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CASSANDRA CLARE  
ROBIN WASSERMAN

TALES FROM THE  
SHADOWHUNTER ACADEMY

The  
Evil We Love

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Margaret K. McElderry Books

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI

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There were, Simon Lewis thought, so many ways to destroy a letter. You could shred it into confetti. You could light it on fire. You could feed it to a dog—or a Hydra demon. You could, with the help of your friendly neighborhood warlock, Portal it to Hawaii and drop it into the mouth of a volcano. And given all the letter-destroying options available, Simon thought, maybe the fact that Isabelle Lightwood had returned his letter intact was of significance. Maybe it was actually a good sign.

Or at least a not-entirely-terrible sign.

That, at least, was what Simon had been telling himself for the last few months.

But even he had to admit that when the letter in question was a sort-of-maybe love letter, a letter that included heartfelt, humiliating phrases like “you’re amazing” and “I know I am that guy you loved”—and when said letter was returned unopened, “RETURN TO SENDER” scrawled across it in red lipstick—“not-entirely-terrible” might be overly optimistic.

At least she had referred to him as “sender.” Simon was pretty sure that Isabelle had devised some other choice names for him, none quite so friendly. A demon had sucked out all of his memories, but his observational faculties were intact—and he’d observed that Isabelle Lightwood wasn’t the kind of girl who liked to be rejected. Simon, in defiance of all laws of nature and common sense, had rejected her twice.

He’d tried to explain himself in the letter, apologize for pushing her away. He’d confessed how much he wanted to fight his way back to the person he once was. *Her* Simon. Or at least, a Simon worthy of her.

*Izzy—I don’t know why you would wait for me, but if you do, I promise to make myself worth the wait, he’d written. Or I’ll try. I can promise I am going to try.*

\* \* \*

One month to the day after he sent it, the letter came back unread.

As the dorm room door creaked open, Simon hastily shoved the letter back into his desk drawer, careful to avoid the cobwebs and pockets of mold that coated every piece of furniture no matter how diligently he cleaned. He didn’t move hastily enough.

“Not the letter *again*?” Simon’s roommate at the Academy, George Lovelace, groaned. He flung himself down on his bed, sweeping an arm melodramatically across his forehead. “Oh, Isabelle, my darling, if I stare at this letter long enough, maybe I’ll telepathically woo you back to my weeping bosom.”

“I don’t have a bosom,” Simon said, with as much dignity as he could muster. “And I’m pretty sure if I did, it wouldn’t be weeping.”

“Heaving, then? That’s what bosoms do, isn’t it?”

“I haven’t spent much time around them,” Simon admitted. Not much that he could remember, at least. There had been that aborted attempt at groping Sophie Hillyer back in the ninth grade, but his mother busted him before he could even find the clasp on her bra, much less master it. There had presumably, been Isabelle. But Simon tried very hard these days not to think about that. The clasp on Isabelle’s bra; his hands on Isabelle’s body; the taste of—

Simon shook his head violently, almost hard enough to clear it. “Can we stop talking about *bosoms*? Like, forever?”

“Didn’t mean to interrupt your very important moping-about-Izzy time.”

“I’m not moping,” Simon lied.

“Excellent.” George grinned triumphantly, and Simon realized he’d fallen into some kind of trap. ~~“So then you’ll come out to the training field with me, help break in the new daggers. We’re sparring mundies versus elites—losers have to eat extra helpings of soup for a week.”~~

“Oh yeah, Shadowhunters really know how to party.” His heart wasn’t in the sarcasm. The truth was, his fellow students *did* know how to party, even if their idea of fun usually involved pointing weapons. With exams behind them and only one more week before the end-of-year party and summer vacation, Shadowhunter Academy felt more like camp than school. Simon couldn’t believe he’d been here the whole school year; he couldn’t believe he’d *survived* the year. He’d learned Latin, run a business, written a book, done some writing, and a smattering of Chthonian; he’d fought tiny demons in the woods, endured a full moon, survived a night with a newborn werewolf, ridden (and nearly been trampled by) a horse, eaten his weight in soup, and in all that time, he’d been neither expelled nor exsanguinated. He’d even bulked up enough to trade in his ladies’-size gear for a men’s size, albeit the smallest one available. Against all odds, the Academy had come to feel like home. A slimy, moldy, dungeonlike home without working toilets, but home nonetheless. He and George had even named the rats that lived behind their walls. Every night, they left Jon Cartwright Jr., III, and IV a piece of stale bread to nibble, in hopes they prefer the crumbs to human feet.

This last week was a time for celebration, late-night carousing, and petty wagering over dagger fights. But Simon couldn’t quite find the will for fun. Maybe it was the looming shadow of summer vacation—the prospect of going home to a place that didn’t feel much like home anymore.

Or maybe it was, as it always was, Isabelle.

“Definitely you’ll have much more fun here, sulking,” George said as he changed into his gear. “Silly of me to suggest otherwise.”

Simon sighed. “You wouldn’t understand.”

George had a movie-star face, a Scottish accent, a sun-kissed tan, and the kind of muscles that made girls—even the Shadowhunter Academy girls, who, until they met Simon had apparently never encountered a human male without a six-pack—giggle and swoon. Girl trouble, particularly the brand involving humiliation and rejection, was beyond his comprehension.

“Just to be clear,” George said, in the rich brogue that even Simon couldn’t help but find charming, “you don’t remember anything about dating this girl? You don’t remember being in love with her, you don’t remember what it was like when the two of you—”

“That’s right,” Simon cut him off.

“Or even *if* the two of you—”

“Again, correct,” Simon said quickly. He hated to admit it, but this was one of the things about demon amnesia that bothered him the most. What kind of seventeen-year-old guy doesn’t know whether or not he’s a virgin?

“Because you’re apparently running low on brain cells, you *tell* this gorgeous creature that you’ve forgotten all about her, reject her publicly, and yet when you pledge your love to her in some goopy romantic letter, you’re surprised when she’s not having it. Then you spend the next two months mooning over her. Is that about right?”

Simon dropped his head into his hands. “Okay, so when you put it that way, it makes no sense.”

“Oh, I’ve *seen* Isabelle Lightwood—it makes all the sense in the world.” George grinned. “I just wanted to get my facts straight.”

He bounded out the door before Simon could clarify that it wasn’t about how Isabelle looked—although it was true that she looked, to Simon, like the most beautiful girl in the world. But it wasn’t about her curtain of silky black hair or the bottomless dark brown of her eyes or the deadly liquid grace with which she swung her electrum whip. He couldn’t have explained what it was about, since George was right, he didn’t remember anything about her or what the two of them had been like as

couple. He still had some trouble believing they ever *were* a couple.

He just knew, on a level beneath reason and memory, that some part of him belonged with Isabelle. Maybe even belonged *to* Isabelle. Whether he could remember why, or not.

He'd written Clary a letter too, telling her how much he wanted to remember their friendship—asking for her help. Unlike Isabelle, she'd written back, telling him the story of how they first met. It was the first of many letters, all of them adding episodes to the epic, lifelong story of Clary and Simon's Excellent Adventure. The more Simon read, the more he remembered, and sometimes he'd even wrote back with stories of his own. It felt safe, somehow, corresponding by letter; there was no chance that Clary could expect anything of him, and no chance that he would fail her, see the pain in her eyes when she realized all over again that *her* Simon was gone. Letter by letter, Simon's memories of Clary were beginning to knit themselves together.

Isabelle was different. It felt like his memories of Isabelle were buried inside a black hole—something dangerous and ravenous, threatening to consume him if he got too close.

Simon had come to the Academy, in part, to escape his painful and confusing double vision of the past, the cognitive dissonance between the life he remembered and the one he'd actually lived. It was like that cheesy old joke his father had loved. "Doctor, my arm hurts when I move like this," Simon would say, setting him up. His father would answer in an atrocious German accent, his version of "doctor voice": "Then . . . *don't move like that.*"

As long as Simon didn't think about the past, the past couldn't hurt him. But, increasingly, it couldn't help himself.

There was too much pleasure in the pain.

\* \* \*

Classes may have been over for the year, but the Academy faculty was still finding new ways to torture them.

"What do you think it is this time?" Julie Beauvale asked as they settled onto the uncomfortable wooden benches in the main hall. The entire student body, Shadowhunters and mundanes alike, had been summoned first thing Monday morning for an all-school meeting.

"Maybe they finally decided to kick out all the dregs," Jon Cartwright said. "Better late than never."

Simon was too tired and too uncaffeinated to think up a clever retort. So he simply said, "Suck it, Cartwright."

George snorted.

Over the last several months of classes, training, and demon-hunting disasters, their class had grown pretty close—especially the handful of students who were around Simon's age. George was, of course; Beatriz Mendoza was surprisingly sweet for a Shadowhunter; and even Julie had turned out to be slightly less snotty than she pretended to be. Jon Cartwright, on the other hand . . . The moment they met, Simon had decided that if looks matched personalities, Jon Cartwright would look like a horse's ass. Unfortunately, there was no justice in the world, and he looked instead like a walking Ken doll. Sometimes first impressions were misleading; sometimes they peered straight through to a person's inner soul. Simon was as sure now as he'd ever been: Jon's inner soul was a horse's ass.

Jon gave Simon a patronizing pat on the shoulder. "I'm going to miss your witty repartee this summer, Lewis."

"I'm going to hope you get eaten by a spider demon this summer, Cartwright."

George slipped an arm around both of them, grinning maniacally and humming "Can You Feel the Love Tonight?"

George had, perhaps, embraced the spirit of celebration a little too enthusiastically of late.

Up at the front of the hall, Dean Penhallow cleared her throat loudly, looking pointedly in the direction. “If we could have some silence, please?”

The room continued chattering, Dean Penhallow continued clearing her throat and asking nervous for order, and things could have gone on like that all morning had Delaney Scarsbury, their training master, not climbed up on a chair. “We’ll have silence, or we’ll have one hundred push-ups,” he boomed. The room hushed immediately.

“I suppose you’ve all been wondering how you would keep busy now that exams are past?” Dean Penhallow said, her voice rising at the end of her sentence. The dean had a way of turning almost everything into a question. “I think you’ll all recognize this week’s guest speaker?”

An intimidating barrel-chested man in gray robes strode onto the makeshift stage. The room gasped. Simon gasped too, but it wasn’t the appearance of the Inquisitor that had blown his mind. It was the girl trailing after him, glaring fiercely at his robes like she hoped to set them on fire with her mind. The girl with a curtain of silky black hair and bottomless brown eyes: the Inquisitor’s daughter. Known to his friends, family, and humiliatingly rejected ex-boyfriends as Isabelle Lightwood.

George elbowed him. “You seeing what I’m seeing?” he whispered. “You want a tissue?” Simon couldn’t help remembering the last time Izzy had shown up at the Academy, for the express purpose of warning every girl in school away from him. He’d been horrified. Right about now, he couldn’t imagine anything better.

But Isabelle didn’t look inclined to say anything to the class. She simply sat beside her father, arms crossed, glowering.

“She’s even prettier when she’s angry,” Jon whispered.

In a miraculous triumph of restraint, Simon didn’t spear him in the eye with a pen. “You’ve nearly completed your first year at the Academy,” Robert Lightwood told the assembled students, somehow making it sound less like a congratulations than it did like a threat. “My daughter tells me that one of the mundanes’ great heroes has a saying, ‘With great power comes substantial responsibility.’”

Simon gaped. There was only one way Isabelle Lightwood, as far from a comics nerd as a person could get, would know a line—even a mangled one—from Spider-Man. She’d been quoting Simon.

That had to mean something . . . right? He tried to catch her eye.

He failed. “You’ve learned a lot about power this year,” Robert Lightwood continued. “This week I’m going to talk to you about responsibility. And what happens when power runs unchecked, or is freely given to the wrong person. I’m going to talk to you about the Circle.”

At those words, a hush fell across the room. The Academy faculty, like most Shadowhunters, were very careful to avoid the subject of the Circle—the group of rogue Shadowhunters that Valentine Morgenstern had led in the Uprising. The students knew about Valentine—*everyone* knew about Valentine—but they learned quickly not to ask too many questions about him. Over the last year, Simon had come to understand that the Shadowhunters preferred to believe their choices were perfect, their laws infallible. They didn’t like to think about the time they’d been nearly destroyed by a group of their own.

It explained, at least, why the dean was hosting this session, rather than their history teacher Catarina Loss. The warlock seemed to tolerate most Shadowhunters—*barely*. Simon suspected that when it came to former members of the Circle, “barely” was too much to hope for.

Robert cleared his throat. “I’d like all of you to ask yourselves what you would have done, were you a student here in Valentine Morgenstern’s day. Would you have joined the Circle? Would you have stood by Valentine’s side at the Uprising? Raise your hand, if you think it’s possible.”



Simon was unsurprised to see not a single hand in the air. He'd played this game back in mundane school, every time his history class covered World War II. Simon knew no one ever thought they would be a Nazi.

Simon also knew that, statistically, most of them were wrong.

"Now I'd like you to raise your hand if you think you're an exemplary Shadowhunter, one who would do anything to serve the Clave," Robert said.

Unsurprisingly, many more hands shot up this time, Jon Cartwright's the highest.

Robert smiled mirthlessly. "It was the most eager and loyal of us who were first to join Valentine's ranks," he told them. "It was those of us most dedicated to the Shadowhunter cause who found ourselves the easiest prey."

There was a rustling in the crowd.

"Yes," Robert said. "I say *us*, because I was among Valentine's disciples. I was in the Circle."

The rustling burst into a storm. Some of the students looked unsurprised, but many of them looked as if a nuclear bomb had just gone off inside their brains. Clary had told Simon that Robert Lightwood used to be a member of the Circle, but it was obviously hard for some people to reconcile that with the position of the Inquisitor, which this tall, fearsome man now held.

"The *Inquisitor*?" Julie breathed, eyes wide. "How could they let him . . . ?"

Beatriz looked stunned.

"My father always said there was something off about him," Jon murmured.

"This week, I will teach you about the misuses of power, about great evil and how it can take many forms. My able daughter, Isabelle Lightwood, will be assisting with some of the class work." Here he gestured to Isabelle, who glanced briefly at the crowd, her impossibly fierce glare somehow growing even fiercer. "Most of all, I will teach you about the Circle, how it began and why. If you listen well, some of you might even learn something."

Simon wasn't listening at all. Simon was staring at Isabelle, willing her to look at him. Isabelle studiously stared at her feet. And Robert Lightwood, Inquisitor of the Clave, arbiter of all things lawful, began to tell the story of Valentine Morgenstern and those who had once loved him.

\* \* \*

1984

Robert Lightwood stretched out on the quad, trying not to think about how he'd spent this week the year before. The days after exams and before the summer break were, traditionally, a bacchic release of pent-up energy, faculty looking the other way as students pushed the Academy rules to their limits. A year ago, he and Michael Wayland had snuck off campus and taken a boldly illicit midnight skinny dip in Lake Lyn. Even with their lips firmly sealed shut, the water had taken its hallucinogenic effect, turning the sky electric. They had lain on their backs side by side, imagining falling stars carving new tracks across the clouds and dreaming themselves into a stranger world.

That was a year ago, when Robert had still imagined himself young, free to waste his time with childish delights. Before he had understood that, young or not, he had responsibilities.

That was a year ago, before Valentine.

The members of the Circle had co-opted this quiet, shady corner of the quad, where they would be safe from prying eyes—and where they, in turn, would be spared the sight of their classmates having their pointless, meaningless fun. Robert reminded himself that he was lucky to be huddled here in the shade, listening to Valentine Morgenstern declaim.

It was a special privilege, he reminded himself, to be a member of Valentine's coterie, privy to his

revolutionary ideas. A year ago, when Valentine had inexplicably befriended him, he'd felt nothing but intense gratitude and a desire to hang on Valentine's every word.

Valentine said the Clave was corrupt and lazy, that these days it cared more about maintaining the status quo and fascistically suppressing dissent than it did carrying out its noble mission.

Valentine said the Shadowhunters should stop cowering in the darkness and walk proudly through the mundane world they lived and died to protect.

Valentine said the Accords were useless and the Mortal Cup was built to be used and the new generation was the hope of the future and the Academy classes were a waste of time.

Valentine made Robert's brain buzz and his heart sing; he made Robert feel like a warrior for justice. Like he was a *part* of something, something extraordinary—like he and the others had been chosen, not just by Valentine, but by the hand of destiny, to change the world.

And yet, very occasionally, Valentine also made Robert feel uneasy.

Valentine wanted the Circle's unquestioning loyalty. He wanted their belief in him, their conviction in the cause, to suffuse their souls. And Robert wanted desperately to give that to him. He didn't want to question Valentine's logic or intent; he didn't want to worry that he believed too little in the things that Valentine said. Or that he believed too much. Today, showered in sunlight, the infinite possibilities of summer opening up before him, he didn't want to worry at all. So, as Valentine's words washed over him, Robert let his focus drift, just for a moment. Better to tune out than to doubt. Just for now his friends could do his listening for him, fill him in later. Wasn't that what friends were for?

There were eight of them today, the Circle's innermost circle, all sitting in hushed silence as Valentine ranted about the Clave's kindness to Downworlders: Jocelyn Fairchild, Maryse Trueblood, Lucian and Amatis Graymark, Hodge Starkweather, and, of course, Michael, Robert, and Stephen. Though Stephen Herondale was the most recent addition to the crowd—and the most recent addition to the Academy, arriving from the London Institute at the beginning of the year—he was also the most devoted to the cause, and to Valentine. He'd arrived at the Academy dressed like a mundane: studded leather jacket, tight acid-washed jeans, blond hair gelled into preposterous spikes like the mundane rock stars who postered his dorm room walls. Only a month later, Stephen had adopted not only Valentine's simple, all-black aesthetic but also his mannerisms, so that the only major difference between them was Valentine's shock of white-blond hair and Stephen's blue eyes. By first frost, he'd sworn off all things mundane and destroyed his beloved Sex Pistols poster in a sacrificial bonfire.

"Herondales do nothing halfway," Stephen said whenever Robert teased him about it, but Robert suspected that something lay beneath the lighthearted tone. Something darker—something hungry. Valentine, he had noticed, had a knack for picking out disciples, homing in on those students with some kind of lack, some inner emptiness that Valentine could fill. Unlike the rest of their gang of misfits, Stephen was ostensibly whole: a handsome, graceful, supremely skilled Shadowhunter with a distinguished pedigree and the respect of everyone on campus. It made Robert wonder . . . what was that only Valentine could see?

His thoughts had wandered so far astray that when Maryse gasped and said, in a hushed voice, "Won't that be dangerous?" he wasn't sure what she was talking about. Nonetheless, he squeezed her hand reassuringly, as this was what boyfriends were meant to do. Maryse was lying with her head on his lap, her silky black hair splayed across his jeans. He smoothed it away from her face, a boyfriend's prerogative.

It had been nearly a year, but Robert still found it difficult to believe that this girl—this fierce, graceful, bold girl with a mind like a razor blade—had chosen *him* as her own. She glided through the Academy like a queen, granting favor, indulging her fawning subjects. Maryse wasn't the most beautiful girl in their class, and certainly not the sweetest or the most charming. She didn't care for things like sweetness or charm. But when it came to the battlefield, no one was more ready to charge

the enemy, and certainly no one was better with a whip. Maryse was more than a girl, she was a *force*. The other girls worshipped her; the guys *wanted* her—but only Robert had her.

It had changed everything.

Sometimes, Robert felt like his entire life was an act. That it was only a matter of time before his fellow students saw through him, and realized what he really was, beneath all that brawn and bluster. Cowardly. Weak. Worthless. Having Maryse by his side was like wearing a suit of armor. No one like *her* would choose someone worthless. Everyone knew that. Sometimes, Robert even believed that about himself.

He loved the way she made him feel when they were in public: strong and safe. And he loved even more the way she made him feel when they were alone together, when she pressed her lips to the nape of his neck and traced her tongue down the arc of his spine. He loved the curve of her hip and the whisper of her hair; he loved the gleam in her eye when she strode into combat. He loved the taste of *her*. So why was it that whenever she said, “I love you,” he felt like such a liar for saying it back? Why was it that he occasionally—maybe more than occasionally—found his thoughts straying to other girls, to how *they* might taste?

How could he love the way Maryse made him feel . . . and still be so uncertain that what he felt was love?

He’d taken to surreptitiously watching the other couples around him, trying to figure out whether they felt the same way, whether their declarations of love masked the same confusion and doubt. By the way Amatis’s head nestled comfortably against Stephen’s shoulder, the way Jocelyn carelessly threaded her fingers through Valentine’s, even the way Maryse idly played with his jeans’ fraying seams, as if his clothing, his body, were her property . . . all of them seemed so certain of themselves. Robert was certain only of how good he’d gotten at faking it.

“We should glory in the danger, if it means a chance to take down a filthy, rogue Downworlder,” Valentine said, glowering. “Even if this wolf pack doesn’t have a lead on the monster that—” He swallowed, hard, and Robert knew what he was thinking, because it seemed like these days, it was all Valentine was ever thinking, the fury of it radiating off him as if the thought were written in fire, *the monster that killed my father*. “Even if it doesn’t, we’ll be doing the Clave a favor.”

Ragnor Fell, the green-skinned warlock who’d taught at the Academy for nearly a century, paused halfway across the quad and peered over at them, almost as if he could hear their discussion. Robert assured himself that was impossible. Still, he didn’t like the way the warlock’s horns angled toward them, as if marking his target.

Michael cleared his throat. “Maybe we shouldn’t talk like that about, uh, Downworlders out here.”

Valentine snorted. “I hope the old goat does hear me. It’s a disgrace, them letting him teach here. The only place a Downworlder has at the Academy is on the dissection table.”

Michael and Robert exchanged a glance. As always, Robert knew exactly what his *parabatai* was thinking—and Robert was thinking the same. Valentine, when they first met him, had cut a dashing figure with his blinding white hair and blazing black eyes. His features were smooth and sharp at once, like sculpted ice, but beneath the intimidating veneer was a surprisingly kind boy roused to anger only by injustice. Valentine had always been intense, yes, but it was an intensity bent toward doing what he believed was right, what was *good*. When Valentine said he wanted to correct the injustices and inequities imposed on them by the Clave, Robert believed him, and still did. And while Michael may have had a bizarre soft spot for Downworlders, Robert didn’t like them any more than Valentine did. He couldn’t imagine why, in this day and age, the Clave was still allowing warlocks to meddle in Shadowhunter affairs.

But there was a difference between clear-eyed intensity and irrational anger. Robert had been waiting a long time now for Valentine’s grief-fueled rage to simmer down. Instead, it had sparked a

inferno.

“So you won’t tell us where you got your intel from,” Lucian said, the only one other than Jocelyn who could question Valentine with impunity, “but you want us to sneak off campus and hunt down these werewolves ourselves? If you’re so sure the Clave would want them taken care of, why not leave it to them?”

“The Clave is useless,” Valentine hissed. “You know that better than anyone, Lucian. But if none of you are willing to risk yourselves for this—if you’d rather stay here and go to a *party* . . .” His mouth curled as if even speaking the word repelled him. “I’ll go myself.”

Hodge pushed his glasses up on his nose and leaped to his feet. “I’ll go with you, Valentine,” he said, too loud. It was Hodge’s way—always a little too loud or too quiet, always misreading the room. There was a reason he preferred books to people. “I’m always at your side.”

“Sit down,” Valentine snapped. “I don’t need *you* getting in the way.”

“But—”

“What good does your loyalty do me when it comes with a big mouth and two left feet?”

Hodge paled and dropped back to the ground, eyes blinking furiously behind thick lenses.

Jocelyn pressed a hand to Valentine’s shoulder—ever so gently, and only for a moment, but it was enough.

“I only mean, Hodge, that your particular skills are wasted on the battlefield,” Valentine said, more kindly. The shift in tone was abrupt, but sincere. When Valentine favored you with his warmest smile, he was impossible to resist. “And I couldn’t forgive myself if you were injured. I can’t . . . I can’t lose anyone else.”

They were all silent then, for a moment, thinking of how quickly it had happened, the dean pulling Valentine off the training field to deliver the news, the way he’d taken it, silent and steady, like a Shadowhunter should. The way he’d looked when he returned to campus after the funeral, his hollow eyes, his sallow skin, his face aging years in a week. Their parents were all warriors, and they knew what Valentine had lost, any of them could lose. To be a Shadowhunter was to live in the shadow of death.

They couldn’t bring his father back, but if they could help him avenge the loss, surely they owed him that much.

Robert, at least, owed him everything.

“Of course we’ll come with you,” Robert said firmly. “Whatever you need.”

“Agreed,” Michael said. Where Robert went, he would always follow.

Valentine nodded. “Stephen? Lucian?”

Robert caught Amatis rolling her eyes. Valentine never treated the women with anything less than respect, but when it came to battle, he preferred to fight with men by his side.

Stephen nodded. Lucian, who was Valentine’s *parabatai* and the one he relied on most, shifted uncomfortably. “I promised Céline I would tutor her tonight,” he admitted. “I could cancel it, of course, but—”

Valentine waved him off, laughing, and the others followed suit.

“Tutoring? Is that what they’re calling it these days?” Stephen teased. “Seems like she’s alreadyaced her O levels in wrapping you around her little finger.”

Lucian blushed. “Nothing’s happening there, trust me,” he said, and it was presumably the truth. Céline, three years younger, with the fragile, delicately pretty features of a porcelain doll, had been trailing their group like a lost puppy. It was obvious to anyone with eyes that she’d fallen hard for Stephen, but he was a lost cause, pledged to Amatis for life. She’d picked Lucian as her consolation prize, but it was just as obvious that Lucian had no romantic interest in anyone but Jocelyn Fairchild. Obvious, that is, to everyone except Jocelyn.

“We don’t need you for this one,” Valentine told Lucian. “Stay and *enjoy* yourself.”

“I should be with you,” Lucian said, the merriment faded from his voice. He sounded pained at the thought of Valentine venturing into dangerous territory without him, and Robert understood. *Parabatai* didn’t always fight side by side—but knowing your *parabatai* was in danger, without you there to support and protect him? It caused an almost physical pain. And Lucian and Valentine’s *parabatai* bond was even more intense than most. Robert could almost feel the current of power flowing between them, the strength and love they passed back and forth with every glance. “When you go, I go.”

“It’s already decided, my friend,” Valentine said, and that simply, it was. Lucian would stay on campus with the others. Valentine, Stephen, Michael, and Robert would slip away from campus after dark and venture into Brocelind Forest in pursuit of a werewolf encampment that, supposedly, could lead them to Valentine’s father’s killer. They’d make up the rest as they went along.

As the others hurried off to the dining hall for lunch, Maryse grabbed Robert’s hand and pulled him close.

“You’ll be careful out there, yes?” she said sternly. Maryse said everything sternly—it was one of the things he liked best about her.

She pressed her lithe body against his, kissed his neck, and he felt, in that moment, a passing sense of supreme confidence, that this was where he belonged . . . at least, until she whispered, “Come home to me in one piece.”

*Come home to me.* As if he belonged to her. As if, in her mind, they were already married, with a house and children and a lifetime of togetherness, as if the future was already decided.

It was the appeal of Maryse, as it was the appeal of Valentine, the ease with which they could be sure of what should be, and what was to come. Robert continued hoping that one day it would rub off on him. In the meantime, the less certain he was, the more certain he acted—there was no need for anyone to know the truth.

\* \* \*

Robert Lightwood wasn’t much of a teacher. He gave them a neatly sanitized account of the early days of the Circle, laying out Valentine’s revolutionary principles as if they were a list of ingredients for baking a particularly bland cake. Simon, fruitlessly devoting most of his energy to telepathic communication with Isabelle, was barely listening. He found himself cursing the fact that the Shadowhunters were so haughty about the whole we-don’t-do-magic thing. If he were a warlock, he probably be able command Isabelle’s attention with the flick of a finger. Or, if he were still a vampire, he could have used his vampy powers to enthrall her—but that was something Simon preferred not to think about, because it raised some unsettling questions about how he’d managed to enthrall her in the first place.

What he did hear of Robert’s tale didn’t much interest him. Simon had never liked history much, at least as it was relayed to him in school. It sounded too much like a brochure, everything neatly laid out and painfully obvious in retrospect. Every war had its bullet-pointed causes; every megalomaniac dictator was so cartoonishly evil you wondered how stupid the people of the past had to be, not to notice. Simon didn’t remember much of his own history-making experiences, but he remembered enough to know it wasn’t so clear when it was happening. History, the way teachers liked it, was a racetrack, a straight shot from start to finish line; life itself was more of a maze.

Maybe the telepathy worked after all. Because when the speech ended and the students were given permission to disperse, Isabelle hopped off the stage and strolled right up to Simon. She gave him a sharp nod hello.

“Isabelle, I, uh, maybe we could—”

She flashed him a brilliant smile that, for just a moment, made him think all his worrying had been for nothing. Then she said, “Aren’t you going to introduce me to your friends? Especially the handsome ones?”

Simon turned to see half the class crowding in behind him, eager for a brush with the famous Isabelle Lightwood. At the front of the pack were George and Jon, the latter practically drooling.

Jon elbowed past Simon and thrust out a hand. “Jon Cartwright, at your service,” he said in a voice that oozed charm like a blister oozed pus.

Isabelle took his hand—and instead of jujitsuing him to the ground with a humiliating thump slicing his hand off at the wrist with her electrum whip, she let him turn her hand over and bring it to his lips. Then she *curtsied*. She *winked*. Worst of all, she *giggled*.

Simon thought he might puke.

Unendurable minutes of torment passed: George blushing and making goofy attempts at jokes, Julie struck speechless, Marisol pretending to be above it all, Beatriz engaging in wan but polite small talk about mutual acquaintances, Sunil bouncing in the back of the crowd, trying to make himself seen, and through it all, Jon smirking and Isabelle beaming and batting her eyes in a display that could only be meant to make Simon’s stomach churn.

At least, he desperately hoped it was meant for that. Because the other option—the possibility that Isabelle was smiling at Jon simply because she wanted to, and that she accepted his invitation to squeeze his rock-hard biceps because she wanted to feel his muscles contract beneath her delicate grip—was unthinkable.

“So what do you people do around here for fun?” she asked finally, then narrowed her eyes flirtatiously at Jon. “And don’t say ‘me.’”

*Am I already dead?* Simon thought hopelessly. *Is this hell?*

“Neither the circumstances nor the population here have proven themselves conducive to fun,” Jon said pompously, as if the bluster in his voice could disguise the fire in his cheeks.

“That all changes tonight,” Isabelle said, then turned on her spiky heel and strode away.

George shook his head, letting out an appreciative whistle. “Simon, your girlfriend—”

“*Ex*-girlfriend,” Jon put in.

“She’s magnificent,” Julie breathed, and from the looks on the others’ faces, she was speaking for the group.

Simon rolled his eyes and hurried after Isabelle—reaching out to grab her shoulder, then thinking better of it at the last moment. Grabbing Isabelle Lightwood from behind was probably an invitation to amputation.

“Isabelle,” he said sharply. She sped up. So did he, wondering where she was headed. “Isabelle,” he said again. They burrowed deeper into the school, the air thick with damp and mold, the stone floors increasingly slick beneath their feet. They hit a fork, corridors branching off to the left and right, and she paused before choosing the one on the left.

“We don’t go down this one, generally,” Simon said.

Nothing.

“Mostly because of the elephant-size slug that lives at the end of it.” This was not an exaggeration. Rumor had it that some disgruntled faculty member—a warlock who’d been fired when the tide turned against Downworlders—had left it behind as a parting gift.

Isabelle kept walking, slower now, picking her way carefully over seeping puddles of slime. Something skittered loudly overhead. She didn’t flinch—but she did look up, and Simon caught her fingers playing across the coiled whip.

“Also because of the rats,” he added. He and George had gone on an expedition down this corridor in search of the supposed slug . . . they gave up after the third rat dropped from the ceiling and

somehow found its way down George's pants.

Isabelle breathed a heavy sigh.

"Come on, Izzy, hold up."

Somehow, he'd stumbled on the magic words. She spun around to face him. "Don't call me that," she hissed.

"What?"

"My friends call me Izzy," she said. "You lost that right."

"Izzy—Isabelle, I mean. If you'd read my letter—"

"No. You don't call me Izzy, you don't send me letters, you don't follow me into dark corridors and try to save me from rats."

"Trust me, we see a rat, it's every man for himself."

Isabelle looked like she wanted to feed him to the giant slug. "My point, Simon Lewis, is that you and I are strangers now, just like you wanted it."

"If that's true, then what are you doing here?"

Isabelle looked incredulous. "It's one thing for Jace to believe the world revolves around him, but come on. I know you love fantasy, Simon, but the suspension of disbelief can only go so far."

"This is my school, Isabelle," Simon said. "And you're my—"

She just stared at him, as if defying him to come up with a noun that would justify the possessive.

This wasn't going the way he'd planned.

"Okay, then, why are you here? And why are you being so nice to all my, uh, friends?"

"Because my father's *forcing* me to be here," she said. "Because I guess he thinks some delightful father-daughter bonding time in a slime-covered pit will make me forget that he's a deadbeat adulter who ditched his family. And I'm being nice to your friends because I'm a nice person."

Now it was Simon who looked incredulous.

"Okay, I'm not," she admitted. "But I've never actually been to school, you know. I figured if I have to be here, I might as well make the best of it. See what I'm missing. Is that enough information for you?"

"I get that you're mad at me, but—"

She shook her head. "You *don't* get it. I'm not mad at you. I'm not anything at you, Simon. You asked me to accept that you were a different person now, someone who I don't know. So I've accepted that. I loved someone—he's gone now. You're nobody I know, and, as far as I can tell, nobody I need to know. I'll only be here a few days, and then we never need to see each other again. How about you don't make it harder than it has to be?"

He couldn't quite catch his breath.

*I loved someone*, she'd said, and it was the closest she—or any girl—had ever come to saying *I love you* to Simon.

Except that it wasn't close at all, was it?

It was a world away.

"Okay." It was the only word he could force out, but she was already walking on down the corridor. She didn't need his permission to be a stranger; she didn't need anything from him. "You're going the wrong way!" he called after her. He didn't know where she wanted to go, but there seemed little chance she wanted to go slug-ward.

"They're all wrong," she called back, without turning around.

He tried to sense some subtext in her words, a glimmer of pain. Something that would give the lie to her claim, betray the feelings she still harbored for him—prove this was as hard and confusing for her as it was for him.

But the suspension of disbelief could only go so far.

Isabelle had said she wanted to make the best of her time at the Academy, and she'd proposed they not make it any harder than it needed to be. Unfortunately, Simon soon discovered, these two things were mutually exclusive. Because Isabelle's version of making the best of things involved Isabelle stretched out like a cat on one of the student lounge's musty leather couches, surrounded by sycophants, Isabelle partaking in George's illicit supply of scotch and inviting the others to do so as well, so that soon all of Simon's friends and enemies were drunk and giddy and in much too good a mood for his liking. Making the best of things apparently meant encouraging Julie to flirt with George and teaching Marisol how to smash statuary with a whip and, worst of all, agreeing to "maybe" be Jon Cartwright's date for the end-of-year party later in the week.

Simon wasn't sure whether any of this was harder than it needed to be—who knew what qualified as *needed to be*?—but it was excruciating.

"So, when does the real fun start?" Isabelle finally said.

Jon waggled his eyebrows. "Just say the word."

Isabelle laughed and touched his shoulder.

Simon wondered whether the Academy would expel him for murdering Jon Cartwright in his sleep.

"Not that kind of fun. I mean, when do we sneak off campus? Go party in Alicante? Go swimming in Lake Lyn? Go . . ." She trailed off, finally noticing that the others were gaping at her like she was speaking in tongues. "Are you telling me you don't do *any* of that?"

"We're not here to have fun," Beatriz said, somewhat stiffly. "We're here to learn to be Shadowhunters. There are rules for a reason."

Isabelle rolled her eyes. "Haven't you ever heard that rules are meant to be broken? Students are *supposed* to get into a little trouble at the Academy—at least the best students are. Why do you think the rules are so strict? So that only the best can get around them. Think of it like extra credit."

"How would you know?" Beatriz asked. Simon was surprised by her tone. Usually, she was the quietest among them, always willing to go with the flow. But there was an edge in her voice now, something that reminded him that, gentle as she seemed, she was a born warrior. "It's not like you went here."

"I come from a long line of Academy graduates," Isabelle said. "I know what I need to know."

"We're not all interested in following in your *father's* footsteps," Beatriz said, then stood up and walked out of the room.

There was silence in her wake, everyone tensely waiting for Isabelle to react.

Her smile didn't waver, but Simon could feel the heat radiating from her and understood it was taking a great deal of energy for her not to explode—or collapse. He didn't know which it would be, but he didn't know how she felt about her father once being one of Valentine's men. He didn't know anything about her, not really. He admitted that.

But he still wanted to scoop her into his arms and hold her until the storm passed.

"No one has ever accused my father of being fun," Isabelle said flatly. "But I assume *my* reputation precedes me. If you meet me here at midnight tomorrow, I'll show you what you've been missing." She took Jon's hand in her own and allowed him to pull her off the couch. "Now. Will you show me to my room? This place is simply impossible to navigate."

"My pleasure," Jon said, winking at Simon.

Then they were gone.

Together.



The next morning the hall echoed with yawning and the groan of hangovers in (fruitless) search for grease and coffee. As Robert Lightwood launched into his second lecture, some tedious disquisition on the nature of evil and a point-by-point analysis of Valentine's critique of the Accords, Simon had to keep pinching himself awake. Robert Lightwood was possibly the only person on the planet who could make the story of the Circle drop-dead boring. It didn't help that Simon had stayed up till dawn tossing and turning on the lumpy mattress, trying to drive nightmare images of Isabelle and Jon out of his head.

There was something going on with her, Simon was sure of it. Maybe it wasn't about him—maybe it was about her father or some residual homeschooling issues or just some girl thing he couldn't fathom, but she wasn't acting like herself.

*She's not your girlfriend*, he kept reminding himself. Even if something was wrong, it was no longer his job to fix it. *She can do what she wants*.

And if what she wanted was Jon Cartwright, then obviously she wasn't worth losing a night of sleep over in the first place.

By sunrise he'd almost managed to convince himself of this. But there she was again, up on stage beside her father, her fierce and fiercely intelligent gaze evoking all those annoying *feelings* again.

They weren't memories, exactly. Simon couldn't have named a single movie they watched together; he didn't know any of Isabelle's favorite foods or inside jokes; he didn't know what it felt like to kiss her or twine his fingers with hers. What he felt whenever he looked at her was deeper than that, dwelling in some nether region of his mind. He felt like he *knew* her, inside and out. He felt like he had Superman vision and could x-ray her soul. He felt sorrow and loss and joy and confusion; he felt a cavemanlike urge to slaughter a wild boar and lay it at her feet; he felt the need to do something extraordinary and the belief that, in her presence, he could.

He felt something he'd never felt before—but he had a sinking sensation that he recognized anyway.

He was pretty sure he felt like he was in love.

\* \* \*

1984

Valentine made it easy for them. He'd induced permission from the dean for an "educational" camping trip in Brocelind Forest—two days and nights free to do as they pleased, as long as it resulted in a few scribbled pages on the curative powers of wild herbs.

By all rights, with his uncomfortable questions and rebellious theories, Valentine should have been the black sheep of Shadowhunter Academy. Ragnor Fell certainly treated him like a slimy creature who'd crawled out from under a rock and should be hastily returned there. But the rest of the faculty seemed blinded by Valentine's personal magnetism, unable or unwilling to see through to the disrespect that lay beneath. He was endlessly dodging deadlines and ducking out of classes, excusing himself with nothing more than the flash of a smile. Another student might have been grateful for that latitude, but it only made Valentine loathe his teachers more—every loophole the faculty opened for him was only more evidence of weakness.

He had no qualms about enjoying its consequences.

The werewolf pack, according to Valentine's intel, was holed up in the old Silverhood manor, decrepit ruin at the heart of the forest. The last Silverhood had died in battle two generations before and was used as a name to spook young Shadowhunter children. The death of a soldier was one thing, regrettable, but the natural order of things. The death of a line was unimaginable.

Maybe they were all secretly apprehensive about it, this illicit mission that seemed to cross an invisible line. Never before had they struck against Downworlders without the express permission and oversight of their elders; they had broken rules, but never before had they strayed so close to breaking the Law.

Maybe they just wanted to spend a few more hours like normal teenagers, before they went so far that they couldn't turn back.

For whatever reason, the four of them made their way through the woods with a deliberate lack of speed, setting up camp for the night a half mile from the Silverhood estate. They would, Valentine decided, spend the day staking out the werewolf encampment, gauging its strengths and weaknesses, charting the rhythms of the pack, and attack at nightfall, once the pack had dispersed to hunt. But that was tomorrow's problem. That night, they sat around a campfire, roasted sausages over leaping flames, reminisced about their pasts, and rhapsodized about their futures, which still seemed impossibly far away.

"I'll marry Jocelyn, of course," Valentine said, "and we'll raise our children in the new era. They'll never be warped by the corrupt laws of a weak, sniveling Clave."

"Sure, because by that time, we'll run the world," Stephen said lightly. Valentine's grim smile made it seem less like a joke than a promise.

"Can't you just see it?" Michael said. "Daddy Valentine, knee deep in diapers. A busload of kids."

"However many Jocelyn wants." Valentine's expression softened, as it always did when he said her name. They'd only been together a couple of months—since his father died—but no one questioned that they were together for good. The way he looked at her . . . like she was a different species than the rest of them, a *higher* species. "Can't you see it?" Valentine had confided once, early on, when Robert asked him how he could be so sure of love, so soon. "There's more of the Angel in her than in the rest of us. There's greatness in her. She shines like Raziel himself."

"You just want to flood the gene pool," Michael said. "I imagine you think the world would be better off if every Shadowhunter had a little Morgenstern in them."

Valentine grinned. "I'm told false modesty doesn't suit me, so . . . no comment."

"While we're on the subject," Stephen said, a blush rising in his cheeks. "I've asked Amatis. And she said yes."

"Asked what?" Robert said.

Michael and Valentine only laughed, as Stephen's cheeks took fire. "To marry me," he admitted. "What do you think?"

The question was ostensibly directed to all of them, but his gaze was fixed on Valentine, who hesitated an impossibly long time before answering.

"Amatis?" he said finally, frowning his brow as if he'd have to give the matter some serious thought.

Stephen caught his breath, and in that moment, Robert almost thought it was possible that he needed Valentine's approval—that despite proposing to Amatis, despite loving her so deeply and desperately that he nearly vibrated with emotion whenever she came near, despite writing her that abominable love song Robert had once found crumpled under his bed, Stephen would cast her aside if Valentine commanded it.

In that moment, Robert almost thought it was possible that Valentine *would command* it, just to see what happened.

Then Valentine's face relaxed into a wide smile, and he threw an arm around Stephen, saying, "It's about time. I don't know what you were waiting for, you idiot. When you're lucky enough to have Graymark by your side, you do whatever you can to make sure it's forever. I should know."

Then everyone was laughing and toasting and plotting bachelor party schemes and teasing Stephen.

about his short-lived attempts at songwriting, and it was Robert who felt like the idiot, imagining even for a second that Stephen's love for Amatis could waver, or that Valentine had anything but their best interests at heart.

These were his friends, the best he would ever have, or anyone could ever have.

These were his comrades in arms, and nights like these, bursts of joy beneath starry skies, were their reward for the special obligation they'd taken upon themselves.

To imagine otherwise was only a symptom of Robert's secret weakness, his inveterate lack of conviction, and he resolved not to let himself do so again.

"And you, old man?" Valentine asked Robert. "As if I even have to ask. We all know Maryse does what she wants."

"And inexplicably, she seems to want you," Stephen added.

Michael, who had fallen unusually silent, caught Robert's eye. Only Michael knew how little Robert liked to think about the future, especially this part of it. How much he dreaded being forced into marriage, parenting, responsibility. If it were up to Robert, he would stay at the Academy forever. It made little sense. Because of what had happened when he was a kid, he was a couple of years older than his friends—he should have been chafing at the restrictions of youth. But maybe—because of what had happened—part of him would always feel cheated and want that time back. He'd spent so long wanting the life he had now. He wasn't ready to let go of it quite yet.

"Well, this old man is exhausted," Robert said, dodging the question. "I think my tent is calling."

As they extinguished the fire and tidied up the site, Michael shot him a grateful smile, having been spared his own interrogation. The only one of them still single, Michael disliked this line of conversation even more than Robert did. It was one of the many things they had in common: They both enjoyed each other's company more than that of any girl. Marriage seemed like such a misguided concept, Robert sometimes thought. How could he care for any wife more than he did for his *parabatai*, the other half of his soul? Why should he possibly be expected to?

He couldn't sleep.

When he emerged from the tent into the silent predawn, Michael was sitting by the ashes of the campfire. He turned toward Robert without surprise, almost as if he'd been waiting for his *parabatai* to join him. Maybe he had. Robert didn't know whether it was an effect of the bonding ritual or simply the definition of a best friend, but he and Michael lived and breathed in similar rhythms. Before they were roommates, they'd often run into each other in the Academy corridors, sleeplessly roaming the halls at night.

"Walk?" Michael suggested.

Robert nodded.

They traipsed wordlessly through the woods, letting the sounds of the sleeping forest wash over them. Screeches of night birds, skitters of insects, the hush of wind through fluttering leaves, the soft crunch of grass and twigs beneath their feet. There were dangers lurking here, they both knew that well enough. Many of the Academy's training missions took place in Brocelind Forest, its dense trees a useful refuge for werewolves, vampires, and even the occasional demons, though most of those were unleashed by the Academy itself, an ultimate test for particularly promising students. This night the forest felt safe. Or maybe it was simply that Robert felt invincible.

As they walked, he thought not of the mission to come but of Michael, who had been his first true friend.

He'd had friends when he was young, he supposed. The kids growing up in Alicante all knew each other, and he had vague memories of exploring the Glass City with small bands of children, their faces interchangeable, their loyalties nonexistent. As he discovered for himself the year he turned twelve and got his first Mark.

This was, for most Shadowhunter children, a proud day, one they looked forward to and fantasized about the way mundane children inexplicably fixated on birthdays. In some families, the first rune was applied in a quick, businesslike fashion, the child Marked and sent on his way; in others, there was great festivity, presents, balloons, a celebratory feast.

And, of course, in a very small number of families, the first rune was the last rune, the touch of the stele burning the child's skin, sending him into shock or madness, a fever so intense that only cutting through the Mark would save the life. Those children would never be Shadowhunters; those families would never be the same.

No one ever thought it would happen to them.

At twelve Robert had been scrawny but sure-footed, quick for his age, strong for his size, sure of the Shadowhunting glory that awaited him. As his extended family looked on, his father carefully traced the Voyance rune across Robert's hand.

The stele's tip carved its graceful lines across his pale skin. The completed Mark blazed bright, so bright Robert shut his eyes from the glare of it.

That was the last thing he remembered.

The last he remembered clearly, at least.

After that there was everything he'd tried so hard to forget.

There was pain.

There was the pain that seared through him like a lightning strike and the pain that ebbed and flowed like a tide. There was the pain in his body, lines of agony radiating from the Mark, burrowing from his flesh to his organs to his bones—and then, so much worse, there was the pain in his mind, maybe it was his soul, an ineffable sensation of *hurt*, as if some creature had burrowed into the depths of his brain and gotten hungrier with the firing of every neuron and synapse. It hurt to think, it hurt to feel, it hurt to remember—but it felt necessary to do these things, because, even in the heart of the agony, some dim part of Robert stayed alert enough to know that if he didn't hang on, didn't feel the hurt, he would slip away forever.

Later he would use all these words and more to try to describe the pain, but none of them captured the experience. What had happened, what he had felt, that was beyond words.

There were other torments to endure, through that eternity he lay in bed, insensible to all around him, imprisoned by his Mark. There were visions. He saw demons, taunting and torturing him, and worse, he saw the faces of those he loved, telling him he was unworthy, telling him he was better off dead. He saw charred, barren plains and a wall of fire, the hell dimension awaiting him if he let his mind slip away, and so, through it all, somehow, he held on.

He lost all sense of himself and the world around him, lost his words and his name—but he held on. Until finally, one month later, the pain abated. The visions faded. Robert awoke.

He learned—once he'd recovered himself enough to understand and care—that he'd been semiconscious for several weeks while a battle had been raging around him, members of the Clave warring with his parents over his treatment as two Silent Brothers did their best to keep him alive. They had all wanted to strip him of the Mark, his parents told him, the Silent Brothers warning daily that this was the only way to ensure his survival and spare him further pain. Let him live out his life as a mundane: This was the conventional treatment for Shadowhunters who couldn't bear Marks.

"We couldn't let them do that to you," his mother told him.

"You're a Lightwood. You were born to this life," his father told him. "This life and no other."

What they didn't say, and didn't need to: *We would rather see you dead than mundane.*

Things were different between them, after that. Robert was grateful to his parents for believing in him—he too would rather be dead. But it changed something, knowing his parents' love for him had a limit. And something must have changed for them, too, discovering that a part of their son couldn't

handle the Shadowhunter life, being forced to bear that shame.

Now Robert could no longer remember what his family had been like before the Mark. He remembered only the years since, the coldness that lived between them. They acted their parts: loving father, doting mother, dutiful son. But it was in their presence that Robert felt most alone.

He was, in those months spent recovering, frequently alone. The kids he'd thought of as his friends wanted nothing to do with him. When forced into his presence, they shied away, as if he were contagious.

There was nothing wrong with him, the Silent Brothers said. Having survived the ordeal with the Mark intact, there was no risk of future danger. His body had teetered on the edge of rejection, but his will had turned the tide. When the Silent Brothers examined him for the last time, one of them spoke somberly inside his head, with a message for Robert alone.

*You will be tempted to think this ordeal marks you as weak. Instead, remember it as proof of your strength.*

But Robert was twelve years old. His former friends were tracing themselves with runes, shipping off to the Academy, doing everything normal Shadowhunters were supposed to do—while Robert hid away in his bedroom, abandoned by his friends, cold-shouldered by his family, and afraid of his own stele. In the face of so much evidence for weakness, even a Silent Brother couldn't make him feel strong.

In this way, nearly a year passed, and Robert began to imagine this would be the shape of the rest of his life. He would be a Shadowhunter in name only; a Shadowhunter afraid of the Marks. Sometime in the dark of night, he wished his will hadn't been so strong, that he'd let himself be lost. It would have to be better than the life he'd returned to.

Then he met Michael Wayland, and everything changed.

They hadn't known each other very well, before. Michael was a strange kid, allowed to tag along with the others, but never quite accepted. He was prone to distraction and strange flights of fancy, pausing in the middle of a sparring session to consider where Sensors had come from, and who had thought to invent them.

Michael had shown up at the Lightwoods' manor one day asking if Robert might like to go for a horseback ride. They'd spent several hours galloping through the countryside, and once it was over Michael said, "See you tomorrow," as if it were a foregone conclusion. He kept coming back. "Because you're interesting," Michael said, when Robert finally asked him why.

That was another thing about Michael. He always said exactly what was in his head, no matter how tactless or peculiar.

"My mother made me promise not to ask about what happened to you," he added.

"Why?"

"Because it would be rude. What do you think? Would it be rude?"

Robert shrugged. No one ever asked him about it or referred to it, not even his parents. It had never occurred to him to wonder why, or whether this was preferable. It was simply the way things were.

"I don't mind being rude," Michael said. "Will you tell me? What it was like?"

Strange, that it could be that simple. Strange, that Robert could be burning to tell someone without even realizing it. That all he needed was someone to ask. The floodgates opened. Robert talked and talked, and when he trailed off, afraid he was going too far, Michael would jump in with another question.

"Why do you think it happened to *you*?" Michael asked. "Do you think it was genetic? Or, like, some part of you just isn't meant to be a Shadowhunter?"

It was, of course, Robert's greatest, most secret fear—but to hear it tossed off so casually like that defused it of all its power.

“Maybe?” Robert said, and instead of shunning him, Michael’s eyes lit up with a scientist’s curiosity.

He grinned. “We should find out.”

They made it their mission: They probed libraries, pored over ancient texts, asked questions that no adult wanted to hear. There was very little written record of Shadowhunters who’d experienced what Robert had—this kind of thing was meant to be a shameful family secret, never spoken of again. Not that Michael cared how many feathers he ruffled or which traditions he overturned. He wasn’t particularly brave, but he seemed to have no fear.

Their mission failed. There was no rational explanation for why Robert had reacted so strongly to the Mark, but by the end of that year, it didn’t matter. Michael had turned a nightmare into a puzzle—and had turned himself into Robert’s best friend.

They performed the *parabatai* ritual before leaving for the Academy, swearing the oath without hesitation. By then they were fifteen years old, a physically unlikely pairing: Robert had finally hit his growth spurt, and loomed over his peers, his muscles thick, his shadow of a beard growing in thick every day. Michael was slim and wiry, his unruly curls and dreamy expression making him look younger than his age.

*“Entreat me not to leave thee,  
Or return from following after thee—  
For whither thou goest, I will go,  
And where thou lodgest, I will lodge.  
Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.  
Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried.  
The Angel do so to me, and more also,  
If aught but death part thee and me.”*

Robert recited the words, but they were unnecessary. Their bond had been cemented the day he turned fourteen, when he finally got up the nerve to Mark himself again. Michael was the only one he told, and as he held the stele over his skin, it was Michael’s steady gaze that gave him the courage to bear down.

Unthinkable that they had only one last year together before they’d be expected to part. The *parabatai* bond would remain after the Academy, of course. They’d always be best friends; they’d always charge into battle side by side. But it wouldn’t be the same. They’d each marry, move into houses of their own, refocus their attention and their love. They would always have a claim on each other’s souls. But after next year, they would no longer be the most important person in each other’s lives. This, Robert knew, was simply how life worked. This was growing up. He just couldn’t imagine it, and he didn’t want to.

As if listening in on Robert’s thoughts, Michael echoed the question he’d dodged earlier. “What’s really is going on with you and Maryse?” he asked. “Do you think it’s for real? Like, for good?”

There was no need to put on a show for Michael. “I don’t know,” he said honestly. “I don’t even know what that would feel like. She’s perfect for me. I love spending time with her, I love . . . you know, with her. But does that mean I love her? It should, but . . .”

“Something’s missing?”

“Not between us, though,” Robert said. “It’s like there’s something missing in me. I see how Stephen looks at Amatis, how Valentine looks at Jocelyn—”

“How *Lucian* looks at Jocelyn,” Michael added with a wry grin. They both liked Lucian, despite his irritating tendency to act like Valentine’s favor had given him insight beyond his years. But after a

these years of watching him pine away for Jocelyn, it was hard to take him entirely seriously. The same went for Jocelyn, who somehow managed to remain oblivious. Robert didn't understand how you could be the center of someone's world without even realizing it.

"I don't know," he admitted, wondering if any girl would ever be the center of his world. "Sometimes I worry there's something wrong with me."

Michael clapped a hand to his shoulder and fixed him with an intense gaze. "There's *nothing* wrong with you, Robert. I wish you could finally see that."

Robert shook off the hand, along with the weight of the moment. "How about you?" he said with forced gaiety. "It's been, what, three dates with Eliza Rosewain?"

"Four," Michael admitted.

He'd sworn Robert to secrecy about her, saying he didn't want the other guys to know until he was sure it was real. Robert suspected he didn't want *Valentine* to know, as Eliza was a particular thorn on Valentine's side. She asked nearly as many disrespectful questions as he did, and harbored a similar disdain for the current policies of the Clave, but she wanted nothing to do with the Circle or its goals. Eliza thought that a new, united front with mundanes and Downworlders was the key to the future. She argued—loudly, and to the disgust of most of the faculty and students—that the Shadowhunters should be addressing the problems of the mundane world. She could often be found in the quad, shoving unwanted leaflets in students' faces, ranting about nuclear testing, Middle East oil tyrants, some trouble no one understood in South Africa, some disease no one wanted to acknowledge in America . . . Robert had heard every lecture in full, because Michael always insisted on staying to listen.

"She's very odd," Michael said. "I like it."

"Oh." It was a surprise, a not entirely pleasant one. Michael never liked *anyone*. Until this moment Robert hadn't realized how much he had counted on that. "Then you should go for it," he said, hoping he sounded sincere.

"Really?" Michael looked rather surprised himself.

"Yes. Definitely." Robert reminded himself: *The less certain you feel, the more certain you are.* "She's perfect for you."

"Oh." Michael stopped walking and settled under the shadow of a tree. Robert dropped to the ground beside him. "Can I ask you something, Robert?"

"Anything."

"Have you ever been in love? For real?"

"You know I haven't. Don't you think I would have mentioned it?"

"But how can you know for sure, if you don't know what it would feel like? Maybe you have without even realizing it. Maybe you're holding out for something you already have."

There was a part of Robert that hoped this was the case, that what he felt for Maryse *was* the kind of eternal, soul-mate love that everyone talked about. Maybe his expectations were simply too high. "I guess I don't know for sure," he admitted. "What about you? Do you think you know what it would feel like?"

"Love?" Michael smiled down at his hands. "Love, real love, is being seen. Being *known*. Knowing the ugliest part of someone, and loving them anyway. And . . . I guess I think two people in love become something else, something more than the sum of their parts, you know? That it must be like you're creating a new world that exists just for the two of you. You're gods of your own pocket universe." He laughed a little then, as if he felt foolish. "That must sound ridiculous."

"No," Robert said, the truth dawning over him. Michael didn't talk like someone who was guessing—he talked like someone who *knew*. Was it possible that after four dates with Eliza, he'd actually fallen in love? Was it possible that his *parabatai's* entire world had changed, and Robert hadn't even

noticed? “It sounds . . . nice.”

Michael turned his head up to face Robert, his face crinkled with an unusual uncertainty. “Robert, there’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you . . . needing to tell you, maybe.”

“Anything.”

It wasn’t like Michael to hesitate. They told each other everything; they always had.

“I . . .”

He stopped, then shook his head.

“What is it?” Robert pressed.

“No, it’s nothing. Forget it.”

Robert’s stomach cramped. Is this what it would be like now that Michael was in love? Would there be a new distance between them, important things left unsaid? He felt like Michael was leaving him behind, crossing the border into a land where his *parabatai* couldn’t follow—and though he knew he shouldn’t blame Michael, he couldn’t help himself.

\* \* \*

Simon was dreaming he was back in Brooklyn, playing a gig with Rilo Kiley to a club full of screaming fans, when suddenly his mother wandered onto the stage in her bathrobe and said, in a flawless Scottish accent, “You’re going to miss all the fun.”

Simon blinked himself awake, confused, for a moment, why he was in a dungeon that smelled of dung rather than his Brooklyn bedroom—then, once he got his bearings, confused all over again about why he was being awoken in the middle of the night by a wild-eyed Scotsman.

“Is there a fire?” Simon asked. “There better be a fire. Or a demon attack. And I’m not talking about some puny lower-level demon, mind you. You want to wake me up in the middle of a dream about rock superstardom, it better be a Greater Demon.”

“It’s Isabelle,” George said.

Simon leaped out of bed—or, gallantly tried to, at least. He got a bit tangled in his sheets, so it was more like he tumbled-twisted-*thudded* out of bed, but eventually he made it to his feet, ready to charge into action. “What happened to Isabelle?”

“Why would anything have happened to Isabelle?”

“You said—” Simon rubbed his eyes, sighing. “Let’s start over again. You’re waking me up because . . . ?”

“We’re meeting Isabelle. Having an adventure. Ring a bell?”

“Oh.” Simon had done his best to forget about this. He climbed back into bed. “You can tell me about it in the morning.”

“You’re not coming?” George asked, as if Simon had said he was going to spend the rest of the night doing extra calisthenics with Delaney Scarsbury, just for fun.

“You guessed it.” Simon tugged the blanket over his head and pretended to be asleep.

“But you’re going to miss all the fun.”

“That is precisely my intention,” Simon said, and squeezed his eyes shut until he was asleep for real.

\* \* \*

This time he was dreaming of a VIP room backstage at the club, filled with champagne and coffee, a gaggle of groupies trying to break down the door so that—in the dream, Simon somehow knew that was their intent—they could tear off his clothes and ravish him. They pounded at the door, screaming his name, *Simon! Simon! Simon!*

Simon opened his eyes to creeping tendrils of gray, predawn light, a rhythmic pounding at his door.



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