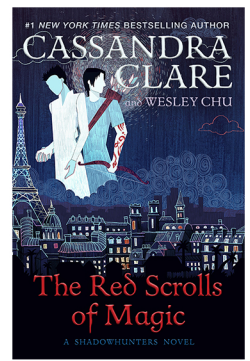


Exclusive extract from *THE RED SCROLLS OF MAGIC*

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"Yeah," Alec said quietly. "We're all right. How about you?"

"Can't complain," said Aline. "Is Jace with you?"

"Uh, no," said Alec.

He wondered if Aline was asking for a specific reason. He recalled that Aline and Jace had kissed in Alicante, before the war. Alec tried to think of what Isabelle usually said to girls about Jace.

"The thing is," he added, "Jace is a beautiful antelope, who has to be free to run across the plains."

"What?" said Aline.

Maybe Alec had gotten that wrong. "Jace is home with his, uh, his new girlfriend. You remember Clary." Alec hoped Aline was not too heartbroken.

"Oh right, the short redhead," she said. She fiddled with her cup for a moment, not looking at Alec, then added, "I saw you and your Downworlder. You know. In the Accords Hall."

There was silence, awkwardness hanging like the haze in the air. Alec remembered kissing Magnus, under the eyes of the Angel and everyone he loved, and also hundreds of complete strangers. His hands had been shaking. He'd been so scared to do it, but more scared that he would lose Magnus, that one of them might die without Magnus ever knowing how Alec felt about him.

He couldn't read Aline's face. He'd always gotten along with Aline, who was quieter than Isabelle and Jace. He'd always felt they understood each other. Perhaps Aline could not understand him now.

"That must have been terrifying," she said at last.

"It was," Alec said reluctantly.

"Now that you've done it, are you happy?" Aline asked tentatively.

Alec did not know if she was simply curious, or if, like his dad, she thought that Alec's life would be better if he kept hiding.

"It's hard sometimes," said Alec. "But I'm very happy."

A tiny, uncertain smile flickered across Aline's face.

"I'm glad you're happy," she said eventually. "Are you still together? Or is it all, oh, now he knows you like him back, he doesn't like you as much? Maybe it was all about the lure of what he couldn't have? Do you ever worry about that?"

"Not before right this moment," Alec snapped.

Aline shrugged. "Sorry. I think maybe I'm just not very romantic. I've never understood why people get so worked up about relationships."

Alec used to feel the same. He remembered the first time Magnus kissed him, and every cell of his body thrilled to a new song. He remembered the sensation of the pieces of the world finally fitting together in a way that made sense.

"Well," said Alec, "we're still together. We're on vacation. It's great." He shot Aline a challenging glare, then thought of Magnus and added, more softly, "He's great."

"So why are you at the Rome Institute when you're meant to be on vacation?" Aline asked.

Alec hesitated. "Can I trust you?" he asked. "Can I really trust you? I mean it. I trust you with my life, but can I trust you with more than my life?"

"That got serious fast," said Aline with a grin, which faded as she took in Alec's grim expression. She bit her lip. "Your fight is my fight," she said. "You can trust me."

Alec gazed at her for a long moment. Then he explained as much as he could, finishing with: "I need to find out if there's been any sign of cult activity in Rome," he said, "but I can't tell anyone else in the Institute what I'm looking for."

Aline absorbed this. He could see the questions in her eyes, but she pressed her lips together.

"Okay," she said at last. "Let's go check out the logged demonic activity in the last few weeks. I'll just say that my friend, a hero of the war, has dropped by to visit me. I think some more visitors are due. With any luck, everyone will be too busy to ask any questions."

Alec gave her a grateful look. Aline was kind.

"If your warlock is doing something evil, we're going to have to cut off his head," Aline added.

Aline was kind, but perhaps not very tactful.