And So The Time Goes ...

by Nylita

Summary

He should've never returned.

He knew it was a mistake the second he set foot in the Institute.

Valentine is still at large, slaughtering downworlders by the hour, and here he was, coming
back to the very place he'd sworn to stay away from.

Magnus Bane has returned after seventeen months, only to come face to face with the person he'd specifically avoided for those seventeen months in the first ten minutes of being back.

Whoever said hell didn't exist on earth had obviously never had the chance to meet Alexander Lightwood.
Hey, guys! Okay, so this has become a monster. I was just doing my thing, you know, studying, eating my weight in candy, wishing that I could have a job as a unicorn trainer, when this idea nestled it's way into my head. Naturally, as the mature, adult in training, I am, I threw my anatomy book across the room and hunkered down. Today is the day after, and what was left in the wake shall never be spoken of again. Heart were broken, and friendships shattered but I made it. One night and a whole bucket of coffee later, I've written 20,000 words. 20,000! So naturally I'm spending my morning posting the first little chapter because that's more important than showering or looking like I haven't been locked away in a basement for the past year. Anyway, I really, really, hope you'll enjoy this! And don't worry, I'm a perfectly sane person. Honestly! ... I think. :) 

EDIT:

Our tagline/motto/unofficial slogan: "And when I thought things could go well, they go so wrong." - domoiswatchingyou

Russian translation of this fic is right here courtesy of samisimi

**Sweet Dreams**

Sweet dreams are made of this
Who am I to disagree
I travel the world
And the seven seas
Everybody's looking for something

Some of them want to use you
Some of them want to get used by you
Some of them want to abuse you
Some of them want to be abused

Sweet dreams are made of this
Who am I to disagree
I travel the world
And the seven seas
Everybody's looking for something

Hold your head up
Keep your head up, movin' on
Hold your head up, movin' on
Keep your head up, movin' on
Hold your head up
Keep your head up, movin' on
Keep your head up, movin' on
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His hair, many inches longer than the cut usually sported by male Shadowhunters, fanned out when he ran past the elevators, through the operation centre in the middle of the institute and took the stairs in two giant leaps. He caressed the corners, moving agile and smooth; exactly what they were known for, and within minutes he'd arrived outside a dark wooden door.

Drawing himself up, he pushed the strands that had fallen into his eyes out of the way and knocked once before entering.

A woman who seemed too young to be seated behind such an imposing desk, looked up with a bemused expression.

"Peter," she said in a measured tone. "What is it?"

"He's back," he calmly announced, not letting his excitement break through his rigid mask.

Neither did she, her rosy cheeks remaining still. But he could see how pleased she was at finally having a way to gain the upper hand in the ongoing battle that permeated their whole world.

"You're sure of it?"

"I'm sure. He was seen at pandemonium yesterday."

Lydia Lightwood, head of the New York Institute of Shadowhunters, rose from her chair.
"Then send for him. Offer Magnus Bane whatever he wants. Just make sure he comes."

Peter straightened his back, his hands falling together behind his back.

"I'll see it done immediately."

New York wasn't a beautiful city, not by a mile. Neither was it pure or simple, which by many standards made it unsuitable for living in, even less to call it home. But for beings like Magnus Bane, that was the exact reason he was coming back. If home was an extension of who you were, then crime-riddled Brooklyn was his dark side; fitting with its size and crowded streets. Many people were responsible for who he was now, no one more so than himself.

After living a few centuries you come to learn a few truths that mortals never had the time to pick up on. They were so busy with the whole 'dying' thing.

- The first was that people don't change. They are born, they live, and they die roughly the same.
- The second was that no matter what you believed, or how much you fought it, if you chose to stick your neck out, someone would, inevitably, chop it off.
- The third was that actions spurring from love, despite their purest intentions, were what lined the road to hell.
- And the fourth was that the past always, always came back to haunt you.

Especially if you were a warlock.

That last thought rang loudly in Magnus' head, reminding him that it had been a mistake to come back, when he held the fire message in his hand. It was addressed to 'The High Warlock of Brooklyn', and he'd been summoned enough times by the pesky New York Institute to recognise their stationary.

He threw it to the side, wondering who of Mr and Mrs Lightwood, shared heads of the institute, had called for him.

"I knew Pandemonium was a mistake," he muttered into his scotch glass.

He'd been aware that it was reckless to appear so publicly, but then he wasn't accustomed to live under the radar and he had nothing and no one to answer to. Still, the past two months without seeing nor hearing about any Shadowhunters had instilled a false sense of security. For once, maybe the angels could keep him out of their business.

Obviously not, he gathered as he glared at the letter.

He could have staved off his return for a few decades. Shadowhunters had a predisposition to die young, and so it would easily have spared him the discomfort of having to run into any children of the Nephilim that he happened to have met before.

It was a handy trick, having time on your side. But it also meant he was doomed to repeat old mistakes.

The last time he'd been in New York, not counting the past weeks, was well over a year ago, and then his affiliation with the Nephilim had concluded rather poorly. The time before that, with the
Circle at its peak, had ended equally disastrous. Nothing good came with getting involved in problems that had nothing to do with you, and that was his philosophy from now on.

Magnus reached for the letter, broke the official seal, and scanned it idly.

Magnus Bane;

High Warlock of Brooklyn

are hereby requested to arrive at the New York Institute of Shadowhunters today at 2 PM.

His help is desired with some precarious circumstances.

His reward, if accepted, will be paid in diamonds.

An answer is expected no later than 12 PM.

Lydia Lightwood

Head of the Institute of Shadowhunters,

New York

Of course it was Lydia. Why had he thought anything else? Magnus supposed he should be grateful it wasn't Maryse Lightwood, although he'd love to have a chance to tell that horrendous creature where she could put her diamonds.

He weighed it in his head - the pros and cons - like he weighed his glass before tipping it to his lips, swallowing it in one swig. It wouldn't hurt to hear her out, he decided. Diamonds never really went out of style. And if it turned out to be nothing worthwhile, he'd have a chance to anger Lydia Lightwood, and, by extension, the Clave. Not bad for an afternoon's work.

He threw the letter in the flames that burned in the open fireplace and smiled. He might have come home, but he wasn't about to announce it to the whole world. Even less to the Shadowhunters.
Mad Hatter

My friends don't walk, they run
Skinny dip in rabbit holes for fun
Popping, popping balloons with guns, getting high off helium
We paint white roses red
Each shade from a different person's head
This dream, dream is a killer
Getting drunk with the blue caterpillar

I'm peeling the skin off my face
'Cause I really hate being safe
The normals, they make me afraid
The crazies, they make me feel sane

I'm nuts, baby, I'm mad
The craziest friend that you've ever had
You think I'm psycho, you think I'm gone
Tell the psychiatrist something is wrong
Over the bend, entirely bonkers
You like me best when I'm off my rocker
Tell you a secret, I'm not alarmed
So what if I'm crazy, the best people are
All the best people are crazy, all the best people are

Where is my prescription
Doctor, doctor please listen
My brain is scattered
You can be Alice, I'll be the mad hatter

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So what if I'm crazy, the best people are

You think I'm crazy, you think I'm gone
So what if I'm crazy, all the best people are
And I think you're crazy too, I know you're gone
That's probably the reason that we get along

I'm nuts, baby, I'm mad,
The craziest friend that you've ever had
You think I'm psycho, you think I'm gone
Tell the psychiatrist something is wrong
Over the bend, entirely bonkers
You like me best when I'm off my rocker
Tell you a secret, I'm not alarmed

So what if I'm crazy, the best people are

The winter of Brooklyn really wasn't that pleasant. It didn't have that snowy fuzzy cold that northern Sweden possessed when he'd happened to pass there some decades ago, nor was it the tropical winter of Goa where he'd spent some of his second century. No, it was squarely in between, inevitably being compared to both and failing in measuring up to either. Perhaps that was why it inspired the feeling of a petulant child with its chilling winds and bare grounds.

He'd really picked the wrong time to return.

Magnus chided himself when he stepped onto the pavement outside the Institute. Owing to his warlock abilities he could see both the mundane version of the building, which appeared to be an abandoned Gothic cathedral - most stately and like himself, ancient - and also see through the glamour, and into the, now whole, expansive crystal panes that sparkled with light from the inside. Without doubt it was housing many of the future hunters that would sooner or later cross his path. Hopefully they'd prove to be less of a hassle than the once he instinctively knew he was about to meet again.

Fixing his hair - portal jumping did have an adversary effect on it sometimes - he then glided up the stairs and opened the door. He'd foolishly assumed it was going to be different, but it was like rewinding a song; the same chorus was repeated back to him. People were moving all over the place, talking in small groups by one of the many small stations, pointing at different screens with economical gestures or practising with wooden staffs, batons and seraph blades in the wide training space.

Magnus sauntered across the area, already seeing some curious looks as to what a stranger was doing there, a stranger dressed as a haute couture designer sprinkled with glitter on top of that. Some might have recognised him as a warlock, but since he kept his mark hidden - a strict policy he'd adapted around the Nephilim - most seemed unaware of what he was.

That didn't last as long as he'd liked though.

His ambition to meet with Lydia and leave immediately after was effectively crushed by a shout consisting of his name.

"Magnus!"

He turned to glance behind and found Clary standing outside the elevators, people walking around her like a roadblock to file onto the ground floor.

"Hello, Biscuit," he said, loud enough for her to hear but not yelling it like she'd done.
Clary lit up in a bright smile - she was a passionate advocate for wearing hearts on sleeves - and weaved her way over to him at high speed. When she came close enough, she twined her arms around his waist and hugged him.

"I missed you," she said into his chest, her head not reaching to his ear.

Magnus smiled. She was the one he'd also missed.

"I'm back now," he replied, letting his arms fall around her slender body.

When she released him it was with the same smile. "My mom is still doing fine."

He patted her cheek.

"I'm glad to hear it. Is Jocelyn here?"

"No, she-"

Whatever Clary's answer would have been it was interrupted by a huskier voice, one that could belong to one person, and one person alone.

"Isabelle," he answered even before he could see her.

"Magnus. You're back."

She came from the direction of the training mats, bathed in glistening sweat that made her skin shine, her long wavy hair stuck to her lip and half naked in the protective sparring gear. How effective that was was a question that didn't seem to bother her. Nothing ever seemed to bother Izzy Lightwood.

"Always one for an entrance," he complimented when she swaggered over, long legs coming to a halt in front of him.

He didn't expect her to wrap her arms around his neck, but when she did he welcomed it before she pulled away after a hasty second.

"I'm sorry. I'm gross right now. I'll hug you properly after I've taken a shower."

"You've never looked gross one moment in your life, and you're aware of that fact," Magnus pointed out and Izzy rewarded him with a toothy grin for speaking a universally acknowledged truth.

He cleared his throat.

"As much as I would like to stay and chat I'm here for business and not pleasure."

Had it been for pleasure, this would be the last place he sought out.

"Where can I find Mrs Lightwood?"

Izzy wrinkled her forehead seriously, like she was wondering if he was speaking in code.

"Mom's not here."

Thank god for that. He could do with another century not encountering Maryse.

"I meant Lydia Lightwood."

Izzy blinked at him. "Why do you want to see Lydia?"
"I was summoned by her. As shared head of the New York Institute, it felt foolish to pass up the chance to grease some of her wheels."

Clary, blushing bright red with the innuendo, touched his arm to catch his attention. "She summoned you?" she asked with incredibility.

Magnus threw out his hands in a carefree manner.

"I was promised diamonds, so here I am."

Before they could respond to this, apparently confusing, request - which he found strange since that was usually how warlocks and Shadowhunters interacted, despite their own abysmal track record in invading his home on countless occasions with their problems, or their panic, or bleeding friends who ruined his priceless carpets - someone else discovered them standing in the middle of the operation centre - likely because they were blocking a big portion of the busy middle intersection - and questioned them thereafter.

"What is going on here?" the voice demanded, and it felt like a whip across his back. Thankfully, Magnus had felt a lot worse over the years, so to turn and face Alexander Lightwood wasn't any harder than portal jumping. You just stepped through.

He turned around, and saw how Alec came to an abrupt stop on top of the stairs leading from the living quarters.

"Magnus," Alec said in a shocked voice.

It was oddly satisfying to see the bemused expression, and the following struggle Alec had to pull himself together. Despite everything, this petty victory was enough of revenge. In fact, he didn't want revenge, he realised when it left a void of any feeling at all in his chest. He just wanted to leave and never return.

"Hello, Alec," Magnus replied, taking in his stiff face and rigid spine.

It really was like a visit to the past and he was sorely reminded why he abhorred looking back.

"You look well."

Alec stood there like he didn't have a clue how to form words.

"Do you know where your lovely wife is? I believe I'm expected."

"She's-" He botched his words. "Lydia's in the- her office."

Magnus waited for a moment, hoping for a continuation, but Alec looked wiped out, his fingertips nervously rubbing together.

"And where would that be exactly?"

"It's-" Alec flapped around; turned and pointed vaguely at the corridor to the right. But then he turned back again and amended with an: "I'll show you."

Magnus accepted with a nod.

He put a finger under Clary's chin to catch her eye.

"Don't be a stranger, Biscuit."
"I won't," she assured.

He squeezed Isabelle's arm when he made past her.

"It was lovely to see you again, Isabelle."

She put her own hand on top of his.

"You too."

As Magnus ascended the stairs, Alec remained like a statue. It wasn't until they were face to face and Magnus had to say; "lead the way," with a sweeping gesture, to get him to start moving. Side by side they walked across the dais and farther into the Institute where the oak walls were thicker and the expensive maroon carpets drowned every sound.

"So ..." Alec started hesitantly when they turned a corner. "How long have you been back?"

"Since September. I was surprised when I heard from Lydia but then again we downworlders have little more to do than gossip. And I'm not one to avoid the spotlight."

Alec shot him a glance that spoke of something akin to confusion but Magnus chose to ignore what he imagined himself to see. He'd never been able to read Alec, and nowadays he hadn't the interest to decipher him. It had been easier to learn Swahili than construe Alec Lightwood's play of features.

"You've been back for two months?"

It was easier than he'd thought, though Magnus hadn't allowed himself to dwell on it beforehand, to speak to him again. He found no residue feelings left. If he had, wouldn't his first impulse have been to see him, even if that meant a fresh rejection? He should have wanted to go to the Institute the second he came back, but he'd been content to be alone. To reside in the same city but not seeking his company.

The notion settled around his heart like a blanket. Truly, he'd moved on from Alec.

"Yes," Magnus answered lightly.

Alec said nothing more until they reached a door without any indicator of being more esteemed than the multitude of exact replicas they had already passed. It wasn't easy for any species other than Shadowhunters to enter the building. Without an invitation it was almost a death sentence to even dip your toe past the wards. And if they somehow penetrated the wards, created by himself and thus quite powerful, they would have to face a hoard of half-angels with swords and bows. Did they really think not labelling their offices would stop whoever it was that had jumped through all those hoops from finding the female component of the pair of the most important people inside?

Did they really think that would stop Valentine?

"She's inside."

"Thank you."

Magnus opened the door without knocking and closed it behind him.

Lydia's steady gaze was already resting on him, as if she possessed a sixth sense. Or she had a rune for eavesdropping.

"Magnus."
"Mrs Lightwood." He gave her a dazzling smile. "You seem settled."

And she did. Her presence was comfortable to the room. It seemed as it had been formed around her.

"I am. Thank you." She stood up, gesturing to the chair across the large desk.

Magnus lifted his ruby coloured tailcoat with flair and then sat down with agility that no four-hundred-year-old should possess.

"Now." He rested his arms on the armrests - lounging like a king before his subject - and regarded her. "Why did you summon me here? Do you need a healer or some wards renewed?"

Lydia remained standing, keeping a professional mask.

"No. It's more ... delicate than that."

Magnus raised his eyebrows. He felt it needed to be done after that dramatic hesitation.

"Colour me intrigued."

Lydia nodded.

"I'm just going to assume you know everything about our endeavours and eventual failures to capture Valentine?"

"I have little birds," he confirmed.

"What you might not know is that we're closing in on him." She leaned forward, like it was a secret. "We're very close to catching him."

Magnus repressed an amused smile.

"No doubt because of your leadership, I'm sure," he lauded. "But I confess to fail seeing where I fit into your web."

"The thing is we have one of his followers captured, here, in the Institute. But he's not talking. He refuses to. We've exhausted every option."

After a hundred years or so, you stopped being surprised. After two-hundred you really started to miss it. But the cold that crept down his spine wasn't pleasant. Magnus sat up straight, abandoning his carefree attitude in a second.

"You want me to torture him," he observed with a sharp edge to the words. "Isn't that against the Accords?"

Lydia's face changed from slight eagerness to a set jaw in the blink of an eye.

"No, not torture. Just providing him with incentive to speak."

"And I repeat, isn't that against the Accords; the backbone of our blossoming world?"

She laid a hand on a paper that rested on the desk by her hip.

"We have permission from the Clave. The security of every warlock, fey, werewolf, vampire and Shadowhunter take precedence over the well-being of Circle members."
Magnus smiled wryly.

"That's a very black and white way to look at it," he replied with disdain. "How do you know if he's guilty? I assume you haven't given him a trial."

Lydia's face was tight when she answered.

"We have sources."

Magnus laughed, curt and sharp like ice. "You're naive. What about Meliorn? Wasn't that your sources too?"

With a graceful movement, he stood and thus towered over her, even from the distance. "Or let me guess, that was a mistake."

Lydia stood silent, stunned, when he bestowed on her a sardonic smile.

"I'm going to have to decline your generous offer. But thank you for thinking about me."

Magnus was about to move his feet, to get away from whatever horrendous thing she'd spit out next but it was too late.

"If it's the order of payment-"

He felt how his hands started to tremble, the magic summoned by upset feelings coiling inside his body.

"You really think I'd torture a living being over diamonds?" His eyes flitted into yellow cat irises for a second, his glamour sliding, reminding both her and himself that while she was half-angel, he was half-demon. "You could offer me your Institute and it wouldn't be enough." He almost bared his teeth, like a dog growling out a warning. "Nothing you could give me would ever be enough."

He turned his back on her, aiming to get through the door and outside this hellhole in a matter of minutes.

But behind him Lydia said accusingly, her tone cutting, "How can you say that? He's a threat to all of us."

Magnus felt the magic starting to seep through his skin and when he turned around he knew exactly what he looked like: the high warlock of Brooklyn, royally pissed off.

"And whose fault is that?" he said darkly. "Do not forget that I have lived longer than any of your ancestors. I was there when the Uprising happened. I've fought Valentine before, when your kind stood by and watched like the cowards you truly are. He is of angel blood, one of your own."

He didn't come closer but she took a step back nevertheless, as if an invisible power was forcing her to.

"You take care of your problems, Mrs Lightwood, and let us demons take care of our own."

With that he left, flinging the door open with a twitch of his finger.

He needed another drink. In fact, he needed to empty the rest of the bottle but another one was a good continuation. Magnus slouched down, lifting his legs so they could rest on the low coffee table.
Calm, his usual constitution, had come the minute he sat his foot outside the Institute and he hadn't wasted it. Through a portal he'd gotten back to his apartment and stayed there until he deemed himself emotionally stable enough to start drinking. And that's what he'd spent the rest of the day doing. Drinking, and trying to forget what Lydia Lightwood had asked of him. When he lingered on her words, her gestures, she really struck him as a young Maryse.

Except she didn't wear a circle rune on her neck.

Young people, Shadowhunters in particular, had this way of seeing the world divided in good or bad. And once one was deemed bad, nothing they did could ever be good again. To punish someone was just; to show mercy was weakness. They didn't understand sacrifice of something greater than life. They thought death was the ultimatum honour and so they engaged it, often and ardently. Shadowhunters made dying a sport, with the rule that they rarely were the first to go. It was often those around that suffered, while they were too busy seeking glory to care about who got hurt in their wake.

It was why he'd avoided mixing with them for such a long time. It was why, oh, so evidently why, he was going to stay far, far away from now until he, or they, whatever came first, perished.

The alcohol did its part of numbing the mind. But as with all good things, it came to an end.

The wards around him started to pulsate and he sat up, eyeing the door. A decisive knock sounded and he rose.

It wasn't Catarina - although she'd promise to come visit him when she had the time, that was something that would only occur when the rest of humanity had died out - he would have felt her magic. And it wasn't Raphael, who would have walked in by now, annoyed at his indolence. It was someone else, but since he felt reckless, and really wouldn't mind getting knocked out instead of drinking himself into oblivion, he opened the door in the hope of some dissatisfied werewolf customer. He'd assisted two just last week.

Instead there was Alec.

"Hey."

He'd preferred the werewolf.

Nevertheless, he graciously smiled.

"The head of the New York Institute. To what do I owe the pleasure?" Magnus asked, faking a exaggerated bow, complete with his hand going in a circle in front of his chest.

Alec raised an eyebrow at his antics.

"Can I come in?"

Magnus backed, opening the door fully. He stretched out his arm completely, palm up. "Welcome to my humble abode."

Alec passed him, dressed in the same clothes he'd worn seventeen months ago: black shirt, black jeans and black leather jacket; all matching his black hair. Magnus would even bet, with whoever that wanted to take him up on that, that it was the exact same clothes. It wouldn't astonish him to learn that Alec only owned that one outfit. In fact, it would explain a lot.

Magnus closed the door behind him and walked towards the living room.
He stopped by the corner table filled with different shaped bottles, most of them older than the person slowly entering the living room.

"Do you want something to drink?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"No, I'm good," came from behind his back somewhere in the vicinity of the open fireplace.

Magnus nodded to himself. Alec was predictable if anything.

"Alright. Take a seat, Alec."

He poured another martini, if you could call straight gin in a martini glass for a martini, and turned around.

Alec had settled himself on the couch, sitting very still and very straight. His feet were firmly placed on the ground and his hands rested on his knees.

"It looks the same," he noted.

It was a wonder he remembered what it looked like at all, considering his go-to move whenever he'd found himself there had been to run away as far as he could get while screaming at the top of his lungs; like flirtation was the plague and Magnus its carrier.

"That's the thing about immortality," Magnus explained. "We tend to not change all that much."

He flowed into the closest armchair and crossed his legs.

"So what can I do you for?"

Alec blinked.

"I- we need your help."

It was as he expected. But at least Alec was honest about it. He'd always been honest, sometimes to a fault.

"Lydia is persuasive I see."

"It's not just her," Alec protested. "All of us need your help."

What a shocker. He rolled his eyes to make a point before refocusing on Alec.

"They always said history repeats itself, and having lived through it, I can attest to that fact by empirical evidence alone, but now it's just starting to get eerie."

He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "There are plenty of other warlocks that possesses the penchant for what you're looking for. Sadly I don't have any names. We run in different circles."

Alec shoulder stiffened just the tiniest bit.

"I sincerely doubt they're as powerful as you."

Magnus nodded in agreement.

"Certainly crueller if they go with you."

"We wouldn't do it if we had another choice," Alec shot back, his words frosty.
"The end justifies the means," Magnus confirmed. He looked out the window, at the cold winds blowing up to a storm. "That's a narrow way to tread."

"It's the only way we can tread right now."

He sighed, and glanced at Alec. He looked as he'd always had, the same angelic features and serious front, but this person had in the past five minutes proved to be more callous than Magnus could ever recall him being. Perhaps he was just seeing it through the softening glass of nostalgia but it saddened him. It had always been one of the hardest things about never perishing; having to witness everything else corrode.

"Is it Lydia who tells you that? Or perhaps your parents? Maybe the Clave?" He paused. "Is that really what you think?"

It seemed to stir Alec.

"I'm not controlled by anyone," he said curtly and many hidden memories came flashing back to Magnus.

Telling him of his lack of understanding, of how he didn't know anything about Alec, and an especially vivid one where an upset Alec, his jaw set, had told him in no uncertain terms to never bother him again. How much more had he forgotten?

Magnus took a sip of the gin, relishing the burn.

"You really haven't changed, have you, Alec?"

He didn't even know why he'd deceived himself to think he had. People didn't change. He was old enough to know that by now, or he should be at least.

"Let me give you a hint. People often start out with good intentions." He took a pause for dramatic effect. "Facilis descensus Averno. You should know that better than most."

_The descent into hell is easy._

At the mention of the inscription that penetrated the very essence of what Alec was, of what every Shadowhunter was raised to honour, he stood up.

"It's easy to say that when you're not in the line of fire."

Magnus was glad he'd swallowed so that he didn't accidentally choke himself to death over Lydia Lightwood's proxy. What a wasteful way to go.

"I'm sorry." He put his drink to the side and rose to his feet. "Are you under the impression that it is my duty to protect the Nephilim? I look after my own, not the children of Raziel."

Alec threw out his hands, like he only did when he was out of other options. Every other time he had perfect control of himself and whatever feelings he actually could feel beneath that cold armour.

"You helped us before."

"Yes, and thankfully I've learned from my significant experience. The only thing Shadowhunters have ever brought me is death and trouble. I don't care for the former and detest the latter."

"Fine." Alec crossed his arms. "Don't do it for us then. Do it for the downworlders. Valentine's targeting them."
"Yes, I'm quite aware," Magnus replied snidely. He'd known of Valentine long before Alec was born and yet they all seemed so happy to forget that there was a point in time when the Clave let Valentine roam free to execute his 'justice'. The poignant word being execute.

"If it's so important, then why don't you do it yourself?" he pointed out. "I'm sure with your imagination you could carve quite a picture into that Circle member."

"I don't like this anymore than you do," Alec said defensively, as if feeling some discomfort about the whole idea would somehow change the reality of what they were asking him to do. "But he's not talking. Not by any mortal means, at least."

So they had already tortured the poor soul.

Magnus didn't know what disgusted him more; the failure on Alec's part to see that what he was doing was no different from what Valentine did, or the fact that he'd justified it to himself. That was a really dangerous weapon to have at your disposal, the ability to turn horrible actions into necessary actions so when it came down to it, it was the right thing to do. War might make murderers of them all, but it didn't have to make them monsters.

Magnus took the opportunity to lay another log on the roaring fire. It warmed some part of his chilly skin.

"Have you tried asking nicely?" he suggested helpfully.

When he turned away from the fire, Alec looked at him, as if seeing him for the first time.

"You're different."

Magnus tipped his head both sides. "Perhaps. But then again I've always found New York winters gives me an edge I've been sorely lacking as of late. You're certainly tougher these days."

"Things change."

"They do. People don't."

He leaned back against the wood panel, clasping his hands in front of his stomach.

"Speaking of change," Magnus continued. "Congratulations on your marriage. I should have said something before but I didn't find the time."

When he turned his gaze towards Alec's, he found something there.

"Is that why you won't help?" Alec blurted out, his whole body language changed. "Because you're mad I got married to someone else?"

Magnus couldn't help but laugh. It was such a bold question, given the situation.

"Married to someone else? I wasn't aware I'd asked for your hand. I distinctly remember offering to do you Pro Bono but that's about as far as I'm willing to stretch."

He had the pleasure of seeing Alec close his mouth, a blush creeping on his neck.

"Alec, our dealings were over long ago. You're a happily married man. I'm not interested in you any more than I've ever been interested in helping the Nephilim. This is your mess and I cannot feign even the slightest interest in helping any of you get out of it."
The colour rose on Alec's cheeks, but not from embarrassment this time.

"So that's it? You're just not going to help?"

"I think I've made it rather clear. I've killed before. I've never tortured anyone and I don't plan to change that." He shot him a sharp glance. "Certainly not for you."

Alec looked furious. His lips were pressed together, his eyes dark.

"After everything we've been through, this is your response?"

Magnus gave him a raised brow. They hadn't been through much together, and if there was one person in the whole world he didn't owe anything to, it was Alec.

"What did you expect? That I would be some kind of pet warlock whenever you or your little Shadowhunter buddies needed one? Let me remind you, Alec, that I've been alive longer than you, and I will be long after you're gone. I tend not to dwell on the past."

But something had changed over the year they'd been separated. Either Alec had grown more confident, or he was just rattled enough to talk back.

"I think you're lying," he blatantly claimed. "You're angry at me, and I understand why, but now's not the time for this."

Magnus reeled at his gall.

Now wasn't the right time? Of course it wasn't. It never was until Alexander Lightwood deemed it so.

Magnus took a deep breath yet found himself unable to shake his irritation. Okay, that was it. He was through being vaguely hostile.

Downright hostile it was.

"I do not care if you're in the closet, out of it, or doing a jig with a foot peaking through," he explained very slowly, pushing away from the wall. "All I want is for you to leave my home and not come back unless you have a less preposterous proposition for me."

Magnus passed him, heading for the kitchen before he did something stupid like drop him off the balcony. "You know where the door is."

Chapter End Notes

So what do you think? Is Magnus really over Alec? Did Alec ever have feelings for Magnus? What do you think the year apart has changed between them? And what do you think about what Alec asked of him? Should Magnus have agreed to torture that Circle member or did he make the right choice in refusing?
Hello, my dudes!

I'm completely blown away from your responses to the last chapter. I'm so excited you liked it enough to read it and to then leave so many sweet and funny comments ... to put it lightly: YOU ROCK! I really, really hope this will develop into what it is you want to read about.

I'm also setting the goal of posting one chapter every week. Hopefully I'll be able to keep that schedule from now on, but I can't promise anything because I'm about as far from perfect as you can possibly get.

Anyway, I hope you'll enjoy this chapter and have fun with it! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Way Down We Go

Father tell me, we get what we deserve
   Oh, we get what we deserve
   And way down we go
      Way down we go
      Say way down we go
      Way down we go
   You let your feet run wild
   Time has come as we all oh, go down
      Yeah but for the fall oh, my
      Do you dare to look him right in the eyes
   'Cause they will run you down, down til the dark
   Yes and they will run you down, down til you fall
      And they will run you down, down til you go
      Yeah so you can't crawl no more
   And way down we go
      Way down we go
      Say way down we go
      'Cause they will run you down, down til you fall
      Way down we go
   And way down we go
      Way down we go
      Say way down we go
      Way down we go
It really was a different climate. Sadly, he wasn't referencing the weather. At the nights, inside the packed Pandemonium, it wasn't noticeable, but as soon as the light turned on, and the humans stumbled out into the sobering winter air, the downworlders started showing signs of nervousness, unease, when exposed to the danger of solitude. No one left alone, not even the oldest vampires tempted fate, and Magnus couldn't fault them for it.

There were many reasons to be nervous.

With the increased circulation of Shadowhunters running around the parts of the city where they thought Valentine resided, and with more arriving every day to strengthen their numbers, people were getting tense. Of course, there was Valentine himself, and the Circle wreaking havoc. But when it came to Shadowhunters many downworlders thought of them as one and the same. Valentine or someone else mattered little. There was a reason behind the deep mistrust most of them held for the Nephilim and now three months back, Magnus could feel it starting to settle in his bloodstream. He held little fear of them of course, but it would be a mistake to say he had faith in their ability to catch Valentine. They hadn't for more than twenty years. And all the while the tension increased. Soon enough someone would make a mistake, and it would ignite the gasoline drenched dread.

It were dangerous times when half-demons were afraid of what lurked in the shadows.

He hadn't felt this kind of atmosphere since the last time the Circle was on the rise. It reminded him of bitter memories, and so very much death.

But in the light of the last sun rays of the short December day coming to a close, it was hard to recall the increasing fear that penetrated their world. It was spectacularly hard when he had to deal with the reality of owning a club.

"And how exactly did the second private room explode?" Magnus asked as he inspected what had allegedly gone down the night before. The whole room could accurately be described as the inside of a fireplace. Soot was covering the entire ceiling down to the smallest crevice. He dragged a finger over the one remaining wall and looked at it. Coal black.

Perkel, one of the bartenders for the night, made a face. Her skin, that held the appearance of the scales of a fish in its unglamoured state, shimmered in violet when she pointed at the corner. "I think I saw some sort of demon over there when it happened."

"Why would a demon blow up a room in my club, while it was still inside?"

"They're not exactly the next Einstein, Magnus. My guess is that it was working for someone else."
Her eyes wandered across the large room and the jackstraws that were left from what had once been tables, sofas and chairs. "You haven't ... angered someone recently, have you?"

Her tone left no suggestion to the imagination.
Magnus cocked his head.

"Are you implying I upset people often?"
She picked at her nails, studiously avoiding his eyes.

"All I'm saying is: there's a list."
Standing in the middle of the wrecked room, in the club that was under his sole patronage, he couldn't exactly protest. Instead he opted for: "Remind me again why I hired you."

Perkel backed away with her hands raised, blinding him with a brilliant smile.

"Because of my dazzling charm. Now I'll be going back to the storage and unpack. We also need to stock up on vodka and tequila."

Magnus sent her off with an acknowledging nod.

"I'll send someone."

"Have I said how great it is to have you back?" she called over her shoulder before skipping away.

"You'd be the only one," he mumbled as he took another look.

He was sure he himself didn't think of it as being great. It was very far from being great.

No one had gotten hurt in the freak attack, since it had happened at the end of the night. But if someone had been inside they would have been killed instantly. It wasn't a comfort knowing that it was probably dumb luck that nothing more serious had gone down. Lesser demons weren't highly regarded for their IQ-scores; for them to accidentally blow themselves up were not as uncommon as you would perhaps think when dealing with creatures of the night. But the question that burned on his mind when he felt the thick air, the scent of destruction assaulting his senses, was why. Why would someone do this? To what end? And who?

It didn't feel like Valentine. It wasn't a Circle approach. They wouldn't put their trust in demons, despite being worse themselves. At least demons weren't sanctimonious. No, this was some other enemy. And despite Perkel's insinuation, he wasn't in the habit of angering people to this degree. He preferred to upset them into a mild irritation, nothing that required retribution.

Magnus stirred at the thought of revenge. He rummaged through the sapphire coloured pockets of his sirwal, snatching up a gold specked cellphone. With a few swipes the dial signal was ringing out and he lifted it to his ear. It got him as far as the voice mail, the fourth time in as many days.

"It's me. Again. Where are you?" he said into the empty void that was Catarina Loss' voice mail. "Are you just busy or should I send in the National Guard?"

Right at that moment, the back door to the club opened up. Magnus couldn't see it, but he heard the ungreased hinges complain when they were forced to rotate. From the back of the enormous space, a pale figure, paler than lack of melanin could create, stepped through and the features of Raphael appeared.

"You're starting to worry me, Catarina," Magnus concluded with a pleading tone. "Please pick up your phone once in a while and call me back."

He disconnected the call, stuffing the phone back into its rightful place before addressing the new face.

"Raphael? You're here early."

The sun had barely gone down. He could even spy a little of it still glittering outside the high windows. Raphael had to be hard pressed to come here at this time.

His facial expression said as much. It was set in stone, with anger pulsating through his ageless body.
"What's happened?" Magnus asked immediately.

"Three of my clan have gone missing," Raphael growled through tense lips.

It was an unnecessary question, but he asked it anyway.

"The Circle?"

Raphael set his dark eyes on him.

"Who else could it be?"

Magnus sighed. "Damn it." He pinched the bridge of his nose, squeezing his eyes shut. "What can I do to help?"

"I need you to move Dumort."

Magnus' eyes opened in surprise.

It was a request he'd never uttered before. A favour that Raphael probably wouldn't have dreamed of asking. But times were changing, and pride wouldn't keep anyone alive, not even the undead.

"Of course," Magnus promised without restriction. "I'll do it as soon as I've paid Catarina a visit. Is that okay?"

It was a spur of the moment decision. He hadn't mentioned him possibly stopping by in one of the many messages accumulated over the course of the last month. Usually they didn't bother with the little details; a few times they had gone years without speaking. But now it was different. He only had to look at the vampire in front of him to know that things were only getting worse.

Raphael nodded, showing sharp fangs when he gritted his teeth.

"Thank you."

Magnus waved it off.

"Don't mention it."

It wasn't a hard thing to do, but now with this new attack on top of every other instances he'd heard of in the recent weeks, with people disappearing right and left, it sent a sense of urgency to gnaw in his gut. He had to reach Catarina today. Something was off about all of this.

"I have to go, Raphael," Magnus finished, already moving away. "Feel free to stay."

"It wasn't a fancy apartment. With a nurse's wages, it wouldn't be. With a warlock's it should. It showed less than told that whatever Catarina was, she was first and foremost good. The kind of kindness she possessed was of the quality that you were either born with it or you could give up hope on achieving it at all. With her talents and her age, she could live like a queen, only thinking of herself as so many of them did. Yet she lived in cramped rooms and a building from the seventies, and not the good part of the seventies, he was reminded when he knocked on the door and it felt like it would fold beneath his knuckles.

"Catarina?" He knocked again. "It's me. Open up."
Magnus listened for movements on the other side but nothing came through the paper thin wood. Not bothering to wait, he murmured a spell beneath his breath and put his fingers around the handle. It swung open soundlessly.

He stepped through, shutting it with a quick flick and looked around.

It was the dust that made his stomach plummet. The smell of it, making the air swirl with flecks of grey dancing from the wind of the closed door. He didn't have to touch anything to see that she hadn't been there for some time, but he did it anyway when he lifted one of her many potted plants, this one a dried up skeleton of something that had once been beautiful, and saw the ring of clear mahogany it left behind. As with every living thing, Catarina went to great pains to nurse her plants. For her to leave it here to die, it would have taken some mayor catastrophe. And if something even half of that would have occurred she would have called him.

A quiet pinging sound, one he hadn't noticed when he entered, originated from the location of what a gracious soul would call kitchen. Cautious now, Magnus slowly stalked down the narrow hall, keeping his ears peeled for any kind of danger. He reached the kitchen without any incidents, and scanned the refrigerator, across the worn stove, before locating the sound's source. Shutting off the the tap that had been dripping onto a single plate that now sported mold where food residue was stuck, he could feel how his breathing had gotten shallower.

On the counter top stood another dried up flower.

With his heart pounding, Magnus turned towards the only room left. Inside the bedroom, the absence was even heavier. The bed sheets were untucked, pillows pressed down in specific positions like she was just going to come back any minute to sleep some more. There was a stray sock on the floor, a cup of old coffee on the bedside table. No holiday decorations on display, despite her fondness of everything jolly.

Quietly, he slid the doors to her wardrobe open; a silly hope burning in his chest that she'd just gone on a holiday without informing him, effectively crushed by his own mind when he was reminded of the fact that she didn't take holidays and once more when he saw all of her clothes still hanging prudently in their designated places.

"Catarina, where are you?" he said out loud without receiving an answer.

He shut the wardrobe, shifted towards the bed and when he reached her bedside, he dipped a knee down in the dust and opened the lowest drawer. Nothing of interest popped out until he reached the third and final drawer. When he pulled it out, the first thing he saw was black metal sheen. Picking it up, he turned the phone in his hand, looking at the screen that was long ago dead.

The blare of a ringtone made him startle. For a moment he thought it was her phone ringing before he recognised the tune. Fumbling for his own cellphone, Magnus lifted it to his ear without paying any attention to who was calling.

"Magnus!"

The howl made him pull it away immediately. He grimaced, looked at the number before easing it back with some distance between the shriek and his eardrum.

"Isabelle." He stared at the black screen resting in his hand. "I'm in the middle of something."

Her voice hit the shrill notes.

"Alec's hurt! she shouted through the phone, her usual jovial nature completely exchanged for a
Kneeling there, in the dust of an unused apartment, Magnus rolled his eyes so hard he feared he'd sprained the left one.

"Of course he is," he sighed.

Why were they always such a nuisance? And why today of all days?

There was that why again.

He reluctantly prepared himself for a portal jump.

"Calm down, Isabelle. I'll be at the Institute in a moment."

"Hurry!" she prompted before hanging up.

Magnus rose to his feet, securing Catarina's phone in his coat before he conjured up a pulsating portal with a twist of his wrist.

Stepping through he arrived into the biting cold right outside the Institute's doors. He could portal inside, since it was his wards, but it felt like a thing better kept hidden. No one who wasn't a warlock, and not even all of them, should be aware of exactly what powers they could possess and how far they extended.

Striding inside, he was met in the hall by a wild-haired Clary. It looked as if someone had shoved her in a washing machine and set it on extra clean.

"He's in the medic bay," she hurried to say. "Let's go!"

She led the way, her short legs moving remarkably quickly when she ran.

When they reached the part of the Institute that held the medical ward, Clary was already inside when Magnus arrived at the opening. On a bed, the only one that was currently occupied, Alec laid motionless.

Rushing forward, Magnus reached the bed, checking Alec's pulse and finding it there on his neck, weak and fluttering.

"What happened?" Magnus shot at Izzy who was standing on the other side of the mattress, trying hard not to cry.

"I don't know. It was a giant-mega-thingy and it stung him! We didn't even see it!"

Magnus checked his eyes, pulling up his eyelids and finding the pupils unresponsive.

"Clary?" he asked.

"I don't know." She was anxiously watching Alec. "We got cornered and it was dark. No runes have helped."

Magnus had finished dragging his hands over Alec's burning face and started feeling out his chest when he felt how his fingertips dipped beneath the slack arm, into the side of him, and saw how something black was oozing out from underneath the ribs.

"Reckless idiot," he muttered as he pulled his hand away and wiped it on his pants. "I know what it
is. Help me get his shirt off."

Clary jumped forward, settling herself on the bed behind Alec before hooking her arm around his neck to keep him steady while Magnus and Izzy did their best to rid him of the t-shirt.

"Can't you just 'poof' it off?" Clary panted when she fought to keep Alec's tall body upright against herself when they pulled on it.

"I don't want to waste my magic. It was an achaieral demon. It got him with its claws and the poison is already spreading."

"That's why it looked so big," Izzy huffed out when she finally yanked the shirt over her brother's head.

Clary scrambled back over the bed, helping Magnus ease Alec down on the bed. Now all of them could see what the achaieral demon had done. Three deep, clean, claw marks, as if knife blades had scraped at Alec's bones instead of a feral creature, marred his side. Where blood should have been seeping there was a black frothy substance as it's replacement, pumping out of the gaps in the same rhythm as heartbeats.

"What the frack is that?" Clary whispered.

Izzy had her hand over her mouth, her teeth sunk into her thumb.

Magnus shrugged out of his outerwear, letting it fall to the floor.

Grounding himself with a deep breath, setting his feet firmly in a stance, Magnus lifted his hand, palm up. He focused, drawing all of his energy to the point where his fingers, which he had started bringing together, would meet. When they slowly joined together, a yellow light, rivalling that of the sun on a bright day, appeared. He held them together for a moment, relishing the scorch, before he threw them out and his whole hand sparked, glowing in the suddenly dark room.

Every light inside of it had faded out at the same time.

"Did you just-" Clary mumbled but Magnus interrupted her.

"Hold him down," he said firmly. "It's not going to be pleasant."

Izzy pulled herself together, taking ahold of Alec's right shoulder. Clary grabbed his left one, but Magnus ordered, "Lift his arm above his head. And keep him still."

Clary pursed her lips in a serious expression and did as she was told.

Magnus took a breath and then splayed his hand over the wound.

The reaction was immediate. Alec spasmed, jerking violently from side to side.

"Hold him still!"

Alec spasmed again, the demon poison rejecting the healing. Then a heart wrenching shriek was ripped from his lips, despite his unconscious state. His eyes closed, his back curving, it looked like a puppet being pulled by its strings, or like a corpse awakening to life. Izzy flinched and Clary yelped but Magnus closed his eyes. He could feel it yielding, bending to his will; its own weakening. He smiled.

A terrified scream caused him to open his eyes and Clary was inclining her head towards his arm.
"What the frack is that!?"

Izzy’s eyes grew wide when she saw what Clary was referring to. Black streaks, wriggling like worms, had entered Magnus' flesh underneath his nails and were crawling beneath the skin.

"Magnus, stop!" Izzy yelled, her eyes glued to the horror film taking place in front of her.

"It's fine,” he forced out through all the tension building around them. It felt like the molecules in the air had started vibrating.

The others seemed to feel it too. Izzy moved anxiously from side to side, as if she was trying to avoid something touching her. Clary was quivering.

"Just a second longer. Keep him down."

Magnus refocused, summoning his last strength. Alec started shaking and the tremors built in Magnus' arm when he secured his hand, sending on a final shock through their joined systems. Light exploded between their skin, sending off fragments that had generated from the contact. It shot out like golden splintered glass, the tinkling sound of every shining particle sounding all around the room like bells when they crashed into the windows and walls, dissipating when they hit the floor.

Alec fell back on the bed, his body lax.

Magnus had to grab ahold of the bedsheets when he started loosing grip on reality. His hand slipped off Alec's pale skin, leaving a glowing imprint behind.

There was a chair behind him all of a sudden, and Magnus flopped down with none of his usual gracefulness.

"What ... was that?" Clary breathed.

Magnus opened his eyes to see Izzy and Clary's heads turned towards him. Between them was Alec's body at rest. His chest was lifting and sinking normally and from his three marks red blood flowed freely.

"I'm going to heal him in a few minutes," he said with more exhaustion seeping through than he meant to. "I just need to catch my breath."

He tried to centre his heart but it was beating furiously. Something wet was dripping across his lips and when he lifted a trembling hand the back of it streaked scarlet.

"Magnus. I've never seen anything like that. What did you do?” Izzy stared at him when she finished, studying him carefully.

"Achaierals are creatures of the dark. Light usually-" he clutched his side when he sat up straighter, ",-does the trick."

"But what about that," Clary gestured to his arm, "black goo?"

"A part of the spell."

Izzy shook her head, like she didn't believe him before she suddenly said, "You took on the poison." Her tone was accusing. "You let it inside of you instead."

Magnus wanted to say some clever retort back, but his body didn't agree with moving, much less witty banter.
"I know what I'm doing," he gritted out.

Izzy narrowed in on his strange sagging position.

"Your side. You're holding it. Let me see."

Magnus grimaced when he tried to right himself. Not the way to prove her wrong.

"As attractive as you are, Isabelle, I find it quite indecent to do in front of Clary."

There was no discouraging her. She was already by his side before he'd finished speaking, pulling at his, for once, simple one piece tunic. He didn't have the energy to stop her when her nimble fingers caressed three identical claw marks on his ribs with the exception that they weren't spilling blood. In fact, it looked as if they had been made from the inside.

"I've never heard of this kind of magic," she mumbled when she passed her hand over it, feeling for severed skin where there were none.

"I'm not surprised." Magnus cleared his throat when she poked it quite hard. "The things the Nephilim doesn't know about magic would be enough to fill the space between the moon and the sun."

Izzy looked up at him, her large eyes soft.

"You look really pale."

"It's not something I do everyday. But the idiot was too far gone." He threw a glance at Alec's sleeping face. "I didn't want to risk anything."

Izzy drew him back with a soft hand on his own.

"Thank you," she said when he looked back at her.

"I didn't do it for him."

Izzy nodded, like she understood, yet he highly doubted she did. Like all half-angels, she never would.

"Should we heal him with an iratze rune now or something?" Clary said, commanding their attention.

"No. I'll do it," Magnus answered, rising on steadier feet than earlier. "It's better if I finish what I've started."

The blood had picked up in velocity now, making amends for its failure to drain Alec earlier. Magnus murmured unintelligible words and blue mist appeared in the palms of his hands. He hovered them gently across the torn skin. Where the mist touched, the skin vibrated like a strong wind was blowing directly on it.

Clary moved closer, her shoulder touching his, as he wielded what he had been born to carry.

At the sudden approach of firm heels echoing down the outside corridor, Clary turned to look. Izzy lifted her head.

Magnus didn't have to. With his luck, and with the lack of exclamation of requests of knowing what had happened, it could be one person, and one person alone.
"Magnus," said a light, but measured, voice.

He didn't shift to look up.

"Lydia," he greeted without warmth.

She came to stand beside him, watching silently how his hands danced across her husband's chest.

"How is he?"

"He'll be fit for fight in a day or so."

"That's good news," she said.

When it garnered no response from anyone in the room, she continued.

"Would you come see me after you're done here?"

Magnus turned his gaze on her for the first time since she'd begun talking. He kept up his movements, but his words were curt.

"Since I am currently in the middle of healing your moron of a husband, could you give me a moment, please?"

Lydia accepted it with a polite smile.

"That's fine. But I need to speak to you later."

The light in his right hand flickered when fatigue set in and her words attacked him on a second front.

"The answer is still no," he reiterated, keeping his eyes peeled on Alec's limp body.

"I'd still like to talk to you. I think I have something that might interest you."

He closed his hands and the light died out.

"For the love of-" he cursed. "Clary, hold something against the wound."

Magnus wheeled on Lydia, his whole body at a boiling point. "What part of the word 'no' is it you don't comprehend? Is it the n or the o?"

Lydia stood her ground, holding her head high.

"Magnus, we need your help. We haven't found someone else. You're our only hope."

"I've already said no," he explained as thoroughly as he possibly could, feeling how his jaw was cracking from the restraint he was exercising. "I will never do your dirty work. If you like torturing poor souls, you do that yourself."

Her cheeks blotched with the insinuation.

"But people are suffering!"

It once again felt like the molecules started vibrating. The little light that fell through the open door at the end of the room seemed to suffocate.
"I was alive long before the Accords existed," Magnus said very slowly, keeping every word captive in his mouth before releasing it. "Do not speak to me about suffering. I've lived it."

He watched her, making sure she didn't miss the meaning behind the words.

"Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to save the rest of your husband's life."

He turned on his heel, his magic stronger now when it was fuelled by anger. Clary yanked her hand back and the towel she'd held against Alec's side when Magnus pushed a hand to form contact and the wound started sizzling.

In his ignorance, and the general ignorance of exactly who Lydia Lightwood was, he didn't expect her to stay. He really didn't expect her to contend him on this point, since there was no contention to make. But like all of his dealing with the Nephilim, this one wouldn't turn out pleasant either.

"And who do you think put him here?" she continued, like she hadn't just been brusquely shoved aside. "It's your fault as much as ours that Alec is hurt right now."

"What?" Clary balked, holding the bloody towel in between her tense fingers.

Izzy glared at Lydia, her mouth a white line. "It's not his fault. It's Valentine's," she said, making sure to pause between the sentences to make the point clearer. She then raised her voice to a sharp, accusatory tone. "And you're torturing someone?!"

Magnus turned his head towards Lydia and let his glamour slip. Yellow cat eyes blinked at her, and she recoiled.

"I've killed your kind before," he said in a tone as smooth as silk. "Don't tempt me."

Her shoulders didn't fall in defeat, but Lydia retreated with her mouth set firmly and her eyes looking disdainfully at the three of them.

"I would say what the frack again," Clary mumbled when she'd gone, "but then it would lose its meaning, so I'm just going to say it. What the fuck was that?"

Izzy was still staring at the door which Lydia had disappeared behind.

"I'm agreeing with Clary. What the fuck was that, Magnus? She wants you to torture someone?"

The blue mist in Magnus' hand faded away and he removed it from its earlier position. Across Alec's side three pink, raised scars, that were quickly fading into the normal skin, perched.

"And quite adamant about it too," Magnus commented.

"But you won't do it?" Clary asked.

"Of course not." he said tiredly. "What is it with you Shadowhunters? You think every downworlder have morals that can be bartered with only because we have demon blood."

"That's not what I meant," Clary protested. "Of course you wouldn't torture someone. I was just confirming what I already knew."

"What do you mean Shadowhunters?" Izzy suddenly said.

Magnus sat down on the bed with his whole body aching.
"As in the plural form of Shadowhunter."

Izzy's hand, that had been caressing Alec's sweaty forehead, was still.

"Alec knew?"

Magnus was aware that it wasn't worth trying to lie. Izzy had known her brother for too long for it to be believable.

"Yes," he admitted, leaning his back against the footboard. His pounding spine didn't thank him for it.

"Great," she sighed, resuming her ministrations. "Another thing we have to fight over."

It was closing in on midnight when another person, one who was actually conscious, came into the sick bay.

Clary had stopped by to say goodnight, and Izzy had checked in twice since they both left after an hour of all three of them sitting around the bed. In the end, they had come to the conclusion that it was wasteful of them to lounge around doing nothing while the second half of the Institute's leadership was down. Izzy and Clary had gone when Magnus had offered to stay. So that was where he was, slumbering in a chair beside Alec's side, when he heard someone entering. He pried his eyes open and found a familiar face.

"Jace."

"Magnus." Jace did his version of a smile. He looked a bit constipated. "I heard you were back."

Magnus wanted to conjure up a dramatic puff of smoke and step through with an over the top 'ta-da!'. But he was tired, and he'd found that sarcasm delivered the same punch without all the theatrics.

"I am," he admitted flawlessly.

Jace glanced past him, seeing his parabaitai clearly for the first time.

"How is he?" he asked, coming closer to bring a hand to Alec's cheek.

Magnus leaned his head back, trying to find a more comfortable position.

"He'll be fine."

When he'd found it, oddly enough it was with his feet propped up on the outer rim of the bed and his body mostly contorted to the left, he bestowed his full attention onto Jace.

"Where were you?" he inquired.

Jace shot him a sharp glare.

Magnus didn't heed it.

"I've never seen you fight without each other."

Jace caressed Alec's cheek with his thumb before standing up, using his height to his advantage.
"I don't see how that's any of your business."

The hostility was clear, especially in the way he was crossing his arms.

Magnus shrugged, picking up a book that barely held together by two leather covers from the floor where he'd discarded it twenty minutes ago.

"Fair enough."

He placed it in his lap, flipping it open when Jace said, "You're staying here?"

Again he wanted to throw some confetti around just to make sure the pointless questions would end sometime this year. Instead he pointed at Alec.

"I want to make sure he doesn't accidentally impale himself on something sharp, like a fork, or a spoon. He's oddly prone to bloodshed."

Jace had his eyebrows up, his whole body a question.

"But I can leave if you want to babysit him for a while," Magnus offered, completely willing.

Maybe if he got out of this place at some point today, he wouldn't have to resort to more than violent wisecracking.

"No," Jace said. "I just wanted to make sure he was okay."

"He is."

Jace hummed his approval and headed for the door. But before he had taken one step, he turned around again.

"So are you back for good?" he asked, his voice short.

Magnus cocked his head.

"What do you mean?"

"In New York."

They were simple words, but the way he said them implied more. It sounded like accusations.

"I don't see how that's any of your business," Magnus waved him off with.

Just as he was getting into the feeling and rhythm of the poetry from the 13th century, he felt something stir against his feet. Magnus looked up from the old yellow pages and saw Alec moving. He stopped balancing the chair on its hind legs and sat up. Getting his legs off the bed, setting the book down, he leaned forward. Alec moved again, restlessly turning to his side, then to his back. Magnus got to his feet.

He didn't have to take a step to be able to hover above him. Gently to not disturb him, he felt Alec's forehead for fever but it was cool and dry now. At his touch, Alec mumbled something. He was about to withdraw his hand, now assured that he was okay, when drowsy eyes peaked open, straight into his. Alec's eyes wandered down his face, past him, towards the foot of the bed, then to the left and then to right, like he was trying to locate something before he turned back to Magnus who
still held contact with his skin.

"Magnus?" he mumbled drowsily, a confused smile on his lips.

Despite knowing he shouldn't, he returned the smile, lightly pushing back the part of Alec's hair that had fallen into his eyes.

"Hi there, sunshine. How are you feeling?"

That seemed to wake him up.

"Magnus!" Alec half-yelped, half-squeaked, sitting up so quick he almost slammed his head into Magnus' chin. "What's going on?"

And he was back.

Magnus sat down on his chair again, tipping it backwards when he resumed his former position.

"Relax, Alec. I've just healed you back to life. According to Isabelle you met some, and I quote: 'giant-mega-thingy', whatever that means; but in reality, you were scratched by an achaieral demon."

Alec's hand went to his chest, feeling where the wound should have been.

"I was ..." He grazed the skin, not finding anything to support his recollection. "I think."

"Your memory should be a little hazy. I had to use a lot of magic."

He watched as Alec grappled to find some footing in his clouded mind.

"What happened?" Magnus prodded.

Alec pulled the covers closer.

"I wasn't fast enough."

What was it about half-angels and always stating the obvious? They were worse than feys and their tendencies to be evasive.

"And they didn't teach you how to tuck and roll in Shadowhunter school?"

Instead of the snappy reply he expected, Alec tried to sit up straighter and groaned.

"Apparently not," he replied after he was done moving.

Magnus studied him carefully.

"You seem to have a knack for almost dying."

Alec crossed his arms. Even in this state he was just as defensive as always.

Was he ever vulnerable? Magnus quietly pondered. Did he even know what it felt like?

"It's my job."

Magnus gestured to his shoulder. It was riddled with white lines crisscrossing over each other. Most of them, if not all, he'd never seen before.
"You have a lot of scars that haven't faded yet."

Alec didn't seem bothered by him pointing it out.

"Hazard of it," he shrugged. "They'll be gone within a few months."

The flippant way he said it, gave Magnus pause.

"You're being careful, right?"

Alec looked at him, and Magnus could see the steel behind. He hadn't known Alec for any stretch of time, but this part he recognised. It was the same expression he'd held every time Magnus had accidentally stepped on one of his many, many toes.

"I don't see how that's any of your business."

Word for word like his parabaitai. Maybe there were more reasons than just love for Alec to want to make that commitment. They were indeed alike. At the moment, Magnus couldn't decide which one of them he had less tender feelings about.

"Fair enough," he repeated, like this conversation proved to be. He snatched up the book and rose to his feet.

"You're leaving?" Alec asked.

"My work here is done. You don't look like you'll drop dead any second and I have somewhere else to be."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet," Magnus said with a half-sincere grin. "It was your sister who called me. And I might have threatened your wife."

An ounce of humour seemed to pull at the corner of Alec's mouth before it settled obediently in its normal line.

"You threatened Lydia?"

Magnus smiled, this time meaning it.

"In my defence, I wasn't really going to go through with it."

Alec raised his chin.

"Care to elaborate?"

"Not really, no."

He bent down to pick up his coat where he'd thrown it hours ago. It felt like years.

"What about payment?" Alec said from the bed.

Magnus stilled halfway from straightening his body. He slowly rose to his whole height.

He knew he hadn't misheard, but it felt prudent to give Alec a chance to think it over.

"What about payment?" he asked, making sure to coat each letter in ice.
Alec wore his puzzlement like a king.

"Have you already covered that with Lydia?"

Magnus could feel how contempt was just oozing through his skin and he didn't do anything to hide it. He threw the coat over his arm and prepared to leave.

"I don't charge for saving lives." He paused and looked him over. "Not even a Shadowhunter's."

He turned, but Alec's hesitating word made him glance back over his shoulder.

"I ..."

"Don't strain yourself," he shot back. "You should still be sore for a few days. Take it easy and remember to move if something tries to kill you. Goodbye, Alec."

His head was still spinning, despite the downtime and he berated himself for using too much magic. He should go home and sleep but instead here he was, tripping down the sidewalk like a senseless human not knowing about the dangers of being out so late. He really was reckless these days but he had to check on Catarina. As soon as he could see her at the hospital, where she must have lived the past month no doubt, he could relax and get some much needed rest.

The scent of hospital; old coffee, disinfectant; and a titch of vomit swirled together, met him at the entrance door to the emergency room. He shook off the stinging wind that had only gotten bitterer with the night and stepped through. The waiting room was empty except for a young couple who sat wrapped up in each other, not noticing his presence. Farther down the hallway was the reception, manned by a blue-scrubbed nurse.

"Excuse me," he said as he sidled up to the high reception desk.

The occupied nurse covered the receiver of the stationary phone with a palm and looked up at him. "What can I do for you, sir?"

"I was hoping you could tell me where I can find Catarina Loss."

Her face immediately changed, closing up.

"I'm going to have to call you back," she told whoever it was on the other end, setting down the phone. "You're a ..." Her eyes travelled down his necklaces, past his tailored emerald peacoat only to return to his eyes lined with blue. It looked like she couldn't exactly pinpoint what he was supposed to be. "Reporter," she settled on after many drawn-out seconds. "Aren't you?"

He couldn't help but give her an amused smile.

"Sorry, I'm not."

Her eyes widened.

"You can't be from the police."

"Police?" His smile faded. "Why would the police be here for Catarina?"
Her whole face, every plane of it, turned the shade of lobster.

"Oh, no." She clasped a hand over her mouth. "I shouldn't have said anything."

Magnus instinctively reached for her free one, squeezing it for a moment.

"No, please tell me. I'm a friend of hers."

She hesitated, her eyes raking over him again. He caught her name tag and decided to gamble.

"You're Angela, right? She's talked about you."

That was a lie.

"My name is Magnus. She might have mentioned me."

"You're Magnus?" She looked him over once more, this time in a more appreciating way. "And here we all thought she was leading such a boring life. Always working and nothing else on the side."

It was clear what she was thinking.

"Yes, she's my girlfriend," he lied along. "I've been out of the country, but I came back yesterday. I've been trying to get ahold of her. Can you tell me if something's happened to her?"

Angela blanched now when she could envision actually having to tell him. She started shuffling down her workspace in the search for something.

"I'll give you the name of the police officer. He can tell you."

It would take too long. Magnus knew whatever it was that had happened, it wasn't good.

"Please, just tell me," he said beseeching, refusing to let her gaze fold.

Angela gave up, her chest heaving with a surrendering sigh.

"She's missing," she purged with a regretful tone. "She's been gone for three months."

Chapter End Notes

So what do you think? What's going on with the Circle? Are they closing in? Why do Alec and Magnus act the way they do around each other? And where exactly is Catarina?
Dead Ends

Chapter Notes

Hello, my dudes!

Your amazing feedback is blowing me away, as usual. You're the absolute best! :D

I almost made the weekly schedule and I'm giving you all an high five because heck yeah! We're doing this, people!

I sincerely hope you'll enjoy this week's chapter and I can't wait to hear what you think! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dysfunctional

First entry for Sickology 101, Dysfunctional

Yeah
Don't you bring me nothing stupid
If you don't want me to lose it
Step back if you don't want me to attack
I'm a beast, better give me the deuces

I have no tolerance for nonsense
Get away from me
Don't wanna holler but you makin' me
I'm a little dysfunctional
You're the problem, please don't awakin' me
And I'm that way cause back in the day
Most have forsaken me

But they don't know I'm roguish
Surrounded by my soldiers
And they be locked and loaded
Will explode if you can't hold me
And I don't got no scruples
I didn't come to fight and shoot you
But you busters better be neutral
Don't get loose because I'm cuckoo

Listen, they call me genius, I run the show
Demons think they the meanest
But I brung the foe on the floor
Little bit sick, don't you know

I'm a little dysfunctional, don't you know
If you push me, it might be bad
Get a little emotional, don't you know
You could fool around and make me mad
I'm a little dysfunctional, don't you know
If you push me, it might be bad
Get a little emotional, don't you know
Might fool around and make me mad
Don't make me mad

Born to hustle
I'm a product of environment
The game done changed
So I've been forced into retirement
But I make moves and I paid dues
And I got common sense
Since I can't lose and I can't choose
Then I'll come back to spit
I'm huntin' leads in desperate need
I hope it's comin' quick
I'd wrap my brain to find a lane
That's gon' bring me some change
But it's so strange, my life has changed
And I am not the same
I come around but since I'm down
It feels uncomfortable
I try to hide it deep inside but I'm dysfunctional
I never learned to hold it in
I gets emotional
First, Implode and then explode
I am combustible
So please don't push to play me, pussy
On some real shit, won't be defeated
if I'm heated

I'm a little dysfunctional, don't you know
If you push me, it might be bad
Get a little emotional, don't you know
You could fool around and make me mad
I'm a little dysfunctional, don't you know
If you push me, it might be bad
Get a little emotional, don't you know
Might fool around and make me mad
Don't make me mad

I aint no killer but don't push me
Goodie-goodie choir boy never been no pussy
Could be carrying something up under my hoody
He would never snap and kill a buddy, y'all
Or would he

Emotions get the best of me
Messed up and then y'all get the rest of me
Depressed and stressed, feel like my destiny
   It's gon' be the death of me
   I wish that it all would go away
Or maybe I should pray for Jesus Christ
   To just un-pretzel me
   Tryin' to pray for change
   But sometimes it feel like he lets it be
   So I just take another couple doses
Probably be fine but if you get too close
   You'll find out that I ...

I'm a little dysfunctional, don't you know
   If you push me, it might be bad
Get a little emotional, don't you know
You could fool around and make me mad
I'm a little dysfunctional, don't you know
   If you push me, it might be bad
Get a little emotional, don't you know
Might fool around and make me mad

"Honestly," Magnus said aloud, settling a flyaway that had torn free in the merciless night wind. "Why do they always run?"

He watched, entertained, as the shaggy man stumbled over a bench, falling over the backrest in his hurry to get away. Magnus waited until he'd gotten to his feet, hurdling through a frozen floral arrangement in the stately park, before he snapped his fingers and the man froze like the dead roses beneath his feet. Ambling casually - since it was in the middle of the night there was no reason for concealment, and what few suicidal people walked around Detroit at this time were discouraged by the oncoming blizzard - he reached the man. Biting snowflakes had already started nipping at the strangers hollowed cheeks, telling tales of what was coming. They began settling in his dark eyelashes, reddening the statuesque eyes.

Magnus snapped his fingers again and the man, barely past fifty, collapsed when he suddenly regained mobility. Patiently waiting for him to stand up, Magnus noted he was starting to crawl.

"I've already told you there's no point in trying to flee."

The thin body stilled, sinking to the snow covered ground like an animal trying to make itself invisible.

"Please ..." he begged, choking on the words.

Magnus brushed off flakes that had started to amass on his shoulders.

"I know you know where she is."

"I-I don't know," he whimpered, his bare hands trembling where they lay, slowly being buried beneath the white flurry.

"I can smell the Yin Fen in you," Magnus scoffed. "I want to know where her shop is located."
"I said," saliva dribbled down the skeletal chin, "I said I don't know."

When he made a move to shift, Magnus put a boot on his back.

"Don't lie to me," he demanded, putting pressure on the spine. "It's tedious and frankly you're not very good at it. Tell me what I want to know and you're free to go."

The man's face, that had thus far been facing the ground, turned towards him and his eyes were a luminescent green. Magnus ground down harder, digging down the spiked heel into the bone and the once green eyes started flitting back, showing the original black colour of the irises. The man winced, trying desperately to avoid the pain, but to no avail.

He spat up more saliva, making wet marks in the snow.

"My pack will hear of this."

Magnus drew back his foot, putting the tip of it underneath the shoulder instead and flipping the light body. It flopped down like a boneless fish. He placed one leg on either side, standing over the rail thin waist.

"How original," he jeered.

Usually he needed magic for this. The children of the moon retained their supernatural strength in human form, as well as their speed, but when they were this drugged up they were weaker than the humans they masqueraded as. And he was far from mortal.

"It's not the first time I've heard that. It's not even the first time I've heard that tonight." He fixed his slit pupils on the shaking figure racked by withdrawal. "It's really starting to get on my nerves."

He nimbly went down on his haunches, almost straddling the man's chest. It could have been intimate, would have been, in any other situation but this one. Magnus grasped the weathered jacket, hauling until the loose upper body was vertical.

Feeling the ragged breath from the stranger's mouth, sensing the vile poison singing in the veins beneath the scrappy fabric, a wave of nausea hit him. Drawing the man closer, staring into those addiction riddled eyes that were half-closed, he made sure to put enough violence into the words that it would reach him, wherever he was.

"Tell me where she's holding up, or Yin Fen won't be the only thing crawling in your system."

His eyes sprang up.

Desperate times called for desperate measures. Or in this case, led to some sketchy places. The abandoned building had red bricks missing every few feet, making it look like a small child losing its milk teeth. Its windows were stacked high on each other, as if the architect had taken inspiration from an especially crooked game of Jenga. Once it might have been beautiful, with its archaic charm of clay tiles and the turret on the corner tipping the tall house to the right, but now the roof was caving, bending under the weight of time, and the turret had taken on the form of a boil growing out of the very inwards of the house.

The whole area, stretching for miles in these deserted outskirts, were imprisoned by a ten feet tall chain-link fence. The purpose of it seemed as forgotten as this place was. Magnus edged past the rusty barrier, ducking into where someone had cut a hole in the first and only line of defence. The
snow on the other side was deeper and the ever increasing flakes were doing their best to make the pathway unmountable. The only living thing in sight was a naked tree with gaunt boughs quivering against the storm. With branches splitting and splitting again, and twigs growing out of every sharp turn, it looked like it was made of human limbs, spurring paper thin fingers in every direction.

Through the screaming wind and the white curtain, it was a world made for the blind.

On high alert, Magnus looked around, trying to peer through the blackness. He hadn't been afraid of using magic in the heart of Detroit, but here, alone in the cold night, he felt the warnings. With a swipe of his arm the snow was swept to the side by what those who would have to explain it with mortal means would say a hefty gust of wind. He strode across the withered yellow grass that had been uncovered and up the winding stairs. There was a door, but it was neither locked nor in any way connected to its frame. It laid to the side with its glass panel removed and mold clinging to its rotting structure.

He stepped across the threshold.

The smell of something dead hit his nostrils and he recoiled. He couldn't make out where it came from and for now it was best not to hunt for it. Walking cautiously, Magnus ascended the rickety stairs. It wasn't until he reached the third floor of the five existing, that he saw something more than bare scraped corridors. He let go of the railing, leaving the staircase and stepped into a narrow passageway filled from the bottom to the top with books. It surrounded him on every side, even crowning the ceiling when he walked farther in. It curved within, despite the house having the shape of a tower. As he followed the maze, Magnus witnessed how the way he'd come from, where the rest of the stairs waited for his travels, suddenly disappeared from view despite that he hadn't turned the corner yet.

Certain now, he put his index finger on the back of a random book without a name or author printed and caressed it. When he turned the finger it was coated with an opaque black. The moment he looked at it, he sensed the presence.

He lifted his head, staring down where he'd entered. In the hollow stood a figure.

"Caedis."

"Bane."

The voice belonged to a woman who had abused cigarettes for sixty years, leaving nothing but lung cancer and roughed up vocal cords. But the form coming towards him didn't remotely match that description. Her shape could have been moulded from Aphrodite. Her dark skin, almost darker than the sky outside, glowed against her amber eyes when she stopped in front of him. She looked about eighteen.

"What are you doing in my neck of the woods?" she asked silvery, though barely moving her full lips.

As if it had been a rhetorical question, she beckoned him to follow with a slender finger.

She moved gracefully, more so than her broad hips and curvaceous legs should allow, when she kept on leading him farther into the house. It was a meandering road, twist upon turn, the path undeterred by such simple things as logistical impossibilities. Magnus never lost her out of sight, never let her get one step ahead. The type of old acquaintances they were could mean mortal enemies on a good day.
After they had circled yet another wall of books, the same as every other they had passed in the last ten minutes, they were suddenly in what resembled a quaint store. Shelves crowded with things such as golden crystals, bowls of oozing emerald liquid, shimmering elixirs in the colours of the rainbow and skulls that must be human, created aisles that branched out into a larger area where an ornate checkout counter took up the back end of it. Magnus couldn't help a wry smile when he took note of the antique cash register, it's brass buttons reflecting the light of the hot fire burning in the open fireplace carved out in the middle of the wall.

He didn't want to imagine what rested in the wooden cash drawer. How she must laugh when she used it.

Caedis took her rightful place behind the oak counter, standing attentively like an owner intent on wooing a reluctant customer.

"Isn't it time you answered my question, Magnus?"

He avoided her game, choosing to throw her off it.

"I see you're thriving."

*Like a roach in nuclear waste.*

She tilted her head, clicking her tongue.

"You still think you can fool me after all this time. My, my, you certainly haven't gotten wiser with old age, Magnus." She smoothed a finger over a perfect blood red nail, and added, as in afterthought; "When was the last time we saw each other?"

Not willing to let her steer, Magnus turned around, inspecting the shelves. He moved a jar stuffed with the skeletons of rats, finding behind it a bottle filled to the neck with something of the colour maroon.

"The forties," he recalled with spotless accuracy. "You sided with the Germans."

"Mundane and their wars," she crowed behind him.

Magnus traversed the shelves, moving to a broad wooden cabinet semi hidden. When he turned the knob, opening the double doors, a pair of dangling shoes were in the height of his forehead. He gazed up where the cabinet collided with the ceiling overhead and saw the body dangling from a hook impaling the rotting flesh. It was hard to see what it once had been.

"A friend of yours?" he suggested, keeping his face unreadable.

"Not anymore," she chirped.

Caedis watched him closely. He could feel the weight of her gaze when he closed the cabinet doors and moved to a rack bolted to the wall.

"I don't associate with beings who has scruples," she posited with a lilt. "If indeed such a creature exists. You don't have any, otherwise you wouldn't be here."

Magnus ignored her determined mindset. Not until he could spy her through the shelf in the middle while he was located on the other side, pretending to be occupied by her for sale objects, did he speak.
"I'm looking for information on the whereabouts of a warlock."

He saw her diamond sharp eyes go to him but he forced himself to study an old copper chalice that had developed patina.

"Her mark is blue skin, white hair, blue eyes; last seen in New York"

The answer delayed.

"Why are you looking for this warlock?" she inquired at last.

There was a new tinge to her way of speaking now, a lazy drawl. It was soaked in the kind of assurance a fisherman experiences when he knows the fish has taken the bait.

"My reasons are my own," Magnus avowed expressionlessly.

He glanced her movements, catching the glint in her hungry eyes.

"Perhaps she was glamoured," Caedis proposed. "It sounds hard moving around the city being the colour of the ocean."

"The people answering to you would be able to see through it."

She licked her red lips.

"But of course."

Magnus made sure to take up a new item, holding himself steady when he was about to tempt her. It all hung on this fragile thread and it felt like it was about to get cut.

"Do we have a deal?"

"A deal?" she echoed. "That depends."

He didn't look up from the vat filled with hundreds of minuscule eyeballs that he held in his hands.

"I'm willing to pay."

"Pay?" She laughed through her barely parted lips. The sound of chiming bells filled the room. "In what? Gold? Rubies?" She changed her accent into distinct southern. "Good ol' american dollars?"

When the laughter died out, she turned her body towards his, showing that she was completely aware of his every move. "Don't treat me with so little civility."

He put down the vat, still avoiding direct eye contact.

"What is it that you want?" he asked.

"A favour," she explained.

His heart didn't sink. He'd already guessed how this would go, but it still made pain flare in his veins.

"A favour," he repeated, picking up a glass container sealed tightly with a lid.

"To collect at the day I give, at the minute I say, no refusing."

He studied the silver powder, on the verge of trembling with the urge to throw it in the fire.
"I see you haven't gotten wiser with old age either, Caedis," Magnus sneered, putting the Yin Fen back in its original place.

"Come now," she cooed. "I thought Catarina Loss was family to you."

His hand stilled for a split of a second and she swallowed it up like something exceptionally delicious.

"Don't look so shocked," she coaxed giddily. "Of course I know who she is. I know who everyone is. I also happen to know that she and the late Ragnor Fell are what you consider your family."

Magnus stepped out from the protective shelves, sauntering into the space between them.

"You've been busy," he remarked, all sense of pretence gone.

Her limbs mimicked his, her body seemingly longing to get closer. Magnus felt a rush of magic surging through his very bones.

"Do you want to know where your precious little friend is?" she whispered seductively, her scent wrapping around him.

He curled his fingers.

"Because I already know."

"You're lying," he scoffed.

"Am I?" Caedis raised a perfectly arched eyebrow. "Are you sure?"

He didn't engage her any more.

"You don't know anything," he said with finality, his hand already flitting with sparks for a portal.

"It's your loss when she dies," Caedis pointed out with glee. "And she will die, Magnus. Mark my words."

He didn't bestow on her another second. Conjuring up the portal behind his back with a sharp wave of his hand, he answered curtly; "I won't grant you a favour. I don't make deals with the devil."

For the first time she looked discouraged.

"Farewell, then," she said and nothing more.

Magnus turned around to step through but right then a jolly voice calling his name caused the shivers, the once that he had forced himself to suppress, to wreck havoc down his spine.

"Magnus ..." it sing-songed.

He looked over his shoulder and Caedis was leaning on the counter with her hands secured at the front with her nails dug into the wood, like she was crawling her way towards him.

"Give my best to Catarina."

A slow catlike smile split the corners of her mouth, opening wounds to her earlobes and showed off rows upon rows of pencil shaped teeth.
The unease kept up its trodden path even after he'd put five hundred miles between them. Meeting Caedis, simply being in her presence, was a horror he would never come to appreciate, no matter how many centuries their meetings were spaced between.

As he marched down a bare avenue in Queens, he couldn't stop himself from being consumed by pathetic self-pity. He'd known the likeliest outcome. There had never really been much hope with Caedis. All night had been wasted on her and he was no closer to finding Catarina than he had been all week. All it had led to was exhaustion of going on little sleep for so long. Exhaustion and anger to be precise. Not a very good combination.

Magnus ducked his head from the sunrise climbing the murky sky in the east. He'd seen too many in the last days to stop to admire its beauty.

Without stopping, he crossed the street, heading for a ramshackle building. By its appearance it was a project from former glory days that never truly saw the day of light. It had been condemned to remain in the limbo with every other half-finished state project around these parts of Queens; left to bare its skeleton to the weather's harsh elements.

He walked through the glamour without feeling it and closed the suddenly unbroken door behind him. Warmth fanned out, caressing his pale cheeks. The light from clear cut lamps fastened to each side of the wall met him as he headed deeper inside. It was murky, the many windows seen from the outside vanished. As he walked, unwrapping his scarf and removing his leather gloves, he found his way to the inner sanctum of hotel Dumort.

It was abandoned when he seated himself on an expansive chesterfield sofa in the shade of wine and unbuttoned his shantung jacket.

But it didn't remain so.

The vampires' heightened senses, hearing in this case, that they had received in compensations for dying, had already alerted the owner to his presence as soon as he'd stepped inside.

Raphael could have used his superior speed to catch him off guard but he seldom exerted himself unless absolutely necessary. When he came into view now, his hair and clothes impeccable despite the early hour, it was with a smile.

"Magnus. I thought I smelled you," he greeted.

Magnus himself might be able to feel when someone moved within his wards, and occasionally pick up their unique energy, but those words would never cease to be unsettling.

"I'm sorry to wake you," Magnus apologised. "I didn't think of the time."

"It's nothing," Raphael assured.

All poise, he sat down beside Magnus. "I assume it's important."

"It is," Magnus acknowledged. "I need your help."

"Oh?" Raphael leaned back against the tailored tufting. "That's surprising."

It was a surprise to himself. He wasn't one to usually clutch for straws but time was running out.
"Catarina's missing," he divulged bitterly. "I've exhausted every option I can think of, but she's nowhere to be found."

Raphael straightened his already immaculate posture.

"How long has she been gone?" he asked with a tinge of emotion in his normally flat voice.

She might not be precious to him in any way, but Raphael had spent enough time with Catarina to form an opinion. And that opinion was clear in the way Magnus saw his fangs suddenly bared, glistening dangerously.

"Three months. I didn't know about it until a week ago," he revealed, feeling the taste of shame rising in his throat.

This would never have happened if he hadn't left.

"Three months?" Raphael repeated. "And what have you found?"

"Nothing," Magnus answered, feeling the chagrin. "It doesn't matter who I meet. No one has seen or heard from her."

Through long lashes, Raphael regarded him. To the naked eye, he seemed a young man, but the air he presented was filled with age.

"How far have you gone?"

Magnus peeled off his jacket before standing up from the sofa. He needed to move or else he was afraid he'd start to vent out his frustrations by the way of screaming. There were no object for him to divide his attention on here, the room's minimalism not encouraging lifting one of the ancient marble busts.

"I went to a demon earlier," he replied when he settled on wandering from one end of the room to the next. "Waste of my time."

"Take care," Raphael cautioned curtly.

Raphael had always possessed an exceptional ability at knowing when to pull back. His wary ways were what had enabled him to survive and rise to the highest of ranks within his clan.

"Demons aren't to be trusted."

Raphael left his sitting place to fetch a crystal decanter. Removing the fan shaped stopper, he poured out the smooth liquid in a low glass.

"Would you like one?" he inquired politely.

Magnus cleared his throat. "Will you always ask me that question?"

Raphael laughed, an unusual sound, and set down the decanter again.

"Blame my sweet mother. She raised me to be a gentleman."

When he resumed his earlier seat he lifted the glass to his mouth. As he lowered it, his lips were coated in scarlet.

"What happens if the young Nephilims finds out about your dealings? They do have their pesky
"Accords to uphold."

"I haven't broken the law."

"Yet," Raphael corrected.

It was a shame they knew each other so well.

"Yet," Magnus conceded. "And when I have to, they won't know about it."

"I would be careful if I were you." He licked his lips clean. "We're not supposed to mix with Shadowhunters."

"I agree," Magnus said. "They pay me, handsomely I might add, which I view as mutually beneficial. I have no plans on getting caught in the crosshairs of their war."

Raphael sobered.

"Three months you said," he reiterated calmly. "You're sure ..." He let the question linger, implying that which he didn't want to voice.

Magnus bit his tongue, pressing his lips together.

"No," he clipped off. "I'm not. That's why I came here."

Raphael set down his empty glass on a circular side table.

"I'm not certain how I can be of assistance."

Magnus' legs were jittery. He kept the wandering up.

"She wouldn't leave New York. So when she was taken it must have gone down somewhere in the city."

"I'll reach out." Raphael was already on his feet again, ready to fulfil his part. "As soon as I know something, I'll be in touch."

"I appreciate that," Magnus picked up his discarded items, putting on the scarf. "I'll be at Pandemonium tonight but you can call me anytime."

"I will," Raphael pledged when he showed him out.

At the door, Magnus looked to him.

"Please hurry."

Raphael drew back into the shadows when he reached for the handle.

"Of course."

As he was about to let the light in, Raphael said, "Magnus."

Magnus turned his head, and met eyes that were both infant and ancient.

"You might not like what you find."

"You're right," he answered, his voice sharper than a blade. "Whoever has her won't like it when I
find them."

His head buzzed, his body protesting, telling him to stay on the chaise longue. The sound of the
alarm died abruptly when he shut it off. Wiping his eyes and smearing whatever was left of the week
old makeup, Magnus got up on worn-out legs. Three hours of sleep wasn't enough any day, let alone
when it was the most he'd consecutively gotten in the last seven.

Which was why stimulants like caffeine existed.

He shuffled to the kitchen and poured what could have fairly been called a bucket of coffee if the
diameter on the mug had been just an inch wider.

Downing it in less than a minute, he made a face at the taste. He'd preferred something alcoholic with
the strength of cocaine but then he'd be done for the night.

So he had to settle for bitter coffee. Right before it kicked in, after another chugged mug, he
considered chewing the beans to get the full effect.

Magnus' eyes fell on the black phone laying on the kitchen counter. Picking it up, he stared at the
screen.

No new text messages.

No new phone calls.

He'd already listened through every voicemail and all of them useless. Four had been from the
hospital, three from friends, a single one from a rude salesman, and then twelve from himself
displaying a mounting degree of psychotic.

The text messages were an equally dead end. Her contacts yielded less than nothing. Her email was
brimming with junk mail. In the end, this little piece of technology that were supposed to have it all,
had absolutely nothing.

Magnus settled it in his pocket before he lost his mind staring at the photo on the lock screen
depicting a dog wagging its tail.

Taking a minute to stretch his arms and roll his shoulders, he then dressed warmly and left the
apartment.

The night, like always, shook some life into him. He stepped into the breeze, welcoming the sharp
bite, more effective than any coffee he'd ever come across. He seldom took his time to walk to
places. Portals were easier and more normal but right now he needed to feel steady ground beneath
his feet. If only for a moment.

He strolled, allowing some time to pass before he could see the flashing sign of his establishment.
Outside was a long line, people huddling together from sporadic gusts of wind. Radiating from the
inside was the warmth of human bodies and a rhythmic beat.

Using the head entrance for a change, Magnus slid past the chain barrier stands meant to deter queue-
jumping, and then the stocky bouncers that worked that angle even better and entered the club.

A wall of sounds and blaring music hit him the moment he came inside. Slipping the sleek hood from
his head, Magnus looked around, trying to locate in which of the bars Perkel was. Through all the
moving bodies he spotted her serving a puca at the largest one placed squarely in the middle of the
floor. Moving with the rhythm, he'd gotten halfway across the dance floor when something snagged
at his arm.

For a second he thought he'd gotten caught on someone's studded jewellery but then he felt warm
muscle and someone pawning at his elbow.

He swirled around and found himself face to face with a tall, broad shouldered, good looking guy.

There was an awkward moment where he waited for the stranger to realise he wasn't the person he
was searching for while the guy just stared at him. The stranger, obviously drunk, leaned into his ear
despite that Magnus leaned away and cried over the music, "You're hot!"

Magnus grimaced at the high pitch and the flying spit.

"You're HOT!" the guy yelled again after half a second, this time almost to an ear shattering degree.

Magnus nodded vividly to show that he'd understood him, not willing to risk his hearing any more
than necessary.

He tried to get back his arm, but the guy had taken a firmer grip and didn't release him.

When he looked up to tell him to let go, the guy with blue eyes glazed over with alcohol grabbed
ahold of his waist. Magnus recoiled. He wrest his elbow free, pushing him away, decidedly not
interested. But like a bouncing ball, or a cartoon boomerang, the guy came faltering back for more.

"Come dance with me!" he shouted, making another grab for his arm. This time Magnus drew back,
putting his hands up.

His head had taken to pounding and this wasn't making it any better.

"No!" he snapped. "Not interested!"

Magnus took another step back and the guy lumbered after like an inane bear.

"Oh, come on!" he complained, the words jumbling in his mouth. "Why not?!"

Magnus was about to shout exactly why when he took in the clothes, the stubbed hair and the guys
overall appearance.

"Oh, fantastic," he sighed to himself.

Magnus put down his hands.

"How old are you?!" he asked instead of the curses he'd been planning on spitting.

"Twenty one!"

Great. A drunk human.

The guy stared at him the way the intoxicated had a tendency to do.

"Aren't you in Zeta Psi?!" he shouted when he narrowed his already squinting eyes. "I'm in Kappa
Sigma!"

A fratboy.
Now it was truly a great ending to a great day.

Magnus shook his head from the left to the right, twice for good measure.

"Goodbye!"

He flipped around to find his way to his employee when someone snatched his hand up this time.

He stilled.

It couldn't be ...

But when he followed where his hand connected with lighter skin it was fratboy, in all his drunken glory.

"What is it with your generation and not accepting a no?!!" Magnus snarled, wrenching to get his hand back.

Normally it wouldn't be a problem. However, his body had been running on empty for a long time and it was starting to take its toll.

The guy didn't let him go. He followed up this display of utter disregard by putting a sweaty palm to Magnus' neck and dragged him forward like he was about to go in for a kiss.

Magnus briefly closed his eyes.

"Now you've pissed me off," he growled, opening them and flashing yellow cat eyes. He set his own palm in the middle of the close space between their chests and spread his fingers.

A bolt of shimmering pink energy shot straight into the unrelenting body and the guy flew back across the floor, falling into an unconscious heap a few feet away.

Those closest around stared, first on the knocked out neanderthal and then at him.

Magnus curled his upper lip in a sneer. "Men."

Spinning on his heel, he abandoned patience and forced his way over to the bar.

He flopped down on the only free bar stool in sight. Leaning his arms on top of the bar, he buried his face and rested his tired mind.

A flask was set down heavily close to him and he jerked his head up.

"Remember the list," Perkel sing-songed, setting down a shot glass beside the clear bottled liquid when she passed.

Ignoring the vodka, Magnus watched her energetic gait.

"He tried to touch me."

Always the practical, Perkel didn't slow down when she bent down to get more tequila.

"Too bad you didn't break something. Next time you should throw him harder."

Magnus nodded in agreement.

"If I ever see him again, I will."
Perkel poured the tequila in a cocktail shaker before securing the lid.

"Before you ask;" she said, shaking it profusely, "no, my spidey sense isn't tingling."

She poured the freshly made drink, serving it to an old-looking vampire.

Magnus trusted her abilities. He trusted her. But nowadays he didn't put much faint into trust.

"Has the bouncers reported something?"

"Nope," she announced, popping the p. "You need to relax. You don't have to come here every night just to watch over us."

He studied the humans and downworlders mingling together, the sheer mass of people overwhelming.

"You're young. Get back to me when you've lived a century."

"I'm positive," Perkel corrected with a carefree smile. "There's a difference."

When she had one hand free, quickly wiping down her work station, she wiggled her fingers at his eyebrows.

"Your eyes are visible."

"They're contacts," he instantly shot back.

She barked a laugh.

"Sure."

Removing the wineglasses a patron had left, Perkel continued. "Talk to Xiaosheng if your anxious ass can't unclench. She was here when we opened."

Ignoring the implication, Magnus scanned the closest bar, trying to catch a glint of rainbow-coloured hair.

"At which bar is she?"

"Second floor. Farthest away."

When he gave her a look, Perkel grinned.

"Sorry," she amended without sounding sorry at all.

"One of these days I'm going to fire you," he vowed, retreating from the bar.

When heading for the wide staircase two-hundred feet away his pocket started vibrating.

For a split second he thought it was Catarina. But it was Raphael's number illuminating the screen and that was the next best thing. Slipping through the crowds, Magnus found a quiet corner and spoke into the phone.

"Raphael? Have you found something?"

The voice on the other end was pleased.
"I have."

"That was quick."

"I have good contacts."

A new song, obnoxious and loud, came on. Magnus covered his other ear to hear better.

"What is it?"

"They found a fairy who's seen her."

Magnus gripped the metal harder, his heart quickening at the notion of a real lead.

"You're sure?"

"It gets better," Raphael continued. "After they found her, they sent her to Pandemonium. She should be there by now."

"She's here?" Magnus traversed the room with his eyes as if he expected this suddenly vital stranger to materialise in front of him at that exact second. "What does she look like?"

"You'll know her when you see her. But Magnus, she's affected by something. I don't know what. I hope you fare better than they did."

He could barely make out what Raphael said, exhilaration running wild in his veins.

"Thanks. I'll get back to you."

Ending the call Magnus spotted a couch pushed against the wall and used it as a vantage point.

She was indeed noteworthy. Unconsciously a ring had been created around her, like there was something about her aura that repelled contact. Her skin shimmered like pearls, long locks of pure white hair tumbling down the naked back. Wings, in the same shape as a butterfly's, dragged behind her bare feet. Their colour could only be described as a kaleidoscope, ever-changing beneath the pulsating lights.

Magnus reached her quickly, getting a closer look at her. Beneath her round eyes were black circles, digging deep into a face that looked younger than fifteen.

She looked without seeing him, clearly hopped up on something.

"Come with me," Magnus said, carefully guiding her to the private room farthest away.

He lead her past the curtains towards a table crowded with three chairs.

She swayed from side to side where he placed her, standing even when he sat down.

Magnus cleared his throat.

"They told me you saw a woman."

She didn't respond, not with any movement or sound.

He tried again.

"Did you see if she perhaps had blue skin?"
But the girl was gone, her gaze seeing something he couldn't.

Magnus took her limp hand, gently warming up the cold skin.

"Don't worry. Take your time."

An hour later he regretted those words.

Nothing had changed. Exactly nothing. The girl was in the same catatonic state. A corpse could look more alive. And she didn't speak. At all.

The only different thing was his now hoarse voice.

Magnus covered his face with his hands.

"Maybe she treated you?" he asked, his billionth question for the night.

When someone answered, he almost started off the chair.

"Treat me?" a brittle voice said. "For what? I'm not sick."

Magnus blinked at her, watching how her big eyes turned towards him for the first time.

There was something eerie about those eyes, the same colour as glass.

"No," he replied in an even voice, taking pains not to push her. "She's a nurse."

Her face crinkled when she pouted her lips.

"Who's a nurse?"

"Catarina," he blurted. "The woman I'm searching for. The person you said you saw."

She gazed at something over his head.

"I thought that was a half-breed," she mumbled, clearly not listening.

Ignoring the slur, he rose to his feet and carefully helped her sit down. When she was firmly seated Magnus bent his knees. They were now at eye level.

"A warlock, yes."

"But now it's nurse?" She walked her fingers thoughtfully over the round table. "I haven't seen any nurses. What do they look like?"

"No!" Magnus snapped before reigning in his impatience. "She's- never mind. Can you simply tell me what you saw?"

"I saw the ..." Her chin dipped into her neck, her voice distorting. "Warlock. She was there, right. And then poof."

On the word poof, her mouth formed a perfect o.

"Poof?" Magnus mind was racing. "As in a portal?" he asked quickly.

"No!" she protested loudly, her arms weaving around. "Like something happening really fast. One minute she was there. The next:" She put up two fists and opened them. "Poof!"
"So ..." Magnus tried to find some way to take this forward. It was obvious she'd seen something. But there was no telling if it had been Catarina or someone else entirely. "How did she 'poof' away?"

That seemed to shut her down like a machine losing its power source. Her open mouth closed, her hands fell down and her head tipped to the side.

Magnus took her by the shoulders and shook a little.

"Are you okay?"

When she remained silent he let her go.

"Did you maybe see someone else there?" Magnus kept prodding, as if he wasn't speaking to someone partially in a coma. "Someone I mig-"

"They took her!"

The sudden cry caught him off guard. He blenched.

"Who took her?"

The girl shot to her feet, spinning in a small circle.

"They!"

Magnus grabbed her shoulders again to stop her from moving.

"Who's they?" he questioned.

"They?" She snapped her fingers repeatedly, seeming confounded. After a minute she gave up. "I can't remember the name but I know they have a name."

She knew they had a name.

If there had ever been a prime moment to facepalm, it would be now.

"Can you perhaps remember any faces? Or the first letter in their name?"

But the words aimed to aid her confused thoughts went straight through her ears.

"They took her!" she cried again, more agitated now.

"I know," he soothed. "You've said that."

"No, you don't get it," she complained and started tapping her foot. "They took her but they didn't take her."

Magnus frowned.

"Sorry?"

Speaking slowly for the first time, she enunciated every syllable. "They took her but they didn't take her."

When he just looked at her, she nodded encouragingly.

"They took her but they didn't take her," Magnus repeated beneath her watchful eye.
When he finished, she smiled like a proud mother.

"I still don't understand what that-"

At once she was in front of him, her nose touching his.

"They take her, but they didn't took her. Understand?"

Magnus chose to back away.

"Ah, I see," he mumbled, feeling dejection hit. "Let's try something else-"

The girl jumped high at the piercing cry cutting through the music. Magnus gaze shot towards the closed curtain.

"Stay here," he ordered in a hushed voice, though he highly doubted she could comprehend simple directions.

Not touching his heels to the concrete floor, he stood to the side of the luscious fabric, the wall pressed against his shoulder, and moved the curtain out of the way.

Before his eyes had adjusted, he imagined it to be normal. But through the dimmed lights and the thick air, he could make out how something fell heavily to the floor and how it created a ripple effect. People who had been dancing up until now started to back away in a haste, stumbling over each other before another shrill scream was cut short and the whole room, in the split of a second, erupted into panic.

It was the smallest puff of air that stopped him in his tracks, his mind urging him to go on. It was the intimate sound of someone losing all of their breath for the faintest of seconds. Magnus turned around and saw her drop down, the blood spouting out of her severed neck. The girl tried to speak but her vocal cords were cut. The sagging wings fluttered one last time before she stopped quivering, her transparent eyes unseeing.

She was splayed onto his feet and he kicked her body away.

The seraph blade glowed in his rugged hands, blood marring its angelic perfection. His irises looked to be a reddish brown, a perfect match for the rune on his neck.

The Circle had arrived.

Chapter End Notes

So what do you think? Will Magnus find Catarina? Did someone kidnap her or did she leave voluntarily? And on a scale from 1 to 10, exactly how screwed is Magnus from the Circle's surprise visit?
Welcome Home Party

Chapter Notes

Hello, my dudes!

So, I know this has taken two weeks but guess what? *drumroll* It's a double chapter! It's twice as long as I usually aim for and hopefully twice as good.

Have fun with it and enjoy! :)

Also, I know we're all dying for some more Alec interactions since last chapter had none. So I present you this:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shake It Out

Regrets collect like old friends
Here to relive your darkest moments
I can see no way, I can see no way
And all of the ghouls come out to play

And every demon wants his pound of flesh
But I like to keep some things to myself
I like to keep my issues drawn
It's always darkest before the dawn

And I've been a fool and I've been blind
I can never leave the past behind
I can see no way, I can see no way
I'm always dragging that horse around

Our love is pastured, such a mournful sound
Tonight I'm gonna bury that horse in the ground
So I like to keep my issues drawn
But it's always darkest before the dawn

Shake it out, shake it out, shake it out, shake it out,
Shake it out, shake it out, shake it out, shake it out,
And it's hard to dance with a devil on your back
So shake him off

And I am done with my graceless heart
So tonight I'm gonna cut it out and then restart
'Cause I like to keep my issues drawn
It's always darkest before the dawn

Shake it out, shake it out, shake it out, shake it out,
Shake it out, shake it out, shake it out, shake it out,
And it's hard to dance with a devil on your back
So shake him off
And it's hard to dance with a devil on your back
And given half the chance, would I take any of it back
It's a fine romance but it's left me so undone
It's always darkest before the dawn
And I'm damned if I do and I'm damned if I don't
So here's to drinks in the dark at the end of my road
And I'm ready to suffer and I'm ready to hope
It's a shot in the dark aimed right at my throat
'Cause looking for heaven, found the devil in me
Looking for heaven, found the devil in me
Well, why the hell did I let it happen to me

The screams of fear fraught with pain assailed his ears but Magnus distanced himself from them. His focus was drawn to the hungry eyes of his opponent; the rabid dog that had invaded his domain. The Shadowhunter stepped over the girl's lifeless body, narrowing the playing field. Magnus parried his manoeuvre, backing away from the blade sweeping through the air. The man bared his teeth in a barbaric grin.

They circled like a dance, moving as if they had been directed. He launched and Magnus countered, keeping the body in between them.

The cries outside grew louder, clawing at his pulse, ripping through his soul. Magnus refrained from turning to them, to interfere in the sickening game of cat and mouse he could hear playing out.

The sounds of running and the sudden snatch.

A yelp of surprise that was cut short.

Something landing on the floor with a thud.

And then it happened over and over again, creating a wind chime of the deepest nightmares. He could feel them dying, taste their terror on his tongue.

Unflinching, Magnus waited for the mistake.

It came mercifully quick. The man propelled from his spot, his blood coated sword leading the charge when he jumped. Magnus threw his own body out of the way, spinning around and sent something from his fingertips that had the shape of a spear and the colour of lightning straight into the man's chest. Where the Shadowhunter landed became his final resting place. For a moment, before his legs gave in, and before he was splayed out beside his innocent victim; their foreheads almost touching, he tottered and clutched his heart.

He succumbed to his knees when Magnus ran past, and was beyond saving before Magnus had ripped aside the curtain. His head bowed to the floor with eyes staring at everything they could no longer see.

Magnus tore through the thick drapes and stepped into madness.

There was blur and light and hysteria swirling together, people escaping like fish fleeing a feeding
Someone crashed into his shoulder, sending him forward and precisely giving him enough time to evade a throwing axe aimed at his head. It sank into someone else, he learned, when he felt the warm blood splattering his back.

Magnus sent an energy bolt towards the direction of where it had come from, but in the confusion and strobe lights that lit up spots of dusky darkness, it was impossible to say who he hit.

Covering on the floor a few feet before him, he could discern a person trying to make themselves as small as possible.

The fight, flight or freeze reaction was a predisposition that often determined your chance of survival. He'd seen it play out many times and tonight freeze might be the best way. A moving target was a dead target. But if the Circle members managed to take over, they were all going to meet their maker, no matter how good they hid.

But he had no choice. No predisposition either. He carried centuries of experience on his shoulders and an abundant reserve of vengeful magic.

Struggling to not be knocked out of the path he was on, Magnus hurtled against the stream. He could see the bar now, or what was left of it anyway. Splintered glass strewed his way, his dart unnoticed until it wasn't. Exactly as he could touch the deep cuts that had been made into the sleek counter top, he was tackled, the impact sending him straight across it. The wall, lined both vertically and horizontally with bottles of varying liquors, met him in an inhospitable manner. They bit at his skin when the broken shards and their content as well, found their way to him by tearing through his clothes. With a shattering smash his short flight had reached its destination on the floor. Dazed, Magnus shook his head to clear it and got unto unsteady feet.

It was a mistake.

It hadn’t been an accident when he’d been body checked and it was far less so when he was grabbed by the throat and thrown against the wall. The lack of oxygen setting in fired off synapses that scattered his mind. He buried his nails into his assailant wrists, ripping through the delicate skin where he could feel sticky moisture starting to flow out. It never made the enemy flinch. This member of the Circle was enormous, the arms thick enough to keep him up against the wall without any support. He held Magnus at arm’s length, his lip curled in disgust.

"You can't use your filthy magic now," he hissed, his pink lips shiny with saliva. He squeezed harder. "Die, scum."

Magnus’ feet dangled, his powers flickering in and out. Panic was the strongest but also the most unpredictable feeling, and this time, when it was most ardently needed, it forsook him. With his chest constricting, the sounds around him going out, Magnus’ hands dropped. Where they fell, his palms flat against the surface, he could make out shapes. The first one he could curl his fingers around, he swung.

The surprise was the only thing he had working to his advantage, being outdone both in height and weight, and it was just enough.

The brute went down like falling timber when it cracked against his temple, the flask breaking on the impact.

Magnus staggered forward, clutching onto the counter when he tried to catch his breath. Hacking,
heaving some much needed air into his frazzled lungs, he allowed a second for refocusing before he stepped past the unconscious member.

"I don't need magic," Magnus rasped, dropping the cut off neck of the flask on the limp legs.

Despite that he travelled down the span of the whole bar in a rush that winded him, he didn't find any of his employees. From this location that provided some vantage point, they all seemed to have disappeared into thin air.

The stomping above him, the beat of footsteps, made him look up.

Had they reached the second floor yet?

Magnus hopped the counter, landing roughly on the other side.

How much time had gone by?

That was the moment when the fire alarm went off. The multitude of sprinklers, covering every hundred square feet, began spurting water, instantly making the dusky club murkier. With the blaring sound that reverberated through the soles of shoes and bounced against the ceiling, it sent a new wave of party goers running for cover. He'd been right in his guess. Those above hadn't been aware of what was going on. But now they were starting too.

The wide stairs, situated freely in the room, had no shelter on either side. It was the perfect spot for an ambush. It was the only way down.

Magnus scrambled across the haphazardly thrown furniture in his pursuit to reach it. Around him he could make out a select few fighting back. The snarl of a vampire that had been caught and had turned the tables, as she was now in the process of sucking her capture dry, was a small comfort. Magnus almost fell over the body of a large grey wolf that lay twitching on the floor, its steaming entrails spilling out from the lacerated abdomen.

He could make out the staircase now, almost spot the faces of those fleeing down it, when he caught the glimpse of metal above.

She sat like a demented spider.

Magnus blinked away the drops obscuring his vision and saw how the member, the shine of her arrow being the source of metal, was somehow fastened underneath the part of the ceiling that came to overhang the stairs. She readied the arrow, her mouth slightly open when she concentrated on choosing a target.

Gripping at an invisible rope, wrapping his fist around it, Magnus yanked his arm back, and she came crashing down with a yelp. It was impossible to hear the crack of the skull, but he could see it when her body splayed out onto the uneven steps, the crossbow by her side. Shocked cries rose around as the hoard of people parted around her like the red sea.

As well as he'd picked her out, her reckless position being her downfall, he too had been made. Through the mass of bodies that was thinning, Magnus evaded the first throwing knife. Through the spray of water, the mist it created shrouding faces, it wasn't possible to differentiate between friends and enemies. Where he had reasons for concern, the Circle had not. Everyone they killed was a target, whereas he couldn't aimlessly attack when he couldn't even see.

He hunkered down when something else was thrown his direction. They marked their approach in the hubristic way they had been raised, not even trying to blend in as they came straight towards him,
cutting down those in the way. They were arrogant to a fault.

Shooting an emerald sphere at the pair, the woman sprang forward while the man wasn't as lucky. It caught him in the hip and not a second later he was set aflame. The water splashing from the sprinklers did nothing to put it out. It didn't seem to touch the fire, gliding off the very flames like they were made from glass. His terrified howls rang out louder now that Pandemonium was getting sparse when the bodies piled up.

At the nick of time, Magnus threw himself down on the waterlogged floor when the woman batted at his head, a few inches from bashing it in. She growled something when he aimed another sphere at her that missed once more. Her spiked mace came down, making a number on the floor when he rolled. His magic acted on its own, the power of it casting her off.

Jumping to his feet, he noted that she was already on hers, steel club in hand. And beside her was not one, or two, but three more members. Magnus backed, trying to get a fix on their positions. The back of his legs hit against the scraps of a table, and he glanced back for a moment.

It chilled him, the adrenaline skyrocketing when he took note of the new faces. Everywhere he looked, they were turned towards him with a sinister glare. At least ten, if not more. Inching in. Blocking every escape.

In his ignorance, he'd imagined himself the hunter, but standing surrounded in the middle of the room, without anywhere to retreat, it was dawning on him that he'd been the prey all along.

With his pulse beating loud in his ears, Magnus failed to take in the sound of a string being pulled. But he didn't have a chance to miss the result. The pain exploded in his shoulder when the arrow penetrated it, the tip coming through bloodied on the other end. He cried out in agony, his knees buckling, and he heard laughing.

Automatically he clutched at the arrow, and it made the pain shoot through his bones. Blood cascaded down his chest, mixing with the water that was pouring down on them all.

Through gritted teeth he could see them closing in, like sharks circling a sinking ship.

Perhaps it was the mockery scorn he saw in their features, or the harrowing recognition that if he did nothing, he'd soon be dead. Whatever it was, it awoke something deep inside him, something that had been sleeping for a long time.

The magic bustled, bristling to take wing.

Magnus let it ravage, welcoming it to use him as much as it was used by him. The magic was a tide, owning no shape, nor form, but drowning just the same. It might as well have been an entity and he its host; the demon within claiming its birthright.

Closing his eyes on the world, he formed his hands into a prayer and fell to his knees.

When the first wave hit, it stopped his heart.

In the balance between life and death, where twilight was forever, he remained. There was no light or dark behind his eyelids, no sounds reaching across the void to pull him back again.

Then the second wave hit.

Every window, from the second floor's that had a whole wall replaced with glass, to the panes in the door leading to the alley behind Pandemonium, shattered inwards. Glass rained upon their heads
when the force field detached from his body in a motion that shook the building's foundation. The strobe lights blew out, plunging the whole club into darkness. Those besieging him and those who weren't, were all flung to the floor.

His soul came slowly back to life where he stood wavering on his knees.

Around him laid Circle members, and all over the floor he could see murky small hills, the shapes of others that had been cast down by the sheer force. It was impossible to tell the living from the dead until some of the heaps started moving. Life was slowly returning to his veins. He felt it creep in when he stood up. But so was the case for the still breathing Shadowhunters. He couldn't say how many of them had died from their proximity, but he could certainly see at least six that were almost on their feet. Before he could do something to change that, Magnus heard the whistling sound of a released arrow. Instinctively, he ducked and flipped around. Almost at his heels, one of the members flopped down, spluttering out their last breath. Through her neck a crimson fletching protruded.

He recognised it, had seen it no more than a week ago hanging in its quiver on the knob of a footboard.

Magnus tore his gaze away and when he lifted his sopping head, he saw the archer.

The figure was at the front door on the other side of the room, the bow already nocking another arrow. Through the dense gloom it was nothing more than a shadow.

Then it shouted, with a voice he'd know anywhere, "Watch out!" and Magnus darted forward.

Something swooshed past Magnus' ear when he dove behind a circular pillar nearby.

The longer part of the arrow that was firmly lodged in his shoulder broke off against the concrete and he bit back a scream.

He shrunk back, pushing his spine against the cold column when another dagger flew past, too close for it to be an accident. Magnus peaked out on the other side, and caught a glimpse of a burly silhouette that was advancing towards him. The person suddenly snapped their head towards him and sent off another dagger. Magnus threw himself back, spinning into the direction of the first blade and fired away a flimsy golden lightning bolt in blind. He closed his eyes from the light, refraining from being flashed. A moment passed before he peered out from his cover and heard the remaining weapons clinking to the floor.

Abandoning the only safeguard he had, Magnus used the cover of the sprinklers that were still going strong to move along the wall. In the night that had overtaken Pandemonium, it was still possible to detect those who were moving but only if they were in the middle of the floor. But no one was there.

There was something malevolent that had entered into the room. Through the open windows the winds from the moonless night sang an ominous song, their musical being the only thing Magnus could discern. The water, that had by now started to create a lake of the once dry floor, lapped at his feet and made other sounds impossible to detect. He couldn't hear his own breath over the downpour from the sprinklers and the curtain it created made him feel completely alone. But he knew he wasn't. Somewhere around him was the Circle and he had no idea how many.

Inching along, keeping his back glued to the wall, he crept closer to where the stairs should be.

It was the small flame of orange that wasn't visible until he was twenty feet from it that made him start.

"Biscuit?" he whispered, as Clary, looking like a drowned cat, was pressed against him.
As she opened her mouth, he realised that there was a shadow that was right behind her. One that was moving.

"Duck!" Magnus yelled, shoving her away with his good arm and lifting his injured one to attack.

But he wasn't fast enough for the enemy that had already been prepared to strike.

There was ill-intent in the way the shadow launched, and he caught most of it when it struck him square in the jaw.

Magnus stumbled backwards, cursing, "Really?"

He had no idea where Clary was, but he noted the luminescence of the seraph blade that was soon to be used against him. He inched to the side, keeping his eyes peeled for any quick movements. His adversary followed.

"You have a perfectly good sword right there," Magnus pointed out. "Why do you have to punch me in face? I'm quite fond of it. The rest you can have a stab at."

As if the outline, which was all they were to Magnus, had taken it as an serious invitation, they raised the seraph blade to strike.

At the same time he was about to dart to the side, the member suddenly collapsed in front of him. When the sizeable body tottered over, a much nimbler outline stood behind. Clary wiped off the sword on her pants.

"Wha-"

Her words were swallowed by an explosion that originated from the second floor. It sparked with hues that were out of the ordinary. The blue and magenta flashes of light died down as fast as they'd appeared.

"I need to get upstairs," Magnus relayed quickly. "Can you cover me?"

She nodded, and he hurried back to where they'd met. Sneaking along the wall, they didn't encounter anyone before they were right across from the staircase. It was at least a hundred yards in an open space without any kind of shelter. The foreboding silence was starting to gnaw at him. Either there were a lot fewer of the Circle than he'd thought, or they were all waiting for someone to make the first move.

If the second guess was right, then he'd have to be the one to make it. There was someone upstairs, and they were in trouble.

Magnus eyed the distance, deciding on the best strategy.

"Do you have any long-range weapons?"

"Yes," Clary mumbled back, making sure to speak as quietly as possible. She pulled out two sets of throwing knives, both looking brand new.

Magnus glanced her way.

"Are you any good with them?"

"Uhm ..."
Her hesitation said it all. Her nervous fiddling with them said more.

Great, he couldn't help but think.

*Just great.*

"You ready?"

Clary agreed despite looking pale.

There was no plan. No preparation. It had been the Circle's arena from the get-go, the Circle's ambush and all he could do now was to try and rectify it. He had to save the once he could.

For a moment, Magnus entertained the idea of sneaking his way up somehow, to not risk his existence if he absolutely didn't have to, but there wasn't time. The tide was pulling, and it wasn't about to wait for him to catch up.

With his eyes fixed on his goal, Magnus shot out from the wall.

The mad dash, the element of surprise, was his only defence against those who were lurking in the shadows.

It was more than bone-chilling that his boots breaking the water surface was the only sound except from the eternal sprinklers.

Halfway there, his breaths coming out in pants, in the corner of his eye, Magnus could make out a form that was gaining on him at an alarming rate. How it moved so quickly through the ankle deep water he didn't know.

There were only two choices he could make. Either keep running, or try and fight that which he couldn't see clearly and leave himself exposed to more attacks.

He made a snap judgement.

"Clary! To the right!" he yelled as loud as he could, forcing his legs to move faster.

The stairs were almost in his reach, his feet an inch from the first step when someone hooked his arm and they both went down. The collision spun him around, leaving him flat on his back and someone was at once straddling his chest.

Their blade was downward bound when Magnus snapped his hands up to the planes of their chest and at contact a fulmination of light flung the attempted murderer straight into the high ceiling. The shape looked like an abnormally large crow with its wings broken when it came back down, rocking the floor when it landed.

Magnus rolled onto his knees.

Around him, where once eerie silence had existed, shouts and violence were now playing on repeat.

There were suddenly people all around. He couldn't tell those fighting apart. All that was distinctive was the glowing seraph blades that were clashing against each other.

He hit the stairs, finally getting to the top and immediately spotted the horror. The very reason for his hurry.

Perkel was pushed into the farthest corner surrounded by four broad figures. She tried to create a
shield, the beginning of it starting to build but then it sputtered and faded out. The fear on her face was stark, the glamour flickering when she searched for an escape.

"Perkel!"

Her terrified eyes snapped up, and so did the heads of those out for her blood.

Gilded spikes shot from Magnus' fingers, aiming to create a distraction. It worked, making the members duck for cover and giving Perkle a chance to break free.

She spurted away.

Magnus ran.

Her lanky legs slipped in the water when she scurried like a hare over the mounds that had to be bodies, and crashed into his arms.

Magnus pushed her behind his back, spreading his arms and alighted his cupped palms with sapphire flames when the assailants, who had already taken up pursuit, drew closer. He retreated, inching her back until they were against the wall again. Perkel was trembling behind him, her breaths on the brink of hyperventilating.

The members fanned out in a half-circle, caging them in. Never taking his eyes off them, making sure she was shielded by his body, Magnus snarled out an invitation. "Come on, then."

Right as the members were about to commence their coordinated attack, something that moved with the speed of light smacked into the two that stood in front of Magnus and Perkel. The one on the right was also pounced, a sword through the chest before he, his square build suggesting a man, could do any more than blink in confusion.

"A little help?!!" a voice anxiously called.

Simon, springing away, was currently trying to avoid getting impaled by the two members that really weren't knocked down anymore but had also given chase.

Yanking the sword out of the chest with a thump, Jace was already on their heels.

It left the last one to him. Magnus reacted instinctively, blazing off the blue fire as natural as breathing came to others but it proved to be redundant. With a loud clang, Perkel had broken the neck of their last enemy with one of the metal bar stools.

"That was therapeutic, asshole," she growled, dropping the stool on the floor.

"Is there more of them up here?" Magnus asked, scanning the space where at the other side Simon and Jace had just dispensed with the last two.

"No," Perkel said, her voice biting. "I'm sure it was only those four."

"Stay here," he ordered before bolting towards the stairs once more.

As he was about to descend, a lone figure was coming up, strolling in a casual manner.

"You guys okay up there?" Izzy asked, wiping a wet tendril from her cheek.

Magnus let her words sink in and took his first real breath in forever.
"Yeah, we're fine. How's things downstairs?"

Izzy walked up to him, beckoning Simon and Jace with a finger.

"Well, we believe every Circle member is dead so that's good. But we could really use some light. And maybe shut off the sprinklers."

"I'll do it." Perkel had come up to them, her body still trembling. With some mumbled incantations, the lights were repaired and the water finally ceased to douse them.

Their eyes adjusted quicker than to the darkness, but it wasn't a pleasant sight to behold. From their high vantage point they could see the bodies that were strewn about like pearls around the whole bottom floor. The majority of them didn't bear runes. Around them on the second floor, the situation was the same.

Among those dead were a few people wandering, and two of them were Clary and Alec.

When they got down, Magnus caught sight of one of the security guards.

"Deati!" Her head jerked up at his voice. He gave her a once-over before inquiring, "Are the others okay?"

"Everyone's accounted for now when Perkel's here," she replied with an unsteady voice, her normally stoic features shaken up. "Mzuzi, Javier, and Rayia are dead."

Magnus didn't allow himself to dwell on it. Instead he kept on track.

"Where were they stationed?"

Deati looked towards the main entrance.

"Up front."

He followed her gaze. Where the doors had been thrown open they were showcasing bodies on the ground outside.

Magnus turned his head and called out, "Perkel!"

She hurried over to them, her eyes darting nervously. Magnus took her firmly by the arm and deposited her beside Deati.

"Get her home and don't come back here until I call. And be vigilant."

Perkel blinked at him, her tone not the usual confidant one, but wobbling like that of a frightened child.

"What about you?"

"Do as I say," he demanded. "Now!"

Deati obeyed orders and took Perkel with her when they exited through the alleyway instead of the main entrance.

Magnus trailed them with his eyes, making sure they did indeed leave before he could focus on something else. His burning shoulder reminded him of a pressing issue. Placing a palm across the place on his shoulder where he could feel the arrowhead poking out, he murmured under his breath
and the pain dissipated quicker than a bad dream. The metal was quickly pushed out by an unseen force when the gash rapidly sealed up.

For warlocks it was always easier to heal themselves than to heal others. Magic was already a part of them. That was why wounds such as these, even if they were gaping, posed little serious threat.

The few people that had staggered around in a dishevelled state when they'd descended the stairs were making a hasty exit. Soon enough the only once left were the Shadowhunters and Simon.

Izzy, Clary and Alec were checking out the dead Circle members, probably hoping for someone still alive. Jace was curled up some feet away, bent over another one.

"Are any of you hurt?" Magnus called out, loud enough to reach Izzy that was farthest away.

"We're not," Simon answered for them all as he came up to him from somewhere behind. "But you look like a murder victim."

Magnus glanced at the white cloak, now stained crimson from the shoulder down.

"That tends to happen when you find yourself on the wrong side of a bow."

Simon lifted a hand as if to touch him.

"And your neck?"

Magnus evaded him and headed towards Jace.

"Why did you come?" he asked as soon as he was within earshot.

Jace tipped back on his haunches, lifting his head to give him a pointed eyebrow.

"I'm grateful for the help, but how did you know?"

"We were close by and heard the tumult." Jace dropped the runed wrist he was checking for a pulse. It flopped down again. "Even for one of your raves it was quite loud."

"I knew it was a bad idea to come back here." Magnus raked a hand through the hair that had plastered itself to his forehead. "One of these days, I'm actually going to start listening to myself."

Jace stood up, wiping off his palms on his jeans.

"You're crabby."

"All these people were under my protection," Magnus said curtly. He didn't have to make a grand gesture to point out those he was referring to. They were everywhere. "And now they're in varying degrees of decomposing. So, yes, I'm crabby."

Clary, Alec and Izzy were coming up to them as he was speaking, Alec shaking his head at Jace's questioning stare.

"Everyone's dead. Izzy spooked the only one alive and he slit his throat."

"Like it's my fault the dude's psychotic," Izzy protested, throwing her seraph blade on the ground before dropping down beside it. The wetness didn't seem to bother her when she stretched out her legs.
“They can't even die with class,” Jace spat.

He turned away, his body language screaming out frustration.

Clary's concentration laid on Jace’s stern back, but she directed herself at Magnus when she spoke.

"We counted twenty members."

"I don't know if I'm supposed to be flattered or insulted," Magnus commented. This day seemed determined to make him regret being born. He contemplated sagging down beside Izzy but didn't have time to go through with it when Alec called his attention.

"Where did they come from?"

"The main entrance is my guess." Magnus nodded at it. "Three of the security guards that were stationed there are dead."

Alec gave him a look.

"You don't know?"

"I wasn't in here when they came."

Magnus didn't volunteer more information and Alec wasn't poised to ask.

Izzy posed the question to no one in particular. "Why would they attack here?"

Simon, who had come to sit beside her, shrugged.

"A lot of downworlders in one place?"

"This was a coordinated attack," Alec disagreed. "And either the Circle has grown exponentially or this was important enough to send a big number of their members."

"Maybe for insured success?" Izzy suggested, her mouth twisting with aversion on the last word.

"No." Alec fixed his intense gaze on Magnus, crossing his arms. "Do you know Valentine, Magnus?"

"We've met," Magnus replied in a measured tone. "But I sincerely doubt he did this just to get rid of me."

Alec kept on, not deterred.

"Where?"

Magnus frowned. Wasn't it obvious?

"The Uprising?"

He waited for a follow-up question, but Alec just stared at him, as well as Clary, Izzy and Jace, who had suddenly turned back.

Magnus' frown deepened. "Are any bells ringing?"

Izzy was the first to speak.
"You were at the Uprising?"

Magnus took in their shocked faces and recalled what the Nephilim were like. Their pride would never allow their dirty laundry to see the light of the day.

He nodded tiredly.

"I see the Clave still likes to pretend it didn't happen. Yes, I was there, and I decimated your kind quite extensively. I suspect it didn't endear me to Valentine, but I wasn't the only one who fought. Jocelyn went against him: his wife. And so did Luke: his parabaitai. I'm not that good at pissing people off."

"So tonight was just to kill random downworlders?" Simon addressed it with a paler face than usual before Izzy broke in.

"Does that mean you fought our parents?"

Alec did a small jerk, as if the words were charging at him and Jace's stare was intently fixed on Magnus.

"I think that's a question you should ask them," Magnus suggested without leaving room for more inquiries.

Izzy looked straight at him.

"It's not like they'll tell us."

Before he could formulate an appropriate brush off, his phone started going off. "Excuse me."

He avoided their questioning eyes and walked away. Not until he was back in the private room where it'd all begun, shutting the curtain to get some privacy, did he pick up.

"Raphael."

"You sound awful," Raphael remarked as a greeting.

"It's been a rough day."

Magnus stared at the ceiling, counting the copper tiles.

Raphael caught his detached tone.

"She didn't talk?"

"She's dead," he stated. "The Circle came tonight."

There was a pregnant silence in between them while Magnus, on his other ear, could hear the rising and falling voices of Jace and Alec, followed by people starting to move around.

"How many dead?" Raphael asked solemnly.

Magnus closed his eyes for a brief moment. "Enough to last a lifetime."

He stepped away from the curtain.

"I want you to keep your ears open for any information about Cat."
"I will," Raphael swore. "Do you think they came because they knew that fairy was going to talk to you? It's a strange coincidence."

Magnus passed the fallen Shadowhunter, the blade still in his clutch.

"It's strange," he agreed. "But it doesn't make any sense. I don't think the Circle has her. It's someone else."

The feeling in his gut was growing, had been ever since he'd started trying to coax the truth out of the girl. The Circle wasn't discreet. They didn't believe in operating in the shadows. If they were the ones that had snatched Catarina, they wouldn't go to this much pain to keep her hidden. It was cementing itself, the more he thought about it. There was another player in this game. It might be good news, considering that she wasn't in Valentine's hands, but the knowledge that she was in someone else's, someone that had slipped past without him noticing, made bile creep up his throat.

"Let me know when you have something."

"Watch your back," Raphael cautioned, his tone sharp like a knife.

"Likewise."

Raphael ended the call as Magnus kneeled on the floor.

The glazed over eyes stared up at him.

He closed her eyelids, giving back what little he could. When he did, the water that had filled them ran down her cheeks, mimicking shining tears for the sorrowful dead. As he grasped her hand it was barely colder now than when he'd held it earlier. Magnus laid it in place on her chest. Except for the blood marring her perfect features, she appeared to be sleeping. When he mumbled an incantation, sweeping his palm over her neck, it sealed up, removing all signs of the violence done to it.

He'd never seen an angel, only the true demons of hell had visited him, but in his imagination this was what seraphic creatures looked like. So very young. And so very lost.

"Did you know her?"

The voice startled him. He rose from her side, standing up to see Alec looking at him, the drapes opened behind him. He was still wearing his bow, his shoulder looking comfortable with its constant companion. It reminded him a lot of the person Magnus had been acquainted with. That person had always been on edge, consistent in his mistrust of everyone. Even now, when their enemies were long gone, he was armed to the teeth.

"No," he replied.

The white dress flowed across the floor beside his feet, stopping short of her knees. He made sure to avoid stepping on it when he walked around her.

"She was just a girl," Magnus added more for his own benefit than Alec's.

Alec didn't understand, and words didn't work on him.

"You okay?" Alec asked when Magnus went past him, leaving her for heaven or hell.

"Of course."

Magnus glanced at him, giving him a quick once-over.
"You're looking better than last time I saw you."

Alec nodded, following along.

"I am. I wanted to thank you again."

They stopped by the closest bar where Magnus went behind the counter. He dipped down and grabbed the first thing that he saw that wasn't shattered. He offered it to Alec with an inviting gesture but Alec lifted his palm up as a silent no. Skipping a glass, Magnus gulped down a healthy amount of brandy before he picked up where they'd left off.

"I should be the one thanking you. I'm fairly certain you saved my life."

He couldn't imagine what it was that could compel Alec to actively seek him out, especially to say thank you. They were in public, although amongst his family and friends, but it should've still deterred him. And in the special case, as it now where, it didn't, them talking never ended well anyway. The last time being evident enough that even their shortest interaction always closed with snarls.

Alec didn't sit, despite the multitude of stools. His mission in life seemed to correlate with always being the most uncomfortable he could make himself.

"Just returning the favour. Izzy told me what you did."

Magnus hummed into the flask. It tasted like regrettable decisions, which fit him just fine.

"You should aim any and all appreciation at your sister." He took another swig before setting it down between them like the first brick in a wall. "It wasn't for your benefit."

Alec frowned.

"You did it for Izzy?"

"No."

When Alec waited for a continuation, he obliged.

"This might come as a surprise to you." He shifted his weight to his other foot, trying to relax and failing. "Which most things honestly seems to do, but I don't take pleasure in watching people die around me. I was never going to let you die. I just didn't do it for you."

Alec regarded him.

"You're angry."

Magnus didn't slam his head on the bar counter but he was very tempted to do it. Then at least he'd be knocked out for the rest of the night. He wouldn't have to have this conversation, or the oncoming argument he could feel rolling in like thunder.

"Oh, so you can read facial expressions," he said with the wryest smile he could muster. "I'm amazed."

Alec looked like a distant version of sheepish, the closest thing Magnus had seen him to regretful.

"I'm sorry for what I said," Alec began in a more hushed voice when Simon struggled behind him, dragging a corpse. From where they were standing, the corpse seemed to be winning. "About the
payment. I didn't mean ..."

He drifted off when he saw Magnus' expression.

"What?"

Magnus had to refocus to really understand what Alec was saying.

"You honestly think I'm mad about what you said to me days ago?" he questioned dubiously.

They were standing in his abandoned nightclub, where bodies, instead of strobe lights, were the decorations.

"How big of an ego can you possibly have?"

"Oh ..." Alec said, and Magnus could pinpoint exactly where his wheels started turning the wrong way.

"So this is about ...

Don't say it, he thought. Don't say it.

You can't be that clueless.

But of course Alec was.

"... the wedding."

Magnus feared he would have a heart attack for a moment but he forced his pulse to slow down. It wouldn't be advised to kill him, no matter how cathartic it would be.

He put his palms flat on the counter.

"I have a lot of things in my life to be angry over. You don't even break the top ten. So if you are done, I'd like to not be around you." Peeling off his hands, and priding himself on not hitting Alec over the head, he ducked beneath the bar counter instead of wasting time on rounding it and walked away. "Preferably some hundred miles apart, but I'll settle for the other side of the room for the moment."

He kept on going, hoping to leave Alec behind, but then he felt a hand on his elbow, one that let go as soon as he turned around.

With his eyebrow raised in a question, he reluctantly gave Alec his attention.

"I want you to reconsider." Alec said it without preamble.

He really shouldn't have stopped.

Magnus prepared himself for what he knew was coming. For what those words implied.

"I hope you're not talking about what I think you're talking about," he said, cautioning him to tread very carefully.

Alec bumbled on like an bull in a china shop.

"Please."
Magnus restrained himself from poking out his own eyes just to get away from looking at Alec, but he couldn't stop himself from almost blowing a fuse.

"Alec," he said through gritted teeth. He was afraid of what would happen if his jaw actually moved. "I'm telling you this in the nicest possible way I can. If you don't get away from me right now, there's a good chance I'll throw you through the wall."

Alec crossed his arms defiantly.

"What?"

Magnus averted his glare from him, holding on to his shreds of control. He was fatigued, exhausted and every thing weary.


"What?" Alec repeated.

It was the last drop.

"Okay, that's it." Magnus turned from him, marching to where Izzy and Jace were manhandling another corpse.

"Scram!" He waved his arm in a dismissive gesture at them. "Go! Shoo!"

"Shoo?" Jace questioned.

"Magnus?" Simon questioned in a bemused tone from behind him.

Magnus threw a glance in his direction. "I mean it. I've had enough of you children for one night. Go!"

"Uhm, Magnus?" Clary had her teeth around her bottom lip, indecisively chewing on it. "The ... bodies?"

"Believe it or not, these aren't the first dead people I've found in here. Unless you want to take them with you, I want you gone."

They all seemed confused except for Izzy. Her stare fell on her brother and it narrowed her eyes. "What did you do, Alec?"

"There's the door," Magnus pointedly told them. "Leave through it."

Jace stood up to his full height.

"We'll take the bodies," he interrupted before Magnus could throw them out.

Magnus took in his resolute face and gave up.

"Do whatever you want," he said. "I'm going home."

He rested his upperbody on the balcony railing, the one thing standing between him and a plunge down to doom. It overlooked Brooklyn, the high skyscrapers, the historic districts with their rich background crowded with square modern buildings. It was the farrago of it that made it easy to find
yourself. Not the worst soul in universe could be more lost than Brooklyn, thus creating a haven for the misunderstood. It was a home for the homeless. And also the place that he'd come to realise that perhaps he didn't know anymore.

The beginning of a song, the first tentative chords, carried from his bedroom to mix with the brisk wind.

Magnus counted. One, two, three ... ten signals.

He hummed along with the ringtone, carrying on when it faltered in the middle of the same verse it had faltered at for the expanse of the day.

It was no longer a suspicion of his that the person on the other side was timing it. After the fourth consecutive time, he'd come to the conclusion that it was every thirtieth minute on the dot and always precise.

It was what had awoken him from a fitful sleep. Bathed in sweat, he'd fumbled for the phone only for it stop when he'd finally snatched it up from the floor where it had fallen at some point during his search. The number had glowed at him through the ink black room, the window shades blocking out every other source of light. When he'd taken a moment to read it again, he'd laid it back down on the floor and rolled out of bed to take a shower.

He'd been clean when he'd gotten home earlier that morning, right after he'd left Clary, Jace, Alec, Izzy and Simon to do what they wanted with the corpses. Sped up healing, a quick spell, and he'd been brand new as he'd fallen into bed in a state of undress.

But he'd stepped under the scalding water anyway, hoping it might wash away that which he sought to forget. When he was done, he'd wiped the fogged up mirror, studying his unbruised neck and whole shoulder. Without makeup to hide it, he looked young, he'd noticed. A feeling he couldn't recall, if he'd once felt it.

Today was one of those days when he knew the weight of his years intimately.

It'd been an impossibility to try and close his eyes. Pulling on the first things he could find, Magnus had tiptoed onto the balcony, his bare feet turning into ice blocks in seconds.

No one was helped by his inability to sleep, he understood. Not Catarina, not himself. But he resigned to the feelings, surrendered to the insomnia like the guilt somehow would ease with it. How else was he supposed to yield to this apathy where he was powerless? He could do nothing; change nothing. The listlessness was driving him towards madness. What he should be doing was gather his strength, bide his time until the traps he'd laid out caught something. There were more people out there looking for her than Raphael's contacts. Something would stick out eventually. But it had only been a few hours and he was already jittery.

He didn't know if he could wait. The worst part of it was that he barely had another choice. Magic had no fix for the real problems. The why:s. The where:s. The what if:s.

Catarina was gone and he didn't know why. He had no guess as to where. And regarding the what if.

What if she was never found?

Magnus wrapped his cardigan closer, goosebumps rising along his arms.

The low sun didn't provide enough heat to stop the climbing roses on the balcony walls from
contorting into twisted little skulls; it couldn't warm his core.

He walked back in on stiff legs, shivering when he filled the kettle with water.

After he fixed the tea, he brought it back to the bedroom, pulling up the disarrayed covers to his waist to warm up. The bed linen got wet spots where his feet were. He felt them when he curled up, shutting his eyes.

That was the right time for the ringtone to go off again.

Magnus shook his head in a silent prayer for mercy, reached down and picked up the phone.

"Alec," he greeted, as if it was perfectly normal to call eight times in four hours. "I have a slight hunch you want to tell me something."

"Magnus. Finally," Alec replied, sounding relieved. "You do realise after the attack last night things have changed. You need to help us."

As indelicate as it was expected, it didn't stop Magnus from scoffing out a laugh.

"Your logic's teacher needed to be relieved of their duty yesterday."

"Thi-"

He hung up on Alec, his words lost in the disconnection.

"Shadowhunters," he said, and it was starting to sound like a curse.

After an hour of broken sleep, where every time he began dozing off the phone started ringing again, he got out of bed when another signal rang through the apartment. The doorbell's abuse was more annoying and he hurried to make whoever it was on the other side stop.

Magnus opened the door and wished he could undo it.

*Shadowhunters.*

"Don't you people have lives?" he questioned, already knowing the answer for that one.

Jace looked over his shoulder, checking out the apartment like it was giving him the eye.

"Is Alec here?"

It was the oddest question. Alec was never there.

"No," Magnus answered, his eyebrows furrowed. "Alexander's not here."

Like he'd exclaimed 'Open Sesame!', Jace took it as an gaudy invitation and walked inside.

"By all means," Magnus said sarcastically, "come on in."

He let the door fall shut and turned to Jace who for once seemed focused on something else but himself.

Like always, he lived on the polar extremities.

"You look like crap," Magnus noted.
He took Jace's chin between his thumb and index finger, turning it from side to side to see the havoc that had been wrecked.

"Not what most people think," Jace replied, his cocky smile splitting his cut lip.

"Did you run into a wall?"

It seemed as valid a suggestion as everything else that could account for the bashed up cheek, scraped forehead and black eye in a hundred shades of blue and purple.

"The wall fought back."

It was as he suspected; another Nephilim who courted death. How was it that they always dropped down on his doorstep?

"There's ice in the freezing compartment." Magnus released his chin, gesturing towards the kitchen. "I can't heal stupidity."

When Jace returned with ice cubes wrapped in a towel, Magnus led the way into the library that was adjoined with the living room. Where the walls were built with indentations, and books crowded inside the ceiling long concavities in homely heaps, Magnus sat down in a well used english couch and waited for Jace to make a choice between the elaborate daybed or the antique camel back.

When he sat down on the bed, his focus was entirely on Magnus.

"I need your help."

Magnus didn't act surprised.

"Isn't that your theme song?" He shook his head. "I can't help you."

Jace kept the towel to his left eye, staring at him with the right one. "You don't even know what it is I'm asking for."

Magnus tilted his head.

"You're here for Valentine."

Jace looked taken aback, as if he was the single greatest mystery in the whole world. If he'd only known how easy he was to read.

"Give me some credit," Magnus carried on. "You weren't with Alec when he got hurt. You got a little too interested when we broached the topic of the Uprising last night. You show up here, looking every version of awful. It's not an enigma."

"So help me."

There were indeed desperate days when these conversations were to be preferred over solitude. But starvation of companionship had not yet set in and therefor this did nothing for him except for starting a dull ache in the back of his head.

"With what?" Magnus queried. "Getting beat up?"

"With finding him!" Jace proclaimed, as though no one had thought about this grand scheme before.

"And how exactly are we supposed to do that? Do you have any idea of how to locate him?"
"No," he admitted without looking sheepish. "Not yet."

Magnus honed in on what he left out.

"But you thought I have one?"

Jace sat up straighter.

"Do you?"

Magnus shook his head again, this time to find some kind of hidden meaning, but it was as simple as Jace put it. Jace believed he had a way to find Valentine and he was here to collect.

"Quick question," Magnus said. "Why should I help you?"

"Why?" It threw him for a loop, Jace's head seemingly spinning before he could catch on. But when he did, it was expressed with resentment. "Because it's Valentine!"

Magnus grimaced at his loud tone.

"I know. You don't have to shout. I'm not on his side." He paused, to mark what he was about to say. "But I'm not on yours either."

Jace spluttered, choking on the many things he wanted to spit out, but Magnus continued unimpressed.

"You take things for granted. I don't fix problems for Shadowhunters. I have enough of those without your added load."

Jace's mouth opened, and he said, in the most cutting tone, "We saved your life last night."

If he'd stated it, without demanding compensation, Magnus might have let it go. But the way Jace gritted it out, like it somehow indebted him to them, as if he now was theirs to command, set his teeth on edge.

"I would have been fine on my own," Magnus assured without warmth. "But if you want to get technical, so be it." He leaned forward, and focused his entire being on Jace. "My wards are what protects your Institute. I fought the Circle when your kind allowed them to run free. I fought them in the Uprising. I hid Clary from danger for seventeen whole years with success. I warned Dorothea when I found out about Valentine's return. I tried to help Clary regain her memories. I saved Luke. I was Isabelle's advocate. You wanted the Book of the White to wake up Jocelyn. The cost of finding it was Ragnor Fell's life. He was family to me. I still woke up Jocelyn. And I saved Alec's life when you weren't even there."

He wrapped it up with a sardonic smile.

"Not that anyone's counting."

Jace didn't have a biting response. It was hard when he didn't have anything to throw back. They stared each other down and it was starting to get oddly intimate when the phone started going off for the eleventh time that day. It was strange how it sounded as loud as it did, considering they were in the room farthest away. How Alec could be this exasperating on such a great distance was truly a god-given talent.

"Aren't you going to get that?" Jace snapped after the seventh signal rang out.
Magnus unwound, letting his shoulders fall. His ears had already become desensitised.

"I have a stalker."

Throwing the towel on the bed, scattering partially melted ice over the mattress, Jace stood up. Magnus awaited his departure with as much relief as he could feel, but Jace was obviously not done. His stare was more of a glare when he stated, "You should stay away from Alec."

Magnus didn't appreciate what he was implying. He lifted his head to look at Jace.

"Is that a threat?"

It would have been amusing had it come from anyone else.

"No," Jace answered curtly, making it sound completely insincere. "It's my advice."

Fed up with his accusations and demands, Magnus put the irritation aside to not get pulled in and said, "Look. I don't know what he's told you-"

"He hasn't told me anything," Jace interrupted unsympathetically. "That's the thing. He hasn't mentioned you. At all."

That didn't make any sense. At all. Magnus looked at him.

"Are you aware that there are sounds coming out of your mouth?"

It honestly sounded like he wasn't.

Jace crossed his arms, his chin jutted out.

"If Alec talks about it, it doesn't bother him. He won't say anything now."

It didn't surprise him in the slightest. Alec could have exactly two topics of conversation, and those were either Shadowhunter business or Institute business. Talking about potted plants would probably be too intimate. If Magnus would ask him how he was feeling he'd probably jump out the window.

"Have you entertained the idea that maybe he's not talking about it because there's nothing to talk about?" Magnus suggested. "I didn't come back for Alexander."

"That's exactly what I mean!" Jace broke formation, one of his hands curling into his jacket. "You can't just come waltzing back and act like nothing happened."

"Nothing happened," Magnus maintained, no lenience on that point. "I had a change of scenery. He married. The two things are in no ways connected."

Jace pushed his lips together, shaking his head like he didn't believe what he was hearing.

"Then you should definitely stay away. He has to keep his head on straight."

The scoff slipping from Jace's lips was enough to get him to rise to his feet. It wasn't an active granting of permission for the irritation to burst out, but it forced its way to the front nevertheless. It definitely had something to do with Jace's face.

"So he can find Valentine," Magnus concluded. "Because you're obsessed with him? He's your parabaitai. Shouldn't you think about him for a change?"
"I am!" Jace shot back, his hackles up. "You left him. You left us. Who's to say you won't do it again?"

The casual way he said it made Magnus bristle.

"I'm not your lapdog!" he objected venomously. "I don't come on command! What claim do any of you have on me?"

"You are-" Jace began but retracted what he'd said,"-were our friend! And then you just vanished!"

Magnus could almost feel the bitterness enter his veins.

"You have a funny way of treating your friends."

Jace disregarded it with another scoff.

"Fine. You mattered to Alec and then you gave up on him."

He was on the verge of screaming. All he wanted to do was scream, but he kept it at bay, barely raising his voice.

"I don't have any obligations to him. He's married."

Jace gave him a look filled with something Magnus couldn't read.

"And why do you think he is?"

Exasperated, Magnus put a hand over his eyes.

"I don't know why. I have no interest in knowing why. It's you Nephilim who keeps on seeking me out, not the other way around."

"You could have gone anywhere in the world but you came here, to New York. Are you saying that it had nothing to do with Alec?"

Magnus removed his hand, his eyes hard as diamonds.

"I lived here long before either of you were born," he clarified slowly. "I have more right to be here than any of you have."

Jace raised his eyebrows.

"That's not an answer."

Magnus set his jaw so hard it felt like it would crack.

"I don't owe you an answer."

In a matter of a second, Jace's face fell, his lips parting.

"You still have feelings for him."

It didn't seem like he believed his own words.

Already knowing that it wasn't true, Magnus snapped, "Get out, Jace."

It didn't matter what he believed. He just wanted him gone, before he had to resort to violence.
Jace refused, his legs not moving.

"I won't let you hurt him again."

Magnus glared, almost spitting out his thoughts.

Again? Again?

Next time, he promised solemnly, next time one of them was outside his door he'd throw them down the stairs.

"Like you did when you knew he was in love with you and you didn't say anything for all those years?" Magnus made sure to cut the words into the air. "Or when you let him take the fall for all of you and marry someone he could never love?"

He wanted it to take, for Jace to learn that he'd outstayed his welcome. It wasn't worth acting with any sense of decorum when they possessed none.

Magnus allowed it to sink in before he finished with a sarcastic sneer. "You don't get to come here and preach to me about him. Get out."

He was not in the mood.

Since Jace had gone, the calls had ceased for an blissful hour or so. And then they had revved up in intensity. He'd stopped counting when they escalated to five minutes intervals. Magnus had only used the spare minutes between the incessant ringing and called up Raphael who of course had had nothing new. Magnus had thanked him anyway, cut the call and then turned off the phone before he threw it at the brick wall.

He'd left it at that. Or so he thought.

But now he stood halfway to the front door, his fixed eyes narrowing when he heard another rousing knock.

If it was Alec who'd made the foolish decision to come here he would literally, figuratively and spiritually evict him from this apartment.

He marched towards the door, flinging it up, ready to jump down his throat and found himself face to face with someone he wanted to see even less. He hadn't even known it was a possibility.

"Magnus."

Her voice was satin, her legs a mile long, and her eyes dead.

"Camille." He didn't make a move to let her in. "To what do I owe the misery?"

She slid past him, her body caressing his in a deliberate way.

"Don't be bitter," she remarked silkily. "It doesn't suit you."

He watched her move at ease, gliding through his home like it was her own and vanishing into the living room.

"I learned of your return," she recounted, her voice floating through the air. "I wanted to come by
and see you."

Magnus closed the door at last, following where she'd gone.

"For a vampire, you're a horrendous liar," he reminded her. "There's always a self serving motive behind your concealed motive. Why don't you just cut to the chase, I'm busy."

Her back was to him, her shoulders moving when she laughed silvery.

"Now is that any way to treat an old friend?"

"I wasn't aware that we were friends. Hostile exes I'd more categorise us as. How come you're even here? Last I heard, Raphael had you locked up in a coffin."

Camille laughed again.

He knew her ways well. The experience had granted him patience and walls higher than the Tower of Babylon. Taking his eyes from her, Magnus sat down in a leather armchair farther into the room and waited.

Her dress, as modern as the times, didn't move when she swirled around elegantly. He could recall how she looked with a tournure and a floor length skirt.

In her hands were two golden drinks. She handed him one before settling herself in the loveseat straight across from him.

"I came to an understanding with Raphael."

She sipped at her drink, setting it down before she undid the clasp on her raven stilettos and pulled her bare feet up. It was an oddly domestic gesture, it struck him, as she lounged like a queen. Some century ago, this had been a dream of his.

He observed her face, a stark beauty laying there.

Then a century ago, he'd loved her.

"I'm sure," Magnus replied, aware of her ability to turn every situation into her benefit.

Camille was a chameleon with the venom of a snake.

"If we're going to play games all day I need to cancel my other engagements." He took the phone that had been coincidentally left right on the side table and pretended to start scrolling through it. When he felt her gaze stay on him, he held the phone to his ear.

He let the seconds go and she finally spoke.

"I need your help."

She didn't have her head turned towards him when she said it. Mixing her drink with a long nail, it was the epitome of casual. Except her words had betrayed her. Magnus set the phone back down.

"You need my help?"

It wasn't a strange thing to hear inside this apartment. Most people came here for magic and quick fixes. But not Camille. She was from another time where only the strongest survived. She didn't rely on others. She'd never asked him for help before. That, and the fact that she had never loved him
back, had swiftly turned them from a couple into what they now were.

"With what exactly?"

She kept stirring, pursing her red lips.

"I need wards around my house."

Magnus smiled when he couldn't help to feel some kind of affection for her. She wasn't a good person. Not a good vampire either. But there were glimpses when he could spy something behind that decaying core. To see her feel, even if it was something as elementary as fear, was rare.

"You need wards? You, Camille Belcourt, whose reputation for ferocity precedes even Valentine's?"

She didn't blench. Her experience was too great and her nerves too dead, but she glanced at him, her brown eyes fleeting.

"This is extraordinary times. It takes extraordinary measures."

Magnus uncrossed his legs.

"You're afraid."

"You're a fool if you are not," she replied, her tone changed. "There's a war brewing, Magnus. You'd better be on your guard."

The way she said it made him straighten his back.

"What do you know?"

Camille turned her head to him, scratching her toes against the fabric of the loveseat.

"Oh, this and that." Her shoulders were relaxed, her hair tumbling across them. "Nothing that would interest you."

"If you have something that I could use, you'd better tell me."

She threw an arm over her eyes like the sun was basking in her eyes.

"Will you help me then?"

It was her bargain chip and she very well knew it.

Betting against her was like betting against the house; it never worked out in your favour. But she was mistaken this time.

"I will," Magnus said, and her lips pulled into a smile. "But not for that," he continued. "Catarina, who I'm sure you remember, is gone. I need you to use your connections to find her."

Camille removed her arm and looked towards him.

"Sweet Catarina," she pondered reminiscently. "How could I forget?" She sat up, finishing her drink. "And you're certain she hasn't gone to Valentine? You know how fickle your kind can be."

He studied her coldly.

"Watch your tongue. Find me a lead and you'll get your wards."
Camille shook out her ruffled hair.

"I promise," she vowed and he didn't believe her for a second.

He met her gaze and a teasing challenge rested there. Smiling slowly, Camille licked her lips in a slick motion.

Involved in his second involuntary staring competition for the day, Magnus reacted from her reaction. Camille's head turned towards the door. He mimicked her, not hearing anything until it was painstakingly clear that someone was coming. And coming fast. He saw her smell the air and a surprised but nevertheless pleased expression bloomed on her face. It didn't give him any kind of indication since she thought almost everyone was good news. New people meant new entertainment. But it wasn't long until he found out who it was when the door flew open and Alec stormed in.

"Magnus!" It had the resemblance of a battle cry.

Magnus leaned his head back so that it was square against the ceiling and closed his eyes.

"For the love of god," he said out loud, "is this the day for unwelcome visits galore?"

Alec, not scanning the wide room before entering it, stomped on.

He came to an upset halt beside him. Magnus could feel the draft.

"I need to talk to you," he demanded more than stating.

Prying his eyes open, Magnus regarded Alec for a moment.

He didn't look like he was going to be deterred easily.

Taking a strengthening gulp of the old fashioned, he emptied the drink in the process.

A stray thought ran through his mind: he really needed to get a lock for that door. It was a little too late for that now however, unless he wanted to shove Alec outside and then lock it. It was tempting and self indulgent and therefore out of the question.

He sat up and Alec took a step back.

"You'll have to get in line."

"Who's this?" Camille purred like she'd been waiting on her cue, watching Alec like a snake watches its prey.

Alec jerked his head towards her, taking in her skin tight dress, long black curls and wicked grin.

God only knew what he was thinking.

"Alec, Camille. Camille, Alec," Magnus introduced in a spent voice, waving his hand between them.

"We've met," Alec acknowledged with disdain.

Camille lit up, her eyes sparkling. It should have been beautiful, but there was something rotten behind them.

"Now I recall it. You're the little Nephilim." She studied him up and down, lingering on his eyes.

"You've always had a type, Magnus. He looks tasty."
Her remark made Alec tense. His hand started twitching, for his bow no doubt.

"It's a shame he's a Shadowhunter," she said with a wistful sigh. Looking to Magnus, she carried on. "Aren't you afraid he'll kill you in your sleep?"

"About as much as I fear you doing it," he concluded in a clipped tone. "Our business is done here. Get back to me when you have what I want."

"As you wish," she replied docilely.

Camille took her time to redo her clasps, dragging out the seconds until she rose to her feet. She smiled again, shimmying closely past Alec to get to the drink table. The disgust on his face seemed to give her great joy.

"You angels can't stand the dark, can you? The temptation of it. We downworlders live for it. Breed with it." She looked between Alec and him, pure delight shining through her essence. "It arouses us," she disclosed, her voice magnetic. "Doesn't it, Magnus?"

He paid her no attention, staring at the painting on the opposite side of the room.

"Leave."

Her laugh was husky when she returned to the loveseat to retrieve her purse.

He shouldn't have assumed it was over. But he had become forgetful as of late.

She came to stand before him. Using a slim finger with a sharp ebony nail, she lifted his chin and angled down, gingerly placing a kiss at the corner of his mouth.

Her eyes rested on his face for a moment.

"I missed you."

Then she laughed, and he waited to hear how she closed the door behind her, disappearing back to whatever hellscape she'd escaped from, before he took a breath.

Was eternity really worth it if it meant he had to share it with Camille Belcourt?

Sighing, Magnus walked over to the drink table. One of these days he would drink himself to death over something silly because his tolerance for infuriating situations had been tried for too long.

He'd almost forgotten about Alec. His sudden talking startled him.

"You associate with Camille Belcourt?"

It wasn't a simple yes or a no question, despite how Alec framed it. There were nuances to their complicated relationship. Most of them stemming from the fact that she was a raging lunatic and he was not.

Magnus did his best to comprise it in one word and made a non-committal sound.

"One of my more unpleasant exes, I assure you. Most of them are quite nice. Then a lot of them are also dead."

He could hear Alec make a choking sound.
"You've dated her?"

Going off Alec's tone, it sounded like he'd axe murdered someone. Magnus shrugged as he poured a helping of whiskey into his empty glass.

"On and off."

He turned back to his seat and found Alec staring at him.

"It's a long story and one I assume you didn't come here to hear, so I'll ask you:" He swirled the amber liquid. "What do you want, Alec?"

"Jace was here."

"He was," Magnus agreed.

Alec cocked his head.

"What did you talk about?"

"I suggest you ask him that," Magnus answered. "He's not my parabaitai."

When there came no more demands for a more disclosing answer, Magnus glanced at him. Alec avoided his questioning gaze, looking anywhere but at him. Alec's fidgeting made it dawn on him.

"He didn't want to tell you," he speculated, and the subsequent silence verified his hunch. "And that gives you the right to flounce in here, how exactly?"

Alec seemed ready to fight, to argue for his cause but then, in front of Magnus' eyes, he deflated, all air leaving him and he slumped down on the chaise lounge.

"I'm worried about him."

Alec refused to look at him, as if showing concern, even for his own brother, was something shameful. Magnus knew better than to try and touch him, to provide him comfort, but he softened his tone.

"He's fine. He's just ..."

There wasn't a nice word to describe Jace, but he could lie for the greater good.

"Processing," he settled on. It was neutral. "It's not easy to have a monster for a father."

A memory he didn't like was rocked loose, already jarred by Jace's earlier visit. He sipped at the whiskey, trying to suppress why he of all people understood perfectly what it was like to have a monster for a father.

"You're not answering my calls."

Magnus stiffened.

"The miracle of caller ID. It really is the greatest invention since the wheel." His voice had taken on a hard note again.

It was the same thing every time. Alec could flash vulnerability for one moment, whether that was while he was still hazy from being smashed up or when being distraught enough to confide that he
believed his whole life to have been a lie, but then it was as if his brain caught up with his actions
and everything shut down; or, as in the latter situation, caused him to propose to the first person he
saw. It appeared his consciousness wanted him to be one person and his unconsciousness another,
and it all seemed to have turned him into a mix of calculated determination.

It was clear that Alec was set on becoming the perfect unfeeling soldier and he had almost completed
the task, although Magnus highly suspected he hadn't done it single-handedly. His wife was the
same, with her insistence on that morality should be changed when it suited, and his parents were
worse. It really wasn't a surprise, shouldn't be, but it didn't stop Magnus from finding it chilling to
have him there, but not really recognising him. The rest of them, Clary, Jace, Simon, Izzy, he could
see. But Alec had always been his blind spot. It was becoming quite obvious to him that whatever
he'd imagined there had been between them so long ago really hadn't been at all. He was an asset,
one Alec was hellbent on securing, and nothing more.

"Why not?" Alec inquired, pulling him back from his thoughts.

They both knew why, but if Alec insisted on asking, then he would receive.

"Because," Magnus said, drawing himself up, "if your wife asks me one more time to use my magic
for harm then I won't be responsible for my actions. The same courtesy extends to you," he added.
"Don't push me."

His shoulder's didn't fall because they were still slack. Alec closed his mouth and accepted his refusal
quietly. It was a nice change, and also unnerving.

Magnus studied him over the brim of the glass.

"You look tired."

He did. And very young where he sat with his head in his hands.

"I'm fine."

It sounded like an automatic response.

"I'm sure you are. All I'm saying is you look tired."

Alec stared into thin air, lost in some other reality.

"It's just a lot right now. My mother is back, and Lydia is under a lot of pressure from the Clave. We
all are." He suddenly came back, his eyes turning towards Magnus and he barked a laugh. "Even
Jace."

Magnus smiled crookedly.

"I think we're all tense. Especially the Clave. Valentine could strike Idris without much trouble."

It wouldn't come as a surprise if he did. It was more of a matter of time. The Clave was surely on
Valentine's list, as was the New York Institute, both which had eventually failed to follow in his
footsteps. Aspiring dictators rarely took kindly to those who opposed them.

"I asked my mother about the Uprising but she refused to answer. But you said you were there."

A conversation, which he had never wished to have, was budding. But he couldn't deny what he'd
confessed as early as that morning.
"I did say that."

Alec raked a hand through his hair.

"How horrible was it?"

Magnus didn't know how to sugarcoat it, and he suspected it wouldn't help. He told Alec what he wanted to hear.

"It was a bloodbath. In the end there wasn't a point in counting all the bodies." The rest didn't need to be said aloud.

Alec seemed to bite his tongue before he blurted out, "Did you fight my parents?"

His eyes snapped to Magnus, to gauge his reaction and Magnus did his best to shield it.

It was times like these he wished him memory was that of a four-hundred-year-old. But he vividly remembered the fighting style of Robert and Maryse Lightwood. They had been on par with Valentine's, as had their fanaticism. He opted for a less painful truth.

"Your parents surrendered when it became clear they were outnumbered. I'm sure they did it because of you; because of how much they loved you."

Alec smiled, but it was distant and didn't entail the warmth of happiness. Suspecting is one thing, but actually having it confirmed that your family had been on the wrong side of a race purge didn't bring anyone joy.

"If they'd loved me, they wouldn't have slaughtered innocent people," he pointed out grimly.

There wasn't a response to that. Not one Alec could accept anyway. Magnus had spent a long time coming to terms with his own heritage. It didn't define him, nor made him who he was, but that was something you had to figure out for yourself. Just like you, and you alone, could decide what kind of person you wanted to be. Most mortals didn't understand that before it was too late. And in the cases where he had to watch them struggle, it was painful. Another complication, and good reason, to stay away.

"I've never been to war." Alec was studying his hands. "Is it different?" he asked them, as if they held the answer.

"I don't know. Evil comes in many shapes; it just means you have to look beneath the surface. War is simply another version of it, no different from the demons you kill every night."

Alec didn't agree.

"Except that this time we're killing other Shadowhunters."

Magnus cocked his head to the side.

"That didn't seem to bother you earlier."

"It doesn't," he acknowledged. "But I'm concerned what it will do to Izzy. And Clary. Even Jace. He likes to talk a lot but he feels everything. I know he does. They haven't been trained for this."

Have you? Magnus felt a need to ask but he stopped himself before he could. Alec had never been anything but honest and it truly didn't seem to burden him at all. If that was a good thing or a bad thing wasn't up to him to decide. He was far from having earned the right to judge.
"The hardest thing to do is often the right thing to do. Valentine and his followers don't believe in mercy. If you, or Clary, or Jace, or Isabelle ever find yourself face to face with one of them, you shouldn't either."

That stirred something in Alec.

"Then why won't you help us?"

Magnus opened his mouth to tell him off, his patience worn thin, but Alec held up a hand before he could follow through.

"Explain it to me. I want to understand."

Magnus sighed. He swallowed the last of the whiskey and set the glass down. If it would get him to stop asking, to stop coming here, it was worth one final clarification.

"I will live forever, Alec," Magnus began indifferently. "I will live while the people I care about die, with very few exceptions. Then I have to find new people to care for, only for the cycle to begin again. I will never have a family, and what mortal would be foolish enough to spend their numbered days on someone who can't give the same back?"

There was a reason that there were a sparse number of warlocks that married. What was the point in the end if the whole ‘death do you part’ only applied to one of a pair?

"I will always be alone," he acknowledged without reservation. It was what he knew to be true. A fixed thing in this ever changing world, as certain as that the sun would rise in the east.

"That means I have to spend the rest of eternity with only one person: myself. I can't spend my life with a monster, and that is what you're asking me to become. I'm not Valentine. And I don't think you should turn into him either." He took a grounding breath. "Perhaps this Circle member deserves no compassion, most likely he doesn't, but cruelty isn't something you can justify. If you do, you're just one step closer to changing into a person you won't want to spend the rest of your life with."

Alec sat quietly, giving him a look he hadn't seen before.

"I've never thought of you as lonely," was his response, and the surprise was evident in his expression. "You always seem so ... well, you."

"I might have exaggerated." Magnus eased back against the leather. "And who knows, with Valentine running around perhaps eternity is cut short and this is all a very pointless admission."

After a while, he asked, "What about you?"

Alec raised his brows.

"What about me?"

"Are you lonely?"

His whole persona changed in the blink of an eye. His shoulders squared off and his jaw set.

"You don't get to ask me that," he shot back, like he'd just been grilled by a nosy stranger on which sex positions he enjoyed the most.

Magnus tapped his fingers against the armrest.
"It's just a question."

Alec stood up in a fit of rage, swelling as quickly and unexpectedly as it burned in intensity.

"You left!" he shouted out of nowhere.

Magnus startled, staring at his sudden outburst.

"You left after Valentine got the cup and everything went to hell, and you didn't come back. We needed you, I-" he stopped abruptly, changing whatever he'd caught himself starting to say. "You just left."

Magnus sat up from his reclining position, his feet coming to the floor.

"You're upset because I left? What reason did I have to stay?"

The answer was immediate.

"Valentine."

Magnus kept himself from gaping, but only just.

It wasn't enough. It wasn't nearly enough and Alec knew it. How he could say that with a straight face was the eight wonder of the world. Alec was truly unbelievable.

"And that's it?" he asked, equally antagonistic but in a detached tone. "That's all you have to say?"

He stood up from his seat with a temper that was flaring dangerously.

"Let's remember what happened prior to this massive betrayal, shall we?" he started on a biting note, his teeth grinding together. "I recall two very distinct words: 'Back. Off.' That's what you told me to do and so I did. I let you marry Lydia. Don't blame me for not sticking around when you made it perfectly clear that you didn't want anything to do with me."

Alec threw his hands out, his face alight with fury.

"I didn't mean leave the country!" he screamed. "You could have been dead for all we knew! You were gone for over a year!"

"And that concerns you how?" Magnus shot back frigidly. "You chose, Alexander," he reminded, using his full name for the first time in his presence in years. It was a slip stemming from provocations and he didn't even register it. "Even if I had died, that wasn't any of your concern. You made sure of that."

Alec gave him a look that could only be described as slipping sanity.

"I never said I didn't care."

At that moment, Magnus seriously contemplated throwing the whiskey glass in his infuriating face before getting the impulse under control.

Like the absence of those words had entitled him to a goodbye. Or his travel plan. Or favours, or explanations of any kind. No, he'd never said he didn't care. Never uttered those exact words since even Alec had understood that maybe that was a bit blunt. But he'd said them a million times, in the way he'd avoided him, in the way he hadn't wanted his help, or his concern, or his presence unless it benefited him. He'd said them when he'd told him that he had proposed to Lydia. He'd growled it out
when he told him to stay away, to leave it be, to just go. Alec had announced it to the world when he had married her and branded that rune on his wrist.

He'd said it so many times without saying it in so many words.

"You never said you did either," Magnus reminded carefully, taking big pains to calm himself down. "I don't care about whatever feelings you might have had. You won't admit to having them, not even to yourself. What you do have is a wife. You have your Institute. You have your honour. Don't blame me if you've come to the realisation that maybe they won't keep you warm at night."

Alec full-on looked as if he was about to kill someone. He turned his back on Magnus and didn't look at him again before there was a good fifty feet between them.

"Let me get this straight." He snarled it without screaming, so it was an improvement. "You get to leave, without a word, and then come back here and throw accusations in my face? You always had our backs until now!"

"Oh, my god." Magnus wanted to do something destructive. Burn this place down with Alec in it or drive his thick head through a wall. Anything to get through to him. "You know why I helped you!"

He was yelling at last, and he knew he'd just lost the upper hand.

Alec shook his head, like he couldn't believe his ears.

"So because I can't offer you that anymore, you refuse to do this one thing?"

Magnus stopped where he stood, the full impact having a delay of a second, but then it hit him like a train. For a terrifying moment, he feared that he would actually flinch, like he'd felt a physical collision from an imaginary locomotive. But it wasn't physical, and he didn't reel from the contact. He'd lived too long to give in to someone like Alec Lightwood.

"I think that's the worst thing someone has ever said to me, you arrogant son of a bitch." He uttered it calm and crystal clear.

Then ... he exploded.

"You think I did it for you?!" he bellowed. "I did it because I cared! Because I couldn't stand by and watch any of you get hurt! You have no idea what you're up against!"

He'd never thought of them as quite as young as they were, their angelic blood lending them an older air. But tonight had confirmed their age, their shared arrogance, and their complete lack of regard for anyone but themselves. Alec had never understood, and Magnus had finally, after more than two years, come to the conclusion that he never, ever would.

He reigned it back in, locked it down where it belonged. He wasn't going to let it go this far ever again.

"I've already told you why I won't do it," he explained frostily. "Why you think I'm acting different is because you've never seen this version of me before. You've never seen me not care about you. But I don't care about you anymore, Alexander. I don't feel anything for you. And I don't answer to any Shadowhunter. You and your kind can go to hell for all I care. I won't be there to pull you back."

It was a cutting silence, so hard that it tore at the very air before Alec broke it, his eyes colder than ever before. He seemed a perfect stranger. And perhaps he was, in every aspect that mattered.
"You're wrong."

Magnus put a hand to his forehead, calling on some higher power to not make him become an arsonist.

"About what?" he sighed.


But it came anyway as Alec's features set in stone.

"I didn't make the wrong choice when I married Lydia."

It was a source of befuddlement as to why Alec hated him. He couldn't figure it out, but he knew it didn't matter in the end. Because somehow, in his head, Alec had found him guilty of a crime and he was going to punish him until Magnus chose to duck the perpetual punches. He was one of the Nephilim, so fixed on right and wrong, to police everyone else, they lacked any kind of self awareness. It might have been his refusal to torture, or perhaps that he was a downworlder, or because he'd made the horrible mistake of having any kind of feelings and expressing them. For all he knew it was everything and nothing. Alec possessed the understanding of where it hurt, and he drove the knife in with a zesty twist.

It was with a reluctant admiration Magnus took him in, that face that could have been a statue's. Alec, when it came down to it, had really never cared. Not for a second. And certainly not now.

"I'm glad," Magnus said dispassionately. He'd never meant those words less. "That should make it much easier for you to leave here."

The wave hit him as soon as he could break eye contact. He couldn't remember if someone had hurt him like this before. It didn't feel like it. He couldn't for the life of him recall a feeling quite like this one. The whole inside of his chest was on fire, burning to a crisp as he watched Alec stalk out. He'd promised himself to keep out of Shadowhunter business. He'd promised himself he was going to stay far, far away from Alec. There were so many things he'd promised himself never to do again, but he did them anyway.

Magnus sat down calmly in the armchair, covered his face with his hands, and cried.

Chapter End Notes

So what do you think? Why did the Circle attack Pandemonium? How is Magnus supposed to find Catarina now when they killed his only lead? Who has her? What did you think about Jace's warning? Is he off the rails completely? Do Camille know something? Do you think Alec meant what he said about making the right choice or do you think he said it just to hurt Magnus? And how do you think Magnus is going to move on from this fresh wound?
Hello, my dudes!

Okay, without further ado; let's just jump right into it.

May the odds be ever in your favour! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Broken Crown

Touch my mouth and hold my tongue
   I'll never be your chosen one
   I'll be home, safe and tucked away
Well, you can't tempt me if I don't see the day

   The pull on my flesh was just too strong
   Stifled the choice and the air in my lungs
   Better not to breathe than to breathe a lie
   'Cause when I open my body I breathe a lie

   I will not speak of your sin
   There was a way out for him
   The mirror shows not
   Your values are all shot

But, oh, my heart, was flawed I knew my weakness
So hold my hand, consign me not to darkness

So crawl on my belly 'til the sun goes down
   I'll never wear your broken crown
   I took the road and I fucked it all away
Now in this twilight, how dare you speak of grace

   So crawl on my belly 'til the sun goes down
   I'll never wear your broken crown
   I took the road and I fucked it all away
Now in this twilight, how dare you speak of grace

   So crawl on my belly 'til the sun goes down
   I'll never wear your broken crown
   I can take the road and I can fuck it all away
But in this twilight, our choices seal our fate
"I'm going crazy. I'm going crazy, crazy, crazy."

Thinking it was the first step. Saying it aloud to yourself was the second step. Seeing things was the third.

He was currently on number two, banging the back of his head against the wall while repeating the chant. Not boding well for number three.

His stretched out legs were dust patterned. Most of the floor too. Even some of the ceiling were showing the sawdust insulation, releasing flakes that sailed down, landing in the disarrayed kitchen. It could be described as being wrecked but that would take something away from the word. Catarina's apartment was the picture of chaos, where even the wallpaper had been torn out.

The cupboards had been emptied, the fridge tipped. Even the picture frames had been picked off, like the bone of a carcass. Magnus' eyes stuck tiredly at his handiwork. If someone would have seen him now, they would have thought him insane. He had, in the wake of other answers failing to present themselves, dedicated the better part of the day to rip apart her apartment. Because the sane thing to assume would be some kind of message scrawled underneath the floorboards. If Catarina ever came home, she'd strangle him without hesitation.

Magnus took a deep breath and closed his eyes. When he forgot, and recognised what he'd done to this once whole apartment, it reminded him too much of why. It pried and tore, screaming at him to look, to understand, to let it go now. Catarina had been gone for three months, three weeks and four days. She was traceless, her presence gone. With every minute, he could feel her slip further, drowning deeper. Today was one of the days he really needed Ragnor back. Or someone else who knew her.

Who understood why he could give her up as soon as he was ready to give up his own life.

Some moments, here and there, when he'd spoken to Raphael for the millionth time without receiving any leads, when he'd broken the bones of an especially horrendous warlock who'd refused to answer his inquires, or when he'd tried, in his utter despair, to summon demons that shouldn't be called from hell for any reason, the temptation to give up was there. It preyed upon him at this very moment, begging him to concede. It would have been impossible to do, had he had anyone who could help him. To simply let them lead, for a precious second. So he could sleep again, or eat. A clue would have sufficed in that absence, something he could use as a lodestar. But he was alone in this room and he didn't want to be. He couldn't allow it to become a reality.

But what if she was dead, he couldn't help to wonder. Who was it that had killed her?

Yet it didn't matter either way, Magnus knew. If she was held captive, someone would pay. If they'd already killed her, someone would pay.

The heart in his chest felt heavy, weary, when it thumped against its cage. It was worn and fraying at the edges. Warlocks could, like every eternal being, petrify, becoming the very definition of life without living. When the years grew to be as pointless as counting them, and the endless eternity spread out in front of their feet, some became breathing statues.

Others lost their mind.

None of their once trio had fallen down that hole, though there had been a few close calls. Nevertheless, today he wanted it. Almost craved it. The feelings inside of his strained bones
hindered his concentration, caused him to want to cry when his heart couldn't bare it. He wanted the nothingness of insanity to consume him, if only to have a moment of peace. Because he knew it was desperation, when all else failed, that had pushed him to this rampage. Not madness.

And desperation made you vulnerable.

Magnus rose from the chilling floor. He wandered into the bedroom, wishing more than believing something would suddenly present itself as a solution. The wardrobe was ripped open like a viscous predator had sunk its claws into its prey's soft belly. Every item of clothing was spread across the floor, acting as an improvised rug. The bedside table was emptied of the dust bunnies, lint and its sparse collection of novels, spreading its entrails onto the colourful skirt that had been flung in front of it. The mattress was flipped, leaving the frame of the bed flaunting its skeleton.

On the right side, he saw his reflection in the mirror that reached all the way up to the ceiling from the floor. It was one of her few possessions that she truly cherished. It was a distinctive piece of art, the frame weaving a forest of frosted roses in shifting cerulean, every thorn a vivid spot of red blood on their white stems. It spanned most of the width of the wall, fanning out into a welcoming embrace that held the whole bedroom in its arms.

It had been a gift from her fiancé, her one true love, Labib. A mortal human.

If there had ever been a tragedy already written in the stars, it was for them.

He'd passed away in old age more than two decades ago, leaving behind what all mortals left behind: loss, and a piece forever missing. How Catarina lived on was a testament to her character. Between himself, Ragnar and her, he'd stood for singularity, Ragnar for sense, and Catarina owned spirit. She had the kind of strength no one could help but admire. She was braver than he'd ever be, no matter how long he should live. The soul she possessed was the purest he'd ever met, all across the world and its inhabitants, he'd never seen one kinder.

Catarina was a better person than he could ever hope to be. Why did life have the penchant of being unfair to those least deserving of it?

Magnus could recall her voice, imagine exactly what she'd say if she saw him right now, as his haggard appearance stared back at him. He looked washed out, the skin taking on the colour of ageing parchment. The circles underneath his eyes were deep, his hair unkempt. Pushing his fingers through the strands, ruffling it further, he asked aloud, "What am I supposed to do?"

In the empty apartment, that had been stripped of its most basic shield, the question echoed back instead of providing him with an answer.

The air in the room was stuffy, on the edge of suffocating. Magnus went to the old window and pushed the sash up. Leaning out of it, he gulped in the fresh air. The view was the frugal sight of the backsides of several other apartment complexes, all identical to this one. Despite its location, being situated on the fifth floor, it couldn't break apart from the other buildings, leaving nothing but grey concrete and the narrow alley straight underneath for landscape.

Everything about this situation was surreal.

Catarina had been taken. There was no question about it. Her phone was currently back at his home, her clothes and suitcase weren't touched. The fridge had been stocked with expiring food that he'd had to throw out. She hadn't planned on leaving. But there hadn't been a struggle here
either. Everything had been left as proof that the occupant of this apartment was coming back. That meant she'd been snatched somewhere outside of her home. But that was also improbable.

A creature of habit, Catarina moved nearly exclusively between the apartment and the hospital. Once in a while she did something wild, which often involved taking a walk around the neighbourhood, but that happened so rarely it was a deviation and not something a prospective kidnapper was going to latch on to. The journey to the hospital was always undertaken by portal to a secluded area behind the doughnut shop a block away. And the block she travelled by foot was a business street bustling with people heading to work, making it highly unlikely it could've happened there.

So naturally the only place she could have been taken was where she portaled every day, since it was the only opportunity where she was alone. But when he'd scoured it, from the backdoor to the dumpsters, he'd found no traces of residue magic. And her powers weren't easily subdued. If someone would've kidnapped her, they would've used magic to overpower her, and whatever spell was strong enough to do that, would leave some kind of remnant.

He'd come to this exact conclusion over and over again, every time thinking that this time, he'd see what he'd been missing. The sequence of events going on a loop. But nothing ever stuck out. All of it was a tangled mess that logic couldn't untwist. It didn't make any sense, whatsoever.

As if the practicality of it wasn't enough of a mystery, Magnus still couldn't understand the motive. There were no reasons that he could think of, that would justify a kidnapping. It wasn't the Circle. After the attack, he knew it wasn't. It was someone he was overlooking, and yet it wasn't. She wasn't dating anyone. Her friends would have no reason to, and even if someone from her social circle would prove to be dangerous, they were still human. There was no one in her life that he knew of, that could pull this off. And even if they could, the question remained: why?

What was it that was blinding him? What couldn't he see?

"Where are you, Catarina?" he mumbled.

Without being none the wiser, he retreated back inside.

In the kitchen he rinsed the new plants that he'd bought to replace the old dead once under the tap. The pipes screeched loudly when he turned off the water. It wasn't a neighbourhood watch, kind of area. Not even when he'd started, quite violently, with the redecoration at seven that morning, had any of the residents knocked at the door to complain.

While his hands were still wet, the phone rang. He picked it up from counter and squinted.

The third step, hallucinations, had set in. Magnus stared at the screen, blinked at the number, the name, until the phone stopped vibrating. And then it rung again.

Perhaps it was the isolation, the overhanging acute risk of killing himself with the closest fork if he was left alone with his thoughts much longer, or the fact that he hadn't slept properly for almost a month, but something made him answer.

"Lydia?" Magnus said.

He hadn't heard from them since he's first thrown out Jace and then Alec. But here was his wife, apparently not a misdial when she began, "Magnus. We have a dead seelie that we would
need your expertise to look over. Of course you will be paid handsomely for your service."

"I ..." She was on his list of people least likely to try and contact him via phone, just behind Santa Clause and the Tooth Fairy, especially since last time. He'd believed she'd hide behind the formality of a fire message the inevitable hour they would call on him, and honestly that would have been his preference. And yet here she was, sounding as collected as always.

"What?" he asked.

"A seelie has been killed," she reiterated. "We don't know if it's by magic. We could use your assistance."

He hesitated, his mind working through syrup. It didn't help to stay here. And going home wasn't something he wanted to do right now. It would just remind him of his failure. Should he remain in this stuffy place alone, there was a good chance he'd crack and start drinking bleach.

"Hello? Magnus?" There wasn't concern in her tone, more impatience at his tardiness.

"When?"

Her response was prompt.

"As soon as possible."

He nodded to the scratched up wallpaper.

"I'll be there," he agreed, before adding, "I just need to put the fridge back first."

The petulant January rain pelted the arched windows that were on the left side of the corridor where he was strolling. The shapes of the stone tracery carved on the outside painted the floor with tree trunks that weaved together. The crown that entwined into creation at the top reached the opposite wall. Passing through the shadows they generated, Magnus beheld the stained glass coming in and out of view, the story it told in flashing highlights. Jonathan Shadowhunter receiving the archangel Raziel to Lake Lyn. Their blood mixed in the cup. The gifts of the mortal instruments bestowed upon him. The first Nephilim created standing alone, taking over the place of the angel. He was depicted larger, thoroughly encompassing.

It detailed how he first transformed his sister, to then use the cup on his best friend, thus beginning the race of Shadowhunters. They defeated the lesser demons, cleansed the earth, founded the Clave that would outlive them all. As the rain truly began pouring, beating its angry fists to gain entry, the story unravelled. They died, like they always did, with honour and sacrifice, leaving behind a legacy that none could forget. In a cathedral, these panes would have been reserved for gods and kings. Raziel's children had barely existed a millennia, and yet this was how they viewed history. A world that had come into being at their creation.

He stopped in front of the next door appearing to his right and knocked. A commanding, "enter" rang out, and he did as it demanded. If he'd paid attention to the pitch, the iron-fisted dissonance in the clang, he would have recognised it and not gone inside. Yet, that was what he did. When he stepped over the threshold, he put a name to the mistake that was glaring him in the face.

"Maryse. And here I thought hell would collapse without your presence."
She was throned behind the imposing desk, her razor-sharp features announcing what creature she was before she'd even spoken. The abundance of runes proclaimed it proudly for those who'd missed the signs. Her nose lifted, as if she was smelling something foul.

"Magnus Bane." She addressed him with as little civility as someone could possibly put into three syllables. "What are you doing here?"

He had no choice but to stay. If he opted to leave now, it would reveal exactly how much he despised her. He preferred to tell her that to her face.

"You said enter," Magnus replied effortlessly, gliding towards the chair he'd occupied the last time he'd been here.

Instead of sitting properly, he threw his legs over the armrest, lounging his back against the other. He smiled at her pinched expression.

Appearance was as much of a shield for him as his magic. A performance and mask he wore extremely well. Particularly now, Magnus was thankful that he'd taken the time to change and put on new clothes and carefully applied makeup. It showed no cracks, hiding the circles beneath his eyes, and every other sign of weakness. Much like glamour, it was the thing he wore around the Nephilim.

"Well?" Maryse demanded, her eyebrows raised.

"Well, what?" he countered pleasantly.

Her mouth twisted sourly.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Magnus studied the bookcase across from him, disregarding the heat filled glare that burned a hole in the side of his head.

"Your lovely daughter-in-law called me. It will surely be a shock for you to learn that Shadowhunters can't conjure magic."

In his periphery, he saw her fingers push together to form a steeple.

"One could ask what you're doing in her office when she's elsewhere."

"I see you're still the same," Maryse acknowledged in clipped tones.

The waves of superiority and contempt were swelling over his head from her direction. In many years, she was one of the most bluntly revolted by him. The frankness a trait she'd no doubt passed on to her son.

Abhorrence wasn't a thing that bothered Magnus. If you wanted to survive their world, a thick skin was part of the package. But it was dangerous once disgust turned into action. It had been proven over and over again. She'd demonstrated it last time they'd been in a war on opposite sides. That she was now a high ranking official, that once had spilled downworlder's blood, made no difference to him. No matter how much time would pass he'd never forgot who it was that resided on the other side of that desk. For all they claimed to serve, the most dangerous creatures for the likes of him had always, and would always be, the very thing that was sworn to protect them.
"Alas, I am," Magnus agreed. "Pesky, isn't it? Since we both know what kind of monster you are."

The tips of her fingers looked stark white when she asserted herself. "Tread carefully."

Leaning his neck back before shutting his eyes, Magnus continued.

"It bothers you, doesn't it? That I know. And that you know. But your children are blissfully unaware. Don't you wonder what they would say if they learned of your past?"

He left a space for her to break in, but when she didn't, he proceeded.

"I'm curious," Magnus admitted, whipping his foot to a beat inside his head. "What do you think would happen if Valentine ever got his hands on you, now after you sold yourself to the Clave? I doubt he'd welcome you with anything but a knife in the back."

When he heard nothing from her side of the room, he peeked an eye open.

"Or do you think because you were his favourite, he'll be merciful?"

Her pale cheeks were splotched with red, her lip quivering.

"Enough!" she commanded harshly. "I forbid you to speak further of it."

"Forbid me?" He laughed at the notion. "Maryse," he said condescendingly. "You couldn't stop me if you tried."

He caught the slight movement, one you might make had you been in close quarters and aimed to sink steel into flesh. All it did was amuse him. For all her airs, Maryse was a coward. A pitiful excuse even for a Shadowhunter.

"Ah-ah-ah-ah," he smiled, tutting at her. "You wouldn't want to attack me here. You don't have any backup." He turned his head to look at her fully for the first time. "And we both know I don't need a seraph blade to win."

The dark irises, despite being so alike her daughter's, held none of the warmth or beauty. It was bizarre, seeing that vitriol expression in them, when Magnus knew Izzy hadn't looked it a day in her life.

Maryse's eyes shot daggers at him. His response was to raise an unimpressed brow.

Her malicious glare didn't leave him before the door suddenly swung open and Lydia appeared. Perfect timing.

"Magnus," she spoke as a greeting. "I've been looking ..." Her voice died down when she noticed that they weren't alone.

"Maryse," she said, her shoulders stiffening. The expression on her face was one of cold. "What are you doing in here?"

It was a question that was posed demanding an answer.

It was highly entertaining to see someone else be so unembellished in their aversion to the grand Maryse Lightwood. For all her faults, this display of cemented resistance was one trait of Lydia's he could admire.
Maryse stood up, her chin held proudly high.

"I was searching for a possession of Alec's."

Lydia crossed her arms.

"His office is in the other corridor. I assume that's where his possessions would be located."

Maryse flatted down her impeccable dress.

"Well, then," she agreed, her lips pressed together firmly. "I'll leave you."

When she passed, her tall figure towered above Lydia's short stature. Lydia turned with her, watching her close the door and leave. Her arms were still crossed, her gaze fastened on the wood, when Magnus sidled up to her.

"I'd heard mother-in-laws could be quite a handful but I had no idea."

Lydia at last tore her eyes away and shifted towards him. A smile, one that changed her into a completely different person, blossomed on her face.

"I'm just glad we don't have kids."

With a shake of her head, she brushed it off.

"Thanks for coming so quickly. We want to get on top of this."

"I'm at your disposal. Lead the way."

Lydia strode with purpose and Magnus was by her side. They were walking through the east side of the open arcade. In the middle of the quadrangle that the cloister created laid the greenhouse, unlit at this time of the evening. The rain, that had now become a deluge, created a curtain that isolated them from the rest of the world.

Even though they were still inside the Institute, nearly in the nave of it, in fact, everything surrounding them was completely deserted. There was something sinister about the stone pillars, and the carved statues of angels that were rising along the walls. The span of their wings reached twenty feet, their unearthly beauty stark. Their dead eyes were looking down at them with vengeance from their mighty height, and in their withering hands were swords poised to strike down those who dared pass.

They seemed almost alive, a flash of light in the stone irises. He wasn't prone to childish imaginations, nevertheless a shiver chased down his spine. It seemed Lydia sensed it too, her stride picking up speed. Relief flooded him when they turned down into a protruding barrel vault. Broad stairs lead them towards the bottom, much farther into the heart of the Institute than he'd ever been before.

At the end of the passageway, Lydia unlocked a door and let him in before she followed.

They stood on top of a short staircase that overlooked a smallish windowless room where each of three metallic tables, all covered with sheets, showcased the ridges and valleys of a body. Lydia descended the stairs and Magnus went after.

"I thought you said one."
The severe fluorescent light made the ivory fabric stand out all the more against the grey surroundings.

"I thought there was when I called," Lydia answered. "But they found more."

Stopping at the first table, Lydia took ahold of the sheet and lifted it.

"I presume you can guess the cause of death."

He could.

Magnus leaned over the torso, studying the part where a head should have been.

"Are they all like this?"

Lydia nodded.

"I've never seen anything like it before," she told him.

As Magnus remained, she went to remove the rest of the sheets.

"They look fresh," he noted.

The blood had dried, but the tissue wasn't ashen and the skin still possessed a healthy colour. Disregarding the whole headless thing, they looked healthy enough to be alive.

"Where were they found?"

"Hunts Point," Lydia relayed. "Jeremy, my second in command, found them all spread out on the same block. They're in the order he discovered them."

Magnus straightened as he retrieved a pair of disposable exam gloves from a dispenser nearby.

"I might have to speak to him when I'm done," he said, putting them on.

"That's fine," Lydia assured. "He's out now, but he'll be back."

She came up to the first table again.

"I have some things I need to take care of. You'll come find me when you have the results?"

"Of course," Magnus agreed.

With that, she was gone.

It didn't demand much thought process to understand why Lydia hadn't seen this type of damage before. He'd guessed it when he'd noticed the pristine condition of the rest of the body.

The fey, with their unparalleled mastery of battle, left clean cuts. This would be a disgrace on their etiquette, a much worse punishment than whatever the Clave could come up with. A werewolf, even one with the restraint stemming from experience, wouldn't be able to be this precise while transformed. No self-respecting vampire would tear off heads and leave the bodies undrained for the fun of it. They held blood in the highest regard. A warlock would be the best bet, but it hadn't been. There was no magic trace left to sense. With how recent they'd been killed, there would have been.
Not the most common thing he'd had the misfortune to stumble upon, but this wasn't a rogue
downworlder.

It was another predator entirely.

Magnus had no true sense of time, but he knew when the door reopened, it might have been a
few hours. Lifting his head to greet Lydia, he was caught off guard when the figure coming
down the stairs was much greater in height and much more unwelcome.

"Alexander." He put down the scalpel, the temptation to use it a little too potent at the moment
to be trusted. "I was under the impression that your mother would be the highlight of my day."

Alec, as far as Magnus could tell, was ignoring his quip, when he came down the room to
where he was standing. Stopping on the other side of the deceased seelie, Alec asked, "What
have you found?"

Magnus lifted the right arm, the one closest to him, that rested on the table and then proceeded
to drop it. It flopped down with a fleshy sound.

"I'm ninety-nine percent sure she's dead."

Alec gave him a look.

"Anything else?"

Removing his gloves and discarding them in the trashcan that stood against the wall, Magnus
said, "It's not a warlock. And it's not a demon."

Alec hovered above where the head was missing, his face one of dismay.

"Then what made her head explode?"

Magnus had pulled a clipboard closer, set a pen to the paper. Flipping through the notes he'd
made earlier, the answer was delayed.

"A gun," he told Alec distractedly.

What had he meant by check palm on number two? When had he written that down?

"A gun?" Alec repeated as Magnus crossed out the reminder.

Walking over to the next autopsy table, Magnus replied, "Mundane weapon." He found the
wrist and traced his fingers over the palm. Nothing there. "Goes 'bang' a lot."

He skirted around the metallic corner to the other side.

"I know what a gun is," Alec stated. "But why would a seelie use one?"

Examining the next palm, Magnus pointed out, in an absent-minded tone, "I'm fairly certain she
didn't accidentally shoot herself."

"Valentine?" was the immediate response.

"Not even he would sink as low as to use mundane ways," Magnus mumbled.

In the bend between the index finger and the thumb, he finally found what his notes had been
referring to. It was needle-thin, but a very deep cut where a small bit of the bone had been exposed. If he had to chance a guess, it looked like the defensive wound someone would attain by trying to stop a delicate dagger's downward trajectory with their bare hand.

Did it happen before or during the murder? He was the only one with defence wounds in that case, and only that single one. There were no other signs of struggle, or that he'd been aware of what was coming. All of them seemed to have been caught of guard at their own execution. The rest of the evidence matched up to his suspicions. It wasn't strange if the attacker had used a knife to begin with and then realised that the gun was a more effective way. If this victim was the first instead of the second, it made perfect sense.

"It looks like murder," Magnus confirmed, when he laid down the hand.

"Just ... murder?"

It sounded like it wasn't enough.

Magnus returned to the third body and the clipboard, jotting down the theory regarding the wound.

"Sorry to disappoint you, but this isn't Valentine branching out into the Mob scene. It's just the crime statistics."

Alec had no qualms of being persistent.

"You're sure?"

Magnus glanced up from his writing.

"That's insulting. Yes, I'm sure."

When he'd put down the last letters and gathered up the papers into a neat pile, he gave them to Alec.

"My report," he said as he covered the last body with the sheet again. "Hand it to your wife, will you?"

As he finished up, Alec waited for him.

Stepping out of the morgue, the night air was a sweet reminder of life. Cold, barren, but life nonetheless.

"I'll transfer your payment," Alec told him as they returned up from the depths of the barrel vault.

"I think Lydia already has that covered," Magnus commented, feeling the same kind of inexplicable dread as he'd experienced before prickle.

"No, I told her I would."

Magnus just nodded and lengthened his steps. Their footsteps echoed, the rain the same flood as before. The judgemental angels bore down on them when they passed, their shadows encompassing. Through the steady stream, the ginormous greenhouse seemed to be a diffuse castle, surrounded by a hedge of gnarly woods; with the many trees in the quadrangle and their thin winter branches, painting the picture.
They arrived at the staircase leading upwards into the Institute. It was guarded by the image of Raziel, his mighty wings creating the catenary arch of the entrance. But as Alec went first, Magnus couldn't help but gaze back.

It looked like the angels' shadows had grown, crawling across the stone to reach their heels.

Magnus had shook of the imaginary foreboding once they'd returned to the operation centre's bustling activity. Alec had disappeared to hopefully settle their affairs. He hadn't specified before he'd left. Loosening the thick wool collar now when he was indoors, Magnus traipsed idly across the floor until a unique colour of hair persuaded him to change course. He rested his arms on the lower metal rail and observed the combat happening in front of him.

The three players all had their own style, each working perfectly with their strengths and weaknesses. Jace had the brute force, using his body more as a weapon that the psychical weapon in his hand. It was the: head on, charge-like-a-rhino style, which would work in his benefit in most circumstances. His weakness would present itself when he met an opponent with the ability to think. Luckily for him, demons didn't precisely prevail when it came to IQ.

Swirling away from his sudden thrust with the staff, Izzy laughed, slapping it away playfully with her batons. Her hair was whipping freely through the air when she spun to deliver a kick with her high heels. Her movements were sharp, efficient without lacking personality. She most likely knew each execution like the back of her hand, but chose not to perform them. Her style was the complete opposite of her brother's, who had perfected perfection. There was no disputing how lethal she was, but the Achilles heel came in the form of her lack of planning. She reacted instead of thinking ahead, leaving herself vulnerable to attacks that required more than one step, such as the intricate plan Jace was weaving when he moved around her, bating her to give chase.

And behind Jace, sneaking on the tips of her toes, was Clary, brandishing a seraph blade. Her style wasn't really a style more than: move if you don't want to get hit. The advantage she possessed was her size and agile feet. It was in full use now, as she closed in on her prey. Her disadvantage was, of course, everything else; such as lack of training. Jace had been aware of her the whole time, he showed, when he didn't do more than glance behind before he heaved Clary over his shoulder, slamming her into the training mat.

It was a surprisingly loud sound for such a small person and a whimper rose from Clary's lips where she laid flat on her back.

"Clary?" Jace sounded worried, an immediate change from his previous ruthless action.

As he was about to kneel beside her, he took a step closer. Her eyes sprang open and she kicked out her leg. It felled him immediately, and he landed hard.

"Damn it, Clary!" he swore while she was laughing.

"You're the one who told me never to turn my back on the enemy," she reminded him happily, ignoring his curses when he got up.

Izzy was laughing too when she extended a hand to help Clary up. With Jace's vexed features not far away, Magnus indulged the temptation and started clapping his hands together.

All three of them turned at the applause. Wiping away sweat from her forehead, Izzy headed
towards him while Clary bent down to pick up her sword.

"I didn't know you were here." Izzy sat down on the other side of the barrier, pushing her legs beneath the rail so they were nearly face to face.

"It wasn't planned," Magnus replied. "I'm just waiting for payment and then I'll be out of your hair."

Taking deep gulps of a water bottle, Izzy put it down first before she fixed her eyes, the exact replicas of her mother's, on him. "Payment for what?"

He was spared having to figure out how to compress that into a sentence when Clary sidled up to Izzy.

"You've gotten better," he directed at her, effectively changing the subject.

Clary grinned at him, tugging her hair loose from a tight ponytail.

"You think?"

"Your form is still terrible," Jace declared as he came to stand a few feet away from them. "And you let your shoulders drop whenever you go for a kick. It gives it away."

"Shut up, Jace," Izzy shot back with ease. "She took you down."

Izzy raised her eyebrows in Magnus' direction when she said it, and he smiled.

It got on a certain someone's nerves.

"What are you doing here?" Jace questioned, with a hostility not well hidden. Even the way he phrased it was dripping with venom.

Magnus barley lifted an eyebrow.

"I speak thirty-two languages." He looked over the dishevelled vision of Jace in front of him and let his smile turn into a grin. "All of them includes the phrase 'none of your concern' in their vocabulary. It's a spooky coincidence."

"Why don't-" Jace started, most likely building to an insult, but Magnus interrupted his flow.

"Do one of you know where I can find Jeremy?"

It'd slipped his mind before. But while he was waiting he might as well use the spare time to speak to the person who'd found the seelies. Though it was highly unlikely it would yield something interesting, it would save him from being around Jace longer than necessary, which would be a bonus in any given situation.

With a slender finger, Izzy pointed in the direction of the main entrance. The inner doors had just opened to let in a chiselled looking man that was shaking off the rain. He was tall, and even at a distance, distinctively muscular.

Magnus glanced over his shoulder.

"You see that gorgeous hunk of a man?" Izzy asked needlessly. The way she was gesturing, it was hard to mistake him for someone else. "Blond. Blue eyes. Wet since he just came in. Probably smelling awesome because of it," she added from her inner monologue of treasure.
"That's your guy."

Jace cleared his throat thoroughly.

"I have eyes," Izzy declared. "So sue me." Bumping her elbow at Clary's shin, she rallied for support. "Don't you think he's hot?"

Glancing at the subject of their discussion, Clary stumbled over her words. "Oh ... well, yeano." The blush, that had earlier stemmed from the rough training session, was creeping onto her cheeks in another nuance. "I don't ..." It was the fleeting look she shot Jace that betrayed her. Jace, who had at Izzy's question, sternly directed his eyes anywhere but at Clary. She diverted her eyes as well, a flicker of hurt flashing in them. "I'm just going to go put this back," Clary opted for instead of finishing the sentence. Taking the seraph blade with her, she vanished out of sight.

With a bitter expression locked on his face, Jace withdrew from them as well. They saw him aim for the living quarters, and watched until he was out of view.

Neither of them made a comment about it. A silent agreement to ignore what they'd just witnessed.

Magnus patted the metal rail. "Thanks for the colourful description, Isabelle."

She lingered a little longer on Jeremy, sighing wistfully.

"You're welcome."

When he traversed the floor, veering off Jace's tracks to come to stand beside one of the islands compiled of a multitude of screens, the figure, barely taller than himself, turned towards him before he had a chance to get all the way there. It seemed he'd been aware of being watched.

"Jeremy? Hello, I'm-" Magnus started when he came close enough, but he was beaten to the punch.

"Magnus Bane," Jeremy finished for him. "I've heard about you."

In some instances, that could have implied they knew of your skeletons in the closet, but when it was delivered with a dazzling smile, it alluded to something else entirely. Coupled with the offered hand, Magnus was caught off guard but shook it with a polite smile.

"All good things, I hope."

Jeremy nodded eagerly, his face's boyish qualities coming forward with the unrestrained movement.

"Of course. You figure in quite a few of our books."

He could only imagine what those said. Shadowhunters were hardly impartial when it came to depicting downworlders.

"You shouldn't believe everything you read," he advised. "History tends to put me in an unfavourable light."

"They're not so bad," Jeremy assured helpfully before he drew himself more serious. "You're here because of the seelies, aren't you? Lydia told me she'd get a warlock to help."
Simply the way they had learned to phrase sentences pricked his skin. Had for all of his years. Lydia had told Jeremy that she'd get a warlock. Not ask. Not consult. Get. As if they were for sale at the closest discount store. It was one of the abundance of reasons why having a deep mistrust of the Nephilim was synonymous with intelligence. Why all downworlders living long enough to understand where they stood in the hierarchy, developed it.

It was a direct consequence of the same ignorance that had led the Nephilim to clump together four different species under one common name: downworlders. While they were one all on their own: Shadowhunters. They had made the first line drawn in blood, always separating them by what they couldn't do anything to change. One was the offspring of demons. One, the children of angels.

"Yes," Magnus said. "Can you tell me about where you found them? Did you see anything suspicious at all?"

Jeremy's shoulder moved when he sighed dejectedly.

"I wish I could help. I don't know what kind of monster that could do that to innocent fairies. But I didn't see anything. I just found them."

Magnus knew it'd been a shot in the dark.

"Where?"

"Up at Hunts Point. I accidentally stumbled over the first body lying in a vacant lot." Jeremy's face grew steadily grimmer when he recollected. "The two others were on the same block, just a few buildings away. I've been out there searching for more of them but I didn't find any and the weather isn't helping."

He certainly looked like he'd been out rummaging through something. The wet hair that reached to his shoulders was plastered to the sides of his face and the knees of his jeans were scuffed and steeped in mud.

"I believe you," Magnus replied. "Thanks for your help anyway."

Before he did more than turn away, Jeremy's voice called him back.

"Hey, can I just ask you something?" he said. When Magnus turned back, raising an eyebrow, he carried on. "Where did you go when you left New York? And before you think I'm some kind of stalker, I'm just a guy in desperate need of travel location advice."

He explained it with so much conviction that it made the lie that more obvious. And Jeremy knew it, his eyes dancing with humour.

"Shadowhunters never travel anywhere," Magnus smiled. "But I'd pick Bora-Bora. It's a romantic place."

"I see those stories are true," Jeremy stated with a grin. "You didn't go alone, did you?"

Shrugging casually, Magnus answered, "I'm not sure what you mean."

The bright smile glinting at him was contagious. For a brief instant, Magnus caught how Jeremy's eyes strayed to something over his shoulder.

"I have to go and get into some dry clothes. It was nice meeting you," Jeremy concluded. But
before he left, he added, in a teasing tone, "I like the hair." He made a gesture to where Magnus' black hair sported a few carefully placed golden highlights. "They match your eyes. Your real eyes, I mean."

Winking at him, Jeremy went towards the living quarters as well, leaving Magnus to stare at his withdrawing figure.

He couldn't tear his eyes away, barely noticing when Alec came up beside him.

"How long has he been here?" Magnus asked without looking up.

"As long as the rest of us," Alec replied curtly.

Jeremy didn't seem to feel the weight of his intense gaze.

"There was something ..."

"Do you know him?"

"Yes," was Alec's one syllable answer. It didn't sound like he was going to tell him more.

Not until Jeremy had turned the corner, did Magnus snap out of it.

Peeling his eyes away, he looked at Alec.

"Sorry, what?"

"I said," Alec repeated, his tone clipped, "everything's finished."

Still distracted, Magnus nodded absentmindedly.

"Thanks," he said as he again gazed at where Jeremy had gone.

It was something he couldn't put his finger on.

He came back to himself, redoing the collar to fend off the oncoming rain. This wasn't a place to linger.

"I'll get going then."

Making for the front doors, and exit, Magnus had barely taken a step when he noticed he wasn't alone.

"You don't have to escort me," he said to Alec. "I won't steal anything on my way out."

Alec's tone held the same harshness it had before.

"I need to talk to you."

"Oh, no," Magnus sighed. This wasn't going to go well. It never did. They passed the elevators when he elaborated. "Those words, coming from you, have never ended well. I do not want to talk. At all."

Disregarding what he'd said, Alec followed behind him when he slipped through the inner doors and then they were soon in front of the main entrance. Halting there, where the rest of the Institute was cut off, and they were alone, Magnus didn't acknowledge Alec's presence with
any kind of urging. He leaned his back against the bitterly cold wall, looking in the other direction.

At last Alec told him what he'd been so adamant to spit out.

"I was maybe a little out of line."

No preamble. No excuse. No apology. Just: he'd maybe been a little out of line.

His self-awareness was staggeringly low. Magnus turned his head towards him, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"It's nice to see you've acquired a sense of humour. That's like saying Hitler was a tad aggressive."

"Fine. I might have put things a little harsh," Alec conceded, without sounding the least bit remorseful. Then his mouth, or the shadow of it that Magnus could spot through the murky air, kept on moving and that was never a good sign. "But you made mistakes too."

Magnus cleared his throat. "Excuse me?"

This wasn't happening. It wasn't possible he was this dense. No one was.

"Please, why don't you enlighten me of these mistakes? Because the only one I know of was wasting time on you."

Alec features were shrouded in darkness, the high ceiling's light not doing much to brighten up this small strip of the Institute. Sadly, it did nothing for the acoustic. If anything, the words rang out clearer.

"You left us to fight off a crisis without even letting us know you were going."

This new part of his life, the one that had taken form when he'd returned, had to be a parody. It was like listening to a broken record over and over and over again. His ears were going to develop tinnitus to protect themselves if he had to keep hearing it. Pushing off from the wall, Magnus took a firm stance in front of Alec.

"I wasn't in hiding," he reminded Alec, a crust of ice coating everything that he said. "I wasn't hard to find. I still have the same phone number, for god's sake. But none of you ever called. You didn't write. No smoke signals. Not one homing pigeon. Nothing. You could have just picked up the phone if you wanted to know where I was. But you never did. So that's not what this is about."

Magnus set his jaw, already knowing Alec wouldn't answer what he was about to ask.

"Why don't you tell me the real reason you're here?"

And he'd been right. There was only silence between them.

Magnus broke it, fully aware that they could stand there until the sun deigned to rise, and it wouldn't sway Alec. There wasn't anything in this whole world that could get under that titanium skin.

"Yeah, you can't," he established. "You know what, Alexander? Why don't you shove your head up your ass and see where that gets you?"
He looked to the door, ready to be done with this, when Alec shot back, equally hostile, "You said you understood."

It was the first time he'd brought it up. Before, it had always been Magnus that had touched on the subject of the past, and Alec viciously contending it. But here he was, reminding them both of a conversation that had put an end to what had never begun. It was, as so many of Magnus' memories, one he'd be better off forgetting.

"I did. Your reasons were very reasonable. But it doesn't mean I have to approve of them, or respect them."

Alec shook his head, throwing off everything he didn't want to have to face.

"How could you possibly understand? You're a warlock. If you disappoint someone, they'll die soon enough anyway."

Magnus knew Alec heard how his breath hitched. It was impossible not to when they were standing so close. Say what you wanted about Alec's prowess with a bow, but his real weapons were his words. Shaking away the sting, like a dog shaking off water, Magnus was left with a fresh wound that bled so much more because he hadn't seen it coming.

"There's not a level you won't stoop to, is there?" he said quietly.

He didn't expect it, because he'd had faith that at least Alec had some kind of line that he wouldn't cross. Some distant version of decency. But there wasn't one. It made it harder to feign indifference, when they both could see that it had hit its mark.

But today was a different day. He didn't need to listen. He could just go, and for once he followed his own advice.

Without giving him another glance, Magnus flung the door open, meeting the deluge without hesitation. But it didn't wash it away. Because Alec had followed, standing on top of the steps under the overhanging roof when Magnus jerked to a halt half-way down.

He turned around to look at him, disgust filling his veins.

"I told you of my reality so that you could understand." He had to almost shout over the sound of water beating against the cathedral behind them. The freezing drops soaked into his bones, making him shiver instantly. "And you chose to throw that in my face at the first chance you got. You will never understand. All you know is this side of the world, where you're the one in charge. Surrounded by cold and suffering that you know nothing about and won't even try to remedy. You're not better than Valentine. You just have the Clave's favour."

He didn't wipe away the water streaming down his face, uncaring for what it did to him.

"You didn't want to give up your life for me."

The memory flashed by of Alec counting out what he wasn't willing to do. Which had proved to be all and everything.

"Not your family, or career. You didn't want to give up anything for my sake. You wanted Lydia. You wanted power. Respect. You wanted to restore your family's honour. Congratulations. You did it. Every dream of yours came true." He spread his arms wide. "This is what it's like to be at the top. Go enjoy it!"
And with that he walked away, not looking back as the cathedral and whatever figure standing outside became hidden behind the rain's curtain.

When he arrived home, weighed down by the soaking wool, he didn't immediately sense that he had company. It was the scent that gave it away, the distinct perfume that had already permeated the air. Idly he wondered how long she'd been there.

It wasn't hard to find her. The trail of discarded items, a pair of heels and a coat of the finest cashmere haphazardly thrown, like a messier version of Hansel and Gretel, led him to the bedroom.

"Fantastic. You've taken to breaking and entering," he sighed at Camille who was splayed out on the bed, grinning wickedly.

"I just let myself in," she told him sweetly.

Ignoring her, Magnus walked into the closet that was large enough to change in and searched for something dry.

"Should I be worried that you've stolen something else from me?" he asked her from inside. "I'm still missing that antic chess set, you know."

When he had replaced his pants with a new pair, he returned into the bedroom shirtless.

"Which I never understood why you took to begin with." He rummaged through one of the dressers as he talked. "You hate chess."

"I liked how the pieces looked," Camille divulged silvery behind him. "And they were yours."

Pulling a sweater over his head, Magnus turned to her with a wry smile on his face.

"Are my ears deceiving me, or are you starting to get sentimental in your older days?"

Sinking down further into the pillows around her, Camille stretched indulgently like a satisfied cat.

"Maybe I truly did miss you," she said.

Magnus sat down at the foot of the bed to wait for the inevitable elaboration.

"Occasionally," she continued innocently. "Once every decade or so."

He laughed. At least Camille would never change, and in a ever changing world she was more permanent than the rest of it combined. Though, and he was more than aware of this, her easy ways weren't to be trusted. Only a fool would believe one single vowel from those lying lips.

"I don't even think you believe that," he pointed out. "What is it you want this time, Camille?"

She dragged it out, bating him. He patiently waited her out.

"I came to honour my side of the bargain we struck," Camille disclosed after she deemed it appropriate time to do so. "My wards for Catarina."

At once, everything turned into focus. She was a lot of things, but never reckless. Camille
craved continuous survival and she might have gone as far as to help him just to attain it. Everything was fair game, except her own life.

"Where is she?" Magnus demanded without much pretence.

He knew his form was slipping, his addled brain not working at top capacity. The day had been long, one in a lengthy line of stretched out time where the clock worked against him. The pitch of anxious desire was a ripe fruit for picking. But Camille surprised him by fastening her intelligent eyes on him, not even a hint of a smile gracing her lips.

"She was seen down at the Bayside Marina," she told him soberly. "And so was a member of the Circle."

Her face blotted out when his mind started working again, in what felt like forever.

"I'm sorry, Magnus."

"Where exactly?" he asked while weighing it in his head, trying to find where it fit.

"There's an old boathouse at the end of the pier. Around there."

It was more than enough.

"You'll get your wards tomorrow," he promised, his face one of stone. "I'd like to be alone."

Unusually cooperative, Camille slid off the bed, her bare feet sinking into the oriental rug.

"Don't be late," she said in passing, caressing the side of his face with perfect manicured nails before she turned the corner.

He kept the mask on, remaining seated, until he heard the distinct sound of the door closing.

Instantly, he fished up the phone from his pocket and dialled, walking over to the window to watch her leave.

She picked up on the first signal.

"Magnus?"

"Isabelle."

He put a palm on the chilly pane.

"I need a favour."

Chapter End Notes

So what do you think? Is Magnus starting to go crazy? Will he ever find Catarina? Is Alec ever going to stop acting like a complete and utter idiot? Did Camille tell the truth? If so, why was Catarina down at the marina? And what's going to happen next?
The Second Was That No Matter What You Believed, Or How Much You Fought It, If You Chose To Stick Your Neck Out, Someone Would, Inevitably, Chop It Off

Chapter Notes

Hello, my dudes!

This thing is ballooning, people. By the time we're finished it'll be a billion pages long. But we'll get there eventually. Together! My fingers are about to fall off, my hair is very unwashed, and I've lost a couple of friends, but I hope you'll think it's worth it.

And a public service announcement! Thanks to the fantastic domoiswatchingyou we now have a tagline/motto/unofficial slogan which I highly suggest you keep in mind as we journey on.

Here it is: "And when I thought things could go well, they go so wrong."

And thus, without further delay, here we go! :)

Wait For It

Love doesn't discriminate
  Between the sinners
      And the saints
It takes and it takes and it takes
And we keep loving anyway
  We laugh and we cry
      And we break
And we make our mistakes

Death doesn't discriminate
Between the sinners and the saints
It takes and it takes and it takes
And we keep living anyway
  We rise and we fall
      And we break
And we make our mistakes
And if there's a reason I'm still alive
When everyone who loves me has died
  I'm willing to wait for it
I'm willing to wait for it

Life doesn't discriminate
Between the sinners and the saints
It takes and it takes and it takes
And we keep living anyway
We rise and we fall and we break
And we make our mistakes
And if there's a reason I'm still alive
When so many have died
Then I'm willing to wait for it

The minute hand was creeping closer to the infamous witching hour, lurking behind number twelve when the nightly peace was disturbed by an announcement.

"We're here!" The perky declaration was too certain to have been a mistake. Still, Magnus snapped his head up at the sound of the door closing.

"We?" he questioned aloud as he fitted the slick jacket over his shoulders, glancing to where the hall connected with the living room and the living room's passageway led to the dining area.

"We," Izzy confirmed, sashaying around the corner and into the kitchen, followed by three more people.

"Clary?" Magnus asked when he spotted her trailing behind. "Simon?" he said, and got a goofy smile in return. His voice got louder when he spotted the grumpy face of the one traipsing last. "Jace?"

Making an expression that made it clear that this wasn't by his own choice, Jace acknowledged his confused exclamation.

"We're here to help," Clary chirped, jumping to sit on the kitchen island. Her boots were strapped tightly to her feet and she wore more than just her seraph blade as protection.

"Isabelle," Magnus cursed, throwing a glare at her.

Izzy grinned, putting her elbows down beside Clary and resting her head in her hands. "You said you needed back-up."

"I didn't mean the whole Institute!" he argued vehemently.

Jace chose to sit down on one of the bar stools. "That hurts, to be honest."

Shaking his head, Magnus sighed deeply. This had just gotten ten times more complicated. If it came to it, he could protect Izzy. But four of them?

"I needed stealth," he told Izzy. "We're going in blind. I have no idea what we can stumble onto."

He surveyed the trio he hadn't asked to come. "And I don't want to be responsible for them when they die."

Clary dangled her legs leisurely. It seemed not even the prospect of a possible death could put a damper on her sunny outlook.

First the parabatai duo of idiots and now her? Why did he always get the ones that were suicidal?

"Don't worry," Clary assured him. "No one's telling Alec."

Magnus scoffed.

"I'm not afraid of Alexander."
"I'm sort of," Simon inserted. He stood beside Izzy, leaning his hip against the kitchen island. "When he gets that look in his eyes, like ..." He narrowed his own, pointing a finger first at Magnus, then at himself. "If you don't shut up right now I will throw you off the closest roof I can find."

Clary tapped her lip with a finger, clearly thinking deeply. "That's really accurate."

"He does wear that expression around you a lot," Izzy agreed.

"Okay, enough," Jace decided with an exaggerated sigh. "Where are we going?"

"We are not going anywhere," Magnus immediately countered.

"Magnus," Izzy began calmly. "If you have no idea what kind of trouble we're getting ourselves into, more eyes can only be a good thing."

Taking in her serious expression, he relented with swirling doubts that told him it was the wrong choice. There wasn't time for this.

"Someone dear to me is missing. She's been gone for almost four months now and I've just learned of a place where she was seen before she disappeared. That's where we're going," he explained with detachment.

His feelings weren't to be trusted, and should he allow them free range, they might swallow him up whole.

The comfortable atmosphere slowly drained when the others came to understand the severity of what he was telling them. Whatever they were going to head into, they might disappear as well if they weren't careful.

"When you say 'dear', does that mean she's a warlock?"

Magnus raised his eyebrows at Izzy.

"Why does that matter?"

The way her eyes were wavering didn't instil confidence. Whatever she wanted to say, it was something he wouldn't want to hear.

Izzy avoided his gaze when she continued.

"You're sure she hasn't ..."

She seemed unwilling to finish, as if the implication wasn't enough of an offence to be deemed unspeakable.

"Changed sides," Jace completed without any hesitation. "Some warlocks have."

How he could stand there, all unapologetic with no remorse, was the spitting image of a Nephilim. They might have come to help, but that never made them leave their preconceived notions at the door. Never once had he seen them put downworlders above their own opinions and prejudice, as if they were what created them. It was the insinuation that changing sides, even to someone as heinous as Valentine, was completely and utterly inexplicable. From their unaffected point of view, it had to be.

"And none of you can imagine why they would do that?"
Looking them over, even Simon, he saw nothing except confusion. Was it his expectations that were too high, or them and their glaring faults?

"At least Valentine is honest when he tells us we're worthless. He doesn't hide behind the Clave. Some of us are just trying to survive without anyone to rely on but ourselves. Your laws were made to protect you, not us. Why should we be loyal to Shadowhunters when you were the ones who invaded our world?"

When he stopped, Simon, for some reason, seemed to feel guilty.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. It made a wry smile tug a the corner of Magnus' mouth. Clary ruffled Simon's hair and gave a small laugh and a little of the tension slipped away. It all came surging back when Jace interjected. "Does that mean she didn't?"

"She would't," Magnus said firmly, putting an end to questions.

Shrugging nonchalantly, Jace replied, "It couldn't hurt to put it out there."

"Yes, it can."

It was an important distinction between assuming guilt and assuming innocence. It was a division that most of the children of Raziel presumed to be one and the same. For them, though they might be wrong, it was never their life on the line and therefore not as important as Shadowhunters, who were always treated as they were entitled to. Because at the end of the day, they had written the law, and they wielded it. It had been taken into their hands, and they could manipulate it until it fit their agenda for the hour.

Despite all their progress of seeing downworlders as something more than spoils, they were stuck in their rigid ways while every vampire, fairy, warlock and werewolf were supposed to be humble and grateful that they weren't openly in season this decade. Until one of the Nephilim understood that, without having to be told, nothing would ever change. It was actually a surprise there hadn't been more Valentine Morgensterns in this world. If they were constantly told that they were better, it wouldn't take long until that manifested in what the Circle had become.

"There is so little any of you know, and what you do know, you twist in your minds. Catarina is a better person than all of you combined. She's the purest creature I've ever met, warlock or otherwise. You will never understand the innate goodness she possesses. Don't question her motives." Magnus didn't let up, sounding harsher by every word. "Or mine, ever again."

"Okay. Okay, we were mistaken," Izzy admitted, standing up straight. "But shouldn't we get going?"

Having been prepared since before they'd arrived, Magnus asked, "You still want to go? I can't promise to keep you safe."

"Of course we do," Clary answered, dropping down from the countertop. "We're ready."

Izzy agreed with a nod. "Let's do this."

When stepping out of the apartment and straight onto the Bayside Marina pier, Magnus was grateful for the late hour. Thick pulsating purple mist wasn't exactly normal by human standards and the ebony night made it far less likely for someone to spot them. The cold weather did its fair share too, keeping all the sane people indoors. The crazies no one would believe anyway.
When his shoes meet the wooden planks someone walked on his heels.

Simon stumbled, mumbling out an apology.

Rolling his eyes, Magnus pointed towards where the pier stopped at a stony shore.

"We're looking for a boathouse. When we get to the end, we spread out. Everybody got that?"

A few hums told him they'd understood the instructions. When they reached land, they fanned out automatically with Simon and Clary heading west, Jace going alone towards east and Izzy tagged along when Magnus headed straight north.

It at once seemed to be the wrong path, as they headed straight into a nearby thicket that stood naked without its foliage. Not the prime location for boathouses, but it couldn't hurt to be thorough.

"So, I've been meaning to ask," Izzy confessed, as they forced their way through. "What did you do to piss off Alec?"

He could have acted ignorant, or ignored her all together, but it wasn't worth the effort. Izzy was related to Alec after all, and with that came the horrible wilfulness which he was known for. Brushing her off would be about as intelligent as setting yourself on fire.

"Exist, I suspect," Magnus replied as he ducked a bulky branch.

"I think you're wrong. I have another theory if you want to discuss it."

"Not if my life depended on it."

Izzy wasn't deterred by his less than chipper attitude.

"I understand why you left."

Magnus rolled his eyes, again. It had become a necessary form of self expression to employ around them when he couldn't say everything on his mind.

"That's great," he commented with a faked exuberance. "Can we drop it now?"

But she kept on because the universe never let up. He was doomed to have this conversation with her, when the only person he would want to have it even less with was her brother in question.

"Alec has about the emotional maturity of a peanut, but I think he's trying to figure things out."

That first part was the only thing true in that sentence. If hurling insults was Alec's best attempt at trying, then he didn't want to see him when he wasn't making an effort.

"What is that supposed to mean? I should be grateful he hasn't tried to strangle me yet?"

Despite their quick pace, Izzy had no problem blabbing on.

"I'm saying maybe it's not hopeless."

Magnus shook his head, despite that she couldn't see it from her position behind him.

"He's married. I'd say that's the definition of hopeless."

Izzy scoffed.
"He might be, but we both know he didn't marry Lydia for love."

Magnus stopped suddenly and Izzy almost walked straight into him. He turned around and looked at her.

"It doesn't make a difference." It was spoken pointedly, with an edge to finally make someone understand that it didn't matter why. It was the action of it. Every reason in the world couldn't undo it. And they all seemed perfectly content to forget that rune drawn on Alec's wrist. "He chose this, and I made my own choices. So I am going to tell you what I've told him, and what I've told Jace. I didn't come back for Alexander. He hates me."

Those words hadn't really settled, been verified as true, but when spoken, they rang in harmony.

"He really hates me, and I don't care why. All I want is to find Catarina."

Izzy's lips were parted in bewilderment when she shook her head firmly.

"He doesn't hate you, Magnus. That's so far from the truth."

"I-"

He didn't know what he was going to answer, how to tell her how she was the one that was wrong without relaying everything that had played out between him and Alec. But he didn't have to since a shout broke in.

"It's here!"

It came from the far right and sounded like Jace. Leaving what had been said hanging in the air behind them, they trudged through the undergrowth compiled by dead leaves and emerged on the other side with twigs stuck in their hair.

As they started walking towards the shape of a barn-esque building steadily growing bigger, they could hear Simon and Clary coming their way. As they approached, Magnus caught the last snippet of their conversation.

"... it feels like we're in a Mission: Impossible movie," Simon chatted gleefully. There was a pause. Then, "I'm humming it in my head."

In the corner of his eye, Magnus saw Izzy bite her lip to check a smile.

"You had to bring them?" he questioned with a quirked eyebrow.

Izzy threw her braid over her shoulder, shrugging carefree with a joyful grin.

"Simon makes really good bait."

Recollecting that Simon hadn't been at the Institute when he'd seen them train earlier, Magnus studied Izzy more closely.

She noticed.

"What?"

"Did you pick him up specifically for that?"

She didn't blush, which he hadn't expected her to. She wasn't as overt as some people. But the way
she didn't have a smart retort, instead seeming flustered at his question, made it slightly perceptible.

Simon joined up to them; Clary a few steps ahead.

"You know I can hear you, right?" He poked at his chest. "Vampire, remember?"

"Come on, slackers!" Jace called. "My ass is deep-frozen by now."

"That's not a tragedy!" Izzy objected loudly.

When they went down the hill and through the door that Jace held open for them, he muttered, "Shut up, Iz, it's a national catastrophe."

The first thing anyone could notice was the odor. It slapped them in the face as soon as the rickety door fell shut.

"My- what the hell is that smell?" Simon complained, pinching his nostrils closed.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Clary complained, clutching her stomach.

It was strange how it could be so overpowering despite the chinks in the wooden walls that left them in a draft and the water that was lapping at the end of the cramped room. The smell of the sea wafted in from the open space where a boat should have been. Or judging by the age of the buckling ceiling, a handcrafted raft.

"You think it's a demon?" Izzy asked Jace, her eyes alert on their surroundings. Not that there was much to be on the edge about. The room was cluttered, but with nothing larger than rotting barrels. If there indeed was a hidden demon, it had to be not much larger than a cat.

"Then it must be a whole bunch of them," Jace answered, covering his nose and mouth with his sleeve. "And your necklace isn't glowing so my expert opinion is a no."

Keeping the talking to a minimum, since that required them to swallow the air, they started to search, shifting piles of ropes and nets out of the way. It soon became evident that it was a pointless endeavour. There were no hideouts where Catarina could be stuffed into, and if there had ever been any clues, they should have been visible in the undisturbed coat of thick dust that swirled up every time they moved something. Magnus felt when their faith started to waver, when their movements slowed down. He didn't blame them for it, but he couldn't stop as he pushed an broken oar out of the way. Stopping now, even for a moment, would let the doubt in. If he let it go, this last piece of a lead, then he didn't know what he was going to do. The minute he ceased it meant she was gone for good. And he couldn't give up on her. She would never do that to him.

"Magnus ..." Izzy sounded hesitant when she approached him.

"No."

He shook his head, moving the other oar of the pair.

"You should leave. All of you. I'll stay."

"Magnus." She gently took ahold of his arm, making him cease. "You look a little insane."

He glanced at her.

"I'm aware."
"Oh, my god!" The sudden cry startled them both. Tears streamed down Simon's eyes and Clary was heaving. "We found the source." Simon choked out.

"What is it?" Izzy asked, keeping her hand firmly on Magnus.

"A cellar." Clary was shaking her head with a revolted expression. Her face appeared to have taken on a shade of green. "It's coming from down there."

Izzy looked at Magnus and he followed in her footsteps. They both had to take a step back at the suffocating feeling assaulting their airways when they reached the cellar door, a small brown square that displayed an opening no bigger than for a normal sized human. It seemed the ceiling was inclining, and whoever was down there had to crouch if they were ever going to reach the surface again.

No one but a complete idiot would be moronic enough to go down there.

Pulling out his seraph blade, having it glow up, Jace passed Clary and with nod he declared his inner thoughts. "This seems like a bad idea." He began the descent into the pitch-black darkness, hunching over. "I'm going first."

They had never needed to crawl, which had been a valid concern. The passageway down hadn't been as narrow or as inclining as it had seemed from above, but the lack of claustrophobia was compensated for by that foul smell growing painfully in potency. When they arrived at the bottom of the compact dirt floor, they were all regretting following Jace.

"Does anyone else feel like their nostrils are sizzling?"

"Be quiet, Simon," Jace ordered, his face barely visible in the faint shine from the sword.

"My hand is itching for a witchlight," Clary said quietly.

"Does anyone else think this is creepy?" Izzy asked. "Boathouses don't have basements."

Nobody answered, but their close-knit huddle spoke volumes.

It was impossible to see much, even less to feel their way through since none of them wanted to stick their hands out. With only three seraph blades as discreet light sources - to not disturb what might lurk in the blacked-out corners - the dark was almost impenetrable. However, as time passed and nothing happened, they relaxed slightly. They all sensed when they passed the threshold to another room, this one more expansive. Spreading out a little, they groped around. Clary, Jace and Izzy with more grace.

"I can't see anything and my vision is 20/20 now."

The comment originated from somewhere on the other side of the room.

"Shut up, Simon," came from the left. It was definitely Jace, judging by the floating blade hanging in the air.

"How do you have any friends?" Simon's voice shot back.

"Oh, boys, can you argue another time?" Izzy, located straight behind, singsonged.

Ignoring her completely, Jace kept going.
"My winning personality."


"My face."

Simon's laugh covered the sounds of something approaching. It was just the disturbing feeling of not being alone in the large space, filled with things they couldn't see crawling in the darkness, that made Magnus look to where the opening from which they had entered should be located. As he did, it seemed like one particular shade of ink around that area had more substance than the rest.

It was also moving.

"Did anyone see that?" he mumbled, and tension seeped into the room.

Clary was close to him, her sword raised.

"See what?"

"The doorway."

It was impossible to identify where the others were looking, if they were scouring the dark, but it was confirmed when Izzy became rooted to the spot, her own sword stilling against her illuminated leg.

"Uh-oh."

At the distance they could all spot her necklace start to pulsate in a bright red. At least they could see her better now, and what little of her face they could make out showed trepidation.

"What do you mean, uh-oh?" Simon said under his breath.

Clary did the same. "Oh, no."

Simon's voice betrayed his fear.

"Oh, no?"

Jace froze. "Shit. They're going to smell us," he hissed, not moving at all. "It's a hellhound lair."

Izzy jerked her head to the wall, the necklace guiding them. "Behind the door," she whispered.

They moved as quick and quiet as they could. Now the Shadowhunters turned to shadows. It was only Magnus and Simon who were worse at it. Reaching the door, they squeezed in tight, someone getting an elbow in their throat and Clary taking a sharp breath when Simon ground down his boot on her foot.

"Now what?" Jace breathed. They all had their backs pressing against someone else's front, so they could only go on his tone to guess what his expression was. It didn't sound thrilled. "They're still going to find us."

"They won't," Magnus breathed back. Struggling between Simon in front of him and Izzy behind, he got a hand free, and a water coloured haze wove into a solid cover over them, licking the outer curves and shaping around their edges before it dissipated into the air. "They can't smell us now."

In the stark silence they could all hear the sounds, low but clear, of sharp teeth tearing into something that was still alive. The poor animal was crying weakly as it was eaten alive and all they could do was stay still and listen to this harmony of death. Magnus could feel Izzy's heart hammering against
his back, and he was sure Simon could feel his pound against his shoulder blade since they were crushed so tightly together.

They shouldn't be here. Why did he bring them? How could he have been this reckless?

The chomping, interspersed with the crushing of bones and growling, made Simon flinch in front of him.

It must have been at least ten minutes of nothing but horror until they heard it calm down. Another ten minutes of quiet provided Jace with enough confidence to turn around.

"Okay," he whispered. "So, this is how we're going to get out."

But they never got to hear his plan. Because out of nowhere, a pop song started playing.

It was the same terror freezing them all in place that simultaneously compelled them to stare at the culprit. Izzy stood nailed to the floor, her eyes about to pop out, as she stared down at her pocket.

Then they all stirred back to life.

"Shut it off! Shut it off!" Jace was yelling at the top of his lungs, and if they hadn't been detected already, they definitely were now.

"I can't reach!" Izzy shouted back, her arms stuck in the cramped space.

"Close the door!" Simon cried, his voice breaking.

They all tried in a joint effort to push it closed, throwing their collective weight against the wood. Slowly, it started to give, moving achingly unhurried over the bumpy floor. Right as it seemed like they were going to make it, a glimmer of hope entering their panicked veins, it was snuffed out by the violent collision from the other side that almost broke the door in half and a giant dog head, with jaws you only saw on sharks, peeked its head in.

"Duck!" someone screeched.

The head of the dog, still just a bodiless head, swooped down at them, knocking Clary to the ground.

"Get back!" Jace screamed, raising his seraph blade and immediately dropping it when the door struck him directly in the face. Izzy, Simon and Magnus shoved at it again, barely moving it when the large body on the other side fought back.

"We're all going to die!" Simon exclaimed encouragingly.

"You're already dead, Simon!" Clary shouted, back on her feet. She charged at the hellhound, pounding on the snapping jaws with the sword. The only problem was that it wasn't as effective when it was the hilt, instead of the blade, that you struck with.

"That's the wrong end, Clary!" Jace cried, snatching up his own weapon and using it the correct way. As the silver blade tore up an oily, oozing path on the nose of the hound, it reared back in pain and they could at last snap the door shut.

With Simon and Izzy pressing with all their might, Magnus put his palms flat against the door. A pressure wave that made floor quake shot through his skin into the fragile wood just before something crashed into it on the opposite side, the vibration sending the three of them tumbling back.
Supporting their hands on their thighs as they hunched over, they were all panting, Simon worse than the rest.

"That should hold it for a while," Magnus huffed out as they could hear a summoning howl resounding on the other side.

It was calling for reinforcements.

Once again the pop song came on.

Bristling, Jace, with sweat running down his face, enunciated, "Shut. It. Off."

Fishing out her phone with clammy hands, Izzy's voice was an octave too high when she answered. "Hey, big bro! What's up?!"

They could all hear Alec yelling something on the other side, more so because Izzy held the phone from her ear.

"Calm down, crazy," she inserted when the voice coming from Alec stopped being audible from a distance. "I'm just hunting some shax demons. No biggie."

The following interrogation was easy to follow even if they were only privy to one part of the conversation.

"Jace? I don't know."

The tone seemed to get sharper by her grimace succeeding it.

"Clary? Maybe try Magnus'."

Izzy rolled her eyes as she listened.

"Simon?" she snorted. "Now you're just making stuff up."


"No," Izzy protested loudly on the phone, "that wasn't Jace. You're starting to hear things-"

They all jumped, Izzy dropping the phone, when a pair of claws, sharp as razor blades and five inches in length, went straight through the door and ripped off the hinges it was mounted on.

"I was wrong. Plan B." Magnus grabbed Clary by the arm since she was closest. "Run!"

If carefully groping their surroundings in pitch darkness had proved difficult, fleeing through it was something else. It was impossible to tell apart the openings that sent them deeper into the underground and the walls that proved to be efficient blockades. One of them slammed into one of the barricades, going by sound alone, but it was hopeless to tell who or where since the howls and growling were overpowering everything else except that one painful yelp.

It got colder the farther they ran, but the air burning in their lungs told another story entirely. Magnus had no idea who was beside him, only that there was someone there and another just behind. Spurting through, his shoulder snagged when they passed another doorway and the last person slammed the door closed. It was a rude awakening when they smacked into a rigid structure.
"Mother-" Clary cursed.

"Clary? Is that you?" Jace's voice came through urgently only a few paces away. Wherever they were it couldn't be large. Magnus could almost pinpoint where Clary was standing by her laboured breathing alone.

"Of course it's me!" she snapped back. "Simon?" she asked into the air. "Magnus? Izzy?"

Waiting for someone else to answer, Magnus' heart beat painfully when it dawned on him that they were alone. They'd lost the others.

"I'm here," he said, taking a step to the side to reach her. She jumped at his sudden touch.

"Where are Simon and Izzy?"

He couldn't do more than hold onto her shoulder.

When Jace opted for the silent approach as well, Clary exploded.

"We've got to go and get them!"

"We've got bigger problems than that." The blade that had retracted during their hasty retreat lit up once more, revealing Jace's hard-bitten expression. "You hear that?"

Their shallow breathing were instantly mixed with the sniffling of dogs catching a scent. The sounds grew closer while they held their breaths.

"Did we lock the door?" Clary whispered.

Jace's set jaw said it all.

"Get behind me," he ushered quietly. When she didn't move quick enough for his satisfaction, he hauled her until she was firmly protected by his body. "Magnus, some type of magic would be good right about now."

He could have portaled them out, the time was there, but he might need help when it came to find Izzy and Simon. It was the decision between maybe sacrificing two to save two or risk all four to get every one of them safely back home. A split second and his decision was made.

"I don't know where I'm aiming."

Now he had to keep a promise he hadn't made because he'd been aware that there was no guarantee.

Magnus' hands began crackling with electricity, as if he was holding a thunderstorm in his palms.

He needed to keep them safe.

"Stay exactly where you are."

Baying, loud enough to scratch at their eardrums, started up. The direction of it was to their left. It was the last warning they received before the door flung up, shattering at the impact, and no less than three hellhounds burst through.

The first was hit by the bolt emerging from Magnus' hands, catching fire immediately and brightening the room. From the macabre torch, the confined space, resembling a windowless storage, revealed how Jace threw Clary to the floor just as he charged at the remaining two.
He got a good hit on the closest one, sending it back while it whimpered over the slash across its neck, but the one behind was ready. It jumped Jace, pushing his chest down into the grime with paws as large as a horse's hooves.

Rushing forward, Magnus sent another bolt, but the wounded hellhound had recuperated and came out of nowhere. The blow sent him forcefully into the wall, knocking the air out of his lungs and sent the energy into the ceiling instead.

The surface it shot into collapsed, raining down the dirt and wood it was made up of.

A scream of pain tore through Jace's throat as the claws started digging into his rib cage. The distorted face of the hound neared, baring its drooling fangs. His sword was just out of reach, as he grasped for it and failed to get a grip.

Heaving for air, his head spinning, Magnus struggled to get up but a firm growl told him to stay put. His eyes flicked automatically to the jaws a few feet away, thirsting for blood. Its ruby eyes glowed deeply embedded in its tar coloured fur, pure evil drawing closer until he could feel its rotten breath ruffle through his hair. He raised an arm and the animal crushed it into the floor with a paw. It was the mistake that would give him the opportunity. Using his free arm, Magnus grasped the hollow, rotting bone and discharged another pressure wave, a replica of the one he'd sent through the door earlier. The effect was instantaneous. The hound, jerking once, exploded in a cloud of the same horrible odour they'd followed and a rain of demon ichor.

As it splattered down on him, another distinctive sound was heard.

With Jace pinned defencelessly on the ground the last demon was beheaded and it dissipated with a howl, leaving behind nothing but a stench.

In the corner of the room the remains of the first one still burned, providing light and the sweet incense of rotting meat.

Gripping the blade tightly as she stood above him, Clary asked Jace, "Are you alright?"

He nodded, letting a moan slip.

"Good," she said curtly before she kicked him squarely in the ribs.

"Ow! What the hell?!" Jace protested, rolling to his side.

"I can take care of myself, you stupid idiot!" Clary spat, casting a final disdainful glare on Jace's pitiful form before she drew herself up and directed her eyes to where Magnus was laying.

"You okay?"

As her attention turned to him, he saw that she too was covered in ichor. In fact, the whole room was.

"I'm fine," he replied, wiping his mouth from the foul taste. "You?"

"Yep," she said briskly. "Let's go."

She seemed reluctant to offer Jace a hand, and it proved unnecessary. As Magnus got to his feet, they could discern running footsteps and a voice calling, "Clary?"

Her head flew up.
"Simon?!!"

Through the opening, Simon, with Izzy on his heels, appeared.

Clary ran into his unprepared arms, throwing her own around his neck. He wrapped her up, hugging her tightly.

"Thank god you're okay," Clary mumbled into his shoulder.

Izzy, seeing Jace, who was now standing upright, settled on another approach. She grinned, and patted his cheek when she reached him.

"You look terrible."

Looking over at Magnus, she kept grinning. "Life's never boring around you, is it?"

She didn't wait for a reply before she directed herself at Jace again.

"Truly appalling. What would our mother say?"

At last breaking the scowl that seemed permanently fixed on his face, Jace smiled crookedly.

"You're one to talk."

He reached out a hand and pulled at her braid. It was coated with ichor, as was her whole outfit as well as Simon's.

Izzy shook out her drenched hair with a disgusted face.

"Yeah, whoever said this was a bad idea was right."

"Maybe we can just sneak in."

It wasn't obvious who, but someone clearly hit Simon over the head as they walked up the steps to the Institute, since there was a wet smacking sound coming from behind. In their state, there was no sneaking in. They would be lucky if they got past the elevators without garnering everyone's attention. Magnus could have dropped them off at the stairs; should have. It was only the irrational fear of one of them falling down and breaking their neck now that they'd survived the whole night that kept him from leaving. As Izzy opened the door, Simon reminded them, "Everybody act normal."

Someone hit him again.

As they trudged in, the experience starting to weigh down on their tiring feet, it became clear there wouldn't be an easy escape.

Right in the middle of where the elevators were, Alec was standing, his arms crossed so tightly they looked about ready to break.

It was the perfect spot. It made it impossible for them to pass him without detection.

Subdued, all of them, with the exception of Magnus, gathered in front of him. Magnus stayed back as even Simon, sticking to Clary's side, seemed to regard Alec as an authority he needed to heed.
Alec judged them in silence, scanning them upside down while they dripped ichor on the expensive flooring.

"Did someone get hurt?" he at last asked.

"No," Izzy said quickly. "We all just need to shower." She made a face. "Really badly."

It seemed to pacify him enough.

"Okay. I expect a full report on those shax demons when you're clean."

Izzy nodded and the rest of them followed in a line.

Knowing they were safe now, Magnus turned around, not far from getting to go home when someone cleared their throat loudly.

"Magnus?" the voice prompted, not kindly.

He turned back and Alec was looking straight at him.

"A word?"

It might have sounded like a question, but it wasn't one. Magnus faintly wondered what would happen if he just made a break for it. Knowing Alec, he'd most likely give chase.

Alec started walking away and, resigned to the fact that his life was a horrible nightmare that kept on getting worse, Magnus followed.

They crossed the dais, heading into the living quarters.

Alec stopped by a door and showed for him to enter. Walking past, Magnus entered what couldn't be anything else than Alec's bedroom. Once, when he'd been very foolish, this might have been a fantasy of his coming true. As of right now, the hellhounds didn't seem that bad in comparison.

He had barely enough time to take in the surroundings: bare walls, large bed and a lack of personal items, before Alec commanded attention.

"Are you okay?"

It wasn't the accusation, or insult - whatever Alec wanted to add to the pile - that he'd been expecting.

Taken off guard, Magnus answered, "I'm fine."

"Good," Alec continued in the same calm tone. "Where the hell have you been? And don't lie to me."

He stood in Alec's private sphere. Alone. Drenched in ichor and with a side that was still pounding from being knocked into a wall. Not an hour ago he'd almost died. The last lead had been a waste and right now there was nothing he could do about it. The last thing in the world he wanted to do was fight. But it wasn't worth the effort to feign innocence, primarily because he didn't look the part.

Defeated, he let the truth roam free.

"I sort of ran into hellhounds."
Alec raised his eyebrows.

"Sort of, how?"

Magnus sighed and leaned his back against a cupboard that seemed to be of good quality.

"I walked into a lair."

Alec seemed to take pains to keep his temper under control. His voice still held the same composure but it was almost more threatening that way.

"Care to explain how it happens that right as you walked into a lair, somehow my sister, Jace, Clary and Simon just happened to be present?"

Avoiding his direct gaze, Magnus chose to look at the ceiling.

"I'll pass."

The black thin fluid seeped into his eyes and he wiped it away right as Alec went off.

"How could you bring them with you?!"

Taking his time to answer, to quell some of the anger that Alec clearly felt the need to express, Magnus replied, "I didn't want to. I asked Isabelle and they all came."

But that wasn't the right answer either. Alec's arms went up, as they tended to do when he got frustrated.

"So you were just going to get my sister killed," Alec said sarcastically. "That's fine, then."

At last Magnus' weariness snapped. He'd lost much in the last twenty-four hours, but his dignity was not one of them.

"This isn't about you!" he informed him heatedly.

Crossing the floor, Alec came straight up to him, his arms folded.

"They're my responsibility! Everyone inside the Institute is under my protection!"

"They make their own choices!"

"You used them!"

Magnus knew his face was one of disbelief. It mirrored his feelings perfectly.

"I asked them!" he yelled, disregarding that he really hadn't. "And they helped me!"

Alec's eyes change from accusing to searching in the blink of an eye.

"With what?"

Scoffing, Magnus shook his head.

"None of your business."

Alec cocked his head to the side.
"Or I can just talk to Izzy."

The indignation died down as quickly as it had flared up.

What was the point? He'd know anyway.

Backing away, feeling the need to put some space between them before he could say it, Magnus began, "My friend is missing. Has been for four months. She was last seen down at the Bayside Marina, along with a Circle member."

He paused.

It sounded feeble when he put it out there. Naive somehow. If someone had told him this, he'd urged them to forget about their friend. To cut their losses and get away before they were the one going missing. Was he really doing this for Catarina? Or was he just desperate not to be alone?

"I wanted to see if I could find any leads."

They said confession was good for the soul, but maybe there were some truths he didn't want to unearth.

With his rigid stature somewhat looser, Alec sounded almost sympathetic when he said, "You should have told me."

Magnus lifted his heavy eyes.

"Yes." He smiled wryly. "Because you and I are on such good terms."

Alec dropped his arms.

"There was a Circle member there four months ago, give or take. The same member we still have in the prison downstairs."

Taking it in, letting hope slither back in as if it'd never left, Magnus remarked, "That's the one..."

Alec nodded firmly.

"Can I see him?"

"I'll take you."

They had made it to one of the lower levels when their progress was halted by another Shadowhunter that hurried up to Alec and gave him a few papers. Scanning them quickly, Alec was seemingly dismissing it before his eyes stuck on the last paragraph.

"What?" he muttered. Going through them once more, his frown deepened. "Wait here."

He and the stranger disappeared, leaving Magnus alone in this underground hallway. There weren't any doors adorning the sides and no windows. The maroon carpets were the same, but except for that it didn't seem to belong to the Institute. It felt like the temperature had dropped also, he noted, as he had nothing else to occupy himself with. As the minutes came and went and there was no sign of Alec's return, he started getting restless. The ichor was drying in patches, plastering the jacket uncomfortably tight against his shoulder blades and chafing against the skin. His feet were starting to fall asleep too. Instead of jumping on the spot, or trying do some kind of exercise to keep the blood
running, Magnus started strolling down where they had been heading. He wasn't sure where it would take him, but he hadn't seen anyone around either.

What was the worst thing that could happen?

As he progressed deeper the carpet ended, fading into exposed stone. The chill he'd sensed before permeated the space between the floor and the ceiling. The light began to fade, the lights fastened on the walls becoming sparser. It seemed to lead nowhere, only farther into the dark. Right as he was about turn around and find his way back, a peculiar compulsion urged him to press on. It was as if his body knew what his mind hadn't understood yet.

Throwing a glance behind, and seeing the path he ought to be taking, Magnus went forward, disregarding that he shouldn't be down here, that he had no business that permitted him access to this area. He forged ahead, driven by that overpowering compulsion.

There was never the possibility to embark on a wrong turn, the corridor leading him relentlessly straight towards a single door. Trying it, and finding it locked, he breathed a spell and went inside when it obeyed and let him in. The room widened into a rectangle with eight metal doors evenly spaced out on each side. On the top of the doors was a square of glass, large enough for someone to look out and be seen, and in the same height as a normal stature would require it to be.

There was no need to look inside the cells. It was clear that this was a prison.

The only thing that stood out was the fact that the cell furthest away had a light on. All the others seemed unutilized. There were no sounds coming from there. It seemed this forsaken place, neatly buried beneath the cathedral, existed in a void which few had the misfortune to experience.

Treading carefully, taking pains to not alert the cell's inhabitant to his presence, Magnus reached the door and glanced through the see-through pane.

The small cube was as bare as the rest of this part of the Institute. Only stone as far as the eye could see. From the wall, where a ring was moulded, hung a pair of chains. Following them, he spotted a small form in the corner, trying their best to hide by the looks of it. Bound by the heavy links, it could have been a tethered animal, subdued by its inescapable captivity.

The huddling figure shivered, and Magnus accidentally brushed against the metal as he took a step closer.

The cowering body raised its head and when blue eyes, deeper than the colour of the sea, noticed him standing there, Magnus felt his heart stop.

"Catarina," he whispered.

He saw her blink slowly, her confusion transforming into astonishment, before her mouth formed his name silently.

The man with the runes marked on his skin dissipated like smoke when the glamour gave way.

He could see past every layer until he reached the azure skin beneath the pale masquerade.

She smiled, despite of her worn appearance, she smiled.

The hinges, once attached to the wall, flew off as the door exploded.

He was inside the cell and beside her the very next moment, wrapping her up in his arms as tightly as
he could.

Her body trembled in his embrace, her thin bones shaking, but she was alive. She was crushed against his chest, her dirt-encrusted hair against his lips, and she was alive.

So very much alive.

The relief washing over him was a mighty wave, making him quiver and clinging harder. How the greatest joy could be found in a prison, when it was supposed to be the place where all hope came to be abandoned, was the single most marvellous thing in the whole world.

Clutching his crusty jacket, seeking purchase on his shoulder, Catarina entwined her arms around his neck, burying her face into the crook of it.

"Magnus."

Pulling her as close as humanly possibly, he closed his eyes.

"Thank you," he breathed. "Thank you."

He spanned her back, feeling over her body to check for wounds and let the happiness seep in as he found her unharmed.

"Are you hurt?"

"No." She squeezed him fiercer. "I'm okay."

Hearing it was enough to let go of some of the terror that had built and made a home of his heart.

"How did this happen?"

Her head began to shake and she pulled back to look at him. Magnus cupped her face in his hands.

"I couldn't leave him. They were going to torture him, Magnus. He was just a boy. I had no choice."

It all fell into place, the puzzle he hadn't been able to see, much less figure out, as those words made it clear. The apartment hadn't been ransacked because there hadn't been a kidnapping. There were no trace to follow because she'd left voluntarily.

If she'd said this any other time, he would've gotten furious, but now he just smiled, grinning widely as he leaned forward and kissed her forehead.

"You glamoured the Shadowhunters to think you were a Circle member. I should have known."

Catarina smiled back, touching her fingertips to his cheek to brush over it. The chains clanked when she did.

"Why haven't you changed back?"

"I can't," she said. "My magic's blocked."

He knew right away why.

"It's the wards," he explained. "I created them. And I made sure no one could wield magic inside except for me."
Another thing he had to apologise for. The first being that he for one second had dared to think about giving up on her.

Gathering energy into his hand, he gripped the manacles and they fell off her wrists with a loud 'pop'.

"Did you tell them who you were?" he asked.

She gave him one of her patented looks that told him he had just now said something incredibly stupid.

"Do you think they believed me?"

It was a pointless question. A second of consideration would have told him that. Of course they hadn't believed her. It wasn't in their vocabulary.

Bending down, and scooping her up in his arms, Magnus kissed the top of her head, breathing in the dirt and the small part beneath all that grime that was her. "I'm taking you home."

They both heard the faint grate of a door opening not far away.

"There's a camera in here," Catarina whispered, angling her head towards the corner.

It perched like a raven on a branch, watching them attentively.

Snapping his fingers, the camera detached from its mount and fell to the floor. At the same time, the door that had been blown apart rebuilt itself and was soon cemented in its rightful place, locking them in.

With another snap a portal took form in front of them. As they stepped through, leaving the Institute behind, they heard someone yanking the handle and failing to gain entry.

She was already asleep as they arrived into his living room. Magnus walked into the bedroom, carefully tucking her in beneath the luxurious fabrics and abundance of covers. Caressing her cheek gently, he smiled when her eyes peeked open. He went down on his haunches so she could look at him without having to bend her neck.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asked.

She gripped his hand, entwining their fingers.

"I'm okay. They never hurt me. They tried a rune, but since it was a glamour it didn't work. Since then I've been mostly left alone." Her eyelids fluttered, struggling to stay open. "I'm just tired."

He didn't realise that he'd been holding his breath until it came rushing out at her affirmation. Everything was going to be fine.

It already was, Magnus knew, as he felt her hand in his own.

"Close your eyes. I'll be here."

She did with one last smile.

"Thank you for finding me," Catarina mumbled as she was overtaken by drowsiness.
"Thank you for not dying on me," he said back.

It wasn't until his legs started burning in protest, and he was sure she was sound asleep, that Magnus left the bedroom.

It was an aimless stroll around the apartment that led him to stare out the living room window, and the fact that he was allowed, that he could take a deep breath and feel how it filled him completely, that he got to be whole again, was more than he'd thought he'd ever get.

The round moon, playing over the balcony and through the panes of the French doors, kept him company as he lit a match and deposited it in the open fireplace. It began as a soft glow, growing brighter and stronger as the dry wood crackled.

It was peace, and since peace was made of brittle components, it was soon to shatter.

The wards that he'd set up started pulsating, building in intensity as the intruder advanced. It could only be one kind of person that would come here at this hour. Nephilims that had been outmanoeuvred not more than an hour ago.

They might listen, or they might not. Either way, they wouldn't get inside.

Considering the front door, he opened it with a sway of his hand and waited, deceptively tranquil. The wards were already up, bending to his every whim.

Taking to the stairs like it was a race against time, Alec came into view in the hallway. At first he didn't seem to notice the golden shield standing in front of him and made to go forward.

"Stay back!" Magnus warned. "I don't want to hurt you, but take one more step and you will be."

Only now spotting the veil between them, Alec's eyes went to his.

"What are you doing? I'm here to help."

Not moving, Magnus said pointedly, "How can I trust you?" He met Alec's direct gaze through the shimmering shield, the only thing separating them. "It's not like you've given me much reason to."

Alec threw out his hands.

"Magnus, come on!"

It was the irritated tone that made it obvious that Alec wasn't there to cause any harm. If he'd come to arrest him, he would have been blunt about it.

But that didn't mean he wanted to take an unnecessary risk.

"Leave your weapons outside." When he saw that the hesitation to follow his condition was clearly there, Magnus added, with steel behind it, "I mean it."

"Fine," Alec snapped. He deposited the bow and quiver on the ground, removed the seraph blade, and seven other kinds of sharp objects. They made a neat, yet large, pile beside his feet when he was finished. It was typical Alec, packing as if everyone was out to get him at all times.

With a raised brow, Alec asked, "Are you going to let me in before we both die of old age?"

Magnus brought down the wards, barely giving him enough time to cross the threshold before he snapped them back into place.
Then he gave him an unimpressed look.

"Was that supposed to be a joke?"

Alec shut the door quickly behind him and ignored the question.

"Can you explain to me why you helped a Circle member escape our custody?" He came to stand in front of him. "Preferably before the cavalry gets here."

Magnus jerked his head towards the bedroom and abruptly walked over there. He held on to the door handle until he felt Alec come up behind him.

"Does the name Catarina Loss mean anything to you?"

By the way Alec's muscles tensed up, he knew it did.

The door slid open soundlessly, revealing the imposing shape of the king sized bed with a wrought canopy draped with sheer crimson curtains attached to the four posters supporting it. In the middle of it all, buried into the pillows, was the outline of a person.

"Alexander." He gestured to the sleeping form. "Meet Catarina. Your missing Circle member."

It had an delayed effect as it reached Alec. He took a step back when he put it together, appearing to be dumbfounded. "I ..."

He cleared his throat and averted his gaze. "I'll call Lydia."

Magnus closed the door, making sure to be silent.

"You do that," he advised drily.

Disappearing into the hall, Alec's voice rose and sank, but not loudly enough for someone to overhear what he was saying.

Sitting beside the kitchen island, Magnus rested his head on his arms when Alec returned and sank down on the opposite side from him.

"That's a no to the cavalry then?" Magnus spoke into the countertop.

When the confirmation was withheld, he raised his head to catch Alec's drained nod.

"This is a disaster."

Magnus let his head fall back down.

"You just noticed?"

As it was settling, the assurance that it was at last over, his body was starting to buckle from all the wakeful nights. His breathing evened out as comfort embedded every frazzled nerve in cotton. Behind his eyelids was the alluring darkness beckoning, and he drifted off listening to the movements across from him, how Alec's formfitting jacket, perfect for hunting, barely rustled when he shifted. It was on the brink of rocking him to sleep when Alec quietly asked, "How could this happen?"

"Glamour," Magnus mumbled.
"But how?" Alec continued. "We can see through them."

"The first rule of glamour is that it makes you see what you want to see." Sitting up, Magnus elaborated. "And Catarina is old. That makes her strong. And magic only get stronger when its fuelled by poignant emotions."

Standing, he turned to the sink and began filling a kettle.

"She wanted to save the boy," Magnus concluded.

It wasn't a decision he could agree with, but it had been hers to make. All that he could do now to help her was deal with the consequences.

Putting the brimming kettle on the stove, he leaned his back against the counter and met Alec's eyes.

"Tea?"

Nodding wearily, Alec covered his face with his hands an instance before letting them move up and rake through his hair.

"No drinks?" It sounded almost hopeful.

If Alec thought getting drunk was the right way to go, he'd be sorely disappointed.

"You made the wrong choice," Magnus noted. "No drink in the world can fix that."

Alec didn't disagree since there was no disagreement to be had. They both knew it was the truth, evident by the fact that Catarina was safely back home while the Nephilim had spent a few good months wasting their time.

Had they given it more thought, perhaps all of this could have taken a different route entirely. Yet her choice had been reprehensible as well. There was no right side here. Both liable for their own nature, equally unable to change.

"I know you can't understand, but she's a good person."

"Why did she do it?" Alec said, and his voice was muddled with confusion. "I thought every warlock wanted the Circle eradicated."

"Empathy."

It wasn't enough of an answer, couldn't explain why she'd gone to such lengths, so far as to take someone else's place. Especially someone who would want her dead. He had to define that which he could barely put into words. It was deeply ingrained, a knowledge that he'd never once spoken about since it was obvious to the likes of him and no one else thought to ask. Because to them, to those who knew that life would end in the next eighty years or so, it never occurred.

"It's different for us."

Putting his arms around himself, he formed a kind of shield.

"You mortals, all of you, are always searching for your purpose in life, because it'll end sooner or later. You've found yours." A small smile pulled at the corner of Magnus' mouth. "The Institute. To be the best leader you can be. But for immortals, eternity gives us everything to live for."

He paused, his gaze drifting away.
It was only the two of them, but it felt exposed nevertheless; the space in between them empty with what he felt hesitant to admit. It was naked to bare it, and he had no faith that Alec would be able to understand. He couldn't fault him for it. If he'd been on the other side of this, he wouldn't have either. Why he didn't leave it at that, he didn't know. Perhaps it was to convince Alec that Catarina wasn't wrong or right. That life had more nuances than black and white. Or maybe he was trying to convince himself of something.

"Time, if nothing else. So we spend our lives looking, not for a reason to live, but for a reason to let this world go. When all you have is endless amounts of days, you need something to make you feel. Something you're willing to die for when death is the one thing that you can escape. Catarina has found her reason. And when all that's awaiting us is hell, I can't judge her for that."

Not wanting to see the misunderstanding mar Alec's features, Magnus turned to pour the boiling water into two cups. Busying himself didn't prevent his hearing from working impeccably, and he heard Alec speak.

"Do you honestly believe you're going to hell?"

Taking a deep breath before returning to sit, Magnus pushed the cup towards Alec before answering his question.

"Half of me is demon. What do you think?"

It contained the same kind of honesty and uncomfortable frankness most other admissions that were unwillingly spilled did. It was the full truth of why so many of them were petrified of dying. Like Camille, they became obsessed with their own survival, loosing what made them part human in the process. They couldn't accept that when infinity at last came to a close, there wouldn't be a happy ending. For himself, Magnus had come to terms with it many years ago. It was why he lived as he did, loved with abandonment and let the rest be. Whatever he did, or how he tried, his bed was made. Had been, since his birth. Even if he was religious - putting his fate in some kind of deity - it wouldn't be enough.

Angels were the ones who went to heaven.

Alec stared at his hands, cupping them around the hot porcelain.

"I'm sorry."

If it was because he was doomed, or because of something else, wasn't specified.

"I'm not the one you should be apologising to."

In the long run, Magnus had gotten off easy.

Alec agreed with a nod, but then he pressed on.

"I owe you an apology too." He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Or a lot of them."

"I've come to terms with the fact that you hate me." Magnus rested his chin in the palm of his hand. "It's okay."

"I don't hate you," Alec said, his gaze snapping up. "Of course I don't."

Raising his brow, Magnus replied, "You could have fooled me."
Sighing, Alec pinched the bridge of his nose.

"I'm sorry."

Beneath his eyes were circles that appeared carved into the skin when the moonlight's muted beams played over his young face.

"I am. It's just ..." He sighed again. "It's strange to have you back."

Of course it was. But they couldn't go back. There was nothing to go back to.

"Because it's different," Magnus concluded. The expression on Alec's face didn't contradict. "I won't do you favours anymore."

Alec looked straight at him.

"Because I thought I'd never see you again." His gaze was dark, unreadable. It gave nothing away. "I thought you were gone for good."

It seemed to be a confession of something; a something that he couldn't deduce.

Holding his gaze, Magnus said, "You never tried to reach out."

"I know," Alec acknowledged. "I know I didn't."

What was he supposed to do with that? It was pointless to broach the subject. All it could do was bring up another heap of unresolved issues, and god knew they already had plenty of those.

"I'm really sorry, Magnus. For a lot of things."

Stirring the tea, letting the words fall to the floor, Magnus shrugged it off.

"I think it's better if we don't look under that specific rock." The spoon clinked against the sides. "Who knows what we'll find?"

Alec's focus didn't waver. Magnus could feel it resting on him.

"You always deflect."

"Maybe that's my bow and arrow."

Alec cleared his throat. "It's effective."

Magnus smiled. "Thanks. I've been practising."

That was the end of their conversation.

They sat together for a while. Not uncomfortably, just in silence as the late night was soon to yield when the sun would take over and obscure the stars.

Setting down his cup, Alec appeared to be ready to leave. But his motions were stuck, seemingly unwilling to go, even as it was the only thing left to do.

Feeling tired once more, Magnus rose from his seat.

"You're welcome to stay if you want."
Alec started, as if he'd been lost in deep thoughts.

"I think I need to head back," he said, rising as well.

"Sure. The wards are down. I think you can see yourself out."

Clearing the kitchen island, Magnus had his back to Alec. He looked up when his name was uttered.

"Magnus."

Alec had stopped near the hall and was now looking at him.

"Can you tell Catarina that we were wrong? And that Lydia apologises for mistaking her?"

"Lydia caught her?"

"Yes," Alec said.

"I will," Magnus promised.

He turned back to his task, depositing the porcelain into the sink, but Alec once more called his attention.

"Magnus." There wasn't a way to misinterpret the clear voice. "I wouldn't blame you if you didn't want to see me again."

Focusing on rinsing, then placing them on the dish rack, Magnus took his time, wiping his wet hands on the ichor infused jacket he'd forgotten to change out of, before he chose to reply. Alec was still standing in the same place.

"If I didn't want to see you again I don't think I would care whether or not you blamed me for it."

He gestured towards the door.

"Goodnight, Alexander."

As Alec left, his footsteps ebbing out, Magnus went into the bedroom. He checked on Catarina, tucking a rogue piece of her white hair behind her ear, before he was satisfied. In the doorway, a voice called his name.

"Magnus?"

Stopping with a hand on the door frame, he mumbled, "Mhm?"

She needed rest, and hopefully his vague response would convince her to fall back to sleep. But he failed to notice that her voice was crystal clear, not at all belonging to someone who'd just awakened.

Catarina sat up, a small outline in the darkness.

"Are you going to tell them?"

He stilled, and he didn't know if she caught it, but his perfectly composed tone didn't betray him.

"Tell them what?"

Her eyes, black in the lack of light, regarded him silently.
"Try to sleep. I'll be in soon."

Leaving her, he went into the hall and opened the front door.

The hallway outside was dark and deserted, the shadows creeping down the walls. Staring where the stairs began, now shrouded in pitch-blackness, was no different from gazing down a bottomless well.

Feeling the wards' strength pulsate against his fingertips, Magnus withdrew, shutting the door firmly.

The lock clicked when it turned into place.

Chapter End Notes

So what do you think? They survived the night and Catarina has been found but does that mean every problem is solved? Is everything going to be fine from now on? Are the winds changing? What did Catarina mean by what she asked Magnus? And what on earth will happen next?
Hello, my dudes!

Our tagline/motto/unofficial slogan: "And when I thought things could go well, they go so wrong." - domoiswatchingyou

So I was thinking to myself that this would be fitting to be a shorter chapter. A normal length chapter, if you will. But then myself happened and it turned into half a novel as usual. Oh, well. :)

This chapter was super fun to write. Sassy Magnus is back and he's not backing down. I hope you'll find it as entertaining as I did.

So without dragging it out, let's get it on!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Feeling Good**

Birds flying high
You know how I feel
Sun in the sky
You know how I feel
Breeze driftin' on by
You know how I feel
It's a new dawn
It's a new day
It's a new life
For me
And I'm feeling good

Fish in the sea
You know how I feel
River running free
You know how I feel
Blossom on a tree
You know how I feel
It's a new dawn
It's a new day
It's a new life
For me
And I'm feeling good

Dragonfly out in the sun you know what I mean, don't you know
Butterflies all havin' fun you know what I mean
Sleep in peace when day is done
That's what I mean
And this old world is a new world
   And a bold world
   For me

Stars when you shine
You know how I feel
Scent of the pine
You know how I feel
Oh, freedom is mine
And I know how I feel
It's a new dawn
It's a new day
It's a new life
   For me

*And I'm feeling good*

It was astounding how life, like flowers during winter, could come alive once more, even as the harsh season had wrecked its designated havoc. That which had seemed to be hopelessly tangled, as a ball of yarn long forgotten in an old drawer, had unravelled in the span of a day. The bleak sun was steadily shining, the apartment no longer a showcase of chaos. Calm had returned. The city that he'd felt he'd become on bad terms with, shrivelling in its usually warm arms, was once again embracing him. An untouchable sense of quiet content had wrapped around the days. How fast normality had taken over, had depended on one person alone. Brooklyn was home once more, because she made it so.

Another thing that was peculiar was how the world that had been flipped on its axis for such a stretch of time had not only righted itself at once, but brought them both back instantly into their accustomed routine. With one new addition that Catarina had felt the need to point out for the duration of it. As Magnus was in the process of dressing, she began rehashing it anew. By now he knew in advance how she would phrase it.

"It's been weeks, Magnus," Catarina informed him with her inherent patience, the hubbub on the other side of the line swallowing up some of the syllables. "You don't have to check up on me every day."

Disregarding her words, Magnus let the silk fall over his head, smoothing it down over the chest.

"You never explicitly explained what you told your boss."

The sigh was exaggerated on her side to make a point.

"I'm working, you know. I have patients."

Brushing through his unruly hair with his fingers when a lack of combs presented itself, Magnus commented, "It's great to hear that your ability to state the obvious hasn't been compromised."

Through the way her voice became flat, losing its peaks and valleys, he could tell she was compressing a laugh.

"Have you always been this much of a pain?" Catarina asked, despite having extensive knowledge on that fascinating subject.
"It's called charisma," Magnus reminded her. "I've been told it's charming."

Now she laughed, the bright peal of it drowning out the rest of the background noise.

"I can't imagine how drunk they must have been."

Scoffing at her quip, he returned to their earlier topic. "So, your boss?"

"My boss," Catarina relented, "was very understanding when I told her that I'd had a family emergency."

A very broad term, encompassing anything from illness to embarrassing family feuds. For such a horrendous liar, Catarina excelled at knowing exactly what to say to avoid further inquiries. It was something of a prerequisite if you were presumed to live forever. However, some of them were better at it than others. Seeing that she was one in the clear minority of warlocks that spent the bulk of their time around humans, she'd grasped the concept fast. Nothing killed the mood quicker than when someone accidentally revealed that they'd been a witness to the French Revolution. She'd never truly forgiven him for ruining that one single dinner party she'd hosted. It was, coincidentally, the only one he was ever invited to.

"And she bought that?" Magnus questioned regardless.

There was humour to find in the ways that humans unaware of the true world, living safely behind walls of facts and science, would do anything to convince themselves that nothing but clear cut reality existed. They even went as far as believing someone that had been reported missing for months had simply gone off to a place without any reception or modern technology of any kind. Like such remote of an area existed in this day and age.

"I think she was just happy that I hadn't been skewered by some serial killer."

"In that situation I'd pity the serial killer," he remarked casually, earning another laugh.

Strolling onto the balcony, Magnus let the sunlight heat his skin. It danced across the broad stone railing, bouncing off the glass lanterns that were entwined into the exterior wall and its mess of climbing roses. Birds hadn't yet begun to thrill their songs, but the beams were warm, made hotter by the crisp wind's contradicting bite. Smiling at the view, at his world, he closed his eyes.

Through the phone he heard her decisive tone, the professional persona shining through even when he couldn't see her, as she was speaking to someone else about lab results.

"No work today?" Catarina said when her attention shifted back to him.

"Not that I know of."

Since she'd returned, the everyday plod had as well. It wasn't too frequent, but he had taken on a few enterprises that paid well. But most days were simple and carefree, as he preferred them to be.

"I guess that means I'm in for another hour long conversation," Catarina stated loudly.

It didn't go unnoticed.

"I take it back," Magnus countered. "Let's find that serial killer."

"If that makes you stop hovering, then sure," she shot back effortlessly.

"Oh, you-"
A shout abruptly interrupted his comeback.

"Magnus?! Your wards are up!"

As he recognised the voice the minute it rang out, he made for the door. As he pulled it open, bringing down the shimmering veil, he found his train of thought once again.

"You're an ungrateful soul," he told Catarina while waving for Clary to come in.

"And you sound busy," Catarina chirped. He knew her face was split in a grin. "I'll talk to you later, then."

"Why did I bother to look for you at all?"

"Because, Magnus," she began teasingly, "you're very pretty. Not especially clever."

With a final triumphant cackle at getting the last word, Catarina hung up. With their combined ages they were older than he'd care to admit. And still impossibly childish.

As he put the phone down, Clary, not making a move to shed her coat, said, "Are you busy? Because I can come back another time."

He looked her over, noticing how her foot was tapping anxiously.

"Not at the moment."

Clary bobbed her head, biting on a fingernail.

Showing for her to come further inside, but understanding that she wasn't about to follow, Magnus inquired, "Is this Shadowhunter related or a social call?"

"I need caffeine," she stated out of the blue. "Do you want to come with me?"

The way the hand hanging by her hip was clenched into a fist, and her eyes bounced around the hall, indicated her frame of mind. She appeared ready to burst. Agreeing with a reassuring nod, Magnus asked, "Where do you want to go?"

They settled in the back of an unassuming cafe, hiding away in a discreet corner as the few other patrons, occupying five of the twelve booths that all sported heinous chequered table covers and tacky electric candles that were lit despite the daylight, barely took notice. The server seemed equally indifferent, bestowing on them a bored glance as he sidled up to their seats.

"Welcome to Coffee Diem, where we always seize your day with our groundbreaking, mind blowing, awe-inspiring coffee. What can I get you?"

It was all relayed in the same exact monotone voice, sounding distinctly akin to a robot. The man didn't take a breath, or pause, between sentences and Magnus didn't realise he'd finished his lengthy greeting until he was met with an annoyed sigh to signify the five second delay.

Taking in Clary's distraught state, Magnus ordered for the both of them. She didn't speak then, nor when they were served what definitely didn't appear to be groundbreaking or awe-inspiring.

Her only response was nonverbal, picking up the fork beside her round plate and starting to aggressively hack the fried dough on top of it into pieces. It was getting borderline violent when he
felt the need to intervene before she stabbed herself or some innocent bystander.

He put his hand in the way, effectively hindering her butchering.

"Did that doughnut personally offend you or something?"

Clary blinked up at him as if she'd for the last ten minutes forgotten she wasn't alone. Straightening slightly from her hunched position, she tucked the loose hair that had fallen over her cheek during the slaughter behind her ear.

"So how's Pandemonium coming along?"

The unexpected topic was enough to make him study her closer. He hadn't seen Clary, or any one of them since last time when they'd been trapped with hellhounds. But he couldn't spot a significant difference, except her mood that seemed volatile.

"It's going to remain closed until it's safe for downworlders to return."

She stirred the coffee, staring at the brown liquid as if it was a difficult puzzle she had to solve.

"That sucks. I'm sorry."

It wasn't a stretch to assume that whatever it was that had her acting like this, didn't involve his club in any capacity. Allowing her time, since it was obvious there was something troubling her, Magnus unwound, lifting the mug to his lips.

It had distinct notes of motor oil and sadness.

He set it down once more and watched Clary pour half a bowl of sugar into hers.

It seemed to help with the taste, seeing as she downed it without a grimace distorting her face. When her eyes kept being turned inward, Magnus nudged his own coffee towards her which she cupped before dipping her head to gulp that down as well.

When she wiped the back of her hand over her mouth, Magnus felt it was time to say something.

"Not that I don't adore this titillating conversation of ours," he assured, "but would you like to tell me what it is that's bothering you?"

Clary shook her head, turning away from his gaze, but from her mouth the words flowed.

"We've been up all night. Following up leads that, surprise, she muttered sarcastically, "were busts."

The way she said surprise conveyed a story of familiarity. It seemed that this was a regular activity of theirs. In all probability it was, but then it was that more confusing seeing her current emotional state. Something out of the ordinary must have transpired.

"What happened?"

"Nothing," she declared with the same clarity as when you're trying to convince yourself of what you're saying. "Nothing out of the ordinary. But it feels like I'm the only one who sees what's happening."

Forcing away what she was revealing by busying herself, Clary began shredding the sugary dough between her fingers.
"Simon is actually happy being a vampire. Alec and Izzy and-" Choking back the final name, she carried on. "They were born into this life. After we found out about what Lydia asked you to do Izzy confronted Alec about it. I thought we were on the same side, but afterwards she ... she told me she understood. Not going to you for it, but the whole torture thing, she understood. But I can't."

It was a desperate ring to her tone, a plea for a kindred spirit. To know that she wasn't as alone as she felt and needing confirmation that their actions were in truth as insane as they seemed, despite how much those around her made them take on the shape of normality. It was a slippery slope once you had begun doubting your own values.

"You knew me. I didn't know about it at the time, but you knew me before all of this. And I was so angry at my mom for keeping this huge part of my life from me, but now I get it. I remember what it was like to be normal and I miss it more than anything. I don't want to fight a war. I don't want to find Valentine."

Her eyes finally lifted to meet his. They were glossy. "Magnus, I'm scared of what we're becoming."

It was automatic, the way he reached out and gently squeezed her hand.

"Where's Jocelyn?"

Clary blinked, tears slowly dripping down her pale cheeks. "In Idris. Luke went with her."

It was an explanation in and of itself. Without a tether - whatever its form everyone had one, that something in the world that grounded them, keeping them from losing themselves when the days got unbearable - it was easy to get lost. If you were left wanting, it was that much harder to hold yourself intact.

But where Clary lacked the experience, he'd had enough encounters with the Nephilim's way of thinking that it was more expected and less of a rude awakening to hear that she was the only one to react.

What facilitated it, why Izzy might be against involving him, yet displayed an unwavering dedication to her brother, was because of the way the Clave chose to build their army on the backs of children. They were bred for a single purpose, soldiers from the very moment they took their first breath. Brought up as pawns, they weren't more than that in their blind loyalty to the Clave and the law. Ready to be used at a moment's notice, it was the ultimate solution. The perfect willing sacrificial lamb.

Their motto of sed lex dura lex; the law is hard, but it is the law, was simply another way to exert control over their conformed minds. If morality was only bound to law, it wouldn't matter what it said. If it was cruel, it was still the law. If it was unjust, it didn't change their commitment to uphold it. Since the Clave wrote it, they could rewrite it, and with that the Shadowhunters’ morals would reform over and over and over again, as it had done through history. Never once thinking for themselves. For all their talk of angels and Raziel, their creed wasn't divinely inclined. It laid with those that ruled, and would always do so.

That was why the rules of consorting, or revealing themselves to humans, were strictly forbidding. A harsh life, an unjustifiable way of living, would not be so if you never became aware that there was something else out there. For those who knew, like Clary, it bestowed more pain than relief.

All of this mastery pervaded their directives, as they were to be strictly adhered to.

They could fall in love, but not above their duty. Allowed to love, yet not enough to change their
priorities. A Shadowhunter was a servant under the Clave and whose loyalty was to lay first and foremost with the Clave. To feel, to truly care, was a weakness that preferably would be expunged by the time they received their first rune. Even the parabaitai bond, a rarity among them to begin with, was to enhance their abilities in battle. The feelings that was its foundation was a necessary evil.

They were isolated, a union between them and any downworlder severely frowned upon. It ensured their unbreakable faith, strengthening it by convincing every young child that they were born better, and should never seek to befriend those on the other side. And so their world kept change at bay.

In a few ways, all Nephilim were prisoners that had taken it upon themselves to bind their chains to the walls.

But the worst offence that they inflicted upon themselves was to let the young lead and thus perish. He might share blood with demons, but cruelty was a trait he'd most experienced amongst the seraphic kind.

"You're only nineteen, Clary. You don't have to atone for your father's sins." Bringing his hand back from her arm, Magnus finished with, "Valentine is the Clave's doing. Not yours."

Moulding what scraps that the doughnut had become into little balls, Clary mumbled, "I wish it was that simple. But there's something coming for us, whether or not I want it to."

It would be naive to ask her to go. To pack a bag and flee. If they'd asked for his advice, he would've told them to get out while they still could. But they would never seek it and telling them would be pointless.

All of the Shadowhunters were in the eye of the storm,courting death as they tended to do, and he couldn't do anything to help. It wasn't advised to get closer to those intent on drowning.

"What did I miss while I was gone?"

There were an abundance of reasons why he'd refrained from broaching the subject in their presence on earlier occasions. Of which few he was aware, only drawing from experience that it would be better to leave it where it laid buried in the past. However, one of those millions was safely secured in his mind and now begging to be let out. It was ridiculous. They weren't his responsibility, had never been. His power didn't extend to protect anyone he didn't choose. They couldn't, even if he wanted to try. He knew it wasn't his fault what had transpired during his absence, as little as it would've been if a stranger was shot outside of the cafe at this very moment. But knowing how it might have been different perhaps, if he'd taken another route, would be painful to hear.

What if's were the most excruciating searing on immortal souls. They might have a millions days to experience, but it was never the exact same one. And once the sun had gone down, that day and those chances tied to the treads of that clock were cut. Roads were lost in the woods forever and chances seldom came twice.

Her fervent fingers calmed down, setting down the wreckage that was left on the small plate. "Do you want the Tolstoy or Cliff's Notes version?"

"I've got time."

Clary's shoulders sagged when she sank deeper into the fading leather of the sofa.

"It's getting to a boiling point soon. Everybody is feeling it. He's had the cup going on two years soon, yet he haven't launched any mayor assaults. And despite that we've lost so many already on
trivial attacks. I can't begin to count how many dow-" She cut herself off and looked to him. "I'm sorry. What I meant was that everyone has been dying."

Magnus allowed the information to singe, powerless to stop the quick bite. It was too late to change things now.

"We can't do anything to stop them either. I kind of wish he'd just get it over with. Then, at least, we wouldn't have to be so completely and utterly useless." Pulling up her legs, Clary hugged them tight to her chest. "I think Jace is actually going insane. And the rest of us aren't that far behind."

"How do you mean insane?"

Jace could easily be designated many colourful adjectives, but deranged was sadly not one of them. Clary rested her chin on the top of her knees.

"He's ... I don't know what he is."

"That's the most accurate description I've ever heard of him," Magnus commented, meaning it wholeheartedly.

She smiled, but it looked deeply wrung.

"We've all changed. We had to. But he's not different, Magnus, he's obsessed. Alec is the only one who can talk him down and it's not even half the time that works. He disappears for days on end, doing god knows what. It makes everything ten times worse."

A stray tear escaped from the corner of her eye and she swiped it away angrily. "What did you talk about when he came to you?"

Spotting his confused frown, Clary said, "I overheard him and Alec arguing about it."

It took Magnus a moment to recollect what she was talking about.

"Nothing, essentially," he told her, which was as much as she needed to know. "I don't think he's off the rails, Clary. Just give him some more time."

"How much time can he need?" she snapped. "It's been over a year. Everyone else has issues but he's the only one who's acting out." Her voice got louder but her lip contradicted the anger when it quivered. "What gives him the right?"

"I don't know," was all there was to offer. "Maybe it's a bad case of ... being Jace."

"I want to strangle him," she muttered. "I've dreamt about it."

Disregarding how much pleasure he'd find in letting her, Magnus chose to think about how upset Clary would be, eventually, if she indeed fulfilled her fantasy, and replied, "Let's put the murderous plans on hold for now. Have you tried talking to him?"

Pushing her lips tight together, she bit the inside of her cheek.

"We don't talk. Not since ..." She sighed deeply, hugging herself tighter. "We don't talk."

Not since Valentine. Magnus filled in the rest of the sentence in his head.

The ultimate punishment would never be rejection. You could move on from that. But wanting to be
with someone and them wanting you back, equally, was rare. And then to have to let it go, to watch each other try, and fail, to move on, was certainly more painful than any broken heart. Neither of them were to blame, but feelings didn't disappear just because you wanted them to.

Upset tears still trickled down her cheeks and she dabbed at them discreetly when she thought he couldn't see. If Jace loved Clary half as much as she still loved him, then it was no wonder he was having a hard time adjusting.

The phone buzzed in her pocket. Wiping her nose on the sleeve of her flannel shirt, she checked the message.

"It's Izzy. Another raid I guess."

At the same time she was speaking, Magnus' phone began ringing.

The timing was uncanny. When he saw the number it confirmed his suspicions.

He answered.

"Speak of the devil. Hello, Alexander."

"Magnus," Alec said. "Hi. Are you busy?"

Seeing that Clary was starting to put on her jacket, he decided to skip the polite chit-chat.

"What do you want?"

It wasn't like their current relationship could deteriorate from being to the point. It had hit rock bottom a millennium ago.

"We know the whereabouts of the mundane that killed the three seelies."

And then Alec didn't elaborate.

Waiting for part two of this tale and it not arriving, Magnus asked, after a short span of time, "Are you expecting applause?"

"I was wondering if you wanted to come with us when we go there."

There were a lot of questions he wanted to ask. Why Alec had called to begin with being the front runner. Going out on missions with them wasn't a normal request and this felt more like an open invitation rather than wanting a service provided. It was at the tip of his tongue when Clary stood up in the booth.

Her eyes were dry now, instantly banishing emotions that had been at the surface a second ago as she rubbed her sugary fingers on the jeans fabric cladding her legs. He'd missed the evolution of her becoming a solider, the angelic version of a warrior, and it wasn't what he wanted for her. Or anyone. But it was the reality staring him in the face.

Yet her cheeks were still splotched with red, still resisting against the mould she was eagerly training to fit into, despite what she'd confessed. To be a Shadowhunter, was to be fighter, a one-man army where softness was simply another part for the enemy to sink their knife into. Clary was becoming jaded, and her mother wasn't there to stop it.

So it fell on him.
"Magnus?" Alec prompted, still clinging for some reason. He should have hung up by now.

"Is Isabelle with you?" Magnus asked.

"Yes," Alec confirmed, but it sounded more like a question.

It settled it.

"I'll meet you there."

"You don't even know where-"

Ending the call in the middle of Alec's protest, Magnus got to his feet as well.

"This is very exhilarating," he smiled. "I haven't been involved in a foray since the Civil War."

Clary tilted her head in surprise.

"You're coming?"

"I'm in desperate need of an adrenaline rush," Magnus said. "It's a problem."

"Then you should stay here," Clary advised him as they passed their server that looked suspiciously like he was practising the art of sleeping while standing up. "Given our track record it'll be another underground cheesery."

Magnus gave her a concerned look.

"Explain that sentence."

Clary laughed as she held the door open for him.

"I couldn't even if I wanted to."

Their meeting place was in Union Square Park, by the George Washington monument. The traffic around ran madly, dashing taxis swerving in and out, and vans with neon logos boldly displayed on the sides streaking past. Equally stressed men and women, dressed in tailored suits and business appropriate heels, swarmed the streets with their briefcases and hand free phonecalls. It was a typical Friday morning in the heart of New York.

"I get the appeal now," Magnus complained when once again a stranger had just walked straight into his shoulder, barely paused long enough to shoot him an angry glare, before going back to yelling into the phone at some poor woman named Hadaya.

Clary smiled smugly as she continued on, undisturbed. The credit went to her runes and their ability to make her invisible to the naked eye, allowing her to easily slip between the oblivious strangers while Magnus drew their disproportionate rage.

Having elbowed their way and crossed the street, narrowly avoiding being run over by a flashy Lamborghini whose owner was very fond of their signal horn, they spotted a trio that stood out. Jace was leaning against the low metal fence surrounding the plinth and the pedestal successively built upon it, crowned by the bronze horse and its rider. A few paces away from him stood Alec and Izzy, caught up in an intense conversation.
Jace was the first to notice them. As he straightened when they approached, it became clear he wasn't in a jolly mood. But then he never was.

"You're late," he declared.

Clary didn't spare him a glance as she went straight up to the others.

It was quite tangible why.

She had definitely left out a few key details, as to why she thought Jace might be on the brink of losing his mind. And it was obvious why she'd become as agitated as she had when he'd been brought up earlier. Recalling her assessment on his slipping sanity, it didn't seem that far fetched. Jace could only be described as the loosing party of a collision with a train, the bruises blooming on his mangled face continuing beyond where his collar stopped, thus hindering insight in exactly how far they extended, but by the looks of the deepening purple it went farther down his chest. There was a fresh gash parting his eyebrow and the skin along the cheekbone had been scraped up mercilessly, as if he'd been dragged face down along the rough asphalt. He was even walking with a visible limp, Magnus noted, when one of his feet dragged along the ground.

Why he didn't use runes to heal faster, or anyone forced him to do it if he was masochistic enough to want to relish the pain, wasn't explained aloud, but by the way Alec and Izzy paid his condition no attention, still absorbed in their discussion, it was quite clear that this wasn't a one time thing.

"My, don't we look lovely today," Magnus complimented him with a smile.

"This is just the face I make when you talk," Jace snapped, in what could only be his most pleasant expression of displeasure.

"You know, I'm not sure if it's me you don't care for, or the world in general, but you should really think about anger management classes."

Magnus kept the smile on his face as Jace grumbled something, just low enough for him to not catch it.

"Sorry?" he prompted. "I didn't hear you."

Jace looked like he was about to explode, as he had been ready to do from the first second.

"I said-" he started again, determined by the looks of it to speak up, but was deterred by a bubbly voice.

"You came," Izzy beamed, bouncing up to them. "Fantastic! That means I can go home and get some beauty sleep." She announced it pointedly and was answered promptly.

"No," Alec shut her down with while he fixed the bow in place over his shoulder. "We're doing this together."

"What even is 'this'?'" Clary asked.

"We're going to St. Gretel's to find the mundane that killed those seelies," Izzy explained as Clary joined up to them.

Clary shot her a questioning look.

"Isn't that a mental hospital?"
"Yup. Fun times!" Izzy exclaimed with too much enthusiasm for it to be sincere.

"And what are you going to do when you find the person?" Magnus queried. "Ask them politely to stop?"

It was more likely they would execute them, but the perpetrator was also human in this scenario, so it might make a difference in their sentencing, seeing that they were to protect, not harm, those creatures.

"I don't know," Izzy shrugged. She turned her head towards Alec who was arriving behind her. "Make them pee their pants?"

Taking no notice of his sister, Alec pointed forward. "Let's get going."

They were making fast progress despite the packed streets they were travelling. Jace was in the lead, followed closely by Clary and Izzy. Alec was trailing behind with Magnus. They formed the end of their small group.

When they turned a corner, Alec chose to speak.

"How's Catarina?"

"She's good. She appreciated Lydia's visit. Although, for future reference, people don't normally go into the O.R. unless they're unconscious or a surgeon."

Something tugged at the corner of Alec's mouth.

"I'll let her know."

Magnus was used to the odd stare here and there when he ventured out in the city, much because of his unique appearance, but it was intensified when it seemed he was talking loudly to himself. When he saw the quick glance of a middle age woman passing him, not the usual curious stare but more like she was assessing a threat, he opted to nod lightly at Alec to show he'd heard him instead of answering.

"And you?" Alec continued hastily, unaware of their audience.

Magnus kept looking ahead.

"Peachy."

It seemed, by the way he felt Alec's eyes study him, that he expected him to continue on this riveting subject.

The conversation slumped dead to the ground when he didn't.

It slowly dawned on Magnus that now, when they weren't actively yelling at each other, Alec didn't appear to have the faintest idea how to behave. He seemed to start a million sentences, his mouth parting slightly only to close again. Alec's head twisted towards him to say something, Magnus presumed, only to snap back into place when he opted to not follow through.

This ritual kept happening on a loop that seemingly would continue until an outer force changed it. When they passed a hot dog vendor, and Magnus had squeezed past the line, he picked up where Alec had left off.
"So," Magnus said casually. "Thinking about getting a dog?"

Alec seemed almost startled by the sudden question after so long of trying to get a syllable past his lips.

"What?"

"A dog," he repeated pleasantly. "From my limited experience that's what married couples do. Picket fence. Dog. 2.4 offsprings. And the Institute is quite large for a picket fence and, don't take this the wrong way, but you don't have that pregnancy glow, so I'm wondering if you're getting a dog."

He gave Alec a dazzling smile.

"If you're one of those unconventional couples I heard they get ferrets."

Alec defied his expectations by answering.

"No. We're not getting a dog."

Nodding understandingly, Magnus replied, "I see. That's too bad." He even went as far as giving Alec a reassuringly firm pat on the shoulder. "I'm sure you'll get there eventually."

A man coming towards them, having just seen him touch the air as if there was someone there, decided to cross the busy street instead. Magnus followed his dangerous manoeuvre with some amusement. Humans, and most other beings, were so afraid of what they couldn't understand. Which typically included anything slightly deviant.

He was pulled out of his musings by Alec's unmistakable tone.

"This is what you want to talk about?" he questioned, and it communicated that he was aware of their current standing, though it was undefined by the broadest of estimates.

It was nice to know he wasn't completely clueless.

"Should we do it your way instead?" Magnus countered. "Complete and utter silence?"

Alec gave him a look but said nothing. Deciding on the silent route once more.

But now when they'd started, Magnus had no intention of letting it die down. They might as well have it out here. The time or place wouldn't make a difference.

"Fine," he allowed graciously. "Let's pick another topic then. How long has Jace been looking like a failed project of Picasso's?"

He watched Alec, and how he was purposely ignoring him.

"No?" he asked nonetheless and received no response. "How's the hunt for Valentine going?"

Still there was only silence, but he could see how Alec had clenched his jaw. It rippled beneath the suddenly tight skin.

"Oh, I know," Magnus continued resolutely. "How's your mother?"

That seemed to finally prompt a reaction. Stopping unexpectedly, Alec turned his whole body towards him.
"You're free to chime in here any time you want," Magnus told him amiably as he kept on heading forward. A hand cupping around his arm made him halt in his step. He turned around, his eyes going between the hand and the owner, which made Alec let him go immediately.

Taking a step forward, putting them squarely in the 'too close for comfort' zone, Alec said, a hand raking through his hair, "Let's just get to St. Gretel's before something else happens."

Magnus backed away, knowing full well that his face revealed exactly what he was feeling.

"Alright," he agreed. "The Shadowhunter way it is. Just shove it away. Don't talk about it, push it down, and it will disappear on its own."

Lifting a finger to his forehead, he made a salute. "Got it."

Once more he made to follow the others that had vanished around the next corner. He'd just passed it when, again, he was hindered by a stubborn hold. Refusing to turn back this time, he pulled free, only to find Alec standing directly in his way.

While Magnus dedicated a few seconds to roll his eyes in exasperation, Alec quickly said, before he had a chance to leave, "Look, I'm sorry. I really am, but I don't know what else I can say."

Putting up his hand, Magnus started counting on his fingers.

"The weather. The increase in crime. The state of the world. How Christmas has become very commercialised." He gasped dramatically as he reached the thumb. "Or why my downstairs neighbours are extremely loud after 10 PM."

As he finished, he wrapped it up with a sardonic smile.

Sighing, Alec closed his eyes for a moment.

"Magnus ..."

"Forgive me. I was under the impression that you asked for casual conversation starters." He let his eyes scan Alec from head to toe in a sweeping motion. "If you want to get personal we can always discuss your wardrobe, or lack thereof."

"Magnus."

"Do you own another jacket?" he asked with concern.

"Magnus!" Alec broke in, severing his solid streak.

Not yielding to it, Magnus raised his eyebrows.

"Alexander," he answered in kind. "Are we naming nouns now?"

At last, Alec seemed to have decided on what he wanted to say. His features set and the words came rapidly.

"You have every right to be upset, or-"

The need to correct him was potent enough that Magnus put his hand right on top of Alec's chest. It made him stop, thankfully.

Removing it, he informed Alec curtly, "You've never upset me."
That was something he would deny until the day he died. There wasn't anything inside of him that could be hurt because of what Alec said or thought. That implied that he cared. And he didn't. He couldn't afford to. The prize was too steep to even consider. It demanded his heart and only a complete idiot would love someone who could never love them back.

Alec's gaze went to the side for split second before it came back, now something else inside of it.

"I was wrong," he acknowledged, almost gently.

Magnus scoffed.

"Which you are about everything so that doesn't exactly narrow it down."

"I should have handled things differently."

Wow. What an insight.

It was like it wasn't obvious.

Fed up, Magnus shouldered past him. When Alec caught up to him, which he knew he would, Magnus spoke aloud. "Congratulations. You have a brain. I doubted you for a second there but you pulled through."

When Alec looked at him now, his face at last showed some hints of frustration.

"What do you want me to say?"

There was no answer to that question. Words wouldn't mend what they had broken in the first place. He didn't know what they were, where they stood, but they could never be anything else. This was the end of the road. There was no going forward or back. This street, this argument, this day were all they were ever going to get. But there had to be some different version of this.

Hell was better than this.

"If you can't figure that out that's not my problem."

If Alec had a ready answer it didn't make it out in time before they were rudely torn out of their heated exchange by a shout.

"Are we getting there this decade or what?!"

Jace's head had popped out from around the next corner, his expression one of impatience.

"We're coming!" Alec shot back, clearly irritated.

Apparently having no faith in their ability to walk in a straight line, Jace waited with his arms crossed for them to catch up. Seizing the opportunity, Magnus slipped past him briskly, lengthening his steps until there was a good fifty feet between himself and any Shadowhunter.

From the outside you couldn't tell the impressive building was a hospital. If it hadn't been for the straightforward letters declaring 'St. Gretel's Mental Health Center' straight across the glass covered entrance, the towering square structure, with its pearl white panels and countless windows, could easily pass as an affluent office building situated in the middle of Manhattan. It was the intent most likely, seeing that this was a private medical institution, and the patients or their family paid great
sums for privacy. In the ruthless world that thrived in the heart of New York, where stockbrokers and lawyers gave demons from hell a run for their money, fragility was the cue for the sharks to swoop in. For those who could afford it, exclusivity was priceless.

That exclusivity had effectively brought their headway to a standstill. They had stolen past the enormous reception, opting for the stairwell instead of the blinding chrome elevators to avoid detection, and easily made it to the fifth floor. But there they had come to an abrupt halt. Outside of the ward they needed to get inside was a man dressed in a security uniform. And to make matters worse, the door was equipped with a key card reader. Taking one look at the obstacle in front of them, they had ducked back into the stairwell to discuss.

It became intense when after fifteen minutes they still didn't have a plan, never mind a good one.

Magnus only hummed along while Clary and Jace were busy being entangled in a silent war with each other, with the small detail that it wasn't silent as much as Clary screaming at the top of her lungs, when another nurse, dressed in the same impeccable white scrubs as the two previous ones, came down the stairs from a higher floor. She gave Magnus a strange glance and he smiled to assure her. In hindsight, perhaps broad smiles weren't a source of comfort when it came from a stranger that up until now had seemed to mumble loudly to himself, especially if it occurred in a psychiatric hospital. She continued on, but he could feel her eyes linger as she descended the next flight of stairs.

Deciding that they'd wasted enough time, even as he concurred with Clary's detailed description of Jace's lack of intelligence, he interrupted her tirade by stepping in between them.

"Why don't you just go and slam your head in the wall, Jace, since you have no brain cells to lose anyway!"

Clary bit back the rest when Magnus cut off her contact with Jace as he broke in. Wisely, he kept his own distance from her as well.

"Good point, Biscuit, but if I can just quickly say something?"

Her nod was curt and sharp as a knife as she leaned to the side to glare furiously at Jace who seemed entirely unaware why she was on the point of growling at him. Her teeth were in fact showing as her jaw snapped shut tightly. With Izzy massaging her temples behind Jace's back and Alec pretending none of this was taking place right in front of him, it was apparent to everyone but Jace that Clary's anger stemmed from something much more than his awful suggestions.

"I'm pretty sure I'm about to be committed against my will soon if we don't come up with a plan. So can we please spare the fighting until we are out of here?"

Clary's glare now turned to him instead but she agreed with jerking nod.

Having no appreciation for being saved, Jace decided the best he could do was to speak.

"We can simply use a rune. We're already glamoured."

Alec pinched the bridge of his nose with a deep sigh and Izzy covered her eyes.

Clary's narrowed and fixed on Jace, and she looked ready to pounce.

"And you don't think someone will notice if locked doors magically open by themselves?" she snarled viciously. "I can tell you from experience, Jace, people don't usually react good to that."

Unruffled, Jace shrugged.
"We can knock him out and steal the security card then."

"Jace!" Izzy exclaimed. When he looked at her she threw her arms out. "By the angel, why?!"

"It's a good idea," he argued.

Glancing to Alec, Magnus bestowed on him a doubtful look.

"Did you know he was this ludicrous when you chose him as your parabaitai? Because if so, then I'm going to start doubting your judgement from now on."

Seeming ready to smother, Jace wheeled on him. "Why don't you-"

Before he could go through with his intentions, Izzy intervened.

"Oh, boys," she singsonged, slapping Jace on the arm to get him to quiet down. "I figured it out."

Jace reluctantly turned his attention on her. "And?"

Arching a single eyebrow, Alec answered, in a deadpan voice, "She's going to flirt her way inside." He looked at his sister. "Aren't you?"

"Heck, yeah, I am," Izzy admitted freely. Making a gesture down her shapely body, she grinned. "Have you seen me?"

"Fine," Alec agreed, sparing everyone from more arguments. "Good luck."

Swiftly making herself visible, Izzy tucked the stele back in her pocket and opened the door leading towards the guard. "I don't need luck," she replied, hair billowing behind her as she sauntered out.

It took about a second after she'd gone for the tension to return.

If silence could have weight, the space they occupied had the mass of a skyscraper. Jace had his back to the wall, his arms folded tightly and his face once more twisted in a scowl. Clary was in the same position, leaning against the wall and glowering at Jace with barely hidden loathing. Magnus was still firmly placed in the middle between them, and it didn't feel particularly good. Staring into the ceiling, as if there was something captivating written there, Alec was no help.

"Well," Magnus said, clearing his throat. "This is awkward."

He retreated back to the first step of the stairs and sat down.

All of them, with the exception of Clary, jumped at the opportunity to get out of there when Izzy returned. But the shake of her head was one of defeat.

"Nope," she declared without a hint of dismay. "He didn't take the bait." Her face lit up when she patted Alec on the shoulder. "You're up, bro."

Alec's eyes immediately darted to Jace.

"What about Jace?" he asked, and it sounded like his voice was wobbling.

"He looks like he belongs behind bars," Izzy pointed out.

Jace's expression turned into a smug one.
"Some people find that attractive.

"Yeah, those are called idiots, Jace," Clary spat.

Izzy nudged Alec.

"You're it."

Alec in return looked about ready to choke to death on his own saliva.

"I ..." His eyes were dancing around, trying very hard not to make eye contact with anyone. "I-"

Sighing internally, Magnus rose to his feet. Ignoring how amusing it was to see him squirm, his compassion extended to stepping in before Alec had time to drop dead from the inevitable stroke he was going to give himself.

He directed himself at Izzy. "Allow me."

Her eyebrows lifted and so did the corners of her mouth. "You think you're better than me?"

"Undoubtedly," Magnus replied with flair. "Glamour yourself again and leave the rest to me."

It was a while since he'd done this. Even longer since it'd held any kind of importance. But it was easy to fall into habits, especially entertaining ones. Leaving the others to stand a few paces away, far enough so that they couldn't overhear, Magnus strolled casually down the hallway. The guard, with a name tag announcing that his name was Seth, looked up from where he was seated, reading a magazine.

He had sunglasses on. Inside.

That was what he had to work with.

Taking a deep breath, and turning on the charm he'd perfected over the years, Magnus hesitated in his step, as if he was unsure how to approach.

"Officer?" he asked.

The man acknowledged him with a nod.

"Hello," Magnus smiled sheepishly, dragging a hand self-consciously through his hair. "Um ..."

When that was all he said, the man put down the magazine and bestowed all his focus on him.

"Is there a problem?"

"Uh, well ..." Magnus laughed, embarrassed. "I was visiting a friend here and when I returned to my car it decided to all of a sudden abandon all hope right outside your doors. Is there any chance you know anything about cars? I would call a towing service normally but they always take forever, and I have a really important meeting in an hour."

The security guard removed his glasses, showing a handsome face in its late thirties.

"I'm sorry," he said, and it sounded sincere. "But I think it's better if you call a tow truck."
Letting his gaze fall for a moment, Magnus looked up at his target again and spotted the cracks in that answer. He decided to push.

"Please?" he implored. "I know I'm asking for a lot, but you'd really help me out here ..." Tilting his head to read a name tag he'd already read, he added, "Seth."

Some people, those going into security professions for instance, were always weak for vulnerability. And it couldn't have worked better in this situation.

With an obliging gesture, Seth stood up. "Sure. Show me."

Smiling like the moon had been hung, Magnus said, "Thank you. You're a lifesaver."

Seth seemed to appreciate the sentiment, returning Magnus' smile when they headed side by side towards the elevator. As they neared, they narrowly avoided walking into Clary who was standing the farthest from the wall. Bringing up a hand to brush through his hair, Magnus discreetly signalled for them to go. When they stepped into the elevator their shoulders brushed.

"Down, I'm guessing?" Seth asked, his finger already pressing the button for the first floor.

"You guess right," Magnus replied, his cheeks hurting from the excessive smiling.

As the doors closed he saw the others hurry into the room. The view was cut off right as he noticed that Alec looked back over his shoulder.

His plan, though effective, had a glaring fault. There was no car. As they exited the hospital, Magnus led his companion towards the parking lot. Thank god it was expansive.

"So how long have you worked here?" he inquired, slowing his step as much as possible without stopping completely.

Either Seth didn't notice or he didn't care as he fell into Magnus' pace.

"Three years."

"Do you like it?"

It was met with a half shrug.

"It's work."

Magnus nodded understandingly while trying to calculate exactly how much time he needed to buy them.

"I know what you mean. It's trying sometimes."

Turning his head towards Magnus, Seth asked, "What do you do?"

It came fast since it was part true. "I'm a consultant."

"Of?"

"I ..."

They passed another row of parked vehicles, but it was thinning drastically. They would soon be at the last parking spots.
How far could they have gotten? Had they located the killer yet?

His mouth moved without reflecting on what he was saying.

"I work with demons mostly."

Magnus groaned inwardly when the answer had left his lips. If that didn't sound insane, he didn't know what did.

But he was surprised by a huffed laugh.

"Lawyers," Seth affirmed knowingly.

Concurring immediately, Magnus said, "How could you tell?"

He was aware of how Seth's eyes scanned him steadily from head to toe.

"Lucky guess," was the reply. "Where's your car?"

Choosing on random, Magnus pointed at sleek jaguar.

"Nice."

How long had they been talking?

"You're a lifesaver, you know," Magnus decided to repeat when every other line slipped his mind.

They should have discussed this beforehand. Why hadn't they decided on a strategy?

"You've said that," Seth remarked.

"Well, I mean it," Magnus smiled as Seth looked at him.

They arrived at the flashy car and Seth was right at the hood when he turned around.

"Would you like to have a drink with me after my shift is over?"

Latching onto the subject, Magnus nodded enthusiastically.

"Sure." He discreetly moved closer, using the excuse of the car. "When do you get off?"

The grin that met him was very white.

"At eight."

Magnus cleared his throat.

"Sounds great."

They were almost pressed against each other now and Seth readily concurred.

"Great." His attention finally fell on the car and he put his hands on the expensive vehicle. "If you just pop the-"

At the touch of Magnus' fingers he collapsed on the ground.

"I was hoping to avoid that," Magnus mumbled as he propped up the unconscious body against the
When he straightened his back he spotted a small group of older women close by throwing concerned looks their way.

"Just sleeping it off," he reassured them. "He's getting married tomorrow."

He saw how they visibly relaxed when their worries were put to rest.

"Oh," one of them laughed. "That's why you're dressed like that?"

"Yes," Magnus agreed amiably. "Yes, it is. Good day, ladies."

It almost took him falling asleep in the warm sun for them to return. As the sound of talking grew louder he sat up, his legs dangling from the hood while he watched them approach. The owner of the jaguar had failed to come and claim it yet.

The first to note the limp form sitting on the ground was Jace.

"You get to knock out mundanes?"

Magnus set his feet to the ground.

"It was either that or having sex with him." He straightened his overcoat. "I'm not aiming for an Oscar here."

Giving them a quick cursory glance which revealed neither relief nor tension, he asked, "Did you find out something?"

Jace made an unconcerned gesture.

"The guy's a run-of-the-mill nutjob. He saw pointy ears and got spooked."

"Good to know."

When all four of them fell into discussion about reporting back to the Institute, Magnus turned back to look at the sleeping figure. The magic would wear off soon. Pondering exactly how morally reprehensible it would be to simply leave him outside exposed to the elements until it did, he hadn't decided yet on a course of action when a voice said his name in a hushed tone.

"Magnus."

He didn't need to look up from his current predicament just to stare at another variation of it.

"That's my name, yes," he confirmed to Alec.

"I need to talk to you later."

That made him lift his head to meet a pair of insisting eyes.

Why talk? Why later? Why at all?

'Why?' was a headache inducing question that only arouse around the Nephilim.

Alec didn't go into specifics while he waited for the answer. It didn't bode well, as so few things did when Alec was involved.
"I have a distinct feeling I'm going to say no to that." Holding up a finger, Magnus gave it five seconds before he capped it off with, "Yes, I'm going to go with no."

Alec closed the distance between them, his voice dipping lower.

"It's important."

All of their business, whether urgent or not, was always so very important. It had to be exhausting to think so highly of yourself. Magnus arched an unswayed brow.

"Please."

Heaving a sigh, already sensing the upcoming regret waiting to rain down on his head at the first sign of what a mistake this would undoubtedly prove itself to be, Magnus said, "Fine." However, he wasn't finished. "But one word out of your mouth that I don't like and you're out the door. Got it?"

Alec's eyes darted behind him and didn't answer as Izzy came dancing up to them.

"Nice work," she complimented.

Stepping back to include her in their space, Magnus replied, "Years of practice."

Over Izzy's shoulder he caught sight of Clary and Jace standing farther away, both studiously avoiding to acknowledge the other's presence.

His wandering attention returned to Izzy.

"Heading back to the Institute?"

"To sleep," she vowed sincerely. "For twenty-four hours minimum."

He'd thought he'd lost his naivety somewhere in the space between 1815 and 1889 but Magnus discovered that some part of it had clung tight throughout the centuries since. When the clock's hour hand climbed higher to the north and Alec had yet deigned to shown up, he took it as an assurance that Alec had changed his mind.

It was a short lived relief, and a sharp reminder why he'd lost his innocence in the first place, when he half an hour later sensed an unavoidable presence arriving on the doorstep.

Effortlessly, with no more than a shift of the wrist, the wards yielded, allowing an approach to be made.

Flipping page, continuously engrossed, Magnus answered automatically when there came a knock. "It's open."

In the corner of his eye he attributed the tall shape and determined footsteps to his expected visitor.

As a last self preservation act, putting off the inevitable for as long as possible, Magnus kept on reading while politely asking, "So what is it you want to talk to me about?"

When a reply didn't come back Magnus exhaled loudly, put the book to the side and found Alec standing close by.

Dressed from head to toe in black as always, Alec's appearance was nothing out of the ordinary until
the seraph blade by his side became noticeable and how other hilts, strapped to both his legs and waist, and probably a lot more places Magnus wouldn't know about unless he chose to get uncomfortably close, peaked out. Around Alec's chest was the quiver fastened. A gloved hand holding onto the bow hanging in the same height as his hips was used to gesture towards the entrance.

"I'll explain on the way."

Chapter End Notes

So what do you think? Is the normal, stress free life here to stay? Is Jace going completely bonkers? Is it true what Magnus believes, that this is all there's ever going to be between him and Alec? Is there something Alec could have said to convince Magnus to forgive him? Where are they going? And did poor Seth get sunburned?
A New Player

Chapter Summary

Hello, my dudes!

Our tagline/motto/unofficial slogan: "And when I thought things could go well, they go so wrong." - domoiswatchingyou

So the reason this took a little longer is because it's another double feature! Or, by now, it's just normal length. Seriously, I'm beginning to think I need to get some help for this addiction. Is writer rehab a thing? :)

Disregarding my descent into dependency to the written word, this chapter is ... something, guys. Stuff happens. Kind of big deal, stuff. I really hope you'll like it!

So, without letting anything get in our way, let's get this show on the road!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hanging Tree

Are you, are you
Coming to the tree
They strung up a man
They say who murdered three
Strange things did happen here
No stranger would it be
If we met at midnight
In the hanging tree

Are you, are you
Coming to the tree
Where dead man called out
For his love to flee
Strange things did happen here
No stranger would it be
If we met at midnight
In the hanging tree

Are you, are you
Coming to the tree
Where I told you to run
So we'd both be free
Strange things did happen here
No stranger would it be
If we met at midnight
In the hanging tree
"Don't misunderstand me. I adore the whole concept of 'coming to my door at the strike of twelve to sweep me off into the night', but it's usually executed by someone I'm in a relationship with, or a friend. Not a person who may or may not be planning where to discard my corpse as we speak."

Speak being a faulty term, seeing that Alec still hadn't begun explaining what they were doing. All he'd asked was that they'd portal back to the Union Square. Having obliged, they were now striding along the same streets as they had earlier in the day. The city wasn't quiet, not even at midnight, but the sidewalks were deserted mostly, and talking to the air didn't draw the same attention. The time of the hour made crazy the new normal.

"If I wanted to kill you I would've done it years ago," Alec eventually replied when they cut a corner.

They were clearly heading towards the square pearl white tower, yet still lacking clarification as to why, now when 'the where' had stated itself with the imposing structure growing bigger as they
neared.

"As comforting as that is, you can never be too careful," Magnus said.

When Alec lifted a brow vaguely in his direction, he continued.

"Didn't they teach you about stranger danger?"

That was left without a comment from Alec, probably because he didn't have a clue what Magnus was referring to. Why would he? Young Shadowhunters didn't have to worry about those sorts of things. They didn't encounter strangers in the first place.

At the entrance, with the exact same letters once more proclaiming 'St. Gretel's Mental Health Center' above them, Alec halted.

Magnus tilted his head to the side as he stared up, trying to make out the capital s.

"Do you have a thing for the mentally unwell?" he mused sweetly. "Because Lydia doesn't seem-"

With a, frankly, rude interruption, Alec cut in. "Are you going to be like this all night?"

"You asked to talk," Magnus reminded him without taking his eyes off the sign. "I indulged you. I never said I was going to be pleasant."

Feeling the pointed gaze stemming from his right side not moving away, Magnus turned so that he could really show off the grin spreading across his face. "That means yes."

When there was no reaction from Alec, Magnus indicated the hospital with a lazy wave.

"Why are we back here? And why did you pack an arsenal?" he added when his attention once more zeroed in on a new hilt it had discovered, this time snugly strapped to the inner upper arm.

How many weapons could one person physically fit on their body before they tipped over with the added weight?

"Because," Alec told him, "there's something not right with the mundane we saw."

"More than the whole 'killing spree' thing?"

Keeping to this new routine of just not replying to snappy quips actively meant that they were stuck in limbo.

"You know this 'stoic silence','',' Magnus made quotation marks in the air, "really doesn't bother me. I don't need you to talk. I much prefer to be passive aggressive and give you snide comments for the remainder of our happy time together. It really brightens my day, if you can't tell."

And his declaration changed nothing. Alec kept looking at him, face cut the same it had been five minutes ago. With this new approach they could in all likelihood spend the rest of Alec's short lifespan not saying another word to each other. By the looks of it, Alec's whole existence could come to an end without a retort passing his lips.

It might have been impressive had it not been so flummoxing. Maybe he'd taken their earlier discussion to heart regarding the 'what do you want me to say' part. Evidently he hadn't come to any conclusions surrounding that yet. Unless he waited to spit them out for dramatic effect later on. Magnus wouldn't put it past him.
But he didn't feel up to prying it out of him. And if they weren't going to freeze their limbs off out here, someone had speak.

"Fine," Magnus yielded. "Do tell."

"That's it," Alec concluded when he'd waited for a moment. "We're breaking in."

Breaking into an open building wasn't as daunting as Alec stated it, but that was a wisecrack for another time. There was another thought, more serious, that was prodding to get out.

"Why ask for my help?"

Magnus let his gaze roam, trying to understand what he was doing here in the first place. This wasn't a typical warlock affair. Another Shadowhunter would do just as fine, if not better. His magic had no obvious advantages here, unless Alec wanted to be portaled to the fifth floor to skip the stairs.

"I don't think I can flirt our way out of this one again."

Showing nothing, and saying nothing, Alec inclined his head towards the entrance and started for it. Following with a exasperated sigh, Magnus pointed out, "You know, one of these days you're actually going to have to use your words."

"Not right now," Alec said quietly, as the automatic doors slid open.

Refraining from shoving him headfirst into the next set of doors before they separated to let them through, Magnus only had access to dissatisfied muttering to quench the lust of friendly fire. "And you think I'm annoying."

When they entered, it was still easy to slip by the reception with the three nurses seated behind. Despite that it was a private establishment the inside was as busy as any other medical institution. There were no people sitting in the pristine couches placed tastefully along the floor to ceiling windows. The navy fabric clinging to the frames seemed to be untouched and it would be a surprise if they had ever been used. This wasn't a place of business for nothing. A patient wealthy enough to land themselves a spot here, was clearly important enough to not be kept waiting. It was the amount of personnel moving around that made their undertaking possible. They didn't have to blend in, they just had to avoid to draw any attention.

As they took the stairwell, Alec leading the way, he didn't stop at the fifth floor.

"Alexander?" Magnus paused at the correct landing. "This is our stop."

"I have a plan," Alec told him as he kept up the pace, climbing higher. His voice echoed as he disappeared out of view, like a very pesky ghost. "Come on."

"Oh," Magnus said, putting his foot on the bottom stair. "Why isn't that comforting?"

A few minutes later they had reached the top floor and were now discussing their approach. He understood now exactly why Alec and Jace fit so well together. Their ideas were profoundly stupid.

"You want to set it on fire?" Magnus repeated, just to make sure he'd gotten the entirety of the strategy and not the quarter it sounded like.

"Just the curtains," Alec pacified him with. "It's the only way. We can't get inside again."

As far as plans went, hearing this one in context now didn't sound awful. Only inconvenient and
"So let's bring everyone out instead?" Magnus questioned, watching Alec agree when he did.

"You do realise this is fifteen floors? How many patients do you think resides here? Lighting this one up is not going to cut it."

"We'll work our way down," Alec informed him. "I'll take the right corridor. You take the left. When we're done, we go down to the fourteenth and so on."

"Until they evacuate?"

Alec nodded decidedly.

"Exactly."

And that was settled. With his stele in hand, Alec headed down the hallway. Magnus watched his back grow smaller and he shook his head.

"Aye, yai, yai," he mumbled to himself. "This is going to be one long night."

It took under half an hour for the building to be emptied. The arrival of the New York Fire Department pushed up the time table exceedingly, not only by their insistent sirens urging the stragglers on, but also through blocking off the evacuating inpatients and personnel from reentering with the fire trucks fencing in the health center, leaving them squeezed into a throng across the street. In the commotion Magnus and Alec had easily followed with the group and were as tightly packed against each other as the people surrounding them.

Their shoulders rubbed when Magnus shifted to get closer, lowering his voice. "Should we spread out? Hurry this up before they deduce there isn't a fire?"

Scanning the crammed crowd without catching sight of the one they were here to find, Alec concurred. "Black hair, green eyes. Aggressive and drools."

That description fit someone else like a glove.

"So, I'm essentially searching for your doppelganger," Magnus summarised. "That's ironic."

"My eyes are hazel," Alec corrected.

His comebacks were truly a work of art. That part was what he disagreed with?

"And the drool?" Magnus questioned innocently.

Abruptly, Alec headed into the mass, leaving Magnus behind to grin. Being around Alec wasn't terrible since he'd obviously made some kind of solemn oath to be courteous. Nothing except that could explain his reluctance to snap.

Feeling pleased with himself, Magnus chose the opposite way of where his escort had disappeared and began weaving a path on the circular perimeter. Taking precautions as to not be spotted as an outsider, he made sure to only brush against the fine beige robes of the patients and slip past before they had a chance to catch sight of the hooded stranger. On the off chance they had enough time to make out his dark attire against the backdrop of the equally dusky night, he was confident it wasn't the first story of a shadowy figure the nurses and doctors had heard. It probably wouldn't be the last
He'd made it about halfway without calling any attention when Alec suddenly popped up by his side. Say what you want about Shadowhunters, but they were skilled in stealth, with or without the aid of their runes.

"I've found him."

Alec guided them to the most secluded corner of the open space, though they stayed hidden within the group. Some feet away from everyone else stood a person fitting the description to a tee. His black hair was thin and the hairline receding. Gaunt, with eyes that seemed pushed into the skull, he could've been a walking corpse. He was perfectly still, despite the commotion, as if he belonged to another world entirely. Surrounding him was not one, or two, but three guards, easily distinguished by their umber uniforms. They didn't have any subduing weapons drawn but they seemed to be vigilant, their positions locked in a perfect triangle around the patient.

"You could've just said straitjacket. That would've gotten the point across," Magnus told Alec quietly while they took stock of the situation presenting itself before them.

"He wasn't wearing one earlier," Alec mumbled back.

Wasn't that amazing news?

"You're awful at being comforting," Magnus said. "I'm assuming he wasn't wearing a muzzle either?"

It wasn't possible to tell if the drooling section of Alec's detailing was true or not. With a heinous mask covering the lower part of the man's face, all they could make out was the breathing hole, which had been sparsely barred. The calmness of the spindly figure clashing with the anxious whimpers from the other patients Magnus could hear farther away, only strengthened the uncomfortable resemblance to a ravenous dog that was awaiting its chance to devour an unsuspecting prey.

"No," Alec affirmed. "Do you want to distract them or shall I?"

"You're invisible." Magnus fastened his gaze on his share of their joined effort. "Go distract."

Alec was effective. It didn't take more than a couple of minutes for the disruption to bring about the intended results. It began with unrest in the middle, where a wave of agitated murmuring rose into a clamour when it spread along the sides. The first guard was dispatched when a shout for assistance rang. When someone loudly cried out, claiming to have been pinched by an unseen force, and not relenting when being told to calm down, the second one left her post, leaving behind only the last one. He was diligent, refusing to leave his designated position. That was until something occurred across the crowd that triggered a pack mentality to set in, causing a rush to start, bodies all at once sprinting in every direction. When the guard, cursing loudly, ran westbound, Magnus darted towards the motionless man.

Up close, he appeared dead. The eyes, perhaps once green, were glassed over, the sockets sunken and on his temple was an infected wound that was oozing pus. He stared at nothing, not displaying any signs of being aware of Magnus' presence. Carefully, Magnus raised his hand.

"Please don't try to bite me," he asked of the man.

Touching a finger to the wound spurred no adversary reaction, or any other type of reaction. It didn't seem to bother him, or he'd already gotten used to the pain. The smell coming off it was the same of
that from rotting meat.

Letting his eyes fall, now when he was sure the patient wasn't about to attack him, Magnus went on with the only plan he could think off. Walking around the immobile body, he set his hands to undo the clasps on the back. But before he'd gotten even one of them unfastened, his focus was drawn to the outline of something sharp sticking up the bent neck. With something dangerously close to dread, he changed direction and began to loosen the collar.

His heart fell in his chest when it too realised exactly what they'd stumbled into. His hold tightened unwittingly.

A loud cackle interrupted his thoughts. Jerking his head to the right, Magnus witnessed how a woman, robe flying around her stout legs, had her arms stretched up in the air and giggled excitedly as she evaded the panting doctor chasing after her. He watched her fly past and vanish down the street.

When his gaze panned back, he caught sight of Alec coming towards him.

When he was close enough to ask, Alec said, "Have you found something?"

He looked closer at Magnus, his face growing concerned. "Magnus?"

Pulling down the fabric, Magnus urged him. "Look."

His fingers fenced in the delicate figure, like an arrow pointing out the target. Alec stepped closer and Magnus saw the moment it dawned, when his jaw tensed and his eyes grew hard.

Letting his palm cover it, as if it could take away what it meant, Magnus looked at Alec. "That's a rune."

The chaos they had created was still ringing out far in the distance when they walked in silence down the way they'd come. As the hour had grown late, the streets that had been close to deserted were now fully abandoned. The rest of the world could stand aflame and Magnus doubted Alec would notice. He was utterly devoured by his own thoughts, his face blank as he stared ahead. When they passed a dark alley, dank and ripe with the scent of decomposing garbage and the noises associated with night, Magnus chose to voice the uncomfortable task neither had acknowledged aloud yet.

"You have to kill him before he turns completely. A forsaken among humans is-"

"I know," Alec said before he could finish. His lips barely moved, his shoulders tense to the degree of breaking.

If only that had been the end of it. But there was an abundance of problems staring them in the face. The first and foremost being who had put the runes on that human. Then there was the question of why. Someone had made a scapegoat to take the fall for killing the seelies. It wasn't the man who'd shot them, since he hadn't turned yet. He wasn't a mindless monster, and thus not susceptible to taking orders or loyal to his creator. He was innocent. Which meant they had a killer whose victim count had just risen to four. But for what reason? Why had the seelies been murdered in the first place?

However, the most problematic thing of all was the fact that it had been a Nephilim. Another one that had ventured off the pedestal they proudly perched upon. They were falling fast now, like the angels
had before them.

Their light breathing sounded heavy in between what they weren't saying.

"I don't think Valentine is behind this," Magnus told him finally, certain of it.

It wasn't the way he operated. If Valentine had been behind the attacks, then he would've boasted about it, not hidden behind a human. He'd never sink to use a human weapon, certainly not to cover his tracks. For being completely insane, he did have an unwavering commitment to that which he deemed crucial. His fault lay in that it was his pride and envy that held no higher esteem. Life had little worth to him and his followers alike.

"He isn't," Alec answered, barely audible. "He doesn't utilise patsies."

They crossed the street without seeing any cars. It was unusual, how quiet the city was around them. Almost as if it knew how serious their discovery had been and chosen to give them their own bubble to help ease the graveness. The streetlights distorted their shadows, making them longer as their steps started quietly echoing.

"What are the odds that this is rouge Shadowhunter? Someone who likes to kill downworlders for sport?"

Keeping his voice light, Magnus didn't allow it to betray him. The years had allowed him to hone that skill to perfection.

"No," Alec replied, sounding completely normal.

It kicked the alarm that was surging inside Magnus' veins into high gear.

He was unaware. Alec didn't know.

With a mind that was racing through possibilities, Magnus tried to find a way to tell him without breaking formation.

"It's one of us," Alec said calmly as he started to inch closer. When they were shoulder to shoulder, Alec gently touched his wrist.

Magnus closed his eyes at the contact.

He'd been putting on a show.

"You hear that?" Alec breathed as he leaned into Magnus' ear.

Keeping as relaxed as possible, Magnus grasped Alec's hand and squeezed. Their echo was still ringing out behind them, despite that there were no buildings that the resounding could reflect against.

Without lifting his eyes, Magnus breathed back, "How many?"

Alec, shifting even closer, if that was possible since he was almost walking on Magnus' heels, entwined their fingers. When they were secured, he pushed down his fingertips into the back of Magnus' hand six times.

Six times. Six stalkers.

It didn't sound like they'd been made yet, the pursuing steps still unrushed. But that wouldn't last
They needed to get out of here. Now.

Glimpsing the beginning of an alleyway straight to their left in a few yards, Magnus held tightly to
summon what little of Alec's attention he didn't already have.

"'Round the corner." Their sides brushed, Alec's hair tickling Magnus' cheek. "Be ready for a jump."

Alec held equally tight and that was as much of an agreement Magnus needed. Without looking
back, they skirted the corner and magic was at once ready to form a portal, sparks popping. But it
died in the palm of his hand when they both froze on the spot.

"We've been waiting for you," the woman standing in the front greeted. With her hair up, the circular
rune was on full display.

Behind her was at least a dozen more, all armed and waiting. They'd been herded like blind sheep
into a slaughterhouse.

Behind them were those that had hunted them and in front were their executioners. The alley, wet
and moist from the chill in the air, had one thin opening on the left side, barely big enough to fit a
child. Other than that, it was a fortress. This normal section of New York had for this evening's
purpose turned from a pedestrian shortcut into an ambush ready to claim its victims.

Despite the hair on his neck standing up when hearing the breathing of those close behind, he didn't
turn around. Alec fought the urge as well, his hand twitching against Magnus'. They both were
highly aware that they were trapped and about to be killed.

It was an involuntarily flinch that made him jerk when he made out the sound of someone nocking
an arrow.

Magnus could feel their grip on each other slipping a second before Alec let him go completely.

The leader, her light eyes glowing with the sweet taste of victory, drew her seraph blade.

"Run!" Alec snapped, and they both bolted.

The only problem was that they were heading in entirely opposite directions.

Defying physics and almost getting stuck the first feet thanks to his blatant disregard for it, Magnus
squeezed through the narrow slit in the wall. The rough bricks tugged at his clothes, urging him to
stay with them, using their encroaching mortar as convincing arguments for their side. Magnus
pressed on, his survival instincts forcing him to ignore the pain when something sharp slashed into
his shin.

In the panic, he'd lost sight of Alec. He'd been convinced they'd been on the same page, but he
couldn't feel someone moving behind him. Risking a glance over his shoulder, turning with great
difficulty, Magnus spotted him over the shapes of those that were in the process of trying to squash in
after him. Alec was scrambling onto a rusty ladder that appeared to be detaching from the wall as he
did, while simultaneously ducking projectiles being fired off.

Magnus lungs burned with the need to scream out his name, to warn him, but he didn't have time
when his body automatically kept moving forward and away from the horrifying sight. As his back
scraped open and his arms roughened until they bled from the walls suffocating him, he wasn't
advancing quicker than his pursuers. Through his own pulse pounding against his eardrums, he
could hear them catching up. With a jolt of frantic energy, he burst through the end of the lengthy aperture. Nearly falling to his knees with his balance off-kilter, Magnus wasted no time on catching his breath. He dashed out of the new alley he'd wound up in. Acting on the sane compulsion to put as much distance as possible between himself and the Circle, he chose to go left.

It was a miscalculation.

Looking behind as he sprinted down the block, which was open and empty like a cursed savannah, providing no chances to shake them off, he found himself hunted by five members. All of them fast, and deadly.

It was a completely silent game of cat and mouse. There were no warnings or threats as Magnus felt something ruffle his hair. The steel of the dagger flashed in the streetlight when he ran past where it had landed on the ground.

The sound of traffic close by reached his ears. Throwing his head around, he saw that they were closing in. Ducking around the corner, Magnus sped up, pushing his legs to move faster as he dove headfirst into the heavy stream of vehicles.

Brakes screeched loudly when he was almost rammed in the first second. Clutching onto the hot hood, he ordered his tired body to move. A horn blared when he darted forward and someone yelled, "Fucking idiot!"

But another sound overpowered the cursing. It was the unmistakable crash of something being struck hard. He didn't check for what he already knew. One or more of them had been hit by a car since their glamour worked only to make them invisible, not invincible. Seizing the opportunity, Magnus ran.

The bright glow of an 'Open 24 Hours' neon sign was as much of an incentive as he needed. With cold sweat sticking to his sore back, and lungs that were most likely suffocating from the lack of proper circulation of oxygen, Magnus yanked the door open.

A soft bell rung above his head, announcing his entrance. The owner, an older woman standing behind the cluttered counter, didn't glance up from her newly lit cigarette and newspaper.

It was a good thing, seeing that if she lifted her eyes, she'd see someone on the brink of collapsing. Breathing like he was having an asthmatic attack, Magnus slid into the last aisle beneath the small three hanging above it. As soon as he knew he was hidden from view, he fell back against the shelf with snacks, cushioning his neck on a bag of popcorn.

The blood in his veins coursed too fast, the hammering in his ears making him deaf. He shut his eyes, trying to reign in his chaotic feelings to be able to think.

He needed to go back.

The objective piece of his brain shouted at him to reconsider. He had a chance to escape unscathed. With a portal he could return safely home. But that wasn't an option. It hadn't been since they split. If he left now, Alec could die. And it would be his fault if he chose to abandon him now.

It can be too late already, a voice in the back of his head pointed out. What happens then?

He ignored it, shaking it away. If Alec had been unwise enough to die, Magnus would kill him twice over.
He was certain that Alec wasn't dead, but the urge to find him and see for himself that he was unharmed burned through every rational thought. Opening his eyes, Magnus stared at the fridge filled with beers and soft drinks.

He could make a portal back to the alley and then try to retrace Alec's steps. That would be the next logical step.

Pushing away from the shelf, with magic ready to act out his will sparkling in his palm, Magnus was about to conjure up the purple mist when the bell, notifying an arrival, chimed.

"Damn bell," the owner grumbled from behind the counter. "Always acting up."

Holding his breath, Magnus fell back, focusing on listening. Soft, seeking footsteps had spread out, one pair moving directly behind him and other pairs out to the sides. And then he heard someone singing under their breath, just beyond the protective barrier of potato chips and salted sticks.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," it sang with an innocent lilt.

It was either his own choice or the magic choosing for him. It was of little concern, who was in control. The result was the same.

A blast, shooting out from his fingertips, hit the shelf, causing it to tip over with incredible force, spreading groceries everywhere. The metal that the frame was constructed of sank past the vinyl flooring when it collided with the surface, cutting down to the concrete foundation as it crushed whatever had been on the other side.

As it keeled over, taking down the two other shelf that had formed the three aisles, it made it apparent how many enemies he had. And how much trouble he was in.

There was a shocked beat, where everyone stopped for a moment to take in what had just happened, and then they charged.

Starting, Magnus scrubbed across the wreckage, betting everything on reaching the outside. A sword came down where his head had been a second ago and he rolled away, only to find another Shadowhunter waiting. Towering over Magnus' crouching form, the boy, not older than Clary, decided on kicking before he deigned to use the spiky mace dangling in his grip.

When he reared his boot back, Magnus clasped the stationary leg. The energy pulsating through his bones went gladly into the skeleton of the boy. It sent him straight backwards, firing him off like a bullet from a gun when he smashed through the wall of glass on the left side of the door and kept going.

Getting to his feet, Magnus dodged an axe flying his direction. Keeping his back to where there was a nice draft coming from the west currently, his eyes, his true eyes, watched carefully the movements of the two remaining.

He grinned wickedly when he saw how the older of them flinched.

"Magnificent, aren't they?" he asked her, his voice a smooth caress.

In the middle of their standstill laid the shelf from where no more singing rose. Magnus focused on the greying woman. The disgust bristled around her large frame and he embraced it with a broader grin.

Her arm, halfway raised, twitched.
"You'll die by my hand if you try," Magnus cautioned her.

The second Shadowhunter, the man on the other side of the room, hissed with revulsion. "We don't make deals with demons."

"You're in luck then," Magnus said. He lit his hands, letting magic burn its way up his arm until it reached his elbow; an emerald fire enclosing it. "I don't make deals with the devil."

Projectiles in the shape of spears burst out of him. Searing the air as they went, they left the smell of burnt wood behind. Their intended targets evaded them, ducking away from the rampage. Magnus dashed, close to escaping when he was rammed. She overpowered him a moment before a charge, passing from him to where their bodies were connected, cast her to the ground.

Behind her came the last one rushing, but the man gave his strategy away. Using his adversary's speed to his own advantage, Magnus moved with the member and when he was about to be struck down, he easily sent a bolt that struck the man straight in the chest. It jolted him to a stop. He stood wavering, as if death was a conundrum that he couldn't grasp just yet. Magnus didn't hinder his fall. Instead he turned to see him crash through the glass wall on the right side of the door.

He was pierced on the shards, dangling over it like a rug hung out to dry.

Slowly, Magnus' eyes returned to their glamoured state. His hands stopped glowing. Giving his body a break from its anxious state, Magnus-

He cried out, more in shock than pain when he felt how the blade dug into the juncture between his neck and his shoulder to then twist. Instinctively, he threw his body away from the source and the knife was ripped out when the attacker held on to the hilt. Blood flowed freely, pooling in the indent of his collarbone.

The reflexes he'd earned with the years were what saved his life. He had one hand seizing her wrist and the other clutching around her throat before he knew he'd acted. Her eyes spewed pure hatred, as she clearly hadn't appreciated the lucky fact that she'd survived that charge. It wasn't going to happen twice.

It was an involuntary act, his mind blanking out.

When he'd held her a moment, he let her go. She blinked at him, bemused. The knife dropped from her fingers when she held up her hand in front of herself. Magnus touched his own hand to his wound, mumbling a healing incantation, as he observed hers beginning to liquefy.

The screams tore, but not for long. Only until her face followed after.

Magnus lifted his gaze above the melting corpse and met the eyes of the owner. She was still standing, the newspaper still spread open in her arms and with a cigarette made up of only ash dropping out of her mouth when her lips moved without making any sound.

Magnus gestured at the state of the store.

"My sincerest apologies."

Turning around, the bell chimed when he exited calmly through the door that had no walls on either side.
Bad idea.

It was such a bad idea, he told himself again where he sat hunkered down behind a parked truck. He'd put his hood up but it felt woefully inadequate to ward off a stab in the back. It enabled him to blend in with the shadows but that was the extent of it. It wouldn't protect him from when he was going forward with his, plainly put, awful plan.

But it was the only one he could think of.

Magnus had found his way back to where they had been trapped earlier. Sitting with his back resting against the truck that was parked squarely across from the alleyway, he'd spied around the bumper and watched Circle members come and go. So far his strategy to keep close to his enemies, betting on that they wouldn't think so little of his intelligence that they'd expect him to return for more, was working. It was at least ten minutes since he'd seen anyone and he was stretching his luck if he waited any longer.

It was time to act.

Repressing the ingrained need to have magic at the ready, he let it lay dormant as he slowly crept around the bumper. It would draw unwanted attention to have radiating flickers of light illuminating his palms, but it didn't make the shiver chasing down his spine any less poignant. It was one thing to hide without it, but to cross the street unprotected was a risky venture. Conducting one final scan of the desolated block and finding it as empty as before, Magnus rose to his feet. He ducked into the alley, quelling the agitation that reared up when he slowed down to a brisk walk.

It went against every instinct that danced teasingly on his frazzled nerves. Sidling up to the wall, he did his best to become invisible. Hyper aware of how loud his soft footsteps were, he made an effort to keep them light as he reached the aperture that had been his escape route. Seeing it now, he had no clue how he'd fitted through it to begin with.

His blood froze thick, chilling him from the inside when he turned to the opposite wall. The aged ladder, more rust than metal, had indeed unfastened from its bolts. It was resting high above him, supported against the brick. It was, however, still attached on the bottom, creating a sort of bridge to the wrong roof. A fall from that height would kill a human. Yet that wasn't the aspect that made his stomach turn.

High up, buried into the mortar, were multiple arrows' fletchings protruding. And from them, trailing down the once red bricks, were lines of blood. Following them to the bottom, he didn't have to look closer to make out the puddle on the ground. It had splattered all the way across to where he was standing. Magnus noticed his shoe was touching a dried patch of it. It looked like a bucket of red paint had been accidentally knocked off one of the top windowsills. But if that wasn't the case, if a tenant hadn't been doing some late night repainting, someone had had their throat cut and emptied onto the pavement.

Seeing the wet puddle glistening, Magnus paused a moment to pull it together. He had to figure out how he was going to proceed.

He refused to assume that that was Alec's blood. There was no body, so he wasn't dead. He might be injured, but that was the worst case scenario Magnus was ready to accept. Perhaps Alec was on the roof. He glanced up. Yes, that was a good place to start. It would give him a vantage point.

But before he could act, he heard someone approaching from behind. He had to hide, and fast, judging by the speed of the incoming steps. There were a couple of dumpsters a stone's throw away. Aiming for the last one, Magnus skirted the first when a hand, out of nowhere, clamped over his
mouth and an arm banded around his waist.

He was pulled down to the ground with force, collapsing when he couldn't break free.

Struggling, he fought against the fierce hold, his nails digging into the wrist of his assailant, when Alec hushed into his ear.

"Shh," he hissed, tugging Magnus closer when he didn't stop.

Immediately, he ceased his efforts to free himself when he recognised the voice, but despite that, Alec didn't let him go. His hand was still covering his mouth, his arm tightening when he dragged them back behind the dumpster with Magnus in his lap.

It became obvious why when they both became transfixed at the sound of the rushed stomping Magnus had heard, stopping no more than ten feet away. Alec's chest rose quickly against his back, his breath warm against his cheek when they eavesdropped on the argument playing out on the other side, with only the green waste container standing in between them and their would-be killers.

"Where are they?!" a woman's voice barked. The same that had greeted them when they'd walked into the ambush.

"Dead," a rougher one answered. "The warlock escaped. He's probably long gone by now."

Alec's arm flexed around his waist.

"Lightwood?" Her tone had taken on a chilling fury. That one word alone sounded like it could cut through flesh.

"We lost him. But he's severely injured."

Magnus tensed. He tried to turn around but Alec held harder, shaking his head so that Magnus could feel it.

With his hand still clasped onto Alec's wrist, Magnus responded by running a relieved thumb over the pulse point.

They were safe. For now.

"Find him!" she demanded harshly. "And it's in your best interest that he doesn't make it home with his head still attached."

That was the end of the conversation. The footsteps dissipated when the woman and her companion headed off.

They remained pressed together, barely daring to breath, while they counted the minutes ticking by. When nothing happened, Alec slowly released him from his death vice.

"You okay?" he mumbled in Magnus' ear.

Nodding against his chest, Magnus asked, in a hushed tone, "You?"

"Yeah," Alec said. "Let's get the hell out of here."

Magnus couldn't agree more. With less grace than usual, he stood up from his scrunched position and extended a hand to Alec.
Pulling Alec onto his feet, Magnus brushed off the sleeves of his jacket that had become crusty with residue from the dirty ground.

"What is going on?" Alec said, but it didn't sound like it was a question he expected to be answered.

"I have no idea." Magnus raised his hand to conjure up a portal. It took shape immediately, as if it too was in a hurry for them to get home. "Let's ta-"

The rest of the sentence stuck in his throat when he was suddenly and violently thrown to the side. His shoulder slammed painfully into the brick before he could catch himself. Flipping around, the protest on his tongue died when Alec, who was now standing in the exact spot Magnus had been rooted in a second ago, sagged to his knees, the shaft of an arrow digging deep into his abdomen.

"Alec!"

Magnus' gaze flitted around, searching for the source until it locked in on a Shadowhunter standing by the alleyway's opening, his bow raised once more. Magnus cut his hand sharply through the air, causing the wall right beside the shooter to crumble. As it began to collapse, Magnus swooped down, draping Alec's limp arm around his neck and hauling him up from where he'd slumped on the ground. But Alec wasn't cooperating.

"Get up!" Magnus urged him when Alec's head fell on his shoulder.

With only his own strength, Magnus somehow pushed them both onto their feet. But that small movement seemed to have drained what was left of Alec's willpower. His legs started giving out and he sagged against Magnus.

"You have to stand!" Magnus brusquely commanded.

Alec only mumbled something into his neck, his eyes barely open.

Alarming shouts coming from a distance announced that it was time to go if they were going to escape with their lives.

Sealing his arm around Alec's back, and pulling him closer, Magnus used every muscle in his body and lugged them forward. In the last moment possible, right before the portal dematerialised, they staggered through.

They stumbled into the coffee table.

Alec tottered to the side, his knees hitting the mahogany. The only thing that kept him from falling was Magnus' bruising grip. Steering them as best as he could, they toppled over a lamp when they wobbled to the left towards the couch. Alec collided with the front panel and started tipping forward. Reeling him back by force, Magnus managed to get him to land on his back. Immediately freeing himself, Magnus' hands went to where the arrow was lodged.

That shook Alec awake from his daze. His eyes sprang open and he groaned in protest. Trying to sit up and failing, he panted loudly at the pain.

Taking a firm grip on the protruding shaft, his hands slick with blood, Magnus warned him, "This will hurt."

Alec bit down on his lip, clutching onto the arm of the couch behind his head for something
grounding. "Do it."

He didn't count down, didn't give Alec any warning before he ruthlessly yanked it through the jagged skin.

Alec's pained cry died down quickly when he swallowed it down. Instead his knuckles paled when he focused all his energy on trying to mould the wood underneath his hands. But it didn't stop him from letting unwilling groans slip out through his fiercely sealed lips.

Barely hearing him across his crisp focus, Magnus discarded the arrow on the floor before he stacked his hands upon each other, covering the gaping wound. Through his spread fingers he could feel the blood flow, finding every crevice to caress until he was thoroughly drenched.

He began murmuring in a language few could speak, and even less had heard. Summoning the power he'd been born with, he could feel every cell in Alec's body halting. If he wanted, he could touch them, seize them, ask them to commit suicide. They would obey, as he commanded.

It was terrifying. It had always eaten at his heart, what he could do, what he was capable to inflict. He seldom chose to act on it, but the knowledge that he could, if he wanted to, was enough to petrify him at times.

It was never present when he chose to kill. He didn't have to feel them perish. But healing was completely different. Magic and the mending belonged together. And since there was no barrier between him and his magic, because they were one and the same, neither existing without the other, the bond to the mending was one that he too was forced to endure.

He could feel everything they felt. The pain, the anxiety, the desperation to keep on breathing. It wasn't mere impressions. Their injuries became his, their fear creeping into his bones. And when they died, when it was too late or he wasn't strong enough or skilled enough, he had to feel the life drain out of them, as if it was draining out of his very own veins. It was the risk he took, having to carry with him that sensation branded like a scar into his mind for the rest of eternity.

He'd died exquisitely and he'd died with regret. He'd died so many times across the centuries without every dying at all. It chipped away at him, broke off pieces he never regained.

That was why he never wanted to be put in these situations to begin with, yet he kept being shoved into them. If he could make a difference, then he'd pay the price of course, but he didn't want to have to. But that wasn't something he could ever admit. It was selfish and childish.

Catarina was spending her entire existence trying to make a difference, experiencing this very problem herself and continuing on without hesitation. And Ragnor, despite his posturing and huffing, had dedicated decades teaching at the Shadowhunter Academy to improve the attitude and minds of the Nephilim.

And Magnus had trouble with the easiest task because it frightened him to give too much of himself in case he'd lose. How could you even begin to justify that?

But being aware of the flaws he bore wasn't the same as eradicating them. Even as a glowing light manifested itself and he sensed how it began healing Alec, he was afraid. It didn't fade away until the wound sealed up and he could touch unbroken skin once more. Glancing to the end of the couch, Alec was sleeping soundly. His face was unmarred by pain and his chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm.

Letting his shoulders drop, Magnus straightened, taking a deep breath for the first time in hours.
Heading into the kitchen, he washed his stained hands. Ignoring how they shook, he filled a water glass. Taking it with him to the bedroom, he opened the first dresser. Upon finding what he was looking for, he returned to the living room.

Alec was crammed on the small furniture. His long legs were awkwardly sticking out over the edge but it didn't seem to bother him in the slightest.

Pulling one of the leather armchairs closer, he sat down beside Alec. He studied him for a while, looking him over.

"Alexander," Magnus said calmly.

Alec didn't move. He appeared dead to the world.

"Alexander," Magnus repeated, louder and crisper.

Alec shifted a little in his sleep, but otherwise there was no change.

Picking up the water glass, and taking a sip before, Magnus hurled it in Alec's face.

He immediately spluttered to life, coughing and hacking.

"Hey!" Magnus snapped. "Sleeping beauty."

He threw the t-shirt at Alec's wet face. He reflexively caught it.

"Put it on."

Alec blinked confusedly at him.

"Sorry it's not your normal colour but I don't do black," Magnus informed him curtly.

In his newly awakened state, Alec looked between the green t-shirt and Magnus without doing anything more.

"Just change," Magnus told him, irritated. "I've seen your chest before. I think I can pull through without swooning at the sight."

As Alec traded his blood soaked shirt for the clean one, Magnus felt how his stare became more of a glare the longer it took. When Alec was done, and sat up, Magnus decided the time was ripe.

"That stunt you just pulled," he gritted out through clenched teeth, "was by far the dumbest thing you've ever done. A more petty person would've let you die just to get that point across."

Alec stared at him.

"Should I have let him shoot you?"

"Yes!" Magnus shouted. He wasn't aware that he was, until his throat started hurting. "I'm not a healer! One of these days I won't be able to save you!"

Alec regarded him calmly.

"I'm not going to apologise for not standing by and watch you get hurt when I could do something to stop it," he said.
Wanting to throw something, Magnus shook his head dismissively instead of resorting to violence. "And you think getting shot is a way to help out?" He couldn't put enough sarcasm behind that sentence. "And you think you getting shot is better?" Alec replied, straightening his back. "This might be news to you, Magnus, but that's not an option."

Magnus narrowed his eyes. "I'm not going to thank you for it. It was unbelievably stupid of you." Alec raised an unimpressed brow. "I didn't do it for a thank you. I did it because my preference is you alive."

He was about to lash out again, but he didn't have a snappy comeback at hand, especially when Alec seemed completely unmoved at his outburst. He was just sitting there, composed and collected. "It was still idiotic," Magnus muttered, pulling up his legs to have something to rest his chin on. "That's your opinion," Alec answered. He didn't avert his gaze. "I'll do it again if I have to."

Using the bottom of the t-shirt, Alec dried his damp face. When he was done, he said, "Those were Circle members."

Magnus waited for the not obvious to be stated. "The seelies weren't killed by the Circle," Alec continued. "And yet they were there."

His gaze focused once more on Magnus, and this time only him. "What is it you're not telling me?"

Magnus heaved a sigh. The events of the past hours were starting to catch up to him and his body wasn't thrilled about that fact. "Nothing."

"First Pandemonium." Alec tilted his head. "Now this? Tell me the truth."

Magnus rolled his eyes hard enough that he gave himself a headache. "I. Don't. Know," he said. "Maybe they were after you. As you might recall, I had no idea where we were going in the first place. I couldn't have been followed."

In the face of logic, Alec surrendered. He slumped against the back support, dragging his hands through his hair. "Did you mean what you said?" Magnus watched closely for his reaction. "Do you think the Shadowhunter who murdered the seelies and marked that human is one of yours?"

"Yes." Alec didn't display any kind of visible emotional response at the thought that someone in the Institute might be an insane killer. "But I don't know why anyone would do that."

Magnus tapped two fingers against his leg. "So we have the Circle on the loose and a crazy murderer possibly living in the Institute." He shaped his lips into a smile. "Your life is certainly not boring."
"I hate my life," Alec sighed but he said it with an attempt at forming a grin.

"Look on the bright side." Magnus relaxed, letting himself find a more comfortable position. "We're not dead."

Alec laughed unexpectedly.

"There's that," he agreed.

"Here," a voice announced, putting down a mug hard on a table. "Coffee."

Prying his eyes open, one at a time, Magnus blinked at the awful light that was blinding him. Drowsy, he squinted around the bright room. Sunlight flowed through chinks in the curtains hanging in front of the tall windows. He soon located Alec close by, engrossed in a book and seated on the couch that had, as of now, crusty brown blotches on the formerly immaculate upholstery. It wouldn't clean out well. Blood seldom did.

But as his mind began sharpening from its newly awakened state, Magnus noticed that the stains weren't actually dry. There was a ring of saturated wetness surrounding them that had to be fresh. It looked like someone had tried to scrub the spots away with a bucketful of water and only succeed in spreading the discolouration over a larger area. The linen upholstery was at this point a strange hue of pink, interspersed with patches of the normal ivory.

"Did you try to wash the couch?"

When Alec didn't reply, only shifted uncomfortably, Magnus accepted it as a confession of the deed and let it go.

"Coffee?" he asked instead of pursuing the topic, stretching out of the contorted position he'd been sleeping in. Still in the armchair, he surmised he must have fallen asleep while they'd been talking.

Alec made a gesture towards Magnus' left without lifting his head.

Fighting against a blanket that he couldn't for the life of him remember fetching, Magnus reached for the mug placed on the small pedestal table beside him. "Bless you," he mumbled.

His gratitude lasted until the liquid hit his tongue. Choking, he ignored his manners and spit it back into the mug.

"That's not-" he objected, appalled, while he searched for an accurate term. It had to be what evil tasted like. "That's satanic," he decided, staring at the deep black content. "What did you put in it? Poison?"

Alec kept on reading.

"Ground beans."

"And water?" Magnus felt obligated to ask.

Alec turned the page.

"The polite thing to say would be thank you."

Magnus snorted courteously.
"I'm not polite at-" He checked the clock. "Seven in the morning?"

Could that be accurate? If so, then barely two hours had passed.

His head swivelled in Alec's direction.

"Did you sleep?"

Letting the book fall closed, Alec set it to the side.

"I couldn't."

He didn't need to go into further detail. It was self-explanatory. Impeding disaster wasn't the recipe for a good night's rest it once had been.

"I think we should talk."

"About what?" Magnus yawned, putting the offensive concoction back where he'd picked it up. He had to get some fresh air before he fell asleep again. "You almost getting turned into a pincushion last night?" He rubbed his eyes to wake himself up and when that didn't do the trick he clapped his cheeks roughly. "Because that's a subject I find most enthralling."

"About what happened before the wedding," Alec said. "And when you came back."

All leftover grogginess dropped off him at once. The swoosh of it almost made his head spin.

The lack of caffeine had nothing on the effect of Alec's words. Magnus felt how his body turned rigid instantly. He righted himself, and focused all of his attention on the person sitting across from him.

"What's there to say?" he asked, and it was a warning as well as a question.

"A lot," Alec averred, as well as seemingly believing it, since he proceeded to say, "I owe you explanations. And apologises."

"For what exactly?" Magnus questioned promptly. "Marrying, or being a complete asshole?"

Alec let him finish before he asked, "If I talk, will you hear me out?"

It wasn't like he could say anything he hadn't heard before.

Magnus shrugged, but it wasn't as casual as he wanted it to be. Something was making his body tense too much for it to not show.

"Go ahead. I don't think you can insult me more but let's find out."

Nodding slowly, Alec took a deep breath and then he began.

"When we talked before the wedding, I know you were just trying to help. But I lashed out. I was upset. Furious with everything. At everyone. My parents. Jace. The world. But mostly I was angry at myself, and I took it out on the closest one standing and that was you. And you didn't deserve to have that thrown in your face. I'm sorry for what I said. I didn't mean any of it. And I shouldn't have said it to begin with." It sounded sincere, looked sincere as Alec kept his gaze steadily fastened on him, despite that it was clear he felt uneasy. "I'm really, really sorry."

Magnus was conscious of how blank his face appeared to be to an outsider. It was a deliberate
choice, as much of a strategic action as when he didn't let it change even as Alec wrapped it up.

It was a nice apology, he freely admitted. Could've swayed many unwilling hearts with less than that. If only it hadn't been so belated. It was pointless to ask for forgiveness when it was too late to give it.

"I didn't need you to inform me of that," Magnus told him, cold slipping into his voice despite that he fought to temper it. He didn't want to reveal more than he absolutely had to. But it was hard to find serenity. It was a struggle to keep the mask from sliding out of place.

Why was it always Alec that made him lose his grip on the perfectly crafted image he'd perfected over the years? Why did it unfailingly occur exactly at the worst opportunity possible?

He wanted control but all he felt was it slipping through his fingers.

"I never blamed myself for what you said or thought of me that day. It never affected me in the slightest. It was a long time ago and if that's all you have to say, then you have nothing I want to hear."

Alec's gaze was intensively, intrusively, staring back at him.

"That's not everything you deserve to know."

He didn't want to. He absolutely, one hundred percent, didn't want to listen to what Alec had to say. Had he thought Alec wanted to argue, it would've been fine. Anger was something he could handle.

It was the hint of truth that set his heart beating. The honesty that lingered in the air that would sooner or later make him bleed. It was only a matter of time.

"So we're to discuss your temper tantrums?" Magnus responded, nursing a foolish hope that it could be avoided. "I honestly have no interest in that either."

But like always, Alec did the opposite of what he wished he would do.

"Please." He leaned forward on the couch, his feet coming to the floor. "Just hear me out."

He could do this, Magnus convinced himself. He could sit here and give Alec all of his attention and not allow it to cut. It was his choice and so he decided.

"No, I want to say something first." He wrapped the blanket tight around his shoulders, hoping it would keep him together if he went astray. "Disregarding our history as it now is, what seems to be the root of your attitude towards me is because I left. Now, I don't know if it's because you expected me to stick around to be your docile servant-"

Alec's mouth moved ever so slightly, as if he perhaps was going to say something, but Magnus promptly put up a finger.

"Don't interrupt me," he demanded firmly.

He gave it a second to see if Alec wanted to press his luck, but the thin crack between his lips sealed up and Magnus resumed where he'd left off.

"Or if it's because you're petulant when not everything goes the way you want it to, but you were the one who told me to go in the first place. I just took your words more literal than you thought I would."

"That's not the reason," Alec disagreed.
Magnus scoffed dismissively.

"What else can it be?"

"I know I said this last time, but I honestly, truly," he emphasised the last word, "never thought I'd get to see you again."

Magnus held back his impolite commentary on that statement and chose to beat him over the head with chilling logic as a substitute.

"So you just saved up a lot of anger on the off chance I'd come back?" he deadpanned to really drive the point home. It sounded even dumber when he said it aloud. "What kind of faulty reasoning is that? If you wanted to know where I was you could have called to check."

Alec’s reply was soft, but crystal clear, like he’d been prepared to answer that specifically. "I couldn't."

Letting his gaze drop, Magnus stared at Alec's clearly functioning hands.

"Are your fingers broken?"

Alec looked at him, really looked at him, before he slowly said, "That's what we agreed to do."

It wasn't what he'd anticipated. Magnus wasn't entirely sure if he'd expected an answer to begin with, but it surely wasn't this.

He didn't even understand what it meant.

"What?"

Taking a deep steadying breath, Alec fingers clenched before they relaxed.

"When you left-

No. Absolutely not. Never again.

Magnus opened his mouth to protest, to let Alec know exactly where he could shove the rest of that sentence, but Alec gave him a beseeching look when he noticed.

"Please," he asked quietly.

One of these days, his patience would truly run out.

Ordering his taut muscles to loosen, Magnus jerked his head so that he wouldn't have to talk. He was afraid of what would come out if he did.

Alec caught on, and resumed.

Magnus averted his eyes, staring somewhere to the side. He knew himself good enough by now, keenly aware of the chinks in his armour. If he had to watch Alec, he could be compelled to break his solemn promise of not caring. If he did more than listen, he might just bleed.

"-you didn't tell us. You didn't call. You didn't leave a note. You disappeared without a trace."

Nodding along in the pauses, Magnus agreed with the account. So far, so good. But he had the distinct feeling it wouldn't last.
Call it experience.

"I didn't know you were gone until I came here to find you. It was right after Valentine had stolen the cup. The day after the wedding. I went because I needed your help. I'm not denying that," he added. "But I was also worried because you were the one that woke up Jocelyn. I thought they might come after you."

Alec's throat sounded dry, like he was too occupied to get this out that he forgot to swallow now and again.

"So when you didn't answer, I was ..." He laughed, but it was choked. "Scared. So naturally, I broke in."

Magnus shifted slightly towards him. Finally finding the missing piece to the vexing puzzle he'd been trying to solve made an unconscious smile tug at the corners of his mouth. "You were the one that kicked down my door."

He'd been wondering about that ever since he'd come back. It had been a surprise, to say the least. His neighbourhood wasn't famous for burglars.

"Yeah." Alec got out a short-lived laugh without choking this time. "Sorry about that."

Magnus made an unconcerned noise. "I have wards. I don't really need front doors that much anyway."

"Good to know."

The slight reprieve didn't appear to have relieved any of the tension in Alec's stiff neck. As a matter of fact, it only worsened as he seemed to remember something.

"I don't need to tell you what I found." His voice dropped off a moment, before his unfocused eyes snapped back to the present. "That was the moment I realised you were gone for good."

He shook his head, as if he was shaking off remnants of a memory.

"The way you left told us everything you didn't. When I returned to the Institute I let the others know and together we agreed that we weren't going to contact you, for any reason whatsoever. We thought we owed you that much, at least."

There was an imperceptible shift in his tone, like he was bracing for the answer to his final question. "Were we wrong?"

Magnus looked at him.

It was the consideration behind it that had made him fail to figure it out before. He hadn't thought they'd reflected much over his departure. For all he knew, and had suspected, they hadn't noticed he'd relocated to another continent before the inevitable time arrived when they'd require his help. He'd just assumed that it had taken them too long to need it. That when they finally caught on, and noted his absence, enough months had gone by that they'd thought it improbable that he'd answer their call.

They would've been correct in that.

Yet he'd been right in his assumptions. Alec had come to find him because of Valentine, as always. Magnus merely hadn't predicted that he'd go as far as breaking down doors.
Since then, with the lack of attempts to contact him, he'd believed that they'd simply forgotten him. Moved on, without sparing a second thought. That would've been his preference, if he was to be honest. It would make everything easier, if he wasn't so entangled. But he was. Regardless of what had happened, he was in the middle now.

And what kind of person would he be if he left them now?

And in view of that, since they had to move forward, they also needed to finish this today. It was time to let it go. And that began and ended with telling Alec what he needed to know.

"No."

Magnus refused to feel guilty after the fact. Alec wanted truth and he was willing to give it. "No, you weren't."

He hadn't wanted to hear from them. Had actively avoided calling himself. He'd gone as far as deleting their contact information because he wouldn't need it in the foreseeable future.

He'd left New York behind and there wasn't an ounce of regret that he would muster up to ease the blow. Going by Alec's retelling, they'd done the decent thing and let him be. He would return the favour with honesty.

"I didn't want to have anything to do with any one of you."

Alec accepted it. What else could he do, but take it at face value? It was candid, and blunt and if it hurt Alec, he didn't let it show. Magnus wasn't sure why he'd thought it might.

But Alec wasn't done speaking, which was a surprise.

What more was there to say?

He wasn't sure if he'd ever had a choice to begin with, but he certainly didn't now. But Alec didn't seem to understand that he'd won. Or that they could be done with this when there were so many more important things to deal with.

"It didn't mean ..." He drifted off immediately, a hand dragging through his hair. It was one of his tells. He only did it when he was under pressure or otherwise stressed. "I wanted to call, so many times."

Alec was frank. Always blunt to a fault but never unreserved. Whatever was in his heart, stayed there. He viewed feelings as equally dangerous as a knife to the throat. So to hear him say this, aloud, was a shock. It was anyhow what Magnus blamed for engaging him.

He knew he should shut it down, that he was the only one that would get hurt by this, and still he said, "And say what?"

He wasn't entirely sure what he wanted to hear. If he wanted to hear anything. But he didn't have time to cover his ears when Alec replied, "To know that you were safe. To apologise for what I said. To ..." And when Alec's eyes fell, when he was the one to look away, Magnus felt his heart drop.

No. This was what he'd been afraid of.

He didn't want to listen anymore.

"To tell you I missed you," Alec finished and lifted his head.
Magnus jerked to stare directly at the wall and nothing else at the same time as Alec looked up, refusing the implication. Rejecting any more words that might be directed at him.

He didn't want this. Not again. This wasn't happening.

Magnus felt Alec's gaze burning his cheek.

He felt an urgent craving for a drink. Why wasn't there any alcohol in his vicinity? There should be alcohol at hand for moments like these.

Getting to his feet in a rush, Magnus drew a silent breath of relief as he turned his back on Alec.

Stopping in front of the drink table, he didn't reach for a bottle, instead clinging tightly onto the edge of the table, closing his eyes.

"Then I'm glad you didn't call," he said, loud and clear. Declaring to the world and to himself that it was unnecessary to unearth that which had been buried six feet under.

It was the past. It had gone by. There wasn't anything more that he could give.

He didn't want to imagine what he would've done if Alec had called and told him he missed him. He didn't want to think about what he wouldn't have given to hear him say half of that. Magnus had no desire to remember how foolish he was prone to act when he was in love.

It wasn't reality. It hadn't happened. This didn't change anything. Alec was sorry, and that was it, he reminded himself as he regained his footing, carefully prying loose his tense fingers one at a time.

Trying to find a neutral subject to phase them out of this conversational minefield, Magnus poured vodka until it reached the brim. When he put back the flask and turned around, he'd thought of one.

"Why did Lydia send the fire message if you'd agreed not to contact me?"

"She never told me," Alec replied. "I didn't know you were back until I met you in the Institute."

His eyes followed Magnus as he returned to the armchair. Magnus made a point to meet them, just to deter him from uttering any more revelations that would make them both uncomfortable. Because Alec was uneasy as well. It was clear in the way he was fidgeting.

"I see. Well-"

And then Alec interrupted him.

"I was ..." He swallowed, like he was readying himself to dive into the deep end.

Magnus could feel his grip on the glass increasing tenfold with every passing second. He wouldn't be surprised if it shattered. It was like watching a train wreck happening ten feet away from him. A stuttering one at that.

When Alec found his voice at last, Magnus lifted the glass to his lips.

He drank deeply, hoping the burning sensation would render him deaf as an added bonus. Sadly, it didn't.

He could make out every unfortunate word coming out of Alec.

"... really hurt when I saw you again. It brought up a lot of things I thought I'd gotten past. I know
that's my problem to deal with and it wasn't fair at all when I took it out on you. That's my only explanation. That's the reason, if you want to know."

He didn't want to know.

He. Did. Not.

Stop talking, Magnus begged soundlessly. Stop talking.

*For the love of god, please stop talking.*

But the floodgates had opened, and Alec didn't seem to want to hold back anymore. All he did was surge forward. His mouth was moving, his body was perching on the edge of the seat and his eyes were burning into Magnus'. It was like staring into the sun and Magnus had to look away unless he wanted to get permanently blinded.

"That was why I thought you were angry at me the night at Pandemonium. Because that was where my thoughts were. It's been the only thing on my mind since you returned."

Magnus choked on the last of the clear liquid.

He would do anything for Alec to be done, give anything for this torture to cease.

Where the hell was a Circle member when you needed one?

Either Alec was blind or he was so riled up he didn't notice that his audience wasn't attentive as much as actively trying to find an escape route.

"Magnus."

Magnus jumped at the mention of his name.

Alec was gazing intently at him and Magnus experienced a sharp and intense fear that he would spit out something much, much worse than an 'I missed you'.

"I don't know if you can forgive me. I really don't deserve it. But if there's a small chance that you might, then I want to try and earn your forgiveness. I never meant- I never wanted to hurt you. I never ..."

Alec paused and Magnus did everything in his power not to make eye contact.

Had there always been this few tiles in the ceiling?

"There's so much I never wanted to happen but they did. And I can't change them. I've made so many mistakes when it comes to you, but I want to make this one right. Any way I can. I don't want you to hate me."

When it finally got quiet, and when Alec at last appeared to have purged himself of everything he'd been holding in, Magnus used the silence to process while recounting the same ornate tiles over again.

He raked through it, ignoring the many parts he didn't care to touch upon in this millennia or the next, and soon arrived at the same decision as before Alec had started spilling every thought he'd ever had.

It wasn't what he'd planned. But when did life ever go the way he wanted it to?
"Okay."

Alec frowned, like the word was foreign.

"Okay?" he echoed.

Magnus put down the empty glass and eventually unwound a little when it didn't set off another ramble.

"Look, I'm not saying I forgive you. But we don't need this hanging over our heads with everything else going on. If we're going to be working together, then we need to cross it out. No more talking, no more fighting, no more mentioning it. At all." He made sure to stress that last part. He didn't want to have to revisit this subject in his lifetime. "Do you agree to that?"

But Alec's focus laid on something else.

"Working together?"

"If you do have a killer in your midst then I'm your best bet at catching them. Especially since we can't involve anyone else."

It would be far too dangerous, given that they had no idea who they could trust.

"Thank you," Alec said. "But no. I appreciate the offer, but you've done more than enough already. Tonight was too close. I don't want to go through another one like it."

It had been close. Close to getting them both killed.

"Quid pro quo, then." Magnus answered. "You have an uncanny tendency-" He lifted an eyebrow at the shirt Alec was still wearing. "Not a tendency really," he amended, "more of an irreversible condition of always getting hurt. I'm actually amazed you've made it this far with all your limbs still attached. My involvement makes it much more likely that you'll survive to celebrate your next birthday."

His eyes didn't narrow, but Alec's body became aware. He straightened, and his tone was serious.

"What do you want in return?"

Magnus wouldn't go as far as deeming him suspicious. But there was clearly surprise, in the way he was looking at him.

Since this was the first time he'd required something else than payment in return, the few times he'd even done that, he couldn't fault Alec for being apprehensive. He just hoped it wouldn't hinder him seeing sense.

"There might come a time in the future when I'm going to need a favour. If, or when, that moment appears, you have to do exactly as I say, whether or not you approve of it. Does that sound like a fair trade?"

When Alec agreed, Magnus let out a silent breath.

"It does."

"I need a promise. I need you to swear that you'll keep your word."

If he gave that, Magnus would trust it. Despite all of Alec's faults, he kept his promises.
"I'll keep my word."

Not with a gesture or a thoughtless expression, did Magnus betray what he'd meant. He could see that Alec was reviewing what he'd said, trying to lay a puzzle with only one piece at hand.

He wasn't worried. The day the inner workings of his world were unchallenging enough that a Shadowhunter could discern them, it was time to retire.

"It's going to be dangerous," Alec said out of the blue. "Are you sure you want to?"

With everything they'd gone through in the past hours, ever since Alec had come knocking, it was no wonder that they were going 'round in circles. They were in desperate need to change scenery from this cursed living room that still housed bloodstained furniture.

"Do you know what I want? Dinner. An inexcusably late dinner." Magnus stood up and stretched out his tired arms. "Do you want dinner?"

Alec got to his feet as well. The t-shirt was unusually tight for him, but since Alec only wore washed out, poor excuses for clothes, it fit like a normal shirt would.

He smiled, and it was unusually broad.

"You cook?"

Leading the way to the kitchen, Magnus gave him a look over his shoulder.

"I conjure."

"A starlit night. Full moon. The sea." Her smile warmed against his chest. That was until she added, with the kind of bad humour only Catarina possessed, "I'm starting to think you missed me a little too much, Magnus."

He laughed out loud, vengefully spinning her in a tight circle before pulling her back in. Catarina, having no option but to follow where he lead, twirled inelegantly before she once more landed against him and then she slapped the back of his head.

Fond, but hard.

"This is why I don't dance with you," she told him. "You know my weak spots."

"You don't dance with me because I excel and you have two left feet," Magnus reminded her by whispering it into her ear, earning him another affectionate slap.

"Watch the attitude. My ancestry is grader than yours, my friend. I'm blue blooded all the way through."

He opened his mouth to give a smart comment, but she beat him to the punch.

"Both figuratively and literally," she declared, effectively shutting down whatever wisecrack he'd been about to voice.

As he began swaying them again, more from side to side than around for her benefit, Catarina began humming.
He propped his chin on top of her head and listened.

They were alone in the dusk of the late night. The beach was empty with the exception of them. Catarina had to work in three hours but they remained dancing underneath the glowing moon.

She snuggled in deeper against him.

"You know, Magnus, I don't think I say this enough, but thank you."

"You never have to thank me," he said into the air, holding on a little tighter.

"No, I'm serious," she protested.

Leaning back, she lifted her head to catch his eye.

"You've only stepped on my toes twice and for that I salute you."

She said it gravely before she carefully raised her free hand that had been resting against his neck to put it to her own forehead in a formidable salute.

Not more than a second later, she burst into a laugh.

It was caught in her throat when Magnus made her twirl again, this time until she lost her balance and stumbled. Since she had a solid grip on his hand, she proceeded to drag him down with her in a jumble of limbs.

They plunged onto the bank, their laughter mixing when it became clear that the cold sand had made its way into nearly every part of their clothing. It didn't get better when Catarina gained the upper hand by flopping down on top of him like a beached whale to push him down further into the loose ground. Picking up a fair amount, Magnus rubbed the grainy material into her hair quite enthusiastically.

When he was satisfied with his handiwork and looked up at her, she was smiling back at him.

"Very mature."

Magnus grinned.

"I think so."

Sticking out her tongue instead of retaliating, no doubt to prove how much more level-headed she was, Catarina clambered off and proceeded to collapse beside him.

The waves crashed against the shore, only a few paces away. The air was crisp and hard, but still with a hint of what was coming. Spring wasn't far around the corner.

Catarina nudged him with a bare foot.

"That's Vega," she announced, pointing up at the sky.

"I know what the stars looks like, Catarina. You've been naming them for four hundred years."

"Alright." She indicated another one of the million shining dots above them. "What's that one called?"

"Pegasus," he declared with conviction. As if confidence in his haphazard, and no doubt incorrect,
guess could fool her.

"Pegasus is a constellation, Magnus."

He didn't have to shift to see her smug expression. He could tell from the way she was speaking.

"Was I close?"

"Not even."

"Fine," he relented dramatically, heaving a sigh so heavy that she would undoubtedly hear it. "Tell me again and I promise I'll pay attention this time."

She sat up beside him, scrunching her legs so that she could rest her chin on top of her knees. Angling so that she could see him, Catarina tilted her head as a beckoning sign. Making a helpless sound, Catarina, with a roll of her eyes, took pity on him and extended a hand. When she'd solely pulled him into an upright position, she rested her head again in his direction.

"Okay. Message received. Can you please teach me about the stars?"

He thought she'd grin, and give in, like she'd normally do. She had a weakness for begging. But Catarina merely looked at him, a soft, yet sad smile lifting the curves of her mouth.

"Magnus. Why don't you tell me?"

His own smile stuck a little, not wanting to ruin it. Not just yet.

"Tell you what?" he tried, and she shook her head to tell him it wasn't working.

"Dinner. Dancing. The Atlantic," she counted out. "You're saying goodbye to me and I don't know why."

He braced for the impact, said it fast so that she couldn't interrupt.

"I want you to leave."

But Catarina didn't even seem mildly surprised. She just lightly raised an eyebrow and asked, "Where to?"

"Spain. You'll stay at the villa."

"And you're coming with me," she said.

When he turned away, avoiding her searching gaze, her tone became taut.

"Magnus, tell me you're coming with me."

The air between them was suddenly suffocating. He stood up before he choked on it. He didn't want to send her away. If he could keep her safe here with him, he'd choose that above everything. If there was some way to protect her, he'd do it. And this was what he had to do.

It was the price he had to pay to make sure she wouldn't be harmed.

But it didn't make it hurt any less when he realised he didn't know when he'd see her again.

Needing space, he began walking down the bank, heading for the water. He didn't care that his shoes
soaked or that he couldn't feel his toes after a second. The strong breeze tugged at his hair, brushing
away some of the sand that had collected in his collar.

He didn't hear her come. She was just suddenly there, a warm presence beside him.

"I heard you and the boy," she said quietly. "Don't lose your heart to a Shadowhunter."

She'd been awake after all. He should've felt it. But he'd been distracted. Like he'd been so many
times these past months. It needed to cease now when things were starting to heat up. Otherwise he
wouldn't be a help to anyone.

"We've done enough. Given enough." When he didn't answer, Catarina put a hand on his arm,
forcing him to feel it. "Remember what we've sacrificed."

He shook it off, as he did the memories her touch were meant to awaken. She knew which buttons to
push and when she needed to, she had no qualms in abusing them. It was ruthless and cutting and
Catarina was well aware.

"Time will take them sooner or later, Magnus."

At her harsh reminder, he snapped, "And that makes them expendable?"

"You know that's not what I mean," she shot back. "They're not going to live forever, no matter
what we do. This is not our fight."

"Because they'll die?" he asked curtly.

A little too curtly. Her voice became icy, and her body rigid.

"The wound never heals."

He shut his eyes, cursing himself when he noted how hard she was controlling herself from letting
it show.

He had no right to bring that up. Nobody had.

"I'm-"

But she disregarded his attempt at an apology.

"Not as much as we need it to, but that's not the reason. They're destruction. That's their gift. And
they'll bring that to you and I'll lose you."

She looked at him, her hair dancing in the wind. In the moonlight it was almost transparent.

"Can't you see I'm scared?" Taking a step closer, she clasped onto his lapels. "You don't owe them
anything. They're not your responsibility."

Magnus tried to smile for her sake, wanting to tell her, 'Of course. Of course, I'll go with you'. But no
sounds made it past his lips.

He wished so many things.

But none of them would ease this blow. There wasn't anything he knew that he could say to mend
this.
"I can't."

Her exhale was a laugh of exasperation.

"They will never choose our kind above their own. Don't you recall why we don't put our faith in them?"

He covered her hands, holding on to her.

"Then I will be better than them. What kind of person would I be if I gave up now?"

Catarina blinked once before her eyes narrowed.

"I'm confused. Are we acknowledging that I know what you're talking about or are we still pretending I don't?"

Taking a step back, putting distance between them at her words, Magnus told her, "You don't know. And I want to keep it that way. You're safe that way."

"I don't want to be safe, Magnus!" she nearly shouted. "I want to be with you!"

When he shook his head firmly, averting his eyes towards where the sea was spreading out endlessly, she grumbled something under her breath.

There was the sound of loud splashing and small waves that lapped against the edge of his shoes when she stomped in front of him, the water going high on her shins.

"Fine. Okay. Then tell them. If we're going to die for this, you tell them the real reason you returned. No more lies."

Magnus stared at her.

"You're not staying."

She laughed harshly.

"Oh, I am," she announced. "I go where you go. That's the deal."

"Catarina," he warned.

He wouldn't allow her to stay. That wasn't going to happen.

Catarina matched him with her own angry glare.

"Magnus. You're my family. I love you." Cupping her hands around his cheeks, she said, "But this? This is a mistake."

Her tone softened as her gaze travelled down the features of his face. With a finger, she wiped away grains of sand that had gotten stuck in the tangle of his hair.

"Don't put your trust in them. Trust me." She ran her thumb across his cheekbone. "Trust us."

He ignored what she was saying, his mind stuck on one thing alone.

"You're not getting involved. I won't let you."

Sighing, she dropped her hands and seized one of his.
"You can't stop me." Stepping around him, Catarina tugged for him to follow. "Let's go home. My feet are cold."

Chapter End Notes

So what do you think? Who marked that human? Who killed the seelies? Why would someone do that? What is the motive behind it? Why do think Magnus asked for a promise of a favour from Alec? What is the favour he wants? What is Magnus hiding? And why did he come back if he's truly been lying about the reason of his return?
See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil

Chapter Notes

Hello, my dudes!

Our tagline/motto/unofficial slogan: "And when I thought things could go well, they go so wrong." - domoiswatchingyou

So, another chapter, which brings us officially halfway. Or, well, at least I think so. I was aiming for an 18 - 20 chapter story, with emphasis on the 20 there, but it might be longer. Who knows? Anyway, that concludes our Public Service Announcement segment.

It's back. We're back. And things are starting to crack at the edges, guys.

I really hope you'll find it as entertaining as I did writing it. :)

And so, without wasting another second, let's dive into the deep end!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Arsonist's Lullaby**

When I was a child, I heard voices
Some would sing and some would scream
You soon find you have few choices
I learned the voices died with me

When I was a child, I'd sit for hours
Staring into open flame
Something in it had a power
Could barely tear my eyes away

All you have is your fire
And the place you need to reach
Don't you ever tame your demons
But always keep 'em on a leash

When I was 16, my senses fooled me
Thought gasoline was on my clothes
I knew that something would always rule me
I knew the scent was mine alone

All you have is your fire
And the place you need to reach
Don't you ever tame your demons
But always keep 'em on a leash

When I was a man I thought it ended
When I knew love's perfect ache
But my peace has always depended
On all the ashes in my wake

All you have is your fire
And the place you need to reach
Don't you ever tame your demons
But always keep 'em on a leash

It was busier than usual. Enough so that he could slip through the occupied operation centre without
more than the weight of a dozen glances accompanying him. Some were of wariness, a sparse few of
genuine curiosity, and the rest consisted of such clear disdain that it would've been less prominent
had they written it across the planes of their faces. Neither the first, nor the last, bothered him as
much as the one in the middle. Cautiousness didn't cause him concern, neither did contempt as it
seldom posed a threat. But the curious inspection, as if he was some kind of exotic circus animal
about to perform a trick, always set his teeth on edge despite that he should know better by now.

It was straightforward to tell them apart. Those that held scorn twisted away when he passed, like he
was contagious. The vigilant ones never let him completely disappear out of their field of vision, and
those that were staring didn't cease even when he looked straight at them.

Paying no attention to them, but being highly aware of exactly where in the room the stares
originated from, as he had to be in case he'd misjudged some of the contempt for something less
sinister, Magnus crossed the dais and went around the corner.

A slight, careening body almost slammed right into him.

A cheery, exuberant smile bloomed on Simon's face when he'd righted himself.

"Hi, Magnus!" he greeted with an enthusiasm that was enthusiastic enough to give anyone a
headache. "What are you doing here? Are you looking for Alec?"

Magnus was about to ask Simon why he assumed that when he took notice of where they were
standing. If you turned left, there laid the only wing for living quarters on this particular floor. It was,
consequently, a logical conclusion. Simon had evidently thought so as well, since he himself
obviously had been heading that way before they'd nearly collided.

Which was odd, considering the time.

"What are you doing here?" Magnus asked instead of answering. "It's not night yet."

"Sparring with Clary," he explained in a pace that rivalled lightning speed. His cheeks spotted in
pink immediately and his gaze flitted around. It'd been some time since Magnus had seen a worse liar
and it was clear it wasn't for his benefit Simon was saying it. It seemed Simon had a secret, and by
the looks of it, he'd better pray no one else would ask him something similar.

"I'm sure she appreciates the help," Magnus commended him graciously. But because he wasn't born
a saint, the polar opposite in fact, he couldn't help but add, "You do know, however, that Clary's
room is located on the second floor, right?"

Simon's broad smile solidified until it looked like he couldn't move a single muscle in his face.

"Give my regards to Isabelle." With a wink, Magnus left Simon standing dumbfounded as he
stepped around the motionless form.
Underneath the shadow of Raziel, Magnus descended the narrow staircase. Below the catenary arch, he halted for a second. The quadrangle was empty this time as well, even as the sun stood high in the sky. With the surrounding cloister abandoned once more, it was precisely as he remembered it, with the exception of the absent rain. As he began walking to his destination, Magnus made no move to hurry.

It was completely different, despite that it was exactly the same.

In the daylight, the angles carved from stone were only that: statues. They were images of the seraphic kind and nothing more. The open arcade was loitered with them, their swords still floating above his head, but this time he wasn't seized by the irrational trepidation that they would strike him down. In their faces, he saw nothing more than a depiction of other-worldly splendour that was as real as any god had ever been.

Angels existed, but Raziel and his likes had long ago gifted this world to the Nephilim, with everything that encompassed. To worship them, to pray for their strength or guidance, was a futile pursuit. It was religion, and like every human one, it didn't provide anything more than vain hope.

He'd realised, with the years, that it was fear that made mortals seek the shelter of the divine variety. It was dread for the unknown, for the darkness to come, that made them cling to imagined answers. They devoted themselves to pray upon stone while their lives slipped by, and did it make a difference in the end? All were born to die, some just had length of time where others ran out.

It made it simple to denounce a god that had never been. Since if there had, he wouldn't be here. Life was much easier when you were condemned. When there was only hell awaiting, faith wouldn't save you, no matter how hard you clung to it.

The only thing you had was your choices. And the path they took you on before the flames came and ate the rest.

Perhaps it had been the judgement of the holy that had sent his mind wandering last time. Maybe it was that specific feeling that had made him shiver, because now there wasn't a tinge of agitation. The clear air was free of any menace and his skin might prickle, but it was caused by the unusually warm sunlight dancing on his arms when he passed beneath the high pillars supporting the cross vault and went out into the open square.

The lawn hadn't begun budding, leaving the ground barren. Yet here and there, through the bare brown sod, some green blades of grass peaked up, embarking on the long journey to beat winter into submission by their sheer number. But still there was some time left, before spring was bound to come and it wasn't nearly balmy enough to allow for a pleasant amble.

Reaching the majestic greenhouse, Magnus escaped the chilling breeze as he shut the door before it could enter alongside with him.

He'd been wrong, he understood as he breathed in the sweet swirling scent of a million different herbs, plants and flowers. Spring was alive inside this palace, the heat of it already making him warm through the layers of clothing. Pushing up the sleeves on his shirt, he didn't resist the temptation to look around.

It was vast, immense even. It could have been a forest, had not the glass ceiling given it away. The hard packed dirt beneath his feet led in several directions. He followed the one ahead and immersed himself in the foliage that created a violet sky. It was a tree-lined avenue that wisteria had taken over, along with the ageing oaks forming it. The flowers swayed high above him, in a gentle wind he didn't feel. He idly touched the rough bark of the white oaks as he strolled. The boles of them were
wide enough that they would require several people to clasp hands to reach around. Their mighty height towering around him still didn't reach all the way to the top, ending before they could caress the panes.

The road lead to what most likely had been meant to be a pond but had taken on the uncanny semblance of a lake. It stretched across an area large enough that swimming across would be quicker than circling around it. An imposing rhododendron tree grew on the other side, overhanging the lake, it released fuchsia petals to rest on the shimmering surface. The floating dots of colour shared the space with the snow white water lilies that bobbed up and down as if moved by invisible ripples.

A weeping willow crowned the east side, not far from him. As Magnus drew closer to it, he noticed what was growing by the trunk. He moved the mourning leaves out of the way. They fell into place behind him, shielding him from view as he came to a stop in front of the thorny bush and kneeled.

The flower was elegantly tapered, forming five lush petals that mimicked the shape of a star. Its colour was indescribable since it altered with every way it twisted. When Magnus set his palm behind it, it turned a golden brown. When he removed it, it changed back into a green hue, almost the same as the shrub it grew upon but richer. Through its translucent petals the world changed into something slightly different.

And much more resplendent.

"Looking glass," a voice said from somewhere behind him.

Nimbly pinching the willowy stem until it snapped, Magnus closed his fingers around the flower for a moment.

When she came to stand beside him, his hand was already hanging by his side again, open and relaxed.

"That's what it's called. Supposedly you can see your deepest desires reflected in it. And in case that's hogwash, it's quite stunning by itself."

Magnus stood up with ease.

"I know."

With a slightly raised brow, Lydia asked, "You've been to Idris?"

Magnus beheld the way the rest of the flowers cast back the light.

"A long time ago."

Pulling back from the memories, he turned to her.

"You called, I believe."

"Yes," she agreed easily. "Thank you for coming."

Showing for him to go first, Lydia followed him out from the shelter of the weeping willow's arms. Setting a comfortable pace, they wandered down another road than the one he'd emerged from.

Magnus waited patiently for an explanation to be offered. It had been a strange fire message and peculiar request. The greenhouse didn't seem fitting for a professional meeting and Lydia didn't strike him as someone who aimed to be friendly with anyone. But it was what she'd asked, and he'd
decided to humour her.

The rocky shore was quiet as they slowly made to trace the edge of it.

"I read your rapport."

It took him a minute to recall what she meant. There was much that had transpired since.

"And was it satisfactory?" Magnus responded when he'd dug around for the appropriate phrase.

Given the way it had come roaring back into his life only a few days ago, he should probably look through it again. Maybe there was some clue he'd missed that could identify the killer. That would certainly aid the fruitless search he'd thus far conducted. It couldn't make it worse, at least.

He waited for the answer but Lydia withheld it. When she eventually did, it was an unexpected reply.

"I didn't find the cut you detailed."

She turned to him, her face neutral but her eyes intense. For some reason it made him want to look away.

"Are you sure of what you saw?" she asked.

For a moment, she was hidden in the shadow of a cheery blossom tree, and he couldn't see her expression when he said, "What are you implying?"

There was weight behind what she'd questioned. Too much of it.

Lydia's face was once more visible and the unfamiliar look was curbed, if it had been there at all. They continued forward on the path they had turned onto. The thicket planted on each side was growing, slowly but unmistakably taking on the appearance of a dense hedge that let in no light. It felt like the shrubbery was readying itself to swallow them whole the farther in they went.

Unconsciously, Magnus lessened the length of his steps and sharpened his senses.

That was when he noticed it.

He'd doubted himself, for a split second, if he'd perhaps misread her. But now, when he pretended to be enamoured with a view that was disappearing, he caught, in the corner of his eye, her eyes watching him.

"Magnus, I'm not implying anything. I don't doubt your competence," Lydia assured him. "I'm asking you if you're sure that a wound made by a blade was present on the second seelie's body."

He didn't know why, but there was a feeling that he trusted that caused him to hesitate. And when it surged, he complied.

"If you're asking me to guarantee it, I'm afraid I can't," he told her.

He remembered the cut, as vividly as he remembered the smooth skin that had been split by it. Recalling the feeling of running his fingers over the palm and then finding the thin slit, he knew it wasn't imagination. It had been there.

Yet something caused the urge to confess to lag.
"I'm not infallible," Magnus acknowledged easily. "It was the last thing I did, and I was severely sleep deprived at the time. It's possible that I made a mistake. My deepest apologies if that's the case."

As he said it, the thicket that had started to draw nearer was on the verge of encroaching. When the flourishing trees began soaring high above them, the path narrowed until it was physically impossible to traverse it side by side. With a polite gesture, Lydia indicated for him to take the lead. Magnus did, following the single winding bend that circled around another angelic statue that was hidden away in the verdure.

Behind him, Lydia halted. Stopping as well, he traced her gaze that rested on the sculpture.

It was dissimilar, the piece twice as large as the once lining the cloister outside; and the white colour had been blackened, the effigy coated in midnight ink. It held no sword, no weapon of any kind. From its back, magnificent wings were spread proudly but they had been licked by flames. The feathers had withered from the mighty frame, leaving it as hopelessly trapped on the ground as they were. The chin was held high with arrogance towards the sky even as it was kneeling, brought to a deep bow by an unseen force. Moss was growing where the feathers should've been, weaving a soft net over the damage that had been inflicted.

Even in this defeated state, the figure evoked an air of defiance.

"How much do you know of our history?" Lydia inquired, as they watched the light play over the charred monument.

"Not enough," he replied.

"This is one of the fallen. One of the nine that rebelled against God."

Magnus took in the submitting sculpture that with a bent back turned to the heavens for a mercy it didn't seem to desire.

"I don't believe in God."

Lydia didn't turn away from the haunting depiction.

"Each one has a statue dedicated to them inside of here. To remind us how easy it is to fall from grace."

They lived as they had been taught from the cradle.

"Facilis descensus Averno," Magnus said, invoking their motto.

It caused a breeze he couldn't feel to ruffle the crowns of the mighty elms surrounding them. A few leaves sailed down to land into the cupped hands of the fallen angel.

"You said nine." He doubted it was an accurate depiction. Few could have seen them, even less that lived to tell the tale. "Is this Lucifer?"

"No, that statue is beyond the lake." Lydia's eyes moved up the naked arched shoulder blades to rest on the regal face. The waist long hair that spilled onto the ground because of the crouched position the image had been shaped into was held back by a circlet weaved into the straight tresses. "This is Asmodeus."

The dead eyes meeting his had no pupils. With the opaque black colour, it seemed they stared directly into his soul. Magnus felt a shiver play on the nerves in his spine when an unprecedented
desperation to touch the effigy, to assure himself it was indeed stone and not some twisted part of his nightmares come to life, made a home in his mind.

"A general of hell's armies," he stated, unknowing as to why he did.

Lydia's head turned to him, her blue eyes searching, alerting him that something was slipping out of place.

He reeled it in, meeting her gaze with an appropriate smile that required a small effort. Yet her expression remained, and the sting of apprehension he'd experienced earlier returned.

It might have been because of the atmosphere, the fact that it was a forest that had no birds singing or insects buzzing. It was eerily quiet with just the two of them, standing beside the tormented carving of an angel in hell.

"You're certain it was a mistake?" Lydia asked.

She wanted assurance he didn't have the inclination to provide.

"No," Magnus denied her. "I can't be certain." Thinking it over and finding an opportunity to gain a possible second chance to examine the victims again, he offered, "Do you want me to look over the bodies once more?"

Shaking her head, Lydia began walking again, this time taking charge. They made it back to the entrance quickly.

"They were claimed by the fey," she revealed as they reached the end of the pathway, the door he'd entered from appearing out of nowhere. It would be easy to get lost inside of this blossoming maze. "It's out of my hands now."

Then why had she asked him to come if there were no definitive way to know?

He didn't voice the question, instead pausing by the lime coloured glass, setting his palm on the handle.

"I wish I could've been of more help, but I'm afraid that's all I know."

Lydia stopped as well, clasping her hands together.

"Thank you, regardless."

Magnus nodded once. "My pleasure."

It wasn't fear that caused him to hurry outside, but there was something else he couldn't put his finger on that crept inside his mind, making him almost break into a sprint as soon as he'd shut the door between them.

Striding down the same hallway where he'd bumped into Simon earlier, Magnus' purposeful gait was rudely interrupted when he once again was met with a force coming from the opposite direction. The difference this time was that it was a heavy oak door and it didn't have the courtesy to stop. The round knob struck him squarely in the ribs right as his attention was on the Shadowhunter rushing past like there was a fire somewhere. The impacting sent him stumbling back with a sharp oath.

"Magnus?" an unfamiliar voice said. "Did I hit you with the door?"
Clutching the sore spot, Magnus glanced up to see a tall, blond figure blinking at him.

"No," he replied. "I usually curse every time I'm faced with people I've met once. I've found it leaves them with a memorable, and highly favourable, impression."

"You okay?" Trying to constrain his laugh, and failing, it made it seem insincere when Jeremy apologised. "I'm sorry. I didn't see you."

"It's fine," Magnus said as he ignored the pounding that'd flared up in the bones that'd absorbed the brute of the force.

He righted himself, and let his arm fall down to its usual position. Jeremy's head was cocked slightly to the side as he watched Magnus attentively.

Jeremy was composed of every attractive trait in the book: a straight nose, barely upturned, long dark lashes despite his golden locks, slightly unruly hair that was currently pulled up in a ponytail, eyes the colour of the brightest sky, a jaw chiselled out of marble and either sweat or water drenching his bare chest that was both broad and taut. It was the kind of handsome that almost made him plain, simply because nothing stood out as extraordinarily pretty.

"Working out?" Magnus felt prompted to ask, since Jeremy was in a state of undress that didn't seem appropriate outside of that specific area. Or the Institute had a practise of casual Fridays he hadn't been notified about.

"You can say that," Jeremy told him, right as someone else emerged from what had to be his living quarters. The man, sporting a buzz cut and stubble, clapped Jeremy's shoulder once before he headed down the other direction. As he turned the corner, he zipped up the fly to his jeans. He never even noticed Magnus' presence.

Giving Jeremy an amused smile, Magnus rounded him. "Well, you carry on with that."

He glanced up when not two seconds later, Jeremy had reached his side and fallen into his pace.

"So what are you doing here this fine day?" Jeremy inquired curiously while they walked.

Magnus didn't miss a beat when he shot back with ease, "Sightseeing."

Jeremy, grinning, responded casually, "Seen anything you like?"

When Magnus turned his head to reply, Jeremy was slowly pulling on a hoodie, stretching his poor abs to the limit when he raised his arms higher than he could possibly have a need to.

Giving him time to put it on, Magnus held off on his commentary until he could see Jeremy's face again.

"I saw an antique desk earlier that tickled my fancy," he remarked. "Other than that, I can't really say I have."

Undeterred, Jeremy reasoned, "You never know. Maybe you should take a second look."

Laughing, Magnus didn't answer as they stepped onto the dais.

"Are you seeing anyone?"

For a moment, he thought he'd misheard what Jeremy had asked. But when he glanced towards him, he was there, smiling openly.
Magnus quirked an eyebrow.

"Are you always this forward?"

Seemingly mulling it over, tipping his head one way and then the other, as if he was trying to see if it fit into his image, they had time to pass the elevators before Jeremy had come to a conclusion.

"I can be blunt," he admitted. And as if he wanted to demonstrate the accuracy of that statement, he continued on by saying, "Are you dating someone?"

They’d arrived at the front door and both reached for the handle. Drawing his hand back before they touched, Magnus took a step back to let him exit. Jeremy showed for him to go, but Magnus waited until he caught the hint and went first. The sunlight was hotter now, almost burning through the fabric on Magnus' back as they descended the stairs outside the cathedral.

"I'm too old to be dating," he told Jeremy.

Jeremy paused at the middle to let Magnus catch up to him.

"Should I take that as a no?"

Magnus shrugged.

"You take that however you want to."

When they'd made it down, and Jeremy came to a stop, Magnus did as well.

"Thanks for seeing me out, but I can manage from here."

Jeremy, a slow grin spreading across his face, said, "I'm actually heading out myself. Watch that ego of yours." He gave Magnus a friendly pat on the shoulder, before winking. "It's starting to show."

As Jeremy truly was going on some mission, since he did walk past him and cut through the cemetery to their right without another word, Magnus rolled his eyes when he heard the first tone of happy whistling.

Jeremy was like a less horrible version of Jace. But quite obviously equally confident in his own perfection, and equally smug about that fact.

He'd been like that in his youth, Magnus recalled and experienced a wave of embarrassment at the thought. Ragnor's dearest pet name for him during that time had been Randy Romeo. It did have something to do with his propensity to recite Shakespeare while under the influence, but Catarina had reassured him that his iambic pentameter was spot on, regardless of how intoxicated he became.

It was a comfort to know he'd retained some class, even as he'd waxed poetically about Hamlet in the ears of such things as - and these situations had been described to him in such colourful details he couldn't doubt the validity of the claims - a horse, a tree, and, Ragnor's personal favourite, an extremely terrified chicken.

Thank god that part of his life was over and wouldn't make a comeback. He'd had enough of charm and flirty innuendos to last him quite a few more years. Maybe when he turned a thousand, life would prove itself to be uncomplicated enough to start entertaining the idea about dating again.

Until then, he was more than content to whisper sweet nothings into Catarina's ear, or, and only if he got truly desperate, there was always Raphael. He'd probably get slapped if he tried. The difference
between them was that Raphael would use his palm while Catarina would dig out a chair.

Smiling at the thought, Magnus turned around and noticed two people approaching. Meeting them in the middle of the walkway leading up towards the Institute, Magnus was greeted by a dazzling Izzy. Her hair was loosely braided, her dress skintight and she shone brighter than any star.

"Morning, Magnus," she chirped, bouncing, more than walking, up to him.

"Good morning to you too. Having a nice day?" he added, when he took in her broad grin. He couldn't help but wonder if it had something to do with a certain person still stuck inside the Institute. Unless Simon had figured out a way to walk in the sun, that was.

"Yes, Magnus," Izzy replied seriously, lifting up a finger to point out exactly how true that was. "Yes, it truly is a good morning. By the way, if you don't mind me asking, what did Jeremy want?"

Her quick change of subject was an impressive deflection. Deciding not to push it further, Magnus said, "Talk, I guess."

Izzy gazed past him, most likely at the retreating form that was Jeremy.

"I wish he'd want to talk with me," she sighed wistfully.

It was edging on uncomfortable, her sighs getting progressively deeper, when Magnus broke in. "Speaking of talk." He looked at Alec that had so far been quiet. "Can I have a word with your brother?"

Tilting her head back to squint at the sun, Izzy's grin somehow took over more than the space it was physically allotted.

"Sure. He's useless today anyway."

With that, she skipped away.

There had to be an explanation.

"Useless?" Magnus inquired when the bubbly air that Izzy created everywhere she went dissipated.

Alec waved it off with enough nonchalance to make it obvious. "It's a long story."

But it was clear there was something more to it and Magnus had all the time in the world.

It didn't take long for Alec to cave.

"She might have beat me when we sparred," he mumbled, looking away.

But that wasn't enough to warrant this kind of reaction. Magnus observed Alec that was studiously avoiding his searching gaze, and detected bruises on the base of his neck that weren't covered by the jacket's collar. And there was definitely more than one.

Magnus narrowed his eyes slightly.

"How many times?"

The answer was delivered in a reluctant grumble.
"Twenty-three."

Magnus coughed back the laugh and kept his lips firmly pressed together. Clearing his throat a few times, it still came out a tad too jolly when he said, "I would say that's not embarrassing, but I don't want to lie to you."

Alec looked at him once more.

"Thanks," he said, clearly not meaning it at all.

"If it helps, I'm sure you can pounce on her when she sleeps," Magnus suggested helpfully.

Alec didn't appreciate his assistance in the slightest.

"It's not helping."

Biting his tongue, Magnus almost choked when he realised something. He slowly raised his arms, holding out both hands in front of him with some space between them, as if measuring an invisible object. When he shifted so that he could compare his imaginary estimates against Alec's lofty frame, Alec crossed his arms.

He could barely get the words out. "Aren't you three times her size?"

Alec's scowl was a permanent fixture.

"Thank you, Magnus, for that enlightening information. I hadn't noticed," he deadpanned and Magnus dissolved into laughter.

"She's-" Magnus made a motion to where Izzy had been standing, as he was overcome once again. It took him a solid minute to finish the sentence he'd begun. "She's tiny."

"I'm glad my pain is a source of joy to you," Alec told him, but it was with a light tone he'd never heard before.

When Magnus kept grinning, Alec finally cracked a smile. It was peculiar how such a small change could make him look so similar to his sister. It had the same radiant quality. The difference was that Izzy gave it freely to each and everyone that crossed her path, while Alec seemed unwilling to bestow it on more than one person at a time and even that seemed to wear on him.

Therefore it was a surprise when Alec made a sort of amused snort before he said, while still wearing the same smile - which had to be a record of some kind by now, "So what do you want to talk to me about?"

Magnus stepped a little bit closer and lowered his voice.

"I need you to get me the rapport on the seelies."

Alec agreed immediately, speaking quietly, "You think there's something there?"

It was a lead. The only one he could think of as of right now. His attempts to get to the bottom of their problem, only lacked a few minor things such as adequate contacts, information and clues to be considered successes. The closest thing to a breakthrough he’d come was when he’d recollected that the Shadowhunter they were looking for had knowledge in how to handle mundane weapons. But unless Alec would be prepared to send out a questionnaire on the subject, that was simply another useless piece of information.
Magnus raised one of his shoulder and then let it drop. "Here's to hoping."

He gave Alec a superficial sweep. "How about you? Have you found anything?"

"Since I can't exactly go around asking people if they have by any chance happened to venture out on a killing spree and forgotten to put it down in their rapports, the answer is no."

Great. They were both stuck in dead ends.

"Was that what you came to say?" Alec asked, when he didn't reply.

"No, I came ..." Magnus began, but he faltered when it dawned on him. "Lydia wanted my help," he said instead and studied Alec closely.

There wasn't any sign of awareness.

"You didn't know?"

It was obviously not something that was unusual to Alec.

"We have our separate responsibilities," he explained. "We trust each other to do our own work. That's how we operate."

If he'd ever heard something more true, he couldn't call it to mind. It sounded exactly how he'd imagined their marriage to be, the few times he'd felt masochistic enough to dwell on it.

And yet there was something that whispered in Magnus' ear that Alec perhaps was more out of the loop than he believed himself to be. He'd told Magnus that he hadn't known he'd returned, while Lydia had. And now she'd summoned him again, to discuss something that could've easily been handled over the phone.

He could still recall the silent forest and opaque stone eyes making his skin crawl.

"That's so hot," he told Alec. "If I ever marry, remind me to not take advice from you."

Not that he at any point would marry, but the scenario was valid none the less.

"I can just picture it. 'Hey, Alexander, what should I get my better half for Valentine's day?' 'Uhm ...'" Magnus dropped his voice until it was barely above a groan, and frowned harshly. "'I dunno.'" He mimicked Alec's body language to perfection, dragging a hand through his hair while deepening the lines in his face severely. "'Uhm ... maybe stay at a hotel but in different rooms.'"

Changing back to his normal tone, Magnus kept up his one-man show.

"'Why, yes, Alexander, that do sound incredibly scandalous. Thank you for that spectacular suggestion.'"

He didn't expect applause. Nor raving reviews of his, frankly, impeccable imitation. Alec did have a sense of humour, Magnus supposed. If humour entailed heaving deeply wrung sighs and crossing arms in obvious displays of dissatisfaction. But not even that did he get as Alec ignored him.

Even as he quieted down, Alec kept staring over his head, as if he'd forgotten he was standing there.

Briefly considering kicking him in the shin to catch his attention, Magnus chose to raise his voice instead. It wasn't worth making Alec cranky.
"My impression of you is spot on and you're not even paying attention. What are you looking at?"

He glanced over his shoulder and instantly found what, or rather who, Alec was preoccupied with.

Her hair was the shade of rust, her eyes several nuances darker and glaring directly at him without faltering when he met them head-on.

There was judgement there, for what he couldn't change. And disdain for what he wouldn't. The warlock aspect entitled him to the first on a regular basis. His unaccommodating personality secured the remaining contempt from the Nephilims that weren't put off enough by the demon attribute. It had left few to call acquaintances. Even fewer to give the moniker of friends. Not only was he a downworlder, but brazenly unashamed of it. Their delicate sensibilities had to positively implode every time they were forced to share the same oxygen with someone of his depraved standing.

It was a source of endless entertainment.

Grinning broadly, Magnus acknowledged the young woman. When that didn't send her scurrying, he attached a slow wave, bending each finger in a fluid motion, as if he was playing piano on the air. Her eyes tore themselves from the object of her dislike, and lifted to stare at something above him and that finally seemed to resonate a response. Her escape was quick as she ascended the stairs and went inside. With the wide smile still raising the corners of his mouth, Magnus turned back to see Alec's gaze fastened on where she'd disappeared. When Alec at last broke the intense staring contest he was having with an inanimate object, he looked at Magnus.

"I'm sorry."

Magnus, tilting his head, kept up the grin.

"Why are you sorry? I've dealt with this for centuries. And let me tell you, it's mostly all of-" He made a grand gesture meant to encompass himself. "-this, that makes them do that face, and not the fact that I'm a living, breathing half-demon that they don't get to kill."

He added a laugh, for the whimsical facet of the world they were living in. But Alec didn't join him.

He wore his serious mask and Magnus curbed the instinct to tell him to lighten up.

"You don't have to joke about it," Alec said, low and edging on harsh. But it was clear it wasn't directed at Magnus at all.

He stifled the cheerfulness when he perceived the provoked tone. It was an unexpected, and unnecessary, statement to make.

He didn't need to be fixed, as little as he craved to be told it was okay to experience righteous turmoil. If he was to get worked up over every little injustice he wouldn't get anything done.

"What should I do?" Magnus asked, with sincere curiosity. "Sit in a corner and sob because Shadowhunters tend not to like me all that much?"

He could think of worse pastimes, but most of them involved some version of stabbing himself in various body parts for the fun of it. None of which sounded, to any extent, appealing.

When Alec didn't have a reply, lacking suggestions on other approaches, Magnus said easily, "Don't worry about it. I'm sure worse things happen everyday."

Alec hesitated, his jaw working for a moment before he asked, "What did Lydia want?"
It didn't sound like it was what he'd really meant to say.

Magnus averted his gaze, covering his own stalling by removing his waistcoat. It was silly, since it was sleeveless and he only wore a smooth shirt underneath, but it provided enough cover to think of an answer that wouldn't be an obvious lie.

It wasn't a question about trust. He simply didn't want to say something, until he knew if there actually something there. Right now he only had a feeling to go on, and he wasn't sure where it stemmed from, what it meant, or if it was his overactive imagination playing a prank.

"Just to know if I thought the wards were strong enough as they are."

He hung the golden fabric over his arm before he turned his eyes up again.

Alec kept on the subject, but not as if he suspected anything had been left out.

"And?"

Magnus was betting on that he wouldn't verify this with Lydia. The odds appeared to be in his favour, given their way of operating.

"Solid as a rock."

It satisfied Alec, allowing him to take up a new thread of conversation they hadn't touched upon.

"We need to tell the others."

Bewildered, Magnus responded, "We can't."

They'd had this discussion. One they'd actually seen eye to eye on, for once.

Alec shot him a doubting look. "You don't honestly believe it's one of them?"

"Of course not," Magnus fired back immediately. "But what if they confide in the wrong person? We have no idea who it is."

Alec nodded, as if he concurred, but said, "They deserve to know."

Weighing the words, taking them into consideration, Magnus found that they stemmed from a place of logic. Alec wouldn't risk putting them in danger. And they'd be safer if they knew. As long as they kept them out of the their search, it wouldn't hurt them. With some luck, perhaps they'd even have a suspect in mind.

"Okay," Magnus agreed. "Can you bring them by tonight?"

Alec righted the bow hanging on his shoulder. "Tonight."

The problem with 'tonight' was that it was as unspecified as saying 'a while'. For some, a while meant ten minutes. To others, it implied hours. That was at least what he blamed as he didn't think before he opened the front door to let them in.

He silently cursed Alec, and every other Shadowhunter that had ever lived on this earth.

Magnus leaned casually on the door frame and said, in a dry tone that contradicted his relaxed
posture, "I thought our dealings were over."

Camille’s sharp teeth were biting down on her sleekly painted lip. The deep maroon contrasted against the perfect shine of fangs.

"You’ve strengthened your wards," she disclosed, as if he hadn't been the one to erect them to begin with. There wasn't an ounce of dissatisfaction in her sultry voice as she said it. The opposite, in fact. She seemed delighted. "Aren't you going to invite me in?"

Magnus didn’t give away anything as he questioned, "What do you want?"

Centuries of experience made him be on his guard. All those years of observations were negated when she smiled, sweet and teasingly, and his cautiousness transformed into vigilance in an instant.

She wasn’t here on a courtesy call. It was never innocent when it came to Camille.

She was Satan wrapped in silk and fur.

"I heard you found Catarina," Camille said with a purr. Her deep eyes flicked to his. "A thank you might be in order."

The way she emphasised 'thank you' insinuated that she expected him to feel gratitude. It was unspoken, but clear in the way that she regarded him, that there wasn't a question in her mind. She wouldn't leave on her own and unless he chose to waste magic on evicting her from the hallway, she wasn't going away.

Aware that the company he’d been expecting could arrive at any minute, and what a catastrophe it would undoubtedly become if Camille got her claws in them, it was easier to simply let her get her way for the moment.

With a tired sigh, Magnus allowed her entry, but made sure to keep his eyes strictly fastened on her deceptively svelte stature. Whatever it was that had prompted her to seek him out again, wouldn’t be something pleasant. Their interactions hadn’t been enjoyable since the late 19th century.

Shedding the sheer coat where she stood with her back to him, Camille threw him a flash of a smile over her shoulder.

"How about a drink?" Stepping away from the fabric that had pooled around her feet, the golden backless dress clung to her hips as she strolled away on long legs. The sound of her razor-sharp heels echoed when she entered the living room.

Magnus followed. Her voice drifted over from where she was occupied filling two cocktail glasses. "I have news"

He stayed in the opening to the room.

"Why does that sound like bad news to me?"

Her laugh was melodic and bright. She turned around with a glass in each hand.

"Martini?"

She offered him the one without any garnish. If it was because she remembered how he drank it, or because she didn’t want to provide him with a sharp instrument and the temptation to use it, wasn’t made clear.
Walking up to her, Magnus took the glass from Camille's offered hand, and reached around her to place it back on the table she'd picked it up from.

"No," he said firmly.

It'd put them in close quarters. She was almost pressed into the drink table, and when he'd put down the martini, his arm had brushed against her waist.

She rose on her toes, her hand lightly landing on his shoulder for support when she turned her head to whisper in his ear, "You're so prickly nowadays."

Her breath was warm against his neck, and so was her soft laugh when she twisted away from him.

Magnus turned with her.

"That's just around you. What is it you want?"

Camille, disregarding his harsh tone, flowed down in the same loveseat she'd occupied the last time they'd been in this situation. As she piled the pillows high in one corner to make herself more comfortable, it all seemed to play out in a tedious déjà vu. There was something she was determined to procure. It was also the same thing she would hide until the optimal time to reveal it.

Nothing she did was ever unintentional.

"I've already told you," she lilted innocently when she'd settled. "Don't you trust me?"

The only defence he had was patience. It was just his luck that he'd run out of it by now. Camille had nothing he could possibly desire and he was fed up with making accommodations for her whims.

Magnus didn't raise his voice, but it was as cold as ice when he said, "Tell me or I'll throw you out this minute."

It made her downright gleeful. She lowered the glass, a skewered olive in between her lips, and met his eyes over the brim.

"Oh, do try. We haven't wrestled in a while."

Grinding his teeth together, Magnus snatched up the drink he'd refused.

"What are we drinking to?" he asked before he took a strengthening gulp. The gin helped sate some of the annoyance. "Drained someone recently?"

Running a finger along the rim, Camille told him, "I've come to a decision." She paused for a moment, dragging out a suspense he didn't experience. She'd reveal her intentions eventually. Otherwise there was no point to her presence here.

"I'm leaving."

He didn't move a muscle at the announcement. It was expected. He'd honestly wondered why she hadn't left already. Camille was cunning, and quite brilliant. She knew when it was time to abandon ship.

"And you wanted to give me the opportunity to celebrate. That's uncharacteristically thoughtful of you."

He shifted to put down the, by now, empty glass. It took not more than a second, but she was fast.
She'd always been.

Slender, delicate hands ran up his spine, spanning his shoulder blades. When Magnus turned back, her fingers captured his jaw and she pulled him down. Her lips were soft for a single moment before she bit down on his bottom one and pushed him against the table. Camille's nails scraped against his neck as she pressed her body into his.

Her mouth had the same properties as the gin coating his tongue: the sting, the burn and the inevitable regret.

When she noticed his muffled laughing, Camille leaned back, but only enough to whisper against his lips, "I want you to come with me."

He had to commend her for persisting on her determined mission even as he kept laughing.

"I want you to follow me, Magnus," she carried on, but some of the seductiveness had disappeared from her husky tone. Her hand fell from his neck. "Magnus?"

Shaking his head with a grin, Magnus took her by the shoulders and moved her to the side. "You want my protection."

For an instant, he let his knuckles brush against her cheek and she angrily slapped his hand away.

"Oh, Camille." He smiled as he sat down on the arm of the couch close by. "You don't change, do you?"

She might be talented with sensing when it was time to withdraw, but a lost battle wasn't something she was used to. Camille was accustomed to getting her way. It was made obvious when she slid in between his legs not a second later, linking her arms around his neck.

"No, I don't. And neither do you. You still want me."

He smiled serenely as he removed her arms. "I would rather set myself on fire than waste a single day on you, least of all more years. Did you really think it would work?"

She waved a hand gracefully in the air.

"You can't still be upset over that inconsequential human."

"I'm not," Magnus affirmed with ease. "Infidelity was the least of our problems."

Love had been their point of contention. Specifically, the lack of it.

Camille placed her hand where his heart beat calmly. If he'd return the gesture, he'd find an empty chest.

"It's not too late for us. Choose me and we'll have eternity."

Encircling her wrist lightly, he put it back where it belonged.

"I would honestly prefer to spend the rest of eternity in hell," he said as he stood up again.

Her eyes slitted as she calculated her next move. Then, with the same flair for the dramatic that she had always possessed, Camille's eyelashes fluttered when she tasted the air.

She looked at him with something victorious in her gaze.
"You're staying because of the boy."

"No," Magnus corrected. "I'm staying because I really don't like you."

She shook her head, like she thought he was acting silly, and with that small shift it felt like the balance was once more tipped in her favour.

Camille stepped into his personal space again, but this time it wasn't for the purpose of getting closer. It was because she wanted assurance that every word would reach his ears.

"You're a romantic," she murmured. "And a fool. You know they can never love us. Our darkness consumes them. A Shadowhunter will never choose a downworlder."

He levelled her with a detached stare.

"You don't love, Camille. How would you know anything about it?"

She considered it, as if it had just occurred to her that her feelings might be as dead as the rest of her was.

Clicking her tongue, she said, after a moment, "Let's imagine it then, shall we? A miracle occurs, an angel wants a demon." She tilted her head in curiosity. "What happens after, when time is ticking by? No matter what you do, Magnus, your precious love will waste away in front of your eyes. As all, but me, will."

Magnus scoffed at her desperate attempt.

"You and I are finished. I don't feel anything for you. There's nothing for you to gain here."

But it didn't appear to matter. Camille's eyes glinted with a spark that would've been beautiful, had it been someone else.

"You know what I say is true. You've known it all along. It consumes you, the painful truth that you will always be the one that's left behind."

He smiled, but it was hard and tense. His muscles didn't want to obey his instructions when she was this close.

"It sounds like you're projecting. Are you feeling lonely these days, Camille?"

She laughed. A clear, beguiling sound.

"They will all die, Magnus. Each and every one of them. So you can love him to your heart's content, but Alexander Lightwood will die soon. They will perish, while we remain; the dirt will grind their bones into dust and when that day comes, you will find me still here."

He kept still, held control tightly reined. But it shattered when Camille rose on her toes and leaned in, a hand going to his cheek. Magnus grasped it, hard, and used it to force her back. She grinned triumphantly when she knew it had worked.

Her words wriggled underneath his skin.

"Leave," he demanded, dropping her hand like it burned him. "Now."

Spinning on her heel, Camille blew him a kiss over her shoulder. "Goodbye, my love."
"Sorry we're late. A certain someone had to do his hair," Izzy explained loudly and unnecessarily slow. It was obvious who she was referring to since there were three of the male variety entering through the door and two of them were Alec and Simon, both of who seemed to operate under the delusion that wearing the clothes they slept in was a valid fashion choice.

"Don't worry about it," Magnus replied as he ushered them inside.

Their delay had provided him with plenty of time to gather together what Camille's impromptu visit had jarred. As they shed their jackets, and filed into the living room, he was in perfect balance.

Alec was the last one in the hall, and Magnus waited for him. As Alec was in the process of removing his jacket he glanced at Magnus and stopped in the middle of the movement.

"You okay?" he asked, waiting with one arm still trapped in the black fabric.

"Fine." Magnus shaped his lips into a smile that didn't strain. "Just tired."

Frowning, Alec completed the task, using the hood as a hanger and suspending it on one of the curved coat hooks.

"You sure?"

Magnus lead the way to follow where the others had gone.

"Yes," he assured.

When they crossed the threshold, Magnus sat down in the leather armchair he favoured. Alec chose the twin of it that stood by its side. In front of them a silent battle was raging. The chaise lounge that was placed vertical against the arm of the couch was occupied by Simon who'd misunderstood its use and had flopped down on his stomach and thus bending his back out of shape like a cat's. The couch, large enough to fit tree people with ease, had been claimed by Izzy who was sprawled across it, taking up more space than she should physically be able to. Beside her, Jace, mumbling quietly but fiercely, was trying to fight for his right to a seat. Izzy easily foiled his attempts with her spiked heels.

"I'm exhausted, Jace. You should try wearing stilettos for a day."

She stretched her legs to emphasise the point she was making.

"Then don't wear them, Iz," Jace muttered.

"I'm just going to pretend I didn't hear that," she told him, closing her eyes and snuggling into the decorative pillow by her head.

This was apparently the time Jace thought she'd be pliable enough to let him have his way. He tried to move her feet again and without cracking an eye open, she gently, but firmly, sent him away with a swift kick aimed for his nether regions.

"Izzy!" he protested, loud enough that no one could pretend anymore that this clash wasn't happening, despite Simon's pronounced attempts to master the art of invisibility as he squirmed uncomfortably from his prime view five feet away.

"I need the leg room, Jace," Izzy fired back. She opened her eyes and motioned towards the loveseat.
"There's a perfectly good couch right over there."

When she said it, it became apparent what her objective was, essentially what this whole power struggle had been about.

It was an intervention.

Because on one of the two loveseat's cushions, located beside the empty one that was now the only available surface left, sat another person. A person who'd been glaring holes in the back of Jace's head during the argument playing out before them. When Jace turned to her, Clary's eyes narrowed. He relented with a shrug that seemed anything but casual. Awkwardly making his way over to her, Magnus almost expected Clary to growl as Jace approached. She didn't, instead giving Jace the death stare as he sat down, careful not to touch her.

It seemed like a wise choice.

Demonstratively, Clary crossed her legs and shifted until she was as far away from him as she could possibly get without actually leaving her designated seat.

Izzy, with a satisfied smile, looked up from her lounging, first at Alec, then her eyes landed on Magnus.

"So, what is the big news?"

Magnus glanced at Alec, who seemed to catch what he was trying to communicate. Relinquished of the responsibility of telling the rest of them exactly what the news were, Magnus relaxed and watched as Alec, leaning forward in the armchair, began explaining.

The clock had ticked by the number one, then two and now it was inching past three. The traces of the night could be seen on the untidy coffee table and surrounding surface. There were abandoned water glasses scattered around the floor, mugs of tea haphazardly balancing on the edge of the table and emptied cartons of ice cream that Simon had claimed, because of the high sugar content, would keep them going until six a.m. That was undeniably a flat out lie, seeing that Clary, who'd eaten a whole carton by herself, was sleeping soundly on Jace's shoulder.

They still hadn't said a word to each other and Clary hadn't done more than grumble a reluctant 'thank you' when Jace had provided her with the necessary spoon, but as the hour grew late, she'd drifted towards the middle of their shared seating arrangement until she was suddenly curled up against Jace, the arm he was keeping around her waist the only thing holding her upright.

The rest of them had also migrated through the night. Simon was lying on his back, humming a song under his breath as he unconsciously played with Izzy's braid. Tucked against the arm of the couch was Izzy. Having seized the popcorn bowl as her hostage, she was inhaling them more than chewing as she and Jace discussed in hushed voices so as not to disturb Clary.

Leaning against the bookshelf, Magnus was trying to get some blood into his legs that had taken to falling asleep whenever he sat down for longer than ten minutes at a time. As his mind drifted, pleasantly empty of thoughts, Alec sidled up to him, resettling to where they'd been standing and talking for a while now.

"Have I mentioned I really like the new couch?" Alec asked, as he handed Magnus a cup filled to the absolute brim.
"I did have you in mind when I got it," Magnus replied as he gratefully accepted the offered drink.

The couch, a mix between red and brown, was the exact hue of blood after it had dried.

"I assumed you would be bleeding on this one too in no time, so I thought I'd save us both the trouble of trying to clean it."

Smiling again, like he'd done most of the night, which was honestly starting to go from strange and a little bemusing, to normal, Alec clinked their cups together before he raised his own and drank. Magnus was about to follow his example when he stopped halfway.

He remembered after all.

"You didn't make it, did you?"

"No," Alec told him. "Izzy did."

Magnus lifted the cup to his lips.

"That's fine, then."

He stilled as the texture assaulted his mouth. Swallowing, it slid down in clumps, making him feel dirty both inside and out.

He lowered the cup, staring at the innocent liquid.

"It's chewy," Magnus remarked in an interested tone. "Why," he asked calmly, "is it chewy?"

"It's not that bad," Alec dismissed, like it wasn't an offence to everyone, both living and long dead.

"It tastes like all of my hopes and dreams came and died in this cup," Magnus insisted and Alec simply laughed before he swallowed the rest of his own share of the toxic concoction.

He hadn't been paying attention to what Jace and Izzy had been discussing, not since they'd all agreed on the extensive list of exactly zero suspects, but now when he heard a name that he recognised, he was pulled back in.

"Okay, that sounds like a plan, at least," Jace just agreed. "We'll check out Hunts Point first thing tomorrow."

Magnus stilled right as Alec was saying something, continuing on his doomed quest of trying to defend Izzy's abysmal kitchen skills.

"We'll do it tomorrow," Izzy said. "Right now we need to get back before someone notices we've been gone most of the night."

Every word sent a chill of fear down his spine. Stiffly, he turned to Alec that hadn't caught the exchange. But before he could say something, Izzy called Alec's attention.

"Alec. Hunts Point tomorrow. Sounds good?"

And Alec nodded.

Magnus suspected his hold on the porcelain would soon result in a crack but he couldn't control it. He stared as Alec finally caught his horrified look.
There wasn't confusion there. Nor anger. Alec's face was completely normal.

"You knew?" Magnus whispered, since he couldn't get his voice to function properly.

Clapping her hands together, Izzy ordered, "Guys, start getting your things." She glanced at him for a moment as she put down the popcorn on the floor. "Magnus, we'll let you know if we find something tomorrow."

Simon slowly sat up from his reclining and stretched. Jace gently started to wake up Clary. At a distance, he almost looked pained as he removed his arm from where it had been resting.

Magnus didn't look further, had no desire to see closer details. There were already more than enough of them imprinted in his mind. He didn't sweep, or march, but slunk out of the room to avoid drawing attention.

The library welcomed him silently, wrapping around him as he let his hands graze the spines of the books that lined the room's every wall, from the bottom of the floor to the highest peaks of the irregular ceiling. There were stacks of them, heaps of history at the tips of his fingers. He should've learned from it, should've seen it coming. But he was missing too much.

This place was proof of how long and far he'd travelled. How much he'd experienced; the old pages speaking for themselves. And yet he'd returned. He always came back, doomed to repeat mistake upon mistake, tensing the rope until something snapped.

Magnus idly wondered who it'd be. Which one of them would be the first he'd have to watch die? How long was it until Camille's predictions came true?

Rattled was a word he wasn't used to employ. As a feeling, it had never been prevalent. Until now. A terror, sneaking to then pounce, had taken his bones, sucking the marrow out of them as he stared at this proof of what he'd done with his part of eternity. He was afraid for what he couldn't see yet. He only knew it was coming, and it would bring them all down.

No matter what he did, they would die. And it would be his fault.

It was already decided. Only time was left and it was ticking down.

He didn't know anything anymore. Not who the killer was, not how to find them, not how to help. He couldn't keep them safe. Not since he could barely keep one of them alive. Only days ago Alec had almost died, because of him. Because he hadn't been paying attention.

It was all slipping so fast now, like blood through clutching fingers.

And now they were all going to join in on their dangerous search, oblivious to the perils snapping at their heels. He wished he hadn't seen this play out before, but he had. He knew the ending, and now he had to witness it being written.

Magnus' eyes fluttered close. Why did they covet death so eagerly? Why couldn't they just live?

There wasn't a sound that betrayed him. They were always adept at moving in silence. But Magnus experienced the jolt, sensing him before he'd said a word. How long had he felt Alec, before he even knew Alec?

The door closed behind him and he looked to find the person he expected standing there.

"I thought we agreed," Alec said carefully, confused as he stepped into the room.
Magnus turned back to stare at books that he'd forgotten were there.

"I didn't. Not to this."

The floorboards beneath his feet weren't steady, his balance washing away with each beat of his plagued heart. Normally, he could pretend. He could push away the feelings that he had no use for, choosing to act on the once he could afford, leaving the rest buried somewhere not even he knew. But something had been rocked in the foundation that he'd so fastidiously constructed.

And Alec was right there, suffocating him without trying and it was going to make it all crumble down.

"We've gotten nowhere. We need their help." Alec's voice came closer. "I need them."

"What happens to them is your responsibility. I'm washing my hands of that. I refuse to take on the guilt." Magnus flipped around, aware that he had no clue what his face was displaying. He didn't know what Alec could read there. "Do you understand?"

"What guilt?" Alec asked, taken off guard by the sudden, harsh tone.

"This is dangerous. I don't think you understand how dangerous." Magnus clung harder to the warm cup in his hands. "We're searching for someone who's murdered three faeries and marked a human. That's not someone who'd hesitate to kill one of their own."

"Magnus," Alec said softly. "This is what we do. This is our life."

"Life?!" he snapped, abruptly unable to contain it. "What life? You're barely adults. You've barely lived."

There were reasons why the Nephilim died young, but that didn't stop him from loathing it. "How can you be this reckless?"

"It's not reckless," Alec responded. "We fight together, as a team." He took another step forward, but it wasn't as secure as it had been earlier. "Why are you so upset?"

"Why?!" Magnus shouted, much louder than he'd meant or wanted to. "Apart from getting you all killed?!"

"Yes." Alec looked at him, his hesitance replaced with something else. "You look ..." Alec didn't finish, didn't go into detail into exactly what he was giving away.

It was a relief. He didn't want to know exactly what Alec saw.

"What is going on?"

"I would just be grateful if-" Magnus started, frustration slipping through his teeth before he managed to snap his mouth shut.

Composure, he urged himself. But it wasn't there. There were no stable walls to lean against.

"Nothing," he gritted out, the bare minimum he could handle without yelling. "Absolutely nothing."

It should've sent Alec running. He'd hoped it would have, but it didn't. Like everything else, it did the opposite of what he desired.

Alec, not moving at all, asked in an kind voice, as if he was trying to calm him, as if he understood,
"You want to talk about it?"

"No," Magnus answered immediately.

He didn't want sympathy or concern. He had no need of it.

There wasn't a single word of comfort Alec could provide that would ease the dread that was freezing him cold.

"I can just listen."

That offer, as if Alec could somehow see right through his collapsing facade, caused Magnus to explode.

"Why are you even here?!!" he demanded cuttingly. Before Alec even had a chance to reply, almost before the words had fully left his own lips, Magnus barrelled on. "If this is about forgiveness, I give that to you, okay? You're forgiven. Just stop trying to help me!"

He wanted to throw something. There was an urgent itching in his palms to make something break, to force Alec to watch something else and not the unmistakable breakdown happening right before his eyes.

Magnus didn't feel insane. But then, those that were truly unhinged, rarely did.

When Alec didn't turn away, he did instead. Staring at the ceiling, his mind stuck on a incessant question.

Why couldn't he get his walls up, and let it go? Why wasn't it possible anymore?

It was torture to try and get it together when all of his precious control fell apart in his hands when he pulled at the strings. He couldn't locate the part of him that was good at acting nonchalant. Had he ever been unaffected, it was long gone by now. What was left in the wake was on full display and Alec had to be blind not to see everything he had never wanted to show.

"Magnus."

Alec's voice beckoned him to listen but he refused. Once his pride had been completely depleted, which would be soon, he'd cover his ears.

"Please, would you just look at me?"

Shaking his head profusely, Magnus denied his request. But he heard as Alec said, in a tone he'd never used with him before, "I'm here ... because I-"

Snapping his head down, Magnus warned Alec, with a desperation that was tangible, "No, don't!"

He'd changed his mind as soon as he heard the beginning of that sentence, suddenly terrified of things he hadn't been told, yet dreaded nevertheless.

He'd always been a good liar that excelled when it came to himself. Adept at the art, he'd begun believing his own words until he couldn't separate the truth from the webs he'd weaved.

He'd asked, but he didn't want the truth.

The lie was what he wanted.
"I can't do this."

If he had to stand by and watch them die, he'd lose his mind.

Magnus finally looked at Alec.

"You're on your own."

At the same moment he said it, someone opened the door.

"Sorry," Izzy apologised as she stood in the opening with a raised brow that spoke volumes. She patted the handle. "Should I slowly retreat behind some sturdy furniture?"

"You're not interrupting," Magnus told her, consciously ignoring the third person in the room completely.

Izzy cocked her head to the side and informed him, with a broad smile, "Your walls aren't soundproof, Magnus. And your voice gets quite piercing when it hits a certain octave."

Turning her attention to her brother, she said, "We did rock-paper-scissors for the honour of fetching you. We're ready to go, Alec."

Magnus didn't listen further. He walked over to the arched window and stared into the lonely night.

He heard Izzy and her heels beginning to walk. But in the corner of his eye, he could see Alec still rooted to the same spot.

"Go," he said, closing his eyes.

He took a deep breath, leaning his forehead on the cold pane.

"Alexander, please just go."

He sensed him leave, heard them close the front door, yet somehow believed when he opened his eyes, Alec would stand there. When he did look, he wasn't.

Why did he wish for things he couldn't change?

Why did he wish at all?

Magnus clutched the cup and in a fit of uncontrollable rage, he launched it at the wall.

Chapter End Notes

So what do you think? Magnus' facade is showing cracks, but what does that mean? What is he feeling behind his armour? What is he hiding behind his easy lies? Will they be able to find the killer? Can the Shadowhunters do it without his help? Why did he give up on them? Is he going to leave them? And will Camille return to wreck more of her special kind of havoc?
The Third Was That Actions Spurring From Love, Despite Their Purest Intentions, Were What Lined The Road To Hell

Chapter Notes

Hello, my dudes!

Our tagline/motto/unofficial slogan: "And when I thought things could go well, they go so wrong." - domoiswatchingyou

So, we're back, guys! Yay!

This chapter is by far the longest I'll ever post on here. It's 20 000 words, and I think I need therapy now. Seriously, writer rehab, here I come. It's one of the reasons why it took me a while to write it. The other being an existential crisis, or two, and you know, procrastination. I'm a flawed human being, so bear with me. :)

Moving past that whole thing, I really, really hope you'll enjoy it. :)

And so, without delay, let's get going!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chop Suey

Wake up
Grab a brush and put a little makeup
Hide the scars to fade away the shakeup
Why'd you leave the keys upon the table
Here you go create another fable

You wanted to
Grab a brush and put a little makeup
You wanted to
Hide the scars to fade away the shakeup
You wanted to
Why'd you leave the keys upon the table
You wanted to

I don't think you trust
In my self-righteous suicide
I cry when angels deserve to die

Wake up
Grab a brush and put a little makeup
Hide the scars to fade away the shakeup
Why'd you leave the keys upon the table
Here you go create another fable

You wanted to
The air surrounding it vibrated, humming with sparkling jolts as it floated, suspended in nothing. The sphere, comprised by energy, changed nuance as it hovered in front of him. It reacted with the shift of his fingers, gliding gracefully to where he guided. The opal surface didn't reflect the pouring sunlight that struck at it, only to slip through. It had neither substance, nor a true form, metamorphosing with each altering turn of his mind.

Beads of sweat joined his already drenched chest when the power brimming through his blood billowed. There were threads connecting him to that which was a creation of himself. It was forged from his magic, brought to ghostly life by his hands. It could harm or heal, whatever he chose for it to do. Presently, it did neither.

They were one and the same. It rippled when he drew a breath and vibrated when he rolled his shoulders. Linked by an invisible chain, it wasn't a surprise that it responded when the power surged, hotter than it should. Its reaction wasn't shocking, but highly tiresome as it shuddered, transforming into a pulsating blob that began increasing in brightness.

The escalation came and went within a second. It took on the colour of a star ablaze, the sweltering heat rolling off it causing him to avert his eyes. It flashed twice in red before unceremoniously blowing up, scattering across the balcony floor and tumbling over the stone railing.

Rubbing his temples harshly, as if they were to blame, Magnus took in the result. "Ngentot!"

"It's been some time since I heard you speak Indonesian," a voice suddenly remarked and he started.

Catarina grinned at him from where she stood in the parting of the french doors. "I must say your vocabulary isn't as refined as I remembered it to be."
Snatching up the towel that hung over one of the railing post's carved cap, Magnus dried his damp forehead. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough," she replied mysteriously.

He dragged away the wisps of hair that stuck to his cheek and wiped down the neck. "I didn't hear you come in."

"If you paid attention to your surroundings maybe you would have," Catarina pointed out.

Magnus brushed it off. There was nothing wrong with his alertness. She was one out of two that the wards would allow passage.

"I was focused."

"I can see that."

Catarina bent down and retrieved a fragment from the ground. She held the pearly piece between her fingertips for a moment before it dissolved into the air.

"Nice explosion," she complimented.

He smiled against his will and made up for it by throwing the dirty towel at her head. "Shut up."

Catarina repelled the attack without doing more than blink. One minute the magenta fabric was on the trajectory to strike and the next it had vanished.

"Classy, Magnus," she commented, studying her expertly cut nails.

"That's cheating," he said in the same offended tone.

There was an overwhelming chance that he'd never see that particular towel again. As revenge, Catarina had probably banished it to Antarctica. She was petty like that.

Lifting up one of the two plastic bags that were placed by her feet, she hitched it up high enough that he couldn't miss it even if he'd been blind.

"I brought lunch. A meal I have precisely thirty-eight minutes and fourteen seconds to enjoy," she went on to say as she checked the watch on her wrist. "Care to join me?"

Bestowing on her a doubting look, Magnus grabbed the one leaning against her leg.

"You don't take lunch breaks."

"I do," Catarina disagreed as they headed inside.

They walked into the kitchen. As she began unpacking the different containers of Chinese food, Magnus spoke into the open fridge, "When was the last time you did?"

The reply was instantaneous. "1999."

His laugh echoed as he reached inside.

"Oh, my mistake. That's frequent."

"Given our lifespan, yes is it," Catarina countered.
Coming back to the kitchen island where she'd set up, Magnus placed a water bottle in front of her as well as another bottle that gave him shills before he took the seat beside her.

Catarina twisted, making their knees collide while she popped the lid open on the ranch dressing and poured a generous helping into her box of chow mein.

"You know that's sacrilegious," Magnus told her with a gagging sound as she stirred it with her chopsticks.

She didn't look at him, only kept on whisking the horrible mess. "When are you going to stop saying that?"

"When you stop doing it."

A sly glint in her eyes was all the warning he received. There was no time to duck for cover. One minute the dampness on his skin was leftover sweat and then the next his vision was blurred by a warm, creamy substance. It squelched when it hit his head, something sticky slowly sliding down his neck.

"Oops," Catarina said sweetly, licking off her greasy fingertips. "I spilled some."

Carefully wiping his eyes clean of the mix of sauce and dressing, Magnus looked at her smug expression as she pretended she didn't see him.

Slowly unscrewing his own water bottle's cap, her feigned innocence was traded for shrewd surveillance as she studied him from the corner of her eye.

"Magnus," she cautioned sternly. "You wouldn't da-"

She choked on the rest as he doused her with the liquid.

Staring at him, Catarina shook her head sadly as she patted her face with an equally soaked sleeve. "I really thought you were better than this."

"I could say the same about you," he replied, picking off a noodle that had glued itself to his forehead.

With a regal wave of her hand, she raised her chin high. "I have no idea of what you are referring to, you uncivilised peasant."

With more dignity than it should be possible to have with mascara streaking down your cheeks, Catarina began eating.

"Why are you wasting your eighteen-years-in-the-making lunch on me?" Magnus asked when she continued pridefully shunning him.

"I'm asking myself that very same question as we're speaking," she told him solemnly.

But then she peaked at him and the corners of her mouth pulled up.

"You look ridiculous," she informed him as she reached up and plucked a mangetout from the top of his head.

Magnus arched an eyebrow as she bit down on it.

"I wonder why," he said drily.
Catarina's enthusiastic laugh caused water to drip from the wet hair strands and join the puddle that had been created on the floor beneath her bar stool.

With her around, he would accumulate water damage before this century came to an end.

With an exaggerated sigh, to let her know how much energy he was exerting on her account, Magnus rose to his feet.

As he padded into the bedroom to fetch a new towel, she began talking in a raised voice.

"So, does the explosion have anything to do with why you've been testy for two weeks now?"

He scoffed extremely loud. "I am not, nor have I ever been, something as ordinary as testy."

Standing in front of the renaissance armoire, he swung the doors open.

"No, forgive me," Catarina replied, the sarcasm holding up remarkably well despite the distance. "Cranky is what you are."

After locating what he was searching for, Magnus shut the aged wood with some force to make up for the lack of a good comeback.

It didn't go unnoticed by Catarina.

"You can't deny the truth forever."

He rolled his eyes in a spectacular fashion, wasting it on the doublet mirror that made up the front. The split in the middle, where the doors separated, cleaved his image in two. The twin halves gazed back at him.

In the midst the familiar reflection, he caught a flash of something else.

Returning to the kitchen, Magnus resumed his seat and placed the fragile object he'd brought between them on the countertop.

Around a mouthful, Catarina hummed her appreciation as she seized the towel and rubbed it vigorously against her hair. After deeming herself tolerably dry, she noticed the item.

"Chinese food. Bare chested." Catarina sighed theatrically. "A flower. You are irreversibly, head over heels, in love ..."

Her voice quieted as her eyes returned to the broken off stem. With reverence, she picked it up and traced the translucent petals with a soft touch. Her eyelashes fluttered closed as she held it.

The small changes of her features, the twitch of her lips and the calm breaths stuttering, unveiled the ravaging of memories that had taken hold, the blow that only the past could dole out.

Catarina looked at him, facing the present with a soft smile and pain shining brightly in her eyes.

"It's almost two years," she whispered, leaving the air undisturbed, as if to not bring up that which was better left buried.

When she blinked a tear fell. Then she croaked a laugh, naked and raw. Her hand found his and she weaved their fingers together.

"What do you think Ragnor would call me if he saw me crying over his favourite plant?"
Her nails dug into the back of his hand and he held tight, keeping her there with him.

"A sentimental loon," Magnus told her honestly.

Catarina bit her lip. "Only that?"

"If he caught me doing it, he'd probably try to turn me into a frog." Or something else unsavoury.

And he'd frown disapprovingly. 'Snap out of it,' Ragnor would certainly grouch. 'And for heaven's sake, cease acting like an uninhibited teenager. You know how I loathe the displays of affection.'

He'd been the kind of person born already a hundred years of age and only gotten worse as time went by. Surly and pessimistic, acting as an old man before either of them had been. Reproaching lectures and loudly voiced complaints was what Ragnor had usually aimed at him, interspersed with disappointed speeches regarding Magnus' incorrigible behaviour.

It had been his role to play in their trio, and he'd executed it with bravura.

He'd been the truest of friends.

"I always was his favourite," Catarina said.

It was supposed to be a lighthearted joke but it fell flat, weighed down by the person who should be there, whose rightful place was wherever they were. If only death could heed the bonds forged by love, few would die at all.

"That's true," Magnus replied.

Her brittle smile turned into a shuddering breath as she continued running her thumb over the stem, as if she was afraid that it would prove to be unreal if she stopped.

"I miss him so much it hurts."

Two years hadn't been enough to mend the rip that had been torn. It hadn't undone the years preceding it, nor could it. There were too many of them. Ragnor had been family and that link was unbreakable. They were chained for life and the hell that came after. He'd just left a while before them.

But it didn't make it easier. It never soothed the pain. Because that was what the absence was.

Pain.

He comprised it in that word to himself since it was as adequate as any other. He could spend the rest of his life inventing new words, with new meanings, to encompass that grief and it wouldn't come close.

'Missing him' sufficed, if that entailed feeling like the loss could end his life in a moment's notice; each time when he wanted to tell Ragnor something, forgetting for a split second that he wasn't alive anymore, and the blade cutting that much deeper in a wound that was already gaping, then yes, he missed him.

He longed until the longing turned into hot barbs that made him want to rip out the memories.

And then there were the dreams.

"Me too."
There wasn't much else to say.

Catarina appeared to agree, moving her hand to put down the flower. But it was a struggle, her knuckles whitening; unwilling to let go.

"Keep it," Magnus urged her softly. It was for her he'd picked it. No one else. "It's yours."

Her lips pulled up and this time they stayed up.

"Thanks," she said, and the solemn cloud that had descended upon them lifted.

One word from her and the sun was shining again.

"But that's not why you've been upset," Catarina continued with confidence. "Ragnor didn't piss you off this much when he was alive, to his immense chagrin. I sincerely doubt he manages that feat when he's dead."

She eyed him closer.

"No," she confirmed. "This has something to do with a certain undead, and I don't use this term lightly, heinous bitch."

Magnus didn't bother to ask her how she knew. But he wasn't about to admit it. Acknowledging that she was correct meant that she'd force him to talk about it. He had very little interest in subjecting himself to that.

Catarina raised an unimpressed eyebrow, as if she was saying, 'Really?'

"She always got under your skin like no one else," she reminded him, letting him know with a single sentence that she had no intention to let it rest.

When she was in this mood, Catarina was like a dog that had misunderstood the rules of fetch; she wasn't about to drop a stick once she'd picked it up. "What did she say?"

"She wanted me to come with her," Magnus answered. The memory's unpleasantness made him not want to drag it out. "To become her personal bodyguard, or something close to that."

Catarina covered her mouth but it couldn't hide the spreading grin.

"She what?" she mumbled with effort as she tried to keep a serious expression.

"And to convince me to do her bidding, she decided that the best course of action would be to kiss me."

Catarina pressed her lips together.

"So you're saying that Camille ..." She cleared her throat, wiping at the corner of her eye. "Kissed you?" Her voice squeaked at the end.

Magnus nodded with a healthy dose of revulsion.

"I still have nightmares."

Catarina burst violently into laughter, snorting as she tried to speak at the same time.

"I wish I could've been there. Her face must have been a spectacular thing to behold."
After pulling herself together, like the professional she was, Catarina asked, "What else?"

It was a shame they knew the ins and outs of each other's lives as well as they did. She was aware of that this wasn't the first time he'd had the misfortune of colliding with Camille's lips after their less than amicable breakup. It usually didn't have this kind of lingering effect.

There wasn't a point in denying what she could see.

"She said the same things you've been saying."

If Catarina caught the faint tone of bitterness, she didn't show it.

"You knew that already," she pointed out, not harshly, but with confusion.

She'd understood at once what he'd meant, but becoming informed of what had played out wasn't equal to gaining understanding. They were different in that aspect. Death had never stirred her. She saw it everyday, greeted it like an old friend when she sat beside those too far gone for even her expertise. Loss affected her, but death itself was nothing horrible. It was a part of life. Not once had she seemed to think it hard to watch those around them perish, the interchangeable creatures disappearing to make place for a new generation of equally replaceable mortals. Catarina embraced it, worked with it, and accepted when it overpowered her abilities.

He did the exact opposite.

It gnawed at his bones, feasted on his core as he tried his hardest not to let it draw blood. A psychologist would have a field day if he'd ever go to one.

But in the absence of answers as to why he couldn't face the fact that humans and their likes tended to die in regular intervals, he would run.

Where Catarina prospered, he wanted to flee. It was the reason, prior to his initial arrival in New York back in 1977, that he hadn't truly settled somewhere. The passing of time became less noticeable if it wasn't spent in one place, and one place alone. Of course, his intention had never been to stay here either. Had he been in the active search of a permanent residence, the chilly Northeast wouldn't have been his first pick. Somewhere warm and easy, where the sun seldom set and the short nights came alive would've been more his style.

But then the Circle had reared its ugly head and the very thing he'd been running from his entire life was staring him in the eye and the choice had been easy.

He couldn't stand by and watch innocents die.

And thus he'd stuck around, returned here, where people had a habit of dying in unusually large quantities.

That made sense.

"It doesn't mean I like to hear it."

Catarina tipped her head to the side.

"It's not about all of them though, is it?" she remarked, cutting through every layer until she'd exposed the sore spot. "I remember Clary from when she was little and I know you feel responsible for her, but this?" She motioned at Magnus, from his bare feet to his equally bare chest. "What you're feeling? That's about Alec Lightwood."
The denial was automatically at the tip of his tongue, ready to contest the words, but Catarina levelled him with a glance.

"I can tell when you're lying, Magnus. If you're just going to do that, then I'd prefer it if you didn't speak at all."

Magnus looked away, biting back the incessant objection that wanted to be let free. It felt like an admission if he didn't contend what she'd said. But then he couldn't. He wasn't completely sure what the lie was anymore. Or who it was he was lying to.

Catarina knocked her knee against his in a comforting gesture, drawing back his attention.

"Why don't you simply admit that you have feelings for him?" she asked softly. "It would give you some relief for a change."

Yes, that was precisely what he would do. Right after jumping out of an airplane without a parachute on. Both ideas rivalled the other in brilliancy.

She must have seen his sceptical expression because she folded her arms before he had even begun.

"Aren't you the one who warned me to stay away?" Magnus fired back. "You weren't exactly subtle about it."

"I want to see you happy. And given your track record, it was only a matter of time before you fell for a Shadowhunter." The corner of her mouth quirked up. "You've dated worse, I believe."

Camille. He'd never escape her clutches completely, nor this conversation it seemed.

Magnus tapped his fingers on the black marble. The point of saying it out loud alluded him.

"I will never be with him," he told her firmly. "It's impossible. He's a Nephilim. He's married. And even if he wasn't..."

He began drawing a pattern, focusing on the glossy surface and avoiding to name the rest.

Alec was one of the Nephilim. That would never change. He'd obey their rulings, enforce their laws, and not think for himself. He'd be a Shadowhunter first and foremost. He'd die as one as well.

He was married on top of that. Lawfully bound to Lydia. And unless she happened to suddenly keel over, belly up, at the ripe age of twenty-five, which was too morbid of a wish to have, that wouldn't change either.

And then there was the whole gay thing. Or, more accurately, the absence of that. Alec didn't want to be, had no intention to be, and that was all there was to it. Yes, it was the Clave's fault; their fundamentalism being drilled into him as soon as he was born. It was the rigid walls of the Institute that kept Alec in his place, but it was the walls he'd chosen himself. It was the stone he'd chained himself to and only he could do something about that. But he would never try to break free.

Alec chose long ago not to have feelings that were deemed inappropriate.

"He's mortal?" Catarina filled in when Magnus didn't finish the sentence.

And then there was that. How many stars would have to align for there to be a sliver of a chance he wasn't sure he even wanted? He couldn't pin a hope he didn't have on that.

It would never happen.
"It's just better not to feel."

A warm hand stopped his, squeezing gently.

"You need someone," Catarina said.

Shrugging, Magnus raised his head to look at her. "Maybe I've grown out of it."

Her hold tightened, as if she anticipated his reaction, when she continued on. "You haven't loved anyone since Etta."

He pulled away, his body tensing.

She had no reason to bring her up. He could vividly recall their fifteen years together without her prompting. If Catarina had asked, he could describe in detail the snowy morning that Etta had packed up the last of her things and left. Or the way her intelligent eyes had hazed over as dementia feasted on her memories.

She hadn't recognised him the last time he saw her, still as beautiful as the day they'd met. She'd died a month after, surrounded by the family she'd wished to have. It was a fitting ending, and he knew Etta had been happy.

So he didn't need the reminder of her, of what happened to those he loved. Not today of all days.

"I assume there's a point in the making here," Magnus said, his tone clipped.

Catarina knew not to mention her. As he knew not to mention those she'd lost.

The way she bit the inside of her cheek told him that she was aware that she'd stepped over the line, but not enough to take it back. Her eyes didn't waver as she told him, "My point, Magnus, is that you deserve to be happy. And if Alec is who you want, then tell him, and stop wasting time. Or if you want someone else, then pick them."

Her gaze drilled into him. "Just stop, before it's too late."

He should've known that was what she was leading to. Tenaciousness was one of her more refined vices.

"And that concludes our talk." He stood up and gathered the trash. "Are you finished?" He pointed at her carton and proceeded to grab it without listening for a reply he wouldn't receive.

Her degree of irritation was in direct correlation with her courtesy, and at the moment she didn't look polite.

"You can't just ignore me," Catarina aimed at his back as he went to the sink.

"We've already had this conversation," Magnus reminded, but aware that it wouldn't deter her.

They'd broached the subject all of three times and none of those attempts from her side had made it this far.

"What conversation?" Catarina asked, her voice frosty. "Every time I bring it up you say no."

He turned to her, resting his hip against the counter.

"Because that's my answer. You are not getting anywhere near this."
Either this had been a rough day, or she'd been seething all along and he'd missed the signs, but that was what it took to push her over the edge.

"That's not your call to make!" Catarina snapped.

"It is," Magnus said gently.

He'd promised himself that he would keep her out of harm's way. And this was him keeping that promise.

"I'm not dragging you down with me."

The eyes that had been angrily fastened on him slitted.

"Is that what you see me as?" She rose from the stool to her full height. "A burden?"

It felt like the sharp edges of her tone meant to cut into his skin.

Magnus shook his head firmly, dispersing her doubt as best as he could. But he didn't try to go to her.

She wouldn't welcome him if he had.

"Of course not."

He had more faith in her than he had in himself. And that was exactly why she had to stay out of it.

"But, Catarina, I need to keep you safe. You're all I have."

She made a noise, an enraged choking sound dislodging from her throat, before she threw her hands out.

"What about me?! You're all I have!"

The flicker of hope that he'd change his mind died rapidly in her eyes as her hands dropped down when he didn't reply. Holding her chin high, Catarina stepped up until she was standing right in front of him.

"Let's get one thing straight here." There was fury seething in her set features. "You're not hiding things for my sake. You're not lying for me. You're doing it to protect yourself. Because you're scared of what the truth brings, so you hide from it. That's why you always go it alone. You're terrified of depending on anyone when you might lose them. You should love me enough, trust me enough, to let me make my own decisions. I'm not afraid. I'm never afraid because I have you by my side."

Her eyes searched his as she pleaded for an explanation. "Why can't you show that faith in me?"

He didn't have the answer she sought. Magnus trusted her; had faith in her. Loved her. And it was that love that left him no choice but the one he'd already made.

She might dislike him for it, but it didn't matter. What it came down to was her safety. It was the one thing he couldn't risk.

"At least you'll be alive to be cross with me."

It was the final straw.
"For the love of god, Magnus!" Catarina cried in exasperation.

She spun on her heel, as if she couldn't stand his presence any longer.

But then she whirled back, and her whole body seemed to have transformed into solid ice in that brief moment. "It's not brave what you're doing. It's selfish."

Before she turned and left without waiting for the answer, she asked one final question, the cold in her voice doing nothing to hide the bitter resentment. "When are you going to learn the difference?"

He had two options. Either wallow in self-pity, which wasn't nearly as dignified as it sounded, or he could face the music and keep the promise he'd made. He'd told Alec that he'd help and then at first sight of trouble he'd had a spectacular meltdown and bolted like a spooked horse. It was embarrassing, really, if he stopped to think about it. Which was why he was adamant not to let that thought form as he stopped on top of the stairs.

The dark cathedral was silent on the outside, not giving away the internal happenings that were undoubtedly taking place within. Usually, he wouldn't have a reason to hesitate. But he wasn't requested this time. He hadn't been so much as asked to come. And even if he'd been invited, he highly preferred the sanctity of summoning. It lend him rights that made his life easier.

But then, it was a long time ago his life had been in the vicinity of easy.

Maybe they didn't need his help. They could've already caught the murderer and he was fretting over nothing. Or they could've gotten themselves killed in the process. Either way, he wouldn't know unless he actually opened the door.

Pushing away the thoughts that vividly recalled the last time he'd entered this place without being summoned, Magnus went inside.

The inside was astir with people bustling about. It was unchanged, as ordinary as always, if - he noted the loud snap of a bone breaking and saw how the pair sparring on the training mats close by halted their exercise as the smaller one of the two pinched the bridge of her nose to stop the bleeding - that was considered normal.

The girl seemingly couldn't get the fractured nose to cease seeping. Turning her face up towards the ceiling, she waved goodbye to her partner as she aimed to exit the area. Magnus watched her leave until his attention was called elsewhere.

"Hi, there."

He turned to the broad figure.

"Did she offend you someway or do all your practices end with blood being drawn?"

Gathering up the weapons, one of which was coloured scarlet at the top which he'd undoubtedly used to strike her, Jeremy shrugged. "She's fine. Her defence slipped, that's all."

"Never heard of a pedagogic approach?" Magnus inquired.

Jeremy supported his chin on one of the wooden staffs.

"Not yet." The grin spreading over his face had a certain charm, and by the looks of it Jeremy was
highly aware of that fact. If there ever came a time where you could bottle confidence, he’d stand to make millions. "But I'm open to learning."

His eyes glinted with a challenge as he went on. "You want to give it a go? I promise to go easy on you."

Magnus leaned his shoulder against the metal rail that enclosed the allocated training space.

"You know," he said casually while studying the operation centre, "I'm not sure if I'm supposed to be flattered or insulted."

He felt, more than saw, when Jeremy joined him. His shadow fell over Magnus as he blocked out the fluorescent overhead light.

"Well, if you're asking me, I don't think you need to decide right now." The easy grin was audible in his tone. "What do you say?"

Magnus only raised his eyebrows and kept looking ahead.

When Jeremy spoke again, his voice came from a much closer distance. "Don't you want to wrestle a little?"

Magnus stopped himself from making a gagging sound, but that was the best he could do. He turned his head towards where Jeremy was now lounging, right on the other side of the rail. Since the entirety of the workout area was located on a platform, Jeremy was still taller despite that he was sitting.

"Has that line ever worked? No, I mean for anyone," he went on when Jeremy wasn't quick enough. "Ever. In the long and prosperous history of humans, has there been one person who's found that appealing?"

Jeremy rolled his shoulders slowly. "Fine," he relented. But then he added, with a bat of his lashes, "Rain check."

He was incorrigible.

It was who Jeremy was, Magnus supposed. Another one of his traits appeared to be favouring only partial clothing. To be fair, they'd only met three times, but two of those times he'd been in this state of undress. So either there was a newly implemented rule in the Institute that all attractive males should be half-naked as often as possible, or Jeremy was extremely fond of his own bare chest.

"So what are you doing here?" Jeremy inquired. "Except admiring me of course."

It was definitely the latter.

Relaxing, Magnus let the shameless self-congratulation slide for now and laughed.

"I'm looking for-" he'd said, when Jeremy took it upon himself to finish the sentence for him.

"Alec?"

The good-natured expression didn't change as Jeremy posed the question, but his gaze was direct. Magnus leaned away from him.

"No," he replied, and it was a chill to his tone. "I wasn't, actually."
Not catching the hint, Jeremy kept looking at him with an unwavering eye contact that was starting to grate at Magnus' skin.

If there was something he lacked appreciation of, it was when strangers interfered in things that didn't concern them.

But before he could inform Jeremy of that, they were joined by a third person.

"Hey, Magnus, can I talk to you for a second?"

Jace had sprung out of nowhere, and now he was looking intently straight at Magnus.

"Jace." Jeremy clapped Jace's shoulder from where he was sitting. "Good hunt?"

"Yeah," Jace responded, as polite and eloquent as he was with everyone.

He didn't so much as spare Jeremy a glance as he continued staring at Magnus.

"Magnus?" Jace repeated, though it sounded less like a question and more akin to an order this time around.

It was obviously something.

"Sure."

The words had barely left his lips when Jace brushed past him and went as far as taking him by the arm. Magnus shook him off when they turned around a corner and was shielded from curious eyes.

"Care to explain that?" he said.

Whatever damage Jace had, Magnus doubted it could be labelled with a name, but it couldn't hurt to ask.

Jace ignored him and cut to the chase.

"How long has Jeremy been seeking you out?"

The abrupt question made Magnus blink. "Excuse me?"

"How long?" Jace repeated.

It didn't take a lot of effort to read Jace's face.

Magnus shook his head sadly. He'd never met someone who was so continuously wrong regarding every single thing.

"This might be a foreign concept for you to grasp, but, believe it or not, some people are just pleasant."

It was like every word went straight through one ear and out the other. There probably wasn't an abundance of resistance for the sounds to cut through.

"I don't trust him," Jace told him with finality.

And that was supposed to settle it?

He was receiving life guidance from one of the most dysfunctional people alive. How in the world
could this be his life?

"Because he talks to me?" Magnus arched an eyebrow that questioned Jace's entire existence. "Are you going to include your own name on that list?"

Jace lowered his voice. "Because there's someone living here we shouldn't trust."

No, was there? Really?

It was almost like Jace had forgotten that he himself hadn't been aware about this for more than two weeks. Either he had amnesia or his memory was highly selective.

Magnus smiled. "You're my prime suspect so I'm not that concerned."

Jace crossed his arms. "Funny. Just watch your back."

"You live here," Magnus reminded him. "Worry about your own."

He didn't need Jace's misguided advice. Magnus was fairly certain everyone in the entire world would benefit from not being on the receiving end of that special gift.

"I have no reason to," Jace said flippantly.

Of course Jace wouldn't listen. He never did.

The fact that the odds of he himself getting a knife in the back, or the front, or anywhere else, was significantly higher, didn't trouble Jace. Why would it? He gambled with his life the same way poker players bet their chips. It was the all-in mentality but with significantly higher stakes. And the difference was that Jace had those that cared about him.

How long was it until he dragged someone else with him into the grave he was digging for himself?

"Then for Clary."

The change wasn't subtle; the reaction far from discreet. It was verging on violent, how quick his gaze switched into stone and his voice dipped down to the sub-zero temperatures.

"What did you say?" Jace said, and every letter sliced the air.

"She's worried about you. They all are."

Even Magnus was beginning to be and he wasn't certain on exactly how the percentages between wanting to strangle Jace and wanting to help him were distributed. If Jace was trapped in a burning building he'd save him of course, after collecting the vital, and a few not so vital, items.

Jace seemed to be the exact same person that had arrived at his apartment bruised and beaten in his fruitless search for his father, and that was months ago. According to Clary, he'd been like this ever since he'd found out the truth about his parentage. Insane, she'd said. Obsessed.

The entire situation was a grenade, and Jace the unstable pin in the equation.

"And if you don't think something's going to give soon, you're far dumber than I gave you credit for."

It shouldn't be possible to enunciate with your jaw clamped shut like that, but Jace managed it flawlessly. "Don't talk about her."
It was the brightest warning sign Magnus had seen in a while. He blew right past it.

"Then stop doing whatever it is you're doing and I won't have to."

Jace looked at him, and not in a way that signalled defeat. "I'm not the only one here with secrets."

Magnus returned the stare, albeit with a wry smile. "Who do you think you are? Nancy Drew?"

Either Jace missed the joke, or he didn't understand it, since he carried on without missing a beat.

"You told me you didn't come back for Alec." His gaze intensified. "I believe you. Which means you returned for something else."

"Yes," Magnus said slowly, as if he was speaking to a child. "Because I live here."

But his brush off didn't take. Jace's expression didn't change, and for a second, that stretched uncomfortably long, it was silent.

"If that was the case, you wouldn't have left in the first place," Jace told him, as if the concept of vacation had yet to be invented. "You came back for a reason."

Magnus regarded him calmly, relaxed. "Is that what you think?"

Jace mimicked his tone. "That's what I think."

"Do you expect me to correct you on your faulty assumptions?" Magnus asked generously. "Because that just seems redundant at this point."

"I don't expect you to admit it," Jace said. "All I'm saying is: if you stay out of my business, I'll stay out of yours. And when I tell you to watch your back, you do it."

The odd, disconcerting concern mixed with vague threats conflicted against each other. It was a paradox; similar to the walking, talking, breathing one standing right in front of him.

The fact that Jace seemed to be entirely at ease with spouting his own brand of unsettling care made it on the brink of believable.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say you are a little bit too concerned with my back."

Jace's mouth reshaped.

It wasn't a smile. A generous person wouldn't call it that. It had an uncanny resemblance to the grimace a baby made right before it vomited.

But it was the closest thing to it Magnus had seen aimed in his general direction.

"Then it's good you know better."

And with that last sliver of wisdom imparted, Jace walked past him, strolling farther into the Institute.

The time for miracles apparently wasn't over.

Magnus went the other way, heading back around the corner they'd turned. Going by Jace's warning, they hadn't discovered anything at Hunts Point, if they'd gone at all.

The others were also clearly alive, since that was a topic that would've come up in their
conversation if Simon had stumbled off a cliff, or something else had happened that was guaranteed
to occur some day in the not so distant future.

Which meant there was no valid reason for delaying the uncomfortable explanation he would have to
provide Alec with. It was better to get it over with. The only thing he had to do first was find him.
And as luck would have it, Alec was nearby. He stood by one of the screens, engrossed in a
discussion with a small group of Shadowhunters. Staying by the wall, Magnus bided his time.

There wasn't an abundance of riveting actions happening around. People were moving to their
destinations, the centre as alive and busy as always, but it was more of a transport route at the
moment and the only fixed point was the assembly to the far right.

He let his gaze wander there, once or twice, as he twiddled his thumbs.

It wasn't often he'd had the opportunity to study Shadowhunters in their natural habitat, so to speak.

Alec seemed to have been born for it. His voice didn't reach across the distance to where Magnus
was waiting, but he looked thoroughly at ease. The few gestures he utilised were restrained,
perfected, as if he'd done this particular task a million times before and would continue to do so until
the day came when he wouldn't return from a mission. Alec's focus didn't waver when one of the
Shadowhunters interrupted him, instead gesturing back to the screen as he took up the thread that
she'd cut off.

There was a lightness to him that usually wasn't there. Like the world, for once, perhaps smoothed
his rough edges instead of adding new ones.

He looked happy.

Leaning against the wall, partly concealed by the softer light that lit up the hallways, Magnus stood
far away from him. This place was one Magnus tolerated when he had to and steered clear of for the
remainder of the time. It was, if he had to put it into words, at least one of Dante's circles. Maybe
two.

The stone he leaned against was cool; the Nephilims inside of here cold. This palace of holy divinity
would never welcome him and he didn't sought its acceptance.

He would rather be a demon.

Magnus kept watching until Alec began wrapping it up.

Alec had made the right choice for the both of them. This was where they belonged, Magnus knew
as he crossed the floor. On the opposite sides of the room.

That knowledge didn't soothe the feeling of the looming awkwardness that would inevitably descend
upon them. How exactly did you apologise for a disproportionate reaction without digging too deep
into the reasons behind it?

"Hi," was the award-winning opening he chose to go with.

Alec must have not seen him, because he turned around at the greeting and his face changed into the
human version of a question mark.

"Magnus," Alec said, pausing for a minute too long until he apparently remembered that there was
something else that should probably be tacked on. "Hi."
"Hi," Magnus echoed once more, a second before he closed his eyes when the first wave of embarrassment hit.

He shifted his weight. It wasn't precisely that he felt wrong-footed. It was more akin to the feeling that the floor was a minefield and he was about to get a leg blown off.

By some saving grace, Alec intervened. "Let's go to my office."

"Mhm," Magnus hummed in agreement. He didn't trust himself with verbal replies just yet.

Alec didn't say anything, to Magnus' relief, when he had closed the door behind them. It was an articulate, "So ..." that slipped through Magnus' lips that broke the silence, despite that he had no idea what should follow that brilliancy.

Instead of dwelling on his deteriorating conversational skills, Magnus took in the expanse of the room. It was tastefully decorated in muted, but warm, colours. The oak walls and oak desk did their fair share of instilling respect, but the dignity was ruined by the spots of flashy green and showy orange, and in one instant a blinding yellow, that were littered across the space.

"It's very ..." Magnus lifted up an intensely pink pillow from the couch that ran along the wall. "You."

"Izzy," Alec explained with a laugh from somewhere behind him. "She insisted."

"Of course she did," Magnus commented.

Izzy and Alec was as different as they came.

Magnus put it down again, flattening his palms over invisible wrinkles.

"Last time we talked," he said, without looking over his shoulder to make sure Alec was listening. It was better to get it over with fast. "Well," he amended, when he wasn't sure how to carry on. "Not as much talking as me yelling."

It had been loud too. He couldn't recall exactly what he'd been shouting and that was probably for the best. Maybe he should hit Alec over the head with something heavy so that he couldn't remember it either.

"I was ..." Magnus' voice died down. What was it he was trying to convey?

"Magnus," Alec said.

"You caught me- it was a rough night."

"Magnus," Alec tried again.

Magnus swiftly turned around so that he could spit it out.

"And I took it out on you because you're sturdy like that, and," he flapped his hand lamely in the air, "tall."

When the words, words he'd said out loud, caught up to him, Magnus put a hand over his eyes.

What the hell was his problem?

"Magnus?"
Maybe the ground could just swallow him up. There had to be a spell for that.

"Hey."

The voice was suddenly close. Close enough that he could easily feel Alec's presence. Steeling himself, Magnus put his hands behind him against the arm of the couch and looked up.

How Alec had moved that quickly and quietly was impressive.

"You don't have to explain. Or-" Alec cut himself off and smiled, devastatingly sincere. "I'm just glad you're here."

It caught him off guard.

"Oh."

That was why he slipped past Alec and put some distance between them.

"I had a whole speech. Not practised." That part was painfully apparent. "Obviously."

Alec shrugged, offering, not an olive branch, but the whole three, roots and all, when he said, "We're good."

It might have been the coward's route to let it slide, but Magnus wasn't about turn down the offer.

"Right." He relaxed as Alec's assurance that this subject wouldn't have to be visited again soaked in.

"So what did I miss?"

A hint of surprise flashed on Alec's face. "You still want to be a part-"

"I told you I would help." Why else would he be here? "I keep my promises."

"Okay." Alec came closer, parking himself across from where Magnus was leaning back against the side of the desk. The tips of their shoes almost brushed when Alec settled in, resting his back against a fortunately placed pilaster.

"We went to Hunts Point but there was nothing worthwhile. And since then we haven't had any free time to spend. I can't put this down as a sanctioned mission since the fey collected the bodies. Pursuing it officially would only draw unwanted attention."

They didn't have access to the victims. But they, hopefully, did have the next best thing.

"Did you by any chance find the rapport?"

He'd forgotten he'd asked for it until just now.

"Yeah, I did," Alec told him.

Rounding him, Alec's stele glinted in his hand for a split second before he pulled out the top drawer. There was no digging around. Alec's neat freak tendencies were present here as well, as he at once located the folder and handed it to Magnus.

He must have seen Magnus' arched brow because he said, as he pocketed the stele, "Precautions."

Magnus accepted the rapport but couldn't shake the image of the runes illuminating as the drawer was unlocked. Alec was the head of the Institute. If he felt the need to take preventative measures
that wasn't a positive sign. "Are you scared?"

Alec blinked at him, as if the thought hadn't crossed his mind that it might be a good thing to be. "No."

But then, what was he really expecting? Alec was a Shadowhunter. They ran towards danger the same way a sane person would run in the opposite direction.

"You sound like Jace." The tone alone revealed that it wasn't meant as a compliment.

Alec caught it and countered by simply disregarding the insulting remark, as if silence was a sufficient defence. "Are you?"

Magnus opened the folder and scanned the words that he himself had put down on the paper. The cause of death leaped at him like a rabid dog. "Not for myself."

The desk moved ever so slightly when Alec's hip bumped against it. "I've looked it through but I haven't found anything."

A minute later, Magnus was inclined to agree with Alec's judgement. The rapport was useless.

"Well," Magnus said, putting the papers down. "It's a comfort to know we both suck. Unless you have a plan of some sort that you haven't shared yet."


That didn't sound comforting. That didn't sound comforting at all.

"Bait?"

Alec nodded. "We're going to lure them out."

Who would be dumb enough to agree to that?

"Who's-"

The answer was as clear as day.

"Jace," Magnus stated in a dead voice. He looked at Alec. "It's Jace who's the bait, isn't it?"

Alec did his best to appear serious but it was a failure. "He volunteered."

In the choice of whether to laugh or cry, Magnus picked the former. "Okay, I have to know. Why did you choose him as your parabatai?"

Alec’s eyes crinkled at the corners, but before he had a chance to tell that, undoubtedly, disturbing story, there was a rapid knock on the door a moment prior to it swinging open without waiting for an invitation.

"Alec," someone said.

Alec looked over Magnus’ shoulder at the figure standing in the door and his face turned sober in an instant. It was a transformation that happened in the blink of an eye.

Magnus followed his gaze, turning his head towards the door and tensed as well, though it wasn't visible.
Jeremy stood in the opening, waiting impatiently; his features cut in stone.

"I need to speak to you. It's urgent."

They both righted themselves.

"Excuse me a moment," Alec said.

"Certainly," Magnus replied in the same formal tone.

Alec walked past him to get to where Jeremy stood and Magnus unconsciously pulled back so that there was as much space between them as possible when he did. He watched how Alec walked out and then the door closed behind them.

Great, Magnus thought. That should definitely help quashing the insinuation Jeremy had made earlier.

He shouldn't be here. It was easy for rumours to spread and the mere whisper of a Shadowhunter, and the head of the New York Institute no less, associating with a downworlder in anything else but business was less frowned upon and more career suicide. Alec might be a Lightwood but that didn't exempt him from the rules. If anything, it tied his hands harder. It was less than two years ago he'd had to marry Lydia to ensure his leadership and maintain the Lightwood family's position and if he wanted to retain that they shouldn't push their luck.

It wasn't fair, but this was how their world operated.

Magnus gazed through the stained window, out at the clouding sky.

He knew better than this. He'd lived long enough to.

The sound of Alec's return pulled him out of his thoughts. Alec stepped inside, shutting the door. When he turned around, his face was a hard mask.

"What's wrong?"

"There's been nine separate sightings of the Circle as of right now." Alec's eyes were cold as they stared ahead. "We're heading out."

"Nine?" That didn't make any sense. Why would Valentine scatter his troupes? "Why would he do that?"

"I have no idea," Alec said. "But you shouldn't go home right now."

Magnus frowned at him. "I'm not going home. I'm coming with you."

Alec's stare landed on Magnus, and he said, on the verge of commanding, "The last time we met the Circle they almost killed both of us. I want you to stay here."

Magnus made some sort of disbelieving scoff as he pushed away from the desk. "Are you seriously going to sideline me? Because last time I checked, I'm a powerful warlock. You kind of need me."

Alec's jaw worked, as if he was chewing the words he really wanted to say.

"Well?" Magnus questioned when nothing came out.

"Fine," Alec agreed, but he didn't seem overjoyed by the prospect.
"Gee, Alexander," Magnus said sarcastically as he followed Alec out of the office. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

When they reached the dais, Lydia was standing by the railing. They parted ways as Alec joined her and Magnus descended the stairs. There was a group of Shadowhunters that had gathered below and amongst them Magnus could see Izzy and Jace.

Izzy had spotted him as he made his way to the back where they were huddled together, since she, when he was close enough, immediately asked, "What are you doing here? We're going on a mission."

"And I'm joining you." He scanned the room and stuck on a short figure making a beeline towards them. "Apparently."

"Do you know what this is about?" Clary panted as she pushed the hair out of her eyes. She wiped her sweaty forehead with the back of her hand and noted Magnus. "Hi, Magnus."

"Hello, Biscuit."

"Nope," Izzy answered. "But Alec seems pissed."

The three of them that weren't already looking directed their eyes at where Alec and Lydia were standing. It wasn't overt that there was an argument playing out, but their mouths were moving faster than normal and Lydia clearly snapped at something Alec said.

What Alec's response was they missed, as someone else came up to them.

"Jace," a sweet voice lilted. "Do you know when we're heading out?"

The girl had, while they'd been looking the other way, sidled up to Jace. Her bronzed skin glistened despite the horrendous fluorescent lights.

"No, I don't," Jace said lazily, as if he couldn't care less if he tried.

"Alright," she replied, flashing a white smile. "Are we still on for tonight?"

Magnus couldn't see Jace, but the words said enough. "Yeah."

It was, without a doubt, the worst timing in the world.

Magnus prayed he was the only one who'd heard the faint catch in Clary's breath as she blinked at the scene playing out in front of her. Going by how Izzy stiffened beside him, he wasn't.

"Lel!" Izzy announced loudly, as if she wasn't addressing someone ten feet away. "I believe you haven't met Magnus."

The girl, Lel, seemed to only now notice that despite her wishes, she and Jace weren't, in fact, alone. Her smile dimmed as it turned on Izzy and it vanished as it fell on Magnus.

Izzy was mistaken. They had met; right outside of here. She'd worn the same look of disdain marring her features then, as she sported now.

Her rust coloured curls framed her face perfectly as she spat, "Warlock."

Her dislike didn't amuse him this time.
"High warlock," he corrected, smiling patronisingly. "I'd hate for you to get my title wrong."

"They're ready," Izzy broke in, jerking her head at the dais and where Alec and Lydia were standing on the elevated front. She looked at Lel and curtly said, "I think you should go back to Miriam."

With her mouth twisted in an expression that ruined the outer beauty, Lel marched back the way she'd come.

The thick silence that reigned between the four of them as Clary looked away and Jace did whatever it was Jace did, didn't have opportunity to take root as Lydia drew everyone's attention.

"Listen up."

The quiet mumbling that had filled the room during the hold-up died down instantly.

"We have received confirmation that the Circle has been sighted at nine different locations less than fifteen minutes ago. Time is of the essence if we want to intercept them before they go under ground. Therefore, we're going out in pairs."

Briefly, Lydia's gaze rested on a man that stood to the side. His brown hair rivalled Izzy's in length.

"I and Peter will be at Grand Central Station," Lydia declared.

Alec shoulder's were squared, standing tall by her side. "Jace and I will be at Jackson Hill.

"Farouk and Cierra," Lydia called. "Inwood Hill Park."

"Nenet and Dimitri; Times Square," Alec continued.

"Vanna and Sabra; Green-Wood Cemetery."

"Miriam and Lel; Fort Totten."

"Jeremy and Magnus; Edebrook."

"Octavia and Tam; Arlington Heights," Alec instructed.

Lydia finished with the last duo yet to be called.

"Izzy and Clary; High Line Park."

With her hands clasped behind her back, Lydia looked out over the room at those standing before her and her husband.

"We don't know how many members that we're dealing with, or what their motive is. Be vigilant."

No one moved at the warning, everyone aware of the possibility that they might not return.

"Any questions?" Lydia asked the silent room.

"Good," she concluded. "Then we're heading out as quickly as possible. Get your partner and go as soon as you're ready."

From being still, the room plunged into fervid activity. Clary and Izzy disappeared towards the armoury while Jace and Magnus remained.

Magnus spotted Jeremy striding towards them and he said, right before he went forward to meet him
in the middle, "You're an idiot, you know that?"

Leaving Jace behind, Magnus met Jeremy that was grinning as always. It seemed to be his perpetual expression.

"You ready for some action?" Jeremy asked.

Nodding that he was, they briskly made for the front door.

When they followed the walkway leading away from the Institute, Jeremy bumped his shoulder.

"Since I got the warlock, does that mean we get to portal?"

"Are you that lazy?" Magnus asked.

They had barely made it a hundred feet. They were still on the premises.

Gasping, appalled, Jeremy replied, in a wounded tone, "My motives are entirely altruistic, I assure you. I'm man enough to admit that, while I do appreciate the," he waved his hand to encompass Magnus, "aesthetics you have going on, it can't be that comfortable to run in. I was simply trying to give you a polite way to bow out, instead of having to exert yourself in a futile attempt to keep up and thus stopping you from being eclipsed in the shadow that is cast by the magnificence that is me."

Jeremy should really have been winded by that.

"Is it a heavy burden to have such a big head?"

Jeremy shrugged. "It's a pretty head, though. That, you have to admit."

He wouldn't. If he did, it might just be the tipping point that prompted Jeremy to custom-order a statue of himself.

"You have convinced me," Magnus told him, sparing himself from having to hear Jeremy sing his own praises all over again. "We'll portal."

The weather seemed displeased. The sky, that that morning had been clear blue, was at the moment swiftly changing into a petulant charcoal grey. It wasn't long after they'd stepped out of the portal, right outside the front gate, that the clouds rolled in above their heads and with them, the air became thick with electricity. The first flash of lightning slashed a zigzag pattern into the overcast sky as suddenly as it had arrived. The first drops of rain began rapidly falling and then, not a minute later, the deluge was a fact.

Still, they didn't lengthened their steps as they approach the vandalised building.

The sign, that once had been fastened above the entrance, dangled from a single nail. A few of the letters had either fallen off, or yielded to the elements, spelling out 'Edbrok Asylum'.

"An insane asylum," Jeremy said loudly to be heard when he squinted to read it through the downfall. "How fitting."

The torrential rain made it difficult to see farther than a few feet in front of them. Even as they neared, they couldn't discern more than the rectangular shapes of windows that lacked panes and the slightly taller rectangle where a door once had been. Through the curtain of water, Magnus could barely distinguish the seraph blade that Jeremy held in his hand. It glowed in the same hue as the
raindrops that were cleaved on the edge of it.

Jeremy motioned with an arm and Magnus followed the suggestion. Cautiously, they slipped beneath the sign that swayed dangerously, and entered.

It was a relief to be somewhere dry.

Shaking his head like a wet dog, Jeremy got the hair out of his eyes as he scanned the walls that might once had had a uniform colour, but was so riddled with graffiti that they could've been yellow or green for all they knew.

It was completely abandoned. The barred windows, howling in agony as the thunderstorm tore at the brick they were attached to, created a sound that echoed with seemingly no end. It reverberated down the corridor, filling the empty hallways with something else than neglect. No one, except teenagers intent on spray painting their own names, could've been here in decades.

If this was where Valentine's minions spent their time, it wasn't a surprise they were as deranged as he was.

Magnus glanced down the corridor that ran from the west to the east before each end were abruptly cut off when the building turned ninety degrees. There were only two directions to choose from.

"How badly do you want to catch them?" Magnus asked in a hushed tone.

Jeremy turned his sopping head towards him.

The surprise was slowly replaced with a delighted grin that bloomed on Jeremy's face. "Split up?"

The possibility of one, or both, of theirs demise seemed to invigorate Jeremy. He sounded giddy.

Magnus shot him a faint smile. "I'll go left."

Excitement, or adrenaline, convinced Jeremy to bump his shoulder again. "Last one to take one down buys drinks."

Going right, Jeremy was gone the next moment. Heading in the opposite direction from where Jeremy's brawny shape had disappeared around the bend, Magnus stepped lightly until he too turned the corner.

It was a sea of doors.

Some of them were swung open, as if the previous inhabitant were welcoming a visitor. Others were marked with indentations that looked eerily similar to what an axe would leave behind.

Evenly spaced, facing each other, they made up the walls.

Magnus paused, scanning the corridor that stretched out in front of him. From the outside, the building had seemed grossly expansive, a kingdom for the mentally unwell, but the interior was narrow, bordering on claustrophobic. If he put his arms out, they would easily touch both walls.

This place, this location, was perfection when it came to ambushes.

Broken glass were strewn like a rug beneath his feet, scraping against the concrete floor as he moved. Reaching the first opening, a pulse of magic beat in rhythm with his heart as he swept his eyes over the first room before turning to the mirror image standing across the hallway.
They were both empty, with the exception of the naked frame of a bed prominently displayed in the middle of the cramped living area in each one of the rooms. The mattresses had rotten away long ago, unveiling the coil springs that laid underneath. Despite the hefty wind that blew through the single barred window, the fluffy layer of dust barely moved.

As Magnus closed the first door, right before he shut the second one, he noticed that it didn't have a handle on the inside.

It felt like it took hours to check each one. A few, where the door had completely fallen off the hinges, he couldn't close after inspecting them. It left him uneasy, having to let them be, as he walked farther and farther into the depths of Edebroke.

The endless hallway came to end abruptly. Since the graffiti had a less prominent presence the more distance Magnus had put between the entrance and himself, he could see when the grey walls sealed up the rooms.

It concluded his search, or so he'd thought.

But when he'd passed the last opening, the final hiding place, without encountering anyone, he discerned another door not far away.

The elevator was out of use. Even when it'd been modern, it must've been a safety hazard. Above it, clearly displayed, was two numbers. One and zero. The floor indicator currently sat on the one. Beside it, a rusting metal bar was fixed on the wall, dipping lower down the staircase that lead into complete darkness.

"Fantastic," Magnus mumbled to no one in particular.

Of course it had a basement. Why wouldn't the creepy mental hospital have a basement?

The heavens rumbled outside. A clap of thunder rang out and a flash lit up the deserted hallway behind him.

Treading carefully down the steep stairs, he descended into the dark.

The air was damp, saturated with moisture that stuck thick in his lungs as he reached the bottom. There wasn't anything that provided light to see. Somewhere above him was the upper floor, but the silence was absolute. Even the thunderstorm, that had roared so loudly, didn't reach this far down. He trembled in the cold that clung to his soaking clothes.

The ground beneath his feet was fashioned by dirt, but the earth was poorly packed. It was uneven, making it easy to sprain an ankle if you tried to move fast. Breathing shallowly, as to not disrupt the quiet, Magnus crept forward.

The basement, if that had been its use back in the day, was ample; the narrow hallways from before a faded memory. There was enough space to feel it stretch, spreading out around him. If something was hiding in the dark, he would only know if it'd get close enough to touch.

Using the brick wall, Magnus dragged his fingers against it to hold his course. He preferred them windowless. It might make it hard to see, but it made him hard to be seen.

That was why he didn't let his hands glow up with energy.
The surface scraped the tips of his fingers, rough against the skin. With his free hand held in front of him, he slowly progressed.

The pitch blackness took a potent toll on his senses. It felt like they dulled the farther away he got from where he'd started. Without the point of contact he had with the wall, he wouldn't know which way to go. Rats scurried over Magnus' shoes, squeaking loudly when he disrupted their rest.

The air didn't grow staler. Neither did it get cooler. It didn't incline or dip. The area probably ran all the way below the higher floor.

It might have been the animals scampering around, their peeps creating the sound, but Magnus stilled when he heard a muffled creaking, as if an unwilling door had been forced open.

Was it Jeremy that had come looking for him? He'd been gone for a while now. It had to be him.

Magnus wanted to call out to make sure, but he didn't, the words staying safely in his mouth. A shiver of awareness travelled down his spine, as the hairs on his neck stood up. If someone came from behind, he would be unprotected, vulnerable.

He could get trapped in here.

Reckless, he cursed silently. He'd gotten reckless.

And he needed to get out.

He could either push forward, hoping to find another exit, however unlikely, or head back and bet on that it was Jeremy.

One of the options was more appealing than the other. As Magnus groped the wall, making sure that he wouldn't lose the feel of it as he'd turn around, he caught another sound; a noise that made him freeze.

It was the soft scuffing of boots, close enough that he didn't have to hesitate where it originated from.

Putting a hand over his mouth to minimise his breathing, Magnus waited for another hint, one more indication of where the person was.

It came a minute later, from somewhere vaguely to his right. There was no way for him to know how large the room was, how much time he had before he'd be discovered, or if there was more of them around than the one he could hear.

But he wasn't about to stick around to ask.

Inching, agonisingly slow, he backed away. The scuffing didn't follow as he put more and more distance between himself and it. Those hunting must have lost the scent.

The adrenaline was still working its way through his system, but it lowered the farther away he got. It couldn't be long now until he'd reach the staircase.

That was when his foot slipped, stepping on something soft that squealed loudly in protest.

He didn't dare to breathe while he waited for what was to come, standing rooted to the spot. A quiet fell like a lid, pounding at his eardrums.

It wasn't noise that broke the hold of the silence.
He really would've preferred if it'd been that instead.

It was a faint glow that cleaved the dark, swinging through the air as it approached, fast but unsteady, as if someone was holding it. It had the shine of a seraph blade. And it was coming straight towards him.

That knowledge was yelling, beating inside his head, telling him to move in case he didn't want to be impaled.

His body jolted into action quicker than his mind. Something brighter than the lightning outside flared from his fingers, shooting out in the direction of the glow. The magic blinded him, the blaze burning into his eyes.

Magnus started. Brushing his palm over the cavities of the bricks, he spun on his heel and ran. He pushed his legs to move as fast as they could, while remaining upright, but it was a struggle. Hollows he couldn't see caused him to stumble and it sent a rush of fresh adrenaline that urged him on.

He was blind. The imprint the flare had left was gone, but the blackness had reclaimed its throne. It felt like he'd run for miles, just praying that he wouldn't crash into something, or someone, or it would be over.

He couldn't fight those he couldn't see.

Magnus' lungs burned, his legs did as well, but it didn't affect him. Forcing the oxygen down, he sped up. The sounds he was making were enough to drown out any other. He hadn't turned around, since he knew he'd fall if he tried. They could be anywhere. Everywhere.

Or right in front of him.

He slid to a stop. Blood pumped through Magnus' veins, soaring when the darkness severed around the pure radiance emitted from a witchlight. It spread wider, illuminating more than the seraph blade had.

The one he'd heard taking up chase must have rounded him at some point, slipped past when he hadn't noticed. That person now stood in the middle of the space, angling the light as they searched.

It didn't look like they'd heard his approach and that was his only advantage. But given how they moved, methodically illuminating each part of the room, it wasn't going to last long.

He had to act.

The steps came closer, the witchlight drawing nearer. Pushing his back against the wall, Magnus shifted alongside it. And the second the light changed direction, flooding the other side, he dashed.

It was a miscalculation. It swung back a second earlier than he'd anticipated, but it worked enough. Ducking whatever weapon meant to harm him, his palm connected with unfamiliar muscle and the flesh on the receiving end of the charge jolted.

The body collapsed like a marionette that'd had its threads cut. The witchlight illuminated the sharp features of the face for a single moment before it went out.

Magnus paused.

"Alexander?"
It came out as a bemused question, as if they'd run into each other at the grocery store and not in the basement of an abandoned hospital.

The pile beside his feet didn't move.

"Alexander?" Magnus repeated, without getting a reply.

Then it clicked, the wheels turning into their designated places.

"Oh, my god," he breathed, before throwing himself down in the dirt.

"No! No, no, no." He shook the limp body, trying to wake him up. "Alec, can you hear me?"

The only thing that met him was silence.

Fumbling across Alec's chest, he found the neck and tried to feel for a pulse. But his fingers were too stiff; the cold too chilling. The fear took a firm chokehold when he couldn't. "No, Alec! Come on!"

He wasn't supposed to die. Not now. Not like this.

Quivering, Magnus' hands trembled when he cupped Alec's cheeks, shaking him again, harder. "Open your eyes! Please!"

But he didn't. Alec's skin was soft beneath his touch; his body warm against him.

It felt like he was alive.

Rearing back his hand, Magnus slapped Alec hard enough that his palm stung. "Wake up!"

Alec didn't move. He couldn't.

"Please!" Magnus begged helplessly. "Please, Alec!"

Because he was dead. Alec was dead.

And he'd killed him.

"No," Magnus mumbled in a daze, letting his head fall down where Alec's heart should be beating. "Alec."

His lips trembled as he tried to take in a shuddering breath.

The chest beneath him rose suddenly with a cough.

Magnus shot up, leaning over Alec's face, holding tight enough to bruise.

"Alec?" he whispered.

Alec coughed again.

It was enough. It was so much more than enough.

Magnus collapsed on top of Alec, wrapping his arms around every part he could reach. "Oh, my god." Burying his face in the crook of Alec's neck, he breathed him in. "Oh, my god."

Alec hacked beneath him, his arms moving unconsciously before he finally opened his eyes.
"Magnus?" he croaked.

Nodding into his neck, Magnus said, "I'm here."

"I can't breathe," Alec rasped into his ear.

"Okay."

Forcing himself to let go, Magnus sat up and took Alec's hands.

"Here," Magnus said, without waiting for an answer before starting to haul him upright. "Sit up."

Alec let him. As soon as he was steady enough not to tip back, Magnus cradled his face again, trying to search his eyes through the darkness. "How are you feeling?"

They were so close that Magnus felt Alec's breath when he exhaled, felt his warmth, and it filled him with a relief that would've made his knees buckle if he'd been standing.

"Magnus," Alec mumbled in a confused voice. He lifted a hand, brushing the back of his knuckles lightly over Magnus' cheek. "You're okay."

Magnus ran his thumb along Alec's cheekbone in a comforting gesture. "What are you-"

But his question was cut off when Alec wrapped him up in his arms, tugging him in.

It hadn't been much space between them to begin with, and now there was none left. He felt how Alec's heart beat steadily against his own, how Alec's strong arms held him so tight that his rib cage couldn't expand. Closing his eyes, Magnus wound his own arms around Alec's neck and squeezed back.

"You scared me," Magnus whispered. "Please, don't do that again."

Alec nodded, though Magnus could barely feel it as Alec clutched him harder.

"What happened?" Alec asked after a while.

Magnus laughed. It was brittle, breaking on the second note, but it was there. "I almost killed you, you stupid, stupid idiot." He let a hand roam over Alec's back, just to assure himself that he hadn't actually done it. "I thought I did."

"I'm alright," Alec promised him quietly.

It was a relief to hear it spelled out, to not have a shred of a doubt, but it didn't explain why. And now, when the panic was slowly giving way for thoughts, Magnus pulled away.

"No thanks to you," he said as he looked at Alec. He couldn't muster up anger. He wasn't angry yet. But that didn't mean he was incapable of demanding answers. "What the hell were you thinking, Alexander? Why did you come here?"

If Alec had stayed where he was supposed to, this wouldn't have happened.

"And why did you chase me?" he added when he remembered to.

Magnus couldn't discern Alec's expression, but his tone was bemused. "Chase you?" he echoed. "I didn't."
Magnus stilled.

If it hadn't been Alec ...

Silvery sparks lit up his palms as he ordered, "Get up."

As he rapidly stood, Alec did as well, though he swayed a moment.

Magnus clasped Alec's arm to keep him balanced until he was steady enough to retrieve the bow and witchlight that had dropped when he'd fallen.

"You were chased?" Alec asked soberly, tensing the bow while they began backing towards the stairs that were visible in the glow from Magnus' magic.

"Shadowhunter," Magnus replied in the same tone.

The back of their heels hit the first step to the upper floor, and freedom.

No emotion betrayed what Alec was feeling when he said, "What happened to Jeremy?"

Staring at the blackness that finally began relinquishing its hold, Magnus said, "He's not dead." Hopefully. "He's in the other wing."

"So is Jace," Alec told him when they'd reached the top of the staircase and could see the deserted corridor once more.

Never before had Magnus been so happy to get to experience the claustrophobic feeling of walls closing in around him, but there wasn't time to celebrate.

They weren't outright running, but it was close. They traversed the hallway in less than a minute and skirted the corner. And around the bend, coming towards them, was Jace and Jeremy.

Magnus slowed down a little, but Alec sped up. It was evident why when they reached the others and Alec, without a word, slammed Jeremy against the wall.

"You split up?" he growled, right in Jeremy's face. "We don't split up!"

Jeremy seemed too staggered to fight back. He stared at Alec, his lips slightly parted. Alec pushed him harder against the plasterboard, his knuckles whitening at Jeremy's collar.

"Who the hell do you think you are?!" Alec spat.

That seemed to snap Jeremy out of whatever shock he was in. He shoved Alec back. "Let go!"

Dropping his hands, Alec took a step back, but his expression was one of controlled rage.

"Do you have an explanation?" he demanded. "Otherwise I'm benching you until you can be trusted on missions."

"Oh, come on," Jeremy snapped, quickly regaining his footing. "You just did the exact same thing with Jace!"

Alec looked ready to murder. He was on the verge of shaking with fury.

Magnus glanced at Jace to see if he would intervene before they came to blows, but Jace's features were set rigidly and he just shook his head at Magnus' unspoken question.
"You almost got him killed!" Alec shouted, seemingly eager to slam Jeremy against the wall again, or perhaps through it this time.

Stepping in between them before Alec had a chance to do either, Magnus put a hand on his chest and called a sharp, "Hey!"

Alec didn't try to get past him, which was a good sign, but he didn't stop glaring at Jeremy either. If looks could kill, Jeremy would be no more.

"While you two are busy arguing," Magnus said pointedly, but only trying to catch Alec's eyes, "we might still have a Circle member downstairs. Let's-"

"No," Alec interrupted him harshly, before turning away. "We're not going back there. We're going to the Institute."

Magnus tried to read his stiff posture but there was nothing there.

This was a golden opportunity if he'd ever seen one. They should take it.

"Why?"

Alec didn't bother to look at him when he commanded, "Now."

They strode in silence. If it was because something would ignite at a spoken word, or because there wasn't anything to say to begin with, there was no sure way of knowing. Alec and Jace made up the front while Magnus and Jeremy followed in their footsteps. The deluge had reached the Institute as well they came to realise when they trudged up the walkway.

He didn't think this often, but right now getting inside, even into the cathedral towering in front of them, didn't sound that bad.

Magnus didn't have the energy, or willpower, to do more than stare ahead, so when Jeremy nudged him, he thought it'd been an accident. But Jeremy followed it up by saying, although in a much more subdued tone than his usual jovial one, "So I guess I'm buying the drinks."

There was no question if the others had heard it. They obviously had, since Jace turned his head to look behind. Not bothering to reply, nor meeting Jace's gaze, Magnus trudged on.

The warmth fanned around them when they stepped inside the doors. Magnus heaved a deep breath of relief, relishing how it seeped into his bones, but he seemed to be the only one. Alec didn't so much as remove his jacket. He walked straight inside and Jace followed. Magnus went after, as did Jeremy.

They opened the second set of doors, trading the vestibule for the inner parts of the Institute. Jace stood just beyond the elevators, having stopped there next to other Shadowhunters that Magnus vaguely recognised as having also taken part in the mission. A stone's throw away, Alec was with Izzy. Her palm rested on his cheek and he kissed the top of her head before letting her go.

When Izzy looked up, seeing the gathering, she started forward, faster than her heels should've allowed. Nevertheless, someone else beat her to the punch. Clary came out of nowhere, flinging her arms around Jace's neck and almost knocking him, and those close by, down in her rush. Recovering from her full-frontal attack, Jace enfolded her, gripping her as tightly as Clary was clutching at every part of him she could.
It felt private, a thing not meant for anyone to see or know, not even themselves. It was filled with so much love that when Clary whispered Jace's name into his shoulder, Magnus averted his eyes.

Izzy was right behind Clary. She quickly scanned Jace from head to toe before moving to where Magnus and Jeremy were. Beginning with Magnus, and finishing on Jeremy, she did the same once-over.

"Thank the angel they found you both," she said, before enveloping Magnus in a tight embrace.

"What's going on, Izzy?" Jeremy asked, his tone low.

Izzy let Magnus go, turning her head towards the central point of the centre.

There, standing in the middle of the screens and work desks, was Alec, holding Lydia in his arms. Her hands were fisted in Alec's jacket, clinging to him as if she was afraid she'd fall if she didn't. Deep cuts, seeping through her shirt at the back, ran in a crisscross pattern all the way up to her neck. Alec was keeping her steady, running his hand over her blood-matted hair, over and over again.

Pressing her face into Alec's shoulder didn't muffle the sounds. Lydia wept like her heart was breaking.

"Miriam and Lel are missing. Their bodies weren't found at Fort Totten so they were probably killed elsewhere."

Sombrely, Izzy gazed at the scene in front of them. "And Peter's dead."

It happened quick; normality shifting into gear. The only thing that betrayed that the loss of three people was present, was in the way some of them walked faster, batons smashing together harder than necessary, strict strategy discussions rising in volume. The Nephilim didn't pause. Life, their mission, went on even as people were lost along the way.

It was a soldier's approach. The way an army acted.

He'd never been gladder to leave.

Magnus had lost track of both the time and the others. His clothes had dried by now, though it would do him little good since he'd have to brave the weather in a minute.

Deciding that he'd stayed long enough, he walked across the floor. When he'd almost passed the first elevator, Clary met him from the other direction. She shook away the water, wiping the drenched wisps of hair that stuck to her forehead out of her eyes.

"You're leaving?" she said when she spotted him.

"There's nothing here for me to do." He buttoned up the coat as she met him halfway. "I should go. Call me if you need my help."

When he rounded her, Clary took a light hold of his elbow. "I'm glad you're okay," she told him when he stopped mid-step.

"Likewise," Magnus replied, squeezing her hand for a brief moment before heading out.

As soon as he stepped outside, the wind slapped him in the face like he'd offended it somehow. The sky roiled like an upset sea; lightning crackling. Magnus surrendered with a sigh.
As his shoe touched the first step, the next taking him into the thunderstorm, the door behind him opened.

"Magnus, wait."

Alec came through the doorway, the door falling shut behind him.

Pausing for a second, Magnus quickly stepped back under the arched roof.

"Has something else happened?" he asked at once, searching Alec's face for a clue as to what this next crisis could be.

But Alec sagged ever so slightly against the door, staring up at the inner slate tiles. "No."

It wasn't a collapse; more like bracing. Like the weight on Alec's shoulders was just enough to make him need a moment to lean on something steady.

Perhaps nothing new had to have happened. The old was plenty enough to deal with as it was.

"I'm sorry about your loss."

It felt woefully inadequate, but it was the only thing he could think to say. Given Alec's earlier reaction, or, more precisely, the lack of it, he probably hadn't known Peter, Lel or Miriam on a personal level, but it still had to sting. They'd been one of his own. And they'd been Alec's responsibility.

Alec nodded, closing his eyes on the world.

When it dragged out, the way time had a tendency to do, Magnus finally said, "I don't want to keep you."

"Can you stay a moment?"

The words were clear, made clearer when Alec slowly opened his eyes again and looked at him. Perhaps through him.

In this light he appeared older; aged in a way Magnus would never be.

"Sure," Magnus said. "I'll stay."

When Alec didn't make a move to leave the comfort the back support provided, Magnus sat down on the top step of the stairs, beside one of the pillars that made up the front of the cathedral. He turned away, gazing out at the downpour. The puddles it'd formed bubbled when the drops broke the surface. It was an early thunderstorm. Just on the cusp of spring.

A warm body settled next to him. Neither spoke, letting the rain do the necessary talking.

It was peaceful, having survived the day. It provided a small window of serenity before the trouble, that was undoubtedly to come, reared its ugly head.

"It's not always going to be like this. There will be an after too. You just can't give up on it."

He said it quietly, as to not disturb the balm of the silence too much.

"I'm dreading the now," Alec answered, barely above a whisper.
He couldn't do anything to soothe it, the trepidation that must ravage through them all; unyielding to
the wreckage it left behind. He'd seen it before; felt the pain and the burn and the blood on his skin. It
didn't hold him prisoner. He didn't fear the demons living inside his head any more than he feared
Valentine and whatever hell he was bringing down upon them.

But that came from experience. From knowing what you could survive; exactly how far you'd be
willing to go.

It wasn't something that could be taught. You had to live through it, hoping to make it out alive. He
knew that.

But he could offer what little he had.

"I'm not," Magnus said. "Do you want to know why?"

Alec might have nodded his agreement. He might have shaken a refusal. But Magnus didn't concern
himself with either.

"Because in every story ever told, the evil psychopath with megalomaniac tendencies gets defeated.
That's the way it goes. Valentine doesn't get to win this."

"Except for, you know, Rosemary's Baby, Angel Heart, The Omen, to name a few," Alec pointed
out, destroying his argument with each factual title.

Instead of correcting him that cinema didn't necessarily portray reality, Magnus addressed a more
pressing concern.

"You watch movies?" Old movies at that.

Alec did a version of a laugh. It wasn't bright, but at least it was something.

"You act like this isn't the 21st century. We do have technology now, you know."

Yes, they did. But imagining Alec engaging in something as conventional as watching cult classics
between slaying demons, and whatever else he spent his time doing, wasn't what Magnus would
consider falling within the boundaries of normality.

"You live in a cathedral, Alexander." He made a motion behind them where it loomed. "Does that
scream modern to you?"

Alec repeated the laugh, once, before it was snatched up, taken away by the vexed wind.

"Can I ask you something?"

Magnus could barely hear Alec's question above the torrents that splashed against the ground. The
veil of rain verged on opaque. Despite that the road was close by, the cars headlights didn't reach
here. It felt like they were observers to the creation of a sea spreading out before them, infinite. They
were alone here, in the vacuum left by what had happened.

Yet, over the sounds surrounding them, he caught the serious edge to it. It would certainly be a
question you could only ask when death had caressed a little too close, when you'd felt the bony
hands ghost down your spine. The thing you'd say when you didn't have the stability to realise you
shouldn't.

Maybe he felt it as well when he agreed. "Okay."
"Why do you keep helping?"

There was an easy answer. There was a hard one as well.

He picked the logical alternative.

"Because I choose to," Magnus explained simply. "What kind of person would I be if I didn't?"

Alec shifted beside him before he at last turned to look, truly look, at him. "You risked your life."

Magnus met his gaze steadily. "It was a chance I was willing to take. If we'd caught one of the Circle, we might have had a way to find Valentine. Don't you want to?"

Going by Alec's face, he didn't.

"You might not agree with it, but I make my own decisions."

Alec just kept looking, his eyes never wavering. "What if you'd died?"

There was a hard tint to his tone.

Rolling his eyes to drive home the point, Magnus said, "I don't know what dying is like, Alexander."

Alec didn't react, other than by declaring, "You know what I mean."

"I don't care for what if:s." He didn't see the point in playing make-believe. They should just be grateful that they'd made it with all of their limbs still attached. "It didn't happen, so there is no use in talking as if it had. I'm alive. You're alive. Let's leave it at that," Magnus concluded, putting an end to the conversation.

But Alec didn't listen. "I don't want to."

His face was serious, but something was brewing behind the composure. "You could've died. Why did you act so reckless?"

Magnus stiffened at the accusation. Even if he had behaved rashly for a second there, that wasn't any of Alec's concern. He didn't have to answer to him.

"It's not my first rodeo. I can take care of myself just fine."

"It's not fine!" Alec snapped, like the words had been the match to ignite his anger. Because Magnus could see it now, plainly. Alec was angry, and it was directed straight at him.

"I thought I'd find you dead and I couldn't breathe."

There was no hesitation when he said it. No pausing. Alec sat still, steady, as he admitted it, and it let Magnus know that he wasn't done. That whatever he was going to say next would be worse. Much worse.

Failing to ask him to stop in time, failing to do anything else but sit there, Magnus had to witness when Alec said, without a hint of doubt, "I care about you, Magnus."

He was too close. The heat from Alec's body was stifling despite the rain. It was suffocating him.

"I'm in love with you."
It did suffocate him.

There was a part of Magnus, the logical side, that wanted to make sure his heart hadn't actually ceased beating. But then there was the other part that told him it wasn't that important really. Death had the one perk: if he flopped down dead, then at least he wouldn't have to confront this.

But as the seconds ticked by, and he didn't fall unconscious, the hurt grew.

Every time he'd thought he'd found steady ground, Alec did something like this. Disrupted the order with one single word. He didn't just pull the rug out from under him. Alec merrily set it on fire.

The right thing to do would be to behave unaffected. To be mature and distant. But who was he kidding? He'd almost gotten killed today. He'd nearly killed Alec. He didn't have it in him to fight this as well. It wasn't like he had that much dignity left anyway.

Groaning, Magnus allowed it to burn as he buried his face in his hands.

How Alec could have anything left to say was beyond him, but he apparently had. "Don't act like your life means nothing."

"Stop," Magnus demanded, repeating the word once more against his palms. "Stop."

He lifted his head and now, when it was too late to make Alec take it back, the ability to form words returned, and they came in the form of anger.

"You have no right to say that. None, whatsoever. You have a wife. A wife."

That he was the one that had to remind Alec that he wasn't exactly on the market was a joke. Why did he have to be the responsible adult when Alec was perfectly capable of taking care of an Institute, yet somehow lacked the fundamental capability to remember that he'd married someone. It couldn't be that hard.

Alec's expression changed. Then changed again into something unreadable. It was like he couldn't decide on one of them, so he mixed them all. "I don't."

Magnus stilled, dumbfounded. He didn't know he was speaking, that he actually had the capacity, before the words came out. Thankfully they were curt and to the point. "Explain that sentence."

"Technically, I guess we're still married," Alec said, doing as he'd asked. "But we're in the process of getting divorced."

It felt like he was hallucinating. It couldn't be real.

"When did-" He tried to make sense of it, to wrap his head around what he was hearing, and failed. "When?"

"Jace told me he'd been to see you. It took me, I honestly don't know how long, before I could pry it out of him. But when he told me that he'd blamed me marrying on you, I ..."

Alec lifted his arms, letting them fall back down.

"It was a wake-up call. One I desperately needed. You were never to blame for my decisions. I spoke to Lydia, and well ..." He paused. "Here we are."

"She knows? The Clave knows?"
A ghost of a smile touched Alec's face. "She always knew. And yes, the Clave knows I assume, since they're still 'processing'." There was a wryness to his tone, as if he'd strained his capability to keep the bitterness from seeping through. "-the divorce, which is a euphemism for finding my replacement I'm guessing."

Magnus didn't know how exactly they were having this conversation. How they were calmly discussing something that shouldn't be within the realms of possibility. But here they were.

"Your parents?"

Alec smiled, a true smile. "No," he said with a headshake. "I'm saving that special moment for later. Izzy knows, and now you."

Just the two of them?

"Not Jace?" Magnus questioned.

"Jace has enough on his plate."

Right. That made sense. The only sense he could find in all this.

When Alec didn't turn away, he had to. Staring into the downfall, he flipped it and turned it, but all he found was pieces that didn't fit together. How could Alec just change things, out of nowhere? Like it was easy. As if the Institute, the thing he'd sacrificed his life for, married for, had lost its meaning. It was Alec's whole reason for existing, his beloved job, and he'd suddenly decided to give it up?

For what?

Magnus' eyes narrowed when he figured it out. Straightening his back, he turned his head to Alec, and asked, in a frigid voice that was meant to cut to the bone, "Why did you do it?" His face was too stiff to show any emotion as he glared at Alec. "And I swear to god, if it was to win me back, I will hurt you."

It hadn't been enough to make him change his mind the first time. It sure as hell couldn't be now. If Alec had decided to throw away everything he'd gained because he suddenly had feelings, Magnus would break something of his. And it would be Alec's leg.

"Do you remember what you said after you'd woken up Jocelyn, right after the wedding?" Alec asked, out of the blue.

It was the last thing he'd expected to hear.

"You told me I shouldn't apologise to you," Alec continued. "That I should-"

Magnus cut Alec off before he could recount that event. "I remember."

It was a memory ripe with pain and fury. The air between them had been heavy with everything left unsaid back then. It'd been the last time they'd seen each other before he'd left.

It wasn't pleasant to reminisce about for many reasons.

"I took that advice. Two years too late I know, but I finally had the courage to do it. And it's not because I thought I'd get to be with you if I did. It's because I'm finally done with lying to everyone. Including myself."
Alec looked so secure. As if it didn't take anything from him to confess that he'd spent the entirety of his life pretending and was at last ready to give it up, no matter the cost.

"I don't want to win you back, Magnus. I want to try and earn you, if you'll let me, if you can. But either way, it's not okay that you put your life on the line like that. That's not something I'm willing to risk."

He should probably address something of that. Any of it, really. Magnus picked the last thing, since that was what he knew what to do with.

"You can't tell me what to do."

Stunned, in the literal sense, Alec sat unmoving, before he questioned, "That's what you took from that?"

"I'm not some fragile thing," Magnus fired back immediately.

"I'm not saying you are," Alec replied, rubbing him all the wrong ways. That was exactly what Alec was saying. And it was insulting on every level. All the anger that hadn't surfaced down in the basement, when he'd been too grateful that Alec hadn't died in his arms to feel it, emerged.

"Sometimes I just want to hit you," Magnus informed him in a low tone. He glared at Alec and by now it felt like it would become a permanent expression. "So you get to run around and gamble with your life, with your stupid parabaitai, and Clary who can't fight, and Isabelle who's Isabelle, but I, a high warlock," he all but snarled, "should stand on the sidelines?"

He kept giving Alec the same look, but now it was tinted by disbelief. "That's a marvellous idea, really. Top-notch, Alexander. How in the world does your mind work?"

It seemed to have dawned on Alec that he wasn't playing around. Because now Alec's temper from before reignited.

"It's my job," he retorted, and it wasn't in a kind way. "It's not yours."

That was his answer? That?

Was he serious?

"You're ..." Magnus grasped for a word that could incorporate what Alec was. Infuriating. Entirely. Completely. Infuriating.

"Impossible," he settled on, pronouncing it like a curse. "I mean, it's like talking to a wall." He stopped himself to fake a laugh. "No, excuse me, a wall would be better."

Alec threw out his hands. "I'm not- how is it impossible to ask you that next time you don't split up?"

"Because I make my own decisions," Magnus shot back.

Alec's jaw was moving. He was matching Magnus' glare when he said, in a forced conversational tone, "I'm just asking you for the bare minimum. Don't go into a dark basement, in an abandoned mental hospital, by yourself." And then Alec wrapped it up by telling him, "I shouldn't even have to
Magnus narrowed his eyes even more. Soon enough he wouldn't be able to see. "It was a calculated risk."

Scoffing, Alec agreed. "'Yeah. Fight the dark.' He smiled sarcastically. "Good reasoning, Magnus."

"Right," Magnus challenged. "And who went into that same basement?"

If he'd acted rashly, then Alec was equally guilty, and he was taking him down with him.

"I was trying to find you," Alec began calmly, but then his tone rose, "to make sure you were safe."

At this point he'd reached the level just below yelling. "Why do you have to make it so difficult?!"

Without thinking, Magnus replied in kind. "And it has never, not once, crossed your mind that maybe I'm trying to keep you safe?!!"

He didn't know who of them stilled first.

The rain filled the silence that the words had caused but it didn't make it easier to breathe.

If he could've rewound time, gone back to the moment when Alec had asked him to stay, he would've changed his answer. He would've run and not looked back.

But he hadn't. He'd stayed. And it left them here. With this. Which was everything he'd never wanted to face.

Clearing his throat helped. It dislodged whatever made him unable to tear his eyes away. Staring out at the downpour, anything to distract himself, unfortunately didn't make him blind. Alec was moving in the corner of his eye, at last unfreezing as well. When Magnus felt him a little nearer, as if Alec was inching in to say something, he sighed deeply. It would be cowardly to cover his eyes, but he did want to. "Look-

He wasn't sure what he was going to say, how to disentangle this mess, but a warm touch stopped him from saying anything.

Turning his head, Magnus looked at Alec. The hand that was gently cradling his cheek felt like it was made of fire. Alec's eyes were studying his face, searching for something.

When Magnus didn't do anything more than stare at him, Alec moved closer. Close enough that their shoulders almost touched.

His fingers were calloused, most likely from years of archery. Magnus could feel the roughness of them as they, ever so slightly, pressed into his skin. Alec's gaze was still searching, still not focused on one point, as they sat in silence.

He couldn't do anything. Even if his life depended on it, Magnus sincerely doubted he could've moved. That single point of contact between them was enough to make him lose every single thought of why this was a bad idea. Why he, if he had any semblance of common sense, should stop this before it went too far.

It was a bad idea. The worst idea he'd probably ever have.

And yet, he didn't move.

He wasn't entirely sure he was breathing when Alec's gaze finally met his and stayed there.
Alec's thumb brushed across his cheekbone, lightly, just once.

Leaning in, Alec whispered, his breath close enough to be felt, "Thank you for keeping me safe."

If Magnus shifted, only the smallest amount, their lips would be touching.

Mistake, his mind was screaming. Mistake. It would be a mistake.

Nodding, moving as little as possible, he whispered back, "You're welcome."

Alec's eyes fell, his hold tightening a little when he leaned in the last inches, the last distance between them, and sealed their lips together.

Alec's shuddering breath washed over Magnus as his other hand came up to frame Magnus' face, keeping him there. Where Alec's fingers pressed in behind the curve of his jaw, Magnus could feel him tremble. Clasping Alec's wrists to steady him, the faint tremors stemming from them reverberated into his own bones.

It did the opposite of help.

They grew; built beneath his touch. Letting go, Magnus searched Alec's chest, checking for his heartbeat. Beneath the worn fabric it beat erratically, hard enough that when he brushed past it, a hint of fear travelled through him. Setting his palm firmly over it, Magnus was just about to push away, to give Alec a chance to breathe, when Alec made a noise in the back of his throat, buried his hands in Magnus' hair, pulled him in the rest of the way, and really kissed him.

Alec kissed the way he fought; violent, and all-consuming.

Magnus clung to him, holding on to Alec's shoulders for dear life when he moved. Out of nowhere, there was something behind Magnus, something he was resting against. Alec braced a hand on it beside his head, and using that leverage, Alec pushed him back until there was no space left. They were chest to chest, breaths rushing from them when they didn't stop.

Alec had a firm hold on his waist with one arm, the other was still bracing, keeping Alec from completely crushing him.

It was a cage, meant to keep him safe. But he didn't want to be safe. He wanted more. So much more than that.

Meeting Alec pulse for pulse, heartbeat for heartbeat, Magnus raked his fingers over Alec's shoulder, dragging them down his chest before he fisted them in Alec's shirt and tugged. Alec's arm flexed, withstanding his manoeuvre for a moment before Magnus repeated the movement, putting more force behind it this time.

Giving in, Alec's arm gave way and whatever gap there had been between them was sealed. It was the pillar he'd been sitting beside, Magnus realised dazedly, when his back pressed fully against it. Alec's hand caressed his face, tilting up his chin, before he kissed him deep enough to steal what little breath he'd had.

This might be what would finally kill him, but what a glorious way to go.

Responding by wrapping his arms tightly around Alec's neck, Alec somehow, someway, pulled him in closer and then, right into their kiss, Alec mumbled his name.

He knew he shivered, and that Alec could feel it. It only made Magnus cling tighter.
A blaring, repetitive sound coming out of nowhere made them snap back into reality. They broke apart, their chests heaving as they tried to catch their breath. As Alec was now cradling his face, keeping them so close together that there was no true change from when they'd been wrapped up in each other, and Magnus in turn had his palms flat against Alec's chest, it proved to be impossible.

Trying to laugh and failing, Magnus closed his eyes when Alec rested his forehead against his.

"I guess you need to go," Alec mumbled when they couldn't ignore the ringing cellphone any longer.

Magnus smiled, leaning into his touch. "I guess so."

But neither of them moved. It was Alec who had to be the one to pull away, but he didn't stray far. "You'll be okay going home on your own?"

Magnus looked at him, feeling Alec's thumb brush against his cheek. "I'll be okay."

Letting go, separating after so long, felt strange. The wind hitting his skin was cold compared to Alec's heat. The thunderstorm came back into view, the sounds loud and roaring. For a while he'd forgotten that it existed. That anything else existed but them. As Alec stood, he offered his hand, pulling Magnus to his feet as the ringtone mercifully ceased sounding.

They stopped by the entrance and Alec looked at him. "Be careful."

Shaking his head, Magnus said, "You worry too much, Alex."

He was interrupted by the soft pressure of Alec's lips, by Alec's touch that lightly rested on his back. When Alec stepped back, Magnus cleared his throat. "Alright. You've made your point."

When Alec just smiled at him, in a way he'd never seen before, Magnus pushed him towards the door. "Shouldn't you get inside?"

Grasping the handle, stopping halfway into the vestibule, Alec asked, "I'll call you later?"

But the way he said it, like he knew exactly what effect it had, made Magnus reply with a scoffing, "Yeah, I'm not going to pick up," before he turned around and headed down the stairs. He could hear Alec's faint laugh cutting off when the door closed, right before the rain drenched him for the third time that day.

He was soaked to the bone, the water crashing down upon him as he got to the bottom, and that was when the phone started up again.

Without glancing at the ID displayed on the screen to see who it was, Magnus accepted the call.

"Magnus Bane," he said.

There was only a deep silence that met him. "Hello?"

It went on for long enough that he was about to check the number of the caller when the sound of something shattering violently made him flinch. A piercing cry rang out a second after, echoing in his head even as the call abruptly ended.

His mind caught on quicker than his body.

The phone slipped from his loose grip when the memory of where he'd heard that scream before assaulted him. The blood froze in his body, each vein turning into solid ice. He knew that terrified sound, had heard it once before in Logroño, when the Spanish Inquisitors had reigned with terror.
She'd been about to be burned as a witch when he'd managed to snatch her away.

And now something had come for her again, something on par with that long forgotten horror.

Catarina.

Running through the portal, the heat of the magic enveloped him for a split second before he arrived in the hall of the apartment. All it took was a step, and he was caught. A wire closed around his throat and he was ruthlessly yanked back.

His hands came up instinctively, attempting to remove the pressure from where he was choking. Digging in his fingers, trying to get beneath it and failing, Magnus fought against the wire but it was pointless. A pained breath slipped from his parted lips as it was pulled taut and broke the skin.

Someone laughed in his ear. The person behind, that had snared him like a rabbit, twisted the garrote, severing the cut that was already deep. Fumbling behind his back, feeling for his attacker, Magnus desperately tried to breathe and it only served to tightened the wire.

It was like a noose around his neck.

He tried harder, scratching for skin contact, for his only chance, but all he clutched was thin air.

He was going to die. The awareness seeped through his mind when his hand fell down, powerless. It wasn't fear coursing through Magnus' body when the magic flickered in and out, as he felt himself submitting to it. He couldn't pinpoint what it was. Maybe regret. Possibly pain. Or perhaps nothing at all. What if indifference was what came to collect the price when you were teetering on the edge of the abyss?

What if that was the big secret? That dying wasn't so bad if you only surrendered to it?

Black dots danced across his vision, the world greying.

Through the thick waters that were dragging him down, he heard a cry and something beneath him gave way.

Magnus inhaled with a start, gasping for the sweet air as he awoke on the floor. Feeling came back first, then colours, and at last sound.

"Magnus!"

Coughing, wheezing out breaths, Magnus forced himself to raise his head. Perl white mist swirled around her profile, curling in her hand as she blasted it at something that was out of view.

Her other hand was suspended in the air, palm flat in his direction.

"I can't hold them anymore!" Catarina yelled above the deafening noise. "Get up!"

Things were fading in and out, blinding and dulling his senses all at once as he coughed again. Trying to push himself up, Magnus' arms shook too much. He collapsed, closing his eyes on the confusion.

Unconsciousness beckoned once more.

"Get up, Magnus!" Catarina shouted, rousing him from his rest. "Get up!"
He jolted, snapping back to a reality that was too bright. She was a blur of blue where she stood inside the kitchen down the hall, her palm still aimed towards him.

"I can't hold them!" she screamed over the distance, and he finally caught on to some of her words, enough to compel his numb head to turn. There were four of them, transfixed on their spots as if they'd been rooted there like trees. Her magic glazed them, shaped around them like a glittering cage. It appeared like thin spiderwebs, glinting in the bulb from the one lamp that didn't lay shattered on the floor yet.

But the shield wouldn't last much longer. He saw the threads' hairline cracks and how they rapidly spread over the surface with a tinkling sound.

Magnus struggled to his feet, inhaling as he did, and it burned all the way into his lungs. Now, as he could taste life again - the sear of it, the excruciating pain as he drew another breath - he wanted it; needed it; was willing to kill for it.

His eyes fell on the garrote, stained red, dangling from the hand of the shortest of the Shadowhunters.

He would kill for it.

With his back to her, Magnus cried, "Cat!" He winced as his throat scratched to the extent that it felt like it was cut from the inside out.

It was a miracle she'd held them off this long. She should already be drained from fighting on two fronts.

Golden flames blazed high in his palms, flickering as his magic unsteadily came rushing.

Catarina's protection of him was breaking, the hold she had on the shield slipping as he readied himself for the clash.

Setting his eyes on their faces, memorising each one, Magnus knew there was only one outcome that he would accept.

"Let go!" he called out.

The threads snapped eagerly, as if they'd been tried to the limit.

There wasn't a delay, the onslaught snapping back into action as if it'd never stopped. But this time he was prepared. There was limited space in the crowded hall, closed quarters that made it hard to dodge an attack. So he didn't. When the first seraph blade was raised, he dipped to the floor and with a single touch, he set it on fire.

The inferno took the two who weren't fast enough. The flames, rearing up like snakes with their jaws hungrily agape, devoured the bodies. They were beyond saving before they'd even realised that the blaze had come to claim them. Their flesh alighted like tinder, their skin peeling off. And as their dying screams rang out, the angels, and their seraphic blood, burned.

When the front door slammed shut, Magnus darted after. The heat didn't touch him, curving around his feet as he threw the door open and dove into the stairwell.

The ambush wasn't as much of a surprise as an expectation. They always went for the back. A meaty arm wrapped around his neck and instead of struggling against it, Magnus used all of his weight to push back, and when the captor lost his balance, they both fell. A wall caught them and the body
behind his own absorbed the hit. The second Magnus felt the collision, he used it as a distraction and wrenched free.

At the same moment, when he tore the disgusting weight from his throat and broke away, he caught the movement. Ducking the arrow that was meant for his head, Magnus backed away, halting on the landing between the fifth and the fourth floor.

"Gentlemen," he smiled. "Leaving so soon?"

The taut string on the bow was his main focus as he studied the two Shadowhunters. Evil had countless shapes. It often took innocent forms. But then there were those that just looked the part. And they surely did.

"You'll pay for that, warlock," growled the one that had grabbed him.

There were two against one. One wielded a ranged weapon and the other a seraph blade. Separably, each had at least fifty pounds on him, and in the harsh stairwell lightening the circular runes on their necks stood out even more.

Magnus embraced the odds with a tilt of his head. "I doubt it. But by all means-

They pounced on him and the first one went quickly. A bright flash of emerald light and the man toppled over. The second one made the same mistake. Their hubris would always be their downfall. The arrow flew, but it didn't hit, and by then it was too late. The next flash struck the archer and he stagger for a moment, his body perhaps fighting the inevitable that would overtake it. When it did, he limply fell over the railing and plunged to his fate.

Without waiting for the thud of flesh connecting with stone to reach his ears, Magnus raced up the stairs.

The inside of the door was nothing more than embers that were faintly glowing when he creaked it open. The devastation was contained strictly to the hall, a clear line where the flames had licked, to then abruptly stop. But everything within the radius had been ravaged.

It was a landscape of cinders and ashes where complete silence reigned.

His pulse, already pounding from the adrenaline, went into overdrive when nothing met his ears. Fear, blinding fear, attacked his mind. Without thinking, Magnus rushed forward through the thick layer of soot that had overtaken the floor, muting his sprinting footsteps. They began pounding loudly when he ran through the corridor and reached the kitchen.

The taste of absolute terror coated his tongue when he saw the heap laying by the stove that had been tipped.

"No!"

Dashing forward, to reach her, Magnus slipped in the blood. He crashed down beside her, instantly scrambling to his knees.

"Catarina?"

Catarina's eyes were closed, her face deathly pale. Pushing hard against her neck, Magnus found a pulse. It was weak, but it was there. For a second relief filled him, right before his eyes travelled down her body and it was stolen away, as if it had never been. The blade of the sword was struck through her stomach. She was pierced on it, skewered like a helpless fish.
"No!" he cried, as if there was a way to undo it. "No!"

Lurching, Magnus reached for the blade. It sliced deeply into his hands as he pulled up. It refused to budge, even as he used every bit of strength he had. "Come on!"

Trying again, forcing the panic down, he could finally feel how it was dislodged. Yanking it out, he dropped it to the floor as he pressed his hands side by side to cover the span of the wound. The metal clanked against the linoleum as the sword fell.

She'd be okay. She'd be okay. She'd be okay.

He kept repeating the mantra as he spread his fingers and closed his eyes. Summoning every last bit of magic, commanding it to do as he wanted, Magnus called on hers. It came, slowly but surely, mixing with his own until they were one and the same. Fixating on the bond, tethering it within his own soul, Magnus began drawing her back from the dark. But as he did, as he demanded her return, something else gave.

There was a disconnect where the healing should've been, a rift that hindered the ability. There were threads going from his fingers, reaching down to where she was waiting, but there was something wrong. A catch, somewhere.

Pressing down harder, pushing the power out of himself and into her, it bent to his will but she didn't respond.

Why didn't it work?

Forcing it to move, to heal, Magnus once more hit the barrier. He felt her there, faint, but she was there. She was still there.

"Why isn't it working?!" he screamed. "Come on!"

And it was then he noticed it, when he opened his eyes to see his hands that were dry. Hot, slick, blood was soaking into his clothes, baptising him in horror, but somehow it didn't come from the gaping wound splitting her stomach.

It had to come from somewhere else.

Magnus dragged his hands over her, trying to find the cut that he'd missed, but it wasn't until his fingers dipped down her sides that they became coated in scarlet. Raising her, he checked her back.

For a moment, the briefest of moments, he thought he'd black out.

Her whole back had been flayed. The marks of a clumsy knife were visible where it had cut deep enough to hit the spine. She'd been skinned like an animal, left to die as one.

Spoils.

She'd been made into spoils.

"Oh, god," he said, but it didn't make a sound.

Her butcher had been sloppy. Strips of shredded flesh hung down, dragging on the floor.

Smoothing a hand over it, trying to mend the violence that had been done, it coated him.

He choked. "Oh, god."
It seeped from her, drenching him. It was a river of red.

He couldn't heal her.

It was too late.

"Oh, god."

Magnus lifted her up, pulling her into his arms. Wrapping Catarina in as tightly as he could, his ragged breathing became muffled as he kissed her hair.

"You're safe," he promised her, as he settled her lax head against his shoulder. "It's okay."

He leaned his chin on top of her head as he placed his shaking hand over her chest. "I love you, my darling."

As her blood seeped through his shirt, soaking what little was left, he spread his fingers. Beneath it all, buried so far down he could barely reach, she existed. She was still there with him.

She was alive.

"Don't be scared," he whispered, as he took a shuddering breath. "I'm here."

He closed his eyes, squeezed them shut, and with tears slipping down his face, he brought it to a standstill.

Her magic fought back weakly, trying to free itself of the inescapable.

"It's okay," Magnus promised, over and over again. He crushed her against himself, breathing her in for the last time. "It's okay. You can go."

Gripping her hand, clutching it tightly, Magnus secured the palm above her chest, digging in his fingertips there. And with one final push, he forced it all to come to an end.

Her last faint breath left her lips as she slipped away to somewhere he couldn't go.

"I love you," he whispered, holding her right there, where he could feel her. "I love you so much."

And beneath his palm her heart was quiet.

That heart that once had beat.

Chapter End Notes

I am so sorry.
An Eye For An Eye

Chapter Notes

Hello, my dudes!

Our tagline/motto/unofficial slogan: "And when I thought things could go well, they go so wrong." - domoiswatchingyou

I've forgotten to let you guys know that this fic actually has a translation in Russian. Now, I can't read Russian, like, at all, but I'm pretty sure samisimi is doing a fantastic job! She might also be calling me an assbutt and I wouldn't know. ;)

If you're interested in reading that, it's right here

On the suggestion from the amazing becksterres, the rating on this has now officially been bumped up to mature and it's been tagged for gore. Let me just say, if any of you have any doubt, that I really appreciate any suggestions on these matters, or any matters. So please, don't be shy. If you feel that something needs to be tagged, or you think a warning is warranted, please do tell me and I'll fix it. :)

On a completely unrelated note, I've finally learned how to link stuff. Took me like 84 years. Yay!

And one final thing before we can get to the fun stuff. Now, I don't know if any of you are a skittish/anxious specimen of a human being (show of hands, people), but if you happen to be one (no judgement here), let me put your fears to rest. I will finish this work. I swear on my ... bunny's grave. Yup. I swear on my bunny's grave that I will complete this or I will die trying. It might take me a little while since I am a student and right now school is slowly sucking the essence of life out of me through my toes (don't ask, it's disturbing enough as it is), but I will do this. We will do this. Together. Have no fear!

So last time was sort of a ... how do I put this nicely? A sucker punch to the face? Yeah, that sounds about right. And you've heard of the whole 'five stages of grief?' Well, we're skipping three of them. I have unwavering faith that you'll be able to figure out which two we are going to tackle.

And so, if you've read all this, congratulations. You have much more patience than I do. And if you haven't read everything, then I just have one question for you: How very dare you? ;)

Have fun!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Paralyzed

When did I become so numb
When did I lose myself
All the words that leave my tongue
Feel like they came from someone else

I'm paralyzed
Where are my feelings
I no longer feel things
I know I should
I'm paralyzed
Where is the real me
I'm lost and it kills me - inside
I'm paralyzed

When did I become so cold
When did I become my shame
Where's the person that I know
They must have left
They must have left
With all my soul

I'm paralyzed
Where are my feelings
I no longer feel things
I know I should
I'm paralyzed
Where is the real me
I'm lost and it kills me - inside
I'm paralyzed

I'm paralyzed
I'm scared to live but I'm scared to die
And if life is pain then I buried mine a long time ago
But it's still alive
And it's taking over me - where am I
I wanna feel something, I'm numb inside
But I feel nothing, I wonder why
And on the race of life time passes by
Look
I sit back and I watch it, hands in my pockets
Waves come crashing over me but I just watch 'em
I just watch 'em
I'm under water but I feel like I'm on top of it
I'm at the bottom and I don't know what the problem is
I'm in a box
But I'm the one who locked me in
Suffocating and I'm running out of oxygen

I'm paralyzed
Where are my feelings
I no longer feel things
I know I should
I'm paralyzed
Where is the real me
I'm lost and it kills me - inside
I'm paralyzed
I'm paralyzed
Where are my feelings
I no longer feel things
I know I should
I'm paralyzed
Where is the real me
I'm lost and it kills me - inside
I'm paralyzed

It was so quiet.

He'd think back on it later, when he'd wake up as it stalked him in his dreams. The quiet, only
severed by a clock ticking, would haunt him; perhaps already had begun in a way.

From here on, until the end of days, silence would always be tainted with the absence of her.

The few tears that'd fallen had dried in tracks on his cheeks. Therefore, time couldn't have stopped.
He hadn't expected it to. She'd been what gave it weight. Without her, it should've run out already.
Days could've passed, years, millenniums ended, and it wouldn't have surprised him.

But barely minutes could've gone by. A few minutes. Maybe five. 300 seconds; the difference
between life and death. That was the separation between them; 300 seconds, when she'd gone and
he'd stayed. A distance that would only grow from now on, until some mercy was extended to him
and he would be permitted to die as well.

Perhaps there was a spell that existed that allowed the time to turn the other direction. He didn't need
much of it. Just five minutes back. And he would've found some way to undo what had been done
here. He would've known if such a spell existed, if he hadn't spent his entire life on frivolousness.
Had he once listened to Ragnor's lectures, maybe this day had never come. If he'd just been better,
tried harder, protected her, like he should've, as he'd promised, then this wouldn't have happened.

It was his fault.

He'd slipped up. Why had he run after the two into the stairwell? What had it mattered if they'd
escaped? Why hadn't he run to her instead? Why hadn't he checked on her first?

Why had he done this?

But the answer, in all its horror, was right there, for the world to see. It laid in his own arms.

If he'd loved her, the way he should've, he wouldn't be alone now.

Catarina was still warm. Her body not yet ravaged by decay. If Magnus didn't look, if he only felt,
she could've been alive still. So, that was what he did. He played pretend. And for a precious,
glorious, moment, the pain subsided. It made it possible to stay afloat.

It was the smell that disrupted the fantasy, that threw in the jagged reality in its stead. When he took a
breath, his chin resting on her head, the draft from the broken window brought with it her scent that
had turned bitter with the smell of iron.

He clutched her tighter, though it wasn't possible. If he held harder, he'd crush her bones.
He continued breathing when it overwhelmed him. As it drowned him, Magnus kept his eyes closed.

Catarina moved when his chest did, her cheek pressed against it. If he let her go, she'd fall limply. Flop down like a bird that couldn't take wing.

They stayed like that, in the silence, until he began feeling how she was turning cold.

Burrowing his nose into her hair, Magnus whispered, "You're not here anymore." The hand resting in his own was stiff. "Are you?"

When no one answered, he opened his eyes.

If he'd looked, he would've seen the wreckage, the remains of what had once been whole. But his vision was overtaken by red. Everything was red. His skin, her hair, the floor.

The walls.

It was what he could see. Her apartment was coated in the colour.

Catarina would've been furious if she'd seen it like this. Spitting mad. It was lucky then, she never would.

The absurdity of the flippant thought rammed into him and Magnus pulled himself together; glued the pieces back in place.

He couldn't stay here forever.

"Alright." He cleared his throat, finding strength to move as he untangled his hand from hers and gently tilted her head back until it rested in the crook of his arm. "Alright, I got you."

Her bent legs dangled when he lifted her up in his arms. One of Catarina's slippers fell off when he tried to stand and the slippery blood made him fall back on his knees again.

"Okay." He checked her over again, and finding her safe, he set his mind to it. "Okay."

Pushing up with all his might, Magnus barely managed to get to standing before he had to brace against the fridge that was hazardously inclining to the left. His arms were shaking with the effort, his heart pounding too fast.

She was the heaviest thing he'd ever had to carry.

Stepping over the debris, passing the tipped stove and the cleaved kitchen table, Magnus pushed down the handle to the bedroom door.

It was an untouched paradise. The air in there sweet, not yet permeated by death. It was clean, untainted. A reminder of how quickly life could be forever changed; blink, and you'd miss it.

Carefully, Magnus deposited her on the bed. The sheets were soft as he set her down, the pillow her head rested on silken. He brushed the few strands of hair that had fallen across her cheek back, tucking them behind her ear.

She looked like herself.

The thought of a blanket crossed his mind a second before it cruelly reminded him that she didn't need one. Wherever Catarina was, she couldn't feel cold.
Tenderly cupping her neck, Magnus leaned forward and pressed his lips to her forehead. His shuddering breath was the only thing that had a sound when he lingered there, kissing her once more before turning away.

The bathroom light was on. Her toothbrush was in the sink, the paste on it dried. They had to have surprised her when she was getting ready to go to bed. Sighing, Magnus rinsed it and put it back in the bathroom cabinet. When he slid it shut, the mirror on the front came back into his field of vision.

As he looked into it, the outline of the figure on the bed was briefly reflected from the side before it vanished. A fleeting flicker.

"GODDAMMIT!" he suddenly, violently, screamed when something broke inside.

Tearing off some of his nails to the flesh, Magnus ripped the front of the cabinet off along with the mirror, and launched it at the other wall.

It hit the tiles with a satisfying crash.

His throat burned, his chest heaving as he stared at the shards. At the demolition.

His pulse slowed as he kept staring at it. At what he'd done.

What he had done.

Leaving it behind, he switched off the light and exited the bathroom and in doing so, he passed the bed once more, but shielded his eyes from the sight. He wasn't strong enough.

He'd never been.

Reaching the bedroom door, Magnus shut it softly behind him before leaning back against it. It steadily supported him, held up what was left alive in this place as he memorised the ceiling.

The air felt dense. As if it had a weight of its own that pushed down his throat. He could breathe it as soon as he could breathe water.

And that was what he did to survive. He drew in air, allowed it to burn in his lungs; drowned, only to stay alive.

When the sensation had passed, he bit down on his tongue until the only thing that he could taste was blood. Straightening his back, Magnus ordered, "Snap out of it."

This was not the time for weakness. He didn't have the luxury of falling apart.

There was work to be done.

Taking stock of the situation in front of him, he decided it was best to begin with the worst task.

With disgust settling in his stomach, Magnus walked back to the kitchen. There, by the single window, laid one body. The other had fallen by the wall. Magnus stepped over the first, glancing through the shattered pane. On the waterlogged street, five floors down, two more were splayed out.

Catarina had sent them straight back to where they belonged.

That knowledge helped soothe some of the revulsion when he hunched down by the sitting body. Placing his fingers on the neck, Magnus let his gaze wander away as he checked for a pulse. Beneath the pads of his fingers, a faint, but steady beat, met him. His eyes snapped back, taking in what it
meant.

Alive.

He stared at the stranger's face.

This one was alive.

Removing his hand, pulling away, Magnus kneeled beside the other one.

Dead, he established, before he began rummaging through the debris for Catarina's cellphone. Magnus had dropped his outside the Institute when she'd called, and Circle members didn't have them since that could be used as a way to track them, but Catarina had called him from here. Which meant it was bound to be around here somewhere.

Lodged in between the remnants of a chair and the kitchen baseboard, Magnus freed it. Dialling the number, he was already in the stairwell when Alec finally picked up.

"Where are you?" Magnus asked as he bent down to check the one that had tried to attack him earlier. He kicked the seraph blade out of reach just in case of any nasty surprises.

There was hesitation on the other end of the line. "Magnus?"

"Who do you think it is? Santa Claus?"

He focused on feeling for a pulse, for any indication of life, as Alec said in his ear, "Your voice sounds different."

"Where are you right now?" Magnus repeated.

"In the Institute."

Satisfied with the degree of decomposing from the body he was leaning over, Magnus spoke into the phone. "Be more precise."

"In my office."

"I'll make a portal there in one minute." He leaned over the railing, searching for the other one. Magnus found him easily, his head cracked like an egg on the stone below. "Bring someone who can carry."

Ending the call, Magnus reentered the apartment and sat down in what was left of the kitchen.

He settled against the wall straight across from the unconscious Circle member. Pulling up his knees, Magnus waited.

His gaze didn't waver as he kept vigil, even as the necessary sixty seconds passed. He never looked away as he waved his hand lightly and a portal appeared on the other side of the kitchen counter where it was less cluttered.

He didn't move until he heard footsteps coming through, and it was only when they abruptly stopped and Alec's sharp voice called his name that he deemed it necessary to. Using the wall as support, Magnus got up. "Over here."

Another voice, speaking on an exhale, reached his ears.
"By the angel."

Having his gaze still glued on the single survivor, Magnus chanced a cursory glance in the direction of the sound. The sight of Jace's glowing seraph blade and Alec's taut bowstring greeted him a moment before his eyes flicked back to their original place. "You don't need those."

Everyone around here were already suffering a serious case of deadness.

The clattering of a bow didn't startle him. What did, however, was when Alec suddenly materialised beside him. He was always so much faster than Magnus anticipated he'd be.

Magnus looked up at him.

"Magnus."

Alec was paler than usual, his eyes enormous as they raked down Magnus's body. As his gaze dipped farther, Alec's breath decreased. When it reached the hip area, he seemed to stop breathing altogether. "We need to get you back to the Institute."

Clamping an arm around Magnus just below the shoulders, and beginning to bend his knees, all in one swift motion, Alec had almost hoisted him up before Magnus caught on to what he was doing. And why he was doing it.

The shirt stuck to Magnus' chest, scratching uncomfortably against the skin where it had unevenly dried when he put a hand on Alec's chest to interrupt his attempt at saving him.

"It's not my blood," he said. "It's fine."

But Alec didn't appear convinced; the information doing nothing.

"Alexander," Magnus said louder as he framed Alec's face with his hands to secure his undivided attention when Alec didn't stop. "It's fine."

He held tightly to make him understand that everything was okay. It was okay. "I'm fine."

At last, it seemed like the words reached Alec. Ceasing his efforts of trying to pick him up, Alec instead stared down at him with something dark buried in his eyes. "What happened?" The grip around Magnus' back increased in pressure. "Who did this?"

Sighing, Magnus ran his thumb across Alec's cheek before he removed his hands and twisted in Alec's arms. Jace was standing close by, surveying the desolation with an empty expression.

"That one is still alive," Magnus gestured to the man he meant. "Two are burned in the hall. Two are dead in the stairwell. Two are laying on the street, and this one," he indicated the one by their feet, "is very corpse-like."

Keeping his blade raised, as if the, clearly, unconscious man would suddenly spring to life like the killer from a cheap horror movie, Jace cautiously bent over the limp body. When he moved the lax head to get a closer look, Jace noticed the rune.

Looking to them, he said, with a disgusted tone, "He's a Circle member."

Magnus had thought it obvious. Was there any other common enemy they had?

But he'd thought wrong apparently, since he heard Alec's sharp inhale. And he was wrong again, his aim completely off, when Alec didn't ask him what he expected. When Alec didn't ask him anything
"Your neck," Alec whispered.

Turning back to him, Magnus noticed Alec had brought up a hand to examine the injury. But it hovered, as if Alec was afraid to touch him, as if he didn't know what would happen if he did. Magnus caught Alec's hand before he had a chance to decide. "Don't worry about it."

He squeezed gently. "I'm fine."

It wasn't perfect. Life never was. But it was good enough. He was okay.

Everything was okay.

Magnus saw the protest form on Alec's lips, knowing he was trying to find an answer to make sense of it all.

If only such a thing had existed.

"What is this?"

They both looked to see what had made Jace react with such audible revulsion. Holding it out towards them, letting it dangle in the air, it was easy to deduce why Jace didn't want it anywhere in his vicinity. The bag he'd taken from the Circle member was inconspicuous. An ordinary, normal, bag. With the exception of the bottom of it, where something had accumulated, staining the brown leather, making it dark and soggy. It leaked onto the floor, one drop at a time.

Something froze inside of Magnus. The rest of his body followed suit.

"Jace." Alec's voice came out rushed; as if he'd felt the shift. "Jace, put it back."

"That's skin ..." Magnus closed his eyes for a brief moment, taking a deep breath, before he looked at the horror in front of him. "Isn't it?"

Jace stared at him before he slowly drew the bag in and looked inside of it. Whatever he saw, he didn't say. There was no need to. His face, as he lifted his gaze, said it all.

Magnus pulled away from Alec. "Excuse me."

He walked across the splayed out body, passed Jace and rounded the kitchen counter. With composure, Magnus stepped up to the sink, grabbed the edge of the counter where the stainless steel chilled his fingers, and leaning over it, he threw up.

It was just bile; rising in his throat, burning his tongue. His stomach turned, pushing upwards, as if it wanted to escape through his mouth. But of course it couldn't. Despite his body's best efforts to force it to, nothing more came up.

The nausea went away as his heartbeat slowed down and his fingers, that held a vice on the edge, relaxed. Rinsing out his mouth, washing away the evidence, Magnus steadied himself.

"Spoils," he said as he straightened to his full height. "I assume you know what it entails."

It was an archaic practice that he hadn't seen performed since the beginning of the 20th century. It had been outlawed long enough that he hadn't thought that he'd live to ever see it become modern again. But then, Valentine had always been a renegade, and it seemed his followers aimed to make it fashionable once more.
"They didn't try ..."

Alec's tentative question brought him back to the now. Magnus avoided his gaze as he wiped the water from his lips.

"No. They didn't try to gouge out my eyes." He strode back to them, where they stood in the exact same spots as earlier. "I suppose I should be grateful."

Extending his hand, he requested the bag. "Hand it to me, would you, Jace?"

Jace was uncertain. He hesitated, as if he didn't know if it'd cause the same reaction again if he dared give it to him.

"Just ..." Magnus waved him forward. "Please, Jace."

Magnus closed his hand around the strap when Jace passed it over. "Thank you."

Carrying it, without feeling the weight, what the cost of it was, Magnus reached the bedroom once again. Setting the bag down right beyond the door, he gazed inside the darkness. The little light the raging thunder provided, when it flashed across the sky, illuminated the bed and the silhouette resting there.

He must have been standing there a while, lost in thoughts, in dreams, because he didn't hear the question being asked.

"Sorry, what?" Magnus said.

"Who was it they skinned?" Jace repeated.

"Catarina Loss."

Magnus closed the door. "Warlock. She was the Institute's prisoner until recently." He turned around. "This is her apartment."

"Did she make it?" Jace asked. His tone was soft. It was unsettling, hearing how much care he took to make the words hurt less.

Magnus had thought it'd take a true miracle for Jace to speak like that, comforting and kind, especially to him of all people. Apparently, it only required pity.

Magnus almost smiled. "Yes, she's just fine being flayed." When he received no response, Magnus clarified. "She's dead."

Catarina was gone. And that couldn't be changed by anyone. It was a waste of time to dwell on it when there were other things that needed to be taken care of.

"If there are more questions, I can answer them later," he told Jace and Alec as he conjured up a new portal where the previous one had been. "Right now we should get that Circle member back to the Institute before he wakes up."

The flames danced in the fireplace, warming him as he held out his hands to catch more of the heat. It wasn't long he'd been alone in the office. Alec would be back soon enough.

He watched the logs burn, the sparks that it threw off when the temperature rose and it crackled. The
sounds were restful, soothing. Enough so, that he had to fight against the exhaustion that made a compelling case for dozing off. With the adrenaline's numbing effect surely diminishing by the second, Magnus anticipated that the painful part of the physical toll would soon begin to creep up on him. But for now it didn't present a problem. So, ignoring the fatigue and the bruises he couldn't feel yet, he refocused on the flames.

Some of the heat slipped out of the room when the door opened. He knew it was Alec and he turned around. "It's-

The question he'd been about to ask was exchanged for a new one.

"Clothes?" Magnus said as he looked at the folded black pile Alec was carrying. "Is this some kind of sacrificial burning?" he inquired as Alec came up to him. Tilting his head, Magnus added, "Because if so, I'm one hundred percent supportive."

Alec didn't laugh at his joke. Only one corner of his mouth pulled up, and it felt like a forced expression Alec was wearing for his sake, and his sake alone, when he said, "I thought you might want to change."

It was a thoughtful gesture, though unnecessary.

"Always the pragmatist," Magnus noted lightly as he accepted the offered clothes. When he did, Magnus accidentally brushed his fingertips against the back of Alec's hand.

Before he could pull back, Alec's fingers kept his wrist carefully captive. But not as if Alec was trying to hold him still. It was more like he was trying to confirm something by touch.

When Magnus felt the pressure on the pulse point increase, as if Alec was checking it for a beat, he couldn't help but laugh a little. "I'm pretty sure I'm alive, Alexander."

Alec raised his head after he'd said it, and replied quietly, without letting go, "You're freezing."

So that was what was bothering him.

"It's the shock," Magnus explained, gently extracting his wrist from Alec's grip. Setting down the clothes on the chair nearby, Magnus assured him, "It'll wear off."

Today wasn't the first time he'd experienced death. Since he was safely hidden away in this office now, and Alec was here, undoubtedly wearing all kinds of weapons, it didn't seem likely it would be the last.

It was so long ago now when he'd first become acquainted with this particular feeling. And then the years had laid their fair share of scars upon that very first loss, the bodies piling up. Shock didn't last forever, much like people.

It wasn't a hard thing to survive after four centuries.

But Alec didn't know that. He'd never know. And it was better that way. It was why Magnus didn't tell him, again, that it was okay, when he heard Alec remove his jacket.

There was a cold that bit into his bones, chilling his very core, but there was nothing to be done about it. Alec's jacket wouldn't change anything, but Magnus let him drape it around his shoulders nevertheless. At least it took away some of the worry Alec was so clearly trying to hide.

Yet it was on the tip of Magnus' tongue when it didn't cause the expression Alec wore to fade away
completely. He wanted to say that the ice, and the numbness, would go away eventually. To reassure Alec that there was no reason for him to look so concerned.

But that required him to explain that it was true, what most people thought. Death and loss did get easier. He missed Catarina, of course. Longed for the memories that they'd never get to make now, but it wasn't crippling.

And it sounded heartless enough, callous enough, that he refrained from saying it out loud. At the moment, he couldn't stand the judgement of letting Alec know, really know, that he was fine.

That despite it all, he was fine.

So instead, as Alec pulled up the zipper for him, and the thick fabric enveloped him, doing its best to warm him up, Magnus just smiled. "Thank you."

Alec had already been standing close, but now when he seemed to understand that Magnus wouldn't suddenly start crying or screaming, he broke the no-touch barrier for the first time since his failed attempt at picking Magnus up earlier. Alec framed his face so lightly that Magnus couldn't actually feel the touch itself. All there was, was the heat that radiated from Alec's palms. It felt like sunshine on his skin.

"Magnus," Alec said softly, searching his eyes. "What happened?"

Magnus met Alec's gaze, allowing himself to enjoy the warmth of his presence for a moment longer. Then he pulled away with a reminder to himself that this wasn't the right time.

"Nothing," he promised. "I have to change, and you have to go and contact another warlock. The wards need to be strengthened."

Alec didn't persist, letting his hands fall back down to his sides again. "I don't follow. You made the wards for the Institute. It wasn't Catarina. Why would we need-" Alec interrupted himself, understanding without having to be told. "You made wards for her too."

Catarina hadn't known about it. She would've refused them if he'd told her. Not that they'd done her any good when it came down to it. It had just been another useless lie, one he could never take back now.

Magnus nodded. "I don't know if they broke through, or if she just hadn't put them up." The ones he'd added in secret would've only worked if she'd bothered to utilise her own. "It was a habit of hers not to. But if they've found a way to get past my magic, I can't guarantee anyone's safety anymore. Another warlock, a different kind of magic, will help. If they've figured out mine, then at least there'll be another barrier."

He'd thought it'd be enough to convey the danger that might come here as well, that the safety of the Institute and all of its inhabitants was at risk. But it clearly wasn't.

"That means they can get into your apartment," Alec said, as if that was the real problem.

Magnus raised an eyebrow. "That's not really the most pressing concern, is it?" He motioned to the door, contemplating pushing Alec towards it when he didn't move. "Go."

The urging seemed to be enough to persuade Alec to do what needed to be done. He glanced to the door, as if the short walk over there was something he needed to prepare himself for, before he looked back at Magnus. "I'll be gone one minute. Okay?"
Alec's reluctance to leave wasn't something Magnus should find as funny as he did. It was sweet of Alec to be so concerned that he thought him incapable of being left unsupervised. But what exactly did Alec think he'd do in his absence? Stab himself with the fire poker?

Amusement tugged at the corners of Magnus' lips before he tamped it down. "You worry too much."

The words, that were meant to be reassuring, only appeared to make Alec more hesitant. Alec's eyes fell down Magnus' body, all the way down to the floor before returning to his face.

"I'll be right back," Alec promised before leaving.

As the footsteps died away, Magnus shed the jacket. Undoing the crusty buttons on his shirt, he dropped it on the floor. He dressed quickly, pulling the threadbare black shirt that couldn't belong to anyone in the world but Alec, over his head. Everything he put on was at least one size too big, hanging on his frame. Once he was done, Magnus gathered up the discarded clothes from carpet. Crouching down by the fireplace, pulling up the sleeves that were too long for him, Magnus only spared the shoes he still wore.

The different fabrics that he pushed into the flames, the silk and satin, had seen better days. They were stiff, saturated; their once bright hues muted, transformed into dull versions of their former selves.

The fire greedily accepted the offering, the heat burning away the evidence, leaving nothing but the scent of it behind.

Standing up, Magnus resumed his waiting position. The light of the fire, that cast its warmth generously over the floor, illuminated his bare underarms. At first, he thought it a shadow, but as he shifted, it remained. Wiping at it didn't take away the tint of maroon that clad him. Magnus scraped his nails at the stain but it refused to show the true complexion underneath, like the colour of his skin had permanently changed.

When the windows violently imploded, Magnus flinched. Shielding his face from the glass that flew in every direction, he jolted when something bit into his leg. It was over as quickly as it had begun. When it was silent once more, Magnus turned around. Taking in the mess, the frames where the stained glass once had been, gaping open, grinning at him, Magnus took a step forward.

A strange pressure, that swelled when he set down his foot, made him aware of the blood trickling down his leg. Pulling out a shard that had buried itself in his thigh, Magnus dropped it on the oak floor. It joined the rest of the stained glass that lay shattered around the office. Some of it was crushed beneath the soles of his shoes when he stooped down. Spreading his fingers above the pieces and fragments, Magnus summoned the magic to mend what had been broken.

It didn't come.

No surge rushed to his calling, no flow gradually rising to meet his demand. Where the brilliant power should've been, there was only darkness.

Focusing on where his palm should light up, Magnus tried to sense where the connection had been lost.

All it did was cause the trembles that made him unsteady to become unbearable.

Curling his fingers into a fist, bringing the tremors to a standstill, Magnus took a deep breath. Then he repeated the movement, once more opening his hand, once again calling on the magic that was his birthright.
Stubbornly, it denied him.

"Oh, give me a break," Magnus sighed when his entire arm began shaking.

He hadn't caught the sound of footsteps, but when the handle was pushed down and the door quietly opened, Magnus withdrew his hand.

"Did you find one?" he asked with his back to Alec.

The reply lagged.

"We did," Alec eventually said. "Her name's Sarnai Ash. Izzy's escorting her here."

"That's good news." Rising from the floor, Magnus turned towards Alec. "I-" Magnus lifted his hands only to let them fall back down again. "I kind of broke your windows. I'm sorry. I'll fix them later."

It was redundant to point it out. It wasn't like Alec had been born blind.

"Don't be," Alec told him as he walked over to the couch, the glass crunching beneath his feet with every step. "I like it like this."

Magnus followed his path from the other side of the room, watching how Alec had to step over a chair that had tipped over from the blast, only to reach a couch that he then had to sweep clean from the sheets of paper that had blown off from the desk and landed there.

"Hey, no offence," Magnus said when Alec had cleared a spot and sat down, "but you have awful taste."

Setting down something on the arm of the couch, Alec commented, "I assume that's a compliment."

Magnus surveyed the office again. "Not really, no."

Meeting his gaze when Magnus looked in that direction, Alec smiled at him. "I'll make you a deal: if you let me bandage your wounds, I'll let you keep insulting me."

The words made Magnus' eyes fall on the box sitting within reach of Alec. A first aid kit. Magnus wasn't sure if he actually took a step backwards, or if the sound was just from shifting his weight. Regardless, it was loud in the enclosed space.

"That's not necessary." He tried to force his expression to work with him, to make it believable, but it felt stiff. "I'll heal everything later. My magic's just not ..." Magnus let his eyes trail over the room.

This was what he was good at. The thing that he was supposed to be able to wield, no matter what. If he couldn't do that, what was left?

He didn't know the answer to that. But what he did know was that right now, in this state, he was dangerous.

Maybe he was a slave under it, the demon side taking over. Or perhaps it was the human part, fraught with weaknesses that he should've grown out of by now.

One of them had caused this.

He wasn't sure which alternative frightened him more.
"... reliable, at the moment."

If Alec was smart, he'd keep his distance until this godforsaken day was over. Everything would go back to normal, once it was.

"Can I look?"

But then, this was Alec after all. He never did the thing he was supposed to.

Magnus tilted his head to the side. "You have a morbid curiosity."

Alec still wore the same calm smile. "I do."

When he didn't move out of his position, completely collected, Magnus gave in. Otherwise this conversation would just repeat itself all over again. Stepping over the mess, Magnus took his seat beside Alec.

"Well, doctor?" he asked with enough sarcasm to make it obvious that he'd meant what he'd said. This was the definition of wasting time. "Will I live?"

But it wasn't the quick once-over Magnus had expected. Alec softly grasped his chin, gently tilted it up, and then he just looked. The only thing that made any sound was the fire, casting its light on them from time to time.

All Magnus could feel was Alec's grip, Alec's breaths against his skin and then careful fingertips brushing across his throat.

Magnus did his best not to recoil from the touch.

Alec released his chin. "Can I clean off the blood?"

Magnus met Alec's eyes, the steadiness there contradicting with everything else that he was. Alec was so young.

"I'm fine," Magnus said with finality, trying to give Alec a reason to believe the words. Maybe that way, Alec would finally relax. "Really. You have to stop hovering."

He couldn't put more emphasis on it, or repeat it one more time. Alec had to accept what he was saying.

He could bear it. He'd done it before.

There was no need for Alec to try and do it for him.

Raising his hand, Alec brushed the knotted hair that had fallen over Magnus' forehead out of the way. "I know you are." The strands he touched were clumped together. "Can I?"

Silently, Magnus nodded.

As if he was afraid Magnus would change his mind, Alec didn't waste any time.

Not paying too close attention to what it was Alec was doing, Magnus only lifted his chin when Alec's touch encouraged him to, leaned a certain direction when that became necessary and then sat still. Not thinking, adamant not to, he focused on nothing in particular, letting all of it blot out in a daydream that wasn't a dream at all.
It was what was left of his life now.

"Does that hurt?"

He must've made some sort of accidental movement, judging by the abrupt question.

"No," Magnus assured Alec. "It doesn't hurt."

The steady caress was at the base of his throat now, where the wire had cut the deepest. Alec barely put any pressure there, but it still made him tense. The reoccurring touch, the slight tug on the split skin, was enough to begin dragging Magnus back to reality.

Unconsciously, Magnus pulled at the fraying edges of the shirt he wore that didn't belong to him, seated on a couch that wasn't his, in a place which he loathed and that loathed him back in return.

"What was it?"

Alec sounded exactly as he'd done a minute ago. Just as calm, just as steady.

"Garrote."

Alec's movements stuttered one short moment, a second when the breath he took was audible, before he, without saying anything, went back to his task.

"I should've seen it coming. It was a rookie mistake."

It was the thing that bothered him the most, the one he had yet to find an explanation for. With his extensive experience, with everything he'd seen, he would've known better than to rush into an unknown situation blindly.

So why had he?

If he'd thought before he'd acted, then maybe it would've ended differently. If he'd been faster, it could've made a difference. If he hadn't kissed Alec, would she still be alive?

"She saved my life." Blinking away the memories, swallowing down the things that wanted to crawl up his throat, Magnus shifted away from Alec. "Okay, that's enough."

He was as clean as he was ever going to get.

"Shouldn't we-" Magnus began, but Alec interrupted him. "What about those?"

"What about what?" Magnus asked, before he followed where Alec was looking.

Resting in his lap, his palms were crusty with dried blood. Magnus wasn't sure if he offered, or if Alec decided on his own, but soon his hands laid flat in Alec's.

"Any pain?" Alec asked him as he examined the cuts, trying to determine how much damage had been done. It seemed a hopeless endeavour, given the amount of blood obscuring the wounds.

"I don't know," Magnus answered honestly. He looked at the palms, at where Alec's fingers were touching his skin, and he couldn't feel it. "The sensation isn't working right now." Perhaps a few nerves had been cut. "I'll get back to you on that." Magnus tried to smile, to ease the seriousness, but his muscles didn't show the inclination to cooperate.

Thank god Alec missed the grimace he made instead.
"How did you get them?"

With Alec sitting hunched over like he was, engrossed in this irrelevant topic, if Magnus hadn't known him, he'd think Alec to be some kind of healer. At the moment, Alec seemed to believe that as well, since he didn't let him go.

"Alexander, my hands are good enough. Isn't it-

Alec cut him off again, and Magnus had to bite his tongue to keep from insisting. "How did you get them?"

"I ..."

Magnus' gaze flicked between the injuries and Alec's eyes that were intently watching him.

"I can't remember. Does it really matter?"

Judging by Alec's expression, it apparently did.

It was quicker to just humour him. Going through it swiftly, combing through the memories that reeked of death, Magnus shrugged. "Catarina was- they stabbed her. I'm guessing I cut myself when I pulled out the sword. I honestly don't know."

There wasn't a moment he could recall where he'd felt the pain that should've accompanied those wounds. But obviously he'd gotten hurt somehow.

Carefully, slowly, Alec folded his fingers over Magnus', covering the cuts. "I'm so sorry you lost her."

Magnus stared at where their hands were connected. If only Alec had known. "I didn't." He didn't deserve any compassion. "I killed her."

Like he'd anticipated this horrific confession, Alec didn't act righteously appalled. He didn't pull away, like a normal person would've. He just held tighter.

"You didn't," he said, like it didn't matter that Magnus was dressed in her blood. "It was the Circle."

Magnus shook his head, vehemently, violently, not stopping until Alec did it for him. "No," Magnus explained, when Alec's palm on his neck prevented him from moving his head. "It was me."

Lifting his eyes, Magnus tried to find the words, but he failed. Like everything else, he failed this too. "I made a mistake, Alec," he whispered. "I should've gone with her when I had the chance. She asked me to and I didn't."

'And you're coming with me,' Catarina had stated beneath the stars.

"What are you talking about?"

"She stayed because of me." Magnus struggled against the guilt that threatened to drown him, pull him down to where light had gone extinct. "I promised to protect her and I didn't."

'And you're coming with me,' she'd said, with the moon and stars aglow in her hair. 'Magnus, tell me you're coming with me.'

"Hey," someone called, dragging him back to where he didn't want to be. Because Magnus knew now. He'd finally understood why his hands didn't hurt. The reason his throat wasn't sore, despite
that his voice was hoarse enough that it sounded like a stranger was speaking his words. Why he couldn't feel where the shard had buried itself in his thigh.

It wasn't nerves that had been cut. It wasn't adrenaline numbing the pain.

It was that everything else hurt that much more.

From the light that the fire cast that stabbed into his eyes, to the way the air burned like acid in his lungs.

So what was one cut, or two, or three, when it felt like every second might be his last, that this, this one, would prove to be insurmountable.

"Listen to me." It was Alec, trying to catch his lost gaze; Alec framing his face to keep him there. "You couldn't have seen this coming." Alec brushing his hair back once again. "It's not your fault."

"I've been so selfish." Magnus' heart was beating too fast, racing against a storm it couldn't outrun. "I made the wrong choice." Every word fell into his lap, a broken, quivering mess. "I shouldn't have done this."

"What do you mean?" Alec asked. "You didn't do this."

Magnus made a sound, somewhere between laughter and sheer pain. "You don't understand."

Alec's hands grazed his cheeks, futilely trying to heal a lost cause. Searching his face and finding no answers written there, Alec said, "What is it I don't understand?"

Magnus tried to shake his head, but he was stuck, unable to move. Clutching at Alec, Magnus found his shirt and wrung his fingers into the fabric right above Alec's heart.

"She was-" Magnus' voice cracked, slicing on the edges of the words and the story they told. "She was dying in my arms. They'd already-" The memory taunted him, making him want to reach inside, to where his and Catarina's last moment together lived, and claw it out. "I- I was too late. I couldn't heal her."

Had the roles been reversed, had Catarina been the one to find him laying on the floor, she would've found a way where he hadn't.

"I tried. I really tried but it didn't work." It would stay with him forever now, until the day he died. He'd seen death so many times, felt it, held the hands of those passing away. And they had left scars and hollows where their lives and his had been entwined. "So I..." But she'd left behind silence. "I stopped her heart." When he wished nothing more of this world than to hear her voice again. "I killed her."

The world was a blur, falling away before his very eyes and it didn't matter. He didn't care.

Perhaps he'd lost his mind now. Maybe he finally, at long last, had gone insane.

"I murdered the only family I had left."

Magnus covered his eyes, but it didn't stop the tears from slipping past. They were so hot and there were so many of them; trailing the shape of his quivering lips, spilling down his cheeks, dripping down his chin. They kept falling, even as they no longer drenched him, but the shoulder that was muffling his whimpers and sobs and sounds of agony. Magnus clung, burying his face deep into a warm neck, leaving bruises on the pale skin beneath him.
No matter how hard he held, it didn't subside.

The aching just rose and rose until it was blinding. Until everything was pure, unadulterated, pain.

Gasping, trembling, Magnus cried for everything he'd lost and that he'd never get back.

"Breathe," a voice mumbled in his ear, stroking his back over and over again. "Magnus, you have to breathe."

Magnus tried to follow the instruction but he couldn't. Shaking his head, shaking and shaking and shaking, until the rest of him did as well, he stayed where he was, tucked in, safe and warm.

"It's okay," the voice whispered, hushing his heart that was beating itself bloody against the inside of his chest. "You're okay." It filled the silence. "Just breathe."

The flames were performing their final dance in the fireplace, throwing dying shadows upon the walls. The heat from the embers and charred wood was not enough to ward off the cold that the evening air and the falling rain brought inside through the empty window frames.

But the arms around him were.

Alec's shirt was damp beneath his cheek, but it didn't bother Magnus as he kept playing with Alec's hand, studying how their fingers fit together; entwining them, only to pull them apart again to find another, a better, way.

Alec's hand was broader than his; his fingers longer. The skin that clad it was pale and wore scars like others wore rings. He had so many scars. Everywhere Magnus' fingers grazed there were white lines crisscrossing, all of them telling stories of wounds that had healed long ago.

His own hand was darker, smooth to the touch. It didn't don memories, no nicks or scratches to mark its years. Flawless, in every sense of the word.

History wasn't written into his skin. He bore no scars.

Magnus interlaced their fingers again. The blood on his made Alec's appear ghostly white.

"I wish it was me instead of her." He hadn't spoken, used his voice in so long, that for a moment, it felt like he'd forgotten how to speak at all.

The words were barely audible, despite that the only sound that could break them up was the downpour outside. The thunder seemed to have given way for the enormous cascades of water still pouring down. It was such a pointless thing to say, but he said it anyway.

He didn't want to keep going. He didn't want to do this alone.

Would it really be so wrong to just stay here, and not get back up?

The arms around him tightened, holding him, there, where he wasn't cold anymore. "You don't have to think about that right now," Alec mumbled into his hair.

But of course he couldn't stay. Not now, at least.

Leaning more heavily against Alec's shoulder, Magnus smiled. "Is that your way of saying we have to go?"
"No," Alec said, not moving an inch. "We don't have to go anywhere."

Contradicting his own words by closing his tired eyes instead of beginning the complicated process of disentangling himself, Magnus disagreed. "No, you're right. We don't have that much time until Valentine realises we have him. He'll be useless once that happens."

Alec's chin, that was resting on top of his head, moved. "What are you talking about?"

"The Circle member," Magnus said without opening his eyes. "Who else do you have in your prison?"

With the chest beneath him rising and falling steadily, lullingly, Magnus didn't notice the change in the air.

"Magnus ..." His name hung there, for a second, while Alec's thumb moved on the back of his hand, painting a pattern there. "Did you take him here so that you could torture him?"

Savouring the last moment before they truly had to leave, Magnus listened to the unending rainfall. "He has information. The Institute has the right kind of facilities. My apartment doesn't."

Alec's ministrations didn't stop, his hold unchanging, but his breathing wasn't a source of stability anymore. He held his breath for too long. "You came here to torture him."

It wasn't a question, but Magnus answered it anyway. "Yes."

When that single word caused the comfort, that had made it so easy to forget that there was another world beyond this room, to begin to dissipate, Magnus understood that he'd missed something.

Opening his eyes, blinking at the last light from the embers, Magnus leaned back so that he could look at Alec. Then he said, "I appreciate that you came when I called, I really do, but I didn't come here to cry on your shoulder."

The irony of it, the fact that he'd done just that not long ago, that he was still curled up in Alec's arms, didn't elude him in the slightest. But it hadn't been part of the plan. It didn't serve a purpose.

"He's a lead, Alexander. The only lead you have. So what's the problem?"

Alec's eyes fell down Magnus' face, up, then down once more. "You don't see the problem?"

The way he said it, implied that it was obvious, there for everyone to see. And Alec hadn't stopped studying his face, like he was searching for something that he wasn't able to find. Apprehension made Magnus sit up straighter. He watched Alec cautiously.

"This isn't you," Alec claimed, and Magnus knew he'd been right to be wary. "You're nothing like them. You wouldn't torture anyone."

Magnus pulled his hand free. "Stop acting like you know me. You don't."

He got to his feet quickly, effectively putting distance between them. "And spare the Kumbaya crap for someone who cares."

It was brusque. It sounded harsh. Too harsh.

Magnus pressed his lips together before he started over. "This is a real, tangible lead," he pronounced carefully. "He's a Circle member. I can vouch for that." Magnus didn't reach out for Alec, but he tried to put reassurance behind the words. "We all have to make sacrifices."
Alec looked up at him from the couch. With him sitting, their height difference had flipped. "Yeah, we do," Alec agreed. "But not this. This price is too high."

Folding his arms, Magnus awaited the inevitable continuation. If he'd learned anything, anything at all, it was that Alec always had more to say, no matter how much he didn't care to hear it.

"Five months ago, I asked you to do this and you said no. And you were right." When Alec stood up, Magnus remained where he was. "You were right all along."

Alec's voice didn't waver; his body language calm. But he hesitated a moment. However, when Magnus didn't do more than silently note the steps he was taking in his general direction, Alec completed the journey into his space. Not coming close enough to be encroaching, just close enough that Magnus knew that Alec wasn't going to back down and let it go. "We don't have to become monsters."

Alec gazed at him, his eyes so bright and piercing that Magnus was the one that turned away. But he could still hear the soft words and the meaning behind them. "You don't have to do this. Not any of it."

Magnus stared at the evening sky, out of a window that wasn't a window so much as just a hole in the wall now. "I can't afford the luxury of morals and principles right now."

The rain kept falling, ceaselessly, constant. It was still falling. And they were still here, in the same room, having an argument that shouldn't even be one.

"You're going to be next." Magnus took a deep breath. He stood close enough that, if the window frame had actually had a pane, it would've left a fog on it. "Or Isabelle. Or Jace. Do you want that?"

"I don't want this," Alec said, crystal clear. "We'll find another way. Just not like this."

Peeling his eyes away, Magnus looked at Alec and breached the distance he'd put between them to begin with. "We don't see this the same way. Okay, and I'm sorry, but at the end of the day, like it or not, it's my decision." He only glanced at the expression Alec wore. It wasn't one he wanted to remember.

Setting his hand on Alec's arm briefly, Magnus said, "I'll see you later," before he sidestepped him. He didn't need Alec's understanding. And even if he wanted it, that wasn't something he would ask for. It wouldn't be fair.

Crossing the room, Magnus was almost by the door when the words rang out. "He's in our custody, Magnus."

It felt like a particularly rough pair of knuckles had collided with his stomach, definitely enough to knock the air out of his lungs. It was actually surprising that he didn't react by gasping, as if it had really happened.

But it clearly hadn't, since he was still standing upright.

Staying completely motionless, Magnus asked of the door in front of him, "Are you saying you're not letting me?"

It didn't reply.

Slowly turning, the glass beneath him grinding against the oak, Magnus took in Alec in all of his
glory. "Answer me."

Had there been a sign of regret, a small part of him might’ve still housed some kind of feeble hope that Alec wouldn’t do this to him. But there wasn’t. From his straight back, to his unwavering gaze, Alec wasn’t unsure. He knew exactly what he was doing. "Yes. Because if you go through with it, I'm afraid you'll never be the same. Don't give Valentine any more than he's already taken from you. Don't give him a part of who you are."

It shouldn’t surprise him. After everything, it really shouldn't. But it was surprise nevertheless that made his eyes burn when he realised just how deep this particular betrayal stung. It felt like the knife Alec had stabbed in his back had struck something vital.

"You wouldn't have that member if it wasn't for me." Even as he pointed out the truth, Magnus had no faith it would change anything. Alec had already made up his mind.

A smile that contorted his face into something closer to a demon than a human pulled at the corners of Magnus' mouth when the silence confirmed it for him. "And it doesn't make a difference to you."

It wasn't anger at Alec that made him falter in what to do next. It was fury, directed at himself. He'd gone into this with his eyes wide open, knowing full well that it was a mistake. He'd been aware of it, thought it before they kissed, and yet he hadn't stopped. All because he'd wanted things he shouldn't want to begin with.

And if this had been his first time, then he wouldn't have faulted himself for it. But they had been here before.

And this time the pain was tenfold.

"You know, I lied earlier," Magnus said abruptly. "I came here because I trusted you. You made me trust in your words. But that's all they were." He forced himself to smile like it didn't hurt. "Pretty words; all for show."

It had meant to struck a nerve. In fact, he wanted to strike all the nerves. Every little one. Maybe then Alec would get a hint of how much he despised him.

"I'm trying to help you," Alec said, like it was a reason, a justification and an explanation, all wrapped into one. But no apology. Standing there, across the room, Alec showed no remorse. He wasn't sorry at all.

Averting his eyes, not able to stand the sight of him, Magnus mumbled, more to himself than to Alec, "I can't believe I actually fell for it."

Now, when everything had fallen apart, he could admit it. To himself and out loud. He'd believed in what Alec had told him. Because he'd wanted so badly for it to be true that he'd ignored what he'd known all along. He was an asset to Alec. One that needed to be functional so that it could be of use to the Institute. Of course Alec wouldn't let him do this.

It wasn't beneficial for him.

"Magnus, I'm trying to help you. I-"

In the corner of his eye, Magnus caught Alec moving. Either consciously or unconsciously, Alec, as he spoke, had taken a step forward.

Magnus recoiled instantly. "Stay away."
Alec did stop. But he didn't take that step back.

Once he'd regained his footing, Magnus spat, "Don't kid yourself. You've never tried to help me. Not once."

"I want to," Alec replied softly. As they were now facing each other again, Magnus could see him, his face matching the tone. Soft. Kind. Caring.

It caused Magnus to experience an irrational desire to claw his own eyes out.

"But I can't let you torture him. I can't do that."

Alec could. But he wouldn't. That was where the problem laid. Alec could help him. He just didn't feel like it.

"I never hated you," Magnus said quietly. "Did you know that?"

He looked at Alec, at his tall frame and unruly hair; at the rune that ran up the side of his neck. Magnus looked to see if he'd truly been so blinded by Alec to see him for who he was. And as the moment dragged out, he knew he'd been.

"Despite everything you put me through, despite how much you hurt me, I never did. I didn't think I had it in me."

His eyes burned once more and he blinked to get rid of it. Of all the tears he'd cried in his life, these were some of the bitterest.

"Well, I guess I've finally learned my lesson." He wiped them away before they could fall. "You go to hell."

Having no desire except for escaping this godforsaken place, Magnus opted for the door. If the window had been closer, he would've chosen that. Anything to get out of Alec's presence as soon as possible.

His plan was squashed by the door opening without any courteous knocking preceding the arrival of the other head of the Institute. When Lydia stepped over the threshold, Magnus didn't waste any time.

"I want to see him," he told her immediately.

With her eyebrows lifting, Lydia surveyed the room. She didn't acknowledge Magnus until Alec snapped from behind his back, "No!"

Ignoring Alec, Magnus repeated, "I want to see him."

Lydia, giving Alec the same raised eyebrow she'd bestowed on Magnus, shut the door behind her. "It's out of the question," she said, right as Alec traversed the floor. "That's what I came here to tell you," she continued, directed at Alec. "The Clave made contact. Given our last failure, they're not taking any risks. They want him moved to Idris."

Alec focused on Lydia. "When?"

"At-"

Magnus put up a hand, cutting her off. "I'm the only reason he's here."
Lydia turned to him with impatience plain on her face. "And while we appreciate your assistance, Magnus, it was your duty to report him. The law clearly states that he's ours."

"The Clave doesn't care about downworlders. They'll probably give him a medal for service well-rendered. Or, I don't know," Magnus paused to shoot a chilling glance in Alec's direction, "an Institute to run."

Alec visibly stiffened at the reminder of exactly how his parents had come to run the New York Institute before he and Lydia had taken over.

It had been their punishment, or reward, depending on how you looked at it, for fighting in the Uprising on the Circle's side. Given that Alec had married to keep the position and legacy in the family, Magnus would say it had been the latter.

He didn't know if Alec was aware of just how much blood had paved the Lightwoods' road to power. Would he still want to claim this as his life's purpose if he knew that his parents had slain children to reach it?

Or maybe he'd been wrong about that too and Alec already knew.

"The law isn't up to us," Lydia replied firmly. "We only uphold it." Her appearance was impeccable but her features were taut, and her eyes tainted by the slightest hint of red, as if she'd been crying. "We all have to fall in line," she continued, her voice wavering on those words for the split of a second before she went on. "You should be well aware of that, given your age."

When Magnus saw that she was done, that this was the last thing Lydia would say on the matter, he drew himself up.

"Certainly," he said. "We wouldn't want to upset the Clave."

Magnus walked past her, but then he turned back around. "But when the Clave fails," he said in a conversational tone, "and they will," he assured. "When Valentine do come, he will kill each and every one of you." Magnus looked them over, the perfect leaders for the Nephilims. The heads of the New York Institute. "I wish I could say that it'll be a loss."

Flinging the door open by a flick of his finger, the magic roaring back into his veins like it had never left, Magnus exited Alec's office just as the wood collided violently with the stone wall.

No more. Never again would he set foot in this place.

It was done. Over. Finished.

Never again, Magnus swore as he stormed down the empty hallways. He wouldn't return here. Not in this life. And if there was a life after that, he'd stay away then too.

At last, Magnus had learned from his mistakes, but the cost of it was astronomical. Coming here, putting his faith in Alec, had been the worst kind of miscalculation. Now Catarina's killer would be collected by the Clave. He'd go to Idris, where they hailed killers like kings.

Another thing he'd failed. One more thing he would have to carry with him from now on. And there was nothing he could do to change it.

Unconsciously, Magnus slowed down as he reached the junction splitting into four different roads to
take, coming to a complete stop.

Or, was that really true?

His pumping blood slowly faded, until ice cold determination took over. The shift made the decision easy.

The hallway ahead of him lead towards the operation centre. The one to the right seemed to invade the inner parts of the cathedral. He had only taken the left corridor once before, and then he hadn't been alone. Ducking the corner, Magnus didn't squander the opportunity by being cautious.

Striding, he found the staircase he'd been searching for. The carpet muted his footsteps once he reached the end of the steep stairs, but as his own became muffled, a similar sound emerged from higher above, the unmistakable clash between rough boots connecting with stone.

Given how isolated this part of the Institute was, whoever it was must have seen him descend. But he hadn't heard anyone calling out for him to stop.

Halting, Magnus awaited whichever Shadowhunter it was.

A pair of legs appeared, before the rest of an easily distinguishable shape came into view.

The true tragedy in his life was the fact that this was a familiar sight.

"If you're here to stop me, I suggest you think again," Magnus warned, as Jace towered before him, having paused on the steps.

Silently, Jace regarded him for a moment, before he asked, his face more expressive than usual, "Can you make him talk?"

For a second, Magnus was caught off guard. But then, it was surreal to have Jace as an ally. This was the only kind of situation where they could actually see eye to eye.

A ghost of a smile lifted Magnus' lips. "I'll make him sing."

Mimicking his smile, Jace quickly conquered the last steps and brushed past him. "Let's go then."

Shoulder to shoulder, they hurried into the depths. The chill that had permeated the air the last time Magnus had wandered this windowless corridor was still there. Perhaps it had never left. As the carpet disappeared, their heels echoing against the confining walls, Jace said, "I've deviated from Alec's orders before. I don't care about what the Clave wants."

Jace glanced at him, as if checking if he was listening. "You?"

Or making sure that he wouldn't back out.

Magnus kept up the punishing pace. "What specifically is it about me that makes you think I care about either of those things?"

It seemed sufficient enough to reassure Jace. "Alright," he said, accepting it. "Follow my lead."

It became clear why he'd asked for assurance that they were both on the same side here when, a minute later, the single door, the only door down here, came into view, along with the two Shadowhunters guarding it.

Jace stepped in front of Magnus as they walked the uncomfortably long stretch of space between
them and the guards in complete silence. As they came to a stop, Jace painted on a suggestive grin. "Hey, gorgeous."

It was so overtly flirtatious that the grimace on the girl's face wasn't the least bit surprising. "What are you doing here, Jace?" she asked, her tone clipped.

"Just stopped by for a chat," Jace replied, unfazed by her unwelcoming attitude.

The second guard, which had so far not concerned himself with their arrival, suddenly spoke. "And you brought a downworlder with you for that?"

His eyes rowed down Magnus' body, in a manner that could've only been considered polite if the boy had been blind. "No one is allowed down here," he continued, speaking to Jace as if he was Magnus' commander, while not removing his eyes. "You need to leave."

Not moving a muscle, Magnus met the boy's stare with a detached look of his own.

"We will, Hunter," Jace promised, the same expression still plastered on his face. Shifting, Jace abandoned the girl, giving all of his attention to Hunter. "It's just one thing I need to say before we go," Jace informed him before he simply raised his arm and drove his fist into Hunter's unsuspecting face. Hunter didn't have time to catch himself. Another direct hit and the stout body collapsed.

The girl didn't have time to do more than yelp in surprise before a straight elbow to her jaw sent her plummeting down.

The whole spectacle was over in less than two seconds. Shaking his hand in the air, like he was shaking away pain, Jace stood in between his two fallen comrades with a grin that reached his eyes this time. "I've always wanted to punch him," he declared, using the tip of his shoe to poke at Hunter's ample cheek. The lax head tipped to the side. "The wait was so worth it."

Raising his head, noticing Magnus' expression, Jace reminded, "I'm not just a pretty face, you know," before he bestowed his attention on the door.

As Jace's back was turned, Magnus stooped down by the girl. From her leg strap, he soundlessly unsheathed two of her knives, sliding them into his pockets. It was lucky that he wasn't wearing his usual get-up, or else he wouldn't have been able to fit them. But with all the practical pockets that Alec's pants had, it made them easy to conceal.

Right as Magnus was done, the lock on the door clicked audibly and Jace turned around with his stele in his hand. "You don't have to check her pulse," Jace remarked when he caught him crouched beside the unconscious girl. "I didn't kill them."

Standing up, Magnus asked, "How long can you give me?"

"Five minutes, maybe," Jace replied. "Ten at best. The retrieval team should be here soon. You have to be fast."

Stepping over the limp bodies, Magnus was by Jace's side when he stopped him. "There are cameras in there."

Giving a curt nod, Magnus told Jace as he entered the prison, "Shout if someone comes."

This time it was the cell closest to the front door that had a light on. Magnus didn't peer through the square of glass. He simply grasped the handle and let it unlock beneath his palm. As soon as he shut the door behind him, and the restrained figure's features became visible, it was clear that he was in
the right cell.

Glancing to the corner, where a camera was mounted, Magnus moved his fingers ever so slightly. The little shift caused the lens to turn towards the wall, filming nothing but the stone it was made from.

A mocking laugh drew Magnus' attention.

"They sent a warlock?" the man strapped in the chair said. He was bound by his wrists, upper arms and ankles, to the arms and the legs of the chair, completely incapacitated, and flashing white teeth. "They must be desperate."

Last time Magnus had seen that face, they'd been in a larger room than this, surrounded by chaos and decaying bodies. Here, in this cube-like prison, their surroundings were bare and they were alone. As Magnus stepped up to the centre of the room, where the stranger was placed, his gaze fell on the man's neck. Two red fingerprints, dried, were faintly discernible.

His own, when he'd checked the pulse.

Magnus reached into his pocket. "I'm not wasting magic on you." Unceremoniously, he drove one of the knives through the back of the hand of the Circle member.

The blade nailed the already restrained hand to the wood beneath it.

The man couldn't move, but it didn't mean he didn't make a feeble attempt. Jerking, he tried to move his arm before the pain seemed to register and he let out a shriek that sounded loud enough to shatter crystal.

Just one piercing cry before his jaw clamped shut, rippling beneath the skin. But the struggle was audible, his panting filling the room as he stared at his impaled hand.

Magnus watched, his face expressionless. When no more exclamation of pain crossed the man's lips, Magnus grabbed his chin roughly, forcing it up. Looking into those hateful eyes that stared back at him, a wave of nausea hit Magnus, but he didn't heed it. "We're going to play a game." Increasing the pressure where his fingers rested, he continued. "And here are the rules, so pay attention. I'm going to ask you questions. Answer them. If you don't, I will hurt you." Magnus released him with a disgusted grimace. "Got that, buttercup?"

The man silently watched him, not replying.

Drawing the second knife, Magnus nailed the other hand to the chair.

This time the cry was lower in volume but significantly longer. When it died down, when the man once more stifled the sounds that wanted to be let free, Magnus lightly put his fingertip on the hilt.

"I said," Magnus began moving the knife, tilting the blade that was embedded into the flesh ever so slightly, "did you get that?"

It earned him whimpers, and almost immediately an enthusiastic nod. "Yeah!" the man assured, struggling to speak in his eagerness to get the words out. "Yeah, I got it!"

"Good boy." Patting his cheek, Magnus let go. At once the man sagged, as far as that was possible with how he was strapped down, and his sturdy frame shook, most likely from the stress that the pain brought on.
"Now," Magnus began. "Where is Valentine?"

Beads of sweat trickled down the man's face, dripping from his sharp jaw. The hair around his temples had become damp, darkening the light colour. Flashing his teeth once again, but this time more akin to a feral dog, the man spat viciously, "Fucking half-breed."

Tilting his head back, looking skywards, Magnus mumbled, almost like a prayer, "What is it about me that makes people think I don't mean what I say?"

When the grey ceiling had no answer for him, Magnus took a hold of the hilt of the first knife and yanked it out without much resistance. It slid smoothly up through the flesh, the freshly wet blade making it easy.

The blood that the knife had clogged up started oozing a violent red, dribbling down the arm of the chair. Ignoring the whining that it produced, the pathetic sound ringing through the room, Magnus weighed the steel in the palm of his hand.

It was the perfect weapon, if you knew how to use it correctly.

To his fortune, and to the man's misfortune, he'd had his fair share of encounters with them. Usually, though, he'd find himself on the other side of this particular equation.

But not tonight.

"New question," Magnus proposed. He looked between the sated steel and the man's fastened hand with curiosity. "How many fingers do you need to wield a seraph blade?"

Under the harsh light, the man's chin, that was shiny with trickling spit, quivered.

Taking it upon himself to solve the conundrum, Magnus splayed out the uncooperative hand.

Magnus' stomach turned as he had no choice but to touch him. This hand was one that had carved into Catarina. The press of it, the pain of it, had been the last thing she'd felt. This was the skin she'd felt against her own as he'd torn her apart.

This was the person that had butchered her while she'd been still alive.

"No guess?" Magnus asked politely as he positioned the blade.

Glancing up, the eyes that met his were so black they seemed to be lifeless.

"Well," Magnus comforted with a shrug of his shoulder. "It was a rhetorical one anyway."

And then he pushed the knife down.

The screams were deafening as the sharp edge sliced like butter through the sinews and slowed down a little as it struck bone. Putting more force behind it, the blade hit the wooden arm of the chair with finality.

Straightening his back, taking a step away, Magnus spoke over the whimpering and crying. "That was three. You want to try me again?" The man only snivelled, the sweaty strands of his curly hair falling over his drooping head. Seizing the man's chin again, Magnus turned his head up. Ignoring the saliva that was being drooled onto his skin, Magnus asked coolly, "Where is Valentine?"

Swallowing, squeezing his eyes so tightly wrinkles spread around them like cracks in the skin, the man said in a pained whisper, "Cathedral of St. John."
Drawing back his arm, Magnus stabbed the knife through the now two-fingered hand, creating a new wound beside the old one.

"Don't lie to me," he advised, his sharp tone cutting through the man's helpless sobbing. "Where is he? What is his plan?"

The man shook and shivered, blubbering like a child. It grated at patience that Magnus no longer possessed. Wiping the drool from his hand onto his shirt with revulsion, Magnus made sure to get it all off. But he slowed in the middle of his efforts as the crying transformed into something different. Between the gasping breaths another sound slipped through. Stopping completely as the snickering filled the room, Magnus stared back at the man as he lifted his head.

Tears were still spilling from the corners of his eyes, but his gaze was empty of them. He grinned, deranged, victorious. "You'll see soon enough. You'll all see."

Magnus' own mouth faintly curved upwards. "Kiss goodbye to the rest of your fingers." If the man thought he was afraid of the insane, he would soon learn otherwise. "Let's see how valuable you are to Valentine then."

But before he could make good on his promise, there was a voice ringing and he turned his head towards the door.

Jace; calling his name.

Time was running out.

"I won't tell you a thing, warlock," the thick voice declared, almost playfully. As if there wasn't a thing that could persuade him to change his mind. There probably wasn't. "I will never betray the Circle."

Turning back his attention to the man, Magnus truly smiled, for the first time in what felt like years. "Oh, you poor little thing. You've misunderstood my purpose here. I don't care about the Circle. I'm not here on Nephilim business. I'm here for you."

Magnus tilted his head to the side, keeping the smile. "You see," he explained, "no matter what you reveal, or don't reveal, you won't leave this cell alive."

He hadn't lied to Alec.

The single thing he'd neglected to mention was how it all was going to end.

Alec had been better off not knowing that particular part.

Had they given him time, and not five minutes courtesy of Jace, he could've probably succeed in extracting some kind of information. But that wasn't what had played out. All he had was this moment. And if he left him alive, if he let him live, he knew he wouldn't forgive himself.

The imminence of his death didn't seem to concern the man as his eyes lit up with understanding. "The blue one," he stated, the corners of his mouths pulling up. "The warlock."

What little of his blood that wasn't cold, that still had some warmth to it, froze at the description.

"So you remember," Magnus said.

The man nodded, eager to share this. "Of course. She was ..." He licked his already spit coated lips
before settling on a word. "Feisty."

Shutting out the images that his mind wanted to conjure up, Magnus didn't smile anymore. "Why did you skin her?" he asked, though he knew that wasn't what he really wanted to know. "Why not just kill her?"

"She screamed," was the answer he received.

The man enjoyed his stage, to set up the scene in painful details. He thrived like a true sadist would, revelling in the pain he knew he was causing as he counted out, "Begged. Cried. Bled like a pig."

"Why?" Magnus repeated, asking the true question at last. "Why?"

And he looked into those black eyes, and the darkness behind stared back at him, peering into his soul. It grinned. "Why not?"

Time had run out.

"Why not," Magnus agreed.

He stepped forward.

"Shadowhunters aren't religious, as a rule," Magnus remarked, rounding the bolted chair. "Now might be a good time to start."

The man followed him, turning his neck to see, but it couldn't twist far enough unless you broke it.

"I'll even begin it for you." Magnus placed three fingers at the base of the man's neck, right where the spine came to an end. "If my memory serves me correctly, it goes something like this:" Pushing his fingernails down, one by one, they made a small 'pop' when they pierced the taut skin. "Forgive me, Father." A small pulse burst from where they were connected, singing through their joined bodies. "-for I have sinned."

Taking his hand away, Magnus returned to stand before the man one final time.

What surprised him was the fact that there was no screaming.

It was quiet enough that when retribution arrived, it came with the sound of tearing.

On the crown of the man's head, where his hairline and forehead met, the skin began to peel off. It was as if stitches were popping out, the structure of the face held up by threads that were now in the process of being snipped. As the flesh-coloured layer folded, like paper curling under the heat of a flame, blood came pouring out from where it had been imprisoned.

The layers unravelled, some strips of skin detaching, falling onto the stone.

As the red fluid splattered across the floor, the man's breaths ceased to be.

It wasn't the haemorrhaging that proved to be his demise, though it played its part.

The last sound that filled the room, that echoed between the bare walls, was a gurgling when he choked to death on his own blood.

It was at the last minute.

As the quiet laid siege, upset voices could be heard echoing just outside.
The door swung open abruptly, like the person on the other side was fully prepared to barge inside, but no such thing followed. The footsteps stopped, halted in their tracks; the metal door creaking.

"What did you do?" someone asked. Through the horror that tainted it, it sounded like Lydia.

"He lost face," Magnus replied, not turning around to check if his guess was correct. "Literally."

"Did-" Jace cleared his throat. "Did he say anything?"

Stepping up to the chair, stopping in the puddle by its leg, Magnus said, as he extracted the first knife, "The Cathedral of St. John, but Valentine won't be there."

Dropping it to the floor, Magnus proceeded to work on the second knife.

"How can you be sure?"

Having to yank it out from where it was buried through the flesh and into the arm of the chair, Magnus only lifted his eyes once he held the steel in his hand. "Would you have told me the truth?" he asked Jace, letting the blade slip from his grasp.

It clinked in the silence when Jace didn't respond.

"I assume the Clave will want to have a chat with me," Magnus said. They surely would. He had just executed their hostage after all. "Please, when they do, be so kind as to inform them that I no longer obey their laws."

He moved forward and Lydia's gaze never left him. She appeared cautious, apprehensive. Maybe even afraid.

Jace's was looking at him as well, but he seemed to be more in the direction of baffled.

And behind Lydia, towering behind her, was Alec. With the same shade as snow colouring his cheeks, Alec seemed to have settled on the stunned route. He was the only one that was staring at the Circle member, or what was left of him anyway. It looked like his eyes had stuck there permanently, unable to move. He didn't even blink as Magnus continued by saying, "If that proves to be an issue they know where to find me."

He paused in front of Jace, waiting for him to move to the side. "Now, you'll have to excuse me. I have affairs I need to sort out."

When Jace did, Magnus walked past him and exited the prison, leaving the blood and all of its horror behind.

Chapter End Notes

So what do you think? Exactly how broken is Magnus? Who will he be, now when he's lost Catarina and tortured someone to death? What are the affairs he's planning on sorting? And what exactly did the Circle member mean by 'You'll see soon enough. You'll all see.'?
Hello, my dudes!

Our tagline/motto/unofficial slogan: "And when I thought things could go well, they go so wrong." - domoiswatchingyou

So, how are you doing, guys? No, really. Are you still in need of therapy since last time? The only reason I'm asking is because if you happen to be sobbing in a corner somewhere, I guarantee you that I'm much further gone. Ah, such fun times we have together. I'm seriously beginning to believe we're all just a bunch of masochists. Like, HARDCORE masochists.

However, now that I've expressed the appropriate amount of concern for our collective mental health there's nothing stopping us from diving right back in! ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**All The King's Horses**

I knock the ice from my bones
Try not to feel the cold
Caught in the thought of that time
When everything was fine, everything was mine
Everything was fine, everything was mine

All the king's horses and all the king's men
Couldn't put me back together again
All the king's horses and all the king's men
 Couldn't put me back together again

Run with my hands on my eyes
Blind, but I'm still alive
Free to go back on my own
But is it still a home, when you're all alone
Is it still a home, when you're all alone

All the king's horses and all the king's men
Couldn't put me back together again
All the king's horses and all the king's men
Couldn't put me back together again

All the king's horses and all the king's men
Couldn't put me back together again
All the king's horses and all the king's men
Couldn't put me back together again
There is a reason I'm still standing  
I never knew if I'd be landing  
And I will run fast, outlast  
Everyone that said no

All the king's horses and all the king's men  
Couldn't put me back together again

All the king's horses and all the king's men  
Couldn't put me back together again

All the king's horses and all the king's men  
Couldn't put me back together again

It was eye-catching; the limbs sticking out in twisted positions, like branches that had been snapped in one too many places. He laid face down, embracing the stone with a bloodied kiss.

Ascending the stairs, Magnus sidestepped the dead man. Avoiding to use the handrail, where some greyish substance had splattered, Magnus climbed the floors. Had he peeked over the railing, he'd still be able to see the man in the centre of the building and the macabre masterpiece he made up.

The heels of Magnus' shoes created echoes that accompanied him every step of the way.

As he reached the landing where he had a clear view of the second body, the place where he'd stood and challenged them not more than four hours ago, another sound began echoing against the aged walls as well.

Pulling the phone from one of the many pockets of his pants, Magnus carefully looked at the number on the screen before he lifted it to his ear.

"Raphael," he greeted, as he kept on walking.

"Magnus?" the voice on the other end questioned. But then Raphael apparently decided that his ears hadn't deceived him after all, since he followed it up by cursing, "Why aren't you answering your phone? Isn't that the purpose of having the dreadful thing to begin with? I've tried to reach you an uncountable amount of times in the last hour. Which means I've willingly subjected myself to the torment that is your voicemail. Do you have any idea of just how insufferable that greeting is?"

Raphael paused to take a breath, despite that he, physically, didn't have to. "Have you heard it?"

It was most likely done for the dramatic effect of it.

"I was the one who recorded it, Raphael," Magnus pointed out.

"To make people cry, one can only assume."

Heaving a deep sigh, Magnus asked, "Did you call just to voice your complaints?"

"No," Raphael said, and now, when he'd gotten the irritation off his chest, his voice was back to its ingrained coolness. It was an unusual occurrence that he lost his composure to begin with. From Magnus' limited experience there was only one situation that could push Raphael over the edge, and unless someone else had, accidentally, set his hair on fire recently, then there really wasn't a reason
for him to snap. "As I couldn't get ahold of you, I decided to reach out to Catarina to see if she knew where you were. And lo and behold, there you are."

"Here I am," Magnus acknowledged, as he stopped in front of the door that stood ajar. From what little he could glimpse of the inside, it was dark.

"When you didn't answer, I was afraid you'd done something half-witted."

Setting his hand on the flimsy door, barely thicker than cardboard, Magnus stepped inside and shut it behind him.

It was the ash and cinder that had made it seem like night had taken up permanent residence from the outside. It was more of a dusk.

Letting his hand roam over the blackened wall to find the light switch, Magnus swept across the bumpy surface to then encounter the toggle switch. The half-melted plastic had turned the toggle into little more than a nub. Flicking it, the lamp hanging in the middle of the hall flickered back to life, flooding the cramped space in light. It lasted a second before it unceremoniously went out as the whole device, along with a chunk of the ceiling, dropped down and collided with the floor, leaving him in the gloom.

Its hard landing stirred up a cloud of soot.

"While that," Magnus suppressed a cough, "undoubtedly do sound like something I'd do, you'll have to be a bit more specific."

Squinting at the scattered parts of the once intact lamp, and the pieces of plasterboard that had piled up on top of it, Magnus used his foot to sweep it to the side.

"The Circle has struck again. And since there were Nephilims from the Institute sighted there not long after the attack," Raphael drew another pointed breath, "I had an awful suspicion that you'd somehow get yourself involved in that."

"What?" Magnus gripped the phone harder, halting in his efforts to clear a path. "When?"

"This evening," Raphael relayed. "At Inwood Hill Park. It was a pack of werewolves that they targeted."

That had been one of the nine sightings of the Circle. The Shadowhunters sent there must've been too late.

"Was it the New York pack?"

"No," Raphael said. "It was a small one from Manhattan. I don't even know if their leader survived or not."

Magnus ran a tired hand over his face. "How many dead?"

Raphael scoffed dismissively. "You know how wolves are. They don't share that information."

They were all like that. Secrets and lies were instruments for surviving in their world. Enemies and allies were treated the same, since, at the end of the day, they were both equally likely to stab you in the back.

But Magnus refrained from mentioning it. Sometimes, the harsh reminder of reality wasn't necessary
"But the Circle is reliving its glory days," Raphael continued. "They're taking spoils again."

So, there was his why. Not the question he'd preferred to be answered, but it was what he'd been offered. There hadn't been a reason for it. The Circle had wanted, and so they had taken. The violence inflicted on Catarina had only been a byproduct, an unfortunate side effect, because of how her warlock mark had manifested itself. Had they gone after him, they would've tried to gouge out his eyes. Maybe they would've even been merciful enough to leave him alive, but blind.

It'd been bad luck, and nothing more.

"Old habits die hard," Magnus commented, as he stepped over the remains of the lamp.

What had they taken from the wolves, he wondered, as he walked down the short hallway. Claws? Maybe fur. Perhaps a werewolf's foot, or two, for luck.

Reaching the kitchen, he ignored the chaos in favour of stopping beside the decomposing body. He stared down at the corpse.

"We have to leave. Everyone who hasn't already, will after this. Magnus," Raphael said into his ear, and his voice was even more grave than usual, "we can't stay here any longer."

Using the tip of his shoe, Magnus flipped the heavy body onto its back. The frozen expression, now permanently carved into the dead face, was that of a doll's: eyes wide in terror and puffy lips parted in surprise.

"I know," Magnus replied, pulling back his foot. "I just have a few things I need to sort out first. Then I'm never coming back here."

"Good," Raphael agreed. "You'll make sure that Catarina comes as well?"

It didn't steal his breath, it didn't hurt to admit it. He doubted anything could hurt him anymore. "She's dead," Magnus told Raphael. "She encountered the Circle."

It became quiet when Raphael didn't breathe at all. The silence between them was soaked in their combined losses and everything that was pointless to say after so many years of experiencing them.

"You finished them off?" Raphael asked. "All of them?"

Magnus smiled wryly to himself, pushing away exactly how hard he'd had to fight to complete that task. "With a little bit of trouble, yeah."

"Okay," Raphael concluded. "I'll see you out of the city."

"I'll meet you out of New York, but don't wait for me." Magnus looked at the crooked clock on the wall, where the hands had stopped on a quarter to nine. Beside it, parts of the wall was missing. "Go tonight."

"Be careful, Magnus," Raphael said.

"You too," Magnus replied, before there was a click on the other end and Raphael's voice was gone.

Putting back the phone in his pocket, Magnus measured the distance between the window and where he was standing with his eyes. Then he bent down and grabbed the woman by the wrists. Dragging her, the hefty body reluctantly following, Magnus reached the window. From the jambs, where the
glass, when it'd been whole, had been fastened, there were jagged shards sticking up, like bared, hungry teeth.

Bending down, Magnus slung her arm around his neck, and, taking a firm grip on her waist, he heaved her up on the sill. As she hung, half of her inside the apartment and the other half dangling above the street below, Magnus used his knee to give her a final push. She dropped like a rock would, powerless against the ruthless gravity that pulled her down.

He didn't hear the thud, neither did he listen for it. A red smear on the sill, where the skin had been cut on the shards, was the only trace left. Sweeping his fingers lightly through the air, as if he was caressing the night wind that had joined him in the empty room, the glass, that laid lifeless around his feet, began moving. The pane reformed itself, returning back to its former self as if it had never been shattered.

Once it was whole, Magnus glimpsed the outside for a moment as he turned away. There were now three bodies spread beneath the heavens, fallen, like the angels had before them.

A family trait, no doubt.

The only benefit from those unfortunate relations was that the runes still had effect even after the user's heart had ceased beating. Having the police sniffing around would've been a bothersome inconvenience.

Walking to the kitchen counter, he bent down, retrieved a bucket and put it beneath the tap. When the water had risen enough, dancing teasingly just below the rim, Magnus took the bucket by the handle and moved sideways, avoiding the table that had been cleaved with precision down the middle. The oven had spilled out its rack. He stepped across it, careful not to disturb the red pool it had drowned in.

The fridge was still inclining, apparently undecided if it should just give up, or fight to stand upright.

Setting down the bucket, Magnus tilted the fridge back into its designated place. He then kneeled on the floor, dipped a dry rag into the hot water, and set to work.

"Thank god for linoleum," he groaned an hour later, as he scrubbed at the last stubborn spot that refused to fade. The floor might be stained, but at least he'd been spared from having to clean blood out of wooden cracks.

As he sat back on his heels, Magnus swept the hair, that insisted on falling into his eyes, out of the way and reached for the bucket. Dunking the rag, he wrung it out before resuming his efforts. The water that was dripping from it as he set it to the floor had slowly changed colour as the minutes had crept by. It'd gone from clear to pinkish, to rose, followed by crimson and ruby only to then change into what it was now: the deepest of wine.

He kept scrubbing, earning an ache in his back and tired arms for his labour.

Magic would've been easier, faster. A few snaps with his fingers and it could've all been put back the way it'd been before. He'd have to use it eventually, unless he planned on becoming both a carpenter and an electrician today. But not yet. For now, he could rub at the spot and know for sure, as surely as his throbbing shoulders joined in the rest of his body's attempts to dissuade him, that it was real, that it had really happened.

It was easy to forget, to rely on the powers they had to take care of every little issue. And that was a
slippery slope to forgetting the most important lesson of all: magic could never fix the true problems; the once that kept you awake at night, or chased you in your darkest dreams.

Sure, it could be used to summon demons from the deepest pits of hell or angels from the brightest skies. It could be molded into kindness or sharpened to kill. It could even bring people back from the brink of death. But once they'd passed, it was too late.

It never gave back what had been taken, or turned time around.

Magic couldn't undo what had been done, and because of that it was as useless as not having it at all.

Where was the worth in possessing it, if it couldn't do anything about the things that truly mattered?

Finally, the stain yielded to his efforts and Magnus straightened his back, stretching his sore muscles. Rising to his feet, he went back to the sink and poured the dirty water down the drain.

He rinsed his hands, but even as the clean water ran over them there were still places that had been discoloured and refused to budge. Ducking his head beneath the tap, Magnus savoured the freezing water splashing his cheeks, washing away the exhaustion that had settled in the fine lines of his face.

Last time he'd been forced to do this he hadn't been alone. Catarina had come and helped him to clean up when Ragnor had been killed. They'd laughed, as they'd sorted through his things, relieved cherished memories, and kept laughing when Catarina had happened to stumble upon the Book of the White. They'd smiled, brightly, because it wasn't as heavy to carry when they did.

But he was by himself here, and if he laughed now there wouldn't be a question as to if he was insane or not. Sane people didn't laugh to themselves. Then, sane people weren't generally hands deep in blood, so maybe he didn't meet the criteria to begin with.

Drying off, Magnus contemplated the rest of the room, scanning the kitchen for the obvious place to start. There was only the problem that no matter where his gaze landed, it was all in the same state of disarray; all of it broken, in one way or another.

Time ran away as he mended the chairs that'd had their legs snapped, hung up the picture frames that had fallen off the walls and sealed the cuts that had been made into the floor by seraph blades. The ash vanished and the blackened door became unburned while the night progressed on the other side of the walls surrounding him. The clock in the kitchen was still stuck on a quarter to nine as the apartment slowly, but surely, assumed its normal appearance.

And then, there wasn't anything left to do.

Magnus locked the front door and switched off the repaired lights as he went down the hallway. He dragged his fingertips against the wallpaper, feeling the intact surface run beneath them.

It didn't take long to reach the door or to push down the handle. It was a painless process to enter and then shut out the rest of the world that went on, like it always did. Blinking against the darkness that wasn't as impenetrable as when he'd last ventured in here to fix up the bathroom, he clasped the strap of the bag, where it still stood, untouched, and brought it with him.

It felt strange, walking up to her bed without a word, looking down at her and not speaking. This was her bedroom, it was her apartment and without Catarina here, it was a stranger's home.

Her head was resting on the same pillow as earlier, the rest of her body just as unmoved. Carefully, gently, Magnus slipped one arm underneath her neck, the other beneath the bend of her knees and lifted her to the other side of the mattress. The soaked sheets stuck to Catarina's back, clinging to the
sticky mess until Magnus put his knee on top to keep them still and they peeled off.

Setting her down, he freed his arms and with steady fingers he undid the buckle on the bag.

Magnus understood why Jace had lost his colour and why he'd thought it unwise to hand it over to him, given his previous reaction to the mere implication of it. But that had simply been an involuntary action stemming from shock.

Now, when his body worked with him instead of against him, he didn't even blink. It might've been particularly repellent for Jace; perhaps he hadn't seen the damage seraph blades could inflict on living beings, but it wasn't the first time Magnus had.

Even as he laid out the cold slab of skin on top of the stained sheets, pulling out the jagged edges so that they didn't fold, it didn't faze him. The attached lumps of flesh and the strings of bloodied sinews were just that: pieces of detached flesh. It couldn't horrify him.

Not when he'd seen so much worse than this.

Reaching out for Catarina again, Magnus lifted her up and gently deposited her back where she'd rested before. When she was settled, he held her hand, brushing his lips against her knuckles.

This time around, when his magic didn't have to contend with hers, it went easily. It healed what couldn't have been made whole before, mending the traces of violence and pain until they were nothing more than memories.

But Catarina wouldn't remember any of it.

Not the suffering or torment, or the metallic smell of blood. She was free from that, and despite how much he hated himself for it, he couldn't help but envy her. Just for a second, barely longer than a heartbeat, he truly envied her.

And Magnus knew, with absolute certainty, that if he hadn't already been condemned to hell, then that thought would've tipped the scale.

Yet, it didn't stop him from desiring it; only a little bit. Just for the weight of it all to be gone.

And that was the most selfish thing he'd ever wanted.

He deserved the guilt and the suffering and the agony. Because she was the one dead, he deserved it all.

There was no need for him to feel her back for marks. The magic had already repaired what the blade had cut apart, but he did it anyway. Grazing his fingertips lightly, Magnus felt her unscarred skin and smiled, once, at her peaceful face.

"I know we said Spain, but I'm going to be a little late." His voice scraped, deafening in the silent room. "I know," Magnus continued, with a laugh that was someone else's, "tardy as always."

He reached out to her, caressing her cheek. "Give Ragnor all my love, and tell him that I was the one who accidentally sat on his sitar. I blamed it on you. That's why he refused to speak to you for those three months back in 1788." He smiled again, and this time it stayed. "I should've told you that before."

There were so many things he wanted to tell her, a million mistakes he wanted to set right, but it was too late for that. She wasn't there anymore.
"Be happy, Cat," he said, even though she couldn't hear him.

Catarina hadn't believed in heaven, but she hadn't believed in hell either. Once in a while, when the question had come up, she'd been content with that. Safe, in the haven that lived within her. She hadn't feared the day it would all end.

"Be happy, wherever you are." Magnus kept trailing soft fingers over her cheekbone, brushing back her hair lightly, and she laid completely motionless beneath his touch. "I promise you, I will kill him. No matter what it takes, I swear he will die." He pressed a kiss to her temple, lingering there. "I'll make him suffer," he whispered, kissing her one last time. "I will."

Rising from where he was leaning down over her, Magnus forced the weariness to subside. He couldn't surrender to it. Not now, when he had promises to keep.

Pulling back his hand, letting go of her, he set his palm above her body, letting it hover in the air. "Nec spe nec metu."

He moved it from her tangled hair, down her stained neck, to come to a stop at her feet. And as he did, an iridescent, shimmering hue radiated from his hand.

Soon, the room wasn't quiet anymore. The sound of flapping wings filled it, chasing away what had once made it empty. Some of them bobbed a curious head up and down to take in their surroundings, others trilled an unknown melody.

Taking a step away, Magnus went to the window. The old sash slid up under a creaked protest.

The outside air smelled sweet after the thunderstorm's ravage. The sun was just barely peaking above the horizon. It couldn't reach above the apartment complexes that interrupted the view with their sombre appearances, but where the buildings separated, through the narrow alleys that made up the city, light shone, golden, against the grey concrete.

As he stood there, they passed in a rustle of feathers spreading to take flight. They scattered in the winds that were calling them home, spreading across the sky until they melded with the azure tint it wore today.

A soft feather brushed across his arm.

The last blue jay perched steadily on the sill, its ivory chest luminescent despite the shades that lived in this bedroom. Its wings flapped, once, twice, but it seemed in no hurry to take the leap. It appeared to be waiting for something.

Its delicate head turned towards him.

Magnus looked back at it, at the feathers that wore every nuance of blue, to the proud head that was held so high, to the eyes that weren't black but instead had a colour deeper than the sea itself.

"I really miss you."

It dove, straight into the unknown. It headed towards the east, where the sun was still climbing to reach the clouds high above. The bird flew and flew and never faltered; inviting the breeze to a playful dance. At last, it was nothing more than a white dot against the city's backdrop. A snowflake in the beginning of April.

Leaning out of the window, holding on the edge, Magnus said, "Selamat jalan," and the wind took the words from his lips, allowing them to join everything else that had gone away.
Beneath, five stories down, an alley cat was loudly digging through a container for its breakfast. Displeased honking, from the streets nearby, rang loudly between the buildings. In another apartment, a couple was having a heated disagreement. It was the symphony of a New York morning, its typical greeting to the ever-rising sun.

The snowflakes behaved tranquilly outside the tall windows. They fell - barely that - powdering the already white ground in a fine, fuzzy blanket that was the only thing that cut through the endless darkness of the cloaking midnight. The window panes, in their overwhelming numbers, reflected his image from every possible angle where he sat, leaning over the desk. It did the same to the flames roaring in the monument of a fireplace. The windows' glass seemed to have been created straight from the blaze; orange and yellow and red mixing into its transparent colour until it looked like the whole world that was reflected in those panes were consumed by an inferno.

The glow that the crackling fire spread across the restful study wasn't nearly enough to make out all of the parchment's writing. Not that more light would've done much difference. The black letters curved in ways that were foreign to him. But the way they were scrawled down in a haste, like the writer had been worried that the words themselves had teeth and wouldn't hesitate to draw blood, made it clear it was some kind of demonic language. Judging by the cracked animal skin that the faded ink clung to, it was much older than the walls around him. It trumped his own age by centuries, no doubt.

By the side of the sentences, that ran without stopping, there was a story told in crude sketches. It looked like a child, that'd been old enough to know better, had drawn faceless figures, with the only intention of making them grotesque. There were five of them, all black, mirror images of each other, down to how their bodies twisted as one, as they experienced the throes of death.

The flickering flames, that moved in the draft, made Magnus lift his head. The absence of light had some advantages. As the long shadows hung around the nooks and crannies, hiding in every corner, it made it simple for him to meld with them. He watched, with cat eyes that measured each movement carefully, how the man entering the room completely overlooked him. Once the man had his back turned, Magnus took the opportunity to thrum his fingers thoughtfully on the desk.

The effect was instantaneous.

The man spun around, jumping back at the same time. A broken melody rang out when his palm hit the keys of the grand piano in his fright. His eyes, already round in shape, looked like they were about to pop out of their sockets. "M-m-ma-gn-gn-nus."

The fact that it was him didn't seem to ease Ibrahim. He still stared, his hand still stuck on the piano behind him.

"Your stutter is worse," Magnus remarked, keeping up the motion of his fingers. The steady sound could've been comforting. Once. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you're surprised to see me." He smiled, but it held no warmth. "But since I haven't heard from you in over a month, why would you be surprised to find me in your home?"

Ibrahim swallowed, twitching under Magnus' piercing gaze, but his mouth remained closed in confusion.

"A friend of mine died last night," Magnus said, his tone relaxed, nothing like the eyes that never slipped an inch from the figure standing across the room. "You can imagine my own surprise at that unforeseen event. So I'm here to ask you a question." His fingers stilled and the room plunged into
silence. "Did you betray me?"

It was a simple question. Yes, or no. But apparently to Ibrahim, it'd been asked of him to solve the secrets of the universe.

His face became flushed as he tried to get every single syllable in the English language to leave his lips as the same time. As he fought against himself, Magnus didn't move a muscle. Right then, in that stillness, he looked every bit a cat spellbound by the enchanting thrashings of a trapped mouse.

"I-I-d-d-didn't-didn't. N-n-no." Ibrahim's focus was so singular that he failed to control his movements. His normal, anxious, constitution was on full display, with his head jerking from side to side in denial, to the way his body quivered and his shoulders seemed to fold in on themselves to make his thin frame ever smaller. "I-I w-w-would-n't-wouldn't. N-nev-never."

Magnus reclined in the armchair. The way the fire spread its luminous light in a half-moon shrouded the right side of his face in darkness.

"You better pray to whatever god you deem holy that I don't find out that you had anything to do with it," he mentioned casually, as if they'd been engaged in polite small talk about the weather. "Because if you did, I will rip the flesh off your bones while you're still breathing."

It was easy to tell, even from a distance, how most of the colour drained from Ibrahim's neck and up.

"Now," Magnus declared, once that matter had been dealt with, "I have been more than patient, but as of today I have run out. I've decided to give you three gracious weeks to acquire what I want."

He set a palm beside the spread parchment and stood. Ibrahim's stare didn't stray from the tips of Magnus' fingers that rested on top of the desk, as if he was expecting, and dreading, the minute when sparks would appear there.

Leaving the desk, Magnus popped his collar against the bitter cold awaiting him outside, barely glancing at the shivering figure as he added, "I'll be expecting results."

"I-"

The first stuttered letter made his hands still on the coat's thick fabric.

"I-I ne-ne-e-ed m-m-ore t-time." It seemed to take all of Ibrahim's supply of already frail nerves to speak up, but he did. "Y-Y-you kn-ow kn-ow h-h-how-

"You've had enough already," Magnus reminded, his voice losing all pretence. "You've wasted enough already."

When Ibrahim didn't respond, only nervously swished the long fox tail that glamour hadn't hidden, Magnus studied him closer.

He hadn't expected to be contended on this point. Given how awful the last ten hours had been, he hadn't even entertained the idea that Ibrahim would prove to be a problem. Yet, obviously, he was.

Changing direction, Magnus turned fully towards him. "If you can't, Ibrahim," he said, as he began walking up to him, "then you're nothing more than a loose end that I will have no choice but to tie up." Every letter was measured, restrained. Calm. The tone didn't suggest the violence that the words promised.

For every step Magnus took, Ibrahim backed one away. It proved to be difficult, though, since he
barely had space to take two before his lower back hit the edge of the grand piano. Ibrahim's whole face twitched as he searched for an escape route that didn't exist. As Magnus reached him, stopping close enough to touch, Ibrahim recoiled, his free hand joining the other one on the keys.

Magnus didn't bother to feign amusement as a deeper version of the same broken melody as before rang out. He didn't lean in; he didn't have to. Ibrahim was merely a few inches away, and Magnus only raised his arm, and with the back of his fingers, he tilted Ibrahim's chin up.

The darting gaze fastened on Magnus, but Ibrahim kept blinking excessively. It seemed like he couldn't decide what would be worse: to actually look at him, or to close his eyes and pretend he was alone.

"You understand me," Magnus said, looking into those grey, watery eyes, "don't you?"

If Ibrahim was breathing at all, the sound of it didn't reach Magnus' ears. Ibrahim's mouth opened, but not a single word left it. Snapping his jaw shut, he nodded profusely.

Magnus removed his hand to grasp Ibrahim's shoulder instead, pulling him up from where he was half-lying on top of the piano's keyboard.

"Three weeks," Magnus reminded him, as he let him go.

Turning back to where he'd intended to go before Ibrahim had interrupted, Magnus was beneath the arch that would eventually lead him to the grand staircase, when a low sound stopped him.

"Y-y-you," it began quietly, "sh-sh-ouldn't t-t-threaten m-me, M-m-magnus."

Only when the lengthy sentence had come to an end, did Magnus look over his shoulder.

The top of Ibrahim's cheekbones were spotted in an upset pink again, but it was for a different reason this time. Ibrahim's eyes were still avoiding, still hiding as they flitted around the room, but his hands were clenched by his sides and they trembled with a scarlet mist.

Magnus didn't bestow more than a glance on the magic or its owner before he looked ahead once more.

There were a lot of things he never should've done; an abundance of situations where he'd made the wrong choice.

This wasn't one of them.

"Don't disappoint me, Ibrahim," Magnus replied, as he passed underneath the arch and began following the path that would allow him to reach the weathered main gate.

As he stepped out of the portal, the fire that had warmed the study was replaced with another type of heat.

The day had gone on without him. The sun, that had only begun its climb earlier, was now set high in the sky and its beams blazed through the panes on the french doors. The apartment looked exactly as when he'd left it. If any Circle- or Clave member had decided to pay him a visit in his absence, then at least they'd been courteous enough not to leave a mess.

It was those small things in life that made it worth living.
And he was eternally grateful for the solitude as well, when he kicked off the confining leather boots and discarded his coat on the floor. Eyeing the couch, Magnus contemplated collapsing there. The aching in his bones certainly agreed with that idea.

But he padded onwards, heading for the kitchen. It wasn't hunger that drove him to the fridge. The food that stared back at him when he opened the door wasn't appetising in the slightest, but he was going on his twenty-fourth hour without anything in his stomach. If he kept this up, he'd be a useless wreck within a few days.

Seizing the first plate his fingers touched, Magnus retreated back to the kitchen island with his haul of mini muffins. As he sat down, he frowned at the mountain of yellow shapes. He couldn't for the life of him remember when he'd bought these. How had he gotten them in the first place?

He squinted and looked closer.

How long had they been sitting in his fridge?

But since food poisoning could only be an improvement on the day he'd had, he ate two without reflecting on whether the flavour was weak lemon or strong mould. Chewing on a third, Magnus' absent gaze fell on the chairs standing on the other side.

The piece he was currently trying to get his teeth through, without much luck thanks to the hardened outside, suddenly felt exponentially larger.

Was it only yesterday that they'd sat there together, laughing? Was it that long ago since their final conversation, their final argument, their final everything?

Was it really that recent?

When it felt like he couldn't swallow without likely choking on stale muffin, and those weren't exactly the words he wanted to have carved into his headstone, Magnus rose to his feet and took out a water glass from the cupboard nearby. Once he'd swallowed - without dying - he set down the, now, empty glass and switched it for the phone on the counter.

He blamed Raphael for his reasons to check it. It wasn't unthinkable that he'd called to check in once more before he'd left New York. That, Magnus could defend. But what he didn't have a defence for, was when he noticed that Raphael hadn't called, but recognised the number that had, why he then opted for blinking at the symbol that indicated that there was a new voicemail, instead of throwing the phone through the window like an intelligent person would've done.

Maybe it was a bad habit. After all, it was just another piece added to his impressive pile of poor choices and even worse decisions that had led him here.

Which meant he couldn't blame Raphael for it. And he couldn't pin it on the flashing symbol that was staring back at him. It only left one option open, and even as he raised the phone to his ear, and pressed the required button, he didn't pretend that it belonged to anyone but himself.

Perhaps it would've been a good thing to brace himself. But Magnus highly doubted that it would've been enough. The voice cut sharply through his ear, and if he hadn't been certain that he was alone, Magnus would've believed that he was standing right beside him in the kitchen.

But it was just a disembodied voice. And that was more than enough to make him want to follow his previous, wiser, thought, and throw the phone away.

"Magnus," Alec repeated, like he'd forgotten he'd said it once already. He sounded drained, weary, if
the deep inhale was anything to go by. "I've called your phone but you're not picking up. Pandemonium is still closed, so you're not there. You're not at Catarina's apartment either, though you've been there sometime today. I'm outside your door right now, but if you're home I'm pretty sure you would've heard me. Or maybe you are home, and you're just ignoring me, which ..."

The recording paused for so long that Magnus suspected for a moment that he'd become deaf. It felt like the unfinished sentence had dug a hole through his head and from here on out there would only ever be silence.

"I heard you," Alec continued, on a completely different topic apparently. Because he hadn't been outside the door earlier when Magnus had briefly returned home. The wards would've picked up on it, even if Magnus hadn't noticed Alec through the walls separating them. Alec couldn't have heard him.

"I want you to know that I did hear what you said," Alec pressed on. "I know ..." His voice waned for a moment. Clearing his throat, it steadied once again. "I know that you hate me."

Magnus sighed deeply, covered his eyes with his hand, and squeezed them shut.

"I'm the last person you want to talk to, and I wouldn't call if I knew where you were. But I don't. I don't even know whose number this is and I'm probably just talking into empty space right now." Alec quieted down a second. "Does this thing even have a cut-off point?" he asked, pausing, as if he expected the automatic voicemail to respond. "Or can I just ramble on until my battery dies?"

When Alec laughed, despite that it was so far from amusing, Magnus unconsciously clutched the phone tighter.

"You're never going to hear this, are you? It doesn't matter what I say." From the other side, where Alec had stood, there were no noises in the background. It was quiet, which made the words that more clear. "But if, by some kind of miracle, you are listening, then I called to tell you that you should leave New York." Alec took a deep breath. "Please," he said, but the deep breath hadn't helped. His tone faltered. "Please," he repeated, stronger, "leave New York. The Circle attacked werewolves last night. They took spoils. You're not safe here."

His words matched Raphael's. If Alec had been standing before him, instead of being miles away, Magnus would've told him the same lie he'd let Raphael believe. It wasn't safe, but that didn't matter. Raphael had left. Catarina was dead. Perkel and the rest of his employees had been given strict orders not to stay here. The warlocks of Brooklyn that he was in charge of had vacated the city seven months ago. The majority of the warlocks that resided in the other parts of New York were long gone already.

There wasn't anyone left that he was accountable for. He wasn't going to pretend anymore that the Nephilim was his responsibility. Alec was an adult. So was Clary, Izzy and Jace. If Raphael hadn't brought Simon with him, then Simon was probably staying as well.

They were old enough to make their own choices. And so was he.

He wouldn't leave.

"Wherever you are, just be safe," Alec said. "And you can always call, if ... yeah." He cleared his throat again. "Bye."

His voice was suddenly gone, replaced by the robotic greeting that declared, "You have no new messages."
Slowly taking away his hand, opening his eyes again, Magnus loosened the desperate hold he had on the phone.

If he'd taken Alec's advice, heeded the urging in his tone and the fear that had clung to every syllable, then he wouldn't have been able to return. Had he run away in dread for the Circle and what they could do, he couldn't have chosen to come back until they were defeated. And given how long Valentine had been hunted, yet remained free, the likeliest scenario was that New York would've been off-limits to any downworlder for decades.

They would probably have spent the rest of their lives apart.

He should return the favour. The right thing to do would be to call Alec up and tell him to go. To leave for somewhere that would put an ocean, or two, between them; where he'd be safe.

Or to push him to run, before this too became blood and soot and ash.

Magnus set the phone back down on the counter.

"Sorry," he said, though no one could hear.

Abandoning the kitchen, he stepped into the bedroom and shut the door firmly. It was bright in here as well, even with every light turned off, due to the large windows letting in the sun. He moved his wrist and the shades cut off the rays, plunging him into night. By the muscle memory that came from living in the same place for over thirty years, he navigated his way to the spacious bathroom through the dark.

The tiles were a little chilly, even through the fabric of his socks. With ease that came from practice, Magnus shed the earrings he wore, along with the rings on his fingers and the necklaces that adorned his chest. He pulled off the shirt, that was cut low enough that it barely deserved that name, and threw it somewhere in the room.

Only when he was left shirtless and barefoot, did he turn on the light. Magnus looked at the reflection that stared back at him. His gaze trailed along the flawless makeup, to the hair that was clean and sporting violet highlights. It was the mask that he'd come home to put on, right after he'd scrubbed off the remains of her blood in the shower. It was as much of a defence as the clothes he wore; his own personal choice when it came to armour.

Bowing his head, Magnus washed it all away. Dragging wet hands through his perfectly styled hair, the dyed strands changed back into their normal raven colour.

Water dripped down his chin when he raised his eyes to the mirror to see himself for what he was, not what he pretended to be.

The makeup hadn't hidden any bruises. Whatever ache there should've been, magic had already taken away. He looked the same as he had for centuries. Today hadn't left any kind of lasting impressions on the planes of his face.

Though, as he brushed his knuckles across the smooth skin of his throat where it had almost been cut, he could feel them; the weight of the scars that he didn't bear.

And the careful motion was stalked by a pair of vicious, horrific, yellow eyes that met his gaze without wavering, the pupils slit and haunting. It was a mark made for a demon.

And he wore it.
Magnus turned away from the reflection, shutting the door to the bathroom. Not stopping to take off the last of his clothes, he pushed the sheer drapes that hung from the canopy to the side and crawled into bed. The exhaustion was too great to do anything about the pile of pillows that took up more room than another person would've. Collapsing in the middle of them, he buried his face in the mixture of soft fabrics and raised embroidery.

Closing his eyes, Magnus fell asleep in the silence that wrapped around him instead of the covers that laid wrinkled beneath his worn-out body.

Spring had always been his favoured season. There was something about the freshness of the air that had yet to turn into the stifling humidity of summer that promised hope, however fleeting it was. It was the season of change, where everything from the grass, to the people populating the bustling city, came to life after the long winter. As the thick coats and bulky scarfs were traded in for a lighter wardrobe, the busy streets underwent the same transformation.

In front of coffee shops wobbly chairs and even wobblier tables were being placed out beneath weather-worn parasols. Central Park had once more become a haven of nature for those who'd forgotten what blossoming trees looked like. And the nightlife, and its connoisseurs, stayed awake long after the sun had risen.

New York was shedding its skin to face the approaching summer as it always did: with seducing charm and alluring lights.

But where he laid, high above it all, it wasn't the glitter from Times Square's billboards that lit up the sky.

Magnus crossed his ankles and kept his eyes fastened on the stars.

There were a million of them, likely more, and they looked exactly the same. Even if he'd paid attention, Magnus sincerely doubted he could've picked out one from such an abundance. Vega, and the constellation of Pegasus, were there, somewhere, but he had no idea where exactly.

At least he could identify the moon, though barely. It was scarcely more than a crescent, its presence on the sky waning.

Linking his fingers beneath his head, one corner of Magnus' mouth lifted.

"What didn't we sacrifice?" he asked into the night, not expecting a reply.

He didn't receive one.

Shutting his eyes on the mute stars, he dozed off. The light breeze that brushed across the surface of the balcony raked gently through his hair, tousling it more than his own fingers had done.

The sweet smell that followed with the air reminded him of home, wherever that place was.

He'd almost fallen asleep when a bright spark appeared out of thin air, crackling in front of his closed eyelids. Heat was accompanying it, growing rapidly in intensity. Swiftly sitting up on the couch, Magnus blinked at the intense flames that disappeared as soon as they'd taken form.

The paper that had landed in his lap was cold to the touch when he picked it up. Despite that the light from inside the living room didn't illuminate this far onto the balcony, Magnus didn't need it to see what the message said. Across the folded note - a page sloppily torn out of a book - three words,
written in bold, sprawling letters, stood out against the printed ink.

IT'S BEEN FOUND

Chapter End Notes

So what do you think? Who is Ibrahim? What is it Magnus wanted him to acquire? What is it that has been found? And exactly how far is Magnus willing to go to fulfil the promise he made Catarina?
Hello, my dudes!

Our tagline/motto/unofficial slogan: "And when I thought things could go well, they go so wrong." - domoiswatchingyou

Okay, I know I'm super late with this but it's partly because this chapter and the next one was originally supposed to be one and the same and then when the word count began running away from me (shocker, I know), I had to separate the two and it was a messy divorce, let me tell you. And partly, it's because the course I'm currently taking, and will be for the rest of the semester (YAY!), is physics. If someone EVER tells you to take physics, please knock them out. It will save you a lot of headaches, along with your will to live.

Also, and I know we're all scaredy-cats here (it's the price we all pay for being in this fandom), but seriously, you can relax. I promise this story will be completed. We can't abandon the ship now! :)

So, with that out of the way, are you as ready as me to get back in there? ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Human**

I'm only human
I'm only, I'm only
I'm only human, human

Maybe I'm foolish, maybe I'm blind
Thinking I can see through this and see what's behind
Got no way to prove it, so maybe I'm lying

But I'm only human after all
I'm only human after all
Don't put your blame on me
Don't put your blame on me

Take a look in the mirror and what do you see
Do you see it clearer, or are you deceived
In what you believe

'Cause I'm only human after all
You're only human after all
Don't put the blame on me
Don't put your blame on me

Some people got the real problems
Some people out of luck
Some people think I can solve them
   Lord heavens above
  I'm only human after all
  I'm only human after all
Don't put the blame on me
Don't put the blame on me

Don't ask my opinion, don't ask me to lie
Then beg for forgiveness, for making you cry
   Making you cry
  'Cause I'm only human after all
  I'm only human after all
Don't put your blame on me
Don't put the blame on me

Oh, some people got the real problems
Some people out of luck
Some people think I can solve them
   Lord heavens above
  I'm only human after all
  I'm only human after all
Don't put the blame on me
Don't put the blame on me

I'm only human, I make mistakes
I'm only human, that's all it takes
   To put the blame on me
  Don't put the blame on me

 'Cause I'm no prophet or Messiah
You should go looking somewhere higher
   I'm only human after all
  I'm only human after all
Don't put the blame on me
Don't put the blame on me

I'm only human, I do what I can
I'm just a man, I do what I can
   Don't put the blame on me
  Don't put your blame on me

The crescent of the moon still hung low on the sky. The stars were still awake as well but everything else had changed.

The thought of sleep was long gone where he sat, waiting for what was to come.

He wasn't sure if it were the wards that let him know that they had arrived, or if their combined footsteps were loud enough to travel through the walls. Removing his thumb from where he was running it over his lip, Magnus brought the shields surrounding the apartment down, unlocking the
front door along with it. It swung inwards soundlessly, but he wasn't left in doubt of whether or not they had crossed the threshold when a voice called out, "Magnus?"

"Living room," he replied.

Dragging his gaze away from the window that was a frame for the starlit night outside, Magnus set it on the entrance that led from the hall.

Izzy was the first to appear in the opening. It was no surprise she was leading the way, since she was the one who had raised her voice to begin with. Behind her, Simon followed closely on her heels, as did Clary.

As the three of them sat down on the couch, without leaning back against the backrest, Alec came into view. Instead of joining the others, despite that there was room for it, he chose to go to the same armchair as the last time they'd all been there. But the change, that the moon and stars were exempt from, was present here as well. Instead of sitting, which was the socially acceptable thing to do, Alec remained on his feet.

And then, shuffling into the living room, Jace arrived.

As soon as Jace became visible, another difference began playing out. It seemed like Alec's choice of splitting from the others had been a strategic move. But even as he stood to the side, and thus putting him farther away from the living room entrance than the three of them were, he still shifted away from it when Jace passed. Clary was openly giving Jace the death stare, which wasn't that unusual, but the strange part was that Izzy was doing the same, only a different version of it. While Clary was blatantly glaring, uncaring that everyone saw, Izzy acted like Jace had suddenly ceased to exist. Her body was twisted away from him, her eyes firmly set on the painting across the room.

Even Simon seemed to have a newfound dislike for Jace, since the smile, the perpetual one that never left his face, had vanished. It was a strange look on him.

It was tangible, the cold that emanated from them; palpable enough that Jace aimed for the long route. Instead of walking past the couch, he circled the coffee table, passing where Magnus sat, stumbling over an ornate footstool until he reached the loveseat. Yet, like his parabaitai, he refused to sit down. Jace even went as far as standing behind the furniture, as if that would be sufficient protection from the evil stare he was on the receiving end of.

When Jace rested his arms on its delicate frame, it seemed like Clary's nostrils flared as she inhaled sharply. Her left eye definitely twitched.

And then it was dead silent.

It was such an uncomfortable situation that it took Magnus significantly more than a moment to find the sentence he was looking for.

"Thank you for coming," he finally said, when the thick quiet kept clutching the room in its tight hold.

Flicking her eyes to him without delay, deliberately skipping past the person to his left, Izzy replied, with the same upbeat tone as always, "Of course." But the smile pulling at her lips was tight. "What's up?"

Magnus glanced between the two still standing. "You two should probably sit."

Wordlessly, Alec sank down on the arm of the armchair, his shoulders squared and tense. His direct
gaze was fixed on Jace that hadn't made an effort to move. Given the way Jace met his stare head-on, they were either having a silent conversation or Alec was blatantly trying to murder Jace without having to actually remove the bow that was strapped to his shoulder, and Jace was actively baiting him to do it.

As the seconds ticked by and Jace didn't change his position, Alec's eyes darkened.

Murder it was.

"Or stand," Magnus amended before Alec succeeded in his quest to mentally strangle Jace. "It's a free world."

Not appreciating the fact that he'd been saved from an intimidating staring contest, Jace snapped, "What's so important that we had to come here at three in the morning?"

The response it garnered was great.

With something close to a growl, Clary buried her face in Simon's shoulder. Izzy, picking up Clary's slack, glared with a heat that could've scorched the sun. Alec's jaw tensed, joining his shoulders in the team effort of making it look like he was suffering a nasty case of tetanus.

Shaking his head, like this had become an annoying regularity in the last three weeks, Simon put an arm around Clary.

"Well?" Jace prompted, ignoring everyone but Magnus. It really seemed like Jace didn't know how to function like a proper human being unless he was punched at least once a day. By the looks of it, Simon might volunteer to do it just to make this tense hostility come to an end.

Magnus gazed past Jace's impatient scowl, finding the window again. There was no perfect way to begin. Every way that it could be said would still prompt the same onslaught of the same questions that he didn't want to answer.

It was pointless to delay it. They were on a schedule after all.

Looking at no one in particular, Magnus said the words that were meant to set it all in motion. "I have a way to kill Valentine. But I'm going to need your help."

It was a bit lacklustre when he was met with deafening silence.

Magnus contemplated on whether or not to add jazz hands, just to let them know that he'd finished speaking, when a very eloquent, "Huh?" broke the quiet.

When he met Clary's enormous eyes, she repeated the brittle sound. "Huh?"

"What do you mean, you have a way?" Izzy cut in. "How? How did you-" She stared at him, her lips parted. "How?"

"It's a long story," he replied. He'd have to tell them the revised version. The true tale was extensive, spanning continents and days that never seemed to reach their foretold end. There would never be a time for that.

"We can kill him?" Jace asked, barely above a whisper. It seemed like the person he was addressing wasn't there in the room with them. Slowly raising his head, his face had lost the frustrated temper that always rested in the lines around his mouth and never failed in making him appear older than he really was. The tension, that had made its permanent residence in Jace's body, suddenly melted
away, like it'd never been. A smile, that for once didn't cause doubt but instead made it abundantly clear that Jace truly was a descendent of the angels, bloomed on his face.

"Actually kill him?" he specified, but it didn't seem like he needed the reassurance.

"We can," Magnus replied anyway. He didn't match Jace's grin that had, by now, taken on impossible proportions, but a corner of his mouth pulled up. "And we will."

Simon clapped his hands together enthusiastically. "That's amazing!" he declared, beaming as he did. "It's everything we've been waiting for!"

When no one joined him in his committed applauding, he slowed down to then come to a complete standstill, his hands suspended in the air, the palms a few inches apart. "Isn't it?"

Clary, already naturally pale, had taken on the pigmentation of a ghost. She seemed in too much of a bewilderment to convince her mouth to open, even less to actually persuade a sound from leaving it.

Izzy wasn't as nonplussed as Clary. Her dark eyes rested on her brother, too intense to be casual. Whatever their wordless conversation was about, it ended when Izzy, without so much as a glance at Simon, clasped one of his hands and put it back in his lap where it belonged. But before she let go, there was the briefest of moments when her fingers tensed around his.

Magnus' unnoticed observation was interrupted when Alec said his name. "Magnus."

Alec sat close enough that even if he'd whispered it, it would've still felt like a shout.

It was jarring, his voice sounding in the apartment again, filling Magnus' head once more. He hadn't heard it since that one single voicemail.

Once he'd stirred the morning after, a new sunrise awakening with him, he'd left the bed - where the only traces of it having been disturbed had been the slight dent in one of the pillows - and stepped onto the balcony. The fresh air had greeted him kindly, the brightening sky welcoming. Leaning over the broad stone railing, he'd savoured the rays of warmth heating his skin.

Magnus had held the phone in between loose fingers, dangling it above the edge.

He knew his weaknesses with an intimate familiarity; had mastered how to tame them along the learning curve. If he'd kept it, he would've listened to that message over and over again, to find something that would never be there. The words had been recorded. They wouldn't change, nor the meaning they conveyed.

No matter how many times he would have fallen for the temptation to hear them, all that would've followed would've been disappointment that, eventually, would have lead him down the path of embarrassing self-pity.

There had been no absolution to find hidden there, regardless of how much he had wished there would be. It had been the right time for him, there, in the newborn sunlight, to finally face the fact that he was alone, and that that was how it was meant to be. Alec wasn't his. Where had the use been in clinging to him like he was?

So Magnus had, for once, followed the wise voice in his head and let the phone slip from his fingertips. When it had fallen, the crash of it not nearly loud enough to reach this high above the ground, it had been the end of everything. The everything that really hadn't been anything. He'd deceived himself, living in fantasies that were as comforting as they were untrue. And if the sun had cut a little too sharply into his eyes once the reality he'd pretended didn't exist had set in, and the
breeze had brushed against his neck just a little bit colder, then that had been a lesson he'd been in sore need of learning.

But knowing that it was over, being aware of the fact, didn't do anything to help him now. It shouldn't matter that Alec was angry at him. Whatever it was that Alec was going to say shouldn't affect him.

Yet, as Magnus turned to face him for the first time since Alec had been standing frozen in a doorway and Magnus had stood across from him in a puddle of blood, he knew it would.

Bracing for it, he met Alec's gaze.

"You have to explain," Alec told him. "How exactly are we supposed to kill Valentine?"

Magnus looked at Alec, probably too long than strictly necessary to catch the words, but it didn't stop him. And there was nothing of what he'd expected to be present there. Alec didn't look angry or upset. His body was still mimicking that of a statue's, but his eyes, directed straight at Magnus, were calm.

Relief he hadn't been aware that some small part of him had wanted washed over him, strong enough that there wasn't a question as to whether or not it showed on his face.

"I'm about to," Magnus promised, the feeling bleeding into his tone as well. He didn't bother trying to conceal what was obvious as he looked forward at the person sitting across from him. "Clary," he said, "do you remember Ragnor Fell?"

Clary, having regained some colour, and basic motor skills with it, replied, "He was the warlock that made the sleeping potion for my mom."

It was such a short recap; not even touching on who he'd been. But that was what he'd been to Clary: a stranger. It would never cease to feel bizarre, hearing how those you'd loved could be summarised in a single sentence.

"Yes, he was," Magnus agreed. He didn't hesitate to say the rest. It wasn't a band-aid to rip off. After two years, he'd removed it enough times that the sting wasn't acute anymore. "Ragnor was a part of my family. A dear friend. And when he was killed by-"

"That shax demon that followed us," Clary filled in quickly. It seemed like it dawned on her; what it all came down to. "He died the same day we visited him."

Ragnor had died, just like everyone else did. A pointless death, in a pointless war created by a madman who would never stop in his efforts to cleanse the world of everything that was innocent and good.

"He wasn't the first person I lost in the fight against Valentine and his crusaders." There were so many by now that he couldn't count them on one hand. The other was of no use either. "But that day, I decided that he would be the last."

As he'd stood in that cold house, that had once belonged to Ragnor, Magnus had known that nothing would ever be the same. It hadn't been meant to go back to normal. Normality, and its virtues, had died with him.

"I know why you think I left." It had fitted nicely: the wedding. The perfect reason for leaving. It just hadn't been the truth. "It's what I wanted you to think." He'd used it with efficiency. Considering the types of conversations he'd had with Jace, Izzy and Alec since he returned, they'd all believed it.
To this moment, even as of this minute, Magnus could see that the last veil of that particular illusion was only now dissipating. Of all the attention that rested on him, there was one person that didn't seem surprised at all. Jace, at last sitting down on the loveseat, just shrugged an unaffected shoulder.

"But the truth is I left New York because I needed to find a way to put a stop to Valentine," Magnus began. "The Clave failed everyone before the Uprising. They could've stopped the Circle years before it took place, but they refused to believe the stories."

There had been many, whispered between hurried lips on streets that became abandoned, or screamed into the night when some poor soul had been caught in their net. Fear, thicker than any smog, had filtered through the city back then, and it had returned once more, this relic of the past, to destroy what it hadn't been able to do all those years ago.

The Clave had denied the horror, rejected the truth because they hadn't believed that the angelic kind could perform such cruelty; as if monsters couldn't clad themselves in wings.

"They let them roam free to slaughter whoever they chose, and then after the Uprising they spent all those years thinking that Valentine had died in the fire that he'd set to the Fairchild manor that killed Jocelyn's parents and supposedly both him and his son. Except, it didn't. Jace lived. As did Valentine. All the while, the Clave believed a narcissist killed himself out of fear for punishment. I've never entertained any kind of faith in their ability to find him and rectify their mistake."

It was likely that there were allies to the Circle within the walls of Idris and even in the heart of Alicante. Valentine might be the symptom but he wasn't the disease. That came from their teachings, their beliefs and their history that was coloured black with the dried blood of each downworlder that had unjustly lost their life to a seraph blade. The Clave was no one's saviour.

"And given their resources, and their subsequent failure, I knew you'd stand even less of a chance."

Alec and Lydia might be running an Institute but they still only had the life experience of their respective ages. How they were supposed to outsmart the crazy was a notion he couldn't grasp.

"There was no way that I knew of that could help me locate him. He has too many eyes and ears, and his followers repay his leadership with blind loyalty." Complete devotion had a higher value than money. It was a priceless currency for those who held it in their hands. It was the only tool necessary to stage a living chess match, and Valentine had an abundance of pawns to play out. "Even if I'd found their hideout, I would've been forced to take on the entire Circle."

Which would've been cathartic, as well as suicidal.

"I had no idea that Valentine had taken the mortal cup until I was already gone." Had he known from the start, he might've stayed, especially considering that Catarina and Raphael hadn't vacated the city. Had he remained, perhaps things would be different.

Ignoring the reminder of what might have been, Magnus pressed on. Reality was what laid in front of him, not lingering wishes of the past.

"I spent months trying to find magic I didn't even know existed; chasing a faint hope." Whispers had led him around the world, stories that pointed him east, only to guide him back west again. He'd tried to clutch a ghost in his hands, and it had proven to be nothing more than a mirage. "I came up empty-handed."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Clary suddenly asked. "We could've helped." Her thin shoulders had fallen some time during his recounting. " Didn't you trust us?"
If it had only been about something as trivial as that.

Uncrossing his legs, leaning back, Magnus cushioned his neck on the leather behind him, closing his eyes on the ceiling above. "It's not about trust. It's never been about trust."

Even if they could've found some way to leave the Institute to accompany him on a wild goose chase that didn't have a set expiration date, the places he'd gone to had been dark enough that no witchlight would've been strong enough to cut apart the shadows that thrived there. It hadn't been travels suited for any Nephilim.

But those reasons had been insignificant compared to the consequences that the journey had harvested; what he'd deep down dreaded would be the cost of it.

"Do you think the attack on Pandemonium was random?" he asked into the air, raising a blind hand only to then let it fall back on the armrest. "That twenty Circle members just happened to be strolling by?"

He lifted his head, opening his eyes again. "It's not a coincidence that Catarina Loss is dead."

And there it was. The ugliest truth of them all. Out, in the open. He might as well had taken that blade to her back himself, torn her open with his own hands, because that was what he'd brought on her. If he hadn't pursued it, if he'd let it go, she'd still be alive.

What little colour that had returned to Clary's cheeks had vanished once more. All of them were quiet, their expressions ranging from serious to sombre.

Alec was the first to say something.

"So Valentine knew that you were trying to find a way to defeat him," he concluded. "How long have you known that he's after you?"

"I wasn't sure until they attacked us in the alley," Magnus replied, "but he's been hunting me ever since I came back, I think. I just missed the signs."

The honest answer brought a new expression to Alec's face, as if things - pieces of an unsolvable puzzle - were finally beginning to fall into place.

"Catarina wasn't aware of what I was trying to do. She suspected my trip hadn't been recreational, but that was the extent of it. And the Circle flayed her anyway." It was an example made in blood, and those were most effective for a reason. Seeing them grasp what was at stake here, Magnus knew they understood enough. "By telling you, I would've put you all in the line of fire." He directed himself at Clary as he continued. "You'll have to excuse me, Biscuit, if I didn't want that on my conscience."

It was already heavy enough without having to add five lives to it.

"But it doesn't make any sense," Izzy decided. Her heels clicked against the floorboards when she changed position on the couch. "Why would Valentine go after you if you didn't find anything?"

"I didn't," Magnus concurred, but that wasn't the end of the story. "For fifteen months. Then, almost eight months ago, I received confirmation that what I'd been searching for did indeed exist. But since my talents have never been in finding that which is lost, I outsourced the job to a contact of mine and I returned home, to prepare for the day that it would be found. And a few hours ago, it was."

The lengthy tale had barely time to come to a close before Jace raised his voice. "What is it?"
"An ancient spell," Magnus replied.

"And that's it?" Jace questioned. "We do the spell and he's dead? Just like that?"

"That's the idea."

Shaking his head, as if he had a hard time believing it, Jace grimly said, "It sounds too easy."

The hope, that had been gleaming in his eyes, was fading quickly alongside the grin that had once softened his harsh features. The rest of them seemed conflicted as well, the doubt sneaking its way into the warm living room when out of all of them, Jace was the one to hesitate.

Magnus looked at them, and said, "Whatever else he might be, Valentine is a Shadowhunter, just like you all are, except Simon. He's not some kind of god. Valentine is mortal. That means he can be killed."

Valentine was more monster than man. But vital blood was flowing through his ageing veins and his battered body was held up by a fragile heart. Would he have it ripped out of his chest, he'd succumb, like all of his victims had before him.

"But I still don't get it," Izzy declared. "Why did you come back at all?" She tipped her head to the side, the mass of ebony hair cascading into her lap. "You didn't tell us what you were doing because you were cautious, knowing that Valentine might find out somehow. Then why not stay away until now, when the spell was found?"

Magnus didn't hesitate. This was the only chance they would ever have. "Because this is where Jace is."

Izzy's eyebrows rose while Simon's sank.

"Uhm," Simon hummed, raising a stick-straight arm into the air like they were sitting in a classroom, "am I the only one missing something here?"

"It's dark magic," Magnus explained, catching how Alec stilled in the corner of his eye. "Black magic. Those kinds of spells always demands a sacrifice of some kind. This one requires blood to work. Valentine's, to be precise."

There was a poetic justice at play here, one the others were unaware of. Had he tried performing this spell on any other Nephilim, it wouldn't have injured them. But in his greed and in his envy of the abilities he couldn't possess, Valentine had gone too far. The sick experiments he'd performed hadn't stopped at his prisoners. He'd tasted the blood of demons, injected the poison into his own veins, and once he'd done so, it had sealed his fate.

A small part of him was now, and would forever be, tainted.

It was an ancient spell, written in a time when Shadowhunters had yet to exist. It'd been created to eradicate demons, not angels.

It was to their great fortune that it would do just that.

Simon's confused frown was exchanged for one of understanding when Magnus finished the sentence.

"Or someone who shares it." Magnus glanced to his left where Jace sat, looking back at him. "Jace is his son."
"Why not me?" Clary interjected, before anyone else had a chance to open their mouth. "Valentine's my-" She stopped for barely a moment before she, squaring her shoulders, started over. "Valentine is my father too."

"Because Jace has Alexander." Magnus made a motion between the two of them, creating an extremely easy version of 'connect the dots'. "Their bond makes him stronger. It's safer that way."

And with that answer, as suddenly as it had come and gone, Jace's grin reappeared. But this time it stuck, even as he stood from his seat. There was something behind it, stronger than hope.

As if he couldn't stand still, his legs too jittery to allow him to, Jace began wandering around the room, the light of his smile rivalling that of the stars outside. "What do we need to do?"

Jace had posed it as a question, but it was clear that whatever Magnus' answer would be, he'd agree. From his posture, relaxed in a way Magnus had never seen it, to his elated expression, Jace had decided. He believed in it.

Magnus returned his smile. "We have to go to the convergence in Alaska."

Jace was nodding before he'd even finished speaking.

"What's a convergence?" Simon mumbled to Izzy who put a hand over his mouth.

"There's a convergence there?" she asked impatiently, ignoring Simon's muted protest.

"It's hidden from Nephilims," Magnus answered her at the same time Simon broke free from her hold.

"What is a convergence?" he repeated, louder this time.

"Magic hot spot," Izzy dismissed him with quickly as she turned what little of her attention that hadn't already been directed that way, forward, inclining her body towards Jace and Magnus. The corners of her mouth had pulled up at some point and now her lips were parting slowly, showing off just how wide her cheeks could stretch. "What do you need us to do?"

The doubt, and the place it had claimed, was now, in a swift takeover, replaced by exhilaration. Izzy seemed ready to bolt off the couch at a moment's notice; Clary as well. Simon's signature grin was back, spreading with even more enthusiasm than usual if that was physically possible.

"It draws all kinds of energy," Magnus said, keeping on topic. "Both good and the other variety. We're safer in a bigger group."

Tapping her mud-encrusted sneakers, that at one point in time must've been yellow, against the floor, Clary announced eagerly, "We can go get the weapons from the Institute." Her bright eyes turned to where Jace stood and her smile only widened. "Right, Jace?"

Jace blinked at her. "Yeah," he said, his voice faltering for a moment before it found strength. But when it did, he finished the sentence with the same certainty that lived in the way she was looking at him. "Yeah," he grinned, "we can, Clary."

"What's the catch?"

The severe voice, that had so far been silent, cut through the excitement until it laid in tatters on the floor. In all the elation, everyone had forgotten that there weren't five people in the room.
There were six.

They all turned to look at Alec, but his eyes were riveted on Magnus; unmoving. Assessing. "Why do we have to go to a convergence?" At some point, when they hadn't been paying attention, he'd stood up. Now, he towered above them all. "Why can't we do the spell here?"

"It's not everyday magic, Alexander," Magnus replied. "It's going to be draining. The convergence will combat that."

Alec's wariness seemed to grow by every passing second, the arms he'd folded over his chest taking on more and more of the same characteristics that sculptures possessed. "How dangerous is this going to be?"

Standing there, waiting, Alec was clearly expecting an answer. So were the rest of them.

Magnus turned towards the other side of the room.

He looked at Jace, and only at Jace, when he said, "It might kill you."

Jace didn't avert his eyes, didn't flinch away from the choice even as they both could hear someone's breath catch, and someone else faintly whisper, "What did he just say?"

Facing Magnus, and no one else, Jace asked, "What are my chances?"

"At best?"

Jace nodded.

"Fifty-fifty."

This time someone drew a loud breath that was cut off abruptly.

Jace's eyes, for one moment, flicked past Magnus' shoulder at the person standing there before it returned to meet Magnus' own.

"And Alec?" he said, his gaze hard.

It demanded the full truth and Magnus obliged. "It doesn't work like that." Their connection wasn't bodily linked. Alec would be safe. "He won't be hurt."

"Say it's the wrong fifty percent; say I don't make it." Jace searched his face. "Will Valentine still die?"

"Yes," Magnus told him without an ounce of doubt. "Whatever happens, he'll die."

Jace kept scrutinising him for a moment longer, but when Magnus' expression didn't change, he stopped.

Raising an eyebrow, Jace announced, "Yeah," a cocky smile lifting his mouth. "I'm in."

Differing variations of the word 'no' rang up in a chorus as if on cue.

"No! Absolutely not!" Izzy protested. "That's not happening. At all."

Jace turned to her. "A hundred percent success rate? That's something we have to bet on, Iz."
"And if you die?" she argued pointedly, shooting to her feet. "What then, genius?"

"That's-"

Before Jace could complete his sentence, Alec, who'd either levitated, or - as he was prone to do - moved with the speed of light, was suddenly by his side, with lips that seemed too tense to move. But the way Alec looked down at him, said enough. It seemed not just possible, but increasingly probable, as the seconds ticked by and Alec's expression only worsened, that the spell wouldn't be what killed Jace.

Through teeth that were too gritted to actually pronounce the words correctly, Alec ground out, "Have you gone completely insane?"

"Please," Clary spat from where she stood beside Izzy, her face lost of any light. "Punch him."

"You know we have to do it," Jace shot back. "It's our job."

Izzy showed off her perfect set of teeth again, but this time it was to bare them. "You know, I'm with Clary on this," she growled. "If you don't punch him, Alec, I will."

"You're not thinking rationally-" Jace tried, but Alec spoke louder.

"We aren't thinking?" he snarled. "We?!"

"Yes, you!" Jace snapped, effectively causing the argument, that had been smouldering until now, to catch flames in the short span of 1.2 seconds.

It was impressive how only four people could create such deafening sounds when they were yelling back and forth.

Magnus rose from the armchair, leaving Jace to deal with his siblings as he moved over to the bookcase located farther away.

Hopefully, Jace wouldn't have to be transported on a gurney to Alaska after they were done with him.

Occupying himself with reading the titles printed on the spines, Magnus tried to ignore the shouting that had now reached a decibel level that only dogs could hear, courtesy of Clary.

He glanced up when he felt someone join him.

"You don't want to yell at him?" Magnus asked Simon, looking over his shoulder a moment to catch how Jace was currently trying to fight on three fronts. It was an even battle. "I'm sure he'd appreciate the break."

Simon's profile was one of concentration. His fingers ran up the spine of a volume named 'Systema Naturae', stopping at the top of it. He pulled half of it out, only to push it back into place again.

"You don't have a parabaitai," Simon said, without taking his focus off the books that he didn't seem particularly interested in.

Magnus arched an eyebrow.

"Has it taken you this long to realise I'm not a Shadowhunter?" he questioned. "The magic didn't tip you off?"
Simon shook his head, but the movement was jerky.

"You don't have an extra ..." Simon waved his hand in the air, presumably to catch the word he was on the hunt for, "battery," he settled on, "or whatever Alec is supposed to be to Jace. If Jace has a fifty-fifty chance, how bad are your odds?"

Magnus resumed his previous activity, giving his attention back to the bookcase.

"I'm considerably older and much stronger than Jace," he replied simply.

In the corner of his eye, Simon turned swiftly towards him, all badly executed pretence gone. "What does that mean?"

Every volume arranged perfectly before him, he knew. Their history and their stories; the reasons why they'd been placed here to begin with and not in the library. Some of them were as old as himself, others almost new.

It was a physical reminder, this collection of memories, of the years gone by. There might have been happier times, or harder than now, but regardless the ease or struggle, they'd passed too.

It was a comforting thought.

"It means that my decisions aren't yours to question, Simon."

Neither of them had noticed the silence that their conversation had caused until it broke.

"Answer the question, Magnus," Izzy demanded, sudden enough that Simon jumped by his side.

Magnus turned around, Simon mimicking him.

All of them, including Jace, were looking at him.

Clary's face was redder than her hair, her cheeks flaming in every nuance in between scarlet and maroon. Izzy's whole posture was stiff, her chest barely rising. The searching look had returned to Jace's eyes with something new, close to haunting, within it. Jace seemed afraid suddenly, an expression that he'd never worn before. Close by, Alec was standing very still, his arms crossed again. The knuckles on his right hand were starkly white.

Magnus met Izzy's eyes. "That's not for you to worry about."

As a look of unrestrained relief overtook Jace's features, wiping away the fear as if it'd never been there, Clary covered her face with her hands and whispered, "Oh, my god."

"By the Angel," Izzy groaned, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"Have you lost your mind?!" Alec cursed, violently enough to cause Simon, who was standing several feet away from him, to jump again. Gesturing between Magnus and Jace, Alec's voice swiftly took on the quality of a talented tenor. He was so loud that everyone, from Simon, to the poor couple living in the apartment below, to the closest surrounding building, could hear him.

"COLLECTIVELY?!!"

"WHILE THAT SOUNDS GREAT," Simon shouted over Alec's bellowing, "HOW ABOUT PLAN B?!"

"There's no other plan," Jace said firmly, straightening his back when Alec's furious attention landed on just him. "This is the plan. So get behind it."
"I'm not doing it," Alec declared. He stared Jace down with barely checked rage. "You need me and there is no way in hell I'm helping you."

Had Magnus given it a brief consideration, an ounce of thought, he would've known better. But he was tired of waging a war against a world that worked against him at every turn. He didn't want to have to fight Alec too. Not now, when they were so close to ending it, once and for all.

The words slipped out before he had the chance to stop them. "You promised me a favour."

Since Alec was facing Jace on the opposite side of the living room, his back was to Magnus. But even with that obstacle, Magnus could pinpoint the exact moment Alec registered what he'd said.

If Alec had been tense before, it was nothing compared to what was happening now. His shoulders seemed to be moulded out of stone in an instance, the muscles beneath the leather jacket surpassing rigid in the blink of an eye.

He turned around slowly, but the extra second it provided him with hadn't helped Alec school his expression. It looked like he'd been slapped.

"This?" he questioned bemusedly, as if he couldn't believe what he'd heard. He searched Magnus' eyes, and when Magnus didn't look away, when he didn't deny it, Alec's expression changed.

The anger that Magnus had been expecting earlier, that he'd been prepared for then, was suddenly and clearly twisting Alec's features. But there was much more than mere simple anger showing on Alec's face. There was hurt there, mixed in with the rage and fury, before it was overtaken by betrayal, and then that was all there was.

A bleeding betrayal.

"You planned this?"

Magnus met his burning gaze without flinching away from the way the words were meant to cut.

It was enough of a reply to make it clear.

Alec looked at him, stared at him, like he'd never seen him before. And perhaps he hadn't.

Maybe Alec understood now why he couldn't have called him back to return the favour, to ask Alec to leave the city, like Alec had asked him.

He'd needed him to stay.

Alec didn't avert his eyes as he said, in a voice devoid of any emotion, "I'm not doing it."

"Can we do it alone?" Jace asked, from somewhere Magnus couldn't see.

All he saw was Alec, and how Alec was looking back at him.

"Yes," Magnus said.

"But it's safer with them?"

"Yes," Magnus answered again, and Alec turned away from him.

Alec walked over to one of the windows, showing all of them his back. What little of his profile that
was visible was shrouded in the darkness that the night cast through the glass panes that such a sliver of the moon couldn't illuminate.

"This is happening. I'm willing to do this," Jace said, addressing the entire room. "So is Magnus. The only difference is that without all of you it's going to be more dangerous. If you want us to be safe, then you'll have to come with us. It's that simple."

It was forthright, harsh and manipulative but it really was simple.

Jace was ready to do what needed to be done. The only question that remained was if they would be forced to do it alone or not.

The reply to that came, in all of its glory, in the form of shattering porcelain.

Jace ducked the next cup that was launched at his head as Clary roared, "What!" She threw a saucer. "Is!" A pair of spoons came flying next, followed by the second saucer. "Wrong!" A sugar bowl, tea kettle and a pair of sugar-tongs whooshed through the air. "With!" Clary picked up the silver tray she'd cleaned out and heaved it in his direction. "You!"

Out of ammunition, but clearly not out of anger, she seized the last object left on the pedestal table. The antique vase was at least half her size and heavy enough to maim a small elephant. How Clary even got it off the tabletop, and then somehow raised over her head, was a true mystery.

"Hey, hey, Clary!" Simon shouted as he lunged forward, snatching it from her hands just as she was about to send it Jace's way. But it didn't deter her. It didn't seem like Clary even noticed how Simon almost toppled over with the sudden weight in his arms.

Her hands still moved as if she was holding the vase in between her trembling palms, ready to launch it at a moment's notice, when she cried, "Wake up, Jace! This isn't a game anymore!"

Jace, who'd only been the victim of the sugar-tongs that had harmlessly struck his thigh before they'd fallen to the floor with a clink, stood calmly before her with a composed expression, hands hanging relaxed by his sides. "It's not a game, Clary." His voice was more serious than it'd ever been. "It's never been."

"Oh, shut up!" Clary demanded, her eyes as wild as her gestures when she spat, "We've given you time and the only thing it's done is making you worse. You've been acting like a maniac for two years and we didn't say anything because apparently your life is the only one that sucks and no one else's." Clary took a step forward, placing herself right in his personal space. "Well, that's over," she announced. "For once, in your sad, miserable existence, stop being so goddamn selfish and think about anyone else for a change. You're not the only one who's lost things, Jace. But you don't see the rest of us going insane."

Jace stared down at her and for a brief moment, a mere flickering of a moment, it looked like he was about to kiss her. But it passed as Clary backed away from him. "I'm not going to help you die. The fact that you even asked is ..." Her eyes flicked to Magnus and she shook her head harshly. "We're not helping you."

"What do you need us to do?" Izzy asked.

Clary's head swivelled towards where Izzy sat on the arm of the armchair, occupying the spot her brother had claimed earlier. Her dress had ridden up high on her thighs as her feet dangled an inch above the floor and her shoulders had dropped, like there was an invisible force pushing them down; yet her expression was resolute.
"Izzy?" Clary said, her lips parting in shock.

Izzy pushed her hair back and looked at Magnus. "Well, Magnus?"

"Iz!" Clary exclaimed.

Izzy snapped her eyes to Clary.

"We don't have a choice, Clary!" Izzy bit back, sharp and sudden. She turned her gaze back on Magnus with determination. "How do you want to do this, Magnus?"

Behind her, Clary sank down on the couch beside Simon. But this time, Simon didn't offer her a shoulder to cry on and she leaned away from him, clasping a tight hand over her eyes.

"I don't have the spell in my possession yet," Magnus told Izzy. "Ibrahim, my contact, does. I'm going to go see him while you go to the Institute and get the weapons you need. We'll meet back here."

"I'm coming with you," Alec said, addressing the window more than Magnus.

"Ibrahim's neurotic," Magnus protested, "not a nutjob. I don't need the company."

"Simon and Jace too," Alec continued, as if Magnus hadn't spoken at all.

"Why are we going with you?" Simon questioned while Izzy extended a hand to him to pull him up on his feet.

"Because you draw unwanted attention, and I don't trust Clary with Jace," Alec explained when he turned around and faced them. He was standing in Magnus' direction when he finished by saying, "She might kill him before Magnus gets to."

The words were freezing and his eyes ten degrees below.

"Fine," Magnus relented. "Your choice."

"Thank you. I'm so incredibly grateful," Alec replied bitingy before he stalked over to where Izzy was speaking quietly with Simon.

Magnus' gaze didn't linger long on Alec's back. It dropped off him automatically when Magnus headed in the opposite direction. Unnoticed, he disappeared into the library.

It wasn't far from the living room it was adjoined with, but the brick walls muted the peaks of the rising and falling voices outside, transforming them into a quiet murmur in the background that was easily ignored.

The distant city lights, glowing like the embers of a burnt out fire, came through the arched window that took up one of the walls in its entirety. It provided enough light that there was no need to turn on the multitude of lamps that were littered around the library; on top of the bookshelves, or nestled in one the corners. Despite the mess, that had always been a permanent resident in this particular room, it was easy to move around. The chaos, that contributed to the homelike atmosphere, was one of control.

Magnus made his way over to the desk that was pushed against the wall to the left. It was swamped by papers and rows of jars filled with everything from dried herbs to inhuman teeth. Books, on the verge of tipping off the edge, framed the desktop. Amidst the disorder, the vial he was looking for
stood out, despite its small size.

As he picked it up, he ran a finger over the cold glass. Behind it, the lilac liquid bubbled hotly, as if it had a source of heat undetectable by human senses.

The potion was worth more than its weight in gold. It could buy more than diamonds.

It was payment for a life.

Why Ibrahim had requested it, in exchange for his expertise, he hadn't explained. Ibrahim had stated his price and Magnus had obliged.

It hadn't laid in his interests to know about affairs that didn't concern him.

Potions, like this one, were uncommon. It wasn't merely because of the rareness of the ingredients; mostly, it was owed to the fact that there were only a handful that could brew them to begin with, even fewer that could do it correctly.

Spells, in all of their glory, were unmatched in intensity. But potions, liquid magic, could conquer the world and raise hell in the wake.

Magnus studied the vial resting in his palm for a moment, his grip loosening for no more than a split second.

They were desired to provide what money couldn't buy; love, luck or bravery. It was a lucrative business, granting people their most secret wishes, regardless of whether they deserved it or not.

It was used for less noble causes every day.

So why should he care who Ibrahim was going to sell it to?

He squeezed the glass in his hand but it was still cold to the touch.

There was always going to be people who wanted things they had no right to; things that didn't rightfully belong to them. Who was he to stop it?

Magnus put the vial in the inner pocket of his sleek jacket and, burying the last thought of some distant concern that wasn't his burden to bear anymore, he pulled the zipper back up.

He had just turned back around, to head into the living room again, when a small figure stepped over the threshold.

"Magnus," Clary said as she closed the door behind her. Letting go of the handle, she turned towards him, her feet firmly placed in front of the only exit. "We can't do this. Jace isn't in his right mind, you know that. We can call it off. We can call it off right now."

Clary's expression was set stubbornly but her fingers, resting on her hips, were anxiously rubbing a hole in the jeans she was wearing.

"Do you remember," she continued, unable to be dissuaded, "what you said to me in that awful coffee shop? That I didn't have to atone for Valentine's sins?" Clary lifted her eyes to his and smiled as if her life depended on it. "You were right. Valentine is the Clave's doing; not ours. I don't have to fight him. Jace doesn't. Neither do you. We can go. We can leave all of this behind. It's not too late."

Her whole being seemed filled with that conviction. The belief that there was still a choice left to make in all of this.
He didn't know how to tell her that there wasn't.

"I'm sorry, Biscuit," he said, and meant it, as much as he was able to, "but it's been decided."

Leaving the desk behind, Magnus passed the piles of books that lined his way back to the door and paused in front of Clary.

She didn't step to the side.

Shaking her head, pressing her lips together as if she was about to cry, Clary conquered the steps between them and reached out for him. Her hands landed on his chest before they slipped up his neck, not stopping until they grasped the high jacket collar.

"Magnus," Clary whispered, barely loud enough to be heard, "I'm so sorry that you lost people you loved. I'm so incredibly sorry that that happened to you, and if I knew of a way to give them back to you, I would." The grip her fingers had on him tightened. "But this isn't going to bring them back." She searched his eyes, her own glossy. "Okay?" she asked, as if she couldn't feel how he'd turned to ice beneath her touch. "They're gone, and nothing is ever going to change that. The only thing this plan will give us is two more people to bury. Where is the point in that?"

With hands that were as steady as they were stiff, Magnus took ahold of Clary's wrists and removed her palms from where they rested just below his jaw. "I understand if this is too hard for you," he said as he released her.

Her hands didn't fall down by her sides again. Clary held them up in mid-air, as if she was standing ready for a fight.

"But then you need to stay here," Magnus continued, without feeling the burn of anger. Instead there was a coldness where the heat of turmoil should've been. "If you're coming with us, then you have to control your emotions. They're not an asset to anyone."

"But it's wrong," she protested immediately. "All of this is wrong. We can't do this." She stared up at him. "You can't do this!"

"That's enough, Clary," Magnus replied sharply. "You can either stay home or come with us, the choice is yours, but the decision has been made. Your opinions on the subject aren't wanted."

Magnus rounded her. His palm was on the handle, grasping the metal it was made from, when Clary's voice rang out.

"If he dies, Magnus," she said, "his blood will be on your hands. I hope you can live with that."

Pushing the door open, leaving her behind, Magnus replied, without looking back, "I've lived with worse."

As he walked back, alone, into the living room, he saw Izzy busy braiding her long hair away from her face. A few feet away from where she was standing, Simon was moving his head from side to side, humming the melody to a song only he could hear.

Jace, having resumed his place on the loveseat, had his neck tilted back and eyes closed.

From the way Magnus had come, through the entryway that separated the living room from the library, he could see three people clearly.

Three; not four.
Barely turning his head, just enough to acknowledge his presence, Magnus caught Alec leaning against the wall. The same wall that was shared between the two rooms.

There was no reason to believe that he hadn't heard everything.

Alec still had his arms folded across his chest as he looked at Magnus, his expression carved in stone.

Setting his gaze forward again, Magnus moved over to where the loveseat was until a pair of legs, resting on top of the coffee table, effectively hindered him from getting past it. With the right amount of civility, Magnus kicked Jace's feet off the table.

The sudden grunt it caused Jace to let out, at the same time his eyes opened, made Simon abruptly cease humming.

Sometimes, violence really was the answer.

"You ready?" Magnus asked, and without waiting for the reply, he offered Jace his hand.

The wind, when it didn't struck them violently in the face, bit at whatever exposed skin there was to nibble on.

All of them, except Simon, shivered where they stood with their feet and part of their legs buried in the wet spread of snow.

The portal that had taken them to their destination disappeared behind them as Jace said, while he shifted his feet to keep the warmth from slipping away, "It's spring."

His tone made it sound like an accusation.

"Welcome to Siberia," Magnus announced as he passed Jace who hadn't made an effort to move yet. Beginning to plough a track through the white blanket that covered the world in these parts, Magnus raised his voice above the howling wind when he didn't hear them follow. "Ibrahim's home is just above the hill. In case you don't want to freeze to death, I'd recommend you start walking."

It didn't take them long to catch up.

When an especially vicious gust of wind decided to run its fingers through their hair, only to then yank hard at the roots, Jace muttered, "I thought you were supposed to be this great, almighty warlock."

Through the snowfall that made their line of sight restricted, to say the least, Magnus shot him a glance from the side.

"You couldn't have portaled us into his house?" Jace clarified, with cheeks that were rosy from the cold.

"No," Magnus explained, "because I have manners. A concept that's foreign to you, I have no doubt."

Jace didn't respond in more than what was either a shrug or an involuntary shiver.

"Hey," Simon said, squinting his eyes. "What's that?"

He pointed at the enormous silhouette towering before them that would, in a short while, embrace
them in its encompassing shadow. It was the exact same thing that they'd been heading towards this entire time.

It was the only form around that wasn't tree-shaped.

"Ibrahim's home," Magnus replied, stating the obvious.

"He lives in a castle?" Simon questioned bemusedly.

Magnus sent him a raised brow. "He's a warlock." It wasn't a well-kept secret that they tended to live extravagantly. "Where did you think he lived? An igloo?"

"That would've been so much cooler," Simon smiled as he tilted his head back a little, trying to take in the entirety of the castle and failing spectacularly. In deep thought, contemplating this brand new information, Simon's bottom lip began protruding. It had reached a pout when he finally said, "You're sure it's the right place? I can't see any lights on."

"Oh, kill me now," Jace mumbled as he sped up. He moved remarkably quickly for someone who looked like they'd lost feeling in important extremities.

"Jace, wait!" Simon shouted, bounding after him.

Jace's pace seemed to increase, but at the growing distance, and the ever-increasing masses of falling snow, it was hard to tell.

In Simon's and Jace's absence, it became quiet, apart from the shifting wind and the sounds of boots crunching through the top layer of icy crust to reach what laid beneath. The cold was still present, but it wasn't that much of a problem. In case he felt a little chilly, Magnus could always warm himself on the burning holes Alec was staring into the side of his face. Those could keep him warm and toasty for a century to come.

Magnus could feel the judgement that was radiating at him from Alec's direction. It'd been present even before they'd left the apartment and he'd steadfastly ignored it. And it had proved to be a winning strategy so far. Alec still hadn't said a word.

Yet, as the seconds ticked by, a creeping feeling of the calm before the storm began settling around him. It was a storm Magnus was hellbent on avoiding.

Keeping his gaze strictly forward, he didn't so much as breathe in Alec's direction.

Maybe the tactic of ignoring a ticking bomb wasn't the most thought-out approach.

"What was the plan?" Alec asked when he broke the silence.

His tone left something to desire in terms of warmth.

"You've heard it," Magnus answered without stopping, without looking his way. "Listen," he carried on. "However Valentine found out about what I was doing, he might still have that way. The more we delay, the more dangerous it'll be for everyone. So if you want to fight with someone," he gestured vaguely ahead of them, "Jace is right up there somewhere."

He wasn't going to argue with Alec about this. They never saw eye to eye to begin with and all it ever lead to was shouting. Today of all days, they didn't have the time to spare for some unscheduled yelling.
Alec continued as if he hadn't heard a word of what he'd just said.

"What was the plan?" he repeated, like a parrot that hadn't been taught what the word 'no' meant. "And try it without the lie this time."

"You were right in the room, Alexander," Magnus pointed out. "You know the plan. I'm not doing this with you anymore."

He didn't try to walk faster to avoid a confrontation. There wasn't going to be one.

Alec evidently disagreed with that.

"Well, sucks to be you then," he declared, "because we are doing this, whether you like it or not."

Alec's voice challenged the frostiness of the arctic air swirling around them when he continued. "Tell me about the plan you had before you decided that the suicidal route was the way to go."

Magnus drew a deep, heavy breath before he asked, "What do you mean?"

"I mean," Alec snapped, "that I buy that you'd gamble with your life. But someone else's? You wouldn't do that to anyone; not even Jace. Which means you came back with another plan. One that didn't involve getting you both killed."

The flurries of snow made the landscape surrounding them melt together into a monochromatic canvas each way they turned their heads. It made it easy to distinguish Alec's dark silhouette sticking to Magnus' side, like a very tall, and a very argumentative, shadow.

"You asked me for that promise long before Catarina died," Alec reminded him. "So what was the real plan?"

Magnus shook his head, causing more of his damp hair to fall into his eyes. "Why does that matter?"

The confirmation that his deductive skills had been proved right didn't seem to suffice Alec. If anything, it made his obvious frustrations kick up a notch.

"Because it does!" he said, snapping once again. "Why can't we use that one instead?"

Magnus forced his feet, that had long ago lost any sense of feeling, to keep going. "Because I'm not planning on sticking around and wait for the Circle to come find me," he said reasonably. "I'm ending it before they can get that chance."

There was no worth in trying to go back to a different time when there was no possible way to do that. Circumstances changed. Paths, that you'd never meant to travel, was suddenly yours to walk alone. Things never went how they were supposed to. That was life, and to be able to continue living it, it demanded adaption in payment.

It was the price everyone had to pay eventually.

"There's no time for second thoughts."

The only way left now was to go forward and forget the fantasies of what might've been.

"So, logically," Alec said, and that word had never sounded more sarcastic, "you decided to spare them the trouble of trying to kill you and just do the job yourself. That's a great idea, Magnus. Now they don't even have to lift a finger."

"I'm not going to die," Magnus sighed, "but by all means keep being overdramatic. You and Clary
can start a club. You're both naturals."

"Really?" Alec asked, without any sincerity. "You're not?" He made a sound that either could've been a laugh, or the curse that the rushing wind made it sound like. "The funny thing is, I don't believe you. You avoided the question earlier, which means you lied. Again. Just like you lied straight to my face when you said you were just going to torture him for information. You knew you were going to kill him all along."

Nothing Alec had said so far had affected Magnus, other than providing him with yet more incentive not to engage with him. The reasons why anything Alec said should impact him, in any way, were gone. But these words, that weren't more poignant than any of those spoken before them, changed that.

Taking his eyes off the magnificent towers that proudly made up the frame of the gatehouse that they were soon to reach, Magnus glanced in Alec's direction. His dark hair was sprinkled with white and his cheeks were splattered in red. It that was because of the cold or his current mood was impossible to say.

"You're wondering how I know," Alec noted. "You have a tell, Magnus, when you lie."

Magnus, unconsciously lengthening his steps into a stride, asked, "So what if I did?"

Where laid the difference, apart from refraining from mentioning it to Alec beforehand, in planning to kill that man, or deciding to kill him once the opportunity had presented itself down in the cell? The end result was the same.

"He deserved much worse than what I did to him." If there'd been such a thing as justice, that Shadowhunter would be burning in the hell that Nephilims never went to. "If you want me to be sorry for it, I suggest you lower your expectations, Alexander."

Alec, with his unfairly long legs, easily kept up with him. "Okay. How did it make you feel, ripping off his face?" Alec said crudely, as if it was supposed to be provocative, rather than true.

To him, it probably was.

Magnus knew he couldn't give that the proper response if he wanted to keep the fight, that Alec was so badly trying to pick, at bay. And he couldn't outwalk Alec. Magnus was adamantly refusing to try and run from him, on principle. That only left one alternative: ignore.

Pretending that Alec didn't exist, though it was difficult since Alec made up a hundred percent of the people in the immediate area, Magnus kept his head down and his lips sealed.

"You can't answer," Alec said, once he realised that he wasn't going to get a reply.

"I choose not to," Magnus told him. He could vividly imagine what Alec's expression would be if he explained that, as far as sins went, he'd broken the fifth commandment enough times that no amount of 'Hail Marys' could suffice. He had done significantly worse things than executed the guilty. "It's wildly different."

"Or maybe you know your act isn't that believable anymore."

"It's not an act. And if you're trying to provoke me," Magnus said calmly, "it's not going to work. I'm not mad at you."
He wasn't upset anymore that Alec had tried to stop him. That feeling, with all of its barbs and painful edges, had been filed down into harmless understanding. The failed attempt from Alec's side to help him had been grossly misguided, of course, but that was Alec's wheelhouse after all.

If Alec was happy or sad about that fact, it didn't show on his face.

As they finally reached some cover, passing beneath the raised portcullis that rattled in the gusts of wind where it hung above them from rusty chains, Alec had decided how he felt about it. "That's too bad. Because there aren't words to describe exactly how angry I am with you."

The stone bridge, that connected the towers standing guard by the castle's main gate, was wide enough that the shadow still cloaked them, even as they were no longer protected beneath the ceiling it created. Alec's features were hidden in the temporary gloom and it suited Magnus just fine. He didn't need a visual aid to know how Alec looked when he was furious.

"Yes," Magnus acknowledged, "I kind of figured that, given all the staring." Subtlety, and its delicate arts, had never been one of Alec's strengths. "So why don't you contemplate that lovely hatred to yourself and we can just walk in silence so that we get inside sometime today; preferably before one of us get frostbites."

That shouldn't be as impossible as it sounded. They'd just passed the entrance. That only left the expansive courtyard to cross before they'd reach the front doors. By now, the fuzzy contours of things, pillars tall as trees and gargoyles, misshapen by the years gone by, were slowly emerging into visibility. The crisp surface stretching out before them, already disturbed by the temperamental weather, threw the powdery snow across the fresh tracks that had been made by two sets of footprints. If Simon and Jace weren't inside in the warmth already, they had to be any moment now.

"You think that's how this works?" Alec asked, louder than he'd been in a while. "You do something like this, and I'll just let you?"

It didn't feel like the optimal time to point out to Alec that he didn't have a say in this. In that moment, the right thing to tell him was some far-off illusion that didn't exist to begin with. Whatever Magnus said would undoubtedly be the wrong thing.

Magnus refocused on moving his feet. "Well," he said under his breath, "one can hope."

Fingers, that clearly weren't as numb as his own, wrapped tightly around his arm. The grip was strong enough that he didn't have much choice but to stop when Alec held him back.

With stiff motions, Alec put himself in front of him, blocking the straight path into warmth and cover.

Patiently waiting for him to move out of the way, instead of trying to go around him, Magnus said, "What is it now, Alexander?"

Alec let him go abruptly, as if it hurt to touch him. "That's not how it works."

The words could've implied that it was some kind of declaration of affection, that Alec saw them as something much more than for what they actually were: just two people who'd happened, through the sheer fickleness of life, to have ended up at the same place at the same time. However, they were contradicted by the tone he used.

It suggested it was a threat.

Magnus looked at Alec through the snowfall that turned everything except him into a blurred out outline. "Everything will go according to the plan. It's all over soon. You really don't have to
worry about it. Okay?"

"That's what you said last time," Alec scoffed, "and then you ripped someone's face off."

He was oddly attached to that word.

"You're mad at me," Magnus acknowledged lightly. "I get it. And you can be as mad as you want, but can you please postpone the shouting until after we've done this? I promise I'll be all ears then."

It looked like Alec was experiencing the early stages of a stroke when he gritted out, "Have you heard a word I've said?" He drew a breath to steady himself.

"You're mad at me," Magnus acknowledged lightly. "I get it. And you can be as mad as you want, but can you please postpone the shouting until after we've done this? I promise I'll be all ears then."

It looked like Alec was experiencing the early stages of a stroke when he gritted out, "Have you heard a word I've said?" He drew a breath to steady himself.

It became apparent that that wasn't its intended purpose when it provided Alec with enough lung capacity to easily overpower the loud wind. "Do you understand anything?! Anything at all?!"

And they were back to yelling.

"Okay," Magnus concluded, grimacing at his outburst. "The others are waiting for us. I'm going inside." Some battles, you just couldn't win. "I'm sure the anger you're stewing in right now can keep you warm, but it's really cold so don't stay out here too long."

With eyes locked on the ground to make sure he didn't stumble in the deep snow when he diverged from the already trodden tracks, Magnus took a step to the side, to go around him. It was the reason why, when he found himself once again face to face with Alec, that Magnus looked confusedly up at him.

It was as if neither of them had moved.

Or both.

Magnus studied him closer, observing the composed expression Alec wore every time he'd made up his mind about something, regardless of how stupid of a decision that was. It was the exact same expression Alec had worn in the middle of the night, as he'd sat on a bloodstained couch and explained, in no uncertain terms, that if it came down to it, he'd push Magnus out of harm's way again, even if it meant he'd get hurt in the process.

He couldn't be serious.

To test him, Magnus took another step to the left and Alec followed, like some sort of sentient roadblock.

He was serious.

Magnus blinked away the flakes that insisted on sticking to his eyelashes but it didn't improve the sight in front of him in the slightest. Alec was still there, and by the looks of it, he wasn't going anywhere anytime soon.

Magnus stared him down. "Get out of my way," he demanded with steel behind it. "Now."

"Or what?" Alec challenged him. "What exactly will you do if I don't?"

Strangle him. Slowly. That was a choice that felt extremely appealing. Beating him to death with the nearest stick was also one of the top contenders. There really were too many options to pick just one.

If his murderous intent was visible on his face, Alec didn't care. He held his ground, and with that single refusal to do as he was told, Alec was actively baiting him to get whatever reaction it was he
was looking for.

Alec was, by not merely one, but a few hundred miles, easily the most infuriating person he’d ever had the misfortune to meet.

Gritting his teeth, Magnus refused to go down this road with him. Hopefully Alec would succumb to the elements first. Then he could just step over the deep-frozen corpse.

"Why can’t you answer?"

Ignoring Alec, ignoring the whole situation that had nothing to do with him, Magnus averted his eyes to look at something more pleasant. That proved to be one of the many diffuse shadows that lived in the old courtyard. But this shadow, unlike the others, was moving. As it rapidly approached, the light hair it wore announced who it was long before Jace was close enough to be heard.

Without paying any attention to their strange standoff, he quickly strode up to them. "You have to come," he said, directing himself at Magnus. "Right now."

Jace’s expression made it clear that there wasn’t time for questions.

He turned back in a hurry from the same way he’d come and Magnus quickly made to follow. He brushed past Alec who let him pass this time. Wordlessly, they both rushed after Jace.

The grand architecture, with its breathtaking elegance of past ages, couldn't steal the air from their lungs. Another view had already taken it for itself.

Simon, paler than even a dead person should be, was anxiously pacing on top of the massive stairs leading up to the front doors. They took the steps two at a time to reach him faster but their arrival didn't seem to bring him any comfort. His flitting gaze immediately darted to Jace who gestured for him to speak.

"I smell blood," Simon said, his eyes wide and watering, as if the scent of it was potent enough to sting. "It's really strong."

"What does that mean?" Alec asked, almost before Simon had finished his last word.

"Either it's fresh or ..." Simon hesitated, looking at anyone but Magnus, "it's a lot of it."

Not far from where they stood, one of the double doors, that opened to reveal the grand entrance hall within, stood slightly ajar.

Magnus glanced warily at it before he directed his eyes at Simon who had ducked his head, staring at the ground. "Are you okay, Simon?"

Simon nodded, swallowing with some difficulty. "I'm good," he said quietly. But he was wringing his hands together and chewing on his bottom lip. Fangs, much sharper than human teeth, were digging into the soft skin.

"Are you hungry?"

Simon's head jerked up quicker than physically possible. It didn't seem like he'd realised what he'd been doing until right now. His tongue darted out to feel the pointy teeth for a split second before he quickly covered them up. "I can control myself," he snapped, fiercer than Magnus had ever heard him sound before. If Simon had had any blood in his body then his cheeks would've been flushed with it.
"I don't doubt it," Magnus answered him. "Was the door open when you came here?"

Simon frowned at him, but it was Jace that replied. "No, we opened it. That was when Simon smelled it."

That was the best of two scenarios. If hope was anything to bet on, then Ibrahim would've just accidentally given himself a paper cut. Still, it didn't rule out that someone else had paid him a visit. A someone who could still be inside with him.

Magnus turned away from them, facing the doors. "Wait out here. If I'm not back in twenty minutes I want you to leave."

"What?" Simon questioned, confused.

"How?" Jace asked, agitated. "We're in freaking Siberia!"

"Walk," Magnus informed him tersely before he stepped forward.

His arm was immediately snagged on something much sturdier than the branches and bushes that didn't grow here. Magnus didn't try to pull free this time either. He wasn't entirely sure which one of them was stronger and he was not in the mood to play tug of war just to find out.

Impatiently, he looked over his shoulder. But the pointed way his eyes flicked from where the fingers were wrapped around his elbow, to the person the hand in question belonged to, didn't make a difference.

Alec raised his own eyebrow. "We came here with you. Either we're all going or none of us are."

"I'm not going to put any one of you in danger."

Alec smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "You're killing Jace in an hour anyway, so ..."

The way he said it, with so much cold, made his grip on Magnus hurt, just a little.

Keeping a sharp retort back, Magnus jerked his arm free.

"Simon, you'll have to lead us to the source," Alec said, unaffected. He looked at Magnus. "Unless you can turn yourself into a bloodhound."

At this point, he was just abusing sarcasm.

Briskly passing Magnus with his bow in hand, Alec didn't leave him even the semblance of a choice. Not when Simon followed, along with Jace who offered nothing more than a roll of his eyes when Magnus shot him an exasperated look.

It would be childish to stay out here and let them possibly get hurt just to prove a point to Alec. But it was awfully tempting.

Tamping down the insisting need to throw something hard at the back of Alec's head, Magnus took the few steps necessary and joined the others right as Jace pulled on the ring handle. The snow that had gathered before the entrance made it a struggle to convince the thick wood to move.

The door creaked as it, painfully slow, widened to allow enough space for a person to pass through. The sound betrayed the absolute stillness that existed beyond it.

The glow of Jace's seraph blade lit up the black hall when they squeezed through one after one,
quickly shutting the door on the horrible weather wrecking havoc outside.

Torches, lit with fire that was sapphire instead of the normal mixture of orange and yellow, lined the castle interior walls. The flames sent off wave after wave of pleasant warmth, yet despite that, they had no light of their own. The heat made the air thick, but night still reigned supreme in here.

"That's convenient," Simon's voice pointed out.

Jace's sword turned in that direction, illuminating a little more of Simon's features. Ruffling snow out of his damp hair, Simon smiled lopsidedly. "Imagine the heating bill otherwise."


Simon's brief smile faded. "Right." His eyelashes fluttered when he took a deep breath in through his nose. His eyes turned slightly to the left before he lifted his hand and pointed in the same direction. "It's coming from up there," he said.

They all followed where he was looking, taking in the impossibly wide staircase that seemed to rear up, straight into the dark heavens outside.

"Alright," Jace concluded. With his free hand placed on Simon's back, he began pushing him along as he started for the stairs. "Come on, gang," he called out for the rest of them.

Chapter End Notes

So what do you think? Had you guessed the reason for Magnus' return? How has the role he played in Catarina's fate changed him? Will the plan work? And what exactly is awaiting them within the castle walls?
Hello, my dudes!

Our tagline/motto/unofficial slogan: "And when I thought things could go well, they go so wrong." - domoiswatchingyou

Okay, so I feel like we must acknowledge I'm late. I'm like the latest ever. I'm super-DUPER late, and I don't blame you if you feel a startlingly passionate need to grab a few shovels and play whack-a-mole with my head. But ... - yes, there's a but - I have like the greatest excuse that anyone has ever had. It so beats the: 'Dog ate my homework.'.

During my Terrible Days of Absence - also yes, those words should be capitalised because I have an inflated sense of self; just roll with it - I had surgery. And now - because why the hell not, right? - I have to see my doctor three times every week because there were complications. Thank you, life! Couldn't resist throwing me a bucket of phlegm, could you?

Okay, and now I'm being overdramatic. I'm going to be fine in no time; I'm just cranky. But, in other news, school just let out and I'm probably going to have much more time to write now, so, hopefully, this'll be the longest wait you'll ever have to experience. Also, this is the longest chapter so far. I feel like you really deserve that after everything.

Another also: lisawid commented, "Pleeease sprinkle in a bit more Malec if that’s possible." And I just wanted to say, lisawid, I've got your back. Don't worry. You should totally trust me! :D

And so, after all that rambling, without further ado, - just a drum roll, or two ... I'm rhyming. I might be just a little bit high right now. I'm not sure how much morphine I've taken, but it might be too much. How much is too much? - let's get right back into it! :) 

EDIT:

I just read about season 4. This is the end. Fuck my life. If anyone needs me, I'll be off dying.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hurt

I hurt myself today
To see if I still feel
I focus on the pain
The only thing that's real
The needle tears a hole
The old familiar sting
Try to kill it all away
But I remember everything

What have I become
My sweetest friend
Everyone I know goes away
In the end
And you could have it all
My empire of dirt
I will let you down
I will make you hurt

I wear this crown of thorns
Upon my liar's chair
Full of broken thoughts
I cannot repair
Beneath the stains of time
The feelings disappear
You are someone else
I am still right here

What have I become
My sweetest friend
Everyone I know goes away
In the end
And you could have it all
My empire of dirt
I will let you down
I will make you hurt

If I could start again
A million miles away
I would keep myself
I would find a way

Magnus easily dodged the arm that shot out to grab at his wrist. Alec, having honed his reflexes by now, paused before he walked straight into Simon where he'd temporarily frozen on the second landing.

"What now?" Jace asked, barely keeping the annoyance out of his voice as he followed behind Magnus who kept on walking. "Do you hear something?"

"No, only faint scurrying," Simon replied as he stuck closely by Jace. "But that has to be rats." When no one answered him, he added, in a squeak, "Doesn't it?"

Simon's next question was prefaced with a curse from Jace when he stepped on his heels.

"He lived alone, right, Magnus?"

Magnus covered his eyes with his hand for a moment. "Since you asked me five minutes ago, the answer hasn't changed."

"Okay, good. I'm-" Simon took a deeper breath than necessary. He didn't really need the oxygen to
begin with, but it seemed to provide him some comfort. "That's good."

Of course, that calm lasted for all of thirty seconds before Simon shrieked, "Sweet baby Jesus, what's that?!" and caused them all to come to a stop.

He jumped back as the high-pitched sound echoed between the walls, landing straight in Alec's unprepared arms. Alec caught him just in time before both of them could fall down the stairs they'd been climbing.

"A statue," Alec pointed out in a low tone, setting him, not gently, back on his feet. "Be quiet."

Staring at the depiction of a knight with its pollaxe poised to strike, Simon hissed, "We're looking for a dead person. It's a sign of emotional health that I'm jumpy." Simon righted himself with as much dignity as he seemed to own. "It's disturbing me to no end how it's a pastime you're all used to."

Jace snorted at his indignant expression. "Whatever you say. Just try not to scream again, unless you want to wake up the entire castle."

Simon narrowed his eyes at Jace, but when his gaze drifted upwards, to where Magnus stood a step above Jace, his face fell.

"Magnus ..." he started, but he stumbled on the rest. "I didn't-."

"No offence taken," Magnus replied, turning around to take them up to the third floor. "I haven't been emotionally healthy a day in my life."

"No, that's not-" Simon tried to say when he raced to catch up to him. "I meant about your- I'm sure he's fine. Totally fine."

Simon seemed to grow more nervous which each time his own mouth opened, but he kept on talking, as if he was powerless to stop it. "I'm sure he's not dead."

Magnus glanced at him from the corner of his eye, but where he wanted to see conviction to back up that statement, there was simple fear. If it was for what sight might be waiting for them to discover, or if Simon simply dreaded what reaction his rambling would garner, he wasn't sure.

"Are we still on the right track?"

Simon nodded before Magnus had even finished speaking. "Yeah, it's getting stronger. I-" He paused. "Wait." He blindly grabbed Magnus to get him to stop moving.

What was it with these people and always touching him?

"It's coming from there, I think," Simon said, jerking his head towards the east corridor. "No, I'm sure it does," he added.

This exact floor. That specific corridor. It made sense.

Magnus retrieved his arm from the bruising hold Simon had on it. As soon as he was free, the tips of his fingers became lit with a pulsating glow that spread through the veins in his hand, as if there was a fire living just beneath the surface there. In the shadows that the light cast, Simon's eyes looked to have grown two sizes.

"Now might be a good time for you to stay behind Alexander," Magnus said, nudging Simon when he didn't move. Simon started as the heat of the magic touched his back, but he did as he was told.
Taking his place farthest back, he became invisible standing behind Alec's tall frame.

"Everybody ready?" Jace asked, his face turned sober.

"His study is that way," Magnus said, putting himself in front of Jace so that Jace couldn't take a step without walking straight into him. "Follow me, and be quiet."

As they crept through the corridor, it branched out in every possible direction; spreading like a hand that had been gifted with too many fingers. Soon, north, south, east and west were abstract concepts that had no ties to reality. The maze of stone and rock that accompanied them on their search, did its best to confuse them. In this castle, within this lonely place, sanity could as easily be lost as the way out.

"You weren't kidding when you said he's neurotic," Jace whispered as they passed yet another opening that was intended to lead any wanderer astray. "Hello, paranoia."

Magnus avoided a protruding torch that almost seemed to reach out to set him aflame. "He has his reasons."

As all of them did, for being who, or what, they were.

In the silence, that had formed once the only thing ruffling it was their hushed breathing, the sounds of scurrying that Simon had mentioned earlier reached their far less sensitive ears.

"That's just the rats," Simon breathed. It somehow wobbled, despite the barely audible volume of it. "Isn't it?"

It didn't sound like rats. There was no squeaking or scratching. Not any of the sounds that they usually made, except that noise, that had more likeness to human fingernails trying to carefully scuttle undetected across a floor, than living animals.

Cautiously, tenser than before, they turned left to then immediately take a right. As they walked further into the very heart of the castle, the walls closed in around them, eating away their space one inch at a time. As the path grew narrower, making it impossible to walk side by side, Simon asked, "Is anyone else feeling slightly claustrophobic?"

When Magnus kept pressing on, feeling the walls scraping against his elbows, Alec cleared his throat almost inaudibly.

"Magnus?"

"Shh," Magnus hushed before he emerged through the last passage. The dome felt especially spacious after the confining corridors. The mirrors, lining each curve, reflecting them from above and clinking beneath their feet when they stepped out on the brittle surface, added some confusion to the sense of confinement.

"Am I the only one who thinks this is super weird?"

"No," Jace told Simon. "You're really not."

Placing his palm flat on the only shattered sheet that existed in this land of glass, Magnus said, "Close your eyes."

Beneath his touch the cold mirror began to glow with a translucent colour that grew to a blinding light that beamed out of every crack. As the sheet repaired, it lost its shape. The sides began
widenings and the top rounded, creating an elaborate arch. The path ahead, that a second ago had been solid glass, had hollowed into a tunnel that bent slightly, hiding what laid beyond. A flickering light, that originated from that concealed destination, lit the way for them.

"This is the place," Simon announced in an oddly flat voice. It became obvious why, when his chest didn't rise and fall like theirs did.

Magnus looked at them, from Simon’s pale face, to Jace's set features and Alec's raised bow.

With trepidation that he didn't want to feel, Magnus took the first step into the tunnel.

"Ibrahim?" he called out. "It's Magnus."

The silence, as the reply lagged, weighed down the air.

"Are you here?"

His voice echoed. Only his. Walking forward, towards the light, Magnus felt Jace behind his back.

"It's just rats," Simon repeated like a mantra. "It's just rats."

It became apparent, to all of them, that when Simon said rats, he'd meant something else all along.

Magnus turned the slight curve with his side pressed to the wall as much as he could, using the stone as protection in case of any nasty surprises. But the study, as he reached the threshold and came to a stop there, was empty of life.

His hands ceased glowing as they came to rest by his sides again.

Jace brushed against his shoulder from where he'd stopped as well, despite that the opening was large enough for the four of them to easily stand side by side without touching.

"Big rats," Jace said without any attempt at humour. It sounded like it was the only thing he could think to say.

The fire that was gasping for breath in the fireplace lent the room some disturbing normality. It made the tidy space take on a deceptively homely air; a place awaiting its owner's return. Had it not been for the red splattered windows that weren't bold designer statements as much as parts of a murder scene, it might've been believable.

"Is that Ibrahim?" Alec asked from somewhere to his side.

Magnus was the first to take a step into the gruesome place. "It was."

The room was big enough that the rest of them could, without any trouble, ignore the sight displayed before them like a grotesque dinner centrepiece and move on. Unfortunately, it was a luxury that wasn't extended to him.

Avoiding to step into the ocean of blood that had spilled down the keys of the piano in streams and gathered on the floor, Magnus set his palm on Ibrahim's dry forehead. "He's still warm," Magnus said aloud, removing his hand. "We shouldn't stay here."

He turned around to face the others.

"It doesn't look like the Circle," Jace remarked from a few feet away. His expression was one of undisguised revulsion. "Unless they've become cannibals when we weren't paying attention."
It wasn't difficult to understand what he meant by that. The only evidence left that could attest that Ibrahim had once possessed organs were the intestines that had been draped artistically over the split chest like necklaces made out of flesh. The rest was gone, having left clean scraped ribs, and not much else, behind.

"I think I might puke," Simon mumbled, his gaze riveted on the eviscerated corpse.

Simon's body seemed conflicted. He rocked forward on his heels, as if he wanted to move towards what he was staring at, yet his chest remained still. In Simon's face, that was always displaying childish characteristics despite that he wasn't one anymore, a hunger had settled that carved into his features until he looked the vampire he was. But his eyes, more expressive than Jace's, showed only horror and disgust.

Putting a hand over his mouth, Simon turned away from the sight.

"Did he have enemies?" Alec's gaze lingered on the body for a moment before it rose to Magnus as he waited for his reply.

"Yes," Magnus answered as Alec walked up closer to him. "Most of my kind do since we tend to live long enough to incur the wrath of multiple generations."

Lucky them.

Watching out for the blood, just as Magnus had done, Alec stopped in front of him. "So it might not be Valentine?"

Magnus let his shoulders fall. "The timing is uncanny, but Ibrahim wasn't exactly known for being a law-abiding citizen. His clientele isn't made up of what you would call decent people."

What that said about himself, he had no interest in knowing.

"Another warlock could've done this," Magnus said with finality as he looked past Alec and gestured at the intricately weaved fabric that hung in one of the many nooks. Whatever the truth was, whoever had killed Ibrahim, this wasn't a good place to linger. "Behind that tapestry lies the library. The spell is written on a scroll in Egyptian. It should be easy to find."

Jace, with his blade ready, gave him a strange look. "You're not coming?"

"I need a minute," Magnus said shortly without offering anything more.

Simon blinked at him. "Were you two-" he began asking. But if Simon was implying that they'd been involved, or something more innocent, he didn't make clear before he changed the words that followed. "Is he your friend?"

Magnus arched an eyebrow. "He's dead, Simon. He's not anything anymore."

When Simon ducked his head, but didn't make a move to exit the room, Magnus motioned to the same tapestry again. "Any more questions we don't have time for before you leave?"

That made Jace take the hint and Simon followed closely behind him. As Jace pulled the tapestry to the side, Magnus glanced at Alec who hadn't turned to go yet. Alec didn't seem reluctant to leave. He had his bow prepared, ready to be used in a moment's notice. It simply looked like he wasn't sure if the request had included him too or not.

Magnus set his eyes firmly on him. "What are you still doing here?" he questioned without pausing
to let Alec answer. "Go."

Alec looked angry - not that he had ever stopped since they'd left the apartment - but still he asked, "You okay?"

He sounded angry too.

"The concept of 'hurry' really is lost on you, isn't it?" Magnus asked, already knowing that was true. "I'm fine. But please, stay and chit-chat and we might get to experience the live action version of Clue." Magnus lowered his voice, as if he was readying himself to divulge a secret. "Between you and me, it's Colonel Mustard. It's always him."

If 'unimpressed' could be a person, that would be Alec.

"Yes," Alec agreed in a tone that was as false as his insincere smile, "you're completely fine. I can see that now."

He turned away, moving quickly enough that he was in the room one second, and the next he was gone.

As soon as he was certain that he was alone, Magnus looked at the table and the body on top of it that had, no more than an hour ago, been a person.

Something sharper than any man-made blade had been used to disembowel Ibrahim. The flaps of skin, that ran from the sternum to the hips, were peeled back neatly. The inside was another story. It looked like it'd been gouged out with a strange instrument for the task. Long grooves, evenly spaced, had left ridges of flesh that rose around the spine that was peeking, ghostly white, through the tatters of muscle.

The pattern had a disturbing likeness to that of a harrow. Or claws.

With a heightened awareness, that grew in strength when the sound of the blood that was slowly dripping from underneath the grand piano reached his ears, Magnus opened his jacket.

Ibrahim's hand was colder than his own, but it wasn't stiff yet. His damp knuckles bent to Magnus' will when he placed the vial in Ibrahim's limp palm and folded the fingers around it. "What did you do, Ibrahim?" Magnus asked, squeezing the back of his hand to keep the vial trapped there.

Letting go, Magnus braced his palm on the rosewood and leaned over the unmoving body. Ibrahim's face was frozen in a moment of terror. His eyes, as lifeless as the rest of him, were almost bulging, as if he was still in the process of being murdered and astounded about the fact that it was happening to him. His thin lips were twisted; his mouth open to let out a scream that no one would hear.

Painting accidental scarlet lines across Ibrahim's eyelids as he closed the staring eyes with stained fingertips, Magnus repeated their motto, "Nec spe nec metu."

They were words he'd uttered so many times. For those he'd known, or had scarcely met. To those he'd loved, or had barely liked, and the rest that fell somewhere in between. But all of them had been dead by then, for reasons that had ceased mattering the minute the breath had halted in their lungs.

They died without hope and without fear, but they died nevertheless. It was the one guarantee, in a world where nothing was certain. Everyone perished, even immortals.

Ibrahim didn't look peaceful. For some, perhaps that was too much to ask for, even in death.
As Magnus leaned back, the last of the struggling fire collapsed in a tired sigh, leaving the room in a gloom. Even the embers abandoned this forsaken place.

He drew his hand away from the piano and that was the moment he saw it.

Turning it over, he noted the opaque film that covered his palm. The blackness of it seemed to pull in every little light for the single purpose of suffocating it.

A shiver ran down his spine as he turned around to gaze at the completely deserted room. Taking in the shadows, that seemed to have grown arms when he'd had his back turned, Magnus studied them, trying to spot the one that was different.

The glamour, the charade of humanity he'd perfected, easily fell away, yet his breathing remained steady. Calmly scanning every corner where something might hide, his eyes suddenly stuck on a weaved fabric.

Fear, the most potent emotion of them all, latched onto him, causing his heart to slam painfully against the ribs that were supposed to protect it. There wasn't a single sound coming from beyond the tapestry.

Forcing his steps to be light and with his back to the wall, Magnus moved as quickly as he could without making any noise. The fabric was heavy when he silently pushed it to the side.

The library wasn't enormous, but it was comprised of two rooms. By some grace of god, Magnus spotted Jace immediately.

"Jace," he hissed to catch Jace's attention that laid on the papers spread out by his feet.

Spinning around, Jace had his seraph blade ready to strike at once before he realised who it was.

"Magnus?" he question bemusedly. "What-

Shaking his head, putting a finger to his lips, Magnus' gaze flitted past Jace to try and see into the dark space behind him.

The absence of anyone else made the fear take a firmer hold.

"Where are-" Magnus whispered, but he interrupted himself when a taller figure appeared behind Jace. Alec, walking without caring how loud his boots were squeaking, looked to Jace to say something right before he noticed Magnus.

He stilled on the spot, observing their strange postures. Tensing, almost imperceptibly, Alec stared straight into Magnus' eyes from across the floor. "What's wrong?" he asked quietly.

Taking the few necessary strides to join them, Magnus spoke quickly. "We have to go." To keep his voice as quiet as possible, he was almost standing on their feet when he came to a halt. Unconsciously, a movement he never even notice he made, had him taking ahold of Alec's wrist and not letting go. "Right now."

"We haven't found it yet," Jace told him. "We can't just leave without-

"It doesn't matter," Magnus said abruptly. "Let's-" He paused, looking over Jace's shoulder. "Where's Simon?"

Magnus had expected him to come into view any second but Alec crushed that delusion. "He wanted
to search that room."

Glancing to where Alec gestured, Magnus took in the sight. "Grab your weapons," he ordered, detaching himself from them as he cautiously approached the open door.

The more empty rooms that they passed through, the quicker they moved. They were almost running by now, their recklessness rising with the relentless seconds ticking by. Magnus’ breathing was laboured and he wasn’t alone. Both Jace’s and Alec’s chest was rising sharply as they shut yet another door behind them.

"Where the hell is he?" Alec hissed, keeping his bowstring taut as they scanned the new surroundings in what appeared to be an exact replica of the previous twelve.

"Magnus, what is going on?" Jace asked, quickly rushing forward to the next threshold.

"I'll hold a Q & A later," Magnus replied hurriedly, following on his heels when Jace swung open the next door.

This one was, to no one’s surprise, precisely, down to the dreadful art desecrating the walls, the same.

"I hate this," Jace cursed through teeth that were forcefully clenched together. "When we find him, I'm going to kill him." He clutched the hilt of his seraph blade tighter. "I don't care if it's a violation against the Accords. I'll run him over with a-"

Alec clasped a hand on his shoulder. "Quiet," he mumbled. "Listen."

Jace stilled, trying to catch whatever it was Alec had heard. In the silence, a voice, speaking loudly, came through clearly from behind the door to their left. Alec was the first one through it. He didn’t wait for them to follow before he began sprinting down the winding corridor that the door had opened into. Jace and Magnus caught up to him right as it twisted sharply to the left.

And as the path straightened out beneath their racing feet, a recognisable silhouette became visible where the corridor came to a stop farther down.

Alec slowed down, even though it seemed like Simon hadn't yet been alerted by the noise they'd made. They could only see his profile as he was turned to the side, gesturing wildly in the air.

As they got closer, Simon's laugh squeaked out, filling the air with the dissonant sound.

"Hey, wait," Jace said, throwing out his arm to hold Alec and Magnus back. "Who's he talking to?"

Now, when they weren't more than fifty feet from Simon who was still oblivious to their presence, it became clear that he was having a conversation with someone. The other person's voice didn't reach this far, but they could hear Simon's parts. It sounded like they were discussing the recent weather.

Knowing fully well what was awaiting them at the end, Magnus made sure to be quiet as he demanded, "You two stay here. I'll go get him."

"No," Alec responded immediately without taking his eyes off Simon.

"We fight better together," Jace said with no hesitation.

With Alec to his right, and Jace to his left, Magnus was acutely aware of which of the two of them
moved first. Slamming the back of his hand against Alec's chest with as much force as he could possibly muster, amber sparks, throwing off a sweltering heat, danced around his fingers. "That was not a request," Magnus explained in a controlled tone of fury.

The threatening magic provided Alec with enough of an incentive not to try and take another step. Magnus kept his eyes aimed forward, uncaring for the, no doubt, colourful opinions Alec was a second from voicing aloud. "Stay here," Magnus commanded, taking down his hand, "or so help me god, I will murder both of you myself."

He didn't give either of them a chance to try and fight him on it. As he strode, Magnus shook his hand and the magic slipped off his fingertips like drops of water. The glamour settled back into its designated place as he dragged a hand through his tousled hair and righted his clothes.

When Magnus was barely ten feet away, Simon's head snapped towards him like he'd noticed him coming long before he'd shown any signs of it.

"Magnus," Simon grinned, but there was something wrong with how much teeth he was showing. His head was microscopically moving from side to side as he continued. "Why didn't you tell us Ibrahim had a daughter?"

When Magnus didn't give Simon any reaction, instead made to go past him, Simon grabbed a fistful of his jacket to keep him from moving.

Seizing his wrist, Magnus forcefully made Simon let go right as he stepped in front of him, turning to face the same way that Simon had been directing himself at a moment ago. "That's because he didn't." Magnus gazed up at the steep stairs that were suddenly towering before him, and the person perched at the very top of them.

"Caedis," he greeted as he pushed Simon back.

Her voice rasped seductively when she replied in kind. "Magnus." Her lips quirked but didn't part. "Imagine running into you here."

He didn't mimic her version of a smile. "Imagine that."

As her eyes left his, drifting to something located behind him, they thinned and, for a second, flashed clear white. "My, my," Caedis mused, raising a delicate finger to point. "What might we have here?"

Stoically keeping himself from banging his head against the nearest solid surface when he realised that it could only be one thing in the whole world that would make her that excited, Magnus was forced to listen to the unmistakable sound of two pair of boots coming to a halt right behind Simon.

He didn't need to get a verbal confirmation on what he already knew to be true, but Caedis seemed happy to provide him with one regardless.

"A child of the night, and two of Raziel," she counted aloud, moving her hand through the air as she did. "You spoil me. How is it you brought me such a feast, Magnus?" she asked sweetly. "One would've sufficed."

This, right here, was the reason why Shadowhunters shouldn't be allowed to breed. They birthed imbeciles.

"What can I say?" Magnus replied, deciding then and there that when they got out of this godforsaken castle, he would leave Jace and Alec to die in the Siberian cold just to make absolutely sure that their IQ-defective genes would never be passed on to the next generation. "I live to please."
He should take a step forward, show Caedis that her presence here was more of the inconveniencing, rather than the intimidating, kind. Yet, Magnus didn't change his position. With him being the only thing standing between her and her prey, it was too risky. "My turn to ask." With the lack of options to move in any direction, Magnus raised an unimpressed brow instead. "Are you Valentine's pet now? Are you here to do your master's bidding? Or did you come all this way just to pay a visit to an old friend?"

Clasping her hands together, as in a wordless prayer, Caedis thoughtfully rested her chin on top of the linked fingers. "You mean, am I here on business or pleasure?" She tilted her head playfully to the side. "What do you think?"

"I know Valentine has the mortal cup. If I would hazard a guess, I'd say he hasn't hesitated in utilising its power." Magnus' face remained emotionless as he remarked, "A leash for a demon. I'm sure some would call it a pitiful fate." It was a fitting one for such incomprehensible evil. "You have my sympathies."

She rose suddenly, too quick for human eyes to catch the movement. With Simon's chest glued to his shoulder blades, Magnus couldn't miss how he flinched.

Carefully skimming a hand down to the hem of her dress, Caedis hiked the ivory fabric higher up on her thighs and extended her leg. Her bare foot didn't make a sound as she set it on the first descending step. "You can't smell it. I know you can't, Magnus, but I want you to know that it is divine." Her voice had taken on a dreamlike quality, caressing each vowel as if they had a taste. "I warned you what would happen but you didn't heed it. You didn't want to give me your word and now look at you. Her blood is on your hands and I can smell it." Her curly hair stood around her perfect face like a halo. An angel couldn't look more heavenly. "I wish you could smell it too."

His heart stuttered in his steady chest. It was only for a moment, a brief reminder of everything he'd moved on from, but it was enough to make him crave it: to kill her, and not for what she'd do if she was given the opportunity, but because he wanted to feel how her neck would bend beneath his hands the second before it snapped.

Despite that there was no light source for them to reflect, Caedis' eyes gleamed as she watched him. "Catarina's dead now."

Raising his chin, to defy her, or the heavens, and anyone else that was left to take him on, Magnus replied, "As are many people."

Her gaze flitted to then fixate, lingering too long on someone he couldn't see. "And so will they be soon."

Slowly, carefully raising a hand to his face to brush away nonexistent strands of hair, he noticed her eyes leave the one she'd singled out and snap back to him alarmingly fast.

"How did Valentine know I was coming here?" Magnus asked, bringing back their conversation on the right track.

"Why so curious?" Caedis swayed teasingly where she stood, but it wasn't a random rhythm. There was a pattern to it, as if she was moving to a melody only she could hear. "Have you misplaced something?"

With those words, she confirmed what he'd suspected.

It would've surprised him if the answer had been any different, but there was one, one single thing,
that didn't add up.

"Somehow," Magnus said, "Valentine has known all along. He's been trying to stop me. And he's afraid now when he's continuously failed. That's the only explanation for your presence here." He cocked his head more than necessary to the side. "But why did he send just you? He's a psychopath, not a moron."

"Yet again, you ask that which you don't really want to know. You meant, am I here alone?" Caedis replied. "Are you frightened at the thought that I might've brought friends with me?" Her gaze moved beyond him, dancing across those standing behind. "Family?" Her eyes stilled in their tracks. "Darlings?"

He didn't indulge her guessing game and either by luck, or by reading the situation as it was playing out before them, the others remained silent. If he hadn't been able to feel the cold of Simon's body pushed against him, Magnus wouldn't have been sure that any one of them had stayed.

"You're so weak; consumed by endless grief and pain. You want to surrender to it. I can feel it in your bones. They are screaming for release. You want it all to end." Her voice lilted and tilted, drew in and pulled away at the same time. "I can help, Magnus." Like a snake charmer trying to hypnotise a resisting animal. "I'll help you gladly."

The way she was regarding him, openly, eagerly, made it seem like Caedis was waiting for him, expecting him to fall at her feet and willingly bare his neck for her to rip open; all because of some words strung together into sentences.

The quality of her incessant mind games had really gone downhill over the decades.

"You think," Magnus questioned, "because you killed Ibrahim, that you can kill me too?" Above his own voice, Simon's sharp inhale rose. Without pausing, Magnus continued with a smile that was as stiff as it was cold. "I didn't know you suffered from delusions of grandeur, Caedis. There's medicine for that nowadays."

When she didn't reply, he spread his arms wider than he should, offering a temptatious target. "I'm standing right here. Why don't you give it a try and we'll see just how far you get."

"So," Caedis remarked nonchalantly, as if their conversation was one of pleasantries and not one soaked to the brim in threats, "my question to you is-"

The arrow was nothing more than a flash, faster than lightning when it swooshed through the confined space towards its intended mark. It wasn't even close to touching her heart when it was stilled mid-air, plucked from its trajectory by an invisible movement.

Rolling the shaft between her fingers, a giggle, as of that of a child, slipped from her lips. "You'll have to do a lot better than that, Shadowhunter," Caedis murmured, pinching the arrow gingerly, causing it to snap in two. As the pieces fell, clinking against the stone floor, she raised her head.

The irises, that had the same deceptive appearance of normality as the rest of her disguise, were caught in a momentum. They were slowly being pushed to the sides, retreating back into the skull to make place for nothing at all. The pure white of the sclera settled into place as her neck twisted to the left, staring at the object of her newfound desire. "And here I was, being so civil."

Her foot, that hadn't moved from where she'd set it earlier, began its decent. Gliding her palm against the polished hand rail, the nails on her fingers clicked against it, growing louder with each step she took.
It was a splendid game of cat and mouse she'd initiated, and the winner would get to reclaim their life as the prize.

"As I was saying-" Caedis began, picking up where she'd left off.

The decision had to be made quickly. To back away, to display any kind of hesitation, was a risk. Yet, to stay still, to allow her to shorten the distance between them, was equally dangerous.

It was a gamble.

One wrong move, one flash of uncertainty and it would be the last mistake any of them made.

"...my question is, Magnus-" She sounded amused as she kept advancing. Her gaze never wavered, still firmly placed on where Alec had to be standing. "-why don't you give up?" Her lips, red with something that wasn't lipstick, were wet by her tongue's eager movement. As if she was making an appearance to an adoring audience, Caedis paused in the middle of the stairs and smiled down at them for the first time.

As if the corners of her mouth had been held together by stitches rather than skin, they popped open, splitting a little farther than a standard smile, showcasing a little more teeth than what was normal.

Magnus ground his elbow into Simon's ribs, pushing him to move back when the healthy instinct that consisted of getting as far away as possible from demons decided to kick in.

It felt like an eternity passed as Caedis resumed her walking while they remained in place. But then, at long last, Magnus felt how Simon grabbed another tight hold at the hem of his jacket and tugged to make him follow when they began backing away.

While listening for any indication that Alec or Jace would choose to perform some more rash acts as they retreated, Magnus made sure to keep a careful watch on her as she continued speaking.

"Why don't you give in to it? You know your father would welcome you in Edom."

The way Caedis said it, joyfully, gleefully, explained, in perfect clarity, not how she knew about it, but rather, that she was aware of what it meant.

Either he was urging Simon on faster than before, or Simon was pulling more on the fabric that felt close to tearing, but for one of those reasons the space between them and Caedis grew.

"I know who everyone is," she reminded Magnus sweetly, following them into the corridor that was already spreading around them once again, "remember?"

Edom was a special place of the underworld, reserved just for him. His own private part of hell, awaiting.

It would have to wait a little longer.

"I'm not his son," Magnus replied, making it abundantly clear that her attack didn't hit its mark. "Blood doesn't make the monster."

The answer made her stop. The extra feet it gave them would've been enough to ease away some small part of the tension that made their pulses beat faster and breaths come quicker.

Would have.

But it was what filled the corridor that made the air thicken, instead of thin, with trepidation.
Caedis laughed, not her earlier childish giggle, nor like an adult. The sound, whatever it was, was not human.

"Not a monster," she mused to herself. "Not a monster, you say," she reiterated before her empty stare finally fell on him again. "Your mother wouldn't agree, would she?"

For a brief moment, the sensation of blistering heat coursed through Magnus' body, filling each crevice in each vein with unspeakable pain before the blood abruptly ceased flowing through his system. Everything, all of that which was meant to keep him alive, turned to ice in the blink of an eye.

His legs stopped moving.

"What-"

Insistent hands that were on his waist tried to pull him back, to force him to follow. He defeated them, pushing free of every hold that was keeping him trapped.

Magnus took a step forward. "What did you say?"

"She hung herself because of you," Caedis explained, wielding the words like a knife. "Because of what she gave birth to."

They were more effective than any blade.

His glamour fell as if it had never been there to shield the truth from those too frail to face what he was. If his own heart had been included on that list once, then it was strong enough now.

With eyes, that were as repulsive as they were lethal, he watched her. "Jace, Alec," Magnus said carefully, "get Simon out of here." Liquid silver, like spilt tears, began dripping from his fingertips. "Now."

Her lips twitched with amusement. "Loyal," she remarked as the sounds that should've been there, of boots hitting stone and hurried footsteps fading out, didn't rise.

"Alec!" Magnus barked with as much fury as he had to spare. "Leave!"

If neither Alec or Jace valued their own life, at least they should care enough to value Simon's. Simon, who'd be about as much of an asset as Bambi if something went awry.

Simon, who'd die if she got her hands on him.

"And your stepfather then, wasn't he a monster?" Caedis continued. "Trying to drown his own son?"

The memory, the scent of it, the feel of hands, much too strong for his own to fight, dragging him forward, pushing him under, resurfaced like a nightmare. The lesson he'd been taught that fateful day used to rouse him in the middle of the night for so many years. He'd woken up enough times crying and screaming that he'd lost count. He'd begged for the mercy of no one, fighting against blankets that had felt like hands trying to strangle him and awoken in sweat, not water, drenching his skin.

But he always woke up; alive.

"But you paid him back, didn't you?" She nodded. "Yes." And even that small gesture seemed filled with glee. "You paid him back tenfold."

Her cheeks split an inch further, lining up with the beginning of her cheekbones. "Tell
me, Cahya, does his body still float in the Angke river? Do you still fear the water?"

He didn't tell her if she was right or wrong, if a body of water set more terror chasing in his bones than the body she'd butchered a few rooms away. Her glassy stare was on him, and he stared back.

"That's the answer to your question, Magnus," Caedis said, sounding almost apologetic at how long it took to reach the reveal. "That's why I'm here alone. For all your posturing and pretense, you're barely standing. A puff of air could tip you over."

Raising her hand up, the nails, that seemed to have grown two inches in the span of fifteen minutes, began lengthening rapidly. "I have nothing to fear from you now." She tilted her head and her neck cracked with an alarming sound. "It's a terrible shame you can't say the same about me."

Magnus took another step towards her, the silver dripping from his fingers suddenly changing direction. As it began painting veins on the underside of his arms, moving against gravity with ease, he smiled. "If you think you can make me cower with a few stories of the past, you're mistaken, Caedis. I'm not afraid of what I've done." The lines became visible once more as they climbed past the collar of his jacket, sweeping the edge of his jaw before weaving into his hair, staining the strands they touched. "So if you want to feel what my father felt when I burned him where he stood, I'll be happy to oblige you."

"I think I'll start with the vampire. They're such zesty creatures."

Her eyes never left Magnus, but the way her mouth parted, enough for there to be drool slipping down her cheeks, made it feel like she was staring straight at Simon.

"Or, how about the golden one?" Her gaze didn't drift to Jace. "He looks tasty."

She licked her lips. "No, I know." Caedis raised her head, and looked at the last person left. "The dark angel."

The silver, that had sunk like tattoos into the skin, began glowing. Her grin split until the majority of her face was comprised of pencil-shaped teeth. "Sore spot?"

Thrusting his hand forward, splaying his fingers in the air, Magnus turned his head as the room filled with a blinding brilliance the same hue as untouched moonlight.

The particles spread, dispersing the foreign light to let the normal colours return after the soundless explosion. The walls of the corridor, as well as the floor and ceiling, became visible again as the last piece, a teardrop of silver still clinging to his fingertip, vanished into thin air.

Magnus stared at the empty space in front of him, at the window at the end of the hallway that was no longer hidden behind a body.

"Where did she go?"

Magnus barely raised his voice enough so that Jace could hear the answer.

"Good question."

"How do we kill her?"

"Good question," Magnus repeated, to Alec this time.

"You don't know?" Simon asked with a voice that simultaneously wobbled and quivered.
"All excellent questions!" Magnus spat as he spun around. "Which was why I told you to take him and go in the first place, you goddamn idiots!" To Jace's and Alec's fortune, and to Magnus' great misfortune, they were out of punching range. "Were you dropped on your heads as babies?! Is that the reason why you can't do a single thing you're told?!"

"Leave you behind so you could die instead?!!" Alec spat back, equally mad. "Why is that always your sucky plan?!"

Of course this was the time Alec chose to unleash whatever was left after his earlier temper tantrum. His timing was one for the books.

"Would you stop?!"

"Yeah!" Alec agreed, but he didn't keep to his word. "Heaven forbid anyone points out when you're acting like a lunatic! Does honesty make you that uncomfortable?!"

"No," Magnus disagreed vehemently, "your presence already got that covered!"

"Hey!" Jace interrupted loudly. "Does this seem like the right place to do this?"

The reminder of where they were was enough to make Alec swallow whatever it was he was going to shout next.

Jace was swift to make use of the quiet. "Magnus, m-"

He was cut off abruptly by Simon clasping his arm. "Please, please tell me I'm suffering from tinnitus and you can't hear that."

They barely had to focus, didn't even need to hold their breaths as the sound, the scuttling from earlier, made a reappearance. It didn't seem to have an origin, bouncing against the walls like it came from every direction. The only difference was that this time around there was a dissonance in the tapping noises. It sounded like the sharp nails weren't sneaking across the floor anymore, but rather digging into the surface.

"Back to back," Alec ordered.

With their backs pressed against each others, Alec and Jace stared towards the south while Magnus and Simon faced the north.

"Magnus," Alec said from across their close quarters, "let's portal Simon out of here."

If he could've found some magical way to kick Alec in the shin right then and there, he would've done it without hesitation. "I can't."

"What?" Jace questioned before Alec had a chance to.

It was a long explanation, and in their current predicament, maybe not the most fitting topic of conversation.

"I can't," Magnus repeated. "You want to hear it in Greek?"

"Is the way we came in the only entrance and exit?" Alec asked quickly.

Magnus answered through his teeth. "Unfortunately."

"Then that's the way we're getting out." By the sound of it, Alec nocked another arrow to his already
armed bow. "Let's be fast."

With Alec and Jace leading them back through the hallway, Simon and Magnus followed in their footsteps, their gazes still trained in the other direction.

Giving Simon a sidelong glance, Magnus said quietly, "Do you hear something?"

Simon shook his head jerkily. "It's still the same. That scurrying."

The corridor, that had seemed long when they'd rushed through it in a hurry, felt endless walked backwards. The walls seemed more oppressive, constricting, and every shadow had sinister intent.

It was a small relief to reach the door to the room, where at least they wouldn't be as vulnerable as out here in the open.

The sofa and the rocking chairs were still gathered around the soot-stained fireplace, the room as dark and silent as they'd left it. Despite that it was empty, the size of it making it impossible to overlook a corner, all of them were still highly alert as Simon, the last person through the door, was about to shut them in.

There was only a crack left to close when Simon's hand stilled on the knob.

"What is it?" Alec mumbled, keeping careful watch on the door they'd need to go through to reach the study again.

"I can't hear it anymore," Simon whispered. "It stopped."

"So she can be anywhere," Jace concluded grimly. "Wonderful."

Shutting his eyes, Simon's chest suddenly rose and fell as he inhaled deeply. They opened as quickly as they'd closed and as his lips parted, sharp fangs popped out. His chest began heaving, his breaths coming out loud.

Slowly, as if he was afraid to look, Simon's eyes climbed the walls before they reached the ceiling and then they froze.

"Watch out!" he cried, right as they all noticed the black shape latched onto the ceiling like a spider waiting in its net.

It all went too fast.

The shape had already dropped down on the floor when Simon's warning rang out. Arrows flew but they missed their target. A seraph blade was wielded, but it cut air instead of flesh. Someone shouted. There was a confusion of movements that made it impossible to discern who were friends and who was the enemy. Magnus' palms sparked with magic, ready to be used. There was a chance that he'd hit one of them, but it was a risk that needed to be taken if they would get out of this alive. He knew that. He knew, but he couldn't get his hands under control to stop them from trembling. Hesitating, in the blur surrounding him, was enough.

Something, with the same force as a speeding car, struck his back, slamming him headfirst into the wall.

The persistent ringing was what let him know that this wasn't the worst kind of a hangover, though it
had the same characteristics. The gogginess was there, as well as the usual pounding headache. Rolling from his side to his knees with a groan, his head swam in a thickness more akin to soup than actual thoughts.

Blinking his eyes open, the view of his left one obscured by something warm and sticky, Magnus peered into the darkness of the unlit room. The fireplace, surrounded by a moth-eaten sofa and stiff rocking chairs, was bursting with ash that was on the brink of spilling onto the chilly floor. The pieces of still existing cinder lining the grate was the only thing that spoke for the room having been used recently.

Everything else appeared unmarked by any touch in years.

Using the wall to drag himself to his feet, Magnus braced his palms against it when it made the ringing in his ears transform from an insistent doorbell into screeching death metal. The paintings, that some generous soul might call art, stared down at him from where they hung while Magnus' attention went to the wall. He ran a finger through the smear on it, discolouring the stone even further.

There was a moment of calm where he simply looked at the maroon line he'd drawn, without thinking further about how it got there, or why he was alone in this unfamiliar place.

For a second, everything was hushed and serene.

It was a borrowed peace; on loan for nothing more than a minute. It wasn't his. It'd never been his and yet, when it was taken away, the shattering reality caused his battered bones to ache with a fresh intensity.

His breath returned in a rush, surging through his chest as everything snapped back into place.

His gaze shot to the door that was closed now, Simon's hand on the knob missing. He was gone. They were all gone.

Had they gotten away? Were they running for their lives through the masses of snow right at this moment? Or had she already killed them after mistakenly thinking that he was dead and left him here to decay?

How much time had passed?

What was he supposed to do?

For the first time, for as long as he could remember, Magnus asked himself that question and couldn't think of a single answer. There was a straight path to the outside. Twelve rooms away laid the library. He could hurry and be there in thirty seconds. He could reach the courtyard in less than four minutes. He could get out.

But what if one of them, or two, were still here? What if all of them had survived and they were just trapped in this maze?

What if none of them had?

Magnus tried to think, but his thoughts failed him like his hands had done before. They raced wildly, as if they were already running away from what he feared he'd see if he went to find them.

But of course, there wasn't a choice to make. He had to look for them, even if that meant discovering their dead bodies. Once he knew for sure, he could leave.
The decision, that hadn't really been one, made the floor beneath him unsteady. It felt like something had been rocked loose within him and he didn't know what it was. He didn't know how to put it back in place so that his mind would work again.

There were four doors. Magnus chose the one facing the east. They'd had a plan: to get out the same way they'd come in. Hopefully, they'd stuck with it and there'd be some signs that they'd gone that way.

On legs that barely bore him, Magnus reached for the knob and carefully pulled the door open. This space, which had the same exact furnishings and fireplace, was empty by the looks of it. Swiping the back of his shaking hand over his eye, Magnus cleared away some of the blood that persistently tried to blind him.

He looked to the ceiling, but it was empty. The corners were abandoned, hiding no one. The fine layer of dust that covered the mantel was undisturbed.

It seemed deserted.

As Magnus cautiously made his way through the rest of the rooms, they were as vacant. There were no traces of a struggle, or a fight of any kind having taken place. The furniture was all lined up in the same order, the carpets in the exact same places.

It was made up like a dollhouse.

The tranquillity should've eased his nerves, made his hands still. But the extended calm was deceitful. He didn't trust it, even as he travelled through it.

The door to the library slid up soundlessly, revealing the innocent books and shelves. The papers were still in the same spot that Jace had left them. Keeping a close eye on the second room of the library, Magnus reached for the tapestry. Sliding the fabric to the side, he slipped past it.

The study seemed to have grown darker since it'd been left to its own devices. Pressing his back against the wall, Magnus scanned the surroundings that appeared hostile in the dusk.

Beside the windows' splattered design, that looked black in the lack of light, the grand piano, painted with streaks of black as well, loomed. His eyes delayed for a second, lingered on the spot on top of the piano that had earlier been occupied.

There were no tracks, or drag marks that he could see, that indicated where Ibrahim's corpse might've been moved.

Treading warily, Magnus reached the middle of the room and looked to the entrance. He stopped mid-step when he noticed the shape lying in the bend.

Sprawled face down, the twist of the limp arms was different, the legs strangely bent. It wasn't the same.

He didn't have to look to know that it wasn't her. It wasn't one of his dreams where he'd have to relieve it once more, kill her again. But the wish that it was, that he was still lying unconscious on the floor and all of this had been some kind of fevered nightmare, consumed him. He'd rather live through that moment, when he stopped her heart and felt her die, a hundred times over than have to do this again.

But there was no one else there. He had to look, to see who it was.
His footsteps were too loud after the deafening silence, echoing in the hollow tunnel. Keeping his eyes forward, searching for an enemy that had already been there, he kept walking.

When nothing happened, allowing him to know that he could lower his guard for the moment, Magnus set his gaze on the ground.

For a second, he paused, taking a deep breath that shook in his lungs. "Jace?" The fair hair had changed colour with all the blood matting it. "Jace, can you hear me?"

There was no movement.

"Please," Magnus asked quietly, sinking to his haunches beside the motionless body. "Don't be dead."

Taking ahold of Jace's shoulder, feeling the stiffness of it contrasting with the unsteadiness of his own hand, Magnus turned him over.

The grisly sight that met him, when the body flopped over like a boneless fish, hadn't provided him with comfort until now.

"Thank god," Magnus mumbled as Ibrahim's corpse came to rest on top of his shoes.

A cry, loud and insistent, cleaved the air. Magnus had barely flinched at the sound when it died down, as sudden as it had stirred to life.

It didn't leave an echo to follow; no signs, or traces to track. But it gave something else.

Someone was still alive. Trapped, but alive.

Shooting forward, Magnus secured his palms on the closest wall and made the only move he'd been left with; the only thing he could do.

In his rush, he didn't notice that Ibrahim's ribs, that he'd put his knee on top of to keep his balance, began cracking beneath the weight.

Ibrahim hadn't been strong a day in his life. Old, yes, but not powerful. That, he'd paid for. The spells that enveloped this castle, and the incantations that had forced it to take on the form of a maze, weren't his. None of them were. Every little bit of enchantment belonged to some other warlock. Whether they'd been old or young, strong or weak, didn't matter as much as the quantity.

In his paranoia, he'd secured his castle, making sure no one, not even himself, could get in if they didn't know the way; or get out.

Ibrahim had made a net to snare his foes and it had backfired on him, and now they were stuck in it too.

But if the magic was shattered, if it could be conquered, it would all be set right and portals would work again.

The problem that Magnus ignored as he closed his eyes was the word 'if'.

It spread rapidly, like fire consuming forests. Rippling through him, it took over, possessing his body until it wasn't possible to distinguish the difference between the human half and the demon one. The magic melded them, the weakness and the strength; bound them together as one. As it reached his lungs, it borrowed the air from there, leaving him breathless.
As it seized what it needed, what Magnus had demanded it take, his hand slipped on the uneven stone.

It wasn't a physical pain: the draining. That would've been easier to bear.

As much as magic could be dangerous to others, it was for him as well. It had limitations, and pressure points that shouldn't be subjected to force under any circumstances.

It was an innate knowledge, not to push it. An inherent survival instinct.

It was a good thing he'd lost his a while back.

But his volatile power wasn't enough. The other magic, the one living within the castle, resisted. It withstood his every attempt, refusing to yield.

Trying to regain his breath, to ground himself, and failing to catch it, Magnus whispered, "Mors ultima linea rerum est."

Keeping his palms pressed to the stone, remaining where he was: leaning above the corpse of a man that he'd known and hadn't liked, Magnus repeated the phrase. "Mors ultima linea rerum est."

He kept saying them; the words that were the only light to find in the endless dusk.

With the grip his own magic had on him, completely, and not of a part, it was difficult to tell when it became victorious. But it did.

When the noise of rocks grinding together reached his ears, Magnus opened his eyes. Dust rained from the ceiling, coating every crevice and crack with its dull colour. The ground vibrated, shifting beneath him. The walls moved, straightening, widening; the ceiling following their lead.

The dome, along with its mirrors, narrowed, altering the shape until it wasn't circular anymore. Corridors that'd been gaping holes where they'd diverged from the correct path suddenly sealed up, leaving behind no traces to hint that they'd ever been anything but solid rock.

It all came to form a hallway lined with sapphire torches. At the end, almost too far away to be discernible, the staircase that had led them up to the third floor was suddenly visible.

With one last shudder, the final stone block settled into place and quiet reigned once more.

With relief that took its shape in a smile, Magnus gazed at the straight way out.

They were far and few between, but occasionally there were perks with the damned legacy he'd inherited.

The fatigue, that drained his soul rather than his limbs, had already set in when he tried to get up. Using the remaining strength he had, Magnus pushed himself to stand, his head still turned towards the exit.

The dizziness, that had added a lovely layer to the already plentiful grogginess, made him unsteady on his feet.

The smile, the brittle comfort that it stemmed from, waned when that sound, that disturbing scuttling, returned. Magnus raised his head to listen for it.

The incessant - tip-tap tip-tap tip-tap - was coming from somewhere above him.
That's where they had to be.

He turned around, to go back, but stilled before he'd taken a step.

With how the tunnel had righted itself, the bend of it was gone, and that put him in the direct view of the study. And the white eyes that were watching him.

The dusk ruling the tunnel was slowly being suffocated as the shape sidled up to the opening. When it settled, stilling as well, it blocked out the last faint light and the tunnel was descended into pitch-blackness.

At this close proximity, Magnus realised that it wasn't a tapping sound, that it had never been. It was the sound of something sharp scratching eagerly against stone that echoed around him.

He reacted, but it wasn't enough. The illuminating shield, that was meant to keep her at bay, shattered as soon as the rushing form crashed into it and plunged the space back into darkness. Something that he couldn't see slashed his side, sending him straight into the wall.

It didn't knock him out this time, but it hurt all the more for it.

Magnus plummeted down, his landing cushioned by a thing not made out of stone. Thrusting his hands down to push himself back up, his fingers sank deeply into the empty chest, digging into Ibrahim's decaying flesh.

He hadn't gotten to his feet when he felt the brush against his leg. Throwing himself in the opposite direction, landing hard on his back, Magnus felt the draft of the claws that swiped through the air before they just barely nicked his stomach.

Aiming blindly, a flash, as of lightning, shot out from his palm and struck the ceiling instead of the correct target.

The noise of rock hitting rock was drowned out by his own pulse pounding deafeningly in his ears. The spell wasn't strong enough to make the tunnel cave in, but the shower of stone bought him a precious second. Scrambling backwards on his hands and feet, he reached the dusk again when the floor beneath his palms was traded in for glass.

It was in the nick of time.

As she emerged, peaking her head out into the dulled light, Magnus ceased his attempt at escaping. He stopped where he was, pressing a hand to the gashes that had split the skin.

"You know, I have to ask," he panted with blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. "What is it with you and walls?"

As the first claw came down on the glass, it cracked around it in a pattern of circles, as if it instead was the surface of water that had been broken.

"I must say," Magnus continued from where he was sitting in the middle of the floor, "you look ravishing. Really-" He drew a laboured breath. "-striking."

She didn't answer. In her state, he doubted she could. The only thing she contributed to the conversation was the unrelenting clink that sounded every time another inch of glass fractured.

As she approached, slowly bringing another leg forward, their reflections mingled on the walls, the mirrors showcasing the scene playing out in front of them in every possible angle.
Even if he'd been standing, her deformed reflection would've towered above his.

The fourth leg, that stuck out of the body at a strange angle, patted the surface of the floor before it was set down.

Magnus made a movement and winced when it pulled at the wounds. His free left hand began pulsating with an intense glow.

"Why do you hide, Caedis?" he asked as he struggled to remain upright. "I'm sure your true form makes you very popular with the other demons."

The triangular head moved hypnotically back and forth as the wide-set eyes fed on him.

Pulses spread out from beneath his palm, swelling like waves against the floor. Their uniform colour began changing as they advanced. They were nearing her feet, rushing across the glass to reach her, when they suddenly and abruptly splintered. Coiling back, they flickered around his fingers like dying lights.

Her elongated jaw snapped, once, and she inched forward.

Flinching, giving it his utmost theatrical performance, Magnus lifted his hand that trembled in an exaggerated way.

It worked exactly as he wanted it to when it didn't give her pause, merely diverting her attention to the palm where magic still flashed every few seconds.

His fingers tensed on top of the gashes, preparing. With a calm that focused his mind and made it easy to wait for the right moment, Magnus inquired, "Is that a sensitive subject?"

She lunged for him, and, letting his left hand fall down, Magnus thrust his right one forward.

It was almost loving: the caress of claws when she caught his wrist before he could do any damage. Even as they pierced the skin, it didn't stop being gentle. In surprise, Magnus stared up at her, at that perpetual baring of ravenous teeth; at that permanent grin.

She kept grinning as she snapped his arm in two.

He'd felt worse things. He'd been alive so long. He had to have felt something more painful than this. But in that moment, when Magnus heard the bones crack and felt them rearrange, he couldn't remember one single thing worse than this.

The scream was torn from his lips, ripping his throat raw.

It echoed, multiplying the sound until it seemed like it had no beginning or end.

When she released him, letting him fall back on the floor on his stomach, it kept ringing out around them, even after he'd stopped screaming.

It was the instinct of survival, the unrestrained need to survive, that made him use his hands to begin dragging himself away instead of vainly trying to get to his feet. When the bones rubbed against each other, grinding together where they'd broken apart, his right arm gave out. Scrabbling for purchase with his uninjured hand, Magnus' fingers scratched helplessly against the glossy surface. The smooth glass became slippery underneath his desperate touch. Excruciatingly slow, he pulled himself across the floor.
The clinking followed him lazily.

Using his feet to push forward, he still wasn't fast enough. As his laboured breathing harshly slipped through his gritted teeth, her shadow fell over him.

One of her forelegs, with their uninviting spikes, began carefully digging into Magnus' already wounded side.

As it seared and burned, tearing apart something inside him, he whimpered. His palm was almost touching rock. The corridor, leading to the outside, was at the tip of his fingers. As he reached for it, his nails scraping against the cold stone, he was knocked on his back.

Once again, she blocked out the light where she loomed above him. Trapped beneath her grotesque body, Magnus reacted in the only way that was left.

As he futilely threw out his hand to grab ahold of the first part of her that he could reach, she moved faster.

It was a silent, fruitless struggle; a battle that had already been won and lost.

When she slammed his arm into the floor, once, then again, the magic yielded. At the second strike, when the glass beneath shattered with the force of it, the weak sparks that hadn't surrendered yet, that still hopelessly fought back, disappeared; snuffed out like the wick of a candle.

Her claws cut deeper this time as she with ease pinned him to the floor, crushing him down.

His heart pounded in his chest, as if it was trying to find a way to escape where he hadn't. The painful thumping of it kept him in the moment, forcing him to keep his eyes open.

Staring up at a ceiling that he couldn't even glimpse anymore, he tried not to see her distorted face inching closer to his. As her body crouched on top of him and her breath struck his chin, Magnus turned his head away as far as he could.

The sound rumbling through her sounded like a distant version of a laugh as she hovered above his exposed neck.

Sticky strings of saliva dripped across his throat and her hold on him tightened.

When the claws dug deeper into his wrist, spilling blood across the splinters and shards, Magnus relaxed. And once he didn't fight against it, when he submitted instead, it didn't hurt as much. As the pain lessened, he beheld the mirror facing him. He looked for a moment, took it in for a moment, before he closed his eyes.

Waiting for the last strike, the final blow, his mind was peacefully empty.

The warm drool began painting his cheek, as if she couldn't decide what part of him to gorge on first. Her breath, hot and damp, danced across his skin as she grazed her teeth against his temple.

When her claws came up to cradle his head, straining his neck to the point of breaking it, and her eager pants filled his ears, Magnus squeezed his eyes shut tighter.

Just as she was about to sink her teeth into his flesh, right as he could almost feel the way they'd rip him apart, a screech, high and unnatural, rendered him momentarily deaf. Magnus flinched at the sound as her crushing weight shifted on top of him. Her wide chest produced the harrowing noise again and he opened his eyes.
From what he could see in his helpless position, their reflection was the same. He was still pinned beneath her, her hold on him still impossible to escape. But the insect-like head, hovering in mid-air, wasn't where it'd been a second ago. It'd twisted, until it had turned a hundred and eighty degrees; the bulbous eyes trained on something behind them.

Staring at the mirrors that showcased every inch of this part of the castle, Magnus noticed the figure standing at the opening of the tunnel.

Jace's seraph blade glowed through the fresh ichor coating its edge. "Here, kitty, kitty." He took a step towards her that echoed through the completely silent space. "Come on."

The hind legs, that had been spread out behind her, curled closer to the body; one of them oozing black onto the floor.

Jace took another step forward. "Come here, pretty girl."

Magnus felt her grip on his head loosen. Slowly, her claws retracted from where they were slicing into his wrist. The massive body moved around, shifting in a circle, while the head remained fixed in place.

The glass cracked when she positioned herself, more drool dripping from the wide open jaws.

The sword shone when Jace raised it with a taunting smile. "Come and get me."

She pounced for him and Jace made a run for it. He disappeared into the tunnel he'd come from and with a terrifying shriek, she charged after him.

Magnus stayed where he was, lying on the floor as if he was still trapped by her. He blinked at the reflective ceiling that was looking back at him.

It was the shouting, the building screams reaching him from far away, that roused what little in him that could actually move. Once he got onto his feet, and legs that somehow carried him, he ran.

The tunnel disappeared somewhere behind him, the hellscape of mirrors relinquishing their hold when he bolted in the opposite direction. The torches lined his path towards the staircase while the noise built to a crescendo.

The corridor, coming to an abrupt end, delivered him straight onto the third floor landing.

"No, move!"

Alec had his bow raised, aiming it straight at him.

"Magnus, move!"

Magnus could barely make out the warning through the deafening shriek. In the corner of his eye, he saw the rush of something black. It was a reflex, however useless, that made him flip around. He didn't have time to get out of the way as the demon appeared out of thin air.

As Magnus froze, rooted to the spot, a blur, out of nowhere, collided with it.

The incredible speed of it knocked the demon off its intended path, sending it reeling to the side.

"Now!" Alec shouted, sprinting forward.

From the opposite direction, Jace came dashing. He was on the demon in a second, cutting at its
spiked legs and slashing claws.

"B-b-ba-d-d i-i-i-id-d-ea!" Simon stuttered from where he was shaken from side to side on top of the enormous back, desperately trying to hold on to the bucking body beneath him.

"Hang-" Jace ducked a swipe that would've taken his head clean off. "-on!"

An arrow lodged itself in one of the forelegs, the shaft sticking out on the other end. Alec fired again when the demon, with an enraged roar, reared up. Simon lost his grip and was flung out of sight down the nearby staircase.

The next arrow missed when the demon jumped on Jace, sending him crashing into the floor. Once Jace's hand slipped from the seraph blade, its brilliant shine faded. Groaning, Jace tried to push himself up, but on trembling arms he collapsed back on the stone.

The demon's claws scratched against the floor as it took a step forward. When it crushed the sword beneath its foot, the precious metal shattered into fragments.

"Jace!" Alec screamed, sending off arrows that only struck the thick shell covering its entire back. Bent and crooked, the brittle arrows fell down with clinks on the stone. Nocking another, blood seeped from Alec's palm down his wrist where the tough bowstring had broken the skin. "Jace, get up!"

The pointed tip whizzed past the demon's head, shattering the window on the opposite side of the landing. A satisfied rumble escaped through the demon's open jaws as it set a foot down on Jace's back, slicing the thin layers of fabric and skin open.

Jace's cry of pain was muffled against the floor when he tried to roll around but was forcefully pushed down harder into the rough surface.

"Jace!" Alec reached behind his back for the quiver. The empty quiver. When his hand clutched air, Alec threw the bow to the floor and drew his own seraph blade. It lit up with angelic light, setting fire to the fury in his features. "Get off him!"

The demon didn't even spare him a glance. Alec was too far away to stop a killing blow.

The teeth, glistening with saliva, lowered to Jace's neck to bite it off. Brandishing a knife that had been hidden until now, Jace aimed blindly behind him and made a cut in the demon's cheek.

It hissed furiously, the broken window's panes vibrating with the sound.

A battle cry worthy of honour and glory thickened the already blood-saturated air. Simon came flying faster than the speed of light, tackling the demon once again. When it lost its balance, its foot unwillingly slipping off Jace, Simon's fangs dug into its raw-boned throat. Screeching loud enough to make them all temporarily lose their hearing, the demon rose on its hind legs.

Simon's pale, scrawny body dangled around its ink-black neck like the strangest strand of pearls the world had ever seen.

The lethal claws were about to descend on him, to rip him off, when Alec drew their attention instead. He struck its chest, creating a deep gash that overflowed with ichor and spilled onto the floor in an instant. When the demon started for Alec, foaming at the mouth, white eyes bulging, Jace
stabbed a knife into its flank.

Letting go of the handle, leaving it buried in the putrefying flesh that reeked of decay, Jace yelled, "Alec!" when the demon whirled around.

Alec threw him the seraph blade and Jace caught it. Angling it up, he drove the sword straight into the demon's stomach. It screamed, almost humanly, when Jace pulled it out. He aimed to repeat the manoeuvre, but the demon moved and Jace struck its thigh instead. The blade hit bone and stuck.

Losing his grip on the sword when the leg was jerked away, Jace drew a dagger fastened to his shin that looked suspiciously like a toothpick when compared with the demon's body. "Shit!"

More ichor painted the stone beneath their feet when Alec landed a throwing knife from the opposite side. When the blade embedded itself into the demon's foot, splitting it down the middle, the demon sprung. Alec was the target and he was too slow. The blow, that came from below, sent him into the ceiling with an unmistakable thud before he landed face down on the floor.

"Alec!" Jace shouted when the flat pile of long limbs and dark hair didn't move.

The demon spun around and jumped at Jace, who threw himself back.

It made a move to jump again, when it paused, abruptly stilling. It was with a sloppy, wet sound, like soup being slurped, that Simon's mouth detached itself from the scaly, callous skin. He dropped down on his feet. Standing before the demon's heaving chest, Simon's doodled Converse became covered in the splattering flood of black liquid that was emptying itself onto the floor from the gaping hole that had been torn in its throat.

The demon began tottering, black pouring out through the palate full of teeth. As it fell on its side with a thump that shook the floor, Simon spit out the piece of jugular vein still caught in his fangs.

With one final breath, the demon's flanks ceased moving and its white eyes glazed over.

Swaying on the spot, Simon tried to take a step back from the sight when his eyes rolled back in his head and he collapsed.

"Simon!" Jace was by his side, shaking Simon by the shoulders when he didn't respond. "Simon!" Jace clapped his cheek roughly. "Hey, stop playing dead!"

"Hit him harder!" Alec urged from where he was pushing himself up to his feet. Running, or, more accurately, hobbling, Alec sank down on Simon's other side on the wet floor.

"Simon, you better wake up or Clary's going to kill you," Jace promised, rearing back his hand.

Before Jace had time to strike him, Simon's eyelashes fluttered. A shudder ran through his whole body before ichor exploded out of his mouth. When he was turned on his side, a cascade of the black liquid came out, drenching the front of his jacket as well. Alec held Simon steady as he threw up more than what should be physically possible for someone of his size.

Jace slapped his back.

"So ..." Simon managed to croak out before he began heaving again. The ichor streamed out past his lips and through his nose, making it look like he had been on the losing end of a fight with an especially vindictive octopus. When he could suck in a breath without immediately choking, Simon completed the sentence. "... gross."
A snort left Jace as his slapping turned into a gentler patting. "You'll be fine."

Simon moaned doubtfully but didn't throw up again.

Jace's gaze went over Simon and found Alec's relieved expression greeting him. When Simon sat up without any assistance, rubbing at his lips with a disgusted grimace, Jace leaned over Simon's legs and cupped Alec's neck. Alec mimicked the movement with a reflex that could only be rooted in years of habit. Jace rested his forehead against Alec's and Alec closed his eyes.

When Jace drew back, he pressed a kiss to the top of Alec's head before he let him go. Rising from his knees to his feet, Jace pulled out his stele and circled Alec. The back of Alec's head was dark and damp with blood; his hair clotted with it.

Setting the stele to the nape of Alec's neck, Jace remarked, "That was some hit, Alec. I didn't know you could fly."

Rolling his eyes with a carefree smile that he never wore otherwise, Alec said, "Just draw the iratze, Jace."

Grinning, Jace did as he'd been told. Once Jace was done, Alec rose to his feet as well and began lining out two iratzes on Jace's back where a large portion of his jacket and shirt was missing.

The sore edges of the inch deep gashes began sealing themselves back together as Alec continued with an additional pair of runes.

When Jace turned around afterwards, his eyes wandered from Alec's face stained with crimson specks stemming from the bloody nose he'd earned, down his chest where the fabric had been shredded across his heart like something had wanted to claw it out. Jace's gaze stopped on the floor where Alec wasn't putting any weight on his right foot.

"How's your leg?"

"I'll live," Alec replied. "How's your pride?"

Jace made a non-committal sound. "Well, it knocked me out, broke my seraph blade, and Simon was the one that beat it. It's safe to say that what just happened will never leave this room."

"Don't worry," Simon assured from where he was sitting by their feet, "it won't happen again. Ever. Next time you're going on a mission, I'm staying home. In bed. Forever."

"Feeling better?" Alec asked.

With a groan, Simon let his head drop heavily onto his bent knees. "This is so bringing on my PTSD."

Jace frowned at him. "You have PTSD?"

"I do now," Simon muttered into the sticky denim his forehead was pressed against.

Jace snorted a laugh and looked to Alec. But Alec wasn't looking at him. His eyes were resting on something else and the smile had dropped off his face.

Jace followed his gaze and found what it was Alec was staring at. Putting his hand on Alec's shoulder, Jace pushed him to sit. "Fix that leg before you fall over."

Surprisingly, Alec did as Jace said. He sat down beside Simon and focused on healing his injury.
Strolling across the floor, Jace came up to Magnus with a smile. "So, was she any nicer to you?"

When Magnus didn't answer, when he didn't stop staring at the carcass splayed out on the landing, Jace added, "I mean, I did find you two in a compromising situation. Don't tell me I was interrupting anything."

It was as if Jace's adrenaline high had fried his system, making it impossible for him to pick up any kind of body language. That was the only explanation why he could possibly think jokes were appropriate.

"Hey." Jace raised his voice again, but this time it sounded less gleeful. "What's wrong with your arm?"

Magnus moved well before Jace could even come close to reaching him. Clutching his arm tighter against his chest, Magnus finally shifted his eyes to set them on Jace. "Don't touch me."

Staying where he was, Jace gave him a bewildered look. "I wasn't going to."

Magnus barely heard him. His eyes fell on the two people farther away. Alec, as well as Simon, was looking at him.

Taking a step forward, knowing now that he was physically able to, Magnus left Jace. He walked past Simon and Alec, pass the pile of flesh that would soon begin to rot, and set his feet to follow the descending stairs.

"You have to cut her up," Magnus said over his shoulder in a voice that wasn't his. It belonged to someone else: a person that he'd been but wasn't anymore. "She ate it."

Through the cracked door, that had been pounded ajar by the wind's relentless fists, snow had slipped through. The fine layer of pure white powered the stone floor in front of the entrance. It was disturbed, ruffled by his footprints, when he walked through it, pushing the door farther apart from its jamb.

The air, chilled with bitterness, greeted him; bathed him in cold before he'd taken more than a step. Its power of persuasion was great and if he could've convinced himself to feel it, he would've turned back. It howled in his ears; chewed on the wounds that dripped red upon the ground. Through the shredded jacket's front, where the five evenly spaced claws had left their mark, the wind's vicious fingers caressed the shallow cuts.

The wall that he reached for when he took another step was hard against his palm. It became rough against his back when he leaned against it. The stones it was built from began tugging and pulling, catching on his clothes to keep him upright when his legs gave out and he sank down, settling into the blanket of snow.

He couldn't get up even if he wanted to. And he didn't want to.

The snow shaped around him, melting against the heat of his body, decorating his hair with wet flakes that disappeared in the tangled strands. Magnus gazed out at the endless white that suffocated everything else. He sat, and he looked, and he stared at it, at this frozen-over hell, in the company of memories of ropes and water; of flames, and blood that didn't wash away.

He remembered, even after all these years spent trying to forget, the lesson he'd learned that day when everything would forever change. Every little detail of what he'd been taught was branded into
his memory. It was the one scar that couldn't be healed by magic.

He'd been too young to understand it beforehand, but afterwards he'd known the stark difference between feeling like you couldn't breathe, and truly not being able to.

And it had nothing to do with water and how it burned inside lungs, or hands back-bound by too tight of a rope. It wasn't about scrapes and cuts from being dragged over rocky ground, or the way your voice became soundless after a while, when you'd cried long enough to lose it.

It was about love, and the loss of it once it turned into hatred.

When it was his father's hands, the only father he'd ever known, that forced him under, it had felt like he couldn't breathe. The water filling his mouth, pushing down his throat, had seemed overpowering; a vast mass intent on taking his life for itself.

But it hadn't. It had let him go and chosen another victim in his place. And when he'd stood there, drenched and shivering to his small bones, watching as his father's body fell into the river that swallowed it whole, when he'd realised that he was all alone in the world now, and for all days that would follow, that was the moment he hadn't been able to breathe anymore.

He'd fallen down at the edge of the water with the scent of burning flesh wrapping around him.

Magnus' heart beat rhythmically in his chest; the only living thing as far as the eye could see. Why it kept it up, like there was a purpose to it, he didn't understand. At some point, wouldn't it recognise the truth and give it up? When would it realise that the world, somehow, had become so twisted that death was the mercy now and living: the punishment.

He didn't pull his legs in tighter to keep some semblance of warmth. He just sat in the cold that couldn't mask the sickly sweet smell of burning that laid festering somewhere deep inside his mind.

The wind, as much as it tried to roar, couldn't cover the sound of footsteps. At the edge of his field of vision, Magnus saw a figure step out the door to then promptly stumble forward in the snow.

"There you are!" Simon greeted cheerily in a tone that almost cracked with how upbeat it was. "I just wanted to let you know we found it. Or, actually, Jace found it. I didn't really dig in, since I passed out once in Bio when we dissected a frog. I hit my head on one of the desks when I fell and got seven stitches. Anyway, we found it; the parchment."

Simon appeared to know beforehand that he wasn't going to get a reply, since he didn't leave any room for a response before he kept on babbling.

"We found other things in there, too. I don't know what she was exactly - I missed a lot, since I'm pretty sure I blacked out at some point during it - but what kind of demon thingy wants to eat us, as well as a fox?"

Ibrahim.

Magnus listened robotically as Simon went on to explain how thoroughly disgusted he'd been when Jace had pulled the red tail out of the dissected guts.

She'd eaten his mark.

"Who looks at a cute, fluffy fox and thinks, 'I want to eat it?'" Simon asked, waving his arms around as if that particular person was somewhere close by and he was encouraging them to step forward.
The lack of response, in any way, shape or form, didn't bother Simon. He quickly latched onto a new subject.

"I love winter. It's my favourite season. I've always been pasty, and you can only apply SPF 100 so many times a day from April to September before you give up and just accept your fate as a pale hermit." At the speed he was rambling, it was impressive that his voice didn't become hoarse. "So, if you think about it, it's actually lucky that I became a vampire of all supernatural things. Now I have a great reason not to go out, since I don't think there's any sunscreen that can keep me from becoming a human torch."

With a laugh that stuck out like a sore thumb in the quiet surrounding them, Simon took a moment to quiet down. Then he blurted out, "My dad died of a heart attack."

"Simon," Magnus said without looking at him. "If you're here to babysit me, I'd prefer it if you waited inside."

"What?" Simon sputtered, too quickly to even be in the remote vicinity of honest. "No, of course not. What makes you think that? Ichor just ..." He paused, as if that would help him figure out a believable lie. "... makes me nauseous."

He was a worse liar than Alec, which was quite the feat.

"You're a vampire, Simon," Magnus reminded him.

Ichor might be demon blood, but it was blood nonetheless.

Unlike the rest of them, Simon's clothes weren't torn to shreds. He didn't have anything to fiddle with. In his periphery, Magnus saw Simon's shoulders drop when he took a deep breath, as if preparing for a plunge he didn't want to have to take, and asked, "Magnus, are you okay?"

It was surprisingly easy to get to his feet on legs that had no kind of blood circulation. Stepping through the snow until Simon was somewhere behind him, Magnus stopped before he could plummet down the steep stairs leading down to the courtyard. He stood at the edge, putting his right hand, once more unbroken, against one of the columns that held up the roof above them. It secured him from accidentally falling forward when he leaned his head, that was no longer pounding with the pain of a concussion, against the weather-worn surface.

Flames, bright orange in hue, came into being from his fingertips. Dancing against the wind, they didn't touch the stone where his palm was resting, staying compliant against his skin.

He knew what Simon meant by asking that question. Magnus' healed wrist brushed against his side that looked as it always did. He was whole, in every way that counted.

"No." Magnus rubbed away the dried blood that had crusted in the corner of his mouth. The teeth behind felt loose. "I'm not okay."

And Simon, who seemed to have an endless supply of words, said nothing.

They stayed like that until the silence was broken by more footsteps. The boots halted, sound dying down for a moment again before Jace said, "We got it."

Magnus didn't look behind him. "You didn't forget anything inside?"

"No," Jace replied.
"Is Alexander with you?"

"Yeah," Alec said before Jace could answer for him. "I'm here."

Magnus nodded. "Okay." He pushed away from the column and took to the stairs without checking if the others were coming. They would follow soon enough. "Let's head back, then."

He didn't turn to see where the column had lit up; orange fire climbing swiftly towards the sky. The dark, billowing smoke was too thick to be swept away by the wind when the castle floors, in rapid succession, were overcome by a ravaging blaze.

As the fire burned the bodies inside into unrecognition, leaving only ash behind for those who'd find them, the flames cast their glow upon the blanket of snow, colouring the courtyard, and the rest of the world, in gold.

The thin moon hung shivering in the black night sky. Dustings of frost had stiffened the grass, mutating the turf of budding blades into brittle ice that crunched beneath the soles of their shoes. The moonlight that had been spilled upon the ground before them transformed the landscape into one that looked to be made of glistening glass.

The raw wilderness of the Alaskan night remained silently spreading out around them, unperturbed by the one-sided shouting match that could've roused the dead.

"Clary," Jace tried, for what had to be the fiftieth time in the last ten minutes. "Clary, come on."

She only walked faster, resting her throat that had to be sore by now.

"Would you stop trying to run from me? You're not that fast."

Clary strode as if she was determined, and highly capable, of taking home the gold in racewalking.

"Clary," Jace repeated, jogging to keep up with her. "Clary, would you-"

"No, Jace," she snarled, her voice trembling on a wavelength between fury and complete and utter rage. "I would not. I'm done doing you favours. I'm done trying to help you. I'm done. You want to die so badly, you go do that. See if I care."

"Clary," Jace said softly, aiming to add the fiftieth and one botched attempt to his growing pile of failed efforts of trying to get Clary to see his point of view.

She hissed something unintelligible in response.

"It's-" Jace began, and committed his second mistake for the night when he lightly took ahold of her arm to hinder her endeavour to get as far away from him as she could. His first had been opening his mouth to begin with.

With a violent shout, Clary shoved him back harder than she should've been able to. "Get your hand off me!"

Jace stumbled back a few steps, clearly surprised by the strength her anger gave her, but recovered quickly.

"Clary."
"Stop saying my name, Jace!" she screamed back at him. "Stop it!"

Jace's eyes fell down Clary's lips that were white where they furiously pressed together, and the jaw set hard enough to tremble, before he carefully took a step towards her. "It's going to be okay," he promised gently. "I'm not going to die."

She blinked, staring at him like he was some stranger she didn't know. "You-" Her lips parted, her shoulders dropping as the fight went out of her body as quickly as it had arrived. Her features cleared of rage, replaced by a sadness that seemed to come from somewhere deeper than the anger ever had.

Clary rubbed at her eyes with a hand that seemed to be too heavy for her to lift. "Do you know what I wish?" she asked tiredly, looking at anything but Jace. "I wish I'd never met you." Her voice was thicker than the chilly air fogging their breath, less alive than the frozen stars above. "That you hadn't walked into me outside of Pandemonium. That I hadn't followed you inside. That I hadn't seen you kill those demons. I wish my life didn't include you." Where she stood, wearily on her feet, it looked like her whole body was made up of sheer exhaustion. "But it does. It does, and I can't do anything about that." Clary took a deep breath and looked at him. "But you can leave me alone, Jace," she said, taking a step away from him, restoring the distance between them again. "I want you to leave me alone now."

With that she turned, striding even faster than before.

When she hurried past the rest of them, Simon followed behind her and soon their silhouettes had disappeared behind the cresting of the hill.

Waiting for Jace to start walking again, standing squarely in his path up ahead, Izzy asked, "What did you expect, Jace? That she'd be happy?"

Grimly passing her, Jace knocked their shoulders together as he went. "I expected you to have my back," he bit back, his face carved in stone. "We don't have a choice." His teeth gritted together when he looked ahead. "But you can leave me alone, Jace," she said, taking a step away from him, restoring the distance between them again. "I want you to leave me alone now."

"That's such a load of bullshit," Izzy said harshly when she joined up to him. "There's always a choice. You're just used to making the wrong one all the time."

Jace's head turned towards her, features cut sharp by the moonlight. "What is your brilliant plan then, Izzy?" he asked without waiting for her answer before he continued. "Huh? Anything?"

"We find another way," Izzy told him, not backing down. "That's what we do. We find another way. We don't just go around dying for the fun of it."

"You think I want to die?" Jace spat.

"Yes," Izzy said simply. "You do."

Those words appeared to take him by surprise, more than Clary's ever had. Maybe it was because, deep down, Jace was aware that eventually his actions would have consequences, or perhaps it was because Clary never shied away from sharing her feelings, openly and aloud. But Izzy never had.

Jace stopped. "I don't." He looked at Izzy as she kept on walking. "Iz, I don't."

Halting, Izzy turned around, and with a sigh that seemed to weigh her down until she could barely stand, she walked back to him. "Yes, you do," she repeated. "You want to kill him so badly that you'd die to achieve that because you want to prove to yourself that a part of you don't still love him." Izzy gripped Jace's shoulders, gently but firm, holding him in place. "And I know that you
don't want to hear this, but it's okay for you to love him. He's your dad. Despite everything he's done, and what he did to you, he's still your dad. And if some part of you love him for what he could've been, then that's okay. That's a good thing, Jace, because it proves that you're nothing like him. But killing him is not going to kill that part of you, no matter how much you want it too. You just have to learn how to live with it."

Jace's face was white. "I don't love him," he said and harshly pushed her hands away. "How could I? He's a mass murderer."

Izzy closed her eyes for a moment. "It's not just you anymore. Magnus is going to die. You already got him to kill for you and now you're going to kill him. And you don't even care." She took a breath that seemed wrung from her very bones. "If something happens, I'm not going to forgive you. Clary won't. Neither is Alec. Not even Simon will." She turned from Jace and resumed walking. "That's the choice you made."

Izzy swiftly followed where Clary and Simon had disappeared, striding purposefully, and Jace, still pale, waited a moment before he did the same.

Jace's shrinking back was still visible through the darkness once Magnus had reached the top of the hill. Farther away, already climbing a smaller knoll, a witchlight lit up Clary's red hair.

Using the moonlight as a guide, he headed after Jace. But a silhouette to his left obstructed most of the silvery beams, sending them flecking across a nearby mountain hemlock.

"What that demon said doesn't change anything, for any of us," Alec said out of the blue. He hadn't spoken a word to Magnus since they'd left Siberia. "Not for a second. You're still the same person you've always been. You know that, right?"

Of course it did. It changed everything. And whatever small pieces that were left unaltered were already black and burned and twisted. He wasn't the person he'd pretended to be, and they knew now. They knew a part of him that he didn't want to know himself.

If that didn't change anything, they were all a bunch of idiots.

"Magnus, it wasn't your fault. No one thinks that. What she said doesn't matter."

Tuning out the rest of whatever pep talk Alec had prepared to fix him, Magnus drew in the fresh air. There was nothing, no words or sentences, no peppy inspirational quotes, that could patch him together. He'd broken so long ago, so violently back then, that he didn't know where to look for the missing pieces.

The cold, rawer, yet not as bitter as it had been in Siberia, swept around him like a blanket as the trail once more began inclining upwards. Despite that it was May, and soon summer would be a fact instead of an assumption, winter reigned supreme here. Perhaps it always would, never fully letting go of the hills and valleys it commanded, crushing the following seasons down until they knew better than to try and come for its throne.

"It really-"

"I don't care," Magnus remarked absently, interrupting the Shakespearean monologue Alec was no doubt working himself up to, "about what you think, or what you know, or what you heard." He relished another breath, feeling the chilled air slip into his lungs and make a home there. "I don't care."

"Okay," Alec said in that same tone, gentle, placating. Pitying. "Okay, you don't have to care. You
just have to call it off."

He should have seen it coming. He really, really should've understood that this was what Alec had been getting at all along. It was Alec after all: the person who never ever knew when to quit.

As it was, Magnus just turned his head to look quizzically at him. "Excuse me?"

Alec met his eyes, holding his gaze softly as he clarified. "We can't do this."

Magnus stopped on the spot. Alec, seemingly having anticipated his reaction, immediately stopped as well.

"Listen to me, Magnus," he said quickly, hurrying the words out before the inevitable interruption, "we can't go through with this. It's suicide. It's going to kill you and it's going to kill Jace."

There were words on Magnus' tongue, merely waiting to be spoken, but none of them fit at the moment. So he simply looked at Alec and heard every regrettable syllable leaving his lips.

"Maybe I was wrong, maybe you could do it before we went to Siberia," Alec continued, but there was no true conviction behind it. Alec had never believed he could do this. Alec had always thought him some fragile little thing in need of protection, and now in need of saving, from himself, of all things. "But not now. You could barely walk out of there. How are you supposed to do a spell that you said just hours ago was draining enough that you needed a convergence to be able to perform it at all?"

Alec looked into his eyes, and there was so much sympathy there that it felt like Alec's gaze burned. "It's not going to work." And not in a good way.

"Alexander."

"Listen, just listen to me.""

"Alexander," Magnus repeated, saying his name like the curse it truly was, "you lost your right to preach to me the moment you decided that you knew better and stayed in that godforsaken castle. You don't get to lecture me anymore."

Of course, that pointed reminder didn't do anything to deter Alec. If anything, it spurred him on.

"You would be dead right now if we hadn't been there," he replied with more of a bite this time around.

"You almost died. Jace almost died. Simon almost died." Magnus brushed his hair out of his eyes to level Alec with a look. "I almost died because of you. And you call that, what? A success?" If that was what Alec thought of as a triumph, no wonder the Circle was still roaming free. "I never asked you to stay. I didn't ask you to risk your life for me."

"You didn't have to," Alec told him, like that was all there was to it. "That was my choice, and I'm glad I did it. You would be gone if I hadn't."

Before he had the chance to do something ill-advised, such as screaming his lungs out and attract the attention of some starving grizzly bear freshly roused from its hibernation, Magnus turned and walked away. He climbed the knoll with all the enthusiasm he could put into it, praying that Alec wouldn't try and do something as unwise as speak again.

When Alec caught up to him, he didn't waste any time in shattering Magnus' wishful illusions. "How
does that not matter?" he asked, and his voice had lost any tenderness it'd had. It was harder than steel. "How does you being alive not matter, Magnus?"

Refusing to hear it, to engage in yet another fight that was as pointless as the one they'd had a few hours ago, Magnus ignored him.

"Answer me, Magnus," Alec demanded harshly. "Right now."

Now Alec could understand commands, when he was the one that issued them. But when he'd been on the other side, when he'd been instructed to do one simple thing, he'd refused. And if he hadn't, if Alec had listened when Magnus said that he didn't need the company, or stayed outside the front door when Magnus had told them to go if he wasn't back in twenty minutes, if Alec had just stayed put in the corridor when Magnus had told him that he'd fetch Simon, none of it would've had to happen.

If Magnus hadn't had to have been focused on their safety, Caedis would've never gotten close enough to touch. He wouldn't have had to drain himself of magic just to get them out. He wouldn't have been too weak to fight back.

If he'd finished her off by himself, Simon's chin wouldn't still be stained black, Jace wouldn't have a dozen new scars to add to his already impressive collection and Alec wouldn't be slightly limping.

All of it, every single moment of it, could've been avoided.

"I killed my own parents," Magnus spat as brutally as he possibly could. "I killed my best friend. And just recently, I became the sole cause for Ibrahim being a little deader than usual, but I sure as hell am not going to be guilty for you too. You almost made me the reason why Isabelle lost her family and Clary lost hers. You did that." Magnus set his jaw hard enough that it felt like it'd crack in a minute or two. "And you did it to me."

"To save you," Alec filled in, like it was enough. "I did it to save you. Did you really think I'd just leave you there?"

Magnus barked a laugh. "Surely, it can't be the first time you've left a downworlder behind. I don't want special treatment."

That stung. Judging by the falter in Alec's step, that got to him.

"That's not fair."

"Why?" Magnus asked. "Because it's true?"

"Just because you push away, it doesn't mean I'll go," Alec bit back.

Magnus laughed again, the same joyless sound scratching his throat. "Everyone I love, or even remotely care about, is either long dead or long gone. I'm pretty sure my mailman is going to keel over any day now. Who exactly am I pushing away?" He scoffed. "You?"

Alec didn't respond to that and Magnus didn't check if he was still there beside him. If Alec was smart, he should've by now reached the conclusion that there was no point to having this argument.

"Nephilims?" If that was what it had come to, it was nothing short of pathetic. "Please tell me my life hasn't become so tragic that Shadowhunters are who I have left in my corner. That is just sad."

"Well, we are," Alec stated - apparently still there. "And that's not going to change. So keep on
acting like this all you want. It's not going to change one thing, Magnus."

The implication that he was some petulant child throwing a temper tantrum and just needed to calm down made Magnus bristle. He snapped his head towards Alec and asked loudly, "What kind of drugs are you on?"

Alec met his gaze with an unaffected expression.

"Let's make something very clear here," Magnus declared. "You're not here for me. You're here for Jace," he explained emphatically. "Isabelle is here for Jace. Clary's here for Jace. Even Simon is."

Regardless of what Izzy had said and Clary had yelled, Jace was their brother. They'd never let him do this alone. And despite Jace's and Simon's bickering, they had put their lives on the line for each other without hesitation just a few hours ago. And Alec was Jace's parabaitai; someone closer than blood. Alec would never abandon him, no matter what Jace did.

They were Jace's family, and that was how families worked: unconditionally.

"None of you would've come if Jace hadn't agreed." Magnus only had to go by Alec's less than thrilled reaction to know that, without a doubt, had Jace declined, they wouldn't be here. "And that's a good thing. Because at the end of the day, you're going to choose your kind, Alexander, and I'm going to choose mine." That was how it was, how it had always been and always would be. Downworlders and Shadowhunters would never be equals. There would always be a line drawn somewhere that couldn't be crossed. "That's how it's supposed to be."

"Is that how it is?" Alec said, arching an unimpressed brow. "Is that what we are?"

Magnus scoffed again. "We're not anything." He looked away from Alec, setting his eyes on the path ahead of them. "We're not even friends."

Alec's deep breath fogged the crisp air. "Killing him won't fix it. It's not going to undo what he did," he said, not cruel, yet not kind. "It won't bring them back."

Ignoring Alec's eyes that he could feel roaming across his skin, searching for something they'd never find, Magnus gritted his teeth forcefully enough that he wouldn't be surprised if one of them chipped. Without sparing Alec a single glance, he announced, "This conversation is over."

Magnus lengthened his stride to get away from Alec since it was generally frowned upon to choke someone to death.

Alec kept up with an ease that, had he not already been angry, would've been the catalyst.

"You can't run from this."

Magnus refused to acknowledge that he existed, least of all talking, but it didn't stop Alec.

"It's not going to go away just because you don't want to face it."

And, suddenly, it became too much.

"What do you want from me?" Magnus wheeled on him. "What do you want?"

Stopping, Magnus raised his hands to try and grasp for exactly what it was that Alec was after. But all he clutched was thin air. And Alec, regarding him silently from where he'd paused beside him, gave no answer.
"A hug?" Magnus said. "A cuddle?" At the second guess, Alec's expression hardened. The look in his eyes, whatever it'd been, was traded for something cold. He turned his face away, but Magnus followed, keeping their gazes locked.

"Some puppies and rainbows while I'm at it? I don't have that." Not anymore. It was gone, and it was never coming back. "I can't give that to you."

Alec's jaw worked before he said, in a voice that, surprisingly, wasn't laced with anger, "I'm not asking you for anything."

"You're asking me for everything!"

Alec needed him to call it off so that they could return alive to a city that was dying. To go back to New York. That was what Alec wanted.

And then, what? Return, and wait around until another body dropped? And then one more, and so on, until there was no one left to bury the dead?

To go back to an empty apartment, with its quiet walls and silent rooms, and do nothing? That was hell. Living, breathing hell.

The thought alone drained him whole; tugged at the bones keeping him upright until they weren't so immovable anymore. It left him empty, and cold, where a moment ago the roiling emotions, that'd kept him warm, had lived.

Magnus rubbed tired hands over his face.

"She wasn't supposed to die," he said into the lonely night, exhaustion weighing down the sentence. "Not like that. Not-" He pushed it down, but the air around him had changed, smelling of iron and blood. He set his eyes on the sky. "-in pain, and afraid, and alone. She deserved better. So did Ragnor."

He got lost for a moment, in the constellations that he couldn't name, and the disarray of stars. Taking a breath, he peeked his eyes away.

"I know they're gone forever, and that there's nothing I can do to change it. I know that." Magnus looked at Alec again and, with a sigh, let his shoulders drop wearily. "But I can kill Valentine. That, I can do." It wasn't enough, but it was a start. It was something, at least. "Someone has to put him down, Alexander."

Alec's face was devastating in all of its softness. Gone were the edges and harsh lines that always seemed to be there. There was no anger or disappointment in his expression. Not resignation either. It just looked like understanding. Like Alec might finally understand.

Alec took a careful step towards him. When Magnus didn't react, remaining in place, Alec reached out for him and he didn't try to move away.

The touch of Alec's palm, that always used to be warm like the sun, was freezing.

Magnus looked up at him.

"Not like this." Alec's thumb grazed against his cheekbone. It felt like ice burning a path every inch it moved, like Alec was brushing scars into his skin. "Magnus," Alec said, his voice almost softer than his touch, "not like this."
There wasn't a hope to be crushed in the wake of Alec's words. No surprise. There was just nothing. Where something should've been, there wasn't anything left. It was just gone.

And Alec had to have understood that already. He must've known what the answer would be. Yet he still tried, for some unfathomable reason.

He always did.

Taking ahold of Alec's wrist, Magnus ungently pulled his hand away. "I'm not changing my mind." He let Alec go, stiffness returning to his frame. "Not for you or anyone else." How Alec could've deluded himself into thinking that he would, Magnus had no idea. "Get over it."

Magnus turned his back on Alec swiftly and took up walking again with a renewed determination.

"I want to go home."

It wasn't the childishness of the words that made Magnus pause. It was how they came out; the way Alec sounded.

Magnus looked over his shoulder and found Alec rooted to the same spot where he'd left him. His hands were by his sides and his shoulders sagged. He looked small. Like the weight of the world had come to rest on his shoulders and his knees hadn't held up beneath the pressure.

"I'm tired," Alec said, not hindered by the crack in his voice. "And I'm scared. And I don't want you to die."

One of his hands twitched, and Alec gripped the leather of his jacket and buried his fingertips there, as if he was trying to control himself from reaching for Magnus again. Not that it would've worked, even if he had tried. They were standing too far apart.

"Magnus, I'm really scared." Alec's eyes were shiny, but it wasn't a reflection of the moonlight. "Please," he begged.

Had Magnus been able to feel it, the weight of Alec's belief that he'd change his mind for him, because it was Alec asking, it could've broken what was left of his heart.

Magnus set his eyes forward again.

"So go."

The brittle beginnings of grass were crushed beneath his feet as he walked away from Alec. "I'm not stopping you."

Alec was free to leave.

Lengthening his stride to catch up to the others before they began believing that he and Alec had fallen prey to a ravenous wolf pack, Magnus had barely made it twenty feet before something was planted directly in his way.

"Move," Magnus ordered lowly.

"No," Alec replied, meeting Magnus' stare with one of his own.

"Alexander, move!"

"I said no!" Alec shouted right back, and this time he was furious.
Fine. If that was how Alec wanted to play it, then fine. He could stay here and rot.

Without another word, Magnus briskly sidestepped Alec to go past and immediately his wrist was caught.

"Let me go!" Magnus tried to wrest his arm free but it only made Alec's grip tighten. "Alec, let me-

Magnus took a step back to gain leverage to jerk his arm away and Alec abruptly released him.

Quickly regaining his footing, Magnus glared at Alec who was unabashedly glaring back at him in return.

"What's your master plan here, exactly?" Magnus questioned cuttingly. "Hold me hostage until I do as you want?"

"I want you to tell me why I should," Alec told him in a tone that was sharp enough that there was no need for yelling. "Give me a reason to move."

Magnus averted his eyes from the train wreck standing in front of him. "You're way out of line."

"Tell me," Alec demanded.

Magnus flicked his eyes back to Alec and stared him down. "Don't push me."

He made to pass Alec again, but Alec stepped right into his path.

"I am not kidding, Alec," Magnus warned. "Get out of my way."

"No," Alec repeated bluntly. "I'm not getting out of your way. What are you going to do about it?"

It was such blatant goading that Magnus couldn't have answered even if he'd wanted to. Instead of dignifying Alec with any kind of response, Magnus angled his head in a direction that wasn't Alec's.

But not even that provided him any kind of respite, because Alec gripped his chin tightly, forcing him to turn back and look at him.

Magnus shoved his hand off.

"You hate me, Magnus," Alec reminded him, ruthlessly throwing those words back as his arm fell down to his side again. "You said so yourself. So I don't understand why you're having problems now."

Not falling for the temptation to snap back, Magnus stared at a dot right above Alec's left shoulder.

"Tell me why," Alec said.

Magnus kept his lips sealed.

Alec scoffed. "Or, let me guess, you can't answer this time either."

It struck the nerve it was supposed to, dug just a little too deep to be ignored, and it made it so easy.

Magnus snapped his eyes back to Alec. With how close they were standing, breathing the same air, the track marks, left behind by tears that Alec hadn't bothered wiping away, were visible.

"Because I don't care about you." Magnus said it simply, recklessly, and Alec blinked. "Because I
don't love you."

If he wanted to, he could lift his hand and he'd feel Alec's heartbeat beneath his palm. He wouldn't even have to move his feet.

"Because I'm not in love with you and I never will be."

And then it was too late when Alec leaned away from him.

"There's your why," Magnus told him, and Alec's eyes fell until he wasn't looking at him anymore.

But he was still standing in the way.

"It was a kiss, Alec," Magnus said, shouldering past him. "Not some epic romance."

When he walked away this time, there was no one there to stop him. There were no accompanying footsteps following behind his back as he continued upwards towards the top of mountain, and that was for the best. Alec didn't understand, and now he didn't have to try to. It was better for both of them like this.

When Magnus reached the next peak, where the faint trackway came to an end with the thick forest thinning out against the rock that had suddenly risen to create a belt of caves, he found the others waiting.

"What took you so long?" Izzy asked, rubbing her arms to keep warm. "We were about to go back to get you." Her eyes went past him. "Where's Alec?"

"I don't think he's coming."

Her lips parted. "What?"

Clary stood from the boulder she'd been perched on top of. "Alec's not coming?"

"Wait, Alec's not here?" Simon shouted from farther away where he was standing beside Jace, who seemed irritated.

"We can't do this without him," Clary said, coming to Izzy's side. Her voice rose. "Magnus, you said we couldn't do this without him!"

"There's no way he'd abandon us," Izzy said. Her gaze came back to Magnus, scrutinising. "Not in a million years. What did he say?"

Without answering, Magnus went over to where Jace was.

Simon turned towards Magnus when he reached them, his eyes round and huge. "Alec's really not coming?"

Magnus looked at Jace. The light of the moon, that was reflected in the clear water of the mountain lake close by, lit up Jace's face, but there was nothing there to see. Pulling out his new seraph blade, the soft glow of it rivalling that of the stars overhead, Jace asked, "So which cave is it?"

Before Magnus could tell him, Clary interrupted.

"Hey!" she shouted to get their attention. "Alec's here!"

And true enough, the top of Alec's head was just becoming visible behind the peak.
Jace frowned, and Simon heaved an enormous breath of relief. "Thank god he changed his mind. I really, really don't like funerals. I never know the amount of crying I'm supposed to do. Is there a memo on that that I've just missed?"

With the tense grip Jace had on the seraph blade, it looked like he was tempted to use it on Simon. "You make me want to die. Do you ever stop talking?"

Simon brushed it off with a huff. "First off," he said, heading towards the others, "I have feelings and that hurt."

Jace coughed behind his back and Simon spoke louder. "And secondly: no, I don't, which you should appreciate, considering no one else wants to talk to you."

That made Jace abruptly quiet down.

Following by his side, ignoring the way he was unmistakably trying to strangle Simon with nothing but the power of his mind, Magnus asked, "Do you have an extra witchlight?"

"Yeah," Jace muttered, "I always do."

And then he didn't say anything else, as if Magnus had asked to be polite. Clearing his throat pointedly, Magnus said, "Can I borrow one?"

Jace shot him an annoyed look. "For what?"

Magnus raised his eyebrows. "I'll give you a hint. It starts with: 'I don't', and ends with: 'have night vision."

Simon looked over his shoulder. "Don't you have ..." He wiggled his fingers at the general area of Magnus' nose.

"I have cat eyes," Magnus explained in the tone reserved for stupid questions, and small children. "It doesn't mean I'm an actual cat."

"But what are you going to use it for?" Jace questioned in a manner that strongly suggested he was much dumber than he could possibly be. "Interior decoration? It only responds to Shadowhunters."

"Oh, dear god," Magnus sighed, "just hand me one, Jace."

"Fine," Jace agreed at last, rummaging through his pockets, "but it won't work. Just use your magic."

Magnus extended his hand, waiting. "I'm not wasting it on that."

With a roll of his eyes, making it abundantly clear what he thought of Magnus' intelligence, Jace dropped the flat stone in his upturned palm.

It was smooth, warm to the touch where it had rested against Jace's body. Magnus closed his hand around it and it immediately began glowing. Light, with the colour of fresh blood, shone through the spaces between his spread fingers.

"Huh," Simon remarked as they came up to the others. "You were wrong, Jace." Sidling up to Izzy, he sent a smug smile Jace's way. "There's a shocker."

Not paying any attention to Simon, Jace's forehead creased when he gazed at Magnus' hand. "That's not possible. How are you doing that?"
Izzy, tilting her head to get a better look, said, "Why is it red?"

"Have any of you read your history?" Magnus asked, though he highly doubted it. When Izzy just continued tilting her head, as if it would make sense if only she could see it upside down, and Jace gave him a sceptical look, Magnus said, "You do realise that warlocks existed long before Shadowhunters, don't you?"

"It's just odd. I've never even heard about it." Izzy frowned at him. "What else can you do?"

"Weren't we in a hurry?" Alec cut in biting. "Are we supposed to stand here all night listening to you talking?"

Izzy, flicking her eyes over to him, looked taken aback by the ice in his voice.

"Alec," Jace interrupted on her behalf, "you're mad at me, not Iz. Don't take it out on her."

Jerking the bow over his head, Alec snapped, "Are we going or what?"

Jace arched an eyebrow. "Magnus said you weren't coming." He watched Alec closely. "Change your mind?"

Alec set his eyes on Jace, levelling him with a withering glare. "I'm here, aren't I?" Snatching an arrow from the refilled quiver, Alec put all of his focus on nocking it into place.

With a shake of his head, Jace turned to Magnus. "Which cave?"

In the low light, Simon squinted at the tapered rock formation. "I always mix-up if it's stalagmites or stalactites that grow from the floor."

"Shush," Clary told him.

Despite her hushed tone, it resounded between the cathedral-esque walls, echoing against the ceiling that was shrouded in both darkness and a distance too great above them to be perceived. For all they knew, the cavern could go upwards for miles upon miles, rising and never coming to an end.

Once the echo disintegrated - the word knocked one too many times against the jagged rock surrounding them to hold together - the eerie silence returned. It wasn't a natural quiet. The opening into the cavern had been left far behind them, yet still a soundless wind dragged its dumb fingers across their unshielded throats and bare cheeks; the scuffing of their shoes the only thing disturbing the stillness of the stale air.

Loudly fidgeting with his jacket, Simon cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Just for the record, so someone has said it, if this was a horror movie-"

"Shut up, Simon," Izzy singsonged from her position in front of him.

"I'm just saying-"

"Shut up, Simon," Jace said from his left, decidedly less sing-songy.

As they ventured further on, continuing deeper into the bowels of the cavern, Simon's consistent commentary thankfully went on intermission. The welcomed silence aided their concentration, sharpening their senses until the faintest exhale sounded like a gun going off.
Even with the way they were spread out, with Magnus, Clary and Izzy making up the front, while Alec, Jace and Simon kept watch on the way they'd come from, the darkness wasn't warded off by the witchlights. The perpetual blackness that dwelled between the walls was barely penetrable, only parting enough to provide them with a visibility that was, at best, fifty feet.

Every step they took made new shapes emerge from the dark. Towering columns, twisting where the stalactites had melded with the stalagmites to form the structures, climbed around them, reaching for that invisible ceiling.

There was a sharp curse, and then the unmistakable clinking of metal hitting stone.

"Simon," Alec growled furiously.

Without caring about the murderous expression aimed at him, Simon clenched harder at Alec, his trembling hand beginning to shake Alec's to the degree that Alec almost dropped the bow as well.

"I don't like this," Simon announced gravely.

"Then maybe you should let me go before I rip your arm off," Alec told him, shoving away Simon's clinging fingers and bending down to retrieve the arrow from where it had fallen.

As soon as Alec was standing upright, Simon was clutching forcefully at him again.

"I'm serious," Simon insisted quietly, like he feared that if they stayed here too long it would become their tomb. "This place gives me the creeps. And not the good kind."

"So am I," Alec replied, freeing himself of Simon for a second time. "And you give me those."

"There's a good kind of creeps?" Izzy asked.

Jace closed his eyes like he was in physical pain. "Next time, I will personally smother whoever brings the vampire."

"You're such an asshole," Simon told him sincerely.

"Next time you commit suicide?" Alec questioned. "I hate to break it to you, Jace, but that is kind of a one time thing." Alec shot Jace a look that matched his tone perfectly. "But I understand that that might be too difficult of a concept for you to grasp."

Jace rolled his eyes long enough that it looked like he was suffering a seizure. "This is going to be that thing, isn't it," he asked, "that you're going to bring up every single day until I'm dead?"

"Not that long then," Alec responded promptly.

And their stride, that had slowed to a walk, came to a standstill.

"That's rich coming from-" Jace began, but Alec cut him off.

"From me?" Alec spat it out, like the words were on the verge of choking him. "Are you kidding me? When have I ever acted as selfishly and idiotically as you're doing right now? You don't think, Jace. You never do. I'd be surprised if you even had a brain to start with."

"So because I'm actually doing what we're supposed to be doing - our duty - I'm-"

Letting his hand fall down to his side, spreading the scarlet shine down his leg, Magnus pinched the bridge of his nose before he looked over his shoulder. Jace and Alec were already several steps
behind.

"What are you two, five?" Magnus asked. "Would you stop bickering and start moving?"

Neither of them paid him any attention, but at least Jace's hearing seemed to work. Closing his mouth on whatever retort he'd been about to send Alec's way, Jace lowered his voice and concurred. "Magnus is right."

"He really isn't," Simon supplied from the sideline where he'd plopped himself down on the ground, settled in for a lengthy fight.

Alec ignored Simon's input as well. "You're going to die, Jace," he said, sounding out each syllable as if he was trying to teach Jace how to say the words, "and not in some abstract way, but in the actual 'not living anymore' way. What specific part of that isn't going through your thick skull?"

The muscles in Jace's jaw tightened, and it seemed that his patience, as far as Alec was concerned, had run out. "My thick skull?!" Jace shouted, and all of their combined effort to not announce to everything within a ten-mile radius that they were here was negated in half a second.

"Jace-" Magnus tried to warn, but Izzy cut him off.

"Let them."

Magnus looked at her, where she was ambling onward, Clary a few paces ahead.

"Yes," Magnus agreed, mirroring her slow pace, "let them scream themselves hoarse while we're in the hub of a convergence. Why didn't that occur to me?"

Izzy shook her head at him through the dark. "No one forced you to bring us here," she reminded him. "You asked us to come. Deal with it."

He'd missed the beginning of what must've been a truly epic retort from Alec, since it ended with the immortal words, "... not possible to be this fucking stupid!"

Magnus silently cocked his head at Izzy.

She glanced at him for a moment. "It didn't, at some point, cross your mind that perhaps we wouldn't be as keen as you are to kill our brother?" Abruptly, Izzy stopped and turned to fully face him with her electrum-whip in one hand and a seraph blade in the other. "I mean, what were you thinking, Magnus? Were you thinking?"

Not feeling especially excited at the prospect of a third lecture in as many hours, Magnus decided not to give her the opportunity. But as he kept strolling forward, Izzy grabbed his arm.

He immediately paused to pull away, shaking off her tight grip. "What exactly is the problem with your family and touching?" he asked coolly. "Don't touch me."

"Guys ..."

"I get Jace," Izzy said, holding his gaze firmly. "He's so far gone he doesn't even realise that he's lost his damn mind, but you know better." She pressed her lips together. "You're supposed to know better." Without lipstick to conceal it, it looked like her teeth had already done a number on them. "What the hell are you doing?"

Izzy looked at him like she expected more of an answer than the silence she received.
Dear god, what had he done in a previous life that was so unspeakably horrible that this was somehow his life? Had he burned down an orphanage? Drowned kittens? Tripped old ladies in the street? Obviously, it must've been something beyond horrendous for his punishment being this: stuck in a cavern with four Nephilims and a skittish vampire.

Turning to keep going before Izzy began yet another tirade that she oddly enough seemed to believe he'd actually pay attention to, Magnus was hindered by Clary backing straight into him.

When she didn't say anything, as if she didn't even realize that she was trying to mould her back against his shoulder with all of her might, Magnus frowned at her. "Clary?"

Grabbing blindly, Clary smacked his cheek before she located his chin. Clenching it between her fingers, most likely leaving bruises where her nails pressed into the skin, she turned his head towards the direction she was facing.

Following where her eyes were fixed on something, Magnus peered into the dark. Clary's witchlight was resting on the ground a few feet ahead where it had been dropped, and despite the hazy glow that the seraph blade that she had aimed in front of her provided, there was nothing there to see but darkness.

Trying to step forward to get a better look at whatever it was that she was staring at, her nails buried deeper when she held him back. Judging by the stinging, it wouldn't be surprising if she'd torn the skin.

"Clary?" Magnus asked quietly, taking ahold of her wrist to pull her hand away from his face. Her fingertips dug, clinging impossibly tighter when she refused to let him go.

On her other side, Izzy passed her cautiously.

"Izzy," Clary whispered, but with both of her hands occupied, she couldn't grab her.

With her blade raised, Izzy stepped past where the circle of Clary's seraph blade's light stopped short and used her own to illuminate the darkness beyond.

Izzy began sweeping the sword from the right to the left, slowly revealing nothing more than the expanse of the exact same dull rock that surrounded them. She'd almost completed a circle, the tip of the sword nearly pointing back at Clary, when something contrasted against the monochromatic landscape.

At the short distance, it looked like a rejected piece from an untalented sculptor. The statue, stark white despite the dirty moisture clinging to every other surface, was standing over seven feet in height, its stick-like legs crooked and the skeletal shoulders hunched. The head, if there was one, was bent forward, out of sight.

Magnus ripped away Clary's hand but she fought back, grabbing the collar of his jacket and pulling tight enough to choke him.

Izzy took a step closer to the statue.

There was a sound like that of a stiff neck being cracked, and then the crafted bones began moving. Double jointed fingers uncurled by the statue's sides, spreading. The shoulders rolled as the head, the front of it, became visible.

A black ink-like substance was trickling down the fleshless cheeks from the empty sockets where eyes should have been.
"Izzy," Simon suddenly called from where he was still sitting, much farther down the passage. "What's that?"

Its mouth opened wide.

The shriek entered their bloodstream, rocking their bones, and made them collapse to their knees.

The synapses in his brain were bursting, setting him on fire from the inside. Pressing his palms against his ears as hard as he could, digging his nails into his head, Magnus screamed. There was an audible 'pop' when it felt like his eardrums ruptured.

He was still screaming when his palm was yanked away.

"Go!" someone shouted across the noise. "Go, go, go!"

Hauling him to his feet by nothing but his hand, Clary jerked him along when she began running in the direction of the voice.

"Izzy, duck!" Alec called from where he was ahead of them, firing off arrows.

"Go, Alec! Go!" Izzy cried from behind. "It's collapsing!"

"Alec!" Jace screamed from where he was trying to pull Simon with him while keeping up speed. "Come on!"

Letting one last arrow fly, Alec spun around and raced after Jace.

The walls around them were reverberating with the deafening sound, vibrating when the echo that bounced between the surfaces grew louder and louder. The foundation beneath their feet quaked like it was going to split in two.

Pebbles had begun detaching from the ceiling, clattering down onto the stone floor at the time Alec reached Jace. Yanking Simon's arm around his neck, and wrapping his own around his waist, Alec's and Jace's combined effort didn't leave Simon any choice but to keep up with their punishing pace. But Simon struggled, his chest heaving as if he couldn't breathe properly.

When they slid around a sharp bend in the road, Jace almost slamming straight into the wall before he straightened up, Clary's fingers slipped from Magnus' when she sped up.

The journey that had taken them over twenty minutes going into the convergence, took them less than ten to run at breakneck speed.

They came around another bend, and then the opening, that looked small at the distance still left for them to cross, became visible.

There was a deafening crack when a nearby column snapped in the middle and tipped over.

"Go faster!" Clary shouted, passing Alec, Simon and Jace.

There was another crack, loud enough to resonate through blood and bone, and the front of the cavern began caving in.

"Hurry!" Alec cried.

But Clary, who was leading the race for their lives, was still a good hundred feet away from reaching the outside, and everyone else even farther behind. They weren't going to make it out.
Though Clary didn't seem to notice that it was too late. She ran without caring about the slab of rock that had become detached from the ceiling and was aimed to crush her skull.

"Stop!" Jace screamed. "Clary!"

But she was too close, and there was nothing that could be done.

The thundering of splitting stone was pounding in Magnus' ears, his legs moving slower and slower by each step. Alec and Simon and Jace were far away, and Clary even farther. With his breath lost, and black, tantalising spots dancing before his eyes, Magnus separated his fingers.

A golden wall, shimmering and humming, spread all around the cavern, reaching the ceiling so high above before it moved forward like a blast wave. As soon as the magic touched Jace's still running feet, he was launched away from it. Simon and Alec followed when they were thrown forward. At the last second, a moment before she was struck by the merciless rock, the wall reached Clary and sent her straight outside.

And then the whole world came crashing down as rock met rock in an ear-shattering collision, and the only way outside slammed shut.

Chapter End Notes

So ... how are those shovels looking?

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