the only Shadowhunter to ever understand the depth of Magnus’ guilt, the extent of his shame, the immensity of his torment. Joshua, the only one to ever know how close Magnus had come to losing himself. Joshua with whom Magnus spent two weeks locked in the heavily glamored Berlin Institute, the last place of refuge, while outside the battle that would eventually mark the beginning of the end of the Second World War raged. They had played chess only half-heartedly during those days, neither of them able to erase from their minds the destruction that a downworlder had tried to bring down on the world under the disguise of a mundane war, a war the continued raging even after the Downworld danger had passed. They had heard the whistling sounds of the bombs as they fell from the sky, avoiding the Institute, just to go on to wreak havoc on what had been one of the most beautiful European cities Magnus had ever seen; destroying not only building and roads, but also shaking the very foundation of a society that had thought itself to be at the pinnacle of civilization. It was as if mundanes were determined to destroy themselves and they didn’t need the help of the Downworld to do it.

Magnus had been such terrible company during those two weeks; plagued by anger, sadness and guilt; grieving what he had lost; remorse chasing away sleep; drinking the only remedy to restlessness. Joshua had placed a hand on Magnus’ shoulder to comfort him one night, the gesture erasing the memory of other Shadowhunters’ contempt and disgust; of Shadowhunters breaking plates as if they were forever polluted simply because Magnus’ hands had touched them. And at that moment, Magnus had loved Joshua. He had loved him with a love without agenda or conditions, without desire or yearning; he had simply loved him.

His brave friend Joshua, thought Magnus; dead now for –wow! –ten years. Yet, to Magnus it felt like it was yesterday that they met for their last game of chess. Joshua, over ninety years old, looking frail and hunched, his chestnut eyes framed by heavy glasses, his life force slowly but surely leaving him. Joshua had been upset because his grandson had joined the Silent Brothers, which should have brought him pride, but instead made him sad. Joshua dying surrounded by his children and grandchildren, taking Magnus’ secret with him; Joshua mourned by generations of Shadowhunters and by him, Magnus, who could never play chess again without thinking of Joshua.

Funny thing, time, Magnus thought again. When it seems to stop, like it did now in this dark cold cell, time becomes pregnant with memories of past lives, of mistakes, of loss. Perhaps this is the way in which immortals should measure time: in mistakes, losses, lives touched and lives that touched them, in instants of joy or sorrow. Or perhaps for an immortal, time eventually losses all meaning and one can live a whole century in just one second, or rather a second can contain more joy, more wonder, more beauty than a whole century.

If Magnus had to choose one second in which to live a century, or even the rest of eternity, he knew exactly what second that would be. It would be the second in which Alec gave him the most precious and unexpected gift that he had ever received. It would be that second, that instant, in which Alec’s big brown bottomless eyes reflected that the internal war he had been waging with himself had finally be resolved; that split moment when Alec took the first decidedly step towards Magnus and surrendered, once and for all, to his feelings for him.
It had not been the public display when Alec kissed Magnus in front of his family and friends. Rather it had been a small intimate moment, sometime later. Shadowhunter traditions and expectations still had weighted down heavily on Alec. Despite the support and acceptance of his closest friends, the looks of contempt, disapproval and sometimes disgust on those among whom he had lived his whole life tormented him. Family expectations to continue the Lightwood bloodline, to marry and follow tradition burdened him in a way that was painfully visible to Magnus. Magnus ached for the young man, felt his pain as it was his own, perceived his hesitation and his self-doubt perhaps more than he had felt his own all those years ago.

“I can lose my career, Magnus, I can lose my family, everything,” Alec had said one night when they were out for a drink, such pain in his expression, such hesitation and fear in his eyes, such anxiety in the way his long fingers wrapped themselves around the stem of his glass, that Magnus had felt his own heart shatter in a thousand pieces. “What am I doing? How do I know this is really who I am?” Alec asked. “I mean I don’t know anything, I have never dated anyone. What is wrong with me?”

They had not been alone since the day Alec kissed him in front of his family. It had been Magnus’s decision because he could tell that Alec was not yet ready, and he was afraid that if he found himself alone with Alec, he would not be able to contain his own impulses. That night, Magnus had simply listened, willing the glass in his hand not to shake, willing his face not to betray how much Alec’s words pained him.

Magnus had been so forward in his flirtations with Alec when they first met, so open, so audacious in expressing his own attraction to the young man. But then, he had realized just how innocent Alec was, how inexperienced, how vulnerable, and he had backpedaled, wanting at first to run away but finding it impossible to do so. Instead, he had stayed and had decided to provide Alec a safe space to figure himself out, to sort out his feelings; determined not to let Alec’s struggle feel like a rejection. Yet, it had been excruciating to watch the war waging in Alec’s eyes, and he couldn’t help to feel guilty; for he was, after all, the cause of the battle, or at the very least the one that had prompted it.

“There is nothing wrong with you, Alexander,” Magnus had said, not for the first time, imbuing as much certainty into his words as he could. “You do not need to decide, not on my account. We can leave things as they are. I can leave New York for a while –for a lifetime if necessary, he thought but didn’t say –and you can go on with your life as if nothing ever happened,” Magnus offered.

He had left places and lives before, gone away until his heart mended, or until time erased the memory of him from people’s minds. But for some reason, the thought of leaving Alec had filled him with an emptiness so profound that he didn’t think he could ever fill it, no matter where he went and how many people he filled his life with. The thought of Alec aging away from him, perhaps marrying and building a life in which Magnus didn’t belong, a stranger’s life, was a prospect that filled Magnus with dread. But if he had to, he would make himself leave, he would take one step and then another and another away from Alec, without looking back, not for himself, but for Alec whose happiness mattered more to Magnus than his own. He would surrender himself to his fate as an immortal, the fate of constantly losing people, the fate of going on alone, even if this time he would have to force himself to meet that fate. He would do it because he was hopelessly in love with Alec.

“Please don’t leave,” Alec had said, sheer panic in his voice. “I don’t think I could stand missing you; I don’t think I could stand not being with you.”

“Oh Alexander,” was all that Magnus had said. The sincerity and urgency in Alec’s voice had felt like the touch of warm fingers against cold skin and he felt the warmth spread throughout his body,
as if the words had been tendrils caressing him, gently and softly. He had yearned to reach with his hand to touch Alec, to brush his fingers against Alec’s cheeks, to run them through his tussled hair, but he had contained his desire and tamed his hands.

They had left the bar a while later and Magnus had stopped on the sidewalk to say goodbye to Alec, but Alec had instead offered to walk him home. It had been an innocent proposal, nothing new, nothing that Alec –the eternal protector, always concerned about other people’s safety –had not done before, and Magnus had simply nodded. They had walked along the quiet and dark streets talking casually about the warm weather, and the lights in store windows, Alec’s presence beside Magnus exerting a magnetic force that seemed to obscure everything else around them, as if Alec’s presence was magical.

Rather than stopping in front of Magnus’s building, Alec had silently opened the door for Magnus and had then followed him up in the elevator and then through his apartment door.

“Thank you for walking me home, Alexander, and for ensuring my safety,” Magnus had said trying to sound playful but not flirtatious, failing on both accounts.

And then, the moment happened; that second in which Magnus wanted to live for eternity; that second in which a whole century of joy could be contained; that second in which he got to witness the most wondrous of events; that second that Magnus would treasure for eternity as if it was the rarest of jewels. He had seen it in Alec’s eyes; the resolution; the last battle being finally decided; the moment in which Alec finally surrendered. It had been a physical experience; Alec’s breath catching in his throat and then a loud exhalation, as he shook his head as if to shed all doubts; the exhalation and the shaking of the head finally silencing all the objections, judgements and protests that had been playing in his mind all this time.

Alec, his brave Alec, had taken a decidedly step forward and, reaching for Magnus, had placed his hands on both sides of his face and had kissed him, clumsiness and desperation mixed with passion and urgency. Magnus had felt himself involuntarily melting against Alec’s body, every part of him becoming keenly aware of the way on which Alec responded to the kiss, the way in which Alec’s breath caught and then released, the touch of Alec’s hands feeling cold and hot at the same time.

They had kissed before, and Alec had touched him gently and tentatively. But this was a different kind of touch, a touch with a forbidden but propitious flavor, a touch that felt like a promise, a first, a beginning. With astounding strength, Alec had pushed Magnus backward until his back was against the wall and then pressed himself against Magnus’, so alive, so vibrant, so electric. Alec gave free rein to his tongue so it could explore Magnus’ mouth, each maddening swirl threatening to overcome Magnus’ self-control. One of his hands moved down reaching for the bottom of Magnus’ shirt and then for his skin underneath. Magnus had felt as each gesture –the playful and urgent touch of Alec’s fingers, the sound of Alec’s quickening breathing, the strength of his body against his own –broke down his own defenses and the barriers he had erected to allow Alec the space and time to decide his own future.

Giving up all pretense of self-control, Magnus had reached with his own hand for Alec, and instinctively and with a desire that surprised even him, he had entangled his fingers in Alec’s hair. With his other hand, he had reached down and hooked his fingers in the belt loops of Alec’s jeans and pulled him even closer to him, wishing to feel the warmth of Alec’s skin against his own, wanting to use his magic to dissolve the layers of fabric that separated them.

Alec had surprised him even more then. With a certainty and dexterity that confounded Magnus, he had reached for Magnus’ belt buckle and loosen it, his other hand reaching for the small of his back and then slowly but resolutely making its way lower under his pants, caressing and pulling
him closer at the same time. Magnus’ breath caught in his throat, a confusing mixture of surprise and uncontained desire. He couldn’t believe how fast his body had responded, how quickly and decidedly it had surrendered to Alec’s touch.

Suddenly and with the last ounces of reason left in him, a thought had popped into Magnus head, stopping him cold in his tracks. Things were moving too fast, Alec was inexperienced and it was up to Magnus to ensure he didn’t push him too hard or too far. He was the one who had to exercise self-control, to make sure to take things slowly, to ensure not to scare Alec away.

“Alexander,” he had said, his voice hoarse and barely more than a whisper. Alec had not replied and instead had silenced him with a kiss.

“Alexander,” he had tried again and this time he pushed slightly against Alec’s chest.

Alec’s mouth had broken contact, but without moving away, and he had looked at Magnus, desire mixed with confusion in his eyes.

“Alexander, I would give anything to lose myself in you right now and forever, but I don’t want you do anything you could later regret. I would hate myself if I ever forced you to do something you are not comfortable with.”

“Magnus, you don’t have anything to worry about.” Alex had said, a smile lifting the corners of his mouth, a smile that didn’t erase the look of determination from his face. “Let me love you, show me, teach me how to love you. I am a quick learner, I promise.”

Alec had pressed his body even closer to Magnus’ then, his mouth searching for his ear. “Give yourself to me,” he whispered, and Magnus’ own internal battle had been decided at that moment, his own hesitation to love, not only a Shadowhunter, but one so innocent gave way to a determination to spend all eternity if necessary trying to make this man happy, letting Alec claim him as his own.

Magnus could not recall later how they had made it to the bedroom, except for Alec’s crystalline laugh as he stumbled across the threshold, and fumbled with the lock in the door without breaking contact with Magnus. He did remember clearly though, how they had peeled each other clothes off with shaking hands, lost in the most exquisite of dances while they gazed at one another with a mixture of amazement and awe. And then, the indescribable feel of Alec’s skin, its sweet taste and scent in Magnus’ mouth and nose; the sight of the runes and of the tiny and not so tiny scars that covered the planes and curves of Alec’s body; the way in which the moonlight illuminated his skin and shone on his tussled black hair, making it look almost blue at times. He would also clearly recall the maddening sensation of Alec’s mouth, tongue and fingers on him, drawing circles on his skin, marking him as if staking a claim, as if with each touch, Alec asserted his ownership over him.

Magnus’ extensive experience had taught him that sex, specially sex between men, required certain amount of negotiation, an explicit moment in which the relationship became defined. He had prepared himself for when that moment came for him and Alec. Thus, he was completely astounded by how easily and seamlessly the terms of their intimacy had been determined. It had not required a conversation, a request, a question; and, it had certainly not required a demand, a plea, or a submission. It had happened so naturally that Magnus couldn’t help thinking that their bodies had been made to fit together perfectly and without struggle or accommodation. For from that very first moment, that moment in which Magnus wanted to live for an eternity, lovemaking for them had been an act of mutual giving and receiving, an act of mutual possession and mutual surrender, an act between equals, without judgement, without demand, without hesitation.
Alec had given himself freely to Magnus and, in return, Magnus had done the same, and their lovemaking had become nothing like anything Magnus had ever experienced; it had become a new world that Magnus was eager to explore and learn, as if he was new and not three hundred years old.

Magnus had thought that the urgency and desperation with which Alec had first kissed him would lead to fast and hasty lovemaking. But again, Alec had surprised him by taking his time to slowly and with fierce determination enjoy every second, every gesture, every touch without rush. For the next few hours they had gotten lost in each other’s arms, making love slowly, softly and tenderly, with the ravenous hunger that Magnus had expected, but without the need for quick release. Alec had taken his time savoring every inch of Magnus’ body without haste or frenzy, exploring with his mouth every inch of him, enticing Magnus’ body to relinquish every possible sound of pleasure, showing Magnus how much he meant to him.

In answer to his gentle touch, Magnus’ body had softened and molded to Alec’s, his mouth searching for his and kissing it deeply but delicately, while his fingers traced his jawline. He too had taken his time exploring Alec’s body, getting to know those places in which Alec felt the most pleasure. When Alec’s hips had begun to undulate in a maddening motion, threatening to push him over the edge, Magnus had resisted against his unruly desire so he could concentrate in every tiny sensation that Alec’s movements provoked in him.

Magnus had attuned every one of his senses to the tiniest of Alec’s reactions watching for his every response to Magnus’ touch. The reward was that he became keenly attuned to each of Alec’s most minute reactions. He had felt in the center of his being the goosebumps on Alec’s skin, every little shiver as he responded to the licks and moves of Magnus’ tongue, every intake of air that entered his lungs as Magnus tasted Alec slowly and ever so gently. Magnus had felt every quiet moan as he fit his body to Alec’s enticing him deeper and deeper into a sensual act of love. In the process, Magnus had also experienced every pleasure Alec took and gave multiplied a thousand-fold, as Alec too kissed, licked, sucked and caressed him. Alec’s light fingers on his skin had been touches that reached the very center of his heart and soul.

They had made love without words, without any verbal expressions of lust or carnal desire, without any demand or request; just the sound of their breathing together deeply and increasingly faster. With every touch and caress, they had let their bodies express to one another feelings and sensations that no words could ever capture. There was none of the rush that plagues first time lovers. They were not seeking climaxing release, but, rather, the pleasure of the journey and every sensation that was the reward for every touch. Without the hasty search for the end, they had stretched every moment of pleasure extending, almost to infinity, the sensuality and seductiveness of every second.

The experience had been physical, emotional and spiritual and, in the process, Magnus had placed his heart in Alec’s hands without reservation, realizing than he had never truly made love until he met this man and lost himself in him.

Hours later, the first light of day had found Magnus and Alec entangled in each other arms; their bodies moving harmoniously; Magnus’ senses keenly attuned to Alec’s quickening heartbeats and to the tightening of his muscles as Alec began to take them both towards another even more powerful climax. Instead of their orgasms being a form of possession of the other, or a form of conquest, they had reached a climax that was a mutual offering that had touched Magnus’ soul like nothing else ever had.

Exhausted, they had finally fallen back on the bed entangled and spent, and Alec had reached for the duvet to cover them, making sure Magnus was warm and comfortable, the gesture so caring.
and attentive that it almost brought tears to Magnus’ eyes. Never in his very long life had Magnus been more grateful than he was at that moment for having witnessed the second in which Alec walked across the threshold that brought him to him and eventually to this moment of shared bliss.

A sound brought Magnus out of his reverie, back to his present in that dark lonely cell, a sound like nothing he had ever heard before. It was as if the building was shaking from its very foundations, and as if it was being pushed up by a mighty force coming from deep under the earth. At the same time, a powerful force seemed to suck all the oxygen out of the air, and even Magnus’ lungs felt empty. The awful disgusting smell of demonic power permeated the air, threatening to send him into a fit of nausea and then, suddenly, he felt his own magic energy being drained, as if it was being suctioned out of him by an invisible vacuum.

Magnus fought, using all his power to counteract the force draining his magic. Bringing his hand to the burn he had inflicted on the skin above his heart, he concentrated all his thoughts and all his magic on that spot and in the memory of that second in which he wanted to live for an eternity. He pushed the memory and his magic deep into the that singular spot on his chest where he had embedded Alec’s gift deep inside his own skin, making it become both a container for his magic and his memories, and a shield, an armor that protected him.

A sudden explosion shook the building even more powerfully, and for a fraction of a second, Magnus thought that he along with the building floated in midair, before crushing back down, the building settling once again on its foundations with a loud thump. A collective horrendous scream reached Magnus across the distance and silence, the collective screams of warlocks in pain and dying, a sound that told Magnus that something more terrible that he could ever have imagined had just happened.

Magnus had been able to protect his magic powers, stop whatever force that had just been released from taking what he was unwilling to relinquish, but the effort had taken all his energy, and now he felt faint and dizzy, and when he tried to stand up, his legs refused to obey him. He leaned back against the wall, trying to take control over his racing heartbeat.

Alec, please be safe, was the only thought in his mind as his hand rested against his chest and he struggled against dizziness and disorientation.
A Voice from the Past

Chapter Summary

As his pupils adjusted to the illumination now filtering into the room, Magnus could take a first unobstructed look at Khuno Jarh, the first man with whom Magnus ever had sex; the man that once introduced Magnus to the secrets of carnal love; the man that Magnus once considered his best friend, the only one ever to see him without his armours.

“You are in big trouble Magnus,” said a dawdling rich voice from the other side of the closed door; a voice that echoed in the darkness; a voice that Magnus had thought he would never hear again; a voice from the past. That deceptively sweet and velvety voice, like milk chocolate and honey licked off skin the color of caramel, sent shivers up and down Magnus’ back. The hair on his arms and at the nape of his neck stood on end; the reaction a mixture of longing and dread.

A shower of welcomed and unwelcomed memories washed over Magnus. They were memories of nights spent under a white gauzy canopy, wrapped in strong arms; moving against a body that seemed to have been made for debauchery and transgression; lost in a pair of eyes that gleamed like polished black coral; swimming in a sea of purple silk, the kind of silk that came from that part of the world that Magnus once called home. Other memories followed: those same black eyes hard and unyielding; those same arms that had once sheltered Magnus raised in the air, red and orange streaks of dark magic pouring out of them, setting fire to wood and sails; a brutal smile on a golden face while hundreds of screams pierced the black silence of the night. Magnus wondered about the kind of power that one voice can wield to evoke such conflicting memories, and whether one can desire and despise someone with such intensity that desire and loathing become fused into one feeling.

Magnus pushed the memories and thoughts out of his mind as he readied himself for the man that was about to walk through the door and back into his life with the inevitability of night following day. He swiftly brought his hand to the burn on his chest and concentrated in slowing down his speeding heart before it escaped through his throat. Determined not to show weakness, he got to his feet with some difficulty, his head still swimming; smoothed his hair and clothes; took two uncertain steps away from the wall; and straighten himself to his full height.

Magnus wasn’t surprised that Annaliese Fen had sent her most loyal abettor ahead of her. In fact, this is what he had been waiting for since the day before, when Gwydion and an unfamiliar warlock pulled him into a narrow dark entryway in the Gothic Quarters, pushed him against a hard stone wall, and told him that he was a wanted man. The impact of his back against the wall had momentarily startled Magnus but he had swiftly recovered, fear for Alec quickly replacing surprise, and he had flicked his fingers and cast a spell of protection, silence and distraction that would prevent Alec from noticing that Magnus was gone for a minute or so.

“We have been waiting for you,” had said Gwydion; a malicious smile on both his and the other warlock’s face. “We have a message.”

“Gentlemen,” Magnus had replied in a slow drawl. “If I had known you were waiting I would have hasted my arrival. To what do I owe this pleasure?” Magnus had not struggled despite the pressure
that Gwydion’s companion was exerting on his chest and the painful impression the stone wall was likely leaving on his back. He did ready his fingers for magic, however, just in case any of them made a move for Alec, who was now distractively turning a corner a dozen meters ahead.

“Don’t try to be smart, Magnus,” Gwydion had retorted with a sarcastic smile, his face so close to Magnus that his horns almost touched Magnus’ forehead. “You know we have been following you and your boy toy since Venice. We haven’t forgotten what you did in Batavia or in Berlin. You betrayed us, not once but twice. If it was up to me, I would kill you right now traitor.”

“Since you know so much, you should also know that it is no longer Batavia; it is Jakarta now,” Magnus had said, ignoring the threat. He doubted very much that Gwydion had the power to kill him, not by himself at least.

“Shut up and listen,” Gwydion had pushed him even more forcefully against the wall, cutting his airways. “If you do not want the Shadowhunter to die right now and right here, along with the hundreds of innocent mundanes walking about the Quarters, you will come tonight. And, don’t think the flimsy protection spell you just casted would protect the Shadowhunter; we are not the only warlocks here. We have eyes on him right now. We could kill him so fast that neither you nor he would have time to react.”

“There is no need for threats; I am happy to accept the invitation,” Magnus had replied, willing his heart to slow down before Gwydion noticed his rising panic.

“In that case,” Gwydion had said as he signaled to his companions, who had remained silent and impassive throughout the exchange, “we will see you tonight.”

The two men had let him go. They had walked away at an almost inhuman speed and disappeared into one of the narrow passageways in the opposite direction from where Alec had walked just a minute or two ago. Magnus had bent down, put his hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath and settle his racing thoughts. This was bad, very bad, he had thought; things were moving too fast, faster than he had calculated. He was running out of time.

He saw Alec turning the corner before Alec saw him. He was likely retracing his steps looking for Magnus; a fearful expression on that lovely face of an angel; fear mixed with loss and confusion, and perhaps panic. Alec was perhaps thinking that Magnus had abandoned him, run away after someone prettier or worthier. Alec who didn’t know the effect he had on those around him; who always hid in Jace’s shadow, whose golden brilliance, he thought, obscured his silvery one. Alec who thought that because Magnus was an all-powerful warlock and an immortal, couldn’t really love him; who thought he wasn’t deserving of Magnus’ love, not knowing that it was actually the opposite. It was Magnus who wasn’t enough.

Magnus’ spirit sunk ever deeper then; for he realized right there and then what he would have to do to ensure Alec’s safety; he would have to break his heart so badly, so completely, so irretrievably that Alec would never forgive him, and would never go after him. He would have to use Alec’s own insecurity as a weapon and he hated himself for that, he hated himself more that he had hated himself for all the other transgressions he had committed in his very long life. He had had to exercise inhuman self-control to straighten and put a smile on his face, before walking out of the dark doorway and casually stroll towards Alec.

Now as he waited for the door of his cell to open, Magnus prayed that breaking Alec’s heart would pay off. He had had to do it; it had just taken him some time to come to terms with the decision. He should have walked away a few days before, in Venice, when he first felt the burn of a pair of ruby red eyes staring at him from a dark archway at the Saint Marco’s Basilica, a gaze so strong that filled him with a feeling of foreboding he hadn’t been able to shake since. He should have walked
away then, but he couldn’t bring himself to; he couldn’t imagine not waking up to Alec’s angelic face, to the even rhythm of his breathing, to the gentle touch of his fingers. Even when he knew that departure was inevitable, he had stayed a bit longer, trying to stretch the minutes. He had been unable to stop himself from reaching for Alec, and Alec’s body had heeded his call. “Make love to me,” he had asked and Alec had, with all the generosity of his spirit, with all the openness of his heart, and Magnus had had to exert all his self-control not to cry, not to break down and tell him everything.

Now that familiar voice echoing in the darkness had told him that the time to face his worst demons had finally arrived, and he was not surprised. Annaliese was, in this regard, predictable, always discharging her sharp weapons before she attacked with her deceptive softness and vulnerability. She had done this before; in fact, Magnus might have even been the weapon once, when he was too innocent, lost and susceptible to realize that he had been played. Not this time though; this time he was prepared; for he had nothing and too much to lose at the same time. The only question was whether the sound of this familiar voice announced an advance attack or just a reconnaissance mission.

The door to his cell—for this is how he had begun to think of this room in the basement of the Royal Palace—creaked open breaking the pitiless darkness and casting a sharp streak of light across the floor. Magnus involuntarily squinted, the piercing brightness momentarily blinding, and he had to rearrange the impassive expression he had plastered on his face before turning toward the source of the light. There, against the illuminated backdrop of the hallway, stood the dark outline of the familiar silhouette of the man, the warlock, that once had been an object of Magnus’ all-consuming desire.

“Magnus, Magnus, we have been waiting for you” said the man as he entered the room and approached Magnus, his drawl as slow and lazy as his catlike movements. He stopped so close to Magnus that the man’s breath felt like a light breeze against the skin on Magnus’ neck, and the familiar scent of coffee and spices on the man’s skin tickled Magnus’ nose evoking a new wave of memories. “Naked, aren’t we? Where is the make-up, outfit, and jewelry you were wearing yesterday? You looked so dashing.”

“Khuno Jarh,” Magnus replied, infusing his voice with the cadence he thought cobras’ voices would have if they had voices. “Didn’t you hear? Simplicity is the new fashion.”

“Simplicity has never been your style,” Khuno retorted, looking Magnus up and down, appreciation tinted with desire in his eyes. Magnus felt Khuno’s featherlike fingers brush against his arm and shoulders as Khuno began to take a turn around Magnus, surveying him as one surveys a sculpture one is considering purchasing, or a potential lover one is considering inviting to bed. The touch and the gaze sent a new wave of shivers through Magnus and goosebumps raised on the spots that Khuno touched. Noticing the involuntary response that his fingers provoked on Magnus, Khuno smiled, a coy and seductive smile that had not changed in three hundred years. Even after all these years, he was confident that he could read Magnus’s body like an open book.

“You have missed me,” Khuno said, not a question but a statement, certainty mixed with self-satisfaction.

“As much as a toothache,” said Magnus, a demure smile on his face, his eyes covertly following the warlock’s feline movements.

“I don’t believe you,” Khuno whispered in Magnus’ ear, one of his hands resting briefly at the nape of Magnus’ neck, before he slowly retrieved it and moved to face Magnus, his piercing eyes intent on him.
As his pupils adjusted to the illumination now filtering into the room, Magnus could take a first unobstructed look at Khuno Jarh, the first man with whom Magnus ever had sex; the man that once introduced Magnus to the secrets of carnal love; the man that Magnus once considered his best friend, the only one ever to see him without his armours.

Occasionally, Magnus caught himself looking for evidence of the passage of time on his own features and demeanor and in that of other immortals, wondering whether time left a mark even when bodies remained immune to aging. He did this now, and was unsurprised to discover that even after centuries, Khuno remained mostly unchanged. The warlock had stopped aging in his early twenties, his handsome boyish features concealing the fact that he was at least five hundred years old. He was a few inches shorter than Magnus, and deceptively slim, with the sinewy figure of a runner. He was wearing a white muscle shirt that emphasized the deep golden brown of his skin, and charcoal jeans that hugged his hips perfectly and accentuated a slender and well-proportioned body that Khuno moved with the grace of a panther.

In addition to a fashionable goatee and mustache, the only other perceptible changes were in his hairstyle, which was now in thin black dreadlocks that stuck out of his head in all directions, and the rows of hoop silver earrings that decorated his ears lobes. Magnus thought Khuno looked like a young jazz musician, a look reinforced by the slow and leisured way in which he moved.

Even after all these years and everything that happened between them, Magnus still thought that Khuno’s face was beautiful in a sinful and decadent kind of way. Black almond-shaped eyes framed by slightly arched eyebrows, a perfectly shaped and symmetrical nose, and a broad mouth that when it smiled revealed two rows of perfectly straight white teeth seemed to coexist in perfect harmony on a golden-brown face whose expression seemed to be an open invitation to mischief. Magnus once thought that Khuno had one of those long necks that one cannot help to explore with one’s tongue. Magnus had, in fact, done precisely that many times, drinking in the scent of coffee and spices that was particularly intense at the spot where neck met shoulder. Once Magnus thought that he would never forget that scent; the taste of that neck; the feel of that body that had been his perdition.

“You told me to come, Khuno,” said Magnus pushing the memories of Khuno’s long neck and mischievous body out of his mind. “Why am I here?”

“Why? I thought you would be happy to come back to us” Khuno replied, the seductive smile taking permanent residence on his mouth. “Annaliese is thrilled. She has missed you and still cares about you despite how badly you behaved after all she did for you in Batavia. We thought you were dead. Imagine the surprise to find you happily strolling through the streets of Venice and with no other than a Shadowhunter. You do get around, don’t you?”

“You know that I have eclectic tastes, and a body as beautiful and accomplished as mine should not be reserved for only one species.”

“The last time we saw you was in Berlin,” Khuno said.

“That’s right,” Magnus retorted, touching the side of his face with a finger, a feigned tone of realization in his voice. “You looked handsome in that SS uniform and in the Aryan face you were glamored in. You were with that Nazi general, weren’t you? the one who was also a doctor, what was his name?”

Where have you been?” Khuno asked, ignoring Magnus’ taunt, a pretended innocent inflection in his voice.

“You know, here and there. Doing my thing.” Magnus doubted very much that Annaliese and
Khuno had not kept tabs on him, and suspected that they had known where he was for a long while. Annaliese told him once that no one ever left her, and Magnus suspected that even if he went to the ends of the earth to escape her, she would still be able to find him. Perhaps only in death he would ever be free of her.

“Who is the boy you were with? He is pretty.”

“No one of consequence,” replied Magnus, making a superhuman effort to dissimulate the sudden jump his heart gave at the mention of Alec. He also suspected, however, that Annaliese and Khuno already knew exactly who Alec was.

“That is what Gwydion said. But imagine the surprise when we went to your hotel room in search of the boy and found the room heavily warded. You would not use that much magic to protect just anyone,” Khuno casually stated, his eyes searching for any reaction in Magnus.

“As you know, I have a varied clientele and, besides, Shadowhunters pay handsomely for my protection.”

“No matter, your wards failed with the explosion along with all the rest of the magic wards protecting the city. You did feel the explosion, didn’t you?” The tone of innocence barely concealing the malevolence in Khuno’s voice.

“So, that’s what that was,” said Magnus, matching tit for tat the warlock’s tone.

Despite not being completely surprised, Magnus’ heart skipped another beat at the mention of failing wards. Before leaving the hotel, he had spent a long while watching Alec’s sleeping figure, the rapid movement of his eyes behind closed eyelids and his slow even breathing the only movements on his serene innocent face. Magnus had tried to commit to memory every detail of that face and of Alec’s relaxed body lying on his stomach, his face turned to one side, one arm extended towards Magnus’ side of the bed, his shoulders and arms the only parts not covered by the white sheets. That and one of his feet, which Alec always stuck out from underneath the covers, not the whole leg, just one foot; a foot that no matter how many times Magnus covered, always managed to escape from under the covers. Last night, more than ever, Alec’s sleeping figure had reminded Magnus of a statute made in the purest of marbles, the sheets unable to disguise the hard planes of his body. Alec was so beautiful when he slept, his face so innocent that Magnus had had to force himself to look away.

Before leaving though and suspecting that Alec would be in danger after Magnus was gone, he had reinforced the wards that—unbeknownst to Alec—he had been casting on each of the hotel rooms they had stayed during their trip. Just a precaution, Magnus had told himself at the beginning; that is, until Venice when the need to protect Alec had become a matter of urgency. He had tethered the wards to his own magic to give them more strength, but after the explosion and having to resist the mysterious force that had tried to drain his powers, he could no longer feel the connection to the wards and suspected they had failed. Khuno was now confirming that suspicion and a sinking feeling settled in Magnus’ stomach. He resisted the need to bring his hand to his chest in search of reassurance; he must not show weakness.

“Don’t you want to know what happened?” asked Khuno, his gaze becoming even more intense.

“I am sure you will tell me if you want me to know.”

“It was a test,” Khuno announced, a mixture of conceit and anticipation in his expression. “Annaliese found a way to contact Mother and channel her energy into this realm. The next step is to open the door for her to return. Our Mother is waiting to come back to us, Magnus, to take back
what is rightfully hers. She wants to be reunited with her faithful children.”

“My mother is dead,” said Magnus. “She killed herself and you don’t come back from that.”

“Don’t be impertinent, Magnus,” said Khuno, his hand lightly slapping Magnus on the cheek, the touch both a caress and a threat. “Annaliese has found it in her heart to forgive you. She wants you to help us to get Mother back. Despite all your rebelliousness, she still loves you like a brother.”

“Annaliese is not my sister; sisters do not do with their brothers what she did with me, and sisters do not make their brothers do what she made me do.”

“You obviously didn’t live through the time of the pharaohs,” Khuno said, the mischievous smile back. “The three of us were good together and we can be good again. Annaliese and I love you, and I thought you found peace with us.”

“I have been in your arms, Khuno, and in Annaliese’s; there is not good, love or peace there,” said Magnus, letting the playful tone fall off his voice for a moment. “So, when do I get to see our fearless leader?”

“I thought we could spend a little time together first, you know, for all times’ sake.” Khuno closed the distance between them, and placed one hand against Magnus’ cheek and the other in the small of his back. Magnus kept his own arms to his side steeling himself for the contact. “I know you want me; your body could never lie to me.”

Khuno kissed Magnus then, his lips an assault on Magnus’ own lips, forcing them open so his tongue could claim Magnus’ mouth. Magnus experienced a moment of confusion, as a new rush of memories assailed him, reawakening an internal conflict he thought he had resolved a long time ago. For an instant, he felt that he teetered at the edge of an abyss, Khuno and Annaliese beckoning him to jump, to come to their side; the old enchantment that once had kept him enthralled threatening to reassert its power once again. For a second, Magnus felt his own body surrendering but it was just a second; and, then something pulsated in the center of the burn atop his heart and the rush of memories was replaced by another chain of images: Alec’s serene smiling face looking at Magnus; his pensive expression intent on a book; his black hair reflecting the sunlight in tones that were almost indigo; his sleeping figure, like a fallen angel that had become entangled in white sheets.

Magnus’ body stiffen then and his lips turned to stone, realization dawning on him: Khuno’s presence here was both an advance attack and a recognisable mission. Rather than coming herself, Annaliese had sent Khuno because Magnus had been with Alec and not with a woman. She wanted to test just how strong Magnus’s feelings for Alec were, and whether Magnus would once again succumb to Khuno’s charms. If he had realized that sooner, perhaps Magnus could have stopped his body from rejecting Khuno’s advances; perhaps he could have pretended to correspond Khuno’s kiss. In any case, it was too late now; Khuno had noticed his rejection, the stiffness of his body.

“Magnus, you haven’t forgiven me,” Khuno said as soon as he broke contact. “After all these years, you still hold a grudge.”

“Oh honey,” said Magnus in the slowest drawling voice he could manage. “It will take a lot more than a kiss for me to forgive you.”

“No matter, we have all the time in the world,” whispered Khuno in Magnus’ ear. “You know how much I love a challenge. Anyway, we should get you ready to see Annaliese. After all these years, I assume, you don’t want to meet her in this rather unstated attire,” he said weaving a hand up and
down Magnus’ body. “We have to rush though; we may have overstated our welcome in Barcelona. We will have to leave soon for the next stop in our mission,” Khuno concluded as he signaled for someone who had been waiting outside the door to come in.

Two warlocks walked in then, the quiet man that had been with Gwydion the day before and a slim woman with hair the color of a summer sky. They didn’t make eye contact with Magnus or acknowledged him in anyway. They just went to work on a pair of shackles that one of them fasten around Magnus’ wrists while the other said an incantation that immediately smothered all magic from Magnus’ fingers.

“I am sorry, Magnus,” said Khuno. “Although we are happy you have decided to come back into the bosom of your family, we need to take some precautions. I am sure you understand. Annaliese cannot wait to see you.”

Magnus didn’t say anything, he simply stared at Khuno. He had loved him once; even now after everything, he was sure of it, and he knew that in his own twisted way Khuno had loved him too. He had also loved Annaliese and, in a way, Magnus knew that he had loved them both because they came as a package, that he couldn’t have loved one without also loving the other; for they were two parts of a whole. He had loved Annaliese with a desperate need to protect her, to run his fingers through that vulnerable face, but he had desired Khuno with uncontained lust, with a lust capable of reaching through the centuries. They were the perfect combination: she, the embodiment of vulnerability, virginity and virtue; he, the face of sin, temptation, excess, an open invitation to step off the edge and jump. Even now and despite all the horrors, the hate and the destruction, Magnus could still feel Annaliese and Khuno’s allure, the reawakening of tenderness and desire. If it is true to one never forgets one’s first lover, then it would be Annaliese and Khuno who Magnus would remember with the impossibility of separating them in his mind and in his heart. He just hoped that when the time came he would be able to look past his love and do what he knew he had to do.

Once the shackles were firmly in place, Khuno guided Magnus by his elbow out of the room and up the stairs. The two other warlocks following close behind.

“We will get you ready for your reunion with Annaliese,” said Khuno, enthusiasm and anticipation in his voice. “You will be happy to know that many of our brothers and sisters have joined us. We are finally going to take back the place we deserve in the world.”
Alec’s absence felt like a hole in the center of Jace’s chest, a hole as big as the one the explosion had left in the Institute’s wall, and like the Institute, Jace felt his entrails were exposed.

“I must insist on my request to portal to Barcelona to ascertain the condition of my parabatai,” stated Jace, his voice barely containing his increasing frustration.

He nervously shifted from foot to foot and had to force his hands to remain interlaced on his back in the posture expected of Shadowhunters speaking to a superior. Sleep deprivation and the stress of the last days were hindering his efforts to control his temper and to maintain an emotionless expression. In truth, he was exhausted as well as desperate for news of Alec, and this was exacerbating his tendency to defy authority. He needed to know what was going on with Alec; it was more than a need; it was an imperative.

“That won’t be necessary,” replied Inquisitor Dearborn at the other end of the videoconference, the nasal quality in his voice contrasting with his commanding tone. “We have things under control here.”

The Inquisitor’s poker-faced expression, with his mane of red curls and light brown eyes on a thin face covered in freckles, made Jace want to scream. The face looked unnaturally large on the big flat screen, and the man’s big ears reminded Jace of parabolic antennas sticking out from under the red curls. He could see each one of the reddish freckles on the inquisitor’s nose, and the look of superiority in the man’s eyes.

Jace had always distrusted Inquisitors. In his mind, they were all corrupted bigots, who saw themselves as the superior guardians of Nephilim traditions and morals. Some of those morals and traditions were so old-fashioned that they had stopped being relevant a long time ago. It mattered little to Jace at this point that his own grandmother was an Inquisitor; he had not known her for long, after all.

He had been on this call with Inquisitor Dearborn for no more than two minutes, but Jace already deeply distrusted the man. Something about him reminded Jace of a weasel; perhaps it was something in his eyes, a judgemental look that the Inquisitor could not completely conceal despite his expressionless countenance.

Jace had been calling the Barcelona Institute almost every hour for the last twenty-four hours, always with the same request which was met with the same reply: the use of all portals was suspended because of the current terrorist threat. Any instruments or technologies developed by or with the use warlock magic was now considered suspect and a potential threat. The command had been already communicated to Jace in a variety of tones by Marite Acquaclara, acting head of the Barcelona Institute, and by her assistants. The only difference now was that the person stating the prohibition was Inquisitor Josiah Dearborn, who until the Paris, Barcelona and New York attacks two nights ago, was a rather obscured member of the Inquisitor’s office. Now, he was apparently in charge of coordinating the team investigating the attacks.
Acquaclara had initially refused to confirm or deny any knowledge of Alec being in Barcelona at the time of the explosions. However, when this morning Jace threatened to fly to Barcelona himself to look for his parabatai, she had finally and grudgingly acknowledged that Alec was at the Barcelona Institute and that he was injured, but stable. Apprehension quickly followed the initial relief Jace felt at knowing that his brother was alive. He was deeply concerned about Alec’s injuries and about the fact that he was apparently alone in a strange country and among strange and potentially unfriendly Shadowhunters. Tempers were running high among the Nephilim since the explosions and, considering the role the Clave thought Magnus had in the attacks, Jace suspected that Alec would quickly become a person of interest in the investigation.

Jace was in a barely contained state of anxiety; anxiety he felt in every fiber of his being, as it coursed through his system tightening his muscles and leaving what felt like a stone lodged in the pit of his stomach. After the initial agony that woke him up just before the explosions two nights ago, his parabatai rune had pained him intensely for a few hours. The pain had, at times, been almost unbearable and Jace had had to exercise all his self-control to focus on the current emergency. The only consolation was that the pain told him that, while in pain himself, Alec was at least alive somewhere.

But then, twenty-four hours ago, as he was walking towards the infirmary to check on the injured Shadowhunters, the pain had suddenly stopped and he couldn’t any longer feel his connection to Alec. It was as if their link had been abruptly severed or blocked. The sensation of being cut off from his parabatai had been so intense that Jace had experienced sudden dizziness and disorientation and had to hold on to the wall to avoid falling.

Jace’s initial thought was that Alec was dead, but when he checked the spot above his hip where his rune was located, he saw that it was still there, which meant that Alec was still alive, even if now his connection to Jace was somehow blocked. Since then, Jace had felt the unnerving sensation that he was missing something fundamental, a limb or a critical organ without which he was weaken and not completely himself.

Jace could not remember a time when he didn’t feel his connection to Alec. Since he was ten years old and first came to live with the Lightwoods, him and Alec had been inseparable, and Jace had grown accustomed to looking to his side and seeing Alec there, always silently alert and protective, a constant that made Jace feel secured, safe and complete.

Becoming Alec’s parabatai had been the most natural of processes because, even before the ceremony, Jace had felt closer to him than to anyone else in his life. Since then, not only had Jace been able to count on Alec’s physical presence; Alec had also been a constant source of emotional support and containment for Jace. In fact, it was his connection to Alec that allowed Jace to, at times, take unnecessary risks and give free reign to his rebellious spirit. For Jace knew that Alec would always be by his side not matter what happened. Some people said that Alec lived in Jace’s shadow; very few people saw that Alec was, in fact, what anchored Jace, the one person that could get through to him, the one who gave Jace the sense of belonging and connection he never had as a child.

In the last few months, Alec had been happy for the first time in his life, and through his parabatai connection, Jace had experienced the sense of peace and completion that came with that happiness as if it was his own. Through Alec, he had felt what it was like to love someone so completely and unconditionally that social conventions, and differences in history and backgrounds didn’t matter. In a way, Alec’s bravery and openness to love had allowed Jace to open his own heart, to also allow himself to be vulnerable and open to love Clary. Now, Alec was gone from him, and Jace felt unmoored and adrift, and he needed Alec with an intensity he could barely contain.
“Inquisitor, I must insist…”

“Mr. Herondale,” interrupted the Inquisitor in a commending voice, “let me assure you that Alexander Lightwood is safe, and that he is receiving the best medical care possible. There is no need for you to come here. Besides, you have more pressing matters to attend.”

For the briefest of moments, Jace shifted his gaze to a point to the side of the screen where Clary was standing, an expression of understanding and support on her exhausted face, her eyes telling him not to lose his patience. “You won’t accomplish anything if you lose your composure,” she had told him before he made this latest attempt to get to Alec. “You cannot afford being removed as acting head of the Institute.”

“Can we at least get an update on his condition?” asked Izzi, coming to stand beside Jace, her shoulder touching his, as if to support him or stop him from throwing a seraph blade at the screen.

“He was knocked unconscious by the explosion, but he is not in any danger,” Dearborn repeated in a tone of exasperation he didn’t bother to disguise. “I assure you that he is being taken care of. There is no need to concern yourself. Now, Mr. Herondale, what do you have to report?” added the Inquisitor, closing any further discussion on the subject of Alec.

Jace took a deep breath and tried to settle his rising temper. “Two Shadowhunters, Fishblue and Bulltower, died in the explosion; they were on guard by the entrance at the time. We have informed their families and will be planning their funerals in next few days. Six others suffered injuries; one of them is in serious condition but it is expected to pull through. In addition, two badly burned bodies were found near the center of the explosion. We are trying to ascertain their identities but we suspect they were warlocks. Luckily, the explosion was in the middle of the night here when very few mundanes were around, and most Shadowhunters were sleeping.”

“Yes, yes, I read that in your report. What I want to know is the state of the Institute and the wards. We must reduce the risk of exposure,” interrupted the Inquisitor once again.

The man was infuriating, thought Jace, and his disregard for the human cost of the explosion only increased Jace’s distrust.

“The wall by the entrance to the Institute suffered serious damage and all windows and some doors on that side of the building were blown in, but otherwise, the building remains structurally sound. The situation room suffered some equipment damage, but nothing that cannot be repaired. The wards failed and were down for a few hours, but we managed to restore them before daybreak. We are once again glamored, so the risk of exposure is now minimal. We do not know though whether the wards can withstand another explosion.”

Jace didn’t mention that shortly after the attacks, Catarina Loss, Magnus’ friend, had shown up at the institute and aided them in re-establishing the wards and treating the injured. Warlocks had suddenly become enemy number one to the Clave, and no one more so than Magnus Bane, and Jace thought it was better to keep that information under wraps for now.

“Our main concern Inquisitor,” added Jace, “is that the explosion released some form of gas into the air that effected mundanes and vampires that were exposed to it. Mundanes who inhaled it seemed to experience apathy, confusion and disorientation. The exposed vampires, on the other hand, became over-excitable, aggressive and their hunting and feeding instincts appear to have gone on overdrive. They seemed unable to stop themselves from hunting and feeding, and the behaviour is putting mundanes at risk. It is a lethal combination: mundanes unable to defend themselves and vampires with no capacity to stop themselves from hunting.”
When Jace and his team had gone out to assess the situation a few minutes after the explosion, they had found several mundanes in complete states of confusion, a vacant look in their eyes, and apparently unable to remember what had happened to them, where they were going, and how they had gotten to the park. At first, Jace had thought that the disorientation was a reaction to the shock of the explosion, but something about the expression on their faces told him that something else was going on. It was not until an hour or so later, that they had observed the effect of the gas on vampires. A group of young vamps that usually gathered in the park after dark, had suddenly and without provocation attacked the mundanes, and Jace and his team had had to exercise considerable force to stop them from killing them. Still, at least one mundane had to be taken to hospital with serious blood loss. When they captured them, Jace saw a similar vacant look in the hungry and contorted faces of the vampires.

As the red cloud left by the explosion began to dissipate across the city skies, a few additional incidents broke out requiring Shadowhunters intervention. Jace had to ask for assistance from Luke and his pack in capturing the rogue vampires and as soon they made the link between the gas and the odd behavior, Rafael had ordered his whole clan to remain inside the Hotel Dumort. Fortunately, no vampire had died; at least not yet.

Jace suspected that the gas also affected the werewolves, but the effect was less drastic, perhaps because their exposure was less severe. They did seem more irritable and prompt to violence, and Luke had acted as if he was resisting the impulse to transform; but when Jace asked, he had been evasive in his reply.

“Yes, we have observed similar behaviours in Barcelona and Paris,” stated the Inquisitor. “We must do everything in our power to stop any threats to mundanes and any Downworld insubordination. We cannot allow any challenges to our authority; specially not under the current circumstances. Assemble your teams and hunt the rogue vampires, Mr. Herondale. Eliminate on the spot anyone found breaking the Accords.”

“But, shouldn’t we try to find out whether the reaction is the result of the explosion first? Shouldn’t we try to help the vampires affected?” asked Jace. He hated the idea of summary executions, especially if whatever was happening to the vampires was out of their control.

“Under the circumstances, we cannot afford being lenient or remiss on our sacred duty,” said the Inquisitor, his voice suggesting that any further questioning would not be tolerated. “Mr. Herondale, until we figure out what is going on, I am naming you acting head of the New York Institute.”

Tell me something I don’t know, Jace thought but didn’t say. He had been acting as the de-facto head of the Institute since the explosion and he felt the official pronouncement was completely unnecessary. In fact, the statement made him even more suspicious for it suggested that Alec would not be returned to them anytime soon. “Yes sir,” was all he said.

“You have your orders, and now I must go back to my duties. Do not waste my time with another request for a portal, Mr. Herondale,” said the Inquisitor and without waiting for a reply ended the call.

Jace looked at the blank screen for a few seconds, trying to collect his thoughts and resist the impulse to shout insults at it. The call had been a complete waste of his time and he didn’t know any more now than he knew before Inquisitor Dearborn appeared on the screen. Though perhaps that was not completely true: he knew that Alec was alive and that he was likely in the hands of the Inquisitor. In some ways, that fact unnerved him as much as not knowing Alec’s whereabouts had. He couldn’t shake the deep distrust he felt towards Inquisitor Dearborn.
“Well, that was helpful,” said Izzy, who was still standing beside Jace, sarcasm evident in her voice. “What do we do now?”

“But we at least know that Alec is alive and is being cared for,” Clary tried to reassure them.

Jace forgot sometimes that Clary was new to Shadowhunter politics, which made her overly trusting. She didn’t always understand that some Shadowhunters, specially those residing in Idris, were so convinced of their superiority as children of the angel that they felt entitled to decide on the life and death of downworlders and mundanes. Their prejudice even extended to Shadowhunters with close ties to the Downworld because they perceive those relationships as corrupting the Nephilim. Valentine, the man that raised him, had believed that, and Jace knew too well what those beliefs had led to. Alec’s relationship with Magnus and the role that Magnus might have played in the attacks put Alec in danger; Jace was sure of that.

There was another reason for concern: the order to summarily execute vampires put the Accords at risk, and threatened a war with the Downworld. Despite the alliances forged in the war against Valentine, distrust and prejudice against the Downworld remained rampant among members of the Clave and many might even welcome a war.

Still, Jace smiled at Clary, because her statement was meant to comfort and reassure him; it was an expression of love and Jace didn’t want her to feel that it had gone to waste.

“Izzy, we need to speak to Rafael to find out what is going on with his clan and whether he knows anything about who may be behind the attacks,” Jace said turning to his sister and assuming the tone of authority that he thought was expected of a leader during a crisis. “We need to find a way to stop whatever is making the vampires rabid before more mundanes are attacked and we are left with no other choice but to hunt them down.”

“I will go see him right now,” said Izzi, stepping away from Jace and taking on the posture of the subordinate, no longer the caring sister, but the soldier, a soldier that trusted her leader to make the right decision. Jace was more thankful for Izzy’s trust than he could express with words; for, through her example, she told the rest of the Shadowhunters in the Institute that Jace’s authority and leadership was unquestionable even if only until Alec came back.

Jace felt completely inadequate to fill Alec’s shoes. His brother was a natural leader, thoughtful, caring and commanding, and he never made people feel that they were being ordered around. Jace always seemed to rub people the wrong way, and his decisions were often hasty and impulsive. Several times during this crisis, Jace had found himself thinking what Alec would do, which had not only made him think twice before issuing an order, but had also made him miss Alec even more.

“Good, I am going to go talk to Catarina Loss; see if I can gather more information about who may be involved in the attacks. Clary, I need you to stay here and supervise emergency repairs and the reinforcement of security. Can you also assign someone to search the historical records for any information about the warlock whose image was projected besides Magnus after the explosions? There must be some record of her.”

He then signaled Izzy and Clary to follow him as he walked out of the room. He stopped in the hallway and after making sure no one else was listening, spoke to them in a voice that was almost a whisper. “We need to find a safe and hopefully hidden spot in the institute where we can open an emergency portal just in case we need to go get Alec. I am hoping Catarina will agree to help us with that. I do not trust the Inquisitor and I am not about to leave Alec in his hands. There is no way the Clave is going to simply release him, especially considering his relationship to Magnus. We cannot underestimate the bigotry and homophobia of some of our people. I hope I am wrong,
but I think Alec may be in danger and he will need our help.”

Izzy nodded in agreement and put an arm around Jace’s shoulders, and Jace appreciated the gesture because, despite her own anxiety and preoccupation for her brother, she still had the capacity to sympathize with Jace.

“We will help him; we will not leave him alone” said Clary reaching for Jace’s hand and giving it a loving squeeze. For a moment, the three of them were linked as if they were a human chain; a chain that at this moment was missing some important pieces but that remained strong. The contact made Jace feel anchored once again, if only momentarily.

“You don’t believe that Magnus had anything to do with the attacks, do you?” asked Izzy, the anxiety back in her voice. “I mean he loves Alec and I cannot believe that he would do something like that.”

“At this point I don’t know what to believe, so I am not discounting anything until we know more,” replied Jace. He loved his sister deeply and wished he could reassure her. Izzy, who carried herself as if nothing bothered her or made her uncertain, was deep down a caring, loving and trusting person, someone whose loyalty people were lucky to gain. She had given her loyalty to Magnus if only for the fact that he had chosen to love Alec. Jace hoped that by the end of whatever this latest crisis was, Izzy would not be disappointed. “We need more information,” he repeated looking at the two most important women in his life. “We cannot go into whatever this is without knowing more.”

A few minutes later, as Jace was leaving the Institute, he turned to look back at the destruction caused by the explosion. Mundanes strolled along the park in front of the building completely oblivious to the scene of destruction now hidden behind think layers of glamour. The Institute’s front wall was almost completely gone, an enormous hole where the front door used to be, and through the hole, what remained of the entryway and one of the situation rooms was visible, like the bowels of a ship, cables hanging from the ceiling and pieces of technology strewn around. The heavy smell of sulfur and other demonic energies permeated the air and had been harder to cover up. As a result, a sign had been placed by a hole on the ground advising passersby that work was being carried out in the sewage system. Near the epicenter of the explosion, a red stain marked the place on the ground where the two badly burned bodies of the warlocks had been found. The stain maintained an intense red glow, as if ambers were still burning under the pavement, and the smell of sulfur was even stronger there.

They had not found any indications of a bomb or any explosive device in the area or on the bodies. Izzy was still examining the remains, but she suspected that the explosion had been the result of magic so intense that it had burned the warlocks responsible for conjuring it up. The incidents had all the markers of a suicide mission, which puzzled Jace even more. It is true that relationships between warlocks and the Nephilim were strained at times, but he would have never suspected that they would engage in such acts of violence.

Not for the first time, Jace thought that they had been extremely lucky that the explosion took place in the middle of the night. Deaths and injuries would have been considerably more extensive if the explosion had happened during the day, as it did in Barcelona and Paris where the number of victims was still unclear. The source of the explosion would have also been harder to disguise from the mundane world. As is, the dozen or so mundanes who were in the park when the explosion happened were the only ones to see when the wards fell and the Institute became suddenly visible, and the gas had such an effect of them that it is unlikely that they cared or even remembered. Still, Jace could not shake the feeling that the attacks were just the beginning and that something even bigger was about to happen.
If only Alec was here, thought Jace as he walked in the direction of Catarina’s apartment. If only he was here to help him understand the clues, and put together the few pieces of this puzzle that were visible. If only Alec was here to tell him that everything would be alright, to stand by him, to have his back as he always did. Alec’s absence felt like a hole in the center of Jace’s chest, a hole as big as the one the explosion had left in the Institute’s wall, and like the Institute, Jace felt his entrails were exposed.

Jace didn’t know that at that precise moment, Alec was regaining consciousness thousands of kilometers and an ocean away, a similar feeling of disorientation at realizing that he could no longer feel his parabatai. The feeling of being severed from something critical to his survival was so overwhelming that it almost matched the emptiness and loss that had taken permanent residence in his chest.
Alec heard the Inquisitor’s voice as if it came from a long distance, as a thick fog began to cover everything and he felt himself fall into a darkness so complete that it seemed to have no beginning and no end. “Help me, please, Magnus, Jace, anybody, please help me,” he wanted to say, but his voice was gone, just the pain remained in its place.

Magnus placed a piece of chocolate in Alec’s mouth. The scent of cocoa, vanilla and cinnamon enticingly tickled Alec’s nose; and its texture, hard at the beginning, slowly filled his mouth with velvety softness and his mind with tantalizing thoughts of seduction and love. The sweet taste of the chocolate intensified a thousand-fold the sensations triggered by the kiss that followed it. A loud sigh of pleasure raised from the center of Alex’s chest and escaped through his lips. In response, Magnus pulled back just a couple inches and smiled, a smile that illuminated his whole face and shone in his eyes with a mischievous brilliance, before closing the distance once again, his lips as soft and sweet as the chocolate.

Alec recognized the memory; it was from one of the first nights that he spent with Magnus. They had just portalled back from an evening strolling the streets of Prague and they were sitting in Magnus’ terrace, the lights of the city bellow resembling stars shinning in the dark warm night. The memory was so vivid that Alec didn’t just taste the sweetness in his mouth, but could also perceive the familiar scent of forest and mountain air that he always associated with Magnus, and feel the softness of Magnus’ silk shirt in his fingers.

Suddenly, Alec became aware of the odd quality of the recollection; the memory was too vivid, its colors and textures unusually bright, its effects on Alec’s body too intense. Abruptly, other memories replaced it: Magnus’ face projected, like a still shot from a horror film, against a red sky; a deafening explosion; bodies on the ground; the smell of burnt flesh; and the overwhelming sensation of nausea.

“I am dreaming,” thought Alec, “this isn’t real.” Before fear and nausea overtook him, he tried to gather his thoughts and force his body to wake up, to move, to pull his mind back to reality. He began to fall fast and out of control and then, with a startle, his eyes opened, bright lights momentarily blinding him, his heart beating at double its usual speed.

“Good, good, you are awake,” came a nasal and overtly bright voice from his right. “And, I can see that the memory rune is working. Good, good.”

Alec turned and tried to force his eyes to focus on the face, but moving his head seemed to require all his energy and concentration, and his body felt oddly heavy and disjointed, as if it had been pulled apart and badly reassembled. He tried to say something, ask the man who had just spoken where he was and what had happened, but while his mouth opened and his lips formed the words, no sound came out. The sensation of panic sent his heart into a run once again. He attempted to speak, but again no words came out. He struggled to lift his arms and bring his hands to his chest or his throat, but he was restrained, arms and legs in shackles that tied him to the bed on which he was laying.
“Calm down, Mr. Lightwood,” said the man, his freckled face framed by a mane of red curls becoming clearer as Alec’s eyes adjusted to the light. “Calm down, clam down, I am here to help you. I am Inquisitor Dearborn and I am one of the Inquisitors overseeing the investigation into the warlock terrorist attacks.”

The man’s voice had a forced tone of friendliness and concern that, for some reason, contrasted with the distrust and malevolence that shone through his eyes. Alec wanted to tell the man to let him go, to untie him, that he didn’t need his help, but for some reason his voice betrayed him and refused to cooperate.

Calling on all his soldier training, Alec forced himself to control the alarm that was sending a rush of adrenaline through his body, and to focus his mind long enough to assess the situation. He made an inventory of his recent memories: he had been in an explosion; he had been outside the Barcelona Institute, trying to help the injured before losing consciousness; and now he was tied to a bed in a bright infirmary room. His body and head hurt, but he didn’t think he was seriously injured anymore. But something was missing, something fundamental to his survival. He couldn’t feel his connection to Jace and the sensation threatened to send him into another state of panic. Was Jace dead? He wanted to ask, but his voice still refused to obey him.

Alec looked around the room searching for someone else, someone other than the Inquisitor, who could help him or at least explain, but there was nobody else. He looked back at the Inquisitor, tried to mouth Jace’s name, ask what had happened to his parabatai, panic and adrenaline coursing uncontrollably through his body.

“Calm down,” the Inquisitor repeated. “Your parabatai is well, I just spoke to him. He is busy but not injured or harmed. What you are feeling is the effects of the blocking rune I drew on you,” he stated and lifted his hand so Alec could see the stele he held between his fingers. “For the treatment to work, we need to temporarily block your link to your parabatai. We need to put you in isolation, so to speak. Otherwise, the cure will not work.”

“Cure?” thought Alec. “Cure for what?”

“I hope you don’t mind that this remains for now a monologue, Mr. Lightwood,” said the Inquisitor, the nasal quality of his voice annoying Alec more and more with each word. “I have drawn a silencing rune on your throat. It is for your own good as well as for the good of the Shadowhunters who are outside this room currently dealing with the emergency. We do not want to distract them, do we? The treatment can be painful, but let me assure you that it is effective.”

“Treatment?” thought Alec. “Treatment for what? What is wrong with me?”

“I am sorry to say that the treatment is rather painful, but its effectiveness increases and produces faster results when the patient experiences it without the release that comes from screaming or speaking. Unfortunately, we are rather in a rush considering the current emergency, so we need to speed things up; hence the silencing rune. It is meant to intensify the sensations. Let me assure you that I am an expert; I know what I am doing; you have to trust me.”

Alec wished he could tell the man that he didn’t trust him as far as he could throw him. Not only had the Inquisitor restrained him against his will, but he had also cut him off from his parabatai. This and the fact that his experience with Inquisitors in the past left a lot to be desired told Alec that the man was not to be trusted, no matter what he said.

Alec wondered whether Jace felt the severing in their connection; was he weakened by the loss in the way Alec was? Would Jace notice that something was wrong and come help him? Would he even care or be able to help? Maybe Jace thought Alec was dead. He needed to get a hold on
himself, bide his time until Jace came, or he found a way to free himself. He thought of Magnus then, and wondered where he was, what had happened, and whether he needed help. He needed to get free; go find Magnus and Jace; go find out what happened.

“You are a soldier,” Alec told himself taking a deep breath to calm his racing heartbeat and reign in his confusion. “You can get through this; you have gotten yourself out of tight situations before.”

Inquisitor Dearborn moved to the other side of the bed and, after opening the hospital gown Alex was wearing, began to draw a rune on Alec’s chest, the burning pain unusually intense making Alec realize that his healing iratze was probably deactivated or depleted. He looked down at himself and saw that another relatively fresh rune was already drawn on his chest, a rune he had never seen before. The new rune the Inquisitor was drawing connected to the first one, as it to complete it. The result was a rune that had sharp edges pointing in all directions and that reminded Alec of a gaping angry mouth, its teeth sharp and angry red.

“This rune,” said the Inquisitor pointing with his stele to the first one, his voice acquiring the tone of a teacher, “is a derivative of the memory rune. It will help us recall those memories that matter to the treatment. The rune I am drawing now,” he continued as he reapplied his stele to Alec’s skin, “is a variation of an agony rune. By connecting it to the memory rune, we can reprogram your memories to have the desired effects, ensuring the effectiveness of the treatment.”

Inquisitor Dearborn’s voice was oddly detached and had the tone of someone who is explaining an experiment to a group of students or scholars, and not to his prisoner. The words made little sense and Alec wondered what the man meant by reprogramming his memories and what kind of desirable effect that could possible accomplish. The expression of Alec’s face must have betrayed his confusion, for the Inquisitor looked at Alec and took a deep breath before speaking again.

“Let me explain what we are doing here, Mr. Lightwood,” said the Inquisitor when he finished drawing the rune, his voice betraying not a hint of emotion. “You have been spell-bound by Magnus Bane, the warlock who is now the primary suspect in the terrorist attacks. He has infected and corrupted you with demonic magic, made you engage in deviant and unnatural behaviour, possibly make you believe that you were a willingly participant in that behaviour. Now, now, let me assure you,” he added as he moved to stand at the foot of the bed, his hands interlaced in his back and the expression of a scholar giving a lecture firmly set on his face, “that we do not blame you at all; it is not your fault that you became enthralled by such powerful dark magic. However, we must cure you before the deviance takes permanent root and the aberrant and, frankly immoral, behaviour becomes permanent. You are young and I am confident the treatment will permanently cure you and eradicate, once and for all, those filthy and unnatural thoughts and impulses. You are sick, Mr. Lightwood and I am your best hope for a cure.”

Alec was so stunt that he thought that even if he could speak, he would be unable to formulate a coherent sentence. There was too much and too little information in the Inquisitor’s statement, and Alec wondered whether he was still confused and couldn’t make sense of what the man was saying. Why was Magnus accused of terrorism? What did he mean when he said that Alec was sick and spellbound? The man was mad, Alec realized, there was nothing wrong with him, nothing unnatural about his feelings. On the contrary, Alec had never felt more complete than he felt when he was with Magnus, and Alec was sure that if the Clave gave him the chance, Alec could prove that Magnus was not involved in the explosion.

It dawned on Alec then the extent of the danger he and Magnus were in. The Clave was blaming Magnus for whatever had happened in Barcelona and Alec, being in an open relationship with him, had also become a subject in the investigation. Worse, the incident –whatever it was–had created
the perfect conditions for a surge of the bigotry Alec knew was rampant among conservative and influential Shadowhunter circles, and he and Magnus had become the target. He knew, at that moment, that he had to get out of there; he had to do it before this mad man put in practice whatever plan he had in mind. He had to go and protect Magnus.

Alec began to struggle against his restraints, but his efforts were futile. His body became quickly exhausted and his head began to pound.

“I would normally want more time for the treatment to work,” continued the Inquisitor, ignoring Alec’s feeble attempts to free himself. “But considering the urgency of the situation and the fact that we need your help to catch the terrorist, and put an end to the warlock threat, we have to haste things along. This means that we need to move through the stages of the treatment in a speedy fashion. Now, now, this is going to be painful, I am not going to lie to you, but you are young and strong and can withstand the pain; I am sure of it. What I am going to do, so you know, is trigger certain memories, especially those connected to the corruption and the contamination. For that, we will use the memory rune,” he stated and pointed with his stele at one of the new runes on Alec’s chest. “Then, I am going to reprogram those memories with the help of the agony rune.” The Inquisitor moved the stele to the rune he had just finished, with the gesture of a teacher pointing to a new fact written on a blackboard. “The result is that you will realize the undesirability of those memories and the feelings they trigger, and when that happens, you will be cured. Since we are in a rush, I must intensify the experience; hence the silencing rune,” he added. “By restricting your capacity to vocally express the pain, we will make the pain more intense. It is the pain, you see, that is the key to the cure.”

Alec could see the excitement in the Inquisitor’s voice and the sparkle suddenly shining in his rodent-like eyes. The man was deranged, and what was worse, he enjoyed inflicting pain.

“No, now, let me remind you that this is for your own good,” stated the Inquisitor.

The man approached Alec’s side once again, and brought the tip of his stele to the memory rune. Alec tried in vain to squirm away, put distance between the man and himself, resist whatever this maniac was trying to do. But the effort was futile and as soon as the Inquisitor activated the rune, Alec felt himself transported to another time and place; to a moment in his memory; back to Magnus; back to the night Alec met Magnus and the warlock’s eyes rested on him for the first time.

Suddenly, Alec was back to that night when he, Jace, Clary and Izzy went to Magnus’ party in search of information about who had taken Clary’s memories. Alec could feel Jace’s presence beside him, his radiance obscuring everybody else’s, but the sensation was odd because it lacked the connection he usually felt to his parabatai. Alec could also hear the boisterous voices of the people at the party, and smell the alcohol and perfume that impregnated the place.

Then, there was Magnus, his eyes on Alec for the first time, stirring something deep inside Alec, awakening something that, until then, had been dormant. The light from Magnus’ eyes on Alec made him feel like the whole room disappeared, leaving just Magnus and Alec alone in the world. Alec, so accustomed to being unseen, to going unnoticed, to people not seeing beyond Jace to the figure in his shadow, felt Magnus’ eyes like warm touches on his skin and he couldn’t help blushing, his body fidgeting while his mind went numb. No one had ever looked at Alec with such attention and intensity, no one’s eyes had ever stirred such tumultuous feelings in him.

Another memory followed: Alec going home that night thinking of Magnus; thoughts of the warlock taking permanent residence in his mind, tormenting him at night and keeping him awake, jumping at him from dark corners, waiting for him when the elevator door opened or when he
entered a room.

The memories suddenly turned dark, Magnus’ eyes on Alec were no longer desiring or friendly, but hostile and threatening. His face was no longer the beautiful face Alec loved to watch while Magnus slept, and become, instead, menacing and terrifying. And then, the pain took over, the most excruciating and agonizing pain coursing through Alec’s body, erasing everything—the world, the room, Magnus’ warm eyes—taking away the memory or turning it into something else. The pain felt hot and cold at the same time, like sharp hot needles being inserted in his eyes and in between his nails. For a moment that was an eternity, all that existed was the pain; the pain became Alec’s whole universe; it overrode the memory of love, of desire, of the beautiful eyes of the man Alec loved.

Alec tried to scream, to yell to the Inquisitor to stop the agony, to not take his memories, but when he opened his mouth, not sound came, and Alec knew he was lost.

“Good, good, that was very good,” said Inquisitor Dearborn, as he watched Alec’s body contort and begin to retch.

Alec heard the Inquisitor’s voice as if it came from a long distance, as a thick fog began to cover everything and he felt himself fall into a darkness so complete that it seemed to have no beginning and no end. “Help me, please, Magnus, Jace, anybody, please help me,” he wanted to say, but his voice was gone, just the pain remained in its place.

“I am sorry Mr. Lightwood, we cannot let you lose consciousness,” said the voice of the Inquisitor, reaching across the distance and the darkness and seizing Alec, forcing him back to a reality that had become harsher than anything Alec had ever experienced.

Two hours later, Inquisitor Dearborn walked out of the infirmary, whistling and rubbing his hands together. The treatment was going splendidly, he thought. In no time, he would cure Alexander Lightwood of his deviance and degeneracy, and would bring him back into the fold of respectable Nephilim society. He would turn Alexander Lightwood into a proper Nephilim once again, and that would earn him, Dearborn, the respect and recognition of his peers.

The Inquisitor was sure his treatment would work. He had studied the methods that some mundanes had proposed to convert degenerates back to their natural and normal state. It was true that those treatments had been discredited as ineffective, but he thought he knew why. Mundanes were unwilling to go the distance it took for the treatment to work and had, thus, stopped short of success. And, mundanes lacked the tools that the Nephilim had at their disposal, tools that could cause more pain and discomfort than any mundane tool ever could. Yes, yes, he was certain his treatment would work.

Once the treatment was complete, Alexander Lightwood would be more than willing to help the Clave catch that degenerate warlock that had corrupted one of the Shadowhunters’ best and brightest son; that same warlock that now threatened the safety and security of the Nephilim. Alexander Lightwood was key to the capture of the warlock; for no one knew him, his weaknesses, and his modus operandi better that Alexander. Once Alexander understood the extent of the warlock’s evil, he would surely jump at the opportunity to assist in his capture.

Inquisitor Dearborn was convinced, not only that warlocks were deviant by nature, but also that their mission in life was to corrupt the Nephilim. They were, after all, demon spawn, a natural enemy of the children of the angel. The Inquisitor thought it was his mission to make sure no other Nephilim was ever again corrupted and he was willing to go to any distance to achieve his mission.
“Jessica, darling, can you please take some water to our patient?” he instructed as he walked into a room adjacent to the infirmary. “And, please remember to treat him kindly and warmly.”

“Yes, uncle,” replied the young woman who was sitting on an armchair, a book in her hand, her voice soft and feminine. She placed the book on a side table, stood up and, after smoothing her dress, walked out of the room and in the direction of the kitchen.

The Inquisitor watched as her niece walked out and, once again, congratulated himself for having raised such a beautiful and dutiful niece. Yes, yes, he thought, she would be a great asset in Alexander Lightwood’s treatment; he was sure of it.
Magnus quickly realized that he had been naïve. For in Batavia too, he was of mixed-blood, a creature of two worlds and still of none.

During a trip to South America a few years ago, Magnus visited his friend Kat-Ata-Killa, or Kat as everybody called her, a warlock who worked at one of the new telescope mundanes had built in the Atacama Desert. Between sips of pisco sour—a deliciously tart and refreshing local drink which sweetness disguised its inebriating effects—Kat and Magnus mused about the time they spent in Peru in the late 1800s, and laughed at the stories of Magnus’ adventures with Ragnor and Catarina, and when night fell, Kat gave him a tour of the telescope.

Mundane inventions always held a fascination for Magnus, and the telescope was not the exception. Its massive eye always pointing towards the heavens captured the most wondrous images from places that were so far away that their existence was almost unimaginable. Looking through the apparatus’ eyepiece, Magnus remembered what Aldous Nix, the former Warlock of Manhattan, had said to him just before he died, that one day mundane innovations would surpass even magic. Perhaps, thought Magnus, the old warlock had been right, and one day magic would be obsolete, left behind in the vertiginous race mundanes were running against time and themselves.

The visit was memorable for another reason. At the end of the night, Kat gave Magnus a framed print of his favourite photo from the telescope’s archives. It was a breathtaking full-color image of two stars caught in each other’s gravity; two stars trapped in an endless dance; waiting for the moment when they would either free themselves, or collide in the most spectacular and destructive of explosions.

Looking at those astral bodies circling one another, slaved to one another’s gravity, Magnus thought of Annaliese Fen. For meeting her was like encountering a star, which gravity pulled him, trapped him and forever altered his life and his destiny. Like those stars, which course, composition and fate was irretrievably changed by their encounter, Magnus was never the same after that fortuitous night he first laid eyes on the beautiful Annaliese Fen.

Had he known that he would not be the only one whose life and fate would be impacted by that meeting; that meeting Annaliese Fen would put him on a path that led to more destruction that he could ever atone for; that the consequences of that meeting would eventually leave indelible scars on the land and the people that he had once called his own, perhaps he would have avoided that encounter. Or, perhaps, he would have still run towards that meeting, drawn by the incredible magnetic pull of the woman who for the first time offered Magnus a sense of belonging.

He met Annaliese in Jakarta, which was then called Batavia, at a lavish New Year’s party hosted by the head of the Dutch East Indian Company to celebrate the start of 1740. Magnus was not yet a hundred years old and had stopped aging just a few decades ago. Considering how long he would get to live, he was still new, fresh and inexperienced. The memories of his years as a mortal were still fresh in his mind: memories from before his demonic blood asserted itself and froze him in time, when he could still feel his body changing and aging, his arms and legs becoming longer and
stronger, his ribcage expanding, his features morphing. He still remembered what it was like to look at his reflection in a mirror and not see the eerie image of a man in his twenties, who despite changes in fashion and attire, always remained the same, like a living fossil or a statue. He still remembered looking at his reflection and seeing that he was still being carried along by the current of time, when he was not yet a witness to its flowing, not yet a witness to mortal lives passing him by, like telephone poles that momentarily appear in a car window as it drives along a dark road.

The memories of the loss and violence that had marked his childhood were also still fresh and raw, and in many ways, Magnus was still angry and rebellious, perhaps going through the warlock equivalent of adolescence. He didn’t yet completely grasp the significance of living forever; the meaning, not only, of being untouched by time, but also of having to live with one’s own mistakes for all eternity.

It was those childhood memories—those of violence and loss as well as those of happiness and love—that had taken Magnus back to his birth place. After years with the Silent Brothers in Madrid, and decades wandering the world, Magnus had felt nostalgic for the place where he was born and had gone back searching for remnants of his past; for any remaining hints of his own history; for, perhaps, an opportunity to exist in a time in a place where no one would try to guess his lineage, a place he might recognize and claim as home.

As a warlock, Magnus already knew that he lived between worlds, not fully human; not fully demon either. His immortality and his magic powers set him apart, and caused fear, rejection and suspicion among Shadowhunters and Downworlders. So many times, he had heard the word “warlock” uttered in the tone one uses to refer to a disgusting insect one plans to crush with one’s foot. Yet, he still couldn’t get used to people seeing him as an abomination and he still felt like the looks of hatred and repulsion burned his skin.

Furthermore, in his travels in the mundane world, Magnus had endured the suspicious and apprehensive gaze of those who couldn’t quite pinpoint his race, his place of origin, or his location in the large scheme of social and racial differences that characterized the 17th and 18th centuries. People constantly asked him whether he was Indian or Chinese; whether he was free or an indentured servant; whether he belonged to the race of free men, or whether his destiny, his life and ultimately his death belonged to another. So, he had decided to go back home in search of belonging, of his past, and of his history.

He arrived in Batavia a hot steamy morning and was welcomed by the scent of cinnamon, clove and cocoa emanating from the cargo being loaded onto ships destined for faraway lands. The port was buzzing with people of multiple ethnicities going about their business, and when he looked towards the hills on the distance, he could see the green of the palm and banana trees of his childhood. The warmth and humidity in the air, the green of the hills, the smell of the sea, and the scent of spices, food and people brought on a torrent of memories of time gone by; of his mother’s spicy tea; of playing with his friends among the trees in his stepfather’s plantation; of water entering his nostrils and pouring down his throat, making it impossible to breath while his stepfather’s eyes stared at him through a curtain of greenish water.

For a couple of years, Magnus meandered through the land of his birth. He went back to his village in search of familiar places; the aromas of home cooking, and of the spices that grew on those lands under the watchful eye of hardworking people. He went looking for the ruins of his home; for his mother’s grave; for the place where his stepfather had tried to drown him and where Magnus, in a moment of uncontained fury and in an spectacular and terrorizing show of his own power, had killed him. Magnus searched for recognition on the faces of people of his old home, but all he saw were familiar features inherited from ancestors, parents or grandparents, dead long ago and whom Magnus had perhaps known as children.
Magnus quickly realized that he had been naïve. For in Batavia too, he was of mixed-blood, a creature of two worlds and still of none. The country was still under Dutch colonial rule, a rule dependent on rigid and heavily policed structures of racial and social segregation, and in which his half-Indonesian, half-Dutch mother was the very embodiment of the perversion and violation of those rules. Magnus, the product of that perversion, as much as the product of demonic intervention in human life, remained an outsider.

Perceiving the looks of disgust, rejection and distrust he got from whites and Indonesians alike, Magnus understood that the conflicts of those lands were written on his own skin. That on his skin he carried the carefully imposed, and at times impossible to maintain, racial separation on which the Dutch precariously sustained their rule, and on which, also precariously, Indonesians tried to ascertain their identity and their claims to freedom. The realization was painful because it forced him to finally see that, for him, there was no home, no belonging, no anchor.

To avoid curious gazes and tiresome questions, Magnus begun to glamour himself, to use magic to disguise some of his features, while making other more prominent. Depending on where he was and whom he was with, he made himself appear more Indonesian or white. The glamour, in combination with his keen consideration for fashion, distracted attention away from his face and his skin and gave him the illusion of being seen and unseen at the same time, of hiding in plain sight. Although this strategy saved him from praying and judgemental eyes, and from the threat of violence, it made him feel even more like an impostor, and by the end of his two years in Batavia, he was ready to leave, to go home, even if he didn’t know where that was.

Magnus was in his breakfast parlour that last morning of 1739, when one of the servants walked in from the market with news of the spectacular party the Dutch East Indian Company was throwing that evening to celebrate yet another profitable year. Magnus had been examining the list of ships scheduled to leave the port of Batavia in the next couple of days, considering whether he should head south towards Australia, or north towards Hong Kong or even India. However, news of the party caught his attention; for he loved parties, and had a few invitations to celebrate the new year that night. Now the prospect of attending one in the lavish palace of the Company’s head and of being in the same room with Adriaan Valckenier, the Governor General, whom Magnus was sure would attend, was just too tempting, too great an opportunity to pass.

He had seen the Governor on the streets a few times, his cold green eyes looking with disdain at anyone who wasn’t European; his plainly displayed superior demeanour a clear reflection of his sense of racial and caste superiority. Magnus had witnessed the Governor either ignoring or mistreating anyone he thought belonged to a caste lower than his own, which in the man’s book, was practically everybody. He had also had a run of sorts with the man a few days back, one of those unfortunate incidents in which Magnus had lost his temper, and had used his magic in ways that perhaps he should be ashamed of, but wasn’t.

Governor Valckenier had been walking a few steps ahead of Magnus one morning; the big and intricate fan in his hand, with its gold inlaid tortoiseshell sticks and painted silk leaf, flapping incessantly, trying to ward off the heat, the insects, and perhaps the smell of the city. His white breeches that matched his wig, his knee-length red silk coat with its elaborate gold stitching, and his white lace cuffs and scarf shone almost blindingly in the oppressive heat of the day and against the background of the grey poverty and decay of the city. As usual, the Governor was surrounded by an entourage of minions, servants and assistants, and was saying something Magnus couldn’t hear to a tall also elegantly dressed man walking beside him.

The young barefooted boy balancing a heavy basket of vegetables on his head had not seen the Governor or his entourage when he rushed out of an alley and crushed head first with the Governor, the basket falling and spilling its content all over the ground and on Valckenier’s elegant
jacket. The Governor had perhaps seen the boy but had felt no compulsion to avoid him because, in his universe, he was god and the rest of the world was expected to stand aside and make way for him.

“Filthy piece of trash,” the Governor had sputtered in surprise, and with astounding strength and velocity had struck the young boy, who Magnus thought was no older than six or seven, across the face with his fan, the sharp point of one of its tortoiseshell sticks cutting the boy’s cheek and the force of the blow drawing blood from his mouth and nose.

One of the Governor’s assistants had stepped in then, and grabbing the boy by the collar of his flimsy and dirty shirt, had lifted him and pushed him against the wall, the boy’s head hitting the stone with a whack that reminded Magnus of a cracking egg.

The scene unleashed a fury in Magnus that, until that point, had been lurking just under the surface of his carefully composed image. A surge of magic poured from the center of his chest and threatened to come out through his fingers like lighting in a storm. At that point, all the frustration, and the feelings of rejection he had experienced during his time in search of home threatened to erupt like a volcano and burn everything in his path. Magnus realized later that he had been impulsive; that he had placed himself in danger of being discovered by either mundanes or by any Shadowhunter currently in the city. But he couldn’t help it. The look, first of surprise and confusion, and then of sheer terror, in the young child’s eyes; his face which would forever bear the mark of his brush with the governor’s racist superiority had reminded Magnus of his own childhood, and an intense need to do something had overtaken him.

Magnus had lifted both his hands and, with simultaneous flicks of his fingers, had pushed the man that had crushed the boy against the wall through a doorway, and then through a portal Magnus conjured just at the other side of the threshold. The portal deposited the man thousands of kilometers away in the middle of the African savanna. With his other hand, he directed the horse-drawn carriage that was passing by to hit a pothole, which he magically filled with water, mud and other unspeakable things, sending a deluge of mud, water and filth all over the Governor and the reminder of his entourage. Magnus had not stayed to witness the aftermath of the incident; instead he had turned and walked away, making his mind up at that moment that he had had enough of Batavia; he was leaving.

But now, the news of the party made him reconsider his decision to leave right away. Perhaps a night of debauchery and of elbow rubbing with the Batavian colonial elites would be the perfect end to his trip, a sort of poetic justice. For none of those people, who would otherwise look at him with disgust, would know that they had shared food, drink, perhaps a dance, or even a bed, with someone they would never welcomed into their midst, if they knew who he was.

“I think I am going to make an appearance at this party,” he announced that morning. Yes, he thought a mischievous smile drawing on his face, perhaps just a short appearance to see how Governor Valckenier was doing; see if perhaps he needed Magnus’ help in finding his missing assistant. Besides he had a new magnificent blue silk jacket he was eager to wear and the occasion was perfect for it. “Could you please get my bath ready, Marie?” he asked his servant. “I have just a few hours to get ready.”

“Ya pak,” said the young woman as she walked out of the room.

He was going to miss the servant girl, Magnus thought as he watched her leave, she was feisty and high spirited despite her social station. He would also miss this house with its airy rooms, its Persian rugs and its heavy and intricately carved mahogany furniture, but it was time to go. He had no home and all the time in the world, after all, and those without home and plenty time can be free
to roam the world.

“Yes,” he said to the empty room, his spirit lifting, “just a short appearance at the Company’s party, the perfect way to welcome a new year of adventures.”

That night by the time the church bells announced midnight, Magnus was already hopelessly in love, the feeling displacing his previous thoughts of leaving Batavia. And, that was before he even exchanged a word with the beautiful young woman with indigo eyes, long dark curls, and the face of a marble angel, that came to the party with Governor Valckenier.

The party was held in the palatial home of the head of the Dutch East Indian Company, a short rotund man with an ill-fitted wig, an unfashionable mustache and a sickly yellowish complexion. The home, however, more than made up for the shortcomings of his owner. it was magnificent, with its white exterior, surrounding arched corridors, tall pillars, and a garden full of exotic and evergreen trees and flowers and in which equally exotic birds continuously sang. The enormous salon into which Magnus was ushered by a servant in white uniform, was equally spectacular, with white walls decorated with priceless local and international paintings, and gilded mirrors that reflected the light from the countless candles held in silver candelabra. Arched windows decorated with white gauzy curtains surrounded the room and were opened to allow the pleasant evening breeze to carry the scent of flowers into the room. Servants in white uniforms walked among the guests with trays containing glasses of wine imported from Europe, plates of cheese and exotic fruits.

Magnus went to the party glamored as a rich Dutch merchant. The deep blue with which he disguised his cat eyes was a perfect match for the intricately embroidered silk jacket he wore. The jacket’s silver stitching was exquisitely fine and its color and design complemented perfectly his black breeches, black stockings, black shoes with their silver buckle, and his crisp white shirt with its lacy cuffs and neckline. Nothing in his attire betrayed his true identity, and the finery of the fabric and the accessories filled him with such satisfaction that a mischievous smile seemed to have taken permanent residence on his lips.

Magnus was looking at his reflection in a gilded mirror, making sure his jacket was perfectly smooth and that the lace of his shirt was sufficiently ruffled at the cuffs without hiding the fine silver stitching on the sleeves. Suddenly, from somewhere behind him, another pair of eyes met his in the mirror’s reflection. Surprised, Magnus quickly turned and there was Annaliese Fen, looking at Magnus from across the room just for the briefest of moments, before she looked away, and smiled at something Governor Valckenier was saying.

That is all it took, a glance from across the room, a glance that lasted less than a minute, for Magnus to fall in love. For the eyes of the young woman reminded Magnus of a lighthouse illuminating a dark night, guiding him to shore. A few moments later, the woman graced him again with her eyes, and Magnus felt that everything and everyone else fell away and those eyes became his whole universe. That night, Annaliese’s eyes were the color of deep indigo, an indigo that reminded Magnus of that time when night begins to slowly surrender its darkness to the approaching light, when the sky is no longer black, but not yet blue, and the night is the coldest, but also the most beautiful.

Those eyes were so captivating that Magnus had to make an incredible effort to shift his gaze to the rest of the young woman’s face and body. The effort was worthwhile, however, for those eyes were perfectly framed by an angelic porcelain face with a mouth that resembled a perfectly formed rose bud; a cascade of long dark curls that reflected the light in a multitude of tones from red to blue; and a long slim neck leading to a pair of bared shoulders, and them to a perfectly rounded bosom that seemed to be issuing an invitation for Magnus to liberate it from the confines of the
tight bodice of her blood red dress. A smooth white pearl the size of a pigeon’s egg hanged from a silver chain atop her chest and its colour was a perfect match for the milky tone of her skin.

The face of the young woman reminded Magnus of the poem that Christopher Marlow once wrote about Helen of Troy: “Was this the face that launched a thousand ships, and burnt the topless towers of Ilium?” Months later from the deck of the ship on which he escaped from Batavia, Magnus watched the fires still burning in the bay and in the outskirts of the city, and wondered if Marlow hadn’t, in fact, had Annaliese in mind when he wrote the poem, for just a look from Annaliese’s eyes could, and eventually did, have the power of sending men to their death, a smile on their faces, a blind conviction in their hearts.

That night, however, Magnus didn’t yet know the name of the young woman and couldn’t have guessed the impact she would have in his life. All he knew was that she seemed to be barely out of childhood, not much older than fifteen, thought Magnus, and that her face and body, with its tiny waist and rounded hips hidden under the full skirt of her dress, retained the innocence of those who had not yet experienced the hardship of adulthood. Anyone who looked at Annaliese would think of her as small, fragile and delicate, someone who seemed to be only partially in this world, and always about to disappear into another dimension, perhaps into a celestial one.

Obeying the magnetic pull of those eyes, Magnus approached the young woman and after a deep bow introduced himself in perfect Dutch.

“Mag ik me voorstellen, mevrouw. Mijn naam is Magnus Bane.”

“I am Annaliese Fen; it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr. Bane,” Annaliese replied in perfect unaccented English, her soft and low voice reminding Magnus of the finest of velvets. She then curtseyed and extended her delicate hand for Magnus to kiss it.

The feeling of that delicate child-sized hand in his, and the softness and sweet scent of its skin against his lips woke up a swarm of butterflies in the pit of Magnus’ stomach, and finally decided his fate. A broad playful smile lifted the corners of his lips, and illuminated his pupils as he lifted his face back to the enchanting eyes of Annaliese Fen.

The breath caught in Magnus’ throat then, because as he looked into those indigo eyes once more, Annaliese momentarily let the glamor that disguised her warlock mark fall, as one lets a piece of garment fall to reveal a beautiful birth mark. It was a gesture just for him to see, like an invitation to intimacy, nudeness, disrobing; or perhaps a hint of things to come. As the glamour fell Magnus saw for the first time the true color of Annaliese’s eyes, the pupils the most intense ruby red Magnus had ever seen, their luminescence reflecting the lights from the candles like the finest and most perfect of jewels.

Magnus couldn’t help but to correspond to her gesture and momentarily let his own glamour fall, revealing his green-yellow cat eyes, and the true tone and features of his face. Annaliese rewarded him with the broadest and warmest of smiles, and Magnus felt like a ship that had finally found port after a long voyage through stormy seas.

“Why don’t you introduced me to your friend, Miss Fen?” came the superior voice of Governor Valckenier from Annaliese’s side, its loud and strident voice irrupting into the intimacy of the moment. The Governor then placed a proprietary hand in Annaliese’s elbow and Magnus felt an even more intense dislike for the man.

“Mr. Bane, this is my good friend Adriaan Valckenier, Governor General of Batavia,” said Annaliese, a soft smile playing in her lips. “Governor, this is Mr. Bane. I have just made his acquaintance so I cannot say much about him.”
“It is an honour,” said Magnus and bowed in the direction of the man. “I am just a merchant, currently travelling on business through this beautiful land.”

“Charmed, I am sure,” replied the Governor, his acerbic tone contradicting the statement. He then turned his attention back to the guests with whom he had been conversing, his attitude one of dismissal and disdain that Magnus thought was the way the man greeted everyone. His hand, however, remained firmly set on Annaliese’s elbow as if to make sure that everyone, especially Magnus, understood that the young woman belonged to him.

After a few more pleasantries, Magnus reluctantly left Annaliese’s side, his heart sinking a little as he put distance between him and the woman who with just one look had stolen his heart. They continued gazing at each other periodically throughout the remaining of the night, however, as if they were learning to recognize each other’s features from a distance. A few times Annaliese smiled, and a twinkle illuminated her eyes, and each time, Magnus felt like a chain was wrapping itself around his heart tying him to her.

Governor Valckenier remained near Annaliese, his arm constantly guiding her by the elbow, in a sign of ownership more than care. Magnus thought that a couple of times the governor noticed the way he looked at Annaliese, and Magnus could feel the hateful stare of the man’s eyes burning a spot on his chest.

At midnight, the guests congregated along the veranda that surrounded the second floor of the mansion for the display of fireworks the Company’s head had ordered from China. For a minute, Magnus lost sight of Annaliese in the confusion of bodies trying to secure a privileged spot from which to watch the spectacle. He searched among the guests and when he didn’t see the Governor either, decided to go look for her.

Magnus found them along a dark corridor off the salon. Valckenier had Annaliese pinned against the wall, a hand firmly wrapped around her slim neck, and the other fumbling for the hem of her dress, fury and lust mixed with drunkenness in the man’s eyes.

“I told you this dress was too revealing,” he was saying, his voice full of fury. “Everybody has been looking at you, specially that petty new merchant.”

“But darling,” replied Annaliese, her voice no more than a whisper. “You said you loved the dress.”

“You are mine, you hear,” sputtered Valckenier in a similar tone than the one he had used to call the small boy on the street a filthy piece of trash.

This time, Magnus’ fury was murderous and his fingers itched to unleash a blinding surge of red magic capable of obliterating the man and everything around him, the room, the house and perhaps even the gardens. He had to exercise all his self-control not to kill the man right there and then, mostly in consideration for Annaliese’s safety, who seemed unable to use her own magic to defend herself.

“I don’t think this is very gentlemanly behaviour, Governor,” Magnus said in a forced tone of politeness as he approached the man, his hands in the pockets of his jacket just in case sparkles tried to escape.

“This is none of your business Bane,” said the man, his hand still squeezing Annaliese’s neck while the other continued lifting her dress.

“But I think it is: you see, I consider it my business to defend the honour of a young lady who
apparently cannot defend herself,” Magnus stated, giving Annaliese a knowing look.

Making a superhuman effort to keep his magic under control, Magnus reached for the man’s shoulder and pull him off Annaliese with all his human strength. The man staggered backwards and hit the opposite wall with more strength than Magnus had expected. He then slid down along the wall half unconscious, half drunk, until he was sitting on the ground, his face bent towards his chest.

“Are you okay?” asked Magnus looking at Annaliese with a mixture of concern and barely contained fury.

“Yes, I am fine,” she replied in a soft voice, her hand rubbing her neck where the Governor’s fingers had left a red mark.

“Let me take care of that,” Magnus offered and with a flick of his fingers sent a gentle flow of healing magic towards the spot, erasing the mark and soothing the pain.

“We should leave, Mr. Bane,” said Annaliese reaching for Magnus’ hand. “Before he wakes up. I have a carriage outside. We can continue the celebration in my house.”

“That is a good idea. But all things considered, I think you should call me Magnus.” Magnus replied and offered her his arm.

A minute later, they were exiting the mansion amid the multicolor explosions of the fireworks that illuminated the sky and reflected on the beautiful angelic face of Annaliese Fen. A fine carriage was, in fact, waiting for Annaliese, a tall handsome man in a footman’s uniform standing by the door.

“Let’s go home Khuno,” instructed Annaliese as she stepped into the carriage, and gestured for Magnus to follow.

The footman gave Magnus an appreciating nod as he held the door for him to step into the carriage, a smile drawing on his face, and a mischievous sparkle shining in his eyes. If Magnus had been more observant and less caught by Annaliese’s allure, he might have recognized, perhaps not the man’s face, but at least his posture and statute. For Khuno was the elegantly dressed man that had been talking to Governor Valckenier the day he collided with the young boy balancing the basket of vegetables on his head.
And there, for the first time since this ordeal began, for the first time since that night they made love in their hotel in Barcelona, Alec saw Magnus, the warlock’s face impassive, his cat-like eyes devoid of emotion, his demeanour one of complete detachment.

Pain and silence would be the most enduring memories that Alec would later recall about his time in the infirmary at the Barcelona Institute: uncontestable, enduring and uncontrollable pain which he borne immersed in the cruelest of silences. The pain obliterated everything around him: the sounds from the outside world that sometimes filtered into his room when Inquisitor Dearborn or his assistant opened the door; the voices of other Shadowhunters; the feeling of the straps that tied him to the bed; the sensation of cold or heat that sometimes impregnated his bones; the Inquisitor’s hands, the sound of his voice and the feeling of his stele against Alec’s skin.

Alec lost count of how many times the Inquisitor activated the memory and agony runes on his chest, and eventually the memories the runes triggered blurred into one another melting into an unrecognizable jumble of images, sensations, and feelings. A thousand time, the runes brought back the image of Magnus’s smiling face and turned it into expressions of evil and hatred. The runes took Alec back to nights in Magnus’ arms, to the feeling of Magnus’ skin and turned its softness and warmth into burning flames, and Magnus’ fingers into sharp knives that cut Alec’s skin into a thousand shreds. Magnus’ lips became poison that turned Alec’s stomach and blistered his skin, and his voice became the sound of breaking glass.

It wasn’t enough for the Inquisitor to trigger Alec’s memories of Magnus; he had to go further, to the first time that Alec met Jace and his golden image blinded him; to the times when Alec felt the sun rose and set with Jace; when he felt that he could never have what he really wanted, and be who he really was, because he could never have Jace. The inquisitor took Alec even further, back to his childhood when he first felt the casual and innocent touch of a boy –a training partner –awaking something inside Alec, something he didn’t know was there; to the first time the glances of the same boy felt like the light touches of feathers on Alec’s skin, the sensation confusing and pleasant at the same time. The pain took all those memories and morphed them, the boy’s gaze turning hateful, Jace’s eyes filling with such shame that Alec’s stomach turned and he began to heave, his body and spirit trying to purge the filth and self-loathing Alec felt was slowly but surely filling him.

The pain turned each memory into a wound, a bleeding festering wound that hurt Alec. And, throughout his ordeal, the memory of his father’s hard and judging eyes and his voice telling Alec that he had to work harder, be braver, grow tougher constantly haunted him, his father’s piercing eyes stabbing his heart.

After a while, Alec couldn’t differentiate which memories were real and which were memories planted by the Inquisitor to alter Alec’s perceptions of his past, and after a few days of agony, it didn’t matter anymore because the enduring pain rendered everything translucent and irrelevant. At the beginning, Alec tried to speak, to scream, to break through the silencing rune to, first demand, and then beg for the pain to stop. In his mind, he called for Magnus or Jace to come save him, to
help him safeguard the memories of love, to tell him that Magnus hadn’t betrayed him, to send him a sign that the suffering had a purpose. But all he received in response was renewed pain and silence.

Eventually, the pain obliterated the world, as if it were a deadly fog that devoured everything, turning the world and Alec’s memories, first into shadows, and then into nothingness, leaving just the pain behind. The pain first changed and then washed away the memory of Magnus, making it impossible for Alec to recall his smile, his face, the soft touch of his fingers, the scent of his skin, the taste of his lips, the sensation of his body against Alec’s, the shine in Magnus’ eyes, the brightness of his smile and the way Magnus called Alec’s name when they made love. Those memories Alec and Magnus had made together, became, because of the pain, insignificant, inconsequential and insubstantial, like leaves blown by the wind. As the memories flew away leaving him empty, Alec searched for the comfort of oblivion.

“Very good, Mr. Lightwood, very good,” the nasal voice of Inquisitor Dearborn reached and yanked Alec out of the state of unconsciousness in which he had found momentary relief. “The treatment is going very well, very well indeed.”

Alec reluctantly opened his eyes; the light hitting his pupils with the savagery of sharp needles. The room was too bright and the quality of the light increased even more the orangey parlor in the Inquisitor’s skin and hair, and accentuated his mouse-like features.

“I have something to show you,” the Inquisitor said, his voice soft and detached. He then produced a tablet in which an image had been frozen on the screen. He placed the tablet in front of Alec’s eyes and pushed the play button. The image apparently recorded by a security camera came to life, showing two men approaching the door of what looked like an Institute. The men walked with odd steps, as if their movements were being directed by a force outside of themselves, as if they were puppets whose strings were being pulled by an invisible puppeteer.

Alec recognized one of the men; it was Rufus, one of the warlocks from New York, but the expression on his face was strange, completely devoid of emotion, as if he was, in fact, a doll being directed by someone else. After a few steps, the men stopped and stood facing each other, a meter or so between them. They then lifted their arms wide and looked towards the sky, their lips moving rapidly, saying something that Alec couldn’t hear; their pupils turning the color of tar and expanding until their covered the white in their eyes. A blinding surge of energy suddenly and with unexpected force erupted from the ground between them, a massive explosion of incandescent energy that set the two men on fire, and then exploded in a massive shock of fire and flames. The camera went dark for a few minutes, its eye blinded by a thick red smoke, and by the flames and energy being released by the explosion.

Inquisitor Dearborn fast forwarded the video until the image came back, an image of utter destruction and panic; debris covering everything; pieces of walls and what appeared to be glass falling from the sky like an infernal rain, raining on bodies strewn on the ground like broken dolls. Alec looked at Inquisitor Dearborn, his eyes full of the questions that his voice couldn’t ask.

“Keep watching,” the Inquisitor instructed and Alec turned back to the screen. And there, for the first time since this ordeal began, for the first time since that night they made love in their hotel in Barcelona, Alec saw Magnus, the warlock’s face impassive, his cat-like eyes devoid of emotion, his demeanour one of complete detachment.

Alec had seen that expression before, a few weeks ago, during the meeting with the Downworld council to deal with the Valentine crisis, when Alec found out that Magnus had aligned himself with the Seelie Queen. Magnus’ eyes had been hard as rocks that day, his face completely devoid
of emotion, his mouth set in a hard line. At that time, Alec had struggled to reconcile that 
expression with the smiling, sassy and playful Magnus of their intimacy. Now however, that same 
expression firmly set on the warlock’s face provoked no reaction in Alec, for that image had played 
in Alec’s mind a thousand times in the last few days as the Inquisitor’s stele systematically and 
mercilessly rewrote Alec’s memories.

Alec stared at the screen, trying to reconcile the image with the man with whom just a few days 
ago he had watched the landscape pass by their window as their train speeded towards Barcelona. 
It wasn’t that Magnus had changed. In fact, he looked the same, the glitter in his hair sparkling 
against the red fog in the background, his make-up and his typically fashionable outfit a stark 
contrast to the destruction that surrounded him. Alec would have recognized those eyes, that face 
and that silhouette anywhere. No, it wasn’t that he doubted that the figure in the screen was 
Magnus; rather, it was that after so many days of pain and silence, he didn’t know how to feel 
about the warlock. He didn’t know whether to be relieved that Magnus was alive, whether to feel 
disgust at the memories Magnus evoked; whether to feel sadness, anger, or disgust. Unable to 
resolve the confusion, his body experienced a violent reaction, nausea raising from the pit of his 
stomach, his skin breaking out in sweat, his sight blurring, the hair in the back of his neck standing 
on end.

Alec mastered all his strength to keep his eyes on the screen and to control the urge to throw up 
while he tried to decipher, not only what his eyes were seeing, but also what his body was feeling. 
He saw, then, that Magnus was not alone. A man walked beside him, black leather jacket over a 
white shirt, sun glasses covering his eyes, short dreadlocks blowing in the wind, and a smile on his 
face as his held Magnus’ hand, the gesture and the posture reflecting an intimacy that all, and 
specially Alec, could plainly see. Two other warlocks, a man and a woman appeared on the screen 
behind Magnus and his companion, and with a flick of his fingers, one of them opened a portal, 
into which the group disappeared without even losing a step or wasting a glance on the destruction 
they had just unleashed. All that was left after the portal closed, was a red fog and the already 
familiar image of Magnus and a woman with ruby red eyes projected on the scorching red sky.

The screen went dark but for a few more seconds Alec could not take his eyes away from it, his 
mind racing, his heartbeat speeding and his stomach going into summersaults. When he looked 
back at the Inquisitor, his face still full of questions.

“This was this morning in Berlin,” the Inquisitor informed him, answering just one of Alec’s many 
questions. “The attack killed five more Shadowhunters. We need your help, Mr. Lightwood; it is 
matter of life and death. We have to capture those terrorists before they bring more destruction on 
the Nephilim.”

Alec wished he could tell the Inquisitor that he didn’t know anything, that what he had seen in the 
screen was also a surprise to him, but he couldn’t. Not only he could not speak, but also, he wasn’t 
sure any more whether he was surprised. He doubted his own memories and feelings, and couldn’t 
any longer tell which ones were real and which one were planted by the Inquisitor; he couldn’t any 
longer trust his own feelings or his instincts.

“We are going to have to speed things up,” said the Inquisitor taking his stele out of his pocket and 
bringing it to Alec’s chest. “It is a matter of life and death, Mr. Lightwood. I hope you 
understand.”

As soon as the stele touched the runes, Alec felt fire igniting in every bone in his body, and a 
blinding rage joined the pain.

“What happened? What happened?!!” Alec silently screamed, but as the pain overpowered and
erased everything, he could no longer remember whom the question was directed to, the face of the man he loved slowly disappearing behind the pain. Only the pain remained, just the pain and then nothing, emptiness. As the pain seized him with even more fury than before, Alec stopped trying to speak or to call out, for the pain finally took his voice leaving him with no other option but to surrender.

When all was said and done, the pain erased the memory of Alec’s love for Magnus, as well as the memory of Magnus’ love for him. With the memory of love, the pain also took the sensitive, loving, innocent and warm Alec, leaving just a shadow in his place; leaving just a ghost of a man, raw and harsh, full of anger and desire for vengeance, unable to feel anything anymore, like a rock hit by the ocean so many times that does no longer feel the water eroding it.

Alec woke hours or perhaps days later to a room that for the first time was in semi-darkness, and to the soft touch of someone bringing a cup of water to his lips.

“Drink Alec,” said a youthful and soft voice. “Water is good for you.”

As they focussed, his eyes registered a familiar face, a face that hadn’t aged much since the last time he saw her, when they were both summer students in Idris a few years before.

“Do you remember me?” the girl asked, a warm smile illuminating her face. “I am Jessica Hawkblue. We went to school together.”

Alec nodded as he tried to recall the memories, sort them in his mind, trying to determine whether they were real or planted. The endeavour was exhausting because the image of Jessica’s youthful face from school, her hair in pigtails and her green eyes framed by glasses got mixed-up with more recent images of a voluptuous, beautiful and feminine woman that the Inquisitor had either triggered or planted by the power of his ruthless stele.

“I am sorry for what you have had to endure,” Jessica said, her face full of sympathy and concern. “My uncle can be a bit overzealous, but his intentions are good. He wants the best for you and for the Nephilim.” She run a hand across Alec’s brow, and smoothed his hair, the gentle and strangely comforting gesture triggering a wave of confusing sensations in Alec, sadness, fury, rejection and attraction mixing into one.

Alec looked into her green eyes and saw the same expression of innocence, shyness and, what he had thought was submission, that had first struck him about Jessica Hawkblue when he first met her at school all those years ago. Even then, she was pretty, despite the oddness that seems to typify all bodies when they go through adolescence. Alec always thought of her as a shy and bookish girl, quietly intelligent and apparently devoid of the vanity that seemed to have taken over all the other girls their age. She was, apparently, also the only girl in school who had not been attracted to Jace. Alec, who already struggled with his own secret, had found Jessica’s company comforting and easy. She liked discussing books and talk about training and seemed to have no agenda when it came to Alec. So, they had struck a friendship that had lasted the whole summer.

At an age in which their classmates were hooking up left, right and center, Jessica had offered Alec certain safety, for classmates soon assumed that they were an item. After school ended, they had exchanged a few letters and then, that Fall, Jessica’s parents had died in a mission in Buenos Aires where they headed the Institute, and Alec had lost track of her. That is until now when she entered his room and told her she was Inquisitor Dearborn’s niece.

He tried to speak, forgetting for a moment that he had no voice, wanting to ask her to set him free, to loosen the straps that tied him to the bed.
“Shush,” whispered Jessica, “it will be okay. My uncle says the treatment is almost done.” She rested her hand atop Alec’s, the touch soft and painful at the same time, and Alec wished he could shake the hand off, reach for the girl’s neck and squeezed it until her lips turned blue and the smile in her lips disappear for ever.
Danger at the Hotel Du Mort

Chapter Summary

Izzy would remember for a long time the rush of surprise and fear she felt then; for at one moment she was cautiously stepping into the room, and the next she had a pair of strong cold arms wrapped around her waist, and she felt herself being pulled back against the hard and muscular body of Raphael Santiago.

“Something seriously wrong is going on with the vampires,” stated Izzy. “Raphael has his whole clan, including Simon, locked in the Hotel Du Mort, but I am not sure how long that would be effective.”

Izzy smoothed her long black hair with a shacking hand, and then, with the same hand, she adjusted the white jacket she was wearing. Clary recognized the gesture as Izzy’s attempt to calm her nerves.

Izzy, Jace and Clary were gathered around a table in the Institute’s situation room surrounded by monitors and surveillance equipment, and by the hustle and bustle of other Shadowhunters going about their business, some of them still working on repairing the damage caused over a week ago by the explosion. A still frame from the security footage from the attacks in Berlin a few days ago glowed in one of the monitors, the image of Magnus and an unknown warlock looking at the camera just before stepping through a portal that took them who knows where.

Jace, Izzy and Clary, along with all the Shadowhunters in the Institute, were wearing the traditional white used at funerals and during times of bereavement. Jace’s golden hair shone brighter than usual against the snow white of his fitted jacket, and his eyes reflected the gold stitching of the grief runes embroidered around the cuffs and kimono collar of his white shirt. Clary’s red curls fell like a cascade of cooper that almost reached the waist of the loose butter white tunic she had chosen for the occasion. The white tight suit with a tuxedo shirt that Izzy was wearing provided a stark contrast to her jet-black hair and, surprisingly, smoothed the expression of concern that, in the last few days, had become permanently edged on her face.

Clary looked around the room at the other Shadowhunters also in mourning dress, her eyes resting for a moment on the faces of Pineshade and Scarcherry with whom she had spent the last few days and nights pouring over the archives in search of any record of the red-eyed warlock. She smiled and thought that if it wasn’t for the state-of-the-art technology that surrounded them, the scene would resemble a painting depicting angels in heaven she once saw at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Despite being in a heightened state of emergency, Shadowhunters all over the world were in mourning. The Clave had ordered that all funeral services be carried out at the same time to allow the Nephilim to stand together in support of one another in a collective show of force, resilience, strength and determination that transcended borders and distance. So far, thirty Shadowhunters had died in the attacks and, considering how tight and interconnected Nephilim society was, almost all Shadowhunters had lost someone they either knew or were related to by blood or family ties. Thus, even if the attacks had taken place mostly in Europe, with only New York breaking the pattern so far, the loss impacted Nephilim stationed all over the world.
Clary looked at the people who in the last year had become her family. Their faces so familiar that she could plainly see the toll that the crisis was having in each one of them. Izzy was not only worried about Alec, but her meeting with Raphael had left her visibly shaken. To Clary, who thought of Izzy as the bravest woman she knew, this was reason enough for alarm. Jace’s eyes reflected the countless sleepless nights spent pacing along corridors, his bedroom, or Alec’s office—which he refused to call his own. The few times that Clary could get him to lie down and he had managed to fall asleep, Jace had tossed and turned, and had called Alec in his sleep. By time he woke up, he was as tired as he had been before. The exhaustion was taking an additional toll on Jace’s temper and he was struggling to keep his usually cool and self-assured demeanor. Truth be told, without Alec, Jace had a hard time maintaining his confident bearing; it was as if he was missing something fundamental to his wellbeing.

“I am telling you, Jace, whatever is going on with the warlocks is also affecting the Vampires,” said Izzy. “I have never seen Raphael like this.”

Izzy had tried to see Raphael several times since the morning after the attacks at the New York Institute, but every time she had gone to the Hotel Du Mort, she had found the doors locked, a sign on the door written in a script invisible to mundanes warning Downworlders to stay away. She had finally lost patience and last night she had approached the hotel through a secret entrance that was known only to her. After her struggle with her yin fen addiction a few months ago, she had promised Raphael never to use that entrance again. He was concerned about Izzy’s reputation, and wanted to preserve the impression that there was nothing untoward about their meetings, even though the attraction they felt for each other was getting harder and harder to ignore. Last night, however, Izzy had thought that the emergency warranted the breaking of that promise.

She had taken a tunnel that led her directly to the entrance to Raphael’s chambers, following a route that she had memorized months before. The hotel was eerily quiet and dark, despite Izzy’s certainty that its rooms were unusually crowded. Only once during her journey through the vowels of the old building had the silence been broken by the sounds of someone screaming somewhere on the top levels of the building. But the screams were quickly silenced as if the oppressive darkness that covered everything in a blanket of night had drowned them. Not wanting to call unnecessary attention to herself, Izzy had decided against using witch light to illuminate her way, choosing instead to activate the rune in her arm that sharpen her night vision.

When she had finally reached Raphael’s rooms, which the vampire always kept illuminated by hundreds of candles, she had been surprised to find it also in darkness. The room was all too familiar to Izzy; for it had been the place where she and Raphael had spent countless nights trying to satiate their addictions, hers for vampire venom; his for Nephilim blood. Despite never being about sex, their encounters in that room had been oddly intimate, and had brought Izzy closer to Raphael than to any of the other men with whom she had had relationships. However, Izzy had not been back in this room since she decided to kick her addiction, and her meetings with Raphael had since always been public, even if they retained some of their seductive and forbidden quality. One day, Izzy had thought as she took one step into the room, she and Raphael would have to deal with their unfinished business.

“Raphael,” she had whispered, her hand still on to the door knob, sure that the vampire’s sharp ears would hear her no matter how far he was. “Raphael,” she had repeated when she received no reply.

“Isabel,” had whispered a familiarly seductive voice from somewhere in the darkness, the name, as usual, sounding exotic and somewhat foreign when Raphael pronounced it in his Spanish-accented English. “Why are you here?”

“Raphael, I need to speak to you,” Izzy had said in an equally soft voice as she let go of the door
knob and entered the room, the door closing shut behind her.

Izzy would remember for a long time the rush of surprise and fear she felt then; for at one moment she was cautiously stepping into the room, and the next she had a pair of strong cold arms wrapped around her waist, and she felt herself being pulled back against the hard and muscular body of Raphael Santiago.

“You shouldn’t have come,” Raphael had whispered, the brush of his lips on Izzy’s ear causing goosebumps to rise on every inch of her body, and the delicious scent of his skin, a mixture of spices and old wood, awakening all her senses.

Raphael had begun to run one hand up Izzy’s torso, his fingers tracing lines on the planes of her stomach; stopping for a moment against her chest; and then going on until he reached her long neck, where his hand finally settled gently around her throat, his fingers searching and then resting atop the artery in the side of her neck where her heartbeat could be easily detected. With his other hand, Raphael kept a firm hold on Izzy’s waist, pressing her even more firmly against his body, and Izzy was sure she detected a hardness against the small of her back that she had never, in all the times she had been near Raphael, felt before. The gestures were unusually sensual and evocative, almost sinful, considering that in the time they had known each other, Raphael had made it plainly clear that sex was not what he was after in his relationship with Izzy.

Involuntarily, she had leaned back against Raphael’s inviting body, and Raphael rewarded her with a loud intake of air that seemed to reverberate in the dark walls of the room.

“Izzy, you shouldn’t have come,” Raphael had whispered again, his lips beginning a madding journey up and down Izzy’s neck. “It is not safe for you here right now.”

The feel of Raphael’s fingers around her throat, the movement of his lips on her skin, and the sensation of his hard body against hers had clouded Izzy’s mind and awakened every nerve ending in her body. She knew she should free herself, step away from Raphael; she knew that this closeness was dangerous, but she just couldn’t. Instead, she turned her head and reaching with her arm behind Raphael’s head pulled him closer to her, her lips searching for his in the darkness. She kissed him fervently, momentarily unleashing the passion she felt for this man who constantly haunted her thoughts and visited her dreams. Raphael responded to the kiss with passion of his own, enticing Izzy’s lips to part, to allow his playful tongue to explore her mouth. Izzy entangled her fingers in the vampire’s hair, and willed her body to melt into Raphael’s, rejoicing in a closeness she had desired for so long.

“Raphael,” Izzy had whispered, her lips momentarily separating from the vampire’s, the name sounding like sweet melting chocolate in her tongue.

“Isabel,” he had replied, “I swear you will be my downfall.”

For a moment, they had lost themselves in the taste of each other’s lips and the feel of each other’s mouth, Raphael’s hardness pulsating against Izzy’s back, his fingers tracing the length of her slender neck, the touch a promise of things to come, of explorations not yet realized but desired with an intensity that surprised them both. Izzy would not be able to recall later when she turned and wrapped her own arms around Raphael’s neck, or how she ended up pinned against a wall, Raphael pressing his body firmly against hers, one of his hands stroking her behind and the other resting against the pulsating vein in the side of her neck. Eventually, Raphael’s lips broke contact with her lips and he began to kiss her neck again, Izzy’s hands entangled in his hair guiding him.

For a moment, Izzy thought she felt sharp teeth against her neck. Almost immediately, Raphael pulled away from her with such strength and blinding speed that she was sure she heard the thud
with which the vampire’s back hit the wall at the opposite side of the room. The departure left her feeling cold, as if a blanket that had kept her warm and cozy had suddenly and without warning been pulled off her. For a minute afterwards, only their fast breathing could be heard in the dark room as each of them tried to bring their desire for the other under control.

“Raphael,” Izzy had said once she felt her voice would not betray her state of agitation. “What is going on?”

“You shouldn’t have come here,” he repeated for the third time, his voice shaky and throaty. “It is not safe to be around the Children of the Night right now.”

“What is going on?” she asked again, her voice betraying increasing frustration.

“We don’t know. It started the night of the attacks. We think it is a side effect of the demonic energy release by the explosion. It is acting like a virus spreading among the vampires and affecting our self-control. We are becoming increasingly aggressive and hungry, especially for human blood.”

Izzy could hear in Raphael’s strained voice the efforts he was making to disobey whatever his instincts were urging him to do, and she was suddenly afraid. She had never seen him this shaken, not even during the worse of his addiction. The vampire had always been a calm and collected person, a voice of reason among a race of beings who had a reputation for excess and impulsiveness. Raphael had managed to carry with him into his vampire life his faith, his belief in god, and a steadfast moral compass that he used to guide, not only his own life, but also the life and the conduct of his clan. Now, something was putting that moral compass and faith to the test, and Izzy feared that Raphael would never forgive himself if he gave in to whatever forces were challenging his self-control.

“Is there anything we can do?” she asked.

“Stay away from us,” Raphael responded, a sharp and definite tone in his voice. “I have ordered all the vampires to stay in the hotel and we have horded as much blood as we could get our hands on. Hopefully, we will be able weather the storm here, but it is getting harder. It is as if the virus is awakening all our instincts to hunt, as if we are being ordered by a force outside of ourselves to go out there and kill any humans we find. You must stay away; it is not safe to be around us right now.”

The agony in Raphael’s voice had tugged at something in the center of Izzy’s heart and she understood then that it had been a mistake to go to the hotel, that her presence was adding to the suffering that this man, a leader among his own people, was enduring.

“Okay,” Izzy had said, and smoothing her rumpled shirt, had taken a cautious step away from the wall. “Before I go though, I need you to tell me anything you know about who might be responsible for the attacks and about Magnus’ role in them.”

“I don’t know anything. Magnus never mentioned anything to me,” he said. Izzy could detect a tone of hesitation in the vampire’s voice that suggested that he was holding something back.

“Come on Raphael; you know Magnus is my friend and I want to help him. You must tell me anything you know.” Izzy tried to convey in her words all her conviction that Magnus was innocent.

“He is my friend too,” Raphael stated after a moment of hesitation in which he took a deep and ragged breath. “I don’t know anything for sure. The only thing I can tell you is that a few hours
before the explosion, someone used a portal to transport something that belongs to Magnus into this room. It was a small box, old for what I can tell, containing a small piece of jewelry, a ring made of a strange metal. I know it belongs to Magnus because, years ago, I saw the box in his apartment when I lived there during my first months after I ascended, and because it is obviously magical.”

“Can I see it?”

“I can show it to you but I cannot let you take it,” replied Raphael. “The ring is emitting some form of energy that is counteracting somewhat the effects of whatever is affecting us. Without it, I am not sure I can control the vampires.”

“I promise I will only look at it,” Izzy told him.

“Okay, but I need to ask for something in return,” Raphael had said. “You must promise me to station Shadowhunters in all the entrances to the hotel, and arm them with fire throwers. I am not sure if and for how long we can resist this disease and you must promise me not to let anyone leave the hotel, no matter what. You must promise me that you will burn this place down with all of us inside if necessary. Do I have your word?”

“But Raphael,” Izzy had tried to protest but Raphael had stopped her.

“You must promise me, Isabel. I will not let my clan be responsible for more innocent deaths.”

“I promise,” Izzy had responded after a moment of silence in which the pleading tone in Raphael’s voice had echoed in the room.

Raphael had taken a few steps towards the sitting room and switched on a lamp on one of the side tables, its soft light barely breaking the darkness, but still illuminating the lovely face of the vampire that constantly occupied Izzy’s thoughts. The expression in Raphael’s face had been pained but determined, and Izzy had understood that he would rather die along with his whole clan before he betrayed the faith and morality that had guided his life since before he became a vampire.

He had reached for the small square box resting on the table and handed it to Izzy before stepping back, once again putting distance between himself and the Shadowhunter. The box was made of polished pinewood, the inlaid design of a rose made of what appear to be rosewood decorated its lid. Before opening the box, Izzy took out her phone and snapped a few pictures. She then lifted the lid to reveal its blue velvet covered interior and the small ring, its design simple and plain, nestled in the centre of the box. The ring was not more than a simple band rustically made of a dark silvery metal that shone rather dully under the light. It looked old and Izzy suspected it was made of a material that was not easily found in this realm.

Izzy took a few more pictures, the energy emanating from the ring casting an odd and eerily glow on the images the phone captured. Even though the small object was obviously magical, its powers would be hard to decipher without more careful examination. But, she had given her word that she would not take it and, for some reason, Izzy knew that this promise she had to keep. She had the conviction that on this promise depended the likelihood that she would not have to keep her promise to burn the hotel with Raphael in it.

She had worked quickly, taking pictures and making notes about the ring and the box. All the while, she had felt Raphael’s eyes looking at her from a dark corner, their intensity almost burning her skin. However, she didn’t look at Raphael again, or seek him out before she left the room. She just walked away with steady and rushed steps, wanting to leave that place as soon as possible, and
before her presence became known to the rest of the vampires currently cloistered in the hotel rooms. She didn’t know what was happening to the vampires, but suspected that whatever it was, was dangerous enough to warrant the promises that Raphael had extracted from her.

She recounted the incident to Jace and Clary now, omitting, of course, the parts about Raphael kissing her. Her brother’s face mirrored her own alarm, and Clary’s smile and her hand resting on Izzy’s, reflected not only her affection, but also her sympathy. Clary understood better than anyone Izzy’s concern and feelings for Raphael.

“I am telling you Jace, the vampires are in trouble,” Izzy said again, her voice barely concealing her anxiety. “We must find out whether whatever is happening here is also affecting vampires in Paris, Barcelona and Berlin. If so, the situation is worse than we originally thought. We cannot protect mundanes while we are also under attack. And now the Clave’s increasing concern about Institute security is going to make it harder for us to carry our duty.”

“I have tried to get a report from the Clave, but information is being handed out piecemeal. And, I still can’t get an update on Alec’s condition from Inquisitor Dearborn,” said Jace, frustration evident in his tired voice.

Since the call several days before in which Dearborn informed them that Alec was injured, Jace had tried numerous times to get an update, but to no avail. He had already placed several calls to the Barcelona Institute that morning, determined not to give up until he spoke to his parabatai and saw with his own eyes that he was alive and well. He had already decided that if he didn’t hear from Alec today, he would portal to Barcelona and would refuse to leave until he saw Alec and was hopefully able to bring him home. The tendency of the Clave to resort to secrecy and to withhold information frustrated Jace more than he thought prudent to show in front of so many Shadowhunters who, in Alec’s absence, looked to him for guidance and a role model.

“The Clave is scared because Shadowhunters have depended so much on warlock magic to protect the institutes and Idris over the years,” Jace added. “Now they feel exposed and threaten.”

“And, we all know how the Clave deals with threats,” said Izzy, her voice harsh, “bigotry, expulsion and unnecessary violence.”

In addition to orders to immediately cease any contact with warlocks, news of warlocks being expelled from Idris had already reached them, and Izzy couldn’t help thinking that the measures only added to the vulnerability of the Nephilim. They needed the help of the warlocks to deal with this crisis; Izzy was sure of it. She was also concerned that the Clave would not stop at banishing the warlocks from Idris, that eventually all progress made in their relations with the Downworld since the death of Valentine would go to waste if the Clave extended the expulsion orders to other downworlders.

“With all that is going on, I don’t think we have the manpower to station enough guards at the Hotel Du Mort,” said Jace, calling Izzy’s attention back to the problem affecting the vampires. He then run a hand over his face as if to erase the exhaustion evident there. “I am going to call Luke and ask for his help. His pack can help us guard the vampires.”

“Is that wise?” asked Clary. “Didn’t you say that you thought something was also going on with Luke when he came to help after the explosion?”

“Yes, but it might just have been my imagination. He has seemed fine when I have spoken to him since then. Besides, we can’t afford not to ask for help. I am going to also ask him to use his contacts to get more blood for the vampires. We don’t want them to run out and then be forced to fulfill the promise you made to Raphael, Izzy.”
“Are we going to obey Clave orders and not to consult with our warlock allies?” asked Clary, her eyes barely concealing her own concern and exhaustion.

“No, we can use any help we can get in trying to figure this mess out,” replied Jace. “Besides Caterina Loss is one of Magnus’ closest friends. If anyone can help us figure out what the hell is going on with him is her.”

After his first awkward meeting with Catarina when he went to her apartment two days after the attacks, Jace hadn’t heard anything from her until this morning.

“Magnus is not responsible for the attacks;” Catarina had said as soon as she opened the door to Jace that morning, her voice carrying all the conviction that her eyes already communicated. “He may have a sharp tongue and may not always play by the rules, but he is not capable of such destruction.”

“But how do you explain then his involvement in the attacks?” Jace had asked.

“We do not actually know if he was involved at all; all we have is an image projected on the sky,” Catarina had replied placing additional emphasis on the statement.

Catarina had led Jace into a small sitting room, part of a no much larger and modestly furnished apartment located on the top floor of an old townhouse that years before had been divided into small rental units. She had then sat on an old yellow arm chair by a window overlooking a small back garden in which children could be heard playing. The morning sun shone through the lace curtains illuminating Catarina’s iridescent blue skin, and contrasting sharply with the purple hospital scrubs decorated with yellow clowns and red balloons she was wearing. Jace had thought the effect was almost blinding and made his already exhausted eyes sting and his head hurt.

Caterina had not bothered to put on a glamor before opening the door to Jace, and she too looked exhausted. It was understandable, Jace had thought. He knew that she worked as a nurse in the hospital and had also just spent two nights helping treat injured Shadowhunters and reinstating the wards at the Institute.

“You need to tell me anything you know; otherwise, I cannot help Magnus” Jace had pleaded, badly containing the frustration in his voice.

He wasn’t a diplomat, he had thought not for the first time, especially not now that Alec’s absence was all he could think about. He was a soldier and an enforcer of the law. Diplomacy and downworlder relations were Alec’s forte; Alec was the one who vampires, werewolves and warlocks trusted. But his brother was not here and it was now up to Jace to get downworlders to cooperate; hopefully without ruining diplomatic relations forever. He should have asked Clary or Izzy to come with him; they were better at soft talk. He was also too tired, too wound up, too worried too spend the energy needed to keep his temper under control.

“I am not sure how I can help, considering that I don’t actually know anything,“ Catarina had said, her tone sharp.

Jace didn’t know whether it was the exhaustion, the effects of being cut off from his parabatai, or the blinding clash of colors in the room, but he had felt suddenly dizzy and had to hold on to the back of a chair to avoid dropping to the ground. His face must have betrayed his state of mind, because Catarina had looked at him with deep concern in her aquamarine eyes.

“Are you okay?” she had asked, getting up and coming to stand beside Jace, placing a hand on his shoulder.
“I am fine, just tired,” he had replied, closing his eyes and bending his head towards his chest trying to get the room to stop spinning.

“You are more than tired,” Catarina had rebutted as she guided him to a sofa. “You are white as paper.” With a flick of her fingers, she had willed the heavier drapes to slide over the window and block the light, sending the room into semi-darkness; the effect dulling the brightness of the furniture and of Catarina’s skin.

Jace didn’t know why, but the comforting sensation on Catarina’s hand on his shoulder and her eyes full of concern had unleashed something inside him, and he had told Catarina everything. He had told her about the pain that had awakened him right before the attacks; about the hours spent in the gruesome work of collecting and identifying the bodies of his dead comrades; about being suddenly cut off from his parabatai and not knowing whether he was dead or alive; about his fear that he wouldn’t be able to be as good a leader as Alec; about the sinking sensation of being lost.

“I need him, and I think he needs me,” Jace had finally said, his voice strained and full of anguish. “I cannot do my job without Alec; I am just half a person without him, weak and scared.”

“A parabatai bond is one of the strongest forms of magic we know,” the warlock had said. “Losing it can be devastating and as painful as having a limb amputated. Believe me, you are doing a lot better than most other Shadowhunters in your situation.”

“I have to find out what happened,” Jace had told Caterina, his voice carrying all the urgency he felt.

“You are impulsive, Jonathan Herondale, and that worries me because I don’t want my friend or any other innocent warlocks to die unnecessarily if you do not approach this situation with a levelled head.”

“Magnus is my friend too,” Jace had rebutted, “and I want to find out what happened and hopefully help him if I can. Listen, he is the person responsible for Alec being happy after years of secrecy and suffering. In my book, that is enough to earn him a chance to explain himself.”

“Tessa Grey, you ancestor, is a good friend of mine, you know, and I met her husband, Will Herondale, once many years ago. You remind me of them. Will and Magnus were good friends and I know he wouldn’t want you to rush to judgement” Catarina had said, her voice soft and comforting.

“I promise to keep an open mind,” Jace had stated, imbuing as much conviction as he could into the statement.

“I am not sure what I can do, but I will think about it,” had been Catarina’s final and non-committal answer.

But this morning, she had finally contacted Jace, and informed him that she would help in the investigation. She had also told him that another warlock, a woman by the name of Kat, was arriving in New York, oddly not by portal, but by plane from South America, and had also agreed to help.

“Catarina is coming tonight after the funerals,” Jace told Clary and Izzy, lowering his voice so the other Shadowhunters didn’t hear. “If I don’t hear from Alec by then, I will ask her to portal me to Barcelona. I am going to bring him back, not matter what.”

The two women nodded at unison, the gesture one of agreement and understanding.
As if on cue, Pineshade interrupted their quiet conversation. “Jace, you have a call from the Barcelona Institute.”

Jace’s heart skipped a beat and the hair in the back of his neck stood on end. Finally, someone had decided to acknowledge his phone messages. He pushed a button on the table and turned towards a big flat screen on the wall.

Suddenly, the familiar face of his brother, the man Jace felt the closest to in the whole world, appeared on the screen, his expression stern, his eyes impassive, and his mouth set on a hard line. Alec was, like all Shadowhunters, wearing white, his outfit providing a stark contrast to his black hair, and accentuating even more his angelic and youthful features. Instinctually, Jace brought his hand to the spot above his hip where his parabatai rune was located, searching in vain for the sensation of connection and wholeness he usually felt in Alec’s presence.

“Report,” was the only word that came out of Alec’s lips, the word sounding as flat and distant as the expression in Alec’s face.
So many small moments of love, care and acceptance, thought Magnus; so many small moments of completeness and peace; so many small gestures stitched together into a story of a love more intense than any other Magnus had ever felt. Each of these moments now contained in a spot atop his heart, where no one could take them away, where no one could ever erase them.

“What was that?” Magnus asked as soon as he emerged from the portal that had just transported him from the grounds of the Berlin Institute to an unfamiliar room in an unfamiliar place. “I thought we were going to meet Annaliese.”

“Just making a statement,” replied Khuno, a coy smile on his face, his hand still firmly holding Magnus’. “I thought you liked making an entrance; or, in this case, an exit.”

“Of course, I do,” Magnus replied, disentangling his fingers from the warlock’s firm grip. “But I would appreciate some warning next time. I don’t like candid pictures; they don’t always capture my best side.”

“You do not have a bad side, honey” Khuno said, gently pressing a hand against Magnus’ cheek before walking off towards an antique cabinet on which drinks had been laid out.

As it had become routine since his ordeal began, Magnus had had no control or knowledge of his destination when he stepped through the portal, and had to rely on Khuno’s guiding hand. The fear of getting lost inside the portal if he let go added to the anxiety that was already wreaking havoc with his usually calmed and cool temperament.

Magnus swiftly looked around the room searching for clues as to his location. He was in the foyer of what appeared to be a grand country state, its white walls adorned with expensive tapestries and paintings. A pair of roman vases sat on the marble surface of a wooden table by the entrance; and a thick Persian rug with an intricate design in earthy tones rested on rose marble floors, and laid out a welcoming pathway into the house’s interior. A high vaulted ceiling supported by arched pillars led to a bright and spacious seating area furnished with heavy antique tables, bookcases and overstuffed couches on which several warlocks sat, talking in soft but relaxed voices. Magnus looked out the enormous arched windows that covered the back wall of the seating area, and saw green hills in the distance, a garden and, in between, a country road lined up with tall and slim cypresses, their tops reaching up towards a blue cloudless sky. He was somewhere in Tuscany, Magnus suspected; he would recognize anywhere that landscape and the scent in the air.

At least they were still in Europe, Magnus thought with relief, his hand briefly resting on the spot atop his heart in a gesture that in the last few days had become almost instinctual. The fading feeling of burning in the self-inflicted wound on his chest comforted him and reminded him that what he was doing had a purpose.

Magnus thought of Alexander every time his hand rested on the wound; of the broad and innocent smile Alec regaled him with that first evening they spent in Magnus’ apartment; of the same smile that barely concealed Alexander’s self-satisfaction when he surprised Magnus with the Omamori
charm after their night in Tokyo; of the shine in Alexander’s eyes the first time he told Magnus that he loved him. So many small moments of love, care and acceptance, thought Magnus; so many small moments of completeness and peace; so many small gestures stitched together into a story of a love more intense than any other Magnus had ever felt. Each of these moments now contained in a spot atop his heart, where no one could take them away, where no one could ever erase them. That spot in which he carried the only treasure that truly mattered to Magnus. At the same time, so many regrets, big and small, the biggest of which was to not have been the first one to prevail over his own fears and tell Alec that he loved him; not “I love you too,” but “I love you and I want you to love me too.” Perhaps if he had been brave enough to be the first one to confess his love, everything that had happened later would have acquired a different meaning. Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps, so many perhaps, so many “what-if’s”, and so many regrets, each one linked in a chain that coiled itself around Magnus’ heart.

Magnus sighed and looked at the warlocks sitting around the room, drinks in their hands while they animatedly talked to one another as if they had gathered for a cocktail party, and not to carry out a plan of destruction. He suspected the house and likely also the grounds were heavily glamoured, warded, or both. For the atmosphere was unusually relaxed and, for the first time since Barcelona, he was not shackled or under heavy guard. Still, he suspected that he was not free to come and go as he pleased.

Since the night that Khuno got him out of the cell in the basement of the Royal Palace, Magnus had slept in comfortable rooms, and servants had made sure he had food, drink and clean clothes. He had never been left alone, though, and was constantly under Khuno or the other warlock’s watch. Khuno had also made Magnus wear an enchanted bracelet that blocked his capacity to access the full range of his magic powers, making it difficult for him to perform all but the simplest and weakest of spells. The bracelet was the warlock equivalent of both handcuffs and, Magnus suspected, the ankle tracking devices mundanes put on criminals. He was a prisoner even if he was no longer in a cell.

The warlocks in Khuno’s party had been constantly on the move, always by portal, and always dragging Magnus along. Until this morning, Magnus had not been allowed outside, and he had been kept in rooms without windows. As a result, he couldn’t tell where he had been or where he was going; the sensation adding to the general feeling of disorientation he had been experiencing since the night he knocked at the door of the Royal Palace. He had learned more about the attacks in Barcelona, Paris and New York by listening to the excited, and sometimes worried conversations between the warlocks that, in increasing numbers, had begun to arrive to join Khuno and, of course, Annaliese in their new crusade.

Now, Berlin had been the latest target. Annaliese and Khuno’s version of poetic justice, thought Magnus. It was in Berlin, after all, that Magnus had last seen Annaliese and it had been there where he had stopped her previous attempt to carry out her plans. Magnus hoped that none of Joshua Pineshade’s children or grandchildren were hurt in the attacks and he did a quick mental inventory of their known location. One of Joshua’s grandchildren was currently stationed at the New York Institute. He had seen him a few times, his young face and his chestnut eyes a startling reminder of his grandfather. Joshua’s daughter was the current head of the Berlin Institute, which likely put her directly in Annaliese and Khuno’s path of destruction. He would never forgive himself, he thought, if the mistake he made over two hundred years ago now caused the life of Joshua’s descendants; his friend who had only tried to help.

The Berlin attack had been a surprise, even though Magnus should have expected it. Khuno had come to his room a few hours ago and had told him that Annaliese would finally see him. He had then handed Magnus the expensive looking shopping bags he was carrying and instructed him to get dressed for the occasion, telling him that Annaliese would want to see him looking his best. So,
Magnus had bathed, put on the new Armani black tight jeans and white shirt, and the Louis Vuitton boots and black leather jacket that Khuno had brought him. As he opened the bags, he had teasingly asked Khuno whether he had robbed the Louis Vuitton and Armani stores in Milan, and Khuno had answered with one of his seductively coy smiles that once upon a time had made Magnus lose sleep.

They had met Gwydion, Rufus and two other warlocks in the living room of the apartment in which they were staying. Rufus had looked nervous, his eyes shifting around the room, and his hands shaking. Magnus had tried to make eye contact, hoping to get information about what was going on, but Rufus had avoided him, turning his back on Magnus.

“You will be fine,” Khuno had said to Rufus and one of the other warlocks, a young-looking man who looked equally nervous. “Our mother loves you and will not let anything happened to you. What you are doing is for the benefit of all warlocks. You are fulfilling a sacred duty.”

Khuno had then patted Rufus on the back and, giving him and the other warlock a reassuring smile, had instructed them to go ahead. The warlock accompanying Rufus had opened a portal and, as soon as the two men disappeared through it and the portal closed, Khuno had smiled broadly and had rubbed his hands together in a gesture that Magnus recognized as one of anticipation and excitement. Something momentous was happening, Magnus had thought, a black hole opening in the pit of his stomach.

A handful of minutes later, Gwydion had opened another portal and, at the same time, Magnus had felt Khuno firmly interlace his fingers with his, the grip strengthened by an unexpected surge of energy that kept Magnus’ hand imprisoned in the grip.

“Do not let go; we don’t want you to get lost,” the warlock had said as he gently but determinately pulled Magnus through, the statement no more than a formality considering the supernatural strength with which he held Magnus’ hand. A second later, they had stepped out of the portal amid a scene of utter destruction, flames and smoke surrounding them, glass and debris falling from the sky, and the heat so oppressive that Magnus felt his lungs catching fire. He didn’t need to look twice to recognize where they were. The Berlin Institute with its neoclassical architecture was all too familiar to Magnus, and he recognized the grounds and the building despite the destruction, the heavy smoke, the debris and the fires devouring everything on their path.

They had walked a few steps, Khuno’s stepping decisively and pulling Magnus along. Magnus had looked around trying to get a sense of what was happening, but then his eyes landed on the two bodies still burning on the ground, a scorching round well between them, heat and demonic fumes rising from it and mixing with the stench of burning flesh, making it almost impossible to breathe. Oh no, Rufus, Magnus had thought, recognizing one of the burning bodies, not by his features which were beyond recognition, but by his size and shape. The warlock that had been a permanent pain in Magnus’ side every time he had come to New York to cause trouble now lay dead, his life a sacrifice in a war that Rufus most likely didn’t even understand.

“Smile, you are on camera,” Khuno had said and Magnus had looked up in the direction towards which Khuno was gesturing, and there he had seen the camera, a small red light indicating that it was still filming.

Magnus had made a superhuman effort to keep a stone expression, forcing his face not to betray the state of agitation and fear that was taking over every cell of his body. He didn’t want Alec, who he was sure would see the film, to think he was in danger or that he needed to be rescued. It was critical that Alec believed that Magnus had betrayed him; the Shadowhunter’s very life depended on it.
Magnus took another deep breath trying to calm his nerves and get rid of the smell of burning flesh and demonic fumes that still clung to his nose. He walked towards a corner of the room and sat on a lonely sofa beside an open window overlooking the gardens. He felt the eyes of some of the other warlocks on him, some of their expressions contemptuous, others fearful. He suspected that, despite the apparently jovial atmosphere, not all of them had joined the group voluntarily, and he wondered how Annaliese had managed to master the power to once again summon so many of his people. In the last few days, Magnus had searched for familiar faces in the warlocks that arrived, and every time someone knocked at the door, he held his breath hoping that none of the warlocks he considered his closest friends would respond to Annaliese’ call. Magnus could only hope that Catarina, Kat and Tessa would manage to stay away, and resist whatever force was bringing the other warlocks to this place.

A minute later, Khuno joined Magnus and, after handing him a drink, sat beside him, his hand resting casually on Magnus’ leg. Magnus gathered the remaining of his self-control to resist the impulse to push the hand away. The feel of Khuno’s touch recalled memories that he wished he could forever forget, and awoke old feeling of guilt and disgust. He couldn’t believe that once he had thought of Khuno and Annaliese as the most important people in his life, as his own kind.

“I thought you didn’t want to be seen,” commented Magnus, imbuing his voice with a casual tone that contrasted with the anger and agitation he felt inside.

“Honey, I love being seen with you, and Annaliese wanted to send a message.”

“To whom?” asked Magnus, adjusting a lock of hair that had come loose in the events of the last few minutes and was now falling across his forehead. The gesture was an effort to settle his nerves and quiet his racing thoughts rather than a reflection of his usual vanity.

“You know who,” said Khuno, his face dangerously close to Magnus, his voice no more than a whisper, a smile lifting the corner of his lips; “your Shadowhunter boy, of course.”

“I told you that the Shadowhunter is just a client.” The statement came out a little bit more forceful than Magnus would have wanted, but the mention of Alec sent a surge of adrenaline through his body and caused his heart to miss a couple of beats.

“You have always been a bad liar, Magnus,” retorted Khuno, his lips almost touching Magnus’ ear; “especially with me. I know you better than anyone. Do you think that Barcelona was the first time we saw you with the Shadowhunter? We have been following your European adventure for a while. Frankly, I never took you for a honeymoon kind of guy. Tell me, does he know you as well as I know you? Does he know what you like the way I do?”

Khuno then gently bit Magnus’ earlobe, the sensation making the hairs in Magnus arms stand on end, and Magnus had to resist the impulse to punch the warlock, to grab him by the neck and squeeze until he erased that smile from his lips. Despite everything that had happened, Magnus had never thought of himself as a violent person, but this situation was putting his character to the test and he wasn’t sure he would come out of it without sacrificing his own sense of self.

“You knew me once, Khuno,” stated Magnus, his voice involuntarily caustic. “But that was a long time ago. People change, you know.”

“Maybe they do,” Khuno whispered, his hand gently squeezing Magnus’ leg. “But you are still a hopeless romantic, that has not changed. Frankly, I am surprised that you would get involved with a Shadowhunter after all they have done to us. Annaliese is deeply disappointed.”

“Is that why she has been avoiding me?” asked Magnus, taking the opportunity to shift the focus of
She is not avoiding you,” replied Khuno, his hand now the one brushing the wayward lock of hair off Magnus’ forehead. The intimacy of the gesture sent shivers down Magnus’ spine, and he closed his hands into tight fists to control the anger surging through him. “She has been very busy. And now I must also leave you, my love. I have some things to take care of. But make yourself at home; we are safe here. I may come visit you tonight.”

Before getting up, Khuno grabbed Magnus by his chin and forced his head to turn in his direction. Magnus tried to resist but the gesture had surprised him and before he knew it, Khuno’s lips were on his, the kiss tasting bitter and burning like poisonous acid. For the second that the kiss lasted, Magnus focused his whole being on the image of Alec that he constantly carried in his mind, willing the memory of Alec’s lips to erase the memory of this kiss from his lips.

“You still haven’t forgiven me,” Khuno said in a tone of mocked injury. He then laughed, and Magnus couldn’t believe that once he had found that laugh musical and sexy. It now seemed to contain all the evil that he knew this man capable of.

As he watched the warlock walk away, Magnus couldn’t help recalling the days when being with Annaliese and Khuno had given him more joy than anything else ever had and ever would in his very long life. That is, until recently when he had finally found peace and a home in the arms of a Shadowhunter; peace and a home he now had to sacrifice to atone for his old sins.

Looking at the warlocks sitting around the room –some familiar, some new –Magnus thought of the last time he had been among so many of his own kind. It was in Batavia during the first months of 1740. He had been in love then, as well as in lust, and the feelings had been so all-consuming that they had blinded him to everything else going on around him. The signs of the upcoming destruction had been there all along, but he had refused to see them, captivated as he was in the thrill of finally belonging to someone and to a people.

That first night of 1740 when Magnus and Annaliese left the party at the house of the Head of Dutch East Indian Company, they had gone to a beautiful house on a plantation in the outskirts of Batavia where Annaliese lived, and they had spent the whole night sitting on the terrace, talking, sipping champagne and looking up at the stars that illuminated the dark sky. Magnus had felt unaccountably shy, and made no attempt to approach or touch Annaliese. Perhaps it was that she appeared so fragile and innocent, not much older than a child, small and gentle. That night –and every night thereafter—he had felt that touching her was a crime, as if his hands were too big, too rough and too dirty; as if a touch of his hands could forever stain the beautiful and unblemished skin and soul of the enchanting warlock.

So, they had just talked, sharing stories of their travels and adventures; talking about what they liked about Batavia and the rest of the country; speaking of the challenges of being immortal while the world went on around them. When the sky had begun to change color and the stars faded, Annaliese yawned and Magnus, realizing his rudeness, had stood up and offered to escort her to her chambers.

“You do not have to put on a glamor in this house, Magnus,” Annaliese had said as she walked alongside him into the house. “In this house, you can be just like you are.”

The statement had surprised Magnus because he hadn’t realized that, while Annaliese had let her glamor fall completely from the moment she stepped into the house, he was so used to his that he had forgotten to take it off. He smiled then and, as is removing a cloak, he let his glamor fall and, for the first time, showed himself to Annaliese completely devoid of all disguises. She had simply smiled and her smile was accepting and without judgement.
Silently, Magnus had walked her to her room and bid her good night. He hadn’t touched her, not then and not for many days and nights after. Instead, he had desired her from a distance and with a burning fire that consumed him, that erased all thoughts of anything but Annaliese.

As he had walked away from her bedroom in search of a room in which to rest and think of her, Magnus had felt the warm touch of a pair of eyes staring at him from a dark corner and when he looked in their direction, he met the desiring expression and wicked smile of Annaliese’s footman.

“Hello, did you have a good evening?” the man had said, and, as he smiled again, a forked long tongue – his warlock mark – playfully stuck out from between his lips in a gesture that was both surprising and incredibly seductive, and Magnus couldn’t help imagining what that tongue would feel like on his skin. He must have blushed for the footman’s smile broaden as he stepped out of the dark corner and into the morning light streaming through a window. Magnus had thought the sun made the man’s eyes shine even more wickedly and accentuated the golden tones of his dark brown skin making him resemble a gorgeous bronze statue.

“Allow me introduce myself,” the footman said as he took a step towards Magnus and bowed, his voice low and as sweet as candy. “I am Khuno Jarh. I am one of your kind; welcome to our home.” He had then headed down the hallway and as he passed Magnus, Khuno run a finger gently along Magnus’ arm, the touch, the voice and the eyes awakening feelings in Magnus that had been dormant for a long time.

Magnus would later wonder whether Khuno’s presence outside Annaliese’s room had been planned; whether the whole night had been a set-up, the trap that finally and hopelessly entangled Magnus in Annaliese and Khuno’s web. For from that very first night, Magnus had become a prisoner of Annaliese’s untouchable allure and Khuno’s open seductiveness. The two were like two sides of the same coin; two parts of a whole; each incomplete without the other. Not only they completed each other, they also openly shared everything –eventually even Magnus –without a hint of jealousy, competitiveness or possessiveness.

In time, Magnus had realized that Annaliese’s attraction, what made everyone –mundanes, downworlders and perhaps even Shadowhunters –fall for her lied precisely in her capacity to appear innocent, distant, forbidden and unattainable. She had stopped aging when she was no older than perhaps fourteen and, as result, had retained, at least on the surface, the innocent expression, demeanor and forbidden allure of a child. However, her physical beauty was just the beginning, just the appeal that lured people in. Her true attraction was her magnetic and hypnotic personality, a personality with the power to enthrall everyone, as if she had been born with a vampires’ gift for encanto. Many years later, Magnus would recognize a similar allure in Camile Belcourt, and his friends would think of the vampire as Magnus’ downfall. But Magnus’ attraction for Camile’s was the result of her reminding Magnus so much of what he had felt for Annaliese, the woman that would remain Magnus’ darkest secret.

Annaliese had a vulnerability that concealed strength and cruelty, and that made people want to protect her even as she was hurting them. She was like a carnivorous flower that attracts its prey with its incomparable beauty, a beauty that no one would ever think is dangerous for it presents itself in a package of defencelessness and softness, and sings in the musical and soft sound of rain falling on leaves. You never knew you was trapped in Annaliese’s web; she confused and drugged the mind until you subjected yourself willingly to her will, even when she commanded you to walk towards your own execution.

No one could resist Annaliese despite, or perhaps because, she remained distant and unattainable; seductive, tempting but untouchable. Even when, weeks later, she finally allowed Magnus to kiss her and invited him into her bed, Magnus felt he could never truly reach her, as if she was
somewhere between this world and another, not completely solid, but rather ethereal and insubstantial. Her distant attitude only increased Magnus’ frustrated desire, and filled his mind with dark thoughts; thoughts of things he wanted to do with her but that also filled him with guilt. With her, Magnus felt that he was doing something forbidden, something that he was unable to resist; as if he was violating something sacred, but couldn’t stop himself; as if he was drinking a venom so sweet that he could not stop despite the certainty of death and damnation.

Khuno, on the other hand, was the embodiment of open and unrestrained lust and joy. While Annaliese was prohibition, Khuno was possibility. While Annaliese was frigid ice, Khuno was burning fire. While Annaliese kept her distance, Khuno deployed all his skills of seduction to reel Magnus in, building on Magnus’ frustrated longing for Annaliese, and offering an outlet for his desires; an outlet with no strings attached and no guilt. Every time Magnus left Annaliese’s room, his heart in suspense and guilt weighting him down, Khuno was waiting outside the door with his wicked smile and the alluring brush of his fingers along Magnus’s arms, down his cheek, or across his back, the gestures a promise of things to come, of sensations free of shame.

Magnus had experienced the desiring stares of other men before, and had himself experienced attraction for men. However, he had never actually acted on those desires. It wasn’t that he was afraid or that some sense of morality stopped him. He just understood that taking that step required trust, and had its costs. Society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with its religious precept and its fear of god, was not what could be called enlightened when it came to different sexual preferences, and his condition as a warlock, as the child of a demon, made the possibility of being with a man even more complicated. Magnus understood that any man would perceive a relationship with him as a step into deviance, a step towards the darkness of hell, an act of transgression that would inevitably be associated with his condition as a warlock. He didn’t want to be part of such a relationship, a relationship based on shame and transgression. Khuno was different; he was a warlock like Magnus, someone who accepted and was proud of his condition as one of Lilith’s children. Being with him would not be a transgression; it would be like coming home, like being authentic and real for the first time.

So, one morning, instead of watching Khuno walk away, Magnus silently followed him towards the warlock’s chambers. There, he allowed himself to be discovered by the wondrous eyes of a man; to be touched by his fingers; to be tasted by that wicked forked tongue that had invaded so many of his fantasies; to be possessed by the strong power of a warlock.

In Khuno’s arms, Magnus had experienced a decadence and playfulness that he could never experience when embracing Annaliese’s fragile body. Khuno willingly gave himself and, in the process, he enticed Magnus to let go of the last of his misgivings, the last of his doubts, the last vestiges of his religious upbringing and embrace his true condition as an inhabitant and an explorer of multiple worlds.

From that very first morning he had sex with Khuno, Magnus felt that he could love Annaliese with less guilt. He felt that while with Annaliese he had to be gentle as if he was touching a doll made of the most fragile of porcelains, with Khuno he could give free rein to his unruly lust. At the end of it all, Annalise and Khuno allowed Magnus to experience what it was like to have the perfect lover, gentle and energetic, chaste and uninhibited, restrained and licentious.

During those first few months of 1740, Magnus had spent almost all his time at Annalise and Khuno’s house. Eventually, he stopped going home all together, and even stopped seeing his clients and friends. Instead, he remained at the plantation going out only with Khuno or Annaliese. Intoxicated by the feeling of being in love, of belonging for the first time, of freedom from disguise or glamor, Magnus begun to believe that he had finally found a home, a place in which he belonged. He also convinced himself that he deserved that home, that it was his right and that he
During this time, more and more warlocks had begun to arrive in ships coming from all over the world, as if they were summoned, or as if some ancient call was attracting them to the same happiness and bliss in which Magnus had found completeness. The plantation became a sort of commune, a place where warlocks could be free to practice their magic without restrain or disguise; a place where they could unleash their powers and try new spells without concern for consequences. Eventually, the plantation became a place that Batavians feared and avoided at all costs; a place where dangerous experiments were being conducted, where terrible things were done to mundanes and downworlders. Overtime, only the slaves that Annaliese owned and who laboured from day to night on the plantation remained, and only because they were not free and couldn’t escape. If Magnus heard the rumours or saw what the warlocks were doing, he ignored it all, and the few times his consciousness threatened to awaken his guilt, Khuno and Annaliese swiftly quieted his doubts.

One night, a couple of months after his arrival, and during one of their evenings sitting, drinking and eating by the fire, Annaliese told Magnus and the other warlocks the story of Lilith, of how Lilith had been expelled from the garden of Eden, outcast and condemned to live in exile, to wander through the underworld in search of home. She spoke of Lilith’s incursions into this world, and how she sent her demons to procreate with humans, to perpetuate her lineage, to create a new race of beings that were superior to the humans that god had favourited.

“We are her children and she is our mother,” Annaliese had said at the end of her tale. “It is our duty to bring her back into this world from which god expelled her. She made us powerful, more powerful than mundanes, yet we are forced to live in shadows as if we were impostors and outlaws. We deserve a land of our own, a place where we can be free and owners of our own destiny, a place where we can live with our mother. We must fight for that place, no matter the cost.”

Annaliese had planned to build a country for warlocks; a place where no one would look down on the children of Lilith; where no one would spat the word warlock as if it was a dirty word or an insult. Back then, she thought Batavia was that place; that Batavia was the place where Lilith could be welcomed back into this realm and where warlocks could build a nation of their own, a nation in which mundanes and downworlders would finally have to vow to the children of Lilith.

How naïve and how blind he had been, Magnus thought as he looked out towards the Tuscan landscape, oblivious to the conversation of the other warlocks gathered in the room. Yet, he could not excuse his actions, for blindness and naïveté were not justification and, in all honesty, Annaliese had never deceived him. Nothing Magnus ever did was under duress. Instead, Annaliese had enthralled him the way she had all the other warlocks, as she had likely enthralled Rufus to walk towards his own death this morning. That was one of Annaliese’s powers: to make those around her follow her, yet without completely losing awareness of their actions; to destroy in her name, willingly and without will at the same time.

After what happened in Batavia, Magnus had hated himself, along with Annaliese and Khuno for the destruction they brought on the land of his birth. Yet, until Berlin two hundred years later, part of him had been unable to completely stop loving Annaliese, despite or perhaps because of the destruction. When it came to Annaliese, love and hate seemed to lose all meaning, the emotions melting together into one. For you couldn’t love Annaliese without also hating her for what she made you do in her name.

Magnus thought that guilt was like a serpent that coiled itself around your body, making it impossible to walk or even move, at times, reaching your neck and squeezing, until you could no
longer breath. He refused to ever live with the weight of that kind of guilt again. He would do everything in his power to stop Annaliese from fulfilling her plans, even if the price he paid was his own life. The only regret he would have is that Alec would never forgive him, not only for breaking his heart, but also for Magnus’ role in the terrible tragedies of the past as well as for the destruction that would likely ensue in this latest battle.

The sound of animated voices brought Magnus’ attention back to the room. As he looked around, he saw the expectant expressions on the other warlocks’ faces as they stood up and turned towards the foyer where a portal was opening. He too stood, curious to see who was the latest arrival. Suddenly, a familiar figure, small and child-like materialized by the entrance of the portal, and Magnus’ hand instinctually searched for the comforting sensation of the wound on his chest, as his heart went into freefall, and his eyes rested on the deceptively vulnerable and still youthful face of Annaliese Fen, her eyes the color of fire and as shiny as precious rubies.
Chapter Summary

The only thing Alec knew for sure was that a few minutes ago, he had lifted his bow and released an arrow intended to hit one of the warlocks that had tried to burn the Zürich Institute, and instead he had likely pierced the heart of Magnus Bane.

Alexander Lightwood stepped through the portal and emerged on the rooftop of the Barcelona Institute. Inquisitor Dearborn along with five Shadowhunters in full combat gear and Calder Berg – the warlock who had opened the portal – followed a few steps behind. Dearborn ordered two of the Shadowhunters to escort Berg to the cells below the building, where the warlock had been kept under guard since he showed up at the Institute door two days after the attacks offering his help in exchange for protection.

Alec rushed towards the edge of the rooftop and began to pace back and forth, his heart beating at such a speed that he felt that, at any moment, it would jump out of his chest. His breathing was shallow, his chest tight, and a sheen of sweat covered his forehead. He felt as if he had run a marathon, and adrenaline was still coursing through his body, making it impossible for him to stand still.

He stopped for a moment and looked down at the bow still in his left hand, his fingers wrapped so tightly around its grip that his knuckles looked as white as bone under the lights that illuminated the rooftop. He resisted the impulse to grab the bow with both hands, break it in two, and throw the pieces over the edge and onto the cobblestones of the street below.

A jumble of thoughts run through Alec’s mind at a vertiginous speed.

“You killed him!”

“No, no, I couldn’t have.”

“What happened?”

“It was my duty; I am a Shadowhunter.”

He replayed in his mind the scene from a few minutes ago: the bow in his hand; the tension between his shoulder blades as he pulled the string with all his strength and lifted the bow; his eyes focused on a spot in the center of a chest, a white shirt reflecting the street lights making it an easy target. Then, the feel of the string and arrow between his fingers just before he released it with the certainty that he would not miss. But the certainty lasted only an instant; for as soon as he freed the arrow, an all too familiar figure stepped in front of the target when it was already too late to recall it, when the arrow was already in motion, its fate and the fate of its unexpected target irremediably linked. “What did I do?” Alec thought as he continued pacing, unable to contain his agitation.

“What happened?” he asked pushing the question and the memory from his mind and turning towards Dearborn. “How did they escape? I thought you said the plan was airtight. We knew their target, we arrived with enough time to set the ambush. What happened?” Alec’ voice was almost a scream, a reflection of the confusing mixture of fury and despair that clouded his thoughts.
“Calm down Mr. Lightwood,” replied Dearborn, his hands extended in front of his body in a conciliatory gesture. “We couldn’t have predicted everything.”

“Now more people are dead and the longer these attacks continue the harder it will be to keep deceiving the mundanes. Sooner or later, they are bound to figure out that these are not simple accidents or common crimes. We must deal with this threat once and for all so I can go back to my real job.”

“And we will; I am sure of it. In the meantime, I think you did very well; very well indeed. You stopped tonight’s attack and with no real loss of life,” Dearborn said, rubbing his hands together, the gesture and the nasal tone on the Inquisitor’s voice annoying Alec even more. “You have come a long way. I am very pleased with the results; very pleased indeed.”

Alec took a deep breath, and resisted the impulse to grab Inquisitor Dearborn by the lapels of his Shadowhunter jacket and shake him until his mouse-like eyes began to rattle like ping pong balls inside his skull, and that condescending smile disappeared forever from his lips.

‘Lives were lost, you moron,’ thought Alec. Three, very possibly four, warlocks were dead, but those lives didn’t count because they were warlocks, less than human, demon spawn that, according to The Clave, didn’t deserve to live.

Dearborn smiled again and, after patting Alec on the shoulder, turned and headed into the building, followed by the remaining of the Shadowhunters who were part of the team selected for tonight’s mission.

Alec began to pace again, hoping to burn off the remaining of the adrenaline still running through his veins, and to gather his thoughts. After a few steps, he looked up at the dark moonless sky and then down at the city lights, and tried to recall once again the events of the last few minutes. Did he really hit Magnus? He asked himself. Maybe the direction of the arrow somehow curved at the last moment; perhaps it didn’t have enough momentum to hit its target; perhaps he missed after all. But what if he didn’t miss? What if the arrow hit the target?

A confusing entanglement of images and memories run through Alec’s mind, images of hateful expressions and evil cat eyes superimposed over memories of a smiling Magnus, his face youthful and loving. Alec run his hand through his hair as if with the gesture her could organize the confusion of thoughts and memories. He didn’t know what was real and what was imagined anymore, what memories were true and which were the invention of his confused mind. He couldn’t tell which voice in his head was his own and which one was Inquisitor Dearborn’s. The only thing he knew for sure was that a few minutes ago, he had lifted his bow and released an arrow intended to hit one of the warlocks that had tried to burn the Zürich Institute, and instead he had likely pierced the heart of Magnus Bane.

He rubbed the back of his neck with the same hand that he had just run through his hair, trying to release the tension building there. The last of the adrenaline was finally burning away, leaving him exhausted, miserable and suddenly very sad.

He rested his hand on the guard rail that surrounded the rooftop, and looked down towards the plaza in front of the Institute. Yellow tape still cordoned off the area where the explosion had taken place almost three weeks ago. Mundane repair crews were already working on getting the plaza, the church and the surrounding buildings back to their original state unaware that, just a few meters away and behind the newly reinforced wards, Shadowhunter crews were trying to do the same with the Institute.

Shortly after the attacks, the Silent Brothers had used concealment runes to glamor the Institutes in
Barcelona and Paris once again. With the assistance of the leaders of the London vampire packs – who helped encanto authorities and news reporters – The Clave had managed to plant credible cover stories that explained the explosions. Thankfully, mundanes always searched for rational explanations for unexplainable phenomena. So, Barcelona residents were now convinced that a leak had caused gas to build up in the old tunnels that run under the city, and that the resulting explosion had been powerful enough to blow a hole on the side of the old church behind which the Institute was hidden, damage buildings throughout the city, and release fumes that killed and injured people in a ten-block radius. The Paris explosion was attributed to a bus that lost control and blew up after crashing against an old building.

The mundanes that had been affected by the demonic energy released in the explosions had either died soon after, or had been taken to hospital where they had eventually recovered from their state of confusion and apathy. The only issue that persisted was the vampires, who were still suffering the effects of demonic poisoning. But those were being quickly dealt with. The explanations and the cover-up were so far working, but if the attacks continued, it would get harder to find new rational explanations. They had to stop whomever was bringing so much destruction on the Nephilim, thought Alec, his mood getting gloomier and gloomier by the minute.

Unaware of the ongoing crisis and after days of mourning, Barcelona was slowly coming back to normal, and Alec could hear the faint sound of music from the bars on the Rambla, signaling that night life was just about to begin. Unconsciously, he traced with his eyes the unseen route of the Rambla all the way to where the hotel he and Magnus had stayed in was located. The memory of Magnus’ hand in his and Magnus’ expression of surprise when Alec kissed him in public suddenly came back, and a confusing surge of despair, nausea and disgust replaced the dreariness. So much confusion, so many conflicting feelings and memories, so much anger and so much disgust. He didn’t have time for wallowing in self-pity, he thought. So, he pushed the dark thoughts away, stood straight and smoothed the hair that his fingers had just messed up. He was a soldier and had a mission to fulfill, that was his purpose, that was his reason in life, everything else was meaningless.

Mundanes might be able to go to sleep tonight convinced that they were not in any danger. The story for Shadowhunters was different, however, because they couldn’t hide from the threat. Looking now at the spot where a pile of rubble marked the place where one of the Institute spires used to reach up towards the sky, Alec thought that it would take a long time for Shadowhunters to get over the loss and the trauma.

For the better part of the last ten days, Alec and the Barcelona Shadowhunters had been in a relentless pursuit of the terrorists. With Berg’s unwilling assistance, and on intelligence gathered by the Clave, they had been portaling from city to city in search of the terrorists, always arriving too late, always a step behind. Since Berlin, two other Institutes in Europe had been attacked: Lisbon and Madrid, bringing the number of attacks to six. But, thanks to increased security, the loss of life had been minimal.

Tonight, it had been Zürich. They had acted on intelligence Jace had somehow gathered, and Alec had been convinced that this time they would finally capture the attackers, that they would finally put an end to this whole nightmare. And, they had almost succeeded. The team had arrived in time to set a trap and when the first portal opened and two warlocks emerged, they were waiting and ready to put an end to the threat. The two warlocks were quickly killed and the attack was averted, but they had failed to capture the leaders. Or, perhaps it had been him who had failed; perhaps he had hesitated and hadn’t done his job. Perhaps the sight of Magnus appearing through the portal had thrown him off and he had lost his concentration, perhaps he was not cured after all.

“Are you coming in? It is cold out here,” the soft voice of Jessica Hawkblue interrupted Alec’s thoughts.
Alec heard the door close and the sound of Jessica’s footsteps approaching, but he ignored her. Instead, he kept his eyes focused on a dark point in the distance trying to regain his composure. He didn’t know how to feel about this girl that seemed to always be there every time Alec turned; that insisted in bringing him water or food; that seemed to follow him when he walked along the corridors; that stared at him with a strange expression when he was training; that used every opportunity to take his hand, or touch his arm. Her overly feminine demeanor that reminded Alec of characters in Victorian novels; the way she anxiously smoothed her dress or her hair every time he looked in her direction; and her soft voice annoyed him. The gestures were so unlike the strong and fierce Shadowhunter women he had grown up with and with whom he lived, trained and went on missions. But, for some reason, he couldn’t bring himself to push Jessica away, for she was the only one who had shown him any compassion since he arrived in this place.

“Alec?” Jessica asked again and this time she placed her small hand atop his, the gesture predictable, but still upsetting.

Alec resisted the impulse to push the girl’s hand away and took another deep breath trying to quiet his thoughts and rein in his wayward emotions. He then plastered an impassive expression on his face and turned towards Jessica’s expectant eyes.

“Yes, I am coming. I must speak to Jace,” Alec replied and, removing his hand from underneath hers, walked towards the door and into the Institute. As he did, he pushed all thoughts and feelings about what had just happened in Zürich from his mind, including the memory of Magnus’ eyes coming into his frame of vision a fraction of a second after Alec released the arrow. By the time that he reached the stairs leading down to the communications room, Alec’s breathing was even, his back straight, his step certain. He had a job to do and no much time to do it. Nothing else mattered, just the job, everything else was inconsequential.

“Your hunch paid off,” Alec told Jace a few minutes later, the image of his parabatai oddly clear on the screen despite the distance that separated Barcelona from New York. “We were able to stop the attack with minimal casualties, but we couldn’t capture any of the terrorists alive, and now we have no clue where they will go next.”

“Is it true that Magnus was hit?” asked Jace, unable to conceal his concern.

“Yes, the two warlocks who were supposedly in charge of the explosion were killed as soon as they stepped out of the portal. The rest of their party arrived a couple of minutes later and we were waiting for them. Two of the warlocks were hit as they were escaping through another portal, one of them was Magnus Bane.”

Jace searched for any hint of concern or despair in Alec’s expression, but found none. His brother was as cold as he had been since the day he was released from the infirmary and he informed Jace that he would stay in Europe working on the investigation. He could see in the screen that Alec had his hand interlaced behind his back in the posture of a Shadowhunter soldier and he wondered whether the posture was his brother’s way of keeping his nerves and emotions under control. But he wasn’t sure anymore. Since the attacks, nothing about Alec was what it used to be, and Jace had a hard time reconciling this Alec, with his harsh demeanor and hard exterior, with the loyal, caring and sensitive man with whom he had grown up.

“Is he dead?” Jace asked, hesitation and fear evident in his voice. He wanted to believe that whatever was happening to Alec would soon pass and, if that was the case, his brother would never forgive himself if Magnus died.

“I don’t know, and that is not important now,” Alec replied, his voice as sharp as a knife. “We have to figure out our next move. Did you find anything else in the archives about this Annaliese Fen,
anything else that can help us?”

Jace looked down at his boots, trying to conceal his apprehension. Not only was Alec’s lack of concern for Magnus unnerving, but he was also about to lie to Alec, Alec who until their parabatai bond was weakened, could always tell when Jace was lying. This new Alec, the one who didn’t care if Magnus died; the one who gave orders that the old Alec would have never followed; the one who was not sensitive or happily in love, seemed to have lost the capacity to tell when Jace was lying. Or if he hadn’t, he didn’t care enough to try to find out the truth, as long as the lies got him the intel he wanted. Only one thing concerned this new Alec: capturing the warlocks responsible for the attacks, no matter what.

No one, not even Izzy wanted to speak with this new Alec, especially after Alec gave the order to hunt and eliminate all the vampires affected by demonic poisoning. Jace couldn’t remember Alec and Izzy ever having a more violent argument. The siblings, who until them had loved one another with unwavering loyalty, had argued loudly. Or rather, Izzy had been loud, screaming at Alec with increasing frustration while Alec simply stood his ground and remained impassive and unbending in his orders. Since then, Izzy had refused to speak to Alec, or even be in the same room when Jace spoke to their brother. Instead, Izzy was spending more and more of her time with Luke and the werewolves guarding the Hotel Du Mort, prepared, Jace thought, not only to fulfill her promise to Raphael, but also to defend the vampires if, and when The Clave ordered their destruction.

Jace looked up and into Alec’s eyes, and part of himself hoped that Alec would notice that he was lying. That would at least suggest that his loving brother was not completely gone. His eyes then drifted momentarily towards a spot behind the screen where Clary, Catarina and the warlock called Kat stood nervously looking at Jace. Pineshade stood behind the three women, a hand resting casually on Kat’s shoulder as if to support her.

“Pineshade and Clary are still searching, but progress is slow,” Jace told Alec, the words coming out quickly as if he was trying to get the lie out as fast as possible.

“Well, hurry up. Joshua Pineshade’s records are the only thing we have to go on for now,” Alec replied.

After a brisk good bye, Alec ended the communication and left Jace staring forlornly at the screen as the image of his brother faded and was replaced by The Clave’s insignia. After a moment, Jace sighted loudly and looked at Clary, and her eyes rewarded him with a familiar expression of love, trust and reassurance.

“Well, that was helpful,” said Catarina surly, her voice full of the irony that Jace had learned to expect from Magnus’ best friend.

If he hadn’t been so upset, Jace would have responded with a smart comment of his own. In the last few days, he had learned that Caterina’s ironic streak was a perfect match to his own, and that for the warlock, like it was for Jace, irony was a way to conceal her concern for her loved ones. At first sight, Catarina was not what people would call warm and fuzzy and she had little patience for non-sense, especially when it came from Shadowhunters who believed themselves a superior species. She was quick to take anyone down a few notches as some of the Shadowhunters in the Institute had already found out, but Jace had learned that she cared deeply for Magnus and for humanity in general.

“Can you tell whether Magnus is alive?” Jace asked her.

“Not for sure,” Catarina replied, her hand wrapped around the old silver charm in her hand, with which she had been trying to track Magnus. “Wherever they are, they are heavily warded.”
Catarina had brought the charm with her the day she came to the institute and finally agreed to help Jace with the investigation. That was ten days ago. Catarina had been accompanied by a quiet and petite woman with olive skin, high cheek bones, intelligent black eyes, and long black hair trapped in a tight braid that fell almost to her waist. Caterina introduced her as Kat, the warlock who had arrived from South America that morning carrying information that could be critical in figuring out the reasons behind the attacks.

Catarina told Jace that the silver charm had been portaled into her apartment a few hours before the first attacks, along with some of Magnus’ personal belonging. The charm likely arrived at the same time than Raphael received a similar delivery at the Hotel Du Mort. Since then, they had confirmed that the charm was made of a metal that had magic powers. It protected warlocks near it —and apparently also vampires — from some of the effects of the demonic powers the attackers were using. As Catarina explained, since the attacks, warlocks had begun to disappear. Many had walked through portals, going about their business as usual, and had gotten lost somewhere along the way; others had simply banished into thin air from their homes as their friends and family watched. So far, the charm seemed to protect Catarina and Kat from a similar fate. That was why, Catarina had asked Kat to fly instead of using a portal to get to New York.

Catarina’s arrival at the institute had coincided with Alec’s order to arrest her along with any warlocks currently living in New York, an order that Jace had and continued to ignore. The Clave had issued similar orders to the heads of the Institutes all over the world, and there were rumors that a detention camp was being set up along the Idris border to house the captured warlocks. It was a huge mistake, Jace thought, because it sent all warlocks, even those who had worked with Shadowhunters all along, into hiding and reignited old hatred, prejudices and animosities. The problem, thought Jace, was not all warlocks, but just some of them. The Clave needed the help of their allies if they were going to deal with this crisis once and for all. So, he had not only ignored his brother and The Clave’s order, but he had also lied about Catarina and Kat’s role in the investigation. He was sure he would be de-runed if The Clave ever found out.

Kat had proven to be an invaluable asset in the investigation and had arrived just at the right time. Clary, Pineshade and Scarcherry had spent days digging through the archives searching for any clues as to the identity of the warlock responsible for the attacks and her relationship to Magnus. The search had been, until then, futile, and Jace was growing increasingly frustrated because he couldn’t believe that, in the last two thousand years, no one Nephilim had ever come across a warlock with ruby red eyes and with a grudge against Shadowhunters.

Jeremy Pineshade found the first meaningful clue in a dairy his grandfather kept when he was the Head of the Berlin Institute during the Second World War. Jace and Clary were meeting with Catarina and Kat for the first time when Pineshade timidly knocked on the door and quietly entered the meeting room. Jace had only had a handful of chances to work with him before, but he thought the tall young Shadowhunter, with the mahogany hair and chestnut eyes, was the quiet but highly intelligent type. He had proven Jace right when he produced his grandfather’s old diary, its pages yellowed and brittle, containing the first mention of the ruby red-eyed warlock.

The entries were rather cryptic and seemed to refer to an unsanctioned mission Joshua Pineshade had been part of during the last few weeks of the Second World War in Germany. As it was common in those old dairies, most entries contained initials and acronyms instead of names –DW for Downworld, SH for Shadowhunter, MD for mundane –but one name was clearly identified: Annaliiese Fen. Furthermore, as if predicting that the information would come handy years later, Pineshade had taken the time to describe her in some detail including her ruby red eyes.

Jeremy had found only one of the dairies at that point. But one of its entries convinced Jace that the records were critical to the investigation. “I just spent the last two nights playing chess with MB
while bombs continue to rain down on the city,” wrote the old Head of the Berlin Institute. “I have rarely seen a man suffer from more guilt that my dear MB. That is why I hesitate to tell him of my apprehension. I don’t think Annaliiese Fen is dead, and if she is not, she and her companion remain a threat; it is just a matter of time.”

“I know who Annaliiese Fen is,” Kat had said, her voice quiet and serene, a characteristic that, since then, Jace had learned to recognize as Kat’s most enduring and endearing quality. “I met her hundreds of years ago when she came to my city with one of the first Spanish expeditions that made contact with the Inca. I was a young warlock then, but I remember her clearly. She wanted to learn about the methods my people used to trace the stars in the heavens and about how we developed our star charts. She spent a few years living with us in the old city of Machu Picchu. She is a dangerous warlock and will stop at nothing to achieve her goals. By the time that she finally left, many warlocks, mundanes and downworlders were dead.”

Since the day of that discovery, Kat and Jeremy had spent countless hours searching through Joshua Pineshade’s diaries and papers, as well as studying star charts and historical archives searching for records of Annaliiese Fen’s history as well as clues as to her next move. Not only was Kat an old friend of Magnus’ and a stern believer in his innocence, but she was also brilliant. She held doctorates in astronomy, history and physics and currently worked in an observatory in the Atacama Desert. Her credentials and her skills had proven invaluable. In fact, it had been Kat who a couple of nights ago had woken Jace up to tell him that she was certain that Annaliiese’s next target would be Zürich. She even predicted the date and time of the attacks.

Jace had to confess that he didn’t understand all of it, but for what he gathered, the sites of the attacks were being determined by the configuration of a constellation of stars that Kat had been studying in the star charts. As she explained, every few decades and over a period of a few weeks, a group of stars began to align in a specific configuration and frequency in the night sky. So far, that configuration and frequency corresponded with the location of the cities in which the attacks had taken place. Jace had been, at first, dubious, but Jeremy Pineshade had convincingly argued that their research was sound, and he and Kat had produced sufficient proof that Barcelona, Paris and the rest of the European targets fell within the same pattern. The only outlier was New York, and Jace now suspected that Alec and Magnus were the reason for that exception.

Listening to Jeremy and Kat argue their case, Jace had wondered whether their relationship had developed beyond a simple working arrangement. Now seeing Jeremy’s hand resting on Kat’s shoulder in an attitude of evident affection, he suspected that he was right, and that by the end of this whole mess there would be one more Shadowhunter in love with a warlock. Love conquers everything, Jace thought. But then he remembered Alec’s sharp answer when he asked if Magnus had been killed, and he wondered whether love would be able to overcome that impasse; whether love, his or Magnus’, would ever be able to reach pass the barriers behind which Alec was hiding. Jace suspected that if Magnus died, there would be no one and nothing capable of reaching Alec, that his brother would be lost forever, and he didn’t want to think about what that would be like.

Jace looked towards the ceiling, exhaled loudly once again, and run both hands through his hair in a gesture of distress, frustration and exhaustion. He then looked back to the expectant faces of the people who in the last ten days had spent countless hours working on the investigation. For what was likely the thousandth time, he thought that he wasn’t a leader, that he didn’t know what to say to these people that counted on him for guidance. He needed Alec to be here, to take on his role as their leader, to go back to being the brother, the parabatai, Jace knew and loved. Jace didn’t think he could continue dividing his attention between the investigation and whatever was going on with Alec.

“What now?” asked Catarina.
“We continue searching the records and trying to figure out the next target,” replied Clary, looking towards Jace with understanding and compassion in her eyes.

Clary was such as special person, thought Jace, and he couldn’t help smiling at her. The fact that she was not raised as a Shadowhunter meant that she had kept much of the warmth, innocence and optimism that many Shadowhunters lost early in life. Yet, she also had the determination, bravery and stubbornness that were a common characteristic among the Nephilim. He loved her precisely because of this unusual combination, and because she was unconditionally his, as he was hers.

“If I can predict in which order and frequency the stars will align next and with which cities, I can likely tell you the next target,” Kat stated.

“We will go back to the archives and the star charts then,” said Jeremy and reaching for Kat’s hand, guided her out of the situation room and towards the library.

Caterina started in the same direction but Jace stopped her with a gesture indicating that she and Clary should remain.

“We are going to bring Alec back,” he told them, having made up his mind less than a minute ago. “As soon as we know the location of the next target, we are going to portal there and we are not coming back without my parabatai. For that, I am going to need your help, Catarina.”

“Are you sure?” asked Clary apprehensively.

“Yes. Something is not right with him and I cannot keep worrying about the attacks and Alec at the same time. We are going to need Izzy’s help; can you speak to her?” Jace asked Clary.

Clary simply nodded and placing a hand on Jace’s arm, gave him a sympathetic smile. She knew him better than anyone, perhaps even better than Alec, and understood both his pain and his determination to get his brother back. In truth, she agreed that something troublesome was going on with Alec; his behavior was just too strange.

“Well, if I help, The Clave is going to know that you disobeyed their orders,” Catarina stated. “You and I and this whole investigation will be in jeopardy. So, you better be sure. And, I am not doing it unless you promise me that you will do all in your power to also bring Magnus back.”

“I promise,” said Jace, his voice full of conviction and gratefulness towards this no non-sense warlock that was willing to put herself at risk to help those who considered her an enemy.

At that precise moment, thousands of kilometers and an ocean away, Magnus was lying on a cold stone floor, an arrow lodged in his chest, blood pouring out of him in a steady stream, a pain so intense that no magic powers, specially his weaken ones, could soothe. He couldn’t breathe, he felt lightheaded, and tears run down his face. “Alexander, I am so sorry,” he whispered with the last of the air left in his lungs. “I love you, please forgive me,” he wanted to add, but there was no voice left in him. So, instead he brought his hand towards that spot on his chest where he kept all his love for the Shadowhunter that had just shot the arrow that was now slowly but surely taking his life.
The Weight of Sorrow

Chapter Summary

Alec hated himself for what he had just done; he hated himself for what he had become; he hated his hands for wishing to squeeze Jessica’s neck and for releasing that arrow that may have killed Magnus; he hated himself.

“How can it be that after twenty-four hours we still don’t know anything about the next target?” Alec asked the Shadowhunters gathered in the situation room, his voice reflecting the frustration and anger plainly visible on his face. “How are we supposed to stop the attacks if we cannot even figure out where to look?”

“We are doing all we can,” Marite Acquaclara replied sharply, battling her own irritation. “We have all available hands working on this investigation. What else do you want us to do?”

After ten days, Alec Lightwood’s unreasonable demands and high expectations were testing the limits of the Acting Head of the Barcelona Institute’s patience. He might be the Head of the New York Institute, Acquaclara thought, but that didn’t give him the right to come into her Institute and order her Shadowhunters around. Besides, he was likely the reason why they were in this mess in the first place. She had said it all along: Shadowhunters should not fraternize with the downworlders they were supposed to police and protect, and the kind of fraternizing in which Lightwood had engaged made her cringe to say the least. ‘He has no right to act all high and mighty, after what he has done,’ she thought but didn’t say.

“As I told you, Mr. Lightwood,” interjected Inquisitor Dearborn, “the secret to finding Bane is in your knowledge of him. You are the one Shadowhunter who knows him best. What do you think he will do and where do you think he will go?”

“Do you think that if I really knew him, I would be in this mess now?!” replied Alec, his voice almost a shout, his anger finally getting the best of him. A heavy silence fell over the room and a few of the Shadowhunters turned and looked anxiously in his direction.

“Calm down, Mr. Lightwood” said the Inquisitor, placing a hand on Alec’s shoulder in a gesture of apparent concern but that Alec thought was utterly insincere. “Remember that you are not yet fully recovered; you must stay calm.”

“Do not touch me,” snapped Alec and pushing the Inquisitor’s hand away, shove past him and out of the room, his hand fisted at his sides and his back straight.

Dearborn stared after him for a moment, concern evident on his face. Alec had been highly agitated since the events in Zürich, and the Inquisitor questioned whether he had made an error in judgement when he thought Alec was ready to be released from the infirmary, whether in his haste to get Alec out in the field, he had jumped through the stages of his treatment too quickly.

The Inquisitor turned towards his niece who, as he had instructed, had been quietly standing where he knew Alec would see her. “Go after him, Jessica,” he quietly instructed. “This is taking too long and we must finish his treatment. You know what to do,” he added, giving her a knowing look.
“Yes uncle,” the young woman replied, running a hand through her long hair and then, with the same hand, smoothing her emerald green dress in a nervous gesture that Dearborn knew all too well. She then walked down the same hallway through which Alec had just disappeared.

Dearborn rubbed his hands together in a gesture of preoccupation, anxiety and anticipation. He was still confident that the treatment would work, but he should document in his file notes that time was a critical factor for success. It was now up to Jessica to move things to the last stage, and Dearborn worried that his niece might not be up to the task, or that Alec was not yet ready. For the treatment to work, it was imperative that the patient be offered an alternative, a replacement, to the abnormal object of desire, and all along, the Inquisitor had planned for Jessica to be that replacement. The match would surely be advantageous, Dearborn thought, and would certainly improve his standing in Nephilim society. The Lightwoods were an old and highly respected Shadowhunter family, despite that unfortunate episode with The Circle. That is why, he had exposed Alec to Jessica’s presence from the beginning, hoping that she would build the necessary rapport with him. Now, there was not time to waste and if the treatment was going to work, Dearborn needed to rush things along. Otherwise, the alternative was to begin the treatment all over again, and that might prove difficult considering that Alec had regained much of his physical strength and Dearborn doubted he would submit willingly.

Alec was in his room, pacing back and forth, his hands in tight fists, his temper like volcano ready to erupt with enough force to set everything around him on fire. He felt his head was about to explode, unable to contain any longer all the thoughts that crowded his mind. His was so exhausted and he longed for a few minutes of silence; for just a few minutes of rest, of thoughtlessness, of sleep. In the last three weeks, he had hardly rested, and on those occasions when his eyes closed and the exhaustion finally defeated him, his sleep was restless and full of confusing and unsettling dreams. He didn’t think he could continue going on at this pace for much longer, and not even the energy and stamina runes were working any more. They had to find out soon what the next target was, or, when the time came, he would be too exhausted to do his job.

Someone knocked faintly on his door, and before Alec could tell whomever it was to go away, Jessica let herself in.

“How are you?” she asked as she approached him, her voice annoyingly gentle.

“I am fine but I would like to be alone for a while.”

“You are upset,” she stated, an odd mixture of condescension, affection and something else he couldn’t quite identify in her expression. Ignoring his request, she stepped closer, and reaching for him, ran a hand down his arm in a suggestive gesture that made Alec’s stomach tighten and his jaw lock. “Let me help you.”

“No, Jessica. I need to be alone. Please,” Alec pleaded, and took a step backward putting further distance between him and the girl who refused to leave.

Jessica took another step in his direction, and tried to touch him again, and Alec felt something break inside him, like an elastic band that reaches its breaking point and snaps in two, each end recoiling with the violence of a whip. All the fury that he had been accumulating since the attacks finally broke free. He didn’t know how or why, but one moment he was trying to get away from this girl whose touch he didn’t want, and the next he had grabbed her by the waist and had pushed her against the wall, pinning her with his body, one hand wrapped tightly around her slim neck.

“Why are you here? What do you want from me?” Alec asked, his mouth very close to her ear, his tone deadly serious, his voice carrying a rage like no other he had ever felt, a rage that blinded him.
“I wa-wa-want to help you,” Jessica replied; her voice shaking and no louder than a whisper; her terrified eyes staring wildly at Alec; her breathing rapid and shallow.

Alec could feel her racing pulse beating against the hand he had wrapped around her neck, and for a split second, he thought that if he tightened his fingers just a bit, he could, with little effort, extinguish the life out of this annoying girl. The feeling of power made him dizzy, and he felt pins and needles in his arms and legs, as if every nerve ending in his extremities had suddenly come alive. He had never experienced such a rush before, and the sensation confused and startled him.

‘What are you doing Alexander?’ a voice echoed in the back of his mind, stopping him cold in his tracks. ‘This isn’t you; you are not this person.’

Despite his soldier training and his combat experience, Alec had never thought he was capable of unprovoked violence, especially against someone who was smaller, weaker and unarmed. Every time he had had to fight anyone, or anything, it had been in battle, but deep down, Alec had always considered himself peaceful by nature. Now he wanted to hurt and cause pain to this girl, perhaps even killed her, and the thought made him sick to his stomach. It was as if his body had been taken over by someone else, someone who invaded his thoughts with dark ideas, and made him act in ways that betrayed his true nature.

“Is this what your uncle wants from me?” he asked, his fingers tightening just a bit more around the girls’ neck. His voice, low and unusually deep, sounded foreign to his ears and contained an anger and despair that he had never heard in it before. “Is this what he wants for you?”

“I am carrying out my duty,” Jessica replied, her face as white as paper, her eyes wide with fear, her heartbeat pulsating against Alec’s fingers.

Alec felt as if a stone that had been wedged in the center of his chest finally come loose and, as it dislodged, it took with it the fury from a moment ago, leaving just shame and disgust in its place. He looked at Jessica Hawkblue and saw her for the first time as she truly was: a young, lost and weak girl that thought that only blind obedience would make her a good niece and a good Nephilim. He released the breath that had been caught in his throat, and as he exhaled, he let go of Jessica and stepped away.

“No, this isn’t duty,” he said as he run a shaking hand through his hair. “There is no honor in any of this. Please leave.”

Jessica brought a hand up to her neck and rubbed the spot that Alec’s hand had just squeezed and took a tentative breath as if unsure whether her lungs would work. She then looked down, her face full of shame and defeat, and taking a step away from the wall, turned and left the room. Alec closed the door as soon as she walked through it and locked it. He then leaned and rested his forehead against it, and run both hands along the sides of his head, pressing forcefully as if to squeeze out all the dark thoughts currently filling his mind.

Alec hated himself for what he had just done; he hated himself for what he had become; he hated his hands for wishing to squeeze Jessica’s neck and for releasing that arrow that may have killed Magnus; he hated himself.

A sudden attack of revulsion and nausea overcame him, squeezing his stomach and forcing him to bend over, vile filling his mouth. He run to the bathroom, and barely made it before he began to throw up, his stomach constricting, twisting and tightening uncontrollably. He continued heaving even after nothing but vile was left in his stomach; even after he felt that he had expelled his own soul through his mouth and that he had been turned inside out. By the time the heaving subsided, he felt completely empty and his whole body shook uncontrollably.
He stood up carefully, his legs shaking under the weight of his body, his whole skin covered in sweat. With tentative movements, Alec removed his clothes and stepped into the shower, turning on the water as hot as he could stand it. He began to scrub his skin furiously, trying to wash away the disgust, filth and self-loathing that threatened to overwhelm him. He stayed under the water for a long time, until finally, the dam that had been containing all his grief broke and, falling to his knees, Alec began to cry in deep and ragged sobs that carried all the despair that, since the attacks, had been building up in his chest. He cried for a long time, all his grief pouring out of him like a cascade that, for a while, Alec felt would never end, but that eventually run its course and left him too exhausted to cry anymore.

Eventually, Alec dragged himself out of the shower, and after drying his raw skin, he slowly walked into the bedroom. He stood in the middle of the room, too exhausted to get into bed, too upset to get dressed and head out. He felt abandoned, lost, orphaned, empty. He felt broken like a boat repeatedly thrown against the rocks by merciless waves.

His eyes aimlessly wandered around the room, looking for any clues that could point him in the right direction, or in any direction at all. After a moment, his eyes rested on a pile of clothes on top of the dresser by the bed. He recognized the clothes he was wearing the morning of the attacks, his shirt still dusty and dirty, his pants stained with what appeared to be blood. He walked towards the dresser and, as if by instinct, searched in the pockets of his pants for the note and the necklace Magnus left behind and that Alec had shoved in his pocket as he walked out of their room that terrible morning.

The note still contained the same four words that had sent his whole world crushing down – *It is not enough*. The words echoed in his mind yet they felt foreign, as if they were intended for someone else, or as if they had been written in a different time and a different place. He wrapped his hand around the old silver arrowhead that Magnus had worn around his neck for as long as Alec had known him. The metal felt unusually warm in his hand, as if it was radiating energy of its own.

Alec sat on the bed, the necklace and the note nestled in his hands, and, once again, his eyes filled with tears, clouding his vision and falling down his face and onto the words on the page. The terrible realization that Magnus might be dead, that he might have killed him, suddenly felt as heavy as a boulder on his shoulders. He might never know why Magnus wrote those words; why just those words and nothing else; why the rejection; and if he never knew, it would be his own fault, for he had released the arrow that took Magnus’ life.

After a while, exhaustion finally prevailed, and Alec curled into bed in a fetal position, his knees bent towards his chest, both his hands cradling Magnus’ necklace, and resting near his heart. He would not remember later when he finally fell into a deep dreamless slumber, the most restful and profound sleep he got in almost three weeks.

Hours later, the sound of doves cooing outside his window finally woke Alec, their cooing reminding him of the sad lament of mourners. It took him a moment to get his bearings, and remember where he was. His eyes felt like they were full of sand, and the muscles of his stomach ached from the vomiting of the previous night. Otherwise, his mind was clearer than it had been in days, and he felt that for the first time in a long while, he could breathe without feeling that his lungs were half-filled with lead.

After a few minutes of looking up towards the ceiling, his mind devoid of all thought, Alec got up and headed into the bathroom where he brushed his teeth and washed his face. He looked at his reflection in the mirror and was not surprised to see that his face appeared older than it had been just a few weeks ago. So much had happened, after all, so much had been lost. Before turning away, he forced his face to adopt the stern expression that was expected of him, the expression of a
soldier with an unescapable mission. He willed the expression to become a permanent feature, a second skin, a mask behind which he would hide his sorrow.

Back in his bedroom, Alec put on black jeans and then, without thinking, he reached for Magnus’ necklace and hanged it around his own neck, the metal warm and comforting against his skin. He had never been one to wear jewelry, but the arrowhead didn’t feel like jewelry. It felt like penitence, like a reminder of his sins and of the mission he must fulfill even if it was the last thing he ever did.

He then searched in the dresser for a shirt and realized that there was no much there except for a black t-shirt. That, and the white shirt he had worn for the ritual of mourning ten days ago when the Shadowhunters killed in Barcelona, Paris and New York were finally put to rest. With his fingers, Alec lightly traced the runes of grief and sorrow that were stitched along the cuffs and the collar. He then put the shirt on and buttoned up, making sure that Magnus’ necklace was safely hidden underneath it. The garment was appropriate, he thought. After all, he was in mourning, grieving for the death of the young man he had once been but was no more; for the dreams that would never come true; for the pieces of his soul that he was leaving behind, scattered like leaves that fall from a dead tree.

Where to go from here? How to live without a soul? Alec silently asked, as he donned on his Shadowhunter jacket and walked out of the room, ready for another day of battle.

“I think we may have something,” Jace told Alec a few minutes later.

Looking at his brother’s ashen face and red eyes on the screen, Alec wondered when was the last time that Jace had slept, and why he hadn’t noticed Jace’s exhaustion before. He was, after all, his parabatai, and it was his job to take care of him. Jace had always been reckless, pushing himself beyond his own strength, and it was always Alec the one that had to remind him that he was not a machine, that he needed rest, that it was okay to have feelings. He also faintly remembered his argument with Izzy a few days ago, and realized that he had not talked or seen his sister since then. This whole mess was taking a toll on everyone and Alec wondered if, when all was said and done, there would be enough life left in him to repair all the damage.

“What do you have?” Alec asked, pushing his concern for his siblings aside and turning his attention to the matter at hand.

“We may have the location of the next attack. I am waiting for confirmation but we think it will be in Rome in no more than two days from now. I also think that we should not discount Zürich just yet. You stopped the attack but Annaliese Fen may try again.”

“What makes you say that?”

“At this point, call it an informed guess,” replied Jace. “These cities are being hit for a reason, and I think Fen may need Zürich for her plan, whatever it is, to work. Do you know what the Institute did with the bodies of the warlocks that died there?”

“I don’t know, but I can ask,” said Alec and turning to one of the Shadowhunters in the room, instructed him to get in touch with the Zürich Institute and request an update on their investigation.

“I think we should examine those bodies,” Jace suggested; “have someone do an autopsy, look for any signs of demonic possession or magic still active. And, they should also keep them in a secured place for now, until we are sure that they present no danger.”

“Alright, but are you going to tell me where this hunch is coming from and how accurate it is?”
asked Alec.

“I am not sure yet. For now, it is just a feeling, but I will let you know as soon as I know more,” Jace replied, and Alec wondered whether there was more in Jace’s expression that what his words contained.

“You should get some sleep, Jace,” Alec told his brother after they had talked strategy for a few minutes. “You look like hell.”

Jace didn’t say anything. Instead, he gave Alec one of his ironic smiles that communicated more than any words could ever say.

Alec stared at the screen for a few moments after their call ended, his mind working, processing all the information currently available, trying to order the clues into some pattern that could point to a course of action. So far, Jace’s intel, however he was procuring it, had proven more helpful than anything The Clave had provided, and Alec thought he would be a fool if he ignored it now. Besides, Jace’s argument had its logic: there was a reason behind the madness of these attacks, and even if they didn’t know what it was yet, they should not ignore the connections. He would request an autopsy of the bodies in Zürich, hoping that they would contain some clue as to what was behind these terrible acts of violence.

He looked around the room and realized that it was unusually quiet. It was early in the morning and the situation room was relatively deserted. Neither Dearborn, nor Jessica were anywhere to be seen, and Alec briefly wondered where the girl was and what she had reported to her uncle. But he quickly pushed the concern away. No matter what Dearborn said, he was cured of whatever the Inquisitor thought he had, and he didn’t need him to tell him that he had a job to do.
Awakening

Chapter Summary

At that moment, Alec was the sun and the moon to Magnus; the breath in his lungs and the light in his eyes; the earth on which his feet rested and the breeze that kissed his face. Everything was Alec and nothing made sense without him. Alec here, his scent in Magnus’s nostrils, the feel of his soft skin in Magnus’ fingertips, Alec, always Alec, and nothing but Alec.

“Wake up warlock,” spoke a soft and deep voice in Magnus’ ear, but Magnus didn’t want to wake up. He was too tired and he was having the most wonderful dream, a dream of a windless night laying on a warm blanket, under a dark sky studded with the brightest of stars; the call of crickets the only sound around him. Magnus knew that sky; he and his mother used to spend nights looking up at those stars when he was little and not yet a warlock; when he was not yet the son of a demon and a woman who couldn’t love him.

“Come on, Magnus, open your eyes,” the familiar voice beckoned once again. Magnus felt a soft hand brushing a lock of hair away from his forehead, the gesture so intimate and familiar, the feel of the hand so comforting that he couldn’t help walking away from the dream, from the warm blanket and from the dark sky of his childhood.

An “aahahh” sound escaped from deep inside him as his lungs expelled the last of the sleepy air out, and he reluctantly opened his eyes, light hitting their pupils and momentarily blinding him.

“There you are,” said the voice, Alexander’s voice, deep, youthful and, oh, so sexy. As Magnus’ eyes adjusted to the light, Alec’s face came into focus, first as a silhouette against a bright background, and then as the face of an angel, the sunlight from the window shining on his black hair creating an aura around his lovely head. The aura competed with the light shining in Alec’s beautiful brown eyes. Alec rewarded him with one of his broad and bright smiles; one of those smiles that Magnus thought could stop traffic, and perhaps even war.

“It’s time to get up, you can’t sleep all day, you have things to do,” Alec said and then his gaze drifted from Magnus’ eyes and down to his lips, in that way that always stirred the butterflies in the pit of Magnus’ stomach and filled him with delicious anticipation. Alec’s eyes rested on Magnus’ lips for a second before he closed the distance between his mouth and Magnus’, the kiss gentle but also full of passion.

Magnus inhaled the familiar scent of Alec, a mixture of soap, lemon and something else he couldn’t quite describe. He wanted the kiss to never end; he wanted to remain in this room, in this bed forever, to spend eternity exploring Alec slowly and thoroughly. Magnus entangled the fingers of one hand in Alec’s silky hair, while with his other hand, he traced the curbs and planes of Alec’s back, starting between his shoulder blades and making his way down, pulling Alec closer, wanting to make the distance between their bodies disappear. At that moment, Alec was the sun and the moon to Magnus; the breath in his lungs and the light in his eyes; the earth on which his feet rested and the breeze that kissed his face. Everything was Alec and nothing made sense without him. Alec here, his scent in Magnus’s nostrils, the feel of his soft skin in Magnus’ fingertips, Alec, always Alec, and nothing but Alec.
“I have missed you so much,” Magnus wanted to say, but his lips were busy. Instead, he let his fingers, hands and body say it for him.

“You have to get up Magnus,” Alec whispered taking a break from the kiss. “You still have a lot to do.”

“I don’t want to,” replied Magnus, sounding like a stubborn child, his mouth seeking Alec’s lips once again. “Can we not stay here forever?”

“Oh, warlock, but you see, I am not here. I am out there and I need your help.”

The words sounded strange to Magnus and a feeling of confusion and then panic settled in the pit of his stomach. He wanted to ask Alec what he meant, but at that instant, he felt a force, like a gigantic hand, lifting and then suddenly dropping him as if from a cliff, the sensation of vertigo increasing the panic. A moment later, Magnus stood by a window in his penthouse looking out towards the New York skyline. He heard footsteps approaching but before he could turn, Alec’s arms were wrapped around his waist, and he felt a gentle kiss on the side of his neck, and Alec’s steady breathing near his ear.

“Hi,” Magnus said, his body instinctually leaning against Alec’s strong and steady frame, the sensation of Alec’s body familiar and comforting. “How did you get here?”

“Hi,” Magnus said, his body instinctually leaning against Alec’s strong and steady frame, the sensation of Alec’s body familiar and comforting. “How did you get here?”

“I have always been here,” Alec replied. “I never left. But, Magnus, it is you who has to go.”

“Go where?” Magnus asked, renewed apprehension washing over him.

“Out there. You still have a lot of work to do and I need you to do it,” Alec said, his voice gentle but firm.

As he turned, Magnus felt Alec’s steady gaze on him, and the comforting feel of Alec’s strong arms sheltering him.

“I don’t want to go; I like it here with you,” he protested.

“But I am not here,” Alec said again. “I am out there and I need you. Your job is not done yet.”

As if someone had turned up the volume on a radio, Magnus heard other voices growing louder, interrupting this lovely moment; anxious voices saying things that Magnus couldn’t quite make out. He was afraid of those voices, those voices that beckoned him to leave this place, to leave the comforting home of Alec’s arms.

“Don’t make me go,” he told Alec. “I cannot live without you.”

“It will be okay, Magnus,” Alec replied, his voice full of love and encouragement, his expression gentle and warm. Alec unwrapped his arms from around Magnus’ waist, leaving him feeling cold and, oh, so alone. As Alec stepped back, he began to fade, becoming translucent as if the light from the window was erasing him.

“Don’t go yet, I have something to tell you,” said Magnus, urgency in his voice. “I have to tell you what I found out…I have to tell you how…” But Alec was gone, his silhouette swallowed up by the light from the window that now seemed to be overtaking everything, blinding Magnus, returning him to a reality of pain and suffering, a reality without Alec.

“I am telling you, we have to remove the manacles,” said a deep masculine voice. “Or they will continue draining his powers and he won’t be able to heal himself.”
“But we need his magic, Khuno,” retorted another voice, the deceptively soft voice of a girl that would never grow to be a woman. “We need all the power we can harness if we are going to succeed. It is taking more magic than we anticipated to open the rift, and Magnus is one of the most powerful warlocks we have.”

“Yes, but there won’t be any power to harness if he is dead,” the other voice replied, Khuno’s voice, Magnus realized, as his mind finally took hold of reality. He kept his eyes close, not because he didn’t want Khuno to know that he was conscious, but because he was too tired and it felt like his eyelids were made of concrete.

“What happened?” asked the other voice, the voice belonging to Annaliese.

“I had no choice,” replied Khuno. “The Shadowhunter had already killed Harjeet and he was about to kill me too. I couldn’t defend myself because I had to keep the portal open. I had to use Magnus as a shield.”

If Annaliese said anything, Magnus couldn’t hear it. However, he did feel a hand fumbling and then removing something from his wrists. Suddenly, as if a faucet that had been closed was abruptly opened, Magnus felt his magic flowing from the center of his chest, through his veins and towards the surface of his skin, and then extending into the earth like growing roots in search of water. The tendrils of his magic searched in the earth for the energy he needed to heal his wound. Before his mind sunk back into unconsciousness once again, Magnus inhaled, the air feeling like sharp needles as it made its way into his lungs, but at least he could breath for the first time in what felt like an eternity. With his last conscious thought, Magnus willed himself to go back to his dream, back to the warm blanket and the starry night of his childhood, when he wasn’t yet an immortal, when he didn’t yet carry the weight of his mistakes.

Magnus finally opened his eyes many hours later, and, for a moment, he felt disoriented and lost. He was lying on a soft bed covered with white sheets, in a room illuminated only by the faint glow of a lamp on the night table. The white curtains on the window billowed in the cool and gentle breeze produced by a fan quietly turning on the ceiling. A blast of images rushed back to Magnus’ mind all at once: Alec pointing his bow directly at Khuno’s chest and then releasing the arrow; Khuno’s magic powers abruptly pulling Magnus towards him and into the arrow’s path; the startled expression in Alec’s lovely brown eyes, as he realized the change in the target. Then, the indescrivable pain as the arrow broke through skin, muscle and bone, and pierced his lung, knocking the air out of him. The sensation of being dragged through a portal and landing on a cold stone floor, like a rag doll, powerless and unable to muster the magic needed to conjure the arrow out of his chest, stop the bleeding and close the wound. The feeling of gasping for air just before the world went black.

Instinctually, Magnus brought his hand to the spot on the right side of his chest, where the arrow had pierced his lung, and determined that, while he was sore, he was able to breath without feeling the stabbing sensation he had felt earlier. Something else was different: he no longer felt his powers being drained like he had felt since Khuno put those enchanted manacles on his wrists that first night in Barcelona. Even though Magnus had depleted a lot of his magic healing himself, at least for now, he didn’t feel the sensation of his powers being steadily suctioned out through the manacles in his wrists. He doubted though that he would be free for long.

“The boy must mean a lot to you, considering how much energy you have spent keeping him safe from me,” a voice coming from a corner of the room interrupted Magnus’ thoughts. “How are you doing it?”

The voice was soft and musical like the voice of a child, and Magnus remembered that once that
voice had made him think of butterflies fluttering their wings. He turned his head towards the source of the voice and all he could see were a pair of iridescent red eyes looking at him from the dark corner. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the low illumination and then he saw the small youthful figure of Annaliese Fen sitting on an armchair, her legs folded under her, her black hair falling in curls past her shoulders. Her face and posture, and the simple black t-shirt and yoga pants she wore made Magnus think of a teenager sitting in her room, thinking of boys or her favorite band. The image contrasted sharply with what he knew of this warlock, her plans and the workings of her mind. Not for the first time, Magnus thought that this was likely Annaliese’s most enduring quality: her capacity to appear so incredibly harmless even as she was bringing destruction down on everything around her.

“Tell me Magnus, what kind of magic are you using to protect the Shadowhunter boy?” Annaliese asked again.

“I don’t know what you mean?” Magnus replied, imbuing his hoarse voice with a tone of innocence that he hoped sounded sincere. “Since you put those manacles on me, I have been unable to muster even the energy needed to do my hair, which is not fair; you know how much I like my hair looking fabulous.”

“Don’t toy with me, Magnus,” said Annaliese, the words contrasting with the gentle tone in her voice. “I am very disappointed that you would choose a Shadowhunter over your own people, especially knowing what his people did to me.”

Magnus thought that it was unfortunate that Annaliese stopped aging when she was still so young. Not only she never got to realize the full potential of her magic powers, and she had to walk through the world being eternally looked upon as a vulnerable child. But also, her youth deceived people into thinking that she was not dangerous. It had been her youth, and her apparent innocence and weakness that, over two centuries ago, had fed Governor Valckenier’s hunger for power and cruelty and had deceived him into committing the most terrible of crimes. By the time Valckenier realized the poison Annaliese had been feeding him in her soft words, it was too late and he was condemned to go down in history as the one responsible for the massacre of thousands of people in his charge as well as the fires that practically destroyed Batavia.

That deceiving innocence had once worked its magic on Magnus too. And, by the time the veil with which Annaliese had covered his eyes fell, it was too late and he was already too entangled in Annaliese’s web. He too was made to share in the responsibility for the destruction she left in her wake. For a moment, the image of the body of a small boy lying on the mud centuries ago came back into Magnus’ mind; a boy looking with lifeless eyes at Magnus, his face still bearing the half-healed mark left by the tortoiseshell sticks of Governor Valckenier’s fan; the boy Magnus saved only so he could die months later in a senseless massacre that Magnus had been too blind to predict or stop.

Magnus also suspected that it had been Annaliese’s apparent innocence that had persuaded the Shadowhunters to take her in when, as a newborn, she was abandoned on the doorsteps of the Belgium Institute in the late 1400s. Surprised later to discover that the girl was a warlock, the ancestors of the Nephilim saw an opportunity to study how her magic worked, not caring how much pain they inflicted on the child, and not anticipating that their cruelty would unleash a hatred and destruction that Annaliese would carry through the centuries.

“That was centuries ago, Annaliese,” Magnus replied. “Didn’t anyone tell you that it is not good for immortals to hold grudges for so long.”

“To me, it was yesterday,” she spouted, her voice full of rage, hatred and resentment. “You know
what they did to me; you know how much they hurt me; how those people, who I thought loved me like parents are supposed to love their children, tried to destroy me. How can you now go and get involved with one of them?”

Magnus sighted, and part of him felt sorry for Annaliese, for the young and innocent child she had once been; a child who until her powers manifested had felt loved by the Shadowhunters who sheltered her. Those same Shadowhunters who then turned on her and used her as a Guinea pig in their experiments. He sympathized; for he too had experienced what it is like to be loved one day and feared the next; he too had experienced rejection, first from his own mother, and later from mundanes and Shadowhunters.

“Those Shadowhunters died a long time ago, Annaliese,” replied Magnus, his tone conciliatory even though he knew his attempt to reason with her would be futile. “The world has changed since then.”

“Has it?” asked Annaliese, an ironic smile lifting the corners of her mouth. “Do the Nephilim accept your relationship with their golden boy? Didn’t Valentine try to eliminate the whole Downworld just weeks ago? Don’t be naïve Magnus. Given the chance, the Nephilim would destroy us. That is, if we don’t destroy them first. But once again, you have shown your true allegiances, like you did in Berlin.”

Annaliese stood and, approaching the bed, sat beside Magnus. Picking up the manacles that had been sitting on the night table, she proceeded to put them back on Magnus’ wrists. Instantly, Magnus felt the effect of their enchantment, as if a pair of iron balls had been tied to his hands, balls that made her arms feel heavy, and his body weak.

“Tell me Magnus, how are you protecting the Shadowhunter boy? What kind of magic are you using to conceal him from me?” Annaliese asked for the third time, the soft and apparently inoffensive tone back in her voice.

“I am not doing anything. He is protecting himself.”

“No matter, whatever it is, it will not work for long. Soon, I will open the doorway to the underworld and Mother will come back to us. No power, Nephilim or otherwise, will be strong enough to resist her.”

“I don’t have any interest in being there for Lilith’ return, so you may as well either let me go or kill me,” said Magnus, his voice steady. “I don’t see what you need me for.”

“Oh Magnus,” Annaliese said, placing a hand against Magnus’ cheek. “Don’t you see? You have always been part of the plan, mine and Khuno’s. The three of us were always good together. You may have tried to destroy us in Berlin –and let me tell you that you almost succeeded –but we never gave up on you. Mother loves you like she loves all her children.”

“If that is so, why is she letting you kill so many warlocks in your attempt to bring her back?”

“Those are necessary sacrifices,” replied Annaliese, her voice full of righteousness. “Those warlocks are martyrs in a struggle to build a world that will belong only to us.”

“We are part human, Annaliese,” Magnus said, reaching for her hand, trying, unsure why, to reason with her. “We share this world with mundanes, downworlders and Nephilim; we cannot destroy them.”

“But they can destroy us,” Annaliese retorted brusquely taking her hand away. “You helped them.
You almost destroyed me in Berlin. Your hurt me badly, Magnus, in more ways than one.”

Magnus looked into Annaliese’s eyes, searching for some remnant of the humanity that he knew had been there once. Instead, Annaliese dropped a heavy glamor that, until that moment, he didn’t know was there, and allowed him a glance of her horribly scarred face. Magnus inhaled sharply, surprised to see that part of her face and half of her hair were gone, replaced with scar tissue that was almost black and that resembled lava that had cooled on her face and skull.

“You did this to me, Magnus,” she said, tears in her eyes. “This is what you and your Shadowhunter friend did in Berlin. Didn’t you know that magic cannot heal burns from demonic fire? But no matter,” she added donning on the glamor once again, smooth skin and long black curls disguising the scars. “Soon, Mother will heal me once and for all, and I will finally have my vengeance. In fact, I am already getting revenge for what you did, Magnus. I may not be able to get to your Shadowhunter boy yet, but I am making darn sure that he knows that you are with us. When he dies –and believe me, he will die –he will do so knowing that you were part of the group that killed him. He will never forgive you and you will go on knowing that he died hating you.”

Annaliese stood up and after gazing at Magnus for an instant, her eyes full of determination, she left the room. “Get some rest,” she said just before she opened the door and left. “I need you to recover your strength for our next mission.”

Once he was alone, Magnus laid his head back on the pillow, the sensation of the manacles draining his magic powers causing him to feel dizzy and weak, a headache settling in his temples. What now? He asked himself, as he closed his eyes and tried to push the image of Annaliese’s horribly scarred face from his mind. He had to gather his wits and think about his next move.

He made a quick inventory of what he had learned so far. The most important was that the attacks were not random. In fact, they followed a pattern that Annaliese and the warlocks in her close circle were following in star charts and old documents that they spent hours studying. Annaliese and Khuno had also installed a small, but sophisticated telescope on the roof of the Tuscan Village that served as their headquarters. Khuno had taken Magnus there a few nights ago to show him how clearly the rings of Saturn looked through the eyepiece. Annaliese was using the stars to determine her targets and Rome would be next.

Annaliese and Khuno were trying to open a doorway into the underworld to summon Lilith, the mother of all demons, into this realm. Magnus wondered whether Annaliese was already somehow communicating with Lilith, whether Lilith was helping by weakening the border between realms at each point in which the attacks had taken place. Magnus had seen the holes in the ground that the explosions left behind, holes that remained incandescent and that continued to release demonic fumes days after the explosions.

He didn’t yet know why Annaliese was targeting more than one city. In Berlin during the Second World War, she had focused her attention only in one place, why was she targeting more than one now?

Magnus knew that the attacks required considerable magic energy; energy that Annaliese was harnessing from other warlocks by using manacles like the ones she had put on him. The manacles appeared, at first sight, quite harmless, not more than metal bracelets with strange runes and designs engraved in them, but their power was considerable.

For the first few days after Barcelona, Magnus had thought that the manacles were meant to restrain him, stop him from trying to escape, and possibly block any attempt to track him. However, since they arrived in Tuscany, he had learned that the manacles were designed to harness his powers. Wearing them felt like carrying heavy weights on his wrists, weights that got heavier
and heavier the more power Annaliese took from him. He also learned that he was not the only one who was made to wear the manacles. Most of the warlocks who unwillingly arrived in the house received the same treatment, their magic mined and used to increase the power needed for the explosions. The drainage had devastating consequences for the warlocks forced to relinquish their powers.

In addition to the two warlocks that sacrificed themselves in each attack, the power of at least three other warlocks were needed to increase the force of the explosions. In the last two attacks, those warlocks whose powers were harvested died, their power completely depleted until not an ounce of it was left, not even enough to draw breath. Those warlocks had died gasping for air, and the manacles had continued draining their power even after death, until nothing was left but dried skin and bone, and the terrified expressions of eyes looking upon the face of death. If he was going to stop Annaliese’s plans, he had to figure out how to weaken her, how to disrupt the flow of magic and the drainage of warlock power.

Finally, Magnus knew that the demonic energy released in the explosions was affecting the vampires and would possibly eventually affect the werewolves too. He had seen it in Berlin the last time Annaliese had tried to summon Lilith, and Annaliese had used that side effect to increase the impact of the destruction. Unable to control themselves, vampires poisoned with demonic energy had gone into an uncontainable feeding frenzy that had resulted in countless deaths. Some vampires had fed to death, unable to stop until they died from too much blood. Back then, the war had provided the perfect disguise for the mundane and vampire deaths. There was no human war on now and Magnus feared that if Annaliese achieved her plan, that would not matter; mundanes, the Nephilim, and eventually even downworlders, would be at her mercy.

Suddenly, Magnus felt a tug in that spot above his heart where he kept his most treasured memory of Alec, and he instinctually lifted his hand and rested it there. His heart skipped a couple of beats, and then picked up speed as if it was answering a call that his ears couldn’t hear; as if Alec, wherever he was, was calling to him. Alec was safe, Magnus thought, and out of Annaliese’s reach; it was imperative that this remained the case. Annaliese already knew that Alec was Magnus’ Achilles’ heel and if she captured him, he would use him to force Magnus to obey her. Thus, Alec had to remain as far away from Magnus as possible. Thankfully, Annaliese hadn’t yet realized the reason why she couldn’t track Alec. With any luck, she would never learn that Magnus had left him a powerful source of protection.

He turned on the bed and lied on his side and he conjured up the memory of Alec spooning with him, his long arms wrapped around Magnus sheltering and warming him. After a few minutes, he began to drift to sleep, the memory of Alec’s angelic face and beautiful smile the only thought in his mind. At that moment, hundreds of kilometers away, in the situation room of the Barcelona Institute, Alec felt the warmth emanating from the arrowhead hanging around his neck increase slightly, the sensation strangely comforting.
After what felt like an eternity, but that was likely no more than a few seconds, Alec looked away, turned and without a word, left the room, his steps steady and fast. Magnus stared after him, as someone stares at the sun as it sets and sends the world into darkness, and he felt suddenly cold, empty and old, older than his three hundred years.

No one would have ever suspected that the Shadowhunter Institute in Rome was located near one of the most visited tourist and religious sites in the world, behind the left semicircular colonnade that bordered Saint Peter’s Square and just outside the wall that surrounded Vatican City. The Institute was wedged between two buildings and it faced a small plaza and a park in which people congregated for picnics on their days off, or to play tennis in one of its courts. Even without protective wards, the building would have still gone unnoticed, its architecture inconspicuous among the imposing designs of Saint Peter’s Basilica and the historical and religious character of the surrounding buildings. The Rome Institute was likely one of the smallest of The Clave outposts and it kept just a skeleton crew, of no more than three or four Shadowhunters.

Kat thought that the plaza in front the institute was the likeliest place for the next attack, and she told Jace as much when the team congregated in the situation room of the New York Institute two days after the Zürich incident. “All other attacks have taken place in open spaces near the buildings’ entrances” she argued, her tone as usual quiet and unimposing, yet still carrying the authority of careful thoughtfulness. “Trust me, the plaza is the place. The other streets surrounding the Institute are too narrow,” she added pointing to the satellite image of Rome displayed on the screen. “And the attack will be tonight,” she concluded, consulting once again the star chart on her tablet.

“Okay then,” said Jace. “I will send confirmation to Alec that his team should set their ambush on the plaza near the Institute’s entrance. In the meantime, we have to decide on our plan of attack.”

“Are you going to tell Alec that we are coming?” asked Izzy, who at that moment was arriving from another night of guard duty at the Hotel Du Mort, her face drawn and her eyes betraying the effects of several nights with little sleep.

“No, something tells me that any information we share with Alec is monitored, and I don’t want to alert the Inquisitor or The Clave of our plan to bring Alec back.”

“Kat and I are both coming; you are going to need two warlocks on this mission,” stated Catarina. “We don’t know what we will run into and you don’t want to be stuck over there with no escape. Besides, Kat needs to see the site of the explosion and at least part of the ritual the warlocks are performing to figure out how to stop it.”

Jace, who had already tried to dissuade Catarina from coming with them, nodded. It was a simple formality because, in the time that he had been working with the warlock, he had learned that she never took no for an answer once she set her mind to something. The apparently ethereal look of her blue skin and white hair, and her colorful outfits, concealed an iron will and a stubbornness equal only to his own.
“Alright,” Jace said, standing up and placing a finger on a switch on the tabletop touch screen computer. The same satellite image of Rome came to life on the screen and Jace zoomed in to the plaza in front of the Institute. The rest of the team gathered around the table.

“Catarina, you will oversee transportation and will provide cover from the perimeter in case we find ourselves under attack,” Jace stated. He then marked a point on the map that he thought would offer accessibility and protection for the warlock to open the portal that would take them there and hopefully bring them back. ‘Clary will stay with you to provide cover. Kat, you will approach the building’s front door from the side, but be prepared to withdraw at any moment even if you don’t get the information you need. Jeremy, you will provide her cover and make sure she doesn’t come under attack from the Shadowhunters in Alec’s team.”

Jeremy nodded and looked towards the small and fragile looking Kat with an expression that was a combination of affection and humour, and Jace wondered whether Jeremy already knew that Kat was a formidable warlock who was unlikely to need his protection.

“Izzy and I will join Alec’s team and stop the explosions. When that is done, I will grab Alec and bring him back with us” he added pointing in the general direction of the Institute’s entrance where he assumed the confrontation would take place. That is, if Kat’s prediction was correct. “If the attacks follow the same pattern than the previous ones, we can assume that there will be no more than two warlocks in the first group.”

“Shouldn’t we try to get Magnus too?” asked Catarina.

“If Magnus is in the second group, Izzy, you will go after him,” replied Jace. “Catarina, you must be ready to get us out of there as soon as we are done. Now get some rest; we will meet on the Institute’s roof at eight tonight. Kat predicts that the attacks will be at about three in the morning, Rome time, that is nine for us here in New York.”

Jace watched as the members of his team began to disperse and marvelled once again at the easiness with which this unlikely group of people had come together under a common goal. Reaching for Kat’s hand, Jeremy guided her out of the room and likely towards the library where they had been spending almost all their time studying star charts and historical records. The young Shadowhunter with his studious face and intelligent eyes, towered over the small warlock, yet he had an expression that denoted deep respect and perhaps even awe towards Kat. Pineshade is besotted, thought Jace and couldn’t help smiling; for he knew better than anyone that you couldn’t help who you love. He just hoped that Kat wouldn’t break the Shadowhunter’s young heart.

Catarina headed for the kitchen in search of food, and Jace was certain he would find her there later, eating a sandwich and chatting with some of the other Shadowhunters about food, the need for a good diet, or the poor condition of the health care system in America. Catarina was a warlock that lived with one foot firmly in the mundane world and the other equally firmly in the Downworld. Yet, she didn’t seem to suffer any conflict as a result.

Reaching for her phone, Clary walked towards the stairs leading to the greenhouse garden located on the top floor. She was likely calling Luke, Jace thought, wanting to check on him and remind him of his duty to protect Simon in case something happened to her. Jace knew that Clary found the greenhouse relaxing and she always went there when she needed quiet before or after a mission. If he had time, he would go and spend some time with her among the flowers and trees, he thought, and for a moment the prospect of putting his arms around her and kiss her lovely lips filled him with anticipation.

“How are the vampires?” he asked, turning to Izzy who had lingered at the table, and who was reviewing notes on her tablet.
“We haven’t seen any of them, except for the ones that come to the door every couple of days to pick up the blood supplies that Luke and his pack deliver,” she replied, a mixture of exhaustion and concern on her face. “That place has always been eerily quiet, but the silence now is even more unnerving. We heard something yesterday around midday: screaming and what sounded like scratching on a window, followed by some movement, but then nothing.”

“Have you seen Raphael at all?” Jace asked, his hand reaching and then resting on Izzy’s hand.

“No,” she replied, sadness joining the look of exhaustion on her face. “He has refused to see me or answer my calls.”

“We will figure out what is happening to him,” Jace reassured her. “Whatever is happening to the vampires began with the attacks. Once we figure out what is behind the attacks, we will find a cure.” Jace hoped that what he was saying was true. The Clave had ordered the elimination of all the infected vampires and, those who had not escaped and gone into hiding in the other cities, had already been killed. So far, Jace had refused to even acknowledge the order but he feared that this was just a temporary solution.

“I don’t know. I wish I was as optimistic as you are,” Izzy said as she stood up and headed out of the room in the direction, Jace was sure, of the armory where she would spend the next few hours getting her weapons ready.

“Try to get some rest,” Jace said as she walked away. “We cannot risk the mission failing because of an exhausted team member.”

“I will be fine,” she replied, turning her head towards Jace and smiling, a smile that failed to reach her eyes.

“It is an order,” stated Jace, imbuing as much authority on his voice as he could manage.

“Only if you rest first,” was Izzy’s only reply before she disappeared down a corridor.

At the end, as with most plans that rely heavily on variables that are unpredictable, Jace’s plan of attack turned out to be more like a guideline. As soon as they stepped through the portal and emerged in a spot on the right side of the plaza, Jace and his team found themselves in the middle of a full-blown battle. Alec, who, with the plan of setting up an ambush, had arrived with his team a few minutes before through a portal on the far-left side of the plaza had found five powerful warlocks waiting for them. The warlocks were flanking the front entrance to the Institute and were protecting the perimeter of what would be the site of the explosion.

As Jace began to move towards the center of the plaza, his blade drawn and glowing in the darkness, he saw Alec, his bow at the ready, standing in front of Berg, the warlock that had opened the portal through which his team had arrived. Berg was keeping the portal open and ready for a hasty retrieve. While the rest of his team neared the enemy’s line of defense, Alec covered them by shooting arrow after arrow in quick succession. The warlocks sent surges of energy that diverted or destroyed the arrows in midday but at least one made it through, lodging itself in the shoulder of one of them. If Alec saw Jace, he didn’t show any sign of recognition, focussed as he was on the task of protecting his team.

The arrival of Jace and his team gave the warlocks another target and they had to split the focus of their attack. As they began to close the distance and attack the enemy’s defense line from the right side, while Alec and his team did the same from the left, Jace and Izzy began to draw as much fire as Alec and his team. Jace saw from the corner of his eye that with a flick of her wrist, Catarina closed the portal through which they had arrived. She and Clary began a slow advance along the
perimeter of the plaza, searching, he suspected, for a more accessible exit point. Meanwhile, Kat and Jeremy slowly made their way along the Institute’s wall towards the front door trying to reach the spot the warlocks were protecting. This created a third point of attack for the warlocks. Kat defended herself and Jeremy with powerful balls of magic fire that she threw with incessant waves of her small arms.

Placing his bow across his back, Alec shouted to another Shadowhunter to stay with Berg, who, having refused to fight, was standing near the entrance to their portal. He then started in the direction of the center of the plaza where hand to hand combat was in full force; a seraph blade drawn and ready to engage the enemy. At that precise moment, a new portal opened on a spot on the left side of the Institute, less than twenty meters from Alec’s location. Four figures emerged from it; one of them was Magnus Bane, his silhouette unmistakable even through the smoke and magic energy that was rapidly covering the plaza in a dense fog.

Alec instantly felt that his lungs released a breath he didn’t know he had been holding and an unexpected warmth rose from the center of his chest and expanded throughout his body.

“Magnus!” he wanted to shout; “You are alive, Magnus,” he wanted to say; “Magnus, I am here,” he wanted to call out, but he didn’t. For the figure of Magnus among those warlocks and amid the destruction, the fire, the death seemed suddenly unreal, like an image in a nightmare. This Magnus with the fierce expression, the dark make-up around his eyes, the black hair styled in spikes, this Magnus was a stranger. This wasn’t the Magnus that smiled and flirted in public with Alec; this wasn’t the Magnus that snapped his fingers with grace and flourish to conjure up coffee or a cocktail; this wasn’t the Magnus who could kiss Alec and undo his belt buckle in the same seamless movement. This wasn’t even the Magnus that had once destroyed a wraith demon to protect Alec and then closed the rift to stop more creatures from attacking New York. This wasn’t his Magnus, the Magnus in those memories that until Barcelona and the Inquisitor, Alec had thought were indelible, permanent, everlasting. This Magnus, the one walking beside another warlock, a warlock that, at that moment, was throwing deadly surges of energy at a member of Alec’s team, was the Magnus from the images the Inquisitor had planted in his mind.

Magnus didn’t give any indication that he had seen Alec, and he kept his eyes on the institute’s entrance. After a few meters, Khuno stopped and turned towards the battle, and Magnus was forced to stop behind him. Khuno’s job was to provide cover for the two warlocks who would unleash the explosion, so he lifted one arm, ready to attack while with the other he kept a firm grip on Magnus’ wrist, a steady flow of energy passing from Magnus to him through the manacles around Magnus’ wrists. The other two warlocks continued walking in the direction of the building.

The sight of Magnus distracted Alec for an instant, enough for one of the other warlocks, a woman with long hair held in a tight ponytail, to aim and release a ball of red fire in Alec’s direction. Alec’s response was nearly instantaneous and, lifting his blade, swung it in the air, hitting the ball of magic fire with a loud crack, and redirecting it towards the bushes on the side of the plaza. The magic energy exploded and set the bushes on fire. The woman threw another ball of energy, this time in Berg’s direction. The Berg’s chest exploded as he felt backward, the portal he had held opened sputtered and closed, leaving Alec and his team with no other way out than the portal that Catarina would hopefully open.

With a sinuous movement, Alec turned and threw his blade through the air in the direction of the woman, and the blade lodged itself in her chest killing her instantly. With another fast and smooth movement, Alec took his bow out once again, nocked an arrow, and lifting it, aimed it directly at Khuno’s chest.

Wrapping an arm around Magnus, Khuno pulled him in front of his body; placing Magnus between himself and Alec’s arrow; using him, once again, as a shield. “Come on, Shadowhunter, shoot; I
dare you, maybe this time you will finish the job,” he shouted, taunting Alec, a malicious smile on his face.

Alec locked eyes with Magnus for an instant, before looking back at the face of his target, his heart beating in his throat, hesitation settling in the pit of his stomach. Magnus looked back, his face serious and his expression impassive, determined not to show Alec the emotions rushing through him, not wanting to influence Alec’s actions. At that moment, Magnus even hoped that the heartbreak he had caused Alec would be profound enough, and that his mission would be critical enough, that he wouldn’t hesitate to shoot even if Magnus was in the way.

Jace, who had been slowly making his way towards Alec, saw that Alec was so focussed on Khuno and Magnus that he hadn’t realize that another warlock, Gwydion, was approaching him from his left side, a ball of fiery energy building in between his fingers ready to release it and send it straight to the center of Alec’s chest. Jace resisted the temptation to shout a warning at Alec, concerned that he might either distract his parabatai or haste Gwydion’s attack. Instead, he finally sunk his blade on the chest of the warlock with whom he had been fighting and turned in Gwydion’s direction, drawing another blade as he run.

What happened next, happened almost simultaneously. With all his strength, Jace threw his blade, aiming it at the center of Gwydion’s back, and the blade glowed in the air for an instant before it hit home. Gwydion turned, a look of horror and surprise on his face and then fell, the ball of energy that had been glowing between his fingers, deeming and dying, at the same time that his eyes went blank. Izzy, who had been approaching Khuno and Magnus from the side opposite Jace, protected by a magic shield conjured up by Catarina, unleashed her whip, its tip cracking as it made its way through the air and coiled itself tightly around Magnus’ wrist, the one that Khuno had been firmly holding.

Recognizing Magnus, the warlock who months before performed a spell to strengthen it, a spell that willed it to never fail its master, the whip held true. The whip released a shower of sparks as it made contact with the manacle around Magnus’ wrist, and momentarily interrupted the enchantment that had kept Magnus tied to Khuno. With all her strength, Izzy pulled the whip and Magnus along with it. At the same moment, Magnus, finally freed from Khuno, and momentarily in control of his power, released a surge of energy through his fingers, still weak and feeble, but enough to push Khuno in the path of the arrow that Alec had finally released. The arrow hit Khuno on his side, making him fall on his knees. Another warlock grabbed him and with blinding speed dragged him away and towards the park that bordered the plaza.

“Jace, retreat!” Jeremy shouted from a spot near the Institute’s entrance and when Jace turned he saw that the two warlocks that had arrived with Magnus and Khuno were standing near the front of the building. They were looking up towards the sky, chanting in an unfamiliar language. A hole had opened on the ground between them, red and orange flames spewing from it, burning the ground, building memento until the flames reached the warlocks and they began to scream, the most horrendous screams of pain, as their bodies burned, the fire building up energy as if it were a balloon that couldn’t contain any more air and was about to explode.

“Catarina, portal!” shouted Kat, as she stretched her arms up in the air and conjured up a shield that she hoped would contain the explosion. Catarina swung her arms in the air and opened a portal, and gestured for Clary and Izzy to go through it. The two women hesitated a moment, waiting for the rest of the team to join them.

Jace who by now had reached Magnus, grabbed him by the shoulder. “Come on Alec, let’s go,” he shouted to his parabatai as he turned and guided Magnus towards the portal.
“Jace, cell block,” Magnus said hastily, as Jace was about to step through the portal’s event horizon. Looking at Magnus, Jace nodded in understanding as he stepped through the portal, Izzy, Clary and Catarina a step behind him.

Alec turned just before he too stepped through the portal and, at that precise moment, the ground between the burning bodies of the warlocks exploded. The last thing Alec saw before he felt the pull of the portal’s energy was the outstretched arms of the small woman who had been accompanying Jace’s team, energy flowing from her hands and forming a dome that contained the explosion. The fire and heat caught one of the surviving warlocks unawares before he too caught fire.

Jace emerged from the portal in the middle of the New York Institute’s cell block, his hand still firmly on Magnus’s shoulder. Magnus’s wrist was still trapped by Izzy’s whip, the metal sending sparkles of energy in all directions, as if a short circuit was interfering with an energy flow, or as if the whip had become a live wire. Izzy was a step behind, followed by Catarina and Clary. Izzy gently pulled on the whip and it uncoiled from Magnus’ wrist, still sparkling as it recoiled.

Alec came through next and, then, they all turned and waited for the last two members of their team. An interminable moment later, Jeremy’s figure finally emerged, Kat’s limp body cradled in his arms. The portal closed behind him with an unusual release of orange energy that caused the temperature in the room to suddenly raise a few degrees, and the ground to shake with the aftershocks of the explosion.

“What happened?” asked Jace, his voice barely containing his agitation.

“Kat contained the explosion by creating a shield,” replied Jeremy, “but the effort drained all her energy and she lost consciousness. We almost didn’t make it.” He then walked towards a bench by the wall and laid Kat down on it, her eyes close and her face as white as paper. Catarina followed close behind ready to help.

Alec turned and set his eyes on Magnus for the first time since Barcelona, weeks and a lifetime ago. Magnus looked back at him, trying to read his expression or at least get a sense of the state of mind of the man he loved more than he ever thought possible to love another human being. For a moment, everything and everybody else in the room disappeared and only Alec existed; only Alec’s unfathomable expression; only his bottomless eyes, like pools of amber; only his beautiful face, now stained with soot and grime from the battle.

Magnus used all his strength to resist the urge to free himself from Jace’s grasp and walk towards Alec; to touch him; to make sure that he was not injured or hurt; to run his fingers through his hair; to tell him how empty, how dark his life had been without him, how much he wished he could have told Alec that he meant the world, the stars, the whole universe to him. Magnus wanted to tell Alec how much he wished he had known hundreds of years ago that one day he would meet him, that one day Alec would fill his life with light. Perhaps if he had known, Magnus wouldn’t have searched for home elsewhere, wouldn’t have been caught in the web that now pulled him back into the darkness.

Alec looked back at Magnus, his eyes steady and full of fire; a rush of mixed and confusing feelings and memories running through his mind. The Inquisitor’s voice echoed loudly in his head telling him that Magnus had cursed him, that what he felt for the warlock was not real. The vivid memory of Magnus’ touch against his skin, cold and hot, sharp and soft at the same time, awakening old sensations, old desires, old fears, and old longings. The longing turning to anger, an anger that seemed to have no beginning and no end. Alec didn’t know how to feel: confusion, distress, relief. His hands ached to touch Magnus to make sure that he was real and not an figment
of his imagination, but he feared that the touch would fill him with disgust, hatred and self-loathing. He wished he could grab Magnus by the shoulders and shake him until he relinquished the answers to questions Alec didn’t even know how to ask.

Alec’s steely eyes pierced Magnus’ heart. The hurt and anger in those lovely eyes that once had looked at Magnus with nothing but love filled Magnus with new guilt, a more profound guilt than he thought possible. Looking at those eyes, Magnus experienced what it is like to feel unending regret: regret for not having looked away that first time his eyes rested on Alec; for not having left New York when Alec was still unsure about being with Magnus; for not having stopped himself from kissing Alec; for not having made himself leave, forget, resigned himself to another hundred years of loneliness. He thought that a hundred, a thousand, an eternity of years without love would have been better than the guilt of having caused Alec so much pain.

After what felt like an eternity, but that was likely no more than a few seconds, Alec looked away, turned and without a word, left the room, his steps steady and fast. Magnus stared after him, as someone stares at the sun as it sets and sends the world into darkness, and he felt suddenly cold, empty and old, older than his three hundred years.

“I have to put you in a holding cell,” Jace, who was still standing beside him, softly told him.

“Yes,” replied Magnus, “you better do that. You should also arrange for me to be transferred to a more secured location. You are not safe with me here.”

Silently, Jace guided Magnus into a cell, and, once there, Magnus sat on the narrow bed by the wall and bending forward put his head in his hands.

“Do you need anything?” Jace asked gently. “Coffee, water, or food?”

“I am fine, Jace, thank you,” Magnus replied, his voice sounding tired and despondent.

At that same moment in Rome, Khuno looked with satisfaction at the incandescent opening on the ground between the warlocks’ burnt bodies. Everything was still on track even though they had had more casualties that Annaliese had anticipated. They had also lost Magnus, but that could prove to be an advantage. Annaliese would soon be able to track him and with him the Shadowhunter boy that Magnus had gone to such lengths to protect and conceal. Yes, everything was still going according to plan, he thought, as he turned and holding his side, where the wound inflicted by the arrow was still healing, he limped through the portal that he had just opened.

I have never written a battle scene before. I am sorry if it is too confusing. Let me know what you think and thanks for waiting this long for these two to finally be in the same room again.
"Annaliese will come after me," Magnus told Jace, "and she will try to get to Alec. She knows he is important to me, Jace, and she hates Shadowhunters. You have to promise me that you will put Alec’s safety before mine, and that you will look after him when I am gone."

“Can you tell us what happened in Berlin during the war?” Jeremy Pineshade asked Magnus when he and Jace came into his cell the day after the Rome attack.

Magnus looked up at Jeremy, the young Shadowhunter’s chestnut eyes a striking reminder of his grandfather. Magnus could almost picture the ten-year-old Joshua Pineshade — skinny legs, long arms, the mahogany hair his grandson would inherit — following him around the Paris Institute, a chess board under his arm, pleading for ‘just one more game, Magnus.’ An involuntary smile rose to his lips; seeing his old friend’s features on the face of the young man in front of him filled him with nostalgia for years and lifetimes gone by.

“I will tell you what I know,” Magnus said turning to Jace, “but first, you have to promise to transfer me to a more secured location. My presence here is dangerous.”

“Surely, you are not planning to hurt us,” said Jace, with a look that betrayed a complete lack of concern.

“Not me,” Magnus stated lifting his hands and showing the manacles around his wrists “These, however, are like beacons and the moment Annaliese and her people home in on them, they will come after us, and I will be powerless to do anything.”

“Can you remove them?” asked Jace.

“This is powerful magic that is also inhibiting my powers. Right now, I cannot conjure up a pair of clean socks, or a cup of coffee. I cannot even do my nail polish,” Magnus said, turning his hands and looking at his nails, trying to sound like his usual sassy self.

“Don’t worry,” Jace told him and smiled playfully. “We will figure out how to take them off. In the meantime, we will make sure you have plenty of clean socks and coffee, and I am sure Izzy would not mind helping with nail thing.”

“You are a darling, darling,” replied Magnus with one of his mischievous smiles.

Jeremy who, until then, had only seen the warlock a handful of times and always in Alec’s company, didn’t know whether to laugh or frown at the exchange. The conversation sounded awfully casual considering the seriousness of the situation. Instead, he stirred the topic in a more familiar direction. “We have records that suggest that you were in Berlin during the war, and that you met Annaliese Fen and Khuno Jarh there.”

“You found something in your grandfather’s diaries, didn’t you?” Magnus asked. Leaning back against the wall, he crossed his legs, rested his hands on his lap, and looked at Pineshade. “Tell
me, did Joshua suspect that Annaliese and Khuno were alive?"

“Yes,” Jeremy replied, surprised by the affection in Magnus’ voice when he spoke of his grandfather, a Shadowhunter who, as far as he knew, wasn’t particularly friendly with any Downworlders. “But his notes are brief and rather cryptic; he speaks of a mission but doesn’t say what it was or your role in it.”

Magnus sighted deeply and loudly. “You grandfather was a true and loyal friend who kept a secret of mine for most of his life. I loved him deeply and I trusted him until the day he died.”

“He didn’t betray your secret,” Jeremy told him, wanting, for some reason, to reassure Magnus that his trust had not been misplaced. “As I said, his notes are very brief.”

“It doesn’t really matter now. We all know that secrets eventually come to light,” Magnus said, and looking at Jace and Jeremy, he began to tell the story, his voice steady. Magnus was determined to tell the tale without justifications or apologies.

“I spent part of the war in France with a group in the French resistance that was made up of mundanes and Downworlders. The Clave had, as usual, stayed out of the conflict and had closed their borders determined to wait out the war in Idris. The European Institutes were heavily warded and kept only skeleton personnel. Your grandfather sent your grandmother and their three young children to Idris and he stayed to protect the Berlin Institute.”

“One day I got a message from a warlock friend, one of the few that were still in Poland. She told me that a warlock by the name of Annaliese Fen was summoning our kind to a town about ninety kilometers south west of Berlin, called Brandenburg. I had met Annaliese and Khuno Jarh, her companion, two centuries before and I knew they were dangerous, so I decided to go and see what they were up to. I portalled to Berlin where I met with Joshua, who was a longtime friend.”

Magnus didn’t tell Jace and Jeremy that the night he arrived, he and Joshua spent the evening playing chess and, over drinks, Magnus told him his story. He spoke about his childhood, his youth, his time with the Silent Brothers in Spain, and his desire to go home after almost a hundred years of wandering. He finally told him about meeting Annaliese and Khuno; of feeling that he had found what he was looking for, a place where he felt completely and utterly fulfilled and loved; and how eventually he had come to realize that the price for that home and that happiness was too high. Joshua, a Shadowhunter raised to distrust and even feel disdain and disgust towards people like Magnus, had simply listened and when Magnus had looked up, he had seen not a shred of prejudice in his friend’s eyes. Decades later, Alec’s expression of unconditional acceptance had reminded Magnus of Joshua Pineshade, and he had felt that the universe had blessed him twice.

“I arrived in Berlin a few days before the Allied Forces began their last offensive on the city. The place was in bad shape but there were still pockets of Nazi troops that fervently and against all odds believed that they would be victorious.”

Magnus had thought that the city was under a cloud of deep denial. Night clubs were still open for SS officers and soldiers to go have fun, even though there was hardly any liquor left. The Nazis radios continued to transmit information about supposed victories and propaganda that promoted the righteousness of the Aryan cause. Despite all evidence to the contrary, many Germans still believed that they would win and the atmosphere was almost festive. No one seemed to be concerned for the millions of deaths that the ideas of a madman had incited. No one seemed to care for the millions who were still dying in the extermination camps peppered throughout Europe.

“Joshua and I went in search of information that could lead us to Annaliese. We didn’t have to go farther than a local night club that SS officers used to frequent. There we run into Annaliese and
Khuno who were in the company of an SS officer, someone by the name of Krupp. Annaliiese was apparently Krupp’s date that night, but as Krupp got more and more inebriated, it became evident that he preferred Khuno. Of course, Khuno was glamored to look like a tall and dashing German officer. Krupp’s tastes might have been eclectic, but I doubt he would have appeared in public accompanied by a man who was born in Africa at least a hundred years before the first white men arrived there."

Meeting Annaliiese after two centuries had been like reopening a wound that Magnus had thought closed for a long time. Old memories and old regrets had come back to him all at once; memories of death and destruction that Magnus had failed to prevent or stop. Still, Annaliiese had appeared happy to see him and she smiled broadly when she saw him enter the club. That is, until she realized that Magnus was in the company of a Shadowhunter. Her smile had frozen in her lips, and then it had turned to disappointment and, later, to a hatred so intense that Magnus thought that the emotion would burn through the glamor that disguised her eyes’ true color. She didn’t say anything to Magnus that night, she simply glared at him and Joshua across the room, conveying with her eyes rapprochements that Magnus needed no words to understand. Soon after, she stood up and giving Magnus a look a deep disdain left, followed by Krupp and Khuno. Perhaps, Annaliiese and Khuno thought that Magnus and Joshua were a couple; perhaps they thought that Magnus had come to join them. Magnus never found out. One thing he was certain of, however: Annaliiese never thought Magnus would get in the way of her plans. Until the very end, she thought Magnus was incapable of going against her.

“After that night, Joshua and I spent a few days tracking Annaliiese around Brandenburg without much success, until we finally found her by following the movements of one of her mundane companions. He led us to a camp located in a forest in the outskirts of the city. The place was no more than three or four wooden barracks, four watch towers, and a building in which labs and a command center were located. We observed the place for a few days, using magic and Nephilim runes to listen in on their conversations, trying to ascertain their plans. That is how we found out that Annaliiese and Khuno had told Krupp about the Downworld. Krupp was a doctor and a scientist who was obsessed with magic. Annaliiese and Khuno had convinced him that if they could devise a way to harness the powers and abilities from warlocks and other Downworlders, they could improve the Nazi’s chances of winning the war.”

“I don’t know how much the Nazi line of command knew, but by the time Joshua and I arrived in Brandenburg, there were about forty SS soldiers guarding and working in the camp, including a team of about ten officers, most of whom were also scientists. Annaliiese’s old accomplices were also there: Gwydion, Edbert and a few of the others that, to this day, constitute her closest circle. In addition to the heavily armed guards, the camp was also warded, but one knight, Joshua and I jumped the fence and went inside, and we saw what they were doing.”

“There were perhaps ten warlocks held prisoners in one barrack. The other barracks housed werewolves, vampires and even mundanes. The prisoners were all in very bad shape, wounded, burnt with silver, weak, half-starved, their power depleted. I think that’s when Annaliiese and Khuno developed the enchantment for these manacles,” observed Magnus, lifting his wrists once again. “They had done experiments and medical procedures, and most prisoners showed signs of mutilation and disfigurement. I think they were trying to learn the effect of demonic powers on Downworlders, and the secret to immortality.”

Magnus voice trailed off until he fell silent, his eyes lost in the distance as if he was seeing again that horrific place and the images of the terrible things that Annaliiese, Khuno and the SS scientists had done to their captives. He never thought anyone could be capable of such cruelty, such savagery. The spectacle had paralyzed him and left him speechless and powerless for the first time in his very long life. He had hated himself for ever having felt anything for Annaliiese and Khuno;
for ever having agreed with their ideas; for once having believed in their plans.

“Please kill me,” one of the vampires had pleaded when he saw Magnus. He was tied to a surgical bed and someone had cut his chest open, exposing his heart. They had left the wound open and exposed to see, Magnus suspected, whether, and for how long, the vampire would survive the loss of blood, or whether infestation would set in on the wounds. Magnus just stood frozen in place, overwhelmed by the pleading face of the young vampire trapped in a permanent state of agonizing non-death. Perhaps the werewolves had been more fortunate, if you could call their fate fortune; for they at least could die.

“Some horrors can never and should never be described,” Magnus stated after a while, his voice heavy with sadness and dark memories. “Let me just say that Valentine didn’t have the monopoly on cruelty; my people are as capable of it as anyone.”

That night, Joshua practically dragged Magnus out of the camp, and towards the forest where, for the first time in who knows how long, Magnus got sick and threw up on green grass and fallen leaves. “Your grandfather was a brave Shadowhunter and even for him this was a lot to take in,” Magnus added looking at Jeremy with evident affection, and remembering how drunk Joshua got that night when they got back to the Institute.

“What happened then? What did you do?” asked Jeremy, eager, Magnus thought, to find out whether his grandfather had found a way to save those poor souls. Perhaps he hoped that Magnus would tell him that his ancestor had found a solution, that at the end Joshua had been the hero of the story. But there were no heroes in this story, for nothing they could have done, would have saved all those lives.

“We went back a couple of nights later. It was the beginning of April and the Allied Forces were about to begin their last offensive on Berlin, the battle that would eventually lead to the end of the war. We had decided to find out what was behind Annaliese’ plan, and we did precisely that. We learned that Annaliese was trying to open a rift between this world and Hades, the deepest, darkest and most mysterious level of hell.”

Magnus told Jace and Jeremy that he and Joshua had arrived at the camp around midnight and had found it largely deserted. There were none of the guards that had been posted on the watch towers two nights before, and the camp was eerily quiet. A few minutes later, they found out the reason: Annaliese and her people had killed all the mundanes, including the soldiers, officers and Krupp. They had set the vampires who had survived the experiments free and, affected by demonic poisoning, they had fed on the mundanes. Magnus and Joshua found bodies strewn around the camp, some burned to death, others with holes piercing their chests from side to side by magic, but most were completely drained of blood. The scene was horrific and bloody. The warlocks had gotten rid of the mundanes prior to enacting the next step in their plan.

Magnus and Joshua had continued walking deep into the camp, following a strange sound that emanated from somewhere near the center. There they found Annaliese, Khuno and the rest of her people congregated around a huge pentagram drawn on the ground with what looked like blood. They had chained the warlock prisoners in a circle around the pentagram and they were standing on a bigger circle surrounding them a few meters out. They were chanting in the same strange language that the warlocks chanted in the recent attacks. A hole had begun to open in the pentagram’s center, like the crater of a volcano that spewed hot lava and rocks. The heat and the flames gained memento until they reached the warlocks in the inner circle and their bodies caught fire. Magnus could still clearly remember the screams and the smell of burning flesh, the old memory mixing with similar and more recent images.
“What do we do?” Joshua had asked calling Magnus out of his stupor.

“What did you do?” Jeremy Pineshade asked now, echoing his grandfather’s voice across the years, his eyes, so like his grandfather’s, intent on Magnus.

“Joshua and I blew the whole camp up,” Magnus replied, a tone of finality in his voice.

Allied Forces had intensified their air strikes on Berlin and the bombs could be clearly seen coming down like gigantic drops of metal rain that never stopped falling and that upon impact illuminated the German sky. Magnus ordered Joshua to leave and, using all his powers, he diverted the course of one of the bombers and then redirected the bombs to fall directly on the camp. As the bombs fell, he used the remaining of his powers to close and seal the rift.

“At the time, I thought that I was also sealing Annaliese inside the rift, or that the explosions had killed her. For a long time, I believed that she had died that night. All that was left of the camps, its barracks and the rift was a huge crater surrounded by scorched forest. I don’t remember how Joshua got me out, but sometime later, I found myself slowly walking by the side of the road with him by my side. He was glamored but I wasn’t, and the roads were dangerous. German and Allied troops were everywhere and the situation was confusing. We walked in silence for a while until I felt strong enough to open a portal to the Berlin Institute where we spent the next few weeks waiting for the Allies to finally take the city, and for the moment when it would be safe to leave.”

“Why was Annaliese opening a rift to Hades? What was her plan?” Jace asked.

“She wanted to summon Lilith, the mother of all demons,” came the quiet and gentle voice of Kat from the entrance to the cell.

“Yes,” confirmed Magnus looking towards his friend, “and I think she is at it again. She has been obsessed with Lilith since I have known her. How are you Kat?”

“Better,” replied his friend with a warm smile. “Magnus, can you tell me what this is?” Kat asked opening her hand and showing Magnus the charm that he had sent Catarina from Barcelona the night before the first attack.

“That, my dear, was made from metal that came from a rock that was expelled out Hades when Annaliese opened the rift. Joshua found it and he gave it to me a few days after we destroyed the camp. We learned later that the rock had magic properties, specifically the power to protect from demonic interference. It could also interfere with magic tracking and with attempts to summon warlocks against their will, as I am sure you have ascertained in the last few weeks. Joshua and I extracted the metal from the rock and with it, we fashioned three pieces of jewelry: this charm, the ring I sent Raphael, which Joshua wore until the day he died, and a third piece that I no longer have in my possession.”

“Do you know whether the metal has any other properties?” asked Kat.

“I am not sure. I have never tried to do anything else with it, because I thought that the plan to open the rift to Hades had died with Annaliese.”

“Is it okay if I conduct some experiments?”

“Ask Catarina, I sent it to her. It is hers now.”

“Alright,” Jace said after a few more minutes of questions. “I think we should call it a night. We are all exhausted and need rest. Magnus, I will send someone with coffee and clean socks. Is there anything else you need?”
“Just that you get me out of the Institute. Jace, as long as I remain here you are not safe,” he said again. “We are taking a risk thinking that the wards on the walls of the cells will block any tracking. As long as I have these manacles on me, Annaliese and Khuno can find me.”

“Can we remove them?” Jace asked turning to Kat.

“I am not sure. This is magic I am not familiar with. For all we know, we could kill Magnus if we try to remove them.”

“Or we can create an explosion that can destroy the institute,” added Magnus. “I am telling you, this is powerful and dark magic.”

“Okay, we will figure it out. For now, it is better that no one knows you are here Magnus. Now get some rest. You look like you haven’t slept in days.”

“Thank you very much for the compliment. You look fabulous too,” Magnus replied trying to keep his tone light.

Jeremy and Kat left first and as Jace was walking away, Magnus stopped him with a gesture.

“How is Alec?” he asked, his voice and his face full of concern and pain.

“I haven’t seen him since we returned from Rome. I am going to go find him now.”

“Promise me, Jace, that you will look after him if, and when, I am gone.”

“I promise, but it won’t come to that if I have anything to do with it.”

“You may have no choice on the matter. Annaliese will come after me and she will try to get to Alec. She knows he is important to me, Jace, and she hates Shadowhunters. You have to promise me that you will put Alec’s safety before mine, and that you will look after him when I am gone.”

“Magnus, don’t ask me to do that. Alec would never forgive me. Why do you think that you will be gone?” asked Jace.

“Because this has always been a battle to the death,” Magnus said and the tone of finality in his voice filled Jace with foreboding.
Parabatai Found

Chapter Summary

Jace took a deep breath before he brought the tip of the stele to his brother’s skin. As the tip touched the wound, Alec took a loud breath himself and the hand holding the witch light trembled and wrapped itself tighter around the stone. But Alec made no noise, and uttered no cry of pain, as Jace redrew the rune.

Hours later, when night had finally fallen on New York City, Jace found Alec seating on a bench in a dark corner of the roof. He was looking at the illuminated New York skyline with the look of a lost child. The expression reminded Jace of the first time he met Alec when they were barely ten years old. Even then, Jace had been full of confidence, certain that there was no enemy and no battle that he couldn’t conquest. Alec, who had been a rather small and scrawny child and who didn’t reach his full height until much later, was insecure, unsure of himself, uncertain of his own skills.

In time, Jace had realized that his brother’s insecurity came from the fact that his father was unusually hard on him and that Alec always compared himself to those around him whom he thought were stronger, braver, worthier. Yet, Jace also learned that under that uncertain exterior, Alec was the bravest of warriors and the most loyal of friends. Not once, not before, nor after they became parabatai, had Jace doubted that Alec would protect him, would be there beside him, would have his back. Jace knew that he was the Shadowhunter that he was because Alec always stood beside him. That fact had become even more glaringly evident in the last few weeks when Alec’s absence had left Jace feeling uncertain, insecure and full of self-doubt.

Seeing his parabatai now, Jace realized how much he had missed him, how much he had needed him in the last weeks, how much he loved Alec.

“Hey, I have been looking for you. Have you been here since we came back?” Jace asked sitting beside Alec.

“No, I was in my room for a while, reading reports, trying to figure out what the heck is happening. I also talked to Jeremy and Kat. You have been keeping things from me,” Alec replied. The words should have sounded harsh but they didn’t.

“I didn’t want the Clave to know that we were working with Catarina and Kat. They would have ordered me to turn them over, and we would have been more in the dark than we are now.”

“And, you didn’t trust me to keep the secret?” Alec asked turning to look at Jace. Jace wasn’t sure whether Alec was mad, disappointed or sad. In any other situation, he would have relied on his parabatai bond to get a read on his brother’s state of mind, but that bond was now so faint that he couldn’t trust it.

“I trust you, you know that,” he replied. “But I didn’t know who was listening in.”

“I get it,” Alec said. “You also disobeyed direct orders. You didn’t go after the vampires.”

“Raphael and her pack are under control for now,” Jace replied. “Hunting them would have been
wrong, you know it. And, you would have never forgiven yourself if you hurt Izzy in such a horrible way. You know how she feels about Raphael.”

“Yes,” Alec said pensively. “She is very angry at me, isn’t she? I went to her room but she wasn’t there.”

“She is spending a lot of time on guard duty at the Hotel Du Mort.”

“It is only a matter of time before The Clave learns that we didn’t follow their orders. They are bound to come and try to do the job themselves,” Alec stated.

“Tell me about it,” said Jace with a sight. “I just spent the last few hours trying to appease Inquisitor Dearborn. He is livid and insists that we surrender Kat and Catarina. The Clave is also demanding that you and I appear in front of the council and explain our actions. Dearborn is insisting on coming to New York himself; thankfully, he doesn’t have access to a portal. Berg is dead and all other warlocks who used to help The Clave have either gone into hiding or are in custody. But it is just a matter of time. The fact that The Clave has closed the borders of Idris and have banned any travel in and out is the only thing we have going for us now. Alec, we cannot surrender Catarina, Kat or Magnus. They are our only hope to get to the bottom of this mess.”

“What did you tell Dearborn about me?”

“That you were injured in Rome and that you are not yet ready to answer any questions. I also denied any knowledge of Magnus’ whereabouts. Three members of your team survived the attack and are now in the Rome Institute, but I doubt any of them saw Magnus coming with us.”

“Okay, that gives us some time then,” said Alec, his eyes back on the illuminated buildings on the distance.

“Is everything okay, Alec?” Jace asked after a few moments of silence contemplation, unease evident in his voice and on his furrowed brow.

“You feel that our parabatai bond has weakened,” said Alec, not a question but a statement.

“Yes, what happened?”

“I am not sure I can explain it but I think I know how to fix it. But I need your help,” Alec stated standing up and pulling his stele out of his pants’ pocket. “Something is interfering with the rune and I need you to fix it for me.”

He lifted his jacket and Jace couldn’t help to gasp when he saw his brother’s side. A thick and jagged scar, red and not yet completely healed, interrupted the flow of the parabatai rune that, since their teenage years, had linked Jace and Alec. It looked like someone had repeatedly drawn a line that cut the rune in two, each attempt leaving a burn over older burns. Jace resisted the temptation to shudder when thinking about how much pain Alec must have endured as the burns were inflicted.

“I need you to redraw the missing links in my parabatai rune, Jace. Can you do that?” Alec asked, his voice not louder than a whisper.

“Oh Alec, what happened? Who did this to you?” Jace asked, his voice barely containing his astonishment and outrage. Who would hurt his brother that way? Who could be so cruel? Anyone would know that parabatai runes were almost impossible to erase or alter while the parabatais were both alive. Whomever did this to Alec, thought Jace, must have known how painful the drawing and redrawing of the line over the rune would be.
“The Inquisitor’s idea of health care,” Alec replied with a sad smile. He then handed Jace his stele and taking a witch light from his jacket pocket, lighted it so Jace could see better what he was about to do.

“Alec, are you sure? This is going to hurt,” Jace said looking at Alec, hoping that his brother wouldn’t make him hurt him in that way.

“Yes, I trust you. Besides, I don’t want anyone else to know what the Inquisitor did and I don’t want him to know that you fixed it.”

“We can call Catarina,” offered Jace. “She can do something about the pain.”

“No, this has to be our secret for now,” Alec replied, determination evident in his voice.

Jace took a deep breath before he brought the tip of the stele to his brother’s skin. As the tip touched the wound, Alec took a loud breath himself and the hand holding the witch light trembled and wrapped itself tighter around the stone. But Alec made no noise, and uttered no cry of pain, as Jace redrew the rune. With each millimeter, he reweaved his bond to his brother, until it regained its original strength. As their bond restored, Jace got to share on some of Alec’s pain, and he felt as if tendrils were reaching from his own parabatai rune and towards his brother. For an instant, Jace could see that Alec felt a pain that was deeper than the one caused by the wound on his side, a pain more profound and the result of wounds that Jace couldn’t see or explain.

A profound fury began to spread through Jace’s whole body. He couldn’t fathom why anyone would cause such pain to his brother, such physical and emotional suffering to his brother who was nothing but good, honest and loyal.

“What happened to you?” Jace asked Alec once he was done. He stood up and, for some unexplained reason, felt a compulsion to put his hand on Alec’s chest, right above his heart. Alec stopped him by bringing his own hand to the spot.

“Magnus Bane and Inquisitor Dearborn happened to me,” he replied, his voice steady. “But that doesn’t matter now. We have more important things to worry about.

“I am going to kill the Inquisitor,” Jace stated between clenched teeth, bringing his hands to his sides and closing them in tight fists.

“Not if I kill him first,” said Alec, his tone dead serious; so serious, in fact, that it unsettled Jace. Alec had never been violent but now the words and the look in his eyes betrayed a deep-seated anger that was unlike him.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Jace offered.

“No,” Alec decidedly replied. “We have other things to worry about.”

“Do you want to talk about Magnus?”

“I especially don’t want to talk about that,” Alec stated, taking a deep breath and pulling down his jacket. Jace thought he saw a hint of white and silver under the jacket and the color reminded him of the white the Nephilim wore when in mourning. However, he didn’t press his parabatai for any more details. Alec would tell him when he was ready.

“Okay, but let me say just one thing,” Jace told Alec. “I think you should hear what Magnus has to say.”
“I read Jeremy’s report on your interrogation. I know about Berlin and about what Annaliese Fen is trying to do. That is all I need to know for now. We need to figure out our next move.”

“Yes, but…” Jace started to say. But, just at that moment, a huge yawn escaped him and he rubbed his eyes trying to dispel the webs of exhaustion that were clouding his thoughts.

“But before we do that,” said Alec, patting Jace on the back. “You need a good night sleep. Go get some rest, it is an order. I will see you in the morning.”

A few minutes later, Jaced was walking down the corridor towards the Institute’s living quarters. The place was unusually quiet as if, for the first time in weeks, the Shadowhunters who were not on duty were able to get a decent night of rest. It is the effect of having their leader back, thought Jace, realizing how much more secured he felt now that Alec was in the Institute, how his brother’s presence quieted his own anxiety. Yes, he thought, his hand resting on the place where his own parabatai rune was located, it was good to have Alec back, not just his physical presence but also the feeling of their bond.

Jace walked past the kitchen and then took a turn towards the dormitories and there, halfway down the corridor, he saw the tall figure of Jeremy Pineshade, his arms wrapped around Kat’s slim waist, his lips on hers, the kiss suggestive and full of passion. Jace stopped and considered turning, leaving the same way he had come in, not wanting to interrupt. But, grabbing Jeremy by the front of his shirt, Kat pulled him into one of the bedrooms, Jeremy’s bedroom, and they were gone, completely unaware of Jace’s presence. Jace smiled as he walked past their door and, for the first time in weeks, he heard himself whistling as he walked towards his own bedroom.

When he opened his door, Jace realized that his room was unusually quiet and dark. Since the death of Valentine, he had grown accustomed to Clary’s comforting and calming presence in his space. He liked walking in and finding her either coming out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around her hair, or seating on an armchair, a book or a sketch pad on her lap and a look of concentration in her face. She would hear him come in and she would look up and smile, one of those lovely and sexy smiles that immediately made Jace feel warm all over, no matter how cold it was outside.

Tonight, however, his bedroom was dark and cold. There was no light coming from the bathroom, and no sound of music or movement. Jace wondered when was the last time that he and Clary had had a moment to themselves, a moment other than a quick kiss when they run into each other in the corridor, or when Jace found her in the greenhouse before their mission in Rome. They had been sleeping at separate and irregular intervals since the whole crisis began. In fact, Jace had barely slept at all, and Clary had spent whole nights in the Institute’s archives, working with Jeremy and Kat. He, on the other hand, had spent countless hours in Alec’s office or in the situation room, in endless communications with The Clave, studying reports and trying to figure out what to do next. They had not spent any quality time together in weeks, Jace realized and turning back, he closed his door and headed down the corridor and towards Clary’s room.

Jace knocked but received no answer even though he could see light coming from underneath Clary’s door. “Clary?” he called as he opened the door and let himself in. The room was, as usual, tidy and bathed in the soft light of a the lamps on the night tables. A sketch pad rested on a table, a box containing brushes and paints beside it. A canvass covered by a white piece of fabric stood on an easel by the window, and while Jace was curious, he didn’t lift the fabric to see what Clary was painting. He knew that she didn’t like to show her work until it was finished. He turned when he heard sounds coming from the bathroom and, just at that instant, Clary walked out wearing a white terrycloth robe, her hair wrapped in a towel.
“Hey,” she said and her smile illuminated the whole room and the darkest corners of Jace’s heart. “I didn’t know you were here.”

“I just walked in,” he said, feeling momentarily and unaccountably shy. Jace realized how much he had missed these quiet and intimate moments with this woman he loved so much, this woman who somehow completed him, who gave him more peace than he ever thought possible to have with anyone. “I thought you wouldn’t mind having me in your bed tonight,” he said and smiled suggestively.

“Really? What makes you think that?” Clary said, a playful smile on her face.

“I know I have been preoccupied for the last little while, so I thought I would make it up to you.” Jace took a step towards Clary, his hands yearning to reach and undo the knot in the belt around her waist.

Clary smiled and, also taking a step closer, looked at Jace with those intense eyes of hers; those eyes that, even in the darkest of times, had haunted him and brought him hope. “What did you have in mind?” she whispered and pulling Jace by the belt loops of his jeans, finally closed the distance between her body and his. She then kissed him deeply and passionately.

Jace reached and unwrapped the towel that trapped her hair and her red curls fell down her back, still wet, reminding Jace of a waterfall. He then entangled his fingers in the coppery silk and imagined himself melting into Clary’s body.

Somehow, she deepened the kiss and an involuntary groan rose from the depth of Jace’s throat, which she rewarded by quickening her breathing and pulling him with even more force towards her. Giving up any pretense of restrain, Jace wrapped his arms around her waist, surprised once again by the strength emanating from her small figure. Clary was deceptively strong, sturdy and self-assured, and every time they made love, Jace felt that he was coming home, like Clary was the family, the kinship that he had been missing for so long.

With surprisingly shaking fingers, Jace untied the knot that held her robe in place and slowly pulled it off, exposing her beautiful shoulders, which he kissed slowly as the robe fell half way down her back, finally giving him the access to her soft skin that he had been craving since he walked into her room. A breath caught in Clary’s throat when his fingers finally touched her skin and she sought his lips again. But instead of kissing them, she bit then gently but forcefully, provoking another groan to rise from Jace’s chest. Clary run her hands down Jace’s back until they reached his buttocks and with another show of strength pulled him to her, as if she wanted the heat from their bodies to melt the fabric of his pants and shirt.

“I should take a shower,” Jace whispered, breathless, his heart beating at a blinding speed in his chest. “I have been working all day.”

“Later,” Clary whispered back, her breath tickling his ear, causing the hairs on the back of his neck and on his arms to stand on end. A shiver run through his whole body and he knew that he couldn’t step away from Clary even if his life depended on it. “I want you in my bed,” Clary said and gently but surely pushed him backwards until Jace felt the edge of the bed against the back of his legs. He sat down and she sat stride on his lap, Jace’s arms firmly wrapped around her waist.

Jace wanted Clary with an intensity borne of days of separation and worry. Yet, he didn’t want to rush. He wanted to take his time exploring her body; savoring her lips and her skin slowly and unhurriedly; inhaling the clean scent of her skin; admiring her beautiful body, her body that she offered to him so freely. In turn, he wanted to offer himself equally freely and without disguises or protections.
He would not remember later how long her mouth explored his, but soon his hands began to make their way up and down her back, urgently and decidedly. With one hand, he rounded her behind and she rewarded him with an exquisite moan that he felt in his groin and in the very center of his being. He grew harder and harder against her, his breathing gaining in speed; hers responding in kind.

At one point, Clary began to slowly peel his clothes off until Jace was naked for her. All throughout, she demanded his unwavering attention and his mind obeyed leaving behind, at least for the moment, any concern for anything other than her mouth on his, her teasing tongue, her soft skin, and her beautiful eyes that seemed to see right into him.

That night, Jace run his tongue through every inch of Clary’s body, buried his face over and over in the jungle of her red hair and lost his soul in the depth of her eyes, until he felt the muscles in Clary’s body tighten and she regaled him with the most exquisite climax, calling his name, beckoning him to lose himself in her. He let go then, and felt himself explode inside her, and for a second, his soul abandoned his body, and took flight reaching almost to heaven before falling back to earth, back to this room and this bed, back into his body still wrapped around Clary.

“We should spend more time apart,” Clary whispered after a while and smiled. “It seems to do wonders for our lovemaking.”

“Oh, you have no idea,” Jace said and searched for her mouth once again, renewed hunger in his voice.

“I thought you were tired,” she said.

“The night is young and I am just starting,” he replied. “I have a lot to make up for.”

“I love you,” Clary said as she entangled her fingers in Jace’s hair, her body responding with surprising speed to Jace’s renewed desire.

“I love you too, more than I could ever express.”

“You can try,” she said, her voice playful and light, her eyes full of yearning, and Jace thought that he was the luckiest man in the world.

Hours later, as Jace was falling asleep, contented and in peace for the first time in weeks, in his office, Alec felt a sudden sensation of harmony come over him, a peace he had not felt since his parabatai bond was severed. The sensation was familiar; it was the sensation he felt every time Jace experienced joy of any kind. He had missed the sensation and was glad to have it back. The feeling wasn’t enough to quiet his own turmoil, but was enough to give him hope. Perhaps as long as there were happy people in this world, there would be hope, he thought, as he continued reading the report on the tablet in front of him. His thoughts, however, were only partially on the task; part of them wandered somewhere a few levels below the building in a cell that, at that moment, was in darkness.
"What you have with Magnus is not a sin," Jace told Alec. "He didn’t curse you; he allowed you to be who you really are, the person I have known you to be all along. You were this person before you met him and will continue to be this person even if you are not with Magnus anymore."

Magnus was so tired. Sleepless nights; the constant anxiety and vigilance of the last few weeks; the weight of guilt and sorrow; the endless preoccupation about things we couldn’t control and, sometimes, didn’t even know; and that absence that felt like a black hole in the middle of his chest. All of that, and the darn manacles first draining his powers, and now smothering the magic fire within him like a heavy wet blanket on his shoulders. He felt cold, freezing really, as if the warmth in the air couldn’t penetrate his skin, as if he was suddenly carrying the coldest of winters inside him.

For the first time in his life, Magnus was painfully aware of the weight of the years on him, as if his three centuries had become a heavy boulder that weighted him down. Even in the darkest of times, he had strived to be vivacious, effervescent, vibrant, the life of the party. Since childhood, he had made it his mission to live to the fullest: to dream, to experience, to try new things, to fall in love. But in the last few weeks he had begun to question whether he had ever truly loved before he met Alec. Did he really ever live a full life before he found happiness in the arms of a Shadowhunter, or was it all just an illusion?

The gloominess that had taken over his thoughts was making it difficult to keep up his commonly sassy and feisty façade. Captivity had never been his thing, and being stuck in a cell was certainly not his idea of a good time, but it was more than that. It felt as if he was carrying captivity within him, as if his usually cheerful self was imprisoned inside, unable to free itself, unable to shine. He had always done sadness and sorrow with flair, style and, certainly, with a much better fashion sense. It had been his way to stick it to fate for, not only, making him immortal, but also, for making him a romantic, a warlock with a soft center, a warlock with an innate desire to belong, yet condemned to live in between worlds.

Perhaps, he thought, he should ask Izzy to come see him. She had a fabulous sense of style and fashion, the kind of sense he had always admired and wished to encourage. She could bring some things from his penthouse, a colorful blanket and certainly a new outfit. Magnus didn’t remember the last time he had worn the same clothes for this long. But as soon as the idea occurred, he thought it was trivial and superficial, and that it would make no difference on his state of mind or ease the sadness he felt.

He knew, of course, that delving on depressive thoughts was unproductive, but he couldn’t help it. After all, there was nothing else to do in the confines of his cell. As hours and hours went by, he became more and more detached from the world. He had asked the guards to turn down the lights and, except for visits from Jeremy, Jace and her warlock friends, he had been mostly alone. The silence and darkness added to the sensation of being removed from reality and he began to consider whether this feeling of being suspended outside time was what it felt like to fade or petrify. Perhaps, he thought, this is what other immortals experience when they have reached that stage in...
their endless lives when they no longer feel joy or the desire to live and see new things. Perhaps this would be the beginning of the end for him. Perhaps this is what the weight of guilt—the guilt of outliving everybody, or of the inevitable mistakes that in the case of an immortal added up without end—does to his kind. As his mind meandered aimlessly in the terrain of his own memories, Magnus began to understand the temptation that plagued old warlocks, to live in the past because they cannot longer look towards the future.

He laid on the bed staring up at the ceiling until his eyes closed and he entered a state that was somewhere between sleep and awareness. His mind eventually run out of thoughts and remembering became too painful, not because of the dark memories, but because of the joyful ones, the ones of Alec’s smiling face, his unusually long fingers, his black hair flying in the wind, his dreadful and threadbare outfits, his scent, his touch, his playful tongue. Magnus didn’t want to lose those memories but he couldn’t bear recalling them either; for they made the absence so much more intolerable. So, he decided not to remember and not to think for a while.

Magnus didn’t know how long he floated in a place devoid of thoughts. Only one thing seemed to call him back to reality. Occasionally, he felt the touch of a familiar gaze, like a kiss on his skin, like the touch of snowflakes. He would open his eyes and look towards the doorway or the room at the other side the glass that separated his cell from the rest of the cell block, but no one was there, just the lingering sensation, like a ghost of something or someone familiar. He would let his mind linger on the doorway or the other room for a while, imagining the silhouette he wished to see there, but when it didn’t materialize, his mind went back to a state of emptiness.

After hours of reading and writing reports, and of catching up on the investigation and on events that had taken place during his absence, Alec decided to take a walk through the Institute. This had been a routine of his since he became Head. Before leaving to go to Magnus’ or to his room, he used to walk up and down the corridors and the grounds making sure everything was as it should be, making sure he hadn’t forgotten or dismissed anything important. This was his way of quieting down his own insecurity about his role as a leader. Now, after weeks away, he felt once again the need to see with his own eyes that the place hadn’t completely fallen apart. The Institute and its inhabitants had, after all, been placed in his care, and he felt he owed it to past generations of Shadowhunters as well as to future ones to be a good keeper of this place.

Repairs were well underway but Alec could still see the impact of the explosion on the historical building that housed the Institute. The front wall was almost fully restored and all the broken windows and doors had been replaced, but even though the new parts were not much different than the old ones, Alec still thought they looked like fresh and not completely healed scars on the face of the old building.

He blamed himself for the attacks, and wondered whether he had missed something: an overlooked detail or an ignored clue that could have allowed him to prevent the tragedy. What was worse, he couldn’t help thinking that if he hadn’t been so in love, so caught up in the sensation of being happy for the first time, he would have been more alert. Or perhaps, he wondered in an internal voice that didn’t quite sound like his own, that had been the plan all along: to blind him, to distract him so he wouldn’t anticipate the danger that was lurking just around the corner.

Alec walked aimlessly through the dark corridors, greeting but not really stopping to talk to his fellow Shadowhunters on night duty. He simply walked and thought, and as he did, he let his feet guide him without much attention to where he was going. Perhaps that is why, he found himself over and over in the doorway leading to the cell block, or in the room outside Magnus’ cell. A couple of times, he almost reached for the light switch, and sat on the bench facing the glass that separated the cell from the rest of the room. Every time he stopped and, realizing where his feet had taken him, turned and left as quickly as he had come. But before leaving, he flittingly glanced
at Magnus’ inert figure on the bed; his face expressionless; his familiar long neck with its Adam’s apple that moved up and down when Magnus breathed or swallowed; his hands resting on his chest; his usually fashionable outfit, now a little less tidy due to the long hours in the cell.

Magnus wasn’t asleep, Alec knew it. He had slept with Magnus so many times that he had learned to recognize the rhythm of his breathing when he was asleep. Magnus was awake, but his eyes were closed, and he looked tired, as if his usual sparkle had dimmed somewhat. The thought tugged at something in Alec’s heart, but he didn’t allow himself to delve on it too much. He had other things to do, he told himself as he walked out of the cell block for the third or fourth time, more important things to worry about. Yet, as he began to walk again, lost in thought, his feet took over with the same determination to bring him back to that cell and to that man lying inert on that bed.

In the small hours of the morning, when the Institute and the city were at their quietest, Magnus’ felt once again the soft touch of eyes on his skin and this time, the sensation didn’t go away as fast as it had before. He opened his eyes and turned, as he had previously done, certain that he would find no one there. Yet, he was mistaken; for there, at the other side of the glass, sitting on the bench, his back against the wall, was the familiar figure of Alec Lightwood. It was as if all the available light in the room shone on Alec’s silky black hair and in his brown eyes that looked intently at Magnus, like beacons calling to him with an intensity that was almost loud in the silence of the room.

Magnus’ heart missed a couple beats and something stirred in that spot in his chest where he carried all his feelings for this tall, young man that now looked at him across the glass with an unfathomable expression. As if Alec had heard the irregular thumping in Magnus’ chest, he brought his hand to his own chest and touch something there. Feeling unusually self-conscious and particularly aware of his position as a prisoner, Magnus sat up on the bed and imitating Alec, sat with his back against the wall. He wanted to say something, so many things, in fact. He wanted to apologize, to explain, to ask, to plea, but he couldn’t find the words. So, he simply stared back at Alec and waited.

“I have something to ask and I expect you to be truthful in your answer,” Alec said after an inordinate amount of time in silence. His voice was serious, steady and completely devoid of the familiarity and affection that Magnus had grown accustomed to. There was no anger in that voice, but there was no warmth either. Magnus suspected that this would not be a conversation between Alexander and Magnus, but between Alec, the Nephilim, and Magnus Bane, the High Warlock of Brooklyn.

“Of course, I will answer any questions you have,” Magnus replied, keeping his tone equally unemotional. “But after I do, you need to let me go, or transfer me to a more secured location. My presence here is dangerous.”

“Did you ever use magic on me without my knowledge?” Alec asked, ignoring Magnus’ request.

“What?” Magnus replied, the question taking him completely by surprise. He had expected Alec to ask him about his involvement in the attacks; about Annaliese and Khuno’s plans; or even why he had left him. This question, however, was completely unexpected.

“Tell me, did you ever spellbound me?” Alec asked his eyes piercing and shining with unusual intensity.

“What are you talking about?”

“Tell me, dam it!” Alex demanded as he stood up and came to stand facing the glass that separated
him from Magnus, his arms behind his back in the posture of a soldier, his voice gaining in volume. “Did you ever spell bounded me or cursed me in any way?”

“Cursed you? For what purpose?” Magnus asked, his thoughts in disarray. This conversation was certainly not going as he had expected.

“To be with you; to be this way,” Alec replied, and Magnus thought the words sounded like heavy stones falling from Alec’s mouth onto the floor.

“Who told you such a thing?” Magnus asked, his tone angry and incredulous. How could Alec imagine that Magnus would do such a despicable thing?

“Just answer me! Did you or did you not use dark magic on me?”

The words, the expression in Alec’s face, and his posture provoked a confusion of thoughts and feelings in Magnus: anger mixed with sadness, surprise and disbelief. What was happening with Alec? What was he thinking? But then it downed on Magnus: those were not Alec’s questions, at least not the questions that his Alexander would ever ask. Those words sounded like words he had heard before, from other Nephilim, older Nephilim, the kind that scrubbed their hands to erase any hints of Magnus’ touch. Magnus felt like an abyss was opening in the pit of his stomach and his soul was being swallowed by it. Someone had gotten to Alec, someone had poisoned his mind. Yet, Alec should know better, an angry voice in his mind interrupted his thoughts. It was unreasonable, Magnus knew, to think that Alec would not doubt him after he left him, but he couldn’t help it, he was angry.

He stood up and walked towards the glass and stopped a couple of steps in front of Alec, so close, yet so far at the time. He wanted to touch Alec, reach across the distance and melt the glass that separated them, to put his hand on his shoulder or on the side of his face. But looking at Alec’ hard and cold eyes, Magnus understood that even if his powers could make the glass disappear, Alec was just too far out of his reach.

“No, Alec. I have never used magic on you without your knowledge or for any other purpose than to heal you when you were injured,” Magnus replied, his voice steady. He struggled to contain the anger, the sadness, the despair he felt raising from his chest and flowing through his body in the way his magic usually did. For a moment, he thought his magic was awakening but when he looked at his hands, he saw no sparks.

“Are you telling me the truth?” Alec asked. His chest releasing a breath that had been caught there since this conversation began.

“I have never used my magic in that way,” replied Magnus, indignation evident in his voice.

“Why then does Inquisitor Dearborn think that you cursed me?”

“Dearborn? Well that explains it,” Magnus replied, sarcasm clear in his voice. Magnus knew the Inquisitor. Or rather, he had met him when Dearborn was a young Shadowhunter and Magnus was teaching at the Academy in Idris. Magnus had made a joke once, a rather innocent comment, and Dearborn had looked at him as if Magnus was a cockroach he was about to step on. Over the years, Magnus had learned that Dearborn was a bigot, not only when it came to downworlders. He also disliked strong and independent women, people who looked different than him and people who, like Magnus, didn’t conform to his ideas of morality. The Inquisitor was dangerous, not just because of his title, but because of his hateful ideas. And, now he had been putting those ideas in Alec’s head.
“And you believed him,” Magnus said after a pause, not a question but a statement.

“It’s not like you were there to set the record straight,” Alec stated and Magnus thought he heard a hint of sadness in Alec’s voice.

“I had to go. I became a liability to you the moment Annaliese found me. I am a liability to you now, you must understand that.” Magnus’ voice sounded like a plea, but he still felt anger seething beneath his words.

“Well, if you were trying to protect me and my people, I don’t think it worked,” Alec said dismissively. “The institute still got attacked and I still ended up by myself, in a strange country and in the Inquisitor’s hands. And, I am still under suspicion due to my association with you. If this is your idea of protection, thank you, but not thank you. Now tell me, why was your face projected beside that woman after the explosion? What is your role in this whole mess?”

Magnus had already answered these questions when Jace asked them, but he knew that he owed it to Alec to answer them again. It was, after all, his association with Annaliese that had landed Alec and him in this terrible mess.

“I suspect this is Annaliese and Khuno’s revenge for what happened in Berlin,” Magnus replied.

“But why attack the institutes? Why make themselves, and you, enemies of the Nephilim?”

“Annaliese blames Shadowhunters for my refusal to join her. She thinks that in 1945 I chose Joshua Pineshade over her, and that was the reason I interfered with her plans. Now, she thinks that you are the reason. She wants vengeance and to destroy my ties to the Nephilim. Perhaps she thinks I will go back to her and Khuno when I have nothing left.”

“And did you choose Joshua over her?” asked Alec, the question pregnant with meaning.

“Joshua was a dear friend. I met him when he was a child. Year later, he helped me destroy Annaliese’s camp in Berlin. After that, we remained friends until the day he died ten years ago.”

“Why are Annaliese and Khuno so obsessed with you? What is the nature of your relationship to them?” Alec asked and Magnus understood that the conversation was getting to a point in which he would have to answer difficult questions.

“I was close to them once, over two centuries ago,” he replied courtly. He hoped to get this part of the questioning over as soon as possible, and without divulging truths that would darken even more Alec’s image of him.

“How close?” Alec asked, and the intensity in his stare almost burned Magnus’ skin.

“Very close.”

“As in sexually involved?” When he walked into the cell that last time and sat on that bench, Alec had told himself that the wouldn’t ask these questions, that he would keep the conversation centered in the attacks. When he met Magnus, Alec had decided never to ask questions about a past in which he didn’t exist; questions which answers might remind him that Magnus had a life before him and would have a life after him. But for some reason he needed to know, he needed to figure out where all this rage, all this anger and all this hate originated, and why he was in the middle of it.

“Yes,” was Magnus only answer, his heart beating even more rapidly in his chest. Magnus struggled to keep Alec’s gaze, not to look away.
“With which one?” Alec asked.

“With both,” Magnus replied. And, right there and then, for the first time since he met him, Magnus saw shame in Alec’s eyes. Not even when they first met and Magnus flirted with him had Alec ever looked at him that way. He had given him looks of confusion, curiosity, uncertainty, but never shame. Magnus felt sad, a sadness that momentarily overpowered the anger from a minute ago, and he wished he could be somewhere else, anywhere else, and not with this man he had missed so much.

“And look where that has led us to,” stated Alec, his tone one of condemnation. “You should be ashamed of yourself. Look at the result of your poor choices; look at what you brought down on us because of your relationship to them.”

The sadness suddenly turned to anger once again and Magnus felt a hint of magic sparkle in his fingertips. He had done all in his power to prevent what was happening, to protect Alec. He had put his own life on the line. Yes, he had made mistakes, a long time ago, but had paid for them dearly and was willing to continue paying for them.

“Excused me?” he asked, his tone challenging and piqued. “I refuse to ever justify who I am,” he stated, through clenched teeth. “I refuse to explain why I love who I love, to no one, not to you, and certainly not to Inquisitor Dearborn.”

“But that is the problem, isn’t it?” Alec said. “How can you call what you feel love? Can you really love if you are immortal? You will not die, and as a result, you cannot love like someone who knows his time is short, that there may never be another chance to love. Can you say that you truly loved Annaliese and/or Khuno? Or were they just one more of the seventeen thousand people you have been with. Were they ever enough to wish to never love anyone else again?”

Magnus felt like Alec had thrown a bucket of freezing water on him, water that doused the anger. Alec’s eyes also looked at Magnus with such piercing sharpness that they felt like the arrow that has perforated his lung. The words were a reminder of the note he had left Alec, the note he had written so Alec would believe that Magnus didn’t love him, that Alec was not enough, so he wouldn’t follow him, so he would be safe. Magnus hated himself, the anger turning inward, making him wish he could take the words back. Despite what he just told Alec, he felt ashamed, not for being who he was, but for having hurt Alec, who was sensitive, vulnerable and trusting.

“Alexad…” Magnus started to say, wanting to explain, to tell Alec that he would rather have one moment with him than a million moments with a million people. But Alec interrupted him.

“Anyway, that issue is not here, nor there, right now. I have a battle to fight and I need to figure out how to fight it.”

“Alec, you need to get me out of here,” Magnus pleaded once again, part of him glad the conversation was taking a more familiar turn. “Annaliese will come after you because of me. You are not safe near me.”

“No, you are not going anywhere,” replied Alec, his tone final.

“Be reasonable,” Magnus tried to argue. “Your life is in danger.”

“You said once that I couldn’t get rid of you that easy. Well, you are not getting away that easy now.”

“Alec, don’t be stubborn.”
“Do you still want to protect me? How has that gone for you so far? Because it hasn’t gone that
great for me,” Alec stated, more than a hint of sarcasm in his voice. “I may be young, a boy as
some of your people call me, but I am a Shadowhunter, and I have a mission to fulfill. You brought
this mess on us, and now you will help me deal with it. I will do whatever I must to protect my
people, the Institute and the city. You can do whatever and go wherever you want after the mission
is done, but for now you are not going anywhere.”

Alec turned and left without as much as another glance in Magnus’ direction, his footsteps echoing
as they rapidly receded down the corridor and up the stairs. Magnus was left alone, standing on
the same spot. He placed his hand on the glass pane, in front of the spot where Alec had just stood, as
if he hoped to feel some of the warmth Alec had left behind.

Alec’s hands were still shaking and his breathing was fast and shallow when he walked into the
situation room. He was angry and upset and couldn’t yet understand why he had gone to talk to
Magnus. He had wanted to know, to hear an explanation from Magnus’ lips; he had wanted some
reassurance that he had not been wrong when he had trusted the warlock. After the conversation,
however, he was angrier than he had been in his whole life. Not only that; he felt small,
insignificant, just a drop of water in the big ocean that was Magnus’ existence. The price he had
paid, was paying, and will continue to pay for a moment in the warlock’s long life was so high, and
it would most likely mark Alec’s life forever.

Jace was ending a call with Inquisitor Dearborn as Alec entered, and after he clicked the switch on
the table that cut off the link, he rubbed his eyes and yawned. Alec approached and rested his fists
on the table, as if he needed the support to rein in the turmoil wracking havoc with his usual calm
exterior.

“Alec, what’s going on?” asked Jace turning to his brother, concern evident on his face.

“Nothing,” replied Alec curtly. He didn’t want to speak, and he wished he could silence his
thoughts for just a moment. “I thought you were still sleeping,” he commented, wanting to delay
the conversation about Magnus.

“I was, but Inquisitor Dearborn doesn’t seem to care for the time difference between Barcelona and

“I just came from the cell block,” Alec replied, shaking his head as if to dispel the conflicting
emotions fighting for control within him.

“Hum, that bad,” commented Jace. “Well, let’s get a cup of coffee and you can tell me all about
it,” he added, patting his brother on the back and gesturing for Alec to follow him towards the
kitchen.

Alec sighted before following Jace out of the room. His heart still pounded on his chest, and the
anger had not yet completely subsided. What’s more, the memory of Magnus’ pained expression
when Alec told him he should be ashamed haunted him.

“The inquisitor told you that Magnus had cursed you to be with him?” Jace asked a few minutes
later, a mixture of incredulity and outrage in his voice.

“Yes,” replied Alec, his hands wrapped around his coffee mug, as if the cup was a source of
support and stability. They had grabbed their drinks and had gone to sit on the same spot on the
roof they had met the night before. Alec had told Jace about the Inquisitor’s accusation against
Magnus. He had not told him though about the Inquisitor’s methods. For some reason, he felt
ashamed and didn’t want anyone to know what he had gone through, that he had not been strong
enough to defend himself.

“And he told you he could cure you of the spell?” Jace asked, the outrage wining over the incredulity.

“Yes.”

“You know that is a whole lot of crap, don’t you?” Jace argued, his own fingers wrapping tightly around his coffee mug.

“Is it though? Wouldn’t I be better off if I didn’t feel this way anymore?”

“Alec, Magnus didn’t do anything of the sort. You must believe that,” Jace stated, imbuing as much conviction as he felt into his voice.

“That is what he says, but look at what has happened because of my relationship to him.”

“Do you believe Magnus?” Jace asked, looking intently at Alec as if to make sure his brother had not bought into what the Inquisitor had said.

“I don’t know, Jace. I think there is a problem with me. It might not be a curse, but something is wrong,” he stated, and his words contained such despair that they touched a spot deep inside Jace’s heart.

“There is nothing wrong with you,” Jace said with unquestionable conviction.

“But you see, the problem is not that Magnus left me; the problem is that despite that, I waited for him,” Alec said, deep anguish in his voice. “The problem isn’t his absence but that I missed him; or that he might be lying, but that I believe him. What is wrong with me?”

“You love and trust Magnus, despite everything that has happened. Deep down you know he was trying to protect you,” Jace replied, not a shred of doubt or judgement in his voice. “You cannot help who you love, take it from me. I loved Clary even when I thought she was my sister. I would have given everything to be with her even if it was a sin, and what you have with Magnus is not a sin. He didn’t curse you; he allowed you to be who you really are, the person I have known you to be all along. You were this person before you met him and will continue to be this person even if you are not with Magnus anymore. What Dearborn told you is hateful, and he deserves to pay for making you feel like there was something wrong with you. If there is justice in this world, he will pay.”

Alec smiled and Jace wrapped an arm around his brother’s back, the gesture one of affection and acceptance.

“Well, there is no time to be worrying about this now,” Alec said. “We have a fight ahead of us and we do not even know where the next battler will be.”

“And, I think we are running out of time,” added Jace. “I suspect that Dearborn will be here any time demanding that we surrender Kat and Catarina, and we still don’t know anything about the next target.”

At that moment, Kat and Jeremy appeared on the doorway. Kat had a tablet in her hand and Jeremy carried a bunch of papers in his.

“Hey you two,” Jace greeted them. “Please tell me you have news.”
“We do,” replied Kat, “but not as good as you hope. We think the next attack will be in the next twenty-four hours, but no matter what we have tried, we cannot pinpoint the target.”

“What do you mean?” asked Alec. “You were pretty exact the last time.”

“We have been following the star chart that we think Annaliese is using to guide her movements,” explained Jeremy. “Each attack has coincided with a star in a constellation getting into alignment in the night sky, but now there are several possible stars coming into alignment. Without knowing Annaliese’s final target or the sequence of the next attacks, we cannot be sure which city will be targeted next.”

“Can we not hit each possible target all at once?” asked Jace.

“There are just too many,” replied Kat.

“I think I have an idea,” Alec said, standing up and turning to Kat. “Magnus says that Annaliese and Khuno can track him through the manacles on his wrists, that the manacles are acting as beacons. Is it possible to reverse the effect and use the manacles to track them?”

“Possibly,” replied Kat, rubbing her forehead with the fingers of one hand in an attitude of concentration. “I may be able to work a tracking spell,” she said as if speaking to herself. “But as soon as Magnus is out of the cell, they will likely be able to track us too. We might not have the element of surprise on our side, and Magnus will be defenseless. What’s worse, they could take control of his powers again.”

“We will likely be walking into a trap,” Jeremy said following Kat’s chain of thoughts to its logical conclusion.

“We will have to move faster than them,” said Alec.

“Are you sure the spell is strong enough?” Magnus asked Kat a few hours later, as the whole team gathered in the cell block. He, Catarina and Kat had been discussing the spell for the past couple of hours, debating back and forth about how to word it and about the forces of nature on which to tap to strengthen it. Kat was now performing the spell, blue and purple streaks of magic emanating from her fingers and wrapping themselves around Magnus’s wrist in a steady stream.

“You forget that I am older than you, Magnus,” the warlock replied and she smiled at his old friend. Kat thought that Magnus looked tired. There was not a trace of make-up on his face and his hair fell down his forehead without its usual glitter. He looked young and no one would imagine that he was the all-powerful High Warlock of Brooklyn.

“When are we leaving?” asked Izzy, who had just arrived in full Shadowhunter gear, whip at the ready and a few blades fasten to her belt.

“I need you and Clary to stay and take charge of the Institute, Izzy,” replied Alec, giving his sister a warm smile that he hoped would at last begin to mend the bridges that he had burned in the last few weeks. “We may get a visit from the Inquisitor at any time, and I need you to be here to do damage control and to provide backup in case we need it. Can you do that?”

“But you are going to need us,” protested Clary. “You are likely walking into a trap and Magnus has no powers to fight or defend you.” Clary looked towards Magnus hoping for some sign of support and Magnus looked back at her and gave her a gentle nod of agreement.

“This is going to be a small party,” stated Alec with conviction. “We are going to go small and stealthy, just Jace, myself, Kat and Magnus. We are going to use the manacles as a magnet; they
will lead us to the warlocks. We need you to stay behind with Catarina and be ready to come to our aid if we run into trouble.”

“I should come too,” said Jeremy looking intently at Kat, his eyes full of apprehension. “Kat is not a warrior; she is a scholar; she doesn’t have battle experience.”

“I will be fine,” said Kat and smiled reassuringly at Jeremy.

“I will protect her,” Jace added. “I promise I won’t let anything happened to her. I expect you to do the same for me and look after Clary,” he added even though he knew that Clary was perfectly capable of protecting herself. Jace understood the anxiety of seeing the person you love go into a dangerous situation, and he wanted to make sure Jeremy knew that he would have Kat’s back. Looking at Kat though, he saw in the warlock’s face a humorous look of disbelief as if she suspected that she would be the one that would end up protecting him.

“You will call if you run into trouble,” Izzy told her brothers. “We will be standing by to go lend assistance.”

“You have my word,” Jace reassured his sister with a smile. “So, where do we begin?” he asked turning to Alec.

“Magnus, can you get us to the villa Annaliese was using in Tuscany?” Alec asked.

“I don’t know if that is a good idea,” Magnus replied. “I was never outside the house; I could only portal us into the house, and there is a very good chance that she and/or her people will be waiting for us.”

“We have to take the chance,” said Alec. “We need to start somewhere.”

“Are you sure?” asked Magnus, his voice unable to conceal his anxiety. This plan was risky, he thought, and it placed Alec and Jace in terrible danger. Kat could likely face anything waiting at the other end of the portal, but Alec and Jace were just Shadowhunters, with no special power beside their weapons.

“Yes,” replied Alec curtly “just take us to an isolated corner of the house.”

A few minutes later, and after saying goodbye to Izzy and issuing his last instructions for taking care of the Institute, Alec came to stand beside Magnus by the entrance to the portal that Kat had opened on the Institute’s roof. Alec was in full combat gear. In addition to the bow and quiver across his back, he also carried several other weapons fasten to his belt. Magnus wore a long black leather coat over black jeans and a grey shirt. On Alec’s instructions and to prevent any attempt on Khuno or Annaliese’s part to regain control over Magnus’ powers, his hands were restrained in handcuffs made of electrum, the same metal in Izzy’s whip. Magnus wondered whether the handcuffs were also intended to prevent any attempts to escape on his part. But he didn’t want to think about it too much.

Magnus and Alec looked awkwardly at the two couples who at that moment were engaged in loving goodbyes. Jace embraced Clary and, after kissing her, he took a lock of her hair in between his fingers and brought it to his nose. He inhaled deeply as if he wanted to carry the scent of the woman he loved with him.

“You look after yourself, you hear?” Jeremy told Kat in a low and tender voice, his arms wrapped around the warlock’s tiny waist. “I will be waiting for your message, ready to go help you if you need me.”
“Take care of yourself Magnus,” said Catarina approaching her friend. “Do not take unnecessary risks. Remember that I have no one else to annoy me.”

“I will do my best,” replied Magnus and smiled warmly. His friend was prickly and not always agreeable, but she was the closest he had to family.

As soon as the embraces, kisses and goodbyes were done, Jace and Kat joined Magnus and Alec by the entrance to the portal. Alec looked towards his sister and smiled one last time. He then turned and nodded at Magnus in a gesture that suggested that the warlock should guide them through the portal. Magnus looked back at Alec and after responding with a nod of his own, took a step across the event horizon, followed by the rest of the team. Clary, Izzy, Catarina and Jeremy waited until each of their loved ones went through and the portal closed, leaving the roof in darkness.
Khuno released the magic fireball, its energy forming a tail that made it look like a minute comet making its way through the air with the speed of a bullet. Time seemed to stop for Magnus. In that instant, he saw long centuries of solitude and darkness; centuries without Alec, without his smile, without his chivalrous and brave gestures, without his tuneless whistling as he tidied up Magnus’ apartment or made coffee, without the taste of his lips, and the touch of his long fingers.

“Don’t come back to the Institute, go anywhere else, but there” came Izzy’s anxious voice over the phone. Alec could hear static and an echo on the line as if his sister was talking from somewhere underground or perhaps even under water.

“Why? What happened?” he asked, his voice just above a whisper, a mixture of alarm, confusion and a hint of panic in his tone. Alec leaned a semi-conscious Magnus against the wall of the narrow passageway in which they had just sought refuge and looked back to make sure that Kat and Jace were behind him.

“The Inquisitor arrived with a team; they have taken control of the Institute and have confined all our people to their rooms. He is demanding your and Magnus’ surrender.”

“Where are you?” asked Alec, a multitude of thoughts fighting for attention in his mind. He looked at Jace once again and saw that he was unusually pale, almost pasty, sweat covering his forehead. Alec feared his brother would lose consciousness at any time. A deep wound bled profusely in his side, and Jace was covering it with Kat’s sweater, the material quickly becoming soaked.

“Clary, Jeremy, Catarina and I and a few others escaped through the tunnels,” Izzy replied. “We are heading to the Hotel Du Mort. We will be safe there.”

“Okay.” Alec said as he tried to collect his thoughts. “Do not tell anyone that we talked. I will call you back as soon as we are safe,” he added and hanged up.

This is bad, he thought as he leaned his back flat against the wall and cautiously peeked out of the alley and towards the main road to make sure they had not been followed. Alec needed to figure out his next move fast. His team was in bad shape. Jace and Magnus were injured, and Kat was not doing much better. An ugly burn, the result of demonic lava, covered her right arm and shoulder, and she had used all her powers containing the force of the explosion that a few minutes ago had broken the silence of the night. Powerful and vengeful warlocks were pursuing them through an unfamiliar part of a city he had only visited once and for only a couple of days. He had called his sister to request that Catarina open a portal for them to return to New York but now their only exit strategy had fallen through.

Alec glanced up at the dark sky and saw a red cloud raising and rapidly expanding from the epicenter of the explosion a few blocks away. Orange and red flames glowed over the roofs of the ancient buildings reaching towards the Tuscan sky, and illuminating the tower of Badia Florentina, the church attached to the Florence Institute. Kat had managed to contain the worse of the explosion and she had done in Rome, but the blast had still been loud, and the resulting fire had
reached part of the ancient monastery that housed the Institute. He could hear sirens in the distance, likely the fire department and police. Alec was unsure how many Shadowhunters lived in Florence. He had seen a few running out of the building a few minutes before, blades on hand, looks of surprise on their faces, but ready to defend their Institute. He hoped none of them had been killed in the battle or in the explosion.

Alec checked his belt and saw that he had used all his blades, and his quiver had no more than a couple of arrows left. Jace was not much better armed, the blade in his hand his only defense. Their stamina runes had been completely depleted and Alec was beginning to feel the exhaustion of the battle and of almost twenty-four hours of constant travel by portal, repelling attacks by warlocks and demons. He needed to come up with a plan fast or they would all be in bigger trouble than they were now.

He turned to look at Kat, hoping for suggestions. “We are on our own for now and we need to get out of here,” he said as he reached for his bow, his only remaining weapon.

“I don’t know if I have enough magic left to open a portal,” Kat stated, her voice and face plainly revealing the pain and exhaustion she felt. “I can try though.”

“I can lend you some of my strength,” Alec offered. “Would that help?”

“No, I can do it,” came the weak voice of Magnus from Alec’s side. With his shaking right hand, Magnus held his left shoulder, as if he feared his arm would come out of its socket. Hours before, Alec had severed the chain that linked the electrum cuffs to allow Magnus more freedom of movement. Without the chain, the cuffs had resembled bracelets of sorts, clanking against the manacles. Now, the manacles and the electrum cuffs were gone, and only deep and ugly burns were left in their place. Alec suspected that Magnus’ arms and possibly torso had also suffered burns; for the sleeves of his jacket were singed in sections. It was evident that the warlock could barely see for he squinted as if the little light that illuminated the alleyway hurt his eyes.

“Magnus, you are too weak,” said Alec, putting a hand on the warlock’s shoulder. Except for dragging him away from the explosion, this was the first time that Alec touched Magnus in weeks and as his hand made contact with Magnus’ body, Alec felt the odd sensation of being anchored, of arriving at port after a long voyage. The sensation changed almost instantly, however, for as soon as his hand rested on Magnus, Alec felt part of his own strength leaving him, as if it was being pulled out of him.

“Don’t touch me, Alec,” Magnus said and gently pushed Alec’s hand away. “I am weak and my body is searching for ways to replenish the magic powers I have lost.”

“Neither of you are in any condition to open a portal,” Alec stated. “Jace, are you able to walk?” he asked turning to his brother.

“Yes,” said Jace, his voice breathy and barely a whisper. “We can look for a place to hide and wait.” However, as he spoke he reached for the wall for support as if his legs were about to give out.

At that moment, they heard footsteps approaching and voices nearby, warlock voices, searching for them. The darkness was momentarily broken by the glow of magic light coming from the entrance to the alleyway. They flatten themselves against the wall behind a garbage dump, and, holding their breaths, stood still for what felt like an eternity until the warlocks moved away.

“We are sitting ducks here,” said Kat. “We need a portal, or they will find us.”
“I can do it,” Magnus repeated, tentatively moving away from the wall hoping his legs would not give out. He couldn’t remember ever being so weak. He had not an ounce of magic energy left in him, and whatever he had, he was about to use to attempt opening a portal. But he had to do it; Alec and Jace were in mortal danger.

“We can do it together,” said Kat standing beside him. “Between the two of us, we may have enough magic left. The portal will stay open for a very short time though, so we better know where we are going.”

“My penthouse,” offered Magnus.

“No,” interrupted Alec, “the Inquisitor has likely sent people there searching for us.”

“I know where,” said Kat. “Do you remember Magnus where we stayed the last time I visited you?”

Magnus nodded as Kat put her uninjured hand on his shoulder, her face immediately registering the effect of lending Magnus the little energy she had left. Magnus lifted his arms and tentatively waved them around. Magic sparkles sputtered irregularly from his hands, as if an old engine was misfiring. But after a couple of tries, a portal finally opened in front of them.

“Oh, let’s get out of this hell hole,” Alec said lending his body to Jace for support. They then closely followed Kat and Magnus through the portal.

They emerged in a bright and luxurious penthouse suite at the Grand Park Hotel in New York City, its floor to ceiling windows overlooking the park and the illuminated Manhattan skyline in the distance. As soon as they stepped through, Jace collapsed and Alec had to drag him to a nearby sofa. He was bleeding badly and his skin had acquired the color of grey ash.

“I got you, body,” Alec whispered as he placed a pillow under his parabatai’s head. “We need a doctor,” he stated to no one in particular, unchecked panic in his voice.

“No, we need warlock magic,” said Kat, reaching for her phone. A second later she was on the line with Catarina and less than two minutes after that, Catarina was emerging from a portal in the suite’s hallway.

“Alright, what do we have here?” she said in the matter-of-factly voice she used with his patients at the hospital.

Half an hour later, Jace rested comfortably in one of the three bedrooms that made up the suite and Catarina was on the sofa with Magnus examining his wrists. “These burns are bad,” she declared as she ran a hand a few millimeters above the injuries, blue and purple magic pouring from her fingers. “Unfortunately, being the result of demonic energy I can only soothe the pain; they will have to heal on their own as you replenish your powers. How far up your arm do they go?” she asked lifting and peeking under the cuffs of Magnus’ grey shirt.

“Not too far,” said Magnus dodging the question. “I will be fine.”

“You have never been stoic, Magnus; do not start now,” she said in the tone of a schoolmaster reprimanding her pupil. “You stink to high hell, I suspect your nerve endings are shut and you cannot see very well, can you?”

“It was the flash from the explosion hitting my eyes,” Magnus replied with the hint of a coy smile on his face. It was not completely true but true enough, he thought. “It will pass, I can already feel my energy replenishing. I will be fine after a few drinks and a good steak.”
“Okay,” she replied in a tone of resignation. “It is your funeral, after all.” After a few more
ministrations, she stood up and headed towards where Alec and Kat were standing in the hallway. Alec
was again on the phone with his sister.

“Kat wants to know if Jeremy rescued the thing the two of them were working on in the lab,” Alec
was asking Izzy in a cryptic tone. After listening for a second, Alec nodded at Kat and she sighed
in relief.

“I have to go back,” Catarina told Kat as Alec walked a few steps down the hallway so he could
hear his sister better over the phone. “They may need a warlock in case they need to run. You
should stay here until you feel better. We think that the Inquisitor may monitor the phone lines, so
we must keep communications to a minimum for now, and stick to old-fashioned fire messages. I
haven’t use one of those since the last time I dated a downworlder in the fifties,” Catarina added in
a sarcastic tone. “Can you ward the room, Kat, or do you want me to do it?”

“I can do it,” replied Kat who was already feeling stronger after Catarina’s healing touches. “But
before I do, I should go downstairs and check us in. We don’t want to be caught trespassing.”

Alec came back after a minute, his phone still in his hand, deep concern evident on his face. He
turned the phone over and removed its battery, and then asked Kat to do the same with hers. If the
Inquisitor tried to track them through their phones, he would not get very far. Izzy and her team
were taking the same precaution. There would be no communications by phone between them for
now.

The conversation with Izzy had been extremely alarming. Inquisitor Dearborn had found a way to
travel with a team and had arrived at the Institute in the middle of the night. He had orders from
The Clave to take control and had demanded that the warlocks and Alec be surrendered.
Apparently, Alec, like Magnus, had become a fugitive of The Clave. He suspected that the latest
images from the Florence Institute’s security cameras would go a long way to support Dearborn’s
accusations.

Thankfully, Izzy, Clary, Jeremy and a few others had managed to escape and were hiding near the
Hotel Du Mort under Luke’s protection. Catarina had raised wards and conjured disguising spells
that would hopefully prevent any attempts to track them.

“Don’t come here; it isn’t safe,” had been Izzy’s reaction when Alec offered to go to the Hotel Du
Mort. “At least for tonight we are safe where we are; let’s not tempt fate. You should rest and
regain your strength. You will need it to stop these attacks and clear yours and Magnus’ name.
You also need to look after Jace or Clary will never forgive you if something happened to him. No
one, except for Catarina, knows where you are; so, stay put,” had been Izzy’s last pronouncement
before she hanged up. Alec thought that his sister, as usual, had all the qualities of a leader
including the commanding voice.

When Alec came back to the seating room, Catarina announced that she was leaving, that Jace
would sleep at least until morning, and that he was healing fine. “Get some sleep,” she told Alec
and she patted him on the arm before leaving.

“I am going downstairs to check us in,” Kat announced as she followed her friend out of the suite,
“I will also order us some food. Lock the door behind me.”

After closing the door, Alec leaned against it for a moment. He was exhausted but knew he could
not sleep. He was wired and his mind was just too crowded with thoughts and images of the events
of the last twenty-four hours. The whole mission had been an uphill battle from the moment it
started. As they had suspected, Annaliiese and her people had anticipated that Alec and his team
would use the manacles to track them, and had made sure to take them on a vertiginous pursuit from portal to portal across who knows how many thousands of kilometers.

As soon as they stepped through the portal in New York and emerged in a corner of a library in the villa in which Magnus had been imprisoned, they had been attacked by two of Annaliese’s warlocks. The villa had been booby-trapped and a series of explosions had brought the roof and walls down on them. The rest was quickly engulfed in flames. Alec and his team would have been trapped hadn’t Kat opened another portal. Thankfully, the tracking spell worked and Magnus could guide them through in pursuit of the warlocks. The chase had not been easy though, and over the next several hours they had played a game of cat and mouse that put their strength, stamina and skills to the test. They followed the warlocks and emerged in the middle of a forest where a pack of raverner demons was waiting. From there, the chase took them to the desert near Abu Dhabi where they lost the trail for a couple of hours and were attacked by a pack of achaieral demons. They then tracked the warlocks that eluded them at the villa to a dark alley somewhere in Istanbul, where they finally caught up to them. After a fight that resulted in the death of one of the warlocks, they followed the survivor to Florence where they emerged in an alley not too far from the Institute.

Alec suspected that the warlocks had not been trying to lose or kill them, but simply to confuse them and exhaust them. He was certain that the plan all along had been to weaken them to such an extent that when they finally arrived at their destination, they would be too tired to mount an effective defense. He also suspected that Khuno and Annaliese had planned to recapture Magnus before they set up the explosion in Florence. And, they had almost succeeded, Alec thought as walked back into the seating room.

Alec looked around and realized that he was alone in the room. Magnus was nowhere to be seen. A renewed rush of anxiety washed over him and for a moment, he thought of the last time Magnus had disappeared without as much as a warning, and how much that abandonment had upset and unsettled him. The fear was unreasonable; but then, most fears are. He wondered where Magnus could have gone. He was injured and Alec was sure he could barely see. The blast he had received had been such as terrible blow to Magnus’ system that not even his condition as a warlock had been able to protect him. Alec heard movement coming from somewhere down the hallway, like the sound of someone stumbling over furniture, and he involuntarily breathed a sigh of relief.

He followed the sound in the direction of the master bedroom. The whole suite was quite big. In addition to the bedroom where Jace now slept, there was a second bedroom and a bathroom to one side of the seating area. The master bedroom was in a wing of its own on the opposite end. As he walked into the sparsely illuminated room, Alec understood why it was called the master bedroom. It was certainly the biggest and most luxurious of the rooms, with a huge bed in the center, covered with crispy white linen, a separate seating area with its own fireplace, enormous floor to ceiling windows, and a door leading to the biggest bathroom Alec had ever seen. The bathroom was in darkness and the only light came from the lamp on a night table beside the bed.

Magnus had made his way from the living room to the master bathroom slowly, by memory, and holding on to the wall. Although he felt his body healing, he could still not see very well and light hit his eyes with the sharpness of a dagger. His legs shook, his body felt heavy, and the initial ringing in his ears had become a constant buzzing. His wrists and arms burned, and the smell of sulfur, fire and smoke coming from his clothes and skin was unbearable. Magnus couldn’t remember the last time he had been this exhausted and dizzy. In fact, he couldn’t remember ever having depleted his powers to such an extent.

He sat on the edge of the tub, his head in his hands, the image of Khuno’s expression edged forever in his mind, the warlock’s look of disbelief and surprise just before his eyes went blank and his chest exploded. Magnus would have never believed that their journey in the last twenty-four hours
would end this way. In fact, for most of that time, he had thought that they would die before they even made it to their destination. Magnus had felt so terribly powerless when they had been attacked by warlocks and demons; unable to use his powers; prisoner to the manacles and to the spell that, while allowing him to track the warlocks, continued to smoother his magic.

Alec, Jace and Kat had shown incredible bravery, however. He had seen Alec fight before, but this time, his movements were even more seamless, sinuous and certain. Alec had always been a protector, willing to put his life on the line to keep Jace, other Shadowhunters and even Magnus safe. That had not changed this time. Yet, there was also a new determination in him, borne, Magnus thought, out of both a commitment to stop the attacks and an anger that Magnus had not seen before. This latest war would change Alec forever, he had feared, and had felt terribly sad that a part of Alec’s innocence and purity would be left on this battleground.

“Khuno is dead, he is dead,” a voice repeated in Magnus’ head as if the thought was rattling inside his skull looking for a place to lodge itself. He couldn’t believe that the man that had meant so much to him once had died such a futile and useless death, and he couldn’t believe that it had been him the one to kill him. He had had no choice; he had to protect Alec, Magnus thought, as he replayed the events in his mind.

As soon as they had gotten to Florence, Magnus had felt the pull of Khuno’s powers attempting to reactivate the manacles. That had convinced him that they were in the place chosen for the attack. But by the time that they got to the courtyard in front of the Institute, Khuno and his people were already there and in bigger numbers than in their previous encounter. This time, the two warlocks needed for the ritual that would trigger the detonation were unwilling participants. They were restrained with heavy chains and tied to a spot on the ground surrounded by three of Khuno’s warlocks. Five other warlocks stood with Khuno forming a perimeter a few meters away from the target. The two chained warlocks—a man in his fifties and a woman that looked no older than twenty and whom Magnus had met briefly during a trip to China a few decades ago—had initially resisted, trying in vain to free themselves. But as soon as the other warlocks began to chant, they went into a sort of trance, their eyes as black as tar, their faces turned towards the sky, and their voices joining in the chanting as it gained in speed and volume.

Suspecting what was likely to happen next, Alec, Jace and Kat had done all in their powers to prevent the explosion. Magnus saw Jace injure and likely kill two warlocks, and two of Alec’s arrows also hit their targets. Kat attempted to stop the explosion by isolating the epicenter with the use of a magic shield, hoping, Magnus suspected, to close the rift. But, as a well of fire opened in between the two chained warlocks, one of their guards casted a spell that threw a lobe of hot lava in Kat’s direction hitting her on the shoulder and arm, and she lost control of the spell.

Jace was injured when one of the warlocks commanded several metal bars to detach from the fence surrounding the courtyard and threw them with the force of lances at him. Jace couldn’t repel all of them and one got him in his right side, cutting through protective jacket and flesh and lodging itself between his ribs. Jace pulled it out, a look of surprise and confusion in his angelic face before falling to his knees. He would have collapsed completely, if Magnus hadn’t run to grab him and drag him out before a worse fate befell him.

It had become quickly apparent that they were outnumbered and outgunned. With no control of his powers and with Khuno’s ongoing attempts to activate the manacles, Magnus couldn’t do much. He resisted with all his strength the pull of Khuno’s powerful spell on the manacles while evading the waves of magic the other warlocks threw at him to knock him out. All throughout, he kept a constant eye on Alec, afraid for his safety and certain that Khuno would eventually make a move against him. That was, after all, the reason why they had been led in this endless chase. Khuno had wanted to exhaust and weaken the Shadowhunters so they would become easy prey. Khuno’s plan
was to kill Alec and make Magnus helplessly watch.

As the fire reached the man and the woman at the center of the circle, and their screams pierced the silence of the night, Khuno had made his final move. Magnus had seen the determination clearly in the warlock’s eyes, in the malicious smile, in the certainty in his step as he veered directly towards Alec, a ball of dark red magic growing stronger and hotter in the palm of his hand. Magnus had seen that evil determination before, once over two centuries ago when Khuno set fire to a ship full of screaming people.

Magnus glanced at Alec and could almost see the calculations he was running at a blinding speed in his head, as Alec tried to determine the best strategy. Khuno was too far for Alec to do any damage with his seraph blade. So, Alec reached for his bow, but Magnus knew that there wasn’t enough time to even nock an arrow. He suspected that Alec knew this too.

Khuno released the magic fireball, its energy forming a tail that made it look like a minute comet making its way through the air with the speed of a bullet. Time seemed to stop for Magnus. In that instant, he saw long centuries of solitude and darkness; centuries without Alec, without his smile, without his chivalrous and brave gestures, without his tuneless whistling as he tidied up Magnus’ apartment or made coffee, without the taste of his lips, and the touch of his long fingers. He also saw a world that would be so much darker and so much more dangerous without Alec’s bravery and selflessness. He knew at that instant that he would willingly leave his very life on that courtyard, and at that very moment, if it ensured that Alec would live; that he would rather face an eternity in hell if it meant that Alec would go on.

Magnus ran at full speed to intercept the deathly blow before it hit its target, and as he stepped between Alec and the magic, he crossed his arms at the wrists in front of his chest. It had been no more than a protective gesture, or perhaps the result of instinct. The fireball hit the manacles with the force of a missile, and Magnus felt his ribs and chest bone being compressed against his heart, and he thought his chest would crush. In that second, Magnus concentrated all the magic energy locked in his body, all the magic that he had been unable to access due to the restrains on his wrists, on one single spot on his chest. It was that spot above his heart on which, weeks before and in the darkness of a hotel room in Barcelona, he had worked a spell to protect the only thing Alec had given him that he couldn’t depart with.

As he had done when he first felt the drain on his energy during the first explosion, he concentrated his whole being in that place on his chest and on the memory of Alec, the memory of that moment in which Magnus wanted to live for an eternity, that moment in which Alec gave himself to Magnus unconditionally and without restrain. Perhaps certain that this would be the last second of his life, Magnus had wanted to take that memory with him into the next world, so he could live in it forever. Perhaps he thought that the soul can find peace and rest in those best moments of one’s life, and that was the best moment for Magnus.

It would take Magnus a long time to understand what happened. Perhaps it was an unexpected effect of the bargain he had made all those weeks ago in the darkness of that hotel room, a bargain to protect and safeguard the only thing that mattered. The fact is that when the fireball hit the manacles and the electrum cuffs, they absorbed the magic, its energy heating up the metals until they turned red. Magnus felt the heat expand from his wrists up his arms and chest until every single cell in his body felt like it was on fire. For a second, unrestrained magic came out from his fingers in multicolor sparkles, as if the power was trying to escape.

Magnus looked at Khuno, the arrogant smile still on that face and in those eyes, telling him that he would never be able to protect Alec, that his death would be futile. Calling on a strength he didn’t know he had, Magnus concentrated every cell in his body and every thought in his mind on the
task of gaining control of the magic wildly coursing through him. With that same strength and concentration, he projected the power in Khuno’s direction, the magic releasing like lightning from the manacles and hitting Khuno square on the chest. Magnus felt himself being propelled backward and the last image before darkness overtook him was of Khuno’s surprised expression as his chest exploded.

Didn’t Khuno believe that Magnus would kill him? Magnus wondered now as he examined the burns on his wrists by the faint light filtering into the bathroom from the bedroom. Did he believe, until the very last minute, that Magnus would eventually walk to his side? Perhaps Khuno didn’t realize that he had already gone so far that Magnus would never join him. He killed Khuno, not only to defend Alec, but because seeing Khuno’s arrogant smile, Magnus had understood that Khuno would never stop; he would never stop believing that his cause was right. He had to die.

He wished now that he could cry for Khuno; for after all, he had been a friend once, someone significant, a lost child, like Magnus had been. Khuno, like Magnus, had been unloved and rejected so many times, looked down as scum, as an abomination by the rest of the world. But he couldn’t cry for the child Khuno had been because Khuno and Annaliese had killed that child a long time ago.
Alec let the feel of their hearts beating together reverberate throughout his body. He imagined himself reaching beyond the agony and memory runes Dearborn had drawn on his chest; beyond the memory of pain; beyond the altered memories and planted thoughts of the Inquisitor; beyond the experiences of the last few weeks until he found, deep in a corner of his soul, like a hibernating plant whose roots have, nevertheless, continue growing, the love he had felt for Magnus all along, the love he had unconsciously but resolutely protected.

Alec found Magnus sitting on the edge of an enormous Japanese soaking tub set against a wall with a window that framed a spectacular view of Manhattan. Magnus was leaning forward; his elbows resting on his knees; his head in his hands; his clothes dusty and burned in places; and his hair in disarray. Something softened in Alec’s chest when he saw Magnus looking so tired and so human. He had none of his usual glitter or glamour, yet he was still so familiar; still the man with whom he had spent nights and days in hotel rooms like this one, laughing, talking and making love. A mixture of affection, compassion and yearning washed over Alec and he wished he could erase all the suffering and pain of the last few weeks. He wished they could forget the days of absence and sorrow.

Other thoughts irrupted in Alec’s contemplation; words and images that threatened to erase and replace affection and compassion with other feelings, dark ones, borne of pain and suffering. For an instant, the Inquisitor’s voice echoed in his mind saying things that confused Alec; things that once had sounded true, but that now, filled him with doubt.

Alec became painfully aware of the dark and sinister rune on his chest, of the things it symbolized, of what he had done because of it, and anger and shame threatened to overcome him. He brought his hand to his chest and touched Magnus’ amulet there, in a gesture that had become instinctual since that night Jessica came to his room and he momentarily became the man he never wanted to be. Since the moment that he hanged it around his neck, the arrowhead had become a sort of talisman that warded off dark thoughts and dark memories. At the beginning, the amulet had reminded Alec of what he had lost, of the parts of himself that he had left in that hotel room in Barcelona. But over time, he had realized that the feeling of the metal against his skin brought him certain calmness and peace, and that it helped him focus. It was not only a reminder of Magnus; it was also a lifeline to what he had been and what he wanted to be again.

Looking at Magnus, Alec let the feel of the amulet push the dark thoughts away leaving just the compassion, affection and gratitude. For at the risk of losing his own life, Magnus had saved his; he had come through for him when Alec needed him most. Khuno had been determined to kill him and, when he looked at those evil eyes, Alec had been certain that he was about to die, that no matter what he did, Khuno was stronger, faster, more powerful. In Rome, Alec had been too busy and preoccupied to pay much attention to Khuno, but now he had a chance to look the man in the eye and what he saw there was deep seated arrogance and hatred. Khuno was certain until the very last moment that he would prevail over Alec. And he almost had.

Alec had been exhausted and queasy from fighting and portal travel. He had also known that he
didn’t have enough time to nock an arrow before Khuno released the ball of energy that had been gaining in strength in his hand. For an instant that felt like an eternity, Alec had been certain that the last thing he would see in this world would be the evil eyes of that warlock, and the triumphant smile that rose to his lips. But instead, Magnus had stepped in front of the fireball and it had hit him right in the center of his chest. Alec saw the veins in Magnus’ hands, arms and neck glow red and orange as if the magic had entered Magnus’ body and was running wildly through his system. The manacles had turned red with heat and fire, burning Magnus’ skin before Magnus redirected the magic towards Khuno, killing the warlock instantly. The impact threw Magnus backward with tremendous force and he landed on a heap on the ground, unconscious and injured. Alec had run and, grabbing Magnus, dragged him away while calling for Jace and Kat to retreat. The manacles and the electrum cuffs fell from Magnus’ wrists and hit the cobblestone with a clunk, smoke still rising from them.

Magnus had saved him, Alec thought as he took a step in the warlock’s direction.

The gentle touch of hands undoing the shoelaces on his boots brought Magnus back to reality; to the smell of sulfur, smoke and burned flesh that had become more intense with the presence of another body in the room; and to the sensation of the hard and cold surface on which he was sitting. He looked up and saw Alec’s crouching figure in the semi-darkness of the room, his black clothes looking even more frayed after their ordeal. The only break in the blackness of his outfit was a white collar beneath his Shadowhunter jacket. Odd, thought Magnus, Alec rarely wore white specially on missions. Alec’s face was turned downward intent on the task of loosening the shoelaces and Magnus could see once again the city lights reflected on Alec’s silky black hair, and he wished he could reach and run his fingers through that hair the way he had done so many times before.

After helping Magnus off his boots, Alec got up and turned towards the shower stall that extended along the whole side wall of the bathroom. He opened the glass door and turned on the water, testing it to make sure it was warm enough but not too hot. He didn’t want the water to hurt the burns on Magnus’s body. He also flipped a light switch on the wall, and a light came on in the shower, which he dimmed a little so it would not bother Magnus’ eyes. He then turned back towards Magnus and reaching for his hand, gently enticed him to stand up.

Magnus felt frail and wondered whether his legs would hold him, but he did get up. Alec supported him by the elbow for a minute until he was certain that Magnus was stable on his feet. Then, slowly and silently, he helped Magnus into the shower, getting in after him, unconcerned that his clothes would get soaked. The water felt refreshing and restoring as it run through Magnus’ hair and down his face, and he sighed deeply, feeling like his lungs were releasing the last of the dark energy from Khuno’s magic blast.

Gently and slowly so as not to cause him unnecessary pain, Alec began to undo the buttons on Magnus’ shirt watching for any sign of discomfort, keenly attuned to Magnus’ every reaction. As the water washed away the stench of smoke and grime, Alec perceived once again the familiar scent of forest and fresh mountain air that he always associated with Magnus, and the scent awoke a multitude of feelings and sensations that had been dormant since the night Magnus walked out of his life.

Although thousands of thoughts, questions and recriminations should have occupied Alec’s mind at that moment, his thoughts were completely calmed and his mind was at ease. If he had things to say, he felt no compulsion to say them. His only concern was to not cause Magnus more physical discomfort, not to make the burns or injuries in his wrists or any other part of his body pain him any more than necessary. His mind was more focused than it had been in days and all he could think of was this moment, this room, and this man injured and hurting.
Magnus wanted to ask Alec what he was doing, but Alec’s gentle and tender touches were the first such gestures Magnus received in a long time, not just from Alec but from anybody. He was just too tired to protest, resist, or even wonder about the meaning of Alec’s actions. He was just so glad to be here in this bathroom with the man whose touch he had longed for so long. Magnus kept his eyes on Alec’s face, not noticing that they didn’t hurt as much anymore, and neither of them felt the need to say anything. There was nothing to say at this moment that could make it more perfect, everything else—the questions, the explanation, the attacks, the fate of the Institute—was left outside the room.

Alec continued to slowly but with steady hands unbutton Magnus’ shirt, beginning at the collar and moving downward. When he was half way through, Magnus stopped him by placing his hands atop Alec’s. “I can do it,” he whispered, feeling momentarily self-conscious. He was, after all, the High Warlock of Brooklyn; he could take off his own shirt.

“It is okay, Magnus, I got it,” Alec replied, his voice steady and certain. So, Magnus removed his hands, feeling surprised and thankful. For after everything that Alec had gone through, he had not lost his capacity to care and put the needs of another ahead of his own.

As soon as he was done with the buttons, Alec began to peel Magnus’ shirt off, careful not to touch Magnus’ skin, specially any spot that could cause him pain, but then a breath caught in his throat. As he uncovered Magnus’ chest, Alec saw the scar atop the warlock’s heart; the mark left by the spell that Magnus had cast the night he left Alec; the spell that allowed Magnus to keep safe that which mattered the most to him. Alec looked up at Magnus, the question plainly written on his face, before gazing down once again as if to make sure that his eyes were not deceiving him.

With tentative and shaking fingers, Alec traced the contours of the scar. It wasn’t strictly a scar or a rune but he didn’t know how else to describe it. For there right on top of Magnus’ heart, as if it was nestled between skin and flesh, was the omamori charm Alec had given him months ago. Alec could see clearly the rectangular shape against Magnus’ golden skin, the rich red and gold of its design, its white ribbon swirling in gentle curbs starting at the top end of the charm, curving along its edges and then disappearing deep under the skin like tendrils reaching for Magnus’ heart.

Alec lifted his eyes towards Magnus’ face once again and the warlock’s eyes were waiting with a guarded expression.

“What is this?” Alec asked, awe and confusion filling his mind.

“You know what it is,” replied Magnus, his voice low.

“But why? What did you do Magnus?”

“I thought there was no coming back from where I was going, and I knew that Annaliese and Khuno would try to find you and kill you. I was also afraid that they might try to spellbind me to participate in their plan. It is a protection spell. It ties my life force to yours; it shields part of my magic from their influence, and allows me to keep you out of their reach.” That was not the whole truth, but it was as much as Magnus was willing to reveal at this moment. “This spell and the amulet you are carrying around your neck prevent Annaliese from tracking you,” Magnus added and, lifting his hand, rested it against the amulet on Alec’s chest, the arrowhead he had carved from the metal he and Joshua extracted from the Hades stone. He couldn’t see the amulet under Alec’s clothes but could feel its presence, the pull of its power, the warmth and energy it emitted.

“Why?” Alec asked again.

“Because it is my fault that you are in the middle of this mess. Because I didn’t do my job properly
all those years ago and now you are paying the consequences. You said once that I was your responsibility; well, you are mine too.”

Alec smiled for the first time in what Magnus felt like years. It was half a smile, just a hint, nothing like the broad smile that illuminated rooms with the strength of a sun, and that had haunted Magnus’ dreams since he left this man he loved and would love for the rest of his life. Alec rested his palm against the omamori charm and was surprised to feel two hearts beating there. He then brought his other hand against his own chest and closed his eyes. Somehow, he knew that he would feel his own heartbeat echoing in the way the charm gently pulsed on Magnus’s chest.

“The spell allows me to feel your heartbeat, and as long as I can feel it, my life force protects you,” Magnus said gently, his hand resting atop the hand on Alec’s chest.

Alec let the feel of their hearts beating together reverberate throughout his body. He imagined himself reaching beyond the agony and memory runes Dearborn had drawn on his chest; beyond the memory of pain; beyond the altered memories and planted thoughts of the Inquisitor; beyond the experiences of the last few weeks until he found, deep in a corner of his soul, like a hibernating plant whose roots have, nevertheless, continue growing, the love he had felt for Magnus all along, the love he had unconsciously but resolutely protected.

After a long time, Alec opened his eyes and looked into Magnus’ own eyes. He then lifted his hand from Magnus’ chest and brought to the side of his face. His gaze shifted down and towards Magnus’ lips, and Magnus felt the pull of those eyes and the familiar anticipation and desire they always provoked in him. After an interminable moment, Alec’s lips finally claimed the warlock’s mouth, ending, once and for all, the wait, the anticipation, the absence that had darken Magnus’ world. The kiss was deep and unguarded, full of passion and longing, full of anticipation, hope, yearning and the thirst of those of who finally find water after wandering the desert for too long.

Magnus wrapped his arms around Alec’s waist and pulled him towards his own body, feeling that he was finally coming home; that he was finally reuniting with the half of his heart that had been missing. With gentle movements, Alec finished peeling Magnus’ soaked shirt off. His own clothes were also rapidly getting drenched but Alec didn’t care, for at that moment he was exactly where he wanted to be. He stopped and broke the kiss when a groan of pain escaped from Magnus’ throat as the fabric rubbed against the burns on his wrists and arms.

“Are you okay?” he asked in a whisper.

“Yes,” was Magnus’s short and brief reply as he reclaimed Alec’s lips.

Magnus searched for the bottom of Alec’s jacket and, after fumbling with zipper and buttons, finally found the comforting sensation of Alec’s skin. With uncontained hunger and desire, he removed Alec’s jacket and sweater, but stopped when he saw the runed mourning tunic Alec wore underneath. He looked at Alec, the question evident on his face.

“The day I lost you, I also lost part of myself, and then things happened and, for a while, I didn’t know who I was anymore. I felt that part of me had died that morning in Barcelona and that I would never be whole again.” Alec’s words were full of pain and sorrow, and Magnus understood what it was like to feel the pain of absence as if it was death.

“Do you want to tell me about it?” he asked.

“No right now.” Alec replied and kissed Magnus again, reaching for his belt buckle, wanting this moment to be pure and untainted by the memory of what the Inquisitor had done.
Alec and Magnus peeled each other’s wet clothes off, letting the water wash away, not only the grime, smoke and dust accumulated over the last twenty-four hours, but also the sorrow, resentment and pain of the last few weeks. The sound of water also sheltered them from the outside world, allowing them to forget, at least for now, everything else going on around them. They kissed and run their fingers through each other’s skin for a long time, recognizing each other’s scent and touch once again, reclaiming each other’s bodies, as if they were new lovers. Despite their intense desire, they felt no compulsion to rush their lovemaking, wanting to not leave an inch of skin untouched or un-kissed.

After a long while, they stood naked facing each other, Alec’s runes and scars and the omamori charm on Magnus’ chest glittering under the water, desire plainly evident on their bodies and eyes. Alec turned off the water and reaching for Magnus’ hand guided him out of the shower. He then gently dried Magnus’ skin with a soft towel. Magnus did the same, and as he run the towel over Alec’s back, he kissed and licked the water drops left behind.

“Make love to me warlock,” Alec whispered in Magnus’ ear, causing goosebumps to raise on Magnus’ skin. Magnus smiled broadly; for the words reminded him of the last time he made a similar request. The words were appropriate, he thought, for when he had made the request, the words had marked the beginning of a long absence; the words now marked its end.

Magnus was now the one to reach for Alec’s hand to guide him out of the bathroom and towards the bedroom and the shelter of a bed where he would do all in his power to erase every sorrow that his absence had caused Alec.

That night, Alec and Magnus made love over and over, each getting their fill of the other. Each time, they made love with increased passion and desire, as if with each climax, they brought down the walls that each had had to put up to survive an existence without the other, and as the walls came down, unrestrained desire poured out.

Alec was demanding, enticing, generous, and he took Magnus over the edge over and over, as he too came undone in the arms of the warlock. Every time that he climaxed, his desire began to build up again, with more intensity and hunger, as if he couldn’t satiate his thirst. “Teach me, show me how to love you. I am a fast learner,” Alec had pleaded with Magnus the first night they made love. Now, however, it was Alec that taught Magnus how to love him, and Magnus learned and rejoiced in the pleasure of discovering new ways to bring and take pleasure from Alec. Magnus thought once again that he had never truly made love until he was in the arms of this Shadowhunter.

Sometime later, Alec felt that he was floating in a state of complete and singular connectedness, linked to everything around him; as if he was growing roots that reached towards the earth; as if his senses were tendrils reaching from the center of his being towards the universe and towards Magnus. Alec could feel Magnus building up to a climax behind him; his forehead resting against a spot between Alec’s shoulder blades; his hands firmly holding Alec’s hands as if he needed an anchor; his breath caught in his throat; his muscles tense. As the most sublime of sensations overtook him, Alec felt that his soul transcended his body and became one with Magnus’ soul, as they both climaxed at the same time, each calling the other’s name, staking a claim on the body and soul of the other, demanding and offering at the same time.

Time seemed to stop and for what felt like an eternity they both remained still unable or unwilling to move, as wave after wave of pleasure washed over them, taking them deeper and deeper into an ocean of ecstasy.

Alec eventually relaxed and he let himself fall back on the bed, Magnus following suit and coming
to rest with his chest against Alec’s back, his arms wrapped around Alec’s waist. Alec searched for Magnus’ hands and nestling them in his own hands, brought them to his lips and kissed them, Magnus’s scent and his own mixing on the warlock’s skin.

He became aware that it had begun to rain outside, and, for a while, Alec listened to the rain tapping on the window, its rhythm in tune with the beating of his and Magnus’ heart. Eventually, however, his desire awoke once again, and he knew he had not yet sated his thirst for Magnus. He turned and looked at Magnus’ lovely face; that face he had loved since the first time that Magnus looked past Jace and towards him; that face that now appeared illuminated by the city lights streaming through the window. He kissed Magnus again, deeply and sensually as his desire reignited with the force of a fire that he had thought extinguished.

“I am not done with you yet warlock,” he whispered in Magnus’ ear, and he smiled when he heard a breath caught in Magnus’ throat and goosebumps rise once again on his skin. Magnus wanted him too, he knew it, with a desire as intense as his. It was Magnus who now sought his lips but instead of kissing him, he bit him gently but oh so seductively, enticing the fire inside Alec to burn hotter. Alec wrapped his arms around Magnus and ran a hand up and down his back rejoicing in the feel of Magnus’ hard muscles, and in the way his skin responded to his gentle touch. He journeyed lower until his hand reached Magnus’ buttocks and he pulled Magnus to him with strength borne of absence and desire.

Magnus’ tongue teased him, liking his neck, and running along his collarbone. Alec entangled the fingers of his other hand in Magnus’ messy hair, pulling his head gently backward, exposing his neck so he could kiss it. He stopped on that spot where Magnus’ Adam’s apple was, and he kissed that spot gently before continuing upwards towards Magnus’ ear. “Magnus, how can I still want you so much?” he whispered.

Magnus’ only answer was another kiss, deeper than the ones before, his tongue demanding and claiming Alec’s mouth with unexpected hunger. How can I want you so much? Magnus thought but didn’t say, because his body was already saying it for him and no words were needed. As he made love to Alec, he felt his magic powers replenish and his vision become clearer, as if he was absorbing the energy that he and Alec were producing and using it to heal himself. Or perhaps it was Alec the one healing him with his love.

At one point Magnus heard the rain tapping on the window, and he fleetingly thought that it would be nice to cast a spell that would transform the rain into stars that fell on them, but the thought left his mind as soon as it formed because he was distracted and he didn’t need magic at that moment. That night, there was no magic, no Shadowhunter runes, no Downworld or Nephilim, just two bodies, two souls and two spirits interlinked in an unbreakable bond.

As the first hints of daylight began to color the dark sky, Magnus and Alec finally fell on the bed for the last time, spent, contented and sated.

“I might be a warlock, Alexander, but even may powers have limits, especially now that I am weak,” he whispered teasingly. “Are your trying to kill me?”

“This is the only way I can keep up with you,” Alec replied and smiled, that broad and beautiful smile that made him look younger than he was. He rested his head on the pillow and sighted deeply and contently, one arm under Magnus’ head, the other on the omamori charm on Magnus’ chest, feeling the beating of his own heart echoing there.

Alec stared deep into Magnus’ eyes for a few silent moments until the exhaustion, the emotions and the exertion of the last several weeks finally got the better of him and he closed his eyes, and fell into a restful peaceful sleep.
As Magnus stared at the peaceful sleeping face of the Shadowhunter, he thought that he had never wanted to belong to anyone before. For so long he had endeavored to live without a plan, or a timetable, or someone to account to. He had thought life was an adventure and that he was free to live it as he pleased. But, in truth, he had been lonely, alone, untethered, unclaimed until now. Feeling his heart linked to Alec’s heart, and his life tied to his, he felt freer, and more complete than ever before in his long life. Magnus fell asleep soon after, a deep sensation of peace expanding from the spot on his heart where Alec’s hand now rested to every single cell of his body.

“Alec, wake up. Come on Alexander, wake up” came the urgent and concerned voice of Magnus, reaching across the darkness of the nightmare and pulling Alec out and back towards the waking world. Alec opened his eyes and the morning light hit his pupils, momentarily blinding him. His heart was beating fast and Alec thought it would scape his chest, and sweat covered his forehead. He let his eyes adjust to the light and as they did, Magnus’ familiar and lovely face came into focus, his eyes full of alarm. Alec realized that his hand was clutching that spot on his chest where Dearborn’s rune was. He felt pain there, as if in his sleep, he had been trying to claw the rune off his chest.

“What is going on?” he asked, his voice hoarse.

“You were having a nightmare,” replied Magnus. “I couldn’t wake you and you were clawing at your chest.”

Alec took a deep breath to calm his racing heart and removed his hand from his chest. Magnus looked at him, deep concern in his eyes and then shifted his gaze downward and towards Alec’s chest. Alec heard the breath caught on Magnus’s throat and his own eyes followed the warlock’s gaze.

“What is that rune?” Magnus asked, his voice full of sudden apprehension. He knew every single rune edged on Alec’s skin, and after years of dealing with the Nephilim, he understood the meaning of most of them. But this new rune on Alec’s chest was like no other he had ever seen before. He brought his hand to the spot, but as soon as his finger touched the edges of the rune, he felt an electric jolt and quickly removed his hand. He had not noticed the rune the night before. It was not surprising, Alec had kept him unusually distracted, and he couldn’t remember whether he had felt a similar reaction when he had run his hand over Alec’s chest as they made love.

“That rune feels angry. What is it for?” he asked. When he failed to get an answer, he looked back at Alec’s face.

“Alexander?” he asked, the apprehension, for some unexplained reason, threatening to become full-blown panic.

After a moment that felt endless, Alec looked up at Magnus, his eyes guarded, but still unable to completely conceal the mixture of sadness and something else that Magnus couldn’t identify.

“It is the punishment I got for loving you,” Alec said, his voice full of pain and sorrow.

“What?” was Magnus’s astonished reply.

“I want to tell you,” said Alec. “But not here; this story has no place in our bed. And, I need a coffee and I suspect you will need one too,” he added, a faint smile lifting the corner of his lips but not reaching his eyes. Alec turned, got out of bed and headed for the bathroom. As Magnus saw him walk away, an abyss opened in the pit of his stomach threatening to swallow all the joy and happiness of the last few hours.
This is the chapter I have been waiting to write for a few weeks. It is still far from perfect, but here it goes. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. Let me know what you think.
“I couldn’t speak, Magnus,” said Alec. "I couldn’t scream, and now I don’t know how to turn that silence into words. I have never felt so alone in my whole life, not even when I was a child. In my mind I called for you, I called for Jace, but neither of you came; no one come.”

Magnus got out of bed shortly after Alec and, after donning one of the white robes hanging in the closet, walked towards the window. The clouds and the rain from a few hours before had cleared and the morning was promising to be a sunny one. It was early, the sun had just begun to show its face above the Manhattan skyline, and the sky had that crisp tone of blue that follows a rainstorm. Except for the sound of water running in the bathroom, the suite was quiet, and Magnus suspected Jace and Kat were still sleeping in their rooms, regaining strength after their last ordeal.

He was about to head for the seating room. Alec was still squeamish about Magnus’ using magic to conjure up coffee, and Magnus thought this morning he would make it the old-fashioned way, by hand, the way Alec liked it. As he turned, he saw Alec coming out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his waist, a despairing expression on his face and a bundle of soaked clothes in his hands, water still dripping from them.

“Do you think the hotel could dry these for me?” he asked, giving Magnus a sheepish smile.

“Oh Alexander, what is the use of dating a warlock if you are not going to take advantage of his powers?” replied Magnus with a broad and mischievous smile. “I have been wanting to get my hands on your wardrobe for a long time. What would you like to wear today?” Magnus had to resist the urge to laugh when he saw the look of horror on Alec’s face.

“Just my regular clothes, please,” he replied, with particular emphasis on the please.

“You are not fun,” Magnus teased him.

“I am sorry,” said Alec and Magnus looked at him in surprise. As usual, Alec felt the compulsion to apologize for being who he was; for not liking the things that Magnus liked, for not being what he thought other people wanted him to be. Didn’t Alec know that he loved him just the way he was, without vanity or ostentations? Didn’t Alec know by now that his unpretentiousness was precisely what Magnus loved the most about him? Perhaps he didn’t know, thought Magnus.

“Never fear; I got the perfect thing,” Magnus told him and rolling up the sleeves of his robe, waved his hands and a surge of blue and purple magic lighted his fingers. The clothes on Alec’s hands levitated midair for a moment as Magnus’s powers dried and repaired them. The clothes that landed gently on the bed were the same clothes but dried and considerably less threadbare.

“I cannot do much about the white shirt, I am afraid” he informed Alec. “Mourning runes are powerful and interfere with magic. Besides, I don’t think you should wear it anymore; it is not your color,” he added. With a snap of his fingers, Magnus conjured up a brand new black t-shirt, making sure to delete the price tag; for the shirt probably cost more than Alec’s whole outfit.
Magnus smiled when he saw Alec’s awed expression. It was amazing, he thought, that after all these months together, his magic powers—which to Magnus were the most natural thing in the world—still amazed Alec. Part of him wished never to lose that capacity to surprise him, for the expression on his face was one of his most endearing.

“How are you feeling this morning?” Alec asked tenderly, as he took Magnus’ hands in his and examined the burns around his wrists. The scars were no longer red and looked considerably fainter than they had the day before, but Magnus suspected that even with his powers replenished, the scars would take some time to go away. Alec cradled Magnus’ hands in his and brought them to his lips for a gentle kiss, the gesture reminding Magnus of their night together and stirring a wave of new sensations throughout his body.

“I am fine, Alexander, almost new. Except that I think my hair is a mess, and I definitely need a new outfit,” he said flirtatiously.

“I am glad to hear that,” Alec whispered and taking a step closer, let go of Magnus’ hands and placed his own on both sides of Magnus’ face and kissed him tenderly and sensually.

The kiss awoke the butterflies in the pit of Magnus’ stomach, and he rested his palms against Alec’s chest, the fingers of one hand tracing the contours of the arrowhead; the fingers of the other hesitantly touching the edge of the unfamiliar angry rune. Alec deepened the kiss and Magnus opened his lips so Alec’s tongue could play with his. Alec moved one of his hands to the side of Magnus’ head where his hair was the shortest and the spikiest, and run his fingers through it, causing a deep sigh of contentment and desire to rise from Magnus’ throat. He liked it when Alec run his fingers through his hair like that, and he suspected Alec liked it too because he always did it.

Alec gently pushed Magnus backwards until Magnus felt the edge of the bed against the back of his legs. He then gave him another gentle push and Magnus found himself laying on soft white sheets. He tried to move his hands from Alec’s chest to his back, needing to close the distance between their bodies, but Alec stopped him and, interlacing his fingers with Magnus’, brought Magnus’ arms above his head. He then trapped Magnus’ hands in one of his own, while with the other, he opened Magnus’ robe to gain access to his skin. His mouth began a maddening journey from Magnus’ mouth, down his neck and in the direction of the left side of his chest where Alec planted a soft and gentle kiss atop the omamori charm that was now part of Magnus’ skin.

Alec had expected to feel the contours of the charm and perhaps the sensation of fabric against his lips. But all he felt was soft skin, the gentle echo of his own heartbeat, and the familiar scent of Magnus getting slightly stronger as his arousal increased. Magnus felt as if Alec’s lips were touching his very heart. The spell had made the nerve endings in the spot where the charm had transformed into skin the most sensitive and every one of Alec’s touches, even the gentlest, caused a wave of mystifying sensations.

Alec wondered whether the spell that made the charm part of the warlock’s skin had hurt. Was it like a burn? He asked himself; or did it hurt the way the Inquisitor’s rune had hurt? Remembering the look of pain in Magnus’ eyes in Zürich, he shifted his gaze towards the opposite side of Magnus’ chest searching for any signs of the wound he had unwittingly inflicted on Magnus. What he found was a faint ragged scar a couple of inches below Magnus’ right nipple where the arrow pierced his chest. Alec planted another kiss there, an even gentler one, light as the touch of butterfly wings. He then looked up searching for Magnus’ eyes and the eyes that met his were a deep chocolate brown, not a trace of the slit pupils and the yellow green eyes that he found so mysterious and beautiful. Magnus was in full control of his magic powers once again, and the glamor was firmly in place.
“I am sorry I hurt you,” Alec said, his voice soft and full of regret. “And, I am sorry that you had to endure pain to protect me,” he added.

Magnus gave him a questioning look. “You didn’t mean to wound me,” he said. “You know it was Khuno who pulled me on the path of the arrow, don’t you?”

“Yes, but still, I was the one to shoot it, and I am not just talking about that wound.” Alec kissed the mark of the charm once again. “I know a little about magic, and I know some spells can be very painful and costly.” He then silenced any retort that Magnus might have had with a fiery kiss.

A deep sigh of pleasure rose from the center of Magnus’ chest and Alec corresponded it by intensifying the kiss and closing the remaining distance between their bodies in a gesture full of promise and possibility. All thoughts of spells, magic and runes were forgotten, and for a minute, the feel and taste of Alec’s lips, the scent of his skin, the echo of his racing heartbeat on Magnus’ chest, and the reassuring weight of his body was all that Magnus could think of. But then the faint trace of the dark energy emanating from that rune intruded in his thoughts, as if its presence had become more discernible to Magnus now that his powers were almost fully restored. Alec was trying to distract him, he thought; he was trying to keep him occupied so Magnus would not ask about the rune on his chest, that rune that he suspected had been as painful to carve as any spell that Magnus might have cast.

“I thought you wanted coffee,” he said when Alec moved his lips towards Magnus’ ear. “And I think you have something to tell me.”

Alec sighed and reluctantly let go of Magnus’s hands and then slowly shifted position to lie alongside him on the bed. “Do you really want to know?” he asked, sadness and hesitation in his voice.

“Of course, I want to know,” Magnus replied, rolling to his side to better look at Alec. “I want to know everything that concerns you, especially if whatever happened was because of me.”

“Okay then, let’s get dressed and get that coffee.”

Half an hour later, Magnus and Alec were sitting side by side on the couch in the seating area of their room, coffees in hand. They were both fully dressed, Alec in his usual outfit, minus the Shadowhunter jacket, and Magnus in brand new black jeans, and a Mao silk shirt, the color of deep red wine. He had taken the time to conjure up some make-up, and his hair was once again in its usual hawk style even though it lacked the glitter he usually applied to its ends. Magnus looked at his fingers and thought that he should get his rings from the safe in his penthouse where he had sent them the night he left Alec. But there was no time at the moment to worry about such things.

Alec placed a hand on Magnus’s cheek and smiled. “I am glad you are somewhat back to your old self. I missed this you,” he said and then kissed him gently, the taste of coffee in Magnus’ lips pleasant and familiar.

Magnus placed his hand on Alec’s chest, atop the rune about which Alec didn’t want to talk about. The angry energy of the rune was fainter but still palpable under Alec’s shirt and sweater.

“What happened?” he asked softly, not wanting to push but certain that this conversation should not be delayed. “You can tell me anything.”

He felt Alec’s back stiffen and his face became suddenly somber. Alec hesitated for a moment, his eyes on Magnus, as if deciding what and how much to say, or whether Magnus was ready to hear it. He exhaled and his eyes shifted from Magnus towards the city skyline in the distance.
“I don’t know how to begin. Some things are so hard to say that perhaps it is better not to say them at all; perhaps it is better that they remain a secret until they are forgotten…” His voice trailed off and he fell silent for a moment, his hands interlaced on his lap.

Magnus remained quiet, silently waiting, because he understood that if Alec was going to tell him what happened, he would have to do it on his own terms. He knew, perhaps, better than anyone what it was like to carry secrets and wish to forget them.

“I woke up that morning and you were not there,” Alec said, his voice so sad that Magnus felt like an invisible hand was squeezing his heart. “I looked for you, but all I found was that note and this,” he added, bringing one hand to the arrowhead hidden once again under his shirt. “I couldn’t understand why you were gone. I don’t know why but since you came into my life, I always thought that no matter what, you would always be there. I trusted you, but then, just like that, you were gone, and all I had were four words on a piece of paper.”

There wasn’t a trace of resentment in Alec’s voice; just a deep and dark sadness, and Magnus understood, more clearly than ever before, the impact of those four words in his note. He wished he could turn back time, to a time where he could have avoided the terrible suffering he caused Alec. Alec who, despite his bravery and strength, was a gentle and sensitive soul. He placed his hand on Alec’s shoulder as if wanting to give him strength to continue.

“Then the explosion happened,” Alec went on, “and I got injured. I woke up in the infirmary and Inquisitor Dearborn was there drawing this rune on me,” he added, shifting his hand to the left side of his chest. “It is a permutation of a memory and an agony rune. It is meant to trigger memories and inflict pain in order to rewrite them. You see, Dearborn told me that what I felt for you was because of a curse; that it was demonic magic; and that he could cure me by rewiring my memories.” Alec smiled, the saddest and most miserable of smiles.

“He did what?” Magnus asked astonished, his voice barely a whisper. He could not believe what he was hearing, and the weight of Alec’s words seemed to take all the air out of his lungs. How could someone do something so evil? How could someone have so much hatred that they would go to such extent to exterminate that which they despised and feared?

Alec didn’t seem to hear Magnus’ question; for as soon as he begun to talk, all the memories of those terrible days of pain and silence poured out of him like a torrent that had been trapped for too long. He began to tell Magnus of the days and nights spent tied to a bed; of bright lights; of countless hours without sleep or rest; of being brought back every time he sought refuge in oblivion; of the Inquisitor’s stele carving, constantly carving with relentless cruelty that rune that now felt like a stone lodged in his chest. Alec spoke of the memories the Inquisitor triggered, and of the images that he planted in his mind in a futile attempt to erase the memory of Magnus’ loving face. He told him of the words Dearborn kept repeating, telling him that Magnus was evil; that what he felt for Magnus was filthy, corrupt, a disease of which he needed to be cured.

He tried to speak of the pain, that pain that burned and froze his bones at the same time; that pain that cut him to shreds over and over again; that pain that repeatedly unmade him just so the Inquisitor could put him back together with the relentless tip of his stele. Alec tried to speak of that pain that obliterated everything leaving just the pain behind, but he couldn’t find the words to describe the experience. For the pain had taken Alec to a place where words no longer had any meaning.

Magnus listened in complete silence, dumbfounded and frozen in place by the force of Alec’s words and the haunted expression in his eyes. At times, he doubted his own ears; for what Alec was telling him was unfathomable. Yet, he knew it was true and listening to Alec, Magnus learned for
the first time what it is to feel the ground under his feet disappear, leaving a bottomless abyss of
guilt, misery and sorrow.

Except for a couple of times during his narrative when his voice trailed off and he went silent,
Alec remained composed, his voice steady. But when he tried to describe the pain, his voice
trembled and his eyes filled with tears. “I couldn’t speak, Magnus, I couldn’t scream, and now I
don’t know how to turn that silence into words. I have never felt so alone in my whole life, not
even when I was a child. In my mind I called for you, I called for Jace, but neither of you came; no
one came.” Alec put his head in his hands and Magnus’ eyes filled with bitter tears, sadness, guilt
and rage mixed together.

In his long life, he had seen much cruelty among mundanes and downworlders: war, death, hatred,
slavery, genocide, bigotry. He had witnessed many acts of human cruelty directed at people simply
because they looked or lived differently, because they dared to walk a different path. He had seen
people die alone and abandoned during the AIDS epidemic; he had witnessed the brutality inflicted
because of homophobia; he had seen the violence perpetrated on people simply because they were,
or they loved someone, from a different race. He had even been at the receiving end of the hateful
and intolerant gaze of people who couldn’t see past his ethnicity or life choices. At times, he had
thought that humanity would finally overcome prejudice, but its enduring capacity for hatred and
bigotry continued to surprise him as much as humanity’s capacity for love and acceptance.

Magnus knew, perhaps better than anyone, that the Nephilim were, like most people, capable of
terrible things. But who could ever think of such cruel torture? Who could ever see Alec as an
enemy? Alec was the bravest and most loyal of Shadowhunters, committed to his work and to his
people. It was his fault, Magnus thought. He had left Alec to fend for himself; he had mistakenly
assumed that Alec would be safer if he left. He had been naïve, and now the knowledge of Alec’s
suffering was part of his punishment; part of the burden he would have to carry because of his past
mistakes. Magnus wished, once again, that he could turn back time, go back to those nights
walking along the streets of Prague or Tokyo with Alec, before his past caught up with him.

Magnus looked down at his hands and saw that his fingertips were glowing red as if an electric
current was searching for release. He placed his hands on his lap, and closed them in tight fists to
avoid setting the couch and perhaps the whole room on fire, and he concentrated in regaining
control of his unruly powers. Once he thought it was safe, he put one arm around Alec’s shoulders
and hugged him to his body. Alec relaxed against Magnus’ side, and after a minute he looked up
and into Magnus’ eyes, his cheeks wet. With the fingers of one hand, Magnus gently dried Alec’
tears and smiled in a futile attempt to hide his own misery.

“Dearborn tried to take my memories” Alec said once again. “Not only my memories of you, but
also other memories. What is worse, for a while, I doubted my own mind; I was confused and
angry. Magnus, even if for a short time, I was tempted to believe that he was right; that I was sick
or cursed. I became someone else, someone angry and violent.”

Alec told Magnus about Jessica and about that night she came to his room. “I wanted to kill her; I
imagined myself squeezing her neck until the light in her eyes went out,” he said looking down at
his hands, as if he didn’t recognize them as his own. “I understood at that moment what Dearborn
had done to me and I was disgusted.”

“Alexander, you were injured and that evil man took advantage and hurt you. There is nothing you
could have done. Pain is such a powerful thing; it can make us believe and do anything just make it
stop,” Magnus said, his voice full of compassion. Magnus understood the power of that agony
rune, and knew that, once the rune was triggered, the pain was so excruciating that you would do
anything to stop it. He had suffered its effects for a short time and couldn’t imagine how Alec
could have endured it for days on end.

“I couldn’t do anything, Magnus,” Alec said. “I should have resisted but I couldn’t.”

“You did all you could have done. Anyone else would have gone mad. Dearborn has to know that it is impossible to reprogram people; even I know that there is no magic or rune that can change who someone is. Mundanes and downworlders have tried before always with devastating consequences. Just think of the inquisition.”

“But I should have resisted, and now I don’t know if the rune has changed me,” said Alec, his voice full of doubt and sorrow.

“Do you feel differently?” Magnus asked cautiously. He couldn’t help being afraid that Alec would feel differently about him now, not because of the Inquisitor but because Alec blamed him.

“You want to know whether what the inquisitor did changed how I feel about us,” Alec said, not a question, but a statement. “No, it didn’t. I was angry, furious at you for leaving, for what I had to go through because of us, because of what we have. But despite everything he did to me, despite all the pain, I couldn’t stop feeling that what we have is good. How can it be bad if with you I feel I am finally free to be who I am?” Alec rested his hand once again against Magnus’ cheek in that familiar and loving gesture that made Magnus feel that no matter how bad things got, everything would be okay. “Being with you last night,” Alec added, “I felt like I could finally reach past all those terrible memories and find the words that make sense, the words that let me express what you mean to me. Being with you is like being home, and I am not ashamed of that.”

It was now Alec’s fingers that wiped Magnus’ tears away and his smile that comforted him. Magnus was lost for words. Alec had expressed exactly how he had felt since the very first time this young Shadowhunter walked into his life; for he too felt that with Alec he had finally found a home.

“I am sorry, Magnus,” Alec said after a moment of silence. “I am sorry that when I went to see you at the cell in the Institute, I said you should be ashamed. I didn’t mean to imply that you should be ashamed of who you love or who you are. I was angry and ashamed.”

“You have nothing to be ashamed of; none of this is your fault,” Magnus said, his voice and expression full of conviction. “If what happened is anyone’s fault, besides Dearborn’s, it is mine for leaving you, for trusting that your own people would protect you. Please forgive me.” Magnus thought that a thousand years would pass and he wouldn’t be able to forgive himself.

“Let’s make a deal,” Alec said, smiling weakly. “I forgive you if you forgive me.”

“Deal,” said Magnus. “Now tell me what to do, how to fix this terrible mess.”

“You can take this rune off me,” replied Alec, his voice deadly serious.

It was now Magnus’ back the one to stiffen. For a moment, the sound of Edmund Herondale’s horrible screams echoed through the years, and Magnus knew that he could never do what Alec was asking.

“Alexander, what you are asking is impossible. It would be like deruning you; it could kill you, or the pain could drive you mad. You just need to learn to live with it.” He looked into Alec’s eyes and saw there a mixture of determination and disappointment.

“No,” Alec said, “I cannot live with it, I refuse to live with this on my chest,” he added touching the rune once again. “It will always remind me of what happened. I don’t want it. You have to take
it off, for me, for us.”

“Alexander, you don’t know what it is like to be deruned,” Magnus tried to explain again. “It is not only painful, but terribly dangerous.”

Alec’s eyes remained steady on Magnus’ face, his expression fearless and determined, and Magnus felt that the fire on those eyes burned his skin. He knew at that moment that no matter what he said, Alec had made up his mind and his decision was unmovable.

“We can ask one of the Silent Brothers; they might be able to help,” Magnus offered tentatively.

“No, no one else can know about this. You have to do it,” Alec stated firmly.

“Alexander, please don’t ask me to do this. First, I wouldn’t know how and, second, I don’t think I can bear causing you that pain.”

“I need you to do it,” Alec pleaded. “Please Magnus.”

“Is this your way of punishing me?” Magnus asked. Removing his arm from around Alec’s shoulders, he stood up and turned to face him. Magnus knew that the question was unfair. He also knew that he should be punished for the role he played in what happened to Alec, but the request felt like a dagger piercing his heart, like that arrow lodging itself once again in his chest.

“No Magnus, it isn’t that,” Alec replied standing up and reaching for one of Magnus’ hands. “But it has to be you; nobody else can know about this.”

“We can ask Catarina,” Magnus offered. “She knows a lot more than me about healing.”

“Please Magnus, please let me keep this last shred of dignity. I don’t want anyone else to know.”

“You can learn to live with the rune,” Magnus said again, grasping at straws.

“Tell me something: are you going to be able to be with me, to touch me, and let me touch you the way we have done before, knowing what the rune means?” Alec knew the question was a low blow, but he had to make Magnus understand how important this was. Removing the rune wasn’t something he had thought much about before, but last night with Magnus, the feeling of it on his chest had been the only dark spot in an otherwise beautiful and dazzling night. He feared that as time went on, that dark spot would become an even bigger presence, especially now that Magnus knew what it meant. Alec understood that he couldn’t live with the mark of that terrible memory on his body. He knew that the memories would never go away, that forever he would remember what hatred did to him, but he couldn’t bear carrying the mark of it on him.

“Alec, I can’t,” Magnus replied, pulling his hand from the shelter of Alec’s hands. He then closed it in a tight fist at his side. He didn’t call him Alexander because he didn’t want his refusal to be spoken in the vocabulary they had created to express their love for one another.

“Then we are at an impasse, aren’t we?” Alec stated, sadness and disappointment written on his face.

A knock on the door interrupted them and Alec went to open it. Magnus saw him walk away, his shoulders stooped as if he was carrying a heavy burden.

“Good morning guys,” Jace said when Alec opened the door. “Kate wants to talk to us.”

“How are you feeling Jace?” asked Alec.
“Much better, thanks to a good night sleep and Catarina’s tender care,” Jace replied, his usual smile on his face. He didn’t seem to notice the tension in the room, or if he did, he ignored it, worried about whatever else was going on.

Alec and Magnus followed Jace to the seating room where Kat was waiting. She and Jace had ordered breakfast and she had a cup of coffee in her hand and a croissant rested on a plate in front of her on the coffee table. She was about to make a snappy comment at Magnus but thought better of it when she saw her friend’s somber expression.

“What’s up?” asked Alec, pouring a cup of coffee and handing it to Magnus with a warm smile. He then poured a second cup for himself. Magnus looked at him and, while he saw the sadness plainly written on his face, there was not a trace of resentment or anger in Alec’s smile. Magnus suspected that their conversation was far from over.

“I got a fire message from Jeremy. He has continued searching the records, and might have found something though we don’t know what it means. I think I need to go to Zürich. I have to examine the bodies from the frustrated attack. They may contain clues that could help us figure out Anneliese’s next step, and I suspect that those bodies are still critical to her plan. Can you get me into the Institute?”

“That might be hard considering that I am now a fugitive of The Clave,” replied Alec. “Jace, what do you think?”

“I don’t know if I can be of much help either,” replied Jace. “Clary told me this morning that we have all been declared persons of interest in the investigation. Dearborn and his people are looking for us. However, I know someone at the Zürich Institute that might help. Do you remember Alicia?”

“Do you think that one of your old flings will be willing to help?” asked Alec, a mixture of disbelief and humour in his voice. “Didn’t she say that she never wanted to see you again?”

“But she wouldn’t have to see me; she would just have to see you. Besides, you know that very few people can resist my charms.”

“Let’s hope Clary never hears you say that,” Magnus stated, bringing his cup to his lips. “May I remind you that she has a temper and is armed?”

“Clary knows that there is no one else for me; I will send Alicia a fire message,” Jace said as he walked away in the direction of his room.

“You should have something to eat Magnus,” Alec said, his voice gentle, not a trace of the disappointment of a few minutes ago.

“Only if you eat too,” he replied. Magnus got up and walked to the table and, after a minute, came back with a plate with two croissants slathered with butter and jam, just the way Alec liked them. He and Alec drank their coffees and ate out of the same plate in silent companionship. Looking at them sitting side by side on the couch, Kat thought that, in all the years she had known Magnus, she had never before seen him this comfortable with anyone else.

Jace came back a few minutes later and announced that Alicia would help, but that they would only have a few minutes to gather the information they needed. I was likely that Dearborn would be alerted as soon as their presence in Zürich was known.

“I should be the one to go with Kat,” announced Alec. “Jace, you should stay, I don’t want you in
any more trouble than you already are. Magnus, you should stay too. This could be dangerous.”

“Absolutely not,” Jace and Magnus said at unison.

“Alexander,” Magnus said lifting a hand in Jace’s direction to quiet his protest. “I am not making the mistake of leaving you alone again. Remember what happened the last time I left you to try to sort this mess on my own. If we are going to succeed, we need to work together.” It was more than concern for Alec’s safety that prompted Magnus’s decision. For some unexplained reason, he suspected that he and Alec had a better chance of stopping Annaliese together than apart. Besides, he didn’t think he could stand being apart from Alec right now. “I will not let anything happened to your parabatai,” he added turning to Jace. “You have my word.”

“Okay then” stated Jace. “I will go to the Hotel Du Mort. I suspect that it is just a matter of time before the Inquisitor decides to go after the vampires. Should we meet here after?”

“Yes,” replied Alec, standing up and heading to his and Magnus’ room in search of his Shadowhunter jacket, bow and quiver. “We are going to need weapons and we don’t have many left.”

“Don’t worry,” replied Jace, “Clary and Izzy sent a few by portal this morning.”

A few minutes later, Alec walked through a portal that Kat opened in the hallway, and guided her and Magnus through. He had been the only one out of the three to ever be inside the Zürich Institute, and as he stepped across the event horizon, he pictured in his mind a corner of the Institute’s library where once, as a child, he and Izzy had spent a few hours reading while their parents attended a meeting.

At that moment, somewhere in the middle of the Adriatic Sea, in a heavily warded ship guarded by powerful warlocks, Annaliese bent over the dead body of Khuno Jarh, her friend of centuries, her confidant, the only one who ever truly loved her. She gently brushed aside a dreadlock and kissed the warlock’s cold forehead, tears streaming down her face and falling on the beautiful face of her friend and partner. She had ordered the warlocks to bring Khuno’s body from Florence because she couldn’t bear thinking of him in the hands of the Nephilim; she couldn’t imagine those terrible, hateful people pocking at him, conducting their experiments, trying to unlock the secrets of his magic, like they had once done with her.

“They are going to pay for this,” she whispered in Khuno’s ear. “I promise.” Her voice was steady and determined. She was far from defeated, she thought. The Nephilim might have taken Khuno from her, but she was far from done taking from them, and was certain that by the end she would take everything.

She felt a familiar vibration in her abdomen, sign that Mother was calling for her. So, she ordered the other warlocks to leave the room. Once she was alone, she undid the buttons of her dress and exposed the ugly open wound she carried there since that night in Berlin, decades ago, when Magnus and that Shadowhunter attacked her camp. The wound was luminescent, and red matter, similar to lava swirled in it, as if Annaliese carried a volcano inside her. The wound had been an unexpected aftereffect of the explosion, a miniature rift between this world and Hades. After weeks of agonizing pain, Annaliese had discovered that she carried in her a direct line of communication to Lilith, that through the wound, she could speak to her mother.

“Mother, I am here,” she whispered.

“What news do you have daughter?” came a haunting voice from the center of the wound.
“I have followed all your instructions and we are almost ready, the time is almost here,” she replied, her voice reverential.

“Good, but you still must complete the task that was impeded the day those Nephilim stopped you” said the voice. “Without it, we may not succeed.”

“Yes, Mother,” Annaliese replied. “But can I ask for an indulgence? The Nephilim killed Khuno, can you please give him back to me?”

“Do not despair, daughter. We will all be reunited once I return to claim what is rightfully mine. In the meantime, you can take revenge on the ones who took Khuno from you.” The soft tone of the voice contrasted sharply with the brutality of the words.

“Yes Mother,” Annaliese responded and a smile lifted the corner of her mouth. Yes, she thought, she would have her revenge, not only for what the Nephilim had done, but also for what Magnus and that Shadowhunter boy had taken from him. The vibration in the wound subsided after a moment, indicating that Mother had cut her link to Annaliese. She closed the front of her dress and called for the warlocks waiting outside the room.

“Gather everyone, we have work to do,” she ordered as she run a hand through Khuno’s forehead one last time. “We have to finish what we started in Zürich.
Escape from the Zürich Institute

Chapter Summary

Saville abruptly stopped and turning towards Magnus, gave him an evil smile, the look in her face even more frightening because of the blank stare of those black eyes. “You betrayed me, Magnus” she said in a voice that was not her own. “You killed Khuno and now I will kill you.” It was Annaliese’s voice, Magnus realized, and he understood that this was their cue to leave.

As soon as Alec, Magnus and Kat emerged in the Zürich Institute’s library, Alec looked around searching for Alicia. He noticed that the library hadn’t change much since the last time he was there almost two decades ago. It had the same dark brown wood panelling, red carpets and deep brown sofas that he remembered. The only difference was the additional bookcases that housed volume after volume of books. The room was empty, silent and in semi-darkness, the curtains drawn, the light of a lamp on a reading table the only illumination.

A wave of apprehension hit Alec and he feared that either Alicia had changed her mind or their plans had been discovered and they were walking into a trap. This was a risky mission and too many things could go wrong, he thought as he looked at his watch, confirming they had arrived at the time they had agreed on.

A faint noise coming from outside the room suddenly broke the silence and they run to hide behind a bookcase. Magnus raised his hands ready to open an escape portal if whomever entered the room was not a friend.

“Alec?” said a hesitant voice from the door, and Magnus needed just one word to recognize the Australian accent; it was, after all, very distinct. “Alec, are you here?” Alicia repeated as she entered and closed the door behind her. Alec stepped out from behind the bookcase, and Magnus and Kat followed.

Alicia was a willowy woman with fine features and intense black eyes; her skin was the tone of milk chocolate; and her black hair fell midway down her back in tight and stylish curls. Pretty, thought Magnus, just the kind of girl that Jace would have gone after when he hadn’t yet been in love.

Alicia was visibly nervous and shifted her weight from foot to foot, as if getting ready to run. She looked past Alec to his two companions with a distrustful expression, and the sight of the two warlocks made her even more uneasy. She was obviously not the kind of Shadowhunter that hung out with downworlders on a regular basis.

“It is okay Alicia,” Alec told her in a calming tone. “They are with me. We are trying to figure out what is behind the attacks. We just need to see the bodies.”

Alicia looked at Alec and let go of the breath that had been caught in her throat. “We don’t have a lot of time,” she said, shifting her gaze between Alec and the warlocks. “A team of Shadowhunters arrived from Barcelona last night, and they just told us that they are taking the bodies with them tomorrow.”
“Okay then, we came just in time,” Alec said, his voice carrying the steady tone of someone used to leading difficult missions. “Can you show us to where the bodies are stored?”

“We are keeping them in the lower levels, in a secured room that sometime serves as a vault. We have turned it into an autopsy room, but there are guards outside. It will be hard to elude them.”

“Can we use a disguising spell?” Alec asked turning to Magnus and Kat.

“Yes, but whatever we use will not be effective for long,” replied Magnus. “I can feel that the wards protecting the Institute are designed to prevent the use of magic inside.”

“That is correct,” Alicia informed them. “Inquisitor Dearborn ordered the reinforcement of the wards after the attack in Rome.”

“We have to take the risk,” Kat interjected. “I have to examine those bodies; I am certain that they contain clues that can help us in the investigation.”

“Okay, let’s get that spell working,” said Magnus rolling up his sleeves and getting ready to perform magic.

“So, I wasn’t wrong about you,” Alicia casually told Alec after she explained the layout of the Institute and the route they would take to reach the room where the bodies have been stored. “I knew you were not into girls, I told Jace as much. How is he by the way?”

Alec looked at her with a mixture of surprise and understanding. He was surprised that someone whom he had seen no more than a couple of times had suspected that he carried a secret. He also understood that Alicia’s offer to help was the result of her lingering feelings for Jace. This didn’t surprise him; Jace had that effect on women. He smiled and shrugged in a ‘what can I say’ gesture. He pondered whether other people had suspected that he was different. Had his parents known and perhaps hoped that he would decide to live forever in the closet? Perhaps they had hoped that he would live a hidden life, a sad lonely life, just so the family’s reputation would remain intact. Alec thought of his parents and his little brother and wondered whether they were okay. He knew that they were in Idris behind closed borders and heavy wards. He had also learned from Jace that they had sent a fire message saying that they were fine but that The Clave was likely monitoring their communications. Would this last ordeal be the final nail in the Lightwood’s reputation’s coffin? He hoped not; his family was a distinguished one, with history and traditions that he, Izzy and Max were supposed to carry on. He looked at Magnus and at that moment his only hope was that their future would be longer than the next few minutes.

A couple of minutes later, the four of them were making their way cautiously and with as much haste as they could manage through the corridors and stairs of the Institute. They were under the cover of a disguising spell that, at least for the moment, was holding. They passed the situation room and Shadowhunters going about their business unaware of their presence. They took the stairs down to the lower levels, and continued walking until they finally took a turn and there, at the end of a corridor, they found a door that led to the secured room’s antechamber. Kat snapped her fingers and the door lost its solidity for a second allowing them to pass without needing to open it.

Three Shadowhunter in full combat gear stood guard inside and, as they walked past them and through the last door, Magnus concentrated his whole attention in keeping the spell from failing. The spell finally lost its power as soon as they were in the secured room where the bodies were kept.
“That was a close call,” Alicia whispered as she turned and saw the door recover its solidity and the backs of the Shadowhunter guards disappear behind solid wood. She breathed a sigh of relief, amazed that the guard had remained completely oblivious to the fact that two Shadowhunters and two warlocks were walking right past them. “I hope this favour doesn’t cost me my runes, Alec.”

Alec gently tried the door handle to make sure it was locked and then flipped a switch on the wall. The room was suddenly bathed in a bluish light that gave the space the feel of a sterile operating room. The air in the room was cold, a few degrees colder, in fact, than outside.

“We converted this room into an examination room. We are planning to conduct the autopsies tomorrow before the Barcelona team takes the bodies,” Alicia explained.

Alec turned and walked towards the autopsy tables that occupied most of the back section of the room. Two bodies, a white man and a black woman, not much older than Magnus and Alec, laid there, naked, just their midsections covered by white sheets. Alec looked at Magnus, who stood silent, his eyes fixed on the bodies, his expression somber.

“Did you know them, Magnus?” Alec asked softly.

“He is Josiah Droit and her name is Saville Bret. They are a couple, married for over two hundred years, most of which they have lived in New Orleans,” Magnus replied, his voice low and sad.

“I am sorry,” Alec said and put a hand on Magnus’ shoulder in a gesture meant to comfort him. Magnus was thankful that despite all the destruction some of his people were bringing down on the Nephilim, Alec still cared for his feelings about the deaths of two warlocks.

Magnus hadn’t known the couple very well, but knew that they led a quiet life, making a living selling voodoo enchantments and spells, mostly white magic, love potions that rarely worked, and spells to mend broken hearts. At a Mardi Gras party in the fifties, Magnus had had a heated discussion with the High Warlock of New Orleans about them. Apparently, the warlock was afraid of the attention that two magic beings living together would attract, but Magnus suspected that it was their interracial marriage that most unsettled him. As he had told Alec before, mundanes and Nephilim didn’t have the monopoly on bigotry.

He hadn’t known that these were the warlocks that Annaliese and Khuno sent to Zürich. He hadn’t seen them at the Villa in Tuscany and didn’t have time to look at their bodies outside the Institute the night of the frustrated attack. He didn’t know either whether the couple had been willing participants, or whether they had been coerced. Seeing them now laying side by side, he knew only that their deaths had been futile, an unnecessary waste of life.

“I am sorry Magnus, but I have to examine them,” said Kat. “You don’t have to watch.”

“It is okay,” said Magnus. “I am fine.” He approached the tables and rolled up his sleeves even higher up his arms, getting ready to assist in whatever manner Kat required.

While Kat began to perform the autopsy with Magnus’ assistance, Alec and Alicia kept watch by the door in case someone decided to come into the room. Alec was worried that as long as they were in this room, they were cornered. There was only one way out and that was through the Shadowhunters standing guard outside. He hoped that either Kat or Magnus would be able to perform another disguising spell; he didn’t want to fight his own kind to escape. And, he definitely didn’t want Alicia to be drawn into the mess in which he and his people were in.

Kat took out of her pocket a small digital recorder and began to speak softly into it, making a record, as she worked. For a few minutes, her low and steady voice was the only sound in the
room. That and the faint sound of movements as Kat and Magnus worked on the bodies. Alec preferred not to look. He had never cared much for the sight of blood, and he was glad not to be the one assisting Kat in the disagreeable task of performing the autopsies. He did glance at Magnus a few times though, concerned because his somber expression from before had suggested to Alec that the deaths of the couple had affected him.

“What is that smell?” asked Magnus interrupting Kat’s monologue a few minutes later. An overpowering stench, a mixture of ichor, sulfur and something else that Magnus couldn’t identify had begun to permeate the air around the bodies and was rapidly spreading throughout the room. Alec’s eyes began to water as the stench reached the place where he and Alicia were guarding the door, and they had to cover their mouths with their hands to prevent inhaling whatever had been released into the air. Alec wondered whether the air was becoming toxic, and he looked towards Alicia to make sure she was okay.

“This is very strange,” said Kat, trepidation in her voice. Her eyes were fixed on Seville’s midsection where a few moments before she had made an incision to open the warlock’s abdomen. “It is as if their bodies have been filled with ichor. Their veins and their stomachs are full of the stuff, and it is moving.”

“What do you mean it is moving?” asked Magnus bending to look in the direction of Kat’s gaze.

“It is as if their hearts were still pumping the stuff through their bodies,” Kat clarified.

Saville’s eyes suddenly opened, causing a startled Magnus to jump back. When he turned, he saw that Josiah’s eyes were also staring up at the ceiling. The warlocks’ eyes were entirely black as if they were completely made of tar.

“Are they supposed to do that?” asked Alec, who having heard the exchange between Kat and Magnus, had approached the tables. He kept his hand over his mouth because the stench was becoming unbearable.

“I don’t think so,” replied Magnus, his voice even more anxious. “Kat, I have a bad feeling about this.”

As if obeying some silent command, Josiah and Saville began to chant in a language that neither Magnus nor Alec could identify. Their voices sounded mechanical and were completely devoid of any inflection as if they were a pair of ventriloquist dummies, their mouths moving but their voices originating elsewhere. The words sounded eerie and made the hair in the backs of Magnus and Alec’s necks stand on end. They looked at each other, surprise, fear and concern plainly written on their faces, and both new that they were in terrible danger.

Apparently, Kat recognized a few of the words; for she brought her recorder closer to the warlocks to capture as much of their chant as possible. She also tried to mouth some of the words as if trying to remember a language long forgotten. “The words sound familiar but I cannot pinpoint their meaning or origin,” she said, her tone curious yet also nervous.

The chanting increased in speed and intensity and Magnus began to back away slowly, his hand firmly on Alec’s arm as if to guide him or protect him. “We need to leave,” he said urgently. “I don’t know what they are saying but the chanting seems awfully familiar. We are in danger.”

Other voices began to echo in the warlocks’ chanting, as if the corpses were suddenly broadcasting voices from far away. Their mouths continued moving with increasing speed, repeating the words until they became no more than a jumble of sounds.
Saville abruptly stopped and turning towards Magnus, gave him an evil smile, the look in her face even more frightening because of the blank stare of those black eyes. “You betrayed me, Magnus” she said in a voice that was not her own. “You killed Khuno and now I will kill you.” It was Annaliese’s voice, Magnus realized, and he understood that this was their cue to leave.

“Come on, we must leave now,” Magnus said with even more urgency. As Saville rejoined her husband and the other voices in their chant, a pool of red lava began to form in the warlocks’ abdomen, consuming their flesh and pouring out, spilling on the tables and dripping onto the floor, setting the white sheets on a fire that quickly spread and threatened to consume the whole room.

“This room is going to explode,” said Kat as she too began to back away. “We have to warn the guards outside and leave.”

It was Alicia who, opening the door, alerted the guards of the danger. A moment later, as they were running out of the room and past the astonished Shadowhunter guards, the bodies of the two warlocks exploded sending a rain of lava and ichor that set fire and burned everything it touched. Magnus turned and saw that the explosion was gaining in intensity and power, and realized that unless something was done, the Institute would collapse. So, he waved his arms on a wide circle, mastering as much power as he could, and conjured up a shield of energy that he hoped would contain the power of the explosion, and reinforce the building’s foundations.

Alec yelled for the Shadowhunter guards to run and as they did, Magnus extended his arms even wider to protect them inside the magic shield. He run backwards, his arms fully extended, keeping Alec on his peripheral vision for guidance. As they reached the end of the corridor, the ceiling behind them collapsed in an thunderous explosion that made their ears pop.

Kat who had been running on Magnus’ other side waved her own arms and conjured up the debris to form a barrier that she hoped would reinforce Magnus’s spell and stop the explosion and the fire from spreading and consuming the Institute.

She and Magnus then turned and began to run at full speed searching for the way out. They followed Alicia for a couple of hundred meters up the stairs and through corridors looking for the exit. Other Shadowhunters come out of their rooms, as alarms rung throughout the building, and they too began to evacuate. They finally stepped through a threshold and they were outside, the crisp evening air hitting their faces and clearing the stench from their nostrils. Alicia quickly joined her Shadowhunter peers hoping that no one would noticed that she had been running with Alec and his team.

Alec, Kat and Magnus continued across the Institute’s grounds searching for a place where they could open a portal to take them back to New York.

“Alexander Lightwood, stop,” yelled a voice from behind them and Alec halted and turned. Marite Acquaclara, the acting head of the Barcelona Institute was coming out of the building, the tip of the stele in her hand touching a spot in the inside of her opposite arm where a rune was clearly visible.

“You must stay, Alexander” she said, her voice commanding. “Listen to me, Inquisitor Dearborn is very worried about you. Your treatment is not complete and you are in danger of losing whatever you have gained in your recovery.”

“No, I am not sick,” Alec said, but he lifted his hand to the rune on his chest which had begun to burn as if a fire had been lighted there. He looked at Acquaclara perplexed.

“You are confused Alec, you are sick but the Inquisitor can help” the woman said. “We are your family and we only want the best for you.” Acquaclara then gave the stele in her hand a turn as if
drilling a hole in her own arm, and Alec felt a stabbing pain on the agony rune and a rush of images invaded his thoughts.

Magnus who had run ahead suddenly halted when he realized that Alec was not beside him. He turned and saw that Alec had stopped a few meters back, and was now looking at a woman that was deliberately walking in his direction. He retraced his steps and reached Alec in a few fast strides.

“Come on,” he said, putting his hand on Alec’s arm. “We have to go.”

“How dare you touch one of the Nephilim,” Acquaclara said as she took a few more decisive steps in their direction, her stele still firmly held against the rune on her arm, her voice full of hatred and disgust. Magnus looked up at Alec and saw the look of confusion on his face, as if he wasn’t quite sure what he was supposed to do.

“Alexander,” he said softly, imbuing his voice with as much warmth and conviction as he could under the circumstances. “Come with me, Alexander.”

Alec turned to him and his eyes locked with Magnus’. He smiled as if seeing him for the first time, and then turned and let Magnus guide him in the direction of the portal that Kat had just opened as few meters away. They followed Kat through the portal not caring much where they were going as long as it was not here. As he stepped through after Alec, Magnus turned and saw in the distance, the unmistakable figure of Annaliese Fen, surrounded by several other warlocks. Her fierce red eyes, luminescent and full of hatred, were fixed on him.
Under the Stars

Chapter Summary

Magnus brought his lips to Alec’s ear and softly whispered a name, the human name that his mother had given him almost four centuries before; the name he used before he became Magnus Bane; the name no person alive had heard or used in all those centuries. Magnus whispered the name because he meant only for Alec to hear and know it. Not even the stars, the night, the wind, or the fire heard the name because it was a secret entrusted only to the one Magnus loved most.

The cold night air hit Alec’s face as soon as he stepped out of the portal behind Kat, and he coughed, clearing the last remnants of demonic fumes and smoke from his lungs. He looked around at the unfamiliar landscape trying to get his bearings. In front of him laid an enormous expanse of flatland that extended farther than his eyes could see in the darkness. They were standing on a hill, and the ground below his feet was dry, hard clods of earth splitting apart under the weight of his Shadowhunter boots. The air was exceptionally dry, as if all humidity had been extracted from it, and the wind whistled as it ruffled his hair.

He turned and saw Magnus emerge from the portal just a second before it closed, the last rays of light emanating from the energy well dissipating and leaving them in almost complete darkness. “Where are we Magnus?” he asked, and Magnus looked up at the sky and smiled.

“There can be only one place where the stars shine this bright, especially on a moonless night,” he said, pointing towards the heavens. “We are in Kat’s homeland, or at least very near it.”

Alec looked up and noticed, for the first time, a dark velvety sky studded with thousand, or perhaps millions, of the most brilliant stars he had ever seen. Alec had grown and spent most of his life in New York where, unless there was a blackout, all but the brightest of stars were outshined by the city lights. Of course, he had looked up at the stars in Idris during his sporadic visits. But even that sky, which was mostly unhindered by city lights, was nothing compared with what his eyes were seeing now. He thought that perhaps they were at a great altitude because the stars seemed closer to the ground, as if the sky and the earth were about to collide.

Before he could ask Magnus to be more precise about their whereabouts, Kat double backed and walked in the direction from where they had just come. Alec and Magnus turned and saw that they were about a hundred meters from the hill’s summit where several gigantic constructions – futuristic in their design, their cylindrical façades glittering silver against the dark sky – stood in a circle around a glass-covered building.

“Welcome to the VLT, short for Very Large Telescope,” said Magnus as he signalled for Alec to follow him and Kat up the hill. “I know, the name is not very creative; but it is accurate. This is the largest and more advanced telescope in the world, and it is located in the Atacama Desert, the driest desert in the world. The lack of humidity in the air makes the sky perfect for sky gazing.”

“This is where I work,” added Kat as she guided them up the hill.

“Why are we here?” asked Alec.
“I need access to the telescope,” replied Kat as she took a magnetic ID card from her pocket and hanged it from a clip on the belt loops of her jeans.

A few moments later, the three of them walked through the installations’ gates, where Kat presented her ID card and spoke amicably and in perfect Spanish with a security guard. They then proceeded through the doors of the building at the center of the compound, and along a series of corridors leading to her office in the second floor. As they went along, Kat affably greeted colleagues and coworkers in at least four different languages. No one seemed suspicious of her companions, or if they were, Kat was a respected enough scientist that no one dared question her.

They finally entered a spacious office in which two large tabletop touchscreen computers competed for space with bookcases full of rare books and an antique desk, its surface covered with papers and prints. The space was an odd combination of a high-tech lab and a museum curator’s office. Carpets in rich earthly colors covered sections of the concrete floor. A comfortable sofa covered in colorful wool blankets sat on a corner facing a floor-to-ceiling window. More books surrounded this sitting area, this time piled one on top of the other on the floor, resembling the fortresses that Alec and Izzy used to build in the Institute’s library when they were children. Astronomy instruments, potted cacti, antique artifacts and large framed prints of star constellations decorated side tables, shelves and walls, adding to the feeling of being in a space in which past and future, modernity and antiquity, coexisted.

Magnus took Alec’s hand and pulled him towards the sitting area where a reading lamp on a side table had been left on, its light illuminating a page on a book laying on the sofa, as if Kat had left just a minute, and not weeks ago. He pulled down the zipper of Alec’s sweater just enough to rest his hand atop the rune on Alec’s chest. Magnus wanted to make sure Alec was not injured but was also conscious that Alec didn’t want anyone else to know about the rune. The rune felt warm to the touch, warmer than the surrounding skin, and Alec involuntarily winced as if in pain.

“Does it burn?” Magnus whispered, his voice devoid of the jovial tone he had used a few minutes ago as they walked up the hill and towards the observatory. “What did that woman do to you?”

“I don’t know,” Alec whispered self-consciously. “Whatever it was, it burned as hell, but the burning is gone now. Don’t worry, I am fine.”

“That was a very ancient, very rare, and very obscured rune on Acquaclara’s arm,” Kat said as she walked towards her desk and began to ruffle through a pile of papers. She hadn’t heard Alec and Magnus’ exchange, but had witnessed the encounter between the woman and Alec outside the Zürich Institute. “It is almost as powerful and as old as the parabatai rune, but considerably darker. It is drawn with a stele which tip has been dipped in the victim’s blood and it can create almost the same link as a parabatai rune, allowing the bearer of the rune to inflict pain. She must have gotten some of your blood when you were in Barcelona. The good thing is that it only works in close proximity. As long as you keep your distance, Acquaclara cannot hurt you.”

“You know that woman?” Magnus said, turning to Kat with an inquisitorial expression.

“Oh yeah, we have had a few run-ins and I knew some of her ancestors. You are not the only one with a complicated history with the Nephilim, Magnus. She is a nasty Shadowhunter, hateful, distrustful and a bigot.”

“Great, as if we don’t have enough of those to deal with,” said Magnus, throwing his arms up in a gesture of defeat. “Can we do anything to prevent Acquaclara from using the rune again?”

“That I don’t know,” replied Kat. “I would need to do some research. You know, some Nephilim believe that they are more angel than human; but in fact, sometimes they appear almost demonic.
The most occult of their angelic magic resembles black magic a whole lot.”

“I am fine Magnus,” said Alec in a tone that left little room for more questions. “We have more important things to worry about,” he added looking at the two warlocks with a determined expression. “It is time we get ahead of Annaliese and her band of thugs. They went back to Zürich for a reason; they needed that explosion, which means that there is a pattern and purpose to these attacks.”

“Jeremy and I found out that the attacks are linked to the movements of a very distant star constellation that appears in the night sky every fifty years or so,” stated Kat. “But so far we have only been able to predict one target at the time and with no more than twenty-four hours in advance. No much time for pre-emptive action. I hope that by observing the constellation directly through the telescope, I can be more precise. But, without knowing why she is using the stars as a guide, we are still guessing Annaliese’s endgame.”

“She wants to summon Lilith, I am sure of it” Magnus said.

“She would need a summoning spell for that, wouldn’t she?” asked Alec.

“Yes, and Lilith is the mother of all demons,” Kat said. “She isn’t just any demon; the summoning spell has to be very specific, and it must be very powerful, more powerful than any magic we know. Annaliese has to create that spell.”

“Magnus, you said that the warlocks at the villa were also observing the stars,” Alec interjected. “I would assume any equipment they have would not be as powerful as this telescope. That should give us an advantage.”

“Yes, possibly,” replied Magnus. “But Annaliese also had her people looking for something else, something important that she needs for the spell. I was planning to find out what, but then you guys rescued me, so that plan was a bust.”

Kat walked towards one of the tabletop computers, turned it on, and linked the digital recorder she used during the autopsies to it. “There is something familiar about the words the warlocks were chanting,” she said. “I am going to run the recording through speech recognition software.”

Alec turned on the other tabletop computer. On one side of it, he called up a map and pinned the sites of the explosions; on the other, he called up the star chart that they had been using to predict Annaliese’s movements. There had to be a pattern to the attacks, he thought, as he began to draw lines between the different cities beginning with the order in which the attacks had been carried out.

“I don’t think the order of the explosions means much,” said Magnus as he approached the table where Alec was working. “Time in Hades is not lineal. Past, present and future collide and may be experienced at the same time. And, I think you should eliminate New York from the equation. I suspect that explosion was more like a message than part of the overall plan.”

“What kind of message and for whom?”

“It was a warning directed at me,” Magnus replied looking at Alec. “Annaliese wanted me to know that she could get to you; that unless I cooperated, she could hit me where I am most vulnerable.”

“Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,” Alec said with a faint smile, and Magnus wondered whether Alec had forgiven him, or whether what he saw in his eyes was jealousy. With a tap of his finger, he removed the pin that pointed to their home.
Alec concentrated once again on the map, searching for any patterns or invisible lines connecting the cities. There was a connection, he was sure of it; he just needed to find it. He and Magnus had been in Paris, Florence, Rome and Barcelona during their vacation. It felt now that those happy, careless days had been years and not just weeks ago. He doubted, however, that their presence on those cities had any bearing on Annaliese’s decision to target them, especially if she was using the stars as guide. Whatever she was planning, she had been planning for a long time, and he suspected that his and Magnus’ link to those cities was incidental.

“You know,” Magnus said after a while, “there is almost a straight line connecting Lisbon, Madrid, Barcelona, Zürich and Berlin. The only ones that don’t fit on the line are Paris, Rome and Florence.”

“That might mean something,” Alec said. “Kat, do you have a pattern recognition app on this computer?”

“Only the most powerful one,” replied Kat tapping on the screen to call on the program. “This software will look not only for star constellations, but also for geological data, geographical markers, historical records, and a whole lot of other permutations. It will take a while to complete the analysis, but if there is a link between the cities, it will find it. Though, there might be too many links, which will not be helpful.”

While Kat set the search parameters on the app, Alec and Magnus examined the map and the star chart once again. After a while, Alec looked away from the screen, as if wanting to give his eyes a rest. He gazed around the office, noticing once more the odd combination between the ancient and the modern that characterized Kat’s working space. It was as if the warlock lived with one foot in the past and the other in the future, one on the ground and the other in the heavens. Magnus loved human inventions but, in many ways, he preferred simple old things: antiques and magic rather than technology. Magnus seemed more focused on the past, on the history he had witnessed, than on the future; Kat embraced both. Suddenly, something occurred to him, a connection that he had not seen before.

“You know,” he said looking at Magnus. “We may be approaching this whole thing with too narrow a focus. You said that in Hades time is not lineal, that past, present and future can collide. What if the answer is both in the technology that allows us to map the stars and in the past, in history, perhaps even ancient history? You said, Kat, that Annaliese would have to devise a spell to summon Lilith, what if the spell already exists? What if this is not the first time someone has tried to summon her, someone who left the spell written somewhere?”

“That is possible,” said Magnus, the index finger of one hand tapping the side of his mouth in a familiar pensive gesture. “But where could such a spell be found?”

Kat looked at the map once again and, suddenly, the expression on her face changed from confusion to realization. “The Rome attack might have been a distraction,” she said. “Annaliese’s target might not have been the Institute but the Vatican archives; Rome might not be part of the pattern either,” she added, reaching for the phone in her pocket. “Do you know what else is in Rome besides the Institute, Magnus?” she said, her fingers flying through the screen as she composed a text.

“It couldn’t be,” said Magnus, incredulity in his voice.

“What?” asked Alec.

“It is said that the Vatican contains one of the biggest collections of magic and other obscured artifacts in mundane hands. Whatever Annaliese is looking for might have been there” Magnus
explained. “Who are you texting Kat?”

“Jeremy, and don’t worry, this line is completely secure and untraceable,” replied Kat with a naughty smile, which Alec thought was a rare expression in Kat. She always seemed the quietest, most serious and least mischievous of Magnus’ friends. “I am asking him to contact a friend of mine in the Vatican and to begin a new search of the records.”

Suddenly, Alec’s stomach gave a growl loud enough for Kat and Magnus to hear. He flushed and gave Magnus a sheepish smile.

“When was the last time you ate?” Kat asked looking up from her phone.

Alec considered the question and, looking at his watch, realized that the last thing he had eaten was the croissant he shared with Magnus at breakfast the day before. “I am okay,” he replied dismissively.

“No, you are not,” said Kat firmly. “You need to eat and rest. We don’t know what we will be up against next, and neither of you can afford to fall over because of hunger, thirst, or exhaustion. It is going to take a while for the computers to run their analyses, and I am going to spend all night at the telescope, and searching the archives we keep in a vault in the basement. Unfortunately, you guys do not have clearance to come with me. So, you two go, get some food and rest.”

“Are you sure you don’t need help?” Alec asked.

“I will be fine, really. Besides, this is one of Magnus’ favourite places in the world and he has great stories to tell you about his times in the desert,” she said giving his friend a playful smile. “We are safe here for now and our people are safe back home. I think we have at least twenty-four hours. Take the time to rest.”

“Come on, Alexander,” Magnus said. “Kat is right, let’s get some food. I know a perfect place for a midnight picnic.”

“Okay, but first, Kat, can I borrow your phone? I would like to check-in with Izzy and Jace and get an update on the situation in New York,” Alec said. As soon as Kat handed him the phone, he walked towards the sitting area. A couple of seconds later, he was greeting Jeremy and asking him to let him speak to his sister or brother.

“Talk to him Magnus,” Kat advised her friend once Alec was out of earshot. She had noticed that, while Magnus and Alec seemed to have reconciled, something, some unfinished business still lingered between them. She had seen it in the way Alec and Magnus looked at each other when the other wasn’t looking. “We are safe here for now; no one knows where we are. Take the time and fix this relationship once and for all. Do not make the same mistake you always make.”

“What mistake is that?” asked Magnus feigning surprise.

“You know which one; the one where you close yourself off in order to protect your feelings and secrets. What you have with Alec is a good thing. Do not mess it up.”

“Alec is asking for something I cannot give,” Magnus replied, sadness in his voice.

“Didn’t you say that once about a young Peruvian?” Kat said with a knowing expression on her face.

“This time, I am afraid is true. What he is asking for is impossible,” Magnus replied glancing at Alec who, at that moment, had his back to them and was talking on the phone in a low voice.
“Nothing is impossible,” Kat said. “Things might be hard, but not impossible, especially when it comes to love.” Kat and Catarina had been dubious about Magnus’ relationship to the young Shadowhunter. They had discussed it extensively even before Kat met Alec. Magnus had a complicated history with the Nephilim in general, and with Alec’s ancestors in particular, and Kat was concerned that history would get between them. But her opinion had changed in the last few days as she had seen Alec and Magnus sacrifice so much for one another. This relationship was one of the good ones, she thought: the kind that leaves a mark that is impossible to erase no matter how eternal one’s life is. Thinking of Jeremy, Kat wondered whether her own new relationship to a Shadowhunter was also the unforgettable kind.

A few minutes later, Magnus was guiding Alec down the hill and then about a kilometer on a trail that was barely visible despite the witch light Alec used to light the way. Eventually, they reached a place where a big and smooth boulder provided ideal shelter from the wind.

“Isn’t deserts supposed to be warm?” Alec asked as they approached the place. He rubbed his hands together and blew into them for warmth.

“Only during the day,” replied Magnus playfully. With a snap of his fingers, he produced a campfire. With another, he conjured up several alpaca blankets and some cushions, colorful and with the intricate designs that characterized Aymara and Inca craftsmanship, the ancient peoples who still inhabited the desert.

They sat cross-legged and side by side on the blankets and cushions, and leaned their backs against the boulder, the stone still radiating some of the heat of the day. With a flourish wave of his hands, Magnus conjured up clay dishes with empanadas made by a local woman whose small restaurant he and Kat once visited; warm homemade bread baked in the clay oven of a man who sold it on the side of the road; freshly churned butter, fresh goat cheese and Quince marmalade from a store in a small town a hundred kilometers away; and olives and olive oil from the Azapa Valley, which Magnus thought were the best in the world, better even than in Greece. He even produced a jug of pisco sour made with the best lemons that against all odds grew in that arid land. Papayas, grapes and bottles of water completed the feast. Aware of Alec’s scrupulous nature, he made sure to leave behind enough money to cover the cost of food and more on the counters and pockets of those from whom he took.

Looking at the spread in front of him, Alec smiled. “You never cease to amaze me, Magnus,” he said, reaching for a piece of cheese. Magnus took a piece of bread and broke it in two and gave half to Alec.

They ate, drunk and talked about everything and nothing, and as the pisco sour warmed his spirit, Alec began to laugh easily and wholeheartedly at the many anecdotes that Magnus told him about his visits to this part of the world; at stories of flying carpets, monkeys, guinea pigs and mishaps over the Nazca lines. He even smiled warmly when Magnus spoke of heartbreak and a life of crime.

After a while, Magnus fell silent and looked deep into Alec’s eyes, thinking that if it wasn’t for Annaliese, this would be the perfect way of spending an evening with the man he loved. Alec took an olive and placed it in Magnus’ mouth in a tender, sensual and suggestive gesture that erased all negative thoughts from his mind. The gesture stirred something in the pit of Magnus’ stomach and put all kinds of naughty ideas in his mind. Returning the gesture, he fed Alec small pieces of cheese, dipped in fragrant olive oil. When Alec reached for a napkin, he stopped him and kissed him instead, the taste of the oil making Alec’ lips even more sensual and delectable.

“You taste delicious,” he whispered and Alec flushed and smiled, embarrassed or pleased, Magnus
didn’t know. He kissed him again, relishing in the sound of pleasure that Alec gifted him with. He
entangled his fingers in Alec’s hair, and Alec responded by grabbing the lapels of his jacket and
pulling him closer.

“Where are we exactly?” Alec asked sometimes later, his voice a little breathless.

“We are in the Atacama Desert,” Magnus repeated. “Lima, Peru is about three thousand kilometers
that way” he said pointing north, “and Santiago, Chile is about a thousand kilometers that way,” he
added pointing south. “The Pacific Ocean is about an hour drive west of here and the Andes which
we cannot see very clearly right now are about another hour drive east. This is Kat’s ancestral land,
where she was born and where she likes to live and work. She is a scientist, right now an
astronomer in the observatory where we just left her, but she was born when the Inca Empire still
ruled this land, before any Spaniards or Shadowhunters ever set foot here. She was part of an Incan
elite entrusted with knowledge of the stars.”

“I don’t think I have ever been this far from home before,” Alec said, surprise and awe written on
his face. “The sky is beautiful here,” he added looking up at the stars once again.

Magnus observed Alec in silence, amazed to see how the light from the fire shone on those brown
eyes, making them look almost golden. Alec seemed relaxed, but Magnus knew that a fast current
of emotions and concerns run just under the surface of that apparent calmness. Underneath, Alec
was alert and worried about everything that was going on. And, their unfinished conversation, that
request that Magnus thought he could never fulfill still lingered between them, like an
unacknowledged presence. Magnus recalled Alec’s face in Zürich, the expression of pain and
confusion, as Acquaclara demanded that he stayed, and a renewed surge of anger run through him.
Alec didn’t deserve what had happened to him. He shouldn’t have to suffer just because of who he
was and who he had chosen to be with.

Alec shifted his gaze from the sky towards Magnus and smiled, as if he had become suddenly
aware of Magnus’ eyes on him. Magnus placed one hand on Alec’s cheek and the other on the
place where that sad reminder of pain, abandonment and absence was hidden underneath Alec’s
shirt. As if wanting to push the memories away, Magnus sought Alec’s lips again and kissed him
deeply and tenderly.

“Magnus,” Alec whispered when their lips parted momentarily. Not wanting to hear what he knew
Alec would say, Magnus silenced him with another and even more heated kiss, a kiss that enticed
Alec’s lips to part so Magnus’ tongue could invite his to play.

“Magnus,” Alec repeated a few moments later, as he placed his own hand atop Magnus’ on the
rune. Understanding that he could not erase the plea from Alec’s lips, Magnus pulled back, his
eyes full of desire and resignation.

“You have to take this rune off me Magnus,” Alec said. “Look at what Acquaclara did with it.
Think of what it will do to us if you don’t remove it. As long as I have it, Inquisitor Dearborn will
be a constant presence in our lives, and you won’t be able to forget what it signifies.”

“You think I cannot look past the rune”, Magnus said, the implications of Alec’s words finally
dawning on him. “You think that I cannot desire you the same way as long as you have it. Why?”

“Because now you know what it means; because it symbolizes something ugly and hateful.”

“You think that the rune makes you ugly or undesirable to me?” Magnus asked, the implications of
Alec’s words feeling like a rock that hits the calm surface of a lake, creating ripples that spread and
disturb its peace. “Alexander, I remind you that my own past mistakes have landed us in a huge
mess, and you are able to look past that. What makes you think that I won’t be able to look past this?” he asked pointing at the rune.

He shifted position and, bringing one leg across, sat astride on Alec’s lap facing him. “Nothing could ever make me stop desiring you, Shadowhunter,” he whispered in Alec’s ear, the words full of promise and certainty. Determined to show him, Magnus brought his lips to Alec’s once again, the kiss hungry and full of fire silencing any further protest; his demanding tongue staking an undisputable claim to Alec’s mouth. He reached for the zipper in Alec’s sweater and pulled it down, and without breaking the kiss and the maddening motion of his tongue, Magnus pulled the garment past Alec’s shoulder. He run his hands slowly down Alec’s chest and abdomen relishing once again in the feel of his hard muscles. He searched for the hem of his shirt, and when he found it, pulled it up to expose the skin underneath, so his hands could stake their own claim on the hard planes of Alec’s chest.

Alec inhaled loudly and with a hissing sound, goosebumps forming as the chilly air kissed his skin. With a quick snap of his fingers, Magnus made the fire burn a little hotter and with another he raised wards that sheltered them and their makeshift camp from cold wind and prying eyes.

Alec relaxed his back against the rock, the playful motion of Magnus’ tongue and the naughty movements of his hands pushing away all thoughts of runes, Inquisitors, and evil warlocks. He wrapped his arms around Magnus’ waist and his own hands made their way under Magnus’ shirt in search of the soft skin and hard muscles of his back. When Magnus entangled the fingers of one hand in his hair and gently pulled his head backwards, Alec exposed his neck so Magnus could kiss and bite it gently in an upwards and downward motion that ignited a volcano in the center of Alec’s chest.

Bringing his hands down to Magnus’ lower back, Alec grabbed his behind and pulled him towards him, desperate to make the distance between their bodies disappear. Magnus rewarded him with a loud intake of air and a sound of surprise that made Alec smile, and when he looked at Magnus, he saw the glamor dissipate from his eyes. Magnus’ cat eyes shone brightly reflecting the light from the fire as the demon side of the warlock came out to play, and Alec welcomed him with a broad and loving smile.

Alec reached for Magnus’ belt buckle but Magnus stopped him. “Not so fast Shadowhunter; we have all the time in the world,” he whispered, and Alec believed him. For at that moment, time seemed to stop inside the magic bubble that the warlock had created to shelter them. With surprising strength and dexterity, Magnus shifted both their bodies and a second later, Alec was lying back on soft blankets, his head resting on a cushion. Alec let escape a deep sigh of pleasure as he felt the weight and feel of Magnus’ body on top of him.

Every time they had made love before, Magnus had given Alec a way out, a certain amount of control, wanting him to have the freedom to stop, to say no, to walk away. Deep down, Magnus had been afraid that Alec would one day decide that he was just too much to get used to; that they were just too different; or, what was worse, that he couldn’t live with the demonic part of Magnus. By giving Alec control, he had also allowed him to explore his own capacity to give and take pleasure, and Alec had not only discovered himself, but had also shown Magnus new ways of loving. Now, however, he wanted to be the one in control; he wanted to show Alec that nothing, no rune, no mark, no past, no pain, could ever diminish his feelings and his desire for him. He wanted to erase from Alec’s mind all doubts, uncertainties and insecurities.

What he didn’t realize was that showing Alec that he accepted him unconditionally required that Magnus bring down the barriers he constantly kept between the human and demonic parts of him. He needed to let the demon inside express his own unconditional love for Alec. As the barriers
fell, magic began to flow freely through his veins, making its way to the surface of his skin, and from there, flowing into Alec, as if there was no separation between them, no place where one ended and the other began.

As he slowly peeled Alec’s clothes and his own off, wanting to extend the pleasure and the anticipation as much as humanly, demonically and angelically possible, Magnus’ fingers drew multicolor magic circles and swirls on Alec’s skin. He had done this before during intense moments of lovemaking when he had lost control. This time, however, the sensation was different, stronger, more powerful. For as he shared his powers with Alec, as magic began to flow between them, Alec’s own fingers began to emit magic energy that drew similar lines and circles on Magnus’ own skin, tickling him with soft touches of electricity that awoke every nerve ending.

As Magnus shared his magic with Alec, Alec experienced new and previously unimaginable sensations, sensations he didn’t have words to describe. It was as if every cell of his body had come alive and vibrated at unison, and he could feel how Magnus drew power from everything around him, from the air, the ground, and even the water that run deep under the dry earth. At that moment, he understood, perhaps better than any Nephilim ever before, what it was like to be a magic-maker, and he knew with absolute certainty that there was nothing evil or ugly about Magnus.

That night under the stars, Magnus and Alec made magic together, casting new and mysterious spells as they wrote their names on every inch of each other’s skin; staking new claims; sharing new energies; and building new and stronger foundations for their relationship. In the process, each offered himself to the other freely and completely devoid of secrets, their souls more naked than ever before.

Minutes or hours later, Magnus felt Alec’s muscles tighten under him as the energy built within Alec for the powerful climax that Magnus knew Alec was about to unleash. “Look at me Shadowhunter,” he said, wanting to delay the release a little longer, his fingers entangled in Alec’s hair, his voice strained. “I want you to look at me,” he repeated.

Alec obeyed, and when those big brown eyes opened, they resembled bottomless pools of gold as Magnus’ magic whirled in them. Alec fixed his intense gaze on Magnus and Magnus’ gasped as the power of those eyes overpowered any attempt to delay their shared orgasm. Magnus let go then and cut off all ties to this world, as he let Alec taken them both over the edge in the most powerful of climaxes.

Eventually, exhausted and sated, Magnus collapsed on top of Alec and rested his cheek against Alec’s chest, Alec’s heartbeat echoing in his ears and on his chest at the same time. Alec reached for a blanket and covered them.

“Well, that was something,” Alec said and smiled after a few minutes of silence. Magnus smiled too, and when he looked up, he saw the last vestiges of the magic they had shared fade from Alec’s eyes. They laid in each other’s arms, their bodies entangled in an unbreakable knot. As Alec was about to drift off to sleep, Magnus finally whispered the words he had been silently wishing to hear since the beginning of their relationship.

“I love you Alexander Lightwood.”
With four words, Magnus had shattered Alec’s heart into a thousand pieces a few weeks ago; now with just three words – I love you – he gathered each one of those pieces and put them back together, healing Alec’s heart as if it had never been broken. Alec took a deep breath as if inhaling each word, wanting to absorb them into each cell of his body. Most of his life, Alec had felt like he stood apart from those around him, alone and lonely because of the secret he carried. Now with those words, this magnificent magic soul beckoned him to tie their lives together.

“I love you too Magnus Bane,” he replied, a sight of contentment following the declaration. Magnus brought his lips to Alec’s ear and softly whispered a name, the human name that his mother had given him almost four centuries before; the name he used before he became Magnus Bane; the name no person alive had heard or used in all those centuries. Magnus whispered the name because he meant only for Alec to hear and know it. Not even the stars, the night, the wind, or the fire heard the name because it was a secret entrusted only to the one Magnus loved most.

“I like it,” said Alec with a warm and loving smile. “I will treasure it forever.” They laid in each other arms, and looked up at the stars, the only witnesses to their lovemaking until Alec felt Magnus relax in his arms and his breathing change. Only when he was sure Magnus was asleep, did he let sleep take him too.

Alec woke up a few hours later as the first of the sunlight shone above the peaks of the majestic Andes and penetrated the wards under wish Magnus had kept them sheltered and warm throughout the night. Magnus was sitting cross legged beside him, his shirt back on, and he was looking towards the sunrise. Putting his own shirt on, Alec sat up beside him and reached for Magnus’ hand. The sunrise was spectacular, and Alec thought that he had never seen mountains as tall and beautiful as these ones, their snowy peaks reflecting the morning light in a startling white that contrasted with the brown and terracotta of the desert below.

“The sunrise in this part of the world is one of my favorites,” said Magnus. “Nowhere else, you see a bluer sky or a clearer sun.”

“It is beautiful,” said Alec. “The size of those mountains makes you feel small, as if everything else, all troubles, were insignificant; as if life was transient.”

“You understand,” Magnus said with a tone of surprise as if Alec had just put into words precisely what he was feeling.

Alec put his arm around Magnus’ shoulders and Magnus’ relaxed against his body. They sat in silence for a while, letting the morning sun clear the webs of sleep away, leaving just the sharp and pleasant memories of their night together.

“I will do it,” Magnus said quietly after a while.

“What?” asked Alec.

“I will try to remove the rune, but I have two conditions.”

“Name them,” said Alec, relief washing over him.

“I need Catarina or Kat’s help, and you need to tell Jace. You will need the strength of your parabatai to survive the procedure.”

Alec simply nodded and smiled. He would have preferred no one else knew about the rune, but he was willing to live with Magnus’ conditions if it meant that he would honor his request. He
wrapped his arm even tighter around Magnus’ shoulders and kissed the top of his head because he understood that agreeing to do what he asked was hard for Magnus, and he was grateful.

Once the sun completely cleared the mountain peaks, they got dressed and, after Magnus used his powers to clear their makeshift camp, they headed hand-in-hand back to the observatory. As they approached the bottom of the hill, they saw Kat heading down with determined and hurried steps, a backpack strapped to her back, her hair in a tight braid falling down one shoulder, and sunglasses covering her eyes.

“We have to go,” she said as soon as she reached them. “Jace called; Dearborn gave the order to eliminate the New York vampire clan. He is planning to attack the Hotel Du Mort this morning.”

“During the day?” asked Alec. “They won’t be able to escape; it will be a massacre.”

“I am going to kill Dearborn,” said Magnus through clenched teeth, as he waved his arms to open a portal.

“Get in line,” said Alec, as he prepared to follow Magnus.
The Siege of the Hotel Du Mort

Chapter Summary

Pushing through the pain, Alec poured all his energy into that singular spot on his chest; all his anger; all his love, happiness and even sadness; all the loyalty he felt towards his people; all his memories of Magnus, of the feeling of Magnus’s magic flowing through him when they made love under the stars.

When Lilith sent demons to procreate with humans to create warlocks, she wanted to give birth to a new species. She wanted her own children to take back what she thought was hers by birthright, that which god had denied her when he expelled her from the world. But, when she sent demons to infect humans with vampirism and lycanthropy she didn't want to create but to destroy; to plant the seed of humanity's demise.

Among the demon diseases she unleashed, the one that infects the Children of the Night is perhaps the most pernicious. It takes its hosts to the threshold of death, to the very limits of their humanity, but without allowing them to completely cross over or to become demons. Thus, once the disease changes them, vampires remain forever in a state between life and death; not truly alive, not dead either. While lycanthropy also transforms its hosts, werewolves remain mortal and, thus, their humanity endures, and sometimes becomes stronger than their demonic side. Vampires are the ones who truly walk the fine line that separates life and death, this world and the next. They are the ones who must always walk in darkness and dwell in places the sun cannot touch, places that resemble the antechambers of hell. As a result, vampires are the most susceptible to further demonic poisoning as well as the ones who struggle the most to control the urges that come with demonic diseases.

In the darkness of his room in the Hotel Du Mort, Raphael Santiago lifted his face in the air, closed his eyes and sniffed, searching for the scent of the one who, since this nightmare began weeks ago, had become both the cause of his despair and his only source of hope. He quickly sorted in his mind the mixture of aromas the air brought him: the smell of Chinese and Indian food from the restaurants down the street, the peculiar combination of fur and skin that characterized the werewolves standing guard outside the hotel, and the already familiar scent of the Shadowhunters who arrived a few nights ago seeking refuge. When his nose finally registered the familiar mixture of wild flowers, lemongrass and pheromones that was the unmistakable fragrance of Isabel Lightwood, Raphael breathed in deeply as if wanting the scent to wash away all the pain and struggle of the last few weeks.

This morning, the presence of her scent in the air alerted Raphael that Izzy had arrived for guard duty hours before it was expected. He walked towards the covered window and run his fingers down the thick black fabric, and for the hundredth time, he was tempted to draw the curtains and look outside. He imagined resting his gaze on Izzy's beautiful figure, her thick and lush black hair, or her haunting black eyes just a second before the sun turned his own eyes into ambers and ash. He imagined feeling the confusing mixture of happiness and relief that would come both from seeing her, and from finally being freed by death from the agony of not being able to have her. But he didn't draw the curtain. Instead, he attuned his sharp hearing to the sound of Izzy's voice, trying to catch the conversation that she was having with Clary and Luke outside the Hotel.
Since that night that she walked into his room, Raphael had refused to answer Izzy's calls or meet with her. But, since she, Luke and his pack started guarding the hotel, he had been spying on her as she stood by the door of the building at night; following her with his eyes when she went on rounds; listening to her voice and musical laugh when she talked to the others; and gazing at her pensive expression when she was alone and thought no one was watching. When sunlight kept him locked in the darkness of his room, he had guessed her location and her movements by how the freeze blew her fragrance in his direction. In time, he had learned to guess her moods by the changes in her scent and could tell when she was worried, sad, scared, angry, and –his favorite of Izzy's moods –resolute. He had told himself many times that he would stop searching for, or spying on her. For while her presence brought him comfort, it also reminded him of how unreachable she was, how futile was to continue hoping.

This morning, the air brought him a different scent, a scent that alerted him that something was about to happen. Izzy was in a state that was a mixture of panic, anger and determination. That is why, he listened carefully to her conversation with her friends, and that is how Raphael learned that The Clave had ordered the extermination of his clan.

The news should have outraged or, at the very least, scared him, but he was tired. He was tired of fighting the effects of the demonic poison that, since the attack at the New York Institute, had been slowly chipping away at both his instinct for self-preservation and his faith in god. If it wasn't for the sense of responsibility he felt towards his clan, and the knowledge that his death would cause Izzy suffering, he would have sought the end long ago.

Raphael and his clan had begun to feel the effects of the demonic poison just a few hours after the attack. One of the clan members, Jessy, a young vamp who used to hang out at the park, dragged himself into the Hotel Du Mort just minutes before sunrise, a wild and disoriented expression on his face. His clothes were soaked in blood, his eyes were bloodshot, and his stomach was distended from too much feeding. He collapsed in the front lobby and when two other clan members, Nadine and Carl, tried to help him, Jessy threw up all over them, a foul combination of blood and a substance as black as tar splashing and staining the floor and walls. When he smelled the foulness, Raphael, who had arrived to assist Jessy right after Nadine and Carl, knew that something was wrong. What came out of the young vampire smelled of copper, sulfur and putrefying flesh, and rather than dissipating after they cleaned up, the stench remained and quickly spread throughout the hotel.

Over the next few hours, Nadine and Carl began to exhibit the same insatiable thirst that had affected Jessy, and shortly after, Raphael himself began to feel the same symptoms. Jessy, Nadine and Carl became irritable, almost rabid, and completely ruled by their instincts. Other clan members had to physically restrain them, lock them in their rooms and use physical force to prevent them from escaping and wreaking havoc in the city. The poison affected Raphael in the same way and only his tremendous capacity for self-control, his unshakable faith in god, his sense of duty towards his clan, and his love for his family, now dead for years, kept him from succumbing to the same urges that ruled the other three members of his clan. Still, by the end of the first day, he dragged himself to his room determined to lock himself in until he died of thirst.

However, when he entered his room, he experienced an unexplainable sense of relief. It wasn't that the thirst, the irritability or the urge to hunt disappeared. Rather, it was as if he had taken medication that dulled the pain without doing away with it. That was when he noticed the box that had magically appeared on the coffee table sometime over the previous few hours. He recognized the box and the ring inside. He had seen it in Magnus' loft years before and, while there was no note, he understood Magnus had sent it to him.

Over the next few days, the demonic poisoning that Jessy had released into the air spread to almost
the whole clan, and only the magic effects of Magnus' ring allowed those nearby to maintain some modicum of self-control. Knowing that sooner or later, The Clave would realize that the clan was diseased, Raphael ordered them to horde as much blood as possible. He then sequestered the clan in the hotel under strict prohibition to leave. Thankfully, Izzy had come through and soon the werewolves began to deliver blood and guard the hotel.

Yet, even with the magical help of Magnus' ring, the effects of the poisoning didn't go away. Not only did the thirst remain, but, in fact, it seemed to increase no matter how much blood the vampires drank. And, in time, the thirst became not just a physical need for blood, but a hunger, a desire, a yearning and, ultimately, an irresistible longing for things lost when vampires became undead. Unable to satisfy it, the thirst morphed into something else, a deep melancholy that no amount of blood, reassurance or love could cure. It was as if unable to give free reins to instincts, other deeper unsatisfied desires took over, as if the thirst opened a void in the center of one's chest, a void that swallowed everything that was good and left only sadness, absence and darkness.

Eventually, it was not the insatiable thirst but the melancholy, absence and longing that were the poison's most devastating effects. A week after Jessy showed the first symptoms, he sneaked out of his room, climbed to the roof of the hotel and, with slow but determined steps, walked out into the midday sun. As the sun slowly blistered and then burned his skin, Jessy called for his mother, dead for over a hundred years; for his sisters; for the children that he never and could never have. He cried for a human life that should have been forgotten but wasn't, and for an old age he would never reach. He cried until nothing but ashes and tears were left of him. After Jessy's death, Raphael ordered all doors and windows be sealed. Still, two more had died by their own hand since then, drowning in their own despair.

Raphael understood what drove Jessy and the others to suicide; for since the poison took hold of him, he had felt more than ever before in his long life the loss of everything he left behind when he became a vampire. Of all of it, the loss of love was the hardest: the loss of his mother and siblings' love, and the loss of god's love. But most of all, it was Isabel Lightwood, that near yet still unreachable and untouchable temptation that symbolized the biggest loss. She was that which Raphael couldn't have but couldn't stop desiring either; that which while reminding him of his loss, he couldn't send away. That is why, despite the torture that it was not to be able to touch her, he followed her with his eyes and nose; for Izzy was his biggest weakness and his major source of strength, his major cause of despair and his only source of hope.

Despite housing creatures who lived in darkness, Raphael had always made the effort to infuse a sense of style, cleanliness, order, and even elegance into hotel. As days and weeks went by, however, the place began to resemble more and more a tomb, a place of death, and sometimes, an asylum for the insane. The vampires stayed mostly in their rooms and the hallways and ballrooms remained in darkness. Only the occasional whimper or scream of agony, and the regular sounds of the werewolves knocking on the side door to deliver blood broke the silence. That, and the arrival of Clary, Catarina and a few others seeking refuge a few nights ago.

Now, the routine would finally be broken because The Clave was coming to put Raphael and his clan out of their misery. Listening to the discussion between Izzy, Luke, Clary and the others, and their planning for a strategy to safeguard the hotel and the vampires, Raphael felt once more the odd mixture of relief, sadness and hope. He knew Izzy would not give up on him, even though he wished she did. He knew that he should fight, that he should come out of his room and organize a defense but an unrelenting exhaustion and a desire to die had, because of the poison, taken root in the center of his being. So, he just stayed locked in his room resigned to whatever fate destiny had in store for him.

Suddenly, several other unfamiliar scents, mixtures of adrenaline, fear, anger and hate, reached
Raphael and he knew that the Clave representatives had arrived. His ears registered rapid movements as the werewolves and his Shadowhunter friends took defensive positions outside the hotel, determined to block the entrances and prevent the other Nephilim from entering. The hotel went deadly silent all of the sudden, as the other vampires registered the presence of the new arrivals. Perhaps some of them readied themselves to fight not caring whether they died as long as their agony ended. The situation was about to become volatile, Raphael thought, but the realization wasn't enough to snap him out of his stupor, not enough to shake him into action. Except for the sorrow that he felt knowing that Izzy would mourn him, he was beyond caring.

As Dearborn ordered his team to surround the hotel, he was disgusted, but not completely surprised to see Jace Herondale and Isabel Lightwood blocking their way. Not only had Jace and Isabel disobeyed his orders to eliminate the vampire infestation, but they had obviously betrayed their duty to the Nephilim by opposing him. Sadly, theirs was not the first act of rebellion he had had to deal with that morning.

In fact, a couple of hours ago, he had been enraged when the Shadowhunters remaining at the New York Institute had refused to obey his order to attack the Hotel Du Mort. Even Scarcherry, member of one of the oldest and most honorable families of Idris had defied him, arguing some nonsense about the vampires not presenting a threat.

"It doesn't matter what you think," he had said to Scarcherry between clenched teeth and in front of all his teammates. "I am giving you an order and you must obey it."

"I cannot," had been Scarcherry's stubborn answer. "My consciousness doesn't allow me to follow an order that is morally wrong."

At the end, Dearborn had ordered the rebellious Shadowhunters back to their rooms, and after contacting Acquaclara, had the warlock prisoner that had transported him and his team to New York open a new portal. She had arrived a few minutes later with a team they had assembled from loyal Shadowhunters from different Institutes, and they had taken over the operation that would finally put an end to the vampire infestation, the Shadowhunter rebellion and, Dearborn hoped, the warlock attacks.

The inquisitor thought that the rebelliousness of the New York Shadowhunters was the result of The Clave's permissive attitude when it came to the Nephilim assigned to the Institutes; of the absence of rules that prohibited fraternization with downworlders; and of the unwillingness of The Clave to punish Shadowhunters who behaved inappropriately. The Clave had been too permissive, too lenient, he thought, and, thus, had allowed the Downworld to contaminate the purity of the Nephilim.

The Inquisitor feared that The Clave had become corrupt when they gave council seats to the Downworld in exchange for their help in the war against Valentine. The moment The Clave opened the door, they lost control, he thought. And now, the Nephilim were comingling and fraternizing with downworlders, allowing themselves to be polluted. Isabel Lightwood's rumored relationship with a vampire, and worse, her brother's disgusting relationship to that warlock were clear evidence that he was right.

The Clave had even begun to question his methods. All because some Downworld representatives had launched complains. It wasn't his fault, Dearborn thought, that the Barcelona Shadowhunters had gotten overzealous and killed a couple of werewolves and a fairy by mistake. Those people all looked the same; after all, they were all part demon. The Consul was now demanding that he return to Idris to explain his actions, but as long as the Idris borders remained closed, all the Consul could do was to scream at him through the phone line, while Dearborn continued doing his work.
If he could only stop the warlock attacks, he thought but then reconsidered. Perhaps it was for the best. The longer the attacks continued, the longer The Clave would remain sequestered in Idris and the more time he would have to clean up the corruption from among the Shadowhunters. He would begin with the New York Institute and Alexander Lightwood. Once The Clave saw that his treatment to eliminate demonic influences worked, they would never doubt him or his motivations again.

Who would have thought that The Clave would become so weak, so open to the corrupt influence of the Downworld? Dearborn asked himself as he took position a few meters from the Shadowhunter traitors and their werewolf allies who formed a line of defense in front of the hotel. No wonder Shadowhunters like Alexander Lightwood had become easy targets for demonic corruption. But no matter, he was confident that he would be victorious at the end; that he would not only end the vampire threat, but would also capture Alexander Lightwood, Magnus Bane and his two warlock accomplices, Catarina Loss and Kat-Ata-Killa.

He had divided his team into three groups: the first, under Acquaclara's command would keep the werewolves occupied while he and a smaller team went into the hotel in search of the fugitives. A third team was in charge of setting explosives and fire bombs around the hotel. The plan was to have the building and everybody in it reduced to ashes and debris by the end of the morning.

"Jace Herondale," Dearborn spoke in a commanding yet still nasal voice, "you and any other Shadowhunters currently in the premises are hereby ordered to leave." He thought he should give Jace the chance to vacate the premises. He was, after all, a Herondale, and Dearborn didn't want the boy's family to accuse him of not having done all in his power to get Jace out of danger. If the boy disobeyed, he would at least be able to say that Jace had had every chance to change his mind.

"I am afraid we cannot do that, Inquisitor," replied Jace in a tone that struck Dearborn as terribly impertinent. "The vampires haven't hurt anyone and, as per their request, they are currently under Nephilim protection."

"I have not heard of, nor do I recognize any such request," replied Dearborn. "Mr. Herondole," he said trying his best reasoning tone, more for the other Shadowhunters to hear than because he cared to convince Jace. He wanted to make sure that none of his action would be subject of scrutiny by a family as powerful as the Herondales. "I must insist that you let me handle this threat. The vampires are dangerous; dangerous indeed."

"I must disagree," replied Jace in a commanding and certain voice. "If you try to come in, you will have to go through us."

"Well, no one can say that I didn't try," he whispered to Acquaclara. "You know what to do. Oh, and make sure to bring any bodies into the hotel afterwards. Since they prefer to die rather than give up the vampires, they should burn with them."

Dearborn had never been one for blood or battle. He was more of a bureaucrat, and thought his calling was to give orders rather than to get his hands dirty. So, as the Shadowhunters under Acquaclara's command got their seraph blades out and began to approach the front entrance, he and his team, made their way towards the side of the building where two of his men were about to break a door. By the time he heard the first clash of blades, he was already away from the unfolding battle.

Alec, Magnus and Kat stepped out of the portal and into one of the hotel's dark ballrooms. Immediately, Alec got his blade out and checked that his bow and quiver were properly strapped to his back. They had hoped to have more time to prepare but as soon as they set foot in the hotel, they heard the sounds of battle coming from outside. Inside, the hotel was immersed in tense
silence and darkness. As they cautiously made their way out of the room and through the first set of corridors in the direction of the front lobby, Magnus kept his hands at the ready just in case they run into one of Dearborn's people, or a rabid vampire and he needed to perform magic. About a hundred meters down the corridor they made a turn and run almost head first into Catarina.

"Thanks god you are here Magnus," she said in her usual dry tone. "I had begun to think that you had gotten lost in the desert once again." Catarina continued walking along the corridor as she waved her hands in front of every door.

"What are you doing?" asked Magnus.

"What do you think?" she said. "I am sealing the doors so we do not have a stampede of rabid, confused and sick Vampires in our hands. Why don't you stop asking silly questions and help? Alec, Clary and Jeremy are in the front lobby guarding the inside of the door," she added turning to the Shadowhunter.

"Okay, I will go help them," stated Alec. "I suspect Dearborn is going to try to burn the hotel. Magnus, is there anything you can do to stop the building from catching fire?"

"I can try," replied Magnus.

"You two go on then," interjected Kat as she rolled up her sleeves and got ready to perform magic. "I will help Catarina."

Magnus and Alec continued silently making their way down to the first level. As they walked by closed door after closed door, they heard faint sounds of crying, whimpering and moaning coming from inside the rooms. He had been in the hotel only a couple of times, and his visits had never been cordial. But tonight, the sounds, combined with the darkness, gave the hotel an even more eerie and unnerving feeling than Alec remembered. There was also a lingering and distinctive smell in the air, as if days or perhaps weeks before, someone had left something to rot somewhere in the hotel and the remnants of the stench remained even after whatever it was had been removed.

"Will you be okay if we run into Dearborn or Acquaclara?" Magnus asked Alec in a barely audible voice. He was concerned that once they run into the Inquisitor, he would try to trigger Alec's rune again. The situation they were in was potentially explosive and not only because the Nephilim were trying to burn the hotel. The vampires were unpredictable in their present state and if Dearborn and his people made it into the building, Alec and his team might find themselves at a disadvantage. Very few werewolves would risk entering the Hotel Du Mort on account of age-old feuds between the two Downworld species. At the end, it might be just them against who knows how many Nephilim.

"I will be fine Magnus," Alec replied and Magnus recognized in the voice the tone Alec used when he was in command. Alec was not the gentle lover or the caring partner right now, but the soldier on a mission, a mission to defend those who, at least at the moment, couldn't defend themselves. Magnus experienced a moment of profound pride, for Alec was brave and selfless when it came to putting his life on the line for others. He just hoped that bravery would not fail him at the end, and if it did, the anger Alec felt towards Dearborn would compensate.

A minute later, they found Clary and Jeremy by the front entrance, their blades at the ready. The sounds of battle raging outside could be heard through the massive front door: the unmistakable sound of blade against blade, of bodies colliding with one another, of running and pushing against the door.

"I should go outside," said Alec as he readied his weapon, its blade glowing even more brightly in
"No," said Clary putting a hand on his arm. "Jace wants us to stay here and stop anyone coming in as well as any vampire trying to get out. If anyone makes it past the door, we have to stop them from going further."

"Is anybody keeping an eye on the Inquisitor?" asked Alec. "I suspect that he will try to sneak in unseen."

"He is sneaky bastard and a coward," said Magnus. "I wouldn't put it past him to use the attack as a decoy to sneak in through a tunnel."

"And we need to look for any teams setting explosives; their ultimate goal is to burn the hotel," Alec added. He thought that if he had planned the siege, he would not just rely on a frontal attack. If they had just had more time, Alec thought, they could have planned a more comprehensive defense strategy. But again, they were just a small group, even when considering the werewolves. And, Dearborn's people were likely skilled Shadowhunters.

"Don't worry, Maya and a small group of werewolves are looking into that," replied Jeremy.

Abruptly, a loud explosion shook the ground and the chandeliers that hanged from the high ceilings, and when they turned in the direction of the bang, they saw a streak of sunlight breaking the semidarkness at the end of the corridor leading to the east wing of the hotel. Almost at the same time, a loud crash cracked the front door, and the sound of screams, cries, and bangs broke the silence of the upper levels of the hotel where the vampires were locked in their rooms.

Magnus and Alec looked at one another with dread. Jace's line of defense outside the door had been breached, and someone had just blown a hole in the side of the building. They were about to be assaulted on two fronts.

"The explosion was near Raphael's chambers," said Magnus, alarm evident in his voice.

"Catarina sealed his door, but that explosion could have disrupted the magic," said Jeremy, his voice barely audible over the increasingly loud banging, and the screams and cries coming from the upper levels.

"You guys go," said Clary as she widened her stand and tightened her grip on the blades in her hands. "We got this."

Alec heard voices and boot steps coming from the opposite wing from where he and Magnus were heading, and as he glanced back, he saw three Shadowhunters and two werewolves join Clary and Jeremy at the precise moment that the front door finally gave in.

The door at the end of the east wing corridor had been blown out of its hinges and the walls and carpets were bathed in bright sunlight for the first time in decades. Magnus and Alec walked cautiously but with determined steps, their backs to the wall. Half way down the corridor, they took a turn that led them to the entrance to Raphael's rooms. That door had also been broken but this time not by an explosion, but by the push of a strong body, or perhaps by the use of magic.

As they walked into the apartment, Alec unstrapped his bow and nocked an arrow, and Magnus rolled up his sleeves even higher, tiny purple sparks emanating from his fingers. Magnus had the distinctive suspicion that they were walking into a trap and he was about to say as much to Alec when the door behind them closed shut, locking them inside Raphael's barely illuminated rooms. Too late, thought Magnus, as he took a deep breath and gave Alec a resigned look. They were on
their own at least for now. He felt his heart beat pick up speed but then the echo of Alec's steady heartbeat on his chest forced his own to settle. Alec was alert but not scared or panicking despite the uncertainty of their situation.

A few steps into Raphael's apartment, the corridor ended at a hallway that separated the apartment into two opposite wings. Alec signaled for Magnus to walk in one direction while he walked in the other. The situation wasn't ideal, thought Magnus as he saw Alec walk away, neither of them knew how many people might be waiting for them, but they didn't have much choice; splitting was the only way to quickly search the whole apartment.

Magnus walked by a bathroom and an empty bedroom, their doors ajar, and continued on until he reached a closed door at the end of the hallway. As he was about to snap his fingers to throw that last door open, two pairs of strong arms caught his hands and trapped them behind his back.

"We got you your filthy warlock," said an unknown rough voice with an Swedish accent coming from somewhere behind him. "We knew you were going to try to help your vampire friend."

The same strong arms pushed him into the dark room, and as soon as they were inside, someone else punched Magnus in the stomach with such surprising strength that Magnus instinctually bent over, the air knocked out of his lungs. With his hands trapped behind his back, he couldn't activate his magic powers before a kick to his knee sent a jolt of sharp pain up his leg and spine. If it wasn't for the arms holding him, he would have fallen to the ground. More punches and kicks to his head and stomach followed in quick succession, and Magnus began to feel disoriented, and he tasted blood in his mouth. No matter how much he tried, he couldn't master sufficient concentration to call on his powers. That had always been his problem; he needed to have control of his hands to perform magic.

Suddenly, he felt a jolt on his chest, and the echo of Alec' heartbeat picking up speed told him that his Shadowhunter was himself in trouble. Before panic overtook him, Magnus closed his eyes and concentrated in determining how many assailants were with him in the room. There were at least four, he thought: two holding him upright and two beating him up. One of them took out a seraph blade, its glow cutting the darkness in the room, and Magnus thought this was his end.

"We have orders not to kill you, warlock," said the voice with the Swedish accent, "but nothing prevents us from doing a little damage. See if you can perform magic without fingers or hands."

That was when the Shadowhunters made their most critical mistake. When one of them forced his arm from behind his back and out so the one with the blade could amputate his fingers, Magnus got sufficient leverage to release a stream of red magic that pushed out of him with enough strength to knock the Shadowhunter with the blade backwards and against the wall. Magnus then twisted with enough speed to surprise the men holding him and, releasing an even stronger stream of magic, sent both of them flying through the air. They hit the opposite wall with a loud thump and they fell on a heap on the floor. He turned again, but this time he wasn't fast enough to prevent the fourth assailant from slashing his side with the blade he had managed to take out. A blinding pain briefly disoriented him, and he involuntarily brought a hand to his side where a deep cut was beginning to profusely bleed.

"You just cut one of my favourite shirts," Magnus said in a tone of forced mockery.

"That is not all I am planning to cut your filthy demon spawn," replied a German accented voice.

With quick snaps of his fingers and circular waves of both his hands, Magnus called on the energy that always floated in the air and redirected it in the man's direction. As the energy obeyed his command, it became as solid and silvery as a steel blade which, with another push of his magic,
Magnus drove deep into the man's chest.

"You Nephilim need to learn new insults," he said as he turned to leave the room. "Those ones are getting old and repetitive."

Alec cautiously walked into what appeared to be the apartment's vast seating area and kitchen. He had a bare recollection of the place from when he had come to get Izzy the night he found out about her yin fen addiction months ago. He had been angry back then and had punched Raphael with an ire that had surprised him. Now, he was back here; but this time, he hoped to save the vampire that meant so much to his sister.

Something told him that he wasn't alone in the room, but the place was dark and he couldn't be sure. Walking alone and without back up into a dark room was not an ideal situation, thought Alec, as he turned and pointed his arrow from one side of the room to the other trying to get a sense of the situation. He needed Jace at this moment; he was always the one to barge in blind, which allowed Alec to walk a step behind and provide cover. He was now on his own and felt more exposed than during any previous mission.

Suddenly, a sharp pain hit him on the rune on his chest, a pain as intense as the stab of a knife and his hold on his bow weaken. Alec made a superhuman effort to keep his hold on his weapon, even though he knew he would not have the muscle to hold the bow or release an arrow. Another burst of pain cut through him and flashes of light on the periphery of his vision threatened to blind him. He involuntarily relaxed his hold on the bow and the weapon fell to his side. He searched for a blade hanging from his belt and as he released it from its hold, the blade glowed in his hand adding illumination to the dark room.

"Mr. Lightwood," came the familiar nasal voice of the Inquisitor from the sitting room where a table lamp came on. "I am so glad to get you alone finally; you and I have some businesses to conclude."

"Unless it is about you ending this attack, you and I have nothing to discuss," replied Alec as he took two decisive steps in Dearborn's direction.

The inquisitor turned the stele in his hand and its tip dug deeper into the rune on his opposite arm. An even sharper pain cut through Alec and he fell to one knee. He involuntarily let go of the blade as one hand reached for his chest and with the other he stopped himself from completely crumbling to the floor. He made an herculean effort to take a deep breath, to take control of his pain and to clear his mind from the rush of images and memories that threatened to cloud his thoughts, but the pain made it almost impossible for his lungs to expand.

"You left before your treatment was finished and I am afraid that you have become even more confused since then." The Inquisitor stood up and took a few steps in Alec's direction, the tip of his stele twisting once again against the strange rune on his arm. "As I told you, Mr. Lightwood, I can cure you; I can stop the demonic curse that has taken control of you before it completely corrupts you. Don't you want to be cured? Don't you want to be normal, become a respected Shadowhunter, someone your family will love and accept?"

"There is nothing wrong with…uggh," exclaimed Alec, the pain so intense that he felt he was being turned inside out. A rush of images run at blinding speed through his mind: Magnus' cat eyes turning black as tar, and is face transforming into the face of a monster; his hands cutting him as they caressed him; and the voice of the Inquisitor in his mind, telling him that Magnus was evil. Alec clawed at the rune on his chest and focused his whole attention on one single memory, the one memory he never wanted to let go of, the memory of the words with which Magnus had repaired his broken heart: 'I love you Alexander Lightwood.' As he recalled the words, he began to
chant them in his mind and imagined the words erasing all the false images, all the planted memories, all the dark thoughts with which the Inquisitor had attempted to poison his mind and his heart.

As he chanted Magnus' love declaration in his head, Alec's mind cleared somewhat and a thought occurred to him. It was a memory of something Kat had said about the mysterious rune on Acquaclara's arm, something he hadn't paid much attention to at the time, but that now acquired importance.

"The rune can create almost the same link as a parabatai rune," Kat had said. "It allows the bearer of the rune to inflict pain."

"Mr. Lightwood, you had made so much progress; so much progress indeed," said the Inquisitor as he twisted the stele once more sending a rush of heat through Alec, a heat that felt like flames blistering his skin. Alec gasped loudly as he struggled not to lose concentration, not to lose the idea forming in his mind. "I can make things so much easier for you if you just let me help you."

With shaking hands, Alec reached for the stele strapped to his leg, and focussing every thought on Magnus' words and on the idea forming in his mind, pointed it against his own chest. If the rune is like the parabatai rune, its connection works both ways, he thought as he dug the stele's tip into the center of that hideous rune on his chest and twisted. Unbelievably, the pain increased even more, heat, cold and stubbing pain threatening to undo him. But pushing through the pain, Alec poured all his energy into that singular spot on his chest; all his anger; all his love, happiness and even sadness; all the loyalty he felt towards his people; all his memories of Magnus, of the feeling of Magnus's magic flowing through him when they made love under the stars.

He heard Inquisitor Dearborn gasp in either surprise or pain, and almost at the same time, Alec felt as if the flow of energy that had been running from the Inquisitor towards him reversed course, and the pain receded a fraction. He gathered the remaining of his physical strength and pushed himself up, standing on his two shaking legs.

"There is nothing wrong with me," Alec said through clenched teeth as he twisted the stele against his chest, "which is more than I can say about you Inquisitor."

Dearborn looked at Alec with a shocked expression, but then twisted the stele once again. This time, however, Alec was ready and with a twist of his own pushed against the power of the dark rune. Dearborn gasped and his face contorted in pain.

"Painful, isn't it?" said Alec as he took two aching but decisive steps towards the Inquisitor. "You have no right to torture people simply because they do not fit within your moral compass. I will see to it that all Nephilim learn what you did to me."

As he finally reached the place where the Inquisitor stood Alec swung his arm with all the strength he could master and hit the Inquisitor with such force that the stele fell from Dearborn's hand and hit the floor with the faint sound of glass hitting a hard surface. As the pain finally left him, Alec felt a blind rage take over him, and grabbing Dearborn by the lapel of his jacket, he pushed him back against the wall. He then wrapped one hand firmly around his neck and pushed up, lifting the smaller man a few inches off the floor. Dearborn flailed his arms about, evidently surprised by the turn of events.

Alec looked into the mouse-like eyes of the Inquisitor and at his freckled face and saw, for the first time, how small and insignificant this man truly was, how scared of things he could not change or understand, how narrow-minded. Alec understood that the Inquisitor wasn't worth him sacrificing his own integrity and honor.
"You are not worth it," Alec said with a derisive tone as he let go of the man, and turned to leave.

As he turned his back on him, Alec heard the Inquisitor cough and then the familiar sound of a blade being unsheathed. He turned swiftly ready to defend himself. But just at that moment, a luminous stream of red and orange fiery energy flew through the air and caught the Inquisitor in the center of his chest, lifting him off the ground and trapping his arms to the sides of his body. A surprised squeak escaped Dearborn and he let go of his weapon.

"I believe Alexander just spared your life," came the cool and calm voice of Magnus from the doorway. "It would be impolite to attack him, don't you think?"

"Your filthy inverted abomination," said the Inquisitor, his voice strained as if his chest was being squeezed, which likely it was.

"Now, now, that is not very polite either," said Magnus, his voice sarcastic, as he took a few steps towards where his powers had the Inquisitor suspended in the air. "Are you okay Alexander?" he asked looking at Alec with concerned eyes.

"I am fine," replied Alec.

"I believe you owe Alexander an apology," Magnus said turning once again to the inquisitor.

"I don't owe you anything," said the Inquisitor. "You are a disgusting degenerate. I will see to it that you never be a Shadowhunter again, your filthy, corrupt…"

"I don't want to be a Shadowhunter if it means to hide for fear of rejection" Alec interrupted. "I am going to live my life out in the open, and I promise I am going to fight for others to do the same. I am not alone or afraid anymore."

"You are finished…" Dearborn started to say but Magnus cut his words short by increasing the pressure of his magic around the Inquisitor's chest. Dearborn began to emit shocking sounds as the magic squeezed the air out of his lungs.

"You are the one who is finished," said Magnus, the sarcasm and coolness gone from his voice, only the dead calmness left. He waved his arms in a decisive half turn and Dearborn's face went even paler.

Alec looked at Magnus and saw that the glamor from his eyes was completely gone and that his cat eyes gleamed with unusual brightness. At that moment, Magnus was more a warlock than Alec had ever seen, his demonic side surfacing with a force that threatened to overpower the human side. Alec should have been scared, but instead, he felt an irresistible tenderness towards the part of Magnus that had spent over three hundred years listening to people like the Inquisitor call him an abomination; the side of Magnus that now came to his aid, to Alec's defense rather than to his own.

"It is okay," Alec said gently placing a hand on Magnus' arm. "Warlock, just let him go, he is not worth it."

Magnus turned and looked at Alec as if seeing him for the first time. In those eyes, Alec saw plainly written the struggle waging inside Magnus between the human and the demonic. He also saw how the struggle was decided, becoming a stalemate between two sides that could agree on only one thing at that moment: their feelings towards the Shadowhunter.

Magnus let go of his magic hold on Dearborn and turned to follow Alec out of the room.

For the second time in as many minutes, Dearborn's treasury and pride got the better of him. He
was not about to just let Alec and Magnus go. He was the Inquisitor and no one turned his back on him and dismissed him with such disdain.

"You filthy degenerates…” he said and he took a knife out of his belt, aimed it and got ready to throw it at Magnus.

However, Inquisitor Dearborn didn't have time to release the knife. For suddenly, the dark figure of Raphael Santiago detached itself from the shadows in a corner of the room and with blinding speed approached the Inquisitor from behind. With superhuman strength, Raphael's fist punched a hole through the Inquisitor's back, piercing flesh and bone until it reached his heart.

"No one calls my friends degenerates," he said as he yanked the heart out of the Inquisitor, the organ beating for the last time when it was already outside the Inquisitor's body and in the grip of Raphael's hand.

With a look of utter surprise, the Inquisitor looked down at his chest for a brief moment and then back at Magnus and Alec before collapsing to the floor, his eyes and mouth open in an expression of incredulity and astonishment.

Time seemed to slow down as several things happened at the same time. Alec and Magnus turned just as the Inquisitor looked up from his chest and collapsed dead on the floor. At that moment, a crash alerted them that someone had broken the door to the apartment and less than a second later, Jace, Izzy and Catarina run into the room, blade and whip in hand.

Raphael looked at his bloody hand and at the strange sight of the Inquisitor's heart in its grip. His fangs instinctually came out as the uncontrollable thirst he had been fighting against for the last few weeks finally got the better of him. Raphael became all instinct and hunger, the animal that, since he became a vampire, he had refused to be. All thought and reason gone, he kneeled on the floor and sank his teeth in the Inquisitor's neck searching for the last of the fresh blood cursing through the man's body.

Alec heard Izzy gasp as she approached him and Magnus, but before she could attempt to get closer to Raphael, who was now kneeling over the Inquisitor's body, his fangs sank on the dead man's neck, he grabbed her. "He is beyond reach," he softly told Izzy.

"No, he is not," she replied, her voice pleading. "He will listen to me, let me go."

"Izzy, it is too dangerous," Alec tried to reason. He looked at Magnus seeking support or suggestions but Magnus' face reflected the same stunned expression that Alec suspected was also written on his own face.

"Let me go, Alec," said Izzy once again as she struggled to free herself from Alec's grip. "I can get through to him; trust me."

Alec let her go, not because he believed that she would get through to Raphael, but because he knew that his sister was stubborn and would never forgive him if he didn't give her at least the chance to try. As Izzy cautiously approached Raphael, Alec picked up his bow and nocked an arrow he hoped never to have to release.

"Raphael," Izzy called him softly and gently, her voice carrying the tone used by lovers. "Raphael, listen to me, I am here and I won't let anything happened to you."

Raphael stopped feeding for an instant, distracted by the sound of a voice he couldn't quite place. The sound annoyed him as if it was a perky insect flying around his head. As Izzy called his name
once again, he cocked his head and when he saw the others in the room, he bared his teeth as a threat to anyone trying to take his prey away from him. Everybody, except for Izzy stood still not wanting to provoke the vampire.

"Raphael, it is me, Izzy," Izzy said, her voice calm and loving. "You know me, I am the girl you have been watching through your window for the last few weeks."

Raphael looked at Izzy with a confused expression, the words sounding familiar, and as Izzy extended her arm tentatively towards him, her scent reached him over the coppery smell of blood. It was a fragrance that he would remember for eternity, the scent of wild flowers, lemongrass and pheromones. Suddenly, a flow of memories returned him to reason: the memory of Izzy standing guard outside the hotel, walking on rounds around the building, laughing and talking with her friends; the memory of her small body against his that night she came to see him, and of her lips soft and sensual.

It was as if one moment his mind had been completely empty, and the next, thoughts, reasons, feelings and memories rushed back to him with a violence that almost threw him backwards. With the memories and thoughts, his consciousness and awareness returned and he saw what he was doing, his bloody hands and the taste of the dead man's blood on his tongue. Raphael let go of the body and with blinding speed retreated to the corner from which he had witnessed the exchange between the Inquisitor, Alec and Magnus. There, he crouched low on the ground and put his head in his hands.

Izzy followed him there and crouching beside him, wrapped his arms around the big body of Raphael Santiago, not caring that his frame barely fit in her much smaller arms.

"Oh boy, what are we going to do now?" asked Magnus as he approached the Inquisitor's body and looked at it as if it was some annoying piece of evidence that needed to be disposed of. The screams and shouts of the rest of the vampires still locked in their rooms could be clearly heard and Magnus suspected they were getting more agitated by the scent of fresh blood. Catarina approached the body beside him and waving her hands put a spell on it that stopped the smell from spreading.

Alec looked at Jace and they both nodded as if reaching a silent agreement. "We are the only ones who saw what happened," he said. "We will tell The Clave that the Inquisitor died in a battle with the vampires, which is not strictly a lie."

"I wrote to our parents this morning telling them that Dearborn had ignored the vampires' request for protection and was planning a massacre," said Izzy from the corner, her voice soft and even. "They will go to the council and speak the truth."

Abruptly, a sound that resembled a roar interrupted their discussion. It was as if the vampires had become even more restless and were now not only screaming and calling out in a panic, but also banging at doors and walls. Raphael lifted his head from his hands and sniffed the air.

"Fire," he said and stood up careful not to move too fast for Izzy.

"But we had things under control," said Jace as he headed for the door followed by Magnus and Alec. "Luke and his pack had Dearborn's people captive outside the hotel," he added as he peeked out on to the corridor.

"Not all of them," said Magnus looking in the direction of the rooms where he had been attacked. "At least two of them may be loose."
As they walked out of Raphael's apartment and down the corridor, they run into Clary and Jeremy who were walking in their direction.

"What is going on?" asked Clary. "Why are the vampires so restless?"

"They smell fire," said Jace.

The phone in Jeremy's pocket vibrated and he took it out and brought to his ear. After a moment of silent, he hanged up. "Two of Dearborn's men tried to set a fire bomb on the back of the hotel," he informed Jace. "Maya and her companions caught them."

At that very instant, a clanking noise came from the end of the corridor where the Inquisitor and his people had blown the door to gain entrance into the hotel. They all turned in the direction of the sound and saw that someone had thrown into the corridor a cylindrical device, which was still slowly rolling in their direction.

"That's bomb," said Jace taking a step back. "It has enough power to bring the whole hotel down on our heads. We don't have much time. Clary, get out of here," he added turning back to look at Clary.

"Magnus, can you contain the explosion?" asked Alec.

"Possibly," said Magnus rolling up his sleeves and getting ready to perform a spell.

"But he cannot stop a whole building from falling; at least not for long" said Catarina who had just joined them.

"And we don't have enough time to evacuate everybody, especially not in the middle of the day," added Jeremy.

"Can we diffuse it?" asked Jace grasping at straws

"No," replied Alec. "It is pressure sensitive; the moment someone touches it, it will go off."

"You must leave," came Raphael's determined voice from the darkness of the entryway to his apartment. "You have done enough; it is time for you to go."

"No," said Izzy, her voice full of desperation, her hand firmly grasping Raphael's. "I won't leave you."

A door opened half way between where they were standing and the gaping hole at the end of the corridor, and the small figure of a girl with pixie red hair stepped out of a broom closet. The sunlight streaming into the corridor almost touched her skin and she wistfully looked in the direction of the morning light. She looked no older than eighteen or perhaps twenty and was pretty despite the paleness of her skin and the blue shadows under her eyes. She was wearing jeans and a t-shirt with a flower design on the chest and was barefooted. She turned away from the sunlight and looked in Raphael's direction and smiled, admiration and affection written all over her face, and then turned back and with slow but decisive steps walked towards where the bomb lied on the carpet.

"Nadine, what are you doing?" asked Raphael, his voice a mixture of surprise and distress.

"I cannot live like this anymore Raphael," Nadine replied, turning briefly before continuing on, her voice youthful and almost musical. "There is no hope for me and I am tired. I have lived long enough; I am done."
Jeremy took a few tentative steps in Nadine's direction, determined to stop her, but concerned that any sudden movement would set the bomb off. Alec followed behind hoping that between the two of them could prevent what he already knew Nadine was about to do. But before anyone could reached her, Nadine –the girl that had survived the demonic poisoning longer than any of the vampires, the one that hadn't hesitated to come to Jessy's aid the day he collapsed in the lobby, the one whose smile always lighted the room –picked up the bomb and run in the direction of the sunlight at the end of the corridor. The last thing Alec saw right before she stepped out into the sunlight was a youthful smile drawing on her face when she looked up as if wanting the sun to kiss her skin after many years living in darkness.

Alec felt an immense force pushing him backwards almost at the same time as the air at the end of the corridor caught fire and a loud explosion shook the ground. He hit the floor with surprising force and the impact of the explosion knocked the air out of him. Just before he lost consciousness, he saw Magnus run in this direction, his arms outstretched, magic pouring out of his hands as he tried to shield him from the wall of fire approaching from the place where Nadine had just disappeared.

I am sorry that this chapter is a bit long, but I am starting to tie lose ends before the end… Also, it took me a little time to figure out a suitable end for Dearborn.
Chapter Summary

Alec shifted his gaze from Magnus’s eyes and down to his lips in that sexy, enticing and promising way that always stirred a storm in Magnus. “It feels like magic,” he said and then kissed Magnus with a tenderness born of love and gratitude. Alec understood at that moment that he was unique, that among the countless lovers that had inhabited Magnus’s life, he was like no other.

“If Raphael hadn’t beat me to it, I would have killed that man myself,” said Jace between clenched teeth. He paced back and forth in front of the window, the view of Manhattan in the distance, and of the late afternoon sky providing a striking background to the angry expression on his face. “I can’t believe Dearborn did this to you. Why didn’t you tell me all of it? I would have kill him before he tried to hurt you again,” Jace said without waiting for Alec’s reply, his eyes shining with the fury of a volcano made of gold and fire. Alec thought that Jace looked like a vengeful angel ready to unleash the wrath of god on anyone on his path.

Alec finished buttoning up his shirt, covering the rune that a minute ago he had revealed to Jace. When Jace saw the mark of what the Inquisitor did, the expression on his face had turned from concern, to shock, and finally to fury at an astonishing speed. Jace had closed his hands in tight fists as if he was readying himself for a fight, even though his opponent was already long gone. Seeing the transformation, Alec had felt a mixture of embarrassment and sadness. Not only did he dislike feeling helpless, but he also abhorred causing Jace pain. He didn’t like it when Jace was angry and didn’t have any place to put it. Jace didn’t do frustrated anger very well; it was one of those emotions that, because of his upbringing, he had a hard time controlling. It was his job to take care of Jace, thought Alec, not to worry him. But if Jace was going to help him remove the rune, he needed to know what Dearborn had done.

“Why didn’t you tell me before?” Jace asked again.

“I was embarrassed because, despite of all my training, I was helpless to defend myself,” Alec replied infusing as much honesty into the words as possible. In the last few days he had come to understand that a major part of moving on, of healing, was to acknowledge that he had felt powerless and that, in part, he had thought that he deserved the punishment that Dearborn had inflicted on him. Alec’s deep brown eyes shone brightly, and for a split second they looked like pools of melted amber about to overflow. Alec quickly reined in his emotions, but not before those eyes had the effect of stopping Jace’s anger in its tracks.

“Why are you telling me now?” asked Jace, stopping his pacing and sitting beside Alec on the sofa.

They were back in their suite at the Grand Park Hotel, sitting in the room that Magnus and Alec shared. The sun was slowly making its way towards the horizon and as the day grew old, the quality of the light changed and became almost orange. Alec always liked the way the Manhattan skyscrapers reflected the late afternoon light; it was as if the whole city was made of rose colored diamonds.

“Because Magnus is going to remove the rune and we need your help,” replied Alec, his face open
“Alec, that is terribly dangerous,” stated Jace, a mixture of apprehension and panic in his voice. “De-running, especially a rune that is so close to the heart can kill you.”

“That is why I need your help. You are my parabatai and I need your strength to withstand the procedure.”

“I can’t believe Magnus would risk your life like this,” said Jace, anger and disbelief replacing apprehension and panic. “Doesn’t he know how dangerous it is to remove a rune like that?”

“He does, and he didn’t want to do it,” Alec replied. “Believe me, it wasn’t easy to convince him.”


Alec smiled because just days ago, he had had a similar conversation with Magnus, and his face had shown the same mixture of concern, panic and acceptance that he saw in Jace’s face now. The two most important people in his life were willing to accept the rune and all it symbolized more easily than he was. He was lucky, he thought; lucky to have people who loved him and accepted him. That is what Dearborn had failed to understand: that the people that love you without conditions, without “despite-of’s” or “no-matter-what’s”; the people that not only tell you, but show you that there is nothing wrong with you; the people who don’t look past or through who you are, but instead love you because of who you are; those people anchor you to life, claim you, give you home. He put a hand on Jace’s shoulder and smiled broadly.

“Alec, I need to get the rune removed,” he stated, his voice even and his tone rational. “As long as I have it, it can be reactivated. I will always be afraid of what people who know I bear it can do. You know now what Acquaclara did, what the Inquisitor did. Who knows who else out there knows about this mark and what it does. Also, I want to live my life free of any reminders of that kind of hatred; I want for Magnus and me to build a life together with no reminders of this dark episode. Will you help me?”

Jace felt a sudden rush of pride. Alec once again showed amazing strength and bravery, and he did it without the need for a seraph blade or in the context of battle. He thought, not for the first time, that Alec had that kind of quiet but determined bravery that made great leaders and good men, the kind of bravery that didn’t need showing-off or bravado. Alec’s kind of bravery was what had always allowed Jace to rush into dangerous situations, knowing full well that Alec would be behind him. Today that kind of bravery was expressed in yet another way. This was the first time that Alec openly spoke of building a life with Magnus, a life without deceit or shame.

“Is this so important to you that you are willing to risk your life?” he asked his parabatai even though he already knew the answer.

“Yes,” replied Alec with certainty. “But I am sure I will be fine. I trust you and Magnus. You won’t let me die.” Alec patted Jace on the back in a teasing gesture. “Besides, if I die, I am coming back to haunt you. You will never be able to sleep in peace again,” he added and smiled.

“Well, I cannot have that,” replied Jace continuing the banter. “I don’t sleep alone anymore and I don’t think Clary will appreciate having you around that much, not even as a ghost.”

They fell silent for a moment, and Alec looked out towards the Manhattan skyline, noticing how the lights from the buildings became brighter as the sunlight faded. It would be dark soon and this terrible day full of death and sorrow would end and become part of the many memories, good and bad, that filled his life. This war was not over, thought Alec; there was still Annaliese to deal with,
but at least one more battle had been fought and, this time, they had come out of it relatively unscathed. No, the war wasn’t over, but at least for tonight they had a reprieve.

“Okay then, when are we doing this?” asked Jace after a while calling Alec back to the moment at hand.

“Tomorrow,” replied Alec.

“Then, I should take Clary back to the Institute soon and get a good night sleep,” Jace said standing up. Before walking out of the room, he placed an affectionate hand on Alec’s shoulder. “Thank you for trusting me with this secret,” he said. “I won’t tell anyone.”

After Jace left, Alec stood up and walked towards the window. He was tired, his head still hurt, and the ringing in his ears caused by the explosion had not completely gone away. But he didn’t think he could sleep yet. He was just too wired by all that had happened in the last few hours. Instead, he looked down at the mundanes going about their business several floors below. Some of them were crossing the street towards the park, their leashed dogs walking ahead or beside them, and Alec wondered what it would be like to have a dog of his own. Besides the cat that lived in the Institute, he had never had a pet, and certainly not a dog. The Nephilim tended to transfer their distrust towards werewolves onto who they thought was their closest relatives in the evolutionary chain. But perhaps he would enjoy having a dog to play with. Of course, Magnus was decisively a cat person, and he may take some convincing, but who knows. He stopped his mental meandering for a moment and realized that he was unwittingly making plans for him and Magnus, for a life together, and smiled. The thoughts were not only surprising, but also rather strange in the context of the uncertainty that surrounded them now. Yet, the mere hope that came from making plans was reassuring.

Voices coming from the sitting room brought him back to reality. He could hear Clary talking to Catarina and then Jace joining in. Until a short while ago, the suite had been a buzz of activity. Jeremy had suffered serious burns in the explosion and Magnus, Kat and Catarina had spent a good part of the afternoon treating him in one of the other bedrooms. Jace, Clary and Alec, as well as some of the other Shadowhunters, had divided their time between the sitting room outside, the Institute and the Hotel Du Mort. Izzy had refused to leave the hotel and was still there coordinating the teams that were working in the cleanup.

When he closed his eyes, Alec could still see Nadine’s smiling face, her pixie red hair, and her outfit, so mundane and innocent, as she run out of the building, the bomb cradled in her arms as if it was a baby. He could only imagine how painful it must have been for the vampire girl to run out into the morning sun; how much determination she must have had to continue running towards death despite the sun burning her alive; how determined she must have been to put enough distance between herself and the building where her people lived. At the end, she had made it all the way to the middle of the parking lot before the bomb went off. Some people believed that vampires had no soul, but this morning Nadine had proven them all wrong.

Still, the force of the explosion had been strong enough to burn everything in a one-hundred-meter radius, and a couple of parked cars had caught fire and exploded. The bomb also sent fire, smoke and debris into the corridor where they had been standing. Jeremy, who had run after Nadine and was the closest to the open door, had suffered the worst injuries with burns on his face, arms and torso. The memory of the young Shadowhunter’s eyes, wild with a pain that he refused to express out loud, his brave determination not to scream as they moved him, still haunted Alec.

The shockwave had knocked Alec unconscious for a few seconds, and if it hadn’t been for Magnus, he would have also suffered burns. At the end, they had been lucky. Thanks to Nadine,
the home of the vampires had suffered no major structural damage, except for broken windows and scorched walls. Save some burns, no other vampires had died. The Shadowhunters and the werewolves had also been spared. Thanks to the burned cars, it had been easy to hide the real cause of the explosion, and Alec suspected that the mundane news would report that a gasoline leak had caused two cars to explode in an empty lot by an abandoned old hotel.

Alec was proud of the people under his command. Scarcherry, and a few of the other Shadowhunters that Dearborn had confined to their rooms, had managed to escape and, after retaking control of the Institute, had come to their aid at the Hotel Du Mort. They had arrived just minutes after the explosion. With the help of the werewolves, they had taken Acquaclara and the remaining of Dearborn’s team back to the Institute where they were now confined to the cells. The Clave would conduct an investigation at some point, but for now his orders were to keep Dearborn’s people in confinement until the crisis with the warlocks was over.

Alec had spent most of the afternoon in teleconferences with the Consul, answering questions, and providing updates on their investigation. In the process, it had become obvious to Alec that the Inquisitor had been rather selective in the information he shared with his superiors. At the end, Alec had been given back his command of the Institute. Of course, The Clave was still suspicious of Magnus, but at least for now, the Consul understood that Magnus, Kat and Catarina were the best hope for stopping Annaliese Fen.

Alec wondered how long it would take for warlocks and Nephilim to trust one another. The Clave was still keeping warlocks confined in Idris and those who had refused to join Annaliese were still on the run. What would it take for all these new and old injuries to be healed? He asked himself again. Could he and Magnus ever truly be happy as long as their people didn’t trust one another, or as long as his people treated Lilith’s Children as inferior? Two things he was absolutely sure of, he thought as he looked towards the park across the street and the mundanes walking their dogs: there could be no healing as long as they didn’t deal with Annaliese Fen, and he would not rest until his people accepted his and Magnus’ relationship.

He heard laughs out in the seating room and he recognized Magnus’ laugh above all the rest. He smiled because the sound of that laugh was the perfect ending for a hard and painful day. He liked that laugh because it was sincere, honest and, at times, sarcastic. Magnus always said that he was a lot to get used to, and that his tongue-in-cheek attitude was probably the hardest, but, as he got ready to go join his friends, Alec thought he couldn’t imagine Magnus being Magnus without that quality.

Alec found his friends sitting in the living room, cocktails in hand, laughing at some story that Jace—who always got too happy, too fast when he drunk—was telling. Alec went to sit beside Magnus in a comfortable sofa, and Magnus handed him the drink he had in his hand. Alec took a sip, the alcohol burning a little as it passed down his throat, which was still sensitive from inhaling smoke from the explosion. He then handed the drink back, and Magnus took a sip himself. They sat together, drinking out of the same glass, which Magnus magically replenished every time it got empty, and Alec began to relax for the first time in many hours. It was as if the sofa was hugging him, enticing his back to melt into the fabric, and the alcohol warmed his body, and cheered his spirit.

Kat joined them shortly after, her face, which had been drawn and upset earlier, had a relaxed expression. When Alec asked, she told him that Jeremy was sleeping and that the burns were almost completely healed.

“He will be as good as new by tomorrow,” she said, as she sat in an armchair, her legs folded under her. She then brought her glass to her lips and took a sip of her red wine. There was love in addition
to concern in her voice, thought Alec, and he wondered whether Jeremy found the quiet, serious
and studious warlock as fascinating and mysterious as he found Magnus.

They talked, laughed and told stories for a while longer while the sun slowly set and the city lights
replaced daylight. However, eventually the conversation inevitably returned to the crisis at hand.

“How long do you think before Annaliese resurfaces?” asked Jace to no one in particular.

“I think at least three days,” replied Kat. “I charted an updated star map while I was at the VLT and
the next star in the constellation to appear in the night sky is not until three days for now.”

“Do you know what city will be the next target?” asked Alec expectantly.

“No yet,” she replied. “I still need to do some more calculations. Jeremy and I will get to it
tomorrow.”

“Did you hear from your contact at the Vatican about what Annaliese may have taken from the
archives?” Magnus asked.

“Yes,” replied Kat. “A few things were taken: manuscripts, a few artifacts, and an ancient carved
stone. Monsignor Augustas will send pictures and descriptions from their records tomorrow. I may
know more then.”

“I would like to see them,” said Magnus. There was something about the Rome attack that kept
nagging at Magnus and, for some reason he couldn’t quite explain, he was certain that the clue laid
on what the warlocks had stolen. Alec’s words rang in his mind: the solution may be in the future
as well as in the past.

“What is going to happen to the vampires?” asked Clary, her hand sheltered in Jace’s hands. Jace
looked at her, smiled and squeezed her hand a little.

“I have no evidence, but I suspect that once we deal with Annaliese, the effect of the demonic
poisoning will also go away,” said Catarina.

“But in the meantime, we have to do something,” said Clary, her tone urgent. “Not only are the
vampires suffering, but they are also dangerous.”

Alec had forgotten that Simon was also trapped in the hotel, which explained why Clary was
particularly concerned about the vampires. Her best friend was one, and Clary was a fierce and
loyal friend. Jace was lucky, he thought. After all that had happened to his parabatai, he had finally
found someone that offered him love and loyalty, someone that, Alec was certain, would also keep
him on his toes.

“Catarina and I have an idea,” said Kat in her usual quiet and unassuming voice. “I found a very
rare spell in an old book I brought from home. If I am deciphering it correctly, we can use the spell
to put the vampires into a deep sleep until we can figure out what to do. I spoke to Raphael and he
has agreed to try it. Catarina and I are going there tonight.”

“Do you want me to go with you?” asked Magnus.

“It is okay, Magnus,” replied Catarina. “We can handle it; besides you drained quite a bit of your
energy this morning; you need your rest. You are the only one among us that knows Annaliese in
any depth; we need you in top shape for that battle.”

Magnus nodded, grateful for the privilege of having two of his closest friends helping him. He was
usually the only warlock in the room; even when he organized parties, not many warlocks came.
His people were not keened on get-togethers unless it was for mischief, but this felt normal. Sitting
here among Nephilim and warlocks felt like being among family. He reached for Alec’s hand but
then stopped himself. Alec and him never touched more than necessary in public; Alec was
reserved that way. However, noticing the halted movement, it was Alec who reached for Magnus’
hand and caught it in his, the gesture natural, more natural, in fact, than Magnus would have ever
imagined.
Magnus looked down at his and Alec’s interlaced fingers and marveled at both the contrast and
easiness with which their hands fitted together. Alec’s long and slim fingers covered almost the
whole back of Magnus’ smaller hand, and his light skin marked only by the runes edged on his
wrists and arms contrasted with the tanned complexion of Magnus’ skin. Alec also wore no
jewelry of any kind, except, of course, for Magnus’ arrowhead that now hanged around his neck
and underneath his clothes. Magnus had finally rescued all his rings from his penthouse’s safe and
their silvery shine adorned every finger. Yet despite, or perhaps because of these differences, their
hands seemed to belong together: two faces of the same coin; two sides of a shared life; two halves
of a whole.
Perhaps it was the effects of the alcohol, but Magnus forgot for a moment the struggles ahead and
the dangers that still lurked around them, and instead imagined a whole long life with Alec; a
whole life of interlaced destinies, of small and big shared decisions, of making coffee for one
another each morning, and going to sleep in the same bed every knight. It was hopelessly romantic,
he knew, but the thought of Alec in his life, of a home with him sounded like the perfect ending to
a long struggle. Yes, he thought, not for the first time, this one would do, this strapping young man
was the one; this hand, this body, this skin, this heart fitted perfectly.
Of course, Magnus knew he shouldn’t underestimate Annaliese. Her rage was so immense that she
would do all in her power to destroy everything and everybody in her path, specially Magnus. He
also knew that he and Alec would have to stand in her way if they were going to stop her, and that
there were no guarantees that they would succeed. It was likely that before this whole ordeal ended
they would have to make even more sacrifices; Annalise had not finished taking from them yet.
Magnus just hoped that Alec would not have to give up too much more.
After a few minutes, the conversation went back to trivial things and soon Catarina was telling a
story of Magnus learning to tango among laud and joyful laughs. Magnus looked at Alec and was
pleased to see him laugh so easily after all that had happened in the last few hours. He liked that
Alec’s whole face illuminated when he laughed, like the face of an angel, and he thought that his
laugh fitted too, and that he wanted that laugh to be part of the soundtrack of his life.
Sensing Magnus’ gaze on him, Alec turned and looked at the warlock with unexpected tenderness,
and for a moment everybody else in the room seemed to disappear and it was just the two of them
linked by the familiar and warm touch of their fingers and by the promise of love in their eyes.
Alec squeezed Magnus’ hand and then brought his lips to his ear.
“Let’s go to bed,” Alec murmured softly. “I want to make love to you, warlock.”
Magnus blushed and the hair in the back of his neck and on his arms stood on end. Noticing the
reaction, Alec smiled broadly and without letting go of Magnus’ hand, stood up, enticing him to do
the same.
“Magnus and I are going to bed,” he announced, his voice completely casual. “It has been a long
day; I suggest you too get some rest,” he said to Jace and Clary. “We still have a few trying days
ahead of us.”
He then gently pulled Magnus out of the living room and in the direction of their bedroom, and as he followed, Magnus glanced briefly back and saw a look of pride on Jace’s face and one of surprise on Catarina’s.

As soon as Alec closed the door behind them, Magnus turned and, grabbing Alec by the front of his shirt, pushed him backwards, pinning him with surprising strength against the wall. As he did, Magnus claimed Alec’s lips and kissed him with a passion and urgency that surprised even him. His tongue invaded Alec’s mouth and explored every corner of it with determined confidence, and Magnus rejoiced in the faint taste of the alcohol they had shared that still lingered in Alec’s lips. The kiss caught fire and gained in ferocity and hunger the more Magnus tasted those sweet lips, while his hands desperately held on to Alec’s strong shoulders and traced paths up and down his muscular arms. Magnus wished he could melt the fabric of Alec’s shirt to reveal runes on moonlight white skin, and for a moment, he had to restrain his magic so it would not escape and set Alec’s clothes on fire.

Alec entangled the fingers of one hand in Magnus’ hair, caressing the hair on the back of his neck, where it was shorter and prickly and so completely Magnus. With his other hand, he traced a path down Magnus’ back and when he reached his behind, Alec pulled Magnus to him with all his Shadowhunter strength, closing all distance between their bodies, and creating a prison for himself between the wall and the hard and strong body of the warlock. A delicious sound of surprise and pleasure escaped from deep in Magnus’ throat, a sound that Alec felt in the pit of his stomach. “Yes,” Alec thought but didn’t say, “yes, this is perfect.”

He wished at that moment that he could melt into Magnus; that he could be absorbed into Magnus’ skin until it was no longer possible to tell where one ended and the other began, until what was two became one. Alec surrendered to the playful movements of Magnus’ tongue in his mouth, to the touch of Magnus’ hands, allowing Magnus to light a volcano of desire in his chest and to own him completely.

A surprising urgency took over Magnus the moment he felt Alec’s heartbeat pick up speed against his own chest, an uncontrollable hunger for the taste of Alec, for the feel of his skin in his fingers and lips, for the sight and feel of the Shadowhunter coming undone in his arms. He reluctantly let go of Alec’s lips, but immediately found renewed pleasure in the taste of Alec’s skin as he journeyed from his ear down to the hollow at the base of his long neck. Alec’s skin smelled of soap, sweat and spices, and a hint of smoke still lingered in his clothes, adding to the masculine scent of Alec.

Without restrain, Magnus kissed and licked, at the same time that with the determination of a pirate looking for treasure, he searched for the bottom of Alec’s shirt and lifted it. Alec gasped loudly when Magnus’ hands finally made contact with his skin and began to trace circles up and down Alec’s muscular chest and abdomen.

Magnus kissed and licked a path down Alec’s neck and continued down until he reached his chest. With a teasing motion of his playful tongue, he drew circles along the length of Alec’s sternum, right through the middle of his chest, and Alec gasped once again, the sound making Magnus forget everything outside of this room, this moment, and the delicious taste of Alec’s skin.

For a brief moment, Magnus looked up at Alec, and saw that Alec was looking back at him, a delightful mixture of love, hunger and lust on those haunting brown eyes. Alec bit his lower lip in the most seductive of gestures, and Magnus experienced a moment of indecision between wanting to bite that lip himself, and wanting to continue his journey of exploration, tasting every inch of Alec. The way that Alec arched his back and tilted his head up towards the ceiling finally convinced him to do the later.
Neither Magnus, nor Alec would be able to recall exactly what happened next. Either by the use of magic or simple human dexterity, Magnus undid Alec’s belt buckle, button and zipper in a blindingly fast succession of movements, and without interrupting the playful motion of his lips and tongue. Alec’s breath caught when he felt Magnus’s lips on the rune edged on his hipbone and thanked the angels in heaven for whomever decided to place the rune there. As the warlock continued making his way lower and lower, exploring and mapping the geography of Alec’s body, Alec held on to the wall as if it was a lifeline, and tried to keep his legs from collapsing under him.

With lascivious and resolute movements of his mouth and tongue, Magnus explored and conquered every inch of Alec’s most intimate corners, claiming him in the most primordial of ways. Alec grew disoriented and, for a while, forgot even his own name and history, and when a loud and uncontrollable sound of ecstasy threatened to escape his lips, he covered his mouth with his hand to avoid screaming and waking the whole suite and perhaps even the whole hotel.

At that moment, Magnus became a raging storm, a gale, a hurricane that picked up Alec and lifted him, enticing his spirit to soar, to fly higher and higher until he felt he could touch the stars. When his spirit couldn’t climb any higher, it stayed suspended in midair for an infinite moment of absolute silence and stillness, a moment in which Alec felt his chest opening up to the sky, exposing his very heart to the four winds. And then, Alec let go and fell back to the earth like a fallen angel, the most amazing sensation of vertigo in the pit of his stomach. As he returned to his body, he finally lost the battle to stay on his feet and fell to his knees. Magnus’ arms were waiting to enfold him and contain him as Alec surrendered to the most incredible, indescribable and unbelievable orgasm.

“Magnus, Magnus,” he whispered between shallow breaths as waves of pleasure made him shake and shiver, “you are going to be my undoing.”

“No more than you’ll be mine,” replied Magnus, his strong arms providing Alec an anchor and a port.

They stayed like that, kneeling on the floor for a while, Alec’s head resting on Magnus shoulder, his face turned towards the crock of his neck, as he inhaled the familiar scent of his skin. Magnus gently run his hands through Alec’s hair and up and down his back in a loving motion until Alec’s heart settled somewhat and he stopped shaking.

With still uncertain legs, Alec stood up after a few moments and reached for Magnus’ hand. “Come on Magnus,” he whispered. “I am not done with you yet.”

Magnus smiled and looked at Alec with playful eyes, and standing up, allowed Alec to guide him, completing the journey they had started in the living room and that he had briefly interrupted. Less than a second later, Alec and Magnus stood by the bed, and now it was Alec the one to claim Magnus’ lips; he the one to kiss him gently and without haste; he the one to pull Magnus’ jacket and shirt off and expose his beautiful body; he the one to plant kisses up and down Magnus’ neck and to bite his lower lip the way Magnus had wanted to do to him before. Alec was the one to gently push Magnus down on the bed, and after pulling his own shirt off, lay beside him, both their breaths catching the moment their skins finally touched.

Magnus had been a raging storm before, a storm that took Alec to the very shores of paradise. Now, Alec was soft rain, and the gently rising tide of a clear ocean that cradled Magnus in tender waves, taking him higher and higher, until Magnus felt close to a heaven that, until he met the Shadowhunter, he had thought was forbidden to warlocks like him.

“Come out to play warlock,” Alec whispered as he looked deep into Magnus’ chocolate brown
eyes. “I want all of you.”

With those simple words, Alec dissolved the glamor that concealed Magnus’ warlock mark and beckoned the magic to freely flow within him. It was as if Alec had the power to summon the demon in Magnus; as if there was a chain that connected Alec directly to the part of Magnus he always kept hidden; or, as if his words had the power to enchant to wild being the resided inside the warlock. As the magic awoke within him, it emanated from the center of Magnus’ chest and flowed in luminescent lines all over his skin as if it was searching for Alec.

Magnus heard a breath catch in Alec’s chest and felt the goosebumps rising all over Alec’s skin as tiny sparkles of purple magic escaped through his fingertips and left traces of color and light on Alec’s skin.

“How does it feel?” Magnus murmured in Alec’s ear.

“Don’t you know?” asked Alec in reply.

“No, I have never shared my magic this way with anyone before,” he confessed. Magnus had been with many people, some of whom had been magic-makers themselves, but no one had ever come close enough to make it past the barriers he kept between his magic and his humanity; no one had ever had the power to bring out the magic in him.

Alec pulled back a fraction so he could look at Magnus’s face and then smiled, one of those smiles capable of illuminating the darkest of nights. He then leaned in and kissed Magnus with even more passion, and Magnus felt in the familiar echo on the mark on his chest that Alec’s heart skipped a beat.

“It feels…; I don’t know how to describe it, like tiny shocks of electricity mixed with the soft touches of an angel’s wings and the warmth of the sun on your skin after a rainy day,” he said and his smile was innocent and playful. “It feels the way your touch and only your touch can feel.” Alec shifted his gaze from Magnus’s eyes and down to his lips in that sexy, enticing and promising way that always stirred a storm in Magnus. “It feels like magic,” he added and then kissed Magnus with a tenderness born of love and gratitude. Alec understood at that moment that he was unique, that among the countless lovers that had inhabited Magnus’s life, he was like no other.

Magnus felt a renewed rush of magic flowing from deep inside him, and this time he concentrated all his energy on the magic’s journey as it left him and entered Alec. With determined strength and curiosity, Magnus pushed his own consciousness to travel along with the magic and became keenly aware of how his powers flowed through Alec’s skin and then left through Alec’s fingers in tiny silver sparkles that tickled his own skin. It was as if Magnus had invented a mysterious spell that created a circle of magic that tied Alec and him in an unbreakable and powerful knot. Alec gasped once again and Magnus responded with a gasp of his own, as Alec’s words finally made sense.

“It does feel like the touches of an angel’s wings,” Magnus said, his voice full of wonder.

Alec kissed him once again and they both surrendered to the sensation of making love in the most magical of ways, the energy building and growing as Alec enticed Magnus towards a powerful climax. At the very moment of his release, Magnus understood why the French called it the little death. For when he finally surrendered and his body began to tremble of its own accord, the most delicious and indescribable sensations running through him and robbing him of all will, he felt that his soul left his body and became pure energy, pure connection, pure spirit. He lifted his chest to the sky and his lungs expanded filling not with air but with the pure magic floating all around us.

As the waves of pleasure began to subside, Magnus became suddenly aware of how Alec, who
until then had enticed and supported Magnus as he built towards a powerful orgasm, finally allowed himself to let go, and his whole body became a tightening muscle that for a marvelous moment squeezed Magnus extending his own ecstasy in countless aftershocks.

Feeling utterly spent, Magnus finally collapsed atop Alec and then shifted his position to lie alongside him, one arm underneath Alec’s head, the other wrapped around Alec’s body, their foreheads touching, their eyes closed. As their breathing slowly settled, they spoke to each other in the mysterious language of lovers, calling each other by secret names known only to them.

After a moment of silent, Magnus heard Alec take a deep and ragged breath. He opened his eyes and saw with surprise that tears streamed down Alec’s face. He pulled away a fraction and looked at Alec with alarm. “What’s the matter?” he asked.

“Nothing,” replied Alec and he wiped the tears with his thumb.

“It’s not nothing; please tell me.”

“I fear,” said Alec, “that I don’t have enough years left in me to love you the way you deserve. One day, death will take me and I will have to leave you.”

Seeing the tears running down Alec’s cheeks and the look of sadness on those beautiful eyes, Magnus felt his own heart breaking. At the same time, he realized just how lucky he was, how fortunate to have been Alec’s first love, first kiss, first companion in his journey of self-discovery. At that moment, he thanked his lucky stars for the rescue that brought him back to Alec; for that night that in this same room and in this same bed, Alec broke through the barriers of his own anger to reach towards Magnus.

Suddenly, his stomach tightened and the weight of the secrets he was still reluctant to share, and which he feared would change the way Alec felt about him, pressed down on him. He fought against his own unruly tears that threatened to pour out of him like an uncontainable river.

“Alexander,” he said as he brought his own fingers to Alec’s face to dry the tears that continued falling. “As I have told you before, not even I can tell the future.” He then kissed Alec’s wet face, the kiss tasting salty and lovely.

Kat quietly opened the door and entered, and the first thing she did was magically extend her hearing towards the room where Jeremy rested, making sure the young Shadowhunter still slept peacefully. She dropped her bag on the floor, removed her shoes and quietly walked towards the seating room in search of a cup of tea before bed. Performing magic, especially the kind of powerful magic that she and Catarina had just performed on the vampires, always made her thirsty and crave for a good cup of tea. She wished she had time to get out her yerva mate gourd, but she was tired and needed sleep, so a simple cup of mint tea would have to do.

As she walked into the living room, she noticed Magnus’ unmistakable figure sitting by the window, studiously examining a book under a reading lamp. He wore a strange ensemble of red silk pajama bottoms, embroidered in a multitude of colors around the hems, and one of Alec’s frayed grey t-shirts. His face had the look of concentration of a student preparing for a very important exam, and he run his finger along the lines of the book as if not wanting to miss a word or even a letter of what was written there. It was odd, Kat thought recognizing the book in Magnus’ hands as his famous book of spells. It was not like Magnus to be studying with such concentration. He always showed off saying that he knew by heart every spell he had ever cast in new and old languages.
“What are you doing Mags?” he asked joining Magnus by the window and using the term of endearment he always used with Magnus when they were alone.

“Kat, I need your help,” he said, his voice full of anguish. And then, without preamble, he told Kat of what the Inquisitor and Acquaclara had done to Alec. Kat listened in horror unable to understand how a people that considered themselves so enlightened and superior to everybody else could ever inflict such terrible torture on anyone, especially one of their favorite sons.

“Alec wants me to take the rune out,” Magnus concluded, desperation, doubt and urgency in his voice. “And I don’t think I can do it; I cannot bear causing Alec all that pain; and what would happen if I fail?” he added, wringing his hands in agitation. “I cannot fail Kat; I simply can’t. It would be the end of me. You have to help me because if I don’t take the rune out, Alec will never love himself completely, and he deserves more than anyone to live a life free of shame.”

Listening to Magnus’ anguished plea, Kat understood once and for all that this time her friend was truly in love. For a long time, Magnus had wondered whether, as an immortal, he was supposed to, or even entitled to love the way mortals do. Every so often, Magnus, like many immortals, would feel the urge to fall in love, to search for companionship, and for the sublime sense of completion that came only when linked to another soul. Sometimes, decades would go by and Magnus would not feel the urge to love. When asked, he would declare that people like him should not be tied down, that without the bonds of love, he was free to live life to the fullest. But the answer always seemed a little empty to Kat. Yet, even when he had been with partners before, Magnus had always anticipated the moment when, because of death or simple disenchantment, that love would end. Now it seemed that Magnus was loving Alec with an intensity that kept his feet firmly in the present, in every second he shared with the Shadowhunter. That was love; that and the emotions in his eyes and voice now.

“Calm down, Magnus,” Kat said and stilled Magnus’ hand by placing her soothing hand on top of them. “I will help you; I assisted someone in a similar procedure once. It was a long time ago, but I am sure I can do it.”

“Thank you, Kat,” Magnus said and took a deep relieved breath.

“Does Alec know the dangers associated with de-runing?”

“I explained them but he is adamant,” Magnus said and unconsciously brought his hand to the spot atop his heart where he could feel the steady heartbeat of Alec who at that moment slept in their room.

Kat observed the gesture with keen curiosity. Since they rescued him from Annaliese, she had seen Magnus do this several times. It was a new gesture, not something Magnus did before. And then, this morning after the explosion, she thought she had seen Alec place his own hand tenderly on the same spot.

With the inherent curiosity that made her a great scientist and that once had made her a great scholar among the Inca, she extended the tentacles of her magic in the direction of Magnus’ chest. She did this sometimes when trying to understand the power of a magic artefact, a spell or a relic. It was one of her most valuable skills, one that allowed her to learn the magic properties of something just by feeling it with her own powers. As she did, she perceived a mysterious energy emanating from Magnus’ chest, a powerful, ancient, and unfamiliar magic that now resided within Magnus.

Before she could stop herself, she extended her own hand and touched Magnus’s chest and an expression of amazement, surprise and concern rose to her face. “What did you do Mags?” she asked her friend.
“It is a protection spell,” Magnus replied, not wanting to say more than what was necessary, but not wanting to lie either. In fact, he didn’t completely understand the magic he had conjured up that night he melted the omamori charm into his skin. It had been a spell that needed very few words, and that he cast guided mostly by instinct.

“It is more than that,” Kat stated, her voice full of wonderment. “That is unusually old and powerful magic. Not many warlocks can perform it. I have never met anyone capable of conjuring such a spell, and I didn’t know you had that kind of power or knowledge.”

“I didn’t know either,” he replied, a tone of modesty that was completely unlike Magnus.

“Does Alec know what that spell truly does and the price you paid for it?” Kat asked cautiously.

“I am not sure I know myself what it does, and, since it is already too late to undo it, the cost doesn’t really matter.”

“I don’t know Mags, it is a big risk you took,” Kat said. “But in any case, I think that this spell may come in handy when we try to remove the rune. If I am correct, the spell has created an almost unbreakable bond between you two, which means you can use it to protect Alec.”

Now that she knew at least in part the kind of magic Magnus had cast on himself, small things she had witnessed in the last few days began to make sense. When Alec and Magnus were together, a faint flow of magic seemed to surround them. If Alec wasn’t a Shadowhunter, Kat would have suspected that he himself was a magic being. She had even seen it during the explosion this morning when Magnus ran to raise a shield to protect Alec and the rest of them from the fire. For a split second, she thought she saw a stream of colorful magic flowing between Magnus and Alec, as if they were sharing power. Whatever magic Magnus had called on when he cast the protection spell, it might have unexpected effects. However, Kat didn’t say anything else to Magnus now, not wanting to add more to the list of things that were keeping him awake. Rather, she filed the information away until she could investigate some more.

“In any case,” she added as she removed her hand from where it had rested atop Magnus’ heart. “You have to tell Alec. You cannot keep a secret like this from him. He will find out sooner or later.”

In his sleep, Alec turned on the bed and extended his arm searching for the warmth of Magnus’ body. When all his hand touched was empty space where Magnus should have been, he woke up startled and disoriented. He looked around in the darkness searching for Magnus and when he didn’t hear or see him, got out of bed and went in search of him. Alec knew that Magnus was anxious about the de-running procedure, and wanted to make sure that he would not spend the remaining of the night fretting and pacing. After all, he, Alec, wasn’t worried.

He stepped quietly out of the room and in direction of the living room. As he approached, he heard voices, Kat and Magnus’ voices, speaking quietly, yet with an obvious tone of concern. It was the tone that made Alec decide to approach cautiously and, rather than entering the room, he stopped by the threshold and listened for a moment.

“Magnus,” Kat was saying, “you have to tell Alec. You cannot keep a secret like this from him. He will find out sooner or later.”

“I know,” replied Magnus, “but not right now; right now, we have more urgent things to worry about.”

“Magnus, listen to me,” she tried to reason. “He should not have to learn about this from someone
else. He would never forgive you if you don’t tell him.”

“It is too big a secret, Kat. And the worse part is that it is not the only one,” said Magnus and Alec could see Magnus’ pained expression from his hiding place.

“You cannot build a life on secrets, Magnus” Kat said.

An old and familiar feeling of insecurity crept into Alec, a feeling that threatened to undo everything that he and Magnus had done in the last few days to rebuild their relationship. He wished he hadn’t gone in search of Magnus, he wished he had stayed in bed, unaware of the existence of secrets. He turned and careful not to make any noise, headed back to the bedroom and to the shelter of his and Magnus’ bed. When a few minutes later, he heard Magnus get in bed beside him and his arms wrapped around his waist, Alec pretended to be asleep.

Neither Magnus nor Alec realized at that moment how damaging secrets would prove to be in the battle ahead.
As Magnus reached deep into Alec’s soul to extract what he thought was the last of the rune’s roots, the protection spell finally faltered. Alec cried out once and then went silent, his body suddenly limp, his eyes closed. Jace abruptly reached for his parabatai rune as he fell on one knee beside the bed where Alec laid. At that same moment, Magnus experienced the most terrifying of sensations as the echo of Alec’s heartbeat went utterly still on the mark on his own chest.

Magnus conjured up a fire ball on the palm of his hand, at least that is what he thought he had done. It was perfectly possible that his eyes were playing tricks on him, and the ball was not actually a ball but a cube and it was not fire, but ice. In any case, it didn’t matter what it was as long as it hit the target. He swung his arm backwards as if he was about to throw a baseball and with all the anger and desperation he felt, he sent the fireball flying through the air with the speed of a bullet. It hit the empty whisky bottle he had just set on the bar, sending pieces of glass and sparkles in all directions. Still it was not enough, and soon another deep crimson fireball, the color of anger, was flying through the air, this time hitting the fruit bowl on the table by the entrance. Pieces of half-burnt fruit flew everywhere, and the room was suddenly enveloped in a faint scent of apple pie. But Magnus didn’t notice or perhaps he didn’t care. Instead, he took a long pull from the already half-empty bottle of scotch in his hand, the bottle that a few minutes ago had replaced the empty one that now lied in pieces on the floor by the bar.

Magnus was drunk, he knew it; likely drunker than he had ever been in his whole life. That was a lot to say considering how long his life had been and how much debauchery he had been part of during the said long life. He had achieved his current state of inebriation in record time by drinking in quick succession a yet undetermined number of cocktails – potent mixtures of magical and mundane ingredients – followed by a bottle of whisky and now the almost empty bottle of scotch. Yet, he knew he was still not drunk enough, not by a long shot. The alcohol hadn’t yet erased from his mind Alec’s look of agony, his lips tightly closed in a thin line as he resisted the urge to moan or scream; the memory of Alec’s tears falling like runaway diamonds down his face; or the sight of his muscles tightening and stiffening as Alec stoically withstood the torture that Magnus inflicted on him. Neither could the alcohol erase the image of Alec’s still figure, his eyes closed, his face pallid, his lips turning blue. He took another drink trying in vain to drown in alcohol the dark memories, but when he noticed that this latest bottle was also empty, he threw it against the wall, smashing it by sheer human force.

Magnus had not always liked or accepted himself, but he could honestly say that, despite his many misadventures and the countless loses and heartbreaks that were part of immortal life, he had never hated who he was. That is, not until now. Now, he hated his condition as a warlock; he hated what his magic powers had done; what he had done to the man he loved. He hated with more ferocity than he ever imagined possible the day a demon crossed the veil and came to this earth to impregnate his mother. If he hadn’t been born a warlock, he would have never met Annaliese or Khuno: he would have never been responsible for countless deaths; and he would have never lived long enough to cross paths with a nice Shadowhunter boy. That boy would have never had to endure what he had endured because of his relationship to a warlock, and what that same warlock had just done to him.
He looked at his hands as if they were his worst enemy, and hated those hands for being the instruments of his magic. He loathed the feeling of magic flowing through his veins, down his arms and through his fingers. Even at this very drunken second, his hands betrayed him by being the only tool at his disposal to give free rein to his despair. He closed those hands in tight fists determined not to use them ever again. From now on, Magnus thought, and until he became a worm at the bottom of a bottle of tequila, he would hold his drink with his knees.

Noticing the absence of the bottle he had just smashed against the wall, he looked around the room searching for the bar. The thought of not ever using his hands again was washed away by the alcohol inundating his brain and drowning all thoughts but those he truly wanted to forget. Magnus stumbled as he made his way to the bar in search of something else with which to drown his sorrows. His body tilted to one side and he briefly wondered who had constructed a room with an uneven floor, but somehow managed to reach his destination. After opening the third bottle in less than an hour, he took a look drink of what he thought was tequila. Suddenly, another pair of hands appeared in front of his eyes, blurry and distorted, but he was sure they were hands. He wondered whether those hands were his. But then realized that if they were, it would mean that he was in the possession of four hands. No magic could do that. In any case, these new hands were annoyingly intent on taking his new friend, Jose Cuervo, from his own very friendly hands.

“Magnus, come on, that’s enough,” said a voice that was not his own voice.

He turned his head in the direction of the voice and a faintly familiar angelic face, with long black hair and the most striking black eyes looked back at him. He moved the bottle away from the intrusive hands that belonged to that face and took another long drink.

“Come on Magnus,” the voice pleaded again. “Give me the bottle.”

Isabel Lightwood, Magnus thought, that’s who the face reminded him of. Isabel Lightwood, daughter of Robert and Maryse.

“Yes,” said the voice of apparently Isabel Lightwood, “It is me Magnus. Give me the bottle.”

Magnus looked back stunned because he hadn’t realized that he had spoken out loud. “You are Isabel Lightwood,” he repeated, making sure that this time he was actually speaking and not just thinking. He had difficulty forming the words, because his tongue had become a rag that refused to obey him. “You are Isabel Lightwood,” he tried again, “daughter of Robert and Maryse, and sister to, to, to Alexand…” Magnus couldn’t finish because a great sob escaped him and his face crumpled in an expression of deep sorrow. Through the veil of drunkenness, he saw once again Alec’s expression of pleading agony just a second before he closed his eyes and the echo of his heartbeat went silent on Magnus’s chest, leaving him submerged in the most absolute of silent emptiness. “I am sorry,” he said, and he covered his eyes with one hand wishing not to look upon Izzy’s face.

He lifted the bottle to his lips for another drink and when Izzy tried to stop him and take the bottle away, he slapped her hand. He took a long drink, longer than the ones before, the alcohol burning all the way down his throat. Still the memories didn’t go away, and he hated himself even more.

“Magnus,” called another familiar voice. “Give Izzy the bottle. You have had enough.”

Magnus turned in the direction of where this new annoying voice was coming from and a vision from the past looked back at him, golden hair, blue eyes, and the face of an angel. Edmund Herondale was calling to him from the grave, Magnus thought. Edmund Herondale, whose screams and sobs had been present in Magnus’ thoughts in the last few days, was here to demand an explanation. Edmund Herondale, the boy that had given all up for the love of a mundane, had
come to punish him for inflicting on another Shadowhunter the pain his own people had inflicted on him.

“I am sorry Edmund,” Magnus said, his voice slurry and almost unintelligible, “I had to do it.” He brought the bottle to his lips yet again and took another drink, the room spinning but his mind still stubbornly holding on to memories he wished forever to forget.

“Come one, Magnus, give me the bottle,” Edmund said and extended his hand in Magnus’ direction. But prepared to defend Jose Cuervo, his new friend, Magnus snapped his fingers. When nothing happened, he snapped them again. Edmund took a step back as if understanding what Magnus was trying to do. Magnus looked at his hands. ‘Great,’ he thought, ‘the alcohol is smothering my powers.’

“Come on Magnus,” repeated the voice of angelic Edmund Herondale and this time he walked more decidedly in Magnus’ direction.

But Magnus was not about to give up. He was the High Warlock of somewhere that didn’t matter at this moment. He snapped his fingers again and, by the third time, a new ball of energy flickered and crackled in the palm of his hand and he threw it at Edmund. With swift movements, the young golden Shadowhunter moved out of the way and the fireball hit the wall behind him.

“Wow, wow, Magnus, come on. It is me, Jace.”

“Jace?” Magnus tried to say but wasn’t sure what kind of sound came out. “Jace,” he repeated, this time the anger he infused in his voice made the name sound clearer. “Why didn’t you stop me? Why did you let me hurt him?” He lifted the bottle to his lips and drunk, determined to drown himself from the inside out.

The mission of apparently Jace must have been to distract him, for as soon as he took the last pull from the bottle, another pair of arms grabbed him from behind, wrapping themselves around him while apparently Jace took the bottle from him. As he did, the other attacker trapped Magnus’ arms to his sides.

“Let me go,” Magnus protested with all the indignation his present state allowed. “Let me go,” he repeated as he tried to free his hands so he could use magic to rescue Jose Cuervo from apparently Jace’s hands.

“It is okay, Magnus,” said a gentle girly voice in his ear. “It is okay, I know you are hurting but we are your friends and we will take care of you.”

The voice must have been magic because Magnus’ body involuntarily relaxed against the smaller but soft body of Izzy, the tears he had been fighting finally flowing unrestrained. Izzy’s body relaxed even more and his body obeyed as if Izzy was the one commanding it. Bending her knees, she brought them both to sit on the floor, Izzy’s warm and comforting body wrapped around Magnus. Magnus put his head in his hands and cried, like he had not cried in centuries, tears of sadness, desperation and guilt burning as they run down his cheeks.

“Finally,” said Jace. “I was afraid he was going to demolish the whole place. Remind me never to get a warlock drunk.”

Magnus sobbed in silence for a long time while Izzy’s arms held him, providing him shelter and comfort. Meanwhile, Jace picked up a garbage pail and began to collect the pieces of broken glass and half-burned fruit that were strewn all around the room. Every time he bent down, however, his whole body ached, and he felt exhausted and almost breathless, as if he had suddenly aged a
hundred years. The last few hours had not only taken a toll on Magnus. Jace was also exhausted and was craving a long night sleep, hopefully in Clary’s comforting arms. He couldn’t wait for this day of sorrow to end.

“What was that ruckus?” came Kat’s quiet voice from the hallway that led to Alec and Magnus’ room. She looked unusually pale and exhausted, and it was evident that she had used up quite a bit of her powers. The sight of Magnus sitting on the floor, his body leaning against Izzy told her all she needed to know. The young Shadowhunter ran her hand up and down Magnus’ arm in a caring gesture that Kat thought was unusual in the young girl. She always appeared to be as tough as nails. Izzy, like everybody in the room, look exhausted and the marks of countless sleepless nights were evident in her otherwise lovely face.

“Oh Magnus,” Kat said as she crouched beside her friend. She put her hand a couple of centimeters above Magnus’ head, and sent a flow of cerulean magic in the direction of the warlock’s forehead. “Everything is going to be okay. You had a hard day. This may help with the worst of the hangover tomorrow. I cannot do anything about the stench, though,” she added and smiled. “You smell like a cantina. Please take a shower before you go see Alec.”

Magnus looked up from his hands; his eyes still wet and glassy from the effect of the alcohol and the crying; his hair in disarray; a question clearly written on his face.

“He is sleeping,” said Kat in reply to the unspoken question. “He will likely sleep for the next several hours. I suggest you do the same; I suspect you burned the last of your energy trying to redecorate the room.”

Magnus wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and tried to rearrange his features in a resemblance of his usually dignified look.

“Thank you my dear,” he said patting Izzy’s hand, his voice still slurry. He stood up on shaky legs, and when the room refused to stop spinning, he extended his arms trying to hold on to anything that would prevent him from falling. What he found were Izzy’s strong arms, as she stood beside him.

“It is okay Magnus, I’ve got you,” said Izzy.

“Thank you,” Magnus repeated.

“Don’t thank me yet,” replied Izzy her voice suddenly recovering its usual sharpness. “I am still pissed with both of you,” she said pointedly looking at Jace. “I will never forgive you for not telling me what you were planning to do. I cannot believe that I had to find out by pure chance. If I hadn’t come looking for Alec you would have never told me what was happening, would you?” she asked looking at Jace with fire in her eyes.

“Alec didn’t want anyone to know,” said Jace apologetically.

“Yeah, I will have a word with my big brother as soon as he is strong enough,” she said, the tone in her voice reminding Jace of Maryse’s voice when he and Alec got in trouble as children.

Magnus looked between Jace and Izzy and it was evident by the expression on his face that he was having a hard time following the exchange between the two siblings. Remembering the reason why he had gotten up, he let go of the anchor of Izzy’s arms and half stumbled and half walked towards his bedroom.

“Hey,” said Izzy, “let me help you.”
“I am okay,” Magnus replied, even though he doubted very much that he would ever be okay again. The room continued spinning and he was sure he was about to get sick, which he didn’t want to do in front of everybody. One thing was to get drunk in front of his friends; another was to throw up all over them. “I will be fine,” he added as he held on to the wall and with uncertain steps walked out of the room.

Magnus approached the bedroom door slowly and with half-closed eyes. Everything around him spun out of control but he concentrated all his attention on staying upright.

“I need to go see Jeremy,” said Kat who had followed him. “I will put up wards around the suite so you two can rest safely.”

“I can do it,” said Magnus though he was not sure he could.

“Mags, you are not only drunker than I have ever seen you before, but your energy is drained,” stated Kat opening the door so Magnus could enter.

The bedroom was in semi-darkness, illuminated just by the faint late afternoon light filtering through the drawn blinds. Magnus walked towards the bed where Alec slept, covered by a white sheet, an ugly red burn on his bare chest, a burn that reminded Magnus of the gaping mouth of a volcano. He took a deep breath and tried to stop his face from dissolving in sobs once again.

“He will be fine, Magnus.” Kat told him, her tone reassuring. “He is tougher and more determined than most Shadowhunters I have met. After a few more spells, the burn will heal.”

“Are you sure he is fine? Did we get all of it out?” asked Magnus apprehensively.

“Yes,” Kat replied. “You did it; you removed the rune.”

“And I almost killed him in the process,” he said, guilt joining apprehension.

“But you didn’t,” Kat said and placed a hand on Magnus’ shoulder in a gesture meant to comfort his friend. It had come close, she thought, but thankfully Alec had pulled through. She didn’t want to think what would have happen if Magnus had not succeeded.

Magnus took Alec’s hand and squeezed it, as if it was a lifeline, a direct connection to Alec’s heart. The hand was warm as if Alec had a fever, but otherwise it felt solid and strong in Magnus’ hand. He brought both their hands to his own chest, where the omamori mark pulsated at a steady pace, echoing the rhythm of Alec’s heartbeat. The pulsations had been unnerving at the beginning when Magnus first cast the protection spell, but in time he had gotten so used to them that his heart felt incomplete without them. This afternoon, for the few minutes that Alec’s heart had stopped, Magnus had felt an emptiness as abysmal as a black hole when the echo of the heartbeat on his chest had gone quiet. He never, never in all eternity, wanted to feel such emptiness again.

“Take a shower and get some rest,” Kat told her friend. “By the time Alec awakes, you should be rested. He is going to have questions and you need to answer them. I will send Jace home too and Izzy and I are going back to the hotel Du Mort. You guys can sleep in peace.” Kat then walked out of the room and a couple of minutes later, Magnus felt the energy of the wards that his friend was raising, and the room went very quiet, all outside noise muffled.

Magnus stood by the bed a while longer, his and Alec’s hand resting on his chest, as he watched the Shadowhunter sleep. The room still spun as if it had been caught in a tornado, but as long as Magnus looked fixedly at Alec’s sleeping face, he felt steady and balanced.

“I swear, because of you, I aged at least a hundred years today, your stubborn Shadowhunter” he
whispered as he brushed the hair away from Alec’s forehead. Magnus had always thought that Alec looked younger when he slept, and watching him sleep had been a hobby of his since they started sharing the same bed. His youth was even more pronounced now that he also looked so incredibly vulnerable, fragile and mortal. “I would have gladly given up all the years left in me if only to save you from all this suffering,” he added.

Magnus didn’t know how long he remained standing beside Alec, their joined hands resting on his chest, but eventually, all the alcohol he had drunk finally overpowered his stubborn determination to keep his stomach from doing summersaults. He reluctantly let go of Alec’s hand and with unsteady steps made his way towards the bathroom. A few minutes later, his stomach completely emptied, he stood under the shower, the cold water washing away the effects of the alcohol and leaving just the miserable memories of a day he wished to forget.

The rune removal procedure had been brutal in its cruel simplicity, Magnus had thought as he and Kat discussed the best course of action over breakfast. The Nephilim usually burned or used seraph blades to cut the marks from those who either decided to leave the Shadowhunters, or were expelled from their ranks. No many had witnessed the procedure, and it was, as Magnus had learned with Edmund Herondale over a century ago, not only dangerous but also excruciatingly painful. As the London Shadowhunters had explained to Magnus, de-runing required the remaking of the Nephilim into a lesser being, and thus, it was like plucking the wings off an insect taking away forever its capacity to fly.

A few times over the last several hundred years, Kat had assisted another warlock in the removal of runes from Shadowhunters who, for reasons that she didn’t explain, wanted to break away from the Nephilim without going through the regular channels. When Magnus asked about her success rate, Kat looked pointedly at Alec and said that most of the Nephilim who wanted all their runes removed had died in terrible pain. However, those who had asked for only partial de-runing had made it. “Of course, those runes were nowhere near the heart. I am not going to lie,” she added her eyes fixed on Alec as if wanting to be absolutely sure that he understood, “the procedure is very dangerous so you better be certain this is what you want.”

Alec, who had silently listened to their discussion from the sofa where he sat with a cup of coffee in his hand, had looked at Kat squarely in the eyes, his mouth set on a stubborn line and had simply nodded.

“Okay then, I think we have two things to our advantage in this situation,” she had explained. “Your parabatai can help by sharing some of his strength with you, and the link that Magnus created when he cast the spell to protect you can shield you. Of course, the protection spell will be more effective if the connection between you two remains strong at all times.”

As the cold water slowly brought Magnus out of his drunken stupor, he realized that he should have refused to continue with the procedure the moment that he saw the look of uncertainty in Alec’s eyes when Kat spoke of the strength of their connection. Alec had been unusually quiet this morning and had only half-heartedly laughed at Magnus’ usually sassy remarks. Magnus had thought that perhaps Alec was more nervous about the removal of the rune than he let on. But now in hindsight, he should have seen the hesititation, the concern, the doubt.

“Is there anything I need to know Magnus?” Alec had asked when Kat left to collect some of the potions she would need for the healing spells she would use during the procedure. He had looked at Magnus with even more intensity than usual, as if he was trying to see deep into his heart. “Anything you need to tell me?”

Magnus should have told him the whole truth right there and then. Perhaps Alec would have
reconsidered and decided not to proceed; perhaps Alec would have decided that Magnus was not
the right person to remove the rune. But wanting to hold on to his secrets for a while longer,
Magnus had replied that there was nothing for Alec to worry about. Not only had he been scared,
but he had also wanted Alec to think about no one and nothing else but himself during the
procedure. Magnus understood now that this had been his biggest mistake. By trying to spare Alec,
as well as to save himself the pain of having to reveal the last of his secrets, he had provided
confirmation to Alec that he, Magnus, was hiding something. Alec’s natural reaction had been to
protect himself and pull back. They both went into the procedure with unfinished business between
them: Alec only half-heartedly trusting Magnus and Magnus protecting his own secrets rather than
Alec. By not telling Alec everything hoping to protect him, Magnus had done exactly the opposite:
he had weakened their link when they needed it to be the strongest.

Yes, Magnus thought again as he stepped out of the shower, his body trembling but his head
clearer as a result of the cold water, the removal spell had been brutal in its cruel simplicity. It
relied on the concerted efforts of three people: Magnus would use his magic to peel the rune layer
by layer; digging deep into flesh, muscles, heart and soul; searching for and extracting every last
vestige of the rune; and burning away any pieces that could not be removed. As he did, he would
reach with the protection spell and shield Alec’s heart to stop it from giving out. Meanwhile, Kat
would use her healing powers to mend flesh and muscle as Magnus went along, and Jace would
lend his strength to Alec in order to help him withstand the pain.

Magnus’ second mistake was to not have stopped when he reached with the protection spell and
felt Alec’s resistance and hesitation. He should have stopped when he felt the weakness in the
protection spell, but when he asked Alec if everything was okay, Alec had simply nodded and
rather than heed his instincts, Magnus had continued. As a result, neither of them had been
sufficiently prepared for the pain and difficulty of the procedure. At the end, Magnus had placed
Alec’s life in danger.

The procedure had been the warlock equivalent to an operation to extract a cancerous tumor. The
only difference is that this operation was performed without anesthetics. Like a tumor, it had been
impossible to know in advance just how deep the roots of the rune had grown until Magnus began
to cut it away. With streams of red hot magic, Magnus had cut, dug, burned, cut, dug and burned
some more at the same time that he extended the protection spell on his chest to create a shield
around Alec’s heart. As Magnus went on, Kat sent blue streaks of healing magic mending and
knitting muscles and flesh and stopping the bleeding. But, the closer to Alec’s heart Magnus got,
the worse the pain that Alec suffered.

Alec had been stoic until the very last minute despite the evident pain he was in. He had held Jace’s
hand while his parabatai wiped away the sheen of sweat forming on both their foreheads as they
shared strength and pain. But the deeper Magnus dug, the harder it became for Alec to dissimulate
or contain the agony. Alec’s skin had begun to take the complexion of ash, all color drained; his
cheek bones had become even more pronounced as his cheeks sunk giving his face a gaunt
expression. Bags had formed under and around his eyes, their color a deep blue, as if with the rune,
Magnus was draining Alec’s life force away. Still, Alec had refused to cry out in pain, his mouth
set on a thin line.

Magnus would never forget the look of pain in Alec’s face, as he, Magnus, reached deep into skin
and flesh removing the rune as one plucks a weed, roots and all, reaching into the very depth of
Alec’s heart and soul.

Magnus had stopped a couple of times, first asking and then pleading with Alec to stop, but Alec
refused, and Magnus went on. And then the worse happened. As Magnus reached deep into Alec’s
soul to extract what he thought was the last of the rune’s roots, the protection spell finally faltered.
Alec cried out once and then went silent, his body suddenly limp, his eyes closed. Jace abruptly reached for his parabatai rune as he fell on one knee beside the bed where Alec laid. At that same moment, Magnus experienced the most terrifying of sensations as the echo of Alec’s heartbeat went utterly still on the mark on his own chest.

“Alexander,” he had called out, as he pulled the last of the rune’s root, leaving just an angry burn, red and raw, on its place. “Alexander,” he called again as he reached for Alec’s hand, panic and desperation in his voice. “Come on, Alexander, don’t do this to me, come on.” He had placed his shaking hand above Alec’s chest and had sent small and then not so small shocks of electricity directly into Alec’s heart, but to no avail. For an eternity of minutes, Alec lied inert and irresponsive, his heart completely still while Magnus beckoned him back to the world with all his powers, his mind, his heart, his soul and his spirit. During those interminable moments, Magnus silently called on all deities –Nephilim, mundane and downworlder –offering his very life in exchange for Alec’s.

Someone must have been listening, Magnus thought now as he donned a pair of pajama bottoms, and looked at his exhausted face in the mirror. Someone must have been looking out for them because when Magnus had begun to feel that an abyss was opening up under his feet, an abyss that would swallow him whole and take him to the most horrendous of hells, Alec had gasped loudly and then taken his first full breath in who knows how long. After a few tentative tremors, Magnus had finally felt the echo of the Shadowhunter’s heart flicker and then restart at a relatively steady pace against the omamori charm on his own chest. Magnus had fallen to his knees and had buried his face on Alec’s hand and would have remained there, hadn’t Kat forced him and Jace to leave the room so she could finish healing Alec’s burn.

Yes, he thought as he walked out of the bathroom, the angel was looking out for Alec, if not for him as well. As he walked into the bedroom, he noticed that day had finally given way to night and that the room was now in complete darkness. He walked towards the bed, and with a snap of his fingers willed the lamp on the bedside table to turn on. He gazed at Alec’s sleeping figure once again, as if wanting to make sure that he was not an illusion, a trick of his drunken mind.

Today and for the second time in as many weeks, Magnus had foreseen an eternity without Alec, without his smile, his touch, his love. As he had sent shocks of electricity into Alec’s heart, willing it to beat once again, he had seen an endless life in darkness, an endless life alone and untethered to anything, like a ship lost in a storm without port, without home or kin. “I swear this will be the very last time you ever leave me like that” whispered Magnus as he got in bed beside Alec, the warmth from Alec’s body settling his shivering, his steady breathing a lullaby taking Magnus towards the deepest of slumbers.
Memories & Truths

Chapter Summary

Alec fixed his beautiful brown eyes on Magnus with an intensity that almost burned him, and those eyes felt like beacons guiding Magnus through a stormy night. Magnus hoped the love on those eyes would guide him safely to port, that the light in those eyes would not falter because without it he was sure he would be lost at sea and would become a wreckage, a ship thrown over and over against the rocks until nothing but splinters and broken sails were left.

He thought he had been asleep for no more than a minute when bright sunlight pierced Magnus’ closed eyelids and recalled him back to the waking world. The first sensation upon regaining consciousness was a piercing headache splitting his skull as if an invisible axe was wedged between his eyes. When he attempted to lift his head, nausea joined pain and he had to lean back and close his eyes again to stop the room from spinning. If yesterday he had been drunker than ever before in his life, this morning, his hangover was the worse in the whole history of the world.

More cautiously this time, Magnus lifted his head and turned it slowly searching for Alec. He found him standing by a room service cart near the sofa, holding a jug of tomato juice in his hand, and looking at him with a mixture of compassion and humour. Alec evidently sympathized with the state in which Magnus was in but found it funny nonetheless. He wore black jeans and the black t-shirt Magnus had conjured up for him the first night they came to the hotel, and his wet hair stuck out in all directions, a sign that he had just walked out of the shower. His brown eyes reflected the sunshine that filtered through the window in a kaleidoscope of warm tones from gold to deep chocolate. Perhaps it was the hangover playing tricks on his vision, but Magnus thought that Alec had never looked more angelic in its silvery shine than he did this morning, and just the sight of his tall figure illuminated by the morning light was enough to make him feel more thankful than ever before for the gift of Alec’s life.

“Hangover, aren’t we?” Alec said, a faint smile on his face. After pouring a glass of juice, he brought it to the bed and handed it to Magnus. “Kat said you should drink this. She came by to check my wound a few minutes ago and brought room service. She said you should also eat.”

After prompting himself up on the pillow, Magus rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand to remove the sand that seemed to have taken residence in them and took the glass that Alec proffered him. Up close, the Shadowhunter still looked pale and tired, and it was evident to Magnus that he was not yet to full strength despite Kat’s treatment and the fresh iratze rune glowing on his arm.

“How are you feeling, Alexander?” he asked, his voice a little hoarse. “How is the pain?”

“I am fine Magnus,” Alec replied in his usual ‘don’t-worry-about-me’ tone. “Much better than you, I am sure” he added and with gentle fingers brushed the hair away from Magnus’s forehead. “Your hair looks like a porcupine made a nest in it.”

“I guess I partied a little bit too hard yesterday,” said Magnus trying to emulate the casual tone in Alec’s voice.

Alec gazed into Magnus’ eyes, a warm smile curving his lips, and a caring expression in his eyes.
He had woken up a couple of hours before to the reassuring feel of Magnus’s warm chest against his back, his even breathing near his ear, and his strong arms wrapped around his waist. He had turned around slowly and carefully so as to not wake Magnus, and had spent a few minutes looking at the peaceful sleeping face of the warlock. He had told Magnus before how much he loved his face with those eyes that were shaped like almonds, and that, when glamored, were the color of chestnuts, and when not, had the captivating attraction of a cat’s eyes. He loved those lips that looked like they had been painted by the devoted hands of an artist and that were capable of giving so much love and pleasure; that two-day stubble that no matter what happened never lost its carefully sculpted shape; and the spiky hair that this morning looked unusually messy but still so lovely and sexy. That face was the perfect fit for a muscular and sexy body that moved sinuously and with the grace of a cat. As someone who had lived for so long, Magnus retained much of the grace of times gone by. He always stood tall and with his back straight and moved with an elegance that reminded Alec that Magnus had lived through the times of mask balls, dinner jackets and women wearing corsets and full skirts.

Alec had told Magnus when they first met that he found him glamorous, and he was glamorous. But, it wasn’t just his physical attributes that had attracted him to the warlock, nor was it just his vivacious personality or his flirtatiousness. It was something else, something that at the beginning he couldn’t quite explain, something in the depth of his eyes, and in the vulnerability that sometimes appeared in Magnus’ face when he thought no one was looking. Behind the carefully crafted image of the all-powerful High Warlock of Brooklyn, lived a young soul that still carried the sensitivity of the lost child he had once been. The anguished face of that lost and scared child had been the last thing Alec had seen right before losing consciousness the day before, and his last thought had been one of regret for causing Magnus so much guilt and pain.

“I know you have secrets,” Alec had whispered, as he brushed a lock of hair away from Magnus’ eyes. “I am a patient man; I can wait until you are ready to tell them to me.” The words had spilled out without Alec thinking and the sentiment surprised even him. But as soon as he said those words, he knew they were true. He trusted Magnus, for reasons that sometimes were unknown even to him. It was true that he had been upset the day before, but the anguish in Magnus’ face as he removed the rune and his look of abandonment and vulnerability had convinced Alec that, not matter what, Magnus deserved his trust.

Now that Magnus was awake, the armour behind which he hid his vulnerability was up once again, even if barely, and Alec couldn’t help feeling his heart melting. Magnus had secrets and he suspected those secrets were painful, but he was patient and could wait to learn them. In fact, he was willing to spend a whole lifetime if necessary learning those secrets.

“Drink your juice warlock,” Alec ordered with a smile, and Magnus obeyed.

However, as soon as the juice reached his stomach it refused to stay there. Magnus stood up at a speed that was completely unsympathetic to his headache, and half run, half stumbled to the bathroom. Alec followed and, as one holds a sick child, he kneeled behind Magnus and held him as the warlock threw up the remaining of the alcohol that was still poisoning his system. Alec run his hand and up down Magnus’ back and pressed a cool wet towel against Magnus’ forehead and the back of his neck. As he kneeled on the floor, his head buried in the toilet in the most undignified of positions, Magnus thought that no one had ever held him while he was sick, not since his mother centuries before. He would never say that the situation was comfortable or desirable, but if he was going to lose his dignity in front of anyone, he was glad it was in front of Alec.

“Kat must have used the wrong spell when she tried to heal my hangover,” he commented as Alec helped him to his feet.
“I doubt there is magic powerful enough to cure that kind of hangover,” commented Alec, a faint teasing tone in his voice.

Afraid of falling on his face, Magnus held on to the edge of the sink, and turning on the faucet, washed his face with cold water. Once he was sure that Magnus was steady on his feet, Alec left him to brush his teeth and fix his hair, and went back to the bedroom and to his mourning coffee. Magnus rejoined him a few minutes later, wearing one of Alec’s grey t-shirts over cerulean silk pajama bottoms, his hair in his usual hawk style thanks to a good measure of magic. Alec was sitting on the sofa, his bare feet resting on a footstool, a cup in one hand, and a tablet opened on the latest reports from the Institute, in the other. When he saw Magnus emerge, he extended a glass of water and two aspirins to him with a smile.

“You know there is no evidence that aspirin has any effect on magic makers like me,” Magnus said recovering some of his usual coy demeanour. Still, he took the pills and drank the whole glass of water, and felt as if the cool liquid was putting out a fire as it run down his throat.

“Kat left some papers for you to look at,” Alec said pointing to a folder on the coffee table.

Magnus sat barefooted beside Alec, his feet resting on the same footstool where Alec’s feet rested, their bodies touching. After taking a few tentative bites of scrambled eggs, bacon and toast from the plate Alec placed in front of him, he picked up the folder and began to examine its contents. The papers were copies from the Vatican records of what Annaliese had taken: descriptions and full-color photos of unfamiliar artifacts and of an ancient carved stone, its hieroglyphs faded and almost invisible in places due to the passage of time. Magnus examined the picture of the stone in particular. It didn’t look Egyptian, but rather Mesoamerican, and definitely pre-Columbian. Magnus thought that the stone must have been part of a larger structure, likely ceremonial, but the translations that the Vatican archivists had provided were sloppy and mostly useless. Magnus was sure that with the right tools he could do a much better job.

For a while they sat in comfortable silence, Alec reading reports and Magnus engrossed in the examination of the documents and pictures. Magnus searched in his vast mental archive for any clues that could help decipher the carvings, sure that if Annaliese had taken the stone, it was because it was important to her plans. He thought that if he could just anticipate her next step, if he could just guess where she was going next and what her final move would be, he could get ahead of her, and that might just give them the advantage they needed to stop her.

Magnus looked up from the photographs when he felt Alec’s intense gaze on him, warm and soft as the touch of feathers of his skin. When his eyes met Alec’s, he couldn’t completely interpret their expression, but that didn’t matter because just then Alec leaned forward and kissed him, gently and tenderly.

“Thank you,” Alec whispered as he rested his forehead against Magnus’ and placed a hand on Magnus’ cheek.

“For what?”

“For removing the rune,” Alec replied.

“I almost killed you in the process,” Magnus said, the anguish he had felt the day before suddenly returning and adding a sharp tone to his words.

“But you didn’t,” said Alec, his voice full of conviction.

“Do you know how close it was?” Magnus asked, anger rising to his cheeks and burning the last of
the hangover away. “You almost died on me. This whole thing is my fault: Annaliese, the
Inquisitor, that blasted rune, it is all my fault,” he added counting each one of his perceived failures
with the fingers of one hand. “I couldn’t protect you.”

“What do you mean?” Alec asked taken aback by the self-loathing in Magnus’ voice. “First of all,
the inquisitor did this to me, not you.” Alec gestured to the wound on his chest. “Second, when are
you going to understand that you don’t protect me; we protect each other? And finally, Annaliese is
not your fault. If anything, you have tried to stop her all along.”

Magnus felt his heart crack as if it was an fragile egg that had hit a hard surface too many times.
He understood that the time had come to reveal one of his most dreaded secrets. Reading the shame
in Magnus’ face, Alec looked intently at him, his eyes piercing as if they were silver arrows. He
put his hand atop Magnus’ heart.

“What are you not telling me Magnus?” he asked.

Magnus looked down at his hands, and for a second intently examined his dark blue nail polish and
the way his rings reflected the light from the window. However, he knew that he couldn’t delay
this confession any longer, so he looked back at Alec, and Alec saw in his eyes sadness and guilt
that were perhaps as old as Magnus himself.

“You can tell me Magnus,” he added trying to settle his speeding heart and keep the dread that was
filling his guts from creeping into his voice.

Alec fixed his beautiful brown eyes on Magnus with an intensity that almost burned him, and those
eyes felt like beacons guiding Magnus through a stormy night. Magnus hoped the love on those
eyes would guide him safely to port, that the light in those eyes would not falter because without it
he was sure he would be lost at sea and would become a wreckage, a ship thrown over and over
against the rocks until nothing but splinters and broken sails were left. He was tempted once more
to stay silent, to keep his secrets and, in that way, perhaps avoid Alec’s judgement. But he didn’t
because Alec was already part of this story and he deserved to know all of it.

“I didn’t always try to stop Annaliese and Khuno,” Magnus started, closing the folder that had been
resting on his lap and putting it back on the coffee table. “Once I believed in them; I believed that
warlocks deserved a homeland of our own, a place that belonged only to us where we could live
free of judgement, bigotry and hatred. Once, I was complicit in their plans; I truly believed that
bringing Lilith back was the answer, and because of that belief, thousands of my people died, no
just warlocks, but mundanes from the land in which I was born.”

“Go on,” Alec said gently, his hand still resting on that place on Magnus’ chest where both their
hearts beat as one.

Magnus had told Jace and Jeremy about what Annaliese had done in Berlin, and had confessed to
Alec that he had once been close to her and Khuno. However, because of his guilt, he had left out
the most important details about the history he shared with the warlocks. Now, those encouraging
words became like a pickaxe that Alec swung with surprising strength against the dam that
contained what Magnus had kept hidden for over two hundred years. As the containment cracked,
words began to spill out, in small trickles at first, and then in an uncontained torrent of memories
and truths.

Magnus began to speak of years meandering the world during a time in history marked by greed,
slavery and racism; of constant drifting, searching in vain for belonging, unable to find it anywhere
because of his heritage and his condition as a warlock. He spoke of feeling lonely and rootless; of
people doubting his humanity either because of the color of his skin or his demonic heritage; of the
first decades after he stopped aging feeling unsettled and restless. He told Alec of how his desire to find roots took him back to Batavia in 1737; of how there too, he felt an outsider, someone who walked between two worlds but belonged to none; and of how he had to hide his warlock mark and his ethnicity to be accepted not only into polite society, but also among the people of his old village.

Magnus told Alec of the violence with which the Dutch treated the Batavian people; of Dutch soldiers taking advantage of young local girls; of the Governor beating up a small child simply because he spilled a basket of vegetables on his new jacket; and of the brutality of the Dutch against half-breeds like himself because they were seen as the product of unforgivable racial transgression. “I went back searching for home, but I only found more rejection and violence,” he said and smiled sadly.

Alec listened silently but with an expression of deep compassion on his face, his hand resting warmly against the mark on Magnus’ chest, his eyes beckoning Magnus to go on. For a second, Magnus hesitated and wished he didn’t have to continue; he wished not to have any more secrets to tell. But he did, and he could not stop until everything was out in the open.

Magnus had never spoken of his time in Batavia to anyone; not even Joshua Pineshade who had helped him in Berlin knew the whole extent of his involvement with the warlocks. Now, he told Alec of how he met Annaliese and Khuno at the Dutch East Indian Company New Year’s party, and of a night spent gazing at the stars and talking with an enchanting warlock with ruby-red eyes, a creature that was so seductively mysterious that appeared to not be of this world. For the first time in over two centuries, Magnus spoke of feeling blessed for the chance to share a bed and a home with Annaliese even though there was always a part of her that remained distant, unreachable and untouchable. Unable to stop the words from stumbling out, Magnus spoke of finding sexual and emotional fulfillment as well as friendship in Khuno’s arms, fulfillment and friendship that compensated for what Annaliese could not offer him. “For months, I lived in a state of permanent bliss,” he said. “I thought that I was the luckiest man in the world because I got to share my bed with two kin spirits, and a house with people like me in a place without glamour or disguises.”

Alec listened in silence and without interruptions and the only sign of his state of mind was the way in which his heartbeat occasionally picked up speed, and his eyes narrowed as Magnus spoke of loving another, of sharing someone else’s bed, of feeling that he belonged in someone else’s arms.

Alec had never been jealous. He had never been in a relationship before, so he hadn’t had a chance to experience jealousy. Now, for a split second, he understood what jealousy felt like, what it was like to feel possessive of Magnus, to not want to know about Magnus’ past, or about other lovers, other people with whom he had felt at home. He, Alec, had never felt at home with anyone the way he felt with Magnus and, deep down, he had wished that Magnus would feel the same, but just with him, no one else. The wish was childish, he knew. Magnus had lived many lifetimes and would live many more. Of course, he had felt intensely for others before him, and would feel intensely for others after Alec was no longer in his life. The thought of Magnus’ immortality once again made him contemplate the smallness and finitude of his own life.

Yet, as he saw Magnus’ anguished expression, Alec understood that something else had prompted Magnus to tell him this story. That something more important than lost love and lost home weighted Magnus down.

“Annaliese told me the story of how god vanished Lilith from the world for refusing to obey him,” Magnus went on, “and how she gave birth to the first demons and eventually created us, her children. For a while, short as it was, I believed. I believed that warlocks needed to claim our own
home, our own place in the world, and that bringing Lilith back was the way to achieve that goal. She is, after all, our mother and mothers protect their children, and she, like me, experienced rejection and homelessness. My human mother couldn’t protect me, she left me so young to the mercy of a cruel world. So, I thought that Lilith could offer me protection and home. That misplaced faith blinded me to the consequences and cost of summoning Lilith. I didn’t see, or rather I refused to see what was happening all around me, what Annaliese and Khuno were planning, and my role in those plans.”

Magnus told Alec that during those first months of 1740, Annaliese had constantly spoken to the warlocks arriving at the plantation about how they would summon Lilith, and the role that each of them would have in the summoning ritual. “Annaliese believed that once Lilith came back she would claim part of Batavia and declare it the new homeland of the warlocks, the way Idris is the home of the Nephilim.”

“Didn’t she know how dangerous it is to summon a greater demon like Lilith?” Alec asked.

“I don’t think Annaliese knew for sure how to summon Lilith at the time,” Magnus replied. “I think that what she knew, she had gathered through small pieces of information, rumours, fragments of scriptures and legends. But, she knew enough about what needed to be done, even if she didn’t share all that information with us. I also suspect that her actions were guided mostly by instinct and fueled by the blind hatred she feels towards anyone who is not a warlock. You know, she, like me, was an abandoned child once and the only difference between us is that, while the Silent Brothers protected me in their impersonal and cold ways, the Nephilim that rescued her eventually turned on her and hurt her.”

“For months, warlocks from all over the world quietly arrived in Batavia and by the beginning of October 1740, the plantation had become the site for the biggest gathering of warlocks I have ever seen,” Magnus continued. He looked out the window and for a moment his eyes were lost in the distance as if Magnus was back in that house that had once been a home.

Magnus had been living in the plantation for months and had not even ventured into the city in several weeks. He had not seen clients or visited friends, and every time he had felt a little bit restless, Annaliese, Khuno or any of the other residents had been happy to provide entertainment and distraction. As a result, he had felt no need to go anywhere. He had been happy, happier than he had ever been in his life; happier that he would be for centuries afterwards. If he had been more vigilant, he might have noticed that in the plantation he was completely isolated and disconnected from everything going on in the country at the time. No news reached him and he felt no need to find out what was going on outside the borders of his little paradise. If he had been paying more attention, he would have noticed that Annaliese and Khuno were keeping him isolated and under constant guard. But he was naïve and happy, and naïve happy people are easily blindsided.

“One night over dinner, Annaliese announced that the summoning ritual would take place just before sunrise two days later, on the morning of the tenth of October,” Magnus told Alec. The announcement had been received with cheers and toasts, and the warlocks had celebrated with food, drink and dance until the sun came out in the morning. At one point during the evening, Annalise had taken Magnus’ hand and guided him to the spot in the terrace where they had spent their first night together ten months before.

“We wouldn’t have made it without you, Magnus,” Annaliese had whispered in Magnus’ ear. “You can’t imagine how important you are to me; how important you are to our endeavour.” Magnus had smiled broadly, and then had gently kissed Annaliese’s cheek, and told her for perhaps the thousandth time that he was grateful to be with her, that he loved her, and that he would follow her to the end of the world. In response, she had graced him with one of her coy and
seductive smiles. Little did Magnus know that would be the last time that he would profess his love to the warlock.

“The following evening –the eighth of October –I was getting dressed for dinner when one of the servants came to my room to tell me that Marie, my old housekeeper, and her father were at the door looking for me,” Magnus told Alec. He began to wring his hands on his lap, and Alec knew that they were arriving at a critical part of the story.

The date would forever be edged in Magnus’ mind because it had marked the beginning of the end, and because in less than twenty-four hours, Magnus’ world would collapse and be washed away in a river of blood. “I was surprised when Marie and the old man she introduced as her father showed up at the plantation asking for me. I had kept my house in the city but I had stopped going there months before, and when they came to see me I wondered whether I had forgotten to pay Marie’s salary that month. But when I asked the reason for their visit, they told me that they had come to ask for my help. They wanted me to do something about the violence that was spreading throughout the city. They told me that badly beaten and tortured bodies were showing up in dark alleys and washing up to shore every day; that the Dutch East Indian Company’s soldiers were becoming even more brutal against the locals; and that many believed that the Governor was ordering the attacks.”

Magnus still remembered clearly the face of Marie’s father, even though he never learned his name. The man was slim and short and moved with the grace of a panther. His eyes constantly shifted in a vigilant gesture and his face bore the marks of long hours of hard labor under a merciless sun. He wore lose fitting pants and a tunic made of hemp, raggedy and worn, the typical clothes of the poor people who worked loading cargo ships at the port. He gripped his straw hat tightly as if that could stop his hands from shaking. When he didn’t look around searching for any possible danger, he kept his gaze on the floor in an attitude that conveyed respect and humility.

Magnus had never met Marie’s father before but knew that he was a respected leader of the Chinese community in Batavia. That night at the plantation, the man told Magnus that people had seen Annaliese, Magnus’ “lady friend,” as he called her, with the Governor during one of the most brutal scuffles between the soldiers and the people in the Chinese quarters. That same night, the old man had seen Annaliese and Khuno at the house of one of the quarters’ leaders, where a group was planning an attack against the Dutch. This time, Khuno had spoken fervently, emboldening the leaders to defend the city and expel the Dutch colonizers. The old man had tried to warn Magnus that Annaliese and Khuno were inciting the violence and had asked him to intervene. “You are like them, please you have to stop them” the old man had said, a knowing look in his eyes, a look that Magnus interpreted as one of not only recognition, but also fear mixed with disdain. He understood then that Marie and her father had known all along that he was not like other humans. “You must do something, or more people will die.”

“I didn’t believe the old man,” he now told Alec, guilt and shame plainly written on his face. “Why would Annaliese and Khuno care about the conflicts in the city or about humans killing one another?” I asked him. “Those issues have nothing to do with us. You shouldn’t be telling lies about people you don’t know.” But the man was insistent and, at the end, I told him that I would make inquiries and send word if I found out anything. But, in truth I had no intention of doing any such thing because I just didn’t believe him.” Magnus couldn’t imagine back then that the person that Marie’s father described could be the same gentle and fragile woman-child that he knew; the same creature that still bore the scars of the abuse that others had inflicted on her simply because of who she was. He had been completely in Annaliese’s thrall; blind to the small and no so small signs of her cruelty; drunk with love and the dream of freedom; and ultimately unconcerned about the fate of simple mortals towards whom he no longer felt any connection.
“In the time I had known Annaliese,” he went on, “I had seen her struggle with her own powers. I suspected that her magic was weak or hadn’t sufficiently developed, perhaps as the result of what the Belgian Shadowhunters had done to her when she was a child. I thought that it was impossible that someone so gentle and fragile could be inciting violence. Most all, I saw no rhyme or reason in the old man’s accusations. After all, we were warlocks and mundane affairs meant nothing to us immortals.” Magnus’ voice acquired at this point in his narrative the tone of arrogance that he had once used when speaking of the petty affairs of those who lived knowing that sooner or later they would die.

“That night, Annaliese invited me to her rooms and over dinner told me that I had an important role to play in the ritual that would bring Lilith back, and that she trusted me to do my part when the time came.” Annaliese hadn’t been very explicit about Magnus’ role in the summoning and when Magnus asked for details she had simply stated that all would be revealed in due time. “I don’t know what prompted me to do it, but I told Annaliese about Marie and her father’s visit and I asked her whether she knew anything about the violence in the city. ‘What happens among mundanes is not our concern Magnus,’ she replied. ‘You know how quarrelsome, hateful and petty they are. They are always finding reasons to kill one another. This land will be in much better hands once it is ours.’ She had never been a fan of mundanes, but for a moment that night her demeanour was unusually menacing and contemptuous. But then, she looked at me with those enchanting eyes and the expression was suddenly gone and I wondered whether I had imagined it. So, I didn’t pursue the issue because I couldn’t bear the thought of disappointing her with my doubts. I was a blind coward,” Magnus added and looked down at his hands once again.

When Magnus had asked Annaliese that night whether she wanted him to stay with her, she had said that she still had arrangements to make in preparation for the summoning ceremony, and that they would have all the time in the world to be together afterwards. “Get some rest, Magnus,” she had gently said as she bid him goodnight at the door of her rooms, “Exiting times are coming and you should be rested to enjoy them.”

During the next twenty-four hours, Magnus hadn’t been left alone for even a minute. He hadn’t noticed it then, but had later realized that he had been under constant watch, and that at least one other warlock had been with him at all times. It had been casual: one of them brought him breakfast in the morning and chatted with him while Magnus did his morning grooming. Later, one of the warlocks walked into the room in which Magnus sat reading as another walked out. As he was getting ready to go out on his daily stroll around the plantation, one of the warlocks offered to accompany him and later invited him to have a drink on the terrace. As Magnus was heading upstairs to take a bath before dinner, one of the warlocks –the young woman who killed Berg and whom Alec killed during the Rome attack –had offered to keep him company. The offer had surprised him and he had declined arguing that he preferred to bathe alone. Still, she had walked him to his room and had only reluctantly left.

“I was about to get in the bathtub when a shadow stepped out from behind the curtains. It was Marie and she looked at me with an expression of terror that startled me. ‘You have to come with me,’ she told me. ‘My father is in terrible danger; they found out that we came to see you and they are looking for him to kill him, please help us,’ she pleaded and her expression was so frightened that I couldn’t ignore it. When I told her that I would meet her downstairs, she became very agitated and told me that we had to leave without anyone noticing us.”

Magnus didn’t know why, but at that moment he had believed the girl, and had followed her down the servants’ stairs and through the servants’ quarters, until they came out of the house through the back door where two horses were waiting. They had quietly guided the horses out of the plantation and then galloped at full speed in the direction of the city. They had arrived just as the sun was setting, and as they approached the city limits, the stench of smoke had brought tears to their eyes.
As Magnus looked down towards the port, he could see the fires in the Chinese quarters, and he had finally understood that something terrible was going on.

“The rest of the city was mostly silent, but the closer we got to the Chinese quarters, the louder the screams became. We dismounted as we approached the entrance, left the horses behind, and continued on foot. Soldiers were everywhere and they were killing anyone in their path. There were bodies lying on the road, so many bodies, women, old people and children, so many children.” Magnus’ voice trailed off and he looked out towards an indeterminate point in the distance, and Alec was certain that at that moment Magnus could see clearly in his mind’s eye the bodies from that night so long ago. Some deaths, especially the death of the innocent, are impossible to forget, thought Alec as he waited patiently for Magnus to continue.

“Some of the bodies had been shot,” Magnus sighed and went on after a minute of silence. “But others showed clear signs of injuries caused by magic.” Magnus had stopped and tried to help a few of them even though he knew it was too late. It was Marie the one who had pushed them on deeper into the Chinese quarters through mud covered streets and burning buildings.

Eventually, they had emerged at the plaza, where the market set up every afternoon, and where the people that lived in the quarters gathered for celebrations and meetings. It was just a square, a wider opening in between houses and buildings, and where a few stands still displayed vegetables, grains and spices waiting for buyers who that night would not come. There, Magnus and Marie found Gwydion and another warlock, a middle-age man with hair the color of snow and light blue eyes that resembled ice, and that had introduced himself as Hagen when he had arrived at the plantation a few days before. Magnus hadn’t known Gwydion very well because the warlock had always kept his distance from Magnus, and he had only seen Hagen a couple of times. He had suspected, however, that the two knew each other and were close friends because Gwydion had warmly embraced the new arrival. Magnus had also seen them sitting together sharing a drink by the fire the night Annalise announced the plans to finally summon Lilith.

“Hagen had Marie’s father in a magic stronghold suspended a couple of meters off the ground, and was slowly choking him,” Magnus continued. “Gwydion was a few meters away playing target practice with a couple of young women who were hiding behind some sacks of grain. They were both laughing as if they were engaged in the most innocent of plays and not in murder.”

The sight had shocked Magnus to such an extent that for a second he stood paralyzed and unable to believe what his eyes were seeing. He had never liked Gwydion much, something about the warlock always provoked him distrust, and he suspected that the warlock didn’t like him either. He always looked at Magnus from a distance and, for a while, Magnus had wondered whether it was jealousy that he saw in the man’s eyes. Still, Magnus had had no reason to believe that Gwydion was capable of such brutality.

“Father!” Marie had screamed beside him, pulling Magnus out of his stupor. She had then taken a couple of steps in the direction of where her father was suspended in midair. Magnus had grabbed her by the arm trying to stop her but she had pulled away. At that moment, Hagen had looked back at Marie, an evil smirk on his face and with a flick of his wrist, had broken the old man’s neck, his body falling to the ground as if it was a broken doll. A sorrowful wail escaped Marie’s lips and she fell to the floor, her head in her hands. Hagen them turned towards the girl, his arms lifted in a clear sign that she was his next target.

“What are you doing?!” Magnus had called out, and before he could stop himself, he had stepped in front of Marie, his arms up and ready to perform magic.

“Step out of the way warlock,” Hagen had said contemptuously. “This doesn’t concern you.”
At that moment, Gwydion had sent a powerful fireball in the direction of where the young women with whom he had been toying were hiding and had instantly killed them both. He had then turned and walked in the direction of Magnus. “What are you doing here boy?” he had asked. “You are supposed to be safe in the plantation. What is Annaliese going to say when she finds out that her favorite lamb jumped the fence?”

“What are you doing this?” Magnus had asked, still dumbfounded.

“What, this?” Gwydion had replied and with a flourished wave of his hand had gestured towards the bodies. “What did you think would happen to the mundanes in the new land of the warlocks? You didn’t think that we would simply share, did you? We need the get rid of the vermin, clear the land, if you will, for Mother to build us a new home.”

“Why are you doing this?” Magnus had asked, still dumbfounded.

“Why are you doing this?” Gwydion had replied and with a flourished wave of his hand had gestured towards the bodies. “What did you think would happen to the mundanes in the new land of the warlocks? You didn’t think that we would simply share, did you? We need the get rid of the vermin, clear the land, if you will, for Mother to build us a new home.”

“You don’t have to do this,” Magnus had argued, his voice almost pleading. “What would Annaliese say if she knew what you are doing?”

“Don’t you dare, Hagen,” stated Annaliese, her tone deadly serious.

Hagen had conjured up a fireball in his hand, a red and incandescent ball of energy, and was about to send it in Magnus’ direction when a voice coming from behind Magnus had stopped him. “He still doesn’t understand, does he?” Hagen asked looking at Gwydion, humor evident in his tone. “Silly innocent warlock,” he had added turning back to Magnus. “Annaliese ordered this; it is all part of the plan.”

Magnus had turned in the direction of the voice and had met the ruby-red eyes of Annaliese who, at that moment, approached from the same direction from which Magnus and Marie had come. The Governor walked beside her, a vacant expression in his eyes.

“Magnus, love, what are you doing here?” Annaliese had asked in a condescending tone, the full force of her enchanting gaze on Magnus. “You should head home. None of this concerns you. I need you at home for the summoning ceremony.”

“What is going on Annaliese?” he had asked. “What are you doing?” Magnus had unconsciously shifted his position and now stood half turned, trying to protect Marie from threats coming from opposite sides. The girl who until a second ago had been crying, now looked at Annaliese with terrified eyes.

“Nothing that should concern you Magnus,” Annaliese had repeated. “The Governor will soon bring the situation under control, won’t you Governor?” she had asked and the governor had replied with a dazed nod of his head. “Come with me,” she had added and had extended a hand towards Magnus, “let’s go home.”

“I was tempted to go with her,” Magnus said and lifted a hand in the air as if he was extending it across the centuries in response to Annaliese’s beckoning gesture. “For a moment, I was tempted to go with her; to forget what I had seen; to pretend that nothing was going on and go back to the innocent bliss in which I had lived until then. But then something caught my eye and I looked down towards the ground. There, in the mud less than a meter from where I stood, lied the inert body of the boy that I had saved from the Governor all those months before. I recognized the small figure, the dirty clothes, the black hair and the still unhealed scar left by the tortoiseshell sticks of the Governor’s fan on his face. His eyes were open and they seemed to be looking at me from across the veil that separates life and death, demanding an explanation. I had saved him all those months ago only to die at the hands of a warlock.”

“I am not going with you,” Magnus had said and had then reached for Marie’s arm and had pulled
her up to her feet. “I am taking Marie home.”

“Stupid warlock,” had replied Hagen from his other side, and from the corner of his eye, Magnus had seen the fireball in Hagen’s hand increase in size and power just as he prepared to release it in Marie’s direction. That had been the moment that had decided everything; that had been the moment in which the tethers that had kept him tied to Annaliese broke and he was free. For at the same time that he saw Hagen getting ready to kill the girl, he also saw a look of malice, hatred and anticipation shine in Annaliese’s ruby-red eyes as she imagined the pleasure that the death of the girl would bring her. In what felt like a millisecond, Magnus had turned, and with all the fury and wretchedness building within him had released a stream of fiery magic directly into Hagen’s chest, sending him flying through the air for a several meters and killing him instantly. Before Gwydion or Annaliese had time to react, Magnus had pulled Marie by the arm and had run with her in the direction of the dark alleys that surrounded the square.

“I heard Annalise shouting behind me,” he told Alec, “instructing the other warlocks to find me and telling them that she needed me alive. I kept running and dragging Marie along until I thought I had put sufficient distance between us and the warlocks pursuing us. I then gave Marie instructions to go to the house of one of my friends and stay there.” Magnus had taken off one of his rings and had given it to the girl. It had been a jewel that Annaliese had given him and was worth more than the girl would make in a lifetime. “Take it and use it to build a good life for yourself,” he had told Marie as he said goodbye. “I am sorry about your father.” He had then walked away and, without looking back, had crossed the road and disappeared into an alley where the shadows concealed him as he went along in the direction of the port.

Magnus had run and hidden for most of the night as warlocks and the Governor’s soldiers searched for him and killed anyone standing in their way. “I finally made it to the port sometime in the small hours of the morning, and there I sneaked onto the last boat that managed to leave Batavia that night. From the deck, I saw Khuno set fire to a ship just a few hundred meters behind us, the screams of people as they burned or jumped in the water cutting the silence of the night.”

“But you see, it is,” Magnus stated. “I was so blind that I didn’t see the signs right in front of me: Annaliese and Khuno’s mysterious outings; the constant stream of warlocks arriving daily to join the cause; the way in which Annaliese and Khuno isolated us in the plantation, not by force but by offering us a place where no one had to hide who or what they were. I had also noticed that Governor Valckenier spent hours in Annaliese’s rooms, and that he always left looking dazed as if he was drunk or under some spell that took away his will. All the signs were there and I refused to see them.”

“If I had paid enough attention I would have seen what was going on. Annaliese might not have known everything about the ritual to summon Lilith, but she knew two important things,” he stated looking at Alec straight in the eyes to make sure Alec understood the full implications of his
words. “Summoning Lilith, the mother of all demons, requires the sacrifice of innocent life, not only one life, but a multitude of lives. Annaliiese and Khuno first incited the violence in the city and then outright ordered the killings because the spilling of innocent blood was part of the ritual.” Two hundred years later it would be the spilling of the blood of the innocent in the concentration camps of Europe. In Batavia, it had been the blood of the people caught in a racial war. Annaliiese and Khuno had spent months inciting racial animosity, stoking the fire of greed, prejudice and hatred knowing that once the conflict broke off, hundreds if not thousands of innocent people would die.

“The summoning requires one more thing: a direct blood connection to Lilith,” he added and this time it was him the one to place his hand atop the mark on his own chest the way Alec had done earlier. “That is me; that is why Annaliiese needed me. My father, my demonic father, is Lilith’s first born, her most beloved son. That makes me, or at least made me at the time, the closest blood connection that Annaliiese had to Lilith. When I escaped and the warlocks failed to capture me, Annaliiese ordered the killing of more people hoping that by increasing the offering of life, she would compensate for my loss. She then attempted the ritual by using warlocks with more tenuous blood connections. I don’t know what they summoned that night, but it was not Lilith. Whatever it was killed at least ten warlocks before the survivors sent it back to hell.”

Magnus had not learned any of this until much later because by the time the sun came up on the tenth of October 1740, Batavia was just a sliver of earth in the horizon, a sliver barely visible from the deck of the ship that took Magnus first to Hong Kong and then on to India. However, he found out about the disastrous consequences of Annaliiese’s failed summoning through the grapevine in months and years to come.

“Oh Magnus, I am sorry you have had to carry that guilt all these years,” Alec said and placed a hand atop Magnus’ on his chest. “But it was not you who killed all those people. You were young and in need of a home.”

“I was almost a hundred years old Alexander. I wouldn’t call that young.”

“In warlock years, that is the equivalent to being a teenager,” Alec said, a loving and forgiving smile on his lips, a smiled that surprised Magnus even more; for Alec was more willing to forgive him that he had ever been willing to forgive himself. “I understand now why you left,” Alec added, “why you felt that you needed to confront Annaliiese on your own. Guilt is a terrible thing.”

“When I left you that note, it was not you or the love and the life that you offer me that I was referring to,” Magnus said, his eyes full of tears. “It is me who is not enough; it is me who can never be good enough for you.”

“Warlock,” said Alec and placed his other hand on Magnus’ cheek. “You are everything to me. The fact that you have been trying to atone for what you feel was your fault makes you a bigger person that anyone I know. That and the fact that you did this to protect me,” he added pointing to the place where the protection spell was hidden underneath the grey t-shirt that Magnus wore.

Magnus closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath before speaking again, as if he was getting ready to jump off a cliff not knowing what waited for him at the bottom. “I cast this spell to protect you from Annaliiese and, in the process, I shielded an important part of my powers from any attempt by Annaliiese to use me. I did that by tethering to you the part of my powers that connect me to my demonic father and to Lilith. Alexander, do you remember that I told you before that this spell ties your life force to mine?” he asked, a cautious tone in his voice.

“Yes, and I told you that I suspected that spell had cost you dearly,” Alec replied. “What was the cost Magnus? What did you sacrifice in order to cast that spell?”
“The spell ties your life force to mine and mine to yours,” stated Magnus, his voice almost a whisper.

He then looked up at Alec with even more intensity than before as if with his eyes he could entice Alec to take full account of the meaning of his words. Alec looked back at him and Magnus saw how the expression of those eyes, those eyes that in the last few weeks had looked at him with anger, resentment, sadness, wonder and love, changed once more from a questioning expression to one of dawning realization.

“No, it can’t be. What did you do Magnus?” Alec asked, urgency, dread and surprise in his voice.

“I had to; it was the only way to keep you safe,” Magnus replied.

“You have to undo it; can you undo it?” Alec asked, desperation wining over all other emotions in his voice.

At that moment, a knock on the door interrupted them. “Not now, can you give us a minute?” asked Alec, not taking his eyes off Magnus who looked back at him with an unfathomable expression in his eyes and a loving smile in his lips.

“I am sorry, but this is urgent,” came Jace’s voice from the door. He then tentatively opened it and peeked into the room. “We need you out here guys. The bodies of four Shadowhunters were just discovered outside the New York Institute.”

“Let me get dressed, I will meet you in the seating room,” Magnus said as he stood up.

“Okay, we will wait for you out here,” said Jace and closed the door.

Alec stood up and went in search of his boots and his jacket, but when Magnus was walking in the direction of the bathroom, he stopped him by grabbing him by the arm. “This conversation is not over,” he said, his voice carrying a determination that surprised Magnus.

Magnus placed a hand against Alec’s cheek, smiled and then kissed him gently because at that moment he didn’t have enough the words to express how much he loved this man with his generous and open heart, this man who thought he wasn’t worthy enough to be the keeper of a warlock’s life.
Foe & Friends

Chapter Summary

Four bodies, all from different institutes, none of them from New York; yet all dumped here. It was a message, Magnus was certain; it was a message from Annaliese, a calling, a summoning, or a warning. This was her way of letting him know that his town was not safe, that his people were not safe, that she was coming for him.

Magnus sat on the sofa in Alec’s office, copies of the Vatican records spread over the coffee table, the tablet in his hand opened to a digital photo of the ancient carved stone. He had spent the last hour staring at the pictures, zooming in on different sections of the stone, trying to decipher hieroglyphs that the passage of time had almost completely erased. On a small corner of the stone, as if it was an afterthought, someone had carved a hieroglyph that had caught Magnus’ attention. It was rather simple: a line linking five points intersected by another line to form a rudimentary cross. The shape reminded him of something, but no matter how hard he wracked his brain, he couldn’t identify what.

As if trying to clear his mind, he looked up at the intricate mosaic window with the image of the angel, his tunic and wings casting white and blue light over the room, the sword in his hand a silvery shine. For an instant, Magnus thought that the angel was looking back at him with accusing black eyes as if demanding an explanation for the lives that were lost today.

“No one else dies in this war,” Alec had said as he stood beside the stretchers on which four bodies had been wheeled into the New York Institute less than two hours ago. “We are not relinquishing one more life, Nephilim, downworlder or mundane, to Annaliese and her people,” he had added, his firm voice and the determination on his face disguising his despair from everyone except for Magnus and possibly Jace.

Unconsciously, perhaps the result of having spent days in the company of close friends in which hiding had not been necessary, Magnus had placed a hand on Alec’s shoulder in a gesture of support, comfort and love. He had swiftly removed it, however, when he felt Alec’s back stiffen beside him and Alec took an unconscious step away from Magnus. He had also felt the weight of the other Shadowhunters’ stares, maybe not all reproachful, but certainly all surprised.

Welcome back to the Institute, Magnus had thought, the place in which Alec was not only the leader, but also in which he had lived, and in many ways still lived, a closeted life. The Nephilim were bigots, Magnus reminded himself; a society in many ways more set on tradition than mundane society; a society that still adhered to a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ rule. Anyway, they had more pressing things to worry about right now, Magnus reminded himself as he went back to examine the hieroglyph that looked so familiar.

Four Nephilim had been killed; their runes burned away and almost every bone broken by magic; their bodies dumped at the Institute’s doorsteps. Remembering the look of agony in Alec’s face as Magnus had burned away his rune, Magnus involuntarily shivered and silently hoped that those poor souls had died before the procedure was done on them.

As soon as they got the news, Alec, Magnus, Jace and Kat had portalled right into the Institute’s
front steps where Jeremy and Clary waited. The scene had been eerie despite the sunlight that illuminated the early morning: four bodies lying on the ground near the Institute’s entrance; four bodies strewn around as if they were rag dolls, disposed of as if they were refuse, as if Annaliese wanted to send the clear message that the Nephilim meant nothing to her. Four bodies, all from different institutes, none of them from New York; yet all dumped here. It was a message, Magnus was certain; it was a message from Annaliese, a calling, a summoning, or a warning. This was her way of letting him know that his town was not safe, that his people were not safe, that she was coming for him.

“Do you remember when I told you that the solution to Annaliese’s riddle might be found both in the past and in the future?” Alec asked from the doorway, startling Magnus back to reality. He had been so engrossed in his thoughts and his examination of the photos that had not noticed that Alec had walked into the office and was now standing behind him.

“Did I scare you?” Alec asked, a hint of humor in his voice. He came around and sat beside Magnus, and it was now him the one to place a hand on Magnus’ shoulder. “I am sorry.”

“As usual, Alexander, you walk with the grace and stealth of a Shadowhunter,” Magnus said with a smile. He looked around to see whether anyone else was with Alec, even though the intimacy of the touch was a clear sign that they were alone in the room.

“I am glad I haven’t yet lost the capacity to surprise you,” said Alec and even though he also smiled, the smile was sad and more than a little anxious.

“You were saying?” Magnus asked.

Alec switched on the tablet he carried in his hand and called up a satellite image of Europe, a red dot marking the sites of each attack. He then placed the tablet beside the image of the carved stone Magnus had been studying.

“We know that the Rome attack was a distraction to break into the Vatican archives,” Alec said. “There have been seven other attacks in Europe beside Rome. I think you were onto something at the observatory, there is almost a straight line connecting Lisbon, Madrid, Barcelona, Zürich and Berlin,” he added and with his finger, he drew a red line connecting those cities. “If we now draw another line connecting Paris and Florence…” his voice trailed off as he traced the new line. “What does that configuration look like to you?”

“That is what this carving reminded of!” exclaimed Magnus, excitement coloring his voice. “The carving is a diagram linking seven spots on a map. But why would a map of modern Europe be carved into a pre-Colombian Inca ceremonial stone?”

“That I don’t know,” replied Alec, “but it cannot be a coincidence.”

Magnus intently examined the map on the screen, the lines clearly connecting the cities in a configuration that was almost identical to the carving on the stone; almost but not quite, something was off. “It is not a map of Europe, and I don’t think that the last point is Florence,” he said after a moment of silent.

“What do you mean?” asked Alec glancing once again at the map.

“There is a reason why Annalise went back to Zürich,” Magnus replied. “Zürich is the point at which both lines intersect but not to connect Paris to Florence; rather to connect Paris to the next and possibly last target.” With his own finger, Magnus extended an almost straight line from Paris, passing over Zürich and continuing south east in the direction of the sea.
“You are right,” Alec added looking back at Magnus.

“Alec,” called Jeremy from the door. “Kat and I have something to show you in the situation room. I think we know what Annaliese’s next target is.”

Alec and Magnus looked at each other and nodded, silently agreeing to wait and see whether Kat would confirm their suspicions. They stood and followed Jeremy into the situation room, where Kat, Jace and Clary were carefully examining the latest star chart on a screen. Ancient books and archival records were spread over the surface of the nearby table. The sight reminded Magnus of Alec’s words, that the key to understanding Annaliese’s plan was to keep one eye firmly in the past and another firmly in the future.

“I think I know what Annaliese’s next target is,” Kat said as soon as Magnus and Alec walked in.

“Let me guess,” said Magnus. “It is Venice, is it?”

“How do you know?” Kat asked in surprise.

“I think we have come to the same conclusion,” Alec stated. “The ceremonial stone that Annaliese stole in Rome contains a carving of what we thought was a map, but now I suspect it is a star chart.”

“That is very interesting,” Jeremy said. “The next star in the constellation we have been tracking will align with Venice tomorrow night,” he added, eager now to get on with the report of what he and Kat had found. “Every seventy-two years, give or take a few months, the stars align in that configuration on the night sky. In the last two hundred years, the constellation has aligned over Europe.”

“That is why Annaliese was in Germany during the war,” stated Magnus.

“We suspect that until recently, Annaliese didn’t have all the information,” Jeremy went on. “She might have been guiding herself by only one star, the brightest and easiest to spot. That is why there was only one target before. This time she knows that there are six other stars in the constellation.”

“How did she know?” asked Clary.

“This time, not only does she have access to modern technology to track the stars,” Kat replied, “she might have also seen this stone. Do you remember, Magnus, the legend of the Chasa?” she added turning to her friend.

“Yes, but what does that have to do with this?” replied Magnus, looking at Kat with apprehension.

“I suspect it has everything to do with it.”

“What is a Chasa?” Jace asked.

“Not what, but who,” replied Magnus. “The Chasa were an ancient race of people that Kat believes lived in Cusco perhaps a thousand years before the Inca.”

“When the Inca first arrived at Cusco, centuries before I was born,” added Kat, “they found ancient ruins and artifacts, signs that another race of people, a race that had mysteriously disappeared centuries before, had lived there. In fact, in the same way that the Spanish built their churches on the ruins of Incan temples, the Inca built on the ruins left by the Chasa. I spent a few years researching those first inhabitants,” she added, “because I suspected that the Chasa were warlocks.
Of course, I wasn’t able to prove much because almost no records of them remain.”

“Let’s start at the beginning,” Magnus interrupted noticing the look of confusion in the Shadowhunters around the table. “Many creations myths, including the Incan myth, follow a similar narrative. After god creates the world, he gives life to a race of people –his children –and he entrusts them with caring for creation. One or some of those people eventually betray god and god punishes them. In the Incan myth, after Viracocha created the world, and before he fashioned from clay and wood the first humans, he created three other deities, whom he considered his children: Inti, the sun god; Coniraya, the moon god; and another god, a goddess actually, whose name has been erased from all records and who Viracocha put in charge of caring for the fruits and plants of the earth. This goddess proved to be rebellious, disobedient and proud. She wanted the newly created humans to worship only her and to forget Viracocha. She was so successful in convincing the human race that she was their only god, that when Viracocha called on his people to meet him by the shores of the Titicaca Lake, no one came. Viracocha was so upset that he punished the goddess, making the human race forget her name, and condemning her to live in the dark depths of the mountains without people to honor or worship her. Viracocha then sent a rain of fire that burned the earth to remind humans that he was their creator. After that, Viracocha created Pachamama, the new goddess entrusted with caring for nature.”

“You think that this unnamed goddess is Lilith,” Alec said, not a question but a statement.

“Yes,” confirmed Magnus, “but that is not the end of the story. Another more obscured legend says that, imprisoned by Viracocha in the depth of the mountain, the unnamed goddess grew resented and angry. She lured some humans to venture into the mountain where she captured them. She took them apart trying to figure out the secret of how Viracocha created life. With the pieces, she created a race of people to worship her. Those people were the Chasa, a race of immortals with extraordinary powers who lived in Cusco for hundreds of years.”

“And you think that the Chasa were warlocks,” Alec stated.

“Yes,” said Kat. “It was something you said, Alec, when we were at the observatory in Atacama: that perhaps Annaliiese wasn’t the first one to attempt to summon Lilith. As I told you before, I met Annaliiese when she arrived with the first Spaniards that came to Cusco. Even then, she was obsessed with ancient Inca astronomy. She might have found some proof then that the Chasa tried to summon Lilith before. They were, obviously, unsuccessful, and it is likely that most of them died in the process. But they might have left clues behind, perhaps this ceremonial stone and at least one more thing.” She then explained that last night, Monsignor Augustas, her contact at the Vatican, had sent her one more record from the archives: a drawing of a carved staff made of wood, human bone and gold that had been brought to the Vatican at the same time than the stone. She then called up a digital image of a rudimentary sketch of what looked like a walking stick, unrecognizable carvings decorating its length. The drawing was obviously very old and was sorely lacking in detail.

“The Spanish must have taken these artifacts along with the many other treasures they ransacked from Cusco during their conquest campaign,” Kat continued. “But I don’t think they knew their significance.”

“Did you ever see the stone or the staff back then?” Clary asked.

“No,” Kat replied, her voice heavy with a mixture of sadness and wistfulness. “By the time I was born, the Chasa had become old legend, and the Inca must have considered these artifacts either very sacred, or very evil, and kept them hidden from all but the highest priests. But I think they are proof that the Chasa had some knowledge of the summoning ceremony. I wish I had known about
them though; we might have been better prepared,” she went on, her eyes fixed on the image of the staff on the computer screens. “By the time I learned the legend of the Chasa, the Inca empire was almost gone.”

“Was the staff also kept in the Vatican archives?” Alec asked.

“Monsignor Augustas told me that at the beginning, everything ended up in Rome in the hands of the church,” replied Kat. “But the staff was eventually given to the Medici family in Florence.”

“That cannot be a coincidence,” Clary said. “So, Florence was another decoy to steal something.”

“Okay, we know that Venice is likely the last target,” said Alec. “We also know that Annaliese is likely following on the footsteps of an ancient group of pre-Incan warlocks who tried to summon Lilith hundreds of years before the Spanish arrived in Peru. But why kill Shadowhunters? How does that fit in her plans? And what role do the stars play in the plot?”

“I think I may have an answer to the last question,” replied Kat sliding her finger over one of the tabletop touchscreens, splitting it in two, the satellite image of Europe on one side and a series of graphs and tables on the other. “Alec, at the observatory you asked me to search for any links between the targeted cities. Well, as it turns out, there are quite a few, but one is the most significant. These cities are situated along a geological fault line, one of a few that exist all over the planet. It is a weak spot of sorts; a spot prompt to earthquakes, likely a place where the separation between this realm and Hades is the weakest. Another similar fault line runs through Cusco. I think the stars exercise a magnetic pull that make the fault line a suitable place to open a rift.”

Alec turned towards Magnus who had gone very quiet in the last few minutes. On his tablet, he was examining the digital photo of the drawing; turning the image one way then another; a look of complete concentration. Alec recognized that look, it was the one Magnus had every time he was working on a new spell, or on a difficult translation. When he had that expression, Alec felt that Magnus was only partially in the room, his body here but his mind somewhere or some-when else.

“What is it Magnus?” he asked.

Magnus looked up and for a second it appeared that he had forgotten where he was. He then smiled at Alec before turning to Kat. “Could it be possible, Kat, that the carvings on this staff are not Incan but a form of ancient warlock?”

“Hmmm,” said Kat, her expression pensive. “It could be. The rendering is not detailed enough to know for sure. We would need to see the actual staff or at the very least a good photograph.”

“You know, now that I think about it,” Alec said, “in Florence, the warlocks got deeper past the Institute’s protection wards than in any of the other attacks. They made it almost to the door. What if some of them actually penetrated the defenses? What if the staff was not in mundane hands, but in Nephilim’s hands? If the Nephilim had the staff all along, they are likely to have a better photograph or record of it. And if so, someone would have noticed if the language on it was warlock. Don’t you think?”

“Yes, but keeping an ancient warlock artifact would be against the Accords,” Jeremy said, misgiving evident in his voice. “That would not look good, especially now that the Downworld has seats in the council. The Clave is unlikely to acknowledge that they had such a valuable artifact in their possession, especially if they no longer have it.”

“And acknowledging that it was stolen would mean also acknowledging that security in one of the Institutes failed,” Jace added.
“If they had it, I will get them to tell me,” said Alec and started in the direction of his office. “It is time I call our parents, Jace, and take my word for it, they will get me the information.”

Less than an hour later, Magnus was sitting at one of the computers, working on a translation of the carved stone, an old book in his hand, a close up of the stone on the screen, when Alec walked back into the situation room. In his absence, the team, with Izzy joining through teleconference, had devised a preliminary plan of attack for their imminent trip to Venice. Jace and Clary had then left to do inventory of the weapons they would likely need. Jeremy and Kat were in the library searching the archives for any indication that the Clave ever had the Chasa staff, as they had begun to call it.

Magnus looked up from the screen as Alec approached, and the Shadowhunter’s appearance startled him. Alec looked almost despondent, his eyes red and his back stooped as if he was carrying a heavy burden, and Magnus suspected that Alec’s conversation with his parents had taken a toll.

“The Clave did have the staff,” Alec stated as he walked towards Magnus, his voice a little hoarse. “They took it from the Medici in the 1700s and had it until Annaliese stole it. They had it all along,” he repeated with a sigh, his voice almost a whisper. He shook his head in an expression that was perhaps incredulity or perhaps disappointment.

Magnus knew that Alec was a loyal Shadowhunter and that he had a hard time accepting it every time his people disappointed him. He was young and didn’t have the experiences or knowledge that Magnus had about all the times the Nephilim had acted reprehensively. He didn’t even know the whole story of his own family and Magnus hoped Alec would never learn it completely.

Alec looked at Magnus and wondered whether he should tell him that he had just leveraged the story of what the Inquisitor had done to him to get his parents’ help. The look of horror on his mother’s face and of fury on his father’s were still vivid in his mind.

“The Nephilim did this to me,” he had bitterly told them after he had finished narrating his ordeal, “because they don’t accept who I am and who I love. It wasn’t just the Inquisitor; he was empowered by all those who are afraid of anyone that doesn’t conform with their idea of morality or angelic superiority. If you don’t help me get to the truth so I can stop Annaliese, you too will be complicit in what that man did.”

“I am so sorry son,” his father had said when he had gotten over the initial shock, tears welling up in his eyes. “We have failed to protect you and support as you deserve.”

“You can make up for that now,” Alec had told him as he dried his own tears with the back of his hand. Shadowhunters show no weakness, his father had repeatedly told him, and crying in front of his parents was a sign of weakness that since childhood he had avoided at all cost. “Find out what was stolen from the Florence Institute and whether The Clave kept an ancient warlock artifact there,” he had added, imbuing his voice with as much determination as he could manage.

His mother had been, as usual, resistant to believe that the Clave would conceal having the staff. She was either loyal or afraid. Alec understood that Maryse was the one who had the hardest time coloring outside the lines demarcated for her by the Clave. His father, on the other hand, didn’t appear to be surprised at all.

Alec knew that he had been hard on his parents. They were, after all, of a different generation. Perhaps they still wished that he would change and become the Shadowhunter they had hoped him to be. Even after all these months, they still struggled to accept his relationship with Magnus.
“I am sorry, son,” Robert Lightwood had repeated once Maryse left the room in search of the information Alec required. “What can I do? Do you want me to publicly denounce what Dearborn did?”

“That won’t be necessary,” Alec had replied. “Besides, we have more important things to do right now. We have to stop Annaliese Fen and her people before they wreak havoc with the world. There will be time for other things later.”

“Alec, please know that your mother and I love you and we want you to be happy. We should have been more supportive,” his father had said, and Alec had seen the sincerity and regret in his father’s eyes.

“It is okay dad,” he had finally said. “I know all this has caught you by surprise. I just hope you understand that Magnus is not an affair or a temporary infatuation. If you can finally accept that, things will be so much easier between us.”

His mother had returned a minute later with a copy of the report from the Florence attack and just the embarrassed look on her face had been enough to confirm that his suspicions had been correct.

“Are you okay Alexander?” Magnus asked him now, all thoughts of the Chasa staff forgotten for a moment.

“I am fine Magnus,” Alec replied with a sad smile. There was no use talking about the disappointment he felt towards The Clave right now, or about what he had told his parents. Instead, he tapped a few commands on the touchscreen, opening the message his mother had just sent him with the report. Attached to it was a series of high resolution digital photos of the Chasa staff. “Is this what you were looking for?” he asked.

“Yes,” replied Magnus, zooming and expanding the image of the faded carvings that decorated the length of the staff. “I knew it, this is an ancient form of warlock.”

“Can you translate it?”

“With Kat’s help, I might,” Magnus replied as he stood up and started for the door. But before leaving the room, he stopped and turned. “I am sorry Alexander,” he said with a sympathetic smile that conveyed to Alec that he knew, not only how disappointed he felt, but also what he had told his parents.

“We were attacked.” Izzy stated a couple of hours later, apprehension evident on her reflection on the computer screen. “Warlocks hit the Jade Wolf and took five werewolves.”

Alec looked from Izzy to Luke standing behind her, his expression as anxious as his sister’s. “How?” he asked.

“The warlocks portalled right into the restaurant,” replied Luke. “By the time we realized what was happening, it was too late.”

“Damn it,” exclaimed Alec and rested his fists on the table. “This cannot be a coincidence. Bodies damped in front of the Institute and now werewolves taken. I am sick and tired of being a few steps behind that woman. How about the hotel?” he asked.
“Thing here are quiet,” Izzy replied. “The vampires are still under the sedation spell that Catarina created, and we are strengthening security and wards. But Alec, the dead Shadowhunters were not all from New York. Annaliese may target downworlders from other cities.”

“She might,” said Magnus who at that moment walked into the room followed by Kat and Jeremy and came to stand beside Alec. “Izzy, do you still have the ring I sent Raphael?” he asked.

“Yes,” she replied. “It is still in Raphael’s room.”

“Good, you, Catarina and the werewolves must remain as close to it as possible at all times. It has the power to not only counteract the effects of demonic poisoning, but it will also prevent any attempt to track you.”

“I should go there,” Izzy stated. “We need to plan for Venice. Catarina and I can portal into the Institute.”

“I don’t think that is a good idea right now,” Magnus said. “If Kat and I are correct, Annaliese is going to try to get to the vampires and possibly target more Shadowhunters.”

“Stay there for now,” Alec instructed. “Magnus, were you able to translate the inscription on the staff?” he asked turning to the warlock.

“I think we have the closest to a translation as we are likely to ever get. This is ancient warlock, so some of the words might be missing or mean something else.”

Magnus then tapped a few commands on one of the computers and a three-dimensional digital image of the staff appeared on one of the screens. “Kat, why don’t you do the honors? You know the language better than me.”

“Okay,” replied Kat and after consulting the notepad on her hand, looked up at the group standing around the room as if to make sure everybody was present. “This is the best we were able to come up with. The words on the staff are actually a riddle that as far as we can tell reads:

“When faithful fire seven doors ignite,
and the path to freedom the night suns extend,
hands of foe and friend the shaft alight
and by beloved breath and innocent blood the untamed ascends.”

“What does that mean?” Jace asked.

“It is basically a recipe for summoning Lilith,” explained Magnus. “Faithful fire refers to the warlocks burnt in the attacks; the seven doors suggest the seven cities, Venice being the last one; the night suns are likely the stars that light the place where the rift can be opened to free the untamed one—Lilith.”

“Could the shaft be the Chasa staff?” asked Alec.

“Yes, I suspect so,” replied Magnus.

“The innocent blood has to be the Shadowhunters that Annaliese killed,” offered Jace.

“I thought so too,” Magnus said, “but Kat doesn’t agree.”
“Lilith and Annaliese would never consider the Nephilim to be innocent,” Kat stated. “You are part angel, which makes you the enemy. You are the foe in the riddle. I asked your pathologist to take a closer look at the bodies from this morning. He found out that not only runes were removed, but the hearts were also taken.”

“Why the hearts?” asked Alec.

“Because she needed their life force,” Kat replied. “According to ancient warlock traditions, the heart is where life force originates.”

“That would make werewolves the friends,” offered Alec. “They are infected by demonic disease. Does she mean to take their hands?”

“Very perceptive question, Alexander, as usual,” said Magnus with a proud smile. “But the use of the word ‘hands’ is rather puzzling. It does not strictly translate as ‘with their hands,’ or ‘by the hands’. I think the word refers to something else.”

Alec stared at the words on the screen, which Clary had just finished typing. “Could the word hand refer to a number? As in five or a handful?” he asked.

“It could be,” replied Magnus. With his index finger and thump, he traced the contours of his lips in a gesture of deep concentration. “How many werewolves were taken?” he asked turning towards the screen where the Izzy and Luke’s faces were clearly visible.


“But she killed only four Shadowhunter,” Jace said.

Silent befell the room as everybody concentrated on the riddle. After a few moments, Magnus’ expression changed from one of deep concentration to one of sudden understanding. “While I was her prisoner, Annaliese kept looking for you Alexander. In fact, she and Khuno were very frustrated that they couldn’t track you. They don’t know about the protections I left you. You might be the fifth Shadowhunter, which means that she is coming for you.”

“Okay,” said Alec and sighed. “That means that she doesn’t yet have all she needs. She has opened all but one of the doors; and she has five werewolves but is still missing one Shadowhunter. Am I wrong to assume that ‘innocent blood’ is a reference to mundanes?”

“It is likely,” replied Magnus.

“That doesn’t sound good,” Alec said. “I will contact the Clave, explain the situation, and ask for help from the Venice Institute. We need to keep the mundies out of this.”

“We should also reinforce security at the Hotel Du Mort, and we should contact some of the other vampire clans,” Kat suggested. “Werewolves are not the only ones who qualify as friends in the riddle. There is a reason why the attacks affected the vampires the way they did. I think she needs vampires affected by demonic poisoning. She may not be able to use magic to track their location, but that doesn’t mean that she won’t find out by other means. She may get the information out of the werewolves.”

“Alec,” Luke called from the screen. “The demonic poisoning is not only affecting the vampires. It has also affected my pack. The effect is less drastic because demonic disease affects us differently. But since the attacks, members of my pack have been more short-tempered than usual, prompt to fighting and to uncontrolled transformation. We have been able to keep it under control, likely because, since we have been guarding the hotel, we have been under the protection of the Hades
“Why didn’t you tell me?” asked Alec even though he already knew the answer. Shadowhunter duty dictated that they had to eliminate any downworlder that posed a threat. Despite all the headways that had been made in Nephilim-Downworld relationships, deep-rooted distrust still existed.

“You guys have a lot on your plate,” he replied, “and, as I said, we have been able to control it.”

“Okay then. You should keep your pack as close as possible to the Hades ring,” stated Alec. “Izzy, I am sending all available personnel to you. We need to secure the hotel.”

“I should come with you to Venice,” Izzy said.

“Agreed,” Alec interrupted her. “but for now, I need you to coordinate things there.”

“Why do you think the warlocks will try to come here? The New York downworlders are not the only ones affected by the poison,” Izzy asked.

“Annaliese is sending me a message,” replied Magnus. “She wants me to know that my friends and my city are not safe. She is taunting me. She first attacked the New York Institute just to let me know that she could, she is now targeting Alec, and the New York Downworld.” He wrung his hands, a telltale sign of his anxiety. “Alexander,” he added turning to look at Alec straight in the eyes. “Annaliese needs me for the ritual, the way she needed me before. I think I am the beloved in the riddle.”

“Her beloved?” asked Jace puzzled.

“She needs you because of your blood connection,” Alec said, momentarily ignoring Jace’s question. Then, turning to the others in the room, he explained what Magnus had told him that morning: that years before, Annaliese had needed Magnus for the ritual because of who his father was. He gave just enough detail, leaving out everything about Magnus’ role in the Jakarta massacre. Magnus was thankful because he didn’t think that, at this moment, he could answer questions about his dark past, or bear the looks of reprehension that he was sure to get from the Nephilim and perhaps even from Kat.

“That information can prove helpful,” stated Kat pensively. “I think that between Magnus and I we can device a counter spell, or a potion that might, just might, stop the rift from opening or perhaps even resealed it. I remember seeing a spell like that described in an ancient book once. If I remember correctly though, we would require the same ingredients needed for the summoning spell.”

“You are not suggesting we kill five Shadowhunters and spill mundane blood, are you?” asked Jace in a tone of outrage.

“No, of course not,” replied Kat. “It is not strictly the life of the Shadowhunters that she needed to take. She needed their hearts. That is why she took the hearst and left the bodies. I suspect that in time, she will do the same to the werewolves and vampires.”

“And how do you suggest we take the hearts of Shadowhunters, mundanes and downworlders without killing them?” asked Izzy.

“We don’t need to take their hearts,” replied Magnus looking at Kat with a mixture of realization and excitement. “We need to extract fresh blood directly from the heart, where it is, according to ancient beliefs, imbued with life. We can use a simple spell to do that. We still need to figure out
the counter spell, though,” he added. “But if anyone can do, Kat and I can. I am after all the High Warlock of Brooklyn and Kat is one of the most knowledgeable warlocks I know.”

“Okay then,” said Alec. “We have a bit over twenty-four hours to figure out a plan of attack. Izzy, as soon as reinforcements arrive and you secure the Hotel, you should head here. Luke, it would great if you accompany us to Venice as well.”

“Of course,” replied Luke. “Annaliese took five members of my pack. It is my duty to rescue them.”

“Thank you,” Alec replied with a nod. “Izzy, I need you to get at least four hours of sleep before we leave or you are not coming with us.”

“I will be fin…,” Izzy started to say.

“It is an order,” Alec said silencing her protest. “We cannot afford having a team member falling over from exhaustion during this mission. When was the last time you slept?”

At that moment, thousands of kilometers away, in the first-class dining room of a luxurious cruise liner floating on the Adriatic Sea, a beautiful young woman sat at a table by a window overlooking the water, a champagne glass in her hand and a distant look in her yes. She remained completely indifferent to the stares that she drew from the other passengers, who couldn’t help admiring her small and beautiful figure, and the way in which her long black hair almost kissed her waist.

“Mundanes are so unsurprisingly petty and pedantic,” Annaliese disdainfully thought as she listened to a couple quarreling at a table a few meters away. Despite being surrounded by the most exquisite of luxuries, dressed in the finest of clothes and adorned in the brightest of jewels, mundanes still found reason for discontent. Not even the view of the sea, extending like an indigo blanket outside the window under a red and orange sky, seemed to distract them from their petty squabble. The woman –thin and with a face that despite a thick layer of make-up still showed the inexorable passage of time –turned, and her companion –a portly bald man with the red nose of a cheap drunk –followed her gaze in Annaliese’ direction as if they had noticed that she was listening in on their argument. The man blushed a deep red and the woman apparently kicked him under the table, and Annaliese understood that she was the reason for their bickering.

Unconcerned and bored already by the attention, Annaliese imperiously turned towards the window and took a sip of her champagne, the bubbles tickling her tongue as the cold liquid passed her lips. For an instant, she looked out towards a horizon that was interrupted solely by the silhouette of a vessel following a few hundred meters away, a vessel that only she could see. But soon her own reflection in the glass reminded her of the squabbling couple and a conceited smile curved her lips. She thought that it was not her fault that her red silk dress hugged her hips so softly, that her hair fell in perfectly formed and silky black curls down her bare back, and that her eyes sparkled as blue sapphires this evening. It was certainly not her fault that her face and her body still preserved the same youth of more than five hundred years ago. “Mundanes are so easily deceived by glamor,” she thought as she rolled a lock of hair around her finger.

A little game occurred to her, something that would both amuse her and teach the bickering couple a lesson, and with a mischievous sparkle in her eyes, she turned to the seat beside her, looking for Khuno who was always eager to go with her on any adventure. But the seat was empty and for a moment the absence almost matched the void she felt in her heart. For over four hundred years, since that dark night they met when Annaliese was travelling through the lands of the Orichas in Africa, she and Khuno had been everything to one another. He had been her companion, her lover, her confidant, her right-hand and sometimes her left, her eyes and her ears, and, most of all, her heart. Now, he was gone, taken by perfidious hands, and she was once again alone, surrounded by
warlocks that feared and revered her, but who didn’t love her like Khuno had, like Magnus once had loved her too.

“No matter, my love,” she whispered as she gazed out the window, willing the words to travel with the wind until they found Khuno. “When Mother returns to reclaim what is ours, we will be reunited once again.”

“Miss Fen,” a young voice with a heavy Greek accent, recalled her attention to the room. “The captain wonders whether you would grace him with your company at his table tonight. As you know it is tradition for cruise Captains to invite some of their most honored guests to join them.”

Annaliese looked in the direction of the table situated in a place of honor by an immense window overlooking the first-class deck. An illuminated water fountain glimmered in the background in an ever-changing rainbow of colors. The captain, a handsome grey-haired man, dressed in a formal uniform smiled and bowed her head at her. Annaliese smiled back and then shifted her eyes towards the young Scandinavian beauty sitting beside him. Underneath the glamor, Annaliese could see clearly the grey leathery skin and the fins protruding from the bald head of one of her loyal warlock. The woman smiled back and Annalise was certain that her perfect smile, and her lovely blond hair dazzled all those who looked upon her.

“It will be my pleasure,” Annaliese replied, the quarreling couple all but forgotten. She stood up and smoothed her dressed, her hand pausing for a second on the spot on her abdomen where her link to Mother extended towards Hades as if it was an umbilical cord. As she made her way across the dining room with the grace and poise of a queen, she turned and slightly nodded at the half dozen warlocks who, also glamored, sat on tables peppered around the elegant room. Another half dozen awaited her signal on the ship that hidden underneath heavy wards shadowed them a few hundred meters away. Four of her most trusted warlocks were on land carrying out the other part of her plan and delivering the message that would assure the timely arrival of the beloved.

“Everything is going according to plan, Mother,” she thought as she extended her hand to the handsome captain. “Let the mundanes enjoy their last meal; tomorrow it will be our turn to feast.”
“Magnus, I want you so much that my heart hurts,” Alec whispered in Magnus’ ear, and the declaration was welcomed even if unnecessary. Magnus could already read the declaration in every inch of Alec’s body, in the way his breathing quickened, in the echo of his racing heart atop Magnus’ heart, in the taste of his lips, in the shine in his eyes.

It was almost midnight when Alec walked into the library where Magnus, Kat and Jeremy had been sequestered since their midday’s briefing. He, Jace and Clary had spent the last several hours preparing weapons and discussing strategy. He had also had pointed teleconference discussions with the Consul and with the head of the Venice Institute, arranging for reinforcements and for extra Shadowhunter security in preparation for any possible attacks against mundanes or downworlders.

Alec was tired; the day had been long but at least he had managed to convince The Clave to put all the Institutes on high alert and to warn Downworld leaders of the imminent danger. Yet, Alec still feared that it would not be enough; that there were not enough Shadowhunters or allied downworlders to protect the whole world. The Clave also remained skeptical and refused to open its borders or to seek help from any potentially loyal warlocks. If they survived this threat, Alec realized, there would still be a long road to travel before relations between the Children of the Angel and Lilith’s Children were mended.

“I think we’ve got it Alexander,” Magnus said as soon as he saw Alec enter the room. They had spent hours searching old spell books and magic treatises, Jeremy making a few trips by portal to collect ancient scrolls and books from Kat’s library and from Magnus’ own collection. At the end, they had combined instructions from several sources to create a counter spell that was frighteningly simple. They had also done a small test to make sure the magic was solid; small because they were working with powerful and highly unstable magic, and a bigger test was likely to alert Annaliese of their location and plans. “We are going to need to wake up Raphael though. He has to come with us,” Magnus added.

“Is that safe?” Alec asked diffidently. “He was pretty out of control the last time, and Izzy is not going to like it.”

“We have to take the risk,” replied Magnus. “We need fresh vampire, werewolf and Nephilim blood. This is powerful magic and we cannot risk screwing things up by carrying blood in a lab tube. Also, if anyone is strong enough to resist demonic poisoning it is Raphael; believe me, I know that boy.”

“Alright, I will let Izzy and Catarina know. Is there anything else you need?”

“Yes,” replied Kat. “We need a method of delivery for the potion. Something strong enough to seal a rift to Hades. We may have just the thing,” she added. “The metal Magnus extracted from the Hades stone is strong enough to do the job. We can use the ring he sent to Raphael, or the charm he gave Catarina to fashion a vessel or projectile of some kind.”
“Kat and I did some testing on the charm before the Inquisitor took over the Institute and we had to escape,” added Jeremy. “The metal is stronger than anything we know and it emits sufficient energy to disrupt any magic. We think it is strong enough to pierce through any spell, reach the rift and act as a locking mechanism.”

“No the ring or the charm,” said Alec reaching under the collar of his shirt; “the third piece Magnus made; this arrowhead. Can you modify it to do the job?”

“Alexander,” interrupted Magnus, reaching and wrapping his hand around the hand in which Alec held the talisman that hung around his neck. “I gave this to you to protect you from Annaliese. Without it you will be vulnerable. I can’t let you do that.”

“Magnus,” Alec said, fixing his eyes on the warlock. “You will protect me; I trust you. Besides, if we take the ring from the hotel, the vampires and werewolves will be exposed, and we need the charm in case this doesn’t work. I will be fine.”

“Kat, can you modify this arrowhead to do the job?” Alec asked again looking at Kat.

“Yes,” Kat replied. “It is a much better option Magnus,” she added turning to her friend.

“Okay, that settles it,” Alec stated, quieting any further objections. “Izzy and Luke picked up dinner on their way here. Everybody is waiting in the kitchen, we should eat and then get some rest. Tomorrow will be a very long day.” He gestured for Magnus to come with him and Kat and Jeremy followed them close behind. “I ordered some beef and broccoli, Magnus. I know you like that,” he added giving Magnus a reassuring smile, hoping to settle the apprehension that at that moment clouded Magnus’ expression.

They joined the others sitting around the kitchen table, and ate in pleasant companionship, laughing and chatting about everything and nothing, purposely keeping the conversation away from the imminent danger that awaited them the following day. As if needing the touch of the person they loved most, Jace wrapped his arm around Clary’s shoulder and every once in a while whispered something in her ear that made her smile or blush, and Kat sat beside Jeremy, and they kept glancing in each other’s direction, their hands interlaced.

Magnus and Alec sat comfortably beside each other and they talked animatedly with everybody, but Magnus kept his distance and resisted the temptation to wrap his arm around Alec, or put his hand on his. Alec was the head of the Institute and Magnus was a downworlder. Centuries of being an unwelcomed guest in the Institutes; of being allowed only through the side door and only as far as the office; of plates being broken because he had eaten out of the them; and of Shadowhunters telling him to tame his tongue unaccountably weighted down on him tonight.

Despite the uncertainty about what was to come, the evening started in a festive mood, with everybody talking spiritedly. Luke and Izzy made fun of Jeremy, the one Shadowhunter in the room that had not grown up in New York, and who hadn’t yet travelled far enough from the shelter of Idris to learn to use chopsticks. After several futile attempts to bring a piece of Kung Pao chicken from the plate to his mouth, Kat pick it up with her chopsticks and placed it in Jeremy’s mouth in a loving gesture, while everybody teased him, and Jeremy blushed.

Magnus smiled because he could see the signs in the young Shadowhunter’s eyes: Jeremy was besotted, and it seemed that Kat corresponded. It was odd, he thought. Kat was reserved, quiet and rather taciturn, and it was rare to see her so openly show affection for anyone. Tonight, Kat laughed more easily than he ever remembered her doing outside the intimacy of her close circle of friends. Magnus, the one who was commonly the most boisterous and openly flirtatious, was, by comparison, the quieter one.
After dinner, Jace stood up and after rummaging through the cupboards came back with a bottle of scotch and glasses. “Now Magnus,” he said teasingly, “you can have some as long as you promise not to try to kill me again.”

“Oh darling,” replied Magnus in a dawdling voice, “I never make promises I am not sure I can keep.”

After a few drinks, the conversation grew quieter and more somber as the weight of their upcoming mission begun to make itself apparent. “Do you really think we can stop Annaliese?” asked Clary after a minute of silence.

“Yes,” replied Jace, resting a hand against her cheek. “You and I stopped Valentine from raising the Angel. Imagine what all of us can do if we work as a team.”

“But she has all those warlocks on her side as well as magic,” she retorted.

“But we have right and reason on our side,” Jace said, his tone humorous, “as well as Magnus Bane, High Warlock of Brooklyn, and Kat-Ata-Killa High Warlock of the Inca empire.”

“And Magnus won’t let anything happened to any of us,” added Izzy looking from Clary to Magnus, “or Alec will never forgive him. Isn’t that right Magnus?”

“That’s correct,” replied Magnus, and he thought that there was more truth in those words than Izzy might have intended. He would do everything in his power to protect this group of people, these young souls who had become his family. And, he would give his very life for Alec if and when the time came.

“It will be difficult,” added Alec, his voice carrying the authority of a leader. “But we have each other. We are a team and we will not let each other down. I am sure of it.” He got up and after giving Magnus a loving smile, a smile that conveyed deep trust, he headed for the door. “Magnus, I need to go check on the night patrols, I’ll be back soon.”

Those remaining at the table talked for a while longer, more quietly this time, and conversations about dreams for the future and hopes for things to come momentarily replaced the previous anxiety about the upcoming battle.

“Magnus, you will look after my parabatai tomorrow, won’t you?” stated Jace after a while. “If your suspicion is correct, Annaliese will go after him.”

“Of course, I will,” replied Magnus.

“You know you are good for him, don’t you?” Jace said and Izzy, Clary and Jeremy nodded in agreement. “I have never seen him happier or more settled in his whole life. That means that while you look after Alec, we have to look after you; he would never forgive himself or us if something happened to you.”

“Thank you,” Magnus replied, his voice conveying the deep gratitude he felt towards this group of people who accepted him and Alec without reservation. “But Jace, you do remember what you promised me the day after we came back from Rome.”

“Yes, but it won’t come to that.”

“I still expect you to honor that promise,” said Magnus, his eyes fixed on Jace with a strength that was almost magnetic. Jace’s only response was a firm nod.
“Let’s all get some sleep,” Alec said as he walked into the room a few minutes later. “We all need to be rested by tomorrow. Luke, there is a room set up for you in the living quarters” he added. Alec then reached for Magnus’ hand and, after saying good night to his family, guided him towards the living quarters and in the direction of his bedroom.

Magnus had been in the Institute many times: in Alec’s office, in the situation room, in the infirmary, and today in the library. At the beginning, he had visited only when invited and to conduct specific businesses, and had entered through the sanctuary, through the door designated for downworlders. It had been only in the last few weeks that he had begun to use the front entrance and had shown up uninvited, just to see Alec. He had never been in the living quarters, however, and never in Alec’s room. In the months that he and Alec had been dating, they always meet in his penthouse. Magnus didn’t mind that. His place was private and, besides, the Institute always seemed foreign, perhaps even forbidden. Now, Alec guided him deep into the Institute inner corridors; through unfamiliar hallways; past bedroom doors, some opened and some closed; and in the direction of his room located halfway down a quiet corridor, covered in black wooden paneling and illuminated by soft lighting.

Alec stopped with his hand on the doorknob and turned to look at Magnus. “I haven’t been in my room very much in the last few days. I apologize if it is messy,” he said and smiled.

Magnus looked at him in surprise; a messy room was the last thing that concerned him at that moment. It was the surroundings that provoked him more anxiety than he was willing to confess to. “I am sure it will be fine,” he said trying to sound casual.

Of course, Alec’s room was tidier than anyone could have expected. Alec was neat by nature and the room was an accurate representation of the Shadowhunter’s personality: orderly, airy, and devoid of clutter; almost Spartan. The double bed in the middle of the room was dressed in crispy white sheets and a simple indigo duvet. Night tables on each side held austere silver lamps and a few books. Except for a few family photographs and pictures of Idris landscapes, there were very few decorations on the walls or the tables. A comfortable and well-used blue armchair sat beside the window surrounded by books and a reading lamp. Alec liked to read, Magnus knew, and he read broadly: history, fiction, biographies, current events, and his small personal library reflected these interests. In addition to the bed, armchair and dresser, the room had a small closet, containing, Magnus was certain, an assortment of grey and black t-shirts, and jeans and jackets in the same tones. There was also a door leading to a small bathroom. Overall, the room had an unpretentious and masculine feel, and was completely and unquestionably Alec.

“It isn’t much,” Alec stated his tone apologetic. “Nothing like your glamorous penthouse, but it should keep us safe tonight.” He smiled and placing a hand against Magnus’ cheek, kissed him deeply and softly. “I know that I didn’t react very well when you touched me this morning,” he said, his forehead resting against Magnus’. “I am sorry, I am still getting used to being in the open with my people. But please know that I have been wanting to kiss you all day.” Before he could respond, Alec pulled Magnus towards him and kissed him again, his warm body making contact with Magnus’ body and sending shocks of electricity throughout Magnus’s skin; awakening desire and passion. Alec’s familiar scent of soap, lemon and something else Magnus couldn’t quite describe invaded Magnus’ nostrils and erased all thought but those of Alec’s body pressed against his.

Alec deepened the kiss, and Magnus’ breath caught in his throat and heat rose to his cheeks. Somehow Alec managed to continue kissing him, exploring him with his lips and tongue, at the same time that he gently guided Magnus towards the armchair. As soon as Alec felt the edge of the seat against the back of his legs, he turned them both so as to switch positions, and gently pushed Magnus to sit down. He then sat astride him, his long fingers entangled in Magnus’ hair; his lips
and tongue continuing their maddening exploration; the strength and weight of his body comforting and familiar to Magnus. Magnus leaned his head back against the back of the armchair so Alec could run his nose and lips up and down his neck, and for a while, he emptied his mind of all thoughts that were not of the incredible feel of Alec’s body, of his messy hair between his fingers, of the strong muscles of his back and chest, and of the naughty motions of his mouth.

“Magnus, I want you so much that my heart hurts,” Alec whispered in Magnus’ ear, and the declaration was welcomed even if unnecessary. Magnus could already read the declaration in every inch of Alec’s body, in the way his breathing quickened, in the echo of his racing heart atop Magnus’ heart, in the taste of his lips, in the shine in his eyes.

“Alexander, are you sure you want to do this here?” Magnus asked, taking advantage of a moment of clarity, his voice breathy and no louder than a whisper, the question revealing a hint of self-consciousness even though his body clearly communicated his desire.

Alec looked at him with a mixture of surprise and humor. “Magnus, we have made love in every room in your apartment, in hotel rooms, even in the dessert under the stars. Don’t tell me you have suddenly become a prude?”

“Alexander,” Magnus replied wrapping his arms more firmly around Alec’s hips and pulling him even closer towards him. “I am the least prude of all people you will ever meet, but this is not just your home; it is also the place where you work, and where you are expected to be a leader. What would The Clave say if they found out that you have brought a warlock who is also a man to the Institute?”

“Many couples and families live in Institutes, including in this one. And, I don’t care what The Clave says,” replied Alec. “You are with me and the rest of the Shadowhunters in the Institute as well as The Clave will have to get used to the idea of us being together. I told you before: I refuse to hide anymore. We should be allowed to sleep together wherever we want.”

“Oh, but Shadowhunter, sleeping is not exactly what I want to do with you right now,” said Magnus, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

“Promises, promises,” Alec said teasingly.

“Are you sure?” Magnus asked again.

“Yes, I want you here, in my room and in my bed for a change.”

It was Magnus the one to claim Alec’s lips this time, the kiss hungry and passionate, conveying the immense joy that Alec’s words provoked in him. They got lost in their slow kissing for a long time, their lips communicating their increasing need for the other; their fingers entangling in each other’s hair, and running down each other’s backs; their tongues playing in each other’s mouth; the scent of their bodies permeating the air until they were both intoxicated with the taste, feel and aromas of the other.

When Magnus began to run his hands down Alec’s abdomen in search of his belt buckle, Alec stopped him by placing his hands atop Magnus’. “Tsk, tsk,” Alec said and shook his head, a sinful smile that showed two perfect rows of white teeth curving his lips. “My turn,” he whispered in Magnus’ ear; “I dare you not to scream.”

He then kissed Magnus with an unrestrained hunger of his own, invading his mouth, exploring, taking and giving with his lips and tongue. Meanwhile, he began to slowly undo the buttons in Magnus’ red linen shirt; exposing soft skin; running his fingers lightly, like the gentle kisses of the
wind along Magnus’ collarbone and shoulders; making a maddeningly slow journey along Magnus’ chest and abdomen; drawing circles and lines; mapping once again the geography of Magnus’ golden skin. When Magnus thought he would go mad from desire and anticipation, Alec sinuously shifted position and knelted in front of Magnus. Without interruption, his hands continued their slow exploration moving lower and lower, unbuckling belt, undoing buttons and pulling down zipper, Alec’s lips following the route marked by his fingers like a faithful pilgrim walking on the footsteps of a previous explorer.

Magnus leaned his head back on the armchair and closed his eyes, his fingers entangled in Alec’s hair. But when he felt he was about lose the dare and a scream would scape his lips, he let go and instead gripped the arms of the chair with such strength that he thought he would for sure leave holes in the upholstery.

“Oh my god, Alexander,” he whispered when he thought he couldn’t contain the energy building within him anymore. In his mind, he thanked all the gods for the gift of Alec’s mouth and tongue, for the willingness, generosity, and audaciousness of this man he loved with all his strength.

When Magnus was about to explode in a torrent of magic and pleasure, his whole body transformed into a volcano about to erupt, Alec suddenly stopped and faced him once again. “Not yet warlock, not yet, I want to enjoy you slowly,” he said and kissed him with such passion that Magnus thought he would come undone.

Alec stood up and after peeling off his t-shirt, he reached for Magnus’ hand. Magnus exhaled loudly trying to rein in the unruly sensations gushing through his body. He then took Alec’s hand and stood, but before Alec could guide him towards the bed, he kissed him, his tongue exploring, taking and giving the way Alec’s tongue had done before. With unrestrained lust, he run his hands up and down Alec’s chest and back, rejoicing in the feel of the Shadowhunter’s strong muscles.

“You are beautiful, you know?” he whispered in Alec’s ear, and Alec smiled a little self-consciously.

“Come, warlock, I want you in my bed right now,” he replied.

“Is that another dare?” Magnus asked. He then pushed Alec gently onto the bed and climbed on top of him at the same time that he reclaimed Alec’s lips.

“Always so graceful,” said Alec during a momentary pause in their kissing.

“I am an all-powerful warlock, grace is part of the job description.”

It was Magnus the one who now became the explorer and the cartographer, his fingers the ones to draw lines, to probe and discover. It was Magnus’ lips the ones to retrace previously travelled trails, and it was Alec’s hands the ones to grip the sheets to stop himself from calling Magnus’ name.

Making love to Alec in his room, surrounded by the things and people that filled his life, felt to Magnus more sinful and forbidden than any of the other times they had made love before. Perhaps it was the fact that Shadowhunter dwellings had, until then, been forbidden places for Magnus; perhaps it was that making love with Alec in his room and in his home felt like an important stepping stone in their relationship; perhaps it was the certainty of the danger awaiting them outside this fortress. Perhaps this act of lovemaking felt special because it might be the last; because neither of them knew for certain that they would survive the upcoming battle.

Whatever the reason, as Magnus run his tongue slowly up Alec’s spine, stopping to kiss a spot between his shoulder blades and gently bite the back of his neck, he felt he was savoring a
forbidden fruit, a fruit so delicious, sweet and precious that its mere taste felt like a blessing.

When minutes or perhaps hours later, he felt Alec’s muscles tighten under him, and the undulations of Alec’s hips picked up speed as he built towards a powerful climax, Magnus surrendered to Alec’s will and let him carry him on, as if Alec’s passion was a river carrying Magnus in its torrents. When Alec called his name at the moment of his release, Magnus let go, and for a moment that felt like an eternity, he was a wave crushing against the rocks exploding into millions of water particles that reached for the sky before falling back to the earth in a gentle mist.

“I love you, Shadowhunter,” he said in between gasps, as he rested his forehead in between Alec’s shoulder blades, and gripped Alec’s hand as if Alec was an anchor or a lifeline, as if Alec was what kept him from flying away.

“I love you too, warlock,” Alec said once he could find his words. He then adjusted both their positions so Magnus lied in the shelter of his arms. With a gentle flicker of his fingers, Magnus willed the duvet to cover them.

“How do you do that?” Alec asked.

“What?”

“You know, your thing,” Alec said and he imitated the gesture with which Magnus had just performed magic.

“I don’t know; I just do,” Magnus replied a little surprised by the question. “I guess I just call on the energy floating all around us, and the energy obeys me, and lifts the covers. It is like walking or blinking; you do not give much thought to those things, do you? Doing magic is like that for me. You have felt magic running through you sometimes when we make love.”

“I have because you have shared your magic with me, but I have no control over it.”

“Does it bother you?”

“That you share your magic with me?” Alec asked. “No,” he replied and kissed Magnus’s forehead. “I love it when you let that part of yourself flow freely. There are no words to describe the sensations. I can tell you though that I feel honored every time you allow me to see that part of you.”

“Well, I should do that more often then,” Magnus said and placed a hand against Alec’s cheek.

“Yes, please.”

They silently held each other for a while, Magnus feeling contained and safe wrapped in Alec’s arms. They didn’t sleep but they felt no need to speak either. A couple of time, Alec kissed Magnus’s forehead, the gesture loving and gentle, and Magnus wished he could stop time and make this moment last forever.

“We have not made love in every room in my apartment yet,” Magnus said after a long while of silence.

“Really?” Alec responded in a teasing tone. “Let me think: the bedroom; the living room; both showers and the bathtub; the hallway once; the guest bedroom when you decided to redecorate your bedroom; the dining room table, that was fun; the kitchen; your office. What am I missing?”

“The terrace,” replied Magnus coyly.
“Hmm, considering that your terrace is visible from multiple buildings, I expect that a concealment spell would be required. I have a reputation to maintain after all. Otherwise, I am game.”

“Something to look forward to,” said Magnus.

“We can try that as soon as we return from Venice,” Alec said. He then smiled at Magnus, but his smile contained a mixture of sadness and anxiety, as if the mention of Venice had reminded Alec of what was to come, of the battle they still needed to win. The smile quickly faded and turned into a wistful expression. Alec brushed the hair away from Magnus’s forehead and sighed.

“Alexander, perhaps you should stay tomorrow. We can use the charm to deliver the potion,” Magnus said, his tone also wistful. “It would give me peace of mind if I knew you were safe; if I knew Annaliese couldn’t reach you.”

“Perhaps it is you the one who should stay,” retorted Alec. “After all, without you, she cannot achieve her goal Magnus,” he added and sighed, “I thought we already had this conversation. You don’t protect me, and I don’t protect you, remember? We protect each other. We are stronger together. This ordeal has taught me that.”

“You are right,” said Magnus. “But you have to promise me that you will look after yourself and that if it comes down to it, you will do everything and anything to stop Annaliese from opening that rift; not matter what it takes. Promise me Alexander.”

“I will promise as long as you promise me the same,” replied Alec. Magnus’ only response was a nod.

Alec sighed deeply and fell silent once again and for a while, they listened to the tic-tac of the old grandfather clock that stood somewhere down the corridor outside their room.

“Magnus, we have to finish our conversation from this morning,” Alec said sometime later. “We need to discuss the implications of the spell you cast on us.”

“We can have that talk after all this is over,” replied Magnus. “Right now that spell is our shield and our strength, Alexander. Let’s not mess with it.”

“But Magnus,…”

“Trust me on this,” he interrupted Alec’s protest. He placed his finger gently against Alec’s lips to silence any further discussion. “There will be time to talk about this later.” He then brought his nose to that sweet spot just below Alec’s ear, where the Shadowhunter’s scent was the strongest, and inhaled deeply, wishing to impregnate himself with the aroma of Alec, wishing to engrave the memory of the scent in every one of his brain cells so he could carry it with him. He did this because, in truth, he was not sure the conversation he was promising Alec would ever take place.

Eventually, warm and safe in each other’s arms, they fell into a deep slumber. Sometime later, Magnus turned in his sleep, and rested his back against Alec’s chest, and Alec placed one arm under Magnus’s head and the other around his waist, in a position that had become a favorite for them since they began to slept together. Unconsciously, Magnus took Alec’s hand and brought it up to his lips and kissed it, Alec’ scent and his own mixing on Alec’s skin.

Hours later, after the sky had already turned from black to blue and night had given way to morning, still in his sleep, Alec tighten his hold on Magnus, his body suddenly besieged by an uncontained rush of desire. The feel of Magnus’ back against his chest awoke every nerve ending all at once, and goosebumps rose all over Alec’s skin. Before his mind even had a chance to wake
up, he was kissing Magnus’ neck and biting his earlobe, the feel of skin and metal from Magnus’ silver earrings, awakening new sensations in his mouth and tongue. Alec run his hand slowly but resolutely down Magnus’ bare chest and abdomen. As he continued lower, Magnus responded, also in his sleep, with a loud gasp, Alec’s touch confusing, enticing and tantalizing.

As if by instinct, Magnus began to move against Alec and before either of them came fully awake, they bodies were already overtaken by passion and heat. Alec bit the back of Magnus’ neck and Magnus inhaled loudly, the air making a hissing noise as it passed through his lips, the sensation of Alec’s teeth sending shocks of electricity along Magnus’ spine. With the unrivaled dexterity of a Shadowhunter, Alec began to run fingers and lips along Magnus skin, and Magnus’ body became a fine-tuned instrument, ready to be played, ready for Alec to extract from it every possible and sublime sound of pleasure and desire.

In record time, their arousal reached an all-time high, and in minutes, their bodies were moving in unison, hungrily and desperately searching for release, each gasping for air as their heartbeats picked up speed, and as they built together towards a powerful orgasm. Magnus opened his eyes for the first time, all glamor burnt away as his magic flowed in luminescent blue and purple lines along his skin, running wildly through his veins in search of Alec.

This time it was Magnus the one to call Alec’s name, the one to take Alec’s over the edge as every muscle in his body tightened and then released, the pleasure leaving him disoriented and dizzy. Alec followed suit and climaxed in between loud gasps, his forehead resting between Magnus’ shoulder blades.

Afterwards, Magnus was the one to wrap his arms around Alec, as Alec rested his head against Magnus’ chest, surprised once again that his taller frame fitted so perfectly in the shelter of Magnus’ smaller one.

“Good morning,” said Magnus when his breathing finally settled.

“Good morning,” replied Alec with a mischievous and perhaps even embarrassed smile.

“That must be a record, Alexander,” Magnus said chuckling at the same time that he tightened his embrace.

The phone in Alec’s night table rang a minute later, and the sound abruptly returned them to the here and now, to the reality of the new day and the prospect of what awaited them. Alec inhaled deeply and after softly smiling at Magnus, reached for the apparatus.

“Hello,” he spoke into it, his voice a little hoarse. He then sat up abruptly and for a moment listened intently to whatever was being said at the other end of the line. “Hold on,” he said and covering the mouthpiece with his hand, turned to Magnus.

“It is Eldermark, the Head of the Venice Institute,” he reported. “It appears that the mundanes lost one of their luxury cruises last night. It left Venice yesterday to continue its journey through the Mediterranean and never made it to its next destination. There has been no radio contact or emergency signal. The mundy coast guard sent search parties, but it is too much of a coincidence.”

“Ask whether there are any children on board,” instructed Magnus as he too sat up in the bed.

Alec nodded and went back to his phone call. After a minute, he hung up and turned to Magnus, all the bliss and happiness from a few minutes ago gone from his face, just the beautiful features left; that and a look of concern and perhaps even panic.
“He will confirm but preliminary reports indicate that there may be as many as 20 children on board. What does that mean Magnus?”

“Annaliese might have found the source of innocent blood,” replied Magnus, his voice almost dejected.

“I have to get up,” Alec said as he swung his legs off the bed.

“Go do your job Shadowhunter,” replied Magnus. “I will meet you in a few minutes.”

Alec found Jace making coffee in the kitchen a few minutes later, his brother’s golden hair looking as wet from the shower as Alec’s hair looked.

“Did you have a good night?” Jace asked in a teasing tone, but the tone was gone as soon as he saw Alec’s worried expression. “What happened now?” he asked as he handed a cup of coffee to his parabatai.

Alec told him about Eldermark’s phone call, about the missing cruise liner, and about the children on board. “Damn it,” replied Jace. “We have to stay ahead of that woman. We cannot lose the little advantage we have.”

“Agreed, but I am not sure how much of an advantage we actually have,” Alec said as he brought the cup to his lips, and for a second let the liquid warm his body and awake the parts of his brain that were not yet fully alert.

Magnus joined them a few minutes later wearing a clean royal blue linen shirt with a Mao collar, black jeans, and black biker leather boots with shiny silver buckles. His hair was in his usual hawk style, its spiky ends glittering in a blue that matched both his shirt and the eyeliner that complemented the make-up around his eyes. Silver necklaces adorned his neck and chest, several bracelets wrapped themselves around his wrists and silver rings decorated each one of his fingers. The true color of his eyes was hidden under his usual deep chocolate glamor. He carried a long black leather coat with silver buttons which he deposited on the back of one of the chairs before grabbing a coffee himself.

“Where is the party Magnus?” asked Jace trying to keep the conversation casual despite the gravity of the situation.

“This is my combat gear, darling,” replied Magnus with a flirtatious smile. “Aren’t you going to put on your full Shadowhunter getup before we leave?”

“Very appropriate,” commented Alec with a warm smile and he couldn’t help thinking that he hadn’t seen this Magnus in a long while. He was glad he was back; he needed Magnus in full combat mode today.

“Hey Magnus, nice outfit,” said Izzy from the door a second later. She was already in full Shadowhunter gear, weapons hanging from her belt, and her whip coiled around her wrist and upper arm. “Alec, Jace, we have another situation,” she added walking in, tablet in hand. “A newborn vampire girl was dumped in front of the Boston Institute a few minutes before sunrise. She was stabbed and someone pinned a note to her chest with a knife.”

Izzy tapped on the touchscreen and after calling up an image, handed it to Alec. Magnus and Jace stood beside him and the three of them looked at a picture of a piece of white paper, its borders ragged and stained with blood that was still red. “Come to me or I will kill them all,” the neat handwriting read.
“How is the girl?” asked Alec, a mixture of tension and anger in his otherwise measured voice.

“The Boston Shadowhunters gave her refuge and they have already contacted the local vampire clan,” Izzy replied. “But Alec, the girl says that she was on a cruise ship somewhere in the Adriatic Sea when she was abducted yesterday afternoon.”

“It is starting,” whispered Magnus, and Alec’s only response was a faint nod of agreement.

“Izzy, is Raphael ready?” Alec asked turning to his sister.

“As ready as he can be,” replied Izzy. “Kat and Jeremy just went to get him and Catarina.”

“Good, let’s get geared up; we leave from the roof in one hour,” Alec instructed. “We will sort any final details once we get there.”

*Sorry it took me this long to post these two chapters, but pneumonia put me out of commission for a few days. Thank you for reading and Happy New Year!*
The night before and in the shelter of his room, he and Magnus had promised each other to do everything and anything to stop Annaliese from opening the rift; not matter what it took. Now, that promise weighted heavily on Alec and he was afraid of what honoring it would require of them. “Magnus,” he whispered once again, “send me a signal; help me find you.”

Despite being a common method of transportation for the Nephilim, a method that he had used many times, portals still unsettled Alec. Perhaps it was the sensation of not being completely in control, or the fear of ending somewhere unintended, or worse, of getting lost somewhere in between, unable to find a way out. Perhaps it was the fact that the experience remained always somewhat unpredictable and uncontrollable. Commonly, portal travel took no more than the blink of an eyes, and felt like being sucked by a vacuum or swallowed by an enormous beast just to be expelled or spitted out in another place. But sometimes, the journey took longer as if the connection between the point of origin and the destination was not completely established. It wasn’t much, perhaps just another second. When this happened, while he was in the portal, Alec could look around and see his own distorted reflection in the walls of the tunnel that linked the place he had been to the one he was going. And, if he looked back, he could see the place he had left behind rapidly shrinking until it became no larger than the head of a pin, while the place where he was going expanded until it occupied his whole frame of vision.

The experience was particularly unsettling when someone else guided him through the portal and his destination was unfamiliar. Those kinds of portal travel required implicit trust on the person guiding the trip. Alec couldn’t help thinking that the chances of getting lost were higher when someone else was in the driver’s seat. In those occasions, he made the effort of completely clearing his mind to not alter the destination. The sensation was less unsettling when it was Magnus the one to guide him across the event horizon; for he felt his presence, the touch of his hand, the scent of his skin, or he could simply stare at the back of his head as he stepped through. He trusted Magnus so completely that Alec never feared getting lost with him. Magnus was, after all, one of the first people to master portal travel.

When it was Alec the one guiding Magnus, he sometimes reached for his hand to ensure that Magnus was close behind. When other people relied on his navigation skills, he made absolutely sure to clear his mind of all thoughts except for the image of his destination because he never wanted to be responsible for the loss of anyone.

As he and his team gathered on the roof of the Institute, Alec checked again the seraph blades fastened to his belt, the dirks hidden in the pockets of his Shadowhunter jacket and attached to his lower arm, and the stele fasten to his right leg. He also made sure his bow and quiver were properly glamored and secured to his back, paying attention to one arrow in particular, an arrow without an arrowhead. Freshly drawn runes were visible on his arms and neck: runes of strength, stamina and healing.

Magnus, already wearing his long leather coat, came to stand in front of Alec. “All ready?” he asked with a reassuring smile as he arranged the collar and pulled up the zipper in Alec’s jacket.
“As ready as I will ever be,” replied Alec with a corresponding smile, as he searched in his jacket pockets for his leather gloves.

“You do remember where we are going, don’t you?” Magnus asked, a touch of anxiety in his voice.

“Yes, Magnus. Don’t worry, I won’t get us lost.”

They had agreed that Alec would be the one guiding the team through the portal that would take them to Venice. It had been Kat’s suggestion because she feared that Annaliese would be monitoring the energy that portal travel releases, and Alec, being under the protection of Magnus’ spell, might be less likely to be detected. Rather than transporting into the Venice Institute, in which none of them had ever been before, or to a random alleyway, they had decided to go to the apartment where Alec and Magnus had stayed during their vacation. Magnus argued that this destination would likely be safer because the wards he had erected while they had stayed there would still be somewhat operational. The apartment belonged to an old mundane friend of Magnus’ and he had agreed to let them use it as headquarters in exchange for Magnus’ assistance with some future business venture that Alec preferred not to know about.

Alec looked from Magnus to his team gathered around the roof. Everybody was in full combat gear, and their faces betrayed a mixture of nervousness and anticipation, as if they knew that this was the battle that would decide the war. Several small cases containing their equipment and the tools and supplies that Kat, Magnus and Catarina would need for their magic making were set on the floor by their feet. Izzy and Raphael stood a little apart from the group, and Alec could see a pained but also stubborn expression in the young vampire’s eyes. Raphael was waging a difficult battle with his own instincts, but as Magnus had observed, he was determined to win. Luke and Catarina stood close by and Alec suspected that this was on Raphael’s request. He was certain that there was an agreement between the vampire and the werewolf, an agreement that would require Luke to stop Raphael the moment he lost control. Alec hoped it would not come to that.

Jace and Clary stood close together, and Jace was double checking that Clary’s gear and weapons were secured. Kat almost mirrored Jace’s actions a couple of meters away as she too checked Jeremy’s gear.

Alec momentarily hesitated and old feelings of insecurity and uncertainty threatened to weaken his resolve as he realized the full weight of his responsibilities as a leader. These were not just his family and closest friends; they were also the people in his charge. It was his duty to bring all of them back safely. If he didn’t, it would be his duty to account to The Clave and loved ones for any lives lost.

Noticing his anxiety, Magnus placed one hand on Alec’s elbow and the other against his cheek, and the gesture made Alec turn and fix his eyes on Magnus. “Everything is going to be okay,” said Magnus, not a thread of doubt in his voice. “You are tenacious and brave Alexander, and I have no doubt that you will do the impossible to fulfill this mission and take care of your people.”

Alec smiled gratefully and returned the sentiment by imitating Magnus’s gesture and putting his own hand against Magnus’ cheek. “Thank you,” he whispered and then kissed him, softly and gently on the lips, completely unconcerned about the witnesses standing around.

“Scarcherry,” he then said, his voice commanding, as he turned to one of the Shadowhunters standing at ease by the door leading into the Institute. “Please try not to break anything or start a new war while we are gone.”

“I will do my best Alec,” replied the young Shadowhunter eagerly.
“We’ve received reports of increased demon activity in all major European cities,” Alec informed Scarcherry. “It is likely Annalieše trying to distract us. Keep all teams on high alert and double patrols in the city. Also, do not forget the Hotel Du Mort.”

“I won’t forget,” the other man replied and Magnus thought that Scarcherry was too young to bear the responsibility of an institute, but so was Alec. Alas, this was the life of a Shadowhunter; they were trained from infancy to become warriors.

“The Institute is all yours,” stated Alec as he extended his hand and shook Scarcherry’s. “You will do great,” he added and with his other hand patted Scarcherry on his upper arm.

Alec nodded at Kat and she waved her arms in a circle, calling on the forces of nature to bend space and create a portal. Orange sparkles ignited and shoot from her fingers and created a whirlpool of energy, a whirlpool that built up as it swirled until the energy pierced space and the portal finally appeared.

“Jace, you bring up the rear,” Alec ordered as he came to stand at the front of his team.

Alec stepped through first. While he was keenly aware of the presence of Magnus and the rest of the team a few steps behind him, Alec cleared his mind of all other thoughts except for their destination. He recalled the image of the entry hallway of the old and elegant palazzo where he and Magnus had stayed during their visit to Venice; its antique red tile floors; its high ceilings; its walls covered in antique and priceless tapestries that contrasted with the modern furniture; the mosaic windows; the majestic wooden front door that opened to a small bridge that crossed the canal that flowed in front of the palazzo; and the steps to one side of the front entrance leading to a side door for guests arriving by gondola.

The palazzo had been his favorite lodgings during their vacation. It wasn’t a hotel, but rather the home of Magnus’ old friend. It had been quiet and private, without servants, housekeepers, or restaurants. Alec had cooked their meals in the old kitchen and had made Italian espresso in a space-age coffee maker that brewed everything from regular coffee to some sophisticated drinks that Alec had never had or heard of before. He and Magnus had enjoyed the privacy and quietness and had spent long hours in the living room on the upper level, standing by the window, the arms of one wrapped around the other, looking out towards the canals and at the gondolas passing by. They had made love with abandon on the soft rug in front of the fireplace, unconcerned that anyone would walk in on them. It had been wonderful and memorable, a place where new love could be freely explored. Now the freshness and vividness of the memory reassured Alec that he would have no issue guiding his team back to that place.

Later, he would think that perhaps he had been too confident; perhaps he hadn’t taken enough precautions; perhaps he should have let Magnus guide them. For as soon as he stepped through the portal, the journey felt different than others, sluggish somehow. It was as if they were walking against a strong wing or through water; or as if they were carrying heavy weights tied around their ankles. He anxiously looked to one side and saw his and Magnus’ reflection on the silvery walls of the tunnel, but then something or someone grabbed Magnus and began to pull him away. Alec saw the look panic in Magnus’ eyes as Magnus reached with his hand, but before Alec could take hold of it, Magnus was gone, plucked out of the tunnel by an invisible force. As soon as Magnus disappeared, whatever had slowed their progress let go and, in the blink of an eye, the portal expelled them at the other side.

“What was that? What happened?” asked Izzy as soon as she stepped onto the palazzos’ ground floor entrance, her voice unable to conceal her panic. She coughed, bent forward and put her hands on her knees as if trying to catch her breath or control her nausea. “I have never experienced portal
travel like that before.”

“Neither have I,” added Jace and he placed a hand on Clary’s back either to comfort her or to steady himself. Clary looked unusually pale and Alec thought she was also fighting the urge to throw up.

Magnus was gone, taken from him, Alec frantically thought; panic and nausea growing in his chest and gushing through his body; old and familiar feelings and memories of abandonment and absence suddenly returning. Magnus was gone, gone, he repeated in his mind, but where and how? As if obeying an unconscious impulse to go after Magnus, Alec took a step in the direction of the portal that at that moment was closing, the last of its sparkles dimming and disappearing into thin air. He was about to ask Kat to reopen it, but remembering his mission, stopped and called on all his willpower to bring his desperation and panic under control. “Get a grip; your team needs you,” Alec told himself, “get a grip and think.”

“Magnus is gone,” said Clary echoing Alec’s frenzied thoughts. “I didn’t know people could be abducted from portals. What are we going to do?”

Jace, Izzy and Jeremy started talking all at once offering possible answers to Clary’s question even though their voices and faces betrayed mostly confusion, disorientation and anxiety.

“Kat, do you have any idea what happened?” Alec asked and his voice commanded the others’ attention. As he turned to the warlock, he noticed that she too was deeply troubled.

“I am sorry Alec, I have never seen someone interfering with a portal like that before. Annaliese must have found a way to track Magnus, or perhaps she had demonic help.”

Alec took his new phone out of his pocket and dialed Magnus’ number but after a few moments of silence, all he got was a message on the screen saying that the call had failed to connect.

“Annaliese must have him,” he said turning towards Kat and Catarina, a statement in search of confirmation. “Can we track his location? Can we use the protection spell he cast on me to track him?”

“I am not sure but I can try,” replied Kat.

“I would advise against that,” interrupted Catarina. “I know my expertise is mostly healing, but even I know that the moment you try to use your magic link to Magnus to track him, Annaliese will detect the energy and she will know where you are, Alec. She will come after you.”

“And we will be ready, what is wrong with that?” asked Jace who always preferred preemptive action to waiting.

“Listen Alec,” Catarina said grabbing Alec by the shoulders, her intense blue eyes fixed on him. “You know that Magnus’ spell doesn’t only protect you; it also protects his powers. Annaliese is going to do everything she can to harness Magnus’ magic for the summoning. But she doesn’t know yet that Magnus entrusted part of his magic to you. Do not make it easier for her to achieve her goal by revealing your location.”

“I agree with Catarina,” added Kat. “She needs Magnus’ at full power for the summoning, which means that she cannot harm him. That gives us until about three in the morning when the final star comes into alignment to find out where she is keeping him.”

“Do you think she is going to attempt to use magic to force Magnus to submit?” Clary asked.

“I don’t think so,” Kat responded. “For the summoning to work, I suspect that she needs Magnus to
be in full control of his powers, and she doesn’t yet know that Magnus locked some of those powers away. Let’s hope she doesn’t find out until it is either too late, or we have a plan.”

“Okay then,” stated Alec and he imbued as much certainty and authority into his voice as he could master under the circumstances. “We stay on mission and we trust that Magnus will do his part. I need to call Eldermark and get an update on the situation,” he added as he headed up the stairs and towards the palazzo’s living quarters, his phone in hand. “Kat, can you raise wards around this place? We cannot afford being detected. Jace, Fray and Luke, secure the perimeter, make sure all entrances are locked; Jeremy, set up the equipment; this will be our command center while we are here.”

“We are being attacked from multiple fronts,” said Eldermark, Head of the Venice Institute, at the other end of the line, his voice strained from anxiety. “In the last hour, hordes of ravener and shax demons have attacked mundanes all over the city. We are also suffering from a rogue vampire infestation, most of them newly ascended and feral with hunger and what looks like demon poisoning. We have asked the local vampire clan for help, but we don’t have enough personnel to deal with it all. We have no records of these many attacks since the fall of the Venetian Republic in the eighteenth century, and I do not have to remind you how that ended.”

“Where are the vampires coming from?” asked Alec. He was looking out the window in the living room, standing pretty much on the same spot where he and Magnus had spent hours watching the gondolas navigate the canals. As night fell, the city grew dark and quiet, quieter than he remembered. He and Magnus had been here in summer and the city had been teeming with tourists. It was now fall and the number of tourist had obviously dwindled. It was fortunate, he thought; they didn’t need any more mundanes putting themselves in danger by venturing out at night along dark canals and alleyways.

“I am afraid most of them were passengers in the cruise that went missing,” Eldermark replied, “which means that more might be coming. That ship was almost full. We need help.”

“Can you ask the other Institutes to send reinforcements?”

“Yes, but there is no way for those reinforcements to get here; we don’t have access to a portal and there are no friendly warlocks left in the city,” replied Eldermark.

“We can help with that. We have three accomplished warlocks in our team; if you get reinforcements, we will get them here.” He didn’t tell Eldermark that Magnus had been taken; it was better to keep that information confidential for the moment. He didn’t want panic or suspicion to interfere with the mission. “I will also send as many members of my team as I can spare to lend assistance,” he added.

After finalizing arrangements, Alec hung up the phone, and for a minute longer, he stared out the window. “Where are you Magnus?” he whispered, the question coming out in a sigh, and he willed the words to fly out into the night in search of Magnus.

Magnus and Alec had spent hardly any time apart since Rome. They had slept together, eaten together and worked together constantly. Now Magnus was gone and Alec felt like he was missing a limb or part of his brain, or that he was standing in the freezing cold without a coat. He had to deploy all his willpower to focus on the mission, and a permanent knot had lodged itself in the pit of his stomach. He needed to find Magnus; he needed to know that Magnus was okay; he needed Magnus like he needed his lungs to breath. Without him, Alec felt unstable and lost.

The night before and in the shelter of his room, he and Magnus had promised each other to do everything and anything to stop Annaliese from opening the rift; not matter what it took. Now, that
promise weighted heavily on Alec and he was afraid of what honoring it would require of them. “Magnus,” he whispered once again, “send me a signal; help me find you.”

Alec lifted his hand to his chest, searching for the comforting feel of Magnus’ arrowhead, but it was not there anymore. Instead, just the chain hung loosely around his neck. He moved his hand to the left and placed it on the spot where he knew Magnus carried the omamori charm on his own chest. The memory of the mark and the love it signified reminded Alec that, even though he felt the same absence now that he had felt in Barcelona, this absence was not absolute or hopeless. The mark of the charm and its magic bound him to Magnus, and no distance or absence could weaken that bond; of that, Alec was certain. “I will come for you,” Alec whispered, tenacity and determination clearly evident in his reflection on the glass window.

At that moment and not too far away, Magnus was bringing his own hand to his chest, a sudden sensation of warmth emanating from the omamori charm, the echo of Alec’s steady heartbeat comforting and reassuring. He had regained consciousness just a few minutes before and was still feeling the confusion and physical effects of the terrible ordeal of being snatched from a portal: an ordeal that he could only compare to being picked up by a tornado that spun him around before dropping him from a great altitude. The pain had been so intense that he had passed out and was just now beginning to get his bearings. He sat on a hard surface, his back against a cold wall, and when he tried to stand up, he realized that shackles attached to heavy chains restrained him and prevented him from moving around. An all too familiar sensation of having his power stifled suggested that the restrains were also a preventive measure against any attempts to escape by magic means.

It was almost completely dark, but Magnus knew that he was in a basement, perhaps even a crypt. He could tell by the way noise carried and bounced off the stone walls and low ceiling. A smell of humidity that was all too familiar to anyone who had spent any time in Venice impregnated the air. The room was cold and he was glad for his long leather coat.

With a gentle flick of his fingers, he conjured up a small flame on the palm of his hand, the flame warming him a little and providing some modicum of illumination. While the sound of breathing, the shuffling of feet and the movement of bodies had already alerted him that he was not alone, the light confirmed this assessment.

Tall and narrow iron cages stood spread out around the room. Some of their occupants sat slumped over on the ground, either asleep or unconscious, others stood and held on to the bars, their bodies fidgeting and their eyes wild. The familiar coopery smell of blood and sulfur overpowered the scent of humidity in one corner of the room, and the look of agony and the fangs in some of the faces told Magnus that at least some of the prisoners were vampires, newly ascended and half-staved vampires by the look of it.

“What is happening to me?” asked a woman in a fancy dress torn at the sleeves, who laid in one of the cages, her voice betraying intense pain.

The bald potbellied man in the next cage turned his head in the direction of the voice. “Martha is that you?” he asked.

“Stanley” the woman called out. “What happened?”

“It is okay Martha, it must be a nightmare,” Stanley tried to reassure her, and Magnus hoped he could tell Stanley and Martha that everything would be okay.

He looked in the other direction and recognized the werewolves from Luke’s pack who were confined to almost identical cages than the vampires, their expressions vigilant and almost wild.
Two of them seemed to be struggling to control their impulse to transform, and Magnus could see claws and teeth extending. Luke’s werewolves were all alive and apparently uninjured despite their obvious state of anxiety.

“Hey guys,” he said in a casual voice that he hoped didn’t appear completely fake. “Nice of you to invite me to the party. But who are the other guests?”

One of them, a young new werewolf that everybody called Bart, nodded and gave Magnus a faint smile. “We don’t know,” he replied. “Some of them were already here when we got here.” He then gestured for Magnus to turn and look behind in the direction of the other side of the room, an expression of deep concern on his face.

Magnus followed Bart’s gaze and directed the light to the other side of the room, opposite from where the vampires and werewolves were being kept. There in a corner stood a larger cage, its floor covered in old rugs and blankets, and seating on them mundane children. There were about ten of them, the oldest looked to be about eleven. They were dressed in colorful t-shirts as if they were just coming back from a party or the park.

The children were eerily silent, and they sat in the dark, perfectly still, their eyes lost in the distance, apparently oblivious to the scene unfolding in the rest of the room. In front of the cage, chained to the floor sat a small and skinny girl, perhaps no older than eight or nine with long platinum hair that reached almost to her waist. Perhaps feeling Magnus’s gaze on her, the girl turned and looked at Magnus with the most striking blue eyes framed by a slim face, the skin the color of cinnamon. Her expression was a mixture of fear, sadness and resignation. Except for an extra set of nostrils located on the ridge of her nose, the child reminded Magnus of Catarina. She wore a colorful purple kurta with silver embroidery around the collar and cuffs, and she was obviously a warlock, a still not fully grown one. Magnus realized that it was her the one responsible for the children’s stillness and look of enthrallment.

“Hello,” he said in his most reassuring tone. “I am Magnus Bane. What is your name?”

The child tilted her head in a gesture of curiosity or query as if trying to ascertain the meaning of Magnus’ words or determine whether Magnus was friend or foe. “Sarah,” she replied after a pause, her voice tentative and shy. “They told me to keep the children quiet,” she went on in unaccented Punjabi. “I am making them believe that they are playing at the park. I don’t want them to miss their mamas and papas”

“That is nice,” Magnus said and hoped his limited Punjabi would not fail him. “Do you have parents?”

“Yes,” Sarah replied and for a moment, her lower lip trembled as if she was about to cry. “My mama, papa, and little sister must be scared because I didn’t come home. Two men took me from my village and forced to help them. When I tried to run away, they chained me. I don’t want the children to miss their mamas and papas,” she repeated and sniffled.

“My friends are coming and together we will help you get back to your family,” Magnus told her and he hoped he would be able to fulfill his promise.

“The lady told me to forget my mama and papa; that she would be my mother from now on, but I don’t want to forget them.” Despite her distress, Sarah’s voice carried unusual determination, and Magnus recognized in the voice the signs of a secured child. This was a young warlock who, he thought, was growing up safe and certain in the love of her mundane family.

“I will take you back to them,” Magnus promised again, the words carrying even more
determination than before.

“I see you have met young Sarah,” came a familiar soft voice from the doorway and, almost simultaneously, several candles came alight all over the room. Some of the vampires became agitated, and they lifted their noses in the air in an instinctive gesture aimed at assessing danger or the presence of blood. The werewolves stood in a position of alert, ready to transform, attack and defend. The only ones who remained completely oblivious were the mundane children. “She is adorable, isn’t she? And a talented warlock to boot.”

Annaliese walked into the room, her face looking as young and innocent as he remembered, her long black hair tied in a ponytail, her eyes devoid of glamor except for the one that concealed her scars. She wore black jeans, high-heeled boots and a short black jacket over a red shirt, and if he didn’t know that she was a dangerous warlock, he would have thought that she was a teenager on her way out for a night with friends.

“I didn’t know you were in the business of abducting children and making vampires, Annaliese,” Magnus replied trying to keep his voice as casual and as devoid of feeling as he could. With Annaliese you couldn’t show weakness; she was able to smell it a mile away.

“I rescued Sarah from people who will never understand or love her the way her own people will,” Annaliese retorted. “And as for the vampires, since you have kept your vampire friends from me, I was forced to make my own. I would have done the same with the werewolves but I couldn’t wait for a full moon. Don’t worry, I only chose nasty, mean and disagreeable people.”

Two warlocks followed close behind Annaliese, carrying bags of blood which they proceeded to throw into the vampire cages. Suddenly, Stanley and Martha as well as the other vampires sniffed the air and, detecting the scent of blood nearby, growled and showed their fangs, and just like that, any remainder of humanity left in them was gone. The vamps became all instinct, an all-consuming desire for blood overpowering all other drives and unleashing a feeding frenzy. They sank their fangs into the blood bags and for the next few minutes, the sound of sucking and swallowing as well as the smell of blood almost obscured all other sound and smells.

“I used a few vampires affected by demonic poison we captured in Berlin,” Annaliese said as if answering a question that Magnus should have asked, a look of pride in her eyes. “And I have infused this blood with the demonic energy released in the explosions. You may have done me a favor, after all Magnus. I wanted to take vengeance on you by taking people you care about, but this solution is much more elegant and effective.”

“What have you done Annaliese?” Magnus asked, a pleading tone unintentionally creeping into his voice.

“What have I done?” she asked in an accusatory tone. “What have you done? You forced my hand; because of you I made these vampires; their fate and the fate of their victims is your fault. But no matter, they might not live long enough to cause much damage. Not all of them will survive the summoning. Mother needs their energy, you know. It is like a lifeline, she needs to latch onto their life force to climb out of Hades, in the same way that she needs your connection to her beloved son.”

“Annaliese, you don’t have to do this,” Magnus said.

“Yes, I do Magnus,” she replied, her voice full of conviction. “Yes, I do. I am tired of being an outsider, of being rejected and looked down upon as if I was scam, garbage, refuse. The question is why aren’t you willingly helping me? You have also suffered; you have also been called demon spawn; why don’t you want to embrace Mother?”
“We are part human, Annaliese. We are not all-demon. Do you think Lilith will love us as her children? She will wreak havoc and destroy everything in her path, us included.”

“She will not destroy us; she made us; she wants us to live in her kingdom.”

“That is wishful thinking Annaliese,” Magnus said giving up all pretense to emotional detachment. “You are as delusional now as you were in Batavia all those centuries ago and look what happened then. How many of your people did you lose? How many humans died? How many have died since?”

“Quiet!” she shouted, her ruby-red eyes shining so brilliantly that they almost overpowered the light from the candles. “The deaths in Batavia and in Berlin were your fault. Your betrayal caused all those deaths. As per the warlocks that have given their lives in the last few weeks for our cause, those sacrifices were needed. Mother will reward our sacrifice by reunite us with those we have lost; she has promised to give Khuno back to me.”

“Annaliese…” Magnus said but with a snap of her finger, Annaliese silenced him, all sound drowning in Magnus’ throat before it could pass through his lips. Annaliese had never been a powerful warlock. In fact, she had never managed to master more than the simplest of magic. Her power lay in her capacity to command blind loyalty, and to awake in others an irresistible desire to protect, love and possess her. Magnus had wondered many times whether enthrallment was her true and only magic ability. That and a capacity for hatred that was almost without compare. Still, she had now managed to silence him with the simplest of spells, likely because Magnus’ powers were being smothered by his retraining. He didn't feel that his powers were being drained the way they had been before; rather it was like he couldn’t access the full extent of his magic, as if his magic remained out of reach.

“I can see that you remain a traitor, Magnus. Not only you are a human lover, but even after all they have done to us, you still consort with the Nephilim,” she said, her voice full of vile, disgust and anger. “Your relationship with that Shadowhunter makes me sick; it is unnatural,” she added between gritted teeth.

She then gestured to a warlock that had remained quietly standing at the doorway, and as he approached, Magnus thought that the man looked older than most warlocks he knew, perhaps in his sixties. He carried an old leather medical bag and had the demeanor and bearing of a small-town physician, including the small rounded glasses set low on his nose.

“Before you killed him, Khuno told me that you were shielding your powers from me,” Annaliese went on. “Declan here is what you might call a diagnostician. He can unravel and find a way to undo almost any spell. He will discover how you are doing it and how to fix it. He tells me the procedure can be painful, so I will give you a last chance to comply.”

Still unable to speak, Magnus replied with a casual shrug of his shoulders, as if indicating that he was as puzzled as Annaliese by her inability to gain access to his powers.

“You disappoint me,” she said and placed a hand on Magnus’ face, the softness of the gesture a striking contrast to the hardness and hatred in Annaliese’s eyes. “Declan, do what you have to do but do not drain more of his powers that necessary. Remember that we need him.”

“Yes Ma’am,” replied Declan in a heavy Irish accent. “I will not damage him… much,” he added and gave Magnus a menacing smile. He then signaled for the warlocks who had just finished feeding the vampires to hold Magnus down and, opening his medical bag, produced a vial with a greenish liquid that he proceeded to pour down Magnus’ throat. Not only was the taste vile, but the liquid burned as it went down, and the sensation expanded until Magnus felt that every cell of his
body was on fire.

Magnus had learned in his very long life that not all warlocks had the same powers or faculties. Some like Catarina were more in tune with the healing energies of nature. Others were more in touch with the threads that connect this world to the demonic realm and were particularly adept at summoning demons. Other were somehow in touch with the forces of time and could predict events yet to come. Some were good at potions, some were good at spells. The older warlocks got, the more spells and powers they could master. Yet some, like Annaliese, never developed their full magic potential no matter how old they got to be, and some skills and spells remained elusive to even the most accomplished of warlocks. Some forms of magic were also so dark that all but the most wicked avoided them. As a High Warlock, Magnus was exceptionally powerful and skilled, but he had always stayed away from the darkest of magic, despite having mastered some of its secrets.

And then, there were those rare warlocks who had the powers and skills needed for unraveling and revealing the secrets, forces and powers involved in magic. Almost any warlock could understand or undo a spell if they knew what incantations and forces had been used and what powers had been called upon. However, there were spells that were not written anywhere; spells that had been conceived by chance or, as in Magnus’ case, out of sheer necessity; or spells which origins were so obscured and complicated that their structure, functions and secrets were not easily discernible. Those spells could only be understood and potentially undone by warlocks who possessed the skill of diagnosing magic. Those warlocks didn’t need to know the spell to undo it because they could use their powers to reveal the threads and knots that tied magic forces together, and could potentially disentangle those threads and lose those knots in order to render the spell inoperable. Declan was apparently one of those warlocks.

What Magnus didn’t know yet was that Declan’s methods consisted of a combination of potions and spells. The potions neutralized any resistance and revealed any weakness; The spells and incantations dug and probed deep into body, mind and soul to expose not only the structure and architecture of a spell, but also the most secret desires behind any magic. Over the next endless hours, Magnus experienced what it was truly like to be turned inside out as Declan administered potion after potion followed by steady streams of spells that cut through, dug out and shredded any barriers and walls that he put up to defend the secrets of his magic. The shackles around Magnus’ wrists and ankles made it impossible for him to resist, and with every passing moment, Declan exposed more of the mystic forces that run through Magnus and that made him a magic maker.

Magnus pushed every thought of the spell he had cast that night in Barcelona deep into the darkest and most secret corners of his mind; those corners where he kept those secrets and memories he never wanted to remember or tell anyone; those corners where his worst transgressions and experiences dwelled. Calling on whatever magic he could access, he pushed deep into his flesh any physical signs of the spell, including the omamori mark on his chest and the invisible threads and knots that tethered him to Alec. But everything was ultimately futile; he just didn’t have the strength to hide the spell from the relentlessly probing powers of the diagnostician. When Declan finally reached the secrets of the magic he had instinctually used all those centuries ago to kill his stepfather, Magnus knew that his last line of defense was about to fall and that he had lost the battle. By the end of it all, Magnus felt that Declan had stripped him completely naked and had then continued peeling off layers after layer of skin until flesh and bones were exposed, and all his secrets were out in the open.

“It is the Shadowhunter boy,” Declan informed Annaliese when she came back a few hours later. “This warlock bound the powers of his father’s blood to that Nephilim,” he added, disgust plainly evident in his voice.
“Can you unbind them?” asked Annaliese.

“No very easily,” Declan replied. “The spell is very unique. I have actually never seen a spell like that before. I cannot wait to record it in my book.” Declan rubbed his hands together as if he was in the presence of a delectable morsel of food he couldn’t wait to taste.

“I don’t care about your book,” Annaliese snapped. “How do we undo the spell?”

“We may not need to undo it,” replied Declan. “If the warlock entrusted his father’s powers to the Shadowhunter, you just need to convince the boy that to stop the summoning he needs to kill the warlock. The boy is a soldier, isn’t he? If he attacks the warlock with the intention to kill, the bond will be broken.”

“But we need Magnus alive,” Annaliese argued.

“That is why you need to time things perfectly. You must open the rift at the moment the bond breaks and the powers return back into the warlock. If the rift is open, Lilith can latch on to her son’s blood and climb out of Hades. Trust me,” Declan added, lovingly putting a hand on Annaliese’s arm. “ Didn’t I tell you that I could snatch the warlock from the portal?”

“It is risky,” Annaliese said. “How do we know the Shadowhunter will attempt to kill Magnus?”

“Believe me, he will. The Nephilim’s only mission in life is to prevent demonic invasion. That mission supersedes everything, and there is no way that the Shadowhunter will put a warlock before his mission. We are demon scam to them, after all.”

Annaliese made a gesture and she and Declan took a few steps away from where Magnus sat slumped against the wall. Magnus could hear them whisper but couldn’t make up what they were saying. He observed though that Annaliese rested both her hands on her abdomen as an expectant mother protectively holds her belly. After exchanging a few words with Declan, Annaliese closed her eyes and bent her head forward as if she was praying. Magnus had not noticed this gesture in Annaliese before and something about it was disturbing and sinister. There was a power emanating from the spot where Annaliese’s hands rested, a dark power that seemed to suck all light from the room.

“I guess we better make sure that the Shadowhunter boy isn’t late for his date with you Magnus,” Annaliese stated with a malevolent smile when she came back to where Magnus sat. “I had hoped to use his blood, but I guess I will have to get me another Nephilim for that.” She then reached in her pocket for her phone and dialed a number as she walked out the room.

Magnus saw her leave through blurred vision. He was tired and his whole body ached, but he had heard the plan, every word of it a nail that sealed his fate. He had also felt that sinister energy that emanated from Annaliese, an energy even more evil than Annaliese herself, an energy waiting to be unleashed. He needed to do something, he thought; he needed to send a message to Alec, warn him, tell him that the situation was direr than they had anticipated.
Chapter Summary

Set me as a seal upon your heart; for love is stronger than death

Anyone who visited Venice and could see behind its wards was awestruck by the red and white brick campanile that guarded the entrance to the Venice Institute. Not only did its pyramidal spire reached almost a hundred meters towards the heavens, but, unbeknown to the mundane world, it also stood less than a hundred meters away from its identical twin, the Saint Mark’s campanile. For those arriving by boat and through the Grand Canal, the identical towers resembled two sentries standing guard at the entrance of Saint Mark’s square and mirrored one another in the same way that the mundane world and the shadow world mirrored one another: the former completely oblivious to the existence of the later. Together with the Saint Mark’s Basilica, the Saint Mark’s campanile constituted one of the city’s most important landmarks. By contrast, its twin sibling guarded the square and the city in silent and invisible magnificence, as it had done for the hundreds of years that the Nephilim had had close connections to the floating city.

Below this invisible bell tower stood the Venice Institute housed in a building showcasing the same Romanesque styles of the surroundings constructions, including the marble and tile accents and arched passageways. Due to the closeness between the building, the Venice Institute was not only warded and glamored, but its location was also hidden in the same way that Idris was hidden. Mundanes walking across its front did not notice that space seemed to fold in that location, and that with just one step they walked across almost a whole block.

Up until the 17th century, the Venice Institute had been one of the busiest Institutes in the world due to the strategic importance that Venice had, first as a trading post, later as a city state, and eventually as the most influential mercantile empire of its time. With the decline and eventual fall of the Venetian Republic, the city acquired a reputation for being a place for sin and debauchery which made it a magnet for demonic and Downworld interference. Many thought that demonic forces had played a major role in corrupting and eventually destroying the Venetian empire, and for centuries, its narrow passages, canals and waterways, as well as its idle wealth, and an aristocracy with an insatiable taste for excess made of Venice the target of regular demon attacks.

In the last hundred years, however, Venice had grown quieter and had become more like a tourist attraction than a sin city. The size and influence of the Venice Institute had shrunk in relative measure, and it now housed a rather small detachment of Shadowhunters. As a result, Eldermark and his team were largely unprepared to deal with the sudden increase in demonic activity, the rogue vampire attacks and the imminent battle with warlocks that, if Annaliese remained true to her MO, would likely be waged a few meters from the Institute.

In the hours following their arrival in Venice, Jace took charge of coordinating the teams of Shadowhunters from the other European cities that began to arrive through the portals that Kat and Catarina opened on the roof of the palazzo. As Shadowhunters in full combat gear stepped out of the portals, they shook hands with Jace and nodded at the warlocks with different levels of unease.

Not wanting to alert Annaliese of their activities, Eldermark and Alec agreed to coordinate troop movements from the palazzo. Jeremy, with the assistance of one of the Venetian Shadowhunters,
quickly converted the living and dining rooms into a field command center, equipped with computers, tracking equipment and all other available technologies needed for tracking demon, Shadowhunter and Downworld movements. From there, Alec and Eldermark handed in assignments and deployed groups to patrol the city and deal with the incessant demon, vamp and warlock attacks.

As casualties began to arrive, Catarina set up a makeshift infirmary in the bedrooms and with the assistance of two Shadowhunter field medics, whom she ordered around as if they were members of the football team and she their coach, began to treat the injured.

As soon as night fell, Raphael and Izzy set out to meet with the local vampire clan to coordinate a plan to bring the rogue vamps under control. Before they left, Kat took a small amount of blood from Raphael’s heart by the use of a simple spell and handed him a small enchanted flask to carry with him. “Do not lose it,” she instructed, her voice resembling a parent speaking to her small child. She then hung the charm Magnus had sent Catarina around Raphael’s neck and told him that it would keep the demonic poison under control.

“Thank you,” was Raphael’s only and quiet reply.

“We need to find that cruise ship,” Luke said as he walked into the living room, “or we won’t know how many vampires Annaliese made, or how many mundanes hostages she still holds.”

Finding the ship had been a priority for Eldermark from the very beginning, but all efforts to track it had proven futile. “It is a big ocean,” argued Eldermark. “The mundane coast guard and some of my troops have been searching for the last twenty-four hours.”

“We do not want the coast guard to stumble on it by chance,” observed Alec. “That would only put more hostages in Annaliese’s hands.”

“The last of the Shadowhunter reinforcements are from the London maritime search and rescue team,” said Clary. “They will be arriving in a few minutes. Luke and I can go with them and assist in the search.”

Alec turned towards Eldermark, deferring to him the decision on Clary’s proposal. He didn’t want to step on the toes of the Head of the Venice Institute. Since their arrival, he had constantly reminded himself that he was a guest in this city and needed all the cooperation he could get from the local Shadowhunters if he was going to accomplish his mission.

“We need all the help we can get, but can you spare them Alec?” asked Eldermark.

“Yes, I think so. We will call if we need you,” Alec replied turning to Clary. Luke was a good tracker even in water and his help would be invaluable in trying to locate the ship. As long as Clary was with him, Alec knew that Kat would be able to reach Luke if and when she needed him.

“In that case, I will come with you and introduce you to the leader of our maritime search team,” Eldermark said. “There is nothing more I can do from here, and we need all available personnel out in the field.” Turning to Alec Eldermark extended his hand for a shake. “Good luck,” he told him and patted Alec on the arm before heading out.

“Luke, check in with Kat before you leave; she needs to take some blood,” Alec reminded the werewolf before he too left the room.

“Take care of Jace please,” Clary asked as she embraced Alec at the door. “I know he will insist on going with you all the way. Bring him back to me Alec.”
“I will,” Alec promised with a reassuring smile. “You keep Luke safe; we need him,” he added and Clary nodded in silent agreement.

When a few minutes before midnight the power went off and all of Venice was submerged in complete darkness, Alec knew the time for the final battle was finally here. He looked out the window and saw candles being lighted in several windows across the canal and was thankful that the evening was cold and that the blackout was likely to make mundanes stay in their houses rather than venture out onto the streets. Still, with the blackout, the number of demon and vamp attacks increased, likely another of Annaliese’s strategies to distract the Shadowhunters and keep them busy and away from the center of the city. The only difference was that the Nephilim became the almost exclusive target of the attacks.

After asking Kat to reinforce the wards and Jeremy to ensure that their angelic power generator was functioning properly, Alec and Jace readied themselves and their small team to leave. Izzy returned to the institute as soon as she got Alec’s call, and she along with two of Eldermark’s best soldiers were the only other members of the team. As they had done when they pursued the warlocks to Florence, they had decided to go small and stealthy, hoping not to call too much attention to themselves. If it wasn’t for the fear of getting lost in the labyrinth that was the city, Alec would have preferred not to bring any one else except for his brother and sister. But if Venice was a maze in the daylight, he could only image how hard it would be to negotiate its narrow streets, canals and innumerable bridges in a blackout.

“Alec, keep this with you at all times,” instructed Kat as she attached a small charm to Alec’s quiver. “It will act as a homing beacon allowing me to track you and deliver what you need when the time comes.” Alec replied with a nod that conveyed the trust he felt towards the warlock that in the last few weeks had become an ally and a friend.

“And please do your best to bring that annoying and troublesome warlock back to us,” added Catarina as she handed Alec, Jace and Izzy small bottles containing healing potions. “A little warlock magic to complement your ‘superior’ healing powers,” she said when Jace gave her a questioning look, adding a sarcastic inflection to the world superior.

“Thank you, Catarina. I will bring Magnus back,” stated Alec his voice conveying a conviction that he hoped sounded genuine.

Kat took Alec by the arm and guided him towards a quiet corner of the room. “There is a magic connection between you and Magnus,” she said. “A connection like I have never seen before. You have felt it, haven’t you? You have felt the magic that constantly flows between you. At times, it is very faint, but at others I can almost see it. That connection will be critical in this battle. Trust it to the very end, Alec. You know that this battle will be won only as long as the two of you work together.” Alec’s reply was a single but decisive nod.

“We are being herded,” Jace whispered beside Alec almost three hours later, the glow of his seraph blade faintly illuminating his face.

Alec glanced towards his parabatai and, despite the almost complete darkness, saw the look of exhaustion on his face. Alec thought that Jace’s energy rune must be almost completely depleted and his own was not much better. Their night vision rune was also faltering, but they dared not use witch light for fear of being detected. They had been fighting almost nonstop since they had walked out of the palazzo. Packs of vampires and demons had ambushed them and tried to either stop them or delay them as Alec and his team attempted to reach the Venice Institute on Saint Mark’s Square. Only once, they had been attacked by warlocks, but Alec had repeatedly felt their presence following at a distance as if shadowing them or checking in on their progress.
Venice had proven to be the worst possible place to be confronting demons and downworlders. Its narrow streets, alleyways full of blind corners, bridges and canals made for a traitorous battle field, and the constant need to jump across canals while avoiding falling into the dark waters put their endurance and stamina runes to the test. They also had to remain glamored and avoid mundanes; yet, as their invisibility runes also became depleted, invisibility became harder; glamors had also always been tricky and required more power near the water.

Alec and his team had killed several vampires and more demons that they cared to count. Most of the vamps had been too weak or feral to put up much of a fight. The shax and ravener demons had been another story, and their attacks had been particularly vicious and put their fighting skills to the test. By the time they could see the twin campaniles glowing against the starry night as if fire was being stoked under them, they had lost one of the Venice Shadowhunters to a ravener.

And then, a couple of minutes ago as they crept along a canal closing in on one of the entrances to the square, they had run into a group of shax demons led by two warlocks. One of the warlocks and three demons had pushed Jace and Alec across a bridge, and, as soon as they were at the other side, the other warlock had cast a spell in the direction of the canal and had raised a wall of water that finally separated Jace and Alec from Izzy and their companion. Jace had quickly dispatched the warlock and Alec had killed the demons, but the warlock standing at the other side of the canal had maintained the water wall in place. “Keep going Alec,” Izzy had yelled from the other side of the barrier. “We will find another way.”

Alec now nodded in response to Jace’s statement. He had suspected for a while that the warlocks were herding them, barring their way or letting them advance according to a predetermined design. They had been under constant attack, but the warlocks had not tried to kill them yet. Instead, they were exhausting them, pushing them beyond the limits of their endurance, making sure that they arrived where they were expected too fatigued to effectively put up a fight. As they crept, walked and at times run along dark and narrow alleys, over bridges and around blind corners, Alec had felt like a rat trapped in a labyrinth, forced to follow the route already demarcated by Annaliese. He also suspected that they wouldn’t be allowed to approach the square until Annaliese was ready for them. He just hoped that by then it would not be too late.

The question that Alec kept asking himself, as he and his parabatai walked along a dark narrow street towards an archway that led into Saint Mark’s square, was why Jace was being herded along with him. He checked his watch and realized that it was almost time, that in less than ten minutes, the star that marked the end of the way would finally come into alignment.

“Come on Kat, don’t fail us now,” Alec thought as he and Jace momentarily stopped under the archway trying to get their bearings. He looked towards the dark square trying to ascertain not whether, but rather where they were more likely to be ambushed.

He and Magnus has spent an enjoyable evening in the square just a few months ago. They had walked around the plaza, Magnus delighting him with stories of his many adventures in the city; of nights spent in the company of more than one prominent historical figure, or with many of the city’s downworlders. Alec had laughed, and when Magnus asked him whether his stories of past adventures and affairs bothered him, Alec had said that they didn’t, that he liked that Magnus didn’t feel he had to censor himself around him. They had sat at an outdoor café listening to the bands that took turns playing on the different stages set up around the plaza, waiting for the lights to come on, and Alec had idly observed that the square was the perfect place for an ambush. It had only three real exit points: the narrow archway under which he and Jace were now standing, and two exits on either side of Saint Mark’s Basilica at least two hundred meters away, one leading to the waterfront, the other into a smaller square and a narrow street that run along the side of the Basilica. Once you were inside the plaza, you were pretty much boxed in and there was no escape
from it that was not through those entry points, unless, of course, you could fly.

“Always thinking as a Shadowhunter, Alexander,” Magnus had said with a flirtatious smile.

“I can’t help it, warlock; it is in my nature,” Alec had replied, and his voice had carried the full force of a promise. All thoughts of ambushes, traps and battle strategies had been forgotten then because Magnus had closed the distance between them and had begun to whisper promises of his own in Alec’s ear. At that moment, thousands of white lights set along the edges of the windows and roofs of the buildings surrounding the plaza had been turned on and suddenly it seemed like the square was floating amid the stars.

The memory of that night offered a striking contrast to the darkness, emptiness and silence that dominated the square now. As Alec looked towards the Basilica at the other end of the plaza, he saw the orange glow of what looked like a fire set between the twin campaniles, and the glow not only broke the relentless darkness that dominated the rest of the plaza, but also marked the end of the line for them, the last target in this bloody war.

“You know we are walking into a trap, don’t you?” Alec asked Jace, as he checked to make sure his bow and quiver remained firmly fasten to his back and were still concealed under their invisibility spell.

“Bring it,” Jace said and he gave Alec one of his golden smiles, the smile containing self-assurance and not a small dose of arrogance. “I am with you all the way, brother, not matter what.”

“Thank you,” Alec whispered and thought that even if it was just he and Jace, there was no one else with whom he would rather go into battle. He tightened his grip in the blade in his hand, the blade and a dirk attached to his leg the last weapons left in the arsenal he had been carrying. “Be careful, we will be exposed in the square.”

Suddenly, as he was about to step out of the archway, a small piece of paper folded in the shape of a bird materialized a meter above Alec’s head. When Alec extended his hand out, it flew down, landed on his palm and immediately caught fire. As the fire message burned and its ashes were blown by the wind, Alec felt a faint rattle in his quiver as if one of the arrows stored in it had vibrated. The fire message burned immediately because it contained no message at all; it was itself a message, a signal, the signal that Alec had been waiting for. He had kept his bow and quiver glamored all through the battle and had not used them even when an arrow would have helped decide the fight in their favor. He had kept them hidden waiting and hoping for the moment when Kat would send the signal that the magic arrow that could decide the battle was ready. He turned to Jace and gave him a small nod, and Jace nodded back, the message clearly received.

“It looks like it is just the two of us brother,” Jace whispered, as he followed Alec into the square and began to walk in the direction of where the fire glowed less than two hundred meters away.

However, they hadn’t walked more than fifteen meters when four warlocks, red and blue blazing magic balls in their hands, emerged from the dark archways that surrounded the plaza and blocked their way. When Alec looked back, he saw that two other warlocks now barred the entrance through which he and Jace had just come in. They were not only, as he had feared, boxed in, but also outnumbered and surrounded.

As he took a defensive stand, legs apart, knees lightly bent, blade at the ready, he turned to look at Jace and saw that his parabatai had taken out his stele and was activating the last of his stamina runes. “I’ll distract them, you go do what you have to do Alec,” Jace said. “I’ll be right behind you.”
Alec took out his own stele and touching it to a spot right above his left wrist, activated his agility rune. Gripping his blade firmly in his hand, he leaped in the air, summersaulted and landed at the other side of the warlocks, the movement so blindingly fast that one of them, a young man that looked not older than twenty, didn’t have enough time to turn before Alec’s blade run him through and almost cut him in half. The warlock fell to his knees grasping his chest before collapsing to the floor. But Alec didn’t witness the last second of the warlock’s life because as soon as he pulled back the blade from the warlock’s back, he leaped in the air again and this time graciously landed on the roof of one of the buildings. From there Alec saw how Jace’s blade deflected each one of the fire balls the warlocks sent in his direction. However, he didn’t have time to wait for Jace; for two of the warlocks leaped after him and landed on the same roof just a few meters away.

Alec run along the roof, avoiding chimneys and exhaust tubes, and dogging the fireballs from both the warlocks pursuing him along the roof as well as another that run alongside him on the ground. As he closed the distance between himself and the Basilica, he registered a low murmur coming from a spot between the two campaniles, in the part of the plaza that separated the Venetian central library and the Doge’s palace.

At that moment, Jeremy and Kat were stealthily approaching the plaza hiding between the columns of the Doge’s Palace’s archways. Kat had enchanted a gondola to silently and undetectably carry them from their palazzo to the canal that bordered the Doge’s palace. They had come to a stop under Ponte del Sospiri, and there Kat had performed the last spells required to assemble the arrow that she hoped had the power of sealing a rift to Hades.

As she, Magnus and Catarina had planned, the spells Kat worked were rather simple. Or rather, they were a set of simple spells intertwined to form a more complex and rather volatile one. Still, due to the distances and the many ingredients needed, the spell drained a considerable amount of her powers. With the flick of her wrist, Kat activated the enchantment she had put in the magic flasks she had given Raphael and Luke. After drawing a small amount of blood directly from the werewolf and the vampire’s hearts, the flasks magically transported right onto Kat’s palm. Wherever they were, Luke and Raphael had felt a sudden sharp pain on their chest, but the discomfort had quickly subsided. The blood of the innocent had required a little bit more inventiveness, but a quick and carefully timed visit by Caterina to a neighbor’s house to borrow a candle was enough to procure the small amount of the mundane blood needed. Likely, when the unsuspecting neighbor opened the door and suddenly experienced a sharp pain in the chest, Caterina told them that it looked like they were experiencing a drop in their blood pressure, and that she was a nurse and happy to check their vitals and make sure they were alright. The only ingredients missing were the blood of the Nephilim and of the beloved, but for that they needed Alec and Magnus. Hopefully Alec would be able to perform that last task, she thought as she sent the fire message to Alec and, using the homing signal emitted by the charm attached to Alec’s quiver, sent the enchanted arrow to its destination.

As Kat and Jeremy approached the waterfront entrance to Saint Mark’s square, they noticed that there were no demons around and that the warlocks were not as concerned with attacks than they had been on the way there. They were likely confident that the Shadowhunters were occupied by the demon and vamp attacks in other parts of the city, or believed that any attempt of stop them would simply be futile.

Jeremy gently elbowed Kat and signaled for her to look in the direction of the library at the other side of the square’s entrance. There Kat saw the soft pulsation of a witch light sending a faint signal in their direction from a dark corner of the building. “It is Izzy,” Jeremy whispered recognizing the series of pulsations learned in years of training. He took out his own witch light and sent a faint signal in response, and he was glad that they were not alone, that Izzy too had made it.
As they closed the distance between them and the square, they began to hear the familiar but still faint chanting of the warlocks. Jeremy looked towards Kat and seeing in her expression the struggle she was waging with herself, remembered that she no longer carried the Hades charm that had protected her from whatever force Annaliese had used to summon the warlocks. Turning to Kat, Jeremy held her firmly by her arms. “Kat, stay with me,” he whispered, his eyes conveying not only urgency and desperation, but also all the love he felt for this enchanting, mysterious and strong woman, “I need you to fight it.”

After a moment of confusion, something in Kat’s eyes shifted, as if she had reined in her self-control and she fixed her own eyes on Jeremy and nodded. “I am fine,” she said and with a snap of her fingers cast a spell on herself that she hoped would be enough to prevent Annaliese from taking control of her, at least until Alec arrived. “My powers are low,” she then told Jeremy, “remember your promise.”

Jeremy nodded once, acknowledging that he remembered the promise Kat had extracted from him the night before in the intimacy of their bed; that he would use his seraph blade on her if she lost control of her powers.

As soon as they reached the corner of the Doge’s Palace, Kat got her first glance of Annaliese in the more than five hundred years since she met the warlock in Peru. Annaliese was standing on a spot between the two large granite columns that stood at the waterfront entrance to the square. The columns were as well-known as Saint Mark’s Basilica, and as old as the twin campaniles that stood in the background less than fifty meters away. The columns had served many purposes over the centuries. Gambling had once been permitted in the space between them and they had also been the site for many public executions. Tonight, the columns seemed to mark the place where the rift to Hades was to be opened. Strategically placed magic bonfires provided the only illumination in the plaza and covered the site and the people standing around in an orange glow.

Kat surveyed the scene unfolding before her and saw the enormous pentagram drawn on the stone floor, its red lines shimmering suggesting that they had been drawn in fresh blood. The source of the blood became quickly evident when she looked to the barely illuminated silhouettes standing around the pentagram. Several warlocks guarded shackled and chained werewolves and vampires, their faces revealing intense agony, as their guards used magic to extract a steady trickle of blood from their hearts; the blood feeding the thin stream that made up the pentagram. Mundane children, apparently unharmed despite their vacant and absent expressions, stood at each point of the pentagram and around them, warlocks continued their steady and low chanting. No blood was being drawn from the children which suggested that their sacrifice would come later, likely at the hands of Lilith.

Kat looked to the familiar lonely figure that stood on Annaliese’s other side, somewhat apart from the rest of the group, and recognized Declan, a warlock she had considered a friend once, the one who had taught her the procedure she and Magnus used to remove Alec’s rune. Kat wasn’t surprised to see the old warlock there; he had always held strong ideas about the superiority of Lilith’s Children.

“We are running out of time,” Kat whispered when she saw three warlocks escorting Magnus out of the Basilica. Magnus walked with difficulty due to the heavy shackles and chains around his wrists and ankles, but he looked otherwise unharmed. The warlocks took Magnus to the center of the pentagram and one of them fastened the chain that linked the shackles around Magnus’ ankles to an iron lop on the ground, and Declan enchanted it likely to make it unbreakable. They then removed Magnus’ handcuffs, but as soon as his wrists were free, Declan sent a silvery magic stream that wrapped itself around Magnus’ body preventing any attempt to move, resist or run.
“It didn’t have to be this way Magnus,” Annaliese said, as she approached him, her voice as soft as ever, her face still maintaining its eternal and deceiving look of innocence, her ruby red eyes reflecting the glow from the fires. “You know you belong with us, with me. This has always been your destiny, your home. We have always been your people.”

“Annaliese,” Magnus said, his voice pleading, “you can still stop all of this.”

“But I will grant you a final wish,” Annaliese went on as if she hadn’t heard Magnus’ plea. “I will let you look into the eyes of your Shadowhunter boy one last time.” She then signaled to Declan and the warlock made a semi-circular motion with his arms and directed the magic stream that restrained Magnus to turn him to face the opposite side of the plaza away from the waterfront and from Annaliese. Magnus looked out beyond the glow of the fires, towards the darkness that still covered most of the square, and the sudden change in the echo of Alec’s heartbeat on his omamori mark told him that Alec had seen him; that he was out there somewhere; that he, Magnus, would not have to face what was coming alone.

At the far end of the plaza, from the place where he was perched on the cornice of the Saint Mark’s Clock Tower, concealed in the shadow of its bell, Alec recognized Magnus’ unmistakable figure as he was escorted out of the Basilica and towards the center of the pentagram. When the warlock standing beside Annaliese forced Magnus to turn in his direction, Alec’ heart jumped in his chest as his eyes landed on the handsome face of the man he loved and would love for the rest of his life, and which Alec could clearly see despite the distance that separated them.

Alec rested his hand on his chest and sent a prayer to anyone listening. “Please grant me the strength to do what I must.” Using what remained of his agility rune, he then leaped and landed silently and gracefully on the stone ground four floors below. When he looked back in Magnus’ direction, his eyes met the warlock’s across the long distance that still separated them and, for a moment, Alex was sure that Magnus could see him, for he faintly smiled, as if to tell Alec that everything would be okay.

From the corner of his eye, Alec perceived movement and when he turned saw that two warlocks were carrying an unconscious Jace towards the pentagram. His parabatai was bleeding, but the connection they shared told Alec that Jace was not seriously injured, at least not yet. The warlocks carried Jace to one of the granite columns and chained him to it. Annaliese approached him, the Chasa staff in her hand and she wetted its tip in some of Jace’s blood.

“Since your Shadowhunter boy is to play a different role in tonight’s program, I had to get another Nephilim,” said Annaliese when Magnus turned his head to look at Jace’s inert figure chained to the column. “I need fresh Nephilim blood to reanimate the one I took from the hearts of the dead ones. This one would do nicely because he has the face and the blood of an angel.” She then signaled to another warlock, who approached Jace, a knife in hand, ready, Magnus suspected, to cut out Jace’s heart at the precise moment during the summoning.

Annaliese looked up towards the star-studded sky in search of the one star that indicated that the moment she had been waiting for all her very long life was finally here. She had gone through so much, suffered so much, given up so much. Now, she would finally achieve her goal; she would finally experience the loving embrace of a mother. Through her connection to Lilith, Annaliese felt her impatience as Lilith stood at the border between realms, eager, ready to finally walk across the threshold and return to the garden from which she had been so unjustly expelled by a god too proud to recognize true love.

As if obeying a silent order, as soon as the star came into alignment, the warlocks increased the pace and volume of their chanting, and Annaliese, eyes closed, began to tap the bloody tip of the
staff against the stone ground, right on the point of the pentagram that the ancients assigned to the spirit. As she did, the ground began to shake and a loud sound of cracking wood rose from deep underground. Feeling the vibrations beneath his feet, Alec remembered what Magnus had told him during their last visit, that the city was built on millions of alder tree piles. After almost a thousand years underwater, the piles had become petrified and as strong as stone, but just a short exposure to oxygen was enough to weaken them. Venice stands on water and its foundations are fragile, Alec thought as he cautiously and hastily made his way across the plaza, careful to stay hidden in the shadows.

As Annaliese weaken the already fragile fault line that separated this world from Hades, the stone inside the pentagram began to first crack and then melt, and a whirlpool of lava and water began to slowly form at the edges of the pentagram.

Alec stopped just outside the circle of light cast by the bonfires, and knowing that he was out of time, reached for his last dirk fastened to his leg. With swiftness and certainty, he made a thin cut across his lower arm and willed the blood to carry out some of his life force. He then took out his bow and reaching in his quiver for the enchanted arrow that Kat had sent him a few minutes ago, dipped its tip in his own blood before nocking it. He pulled the bow string with all his strength and aimed it towards the center of the pentagram, his eyes fixed on Magnus, millions of thoughts and feelings rushing through him.

Kat had been precise in her instructions, Alec had to pierce the space inside the pentagram, seal it by the combined life force of Nephilim, Downworld and mundane, and for the seal to hold, they needed Magnus’ demonic blood, not just any blood, but blood straight from the heart.

“Magnus,” he whispered, knowing that Magnus would not hear him. “Magnus, get out of the way. Don’t make me do this.”

But surprisingly, Magnus replied, just a small gesture, a nod, a smile on his lovely face. “Do your job Shadowhunter,” he mouthed. Alec clearly read the words in Magnus’ lips just before what looked like steam or smoke began to raise within the pentagram.

“Do your job Shadowhunter,” Alec whispered echoing Magnus’ words, and at that moment, all other thoughts disappeared and just he, Magnus and their mission existed. That, and the memory of what Kat had told him; that there was a strong connection between he and Magnus, a magic bond that he had to trust.

Annaliese briefly opened her eyes and through the veil of smoke rising within the pentagram, saw the dark silhouette of the Shadowhunter, his bow lifted and aimed, and a triumphant smile rose to her lips. She had known all along that when it came to their angelic duty, the Nephilim didn’t care for love or loyalty. Their incapacity to love those they could not accept, their incapacity to see downworlders as their equal, their prejudice and bigotry would be their undoing. Nephilim hatred would be her most secret and powerful weapon, and at the end, she would show Magnus, Magnus who had always been so naïve, that she had been right all along: the Nephilim are only capable of loving themselves.

What happened next happened almost simultaneously and at such a speed that anyone would have a hard time recounting later the exact order of events. Perhaps a split second before Alec made up his mind, Izzy, responding to a signal from Kat, run out of the shadows where she had been hidden and uncoiling her whip from her arm, unleashed it in Annaliese’s direction, its tip making a cracking sound as it flew through the air and caught the warlock in the wrist, momentarily halting the tapping of the staff against the ground, and weakening the veil of smoke rising within the pentagram. The action was meant just to distract and gain time, and Izzy was not completely
surprised when another warlock sent a stream of dark red magic in her direction, the blow so powerful that it threw her backward several meters and she landed half-unconscious in a heap on the ground.

However, that was all the distraction Kat needed to step out of her and Jeremy’s hiding place and throw her own magic fireball in Declan’s direction, weakening his hold on Magnus, and forcing him to stumble backwards a few steps. The old warlock looked in Kat’s direction, astonishment clearly written on his face. Taking advantage of his surprise, Jeremy threw his last seraph blade directly into Declan’s chest.

At that precise moment, oblivious to everything else going on around him, Alec inhaled and closed his eyes and, as he exhaled, he released the arrow straight into Magnus’ chest. For a millisecond, a millisecond that seemed to go on forever, the arrow stood still, as if unable to reconcile the kinetic forces exercising influence over it: gravity, friction and push causing the arrow to bend before push prevailed and the arrow took off with unbelievable force.

Taking advantage of the weakening in Declan’s magic restrains, Magnus reached for Alec with all his powers, as if his powers were luminescent tendrils in search of home. Alec responded, sharing his energy across the distance, without the need for touch, for his life force was already intertwined with Magnus’. Magnus experienced a sudden surge of power, as he received the energy Alec shared, and the energy that built between warlock and Shadowhunter was enough to break Magnus’ restrains at the precise moment that Alec’s arrow reached Magnus’ chest.

The arrow, which tip was made of Hades stone and fortified with werewolf, vampire and mundane blood, pierced skin, sinew and muscle as it unrelentingly journeyed towards the warlock’s heart. When it reached his heart, Magnus willed some of his own blood to impregnate the arrowhead before he gave it an additional push that forced the arrow to continue on and leave his body through his back.

As the arrow exited, Magnus, finally free of his restrains, fell on one knee. Using the last of his strength, he turned in Annalise’s direction and extending his arms projected all his remaining power as well as the strength that Alec had shared with him into the arrow. For a millisecond, the arrow floated in midair just before Magnus altered its course, and sent it with renewed speed towards Annalise’s midriff, directly into her center where he had felt Lilith’s dark powers calling to him before. Since the moment he had felt the energy emanating from Annalise’s abdomen, Magnus had known that to ensure the permanent closure of the rift, they needed to also sever Annalise’s connection to Lilith.

“Nipa ẹjẹ angeli ati ẹmi baba, Ọnu-Ọna si Hédímù titi lailai,” Magnus whispered with the last of his breath. (By angel’s blood and father’s breath, the door to Hades forever be sealed).

The Hades metal in the arrowhead recognized its destination; the magnetic force that called to it; the place it had desperately wanted to return to since, as part of a magma rock, it had been thrown out of its home. As if pulled by an irresistible force, the arrow veered slightly downward and propelled by Magnus and Alec’s shared power, hit home in the middle of Annalise’s abdomen with such force that Annalise was thrown back a few meters. Just before she hit the ground, she looked at Magnus with a look of utter surprise, and as she let go of the staff in her hand, the ruby red light in her eyes went out. By the time she hit the ground, she was already dead, all glamour gone.

Annalise’s hatred of the Nephilim was founded on her absolute belief that the Children of the Angel were incapable of loving anyone with demon blood. She thought that incapacity was her most powerful weapon; the key to unlocking Magnus’ magic connection to his father, Lilith’s most beloved son. Annalise didn’t know that, just like Kat had used the same ingredients needed for
opening the rift to devise a spell strong enough to seal it, the love Magnus and Alec shared was stronger than any demonic connection, a force so powerful that no demonic power could undo its magic. Annaliese didn’t know that when Alec’s arrow made contact with the omamori mark on its way towards Magnus’ heart, it also picked up some of the magic created by Magnus when he bound his and Alec’s life force. That magic was the last ingredient needed to seal the rift.

Even before the arrow reached its final destination and killed Annaliese, Alec began to run at full speed in Magnus’ direction, and as he went, he released arrow after arrow hitting and injuring as many astonished warlocks as he could. When he reached Magnus, he fell to his knees just in time to catch the warlock as he fell backwards, his eyes closed, his chest still.

“Magnus, Magnus,” he called, his voice imploring, “please don’t leave me, please, please, please don’t leave me, don’t do this to me.”

Completely oblivious to the chaos unleashing around him, to the Shadowhunters running into the square, to Izzy freeing Jace, to warlocks running in a panic, Alec held Magnus and searched for any sign of life in his beloved warlock. Perhaps by instinct, or perhaps obeying commands only he could hear, Alec laid Magnus on the ground, and undoing the top buttons of his own shirt, took out his stele and brought its tip to his own heart. He then slid his other hand underneath Magnus’ shirt and gently rested it on the omamori mark, the mark now barely visible under the blood that poured out of the wound inflicted by the arrow. Alec closed his eyes and began to draw a rune on his chest, a rune that erased the last vestiges of the scar left by the Inquisitor’s hatred. As he did, he willed bone to fuse, and sinew and muscle to knit together, projecting his very life force into the echo of his heartbeat on Magnus’ chest. As he carved the rune, a multitude of images began to play in his mind: Magnus’ attentive eyes on him the first night they met; Magnus’ flirtatious smile the night Alec helped him treat Luke’s injuries; Magnus’ look of surprise the first time Alec kissed him; Magnus’ wondrous expression when Alec took him to bed that first time; Magnus telling him that he loved him; Magnus looking up at the stars in the desert; Magnus touching him; the taste of Magnus’ lips, the scent of his skin, the feel of Magnus’ hair between his fingers; Magnus, only and always Magnus.

As he finished drawing the rune, Alec spoke in a low voice, repeating a spell, or perhaps a blood oath, whispered in his ear by the wind in the soft voice of a woman, a spell or an oath he had never heard before and in a language Alec didn’t know he spoke: “Tetapkan aku sebagai segel di hatimu; karena cinta lebih kuat dari pada kematian. Bangun sayang, bangun sayang.”

Alec then held Magnus once again and waited, Magnus’ head resting in the crook of Alec’s arm. After a long moment of still silence, a moment that seemed to have no end, Magnus stirred and took a deep breath.

“Set me as a seal upon your heart; for love is stronger than death. Rise up my beloved,” Magnus whispered and opened his eyes and looked up at Alec, his expression full of wonder. “I didn’t know you spoke Indonesian Alexander.”

Alec smiled, one of those smiles that illuminated rooms with the strength of the sun. He then lifted his hand from Magnus’ chest and saw with surprise that the wound that had been there a minute ago was now completely gone, not even a scar left, nothing to blemish the beauty of the omamori mark on Magnus’ golden skin.

The Nephilim had no magic powers of their own. The powers of rune and steles were external and could only protect them and enhance their human abilities. But that night for just a moment, Alec became a creature of magic, a being with the power to reach beyond the veil, to seize Magnus from the grips of death and bring him back. With those words, Alec sealed his bond to Magnus, his very
life becoming inexorably linked to the warlock, the way Magnus had sealed his bond to the Shadowhunter the night he embedded Alec’s gift in his chest.

Alec helped Magnus to his feet and, placing a hand against his cheek, kissed him with a passion borne of not only love, but also of immense happiness and gratitude, for he would never stop thanking his lucky stars for the gift of Magnus’ life.

As soon as Magnus was back on his feet, the true magnitude of the situation downed on them. Suddenly aware of the events still unfolding around them, Magnus smiled and told Alec to go do his duty. “I also have a lot to do,” he added, after kissing Alec and briefly resting his hand on Alec’s chest.

After the sealing of the rift and the death of Annaliese, Shadowhunters and Downworlders faced the daunting task of bringing the city back to some normalcy before daylight brought the mundanes out of their homes. With Annaliese dead, her loyal warlocks were easily captured or they voluntarily surrendered to the authority of The Clave. Kat and Magnus assisted those who had been compelled to join Annaliese against their will, and promised them quick release if they cooperated with The Clave in the investigation. Alec thought that it was fortunate that the Council now had Downworld representation; for that would ensure the fair treatment of those who had been forced to participate in Annaliese’s plan.

A little while later and after the situation in the square had quieted somewhat, Alec found Magnus standing by Annaliese’s body, the eyes of the dead warlock now close, her hair spilling like a cascade of black water on the stone floor, her horribly scarred face completely exposed. “She wasn’t born bad, you know,” Magnus said when he felt Alec’s presence beside him, and his voice carried unexpected sadness. “She wasn’t evil; she wasn’t even a very powerful warlock. In fact, I think that the demonic blood in her was rather weak. She was an innocent child once; a lost child like me; a child in need of love; a child that was abused and tortured by people who should have loved her.”

“I don’t believe anybody is born evil Magnus, no matter whose blood run through their veins” Alec responded. “We learn to hate and love as we navigate life. You loved Annaliese once, and perhaps in the time you were together, she experienced what love is like.” Magnus looked at Alec and smiled, and Alec smiled back, and Magnus could see not a thread of resentment or rapprochement in the eyes of the Shadowhunter.

“What is going to happen to her body?” Magnus asked.

“I don’t know yet, but I will make sure it is treated with respect,” Alec promised and was determined to keep that promise.

Thanks to Sarah, the warlock child, the mundane children remained completely oblivious to what had happened and they were quickly returned to their parents aboard their disabled cruise ship. After searching most of the night, Clary, Luke and the other Shadowhunters had finally located the vessel adrift in the middle of the Adriatic Sea, no warlocks or vampires left onboard.

Magnus, Kat and Catarina portalled onboard the ship and with no small amount of magic, and with the help of several Shadowhunter teams, made it appear that a terrible explosion had disabled the vessel and thrown some of its passengers overboard. They spellbound the surviving passengers and crew to forget anything connected to the shadow word they might have seen and to believe the story of the explosion. Before they portalled out, the Shadowhunters shot emergency flares in all directions alerting the mundane coast guard of the ship’s location. The news would report the incident the following day as an unfortunate and tragic accident that cost the lives of at least thirty passengers and crew, many of whom were still unaccounted for. The coast guard would search for
days but no bodies would be found.

As soon as the rift was sealed in Venice, the effects that the demonic poisoning had on vampires and werewolves also disappeared, making it easier for Raphael and the Venice vampire clans to bring the remaining of the rogue vampires under control. Very few of the vamps that Annaliese made survived and those who did had a long road ahead of them before they came to terms with their new reality.

Hours later, the first of the morning’s sunlight shone on the ancient floating city and found Magnus and Alec sitting by one of canals, their feet dangling over the edge and almost touching the greenish blue waters. They each held a cup of coffee which Magnus had magically materialized a few minutes before when he realized that neither him nor Alec could take another step without sustenance. They drank their coffees in silence, Alec’s eyes fixed on the gentle waves that barely seemed the disturb the calm surface of the water. Magnus looked up towards the morning sky and thought that Venice in Fall had its charms.

“Magnus, I love you more than I ever thought possible to love anyone,” Alec said after a moment, and he looked Magnus straight in the eyes, not a hint of hesitation or doubt in his expression. “I want to spend the rest of my life with you; I am sure of it. But you have to tell me about the effects of the spell you cast on us.”

Magnus smiled faintly and the smile contained not a small amount of hesitation, and Alec understood that Magnus was afraid of this conversation. “I don’t know for sure Alexander what effects it will have on you.”

“But you do know what effects it is having on you, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Magnus replied. “But I don’t know for sure whether the effects are permanent or reversible. Kat and Catarina believe that they might wear off and that, in time, I will go back to normal.” Magnus had noticed the effects of the spell a few days after leaving Alec in Barcelona. He had been in the bathroom in an apartment in Berlin to which Khuno and his warlocks had taken him. He had stepped out of the shower, his mind lost in thought, trying to come up with a way out of the impossible situation he was in. Without giving it much thought, he had glanced at his reflection in the mirror, and then he had had to look again.

Magnus remembered precisely the moment he realized he had stopped aging, the moment he knew he would look like a man in his late twenties for all eternity. He had seen it in his reflection in a mirror, the way the image the mirror returned to him seemed suddenly cold as if frozen somehow, as if immortality had transformed his reflection into a marble statue impervious to the ravages of time. Since then, every mirror had shown him a reflection that seemed like a photograph taken with a lens that colored it in an icy blue hue. However, when he looked in the mirror that morning in Berlin, his reflection hadn’t had that cold frozen quality. In fact, for the first time in three hundred years, his reflection seemed to glow with warmth, a warmth he had forgotten was possible. He had touched his reflection, a look of astonishment and surprise in his cat eyes, and at that moment, Magnus had understood that the clock that had stopped three hundred years before had somehow restarted. He was aging again, slowly, more slowly than normal mortals aged, but aging nonetheless. He should have been alarmed at the potential loss of his immortality, but somehow and for some reason, he wasn’t. For when he cast that spell, the spell that protected and entrusted Alec with his powers, the spell that bound him to a Shadowhunter, he had been willing to pay any price and accept any consequence.

“When will the effect wear off?” Alec asked now, apprehension evident on his face.

“Declan, the magic diagnostician, told me that the aging effect would go away when your life force
is no longer tied to mine Alexander.” Declan had been extremely puzzled by the spell and its effect. “What reason could you possibly have to cast such magic?” the old warlock had asked, and Magnus had understood that, in the same way that Annaliese could never believe that a Shadowhunter could love a warlock, Declan could never imagine that a warlock could love a mere mortal. “The spell is structured to wear off once your link to the Shadowhunter is severed, and I think it is meant to make you experience aging without aging becoming permanent,” Declan had declared, his voice unsurprisingly resembling the voice of a doctor.

“Does that mean that when I die you will revert to normal?” Alec asked.

“That is what Declan thought,” Magnus replied, his voice unconcerned and rather casual.

“And that doesn’t concern you Magnus? Alec asked surprised. “You could undo the spell now.”

Magnus reached for Alec’s hand and took it in his. “Alexander, I too love you more than I have ever loved anyone, and in my very long life, I have never desired to get old with anyone like I do with you. In fact, I find the prospect of experiencing what a finite life is like rather exiting. I want to get old, cranky, grey and wrinkled with you. Hopefully not bald though; I love my hair too much. If you would have me, I want to do all that with you.”

Alec smiled broadly and then kissed Magnus, the kiss full of promise and passion and, at that moment, it didn’t matter what life was yet to bring, or how many years he would get to spend with Magnus; for he was exactly where and with whom he wanted to be.

This chapter still needs some work, but I thought I would post it anyway.
"I love you Magnus," Alec said. At that moment, Magnus forgot his nostalgia for past lives, and only that moment with Alec's existed, only Alec's gentle touch, only the soft feel of his lips, and the sheltering sensation of his strong body.

Magnus put a few red seeds in Alec’s mouth, and Alec closed his eyes for a moment and let the sweet and tangy flavor of the fruit explode like tiny bubbles on his tongue, filling his mouth with the taste of sunshine. Alec inhaled deeply, and the mixture of the citrusy and flowery fragrance of the fruit and the sweet and creamy scent of orange blossoms filtering in through the window filled his senses. Alec had never had pomegranate before, the red rounded fruit with its hard shell and seeds that resembled rubies. But as the tiny arils filled his mouth with their juicy treasure, he thought that mother nature must have been thinking about making love on a warm starry night when she crafted the fruit. For its taste, scent and texture was perfect for a night in the arms of a lover.

Mesmerized, Magnus stared at Alec’s pleasure-filled face, and thought, not for the first time, that the Shadowhunter looked like an angel with his eyes closed, his face peaceful, his hair in disarray, and the gentle but suggestive smile that lifted the corner of his mouth. If Magnus could magically give Alec wings, he thought he would make them silver to reflect the sun and the shine in Alec’s eyes when he smiled.

When a tiny bead of juice escaped between Alec’s lips and colored them in exquisite vermillion, Magnus couldn’t resist any longer and hungrily and greedily claimed those lips for himself, the sweet taste of the fruit and of Alec mixing like an elixir that no sane person could resist. He kissed him with more passion than he had anticipated, his tongue and Alec’s starting a familiar dance in each other’s mouth, a dance that was an invitation and a promise.

“Again warlock?” Alec asked softly during a brief pause in their kissing a few minutes later, his eyes shining, his breathing shallow. “Aren’t you sleepy?”

“She’s not going to sleep, I know that,” Magnus replied and kissed him again, and this time he wrapped one leg around Alec’s hips and pulled him closer, wanting to melt into him and become one with Alec.

They had been in bed practically the whole time since when, hand in hand, they walked home from their visit to the palace the evening before. They had been pretty much cloistered in their bedroom; feeling no need for clothes on a night that was surprisingly warm considering that it was officially winter. They had made love with increasing abandon and surrender; rejoicing in a sense of completeness and connection that was already familiar. They had also talked, laughed and made plans.

At some point, Magnus’ stomach had growled loudly, and Alec had laughed. “I think it is time we get some food in you Magnus. I don’t want you to faint on me.” He had gotten out of bed and, after putting on a t-shirt and track pants, had gone to the kitchen. Magnus had heard him rummaging through the cupboards and the refrigerator, and a few minutes later, he had returned with a tray containing figs, oranges, grapes, cheese, bread and, of course, wine. They had eaten in
bed, and Alec had feed Magnus small morsels of cheese and bread dipped in olive oil and they had reminisced about their midnight picnic under the stars in the Atacama Desert all those weeks ago.

“I want to go back and visit Kat the next time we have a chance to get away,” Alec had told Magnus, and Magnus had said that would be a great idea because, surprisingly, he missed his friend since she went back home.

“What is this?” Alec had asked and had handed Magnus a pomegranate.

“Don’t tell me you have never had pomegranate,” Magnus had stated with surprise. “You cannot come to Granada and not eat pomegranate,” he had added. “In Spanish, this fruit bears the name of this part of the world.” With a simple spell, Magnus had to cut the fruit, removed its luminescent red seeds, and deposited them in a colorful ceramic bowl. Alec had given him a look of surprise and amazement, one of those looks that Alec gave him every time that Magnus performed magic for him in the intimacy of their shared life; one of those looks that told Magnus that Alec didn’t take his magic for granted, or felt entitled to it, the way so many Nephilim had done before. It wasn’t that Alec forgot that Magnus had powers; rather he never expected Magnus to do magic for him. Even when he hired Magnus’ services for Nephilim businesses, Alec always said ‘please’, ‘thank you’, and ‘only if you feel up to it’, which made Magnus feel both free to refuse and compelled to say yes.

Their trip back to Spain had been a surprising request by Alec. After weeks of nonstop efforts to sort out the mess that Annaliese Fen left behind; of trips to Idris to assist in the investigation and appear before the Council; of working incessantly to fix the almost unfixable relationship between the Children of the Angel and Lilith’s Children; of countless hours writing reports; of endless meetings to secure the release of wrongly imprisoned warlocks; of quick shared meals and of shared nights that were too short, Alec had finally asked that they go away for a few days.

“I think it is time we finish the vacation that Annaliese Fen so rudely interrupted,” Alec had stated one morning over breakfast a few days ago. “You still owe me Granada and the Alhambra, our last stop in our trip.”

“Can we take the time to go away?” Magnus had asked fully aware of how busy Alec was with the Institute, as well as how busy he, Magnus, was trying to mend things among the warlocks. He had smiled then realizing, not for the first time, how easily he had begun to speak of his and Alec’s life in the plural: our time, our work, our Saturday night plans. Life as a couple was a marvelous experience, one he had thought he would never again have.

“We must make the time,” Alec had declared, “or nobody is going to make the time for us.”

They had done precisely that. After leaving the Institute in the capable hands of Jace, Clary and Izzy, and rearranging their many commitments, they had portalled to Granada the day before. At Alec’s request, they had found a small apartment with a terrace and an unobstructed view of the Alhambra and the Sierra Nevada mountains. Alec had even arranged for groceries to be delivered. This would be a quiet and intimate getaway, he had told Magnus: home cooked meals, evening strolling the city or the palace, and absolutely no Shadowhunter or Downworld business.

After a simple meal out in the terrace, they had set out on foot up the hill towards the Alhambra palace. The day was sunny, warm and dry, so different from the winter scenery they had left in New York. As they walked along the trails that led up to the fortress, Magnus had told Alec stories of his previous visits to the Alhambra; of the many people, mundanes and downworlders, he had met in Spain over the centuries; of horseback rides from the coast, along the path that bordered the mountains to visit the Spanish court when it occupied the palace. He also told Alec of the work he did in the 1930s, when a group of archeologists and historians hired him to excavate some of the
palace’s original reflective pools. The pools had been buried by some of the people who had occupied the palace after the Moors were spelled from the region five hundred years before.

“Where you here when the Moors still occupied Granada Magnus?” Alec had asked when Magnus was telling him about the history of the Alhambra.

“Alexander, I know sometimes I pretend to be older than I am, but the truth is that I am not that old. The Moors were expelled from Granada in the fifteenth century, at least two hundred years before I was born.”

“I can’t imagine what it is like to speak of centuries as if they were decades,” Alec had commented as he looked up towards the palace’s walls. Magnus had said nothing because there was nothing he could say. Immortality was so hard to understand for those who didn’t get to experience it.

They had spent the rest of the afternoon walking along the rooms, corridors and inner courtyards of the Alhambra, admiring its breathtaking architecture, its column arcades, its fountains and reflecting pools in which water seemed to have been flowing nonstop for the last five hundred years. Magnus explained to Alec the value of the monument as an example of Islamic art, with its Arabic inscriptions, complicated mathematical patterns and intricate mosaics and wooden ceilings. He had told him about being hired once to translate some of the most obscured inscriptions and how that allowed him to spend a few weeks practically living in the palace. He spoke of his friend Gabriela, a young historian and artist, and of an evening picnic by one of the fountains with her, a picnic that included an inordinate amount of wine and that resulted in a few hours Magnus couldn’t completely account for.

Alec, as usual had laughed at Magnus’s stories, but for some reason, he seemed a little nervous or perhaps absent, as if his thoughts were only partially in the present.

As the sun begun to make its descend towards the horizon, the red bricks walls that made up the fortress, and the red clay that covered the nearby mountains had become almost luminescent and the landscape had been painted in the most spectacular tones of red and orange. “This is why the Moors called the palace Qalat Al-Hamra, The Red One,” Magnus had explained as he and Alec admired the scenery from one of the terraces. “The palace closes at sunset,” he added, “we should start heading down.”

“Can’t we not stay a little longer?” Alec had asked. “I can use glamor, or you can use magic to hide us.”

“Why Alexander! Are you proposing I use my powers to break the law? When did you turn into me?” Magnus had taken Alec by the hand and pulled him into a dark corner and with a flick of his fingers, had cast a spell that made them both invisible. “What should we do now?” he then asked, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

“I can think of a few things,” Alec had replied and pushing Magnus against the wall, had sought his lips for a kiss that left them both breathless. As he hooked his fingers on the belt loops of Alec’s jeans and pulled him closer to him, Magnus had thanked the universe for the simple invisibility spell that concealed them from the visitors that were slowly beginning to leave the palace. They had kissed long and slow as oblivious to the tourist as the tourist were to them. After a while, they had left their refuge and walked hand in hand towards the gardens that surrounded the palace, and after strolling along pathways and around fountains and flower beds for a while, they had reached a water fountain that stood in the middle of a knot garden.

“This is one of the fountains that I helped dig out,” Magnus had commented recognizing the intricate design. He looked at the beautiful water fountain with some nostalgia and wondered
whether Gabriela had completed its restauration, and then, remembering how much time it had passed, realized that his friend must have died decades ago.

Alec had stood behind Magnus and wrapped his arms around him, and Magnus had leaned back against the sturdy and sheltering body of the Shadowhunter. “Thank you for bringing me here Magnus,” Alec whispered in his ear. “I know that it is not always easy to revisit places that hold so many memories for you, but this trip feels like the end of a process for me, the closure of a stage and the beginning of another.”

Magnus had squeezed Alec’s hands but had said nothing. Alec was right, this felt like the beginning of a new phase in his life, or rather in their lives. Since they had returned to New York, they had rarely spoken about that night in Venice, or about the effects of the protection spell. Perhaps they felt there was nothing more to say; perhaps they were both still trying to sort out what everything meant, what their future would look like. They had walked back to their apartment at twilight, and Alec had not let go of Magnus’ hand despite the fact that they were no longer invisible. As soon as they walked in and closed the door, Alec had guided Magnus to the bedroom and had kissed him long, gently and passionately before slowly taking off his clothes.

“I love you Magnus,” he had said. At that moment, Magnus had forgotten his earlier nostalgia for past lives, and only that moment with Alec’s existed, only Alec’s gentle touch, only the soft feel of his lips, and the sheltering sensation of his strong body.

Magnus now took a few of the pomegranate seeds and sprinkled them over his own chest, the red little jewels gleaming in the soft glow of the many candles he had magically lighted around the room. He gave Alec a mischievous smile, his eyes issuing an invitation or perhaps a dare.

“Is this a challenge, warlock?” Alec asked with a mischievous smile of his own. He then licked one of the seeds off Magnus’ golden skin, and the breath caught in the warlock’s throat. But rather than continuing, Alec stopped, fixed his eyes on Magnus, gave him a teasing smile, and bit his own lower lip in that way that always made Magnus lose his train of thought.

“Oh, don’t tease me Shadowhunter,” Magnus retorted, his voice carrying a feigned tone of complain.

“I am sure you can find other enticing places to spill those seeds,” Alec whispered in Magnus’ ear. He chuckled softly when he saw the goosebumps rising is Magnus’ arms and the glamor vanishing from his eyes, gold taking over black as Magnus’ pupils constricted. Suddenly, Magnus’ eyes sparked as if they were precious stones, their shine competing with the red glow of the pomegranate seeds. Magnus smiled seductively, grabbed another handful of seeds and, just like Hansel did in the fairytale, began to drop them like breadcrumbs along a path, a trail that clearly demarcated all relevant landmarks in the geography of his body and which Alec was happy to traverse.

Alec slowly licked the seeds off Magnus’ skin, following the path the warlock showed him, the sweetness of skin and fruit mixing in his mouth, stoking the fire in the center of his being, that fire that never seemed to completely go out. When Alec thought that he was drunk in the sweet taste of fruit and Magnus, in the scent of forest and fresh mountain air from Magnus’ skin, Magnus wrapped his legs around Alec and shifting their positions, pinned him under his own body, the movement catching Alec by surprise.

“I love you,” Magnus whispered, his voice husky, his eyes like bottomless pools of gold honey.

“I love you too Magnus, always,” replied Alec, and entangling his fingers in Magnus’ hair, pulled him closer, seeking his lips.
They got lost then in the texture and taste of each other; in the urgency of their increasing desire; in
the sensations of their bodies moving together in a dance only people who truly love one another
can ever really master. They should have been surprised that, after making love almost nonstop
since they first walked into their room hours before, they could still feel such raging urgency for
one another, but they weren’t. Instead, they let themselves be carried away by the torrent of their
need, by the sounds of their passion which drown all other sound, and by the sight of their
pleasure-filled faces which erased everything else. When Alec saw that Magnus gripped the sheets
in an attempt to contain the climax he already knew was building like a volcano in the center of
Magnus’ being, a volcano that no amount of restrain or effort could stop from erupting, he let go of
his own attempts at self-control. His body began to move with increasing speed as he urged
Magnus to take flight with him, to let go of all ties to the world and allow himself to be transported
to that place between heaven and earth in which only they existed. When he heard Magnus calling
his name in a tempest of pleasure, he too orgasmed in a chain of loving promises whispered in the
warlock’s ear.

“Pomegranate is definitely my new favorite fruit,” Magnus whispered as his breathing settled, his
arms firmly wrapped around Alec, containing and anchoring him, as the last of the aftershocks
washed over the Shadowhunter.

They laid in silence for a while and after a few minutes, Alec’s breathing changed as he drifted off
to sleep, one arm wrapped around Magnus’ waist, his head resting on Magnus’ shoulder, his nose
in the hollow of Magnus’ neck. Magnus kissed him on the forehead, the gesture tender and almost
paternal and silently thanked him for insisting on this trip. They needed this, he thought: this time
without interruptions, without duty or responsibilities.

When he was certain that Alec was deep asleep, he slowly and quietly got up and after donning on
his black silk pajama bottoms and one of Alec’s t-shirts, he silently opened the French doors and
walked out onto the terrace. The full moon looked spectacular as it hung high on the sky, bigger
than usual, its silvery shine almost obscuring the lights that illuminated the Alhambra. The night
was quiet except for the seductive call of the nightingales. Magnus leaned on the veranda that
surrounded the terrace and contemplated the surprising turn his life had taken in the last few
months.

Previous to this trip, Magnus and Alec hadn’t really had any real time to themselves since, well
since those two days they disappeared from the face of the earth right after they returned to New
York from Venice. The days and nights following Annaliese’s death had been hectic to say the
least. The whole team had remained in Venice for a few days, helping with clean-ups and cover-ups
to ensure that mundanes remain oblivious to the Shadow World and to the crisis that had so
narrowly been averted. They had also welcomed the representatives of The Clave and the Head
Inquisitor who, as usual, arrived when it was too late to do anything productive, when it was no
longer dangerous for the Nephilim of Idris to step beyond their borders.

Magnus had always thought of himself as capable of adjusting to almost anything. He had, after all,
been born during a time and in a place without many of the amenities and comforts of the modern
world. However, after six days in an apartment with five Shadowhunters and another warlock, and
the constant interruptions of Nephilim walking in and out without regard for privacy, he had been
at the edge of insanity. It was funny, Magnus thought, that an apartment that had seemed spacious
when he and Alec had stayed there, seemed to be full to bursting when the whole team occupied it.

Magnus had always found Alec’s fastidious attention to order, cleanliness and tidiness endearing,
but that didn’t mean that he was prepared to live with four other Shadowhunters with the same
habits. It was just too much. And then, there had been the lack of privacy; the people sleeping on
sofas and in sleeping bags in the hallway; the arguments over whose turn it was to use the
bathrooms; the constant teasing because Magnus spent too much time doing his hair. Magnus had never had siblings; had never really had a family, and the last time he had lived with others it had been in Annaliese’s plantation in Batavia. As a result, he was not prepared and had no inclination to live in close quarters with a bunch of Nephilim.

He and Alec hadn’t had a single moment to themselves during those few days. He was all into adventure, but there was no way that he would make love to Alec with all those Shadowhunters sleeping right outside their door, and most nights Alec had been too tired for sex anyway. They had, at the end, resorted to stolen kisses, evening strolls through the city, the brushing of fingers when passing in the hallway, and looks of longing from across the room. Magnus had felt that he was back in time, back when platonic love, looks of desire that promised more than delivered, and little somethings whispered in the ear was the most common way in which people expressed romantic feelings for one another.

There had also been the stares from some of the other Nephilim, the looks of rejection and even revulsion when they saw Alec and Magnus together, and which had reminded Magnus of the bigotry and prejudice of some of the Angel’s Chosen. In front of Magnus, Alec had pretended not to notice, but Magnus knew that Alec had gotten into more than one heated argument over their relationship. Magnus wondered about the effect of their relationship on Alec’s career and reputation as a Shadowhunter.

Magnus had already decided to return to New York by himself when Alec finally announced that they were going home. Magnus loved Venice, had loved it at different points in its history, and had never imagined that he would want to leave the city with such eagerness.

“Take me home,” Alec had whispered in Magnus’ ear as soon as they had stepped onto the New York Institute’s roof. Turning to his parabatai, Alec had asked Jace to look after things for a couple of days and to not call unless the sky was falling on the Institute, and only if they couldn’t figure out how to hold it up.

“Remember that I haven’t been back in my penthouse since we left for Europe last summer,” Magnus had mentioned as he and Alec walked towards the subway. “Forgive the mess.”

At the end, there hadn’t been any mess. Catarina, who had returned to New York with Luke and Raphael a couple of days after the battle, had been by and had tidied up and stocked the refrigerator and cupboards with food. However, Magnus didn’t think it would have mattered much if his place had been in ruins. For as soon as Magnus closed the door behind them, Alec turned and grabbing him by the lapel of his jacket, pushed him with unbelievable strength and certainty against the wall. He then kissed Magnus with a passion and hunger that took Magnus’ breath away and with surprising urgency reached for his belt buckle.

“I couldn’t have stayed one more day in that crowded apartment,” Alec said when he took a break from kissing Magnus a moment later. “I wanted you so badly that I thought I was going to go crazy.”

It was Magnus then the one who had grabbed Alec by his shirt and turning, pinned him against the wall rejoicing in the feel of Alec’s strong and tall body against his own. “I know exactly how you feel Alexander” he said as, with his lips and tongue, he began to trace maddening lines along Alec’s neck, breathing in the mixture of lemon, soap and desire in Alec’s skin. Alec had caught fire and Magnus had burned, and at an almost blinding speed, they had peeled each other’s clothes off searching for the feel and taste of each other’s skin. In minutes, they laid naked on the soft rug Magnus had bought for his hallway during a trip to India, and they were moving at the rhythm of their uncontained need and passion, searching for a quick release to their accumulated longing.
They had possessed one another hastily and with a hunger that made them almost clumsy, and before their minds had a chance to catch up, they had had been climaxing with such intensity that Magnus was sure the neighbors would evict him for disturbing the peace of the building.

Afterwards, Magnus had gotten to his feet, had reached for Alec’s hand, and had guided him to the bedroom. By soft candlelight, he had spent the remaining of the night savoring Alec slowly and unhurriedly, and Alec had savored him in the same way. For the next two days and two nights, the apartment had become a place of magic and Magnus and Alec its magic inhabitants. Their room became a place in which gravity didn’t always behave as expected; a place without glamor or disguises; a place of shooting stars and tiny full moons, of golden magic lines obscuring runes, reaching out from fingers in search of connection and home.

They had spent two days and two nights completely oblivious to everything else going on in the world, lost in a universe of their own design in which only the other existed and mattered. Alec had, as usual, been as demanding as he had been generous and with his habitual open heart had given and taken pleasure from Magnus in equal measure, possessing and allowing himself to be possessed with no need to dominate or submit. He had laughed openly and wholeheartedly with Magnus’ stories and had been, as usual, caring and gentle, bringing Magnus coffee or food, brushing the hair away from his forehead and wrapping his arms around him when they sat on the sofa. He had also been adventurous and inventive in his lovemaking and, once again, Magnus had been surprised that someone for whom this was his very first experience, someone who just a few months ago had been closeted, could be so comfortable with this new intimacy. “I have a good teacher” Alec had answered when Magnus commented on it.

“Can I meet him?” Magnus had teasingly asked.

In those two days, Magnus and Alec had healed the last of the wounds the previous few months had inflicted on them, and by the time Magnus found Alec making coffee and breakfast on the third morning, fully dressed in his usual Shadowhunter clothes, the last barriers Magnus had erected around his heart were a distant memory.

“Can I come back after work tonight?” Alec had asked as he handed Magnus a piece of toast with butter and jam. The question had sounded like a plea, as if Alec didn’t feel entitled to Magnus’ space or company; as if he was giving Magnus a way out, an opportunity, however unnecessary, to say no, to set boundaries, to put distance between them; as if he was offering his heart without the expectation that Magnus would take it.

“Move in,” Magnus had replied without thinking or planning, because it was the most natural of things to suggest; because he wanted to build a home with Alec; because he knew that only with Alec his life felt right. Alec had smiled broadly and had hugged Magnus tightly.

“I will see you tonight,” he had said and had kissed Magnus at the door. Since then, Alec’s clothes—all of them in the same tones of grey and black—occupied a small corner of Magnus’ walk-in closet; his toothbrush had found a home beside Magnus’ in the bathroom; and Alec’s black socks cheerfully spin with Magnus’ more colorful ones in the dryer. Magnus had even emptied the closet by his front door, so Alec could store his weapons when he came home after a night of shadowhunting.

Magnus had lived a long time and would likely live for many centuries still. Yet, with Alec, he felt that his life had found containment, an anchor, something to tether him and keep him from being blown away by the unceasing winds of time. He was in love, he had known it for a long time, and looked forwards to a long life with Alec. Yet, as he now looked up at the moon, he couldn’t help thinking that perhaps Alec was being shortchanged in the arrangement. Alexander was a mortal,
someone with a limited number of decades to experience life. He, Magnus, had lived so many
lifetimes, had seen so many mortals come and go and, thus, had a sense of how short and fragile
mortal life was, how little time mortals had to experience living. He had been Alec’s first and only
relationship, his first date, his first kiss, his first lover. When Magnus had asked Alec to move in
with him, he had also asked him to give up his freedom, to close the door to the possibility of other
relationships. It wasn’t that Magnus had asked Alec to be just with him. He didn’t need to ask; he
knew that it was in Alec’s nature to be faithful. But perhaps Alec deserved to experience more, to
live more, to go on adventures, to taste other lips and be in other arms. The thought of Alec being
with someone other than him caused Magnus deep despair and a feeling of possessiveness that was
new to him. Still, he didn’t want Alec to look back on his life one day and wish he had done more,
seen more, feel more.

“What are you thinking Magnus?” Alec asked from the doorway, his voice a little hoarse and still
heavy with sleep. He was putting on a t-shirt over his track pants. As he approached Magnus, he
rubbed the sleep from his eyes with the back of his hand. He then looked up at the moon as
Magnus had done before, and the sight of his moonlighted face took Magnus’ breath away. Once
again, he thought that Alec looked like an angel, and something in his heart melted and spread
surprising warmth throughout his body.

“Nothing,” he replied. “I thought you were asleep.”

“I woke up and you were not there,” replied Alec and the words and the expression on his face
reminded Magnus of just how young Alec truly was. Alec put one hand over Magnus’ which rested
on the edge of the veranda, “The moon is beautiful, and you look beautiful under its glow,” Alec
added and, placing his other hand on Magnus’ cheek, kissed him slowly, lovingly and fervently.
Magnus rested his free hand on Alec’s chest and through his shirt felt Alec’s heart beating at the
same steady rhythm as its echo on the omamori mark on his own chest. They kissed for a long
time, neither of them feeling the need to take things further, contented in the taste and feel of each
other’s lips, and in the sensations of each other's touch.

“I want to ask you something, Magnus,” Alec said after a long while of kissing. He then turned and
looked out towards the distance, his shoulder touching Magnus’, one hand still resting on Magnus’
hand.

“Sure” Magnus replied offhandedly as he too followed Alec’s gaze, apparently oblivious to the
nervousness that had crept into Alec’s voice.

“You know that I love you and that I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I am wondering
whether you would consider being just with me for the foreseeable future. I mean I know that you
have had many relationships before, men and women, and I would understand if you don’t want to
be exclusively with me, but if you do…” His voice trailed off a little, as if he was unsure how to
proceed, and Magnus realized that Alec was unusually nervous, and that his voice contained a tone
of uncertainty he hadn’t heard in a long time.

“I love you too Alexander, and I don’t want to be with anyone else. I told you I am a one-soul-at-
the-time kind of man. Why are bringing this up now?”

“Because if you think that you could be with me for the rest of my life, I wonder if you would
consider asking me to marry you.” With shaking hands, Alec took a small black box from his
pants’ pocket and presented it to Magnus.

“What?” Magnus asked. He looked down at the box and then back at Alec as if doing a double
take to ensure that he had heard correctly. He took the box but didn’t open it.
“I would like you to ask me to marry you Magnus,” Alec replied, his voice considerably more certain than it had been when this conversation started.

“Alexander, marriage is a big commitment, especially for a Nephilim…”

“I know that,” Alec interrupted. “That is why I want us to do it. I want everybody to know that what we have is serious, as serious as any marriage. I mean, we are already closer than most married couples are. Our lives are already bonded together…”

“But that doesn’t mean that we have to get married,” Magnus retorted. “I didn’t cast that spell so you would stay with me forever, Alexander.”

“I am not with you because you cast that spell Magnus. Let’s agree that neither of us owes the other anything. Let’s agree that we are together because we both want this. Unless, of course, you don’t want to…” Alec’s voice trailed off again and Magnus’ heart broke a little seeing the sudden uncertainty creeping into Alec’s voice.

“Alexander,” he hastily said. “I love you, you must never doubt that, and if you would have me, I want to build a long life with you. I told you, I look forward to getting old, grey and wrinkled with you. But we don’t need marriage for that, and you are still so young. How do you know this is what you want? I mean how do you know that one day you won’t want someone else? I am your first relationship, you may want to experience other relationships.” His earlier thoughts suddenly weighted heavily in Magnus’ mind, and despite knowing how much it would hurt him, he was certain that he didn’t want to rob Alec of any chances to live life to the fullest.

“I may be young in comparison to you, Magnus,” Alec stated, all uncertainty gone from his voice, “and I may not have all the life experiences you have. I will never know what it is like to count life in centuries, but I know my own heart. This is what I want. I want you to be my life partner. I don’t want or need anyone else, and I don’t want anybody, Nephilim, mundane or downworlders, to ever doubt my commitment to you.”

“But marriage Alexander?” Magnus asked, a knot lodging itself in his throat.

“I plan to marry only once in my life Magnus, and I want to do it with you. I want my people to recognize and honor what we have,” Alec replied, his voice full of unquestionable conviction.

“Are you sure? I am not the best choice for a Shadowhunter’s husband.”

“Do you say that because you are a man?” Alec asked. “I thought we were past that.”

“No just because of that, you must know,” Magnus replied.

“Because you are a warlock then.”

“That too…and because I am not white. I mean, you must know that a marriage with me will raise eyebrows among the Nephilim. Many will object to one of Idris’ most beloved sons, a member of a prominent and respectable Shadowhunter family to marry someone who is a warlock, a man and not white, it can’t get any more unconventional than that! What would your parents say? What would this mean for your career?”

“Magnus,” Alec replied, and as if to quiet his concerns, rested his hand on Magnus’ chest, the familiar echo of two heartbeats reminding him of the unbreakable bond between them. “I see everything about you, and I love all of it. I love you because, and not despite, the fact that you are a man of color who is also a magic-maker. Can you love me with everything that I am, despite belonging to a society that still needs to change so much, despite the limitations of my mortal life?
If you do, I promise that I will make sure my family and the rest of my people accept us. It is time the Nephilim got over their prejudices, racism and sense of superiority. But if you don’t want to ask me to marry you because you are not sure, I will understand.” Alec looked down at his hand resting atop Magnus’ chest, and the sadness in his expression stirred something in the pit of Magnus’ stomach.

“Why do you want me to ask you? You could ask me,” Magnus said, and his eyes searched for Alec’s eyes, enticing him to look at him again.

“Because I want this partnership to be between equals,” Alec replied. “I know that the Nephilim have treated you as if you were inferior, as if you had no choice but to serve them and do what they asked. This is my own imperfect way of telling you that I will never behave like that with you. You don’t have to ask me if you are not ready; I just want you to know that if and when you do feel ready, I will say yes because there is nothing else I want more in the world.”

Magnus took a deep breath and smiled because, at that moment, he couldn’t find any words to convey the feelings that were making his heart beat faster and his thoughts race. As he had seen Alec do in his encounters with other Downworlders, Alec wanted him to know that he had rights and power in their relationship, that he could say no, or make his own choices independently from what he, Alec, wanted. In his own peculiar way, Alec was relinquishing control to Magnus. Magnus looked down at the small black box in his hand, the box that Alec had handed to him with shaking hands. He opened it and inside, nestle if black velvet, he found two rings, two simple white gold wedding bands, heavy and sturdy, without adornment or jewels, but solid just like Alec.

“I saw them in the jewelry store on Ponte Vecchio in Florence when we were there during our vacation,” Alec explained. “I told the jeweler to hold them for me and meant to go back to get them, but then things happened, and our life took a turn. Last week, I asked Catarina to portal me back. I know they are not as glamourous as you are used to, but I wanted them to match and I cannot wear anything too intricate while I am at work and I don’t want to have to take mine off every time I need to wear gear. If you don’t like them, we can choose something else…”

“They are perfect,” Magnus interrupted, and he was suddenly seeing Alec through a thin veil of tears. He swallowed and took a deep breath to rein in his emotions and steady his hand. He then looked up into Alec’s eyes and smiled.

“Alexander Lightwood,” he said, his voice a little shaky, the small black box opened in his hand, the wedding bands reflecting the light from the full moon. “Would you do me, Magnus Bane, the great honor of accepting my hand in marriage? If you say yes, I promise to love you for the rest of my life.”

Alec smiled broadly and brightly, and, for a moment, the smile almost outshined the full moon. “Yes, Magnus Bane, I would,” he replied and touched his forehead to Magnus’ as if wanting to convey that their union would be of heart, body and mind. “I promise to love, honor and protect you with my very life and for as long as I draw breath,” he added, his voice carrying the full force of a solemn oath.

Alec and Magnus would marry by mundane, warlock and Nephilim law two years later, and would profess their commitment in vows of love and loyalty in front of all their friends and family. It would take them that long to marry because Alec would spend that time making sure that Nephilim law recognized their bond and their union as equal to any other Nephilim marriage. Theirs would be the first of many such unions that over the years, decades and centuries would slowly change not only the make-up of Nephilim society, but also the relationship between the different peoples that made up the Shadow World.
Yet when, over the years, people asked them about the moment when their relationship was decided, they would not speak of their wedding, or of the night when Alec brought Magnus back from the grip of death by using the magic bond that existed between them. Rather, it would this night and these words that they would recall as the moment when their bond was sealed. They would remember this night under a full moon as the moment when their destinies became one. As Alec closed the distance between him and Magnus and tenderly kissed him, his hand still resting on Magnus’ chest, the reassuring sensation of his and Magnus’ hearts beating as one, he knew that he would spend the rest of his life doing everything in his power to make sure that Magnus never regretted trusting him with his heart and his life.

Magnus wrapped his arms around Alec’s waist and pulled him closer, and for the first time in his very long life, he was not afraid of what the future would bring because he was no longer alone, no longer an orphan, no longer an abandoned child without home or kin. For Alec had claimed him, recognized him as equal, beckoned him to become his partner in life, and in the process, Alec became his home, his country and his kin.
Epilogue: Reborn in You

Chapter Summary

Alec loved Magnus every minute of every day. He loved him with a passion and a tenderness that knew no end, and after all they had gone through together, after all the battles and wars, big and small, he still loved him like the first day.

Alec squinted as he tried to see his own image in the full-length mirror and with shaking hands, hands that sometimes he had a hard time recognizing as his own, did up the buttons of his tunic.

“Did you forget your glasses again Alexander?” Magnus asked, and Alec saw his husband’s reflection in the mirror, clear, sharp and young. Magnus was standing behind him, and his sleek black hair glittered in the sunshine coming through the window. Alec’s eyes met Magnus’ and Alec saw, not only love and warmth, but also compassion in those lovely cat eyes.

“I told you Magnus that I can manage without glasses,” he replied sharply. He tried to imbue certainty and perhaps some indignation in his voice but couldn’t quite manage it. His voice sounded foreign, hoarse somehow, and too quiet to be the voice of a respected Shadowhunter leader. He squinted again, trying to make up his features in the mirror, but all that the glass returned to him was a blurry tall and slim figure, and the silvery reflection of the sunlight in his almost completely white hair. “Darn it,” he muttered under his breath, his voice now frustrated rather than outraged. He hated it when Magnus was right, which happened more and more often lately.

“You missed one,” Magnus said with a faint mocking tone and then pointed to the first button, the one near the collar of Alec’s shirt. “And why are you wearing white?” he asked.

Alec run shaking fingers down the front of his shirt, feeling for the button hole he had missed, until he reached the last one, the only one missing a button. Now he would have to undo and redo all them, he thought with deep frustration. “I know I missed one; you don’t have to tell me,” he said, and knew that he now sounded like a petulant child. “And, I wear white because I am in mourning, don’t you remember?” He reached for his cane which hung from a peg by the side of the mirror, and leaning on it, turned and took a couple of steps towards the night table where his glasses laid.

“I hate these darn things,” he complained as he settled the glasses on his nose. “Shadowhunters are not supposed to have poor vision, we are supposed to be immune to things like blindness.”

“Shadowhunters are not supposed to live as long as you either Alexander,” Magnus replied and placed a steady hand on Alec’s shoulder, the gentle, loving and youthful smile clearer now that Alec could see better. Magnus was beautiful, as beautiful as he had been when he and Alec married all those years ago, his hair as stylish and glittery as ever, his eyes shining in that way only the eyes of the young shine, his steadying hand strong and soft, as it had always been every time he touched Alec. For a fleeting moment, Alec wondered how come Magnus suddenly looked so young, but then realized he didn’t care. He had loved Magnus at all ages.

“You are right,” Alec replied and smiled, his hand reaching and resting atop Magnus’ on his shoulder. “Shadowhunters are not supposed to live to be three hundred and eighty-two years old. I forget sometimes that I am a freak of nature.”
At the end, neither Alec nor Magnus could predict the effect of the spell that Magus cast to protect Alec and his own powers from Annaliese Fen. Neither of them could have predicted that, in the same way that the spell that joined their life forces allowed Magnus to experience aging, it also allowed Alec to experience some of what immortality was like. The spell was unique and no one, no warlock and no Silent Brother, had been able to uncover all its mysteries. Neither had anyone been able to replicate its magic. What remained a certainty, however, was that, on account of the spell, aging had arrived slowly for Alec and Magnus, more slowly than anyone expected. The years and eventually the centuries had settled at a snail pace in Alec and Magnus’ reflections in the mirror, in thin slivers of grey and silver, and faint and then no so faint furrows on their skin.

Alec still remembered the smile, a mixture of surprise and dismay, that rose to Magnus’ lips when he saw the first gray hairs at his temples, and how much he contemplated whether he should color them or hide them with magic. Alec had been standing behind him, their eyes locked in their reflection, and when Magnus asked his opinion, Alec had hugged him from behind and Magnus had leaned against him, and he had told Magnus that he liked the grey, that it made him look respectable and handsome. They had been married almost a hundred years then, and Alec had already felt the weight of sorrow that came with a quasi-immortal life, the endless chain of loss and change that was part of a life than went on beyond what was expected or possible.

“That was a difficult time for us, wasn’t it?” Magnus asked now as Alec redid the buttons on his bereavement tunic.

“Yes, it was,” Alec replied. “You punished yourself for giving me this gift I never asked for.”

“And you were mourning and didn’t always know where to put all that grief,” Magnus replied.

“So were you Magnus,” Alec said, “we both lost so much that first century.” Alec hadn’t really understood what Magnus’ immortal life was like until he experienced the loss and grief that came from losing so many of his loved ones. Overtaken by sorrow, he and Magnus had gone away for a few years and had sought refuge with Kat in a small village by the sea near the Atacama Desert. They had lived in a small house, no bigger than a cottage, and had gotten a dog with whom they run and played on the beach. Alec had left the Shadowhunters for a while, until a new demonic war brought them both back home and returned him to the ranks of the Nephilim.

“But we also had good times and good things, didn’t we?”

“Yes, we did,” Alec replied and smile wistfully. “Remember the lovely laughs of children that filled our home back then, the sound of small feet running up and down corridors, the endless mishaps as Iara and Madzie mastered their spells, and the constant search for Shinzō’s stele? That boy would have lost his head if it hadn’t been attached to his neck.”

“Oh yes, I remember,” replied Magnus. “And remember the endless teenage years? I never thought that it would be possible for a few years to feel like an eternity, especially with Christopher. If it hadn’t been for the steady and calming influence of his parabatai, that boy would have ended up a delinquent.”

“It wasn’t just Shinzō’s influence Magnus,” Alec stated and looked at Magnus with loving and proud eyes. “That boy adored you and looked up to you his whole life. He was the one among our four children who had the hardest time dealing with his condition as an adopted child. He was so small when we rescued him from the ruins of the Santiago Institute after that nasty incident with those rogue vampires, so small when we brought him home, but he still felt the absence of his biological parents. You helped him, and he loved you unconditionally because of that. You were a good dad Magnus.”
“And you were a good father Alexander.”

“It was because we had each other,” Alec added. “Through the good and the bad, through the loss and the rebuilding, through grief and joy, we had each other. I am sorry if I didn’t tell you more often, but I never regretted you giving me the gift of a long life.”

“Consul Lightwood?” came a voice from downstairs, the Idris accent clearly audible in a young man’s voice.

“Why do people always confuse me with my father? Or is it my daughter they are confusing me with?” asked Alec under his breath.

“They are not confusing you with anyone old man,” Magnus said. “You hold the title of Consul. In fact, you occupied the role twice, don’t you remember?”

“Of course, I remember,” Alec replied as he donned on his formal Shadowhunter jacket. “I wish I could forget it.”

With slow steps, Alec made his way down the stairs and on the landing, he took a moment and glanced out the enormous window that provided natural light to the house. Through it he saw the crisp white peaks of the Idris mountains, and in the distance, the demon towers that for more than a thousand years had protected the glass city. Idris was beautiful this time of year, he thought, and was glad that, after three centuries of travelling and serving in Institutes all over the world, he and Magnus had chosen this part of the world to retire.

“It was a semi-retirement Alexander,” Magnus said as he leaned against the banister and too looked out the window. “You loved teaching at the Idris academy.”

“And you loved doing research there too,” Alec added and smiled, “and it kept you out of trouble.”

“Consul Lightwood, we should get going,” said the young voice from the bottom of the stairs. “Consul Lightwood-Bane is waiting for you.”

“Okay, okay, I know Iara doesn’t like waiting. Patience has never been my daughter’s virtue,” Alec said as he slowly continued down the stairs. The young Shadowhunter climbed a few steps and held out his arm to support Alec, but Alec refused with a dismissive gesture. He could still manage the stairs by himself, he thought. He looked back at Magnus who was still standing on the landing and saw the reproach on his face. Considering that he was an immortal, Magnus had aged with so much more grace than Alec. After he got over the initial surprise, he never minded the wrinkles, the grey hair, the cracking joins, the slowing of his movements; neither did he mind it when people offered their arm for support, or their seat in the subway, or when his assistant handed him his glasses when he squinted to read a manuscript. Thankfully, neither of them had gone bald; that would have been a tragedy for Magnus. Yes, Alec thought as he reached the last of the steps and stopped to catch his breath, Magnus had aged with so much more grace. Perhaps it was because he knew it would be temporary.

“What is this thing we are going to?” he asked the young man that Iara had sent to escort him to the glass city.

“Don’t you remember?” the young man asked. “Today is the unveiling of the monument and the opening of the Magnus Bane Downworld Library.”

“Oh yes,” replied Alec and looking back at Magnus, saw the look of self-satisfaction and pride in
the warlock’s eyes. “What is you name young Shadowhunter?” Alec asked trying to ignore Magnus as, with springy and light steps, he almost run down the stairs. Show off, he thought.

“I am Jonathan Herondale, sir.”

“I should have guessed,” Alec stated adjusting his glasses to take a better look at the young man with the red hair, the same tone as Clary’s, and the golden eyes that reminded him so much of Jace. “I can see the resemblance to your ancestors.”

“Thank you, sir,” young Jonathan replied. “Jace Herondale and Clary Fray were my great, great, great grandparents. If you follow me, I have a portal already opened.”

“How are you father?” asked Iara when Alec stepped out of the portal and onto the courtyard of the Idris Shadowhunter Institute less than a minute later. Iara hugged him gently and lovingly, her silver blue eyes and her long sleek silver blue hair reflecting the sunshine as if they were made of precious metals. Not for the first time, Alec wondered how his youngest daughter could look so different, yet resemble Izzy so much, with her warrior demeanor and her no-nonsense attitude.

“We are good, happy to see you.”

“I am happy to see you too,” his daughter replied and taking Alec by the arm guided him towards the center of the courtyard where a small stage stood beside what looked like a giant canvas-covered ghost.

“Madzie is here,” Iara said as she slowly guided her father towards his seat. “She portalled from the New York Institute just a couple of minutes ago.”

A second later, Alec was wrapped in the warm and loving embrace of Madzie Lightwood-Bane, the oldest of his children. “How are you sweetheart? How are things back home? The children?” he asked as he placed his hand against his daughter’s cheek. As usual, Madzie dressed to impress in a tailored Shadowhunter suit that he was sure concealed more than one weapon, a red silk scarf covering her warlock mark, the only color in her otherwise completely black outfit. Madzie didn’t look older than twenty-five, and her tight black curls stylishly fell half way down her back. Madzie had looked twenty-five for over three hundred years, and she was beautiful, with a fierce expression that reflected her Shadowhunter bravery and that Alec thought she had inherited from him, and the sense of style and elegance she had inherited from her dad.

“Everybody is well back home father. How are you?”

“Getting older by the minute,” he replied as they sat on seats that were obviously reserved for the guests of honor.

Suddenly, he was surrounded by people and he had to stand up again and shake hands and receive embraces from old and young Shadowhunters, Shadowhunters that called him grandfather in the same loving way that they called Magnus grandpa, the many ‘greats’ that should accompany the title all but forgotten in the name of simplicity. He saw in some of the faces the familiar thoughtful blue eyes that were Christopher’s, and the intelligent almond-shaped eyes and fine features that were Shinzō’s. The years and centuries, and their effect on memory, made it hard to keep track of all his descendants, but seeing so many gave him a sense of completion and accomplishment that filled his heart to bursting.

“Many of our relatives have made the trip for this joyful occasion,” Madzie commented. “Isn’t that nice?”
Alec looked around, searching for more familiar faces in the crowd that was gathering for the unveiling, and saw so many faces with features that reminded him of Jeremy, Izzy, Jace and Clary: sleek black manes of hair, golden eyes, and red curls. So many generations of descendants gathering in one place. And then, there were the downworlders, some wearing Shadowhunter gear, others in civilian clothes. “This is a society so different from the one I was born into,” he commented under his breath.

“In many ways, Idris is what it is thanks to you and dad; you broke through many barriers” Madzie stated, and Alec remembered that one of his daughter’s powers was surprisingly sharp hearing.

A portal opened under a protective roof at the back of the courtyard and Raphael Santiago walked through it, his friend looking as young and handsome as ever in his black suit. Thanks to a new protection spell that Kat and her assistant had recently developed, he could stand in the daylight for a short time, and only as long as he stayed in the shade. Several Shadowhunters stood up and went to greet him with loving embraces, and Alec was sure that those Shadowhunters also called Raphael grandfather, despite the fact that the vampire didn’t look a day older than twenty-five.

It had been so hard for Raphael when Izzy left him, Alec remembered; when she disappeared, and he didn’t hear from her for months. Alec and the whole team had left no stone unturned looking for her until a note arrived at the Institute in Izzy’s handwriting. “I am fine and safe; take care of Raphael while I am gone,” the note said.

Izzy had been true to her word; she had returned three months later with the casual demeanor of someone who had just gone out to the store. Shortly after, she and Raphael announced that they were getting married and less than six months later, they welcomed the twins, the Lightwood-Santiago twins; brother and sister; Shadowhunters through and through; fierce and brave just like their mother. Raphael had cried like a child when he held his children for the first time and Alec and Magnus had put their hands on his shoulder. No one ever mentioned Izzy’s disappearance and no one, Nephilim or downworlder, ever dared question Raphael’s parentage of those children.

Raphael now looked in Alec’s direction, smiled and nodded his head in greeting.

“Look at that proud man,” Magnus whispered in Alec’s ear. “Who would have thought that he would make such a good family man.”

Someone announced that the ceremony was about to begin, and people began to take their seats. Alec looked at Magnus sitting beside him and saw a familiar look of excitement and pride in his lovely young face as he adjusted his hair style and run his hand though the front of his jacket, checking to make sure that nothing in his stylish outfit was out of place. After almost four hundred years, Magnus’ lovely face and the twinkle in his eyes still managed to stir the butterflies in the pit of Alec’s stomach. He had loved Magnus every minute of every day of those centuries. He had loved him with a passion and a tenderness that knew no end, and after all they had gone through together, after all the battles and wars, big and small, he still loved him like the first day.

“Ladies and gentlemen.” Iara’s lovely voice recalled Alec to the present and he turned towards the stage where his daughter, Consul Lightwood-Bane, commanded the attention of the audience. “It is my great pleasure to welcome all of you here today as we honor the legacy of Magnus Bane and Alec Lightwood, and we inaugurate the Magnus Bane Downworld Library. This is a distinct pleasure for me and my sister, Madzie Lightwood-Bane, current Head of the New York Institute, because, as you know, Magnus and Alec are our fathers.” Iara looked in Alec’s direction, and her smile was loving and tender.

“Did you know that she is dating that girl, what’s her name?” Magnus whispered beside him.
“Shush,” Alec said. “Her name is Ariché, she is Kat’s assistant and a powerful warlock in her own right,” he whispered back.

“She always had good taste, just like her dad,” said Magnus, a proud smile curving his lips.

Madzie squeezed Alec’s hand as if trying to recall his attention to the ceremony and Alec looked at her and smiled indulgently. Madzie had always been the sensible one among the children; the responsible one; the one that never gave them any trouble; the one currently married to a respectable Shadowhunter and raising adopted children of her own.

After a long while of what seemed like endless speeches from prominent Shadowhunters and Downworlders, all of whom spoke glowingly about Magnus and his contribution to Nephilim and Downworld society, and to the betterment of the world as a whole, Iara finally came back on stage. “It is my great pleasure,” she said again, “to invite my father, Alec Lightwood to the stage to say a few words and unveil the monument that will stand at the entrance of this important building.”

Before he knew it, Alec was standing up and slowly walking up to the stage, Madzie’s steady hand on his elbow, his wooden cane marking every slow step with a tap on the ground. And then he was standing in front of all those people and he remembered that he had never liked speaking in public or giving speeches. This had always been Magnus’ area of expertise. Magnus had always written his speeches on those occasions when Alec couldn’t get out of an official function and was required to say a few words. He looked around with an expression of confusion or perhaps disorientation, but then Iara handed him the end of a rope and he pulled on it, the canvas falling and revealing the effigy that would stand for all eternity in front of the building bearing his husband’s name.

Alec looked up at the enormous marble statue and the breath caught in his throat. There in a gigantic scale stood the unmistakable figures of Magnus and him, looking the way they had when they appeared not older than thirty. Magnus had his hands in front of him and by some magic trick, blue and red light streamed from between his fingers, and Alec stood beside him, his bow in hand, his quiver strapped to his back, in the eternal posture of a warrior. For an instant, Alec wondered whether the monument was meant to depict their confrontation with Annaliese; or whether it commemorated any other of the many battles he and Magnus had fought in their very long lives. At the end, it didn’t matter, he thought; for the monument was a startling reminder of everything he had lost and gained in his very long life with Magnus.

“Father, you should say a few words,” Iara whispered beside him, calling Alec once again back to the here and now.

Alec looked out towards the crowd and cleared his throat. “Thank you all for coming,” he said, his voice hoarse and heavy with emotions. “This really is a great honor for us…”

His voice trailed off as he glanced towards where Madzie sat in the front row, a sad smile on her face. He shifted his glance towards the empty seat beside her and his heart missed a beat. “Such a long life,” he went on, his voice acquiring a wistful tone, “Magnus told me once that life is like a journey without return and that years are like the ever-growing luggage we accumulate and carry with us. My luggage is jam-packed with years of love and joy. Yet despite being longer than I ever imagined, my life still feels too short. It seemed that it was just yesterday that I met Magnus, that we got married, that we built a life and a family together,” Alec squeezed Iara’s hand gently, as if wishing to borrow some of the steadiness of her daughter’s youth. “As you know,” he said and then paused to swallow the sob raising from the depth of his being, “I lost Magnus six months ago, he was taken from me and now I don’t know how to go on without him.”

Suddenly, Alec was seeing the crown as if through a veil and before he could stop himself, he was
back to that horrific night in New York six months before. Magnus had been so excited about
spending a weekend walking through art galleries and museums and visiting with friends. They
didn’t get to go to New York as much as they used to, and he had planned the weekend months in
advance. They had visited with Madzie and her family as well as with Raphael, and on Saturday,
they had gone to a few art galleries and to an evening concert. They had been in such a good mood
and had laughed and held hands as they strolled through the city of their youth. New York had
changed so much in three hundred years, some of which were of war and conflict, but in so many
ways remained the same. Its mundane and shadow worlds still overlapped with incredible ease, yet
the former remained completely oblivious to the existence of the latter.

Magnus had reached for Alec’s hand outside the concert hall, and Alec had turned to look at his
husband; at his wrinkled yet still handsome face; at the laugh lines around his eyes, testimony of a
life that contained more joy than sorrow; at his almost white hair. Magnus had kissed him, gently,
tenderly but still with a burning passion than didn’t seem to go out despite centuries of a shared
life. “Take me home, Alexander, and make love to me,” he had softly said.

They had slowly walked hand in hand through Central Park in the direction of their hotel, two
elderly men, slow, grey and wrinkled holding on to each other, chatting animatedly, reminiscing,
making plans, feeling completely safe under the glamor that concealed them from the mundane
world.

Everything had happened so fast. Alec hadn’t seen the demon until it was too late. He hadn’t had
time to react, to take out his seraph blade, or to stop Magnus from stepping between him and the
ravener. He had been too old and slow, and before he knew what was happening, Magnus was on
the ground, his eyes closed, his breathing still, a hole in the center of his chest through which his
life had already escaped. Just like that, Magnus had been laughing, chatting, and asking Alec to
make love to him one minute, and dead the next. Alec had felt a sudden weakness as the last
tendrils of the magic bond that had connected him to Magnus for over three centuries finally
snapped, leaving him orphaned, unmoored, untethered like a kite being blown away by the wind.

Alec had kneeled on the cold ground and had gathered Magnus in his arms. “Magnus, Magnus,
please don’t leave me,” he had whispered but there was no answer. As if from a distance, he had
heard the mournful howl of a wounded animal, and he didn’t realize that the sound was coming
from him. He had held Magnus for who knows how long, and all the time, he had moaned and
sobbed, calling with all his strength for Magnus to open his eyes and smile at him.

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this,” he said, tears welling up in his eyes. “I wasn’t supposed to
outlive Magnus. I was supposed to be the one to die, and he was supposed to go on.”

“Father,” whispered Iara beside him and Alec realized that he had been speaking out loud. He
looked around and saw tears streaming down faces and looks of compassion and sadness. Madzie
was then standing beside him and she was guiding him by the hand off the stage.

“I think I want to go home now,” he quietly told his daughter. “Please take me home.”

“Of course,” Madzie said gently and waving her arms opened a portal. Before stepping through the
event horizon, Alec looked back and met the marbles eyes of the statue of Magnus and, for a
moment, thought that the warlock was smiling at him.

A few minutes later, Madzie helped her father settled in his favorite armchair by the window and
tucked a blanket around his legs hoping to ward off the chill that seemed to envelop Alec since that
night she and the New York Shadowhunters found him kneeling on the ground, cradling Magnus’
body, crying like a child.
Magnus had received the Shadowhunter funeral that his centuries of service to the Nephilim earned him. Alec had stood by the pyre all night as Magnus’s remains were cremated, friends and family standing beside him in silence, coming and going until just him, Iara and Madzie remained, the last survivors of their family. When night had begun to turn into morning, Iara and Madzie had tried to convince Alec to come home with them but he had refused. Instead, he had asked them to go ahead without him. “I would like a minute alone, if you don’t mind,” Alec had said. As they walked home, the sisters had commented that, since the death of their dad, their father was getting older and more fragile by the minute, as if he was fading, as if his magic connection to their dad was like a tether that slowly pulled their father towards whatever realm their dad now occupied.

Alec had come home a few hours later, carrying the urn containing Magnus’ ashes. Madzie had placed a cup of tea and some scones in front of him and had tried to get him to eat, but Alec had just stared at the table and then at her with a vacant expression. After a while, he had stood up and, after washing his untouched teacup, had walked out to the backyard where he and Magnus had spent long lazy afternoons sitting in matching lounge chairs, readings books, listening to music or just quietly watching the birds perched on the tree branches. He sat in his chair and placed the urn in the chair beside him, the chair where Magnus always sat. It had been a chilly and grey morning and Alec wasn’t wearing a jacket. He simply sat in silence in his white bereavement tunic, the silver mourning runes embroidered along the collar and cuffs shining dully in the gray light of day.

Alec had sat in that chair without moving for hours and at one point, concerned that he could get sick, Madzie had taken a jacket to him and covered his legs with a blanket. “Father, why don’t you come inside? You will get sick out here,” she had pleaded, but Alec hadn’t even looked in her direction. He was lost in some distant place, in the place of his memories.

So, Madzie and Iara had sat together by the window, looking out towards the place where their loving father sat alone with his grief, with the immense black hole that their dad had left in his life. Through that afternoon and into the evening, the heavy and almost unbearable weight of loss and grief had felt like an oppressive force trying to crush the house. Iara and Madzie spent hours talking about their childhood with their fathers, about their Shadowhunter siblings, Christopher and Shinzō, brothers and parabatais, gone now for almost two centuries. Iara and Madzie understood as well as their father the heavy weight of loss and, despite the fact that their brothers had left a long and large legacy of stories and descendants, the void they left in their lives felt so much bigger now that their dad was also gone.

When night fell, and they could no longer see the stooped figure of their father, Madzie had gone outside. “You are going to get sick father, please come inside where is warm,” she pleaded, and when she took Alec’s arm, he obeyed and silently allowed his daughter to lead him inside. The two sisters couldn’t convince Alec to eat and had to help him take off his shoes and get in bed. Iara and Madzie had taken turns kissing him on the forehead, and after wishing him good night, had left him, silent and wide eyed, lying on the bed in the guest bedroom because neither of them could yet bring themselves to walk into the room Alec and Magnus had shared.

When they got up the next day, Alec was already outside, sitting on the same chair, his mourning tunic wrinkled: unfed, unwashed, silent. The urn containing Magnus’ ashes sat once again beside him. In his hand Alec held his stele, the stele that Magnus had reinforced for him with spells of protection and safety, and he turned it around in his hand and between his fingers, the gesture mechanical and unthinking. All through the day, Alec had sat, without moving or speaking, just silently looking out towards the mountains of Idris which had become part of his and Magnus’ home in the last two decades of their lives. To Alec and Magnus’ surprise, they had loved this place and this house more than expected. The older they got, the more they craved the quietness of country life, the breathtaking view of the mountains, and the relaxing hikes through the forest.
They had been happy here and now Magnus was gone.

When night came that second day, Madzie once again guided her father by the hand towards the guest bedroom, and just like the night before, she left him lying down on the bed, his eyes wide open looking up to the ceiling, lost in his grief.

Madzie was worried. No one better than she understood loss, the weight of immortality, the terrible burden of having to go on when life took away the reason for living. But she was Alec’s daughter and no matter how much she tried, there were things about her fathers’ relationship she could never understand or know. As she walked out of her father’s room, Madzie took her phone out of her pocket and dialed a number.

By the third day, Madzie and Iara had been frantic with worry. But when they were getting ready to go outside and try to bring their father back inside once again, a portal opened, and their uncle Raphael walked through it, looking as young and handsome as ever, even though a look of deep sadness darkened his expression.

“Thank you for coming; we didn’t know who else to call,” Madzie told Raphael as soon as they came apart from their embrace.

The three of them had watched Alec from the window as the day lost its luster to a blue and orange twilight. When night finally set, Iara walked towards the door determined to go get her father.

“Let me,” Raphael had said. “You two go get some rest; I will take care of Alec.” Grabbing a blanket, he went outside, and from the window, Iara and Madzie saw Raphael gently set the blanket around Alec’s shoulder. Gathering some wood, he made a fire in the fire pit, and then silently sat on a chair beside Alec.

Iara had woken up just as the sky was changing from black to dark blue and when she walked into the kitchen, she found Madzie sitting by the window as if she had not yet gone to bed. Iara grabbed a cup of coffee and went to sit beside her sister and through the window, they watched as Raphael and Alec sat by a dying fire, Raphael silent and still as a statute apparently unconcerned about the approaching daylight.

A knot tightened in the pit of Madzie’s stomach as she looked at the two figures that constituted permanent landmarks in the geography of her life. Her uncle looked so young; as young as he had been when she first met him; as young as he had been when he married her aunt Isabel almost four hundred years ago; as young as he had been when he too stood by the pyre when Isabel died, surrounded by children and grandchildren, when his own reason for living had abandoned him. Her father, on the other hand, looked all of his three hundred and eighty-two years, grey hair, arched back, shaking hands, but still tall and handsome, despite the marks left on his face by so much loss and so much grief.

Raphael had sat beside Alec all through the night, still as a statute his hands resting on his lap, looking towards the distance, thinking with his friend about all those years of shared stories, of lives built and rebuilt, of family, of loss, of gains, of eternity and tiredness. As the sky began to lighten, Alec suddenly turned and looked at Raphael.

“What are you doing man?” he asked his voice hoarse from lack of use. “The sun is about to come out.”

“The same as you; waiting for death,” Raphael had replied, his eyes still in the distance

“Why?”
“Don’t you know, Alec?” Raphael had said, his expression somber. “When you are gone, I will be the last one left. I will be the last one of our friends left behind. Everybody else will be gone.”

Alec had understood that no one better than Raphael knew his loss; not even his daughters or grandchildren knew what it was like to be the last, to see your children, brother, sister and friends age and die while you go on and on. Long life had, at times, been difficult for Alec; it had taken a toll that at times seemed unbearable. But he had had Magnus to carry him through, and Raphael, with all his peculiarities, had also been a constant presence.

“I understand,” Alec had said and standing up on shaky and sore legs, had gestured for Raphael to do the same. “Come on,” he had added, and as they walked back to the house, Alec had reached and steadied himself by holding on to Raphael’s arm. The two had walked back inside and for the next several hours, had sat around the kitchen table, a cup of coffee in Alec’s hand as they told stories of their long years of friendship, of Magnus, of Izzy, of Jace and Clary.

“It is my fault,” Alec now said as Madzie helped him get settled in his chair. “It is my fault that Magnus died. He was too weak; his powers were almost depleted. That is why he couldn’t fight that demon.”

Alec had known for a while that the flow of magic energy between him and Magnus was no longer flowing in both directions. Their bond remained strong and unbreakable, but instead of sharing energy, Magnus had been using the bond to give Alec strength. Alec had begun to see the end of the long road of his life, his eyesight failing, his body weakening, his hands shaking. He was fading, he knew it and he was ready. He was not afraid of dying; three hundred and eighty years was more than Alec had ever hoped for, but Magnus had refused to accept that the end was near and had begun to use his magic to strengthen Alec, to help him live another day, another week, another year.

Alec had confronted him about it a few weeks before their trip to New York; it had been their last argument. He had demanded that Magnus stop. “You are getting weaker, Magnus,” he had pleaded, “please stop. I have lived long enough.”

“I can’t,” Magnus had replied between barely contained sobs. “Don’t ask me to do that; I don’t think I can live without you Alexander.”

Alec had held Magnus, his frame feeling so fragile against his also fragile body. “You still have an eternity to live Magnus. You will go on, you have to go on.” But Magnus had remained resolute and had refused to discuss it any further. Instead, he had taken Alec by the hand and had guided him to their bedroom, and they had made love slowly and lovingly as they had done countless times in their very long life together.

“It wasn’t your fault, father,” Madzie said as he brought Alec a cup of tea. “Dad died protecting you, and because he loved you more than he loved life itself.”

Alec convinced Madzie that he was fine, that she should go back to the glass city and visit with Iara. “I will be fine, I promise,” he said and kissed his daughter on the forehead.

“I will come to see you before I go back to New York tomorrow,” Madzie said as she stood by the door, her eyes full of love, the kind of love that warmed Alec’s heart.

For the rest of the day, Alec sat in silence in his favorite chair, the chair that for countless years had sat beside Magnus’ chair. He looked out the window as the sun slowly made its descend towards the mountain peaks, and as a full moon replaced it in the sky. He thought of Magnus; of their long life together; of the many wars and battles they fought; of the countless demons they
defeated; of how much they loved their children. As he did, he thanked the heavens for the
countless years of happiness he had experienced with the warlock, for the priceless gift of a long
life with the first and only soul to truly see him, to truly know his heart.

As night finally replaced day, he stood up and slowly and with the assistance of his cane, made his
way up the stairs, not to the guest bedroom where he had slept since Magnus’ death, but towards
the bedroom that he and Magnus had shared. As he laid on a bed that felt too big and too cold, he
called for Magnus with all the strength left in him.

Sometime in the small hours of the morning, as the first light of day began to filter through the
window, Alec felt the gentle and familiar touch of a hand on his cheek.

“Wake up Shadowhunter,” Magnus whispered in Alec’s ear, and Alec opened his eyes and as they
adjusted to the light, Magnus’ beautiful and youthful face came clearly into focus. “Get up
Alexander.”

Alec obeyed and as he got up from the bed, he was surprised to feel a youthful spring in his
movements. His joints no longer hurt, and he could see better than he had seen in years. He looked
at his hands and recognized his young hands, free of wrinkles and sun spots. He searched for his
reflection in the mirror and the glass returned to him the face of his youth, the clear eyes, the broad
smile.

“Come on Shadowhunter; it is time to go,” said Magnus reaching for Alec’s hand.

“Where are we going Magnus?” he asked.

“Wait and see, Alexander. It is a surprise,” Magnus replied and then he winked at Alec in that
suggestive way he had done the night they met, and he so openly flirted with Alec. With a youthful
spring in his step, a spring Alec hadn’t felt in so long, he followed Magnus down the stairs. “There
is a whole new world of adventures waiting for us Alexander,” Magnus said as he opened the front
door of their house and him and Alec stepped outside.

“Lead the way warlock,” Alec replied, a smile curving his lips, one of those smiles that Magnus
thought had the power of illuminating the darkest of nights.

When later that morning, Iara and Madzie Lightwood-Bane came to see their father, they found
Alexander Lightwood dead on the bed he and Magnus had shared for countless years, a peaceful
smile on his face, his hand resting on the rune above his heart, his expression resembling an angel
in repose.

This is the end; what a journey!

I never planned to write such a long story, and I never planned to end the story this way, but
these characters captured my imagination and ended up telling me so much about
themselves.

I ALWAYS APPRECIATE COMMENTS, SO LEAVE ONE IF YOU CAN.

Thank you for sticking with me for 36 chapters!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!