



*Cortana wove with her words, underlining each one with steel. She turned as her sword turned, and her body curved and moved like water or fire, like a river under an infinity of stars. It was beautiful—she was beautiful, but it was not a distant beauty. It was a beauty that lived and breathed and reached out with its hands to crush James's chest and make him breathless.*

James had felt a strange emotion when Daisy first took the stage at the *Hell Ruelle*. It was a mix of several feelings: worry on her behalf, annoyance at Kellington, curiosity, and admiration for her bravery and poise. It was unfair of these Bohemians to force her to caper for them, and, he thought, a bit insulting to Shadowhunters in general. He supposed that Matthew had given them a rather unusual view of what the Nephilim were like in such circumstances.

And then she had begun to dance. And suddenly she was not Daisy, his old friend. She was Cordelia, whose name meant *heart*, whose every gesture was fire. Every earthly worry he'd had had been swept out of his mind. He was conscious only of Cordelia, whirling back and forth across the small stage. Cortana danced around her, shedding light like embers. The dull glow of the lamps illuminated her body, describing her every movement, her every curve as she danced. Her scarlet hair whipped around her in time to the music, and the golden light of the lamps in the Ruelle slipped across her skin, slow and hot, like beads of honey. The cadence of her voice, rising and falling, seemed to weave a cage of silken thread about her audience, and James was no exception.

Later, James would think it was odd that he had not compared her to Grace. Grace had never entered his mind at all. Cordelia danced, and by the end of her performance, James's entire life had been disassembled and put back together in a new and different shape. He was conscious of Matthew, beside him, also staring as the crowd cheered, his sharp cheekbones flushed. He looked dazed; James couldn't blame him.

Cordelia descended the stage and slipped through the crowd to come back to them, blushing at the looks and murmured comments she was drawing from the audience now. James could see the desire in the eyes that followed her. Everyone wanted her. He felt a dull fury. They had no right. They did not know Cordelia. She was more than just that dance.

When she reached them she let out a long breath of relief and smiled. She glowed with the exercise of dancing. Sweat beaded along her collarbones, shimmered between her breasts. Her eyes were bright as Cortana's blade, strapped to her back.

"Bloody hell," Matthew exclaimed. "What was *that*?"

A look of uncertainty crossed Cordelia's face. James said, "It was a fairy tale, Math," and Matthew nodded. His dark green eyes searched Cordelia's face, as if looking for the key to a locked room he had only just discovered.

Cordelia looked uncertain. James couldn't bear that. She'd been magnificent; she should know it. But he couldn't *say* that, of course. It would only make her self-conscious.

"Well done, Cordelia," James said instead; when he unfolded his arms; his wrist hurt and he wondered if he'd been clenching his hands.

*Cordelia*. He hadn't called her Daisy, and she looked a little surprised. It seemed inappropriate, somehow. *Daisy* was Lucie's friend, the Merry Thieves' compatriot; he found it a smaller name than she deserved. *Cordelia*, though—she had been a queen, hadn't she? Queen Cordelia, daughter of Leir, ruler of Britain before the Romans had ever landed on those shores. Like Boadicea, a legendary warrior queen. A blazing white fire behind fathomless black eyes.

"Anna has disappeared with Hypatia," James said, noting the empty settee, "so I would call your distraction a success."

Cordelia's lips twitched into a smile. "How long does a seduction usually last?"

"Depends if you do it properly," Matthew said, with a wink. James felt it as a spark of relief, a bit of lightness amid the feeling that something heavy was sitting on his chest.

"Well, I hope for Hypatia's sake Anna does it properly," James said. He registered, with the reflexes of a *parabatai*, that Matthew had gone still next to him, and wondered what was wrong. "Yet for our sake, I hope she hurries it up."

All hint of Matthew's jocular tone from before was gone. "Both of you," he said urgently. "Listen."

Did he mean all the muttering about Shadowhunters? Was he only noticing it now? It had followed them since they came into the place. But when James followed Matthew's gaze, he found Kellington staring with an expression of vexation, not at them but at the door. All questions were answered as through the door came Charles Fairchild, looking around him with a haughty expression. He looked like was about to raid the place; so much for whatever work Matthew and Anna had done for Downworlder-Shadowhunter relations here.

Matthew narrowed his eyes. "Charles," he sighed. "By the Angel, what is *he* doing here?"

Charles was, James thought, probably looking for them. He was making his way through the crowd and gazing around him. Luckily for them, the crowd was not interested in letting him through, and he was moving very slowly.

"We should go," James said. "But we can't leave Anna."

In one way, at least, Charles's arrival was helpful; it threw a bucket of cold water on the roiling heat that had gripped James's heart since Cordelia had begun her dance. Back to the matter at hand: a demon, a Pyxis, a plan.

"You two run and hide yourselves," Matthew said, still keeping his eyes on his brother. "Charles will go off his head if he sees you here."

"But what about you?" said Cordelia.

Matthew shrugged, but James could see the tension in his jaw and his shoulders. "He's used to this kind of thing from me. I'll deal with Charles."

Not for the first time, James wished that his *parabatai* wasn't in such a hurry to sacrifice his own reputation. He exchanged a long look with Matthew, but Matthew was sure, and determined, and his desire to rush into his own humiliation was an issue that would have to wait. Nodding, he turned and caught Cordelia's hand with his own. "This way," he said, and she nodded back in acknowledgement. As he pulled them into the crowd he heard Matthew's voice calling, "Charles!" in a hearty tone of pleasant, if entirely false, welcome.

James didn't know his way around the place, and the crowd made orientating himself even more difficult, but after some trial and error he and Cordelia managed to get behind Kellington and slip into a corridor leading away. This wasn't safe in itself, since from the main chamber one would have a clear view down the entire corridor. In fact, they were temporarily more exposed than before, and James's hope for the hallway to take a quick turn or to contain large statuary to hide behind was quickly dashed. He continued to hold onto Cordelia's hand, not that he needed to; she seemed to know her way better than he did.

Partway down the corridor, James caught sight of an open door — its silver plaque labeling it the entrance to THE WHISPERING ROOM. Swiftly he drew Cordelia inside, out of sight. He slammed the door behind them, causing a loud noise, but he thought it couldn't possibly be heard over the crowd in the main chamber. Only then did he release Cordelia's hand and take stock of their surroundings.

The room was dimly lit, but not cold: a scented fire burned in the grate, filling the space with the smell of sandalwood and roses. It was a study, he guessed, based on the gigantic walnut desk against the wall and the bookshelves opposite, but it was too richly decorated to be solely a place for studious contemplation. Phoenix feathers and dragon scales danced across the gilded wallpaper; there were no windows, but the walls were hung with patterned tapestries, the floor covered with a rug so thick James felt his boots sink into it as he moved further into the room.

Cordelia had leaned her back against the wall next to the door. Her eyes were closed and she was taking deep, full breaths, calming herself down. Cortana gleamed gold over her shoulder; the firelight gleamed a deeper gold on her skin, which seemed to take and hold its warmth. James curled his fingers in against his palm.

He wanted to touch her. He half-turned away, pretending to study the books on the wall. Any other time, he would have been fascinated by the titles. Now they seemed distant, neither immediate nor important. He could have sworn he heard his own heart hammering. He said, "Where did you learn to dance like that?" surprising himself with the roughness of his own voice.

His gaze snapped back to Cordelia as she opened her eyes and gave a little shrug. There was something magical about the dress she wore: it followed the shape of her own body rather than the shape of corsetry or whalebone petticoats. It slid softly against her skin as she moved, just as her dark red hair tickled the bare skin of her throat, her shoulders. "I had a dance instructor in Paris. My mother believed that learning to dance aided in learning grace in battle."

The word *grace* pierced James like an icicle. He could not quite picture Grace at the moment, it was true; could not quite envision her face. He had given Grace his heart — that was an immutable fact, something he knew as he knew that two plus two equaled four. But he had to admit that at the moment his heart did not *feel* given. It felt like a thrumming machine inside his chest, pumping blood and heat.

"That dance," Cordelia added with a quirk of her soft mouth that struck James like a blow to the stomach, "was forbidden to be taught to unmarried ladies. But my dance instructor did not care."



“Well,” James said, keeping his voice steady with practiced control, “thank the Angel you were there. Matthew and I could certainly not have pulled off that dance on our own.”

Cordelia turned away from him, the smile still on her face, as though she were keeping it secret from him. She trailed her hand along the top of Hypatia’s desk. At one end was a stack of papers held down by a large copper bowl of fruit, and she brought her hand up to trace its rim.

James may have been distracted beyond the capacity for distraction he’d known before, but he was still a Shadowhunter. “Be careful,” he said warningly. “I suspect that is faerie fruit. It has no effect on warlocks—no magical effect, at least. But on humans...”

Cordelia pulled her hand back as though stung. “Surely it does not harm you if you do not eat it.”

“Oh, it does not. But I have met those who have tasted it. The say the more you have of it, the more you want, and the more you ache when you can...have no more.”

Cordelia was looking at him now, and though it took a great summoning of courage, he returned her gaze. In her dark eyes the silver and blue flames of the fireplace danced. James could not catch his breath. He had never felt this before, this breathlessness. It was like pain, but with a sweet, sharp edge. Like licking honey from a knife. He said, in a low voice, “And yet. I have always thought...is not knowing what it tastes like just another form of torture? The torture of wondering?”

The door shook on his hinges suddenly, making a clatter that made both he and Cordelia jerk their heads around to look at it. The knob was starting to turn.

Cordelia paled. “We’re not meant to be in here —“

James’s world closed down to just this: Cordelia was here, she was with him, and she looked frightened. He would do anything to stop that look on her face. He caught her in his arms, and the relief was incredible — he had not realized how much he wanted to be touching her until he was. Until he was holding her, and her strength and warmth and softness were all pressed against him, and her face was so beautiful it hurt, and her lips were parted in surprise and without another thought he kissed them.

He could feel her sharp intake of breath with his hands, clasped together at her lower back. She gasped, but did not draw back, or away — he thought he would have died if she had — she leaned into him, her full lips opening under his. She was kissing him *back*. He tasted honey, smelled jasmine and smoke. His hand slid up her warm cheek and into the soft fall of her hair.

Time stopped.

Cordelia’s arms were around his neck. Her lush mouth opened a little against his, and the kiss deepened. He moved his hand to the back of her neck to bring her closer. Her teeth grazed his lower lip, and he couldn’t help it; he moaned, and felt her tremble against him.

Very far away, a voice chuckled and the door closed with a soft click. This whole thing had been intended as a ruse, he knew, for the benefit of whomever was trying to get into the Whispering Room. Probably some Ruelle attendees, Downworlders most likely, who had snuck off for a rendez-vous.

Ruse accomplished, then. With intense regret, James drew back from Cordelia. Her hand, warm and soft and wonderful, was against his neck; her fingers stroked his pale white scar. Her eyes were fixed at the level of his shoulder. He could hear himself say her name — *Daisy, my Daisy* — instead of responding, she whispered, “I think more people are coming.”

He knew it wasn’t true. He didn’t care. He knew what she was saying: that she was asking and giving permission at once. All James’ life, he had struggled for control: control over his sudden falls into shadow, control over the dark world he could see, that was invisible to everyone else. He had worked and fought and trained for control every day, and for the first time in as long as he could remember it deserted him.

The walls he had put up burned to the ground in an instant as he caught Cordelia to him. He groaned against her mouth, his hands slipping over the silk of her dress, the hot satin of her skin. He undid the strap that held Cortana, got rid of it somehow — carefully, he hoped — and let himself fall back into delirium.

He did not ask himself why he had never felt desire like this before. He could not. He was lost in the feel of her, the incline of her waist, the flare of her hips, the rise and fall of her chest as she gasped. They were kissing wildly, uncontrolled; they fetched up against the desk, Cordelia’s back to it.

Her body bent backward in an impossible arch, her hands going behind her to brace herself. Her eyes half-closed, her head fell back, revealing the bare column of her throat. He pressed his lips there, eliciting a gasp of surprised pleasure.

His hands trailed up the sleek material of her dress — he could feel the heat of her skin through it — from her waist to the neckline of her gown. His palms followed her curves until the tips of his fingers were pressing into the bare bronze skin just above the neckline of her dress. She was sleek and soft and hot all at the same time, like nothing else he’d ever touched. He heard her whimper; she was saying his name, and his heart beat in time with her words: *James, James, Jamie please*.

The *please* undid him; shrugging off his frock coat, he caught hold of her around the waist, lifting her until she was perched on the edge of the desk. The material of her dress bunched around her knees, her thighs, as she took hold of his shirt by the starched front and kissed him. His mouth drove against hers, hot and demanding, even as he clambered onto the desk after her. She reached up her arms for him and he sank down on top of her, bracing his weight with a hand above her head.

He paused, just for a moment, looking down at her. Her scarlet hair fanned out across the desk, her eyes glazed, her full lips red from kissing. He was cradled by her body, her legs on either side of his hips, her skirt rucked up nearly to her waist. She wrapped her long, bare legs around him and he shuddered. What was in him, what he *wanted*, was inchoate but insistent, a force he’d never known. A yearning like hot wires in his blood, the pain-pleasurable ache of unbearable wanting that drove him to kiss her again, kiss her harder. She tangled her hands in his hair, pulling at it as he kissed her breasts, flicking his tongue over the sensitive skin until she gave a low scream and clutched at him with desperate hands.

He sank down against her and kissed her, hot and deep and hard. She arched into the kiss, her breath coming in gasps. He *felt* her through the thinner material of his shirt: the heat of her, the swell of her breasts against his chest, her hands smoothing over his chest, his sides.

His hands aching to touch her in kind, to find out what she liked, what made her gasp, and do it again and again . . . Nothing had ever felt like this, nothing. He'd known desire before; so he remembered, so he had believed. It turned out he had stepped into a puddle and thought it was the sea. As Cordelia moved in his arms, as her lips, he realized there was a depth to desire he hadn't even guessed at: that it was more than just desperation, but joy and need and wanting and being wanted *back*. It was a fever dream, his hands sliding up under the heavy satin of her skirts, the salt-sweet taste of her skin, the soft sounds of her pleasure as she urged him closer, urged him onward, the desk seeming to spin beneath them.

He heard, as if at a great distance, the sound of the door opening. He lifted his head, saw the slim fair-haired figure in the doorway. Ice washed through his veins. Cordelia stiffened, began to scramble to sit up. *No*, he thought, but he couldn't stop her, couldn't blame her. It — whatever it had been — was over.

He slid off the desk. Already the fever was vanishing, that feeling — the glorious freedom from the burden of his own will — receding. Grasping at his control, he drew it around himself, reaching for his coat, turning to calmly meet the gaze of his *parabatai*.

“James?” Matthew said.