The Great Repression
by CryptidBane (Impetus)

Summary

When Alec Lightwood masturbates for the first time in eight years, he finds himself a bit infatuated with the camboy. Good thing he’s hired as aforementioned camboy’s fake boyfriend.

Notes

I just REALLY wanted Camboy!Magnus and Suppressed Virgin!Alec but it also has a stalker in it, so PLEASE BE AWARE that this fic will include events that may be triggering. Please take care to keep your best interests in mind.

Thank you to my betas Toughpaperround and La_Muerta!!! You both saved my life and this fic! They caught all of my mistakes and gave me some great suggestions for improvement!

Also a huge thanks to my artist Dimshums!!! I’m so enamored with their work and it really made me so happy to see!

See the end of the work for more notes.
He was born and baptized Alexander Gideon Lightwood: the treasured eldest child of the Lightwood family, a family with a level of prestige matched only by its wealth and piety. He was first given communion at seven and confirmed at fourteen years old.

At the age of sixteen, Alexander Gideon Lightwood realized that he was gay.

At the age of twenty-two, Alexander Gideon Lightwood came out to his family.

At the age of twenty-five, Alexander Gideon Lightwood is a single virgin with a strained relationship with his father and a hand down his pants.

Sex and masturbation are okay. Alec reminds himself that they are, time and time again. He’s walked in on Izzy and Jace in many compromising situations, and neither of them have been struck down by God.

Then again, neither of them are gay. Not that he knows of anyway.

Alec pulls his hand out of his boxers and sets it innocently on top of his plain navy sheets. To ignore the persistent throbbing beneath said sheet, he thinks of how many things he has to accomplish the next morning. He will wake up with the sun to go for a run. Upon returning, he will shower and make breakfast. After that, it’ll be time to head to work and shove said breakfast into the hands of his siblings who will undoubtedly arrive late, hungover, and hungry.

It’s a Thursday night, and Alec knows his siblings are out at the bars they tried to drag him to. So he settles deeper into his bed. The weather is getting cold, and he’s had a long day.

A training demonstration had gotten out of hand, and Alec did not remember fake blood being quite so disgusting. He doesn’t even know how or why Izzy brought it into the facility.

Frankly, Alexander Gideon Lightwood is exhausted.

And his cock is still hard in his plain black boxers.

He swallows down the desperation that tugs at every inch of his long limbs and grips the discipline he’s woven into every fiber of his being. Alec manages to stay strong until he’s sitting with his laptop open, cocoa butter lotion at his side, and a Jace-recommended porn site typed into the search bar.

Alec’s dick aches in approval as years of conditioning scream bloody murder in his head. He hasn’t jerked off since he was seventeen and at the peak of puberty, but his hands press enter and click through until he finds something. The first couple of videos are everything Alec expects from porn, gratuitous moaning and faked orgasms, but he bites his lip and reaches back under the blankets.

Ten minutes pass and Alec has yet to get through a single video.

“Fuck,” he grumbles under his breath. For some reason that Alec cannot fathom, watching men have sex with each other is not doing it for him. Maybe it’s because he’s really just that monogamous. He knows rationally that they’re paid and aren’t in committed relationships, but it feels like he’s watching something he shouldn’t. It’s intimate. Despite the fact that these men are
putting on a show for an audience, Alec simply cannot bring himself to watch.

So he decides to call it a night. He still has a raging erection, and maybe it is because of that erection that he notices something on the sidebar.

“The Great Bane is live! Click here now!”

The message flickers beneath a loop of video featuring a beautiful man easing onto the largest dildo Alec has ever seen in his life.

He clicks.

***

Alec isn’t sure if he has a type, but if he does, The Great Bane is exactly his type. It also turns out that watching the man stretch himself open and flirt with the camera is doing what all of the other porn should have done. A small navel piercing moves with every breath the camboy takes, twinkling in the bright lights and begging for Alec’s tongue.

An airy gasp steals all of Alec’s breath. Alec’s hand glides along his cock and down over his balls when the sound of change rings from Alec’s speakers. The man on his screen sits up a bit farther and squints dark eyes as if reading something.

“Thank you for your kind donation, BigBear77,” The Great Bane coos. He pairs the open gratitude with another finger in his ass and a soft moan that has Alec’s dick throbbing almost angrily.

A quick glance to the comment section confirms Alec’s suspicions. The Great Bane personally thanks tippers.

Before Alec even realizes what he is doing, he retracts his hand from his underwear and begins creating an account. In his haste, Alec doesn’t give much thought to his username and uses a jumble of letters as his password.

It’s only after he’s confirmed all of his information and submitted a tip that he realizes what he’s done. The sound of change jingles hollowly in Alec’s ears as he watches The Great Bane’s eyelids lower.

Warm-looking skin stretches over taut muscles and Alec is weak. He sucks in a breath, unable to keep himself from stroking his erection despite the anxiety he feels.

With deft fingers, the naked man lubes the dildo in his hand. After thoroughly slicking the bright blue behemoth cock, The Great Bane turns his back to the camera and begins the slow slide down its length. He fucks himself shallowly until he’s ready and sinks down a little more. The camboy bottoms out and looks over his shoulder with a painted fingernail pressing against his spit-glistened lips.

The Great Bane opens his beautiful mouth.

“Thank you so much for your kind, first donation, Alexander,” he croons. “I hope to see you again soon.”

Alec cums.
Alec wakes up filled with dread. He treads carefully through his apartment as he gets ready to go out for his usual run. At every street corner, he checks both ways three times before finally crossing. Once he makes it to a trail he favors, he stares resolutely at the ground in front of him and holds hope that he won’t be run over by an errant bicyclist. A stressful hour passes, and Alec manages to make it back to his apartment without loss of limb or anything worth noting. He just barely smothers the sigh of relief as he steps into the shower.

The last time he had tried exploring the more carnal aspects of humanity, he was seventeen years old. He had been horrified the next day when Jace broke his arm and Izzy’s skateboard was stolen. Max lost his favorite toy. Maryse has been beside herself as Max wailed for an hour straight.

Alec tried to burn sage around his dick, and ended up with nothing but singed pubes for his trouble.

It was God punishing him. It had to be. And thus came his eight years of complete and utter celibacy—until last night.

This morning has been surprisingly easy, but he is still a gay man more than paying for his late night sins in anxiety alone. But the world waits for no one. The world especially does not wait for over-cautious men expecting to be set ablaze by holy entities.

Alec knows that he’s being a tad ridiculous. After he had come out, both Izzy and Jace had been more than supportive. When they coaxed out a confession of his guilt to both of them after a long night of alcohol, they both gaped at him open-mouthed and proceeded to laugh before soothing his wounded ego with ice cream.

He appreciated the attempt at reassurance, but it didn’t wipe away the guilt. So now, despite all of his rationale and his separation from the mentality that stifled him, Alec still waits for the hand of God to eradicate his existence.

When he shows up for work, he half expects his father to appear in every shadow and demand to know what he’s done. It turns out that his father is absent per usual, and his mother greets him with a hug like always. So Alec makes it to his office with coffee in hand and his entire self intact.

His father and an undue amount of filial piety forced him into a position heading one of the Lightwood Corporation’s branch companies. It’s no secret that Robert uses his job to keep track of him. A small part of Alec still craves approval, even if Robert insists on calling everyday to tell him about eligible daughters of his many successful colleagues.

His siblings and mother stand by him. So despite how it all happened, Alec actually likes his job. Training and coordinating security detail for politicians, celebrities, and anyone else with the money is a surprisingly satisfying way to direct his energy.

It’s nothing short of a miracle, but Alec has lived through too much in his short life to take anything for granted. A sip of coffee, and Alec dives headfirst into his work.

When both Jace and Izzy lurch into his office, Alec waves a hand at the lukewarm egg and bacon sandwiches sitting next to their assignment packets for the day.

“Magnus Bane?” Isabelle smirks, eyebrow raised and shoulders back. “Sounds sexy.”
“Magnus Bane sounds like a stripper name,” Jace mutters around a mouthful of food.

“Mr. Bane is a new client,” Alec reminds them. “We received the inquiry last week. Apparently he’s been on the receiving end of some unwanted attention, and he’s got the money to afford us.”

“Stalker?” Izzy asks as she skims the notes Alec provided.

“Sounds like it,” Alec shrugs. He stands and opens the office door. “Finish your food. Bane’s coming in for his consultation in five minutes, and I’ve got a call with dad, so I’ll join you in about twenty.”

“You got it, boss!” Jace calls cheerily as Alec closes the door behind him.

***

The call is a complete waste of Alec’s time. He sits on one side of a desk while his mother sits on the other. In silence, they both listen to his father make sure that Alec knows to be at the big get together in the Hamptons that weekend.

“You will be escorting Lydia Branwell.”

“Robert,” Maryse cuts in. “I believe Alec will be busy this coming weekend.”

“Doing what, exactly?” Robert asks. His voice brooks no room for argument as he continues, “What is more important than attending this event with a beautiful young lady like Lydia?”

I don’t know, maybe the fact that I’m gay? Alec thinks.

“We have a new client, and we are working on the logistics of his security detail now. He requested our best, so I will likely be assigned to the project,” Alec says instead.

Alec’s words are met with silence until Robert’s voice booms from the phone once more.

“Fine,” Robert snaps. Then the line goes dead.

The dial tone fills the air with tension until Maryse finally reaches out and returns the phone to its dock.

“Alec, honey,” she says, laying a comforting hand on his arm. “Go meet your client. I will call Lydia and let her know that you’re indisposed this weekend...and any that may come after. She’s a practical woman. She’ll understand.”

Alec nods and shoots his mother a grateful smile. He gives her a quick kiss on the cheek and sets out to meet the client that saved him from a weekend in the Hamptons with his father.

***

Alec pauses outside the conference room when he hears raucous laughter. He checks the placard to confirm that this is where the coordinator sent the client. Raj said “Meeting Room B” in the email, and the placard says “Meeting Room B.” Alec squares his shoulders and opens the door.
He begins to introduce himself when Magnus Bane looks up at him with winged eyes and glossy lips. A red blazer, tight black pants, and an abundance of jewelry adorn Magnus’ form. He’s a far cry from naked, but Alec’s heart still thuds in his chest.

“There’s a great brunch place on Atlantic--Ah, Alexander Lightwood I presume?”

Thank you so much for your kind donation, Alexander.

The Great Bane. Magnus Bane.

“Alec,” Alec wheezes. Magnus raises a brow and appraises him with a pleased expression.

“He’s more handsome than you said he would be,” Magnus murmurs to Izzy.

Izzy shrugs and shoots back a conspiratorial grin.“Didn’t want to oversell.”

“You can’t oversell beautiful eyes like that,” Magnus says with a flourish in Alec’s general direction. Painted nails catch the light, and Alec swallows drily. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Suddenly, Magnus is standing in front of Alec and holding out a hand for formal introduction. Alec grasps it awkwardly.

“Nice to meet you too, Mr. Bane.”

Magnus smiles and gives Alec a flirtatious wink. “Call me Magnus.”

Magnus Bane sat on a dildo the size of Alec’s forearm last night. Magnus Bane is also gorgeous in person.

At the age of twenty-five, Alexander Gideon Lightwood is a single virgin, has a strained relationship with his father, and is holding the hand of the man he masturbated to.

God really does hate him.
Magnus skin is warm against his, and Alec promptly forgets who he is and what he is supposed to be doing.

Behind Magnus, Alec knows there is a large window that takes up most of the wall space. It looks out over the city. To Magnus’ left, Alec remembers a table surrounded by chairs, one of which might still smell like Magnus’ cologne. To Magnus’ right, there is a plant that Simon, a friend of Jace’s girlfriend, Clary, insisted on naming “Jimi, J-I-M-I.” Alec still isn’t sure why Simon insisted on naming it Jimi, but the plant is three times larger than it used to be, and Alec is a little concerned that it’s going to take over the entire conference room. Alec hears Jace clear his throat from somewhere by the door. Jace never sits during conferences, and Alec remembers that he’s usually sitting across from his clients by now.

With an awkward cough, Alec manages to stop shaking Magnus’s well-manicured hand. Izzy grins at Alec from where she’s sitting, but she doesn’t keep his attention for long. The rings on Magnus’ fingers glint and draw Alec’s gaze upward toward gold-lidded eyes. Although he knows little about it, Alec can tell that the blending is superb.

This man is not only a dildo aficionado, but also a makeup expert, and Alec is officially convinced that there’s nothing that Magnus can’t do.

Jace sneezes, and Alec finds himself back into the present. Alec chuckles and pulls back, a little sheepish. Magnus steps away, and through his disappointment, Alec notes that the corners of Magnus’ eyes crinkle when he smiles.

“Well, Mr. Lightwo--”

“Alec!” Izzy interrupts eagerly. She flashes Magnus a beatific smile. Both of the men turn to face her as she speaks again. “Call him Alec,” she says, giving Alec a hard stare before turning back to open the file she’d left on the table. She settles in and pretends to read when Magnus turns to look back at Alec expectantly.
“Right...uh, feel free to call me whatever you want, Mr. Bane,” Alec ventures slowly. It takes one look at Isabelle’s face to realize that he has either said the perfect thing—or the worst thing imaginable. Magnus laughs.

“Please, I prefer Magnus,” he says with a light flourish of his hands. “Well then, darling, shall we get back to business?”

Alec Chokes on his spit as Magnus returns to his seat. Each of Magnus’ movements carry an effortless elegance that Alec had once thought unique only to Izzy, and surely Alec is dying.

“I, uh, that’s not what I meant.”

“I don’t know, man, you might want to get used to him calling you that,” Jace says from where he stands against the wall. Alec looks over at his brother as the blond waves the file in the air. “You looked over this, right?”

“Yes,” Alec confirms. This, at the least, he can do without distraction. “I went through it again this morning.” He holds up his own file with all of the documents and information he’d received from Magnus’ manager, Ragnor Fell. Maybe Jace was onto something. Magnus Bane definitely sounds like a pornstar name, and Ragnor Fell definitely sounds like the name of a pornstar’s manager.

“Then you know that the best option is to give him personal security detail until Fell can sort out all of the legal stuff,” Jace says. Alec looks at him with a brow raised, and Jace nods to Izzy. “We talked to Magnus a bit, and I think we’ve come up with a solution.” A knowing smile settles on Jace’s lips, and Alec suddenly doesn’t want to hear whatever else Jace has to say. "Hey, Izzy. Do you want to tell Alec the rest, or should I?” When Alec turns to Izzy, she wears an expression that usually comes with misadventure and consequences.

“Magnus works as a pornstar.”

“I’m a camboy, dear,” Magnus says gently.

I know, Alec thinks.

“And?” Alec asks instead.

“He told us that he’s had this issue before and that while all of the paperwork is being figured out, he’s found that the best solution is to reject them without rejecting them,” Izzy shrugs. Her long nails pull at a loose thread in the arm of the chair. “Which is where you come in!”

Alec waits for her to continue. She doesn’t.

“What she means to say is that I’ve never been...courted by any of my past stalkers quite like this one, but I’ve managed this long by taking myself off the market so to speak,” Magnus says carefully. “Your service was suggested to my manager by a friend and you’re well known for a quiet and thorough job. I enjoy my line of work and would rather keep my professional proclivities to myself. Having a bodyguard might...draw more unwanted attention.” Magnus pauses, as if considering how to continue. Finally he draws in a breath. “When I brought up the issue, your siblings offered a somewhat interesting solution.”

“He needs a fake boyfriend,” Jace deadpans.
Alec’s heart soars.

“Or girlfriend!” Magnus chips in helpfully. “I’m not opposed to anyone you may have available.”

Alec’s heart plummets.

Izzy is the obvious choice. Alec has a hot zero experience points and Alec has unwillingly witnessed at least ten lovers come and go from her room at questionable times. And those were only the ones foolish enough to get caught. Alec smothers the hope that still stirs in his stomach and waits for her to speak.

“I think Alec should take this case,” Izzy says. Alec’s jaw drops. “He’s the best,” Izzy tells Magnus proudly. Alec manages to shut his mouth in time to attempt a smile when Magnus sends him a cursory glance.

“Yeah, except for last night when I whooped his ass during training,” Jace smirks. Alec opens his mouth, but Izzy beats him to it.

“Sure, Jace. Since you’re the best, why don’t you just go tell Clary that you’ll be dating Magnus for the next couple months,” Izzy rolls her eyes. Jace blanches.

“Alec did kick my ass yesterday morning,” he admits with a shrug of the shoulders. “I guess you could say that we’re evenly matched.”

“Glad to know that you’re willing to put aside your pride for my well-being,” Magnus says drily. Alec moves to reassure him before seeing the amused curl of Magnus’s soft-looking lips. “I do have to admit, Alexander is much more my type than you are. Besides, I do think this whole ordeal would be made easier if I have someone beautiful to look at.” Magnus winks at Alec, and Alec tries to swallow only to find that he can’t.

“Alexander?” Izzy repeats. She leans on the table and taps a finger to her lips thoughtfully before nodding. “It’s probably better for you to use Alexander. If you call him ‘darling’ again, he might die.”

“Iz!” Alec hisses. He can feel the heat and rush of blood as the blush hidden under his collar begins its ascent up his neck and to his cheeks. “Um, Mr. Bane-”

“Magnus,” Magnus reminds him genially.

“Magnus,” Alec obliges. “Are you sure that you’re ok with this? This will be an invasive security detail, and I’m sure there are other options for the situation.”

“Well, if you don’t want to date me, Alexander, just say so,” Magnus says with a pout. His expressive golden-brown eyes peer up at Alec from beneath thick curled lashes.

“No, that’s not it,” Alec says hurriedly. The pitiful look Magnus wears is unfair, and Alec is painfully gay. “I just meant to say that I’m sure that we have some less...experimental and personal ways of making sure you’re safe.”

“I’m all for experimental and personal,” Magnus replies. “The whole black suit, black tie, and
“black shoes security detail is rather drab, is it not?”

Alec removes a hand from his black pants’ pocket and runs his fingers along his black shirt and tie as he shifts in his scuffed, black shoes.

“I think it would be great to get more diverse experience for us,” Izzy says. “We’ve only participated in those *drab* cases, and I think it’s time for us to branch out. It’s time to try new things.” As if her words aren’t enough, she catches Alec’s gaze before standing. “Plus, with Alec assigned to you so closely, Jace and I can take on other clients.

“It’s settled then!” Jace exclaims. Alec glares at Jace who ignores his betrayed expression. “Well, Magnus, meet your new boyfriend.”

“Alexander Lightwood,” Magnus says grandly. “It truly is a pleasure.”

***

A knock at the door ignites the crushing anxiety that grips Alec’s gut. He just barely holds in the sigh of relief as Raj opens the dark wooden door and pokes his head inside.

“Mr. Lightwood, Mr. Bane is almost done with all of the documentation and payment. Would you like me to send him here after he’s finished?” Raj’s eyes dart to the paper-covered surface of Alec’s large mahogany desk. Alec shifts in his seat and knocks his knee against the bottom left drawer that always refuses to stay shut.

“Yes, that’s fine,” Alec says through clenched teeth. Raj nods in acknowledgement and turns to leave without closing the door behind him. Alone again, Alec rubs his knee and looks over Magnus’ schedule for the third time in the last ten minutes. Alec knows that Isabelle and Jace interfered, blatantly, but their heavy-handed suggestion is actually quite reasonable. He’d been trying to figure out the best way to provide protection without interrupting Magnus’ obligations. For a camboy, Magnus spends most of his day away from home, returning when night falls.

Alec doesn’t see any studios mentioned anywhere on the itinerary, so the likelihood is that Magnus does in fact shoot at home. Since Magnus would prefer discretion, it does seem only natural for him to be Magnus’ boyfriend. Or pretend to be anyway. Alec lets out an exasperated groan and drops his head into his hands.

One day he’s masturbating for the first time in eight years, and the next, he’s in a fake relationship. What’s after that? A real relationship? Actual sex? Marriage? It’s a strange sort of masochism that has Alec wondering what it would be like to do all of these things with Magnus. He supposes, in a way, he’ll find out.

A deep breath in and Alec manages to bring his imagination back under control. He hears a playful series of knocks, and the rings on Magnus’ fingers wink at Alec under the harsh hallway lighting. Despite the obvious invitation, Magnus waits without stepping inside.

“Come in,” Alec calls. He pats himself on the back when he manages to smile as Magnus sweeps into his office. Alec gestures to the chairs in front of his desk and tries his best to ignore the sway of Magnus’ hips. Magnus sits comfortably against the leather seat before looking at him with a tilt of the head. Alec’s smile falters as Magnus’ brows furrow in concern.

“Alexander, are you quite alright?” Magnus’ voice is soothing and too intimate now that they’re
face-to-face. Alec prefers to keep his office relatively dark. The lighting in his office is afforded mostly by a window behind his mildly squeaky chair and the low desk lamp he keeps for when the sun sets. In the soft light, Magnus’ beauty is almost suffocating.

“Yes, I’m fine,” Alec says. Magnus looks relieved but unconvinced. “Why, is something wrong?”

“Not at all,” Magnus hums. “I was simply concerned because you look...well, you look like you’re in pain.”

Alec’s tight smile droops at the corners.

“Ah, are you sure you’re alright? Can I get you something? Maybe a granola bar? I always keep something in my bag,” Magnus says again, reaching into the aforementioned bag and letting out a low triumphant sound as he unearths a yellow-wrapped protein bar.

“I’m fine,” Alec mutters, put-out that his attempt at expressing friendliness has somehow backfired. Magnus fidgets a bit under his gaze before returning the bar to his bag and looking around the room. His eyes scan the bookshelves and a tiny potted plant Simon calls “Jimmy, J-I-M-M-Y.” While beautiful and put together, he is reminded that Magnus is not invulnerable. That’s why Magnus is here asking for Alec’s help, and it’s startling to think that Alec can help a man like Magnus Bane. Alec smiles, small and genuine this time. “The paperwork is finished then?”

“Yes,” Magnus says, voice still melodious despite his discomfort as he leans forward. His eyes catch on Alec’s face, and he pauses for a moment, as if stunned. Alec watches as Magnus takes him in and flushes as he realizes that Magnus likes what he sees. The golden-brown eyes drift over him as if taking notes. “Really, Alexander, I do appreciate this. I know you are being paid; however, I’m not under the impression that you owe me anything.” Magnus’ gaze dips away, and Alec misses it immediately. “I understand that this might be awkward for you. Isabelle mentioned your unique...situation. But I will be sure to keep myself from crossing any boundaries you may have. Though I’m not opposed to any curiosities you may have,” Magnus winks. “I’m in your care.”

Alec sucks in a breath.

“I look forward to working with you,” Alec says softly. Magnus lights up, and Alec thinks that just maybe, God doesn’t hate him that much after all.

Alec’s stomach makes a very angry noise. The breakfast he’d made for his siblings but forgotten for himself is still lying on the side table by his front door, and Alec feels his cheeks redden. Magnus chuckles and plucks the protein bar from where it’s hidden. Alec accepts it as graciously as he can.

God definitely still hates him, and he peels the wrapper open and takes a bite. It’s citrusy and sweet. Magnus shoots him a generous smile as Alec wolfs down the first thing he’s had to eat all day.

“That can’t possibly be enough food for those muscles of yours. Maybe we could grab something to eat before we stop by your apartment to get your things?” Magnus offers. “There’s this delicious restaurant that I’ve been dying to take someone to. I’d love for you to indulge me.”

No time like the present.
“Lead the way,” Alec says, standing before gesturing to the hallway.

Magnus lays a hand on Alec’s arm on his way out, and Alec promptly bangs his hip against the doorknob.

***

The restaurant turns out to be a Thai place within four blocks of the Lightwood office. Alec takes in the cracked linoleum and follows Magnus’ crimson blazer as the man strides toward the front stand, all confidence. Most tables are taken by families and couples despite the mid-afternoon hour.

Large panel windows lined with a pale orange fabric stare out onto the street. The beautiful sight of New York construction and passersby kept out by streaky glass and a blaring pop song that topped the charts months ago. It smells divine, and the plates Alec can see make him salivate.

He’s really fucking hungry.

“Would you prefer a table or a booth?”

“A booth, please,” Alec says, voice polite. “Would it be possible for us to sit along the wall instead of the window?” Alec asks. “I burn easily.”

The man nods before leading them with a gesture of his hand.

After crossing almost the entire establishment, they’re seated in a booth placed directly in the corner of the room. Alec scoots past Magnus and slides onto the cushion set along the back of the restaurant. Magnus sits opposite him reaches out to pull a couple napkins from the dispenser.

The host leaves them with a pair of worn green menus and a promise to return with water. Alec picks his up with one hand, the plastic encased paper bending backward as he reads the front. He opens it and sits back against the stiff red vinyl of the chair. He scans the room from over the top of the floppy food catalogue. No one looks suspicious, and Magnus seems to notice what he’s doing and stiffens, turning to look himself. After a moment, Magnus relaxes and turns his attention back to finding something to eat. Alec does the same.

“All reviews highly recommend the curry,” Magnus hums, just loud enough for Alec to hear over the din of the room. “I’m partial to yellow curry myself, but I’ve heard that the green curry is to die for.” Alec nods, looking up in time to catch Magnus’ eyes. Magnus glances back down before letting out a distraught sound. “It all looks so good. I hate that I have to choose just one.”

“I like green curry.” Alec says. “You can get yellow, I can get green, and we can...share? I like it with chicken” Alec winces at his lack of finesse, but holds firm as Magnus seems to contemplate this idea.

“Yes, that sounds good. I like curry with chicken too.” Magnus turns another page and makes another frustrated noise. “But these noodles look delicious too.” Alec watches Magnus navigate the menu with intense concentration.

“Are you ready to order?” The waiter stops by their table with two full cups and a pair of straws, the paper wrapping already wet. They thank the man, Alec moving a cup closer to a still-focused Magnus before taking one for himself. After setting down the drinks, the server pulls out a pad of paper and a pen, expression pleasant.
Magnus shoots Alec a glance and shrugs sheepishly. The casual action draws attention to Magnus’ shoulders and the restaurant employee clears his throat.

“I think we still need a minute,” Alec says. The waiter nods before dashing off to call a busboy for the now vacant table next to them.

Magnus mutters his thanks, but is otherwise dead to the world as he deliberates, tapping his fingers on the tabletop before pinning Alec with a curious expression.

“Alexander?”

“Yes?”

“Could I possibly talk you into splitting a serving of pork phat see ew and some tom yum with me?” Magnus straightens his posture and cocks his head to one side. Alec stifles a snort and searches the pictures for what Magnus mentioned.

“This is a lot of food, Magnus,” Alec chuckles, trying to fathom just how they’re planning on finishing it between the two of them.

“That’s what doggy bags are for! I’m no stranger to leftovers, Alexander,” Magnus replies, voice full of faux offense. “One thing you must know about me is that I always order too much for one meal, but just enough for two.”

“Is that right?” Alec smirks. Magnus winks in lieu of an answer before raising a hand to politely call a server to their table.

“Are you ready to order?” The waiter twirls their pen between their fingers. Alec feels Magnus’ expectant look and sighs.

“We’ll have an order of pork phat see ew, tom yum, one yellow curry, one green curry, both with chicken,” Alec says. The waiter raises a brow.

“That all?” they ask.

“That should be good for now,” Magnus grins. They laugh together as the server shrugs and walks toward the kitchen. After they collect themselves, Magnus leans in. “So, since we’ll be spending a lot of time together, why don’t you tell me about yourself? Isabelle seemed excited to kick you out of your own home.”

Alec shrugs. “I don’t get out much. I’m assuming they think that this will...help me explore. Or something like that.”

“Well, I’m all for exploration,” Magnus says. Alec half swallows his tongue when Magnus unwraps his straw, puts it in the cup, and sucks.

“I’m going to go wash my hands. I’ll be right back,” Alec chokes out. He stands up before Magnus can reply, and walks toward the front table. He’s directed to the public restroom behind a pair of curtains and hurries inside.

The bathroom light casts a yellow glow across Alec’s pale skin. A blue raspberry sunset scented spray stands between two stacks of paper towels. He stares into one of the three mirrors, all with small smudges, and waves his hand under the automatic faucet. Water rushes from the tap. He tests the temperature; it’s cool, so he washes his hands before cupping them and splashing his face. Thin rivulets trail down his neck. His hairline and the top of his button-up are wet, but Alec doesn’t
care. At least now he’s somewhat clear-headed.

Outside, in that restaurant, Magnus is waiting for him. Alec dries his hands and pats the last of the water from his neck. With a sigh, Alec steps back out. When he makes it back to the table, their soup and Magnus are waiting for him, Magnus holding a small bottle of hand sanitizer.

“I was going to offer you some, but you were already gone,” Magnus says. Alec nods as he slides into his seat. “Do you want to start? They brought us two extra bowls and some really rather cute soup spoons.” The spoons in question are white porcelain with red painted flowers. “They’re gladiolus flowers. It’s quite amazing that they managed all that detail on such a small surface,” Magnus murmurs wonderingly. He smiles at Alec before taking a deep breath. “It smells good.”

“Yeah,” Alex murmurs. He and Magnus watch each other for a moment before Alec’s gaze dips away. He picks up Magnus’ bowl and spoons some tom yum into it before serving himself. Magnus watches him with an attentive expression, but Alec can’t find it in him to make eye contact again. Then, a waitress stops by their table with a large tray in hand.

“We’ve got two curries, one yellow, one green, and a phat see ew?”

“That’s us,” Magnus says. She sets the dishes on the table and walks away. They stare at their food, both of them looking up at each other and cracking up.

“We made a mistake,” Alec laughs.

“A wise man once said that there are no mistakes, only happy accidents,” Magnus says.

So they dig in.

It’s not the same as when he gets food with his family. It’s not like with Clary or Simon or Maia. It’s different and electric as Magnus shoots Alec a smile mid-chew and sends an arrow straight through Alec’s gut. The food is delicious, every story Magnus tells is borderline unbelievable, and Alec wonders if this is what dates feel like.

***

They stop by Alec’s office to retrieve the things Izzy insisted he bring with him to Magnus’ place. She shoves the bag into his arms with a mysterious and unsettling “I’ve been waiting for this moment for my whole life.”

Magnus’ apartment is gorgeous, and Alec really doesn’t know how to deal with feeling like a giant humanoid inkblot splashed across a beautiful painting. He stands right by the door and takes off his shoes and sets them aside.

For all of the stress the situation is putting them both under, there are very few details to iron out. The strategy is simple: Alec will attend any and all social events with Magnus, live with Magnus for the time being, and accompany him on public transit. And be Magnus’ boyfriend. At least until Ragnor manages to pin the right legal documentation to the stalker’s forehead.

Since their situation is a bit unique, Alec has left the number crunching to his more experienced mother and quietly pities Magnus’ wallet. It isn’t until Isabelle sends Alec a text with a winking face and dollar signs that Alec learns that his mother isn’t bleeding Magnus for all he’s worth.

“She likes him and gave him a discount!” The text reads.
Alec’s phone chimes again. The message is from Jace this time, and Alec rolls his eyes at the contents. “Which might be because we told her that you popped a boner when you saw him.”

Alec sends Jace a picture of an exceptionally hairy buttcrack he keeps on hand for times like these. He receives a very disgusted selfie of Jace and Isabelle in return. He chuckles despite himself.

“You have a very nice laugh,” Magnus says. Alec turns to take in the sight of Magnus watching him from a doorway rimmed with bright green wood. The shorter man gestures behind him casually. “I put the leftovers in the fridge if you want any.”

A strange sensation settles into Alec’s skin and hums in his chest.

“Thank you,” Alec murmurs. They stand in awkward silence for a moment before Alec shakes himself. “Where should I put my stuff?”

Magnus strides forward and takes the bag from his hand.

“Follow me! I’ll show you where you’ll be staying,” Magnus hums. He moves without waiting, and Alec follows him through a dimly lit purple-painted hallway that splits off into three different rooms. The first on the right, Magnus informs Alec, is his bedroom. A flourish of adorned fingers points out the plain middle door. “The bathroom you’ll be using. It has a standing shower that I stock with my own homemade products. Feel free to use them; I might mix something just for you. You strike me as the musky wood type.”

“Oh, um, it’s okay. Izzy packed my bag, so she probably put something in there,” Alec says. He colors under Magnus’ thoughtful and flirtatious gaze. Eventually, Magnus shrugs his shoulders and moves into the room Alec assumes is for him.

“If you change your mind, I think you’d smell absolutely amazing if you used my special body wash,” Magnus sighs. He sets Alec’s bag at the end of a plush blue bed covered in countless embroidered pillows that look more expensive than Alec’s entire, currently uninhabited, apartment. “I hope this is to your liking. Let me know if you have any questions or just want to grace me with your handsome presence,” Magnus says and winks.

And Alec is left alone again with powder blue blankets and cobalt blue walls. He ventures over to the night stand and moves to set some of his valuables inside when his eyes catch on a bottle of lube, condoms, and a set of what looks like nipple clamps.

Alec stares for a moment, then closes the drawer and lies down. His eyes trace the sloping ceiling and the small stars he finds painted there. From outside, he can hear Magnus puttering around. Then comes the unbidden thought of Magnus wearing nipple clamps. Alec sucks in a breath and runs his hands down his face.

If God doesn’t kill Alec, Magnus will.

But that doesn’t sound so bad.

Chapter End Notes
Thank you so much for reading!
<3
A Broken Heater

Chapter Summary

Some ATMs do dispense $5 bills.

As this is my first update for the Malec BB, I have another 4 chapters to be posted! Since I’ve also updated chapters 1 & 2, I’ll post chapter 4 on Tuesday! Then I will post one chapter a day through Friday.

Alec wakes up slowly. Through the heavy, cloying warmth of sleep, he can hear and feel a persistent trilling noise that settles into a purr. Another brief moment, then a cold nose presses against his cheek, sending a tiny shiver down his spine. He lifts his arm and blindly pets the cat that snuggles into the curve of his neck and remembers that he doesn’t own any pets.

“Chairman! Come here right now, you naughty fiend!” The voice is low, as if to preserve the murky comfort still clinging to Alec’s lashes. The cat, Chairman, leans into him with a soft mrow before trotting across the bedsheets and leaping off the bed. Chairman’s paws hit the ground with a muted thud and the jingle of metal tags. The next string of words is equal parts admonishment and fondness. “I told you not to disturb our guest! What kind of host have I raised you to be?”

The words fade quickly as the door clicks shut and footsteps wander off down what Alec remembers is a purple hallway. Alec shifts. He doesn’t remember falling asleep, and Alec doesn’t make a habit of falling asleep on the job. Within seconds, the blankets are thrown to the side and his feet hit cool wooden floors. Above him, painted stars and constellations catch the white light of his phone screen when he taps its surface.

It’s just after eight o’clock. He’s been out for at least five hours, and he’s condemned himself to a sleepless night. To make things worse, he’s even abandoned his very hot client. The client who mixes his own hygiene products and has nipple clamps in the guest room nightstand. Alec slaps his cheeks lightly and stands. The client who seems to have been content to let Alec sleep through the whole evening.

It takes three steps of his stiff legs to get from the bed to the closed door, and Alec notices with a strange fondness that the door has stars painted on it to match the ceiling.

Alec slaps himself again.

He opens the door and wanders down the hallway toward a heavenly smell. The passageway is dark, just like the room had been, the festive plum color muted by the dim lighting. Alec’s hand ghosts along the wall when the sound of small paws draws his attention.

A shadow races into the hallway from what Alec remembers as the open eating area, a cheerful jingle accompanying it. The ‘naughty fiend’ skitters to a stop and winds through Alec’s ankles. A chair’s legs scrape against hardwood as Magnus calls out a curious “Chairman?” Alec stoops down to pet his new friend when footsteps tread toward the hallway.

Alec freezes as Magnus appears at the mouth of the corridor. The light from the living room and
kitchen cast him in silhouette, and Alec reminds himself that he has a job to do.

“I’m so sorry for falling asleep,” Alec blurts out. “That was unprofessional of me.” Thoughts race through his mind as he grasps for something to soften the blow. “But you have very nice furniture,” Alec says. *Very. Nice. Furniture.* The words hang in the air for a moment before Magnus laughs and shatters them. With a sway of hips, Magnus strides forward and leans down to scoop up the miscreant creature he’d been looking for.

“Don’t worry about it. From what your sister told me about you, I’m honestly surprised that you took this day as well as you have,” Magnus says, laying an exuberant kiss to the top of the Chairman’s head. “I’m quite glad you got some rest. That room has been desperately wanting for someone to appreciate the comforts it offers.”

Alec thinks of the nipple clamps and knows the tips of his ears are blazing with embarrassment. He clears his throat.

“Thank you for letting me sleep, then.” Izzy always said that he should apologize less.

“It’s really no problem at all!” Magnus smiles, pleased. He brandishes his hand and gestures to the colorful space that left Alec feeling out of place. “You’re very welcome, Alexander. This is your home now.”

In the shadows, Alec’s inky presence does not feel so out of place as it seeps into and blends with the brightness Magnus offers. So he nods in thanks.

For a few moments, they just watch each other in the dim, but increasingly comfortable space. With a dashing smile, Magnus turns with the Chairman still in his arms. He glances back over his shoulder with a look Alec can almost pretend is flirtatious. “Dinner is ready. I wasn’t sure how you felt about leftovers, so I whipped up a little something.”

Alec’s stomach flips and his chest clenches. Izzy makes him food at home all the time. He never wants to eat it, but he knows it’s the thought that counts. So why is the thought of Magnus cooking for him making him feel like he’s swallowed a bucket of live eels? Excitable creatures that churn and writhe against the lining of his stomach as they try to slither up his throat. Despite the ugly imagery, it doesn’t feel quite as disgusting as all that. As the eels settle and nestle in his gut, Alec begins to think that maybe he might get used to them.

Magnus pokes his head back into the hallway to look at him, eyes crinkling at the corners.

“Alexander? Are you coming?”

Alec nods and walks just a bit faster than normal. His socks skid and catch on tiny splinters as he rounds the corner.

***

Yes, it is pleasant. So Alec basks as Magnus meets him at the wide kitchen table. Magnus sits so close that their elbows brush and their knees knock together. Magnus asks Alec what he thinks of dog breeds and whether or not he should get one. It’s a job, Alec reminds himself.

“A Great Dane, or a Doberman,” Alec says. “They’re smart, loyal, and strong.”

“Like you,” Magnus replies, mouth curving into a playful smile. A wad of rice lodges itself in the awkward space of Alec’s throat that threatens to make him gag. “Plus, my stage name is The Great Bane. The Great Bane with a Great Dane...or Doberman. What a sight that would be,” Magnus
winks.

Alec swallows the rice down. He hazards an awkward chuckle before reaching for his glass. Magnus pats his back in sympathy, and Alec coughs up the water he’s drinking.

***

Magnus abandoned his blazer sometime before dinner, leaving Magnus in an off-white button-up embroidered with red flowers with long thin petals that arch like spider’s legs. The cuffs lay folded by his elbows. Warm skin stretches along his forearms and his painted nails tap mindlessly against the wine glass resting on the table. They’ve eaten well, and although Alec doesn’t drink much, he actually likes the sweet sangria cascading over his tongue.

“So, Sir Chairman Meow over here, the naughty boy, clung to and ruined my favorite pair of designer chinos,” Magnus says tragically, though the fond smile and twinkling eyes cut the exasperation in half. “He was scrawny and definitely malnourished, but he was also very determined. Isn’t that right, my handsome boy?” Magnus coos, making high chirping sounds at the lazing tabby cat.

Alec watches as said determined cat rubs his head against his master’s hand. Shamelessly, the Chairman bats at Alec’s own fingers until he finally joins Magnus in lavishing the adorable feline with attention. Alec’s eyes flicker upward. He remembers how breathtaking Magnus was online and in Conference Room B, but neither time holds a candle to now.

The kitchen light casts shapes on Magnus’ skin through its stained glass. Each shade of orange, red, and green playing on high cheekbones as Magnus dedicates himself to the Chairman’s every whim, oblivious to the attention he garners himself. Alec doesn’t remember the last time he felt so singularly content.

For a long moment, the only weight on Alec’s shoulders is the smell of food gone cold and the sound of a heater that’s past its prime. He’ll put the food away in a moment. Or maybe Magnus will take the plates covered in drying sauce marred by fork tines.

He reminds himself to ask Magnus if he can look at the heater. He’s handy with tools and the idea of Magnus living with wheezing machinery makes Alec turn to glare at the closet it hides in. It’s a strange feeling of comfortable domesticity that leaves Alec a little unsettled and satisfied all at once. Alec cannot help but wonder if being with Magnus will always be this way.

Then a knock on the front door sends a visible shudder up Magnus’ spine, and Alec shamefully remembers why he is here. Imagining futures full of shared chores and home repair is not what he is being paid for.


So he gets up and walks to the door. A glance through the peephole, and Alec knows that this is where he makes his first stand. He unlatches the deadbolt and peers through a crack, widening the space just enough to show off his height and the breadth of his stature.

“Oh,” their visitor says.

Oh indeed, Alec thinks. The person in front of him is all handsome boyishness, with a scarf wound around his neck one time too many. Light blond hair dusts long eyelashes. He wears a shy smile that doesn’t seem genuine. Alec decides that he does not like this man. He watches, brow furrowing as he waits for the intruder to speak.
“Well?” Alec asks. He opts for being direct. “Did you need something?”

The stranger startles at his hostility and his warmth disappears, making way for forced politeness. “I just wanted to introduce myself. Are you the resident here?” Alec pauses and considers what to do. The man’s gaze darts around Alec’s profile. Clear blue eyes glitter under the bright landing chandelier, searching and full of intent that Alec can’t quite pin down.

Alec makes a decision and leans against the frame. He makes sure to block any view of the apartment inside. “Yeah, I’m living here.”

“I see. You don’t seem like the type to live in the penthouse of a place like this, if you don’t mind me saying.” Surprise and condescension tinge the otherwise pleasant voice.

Now that won’t do. Alec rolls his shoulders casually and draws himself upward--cheap but effective tricks to look bigger. He used to hate this, making himself more noticeable, never liked attention when he could avoid it. Then his mother reminded him that bodyguards were supposed to be large and threatening. So Alec took to watching Jace when Jace flirted with girls.

It’s a universal truth. If Jace is flirting with a girl, he will try to make himself look as large and impressive as possible. Admittedly, Jace is pretty physically impressive. Not that Alec will ever admit it.

Jace is also often a jealous boyfriend, so Alec figures it’s fitting enough.

“Well, I’m living here, so what did you want to say?” Alec asks, voice brusque. “Are you Mr. McGaffen’s kid? He told my boyfriend that his son was coming to visit.”

The man smiles, lips thin. “Sorry to disappoint, but I’m not Mr. McGaffen’s son. My name’s Sebastian. I’m the new landlord.”

Fuck. He just tried to intimidate Magnus’ fucking landlord.

“Oh, I see.” He rubs the back of his neck, dialing down the aggression to hide his embarrassment. Sebastian would be a valuable ally if necessary. Alec coughs and offers up an awkward chuckle. “This is actually my boyfriend’s apartment. I just moved in, so we’ll probably be seeing more of each other. My name is Alec.” He holds a hand out and Sebastian takes it.

“Nice to meet you,” Sebastian says, though it’s obvious that he doesn’t mean it. After shaking Alec’s hand, Sebastian takes a step back and gives Alec an obvious once-over. His clear blue eyes seem a bit cold and calculating, but Alec supposes he deserves a bit of suspicion for being so rude.

“Darling, is there someone at the door?” Magnus calls. Alec scowls when the stranger in front of him blushes at the word darling. Magnus’ voice is silken and seductive despite its casual nature.

Curiosity blooms like a flower under the sun. Sebastian’s demeanor softens and opens up. Alec knows how that feels—like Magnus is a source of energy to reach for.

It’s petty, Alec knows; but Alec wonders if Magnus makes everyone feel that way. Even viewers who have only seen him from behind a screen. Magnus must, Alec figures. That’s why Alec’s here to do his job instead of fall all over himself like a hapless puppy.

But that’s a thought for another time.

Sebastian opens his mouth, and Alec doesn’t have to feign any jealousy.
“Just the new landlord, babe,” Alec cuts in. He shoots Sebastian a quick warning look. The man has the decency to murmur a low apology.

“No offense intended, but he’s got a nice voice, I’m a bit of a sucker for that,” Sebastian admits, shrugging. “I suppose I wouldn’t be too keen on sharing him either.” Alec frowns.

Alec has no dating experience, but he imagines that possessive boyfriends look somewhat like he does. If the man’s expression is anything to go by, he’s right. So he drives the point home. “It was nice meeting you, Sebastian.”

Sebastian tilts his head and waves goodbye as Alec closes the door.

When he turns the lock and meets Magnus’ grateful expression, Alec thinks that this is going to be the easiest and toughest job he’s ever had. Pride wells up in Alec as Magnus walks toward him and pulls him into a hug.

“Thank you, Alexander,” Magnus says, voice soft. A ghost of lips across Alec’s cheek. Then Magnus is gone, halfway to the kitchen when he looks halfway over his shoulder and opens his mouth as if to speak. Alec waits, breath caught in his throat. Magnus shakes his head and continues on his way.

He pauses at the dinner table and picks up the dishes. At the reality of his daydreams made manifest, Alec rushes over to the table and plays his part. Magnus looks up and smiles when Alec packs up the last of their meal. Alec tries his best to focus the task at hand. He tucks the food into the fridge, grabs a purple pen magnetically stuck to the door next to the beginnings of a grocery list, and scribbles the date on each lid.

The sound of rushing water breaks the silence of the loft. A fork clinks against a dish, and Alec turns to see Magnus standing back-to-back with him. He watches as he closes the refrigerator door and puts the pen back where it belongs.

In the time Alec had been stowing away their food, Magnus has donned a pair of bright yellow gloves and an apron. Bubbles rise around Magnus’ elbows. A haphazard bow lays against the nape of Magnus’ neck, tempting Alec with the want to pull one end until the whole thing comes undone. He settles on rubbing the back of his own neck instead.

“Can I help?” Alec asks. Magnus turns with his hands still deep in the pooling water and tilts his head curiously.

“I’m not paying you to help me with chores, Alexander. You’re my bodyguard, not my housekeeper,” Magnus chuckles. “I can take care of a few dirty dishes, scouts honor.” He shoots Alec a flashy wink and lifts a dripping hand to turn off the tap. Alec moves forward anyway and grabs the sponge just as Magnus reaches for it.

“I’ll give you the sponge if you let me dry as you go,” Alec says. He sets one hand on the marble countertop and his lips in a firm line. “You can try to wait me out, but I once sat in the bathroom for three hours because Izzy wouldn’t stop rushing me in the morning.” Magnus looks at him thoughtfully, a slow grin spreading as he leans in close.

“Why, Alexander. I’d almost call you stubborn,” Magnus teases, opening the cabinet beneath the sink and fishing out a fresh towel. Alec shrugs in mock innocence. They trade the sponge and towel with faux solemnity. “Nice doing business with you, sir.”

“Likewise,” Alec says.
They stand side by side. Magnus washes their utensils with a practiced hand and passes them on to Alec who wipes them down diligently. It’s minuscule—the ease that finds its way back into Magnus’ movements. Alec doesn’t push, choosing instead to focus on the task at hand.

Alec can feel the warmth of Magnus’ arm against his own. It doesn’t take them very long to finish the task at hand, their teamwork seamless despite the time it takes for Magnus to tell Alec where each glass, spoon, and plate goes in the kitchen’s many cabinets.

“You can hang the wine glasses here, darling,” Magnus gestures flippantly with his hand, moving past Alec as he hangs the apron on a hook near the entryway. Alec spots a green bit of script that reads “cumin, and lettuce eat!” He smothers a snort and does as he’s told. At the sight of Magnus’ smile Alec remembers something important.

“Do you mind if I take a look at your heater tomorrow?”

***

“I can’t do this, Izzy!”

“Were you always this dramatic or has Magnus changed you that much in just a day?” Isabelle asks. Alec runs fingers through his hair as he sits alone and shirtless in what he has dubbed the Nipple Clamp Room. His hands are clammy, and the phone lies heavy in his hand.

“I’m being serious!” He sucks in a breath and lowers his voice. Magnus is just across the hallway and Alec can’t risk any of his words slipping underneath the door and scuttling into Magnus’ ears. “I told him he had very nice furniture. I fantasized about doing chores with him,” Alec hisses. “Then I almost had a heart attack when we did do chores together.” Alec lowers his voice and whispers. “When he handed me a wet dish, I almost dropped it because he smiled at me.” He can practically hear Izzy roll her eyes, a snicker sounding through the speaker in confirmation.

“Right, you have no game and are severely deprived. This isn’t news to anyone,” she hums. Ouch.

Alec takes a moment to lick his wounds before snapping back to attention. “I don’t think he’s going to fire you just because you complimented his taste in interior design.” A pause. “Actually, he probably appreciated that.”

“Okay, but that’s not going to impress him,” Alec grumbles. There’s a strange sound on the other end of the line. For a moment all he hears are muffled thumps and then a triumphant noise as Izzy’s voice strikes back up.

Alec settles in, long since resigned to what’s about to be thrown his way.

“I went to find Jace, and now you’re on speakerphone, because it sounds like you’re less worried about doing your job and more about getting with Magnus,” Izzy declares. It’s then that Jace begins hollering into the speaker.

“Bro! Please get laid, we’ve been trying to get you some for forever, but every time we take you out you just kind of look like you’d rather die,” Jace says with a chuckle. Suddenly, he gasps, voice sober as he speaks again. “Okay but really, Alec, it’s like everyone’s dream to get with a pornstar. You have to do this. For you, of course, since you seem to be doing something about your feelings for once, but also for me. I have to live vicariously through you! I’m spoken fo—ow!”

“What Jace is trying to say is that you should do things at your own pace, and that we are very proud of you for acting on your feelings for once,” Izzy says. There’s a sigh, and Jace’s voice comes through again.
“Seriously, man. He seems cool, and we were joking about you popping a boner earlier, but I’ve never seen you that interested in anyone ever. Which isn’t saying mu—“

“Thank you, Jace.” Izzy’s exasperated tone cuts Jace’s earnest attempt down at its knees. “Alec, we’re behind you all the way. Plus, now we know you’re a secret romantic who waxes poetic about fixing an old apartment heater.”

Jace lets out a bark of incredulous laughter. “What the fuck, you’ve known the guy for less than a day and you want to fix his heater?” Jace asks. “When I asked you to give me five dollars you told me there was an ATM three blocks away.”

”That ATM doesn’t even dispense five dollar bills,” Izzy snorts.

“It makes noises!” Alec mutters. “And, he seemed pleased when I offered.” He eases deeper beneath the fancy blue bed covers in embarrassment and desperation to quiet the conversation further. Alec bites back a small smile. Despite the humiliation that this whole situation has wrought upon him, talking to his siblings about attraction is something he never expected to experience. At least, not in such a natural way.

“That’s a real live crush you’ve got there. Actual fucking romantic interest, Alec,” Jace says, not unkindly. “I’ve slept with people multiple times in some decrepit apartments. Home repair? Not something that ever came to my mind.”

“Same, and unlike Jace, I can actually fix things,” says Izzy. Jace makes a noise in protest.

Alec huffs out an incredulous laugh. They’re not going to let this go. So he takes a moment and thinks back on how Magnus smiles. It makes his stomach flip happily.

“Yeah...um, so this crush thing. How do I go about dealing with that?”

The speaker crackles as both Izzy and Jace launch suggestions at him like cannonfire. Every familiar dig and offhanded insult takes on new meaning as he hears his siblings’ mounting excitement. It’s then that he realizes. They’ve tried to get him to go out and meet people, but they always kept his comfort in mind.

They never stepped into this territory beyond accepting that if he didn’t have a boyfriend, he would have his family. Every blind date and setup ended in failure. They always teased him for it, never quite pushing him over that threshold. But now, he’s leading the charge. Just one day into this arrangement and he wants to do something about his attraction to Magnus. His siblings are in his corner.

And it feels good.
The next day, Alec faces the world with a new outlook and way too many peppy texts populating his inbox. While he was sleeping, Izzy and Jace both sent three suggestive messages each, Simon and Clary joining in with their own exclamations of excitement in a newly established group chat, inappropriately titled “Malec’s Sex Tape.”

Even the last Lightwood, 18-year old Max, has chimed in - with a separate message, having removed himself from the group chat immediately once he realised what it was for. “I’m as nosy as the next person, but I don’t need to see Izzy and Jace using emojis like that unless absolutely necessary,” Max’s text reads. “But I believe in you, bro!” Then, as if in afterthought, Max has attached a link to a safe sex bulletin sent out at his university. “Be careful!”

Alec wants to die. His siblings aside, he stares down at his phone in mild horror as a notification tells him that he has a voicemail from his mom.

“Hello, Alec, this is your mother. I just wanted to check in with you and make sure everything was going smoothly. Let me know if you need anything! I made sure Isabelle packed a box of condoms in your bag, so make sure to keep a couple with you at all times. I’m expecting a status report from you by the end of today--so make sure you don’t get too distracted. Love you!”

He deletes the worst voicemail in Lightwood history and hurries to the bathroom to get ready. And maybe throw up a bit.

***

Alec always thought Simon had been talking out of his ass. To be fair, Simon usually is. The bespectacled boy spits out inane facts and cringe-worthy observations like he’ll die if he doesn’t say them aloud. So when Simon had told Alec “music just sounds better on vinyl,” Alec had done what he usually did: he’d ignored Simon.

It is with great humility that Alec admits Simon was right. Alec doesn’t care much for music. He listens to it on occasion, but much prefers silence and the solace he finds there. But as he watches Magnus spin and glide around the living room, Chairman Meow protesting in his arms, Alec gets what Simon means.

The beat-up record player sits on one of Magnus’ many end tables. There’s nothing remarkable about its scuffed black lid, the outdated speakers, or the nonsensical stickers peeling at the edges. Alec doesn’t understand how something so nondescript can create something so beautiful. He watches as the black disk dips and wobbles with each turn beneath the needle, the dulcet tones of a man Alec doesn’t know drifting through the air as Magnus finally frees the Chairman from his grasp.

“Why are you leaving me?” Magnus laments, watching with sad eyes as the Chairman puffs up and trots away, tail swishing in aggravation. “Why is he leaving me?” he asks, nailing Alec with his
pitiful gaze. “Chairman never wants to dance with me,” he sighs. The cat pays him no mind, and
flicks an ear as if to drive the point home. Magnus pouts.

Alec chuckles at Magnus’ dramatics from where he sits at the kitchen table. Magnus walks toward
him from where he’d set down Chairman Meow, the gentle plucking of guitar strings rising in the
air as he walks, carrying him with each chord.

The remnants of french toast and berries linger on Alec’s tongue, sweet and tangy as he reaches for
a drink of water. He swallows around the ice that crowds his lips. Magnus waits for him to answer,
faux concern pulling at his brows.

His lips curl at the edges as he takes in the unfairly charming sight of an impatient Magnus. Alec
sets his glass down and follows Chairman Meow’s path from the middle of the living room to the
sun filled window. He turns back to look at Magnus, who watches him with a soft look that Alec
doesn’t really understand.

They stay like that for a moment. The record player presses on, filling the open space with feelings
that Alec struggles to comprehend. He’s trying, he is, but Magnus looks at him with expressions
and soulful eyes that Alec doesn’t know what to do with.

Magnus moves toward the window to stand next to his cat and breaks their eye contact. The
mysterious weight disappears. Alec finds that he misses it.

“I don’t know,” Alec says finally. “Maybe he doesn’t like the music.” Magnus turns to look at him
with mock offense. Alec catches the hints of a smile that grows into a full blown smirk as Magnus
sways his shoulders and gestures to the air around them with his hands.

“Well I like the music, and my taste is impeccable,” Magnus sniffs, voice indignant as he rests his
hands on his hips. “Tell him, Alexander. Tell him my taste is impeccable.”

Alec steels himself, choking down the feeling of foolishness, and then turns back to the window
and the lounging feline. “Chairman,” he says seriously. “Magnus has an impeccable taste in
music.”

“Thank you,” Magnus laughs. “Maybe, since you seem to be a gentleman of taste as well...would
you care to dance with me?” The question is posed carefully. It’s delicate and curious, reaching out
with its palm turned upward in a gesture of offering. “If you’d rather not, I understand. I’m used to
being slighted, as you can see, not even my cat will dance with me.”

“I’ll dance with you,” Alec says, the words flooding up from his chest and into the open. He stands
up, the backs of his legs catching the edge of the chair with his abruptness. “I...I’m supposed to be
protecting you. Knowing how you move will help me. The more familiar with you I am, the
better.”

It’s an excuse that’s about as watery as the coffee Alec’s mother gave to Max when the youngest
Lightwood had claimed caffeine dependency at 13 years old. But Magnus doesn’t seem to mind.
He walks back toward the open flooring between the dining room and the largest and greenest of
Magnus’ many chairs. Alec shuffles away from the table, pushes the chair back in its place, and
approaches Magnus as his blood hums in his veins.

Alec knows that these moments don’t mean to Magnus what they mean to him. The man is just
trying to make a stressful situation easier on them both, but Alec can’t shake the intense belief that
everything about them feels important somehow. Isabelle and Jace often wax a bit poetic about
how it feels when they’re in love. Alec cares for them both, and as the eldest, often reminds them
to keep their feet firmly planted on the ground.

Maybe he should give them more credit. He’s only on day two with a veritable stranger, and already he can’t stop thinking about how everything feels beautiful and right. The eels return. They lay heavy in his stomach, chilled and slippery, but he pushes their presence away and ends up in front of Magnus. They stand face to face. Alec searches Magnus’ face for any sort of discomfort and eases when he doesn’t find any.

The song fades and moves without pause into the next track. Like the last, it starts with a series of guitar strums that radiate outward from the speaker and take residence in Alec’s bones. Magnus holds out a hand, and Alec takes it. They step in time with the first wispy words that move them from side to side.

Alec knows he’s not a good dancer. He’s got legs as long as as giraffe’s and half the grace of a newborn calf, but it doesn’t seem to matter. Undeterred by Alec’s heavy feet, Magnus glides across the floor and takes Alec with him.

Each step takes intense concentration on Alec’s part. In an effort to keep himself upright, Alec reaches out and catches Magnus’ other hand in a tight and unwieldy grip.

“Let me lead you, Alexander,” Magnus says, expression soft. Alec gulps and nods in acquiescence. Magnus handles him with patience, taking the feeble control Alec gives to him and treating it with easy confidence. “Step with me. Forward, right, back, left...good, that’s it. You’re a natural!” With his mind focused on the placement of his feet, Alec just manages to follow along as Magnus spins them in a wide circle. Together, they paint patterns on the hardwood floors—Alec’s black ink blending with Magnus’ warm reds and playful purples.

Magnus guides Alec toward the balcony, their movements sweeping long green and white curtains to and fro. Streams of gold wash over them both as the sun winks at them through the French doors. Alec stumbles when his foot clips a door jamb, and he refuses to look up when Magnus pulls him closer.

Simon’s earnest words echo in Alec’s mind. “Music just sounds better on vinyl.” Maybe that’s true; Alec isn’t the right person to judge. But dancing with Magnus and watching Magnus with the Chairman makes him wonder if it’s the record player he owes this magic to.

***

With a soft click, the vinyl stops spinning. They stop and stand with their hands still woven together. Alec breathes in, holding the air in his lungs as the smell of sandalwood warms his chest.

“Alexander, I have to change the record.”

“Right,” Alec murmurs. Magnus chuckles, golden-brown eyes twinkling with mirth as he taps his fingertips on the backs of Alec’s hands.

“You’ll have to release me for that.”

Alec hurries to obey, fingers finding refuge in the hairs on the nape of his neck and inside the pocket of his dark jeans. Magnus winks at him and saunters over to the end table the player sits on.

A knock on the door startles them both. Alec looks on as Magnus feigns disinterest, sorting through his music collection despite the rigidity of his posture.

“Alexander, would you be a dear and get that?” Magnus asks, Alec already at the front door by the
time Magnus is halfway through his request. Alec cracks the door with a healthy amount of caution, making sure to keep Magnus out of sight.

The door opens to a smug-looking Jace and an excitable Isabelle. Accompanying them are the other two “Malec’s Sex Tape” chat members. Clary waves at Alec, arm swinging, before mouthing him an empty apology. Simon’s ears perk as music strikes up from inside the apartment.

“This is a good album, man! I didn’t know you had such good taste,” Simon grins. “You should’ve told me you had a record player, I’ll bring some of my stuff over next time.”

“I don’t own one. This is Magnus’ place, which begs the question—why are all of you here?” Alec asks.

“It’s our job!” Isabelle answers, glee clinging to every small shift of her body. “We told mom that we’d check up on you before heading into work today. Clary and Simon came with us because Clary slept at Jace’s and Simon wanted to check on Jimi and Jimmy.”

“We even brought food,” Jace says, waving to-go bags of what smells like fifty different kinds of breakfast burritos and pizza.

“We already ate,” Alec deadpans.

“We?” All four visitors exchange a weighted look and turn back to him with fiendish smiles. “We’re so sorry to disturb your time together.”

“Alexander? Who’s at the door?” Magnus appears at Alec’s elbow, standing behind the door as he waits for Alec to respond.

“It’s just my siblings and a couple friends. I didn’t know they were coming and they were just about to leave. Right, guys?”

“Oh, Isabelle and Blondie?” Magnus asks, moving to peak over Alec’s shoulder before waving at the group in greeting. “Hello! Who are you two lovely people?”

“My name’s Clary!” Clary says. “And you must be Magnus. I’ve already heard so much about you.” She smiles at Alec before shaking Magnus’ hand.

“Ah, Blondie’s girlfriend then? A pleasure to meet you, biscuit. Do you mind if I call you that?” Magnus’ leans into Alec’s space, the warmth of his body running along the lines of Alec’s arm. Clary shakes her head. “I don’t mind that at all.”

“And you?” Magnus turns to face Simon, taking in the man’s lopsided grin and band tee. “Nice shirt.”

“Oh my god, a man of culture. Alec if you don’t keep him, I will,” Simon says, hand already slotted into Magnus’ own. “Alec said that the player was yours. It’s got great sound quality and this album is great. My name’s Simon.”

Alec doesn’t even realize that he’s raising his hackles until Isabelle looks at him with an odd expression. He forces himself to relax and turns to address Magnus. “I’m so sorry about this, I know it’s weird.”

“It’s alright, Alexander,” Magnus says, nudging him with his hip. “Would you all like to come in? Sherwin, you can take a look at my music collection.”
“It’s Simon,” Simon says pointlessly as he and the rest of their posse enter the loft. Alec waits until everyone is inside. He ignores Jace’s satisfied smirk and closes the door, catching the back of Jace’s heel in the process. The blond shoots him an ugly look before toeing off his shoes and holding up the bag he’d tried to tempt Alec with.

“We brought food if you want any, Magnus,” Jace says. “You mentioned you like the place on 28th so we stopped by and picked up some stuff.”

“I’m the one who remembered you like the place on 28th, by the way” Isabelle notes, stealing the bags from Jace before walking toward the dining table with the familiarity and ease of a frequent guest. Alec watches in mild horror as the four spread out around Magnus’ loft. He strides over to Magnus and takes his hand to get his attention, guiding the apartment owner away from a zealous Simon. They pause by the window. The Chairman lets out a soft meow and begs their attention, Magnus reaching up to stroke the cat’s fur.

“I’m so sorry, Magnus,” Alec hisses. “They’re just really nosy and they’re probably just jealous I got such a great job this time around. I’ll get them out as soon as they’re done eating, I promise.”

Magnus shrugs and takes in the room with a fond expression. “I’m a great job, hmm?” Magnus shoots Alec a sly smirk that has him reeling. Then, as if reassure him, Magnus continues. “It’s nice to have guests. I haven’t had many people over recently, and if we’re supposed to be convincing boyfriends, the least I can do is meet the family so to speak.” Magnus steps away from Alec’s side and toward where Izzy stands, dividing the food amongst their old breakfast plates. “What do you say we help your dear sister with some spare utensils, hm?” With one last squeeze of Alec’s hand, Magnus glides away.

“Oh, Magnus, do you have any extra napkins? I don’t think we don’t have enough,” Izzy says, absent minded, muttering each order and the corresponding recipient under her breath.

“I do, I’ll go fetch them. If you’ll excuse me,” Magnus hums, scooping up the dirty dishes and whisking them away into the kitchen. He emerges moments later with a stack of white napkins and a handful of forks. “They never pack enough,” Magnus says by way of explanation. Izzy nods in agreement before pausing, staring at Magnus’ shirt with a critical eye before letting out a small gasp.

“Oh my god, is that from Raphael Santiago’s spring line? It was one of my favorite looks, and your pants are gorgeous! Where did you get them?” Izzy’s practically vibrating, Magnus meeting her energy in spades as they share opinions on designers and the current trends.

“Damn, they get on like a house on fire,” Jace says. He sidles over to where Alec is standing and ignores the glare Alec sends his way. “Magnus is such a courteous host. Not kicking us out and even inviting us in to eat--unlike some people I know.” Chairman meows, and Jace pats the cat with an unsure hand. The Chairman looks decidedly unimpressed.

“It’s not my apartment,” Alec huffs. “And you guys are being rude, showing up without warning and acting like Magnus and I are a real thing when we’re not.”

“Are we really being rude? Or are we just making it harder for you to deny your big crush on our resident pornstar?”

“Camboy.”

“Whatever. Point is, we have to sell the act and Magnus told mom he was okay doing anything he needed to do—which includes impromptu visits from yours truly. Plus, he likes Izzy and I think he
likes Clary too...I don’t know how he feels about Simon though,” Jace shrugs.

Alec glances toward the others, catching the sounds of rolling laughter and the sight of Clary laughing as she leans on Magnus’ arm. Simon sputters protests as Magnus speaks again, another wave of laughter overtaking the group. Alec can’t quite keep up with what they’re saying. He reaches out to pet Chairman Meow with a distracted hand and turns back to Jace again.

“I wish this was real,” Alec murmurs.

Jace winces in sympathy. “I know buddy. I know.”

***

“Ugh, this food is so good, what the fuck is in this?” Jace asks, mouth full and eyes wide.

“Honestly I’m convinced there are some ingredients that aren’t quite FDA approved,” Magnus says with a slow smile. “But it’s delicious, and the place still has an A health rating, so I’m more than inclined to give their establishment my patronage.”

“Well, whatever it is, I want to see if I can recreate this at home. It’s so good!” Izzy says, taking a bite of her meal. Jace chokes and sputters, asking for water between wheezes. Alec rushes to the kitchen and returns with a glass before Magnus can even stand.

“Are you sure you guys don’t want any?” Clary asks. “We bought a couple extra for you. We just went with the cashier’s recommendation since we didn’t know what you like and Alec wasn’t answering his phone.”

“Oh, yeah, speaking of phones. What’s your number, Magnus? We might need it,” Izzy cuts in, setting her burrito aside and searching for her phone. “Here, put your number in.” Magnus does as he’s told and hands the phone back before addressing Clary.

“We ate just before you arrived, but I appreciate you thinking of us,” Magnus says.

‘We,’ Jace mouths at Alec. ‘Us.’

“Actually, Alexander, I don’t believe you have my phone number yet.”

“He doesn’t have your number and you’re dating?”

“We’re not actually dating, Sherwin,” Magnus reminds him. “But I definitely wouldn’t be opposed, if you catch my drift.” Magnus’ flirtatious wink burns a hot blush up the back of Alec’s neck.

“Alas, the point still stands. Hand over your phone, Alexander.”

Alec walks into the kitchen to retrieve his cell. He finds it sitting next to the stove where he set it after convincing Magnus to let him cook. His screen lights up with notifications as soon as he unlocks it, messages from all four interlopers devolving from “hey do you want any food” to “We’re coming over right now! Please don’t be naked!” Alec shakes his head and walks back out and settles himself in the empty seat next to Magnus.

He offers the man his phone and watches as Magnus enters his information, blinking in surprise as Magnus nudges him into readiness for a selfie. After checking that everything is to his satisfaction, Magnus places the phone into Alec’s palm. Alec scans the screen before his eyes dart back to the name at the top of the contact.

“Why does your name have a bunch of hearts and sparkles around it?” He asks.
“They’re emojis, Alexander. And it’s because I’m special,” Magnus answers, hand cupping his cheek as he leans against the table, looking up at Alec with lowered eyelids.

“Oh my god, you guys are so cute,” Clary croons. Izzy nods in agreement and Simon snorts, indiscreet, when Alec gapes at them in disbelief. Jace slaps a hard hand against Alec’s back. He smiles innocently when Alec glares at him, waiting for Alec to speak.

“Thanks,” Alec replies, gritting his teeth. “Now, aren’t you going to be late getting into work?”

“Oh, shit,” Izzy says, shoveling the rest of her food into her mouth.

“Thanks for showing me your collection. It’s great! If it’s cool with you I’ll bring over a couple records I’ve got at my place,” Simon says. “I’d love to hear how they sound, your loft has great acoustics.”

“That sounds nice, Simon.”

And it looks like Magnus means it.

***

After Jace, Izzy, Clary, and Simon vacate the premises, Alec sets to work cleaning up the eating area.

“I like your family, and your friends seem nice too,” Magnus pipes up from the kitchen. The faucet squeaks into life and Alec hears the sound of water. “I’d love to have them over again.”

“I’m sorry for the intrusion, again,” Alec says.

The water pauses. Magnus looks up as Alec walks in with a handful of garbage and three forks. He smiles, wide and genuine, stopping Alec in his tracks. “Alexander, I really don’t mind.”

All hesitation and anxiety clears from Alec’s stomach with a whoosh of air as he exhales. He tosses the rubbish and places the forks into the soapy water. Moments pass as he takes his place by Magnus’ side and begins to dry the dishes as Magnus hands them over.

They finish up and put the plates and cutlery away, the sound of the broken heater churning in the background.

***

“Today is volunteer day at the rehab center,” Magnus says, sweeping by the dining room table as Alec sorts through paperwork. Documents and folders sit in stacks by Alec’s elbow. A burning candle sits in the middle, smelling of cinnamon and honey. Magnus seats himself across from Alec. He sets a mug of tea in front of Alec before taking a long drink from his own. Then, he stretches, languid and graceful as he puts his cup back down.

Their feet brush beneath the table. Alec curses his long legs and their proclivity for taking up space that doesn’t belong to them. Magnus doesn’t seem to mind.

Alec tries to tuck his legs beneath him. Magnus’ feet bump into his again anyway. His eyes flicker up to Magnus’ face and find nothing but innocence. So he bites back a private smile.

Alec pulls out his planner and runs his finger along the page until he finds the date. “Until five o’clock, right?”
Magnus nods. “That’s right. I’ll be leaving at noon. I like to get there a bit early.” His feet pull away, leaving Alec forlorn and with a host of mixed signals he can’t even begin to decipher.

So he looks back at the crisp paper in front of him before checking the time. His watch tells him that it’s about nine in the morning. “I’ll go get ready,” Alec says. He pushes the chair back and catches his knuckles along the edge of the table. A dull thud accompanies the impact, and Magnus startles, peering over at him. Alec holds his hand up and shoots Magnus an embarrassed smile. “I uh, was just being clumsy.”

“Do be careful, darling,” Magnus hums. The light stubble on his cheeks catches the morning light as he stands. He leans over and takes Alec’s hand. Golden-brown eyes run along the knuckles and the soft pad of Magnus’ thumb rests on the curve of Alec’s wrist. A glance from beneath long, straight lashes, strikes a match in Alec’s stomach. “Wouldn’t want you damaging the merchandise, so to speak. I do expect you to be in peak condition.”

Alec burns up like kindling. Sparks and fire ripple over his skin as Magnus gives his hand a chaste kiss.

“To make it better,” Magnus says.

He can’t breathe. Magnus looks up at him with a smile and unintelligible intent and Alec can’t fucking breathe. “Thank you,” Alec manages. Magnus pulls away, and Alec all but flees from the table.

Alec hurries through the hallway and into his room before closing the door with a soft click. He takes a moment to find his breath and another to strengthen his waning legs, before he finally gives up and just sits with his back against the blue wood and stares up at the stars above.

Minutes, long and short, pass without Alec’s notice. Then, he hears soft footsteps and a low sigh.

“Too much, Chairman?” Drifts through the wood. There’s a tiny sneeze in response. “I thought so.”

Alec waits until the door to Magnus’ room shuts. Then he hauls himself to his feet, head heavy with whirring gears, and opens his luggage to look at the day clothes Izzy packed for him.

There’s a single pair of black jeans. Everything else is vibrant, and Alec has never seen so much paisley in his entire life. So he pulls out the least eye-catching button up he can find, the black jeans, paisley boxer briefs, and a pair of navy socks. Then he fishes out a black belt with an ostentatious silver buckle that’s made of tiny filigree in the shape of arrows and stars.

He lays the clothes out on the bed, and decides to ignore the eventuality by taking a shower instead.
Alec uses Magnus’ shower and Magnus shows off.

Magnus’ “standing shower,” like everything Magnus-related, is amazing. There’s no showerhead, so Alec fiddles with the knob until the ceiling unleashes a cold deluge upon him like rain. It catches him off guard, freezing him from head to toe. He almost slips and dies, but he manages to stay upright by grabbing onto a metal bar jutting from the sliding glass door, bashing his knee as he blinks the warming water out of his eyes. A pained groan echoes around the bathroom as he tries to regain his bearings.

“Fuck, shit, holy dicks is the wall made out of rock?” Alec hisses. He checks. It’s a series of taupe tiles and tiny embedded stones that shine up at him, unaware of his pain and the middle finger he gives them.

There’s a knock on the door. “Alexander, are you quite alright?” Magnus asks. Through his pain, Alec lifts his head and steadies himself.

“Oh, did Isabelle not pack something for you? I’m glad you’ll have the chance to try it.” Magnus sounds delighted, and Alec makes a mental note to throw out the products he forgot to grab from his bag before heading to the bathroom.

He grabs the bottle in front of him and pops the cap open. “It smells really nice,” Alec says aloud. And it does. It’s warm and masculine, and now Alec wants to know if Magnus ever uses this body wash. And now he’s thinking about Magnus naked, using this body wash.

“Well I hope you like it. Let me know if you need anything.” There’s a light rap of knuckles and then footsteps that fade from Alec’s hearing as he still tries to wrap his mind around the mental image of Magnus in nothing but suds and teakwood laced steam.

And now he’s half-hard.

He listens, and hears nothing outside the sound of splashing at his feet and the blood pumping through his veins. So he takes another tentative sniff of the soap, squirting a dollop into the palm of his hand. His fingers graze his dick, but then he withdraws, shaking his head before moving to lather his chest instead. Then, the persistent thought of nipple clamps pops into his mind, and Alec’s hand is coating his dick with bubbles and leftover shower gel.

Magnus’ lips on his hand. Magnus’ foot against his own. Magnus in an apron, elbow deep in dishes. Magnus waltzing around the living room. Magnus.

His cock demands his attention, laying hot and eager against his hand. Guilt sets up camp in the back of Alec’s mind with blaring airhorns. He grits his teeth before pulling away again. Alec is Magnus’ guest, and here he is, just one flick of his wrist away from jerking off to his host. It feels
wrong for Alec to take advantage of Magnus’ hospitality, and masturbate in his shower. But with the thought of Magnus comes thoughts of nipple clamps, teakwood scents, and memories of bright blue dildos that make Alec jealous.

Magnus, with his rings and luminescent smiles.

Fuck it. He’ll be quick.

So he bites his lip and reaches down. He wraps his fingers around his erection, letting out a deep sigh of relief as he strokes once, twice. Before he can change his mind again, he rests his back against the cool wall and thrusts into his right hand. His left comes up to cup his balls and his eyes flutter closed with a sigh.

Every desperate twitch of his hips slaps his ass against the unforgiving tile and he wonders if Magnus can hear him over the now lukewarm cascade. He almost hopes that Magnus can. The thought of Magnus listening, watching him and wanting. Alec giving Magnus the same show Magnus gives every other night. Alec closes his eyes and imagines.

The thought of Magnus on camera, on his bedsheets looking debauched, flits through Alec’s mind as he fucks harder into his fist. Magnus looking at Alec through the screen.

Magnus calling him Alexander.

Alec moans and cums in his hand, chest heaving as water rushes along his skin and washes away the evidence of his newfound hobby. Each shuddering gasp of air sucks in rivulets that wet his tongue and ground him as they run over his lips and down his body before slipping down the drain. He reaches out for the caddy again and scrubs with the soap, rinsing his hands before plucking the sandalwood shampoo from among the many bottles still waiting to be used.

The familiar warmth threatens to test just how short his refractory period is, so he hurries through the rest of his shower, smelling better than ever before.

He turns the knob. The shower eases before turning off altogether, droplets beading and falling as he breathes in the humid air. Despite the shame still weighing him down, Alec has to admit that the adrenaline and release have him feeling refreshed and invigorated.

But that’s enough of that. So he reaches out and plucks a nondescript towel from the rack and dries himself off. He ties it around his waist and cracks the door open. When he spots Magnus in the hallway, he can’t bring himself to meet the camboy’s eyes.

***

Alec tugs at the ends of his shirt. The wrinkle-free material is off-white with dark green trees embroidered in a straight line across his chest. He finishes buttoning it up and frowns at his reflection, the hem sits just along his hips, and his fabric lays flat, stretching over his pecs. If he twists or reaches too far, the shirt might just pop open.

He checks his bag. Every shirt is the same size except for the paisley shirts, which look even smaller than the rest.

“What the hell, Izzy?” Alec mutters. With careful hands, he bunches his sleeves up past his elbow, letting out a heavy sigh when he checks his reflection again. He tests his mobility and finds himself wanting. How is he supposed to fight in this? Or do...anything?

He pulls out his phone and rings Isabelle.
“Hey, Alec! You just caught me on break, what’s up?”

Alec checks the time. It’s coming up on ten forty-five, so he accepts her excuse and plows on. “Why are all of my clothes too small?”

Izzy laughs. “They’re not too small, Alec. It’s called tailoring,” she replies. “I asked mom for access to the health records and took your measurements from the physical paperwork. Your shoulder to waist ratio is ridiculous, by the way.”

“I can barely move,” Alec says. “Jace has been making me bulk up since our last physical. I’ve probably gained like an extra two inches.”

Izzy goes quiet. Then she speaks up again. “Let me see you.”

He rolls his eyes and switches over to video chat. Izzy pops up on the screen, the plain grey walls of the Institute break room casting her in stark relief. She stares at him before dissolving into giggles.

“Izzy, I’m serious! The shirt is going to rip apart any second now.”

“Oh my god, no that’s the perfect fit. But you should go ask Magnus for his opinion,” she winks. Alec’s mind flashes back to his shower and he flushes. Izzy notices, but he speaks before she can open her mouth.

“I’m going now, goodbye.”

“Love you! Give Magnus a kiss for me,” she says, her suggestive smile lingering for a moment before the screen goes dark.

Alec refuses to entertain the idea, but he does have to leave his room eventually. So he ventures out into the hallway and catches sight of Magnus in his bedroom. The door hangs open, just wide enough for Chairman Meow to come and go as he pleases. Through the space, Alec watches as Magnus leans over his vanity, powdering his skin and examining his face with a critical eye.

The mirror reflects Magnus’ face and open chest, the robe he wears draping around him like a waterfall that shimmers under the bright lights. Alec forces himself to look away. He wrenches his gaze from Magnus, then takes three deep breaths before knocking on the door.

Magnus startles. His hand flies to his chest, and he lets out a soft sigh when he spots Alec in the doorway. “Oh, Alexander. You startled me. Come in! Please...excuse the mess.” He tilts his head, expression sheepish as he beckons to Alec.

Alec pushes the door open further and inches inside. Despite Magnus’ warning, there’s very little mess. His gaze darts immediately to the familiar sight of Magnus’ bed. There are swaths of flowers carved deep into the wide, imposing headboard.

Magnus’ bedsheets lay in heaps of deep red shot through with swirls of dull gold. Two rugs spread over hardwood floors and there isn’t any strewn clothing in sight. There is, however, plenty of filming equipment resting in the far corner, leaning against an exposed brick wall. Alec spots multiple tripods and light stands, standing out against the otherwise austere decor. The nightstands, bed frame, and vanity are made of dark wood, natural light filtering in through gaps in Magnus’ heavy duty blackout curtains.

“You have a nice room.”
“Well, nice furniture does make for a nice room,” Magnus points out with a light laugh.

Alec blushes and laughs with him, moving to rub the back of his head before the tug of his sleeves stops his in his tracks. “This stupid shirt,” he mutters.

“Having trouble?” Magnus stands, makeup half-done and still entrancing enough to make Alec stare. Magnus waits. He arches a brow as he waits and Alec blinks before nodding.

Magnus sets down his brush. He takes a moment to straighten his robe before making his way over to where Alec’s trying to keep his shirt from ripping.

“Izzy uh, she used outdated measurements for my clothes and they’re a bit too small,” Alec says.

Magnus makes a sympathetic noise. He gives Alec a once-over, resting a hand on Alec’s arm. Alec feels the heat of Magnus’ gaze. Magnus likes what he sees. Alec sucks in a breath and regrets it as soon as the shirt pulls tighter across his back.

“While a bit snug, I have to say that this is actually a perfect fit. Your sister chose well,” Magnus smiles and reaches up to fix the collar. “I think you’d like it a bit better if you just…” And then Alec feels the pressure on his chest alleviate because Magnus Bane just undid three buttons of his shirt. “Also, while we’re fixing things, hold out your arms for me?”

“Oh, yeah, okay.” Alec nods, dumbstruck, then does as he’s told. He lifts his arms and watches through hazy vision as Magnus pulls on each sleeve before folding the fabric, tucking extra material into the makeshift pocket, and then tugging on the cuffs so that they lay against the lower curve of his bicep. Magnus stares at him, eyes contemplative. Then Magnus nods and runs his fingers through Alec’s hair.

He takes a step back, gesturing to the mirror with a grin. “There, much better. Go have a look.”

Alec shuffles toward the vanity. Magnus trails behind him, and Alec can see the sway of Magnus’ shoulders in his periphery. Then he addresses his reflection. His shirt, undone by Magnus’ ringed fingers, fits him now, comfortable and much more forgiving as he tests his range of movement. But that freedom comes with a price. A bit of his chest, and the dark hair that covers most of it, peeks out from the top open collar. Alec fidgets and tries to think of any way he can fix the issue.

“It really makes your neck and pecs look fantastic,” Magnus hums, coming up behind him with an easy gait. “You’re quite fit, and this does a good job of highlighting that. I love how it’s been tailored. It makes your arms look phenomenal, if you don’t mind my saying.”

Alec doesn’t. Alec also resolves to wear this shirt, and every other shirt of the same variety, until Izzy forces him into something new.

But that doesn’t forgive the short hemline. Even now, as he appreciates his newfound mobility, the shirt pulls up and shows a sliver of skin above his pants. The effect is something he admires on other men, but right now, all he can stare at is the long, long, expanse of legs that prop him up like stilts.

“Why are my legs so fucking long,” Alec grumbles, just low enough to escape Magnus’ notice.

“I didn’t quite catch that,” Magnus says, still examining Alec’s outfit. “But you look great. Those pants fit you perfectly. Really, people would kill for a body like yours.” His voice is flippant, but leaves Alec reeling all the same.

“Uh, you think so?”
“Seriously, Alexander. If you weren’t already employed, I’d recommend that you take up modeling. Or even adult film if you felt so inclined,” Magnus says with a sultry wink.

“I’m a virgin,” Alec blurs out.

“Which, I assure you, isn’t a problem in any context, darling,” Magnus sighs, coming around to Alec’s front and laying a soft hand against Alec’s cheek. “I’m just teasing. If I offend, please let me know.”

“I uh, I mean, Izzy told you already anyway,” Alec mumbles.

“Dear Isabelle simply said that you haven’t dated since coming out,” Magnus says. He dips his head, as though in apology. Then he looks up and Alec can see every fleck of gold woven into his brown irises. “Never feel like you must explain your experiences to me, Alexander. Relationships, sexual or otherwise, are personal. I never intended to pry and I don’t plan on starting now.”

Alec leans into the touch, unable to help himself as his lashes lower over his eyes. Magnus looks up at him in earnest.

“Thank you, Magnus,” Alec whispers. There’s a shift in Magnus’ expression. Alec doesn’t know what it means, but he doesn’t mind waiting to find out. He doesn’t mind standing here and feeling the electricity charging the air and Magnus’ warm skin against his own.

He doesn’t mind at all.

“You’re very welcome, Alexander,” Magnus says. “Now if you’ll excuse me...since this is what I’m up against, I’ll have to look my very best.” Then, with one last look of approval, Magnus strides over to his closet, robe fluttering as he disappears.

Alec hovers for a moment before he realizes Magnus expects him to leave. So he resigns himself to a day in this ludicrous outfit, and heads out to the table to finish the paperwork he’d abandoned.

It’s eleven. Just one hour until Alec gets to live out his greatest dream and worst nightmare.

After an hour passes, Magnus sweeps out into the living room, looking gorgeous in a tasteful black trench coat hanging over a black button up with tiny white stars embroidering the material. His pants taper at his ankles, fitting his legs in a way that makes Alec want to stare and look away all at once. Shining dark brown shoes tap against the wooden flooring as Magnus gives a little spin.

“What do you think?” Magnus asks with a wink. “I wanted to give the all black thing a try. Plus this way we look like a pair.” He steps into Alec’s space, fingers trailing along the seams of Alec’s shirt, tugging on the crisp cotton. “Light and darkness. You make quite the beautiful angel, and I’ve been called an incorrigible devil once or twice.”

And Magnus does look sinful, with his shimmering eyelids and glossy lips.

Alec fights to speak. “I uh, have to get my jacket.”

“It’s not white is it?” Magnus teases. Alec pauses to think.

“It’s black,” Alec says. Magnus pouts, still so close, close enough that Alec can smell the shower gel.

“Pity,” Magnus hums. He pulls away, allowing Alec to find a modicum of breath in the space between them. “Though I guess that just means we’ll match.” He goes to wait by the door. “Are
“Yeah, uh, one second,” Alec mutters. He turns in his chair, the table digging into his side, and plucks the coat from the back rest as he stands. With a few long steps, Alec pulls on the familiar leather material. He opens the door. “After you,” he smiles. Magnus shoots him an appreciative look and walks into the hallway.

***

The facility sits a comfortable thirty minutes of transit time away. He checks the clock and sees that they’ll likely be arriving at the location a quarter before one. He chances a glimpse at his charge. Magnus’ hair and makeup are impeccable, gold and warm neutral colors pulling Alec’s attention and heartstrings.

Magnus’ loft is a convenient two blocks from a subway station. They swipe their way through the turnstiles and Alec follows Magnus to the correct platform. Alec’s eyes sweep over everyone in sight, cataloging those closest to them and noting any odd behavior.

He’s staring hard at a young man who keeps glancing at them from about ten feet away when he feels a touch against his hand. Magnus weaves their fingers together and leans in close, laughter on his lips.

“He’s suspicious,” Alec mutters, gruff and unsociable as he tries to hide the flush that rises due to Magnus’ attention. He shifts closer and pulls Magnus in by his hips. Dating. They’re supposed to be dating, Alec reminds himself. “He keeps looking over here.”

“You are quite eye-catching,” Magnus says, voice amiable. Alec blushes harder and Magnus laughs for real this time.

Though Alec doesn’t like the extra attention, none of his warning bells go off. After years spent learning to read body language and anticipate danger, Alec is confident in saying that the boy on the platform is just interested in Magnus. He pulls Magnus closer. It’s petty, but he doesn’t have to feign jealousy.

The boy looks down and away. Alec turns back to Magnus and lets out a sheepish smile.

“He’s harmless,” Alec admits. Magnus nods in agreement.

“And you’re oblivious,” he sighs. He’s so quiet that Alec almost loses the words in the sound of the train that rushes by. “This is us,” Magnus says.

They step on the train, the boy entering the car as well. People crowd around them on all sides, and Alec shelters Magnus against a pole.

“How many stops?” Alec asks. He knows how many, but he likes hearing Magnus talk.


Magnus’ hand is warm in his own.

***

Walking from the station to their destination is brief and Alec notes that the simple path makes
following Magnus’ movements very easy. The streets still hold a fair number of pedestrians, but ease up as they continue toward the campus of colorful buildings, crowds thinning as they pass the last couple of blocks.

Alec takes stock of their surroundings as they pass through the entryway. There’s no one around but people with name tags escorting teenagers wearing thin hoodies and t-shirts despite the chilly weather. Some pause to greet Magnus and peer up at Alec, curious more than suspicious. Nothing out of the ordinary. There aren’t any places to hide, and the number of people makes the campus too high risk for anyone to approach Magnus and expect to succeed in daylight hours.

The rehabilitation center is more open than Alec expected of any kind of institution, much less a volunteer-run location on the outskirts of the city. Each building winds around courtyards and open spaces. Fall air rushes between the passages. It blows at Alec’s jacket and into his stupid open collar. A strong gust strikes up as Magnus leads them toward the main building, nipping at their noses, and doing its very best to bowl them over.

Alec reaches out on instinct, looping an arm around Magnus’ waist to haul him in closer.

The gust blows hair into Alec’s eyes, so he pushes it back with an impatient huff, prompting a laugh from his companion. A hand wends its way into the fabric of his sleeve as Magnus looks up at him with a soft smile.

“So sorry about that, darling,” Magnus winks. Alec stutters something dismissive, he isn’t quite sure what, but Magnus seems to understand all the same. “Let’s get you inside. I’m so excited to flaunt how hot you are.” Alec flushes. Magnus plows onward, unaware. “Did I tell you that Lor didn’t believe me when I said I had a boyfriend?”

Alec chuckles at the thought of Magnus telling stories about his fake boyfriend, and the fact that he’s acting so outraged at poor Lor who didn’t believe his lies. All for honesty, Alec opens his mouth to rebuke the tenacious camboy, but thinks better of it as Magnus lowers his lashes and twines their fingers together.

“The nerve,” Alec says, putting just enough dramatic breath into the words to make Magnus’ smile grow into a full-blown grin.

“Right?” Magnus’ eyes twinkle as he pulls Alec toward the shiny automatic doors. A pair of workers look up and greet them with warm voices as they step into the lobby. “Well, Alexander. Welcome to the Idris Memorial Center.”

“Oh my god, Magnus is this him?” One of them says. Their brown eyes trail over Alec’s form in a way that makes him feel prideful instead of shy.

To this person, he’s Alexander, Magnus’ boyfriend that comes up in the wild stories that Magnus likes to tell. Alec has never felt interesting before. Magnus pulls him closer to the front desk and makes a show of raising their joined hands.

“The one and only,” Magnus beams. “I told you he was tall. Didn’t I, Lor?”

Lor rolls their eyes and turns to Alec with a raised brow.

“Is he like this at home too? He never stops being... him,” they say with a pair of unenthusiastic jazzhands.

“Oh my god, does he have nipple piercings? He keeps saying he does, but he won’t let us look and I don’t believe him,” the other worker asks, expression curious.
Alec stands his ground, feeling Magnus pressing against his side and thinking about how he does know the answer to both of those questions. He clears his throat and looks down at the man beside him. A playful smirk curls itself across his lips as Magnus lets out an indignant noise at the accusation.

“No, he doesn’t have nipple piercings. But he does have a navel piercing,” Alec says. Then, he pauses, considering what to say next as Magnus feigns offense at having been betrayed.

“Alexander,” Magnus pouts, looking so comfortable and soft as he puffs his cheeks.

Alec does it before he realizes it. He tugs Magnus deeper into his grasp and lays a chaste kiss to his lips before turning to look at Magnus’ coworkers.

“He is like this at home. He always makes my day better.” It almost sounds like someone else spoke. His voice is low and tender and oh my god he sounds like Jace when Jace talks about Clary’s ass.

Magnus’ coworkers stare, a little slack-jawed, before both pairs of eyes slide from Alec’s face to Magnus.

Alec freezes.

That was his first kiss, and he’s still not even sure if it happened in real life or if Magnus is okay with being kissed at all, but then there’s the familiar smell of heady shower gel and Magnus has let go of his hands and is looping strong arms around his neck. Alec takes in Magnus’ half-lidded eyes and the strange, vulnerable way they stare up at him.

“A proper one for the road?” Magnus whispers. The words are just quiet enough that Alec almost wonders if Magnus said anything at all. Alec nods, a bit dumb, and then Magnus is kissing him again.

It’s long and deep and Alec can’t breathe but it doesn’t matter because Magnus is in his arms and it feels so right. Until it’s over. Magnus takes a couple steps back, and Alec feels every finger leave his grasp. Then, as if to soften the blow, Magnus waves goodbye. Alec waves back and walks out the door.

He hears the distinct sound of hollering, but Alec doesn’t pay attention to what Magnus’ coworkers call after him. He’s too busy walking on clouds when the fall air slaps a crisp red leaf right into his face.

Alec rolls his eyes, his feet and mind now back on earth as he remembers what he’s there for. It’s all fake. No need to get himself in a twist about kisses that mean nothing. He takes a quick walk around the courtyard before leaving. Everything seems in order, and he acknowledges the people who recognize him from when he’d arrived.

It seems safe enough. Since Magnus wants to maintain discretion, Alec can’t follow him around all day, and Magnus seems confident and comfortable in this space amongst his coworkers. This is the best he can do.

Alec heads back to the loft. Magnus has his phone number, and Alec already knows when to return, but it doesn’t stop the shame that reddens Alec’s skin.

Magnus is distracting him, too beautiful and enchanting to ignore. But Alec has a job to do. So he hurries back home, full of plans to sit at the kitchen table, and sort through all the paperwork sent to the agency.
Alec has to keep Magnus safe. That’s what he’s paid to do, and really, that’s all he wants anyway.
The trip back and Alec’s new conviction help clear his mind, reminding Alec to check out the rest of the apartment building and introduce himself to the front desk. Alec walks into the lobby and makes a quick round of the floor. There’s a gym, an indoor pool, and a spa, amenities that strike Alec as more luxurious than anyone considers necessary.

He wanders out of the hallway that branches off to the large private salon. The person at the front desk looks up at him, taking stock of his tall frame and dark clothes.

“Can I help you, sir?” She asks. “Are you interested in possibly renting from us?”

“I uh, already live here, actually,” Alec says. “I just moved in with my boyfriend so I wanted to check out the amenities since he’s always talking about them.”

“Oh, well then please take this brochure! I’m sure he’ll show you personally, but we have plenty of great options for you to occupy yourself with until he gets home from work,” she winks. Alec blushes.

“Thank you. I really appreciate it,” Alec nods. He takes the pamphlet and salutes her with it before wandering off to explore more before heading back upstairs.

***

It’s obvious why Ragnor can’t seem to get a proper restraining order on the bastard. The information is abysmal, better than nothing, but not by much. For one thing, they don’t know who it is. There’s been no physical engagement. No one has come up to Magnus or even left phone calls.

But there are other things.

Such as fanmail.

As a camboy, Magnus receives gifts in the form of sex toys and lingerie sent to a PO box under the name of some poor asshole who lost it to Magnus in a bet. Alec snorts as he thinks of the way Magnus tells the story, and the approving glance Isabelle shot him over breakfast.

There’s plenty of that, some of it still in boxes, but Alec focuses on the pile with a bright yellow sticky note.

*Creepy Shit*, reads Ragnor’s slanting penmanship. Alec peels off the post-it. He spreads the postage out in front of him and readies a notepad.

Broken wax seals and strips of ribbon cling to each thick designer envelope. Some of the letters come with jewelry, others with checks written for hundreds of dollars, and more with small hard caramel candies. Alec sorts through it all. There are so many handwritten letters that a couple
threaten to tip over onto the floor when Alec hits the edge of the table. Each one is penned in the same even script. It’s calligraphy, because of course it is, and Alec hates this mysterious person more and more as he reads.

‘My Beautiful Magnus,

I send you this letter with hopes that you’ll remember our times together. This necklace is a token of my affection. Wear it during your next show, so that they know you are mine just as I have always been yours.

With Love,

Your Guardian Angel’

Alec’s lip curls in distaste and ugly, persistent, jealousy. Guardian Angel his ass.

Each letter is the same. A gift, a declaration, a plea for recognition. It’s obvious what this person wants and at first, Alec wonders why this fanmail is different from the shrink-wrapped boxes of dildos littering the space around his feet. Then it clicks.

Magnus. This person calls Magnus by his name. He shuffles onward, moving in the chronological order from the dates marking each letters’ upper right corner. Alec picks up the last one, noting that it’s longer than the rest. It’s dated a week before Magnus came into the office.

This is what pushed Magnus to ask for help. Alec frowns and unfolds the crisp paper.

“‘My Beautiful Magnus,

It’s been a while. I hope you haven’t missed me; I’ve been busy making arrangements to better prepare for our lives together. It’s been hard, but this morning, I saw you at your favorite bakery. You got the orange and chocolate muffin like you always do, and your smile reminded me that this is all worth it. Wait for me. I will be by your side soon.

With Love,

Your Guardian Angel’”

The hairs on the back of Alec’s neck rise. He’s alone, and he checked the premises upon returning home, but he can’t shake off the feeling that there’s someone out there that knows where he is at this very moment.

Alec doesn’t shy away from danger. He doesn’t court it like Jace, or laugh at it like Isabelle, but he’s always been protective, and that means he can’t back down from a fight. It’s a skill he’s put to use over the years, standing staunch in the face of celebrity meet and greets and the occasional assassination attempt. But this is different. He’s never been involved in a case like this before.

It creeps, slow and insidious. It fills him with paranoia that’s not paranoia but feels like it just the same. There is something to fear. It’s unnamed and quiet, but it’s undeniable.

There is someone coming for Magnus.

Magnus, who spends his free time volunteering and dancing with his cat.

The thought of Magnus’ effervescence dying out beneath the looming darkness steels Alec’s determination. Magnus deserves to feel safe and happy. Alec wants him to smile without the
weight of a lurking shadow. Alec gets back to work.

It’s arduous, picking through the letters and fighting off the perpetual discomfort of a nameless presence. He manages to gather more information regardless.

The stalker knows Magnus by name. They’re local and Alec wants nothing more than to turn them upside down and shake the pretension out of their pockets. All of it is worrisome, but one thing concerns Alec the most.

This person has money. It’s not just the gifts or the checks that Magnus never even tried to cash; it’s in the way they communicate.

They practice calligraphy, and use scented wax seals. Ragnor left a note with the documentation. He knows the company that makes the custom seals and wax. There’s one source that laces its wax with gold leaf and fucking *diamond dust*. It’s a custom brand from the UK that only serves a small clientele and has a waiting list as long as the line at the DMV.

That tidbit of information doesn’t do much for them though, because Ragnor already tried that route and their client list is “classified”. In other words: not for the eyes of a camboy’s manager in Brooklyn.

Alec picks at one of the seals that’s still intact. Ivy frames the edges and kisses the lines of a small cat.

Everything about this puts Alec on edge, but then Chairman Meow leaps up into his lap and demands attention. The tiny tabby chirps, settling against him, bringing him back to the present and the fact that this isn’t personal. This is a job. At least that’s what he tells himself.

The Chairman curls against Alec’s stomach as if he belongs there anyway.

***

Alec doesn’t make much headway beyond cataloging the notes he made and reporting it back to his mother for documentation processing. They have contacts on the police force and at a law agency that she’ll forward it to once Alec puts together enough information for submission alongside Ragnor’s efforts.

Chairman Meow continues to sleep. Alec makes great pains not to move too much or too far, avoiding the possibility of waking the napping feline at all costs. It’s alarming, how endearing the occupants of this loft are.

Alec knows he’s a goner. He’s got a massive raging crush on his client, and a bruising soft spot for his client’s cat. It’s the worst. There’s no forgetting that there’s a stalker out there, but there is forgetting that Magnus isn’t his boyfriend and that Chairman isn’t his cat and that all of this is just a dream made manifest by necessity.

With a heavy sigh, Alec pats Chairman’s soft stomach, waiting for the sleepy twitches to become full blown awareness before he shifts. With a languid yawn and a luxurious ruffling of his fur, Magnus’ cat leaps off of Alec’s still-warm thighs. He presses his head to Alec’s shins before wandering off to find another, better, place to sleep.

The sun is still high over the city. It’s about three in the afternoon and Alec still has a couple hours to burn before it’s time for him to leave. So he sets aside the aptly named *creepy shit* and begins to canvas Magnus’ apartment.
There are four inner rooms, the biggest of which is the master bedroom, which has a walk-in closet and a large bathroom branching from it. The other three rooms are the Nipple Clamp Room, the hallway bathroom where Alec jerked off in Magnus’ shower, and the study. Alec is more familiar with the Nipple Clamp Room and the bathroom than he wants to dwell on, and Magnus’ rooms are off-limits without express permission from Magnus.

That leaves the communal spaces. Alec starts in the dining room, counting the windows and vents as he wanders through the discreet boxes from various sex stores. There are three large panes of clear glass with blue curtains. There are two vents, one on the floor by the entrance to the kitchen, and one in the corner beneath an end table with a beautiful porcelain vase on top of it.

He moves on to the living room. Then the kitchen, and then he goes back over his own bedroom and the bathroom just in case. It’s tedious work. After about forty five minutes, he returns to the front rooms. He checks his phone. A little over an hour left before he leaves to meet Magnus.

Alec finds his way to the small closet that houses the noisy heater.

Magnus had laughed when Alec brought up the heater to him, but approved all the same.

Alec smiles at the memory. Then, instead of staring at the unremarkable closet door any longer, he pulls it open and takes stock of the damage. It’s a simple fix. Alec nods and sets out to find the proper equipment for the job.

The main tool box sits in the cupboard below the sink, but it’s empty. He digs around Magnus’ apartment for some tools and finds them hiding in the oddest places. A wrench in the bathroom, the screwdrivers in the Nipple Clamp room (all but one are broken), and the rest require him to get his knees and elbows on the ground as he searches below furniture and around old pairs of shoes.

After about half an hour, wielding a...creative array of tools, he sets to work. The old heater fights him every step of the way, but he manages to get it up and running as if it’s new.

Even if it’s small, Alec is glad to do something for Magnus. Something he’s not paid for.

***

Alec pulls on his jacket and heads out the door, fishing out the spare set of loft keys sitting in his coat pocket. He locks up before walking to the stairs. Magnus lives on the top floor, but Alec is a bit early, and he doesn’t want to seem more eager than responsible. He steps out into the main lobby. White marble and gold paint decorate the whole space, a bit intimidating and grand for Alec’s taste. The doorman nods as he passes. Alec nods back with a tight smile and pushes out into the evening air.

“Oh, Alec.”

Sebastian greets him with a wave from where he stands on the sidewalk. Alec manages to hide his irritation.

“Sebastian,” Alec says. Sebastian offers a hand and Alec takes it, shaking it before pulling away. He tries to convey urgency in his movements to get away from the inevitable small talk the landlord will strike up.

“In a rush?” Sebastian asks, brow raising in question. Alec feigns disappointment.

“Oh, yeah. Sorry about that,” Alec says, not meaning the apology at all. He jerks his thumb in the direction of the nearest subway entrance. “Boyfriend. Picking him up to walk him home.”
“The one with the nice voice?” Sebastian’s innocent smile grates at Alec’s every nerve.

“The one and only,” Alec chuckles, hoping it sounds genuine.

Sebastian inclines his head. He looks contrite and apologetic. “Yes, of course. How silly of me. I take it you’re a one soul at a time kind of guy?”

“Yeah. We both are,” Alec replies. He makes a show of checking his phone. “I really have to go. It was nice seeing you, Sebastian.”

“Likewise,” Sebastian says.

***

Alec is late. He left on time, but between Sebastian and a persistent gaggle of teenagers, Alec steps out of the train car and onto the platform four minutes past the time Magnus gets off work.

He jogs to the center, taking note of all the people as he goes. Most pedestrians ignore him. As he gets closer to the Idris Memorial Center, Alec begins to recognize the workers he saw earlier in the day, nodding to them as he hurries. He continues up the steps and through the automatic doors.

“Alexander!” Magnus says. He’s leaning over the counter with his trenchcoat open, expression bright as if Alec isn’t almost ten minutes late on his literal first day as Magnus’ boyfriend.

“Sorry I’m late,” Alec breathes. Magnus rolls his eyes and steps around the front desk, walking forward to cup Alec’s face and give him a quick kiss. Alec’s heart soars.

“Nonsense. You’re actually right on time. We had a session that ran a little long,” Magnus says. He pulls at Alec’s collar to straighten it, rubbing the windchill from Alec’s cheeks with the palms of his hands. “Did you run here?”

Alec shrugs. “I wanted to see you.” It’s honest, and Alec reminds himself that this is okay. Why act when he can convince everyone with the real feelings he has?

“Oh my god, Magnus go home. We can’t watch you anymore,” Lor says with a groan.

Magnus turns to shoot them a mock glare. “Too bad, because he’s going to be picking me up every day from now on. Isn’t that right, darling?”

Darling. He blushes. If it weren’t so pleasant, Alec might hate the word for having that much power over him.

“That’s right,” Alec agrees. He wraps a comfortable arm around Magnus and enjoys the way Magnus fits against him. “Hope that won’t be a problem,” Alec calls to Lor.

They wave him off with an indulgent smile. “Whatever. As long as he’s happy.”

“Then Alexander may as well be here all day every day,” Magnus teases, looking up at Alec with a grin just this side of blinding. “I’d love to have something nice to look at while on the clock.” Alec smiles back because he can’t help himself.

“You don’t even get paid,” Lor rolls their eyes. “I’m drawing a line in the sand, this is too much.”

Magnus lets out an exaggerated sigh. “Lor is trying to tear us apart, Alexander.”

“I won’t let that happen.” Alec lays a peck to the side of Magnus’ head. “I’m watching you, Lor.”
Lor laughs and shoos them from the premises. They step outside. Magnus shivers and tucks himself closer to Alec.

“Cold?” Alec asks. Magnus nods, shooting Alec a sheepish look. Alec steps back and buttons up Magnus’ coat. “Well, leaving this unbuttoned isn’t going to keep you warm.”

“But then no one can tell we’re matching,” Magnus pouts. “Your jacket isn’t zipped up.” Alec glances down and pulls at the tab, the jacket coming together with a hiss. Then he reaches out to fix Magnus’ buttons.

“There, now we’re matching again.”

Alec stands up straight. His eyes light on Magnus’ own, and he sees something that he doesn’t quite understand.

Magnus blinks. Then he shoots Alec a beatific smile. “We make quite the couple.”

Alec holds out his hand, and Magnus takes it, lacing their fingers together.

“I think so too,” Alec murmurs.

***

Their way back to the station is comfortable. They never let go of each other, and Alec makes sure to cover Magnus as best as possible without laying directly on top of him.

Alec spots a number of strangers taking second looks. Magnus doesn’t notice the attention, so Alec remains vigilant.

“Should we stop somewhere for dinner?” Magnus asks. Alec startles, and Magnus laughs, soft and playful. “I said dinner, not a strip show.”

And doesn’t that just put the prettiest image of Magnus into Alec’s mind.

“Uh, yeah. Dinner, uh, sounds good,” Alec stutters. “Do you have anything in mind?”

“I picked last time,” Magnus counters. “I’d love to go somewhere you like.”

Alec’s mind short-circuits. What places does Alec like to eat? Magnus likes to enjoy delicious cuisines from all around the world, and Alec can only think of one thing.

“Bacon cheeseburgers,” Alec blurts out. He can already feel the blush rising up his neck. Magnus is silent at his side, and Alec wishes he could take back his inelegant suggestion, already scrolling through the abysmal mental archive of restaurants he’s been to in the past year. He can hear Jace laughing in the back of his mind. Bacon cheeseburgers. Honestly.

“Bacon cheeseburgers?” Magnus repeats. Alec steels himself and turns to face Magnus. A smile greets him. “That sounds good. Did you want to go anywhere in particular? I have to admit that I’m not really familiar with a lot of good burger joints around here.”

“I, uh...I know a place,” Alec says. Magnus nods and nudges him, eyes expectant.

“Well then, lead the way.”

***
The Hunter’s Moon is so much farther away than Alec remembers it being. It takes them two line changes to get there and Alec wants to apologize, but Magnus doesn’t seem to mind at all. It’s almost half past six by the time they arrive.

“Alec?”

And Alec really should know better than to come to The Hunter’s Moon with Magnus on his arm. He knows half of the staff, and of course, Maia is working the night shift on the one weeknight he decides to come with Magnus fucking Bane.

“Maia,” Alec says, hoping to every deity out there that she won’t notice Magnus beside him. It takes one look at her smug expression to know that he’s done for. So he rips off the bandaid. “This is Magnus.”

“Nice to meet you, Maia.” Magnus and Maia shake hands.


“Bacon cheeseburgers,” Magnus announces, turning to Alec with a pleased smile. “I’ve heard great things.”

Maia laughs. “Well if Alec’s the one you’re hearing from, I hope so. I’m not even sure he chews. He just kind of vacuums them up.”

“Oh really? Do tell,” Magnus says, leaning against the bar. The bar is empty, considering it’s a Monday, and Alec wants to just jump back in time so that he doesn’t have to watch as Maia and Magnus take to each other like long-lost friends.

“Okay,” Alec interrupts. Maia glances up at him with a keen smile. “We should go grab a table.”

It’s obvious that he’s trying to separate them, but he likes the sight of Magnus chatting with Maia just a little too much.

“I didn’t mean to steal your date, Alec,” Maia chuckles. “I hope to see you again soon, Magnus.”

“You most definitely will,” Magnus winks. “Although I’d like to try one of your martinis if you don’t mind. And a drink for Alexander as well.” Alec moves to say he can’t drink on the job, but the protest dies on his tongue as Magnus tugs on his hand and he remember that this is, and isn’t, a job. “Alexander, what do you want to drink?”

Alec sighs and looks at Maia.

“Whisky on the rocks,” he says.

“Whisky? Really...I didn’t peg you as the whisky type,” Magnus admits aloud.

“That’s because he’s not the whisky type,” Maia says, voice flat and eyebrow at her hairline. “You never drink whisky. I’m making you your usual.”

“Wait, Maia--”

Maia pays him no mind, turning her back to them as she starts mixing their drinks.

Magnus peeks up at him. “Let’s go find a table. I’m dying to try these burgers.”

Alec knows Maia won’t back down, so he nods and leads Magnus to an open booth. He knows this place inside and out, and he trusts the staff. Magnus is safe here. They both divest themselves of
their coats when Maia stops by, tray in hand, wearing the same immovable smirk she’s worn all night.

“A martini for Magnus, and a Cosmopolitan for Alec.”

“You have good taste,” Magnus says. “Definitely more of a Cosmopolitan guy than a whisky guy.” Alec blushes, but Maia shoots him a look of clear approval before gesturing the back of the restaurant area.

“I’ll put in your order too. Fries and four burgers, right?” Maia confirms. Nice shirt, by the way,” she snorts. Alec tries to pull on his collar. It doesn’t do much, and Maia laughs at his expense.

Magnus doesn’t even bother trying to hide the interest in his expression. Red with embarrassment, Alec nods. Maia walks away. Alec wants to sink into the floor, but Magnus reaches out and lays a comforting hand on his arm. Then, Magnus smiles, playful and heartstopping as he levels Alec with the full force of his golden-brown gaze.

“Four burgers?” Magnus asks.

“I uh...usually eat three on my own,” Alec admits. “I come here a lot.”

“Well then. I hope you know that means you’re sharing, because I’m not sure one is going to be enough for me,” Magnus says, very matter-of-fact as he takes a sip of his drink.

“Who says I’m willing to share,” Alec replies with a mischievous smile. He surprises himself. Flirting isn’t in his repertoire, but by the look on Magnus’ face, he’s not that bad at it.

Magnus plays with his fingers. Then, with a coy lowering of lashes and a tilt of his head, the shitty bar lighting catches the shine of his lips just right. “You wouldn’t let me go hungry, would you?”

“Never,” Alec admits. And it’s true. Everything is true and Alec never knew he was the kind of person to fall for someone so hard and fast. But he is. The responsible part of him begs him to stop but he can’t bring himself to turn away.

Inviting Magnus here, into his everyday life was a mistake. A mistake Alec would make over and over again as long as he gets to see Magnus smile like that.

***

It’s almost eight and the walk up to the loft is so much harder with a stomach full of grease.

“Ugh, I can’t believe you let me eat so much! I have a show tomorrow night and now I’m going to be all bloated,” Magnus whines.

Alec struggles to breathe for a moment.

He forgot. The Great Bane has a show every Tuesday and Thursday. After orgasming for the first time in eight years, Alec had watched Magnus explain his schedule through dazed eyes and satiation. Plus he has a hardcopy of the schedule back at the loft because he’s Magnus’ security detail. Right.

“I forgot that you have a show tomorrow,” Alec says, trying to keep it conversational. The last thing he wants to do is admit that Magnus is the main star in all of his latent sexual fantasies.

“I do,” Magnus says. “But it should be fine because it’s a Q&A session anyway. We play strip
Truth or Dare,” Magnus winks. “If I won’t tell the truth and can’t fulfill the dare, I take something off.”

“That sounds, uh, fun,” Alec choking out.

There’s a pause.

“If you’re against my profession, this is going to be very difficult for you,” Magnus says, voice cold. He stands in front of his loft doors with rigid shoulders and a defiant lift of his chin.

Alec scrambles to rectify the situation.

“That’s not what I meant at all. I just, uh, virgin, remember?”

A virgin that can’t seem to stop masturbating to the thought of you, but a virgin nonetheless, Alec’s mind whispers.

Magnus relaxes. “Right. I tend to get a bit defensive.” Magnus bites his lip and Alec’s eyes dart to the reddening skin. “I apologize, you didn’t mean any offense and I shouldn’t have assumed.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m sure you probably get dicks all the time,” Alec says. Magnus looks at him with a tiny snicker and Alec’s eyes widen. “I mean people being dicks about your job. Like to you. Not that you get dicked all the time which...I suppose you do…”

Magnus laughs and unlocks the door before turning to him with a brilliant smile.

“Thank you, Alexander.”

Alec breathes. In, and out, soaking in the rays of Magnus’ sun.

Anything to make you happy, Alec thinks.
Magnus sheds his jacket and drapes it over the back of the couch. He pauses by the dining room, where there are still boxes on the floor and stacks of letters, staring hard at the table before addressing Alec.

“Did you find anything?” His voice is even.

“Nothing much,” Alec admits. He pauses, then decides it’s worth the risk. “They know you.”

Magnus tenses. Then he nods, gesturing to the letters with half-hearted flourish. “It would seem so.”

“They’re local, and rich. Can you think of anyone that might fit that description?” Alec knows he’s pushing it, but he trusts Magnus to tell him where to stop.

“Everyone around here is rich and local,” Magnus sighs, impatient but not unkind. “I don’t have many friends. I don’t have any trouble finding dates, but all of them have my number and I haven’t received any calls.”

“One-night stands, maybe?” Alec tries.

“If they’re truly a one-night stand, then I have a zero tolerance policy regarding continued contact. Can’t have anyone getting...attached,” Magnus says with a shrug of the shoulders. Attached. Alec’s insides shrivel as Magnus continues. “Besides, none of my one-night stands would bother with all of this. Trust me, I can only think of two in recent memory who actually made me cum, they wouldn’t send me money or jewelry.” His joke is lost beneath the obvious frustration he wears on his sleeve.

“Right,” Alec says, swallowing hard. “Well, I’ve sent the information to my mom and she’s forwarding it to our contacts with the police. They’ll evaluate the evidence as I send it in and will assign the case as they see fit.”

“Thank you,” Magnus nods, but Alec can still read discomfort in his features. So he walks forward. He ventures into Magnus’ space and lays a hand on Magnus’ cheek.

“Until we find this person, I’ll be here to protect you. Even after that. Never feel like you can’t ask me for help,” Alec whispers.

It’s more than he wanted to say, but Alec is glad he said it all the same.

Magnus looks away. Then, after a moment, he looks back up at Alec, expression regretful.
“I owe you an apology.”

Alec blinks. “For what?”

Magnus looks awkward, out of his depth, but resolute all the same. “I kissed you.”

Sirens go off in Alec’s head. “I kissed you first,” Alec says, desperate to cut off any platitudes that Magnus might throw at him because hearing “it was just for show” might break the illusion he wants to maintain.

“Even so,” Magnus starts. He hesitates, contemplating his words, then he sighs. “Tell me if I ever overstep. We should discuss boundaries. I don’t want you to feel like you have to do anything you’re not comfortable with. I’m not expecting anything and I don’t want you to feel obligated due to our...situation.”

The assertion is ridiculous to Alec’s ears, but Alec’s gaze skims over Magnus’ figure. Magnus is his employer. He can see why Magnus wants to address this. This entire situation is strange and confusing for them both, and Alec needs Magnus to know where he stands.

He takes in Magnus’ nervous fingers and serious expression before stepping forward. Alec doesn’t know how to tell Magnus that he has nothing but open arms for anything Magnus is willing to give him.

“Tomorrow?” Alec asks.

“Tomorrow is fine,” Magnus says. “But we should discuss them sooner rather than later.”

“Okay,” Alec murmurs. Then, with the assurance of an easy escape, Alec leans in to kiss Magnus’ cheek. “Good night, Magnus.”

Magnus lifts his hand to cup Alec’s face, then lowers it, expression soft but still unsure. “Good night, Alexander.”

***

Alec walks to his room, closes the door, and brushes his teeth with more aggression than is necessary for any act of personal hygiene. He strips and dives into bed to try and hide from the blush that’s still streaking from his neck to his ears.

Today feels like a step forward, a bridge of sorts beginning to form between them. Magnus is accommodating and open, but there are moments where that makes Alec too comfortable; dragging him deeper into the ridiculous dream of a real relationship with Magnus.

Alec lies in bed. His mind goes through all of their interactions today. Despite knowing it’s all for the sake of their cover story, Alec can’t help but think back on their dancing in the living room, how Magnus got along with his friends and family, that kiss for the road, and the apology for boundaries they never quite established. Magnus didn’t have to do any of those things.

Those moments weren’t for the stalker. At least Alec hopes not.

He flips over. His long legs poke out of the tiny boxer briefs Isabelle packed for him, tangling in the multitude of sheets that Alec doesn’t know the purpose of.

Then, before he can think about it too much, Alec pulls out his phone and sends Jace a text. He sets his cell aside. It takes all of two seconds for it to buzz. It’s a short message.
“He likes you, you fuck,” it reads.

“Thanks, Jace. Real helpful,” Alec mutters into the darkness.

”Get it,” follows soon after.

Alec decides to turn on Do Not Disturb, still catching the incoming notification for one last message as he does. He neglects to read the text that comes through, choosing instead to pull the covers over his head.

It’s quiet. The frequent creaking from the heater is gone, and Alec allows himself a moment of pride. He wonders if Magnus is happy that the heater is working without sounding like it’s going to explode.

Magnus didn’t seem to mind the noise before. Maybe he’d let Alec fix it to indulge Alec’s insistence, Alec had been eager to help, and it’s clear that Magnus wants to do everything in his power to make sure Alec is comfortable.

Alec frowns, the thought riddling him with anxiety. The last thing he wants to do is take advantage of Magnus’ kindness.

Magnus hired Alec for protection; Alec’s attraction to him is just extra baggage he wasn’t warned about. He didn’t intend to buy the “Guy With a Huge Boner For You” package. All Magnus wanted was a goddamn bodyguard and for his stalker to stop harassing him.

But then Alec thinks about all of the things they’ve done since yesterday. They’ve eaten meals together, washed dishes, danced in the living room, and Alec has seen Magnus full-frontal on camera. Alec can say, with the utmost confidence, that he’s already well on his way to liking Magnus.

It’s like everything in his life is being put in fast forward, catching up for all of the lost time spent hiding in the shadows of his hard-earned accomplishments. In a short span of just two days, Alec is experiencing milestone after milestone of a relationship, and as scary as he finds it, it’s thrilling.

At first this was his most horrific nightmare come true. Fake dating the man he broke an eight year dry spell with, acting as his main source of security while trying to keep it in his pants with the added bonus of having to pretend that they’re intimate on the regular? Alec never even goes out past nine if he can help it because he’s so unwilling to meet or engage with anyone. By all accounts he has every right to demand that Izzy trade spots with him right now. But instead, he’s burrowing deeper into Magnus’ guest room blankets, trying to figure out if Magnus’ flirtations are anything but casual conversation.

Everything with Magnus feels real.

On one hand, Alec is grateful that Magnus is making this as easy for him as possible, but on the other, he’s getting swept up in all of it and it’s beyond terrifying. He’s far past dipping his toes in. All Magnus had to do was smile at him and Alec flung himself straight into the waters.

Jace’s voice perks up in the back of his mind.

He likes you, you fuck.

And that’s when Alec knows he’s lost it. If he’s starting to take anything Jace has to say at face value, his mind is too jumbled to take seriously.
All of his rationale and discipline comes apart at the seams as he tries to make sense of the conflict in his chest. Jace says Magnus likes him. He and Magnus get along so well, and Magnus is better than any fantasy Alec’s ever come up with. Alec lets out a frustrated groan.

It’s too hot.

Alec flings the sheets, blankets, and pillows off, sitting up in his puny underwear with a heaving breath. He needs to get some air.

Since he knows Jace is awake, Alec grabs his phone to send out a text that gets a quick “Fine, but you owe me,” in response.

His fingers reach for the lamp, turning on the light before wandering over to the bag with his ill-fitting clothes. He finds a pair of shorts that reminds him a bit of the bodycon dresses Izzy favors. A little more digging unearths a smaller set of spandex and a pair of track pants that rest low on his hips. Alec lets out a groan and pulls on the joggers before looking for a shirt. He finds one, nondescript beyond the deep v-neck that cuts across his collarbone.

Alec withstood the button-up from today and already committed himself to a lifetime of discomfort just to light the same fire in Magnus he saw this morning. He can take on any shirts Izzy throws at him.

After gathering a couple other necessities, Alec pokes his head out of his room. He spots a dim light emanating from the dining room.

“Magnus?”

There’s a short screech of a chair scraping across the floor.

“Alexander?”

Alec walks down the hall, bag in hand, and emerges to find Magnus sitting amongst the mess of letters. The awkwardness from earlier still lingers at Magnus’ edges, bordering on defeat as he rifles through the papers.

“Hey,” Alec murmurs, moving forward and setting his duffel down to take the envelopes from Magnus’ hands. He puts them on the table. “You couldn’t sleep?

Magnus shakes his head. His lips draw back in a tight line as Alec pulls over an open box and stacks the evidence inside. The silence is heavy, so unlike the usual comfort Alec finds between them. Magnus stands. Alec watches as Magnus wanders over to the window and pulls the balcony doors open. Night air and the sound of scant honking floods the apartment, chilling them both.

Alec follows Magnus, by intention or by nature, he doesn’t know. He comes to a stop at Magnus’ side as they look over the city.

“I feel helpless,” Magnus says, gaze moving from the skyscrapers to his hands. “I’ve spent so much of my life learning who I am, discovering myself, and fighting for what I believe in. I built myself up from the ground and came into honest money despite every effort others took to drown me.” His eyes glint in the darkness as his lips twist. “I’ve done everything I can to prepare myself for anything, but it doesn’t matter because right now I’m scared.”

Alec’s breath catches in his throat when Magnus turns to him. The wind blows at Magnus’ hair and leaves wild ribbons of black across cold cheeks. Alec wants to touch. So he does, and Magnus leans into the skin of his palm.
“You’ll be okay, Magnus,” Alec whispers, voice urgent as he tries to communicate the conviction in his gut. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“I shouldn’t need your help,” Magnus mutters. “I’m grateful,” he notes, pulling away to rest his hands on the cool metal railing. “But I’ve always looked out for myself, and the delusions of some random stranger shouldn’t get to me, but they do.” He bites his lip and slaps a hand against the protective barrier that keeps them from tumbling down into the streets.

Alec’s brow furrows as he comes up next to Magnus, bearing the chill that raises the hairs along his arms and chest.

“It’s okay to need help, Magnus. This isn’t a guy picking a fight with you in an alley,” Alec says. “This is someone invading your privacy, making you feel unsafe in the spaces you frequent, and claiming you as their own. There’s no person in the world who can take that on alone.” Alec swallows, and makes a decision. “And if nothing else, I’m glad you have people who care about you enough to help. I’m glad Ragnor contacted us and I’m glad that I can keep you safe.” He pauses, then plows onward. “I wish the circumstances were different, but I’m happy that I met you.”

Magnus doesn’t look at him, but Alec feels the soft press of Magnus’ shoulder against his arm.

“Yeah, me too.”

***

They stand there for a while at the mercy of New York City’s fall weather. Then, Alec can’t hide the shiver that works its way up his back. Magnus peeks over at him with a playful smile.

“Cold?”

“A bit,” Alec confesses. He crosses his arms in an attempt to keep himself warm. Magnus eyes him for a moment.

“Come here,” Magnus says. He pulls Alec into a hug, guiding with light touches to move them both inside before stepping away to close the doors. Magnus turns back to the table, putting space between them, when he notices Alec’s bag sitting on the floor. “Were you going somewhere?”

“Uh, yeah,” Alec mumbles. “I was going to make sure the perimeter was secure before heading out the gym. Jace is on his way now to cover for me while I’m gone.”

“This building has a gym for residents,” Magnus hums. “I’m sure you’ve already seen it. It even has a training room, spacious enough for actual sparring. We could go together.”

“Together?” Alec repeats. “You’ll come with me?”

“That’ll make it easier on Blondie, wouldn’t it? Plus, I would like to burn off some energy if you’re willing to spar with me,” Magnus shrugs. “I’m a bit rusty, and I’d rather be prepared just in case something should happen.” His gaze dips away. “Better safe than sorry.”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” Alec agrees. “I’ll just tell Jace to uh, stay where he is.”

“I’m assuming he’s with Biscuit?” Magnus chuckles. Alec nods. “Yes, then we’ll definitely be doing him a favor. Let me go change and we can head out.” Magnus sweeps down the hall and into his room, leaving Alec to send Jace an update. Jace sends back a now predictable set of eggplant emojis. Alec rolls his eyes.
It doesn’t take very long for Magnus to return. He’s wearing a heather grey tank top and dark blue leggings, all traces of jewelry gone.

“Well?” Magnus asks.

“Yeah, uh, let’s go,” Alec says, trailing after Magnus as he walks out the front door. They lock it, and head to the stairwell.

***

Magnus is gorgeous. It’s a fact, and one that Alec is more than aware of. It’s almost detrimental at this point, and Alec is going down in flames as he watches Magnus move through several tai chi routines in an effort to warm up his muscles.

A slow grin plasters itself across Alec’s cheeks as he watches. Magnus already knows how to fight, and is graceful doing it.

Every part of his body moves in symphony with the rest as he slides from one position to the next, the floor mat beneath Magnus’ feet sinks and rises with every shift of weight. If all of Alec’s new trainees were as familiar with their bodies as Magnus, Alec would be set for life.

Not to be outdone, Alec does some quick exercises to loosen up and get his heart going. Thought he really doesn’t need exercise for that anymore. Not since Magnus. After some stretching, and more clandestine admiration, they’re both ready to start.

“I tend to go a bit hard, so please let me know if you’d like me to ease up,” Magnus says. “Ragnar says I’m a too competitive. I don’t think I am, but I will admit that I’m looking forward to this.”

His eyes flicker up and down Alec’s body. “I think it’ll be fun.”

Alec laughs. “Yeah, okay.”

“Don’t go easy on me,” Magnus warns.

“I’m supposed to protect you,” Alec reminds him. Magnus widens his stance and winks.

“All the more reason to make it feel real.”

Alec pauses for a fraction of a second and Magnus is in his space, smelling of sandalwood and the beginnings of sweat, moving with the intent of tackling him to the ground. Alec strengthens his core and moves with Magnus’ momentum, taking the hit instead of fighting it, staying upright despite the pain that wraps around his middle. All of Alec’s instincts rush to the surface when realizes that Magnus is strong. This is going to be fun.

Alec grips Magnus’ arms, plants his feet, and twists, wrenching Magnus from his body. Magnus tumbles sideways with his arms tucking up against his chest. He rolls into a crouch, standing before letting out a short breathless laugh into the sticky air.

“I can’t believe you’re still standing,” Magnus says.

“I can’t believe you opened up with a tackle,” Alec replies. Magnus shrugs.

“Wanted to see what you would do.”

Alec gestures to himself with one hand, as if asking for critique.

“And?”
“I like what I see.”

Alec grins and launches forward.

They fall together and dance apart, matching each other hit for hit with startling accuracy. Fighting Magnus is exciting. Alec, Jace, and Izzy train together almost every day. They trust each other and move together with the trust that comes with years of bonding.

Fighting Magnus is like standing in the middle of a storm. The smooth movements of Magnus’ tai chi transform into explosive punches and kicks that Alec catches on muscle memory alone.

Magnus’ grace belies his strength, turning beauty into power as he shifts his weight and whips his leg up and around. Alec blocks the strike. Magnus is corded with muscle, Alec knows that, but being on the receiving end of Magnus’ single-minded focus stokes the kindling in Alec’s stomach.

Alec manages a quick breath before Magnus is on him again. Magnus ducks low, aiming for a quick shot that Alec catches with his forearm. He retaliates by grabbing Magnus’ arm. Magnus twists away and out of Alec’s grasp, faster and more compact than Alec is.

“You’re good,” Magnus breathes. Alec feels a bead of sweat running down his cheek.

“You are too.”

***

By the time they finish, Alec feels like one living, satisfying bruise.

“Was that as good for you as it was for me?” Magnus wheezes.

Alec snorts, his entire body a mess of ache and laughter as he stretches out on the mat beneath his back. He turns his head, looking over at where Magnus lays, nail varnish shining under the dramatic gym lights.

“Better than I expected,” Alec says. Magnus shifts next to him, turning to bring them face to face.

“You wound me. Ye of so little faith,” Magnus pouts, feigning hurt as he traces shapes into the disgusting collection of dust and sweat they’re resting in.

“You’re a great fighter,” Alec says, serious and intentional as the thought of Magnus’ frustration wells up in his mind. This situation isn’t a matter of weakness, physical or otherwise, and he needs Magnus to understand this.

“Really? You weren’t going easy on me?” Magnus teases.

“Never,” Alec says. “Jace always gets on my case about going overboard when we train.” Magnus snorts, a half aborted laugh that gets caught and turns into a hacking cough. “You okay?” Alec asks, brows creasing as Magnus tries to right himself.

“Ugh, I think I just swallowed some dust. For how expensive this place is, you’d imagine that they’d make sure it’s clean,” Magnus says, nose wrinkling.

Alec chuckles and gets to his feet. He stretches, reveling in the tension of tight muscle and the familiarity it offers. With the awkward shuffle of still unstable feet, Alec comes to stand by Magnus’ side, offering his hands. Magnus lays flat on his back, looking up at Alec from beneath sweaty hair and lidded eyes.
Alec smiles as Magnus’ gaze flickers from his face down to his hands and back up.

“Let me help you up.”

“What a gentleman,” Magnus says, reaching up. Their fingers lace together, and then Alec finds himself falling, unable to fight as Magnus steals his balance. Alec collapses against Magnus’ chest.

“Magnus,” Alec sighs, breathless and a more than a little horny at the press of their skin.

“You’re not escaping this time, Alexander. We should talk,” Magnus says. Alec feels more than hears the words that reverberate through his body and mind. He ignores the sweat and rests his chin on Magnus’ shoulder, still holding Magnus’ hands as he stares at the solid wall of mirrors. He feels every one of Magnus’ breaths along the shell of his ear. There’s silence, and then Magnus nudges him.

“What should we talk about?” Alec asks, not wanting to hear the answer out loud.

“Boundaries. Yours to be exact,” Magnus hums. “For example, kisses.”

“Fine,” Alec mutters. “Kisses are fine.”

Magnus nods, then shifts. “Holding hands.”

“Necessary.”

“Necessary?”

“I can keep track of you in crowds and communicate with you nonverbally.”

And I like it, Alec thinks. Magnus seems to accept Alec’s excuses.

“Sex talk?”

“You can make up anything you like.”

“Darling, you have to work with me here,” Magnus huffs.

Alec is grateful he can’t see Magnus’ face and Magnus can’t see his when he says: “Magnus, I trust you. So trust me to tell you if anything is wrong. Please.”

Magnus doesn’t answer for a long time, and Alec finds that laying on top of Magnus isn’t quite as comfortable as he imagined, despite how nice it is to feel every curve of muscle.

Then, Magnus lets him go.

“Okay. I trust you,” Magnus whispers.

Alec nods and sits back on his heels before pulling himself to his feet. Magnus follows, rising to his full height.

They collect their bags and towels. Then they leave the studio together, shoulders grazing each other with each step as they make their way back up to the loft.

Magnus unlocks the door, holding it open for Alec before closing and locking it behind them. It’s quiet and warm in the apartment with the dim lighting of the dining room chandelier left glowing
in their absence.

“Good night, Alexander,” Magnus says. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” Alec agrees. Magnus inches forward, pressing a kiss to Alec’s cheek.

“Revenge,” Magnus teases. He waves and disappears down the hall. Alec stares after him.

“Revenge for what?” Alec murmurs. The Chairman flicks an ear at him from the couch. “You’re no help at all,” Alec tells the cat.

Chapter End Notes

So as you can see, this is not finished like I expected it to be! I’ll be trying to post regularly but my computer is currently kaput. Until I get a new one I won’t be able to establish a regular schedule. Hopefully that’ll be sooner rather than later! Thank you for reading this far! I hope you’ve enjoyed it and I’ll try to update as soon as I can!
Alec sits on his bed, too awake and aware of himself and Magnus’ presence just across the hall. There’s only so much one man can take, and maintaining close contact with Magnus means Alec’s perpetually half a second away from popping the question (and a nut), and it’s only been 48 hours.

He’s sweaty, gross, and turned on. Ever since breaking his eight-year celibacy, his horniness is like a river surging through the remnants of a once-mighty dam. Spending all of this time with Magnus doesn’t help in the least bit.

A shower sounds good. Alec stands up and this time he remembers to bring the hygiene products that Izzy packed for him. No teakwood, sandalwood, or any other kind of wood, will keep him from having a masturbation-free shower.

He manages to wash up and get ready for bed without any gratuitous dick-touching. Alec takes a moment to congratulate himself, and then berates himself for being proud that he didn’t crank it. He pulls on a pair of boxer briefs and settles his towel around his shoulders. The hallway is quiet and warm as Alec steps out of the bathroom.

“Ah.”

Alec freezes. The voice was soft, almost reverent.

He doesn’t hear anything else, but he decides to do a quick check of the apartment before heading to bed, just to make sure everything is in order.

Alec ventures out into the living room and pauses to give Chairman Meow a few pets and a surreptitious kiss to the top of his head. Everything seems to be clear. Time for bed. Alec walks back down the corridor and puts his hand on his doorknob.

“Ah, fuck.”

Alec stares at the Magnus’ door. The red wood is pristine, and it’s the only thing between Alec and
what Alec can presume is Magnus having some personal time.

“Oh my god,” drifts through the air.

Is Alec this loud and obvious when he masturbates? Do camboys jerk off while *not* on camera? Alec doesn’t know the answer to either question; but all signs point to ‘yes’ for at least one of them.

Unless Magnus is live.

Alec pulls up the porn site on his phone. Magnus isn’t streaming. This is private, then. This isn’t a show for him or anyone else. Alec moves back into his room and shuts the door. He hangs the towel from his closet door before throwing back the covers and laying on the sheets.

His cock is hard. He made it so far, and still, somehow, his conviction crumbles before his very eyes as he wriggles out of his underwear and reaches into the nightstand for the lube. His fingers sideswipe the stupid fucking nipple clamps and Alec wonders what they would feel like.

Not tonight, Satan.

Maybe another time.

Alec pops open the lube and drizzles it on his hand and hardening dick. It’s smooth and slick, and Alec lets out a breathless noise as he spreads it, resting his hand at the root of his cock. His thumb and index finger curl around its base when Alec hesitates.

He’s spent so much of his life ignoring his penis and its many traitorous desires, that he never took a moment to *look* at it. Alec isn’t sure he wants to. But then he thinks of Magnus and how pretty Magnus’ *everything* is, and Alec wonders what the Lightwood genetics have to offer.

If nothing else, he wonders if his cock is worth Magnus’ time.

The locker room measuring contests always tempted Alec, but he was so resolute in averting his gaze that he never knew how he compared, choosing instead to just read the graffiti carved into wooden benches as the others discussed how Thomas came so hard one time that the jizz hit the ceiling.

He sits up. The lamplight is soft, catching on the glistening lube and painting his skin orange. He hopes his erection is a standard color in normal lighting. Despite his intermission from the now regularly-scheduled masturbation program, his dick is still eager. He’s cut. It curves a tad to the left and Alec’s limited experience tells him it’s pretty unremarkable. With his dry hand, he taps a question into his phone’s browser.

‘What is the average penis size?’

‘13.12cm (5.16 inches) long,’ according to google.

Alec taps ‘images’ and holds up the screen to compare. That looks about right. Alec nods in satisfaction. He’s about average, and Magnus doesn’t seem like the type to be cruel about size anyway. His dick twitches.

With that settled, Alec drops his phone onto the bed and drags his fingers upward to the tip of his erection. He thumbs the head. Maybe he should get it pierced.

Maybe not. Magnus doesn’t have his pierced. Is Magnus interested in that? Alec feels his face get
hot, and he can’t believe there’s enough blood in his body to supply both his hard-on and his blush. His body is in peak condition. He never knew that this was the secret advantage to working out every day. What a great skill to have; Izzy and Jace would be so proud.

And the thought of Izzy and Jace kills Alec’s boner. Halfway, at least. It’s flagging, leaning a bit to its natural left curve, when the thought of Magnus moaning threatens to bring it back to life. Magnus, who is trying to get off in the privacy of his own home.

Alec grits his teeth and snaps the cap back onto the lube before reaching for some tissues to clean himself off. Not tonight.

***

Waking up from an unsatisfying night isn’t new. He’s spent years like this, alone in a bed with not even his hand to keep him company. All of those years amounted to this. It’s near desperate, more need than want. The need to touch.

Alec shakes himself awake and pads over to the bag he refuses to unpack. He grabs his toothbrush and ventures out into the hallway, listening to the sounds of ceramic and metal settling against fancy marble countertops. He relieves himself and brushes his teeth.

Faint noises of footsteps and Magnus singing to Chairman Meow warm him despite the chill of the tile beneath Alec’s feet. He splashes his face with cold water.

Get your shit together, Lightwood, Alec tells himself.

Seeing Magnus in the morning, shirtless, soft, and sleepy—weakens the already pitiful resolve Alec has. Magnus stands in the kitchen in just a pair of billowing pants, using a fancy coffee contraption that looks like a cross between a plunger and a syringe. Alec accepts the cup Magnus passes his way. He feels the phantom sensation of Magnus’ fingers grazing his own, and then, the very real sensation of lips against his cheek and a hand on his shoulder.

“Good morning, Alexander,” Magnus chirps. “Did you sleep well?”

“I, uh, yeah,” Alec mumbles, blinking more than necessary as he tries to recalibrate his mind. “Yeah.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Magnus says with a smile. He turns away and heads to the fridge. Alec’s eyes dart to the notepad hanging from the door. The grocery list is longer than it was two nights ago, and if the noises are anything to go by, Magnus isn’t having much luck rummaging for what he wants.

“I can, uh, go grab groceries if you’d like?” Alec suggests, taking a sip from the mug. The coffee is sweet and tastes of vanilla and cinnamon.

Magnus pauses and peeks over at him through strands of bed-mussed hair. “You don’t mind?” Magnus asks.

“No, not at all,” Alec says in a rush. He gulps down more coffee so he can stare into its light brown depths instead of into Magnus’ face. The coffee burns his tongue a bit, but he supposes it’s what he deserves for being a coward.

“Well then, I’ll go with you.”
Snorting, swallowing, and choking all at once has to be some kind of feat. Alec coughs and pounds a fist against his chest as Magnus approaches him with concern. To avoid any further accidents, Alec sets his cup onto the counter and catches Magnus by the arm.

“I’m fine,” Alec wheezes. Magnus hovers, just outside of Alec’s space, and the feel of Magnus’ skin beneath his palm brings Alec back into reality. He pulls away and gestures toward the hallway with an awkward wave. “We should go, uh, put on some clothes.”

Magnus looks up at him and smiles. Alec’s heart threatens to climb up his throat and fling itself into Magnus’ arms.

“Oh course,” Magnus says, obligingly. “Wouldn’t want to scare the locals.”

“Yeah, we wouldn’t want that,” Alec breathes.

***

If nothing else, this little outing is satisfying Alec’s need for close contact.

“Alexander, I will have you know that twinkies are part of any functional household,” Magnus says, holding the box against his chest. Sharp white lights cast odd shadows on Magnus’ face. The shiny linoleum and shelves of preservative-ridden baked goods frame Magnus’ loose green sweater and mustard yellow pants like macaroni and popsicle sticks around the Mona Lisa.

Magnus’ pout is still devastating.

“That’s not how that works. Besides, I don’t understand how you can tolerate those,” Alec mutters, scowling as he crosses his arms and waits for Magnus to return the junk food to the shelf. “Taste aside, those will kill you.”

“Well, then I guess you’ll just have to protect me from the big bad twinkies, darling,” Magnus hums, pressing close and batting his eyelashes. “Everything in moderation,” Magnus says with a decisive nod. Alec sighs and accepts the inevitable.

The twinkies join the sugary cereal, chips, and package of muffins already waiting to head to the cash register. Magnus tugs Alec along by the hand. They wind through the aisles with their sticky-wheeled cart, as inoffensive but boring music drones overhead. Their fingers, twining together in a now-familiar show of affection, break Alec down with swift surety.

By the end of the trip, they didn’t buy anything on the list, so Alec resolves to come back and buy the vegetables and eggs Magnus neglected to purchase.

***

The evidence of the stalker stares at them from the dining room table and floor. Magnus ignores it all, shuffling around the boxes and letters like they don’t exist. He attacks the groceries with single-minded determination, so Alec sets to work putting away the reminder of why he’s here.

In thanks, Magnus gives Alec’s cheek another kiss.

Don’t get used to this, Alec thinks.

“Thank you, Alexander,” Magnus says.

“Always,” Alec says.
And Alec means it. He means it all.

***

They spend the day together. Magnus lazes on the couch with the Chairman in his lap as he watches the third horror movie in a row. Alec sits at the dining room table and sorts through work emails and red tape from the Institute and their police contact, Underhill.

It’s slow, tedious, work, and Alec finished it all an hour ago. Alec’s been playing minesweeper for the past forty-five minutes, the first fifteen having been spent wondering if he should sit next to Magnus as he watches, stone-faced, as teenagers take turns walking into yet another haunted basement.

“Oh come on, Sarah, please do not fuck the ghost woman,” Magnus groans. “There are so many other people out there who are not dead—”

A series of persistent knocking interrupts Magnus’ disapproval of Sarah’s dating habits.

Alec stands. The sounds of ghost-sex fading into the background as he strides over to the door and peeks through the peephole. The person on the other side continues to knock, and Alec takes in the fisheye image of a man just a few years older than himself with a wide forehead and thick, dark brown hair.

He jerks the door open.

“Yes?” Alec asks, glaring down at the stranger.

“Yes, yes, you’re very intimidating. Now will you please let me inside? I’ve been trying to contact Magnus all day and he refuses to respond to me,” the man sniffs, annoyance riddling every inch of his being.

“Get out of here, you doughy prune,” Magnus calls from the sofa. Despite the harsh words, it’s obvious that Magnus trusts this man, so Alec steps aside to let him pass, and closes the door.

“Prunes can’t be doughy, you bloody git. Now cancel your show.”

“Nope, no can do. Alexander, I can’t believe you let him into our home,” Magnus groans.

“Magnus, I’m being serious,” the newcomer says without pause, removing his shoes and tossing his coat over the back of a chair with easy familiarity. “I insist that you cancel your show.”

“The point of hiring Alexander was so that I could continue my work, Ragnor. Or have you forgotten?” Magnus says, staring at the screen where Sarah’s dead lover is now chasing her down the hall.

So this is Ragnor Fell, the mysterious manager Alec’s been emailing. He missed meeting Ragnor at the agency due to the phone call with his father. Ragnor looks about the way Alec expected him to.

“What do you think, Alexander?” Ragnor asks. Hearing his full name from anyone other than Magnus is jarring, and Alec shoots a glance over at the sofa. Magnus is paying full attention to them now.

“I, uh.”
“Be honest,” Ragnor says.

“Well, I do think that Magnus should do his show tonight.”

Magnus makes a triumphant sound and claps his hands together. “And this is why I love you, Alexander.”

An unflattering noise escapes from Alec’s nose and mouth as he processes Magnus’ words.

“No, this is not why we hired you,” Ragnor groans. He turns to where Magnus looks on with self-satisfaction. “Magnus, I know you want to continue your work, and don’t forget that I’m on the payroll here as well--but maybe wait until things have settled a bit.”

Alec’s brows furrow as he shakes off his excitement and contemplates Ragnor’s words. Alec considers the conversation, mulling over all of the possible complications of Magnus going through with his camshow.

“Ugh, this is why I don’t pick up your calls,” Magnus mutters.

“You should probably make sure to pick up his calls,” Alec says. Magnus sniffs in disagreement.

“Thank you,” Ragnor says. “Alexander, since he actually seems to listen to you, tell him to be reasonable.” To Magnus, Ragnor says, “You didn’t tell me I just needed to be buff and handsome for you to listen to me, Magnus, or I would’ve gotten in shape years ago.”

“Believe me, nothing in the world could make me listen to you,” Magnus snipes with a roll of his eyes. “Et tu, Alexander?”

Alec blushes under Magnus’ half-hearted glare.

“Well, I mean, he’s your manager. He might have something important to tell you,” Alec reasons. “You’re my number one priority, and being in contact with Ragnor is crucial to keeping you safe.”

“Oh my god, now I understand why you’re so smitten,” Ragnor says to Magnus.

Alec turns to look at Magnus, who just winks at him.

Magnus pets a still-sleeping Chairman. “Who wouldn’t be smitten with Alexander?” he asks, shooting Alec a warm smile. The Chairman lets out a tiny yawn. With a stretch and several groggy trills, the cat jumps off of Magnus’ legs and treads over to where Alec is, rubbing against his ankles.

Alec’s blush deepens. He shifts his weight from foot to foot as the Chairman walks away. “Plenty of people,” Alec replies, voice short.

“Well then, I’ll just reap the benefits of their neglect,” Magnus hums. “Ragnor helps me with financial management and moderates the chat.”

“He’s lucky I’m such a good friend or he would have to pay me a lot more to sit through all of the filth just to block and ban the wankers.”

“Very literal wankers,” Magnus says with a smirk. “Besides, you only see the messages, nothing else.”

“Believe me, those are enough to make anyone want to quit,” Ragnor says. Magnus rolls his eyes, turns off the TV, and stands.
“Well, I have Alexander’s blessing, and it’s time to get set up. So I suggest we get this show on the road,” Magnus says. He brushes past them both and disappears down the corridor. “Good night, Ragnor,” Magnus calls behind him. The door to his room shuts, and then Alec and Ragnor are alone together.

“What will I ever do with him?” Ragnor asks, looking both exasperated and fond. “He’s stubborn and foolhardy, but he’s very important to me, and to many others as well. Please keep him safe,” Ragnor says, voice low in the delicate air. He says nothing else before turning on his heel and heading toward the door. Then he pauses. “My setup is at home. I’ll do my job. Do yours.”

“I will,” Alec says. Ragnor nods and opens the front door.

“Thank you, Alexander.”

“Call me Alec,” Alec says. Ragnor smiles, the first positive expression Alec has seen him wear all night.

“Good night, Alec.”

***

Another masturbation-less shower under his belt, and it’s a ten minutes until the show starts. Alec hasn’t seen hide nor hair of Magnus since Ragnor left. He sits in the Nipple Clamp Room with his laptop humming on top of the dresser near his suitcase, and passes the time by messaging Izzy and Jace about their cases while going through his evening routine, pausing to let the Chairman into the room when he hears scratching at the door.

He clears all of his emails and rubs a towel over his wet hair. The Chairman leaps up onto Alec’s bed, and Alec joins him after turning his computer off. He settles in, scratching behind the cat’s ears, when there’s a soft knock.

“Alexander?”

“Yeah?”

The door opens.

Alec looks up. Magnus stands in the doorway in a silk blue robe and slippers. He takes a step into the room, then takes one back, wavering on the cusp of Alec’s space.

His makeup is dramatic and dark, blood-red lipstick catching the lamplight as he smiles, looking nervous somehow. Magnus takes a deep breath. “Will you be watching the show? It’s not in your contract, so I wasn’t sure if you’d be...participating in the night’s festivities, or if you were interested at all.”

*If you were interested in me,* seems to echo, loud but unspoken, through the room.

Alec looks on as Magnus hovers just out of Alec’s room as if waiting for Alec to accept his hand. It’s the opposite of an innocent question, but phrased as one all the same, and Magnus waits.

Something electric courses through the air, smelling of sandalwood and feeling like surging rivers through broken dams as Alec makes a decision. He hopes that this means what he thinks it means.

“I’ll be watching,” he says.
Magnus bites his lip, grinning as his expression turns bright. “Well then, I hope you enjoy the show,” Magnus murmurs, voice so low, Alec almost misses the words altogether.

And then Magnus is gone.

The Chairman chirps to recall Alec’s attention, kneading Alec’s blankets with his paws. Alec checks his phone.

Five minutes.

Five more minutes until the show.

The Chairman gives up on getting Alec’s attention and stalks out the room. Alec rushes to the door and closes it behind the haughty sway of the feline’s tail, heaving breaths as he tries to reconcile himself with what he’s done.

Magnus knows he’ll be watching. He slides into bed and looks at the time.

Four minutes. Alec opens the nightstand and pulls out the lube.

Three. He pushes the blankets to the side, kicking off his pajama pants.

Two. His boxer briefs hit the floor.

One. Alec opens the browser on his phone.

“The Great Bane is live! Click here now!”

Alec clicks.

The screen loads, and Alec watches as Magnus’ room comes into focus.

“Good evening, everyone,” Magnus croons. He’s lying sideways across his bed, one arm propping up his head as he traces shapes into the bedsheets with his free hand. “Did you have a good day? I hope so,” he says with a wink. “I hope I can make tonight even better.”

Despite knowing what Magnus’ room looks like from personal experience, Alec can’t help but take in the image with new eyes. Magnus stretches, allowing the robe to slide along his skin and reveal glimpses of his cut muscles, hairless and warm-looking.

Then, as if the universe knows that he’s going to sin, the Chairman begins pawing at Alec’s door to be let in.

The sound of the Chairman’s desperate meows and tiny claws fills Alec’s room, coming from the source and from his phone speakers.

Magnus’ eyes dart to the side where Alec knows the bedroom door is. “One moment,” he says.

Alec watches with rapt attention, as Magnus leaves the camera’s view. He hears footsteps, then the placating murmurs of Magnus talking to the Chairman. Magnus is right outside Alec’s door while Alec is buck naked and waiting for him to continue his show. Embarrassment strikes him first, but then there’s a strange sort of satisfaction.

When Magnus walks off screen, he’s still within Alec’s reach, and that enlightenment reminds Alec how easy it would be to close the gap between them. Alec swallows around the sudden heat building in his chest.
The Chairman seems to have given up, and Magnus reappears on the screen. He climbs back into bed with a small pout pulling at his lips.

“I’m so sorry for the interruption. Now, we all know how this works, don’t we?” Magnus asks. “Every tip at least fifty dollars higher than the last comes with a chance to ask me Truth or Dare. Don’t worry, my lovely mod is keeping track as always.”

There’s a ping from Alec’s phone, and he pulls up the chat below the stream. Among the wall of orange usernames is one blue name.

_The Warlock_: I’m watching you bloody wankers.

Magnus chuckles, bringing Alec’s gaze back to him. “Truths have to be about me and Dares have to be things I can do within the confines of my bedroom. If I refuse to answer the Truth or perform the Dare, I take off one piece of clothing until, well, I don’t have anything else to remove.”

Magnus hums, fingers now tracing up and down his body. “I have all these toys at your disposal.” At the foot of the bed are five dildos of different sizes and shapes. There are a couple of other accessories, like a string of anal beads, multiple butt plugs, and a pair of black leather gloves lying among other sensory toys.

Alec can’t help but imagine Magnus running smooth leather over Alec’s skin, making him sob with pleasure. And that sure is a lot to unpack.

“Tips start at 100 dollars, and I’m aching to begin,” Magnus says, twisting his body to drag his obvious bulge along the blankets. He gives a few more languorous rolls of his hips. “Let’s get to it, shall we?”

There’s a flood of tips, change ringing as orange usernames fill the chat. Then, after a few seconds, Ragnor appears again.

_The Warlock_: leathervenom889.

_leathervenom889_: Truth. Do you like giving head?

It’s tame, even for Alec, but he’s eager to hear the answer all the same.

Magnus grins, teeth sharp and wolfish behind his crimson lips. “Thank you very much for your tip, leathervenom889. You must be new here,” he says, “welcome to my show.” Then, without preamble, he sits up and takes one of the dildos into his hand. Magnus spits on it. He slicks it up with his tongue and hand before taking the whole thing down his throat in one go, keeping eye contact with the camera as he bobs up and down with ease, pulling off with a slurp that stiffens Alec’s dick in record time.

Magnus purrs as he licks circles around the tip of the plastic cock. Alec swallows, blindly reaching for the bottle of lube, popping open the cap and drizzling some on his right hand when Magnus speaks again.

“I love giving head.”

“Oh my god,” Alec gasps, wrapping his fingers around his proud erection, trying to find his breath. The flesh is hot and throbbing beneath the rough skin of his palm. The lube drips down onto the skin of his abs and thighs, but Alec doesn’t care about the mess. All he cares about is the idea of Magnus looking up at him, sucking him down to the root, and the expression of pure pleasure Magnus would wear. Fuck.
The relentless sound of change pings through Alec’s speakers, and then he hears the noise that signals Ragnar’s account entering the chat.

*The Warlock*: HotRocket22.

*HotRocket22*: Dare. DP with ur 2 biggest butt plugs.

Alec rolls his eyes at the obvious play and slows the pace of his hand. He wants to watch this.

Magnus raises his brow as he reads the prompt aloud before picking up his two largest butt plugs. He holds them in front of the camera with an arching brow, letting the audience take in the sight of how sizable each one was on its own, much less paired with another of similar girth.

“You’re not messing around, HotRocket22,” Magnus sighs, sitting with his legs spread wide, bent at the knees. “Thank you for your tip, and I concede defeat.” He undoes the knot keeping his robe together. In one smooth movement, the robe falls, rippling in rich waves of navy, off of his body before pooling around his hips.

Magnus is wearing a harness of red elastic that crosses over his stomach and clips to the top of his jockstrap. The bright red underwear stretches over the shape of his hard-on and curves around his firm thighs as Magnus turns to show off his ass, red straps cupping the plump muscle.

Alec thrusts up into his hand at the sight, imagining sliding between those thighs or along the line Magnus’ penis cuts beneath the scarlet material. His eyelids dip down at the thought of rocking against Magnus as they dry-hump like the teenagers Alec never let himself be. He can almost taste Magnus’ mouth as he gets caught up in the feeling of his hand, wanting it to be Magnus’ as he fucks into it with abandon, then he lets out a soft cry and wrenches his hand away from his cock. His hips twitch as the stale air hits his desperate erection. Magnus isn’t even naked yet. Alec doesn’t want to come until Magnus does.

He stares up at the ceiling and listens as Magnus’ voice drifts from his phone’s speakers. Alec is too caught up to pay much attention as Magnus’s words bleed together into a low constant murmur. Another dare, one that Magnus can’t fulfill, and he hears the sound of the harness’ metal clasps hitting the floor. With one last deep breath, Alec turns back to the stream.

Alec finds Magnus palming his still-clothed dick. With a quick scroll back through the comments, Alec sees the last two asks. The first was the dare that rid Magnus of his harness, a bet that Magnus couldn’t keep quiet while pinching his nipples. Alec regrets missing that. The second is another dare. A request to see Magnus deep throat his biggest dildo and swallow around it for thirty seconds. Magnus must have succeeded.

Alec really regrets missing that.

He makes it back to the bottom of the chat just in time to catch Ragnar’s newest message.

*The Warlock*: HillshireFarmer

*HillshireFarmer*: Truth. How many people have you slept with?

The question piques Alec’s curiosity. He’s a virgin, and he knows Magnus is experienced, but he never thought of how many people he would have to measure up against if he and Magnus ever did...pursue something. Magnus, who is just one room away.

Alec lowers the volume on his phone. He trails the tips of his fingers up the vein running along his average-sized penis, and waits.
Magnus lets out an exaggerated sigh, and Alec can hear him through the apartment walls.

The thought has Alec’s hips flexing with the desire to be the reason Magnus is making those noises. It’s odd and a bit possessive, but Alec can’t bring himself to feel guilty for it. He hurries to turn the volume back up; not wanting to miss anything on the off-chance Magnus lowers his voice.

“Thank you for your tip, HillshireFarmer. Unfortunately I can’t tell you because I don’t know,” Magnus answers with a pout. He waves a dismissive hand. “I usually have sex about once a month when I’m single.”

Alec isn’t sure if he’s relieved or upset by this news. He doesn’t have long to dwell on it, as Magnus makes a show of tweaking both nipples on the way to the jockstrap’s waistband, dragging Alec’s attention back to the beautiful ridges of Magnus’ chest and abs.

“But when I’m in a relationship, and I’ve been in a few, then that’s that. I’m a very...one soul at a time type of guy,” Magnus says with a wink, hooking his thumbs on the elastic and tugging it down his legs.

Alec’s heart threatens to flutter out of his chest.

Magnus drops the underwear to join the other articles of clothing now littering the floor. His penis, uncut and weeping with precome, arches up toward his stomach. Alec’s mouth dries out. “Now that you’ve got me how you want me, every tip at least five hundred dollars higher than the last will allow you one request or question.”

Alec watches as the tips flood in, the sound of change jingling from his speakers as username after username pops up with money attached to their message. No wonder Magnus can afford this fucking place, Alec thinks. Then, Ragnor’s username appears as the number skyrockets, his mod notification drowning in the sea of tips.

**The Warlock : MorningStar**

*MorningStar :* Make yourself come, any way you want, without touching your dick.

Magnus grins. “Thank you for your tip, MorningStar. And thank you for such a generous request.” He selects his largest dildo, the same bright blue monstrosity Alec remembers, and lubes it up. Sweat glows on Magnus’ skin as he hurries to get the dildo inside of him, looking so cock-hungry that Alec fumbles to take a screencap with one hand.

“Oh, fuck,” Magnus moans, sliding down onto the dildo inch by inch, his knees carrying his weight up, then down, then up again, as the sex toy sinks deeper into his body.

Alec’s hand follows Magnus’ descent, his hips jerk in shallow thrusts as he tries to mentally place himself beneath Magnus’ body. He knows how Magnus’ body feels against his. With the memory of each sculpted muscle pressing against his own, Alec moans, loud and unapologetic. A tiny muffled version echoes through his speakers.

Another tip rolls through.

**The Warlock : MorningStar**

*MorningStar :* Truth. Are you thinking of anyone specific right now? If so, describe them.

Magnus’ cheeks flush a pretty pink as he lets out a soft moan, eyelids fluttering with every rise and fall of his chest.
“My boyfriend,” he confesses breathlessly. Magnus runs his hands up his neck and into his hair, low moans drifting from Alec’s phone speakers.

Alec watches through bleary vision as Magnus continues to ride the dildo. His dick bobs in the air. The heady desire to suck Magnus off flashes through Alec’s mind, then, Magnus’ words register. Boyfriend.

Magnus is talking about Alec.

“He’s tall, with dark hair and big hands,” Magnus groans, voice rough as every thrust of the dildo fucks the air out of his body. “He’s strong and kind and he’s got this fucking scar in his eyebrow and I just want to fucking bite it,” Magnus gasps, bottoming out and grinding down against the sheets. “And my cat loves him. It makes me jealous.”

Alec’s heart hammers in his chest, working overtime as both his emotions and his libido soar skyward. Magnus is thinking about him, whether it’s due to their arrangement or not, Magnus is masturbating while thinking of Alec.

He’s sweating now. The sheets stick to his skin, but Alec imagines soft silk and the smell of sandalwood. He thinks of Magnus beneath his big hands and the feel of Magnus nibbling on his stupid fucking scar, and this is all so personal that Alec can’t keep himself from letting out a breathless “Magnus.”

Then, another tip comes through. Alec doesn’t have much presence of mind at this point, but he checks the chat anyway.

The Warlock: MorningStar.

Again? Alec thinks. He checks the dollar count, they’re already at eighteen thousand dollars, and this guy has already tipped once. Alec remembers Magnus joking about introducing Alec to the adult film industry. Maybe Alec should consider the option. Maybe they could work together. Anything to have the opportunity to experience Magnus like this without walls and phone screens between them.

Then, the message comes through.

MorningStar: Truth. Would you ever date a fan?

Alec’s eyes narrow, but Magnus doesn’t seem perturbed by the question.

“I don’t know,” Magnus moans. His hips stutter as he continues to fuck himself. “I wouldn’t be opposed. But I’m happily taken at the moment, and he doesn’t like to share,” he says, dodging the awkward question by fucking himself with climbing fervor, head tipping back as he chases his orgasm.

Alec grins despite himself. “No I don’t,” he mutters.

The jackpot is huge, capping out at almost twenty thousand dollars. It’s clear that Magnus expects that to be the last of the questions as he focuses on reaching his orgasm. Alec shuts his eyes and fucks into his hand, faster, and faster, as he imagines what it’d be like to share Magnus’ bed. The bed that’s within his reach even when this show is over.

He pictures the rise and fall of Magnus’ hips as he strengthens his grip, creating a tighter, slick passage for his cock. It’s a poor replacement for the imagined heat of Magnus’s ass, but it’s enough for now. Magnus moans a soft “ah,” and Alec wants to trap the sound so he can listen to it
forever. He imagines what Magnus would feel like clenching around him, and that's what finally sends him over the edge, coming with a bitten-off moan of Magnus’ name. His chest heaves as he blinks away stars. Magnus is still moaning loudly over the speakers.

Then, there's the sound of change.

Alec’s eyes snap open as he checks the chat. Another tip from MorningStar. Ten thousand dollars; it’s a jump that no one seems to have expected, and one that no one seems willing to follow. MorningStar runs the show now. Magnus sits up in surprise, still hard and unsatisfied, trying to read his screen.

MorningStar : Truth. Do you love him, your Alexander? Do you think it’s fair that he gets you all to himself?

Magnus freezes, the flush from his cheeks fading away as blood rushes from his face. He doesn’t speak.

Twenty five thousand dollars.

MorningStar : Truth. Did you know that Alexander means “protector of men”?

Comments pour in as viewers ask what is going on. But Magnus just stares into the camera, gaze growing steely despite the fear Alec knows lingers just below the surface.

One hundred thousand dollars.

MorningStar : Truth. Do you think that means he can protect you?

The chat is silent.

MorningStar : I’m waiting.

User ‘MorningStar’ has been banned from the chat.

The Warlock: The tips will be returned in full to MorningStar.

The Warlock : This show is over.

Magnus blinks, trying to find his bearings, lacking his usual grace as he works the dildo he’d been riding out of his ass. He sets it aside and sits back on the bed. Magnus plasters a smile on his face, trying to charm the camera, and slipping back into his skin with an unsettling ease.

“I’m so sorry about that, everyone,” Magnus says, voice soft and silky. “I apologize for the inconvenience. Due to some unforeseen circumstances, I won’t be having another show for a while. Good night.”

The screen goes black.

Alec scrambles to wipe himself clean, untangling his legs from the sweaty blankets. Somehow he finds his boxer briefs and jerks them on. He’s out of his room and standing in front of Magnus’ door in seconds, hand hovering over the wood, when it opens.

“Alexander,” Magnus murmurs. His makeup paints lines of smeared black and grey by his eyes and across cheeks. He meets Alec’s gaze with a quiet defiance. Then, Alec watches as it peels away to leave a man struggling to maintain his strength under the burden of a phantom presence; a shadow that crushes him beneath its weight.
Alec pulls Magnus into his arms. “I’ll protect you, Magnus,” Alec whispers. Magnus sighs into Alec’s chest, skin sticky with sweat and tears.

“I told you that I trust you and I meant it,” Magnus says. “I don’t know why. It’s only been three days and I trust you with all of this,” he says. Each word brands Alec’s heart with new oaths of conviction.

It only took me three days to fall in love with you, Alec thinks.

He’ll say it one day. Not now, not tonight, Alec decides. So he holds Magnus in the dim light of a purple hallway, mind racing as he whispers promises into Magnus’ warm skin, over and over.

“I’ll keep you safe.”

Chapter End Notes

Smut TL;DR: Username “MorningStar” asked about Alec and asked if he thinks Alec is allowed to keep Magnus all to himself.
It’s odd to Alec that there are conventions to falling in love. In movies there are always timelines the characters follow, milestones to meet, and moments he admittedly does want to experience, but cannot help but shirk all the same.

Here, holding Magnus close, Alec thinks that this feeling must be some kind of love. Maybe not the full-blown version with the fireworks and the confetti, but an inexplicable and hungry fire that demands attention he’s all too willing to give. Magnus shifts in his grasp.

Hot breath washes over Alec’s skin. “Alexander, you’ll tell me if I ever overstep, right? You promised,” Magnus says with a strange pragmaticism.

Alec’s brows furrow at the question. He doesn’t think he’s ever given Magnus any reason to question his honesty, but he responds nonetheless. “Yeah, I’ll tell you.”

Silence stretches between them. The only sign of acknowledgement Magnus gives is a slight increase of pressure against Alec’s chest where Magnus’ forehead rests.

“At, in the guest bedroom? With me?” The words worm into the space between them, squeezing in the cracks and pushing them apart.

Magnus stiffens. “I’m sorry, of course that’s overstepping. You’re a professional and I am too, and I need to learn how to act like one. Good night, Alexander.” And then Magnus is pulling away and Alec can’t let that happen.

This is tantamount, and he is going to do this right. He tightens his grip and opens his mouth.

“Stay with me.” Alec is a simple man, he never finds himself waxing poetic as words tend to fail him where the steadiness in his shoulders does not. These words are all he has. Then, uncertain hands are sliding up Alec’s warm back, tracing the knobs of his spine and settling along the wings of his shoulder blades.

“Thank you,” Magnus whispers. Sweat, spit, and tears catch the light as Magnus looks up into Alec’s face. He’s open and raw, vulnerable in a way that’s almost a shade too intimate. In all of the pervading suspense of this night, Magnus still trusts him. Even under emotional onslaught, Magnus maintains a dangerous sort of magnetism that bends Alec to its will.

Impulse, a foreign creature making a home inside of Alec, rears its head. Alec lays a kiss against
Magnus’ lips. It’s short, nothing like the goodbye kiss or any of the other kisses they’ve shared because this is an open line of communication now.

It’s fragile, in all of its newness, but there all the same. An open door.

Alec doesn’t want to pull away, but he does, waiting for Magnus’ response. Magnus stares up at him with wide eyes. A hand slides up from Alec’s shoulder blades to his neck, then up into his hair, and then they’re kissing again, with the same gentleness as before.

It’s hard, but Alec forces himself to take a moment, searching for breath. “Let’s get you ready for bed,” Alec murmurs. Magnus laughs against his lips, the remnants of red lipstick lining the edges of the pleasant sound.

“Okay.”

Fingertips blaze trails of heat as they find each other. Alec backs up, taking Magnus with him as he steps into the room, knees finding the edge of the bed. It’s an easy, thoughtless movement—settling Magnus onto his bedsheets.

Magnus sits in the very place Alec watched his show. His robe rides up the thick muscle of Magnus’ thighs, no hint of underwear that Alec can see.

Alec’s averts his gaze. Then his eyes catch on the evidence of his...previous activities.

“Oh my god,” Alec sputters. He releases Magnus’ hands to scoop up the wads of tissue and sweep up the still-uncapped bottle of lube he’d procured from Magnus’ own nightstand.

“It looks like you enjoyed the show,” Magnus says with an attempt at a smirk, lips pulling too tight and eyes too wary. “Well, some of it anyway,” he amends with a dip of his head. Alec looks him over. There’s an obvious discomfort in Magnus’ eyes as he tries to reconcile that his livelihood is being wrested away from him, but there’s also defiance.

Alec knows from firsthand experience that Magnus is prideful. It’s in everything Magnus does. Even now, Magnus raises a brow, catching his attention, and challenging him to push through the open door and storm into the keep.

Not yet. Stories of why and how Magnus became the person he is today are still out of Alec’s reach. But that’s okay; Alec is willing to wait.

The garbage can is on the opposite side of the bed. Alec crawls across the mattress to deposit the trash where it belongs, feeling the skin of his hip brush against Magnus’ arm, their collective silence making room for blankets rustling and anticipation. He comes back to rest on his feet, Magnus’ eyes still on him as he tucks away the lube.

“I did. Enjoy the show, that is,” Alec admits. Then, a thought strikes him. “Where is your makeup remover?” Alec asks.

Magnus blinks once, then twice. “What?”

“Your makeup remover,” Alec repeats. “And your toothbrush. Thought you might want to clean up.”

Magnus smiles. “I can get everything,” Magnus says with a fond shake of his head, sliding off of the duvet.
“It’s okay,” Alec insists. “Allow me.”

Magnus considers this. Then he sits back down.

“The makeup remover is on the counter with my toothbrush. Cotton pads are in the top right-hand drawer. I keep face wash in your bathroom, so I can use that,” Magnus says. Alec nods, then hurries away, greeting the Chairman when the tiny cat meows at him in the hallway.

“Go find your dad, he could probably use a few cuddles.” Alec gestures to the door leading to his room. “And he doesn’t want to be alone.”

Alec doesn’t think Chairman Meow understands human speech, but the cat trots off into his bedroom anyway, paws padding across the threshold. Alec continues on his way. He doesn’t want to leave Magnus for long, both for Magnus’ sake and his own. Alec skirts past all of Magnus’ still-standing equipment as quickly as he can, and goes into the bathroom. He flips the lightswitch.

The bathroom is larger than its hallway counterpart. There’s another shower, and a giant claw-foot tub sitting over a round drain, emerald-green tile pouring outward in neat circles, ending in a ring of white along the walls. Alec walks toward the sink. It’s to the left of the door, with a deep basin and a silver faucet with porcelain handles. Rows of products cover the white marble counter, and Alec takes the time to read each one to make sure he’s picking up the correct things.

An orange bottle of makeup remover for combination skin, an electric toothbrush, and the cotton pads he finds on top of a wide selection of face masks. Alec grabs one of those too. He does a quick inventory check, then heads back out into Magnus’ bedroom.

Lights stand at attention, shining on the bed and its assortment of sextoys still left in disarray. Alec turns them off as he walks by. The bright blue dildo stares up at him from where it lies on a towel amongst its comrades.

There’s a set of cleaning supplies already set out for convenience, as Alec expects that Magnus attends to the less glamorous sides of camwork as soon as the camera is off. Alec tucks the cotton pads and face mask under his left arm, wrapping the dildo before collecting it and the cleaning kit. He strides across the hallway bearing his spoils.

“Oh my god, Alexander,” Magnus snorts, still where Alec left him, but with the addition of Chairman Meow. “You didn’t have to grab all of that.”

Alec shrugs. “I figured it would help.”

Magnus stands, leaving a bereft Chairman, and takes the dildo, towel and all, out of his hands. He walks around Alec’s bed and dumps the dildo into the trash.

“I’d rather just...buy a new one,” Magnus says by way of explanation. Alec studies him. He looks unrepentant and almost relieved, standing just south of naked, over a tiny trash can.

Alec chuckles. “Well, you have plenty to choose from just in your living room.” Magnus grins.

“Yes, I suppose I do,” Magnus agrees. “Well, Alexander, I do see an aloe vera mask just calling my name. Shall we?”

“Yeah,” Alec says.

***
They make quick work of cleaning themselves. Alec watches as Magnus goes through his evening routine. It’s fascinating, watching as the makeup washes away, leaving Magnus as close to fresh as he can be. His eyes are bloodshot and there are prominent bags beneath them.

Alec reaches out and strokes the inflamed skin with his thumb.

“I wish I’d prevented this,” Alec murmurs.

Magnus’ eyelids flutter shut, water dripping from the ends of his hair. He takes a deep shuddering breath as he rests his forehead on Alec’s shoulder.

“I don’t expect miracles,” Magnus says, voice soft. He grimaces. “I didn’t even think it was that serious until now, I should’ve listened to Ragnar.” Magnus lets out a snort of laughter and strokes Alec’s arm with his hand. “Don’t tell him I said that.” He gives Alec a harmless pinch.

“Never,” Alec replies, kissing the crown of Magnus’ head. Magnus responds with a kiss of his own to Alec’s collarbone.

“Let’s go to bed, the Chairman must be waiting for us,” Magnus says. He leans further into Alec’s arms, and Alec takes his weight, light laughter echoing off the mirror and high ceiling.

“Well, we definitely can’t have that.”

***

“Alexander, aren’t you coming to bed?”

Alec shifts his weight, standing by the door as Magnus watches him from beneath the blankets.

“Uh, no. I was just going to keep watch,” he says. Magnus pins him with a curious look that Alec finds endearing. Then, it shifts, becoming insecure.

“I was thinking that maybe we could sleep together.” Magnus busies himself with Chairman Meow as he looks anywhere but at Alec.

Alec can’t help but copy the movement, the sudden tension making it difficult to do much more than stare at the floor beneath his feet. “Like…”

“Just to sleep.” Magnus insists. Alec glances up at him, catching the tiniest glimpse of a blush. Magnus’ fingers twist in the sheets as he meets Alec’s gaze. “I uh, I’ll admit that I’ve developed a bit of a crush, so I understand if you’re not comfortable sharing the bed with me.”

It’s maddening, how endearing Magnus looks, and Alec can’t help the giddiness that unfurls in his chest and draws a wide grin across his cheeks.

“A crush?” Alec repeats, half laughing as he bites down his disbelief. “You’ve got a crush on me?”

Magnus’ flush deepens but he continues nonetheless. “I...yes. I thought it was a bit obvious.”

Alec strides across the room, hands seeking Magnus’ own as he presses their lips together. “I thought we already moved past crush.”

Magnus laughs at that and has the decency to look a bit sheepish. “Well I wasn’t sure what was your commitment to your job and what was you,” he whispers with a shrug. “I’m not looking for comfort, Alexander. I’ve dealt with worse than this alone.”
Guilt washes over Alec despite understanding he has done nothing wrong. It’s impossible, he knows, to protect Magnus from everything, much less the horrors of Magnus’ past. He still wishes he could’ve been there to stop it, to help, if nothing else.

“Well, all of this is me. From the beginning,” Alec says. “And you? If not comfort, then what are you looking for?” The air is sweet and fills Alec’s lungs with hope as they linger together in the space between now and the future.

They’re so close—just a hair’s breadth part—eyes searching and softening and spilling over.

“Whatsoever you’re willing to give me,” Magnus murmurs, giving Alec a chaste kiss. He swallows heavily. “I don’t know you very well, Alexander. But everything I see, every moment I spend with you, consumes me until there’s nothing left but wonder.” His nose wrinkles as he cocks his head. “It’s a bit ridiculous isn’t it? All of that.”

“Not at all,” Alec breathes.

Magnus smiles, open and indulgent. “Come to bed, Alexander,” he says against Alec’s lips.

Alec leans forward, and Magnus catches him.

***

Magnus spends the night. If Alec didn’t feel Magnus’ body heat, he might not believe it, chalking it up to being nothing but a pleasant dream.

There must be some sort of protocol regarding spending your first night sharing the bed with someone you have feelings for, but Alec can’t shake off the lingering anxiety that Magnus’ eyes reflect back at him.

His swooning heart can wait.

Alec submits his notes from the show to Underhill and documents the events for his mother the next morning. He spends the rest of the day sitting next to Magnus on the couch, watching movies.

When Alec calls at the end of the day, Underhill has nothing. Magnus doesn’t react beyond nodding and turning back toward the TV. So Alec does some investigative work of his own. He’s not a police officer or detective, so there’s not much Alec can do, but he pulls out the letters to look over them again. He finds nothing. Magnus seems to sense his frustration, twining their fingers together.

They hold hands through dinner.

When it’s time for bed, Magnus pauses in the doorway to his bedroom.

Alec leaves his door open—wide enough for both cats and camboys—and scoots over when Magnus climbs into bed next to him.

So they sleep together again that night. Alec feels Magnus struggle back into awareness every couple of hours, and reaches out to thread their fingers together.

There are still no leads the next day. Alec and Magnus go for another shopping trip. They buy actual vegetables this time and Magnus’ genuine smiles return again, small though they are.

Alec lives in a state of constant diligence. He teeters back and forth between the elation of sharing
daily life with someone he cares about, and doing his job.

Every waking moment is wrought with the weight of reality. Alec soaks up the now-familiar affection, exploring the happiness they’re finding together, while casting an eye of suspicion over the world at large.

It is taxing on them both.

But in the evening, after fastening the locks and closing all the windows, Alec feels himself soften around the edges as he and Magnus ease into the peaceful cover of darkness.

There is no pausing in doorways that night. Magnus claims the left side of the bed as his own.

They wake up, and they kiss, and Alec wants to live like this forever.

Another night. Magnus likes to snuggle against Alec with their fingers lacing together over Alec’s heart. He says that the consistent rhythm calms him.

Alec listens to Magnus’ soft breaths. He’ll do anything to keep Magnus safe.

He says so, like he does every night.

“Good night, Magnus,” he murmurs. “Thank you for trusting me.”

“Sweet dreams, Alexander,” Magnus sighs, curling closer into Alec’s arms.

Three days of relative peace. Alec tucks Magnus’ head under his chin, their legs tangling together beneath the blankets. As Magnus slumbers, Alec accepts the fitful sobs that weave through otherwise even breathing; keeping vigilant watch over the room until he falls asleep.

***

Alec wakes up with warm toes and a full bladder. Magnus sleeps on, nestling closer as Alec tries to ignore the need building in his groin. He has to fucking piss, but he doesn’t want to leave Magnus or disturb the Chairman—the cat dozing just above their heads.

He lasts a few minutes, eyelids fluttering as he drops in and out of sleep, fighting the inevitable. It’s too much. Alec manages to extract himself, pressing a small kiss to Magnus’ forehead. Magnus hugs his pillow with a soft sigh. Eager to return, Alec sneaks into the hallway.

The bathroom tile sends cold shivers up Alec’s spine. He does his business quickly, shaking off his dick before tucking it back into his boxer briefs. With a quick flush and a thorough washing of his hands, Alec debates brushing his teeth or joining Magnus back in bed, before deciding on both.

Alec walks back into the bedroom and finds Magnus blinking at him through sleep-crusted lashes and bedhead. He takes the time to admire Magnus in the morning sunshine, committing the moment to memory as he approaches the bed. “Good morning.” Alec wants to kiss Magnus.

So he does. Magnus smiles up at him, stretching in the sheets, fingers grazing the Chairman’s fur.

“Good morning,” Magnus croaks back. He frowns and smacks his lips. “God, my mouth is so dry.”

“I’ll get you some water,” Alec says. Magnus opens his mouth to protest, but Alec just drops a quick kiss on Magnus’ lips and slips away.

“You can’t keep doing that,” Magnus calls. His voice trails after Alec, bouncing off the walls and
ceiling with a timbre that reverberates through Alec’s bones.

“Yes I can,” Alec replies. He hears the tiny echo of Magnus’ laugh. The glasses are in the left cupboard over the sink, an array of tall and squat cups greeting Alec as sunshine passes through them. He grabs a clear blue glass and fills it with water from the fridge.

With a quick sweep of the apartment, Alec heads back toward the bedroom.

“Welcome back,” Magnus mumbles, peering at him with a sleepy smile, beckoning to Alec with a curl of his fingers. “I kept the bed warm for you.”

“For me?” Alec asks. His lips pull back into a playful smile. “You shouldn’t have.”

“Well you know, I’m just a giving person,” Magnus jokes, rolling over and patting the vacated space before reaching out to accept the drink. Alec hands it over and Magnus takes a sip as Alec slides beneath the blankets.

“I know you are. In fact, if rumors are to be believed, you love giving,” Alec jokes.

Magnus choke on his water, sputtering as he tries to swallow and laugh at the same time. “Oh my god, did you just make a joke about giving head?”

“I’ve been known to be funny every once in a while,” Alec says with a smirk. Magnus sets the water to the side, burrowing deeper into the sheets, tracing a finger along Alec’s abs.

“Hm, yes, but I’ve never heard you make a sex joke before,” Magnus hums. “I’m corrupting you.”

Alec shrugs and kisses the top of Magnus’ head. “I won’t deny it.” He follows Magnus’ hand with his eyes, allowing the lazy exploration as Magnus teases him.

“Hey, can you guess what I’m writing?” Magnus asks. Alec studies the movements of Magnus’ fingers.

“Well, I can see what you’re writing,” Alec says.

Magnus pouts up at him and lets out an impatient huff. “Close your eyes.”

Alec rolls his eyes first, but follows Magnus’ instructions. Magnus draws the faint shapes of C’ and ‘H.’ ‘Chairman Meow,” Alec guesses.

“That’s not fair.” Magnus swats him before soothing the nonexistent ache with a kiss.

“That was perfectly fair,” Alec insists.

The aforementioned Chairman chirps from where he rests against the headboard. With another trill, Alec feels him stretch and leap off the bed, the jingling of his collar fading out of the room and down the hallway before either of them can pester him into staying.

“See? Chairman Meow protests your skills. You’re too good at this,” Magnus complains. Alec laughs and lavishes Magnus’ collarbone with apologies, eyes fluttering open as he makes his way up the column of Magnus throat. With a soft kiss, Magnus accepts them before returning to his ministrations, instructing Alec to look away.

Magnus’ touch is the focal point of Alec’s whole world. The sensation of Magnus’ fingers wandering over his body leaves sparks skittering over his skin and deep into the very makeup of his DNA. He’s never felt such undeniable attraction to anyone before in his life, and it’s a mutual
attraction.

“Darling,” Alec guesses.

“Cheater,” Magnus grouses, fingernails catching on Alec’s abundant body hair. Alec laughs at Magnus’ petulance and tips Magnus’ chin up.

“I don’t need to cheat. I just feel you,” Alec says. That was weird, and the words draw a curious glance from Magnus, so Alec tries to recover. “I, uh, I just. You’re like a livewire.” There’s no salvaging his clumsy words, so Alec resigns himself to burning up with embarrassment.

What a way to go. The guy you might kind of possibly love confesses that he kind of maybe likes you, and you go ahead and tell him that he’s something dangerous, like a livewire. Alec can hear Jace and Izzy laughing. Romance is dead and Alec killed it with his sheer lack of poeticism.

“Would you say that I’m electrifying?” Magnus asks, wiggling his brows. Alec laughs, half in relief, and half in good humor. Magnus inches closer. “Or maybe that I make you ecstatic?” He brands kisses up Alec’s neck and chin, anywhere but Alec’s lips. Alec moves closer, intent on deepening the kiss to avoid embarrassment. Magnus leans in, then shakes his head and makes a noise of irritation. “Ugh, actually, hold that thought,” Magnus says. He pulls away. “I’m going to go brush my teeth so I’m not tainting my precious jokes with morning breath.” Alec tries to assuage Magnus, but he’s already out of bed and making his way to the bathroom.

Alec lies back on the pillow. He waits for Magnus to return, soaking in the warmth of the sunshine and Magnus’ residual body heat as he listens to the sounds of water and Magnus’ toothbrush. When Magnus appears in the doorway, Alec grins and sits up further, shifting the blankets to make room for Magnus.

“I kept it warm for you,” Alec teases, stealing Magnus’ own words.

“My hero,” Magnus chuckles. He walks toward the bed, robe falling open with every sway of his hips. “If it’s not too forward of me...might I reward you for your trouble?” Magnus suggests. He pauses just out of Alec’s reach. “I’m so giving after all.”

All of the air rushes from Alec’s lungs.

“I, uh,” Alec wheezes.

“I’ve even been told I’m a bit of a livewire. Electric even,” Magnus smirks. And Alec wants to call him out on all of his horrible lines, but the implication of Magnus giving Alec a blowjob, ever, short-circuits Alec’s brain. “If you’re willing to oblige me.”

Alec wants to say yes, almost desperately so, but he can’t.

“Magnus, I don’t want you to force yourself,” Alec blurts out, the thought too unsettling to go without acknowledgement. Magnus shakes his head, climbing up on to the bed, robe coming just a bit looser.

Alec looks away.

“Alexander,” Magnus whispers. “You said you’d tell me if it was ever too much. Trust me to do the same.” Magnus rests against the pillows, leaving space between them for Alec to breathe. “Alec...I want to, but only if you want it too.”

There’s a beat of silence as Alec lets the words sink into the fabric of his reality. He meets
Magnus’ eyes and searches them.

“Magnus,” Alec breathes.

Magnus leans in closer, heat sparking in the golden-brown Alec loves so much. The cursed fucking robe slides further off of Magnus’ shoulder, and Alec watches as Magnus’ fingers trail down Alec’s chest, down his abs, and along his waistband.

“May I?” Magnus asks, voice soft.

“Yes,” Alec says. Every fiber of his being compels the confirmation from him. He doesn’t want to fight anymore.

Magnus beams, shrugging his robe off entirely before capturing Alec’s lips in a deep kiss. “Thank you, Alexander.”

And Alec doesn’t understand why Magnus is thanking him, but he does understand that Magnus is outlining the shape of his cock through his underwear, and that he’s already trying to keep from blowing his load.

“Fuck, Magnus,” Alec groans.

“That’s the plan,” Magnus says, voice walking the line between playful and seductive. It does wonders to Alec’s libido. “Holy shit, you’re big aren’t you?” He catches Alec’s eye and bites his lip. “I can’t believe you’ve been holding out on me,” Magnus jokes.

Alec frowns, the sudden thought of disappointing Magnus with the size of his penis putting a damper on things. “I’m uh, actually average sized,” Alec says. Magnus raises a brow before giving Alec’s dick another stroke.

“Are you sure?” Magnus asks. He slides down the bed and gives Alec’s erection a long lick through the stretchy fabric of department store boxer briefs. A finger runs back over the trail of spit as Magnus mouths Alec’s balls.

Alec gasps for air as the reality that Magnus fucking Bane has his lips on Alec’s crotch crashes down from the high heavens. “Yeah, I checked,” Alec moans.

Magnus shoots him an incredulous look, then chuckles, hot breath puffing against Alec’s sensitive skin. “You checked?” He treks back up Alec’s body. Magnus hovers on his hands and knees, every movement he makes drawing Alec’s eyes to the piercing in his navel and lines of muscle that dip beneath Magnus’ waistband.

“I was curious,” Alec says, for lack of anything else. Magnus seems to accept this.

“It’s good to be curious about your body,” Magnus murmurs, tongue flicking out and teasing Alec’s lips, one of his hands slipping beneath stretchy cotton and grasping the hot length of Alec’s erection. “But I do think you’re wrong about this, darling.”

Magnus retracts his hand and rests his ass on Alec’s crotch before grinding down.

“Oh, fuck,” Alec gasps, sucking air in through his teeth. “Holy shit, Magnus.”

“Language, young man,” Magnus chides Alec. He shoots Alec an admonishing look that lacks heat, pressing a finger to Alec’s lips as he grinds down again. “That’s not what your mouth is for.”
Alec laughs. “Is that so?” He asks, challenging Magnus with the quirk of his brow. “Well, what are mouths for?”

Magnus grins and shoots Alec a wink. “This,” Magnus says, kissing down Alec’s body, nipping Alec’s hip in warning when Alec snorts in disbelief. Then, Magnus’ tongue is flat and licking languid lines along Alec’s pelvic muscles. “I love these,” Magnus sighs happily.

Alec back arches as Magnus nibbles and sucks marks onto his Orion’s belt. He caresses Magnus’ cheek with his hand before tracing over the reddening skin Magnus leaves behind.

They’re just vanity muscles, but Alec’s never been more grateful that he has them.

Magnus glances up at Alec and scrapes his teeth along Alec’s hip bones. Magnus looks beautiful like this—sleepy and still so seductive as he threatens to consume Alec whole.

Alec watches as Magnus takes him apart piece by piece.

There are fantasies, and then there is Magnus Bane. Alec mouth dries out. It’s ironic, almost, as he watches Magnus pull down his underwear and then Magnus begins to suck him off, hot and wet. Alec can’t keep his eyes open. The sensation of Magnus taking Alec’s cock deeper, writhing, and moaning has Alec’s toes curling.

“Magnus.” Alec searches through the pleasure, trying to form coherent thought. “Oh my god.”

There’s a slurping noise. Alec can’t fucking open his eyes and look or he’ll come on the spot. Magnus is stroking him with one hand now, lips and tongue lavishing him with more attention than he can stand. Magnus’ other hand comes up and tugs his boxer briefs even further down until they’re by Alec’s knees.

Magnus pulls his mouth away, leaving Alec forlorn and unable to say anything beyond ‘fuck’ over and over.

“Alexander,” Magnus calls. “Open your eyes for me, darling.” And Alec can’t deny Magnus anything, not even when Magnus strokes up and twists.

Alec’s eyes flicker open. His hazy vision focuses first on the high ceilings before coming down, and the sight of Magnus’ smoldering smile has him clutching the sheets. Magnus’ skin glows in the shimmering sunlight.

“You’re so beautiful,” Alec murmurs. The words well up and surge out of him. “Magnus, smile for me,” he babbles. “Please.”

Magnus doesn’t seem to understand him at first, but then Magnus beams, brightening the room more than the sun ever could. “Oh, Alexander,” Magnus murmurs, voice reverent. “Do you know how special you are?”

Alec goes to respond but then Alec’s dick is back in Magnus’ mouth and Alec’s head falls back. He fights to keep his eyes open, but it’s a losing battle. Magnus’ tongue runs along the underside of his erection. Alec lets out a strangled groan, keeping his hips firm to the bed, and Magnus chooses then to suck Alec down to the root.

“Ah!” Alec gasps. His hips threaten to snap upward in an effort to plunge deeper into Magnus’ throat. Alec grits his teeth and wills his body to still. “M-Magnus.” He tries to speak again, but can’t, unraveling at the seams as Magnus swallows around him. Magnus pulls off, hand taking over.
“Fuck my mouth,” Magnus says.

Alec blinks. He sits up to look Magnus in the eye, catching a glimpse of Magnus’ hard-on dragging along the blankets, and forces himself to respond. “What?” He asks, voice rough. “You want me to do what?”

“Let go, Alexander,” Magnus insists. Then, without preamble, Magnus deepthroats Alec again. This time, Alec can’t fight it, and he thrusts. Magnus makes a contented noise and Alec sees him rut against the bed.

Magnus likes when Alec fucks his mouth.

Alec remembers the camshow—remembers being jealous of an honest-to-god dildo—but now he’s here; writhing beneath Magnus’ eager touch.

This isn’t a show. There are no viewers or mods or fucking tips. This is just for them.

Alec gets to coax those sounds out of Magnus, so he does, threading affectionate fingers through Magnus’ hair and rolling his hips. He can feel Magnus’ ragged breathing. It drives Alec wild, dragging him closer to the edge.

Alec shudders. Each buck of his hips feels sinful, but too delicious to be wrong, so he lets go.

“Mag—fuck,” Alec moans, using every ounce of discipline he has to remove his hand from Magnus’ head. “I’m gonna, ah, Magnus.” He fists the pillow. It’s a poor replacement, but he’s about to come in Magnus’ mouth and he can’t bring himself to care.

Magnus doesn’t budge, sucking him impossibly deeper, tracing letters on Alec’s stomach.

Come.

Alec’s orgasm sweeps through him. It leaves him shaking, helpless to do anything other than feel as he climaxes. Magnus swallows all of it, coming up with a gasp for air before leaning down to suck Alec’s over-sensitive cock clean of any remaining traces of come. Alec stares up at the tiny painted stars that watch over them from above.

Magnus just gave him head.

Magnus Bane gave him, Alexander Gideon Lightwood, a blowjob. Alec can’t do much more than just dwell in the moment. So he lays back and tries to ground himself, counting out seconds to regulate his breathing.

Magnus crawls back up the bed and taps his fingers on Alec’s chest. “Sorry, I should’ve asked what you’d prefer beforehand,” Magnus says. His lips are red and plush, tongue flicking out to catch a line of spit. “I just kind of...figured it’d be easier clean up if I swallowed.” He shrugs, and Alec has never seen anything so ethereal.

“That was perfect,” Alec breathes. Magnus laughs, and Alec can feel Magnus’ erection against his thigh. “Do you want me to help you with that?”

“Would you mind?” Magnus asks, voice soft and content despite the hardness of his dick. “I can take care of it myself. It’s kind of my specialty,” he jokes.

Alec rolls over, pinning Magnus beneath him. “I’d like to try,” Alec says.
“Okay,” Magnus murmurs.

It turns out Alec is miserable at giving head, but Magnus is patient, and Alec watches with rapt attention as Magnus brings himself to orgasm.

“Can you teach me?”

“Of course, darling. We have all the time in the world.”

They laze for the rest of the day, soaking in the small magic of each other’s company.

***

The next day begins with kisses and a clumsy handjob. Alec tries his best, and Magnus seems to enjoy Alec’s touch, no matter how amateur it is.

“Would you like to go on a date with me, Alexander?” Magnus hums, nuzzling Alec’s shoulder and stroking Alec through his climax. Alec has no hope of responding, but Magnus is patient with him, waiting until Alec can form proper sentences again.

“Yeah,” Alec breathes. He tries to piece himself back together. “A date sounds good. Okay.”

They stumble down the stairs together.

Alec spots Sebastian as they leave, shooting the landlord a polite smile as Magnus drags him away.

They go to Magnus’ favorite nail salon. Alec winces in sympathy as the nail technician stares at his feet, regretting how neglectful he is of his cuticles. Magnus chooses a dark green varnish.

“It reminds me of you,” Magnus says.

Alec blushes and selects a deep purple. He doesn’t tell Magnus why that’s the color he wants, but Magnus smiles at him all the same. The manicure and pedicure are life-changing in both good and bad ways. Alec feels fresh and clean, but he doesn’t like how much attention he gets from the manicurists as they buff and trim and file, nor does he like the sly looks they keep sending his way.

Magnus looks thrilled, chatting with the woman rubbing a floral lotion into his skin. Alec decides that nail salons are good things.

They walk to a bodega, buying a ridiculous assortment of foods, then carry their meal to a nearby park. It’s much too windy for them to have a proper picnic, but they try anyway. They end up with mouthfuls of leaves and the scant insect as they try to devour their prepackaged yogurt parfaits and deli sandwiches.

After the messiest meal Alec’s ever partaken in, they stroll through the park. There’s a dog party happening in one of the main clearings. Magnus falls in love with a giant doberman and Alec finds the only cat amongst the party.

“The Chairman won’t be amused,” Alec says, tugging Magnus away. Magnus pouts. “Don’t worry, how about we stop by that new Chinese place to grab take-out for dinner. My treat,” Alec suggests.

“Can we get an extra entrée?” Magnus asks, still sullen as Alec drags him down the street.

“Of course,” Alec agrees, accepting Magnus’ kisses of forgiveness.

“Then you have a deal, Mr. Lightwood.”
“Pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Bane. As always.”

***

They unlock the front door and head to the kitchen. Their arms are laden with bags, the delicious smell of fried rice permeating the air as they set the containers down on the counter. Magnus plates their food, chatting with Alec over his shoulder when Alec sees it.

There’s a black spot on the flower vase by the sink. Alec would recognize one of those anywhere. A bug, and not the natural kind.

“Alexander?” Magnus asks. “Do you want your dumplings on a separate plate or do you just want them with your rice?”

“Either way is fine, babe. I’ll uh, be right back,” Alec says.

“Okay. I’ll just put all of the dumplings on one plate,” Magnus replies, shooting him an odd look before shrugging, returning to the food.

Alec gives Magnus a quick kiss on the cheek before scanning the rest of the kitchen. He doesn’t spot any more, so he ventures out into the living room. There. He spots another on the doorframe leading out to the balcony. He finds one more under the end table holding the record player, and Alec would bet money on there being microphones hidden all over their bedrooms and bathrooms.

Alec heads back into the dining room and drags his knuckles along the bottom of the table until they catch against something. It’s round and small, discreet beneath his fingertips as he feels the underside of the wood. He bends down to check.

Another one. Alec shoots Izzy a text to confirm.

‘Did you or Jace bug the loft?’ He waits for her to respond, muscles tense, righteous fury coursing through his blood. His phone buzzes.

‘No, why?’

The stalker was here.

He looks up at Magnus who’s setting the plates down.


“Okay, darling.” It sounds natural, even to Alec’s ears, and Alec is grateful—not for the first time—that Magnus trusts him. Magnus makes his way around the table. Alec takes his hand and runs it along the wood, stopping when Magnus’ fingers bump into the hidden microphone.

Alec pulls out his phone and sets it on the table. “Thank you for getting the food ready,” he says aloud. He types a message into his phone. ‘The apartment is bugged. We need to leave. We can’t let them know we’re aware.’

“Of course, Alexander,” Magnus replies, still playing along. He’s not cowering, far from it, but he looks insecure and anxious. This is his home, and it’s being taken away from him. Helplessness comes in many forms—including Magnus’ crossed arms and the nervous rub of his fingers.
“Come here,” Alec murmurs, when Magnus’s eyes flicker up to his own.

Alec would do anything to keep Magnus from looking this way. He pulls Magnus close, tucking Magnus into the crook of his neck and trying his best to kiss away the horror lingering in Magnus’ eyes. Magnus begins to hyperventilate. Alec’s gaze passes over the words still plastered across his phone screen, interweaving heavy breaths of his own, masking the true nature of Magnus’ reaction.

The stalker got into Magnus’ loft. The stalker was here, hours ago, or maybe even just ten minutes ago, and Alec knows that they can’t stay anymore. Magnus can’t work. He can’t live in his own home in peace.

Alec is livid, but he has a job to do, and he has to act casual.

“Sorry to interrupt dinner, babe, but I forgot about a call I was supposed to make. It’ll just be a second, and then we can get ready for the vacation we talked about. Go ahead and eat without me.” He grips Magnus’ shoulders and presses a soft kiss to the corner of Magnus’ mouth.

Magnus looks indignant for a moment, like he’s going to insist they stay. Pride and stubbornness rise and burn away within a single breath. He leans in Alec’s warm touch. Then, Magnus nods, holding a hand over his mouth to keep his shallow breathing from leaking into the air.

“Okay, hurry back,” Magnus says.

Alec drops a kiss on Magnus’ lips before heading into the hallway, footfalls steady and even on the hardwood floors. He does a sweep of both sets of bedrooms and bathrooms, finding multiple microphones. The stalker is an amateur, but they got inside, and that’s already too much. Alec needs to do better.

But first, phone calls.

He walks into his room and packs his belongings with one hand, pulling his phone out with the other. It only rings once before the receiver picks up.

“Alec?”

“Hey, Jace? Can I borrow your car? And yes, I’ll buy you a six-pack.”

Chapter End Notes

Magnus gets tested regularly and Alec has touched his not-average dick like five times total so I just let it go—but STAY SAFE AND USE CONDOMS IRL.
Jace shows up at the next morning with a stern expression, phone in hand. Every line of his body is casual, oozing confidence and nonchalance, as he gives Alec a two-fingered salute.

Two bugs in the hallway outside of the apartment that Alec missed. Or they might have appeared overnight. Alec’s eyes flicker back toward where Magnus is packing, jerking the door open wider for Jace.

“Hey,” Alec says. “Thanks for coming. I figured it’d just be easier to do this by car since you have one.”


“Very funny,” Alec retorts. “He’s got a last minute trip for some family stuff. I’m gonna stay at my place for the time being and come over to take care of the Chairman while he’s gone. C’mon in.”

Alec closes and locks the door once Jace is inside, leading Jace toward the kitchen. He jerks his head toward the bug on the wall and then gestures to the dining room table. Jace nods in understanding and takes a seat.

“Do you need help with anything other than New York traffic?” Jace asks, rapping his knuckles on the wood, as he sets a device onto the surface. He taps a button and a series of black lines run across the dull screen.

“Nah, Magnus is packing. Most of my stuff is back at my apartment anyway because I haven’t had the time to move it all over yet. I’d help him but I’m pretty sure Magnus would rather die than wear anything I picked out for him,” Alec says, eyes on the electronic testing equipment. There’s signal. The stalker is either recording them, or listening live.

“Not true, Alexander,” Magnus replies, striding into the living room from the hallway with two suitcases in hand. “I would wear anything you chose for me with great pride.”

Alec blushes.

“Oh my god, it’s not even 10 am I can’t deal with this,” Jace grouses. He pushes his chair back and
stands. “I’m going to go on a bodega run. You guys want anything?”

Magnus opens his mouth.

“Oatmeal for us both, thanks,” Alec answers.

Magnus pouts.

Jace lets out a bark of laughter. “I’m assuming that’s not what Magnus usually has in the morning?”

“Since he’s moved in, he’s been forcing me to leave my dearest breakfast foods in the cupboard,” Magnus says with a mournful sound. “He keeps feeding me steel-cut oats and eggs without ketchup.”

“The horror,” Jace says. “You should see what he gives me and Izzy.”

“Breakfast that you would otherwise go without?” Alec cuts in, brow arching. “That can change anytime, you know.”

“And by that, I mean that it’s always delicious and great. Even when it’s chia seeds in plain yogurt,” Jace says, chancing Magnus a conspiratorial wink.

Magnus makes a gagging noise. “He’s lucky he’s so handsome.”

Alec rolls his eyes and walks over to give Magnus a chaste peck. He can’t help but smile when Magnus chases after his lips for another. “Yeah, that’s why I’m so lucky.”

***

“Now, Chairman. You have to promise to be good for Alexander,” Magnus says, holding one of the Chairman’s forepaws in each hand. He gives Chairman Meow a kiss on the nose. “I’m going to miss you,” Magnus murmurs. Alec hears his voice crack, can see trembling in the curve of his spine, and the tightness of his jaw.

“I’ll take good care of him,” Alec says. “And if it looks like this is going to be a longer trip, we can bring him to my place once he’s more comfortable with me.” Magnus shoots Alec a soft smile before turning back to the Chairman, whose soft meows are growing more plaintive by the second.

“See? You have nothing to worry about,” Magnus says, shifting to scratch beneath the tabby’s chin. He runs comforting hands over the Chairman’s back, all ten fingers drawing individual lines along gray fur. That’s just how Chairman Meow likes it, Alec knows, and Magnus can’t seem to find it in him to let go.

“Magnus? Babe, we have to head out or you’ll miss your flight,” Alec says.

“Of course,” Magnus says, pulling away and standing up straight without his usual grace. Just a vacation. “Goodbye, my sweeting,” Magnus says. The Chairman lets out a soft trill, and Alec finds his own heart pulling apart at the seams.

They leave, door snapping shut, and lock falling into place.

***

Rock music groans through Jace’s aging car speakers. The droning baseline offers pitiful reprieve from the yawning silence, thudding through Alec’s body as they drive through a red light. They
cruise through four more intersections, currents of pedestrians rushing past, and suitcases shifting in the trunk with every lane change.

There’s a coughing sound from the back seat, and Alec’s gaze moves from gray concrete to the somehow equally gray interior of Jace’s car. He reaches back, setting his hand on Magnus’ knee, and gives Magnus his attention.


“Uh, Hell’s Kitchen,” Alec says. “It’s nothing special. Just a one bedroom, so we’ll have to share.”

“Yeah, like that’s a burden,” Jace chuckles. He taps his fingers on the steering wheel. “Why didn’t you tell me you guys boned, Alec? I thought there were no secrets between us.”

Alec chokes on his spit and turns back sharply to glare at Jace, who gives him a wolfish grin.

“I didn’t peg you as part of the Hell’s Kitchen crowd. Hell’s Kitchen is very nice,” Magnus comments, ignoring Jace altogether. He shoots Alec a pleased smile and lowers his voice. “Right next door to all the clubs too. We should go dancing.”

“Oh. I uh, didn’t know that,” Alec replies, leaning further backwards toward Magnus. “I don’t actually know much about the area. Izzy helped me pick it out, and it’s close to the Institute.”

Magnus’ pushes against his seatbelt to give Alec a kiss. He bites his lip and shrugs his shoulders. “That makes a lot of sense. But that’s always an option if you want to go.”

Jace lowers the music. “Did you guys say something?”

“We were just talking about how Alexander likes his dick sucked,” Magnus replies with a wicked smile.

Alec’s free hand whips outs to crank the volume, wailing guitar rattling the windows, as Jace speeds through another red light.

***

Jace pulls into the loading zone and Alec all but throws himself from the vehicle. He walks to Jace’s trunk and taps on the window, waiting for Jace to pop it open. After Alec retrieves Magnus’ luggage, with minimal teasing, Jace honks his horn and pulls away from the curb.

Alec turns to Magnus, accepting a kiss on the cheek as Magnus takes one of the bags. They walk toward Alec’s building hand in hand. The doorman opens the door with a polite smile.

“Good morning,” Magnus chirps.

“Good morning, sirs,” the doorman says with a nod. He spots the suitcases. “Will you be staying for a while, sir?” He asks Magnus.

Alec shifts his weight between his feet, unsure of what to do while Magnus and the doorman chat.

“Yes, I’m not sure how long, but it should be for at least a week,” Magnus says. “Right, Alexander?”

The doorman turns to him, wearing an expectant but also distant expression. Alec sees this man almost every day, but they’ve never spoken beyond first meeting and when Alec leaves a customary tip during the holidays. Except once, when Alec dropped his keys, the doorman was
kind enough to chase after him.

“He’ll be staying here until further notice. But uh, yeah, he’s with me. So if there’s any trouble feel free to let me know,” Alec says.

“Is he okay to accept packages and any other mail that may arrive addressed to you?” the doorman asks.

“That’s fine,” Alec says. The man nods.

Magnus puts his suitcase down and offers his hand. “It’s nice to meet you…”

“Amir,” the doorman supplies. “It’s nice to meet you as well.”

“My name is Magnus,” Magnus says, smile stretching as he and Amir shake hands.

After the brief introductions, Magnus collects his baggage, and they walk past Amir and into the lobby.

White stone floors shine beneath a series of tasteful chandeliers. There are seating areas on both sides of the doors, a couple of people walk past with steaming thermoses, and countless potted plants populate the floors and tables.

Alec doesn’t often linger in the lobby, but Magnus seems to like it, so he stands back and watches Magnus approach the nearest flower arrangement. Magnus takes a deep breath, inspecting the petals of a small white flower. After a few moments, Magnus glances over at Alec, smile stretching from ear to ear.

“Do you like it?” Alec asks.

Magnus nods, beaming. “It’s beautiful, Alexander.”

***

They take the elevator up four floors and step out onto the landing, the same decor escorting them through the hallway as Alec leads Magnus to his apartment.

“Apartment 420, nice,” Magnus says.

“What?” Alec asks, fitting his key into the doorknob before pushing the door open.

“Nevermind,” Magnus chuckles. Alec steps inside and sets down the luggage, turning to watch as Magnus walks inside. “Oh,” Magnus says, expression falling like a stone.

“Magnus? Are you okay?” Alec asks, concern carving spindly lines in his ribcage.

“I uh, I’m fine,” Magnus says, plastering a smile onto his face. “Where did you find this uh, very interesting couch?”

Alec gives his sofa a cursory once-over. Izzy always complains about it, though Alec doesn’t understand why, it’s just a chair. It’s a burnt orange color with red patches of knitting running through the fabric like salmon swimming upstream.

“At a furniture warehouse, actually,” Alec answers. “Why?”

“Was it on sale perhaps?” Magnus asks.
“Yeah, it was. How did you know?” Alec inspects the chair. It’s seen better days, sure, but it’s holding together well enough. He lets out an awkward chuckle. “Are you a furniture expert?”

“You could say that,” Magnus replies, smoothing out a throw pillow that Alec admits is a bit lumpier than most. There’s silence as Magnus takes in the rest of Alec’s living room.

Worry clambers up Alec’s spine and sits on his shoulder, Magnus’ gaze seeming to grow more disenchanted by the minute. “To the bedroom?” Alec suggests.

Magnus blinks, gaze pulling away from Alec’s TV, critical eye softening as he picks up his suitcase.

“Lead the way, darling.”

Alec’s apartment isn’t close to the same size as Magnus’. As Alec guides Magnus down a short, off-white hallway, the reality of their differences begins to sink in. He just hopes that Magnus doesn’t notice.

When Magnus takes in the sight of Alec’s gray sheets and tidy bookshelf, he relaxes, the rings on his hand glinting in the light pouring in through Alec’s window as he strokes the duvet. Alec follows him further into the bedroom as Magnus sets his bag down by the dresser.

“You can put your stuff anywhere,” Alec says, relieved. “I can clear out a few drawers and there’s plenty of space in the closet.” And there is. Unused space because he, unlike Magnus, wears two colors—black, and the occasional gray.

Alec thinks of what Magnus’ festive clothing might look like, mixed amongst his belongings. He finds the idea charming. He hopes Magnus does too.

Magnus nods, expression polite and curious as he moves across the hardwood floor. He looks outlandish in Alec’s monochromatic bedroom even in his plain black jeans and blue button up, a bright spot of something magical in the sea of Alec’s inky home.

“I’m going to put my products in the bathroom,” Magnus says, holding up a tote bag brimming with bottles.

Alec tries to remember if Izzy liked the counter space he had or if she thought it wasn’t enough. He comes up short.

“I’m uh, going to go catch up on some emails in the kitchen and make us something to snack on. Take all the time you need,” Alec says. The desire to kiss Magnus wins over the anxiety sitting on Alec’s shoulder, and the reassuring warmth of Magnus’ lips helps quell the chill of nerves.

“Do you think you could make just a little more time for me?” Magnus peers up at him, pressing kisses onto his collarbone and neck. Then, Magnus laces their fingers together, bringing Alec closer, closer, and they fall together onto Alec’s inoffensive bedsheets.

Alec laughs. The impact rumples the blanket, sinking them into the bed, as they find each other. The air is cool and sunlight milky as it washes in through the window. Magnus unwinds their fingers, tugging at Alec’s waistband.

“Magnus,” Alec gasps.

“May I?” Magnus asks. There’s a look in his eyes that gives Alec pause. Magnus blinks, the beginnings of tears resting on his eyelashes. In this room with its plain white walls and plain white
ceiling, Magnus bites his lip and averts his gaze, scanning those plain white walls and settling on the plain white ceiling. His hand pulls away. “I…”

“Magnus,” Alec says again.

Alec shifts, reaching out to stroke Magnus’ arm, up the warm curvature of his neck, and finally cupping his cheek.

Tired brown eyes turn toward him, blinking, slow and out of focus. “Alexander.”

“Yes?” Alec whispers, careful not to break the glass they spin in the air.

“Do you think we’re moving too fast?” Magnus asks, words raining down, blunt despite their fragility. Alec handles his own with care.

“Maybe,” Alec says. “Are you happy?” Sandalwood mixes with the scent of clean laundry. He waits, breathing the possibilities of what Magnus might say.

“I don’t know,” Magnus replies. He presses a hand to his chest, wrinkling the silken fabric of his shirt, and lets out a soft sigh. Moments pass, cast in nothing but dust motes and heavy silence. He opens his mouth. “By all accounts, I shouldn’t be. But you...you’ve brought me so much happiness. So yes. Yes I am.”

Magnus sucks in a breath, eyes shining up at Alec with a reverence Alec isn’t sure he deserves. He lays his hand over Magnus’, feeling the weight of the heart that pounds beneath their palms.

“I am too,” Alec says.

Magnus smiles, playing with Alec’s fingers as he presses a soft kiss to Alec’s rushing pulse.

“Then that’s enough for me.”

***

They laze together for the rest of the day. Magnus refuses to sit on Alec’s couch, and they end up spilling pizza crumbs all over the floor as they watch a nature documentary.

Magnus licks some sauce and oil that splattered onto Alec’s collarbone, tongue laving liberal stripes, and moves closer before planting himself on Alec’s lap.

“Hello,” Alec whispers, accepting Magnus’ kisses. “Can I help you?”

“Depends on what you’re offering,” Magnus replies. He lets out an exaggerated sigh and trails his fingers down Alec’s chest, nails catching on the loose fabric of Alec’s t-shirt.

“I’m open for negotiation,” Alec says, hands settling on Magnus’ hips.

Magnus looks down at Alec with a pleased glint in his eye. “I’m sure we can work something out.” He grinds down, rolling his hips, and plays with the hem of Alec’s shirt. “Would you like to make a deal, Mr. Lightwood?”

Alec grins. “Please, call me Alexander.”

“Shall we take this somewhere more appropriate?” Magnus asks. “Not that I’m complaining, but I hope to ride you, and I don’t think you’ll want your first time to be on hardwood floor.”
Alec’s dick rises to the occasion, and Magnus gives a short laugh before climbing off of his lap.

“To the bedroom?” Alec murmurs.

“Why, I thought you’d never ask.”

Alec leaves Magnus on the bed. He closes the door behind him when he steps into the bathroom, searching through cabinets more haphazardly than he would like to admit, hygiene products hitting the floor. Finally, he finds the lube and condoms Jace gave him as a joke on his birthday. He checks the expiration dates just in case. All clear.

He walks into the bedroom to the sight of Magnus lounging against his pillows in nothing but a white jersey and socks. “Idris University” stares up at Alec in golden letters. Magnus sits up on his knees, turning just enough that Alec can the eponymous “Lightwood 1” on the back.

Robert Lightwood definitely did not force his sons to join their very Christian university football team with this in mind.

Alec didn’t think of it either, but his dick is liking it just fine.

“Where did you find that?” He asks, all too aware of the fact that Magnus is sitting on his bed, wearing one of his old jerseys, and plans on riding him.

“I saw it when I was putting my clothes in the closet. It’s very comfortable, though I will say that the sleeves are a bit tight,” Magnus purrs. He flexes a bit, drawing Alec’s attention to the hard cords of Magnus’ biceps. “These socks are mine, but I figured they’d make a good match.” Magnus lays back, stretching his legs out on Alec’s cheap cotton duvet, and Alec remembers that god is real. “Do you agree?”


“I’m glad,” Magnus says, widening his legs just enough that Alec can see just how naked Magnus is beneath the swaths of white polyester. “Are you going to join me, Alexander?”

Alec doesn’t need to be asked twice. He strides forward, leaning over the edge of the bed to cage Magnus in with his arms. There’s no time for Alec to doubt himself, the heat singing through his veins as he drinks in the reality of Magnus wearing his name, surging forward to push Magnus deeper into Alec’s blankets.

Magnus moans, running his hands through Alec’s hair in an effort to pull them closer together. Alec drops the condoms onto the bed.

They both fall into the kiss, open-mouthed and desperate, as Alec peels the plastic off of the lube bottle.

“Magnus,” Alec groans, feeling Magnus’ fingers venturing down his neck to his chest, then further. He gasps as Magnus sneaks under his waistband and grabs his cock.

“Mm?” Magnus hums, dragging his fingernails lightly through Alec’s thick pubic hair.

“Can I prep you?” Alec asks. “Please.”

“Oh, darling,” Magnus sighs against his lips. “I would like nothing more.”

Alec sets a hand on Magnus’ chest as Magnus retracts his own hand from Alec’s boxer-briefs. It’s
a pity, but the view makes up for it.

Magnus in white and gold, warm brown limbs stretching in the light of an orange sunset.

“I always dreamed of meeting someone like you,” Alec says. It’s true, plain and vulnerable, and Alec cannot help but say more. He runs his hands up Magnus’ sides. “I never thought I could have this.”

“You have me,” Magnus insists, cupping Alec’s cheek. “All of me.” He moves to pull off Alec’s uniform.


Magnus beams, beatific, and nods. “How do you want me?” He asks.

Alec hesitates, a thought coming to his mind and sticking there, immovable.

So Alec reaches out and grabs Magnus’ hips, urging him to flip over. Magnus follows his lead and turns onto his stomach, Alec’s kit sliding down the arch of his back until his ass is on full display, erection and balls hanging heavy in the air.

Alec kisses the soft curve of Magnus inner thigh and pops the lube cap open. He dribbles some of the fluid over his fingers, making sure his fingers are slick, and eases one inside Magnus’ tight heat. There’s little to no resistance. Magnus sighs in satisfaction as Alec moves deeper.

“Is this good?” Alec whispers. He hopes it’s good for Magnus because the sight of Magnus taking his fingers is definitely doing it for Alec.

“You’re doing wonderfully, darling,” Magnus gasps. “But might I suggest more fingers? You’re quite a bit larger than just one, you know.”

Alec flushes, adding another. Magnus takes it easily. He adds a third with a tiny bit of pushback, and thumbs the base of Magnus’ balls. Magnus shivers.

“You like that?” Alec asks, mouth dry. Heat builds in his gut, growing with every moment he watches Magnus writhe against the pillows.

“Yes,” Magnus moans. “I’ll need just one more, and then I’ll be ready for you.” Alec adds another, trying his best to find the spot that makes Magnus’ breath hitch.

Alec twists his fingers, eyes trailing over the letters that slide over Magnus’ back. He grazes a spot that has Magnus grinding back onto his hand.

“Are you ready?” Alec doesn’t stop moving, waiting for Magnus to respond before proceeding, but too invested in each of Magnus’ sounds of pleasure.

“Yes, oh my god, Alexander,” Magnus babbles. “Please, I need you inside me. Can I ride you?”

“Yeah, Magnus, fuck,” Alec breathes, pulling his fingers from Magnus’ ass. Magnus rolls over, sitting up and waiting for Alec to be done, before pushing him gently back against the blankets. Alec goes without argument.

Alec’s heart flutters in his chest as he realizes that this is a moment he didn’t know he was waiting for. There’s a man he cares about in his bed, wearing his clothes, who wants him. The thought is so
ridiculous, and yet.

Magnus climbs on top of Alec, the hem of the football jersey gliding against Alec’s skin. He tears open a condom packet with his teeth, sending Alec’s libido through the roof, and rolls the condom onto Alec with practiced ease. Alec feels the cold slick of lube and the warmth of Magnus’ touch.

“Are you ready?” Magnus asks, hand caressing Alec’s cock, guiding it to where it needs to be.

“Please,” Alec pants, heart hammering in his chest.

Magnus eases the head in. He hums as he slides down, groaning in satisfaction when he bottoms out. Alec tries to hold still, every nerve in his body desperate for more as Magnus begins to ride him.

Alec is pretty sure he’s dying, and his soul is going to leave his body through his dick. Now he knows why Jace tried to hard to tumble anyone even mildly interested.

Sex—or maybe just sex with Magnus—feels like physical manifestation of the every word he wants to convey. Alec knows sex is pleasurable, expected it even, but this is something else. The connection he has with Magnus, every emotion, heightens as they fit together, sliding into place.

A sea wells up inside of Alec: affection, the desire to protect, the need to be close, hope for a future together. Alec grips Magnus’ thighs. He feels the rippling of muscle and tries to pour all of his love into Magnus’ bones.

“Oh, Alexander,” Magnus gasps. “Oh my god.” He rolls his hips, chest heaving, as he clutches around Alec’s erection. “You’re absolutely delicious, darling.”

Alec hips snap upward, self-control crumbling as he jerks up into Magnus’ body. Magnus moans, hands scrabbling along Alec’s shoulders and chest as he falls forward, keening when Alec fucks him again and again.

“Fuck, Magnus.” Alec grasps Magnus’ ass, massaging the muscle as it flexes beneath his hands. Beneath all the sweat and heat and pleasure, Alec feels the burning desire to touch, trying to ground himself.

He watches Magnus move above him, the uniform painted pink as the sun sinks lower beneath the horizon. The kit prevents Alec from seeing much more than Magnus’ smooth neck and face slack with pleasure—something he’d never complain about—but he can hear it all. The slick sound of lube as Magnus rises and falls. Each tiny noise Magnus makes when Alec thrusts up at just the right time. Then, Magnus’ socks rubs against Alec’s calves, and the feeling draws Alec’s focus with startling clarity.

Alec can’t decide where to look, gaze shifting from Magnus’ socks, to the uniform, to Magnus’ face. Magnus looks divine.

Magnus flicks Alec’s nipple, using his other hand to play with the precome beading at the head of his dick. He leans in for a kiss, smearing the precome onto Alec’s abs, and grinds his cock into the mess.

Alec grits his teeth and clutches Magnus’ waist and prays to fucking god that he won’t come before Magnus does.

God betrays him, which seems fair in retrospect.
He gasps, orgasm shuddering through him as he continues to fuck Magnus, still chasing Magnus’ climax.

Plush lips shape reverent praise, teeth and tongue carving into Alec’s neck. Magnus’ come pools in the lines of Alec’s abs and Magnus drags his fingers through the slick as he comes down from his high, feeling the ridges of Alec’s muscle.

“You look so good with my come on you,” Magnus says, easing off of Alec’s cock.

“Is this going to be a thing?” Alec asks.

“It can be, if you want it to,” Magnus replies.

Alec considers this. “I do.” Magnus’ face lights up, and Alec knows he made the right choice. He tugs on the jersey, now sweaty, still hanging from Magnus’ shoulders. “And this? Can this be a thing?”

“Oh, darling. It already is.”

***

Walking into Magnus’ building is as good as a declaration of war. Alec knows this, knows that taking Magnus away was the only way to keep him safe, but also the most surefire way to upset the stalker. No matter how patient they may be.

He bumps into a tiny woman in the lobby.

“Excuse me,” Alec says, not wanting to be rude to Magnus’ neighbors. She glances up at him, and plasters on the fakest of smiles.

“Please get out of my way,” she says. Then, in all her faux politeness, she pushes past him, heels tapping as she goes.

Alec rolls his eyes, unsurprised by her attitude. He goes back to his business. The building mailroom is small and cramped. Magnus’ mailbox is too. Alec collects all the envelopes, taking note of the number. Magnus needs to check this mailbox more often.

He greets the workers at the front desk, nods to the landlord hurrying by with a laptop in hand, and heads up the stairs. The two bugs are still in the hallway—no more, no less.

The key slides into the lock, and Alec is inside. It smells like Magnus. Chairman Meow waits for him, chirping and winding between his legs, begging for attention. Alec bends down to scoop the feline up into his arms.

“Hey there,” Alec croons. “I’m sorry you’ve been alone. Your papa is out of town so it’s just you and me.”

They cuddle on the couch for a while. He kisses the top of the Chairman’s fuzzy head and lavishes the cat with pets and praise. Alec smiles to himself when Chairman Meow nestled deeper against his stomach. Despite their short time together, he feels a deep well of affection for Magnus’ cat.

There’s so much change happening in his life. Despite the fact that he’s literally had Magnus’ mouth and ass around his dick, average size notwithstanding, Alec isn’t scared anymore.

It feels like he’s leapt off of a cliff, hurling into the ocean, and swimming into Magnus’ arms. He
waited on the edge for eight years; living through eight years of self-hatred and struggling just with the idea of touching himself. A lifetime of staring at graffiti, hiding from other boys in the locker room, and childish superstitions about bad luck—all of it falls away in the face of the all-consuming happiness he has now. There’s no haunting fear of lightning bolts burning him to ash.

Being with Magnus, exploring his attraction and indulging the romantic side of him, makes him feel like every part of his life is coming together.

He regrets it now, spending so much of his life neglecting himself, forgetting to love himself as his family does. Hiding such an integral part of his identity, ingraining that into his sense of duty, made sense then. It still makes sense to him in a small way. He took a chance for his own good, but it’s hard to break free of the lessons he was taught.

For all its wonder—the last week has been a mental gauntlet. Alec is exhausted. But the ache of these new muscles is welcome, stretching as they bloom and reach upward to the sunlight he allows in, one open thought at a time.

Alec has spent all of his life being strong. He stands upright, back straight, hands clasped, and eyes on the goals his father set for him. Alec doesn’t know how to be a boyfriend. He doesn’t know how to kiss, what flowers to buy, or even what Magnus’ favorite food is. But he can’t bring himself to care. All he knows is that he wants to make Magnus smile, and when Magnus touches him, calls him darling with what Alec knows is adoration (because that’s what he sees in his own reflection) —Alec cannot look away.

When Magnus looks at him and says that he’s beautiful, all of the voices in his head scream that Magnus is wrong; but Magnus murmurs the words into his skin, repeating them over and over until the letters themselves are red and purple for everyone to see.

So it must be true.

He’s been running all this time, bearing a weight that was never his. Now, he’s still running, chasing after the reality he always felt was just out of reach, only to grasp its hems and cling. He’ll never let it go.

His legs have fallen asleep. The Chairman steps off his lap and meows, walking over to his empty dishes. Alec follows him and pulls out the electronic signal detector, turning it on, and checking the display. The stalker is listening. Alec puts a record on and refills Chairman Meow’s food and water, counting bugs as he goes.

Alec notes a new microphone on the way to the kitchen. He opens the fridge to sort through the perishable foods inside. All of the vegetables, dairy, and meat he bought are set to expire within the week. As a sort of apology, Alec boils the Chairman some plain chicken.

He walks the rest of the apartment, finding four more bugs than there used to be, and cleans the Chairman’s litter box. He disposes of the waste.

Alec returns to the kitchen and checks on the Chairman’s food, pulling out and preparing the white meat before setting it aside to cool.

He sits at the kitchen table, the Chairman leaping into his lap as he organizes the mail. Junk mail, a few bills, and three personal letters addressed in cursive.

Two are from Catarina Loss, someone Alec knows from Magnus’ stories as a doctor working abroad. The last is from Camille Belcourt. The blood red ink beams up at him, crisp and sharp and
smelling heavily of perfume. He turns the envelope over.

A shimmering gold wax seal, a rose in a circle of thorny vines, sets Alec’s teeth on edge.

Magnus has never mentioned Camille before. Alec sets the letter aside with the voting ballot and Catarina’s more welcoming script. The Chairman stretches, climbing up onto the table, and nuzzles the stack of junk mail until it falls the floor.

Alec sighs, and moves to pick it up.

He gives the cat a belly rub, relishing the sound of the Chairman’s purr, and pauses only to get the chicken he cooked. The dish clinks as he sets it onto the table. “Magnus will be back soon,” Alec says.

The Chairman accepts the food, eating with gusto as Alec goes to open the blinds. “Sunlight for you, Mr. Chairman Meow,” he says, the vinyl clicking to a stop as he neatens up the living room. Alec puts the record away.

He checks on the heater before he leaves. It’s working just fine, no sounds of distress or leaking fluids. Alec takes the plate after the Chairman finishes licking it clean and washes it, gathering the perishable food in a spare bag. One last cuddle, whispering reassurance into tabby fur, and Alec collects the mail.

The key slides into the door, and Alec leaves.

***

“It’s the building right across the street?” Alec confirms, jaywalking from Magnus’ apartment complex to the skyscraper across the way.

“Yes, on the fifth floor,” Jace says, his voice clear through the Bluetooth in Alec’s ear. “Luckily, that office is vacant—lease expired just a month ago. They said it was barely used, some startup run by just one guy. They’re expecting one of the other companies on the floor to rent it out for extra space.”

“Tell Underhill thanks for me,” Alec says. He walks through the first floor cafe entrance, then changes course and slips into the building lobby. The security guard lets him through, offering a key and a bag.

“Will do,” Jace says. “Oh, by the way, you still owe me a six pack.”

“I’ll bring it in tomorrow,” Alec replies, heading to the stairwell.

“You comin’ in?” Jace asks. “Is Magnus coming too?”

Alec scans floor numbers as he goes. “We’ll see.”

“Bring him, mom wants to see him again.”

“I’ll talk to him about it,” Alec says. “I’m going to do my job now, you should try it sometime.”

Jace sucks in a wounded breath. “Ouch, point taken. I’ll let you know when we go live.”

“Thanks.”

Alec hangs up, hitting the fifth floor and pushing the door open. There are several offices with
placards denoting company names. He heads to the end of the hall, unlocking the door and closing it behind him. The groceries go on the floor for the time being.

He opens the bag he received at the front door and pulls out a camera. There are multiple outlets around the room, ideal for his purposes, as he sets up by the window. This room has a perfect view into Magnus’ apartment. He pieces together the tripod and places the camera on top, checking the focus and watching Chairman Meow through the open blinds.

There’s a lightweight laptop in the innermost pocket of the pack. Alec places it on the floor, knuckles brushing dusty linoleum, connecting it to the camera and a secure WiFi router prepared for him in advance.

He checks the feed one more time, spying on Chairman Meow as the cat chases after one of his many toys.

There’s a buzz in his pocket.

“We’re good,” the text reads.

Alec locks up and heads to the elevator. He presses the button. He might stop somewhere to grab some food on his way home, there’s a Malaysian restaurant that Magnus expressed interest in, but forgot about in lieu of Alec’s clumsy blowjob.

The elevator is taking forever.

A man walks up next to him. He’s wearing a bespoke suit and holds a satchel with too many straps and clasps. The newcomer is shorter than Alec, but taller than Magnus—thin and red-headed. Not a threat, Alec decides. He watches the lights above the elevator doors light up and go out, counting out floors. It halts at the fourth floor.

“So I’ll be seeing more of you? Do you often bring groceries to work?” The man asks. “Oh, sorry, that’s rude of me. My name is Rufus,” he says, holding out a hand. Alec takes it and shoots Rufus a tight smile.

“John,” Alec says. “Nice to meet you.”

“I’ll say,” Rufus sighs, giving Alec a blatant once-over. “There’s a piano bar just a few blocks down. We should grab a drink sometime.”

Magnus would love to go to a piano bar, Alec thinks. The elevator dings. Door slide open, and Alec steps inside, Rufus at his heels.

“I uh, I’m not really one for drinks,” Alec says. He reaches out to press the button for the ground floor.

“Surely you’re one for good conversation and company, John,” Rufus replies, stepping a bit closer. He pulls a pen from his breast pocket. “May I?” He asks.

“Sure,” Alec doesn’t know what Rufus is asking for, so he just nods. Rufus smiles. Then, there’s a
hand on Alec’s own, cool ink gliding over his skin.

The elevator hits the bottom. Rufus steps out, briefcase swinging at his side, and smirks.

“Call me,” he says, walking away,

The doors almost close on Alec’s toes.

***

The number stares up at Alec from the palm of his hand. He rubs at it, smudging the ink until it’s illegible, and forgets the way Rufus looked at him.

He takes the G to the E to get from Brooklyn to Hell’s Kitchen. Magnus is waiting for him there, so Alec hurries up the stairs, and clears the landing when he hears giggles and an alarming thud come from behind the door.

He checks the “420” embossed on a shiny steel plate, staring at the entryway his apartment as another crash shakes the door. The key goes in and turns like it should.

“Alexander? We weren’t expecting you back so soon.” Magnus smiles at him, wearing one of Alec’s old t-shirts, looking gorgeous and paint-smeared.

Alec blinks. His whole living room looks different, and it smells. There’s a shiny new coat of blue on Alec’s apartment walls. Tarp crinkles beneath his feet as he steps inside, kicking off his shoes.

“We?” Alec repeats.

“Hey, Alec,” Simon says, poking his head out from the kitchen.

“Welcome home,” Clary chimes in. She peers up at him from the floor, hair in a messy bun, holding a dripping paint roller in her right hand.

“You painted my living room,” Alec says.

“I just felt that it could do with a little sprucing up,” Magnus replies, beaming at Alec with pride.

“Do you like it?”

Alec doesn’t know how he feels about it. But with six eyes staring at him, full of expectation, Alec forces a smile.

“Yeah, it’s great.”

***

The day passes quickly after that, but not fast enough.

Simon and Clary linger. Then, in the evening, Jace and Isabelle arrive, drinks in hand. Magnus plays host to them all, and everyone comments on how much Magnus is changing him for the better.

Alec knows that he’s changing, growing even, with Magnus’ presence in his life. It’s impossible not to. But as Magnus pours Izzy another glass of wine, Alec thinks of the ink still smudged on his hand and wonders if maybe Magnus would prefer someone like Rufus. They could go to piano bars together.
Alec looks at the dark blue walls of his living room, and the throw blanket covering the entire surface of his couch.

Change is good, Alec tells himself, trying to believe it. He ignores the irritation climbing his spine as Jace and Izzy crack more jokes about how they feared Alec would end up living in a decrepit apartment, growing into an old and grumpy spinster. It’s well meant—in good fun, and Alec cannot bring himself to let it go.

Alec isn’t hapless, he’s an adult, and he has priorities. Like making sure his siblings are fed, or Magnus is happy, or he’s doing his job. Just because he has bad taste in furniture and hasn’t slept with more than one person shouldn’t mean anything.

He feels the frustration rise like the tide, full of rocks and sea snakes and endless foam. Then Magnus smiles at him from over yet another glass of wine. A boat, riding the crest of the waves.

“Believe me—Alexander is doing wonders for me. I actually like steel-cut oats now. Did you know that you can prepare them overnight? It’s so convenient and great for my digestion.”

“No joke, I saw Magnus’ cupboard yesterday and there’s nothing in it but junk food,” Jace says.

“Jace, your lunch was one bag of each kind of chip offered in the office vending machine,” Izzy says, deadpan.

Alec feels a hand resting on his knee. Magnus looks over at him, leaning in to press a kiss along his jaw.

“Are you alright, darling?”

“Alec murmurs.

“But I’m asking you,” Magnus replies.

Alec thinks about it, thinks about voicing his worries and the banging in his skull, then shakes his head.

“Yeah—yeah I’m fine.”

***

Everyone leaves at nine.

Alec doesn’t even pretend he wants them to stay, rolling his eyes at every word Simon says, no matter how reasonable. They clean up and do the dishes before heading to the bathroom. Magnus turns the faucet off as they brush their teeth shoulder to shoulder, their reflections blinking back at them.

Silence settles over them.

“Alexander?” Magnus asks, mouth wet and chin dripping.

Alec spits out a mouthful of water. “Yeah?”

“Are you alright?” Magnus pulls out a tiny container of floss.

“You already asked me that.” Alec sets his toothbrush to the side. He accepts the box when Magnus offers it to him, popping open the lid, and takes a line of the minty string. He puts it away
in the drawer.

“I’m asking you again,” Magnus says, sucking on his teeth after flossing the top row. “Please answer me—honestly this time.”

Alec’s reflection rests its eyes on Magnus hands.

“You’re changing me.”

Magnus’ gaze flickers over to Alec for a moment, turning the faucet on and squeezing some face wash into his palms. “How so?”

Blue.


“Go on.”

Alec looks at Magnus through the mirror, watches as Magnus pats his face dry.

“You covered my couch with a blanket.”

“It’s hideous,” Magnus says.

“That doesn’t matter,” Alec snaps. He takes a deep breath, cool air rushing over the droplets still clinging to his skin. “That doesn’t matter,” he repeats. “Izzy always gets on my case about it, but it’s the first home purchase I ever made and you just covered it with a blanket and painted my walls blue and invited my family and friends over to my home without asking even though I just wanted some time alone with you.”

Magnus blinks. His eyes, expressive and vibrant, soften as he considers Alec’s words.

It’s odd, being stared at and weighed by someone you’ve kissed and fucked and still don’t know in full.

“Oh, Alexander. I’m sorry.”

Alec shifts on the bathroom mat beneath his feet, reaching for the hand towel hanging from the cabinet door beneath the sink. “It’s fine. I’m just getting upset over something stupid.”

“No,” Magnus says, looking as groundless as Alec feels. “No, you’re not. You’re upset for a reason, and I shouldn’t have done those things without asking.” He takes a breath. “I feel out of control, right now, and I tend to cope by updating my surroundings—but this is your home, and I never meant to imply that I wanted to do the same to you.”

All of the air rushes from Alec’s lungs, sloping his shoulders, as he turns to look at Magnus.

“Everyone else seems to think it’s a good thing,” Alec mutters.

“Darling, I don’t think that counts as change,” Magnus says, stepping closer, melding their warmth together through the hand he places on Alec’s cheek. “Not the good kind, at least. I shouldn’t have done this to your home. I wasn’t thinking about you; and being selfish, forcing something like this on you, isn’t positive change. I don’t want you to think that.”

“It isn’t just you,” Alec admits. “Everyone seems to think that I need to be different.” He leans into
Magnus’ touch and kisses the soft flesh of each fingertip. “I’m so grateful for you. I’m so glad to have met you, and I am changing…”

“But you are your own person, Alexander,” Magnus says, finishing the sentence when Alec’s words die on his tongue. “Discovering new parts of yourself is positive change. But that change has to be for you, no one else.”

“I still feel like me, just... now everything is out in the open,” Alec confesses. “I don’t want to change who I am, and I don’t like that people think I’m becoming someone special and different when I’m just the same Alec I’ve always been.”

Magnus smiles, gentle despite the frantic rush of Alec’s blood through his veins. Then, Alec feels Magnus pulling him closer, slow and patient.

“Alec, you being you, just you, is so special. I’m sorry for making you uncomfortable. I never want you to feel like you have to be someone different for me. You don’t need any fresh coats of paint or throw blankets,” Magnus whispers with a sheepish grin. “Thank you for telling me how you feel.” He pauses, biting his lip, folding Alec further into his arms. “If you want to be with me, really and truly want to be with me—please, talk to me.”

They stand together, breathing in and out. Alec nuzzles into Magnus’ neck, then nods, taking in Magnus’ warmth.

“Magnus?” He asks.

“Yes?”

“I want us to be happy together...I just don’t know how to be in a relationship,” Alec says. “I don’t want to move too fast or too slow or do something wrong—.”

Magnus kisses Alec’s shoulder. His lips are dry, soft against Alec’s pale skin.

“We’ll figure it out together,” Magnus sighs. He draws back just enough to pull Alec into a peck on the cheek.

“I don’t even know where to begin,” Alec mumbles, blush creeping up his cheeks.

Magnus reaches up to brush a lock of hair off of his forehead, then presses a kiss there. “I think this is a very good start.”

Alec clutches Magnus closer, half-carrying all 5’11” of him, and stumbles into the bedroom. They wrap around each other beneath the blankets. Alec feels Magnus fall asleep, soft snuffles puffing from Magnus’ lips, as warm contentment washes over him.

This is just the beginning, Alec thinks.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Sorry for the delay—my computer was out of commission for a solid week or so. If you’ve noticed, the chapter count went up because I ended up splitting his chapter in half.
Guns and Roses

Chapter Summary

He doesn’t like either.

Chapter Notes

As always, thank you so much to la_muerta and quillstem for being the MVPs!!!

This fic would be a mess without them!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alec is a morning person. It’s the best time to get things done, before the rest of the world wakes, and Alec enjoys taking full advantage of those precious hours. He wakes with the sun, stretching with a yawn.

Magnus snuggles against Alec’s side. Alec leans over and kisses his forehead, settling back in as Magnus lets out a stuttering snore. The pillows smell like Magnus, and Alec falls into the comfort the scent provides, sinking deeper into the mattress.

He lazes for another hour before pulling himself from the warmth of blankets and soft skin, rubbing sleep from his eyes as he pads across cool floors to the bathroom. He almost knocks over the new row of products sitting on his counter trying to get his toothbrush.

He watches through the open bathroom door as Magnus reaches out for him, blinking into awareness when fingertips find nothing but bare sheets. Unable to help himself, he walks over to the bed and sits, smoothing down Magnus’ flyaway bedhead. Magnus stretches and nuzzles into his hand.

“Good morning,” Alec murmurs.

“Good morning,” Magnus replies, pressing his lips to Alec’s palm. “Why are you up so early? Come back to bed.”

Alec indulges Magnus a bit more before standing. “I’ve got to go check on the Chairman.” He watches as any protests Magnus might have had turn into a watery smile.

“Okay,” Magnus hums. Pink and orange wash in through the window, playing on the apples of Magnus’ cheeks and in his messy hair. Color climbs Alec’s plain bedroom walls, and Alec cannot help but think that Magnus looks like he belongs here, in Alec’s bed, sunrise painting every surface. “Dress warm,” Magnus says, voice as bright as the sun, as he burrow back into the sheets. It takes Alec a full ten seconds to pull himself away.

After a few minutes of shuffling through his closet, Alec’s lingering at the bedside once more. “I’ll be back in a couple of hours,” he says, not even sure if Magnus is awake to hear him. The sheets
rustle as Magnus peeks out at him.

“I’ll be here when you get back,” Magnus murmurs, watching him from beneath the blankets. Alec turns to leave when Magnus makes a disgruntled noise.

“Yes?” Alec asks, laughing a bit as Magnus pouts at him.

“No kiss goodbye?”

“I think I can manage that.” Alec leans down and kisses him, relishing the still-lingering dreams, and heads toward the hallway.

“Alec?” Magnus calls. Alec turns, playful admonishment dying on his tongue when he sees Magnus’ face.

“Yeah?”

Sunlight catches on Magnus’ lashes, the worry-lines wrinkling his forehead, and a soft down-turn of lips.

“Be safe.”

***

The phone rings once.

“Detective Underhill.”

“Congratulations on the promotion,” Alec says, waving to Amir as he heads through the doors and turns toward the train station. Foot traffic rushes by, the screeching of metal surges up to meet him as he descends the stairs, swiping through the turnstiles.

“Thanks, it’s kind of weird to be wearing a suit now,” Underhill says, chuckling. “Any news on your newest case?”

“Well, actually, I was wondering if you could help me with that. How fast can you be in Brooklyn?”

***

There’s a beat cop talking to the doorman when Alec enters Magnus’ building. He walks past Underhill, who’s at the front desk, without acknowledging him. He checks Magnus’ mailbox. Nothing new. In all of the madness, Alec forgot to give Magnus the mail the night before. Camille. He’ll have to ask Magnus who she is. He heads toward the stairs when he catches sight of the landlord, hair dark, and shorter than Alec remembers.

He walks over to Sebastian. “Hey, what’s with the cops?”

Sebastian sighs. “Apparently there was a mugging nearby. They asked for the lobby tapes and to speak to the doorman. But there’s nothing wrong here. It’s perfectly safe in this building,” Sebastian says. Alec nods in understanding, glancing over at Underhill as he leaves the building. “I trust you’re doing well? Any complaints?” Sebastian asks, adjusting the bag strap laying on his shoulder. He looks odd with dark hair, a bit pallid, and on edge.

“None,” Alec says. “We’re doing well, boyfriend’s out of town at the moment. You uh, dyed your hair.”
“And cut it.” Sebastian gives Alec a vague smile. “I figured I’d try something new. Grew a bit tired of being blonde.”

Alec doesn’t know what it’s like to get tired of looking like yourself, and Sebastian seems a bit worse for the wear, but he feigns interest anyway. No point in pissing off Magnus’ landlord over an ugly makeover. “It looks nice,” he says. For a moment, Sebastian looks almost irritated.

Then, Sebastian smiles, lips stretching a tad too wide. “Thank you. Change is always good.”

“Oh, yeah,” Alec replies. He gestures toward the stairwell, still trying to be polite. “I’m going to head up. I’ll see you around.”

“Of course,” Sebastian says. Alec nods, and makes his way to Magnus’ loft.

***

The Chairman launches at Alec as soon as the door is open wide enough. He scrabbles up Alec’s pant leg, claws tearing into the fabric, and doesn’t stop his ascent until he’s clinging to Alec’s shoulder. Chairman Meow nuzzles against Alec’s chin, tiny body pressing against Alec’s as he purrs long and loud.

“Hey,” Alec murmurs. He pets the Chairman with both hands, supporting the cat’s weight as he walks through the apartment. Nothing has changed, no additional bugs, and the smell of Magnus still lingers everywhere he turns. Alec puts on a record, asking Chairman Meow for opinions on what record to listen to. They settle on one, and with the music playing, Alec moves to the most isolated bug that’s hidden in Magnus’ closet. He checks the signal. Still live.

Alec walks to the closet where the litter box is. He tries to remove the Chairman, but the cat refuses to leave his shoulder, looping around Alec’s neck as he stoops down to clean. Chairman Meow continues to purr as Alec goes around and waters Magnus’ plants.

After giving the Chairman some food and clean water, Alec manages to coax Chairman Meow off of his shoulder. He moves to put the record away when the Chairman streaks after him, leaving the food untouched, and climbs back up into his arms.

“I’m still here. Don’t worry,” Alec whispers, walking over to Magnus’ kitchen. He sits on the floor. The Chairman inches toward the ground and begins to eat, sitting on Alec’s lap as he does so. “You miss your dad, don’t you?” Alec asks. Chairman Meow continues to eat, meowing pitifully when the bottom of the bowl begins to show. Alec shakes the dish, and the Chairman begins eating again, curling up for a nap after finishing a third of the dry food.

Alec takes a picture of the dozing cat and sends it to Magnus. His phone dings.

“I miss him,” the text reads.

“He misses you too,” Alec types back. The Chairman sleeps for a few more minutes before wandering off, content, tags jingling.

He refills Chairman Meow’s kibble and heads out, stopping by his apartment to collect Magnus on his way to work.

They stop by a bodega for breakfast. It’s a place Alec frequents, and the cashier expresses interest in Magnus as they stand together in the perpetual smell of bagels and pickles.

The air is crisp and cool, leaves swirling around their ankles as they walk through the crowds
milling on the sidewalk. The Flatiron district vibrates with activity as Alec leads Magnus toward the Lightwood Corporation.

“Would it be possible to move the Chairman to your apartment?” Magnus asks.

“We should wait,” Alec says, remorseful. His eyes narrow as a series of joggers acknowledge them both before hurrying past. Magnus nudges him, swinging their arms, and shrugs.

“I figured it was worth a shot. But you’re right. It’s not good to disrupt cat’s environments, and Chairman Meow is a big boy. He can handle it,” Magnus says with a tight smile.

Alec nods and squeezes Magnus’ hand, giving Magnus a peck on the cheek. “He is. You guys will be together again soon, I’ll make sure of it.”

They walk for a few more minutes, soaking in the sunshine, and stopping at a cafe for some coffee. Izzy meets them at the Institute’s front doors.

“Where the fuck have you been?” she asks, taking the latte Alec offers her. The bright red cup matches her nails. She smells like soap, clean and fresh, when he wraps her in a quick hug.

“Doing my job. Good morning to you too,” Alec replies. Magnus chuckles at his side, leaning in to give Izzy a hug.

“Alec rolls his eyes. “I told Jace I’d think about it, but now I’m going to take Magnus home. Especially if you have a surprise.”

“Mom would break down your door,” Izzy says.

“There’s no need for that,” Magnus chips in. “I’m very interested in seeing what you all do here.”

Izzy gives Alec a pointed look and takes the tray of assorted drinks. “See? He’s very interested in seeing what we do.” She struts away, Magnus beaming at Alec before following the sound of heels clicking on the shiny stone flooring.

The front lobby area is a canvas of black and silver, microphones hidden on every possible surface, a large number of cameras mounted conspicuously on every wall. Alec follows them into the elevator. Izzy pulls out her ID card, running it through a small scanner. She presses the bottom-most button.

“To the basement?” Magnus asks. “Not the second floor?”

“That’s for business, Lightwood Corporation,” Izzy says with a smirk. “This is the real stuff.” The door dings, and they step out onto the landing, bright lights rippling over the floors. “Welcome to The Institute.”

Magnus glances over at Alec. “Very top-secret and very hot.” Alec blushes, delighting both Magnus and Izzy when he tries and fails to hide it.

Their custodial team makes rounds every hour. Every surface is spotless, the smell of cleaner lingering in the air. Employees dot the hallways. Most of them wear black from head to toe, practical shoes, body armor, and weapons strapped to their shoulders. They glance over Magnus, a
bright splash of color in a sea of ink.

Magnus stiffens at Alec’s side, eyes meeting theirs before darting over their gear.

“Good morning,” Alec says, taking Magnus’ hand.

“Good morning, Mr. Lightwood,” they reply, averting their gaze away as Izzy, Magnus, and Alec walk by. They turn a corner, and Magnus relaxes.

Magnus turns to Alec and gives him a wry smile. “Mr. Lightwood?”

“I would prefer it if they just called me Alec, but dad says that I need to remind them who runs this business,” Alec groans, biting his lip. Alec leans closer to Magnus when he catches sight of his mother stepping out from the hallway that leads to the shooting range.

“Magnus, we’ve been expecting you,” Maryse says, adjusting the gun holster on her hip as she approaches. “I’ve been looking forward to seeing you again. Welcome to the Institute.” She cups Magnus’ face, kissing him on each cheek, which he returns in equal measure.

“I’m excited to learn more about what you do here,” Magnus replies. He shifts his weight between his feet, shuffling in a way Alec never noticed before. “Alec is performing perfectly well, and I’m sure the facilities you have are state of the art.”

Maryse beams with pride. “They are. We have multiple shooting ranges, training rooms, and labs. We also have a very well-stocked arsenal. Security is difficult work, and we take our work very seriously here.”

“I see,” Magnus says, expression forced. “As expected.”

She leans in and gives Magnus a surreptitious wink. “I also have some darling childhood photos of Alec in my office,” Maryse whispers.

“Actually, I told Jace we’d meet him when we came in. Is he training?” Alec asks, cutting in as Magnus begins to express interest in seeing evidence of his unglamorous past.

Maryse sighs and gives Magnus a fond shake of the head. “He’s in the training room. I told him he needs to get his reports done, so please send him my way once you’ve seen him.”

“Will do,” Alec says.

Izzy smiles, handing Maryse one of the coffee cups. “We’ll see you later, mom.” She loops her arm through Magnus’ and pulls them left down the corridor to training wing.

“Have fun,” Maryse calls. Magnus smiles at her over his shoulder as Alec and Izzy escort him down the hall.

Once they’re out of Maryse’s sight, Alec tugs on Magnus’ fingers, pausing all three of them. Izzy takes the hint and walks ahead.

“You okay?” Alec whispers. “Don’t worry, my mom likes you already.”

“I’m fine,” Magnus says back, unblinking. “Don’t worry about me, darling. Shall we follow your sister?”

Alec searches Magnus’ face. Magnus’ smile never falters, only thinning a bit at the sides. Alec won’t push. “Yeah let’s go.”
They find Jace doing bench presses.

“Nice of you to finally show up,” Jace says with a smirk, sucking in air as he finishes his set. He grabs his water bottle and takes a few short sips. “You wanna get in on this or are you gonna get soft, cuddling in bed with your boyfriend?”

Magnus laughs. “Soft is the last thing Alexander is in bed.”

Jace grins. “Oh hell yeah, that’s my boy. Anyway, point still stands.” He sits up and looks Alex over. “No six pack?”

“No spotter?” Alec asks, voice dry.

“You wound me,” Jace says.

“You’ll wound yourself one of these days,” Alec mutters. Izzy laughs and takes a sip from her cup, turning to watch a pair of employees sparring on a floor mat nearby.

“Anyway. I’m fucking hungry, can we eat now?” Jace asks, ignoring Alec’s scolding.

“Yeah, but you’re buying. Plus, mom says you owe her reports,” Izzy replies, attention still on the fight. Jace lets out a groan, looking toward Alec for help that he doesn’t find. Alec shrugs, unmoved, then appreciates the view as Magnus bends over to read the instructions on one of the machines.

They order pizza and breadsticks. Alec and Izzy go up to accept the delivery, waiting by the elevator as a teenager ventures inside, eyes flitting from camera to camera as he walks toward them. The smell of garlic and tomato sauce fills the space, as large and empty as it is.

“I’ve uh, got two large pizzas?” The kid looks like he’s about to bolt.

Izzy smiles, setting the delivery boy at ease as she hands over Jace’s money. Alec takes the boxes. The driver turns to leave when Alec realizes something.

“Hey—.”

“Please don’t hurt me, man. I’m just working this job to help pay for school and I’m still in the pit with loans. I swear I didn’t see anything,” the boy yelps, arms and legs tense as he stares up into Alec’s face.

“We also ordered breadsticks,” Alec finishes, deadpan, eyeing the boy’s name tag. “Uh, Jared.”

“Breadsticks?” Jared parrots. “Wait, so you’re not gonna kill me?”

“Why would we kill you? And why would we tell you if we were going to?” Alec asks. Izzy snorts, laughing as she grabs the pizza boxes from Alec’s hands.

“I’m going to take these. You grab the breadsticks,” she says to Alec. “Don’t worry, Jared. He doesn’t bite. Most of the time.” Izzy pulls out her keycard, punching in the floor she wants, and the elevator doors close.

Jared stiffens and glances up at the cameras again, gesturing toward the door. “I uh, I should have

“Oh right, yeah, cool. No worries,” Jared stutters, eyes still canvassing the lobby. Alec follows Jared to the doors, taking in his twitchy fingers and awkward attitude. Once they clear the doors, Jared sucks in the polluted New York air and lets out a choked laugh. “How do you guys deal with working in a place like that?” Jared blurs out. He searches his delivery pouches, poking through them with clumsy hands.

“Excuse me?” Alec asks.

“I mean, I guess you fit in just fine. Are you part of the mob? Like a front? I won’t say anything, I promise,” Jared babbles. Alec looks Jared over as the delivery boy hands him the missing breadsticks. Despite his word vomit, Jared seems halfway to fainting.

“Thanks for the breadsticks,” Alec says. Jared nods and trips over the curb in his haste to get away from Alec.

As Jared bikes away, Alec turns back and walks into the lobby, taking in its dark stone and almost-gaudy majesty. The cameras follow him—gleaming, soulless eyes. He heads into the elevator and walks to his mother’s basement office.

Noise and the scent of pepperoni hit him as soon as he reaches the door. The room itself is spacious, with a series of couches set in front of her wooden desk. Flowers, some dried, all real, dot the surfaces of each table.

“I have the breadsticks,” he announces. Magnus’ gaze snaps up to his face, a warm smile spreading across Magnus’ beautiful features, broad shoulders relaxing as Alec gives him a soft kiss. Jace makes a hooting noise. Maryse shushes him, and Alec can’t help but smile against Magnus’ lips.

“Welcome back, darling,” Magnus says. There’s something in his eyes that Alec can’t place, but then Magnus looks away, and Alec loses his chance to figure it out.

Alec takes the seat next to Magnus, across from Maryse’ desk. Magnus feigns disinterest in the pieces with the most toppings, Jace takes them without remorse, and Alec lets Magnus steal the pineapple off of his own slices. Izzy razzes him for a whole ten minutes when she notices. When Maryse pulls out the dreaded photo album, Alec takes it in stride, and Magnus flips through its pages with vested interest.

The rest of their time is spent chatting around mouthfuls, the nature of their work interrupting the modest domesticity when an employee steps in to deliver a report. Her gun gleams at her side, and Alec can spot the blood-stiffened folds of her black shirt. Maryse glances at Magnus and stands, leaving in a gust of apologies.

Magnus gives a stiff nod.

There’s silence, then Jace perks up and flashes his gun holster. “Want to go check out the range?” Jace asks. “Get in some practice so you don’t get rusty?” He takes one last bite of the now-cold pizza before tossing the crust next to the onions he left on his plate.

Magnus’ takes Alec’s hand, and Alec gives him a quick peck on the cheek before rolling his eyes. “You just want to show off,” Alec says.

“How’d you know?” Jace jokes with a wolfish grin. “C’mon.”
They clean up their mess, a faint hint of potpourri rising over the stubborn smell of garlic. The shooting ranges are on the opposite side of the building, a bit of a walk from Maryse’s office, which sits at the north end. Jace and Izzy walk ahead, chatting about a TV show Alec doesn’t watch. Magnus doesn’t either, if his silence is any indication.

They’ve almost reached the south wing when Alec hears the first few rounds of fire. It doesn’t sound like there are many people at the range. Magnus stops walking. Alec pauses, confusion turning into concern as Magnus struggles to breathe. Alec reaches for Magnus’ hands and searches Magnus’ face. “Magnus?” Every line of Magnus’ body is rigid, fists clenching until Alec can see Magnus’ nails biting into his skin.

“I’d like to stay here, I think,” Magnus says, careful, as if each word tastes like broken glass. Another muffled series of gunshots rings in the stale air of the corridor. Magnus stiffens beneath Alec’s palms.

Oh.

Alec nods and turns to his siblings, who are watching them from the mouth of the hallway. “You guys go ahead. We’ll wait for you,” Alec says, voice even. Jace opens his mouth to protest, shutting it when Izzy nudges him.

“Okay, we’ll see you later.” Izzy gives Alec a proud smile before she pushes Jace down the hallway. Magnus doesn’t look up.

“Hey,” Alec whispers, running his hands up and down Magnus’ arms in an attempt to offer comfort. “Do you want to head to my office?”

“Your real one or your business one?” Magnus asks, staring at the ceiling. His voice is flat. Alec hates it.

“For me, they’re the same,” Alec says. “The one downstairs is my father’s, but my mom uses it when he’s away.” Magnus lets out a small, humorless, chuckle.

“Yeah, okay.”

They walk hand in hand to the elevator. A medley of office employees populate the second floor, Raj hurrying to give Alec a teetering stack of paperwork before dashing back into his office to answer the phone. Alec sighs.

His office is just as he left it, albeit with three additional mounds of paper that he needs to process and approve. But that can wait. Magnus hovers in the doorway, tense, having pulled away when Alec moved to set the documents onto his desk. Alec takes a moment to neaten the space. He tamps down the desire to take Magnus’ hand, determined to be patient, and waits for Magnus to come further inside.

Magnus does, shutting the door behind him.

Alec settles on the couch, at ease, and watches as Magnus follows. He opens his arms, and Magnus falls into them.

“Hey,” Alec murmurs. He presses kisses to the parts of Magnus’ forehead that he can reach. “What’s wrong?” Alec has an inkling, but he’ll wait, always.

“I hate guns,” Magnus mumbles into Alec’s chest. “I hate guns, I’ve always hated guns, and now my boyfriend and his entire family use guns every day.” He heaves a shuddering breath and lets out
a long groan before going quiet. “Did you bring a gun into my home?”

Alec doesn’t let the possibility simmer. “No,” he says, fervent, holding Magnus tighter. “I didn’t. I don’t like to carry them.”

Magnus considers that, then speaks again. “But you use guns for work.”

“I do,” Alec replies. If Magnus buries any further into Alec’s arms, he’ll crawl into Alec’s ribs and make a home there. He already has. “Is that okay?” Magnus goes still, and Alec braces himself. It was too good, always too good, but he still wants to hold to it with everything he has. God can fuck off.

“I don’t know,” Magnus admits. There’s a pregnant silence, then, quietly, “Have you killed anyone?”

“No,” Alec says. “I haven’t.” He can’t find any words to say other than the truth, hoping that it will be enough.


The air freezes in Alec’s lungs. Magnus pulls away and covers his mouth with both hands, lurching to his feet, gasping. Alec reaches after him. Don’t leave me, Alec thinks. Magnus keeps moving farther away until his back is to the office door.

“With a gun?” Alec asks, trying to connect with Magnus without the anchor of touch. He misses Magnus’ warmth. It’s silly, to think of that now.

Magnus doesn’t speak. He shakes his head, every part of him pulling upward instead of inward, an act of defiance in the face of his own confession.

“He pointed it at me and fired,” Magnus says, finally. “He missed. I tried to run past him. I needed to get out, but he was blocking the stairs.”

“Magnus--”

“I tried to run past him,” Magnus repeats. “He caught me, but I must’ve been stronger than he expected.” Magnus gaze meets Alec’s, red and angry and scared. “We had marble floors,” Magnus says. “Each step was white marble.”

“He tried to kill you,” Alec says.

Magnus shrugs. “It wasn’t the first time. Wasn’t the first person to try either.”

“He fell,” Alec insists.

“I pushed him,” Magnus replies, voice dry and words practiced as they march out of his mouth and wait to die. “Asmodeus Edom, dead at last.”

“Edom? The arms dealer?” Alec asks.

“The very same,” Magnus says. He holds his arms out and bows, all theater and misery as he waits for Alec to strike him down. “And his heir, left alone after the tragic suicide of his wife that drove him to madness. He threw himself down the stairs after failing to shoot himself, did you know?”

“How old were you?”
“Does it matter?” Magnus asks. Alec watches as fear and anger and self-hatred all come and go as Magnus challenges him to say something.

Yes, it does, Alec thinks. How long have you lived with this pain and guilt? He gets to his feet.

“I won’t hurt you,” Alec says.

“Shouldn’t I be reassuring you of that?” Magnus laughs, somehow finding humor in a situation Alec finds incredibly bleak. “I’m here, freaking out about guns, when I’m the one who’s killed somebody.” Magnus sniffs, already pulling his walls back up as he wipes away the salt sticking to his lashes.

Alec stops in front of Magnus, lingering, cupping his face with gentle hands. “Magnus.”

“I’m a mess,” Magnus mutters. “My makeup must be ruined.” It is. Alec wipes it away with his thumb.

“Magnus,” Alec says again. Magnus stops fidgeting, posture collapsing, veneer crumbling as Alec presses their lips together. Magnus tastes like salt.

“Are you sure you want to do that?” Magnus asks, crying again. “I wouldn’t blame you if you didn’t, you know.”

“Yeah, I’m sure,” Alec murmurs. “I haven’t killed anyone, but Jace has, and my mother has. I’ve just been lucky.” He considers this, kissing away the fresh wave of tears from the corners of Magnus’ eyes. “But I love them anyway.”

I love you anyway.

“That’s not the same,” Magnus protests weakly.

“You did what you had to do to survive,” Alec reminds him. “I don’t like guns. The first time I ever shot one, I killed a squirrel.”

“Were you hunting?” Magnus asks.

“No. It was an accident.”

“Oh, Alexander. It was an accident—.”

“Exactly,” Alec says. “It was an accident. I was eight and my dad handed me his rifle. I didn’t mean to shoot the gun, but I did, and I killed a squirrel.” He leans his head on Magnus’ shoulder, willing himself to continue. “I’ve never felt so out of control in my life, but there were never any other paths for me. So I learned how to use it so I would never feel that way again.”

“But you don’t like them.”

“I don’t.”

Magnus’ hand comes to cradle Alec’s neck, the other resting on his back, holding Alec like he’s something precious. Alec understands the sentiment, returning that same affection by sinking into Magnus’ heat.

They stand there, silent. Settling.

“I should have told you.”
“About which part?” Alec asks.

“All of it. About my father, and how I killed him.”

“How he died,” Alec corrects him.

“About guns,” Magnus continues. Alec pulls away to get a good look at Magnus’ face. There’s eyeliner and mascara dripping down Magnus face, and Alec loves him so much.

“Magnus.”

“Alexander.”

Alec chuckles, letting Magnus relieve the tension still hanging in the air. “Thank you for telling me. You didn’t have to, you didn’t, but I’m glad you did.” He takes a deep breath, taking in the scent of sandalwood and tasting Magnus’ skin as they kiss again. “I’m not going anywhere if you don’t want me to.” Alec’s heart batters against his bones as he waits.

“I don’t,” Magnus says, looking thoughtful as he nibbles on his lower lip. “I...I know what you do. I know what your job is, and I know that I want to be with you for as long as I can be.”

Something loosens in Alec’s chest. “That’s all I want.”

“And no guns in the house, please.”

They both laugh at that, together, letting the nerves out in rolling bursts. Alec nods.

“No guns.”

They curl up together on the couch, exchanging body heat as they recount stories from their lives before each other.

“I actually used to work around here,” Magnus says. “At the rehab center off Houston street.”

“I wish I’d met you earlier. Before all this,” Alec admits.

Magnus lips brush Alec’s neck. “Me too, darling.”

Alec plays with Magnus fingers. “What happened?”

“I had a rough break up a few years ago, and I needed a change of scenery. The place ended up bankrupt this past year and I don’t think anything has taken its place yet,” Magnus says, sounding a bit sad.

“Why do you work at rehab centers?” Alec asks, direct as always.

Magnus shrugs, snuggling closer, and sighs. “I want to help,” he says. “Everyone deserves to have someone there to help them in their darkest times. Ragnor helped me, once. You’re helping me now. It’s the least I can do.”

I love you, Alec thinks.

“I’d like to go with you sometime. Are they taking volunteers?”

Magnus squirms out of Alec’s grasp, sitting up, beaming as he looks Alec in the eye.
“There’s always room for you, Alexander.”

***

Jace and Izzy find them as Alec fills out some paperwork. Magnus turns to the door as it opens, legs hanging from where he’s perched by Alec’s side.

“Hey, we’ve been looking for you” Izzy says, cutting through the warm silence of the room. Her playful tone makes him suspicious, as always, but he turns toward her anyway. She grins. “Want to see something cool?”

“Does it involve guns?” Magnus asks, expression light despite the edge in his voice. “Because if so, I will have to decline.”

“No guns,” Izzy promises.

Magnus eases off of Alec’s desk, all grace, and dusts himself off. He smiles at all three of them in turn. “Hit me with it.”

They take the elevator back to the basement. She leads them down to the research wing, where they perform experiments and look into possible equipment to add to their arsenal.

Alec doesn’t usually come into Izzy’s lab. It’s always cold, everything echoes, and it smells like the liquid she uses to preserve the unidentifiable specimens Alec won’t risk going near.

He’s half-convinced that Izzy tends to do more of her own research than any research their father might assign to her.

Magnus, on the other hand, looks enchanted. He brightens as they enter the room, descending upon all of her equipment. Questions tumble out of his mouth as she shows him around. He and Izzy soon start talking about chemical compounds and materials that Magnus insists are worth looking into. Magnus is a scientist, Alec realizes. He bites down the little bubble of pride.

Jace, who is not impressed, clears his throat. “So you’re both nerds, we get it. What did you want to show us?”

Izzy and Magnus regard him with withering disdain. Then, with a flip of her hair, Izzy walks into her office and brings out a machine with spindly legs and rotors. A camera hangs from its middle. She sets it on the table that sits in the center of the room, a vision of white on its spotless black surface.

“What is it?” Alec asks. The contraption begins to hover, silent, as he eyes it with distaste. “It looks like a toy.”

“It’s a drone,” Izzy says. She brims with excitement as she pulls out her laptop, rhythmic tapping of the keys bouncing off every corner of the sterile environment.

“A drone?” Magnus asks. “I didn’t know that security firms used drones.”

“It’ll help us identify threats like snipers,” Izzy replies. Alec nods in understanding as Magnus steps closer against his side, wrapping a comforting arm around Magnus’ waist.

“That’ll be helpful,” Alec admits. “How much did this cost you?”

“Not that much, Mr. Boss Sir,” she says with a roll of her eyes. “Plus, it can help with tracking.
Watch this.” Izzy types in a series of commands, and the drone lifts off, zooming around Jace in circles before stopping just short of his face. She turns the laptop, showing them the screen. “I have it locked onto Jace, now it’ll follow his every move.”

Jace tests this, walking around the room before ducking beneath the table. The drone follows him, meeting his height, the camera feed showing them his every move. “That’s pretty cool, but it’s not going to do us much good if it’s so conspicuous,” Jace says, breathing onto the camera lens.

Izzy makes a noise of disgust and clicks a series of different options with her touchpad. The drone zooms off into a corner, but its camera stays trained on Jace.

“Once it’s locked on, it can track from farther than 500 meters away.” She turns toward Alec with a pleased smile. “Impressed yet?”

“Not until it proves itself useful,” Alec says.

“We can do some exercises with it, maybe give it a whirl on our next high profile mission,” Izzy suggests.

Jace holds up a hand, offering Alec his phone. “Speaking of missions, Underhill sent us the footage he got from Magnus’ place.”

“You got footage from my apartment building?” Magnus asks.

“Yeah,” Jace says. “Alec had a hunch, and it looks like he was right. There’s only one non-resident who came in unaccompanied.” Alec takes Jace’s phone taking in the grainy image of the woman he ran into.

“Do you recognize her?” Alec asks, turning the screen toward Magnus.

Magnus leans in close, then groans, pushing the phone away. “Yeah, that’s my ex.”

Alec clenches his jaw.

“Your ex?” Izzy asks, sending Alec a worried glance.

“Camille, to be exact,” Magnus continues. “Camille Belcourt.”

Chapter End Notes

Been in a bit of a creative rut, so I’m glad I got this out! Things are gonna steamroll from here on out, so get ready!
The Spiral Labyrinth

Chapter Summary

Subways have shit cellphone service.

Chapter Notes

It’s been a while!
Thank you so much to my betas @la_muerta and @quillstem!
They, as always, saved my ass and pulled something out of the ashes.
I hope you enjoy!

Somehow, Alec has forgotten that Magnus has exes; a litany of past relationships that didn’t work out for whatever reason. It is this lapse in memory that tears the world from beneath Alec’s feet.

Magnus’ ex, Camille, left a letter in Magnus’ mailbox that smells like perfume. Alec ran into her. She exists, and Magnus’ other exes exist. Alec might even become an ex someday. He doesn’t know how to resolve his feelings on the matter, so he sets them down and kicks them into the dusty corners of his mind.

“Alexander?”

“Yeah?” Alec turns to meet Magnus’ gaze and wonders if there will ever be a time that Magnus kind gaze would harden at the thought of him. He bites his lip.

“Are you alright?” Magnus leans in to place a soft hand on his cheek.

“Are you sure it’s her?” Jace asks. Alec has almost forgotten that Jace was here as well.

“I’m sure,” Magnus says, not looking away from Alec’s face. “I’d recognize her anywhere.”

“Well, in that case,” Izzy cuts in with a sigh. “It looks like we have our first lead.”

Alec shakes off the alarms that blare in his head, and turns toward Izzy and Jace. “Let’s run a background check and get some information. I want a full report on the last three years of Camille’s life in my inbox by tomorrow morning. Pull a list of clients from that wax maker while you’re at it, Ragnor couldn’t get anything, but we should give it a shot.”

***

They leave to head back to Alec’s apartment. Izzy and Jace bid them both goodbye in Maryse’s stead, giving Alec a hearty ribbing as they walk through the echoey foyer and onto the sidewalk.

Through it all, thoughts of Camille infest Alec’s mind with greater unease than any first lead ever should. It’s good to have something to hold onto, grip and tear with his teeth, but there’s an air about her that strikes Alec beyond that.
She was rude to him. Alec doesn’t mind rudeness; after a lifetime in New York, he’s grown accustomed to elbows and snide remarks.

But Magnus isn’t rude. Magnus is one of the most well-mannered people Alec has ever met. The idea of them together, a couple, is almost irreconcilable.

“How did it happen?”

“How did what happen?” Magnus asks, pressing against Alec as the train swings around a curve, metal and concrete whizzing by as the smell of stale urine makes Alec wrinkle his nose. A woman coughs at one end of the car.

“You and Camille,” Alec says.

Magnus tilts his head from side to side, eyes scanning the ceiling and the floor before coming to rest on Alec’s face. He shrugs.

“She was untouchable and beautiful, and I was young.” Subway lights flash over his skin and hair, a film reel of awkward memories made manifest by public transit. He winces a bit before continuing. “We were in university together. She walked up to me and stole my cigarette,” he says with a laugh. “She was nice to me, she laughed at my jokes, and she held me when I was sad.” He pauses. “Until she didn’t.”

Alec frowns. “What do you mean?” Then, a sudden realization strikes him. “Wait, a cigarette? Magnus, those are so bad for you.”

Magnus shoots him a fond smile. “I quit a few years ago. Don’t worry about it. Are you sure you want to hear the rest?” Alec isn’t sure; he doesn’t want to hear about Camille at all, but the look on Magnus’ face makes Alec curious and a bit masochistic. He nods. Magnus’ smile shifts into something a little pained, and a train announcement blares over the aging speakers. Their stop is next.

They shuffle onto the platform, through the turnstiles, and up into the frigid air. The wind sucks all conversation away. Alec loops an arm around Magnus’s shoulders and pulls him in close as they walk. Amir greets them as they hurry into the warmth of Alec’s lobby and up to the apartment.

They shed their shoes and coats, a small synchronization that helps dispel the odd anxiety that young Magnus brings with his cigarettes and ex-girlfriend.

They don’t say much as they make themselves comfortable. After changing into pajamas, they bundle together on the couch, Magnus sitting in Alec’s lap. The contentious throw blanket of yesterday lays over them both. It provides them with warmth as Alec’s heater kicks on.

“So you quit smoking?” Alec prompts.

Magnus laughs, a shallow thing that makes Alec want to kiss his neck. Alec does, a soft peck, then another for encouragement. Magnus smells like fresh laundry.

“Yeah, I did,” Magnus says. “But uh, after Camille.” He tugs on the blanket to straighten out wrinkles and folds. When Alec stays silent, Magnus sighs and forges onward. “She told me that she had needs I wasn’t fulfilling, so she wanted more.”

“More?” Alec repeats. Then it clicks. “She needed more attention?”

“Theyir names were Brad, Gerome, and Darien,” Magnus says with a wry smile. “She also gave me advice on how to be a better boyfriend. The usual bullshit people feed you—more gifts, no friends,
no more dreams that might take you far away.” He goes quiet. Then, hesitant, adds, “She wanted to
watch me fuck them.” Magnus turns in Alec’s arms, settling with his thighs on either side of Alec’s
waist. He takes a deep breath, eyelids sliding closed, a barrier between Magnus and the world.
Alec doesn’t care about the rest if it hurts Magnus this way.

“Magnus—.”

“But I told her I couldn’t. I didn’t want to.” He ducks his head, hiding it in the crook of Alec’s
neck.

*I’m a one soul at a time kind of guy* rings through Alec’s mind with strange resonance, words
swirling in the vortex of his mind, centering on the fact that Camille didn’t give a shit about
Magnus at all.

“What did she say?” Alec asked. Magnus burrows deeper, every shaky breath warming Alec’s
skin.

“She told them to take turns fucking me,” he whispers. Then, with more heat: “She wanted me to
prove myself. Because if I loved her then I’d let her see *all of me.*” His voice tapers off, hoarse,
scarred by a thousand tiny cuts. “That broke my heart. So I left.”

“And the others?” Alec asks, giving Magnus’ temple a soft kiss. “You don’t have to tell me.”

“Nothing happened, if that’s what you’re asking,” Magnus replies with a heavy sigh. “I left and
they didn’t follow.”

“And Camille?”

Magnus laughs. “I can’t escape her no matter how hard I try. She still flits in and out at her leisure.
Camille isn’t one to be deterred by anything, or anyone. She does what she wants,” Magnus says.

“And if she wants to get you back?” Alec suggests, implication clear as Magnus pulls away to stare
him in the eye.

“It’s not her,” Magnus says, voice flat. “She’s not the cloak and dagger type—she’s all gold, glitz,
and glamor. If it were her, it’d have her name all over it.”

Alec frowns. “It might. She sent a letter.”

“Ah, yes. She does that,” Magnus says with a roll of his eyes. “Did you collect my mail for me?”

Alec blushes, a little ashamed at having forgotten about it. “Yeah. There are a couple letters from
Catarina as well. One second, I’ll go grab them.” His hands settle on Magnus’ hips, guiding
Magnus up and off his lap. Magnus pouts, rising to let him leave, then hoards the blanket as Alec
heads off into his bedroom.

He gathers the letters and bills. Camille’s handwriting leers at him as Alec steps back into the
living room, offering the envelopes to Magnus.

Magnus lifts one side of the blanket, shaking it, waiting for Alec to sit next to him again. Alec sits
down, expecting and enjoying the way Magnus nestles in with his legs slung over Alec’s own. He
takes the letters once Alec is settled. The floral scent tickles Alec’s nose, and Magnus sneezes.

“Ugh, she’s still wearing this awful perfume?” He asks, a bit incredulous and more than a bit
offended. “This was bad then and it’s still bad now. I can’t believe that I spent so much time with
her, you can never account for taste, Alexander.”

“Well she definitely didn’t have good taste if she let you go,” Alec says.

Magnus stares at him for a moment, blinking, then smiles. “I’m glad she has bad taste, because otherwise, I never would have found you.”

Alec’s heart slams into his lungs and ribs in an attempt to fly out of his chest. He blushes and leans his head on top of Magnus’, feeling Magnus’ soft hair against his cheek. “I looked at it earlier, but let me check it again before you open it.”

Magnus hands it back to him, and Alec does a quick, but thorough, inspection. Once he’s finished, Magnus peels the flap off of the adhesive. A card falls onto the blanket. Magnus flips it over and lets it a short laugh.

“I see,” he says, a little bitter.

“What is it?” Alec asks.

“It’s an invitation,” Magnus replies.

Alec frowns, trying to read Magnus’ expression. “To what?”

Magnus flips the card to show Alec the script. “To her wedding.”

Alec watches the hurt as it courses through Magnus gaze, trying to ignore the gaping pit that yawns open in his stomach.

***

Dinner is quiet, and Alec can’t forget the way Magnus looked at the news of Camille’s marriage. He manages to avoid Magnus’ questioning glances until they’re both laying in bed together, side by side, beneath the blankets.

Magnus shifts, turning onto his side to face Alec. “Are you okay?”

Alec wants to say yes; he wants to ignore the gnawing worry in his gut, but he shakes his head and finds Magnus’ hand with his own. He meets Magnus’ gaze. “What will you do if Camille is the stalker?”

Magnus bites his lip, the slick of spit catching in the low lighting. He opens his mouth. “It’s not her.”

“But if it is?” Alec asks.

“It’s not,” Magnus repeats, firm.

“Why don’t you think it’s her?” Voices rise in Alec’s mind, tumbling over each other as they fight for his attention. Because you still love her? Because you don’t trust me to do my job? Because you don’t trust me?

“She would never lower herself to this,” Magnus replies. “Not for me—not for anyone.” He leans in, slow, cupping Alec’s cheek and pressing kisses wherever he can reach. “Trust me, Alexander. I know Camille.”

“I do trust you,” Alec murmurs. “But I don’t think we should dismiss her as a suspect just yet.”
Magnus pulls away. Golden-brown eyes drift over Alec’s face, searching, for what, Alec doesn’t
know. He nods and tugs on Alec’s hand.

“Can we talk about this tomorrow?” Magnus asks, voice soft. “It’s been a long day.”

No, Alec wants to say. *Do you still care about her?* Alec wants to ask, but Magnus looks tired,
drawn out from having the pains of his past cut open and laid out for Alec to see.

“Yeah,” Alec whispers, meeting Magnus’ lips. “I’ll get the report tomorrow and we can talk about
it then.”

“Thank you, Alexander,” Magnus hums, kissing him in earnest, pouring affection into Alec that
almost quells the fears still festering beneath Alec’s skin.

***

Alec goes on his morning run for the first time in a while. He missed it, the pounding of his feet on
concrete as he navigates the streets—the morning hum of New York rattling through him.

Being back in his apartment allows him slip back into his routine: traversing through the park
nearby, sneakers kicking up gravel and dirt as he goes. His thoughts drift from Camille to Magnus,
then back to himself, his breathing and the feeling of sweat on his brow.

It helps him find a sense of calm.

When he returns, Magnus is still asleep, so Alec kisses Magnus’ forehead and hops into the
shower.

He emerges from the shower feeling human again. The bathroom smells like soap, steam lingering
in the air as Alec rubs a hand through his hair and slings a towel around his hips. An acrid smell
tickles his nose as he approaches the bathroom door. Something is burning.

Alec steps out into the hallway, the cold air provoking goosebumps as he hurries to the kitchen.
There, he finds Magnus, fiddling with his countertop convection oven.

“This thing is far too complex for a toaster,” Magnus declares, pointing an accusatory finger at
Alec from where he stands. “You don’t have any cereal, and your toaster has fifty different
settings, and now we don’t have any breakfast.” Magnus looks far too harassed for such early
morning hours, and Alec can’t bite down his laughter.


“We’re out of bread,” Magnus informs him, waving to a pile of blackened lumps that sits on an
ashy plate.

“I see,” Alec says, trying to keep a straight face.

Magnus blushes, then, failing to keep down laughter of his own, shoves Alec back toward the
bedroom. “See if I ever try to cook for you again,” he grouses. “Now go get dressed and get us
some breakfast.”

Alec obliges. He leaves Magnus to clean up, and puts on some clothes before heading out the door.

Breakfast is a quick affair, a pair of bagels with lox as they hold hands over the table. Neither of
them bring up Camille, and Alec’s email inbox remains empty. He sends Izzy a text asking about
Magnus asks Alec to give Chairman Meow some extra cuddles and treats, giving Alec a quick kiss goodbye.

Alec’s phone pings as he leaves the lobby. It’s a message from Ragnor, straightforward.

“In order to issue the refund to Morningstar, the bank requires Magnus’ physical signature. I have the paperwork for Magnus to sign,” it reads.

Alec waits for a moment, but nothing else comes through. He types a reply letting Ragnor know that he’ll come pick it up, receiving another message with an address that’s not far from Magnus’s apartment.

It’s a handful of extra stops, but the car is somewhat empty, so Alec revels in the peace. One of the other passengers reveals themselves as a performance artist and begins to sing despite the sparse crowd. Alec throws himself out of the car a couple stops early and walks.

He finds himself in front of a bookstore, with dusty windows and a sign reading “closed” in big red letters. There’s another, smaller, sign that displays the hours of business. Alec checks his phone, and confirms it should be open. He lays a hand on the door and pushes. It gives beneath his fingertips, letting him inside.

The storefront would be spacious if not for the clutter. High ceilings and tasteful lighting looms above them. Everywhere Alec looks, there’s a mysterious object that he can’t name, glinting from beneath thin layers of grime. There’s a spiral staircase behind the counter that leads up and out of sight. The counter itself is littered with paper receipts and trinkets, an old register reigns supreme over the surface, the mess rippling outward from the epicenter.

It smells like years of neglect: musty with a tinge of what Alec assumes is mothballs. There are books and paraphernalia packed together on the shelves. A fragile-looking table to his right, near the windows, groans under the weight of innumerable globes. There are music boxes and chests of all shapes and sizes, some littering the walkways. Alec treads lightly as he ventures further into the shop.

“Ragnor?” He calls. His voice disturbs the air around him, cutting through a layer of stillness as he introduces life into the otherwise dead room. Footsteps shuffle across the ceiling above him. A pair of bedraggled slippers appear on the stairs, legs, body, and head following in their wake. Ragnor peers at him through the gloom.

“Alec. You’re here, let me get the papers for you.” He disappears back upstairs. Alec waits, poking around the spines of several decrepit books.

Someone steps into The Spiral Labyrinth. It’s a store, in name if nothing else, but Alec didn’t expect any customers to show up. He feels more than hears the front door opening. The interloper’s shoes tap on the uneven floorboards, and Alec ignores them.

“Ragnor? Where are you, you grouchy old goat?”

Alec knows that voice. He turns, and there she is in all her brand-name glory. Camille Belcourt, in the flesh, wearing towering heels and a skirt despite the fact that it’s midwinter.

A thud sounds from above. Then, stomping shakes an alarming amount of sawdust from the rafters as Ragnor’s legs appear at the top of the stairs.
“Satan? Is that you?” Ragnor calls.

Alec bites down a laugh, but now that he’s facing her, he can see Camille’s eyes dragging down his body. She smirks.

He rolls his eyes.

Her smile drops, and she turns her attention back to the now half-visible Ragnor and the sheaf of papers he’s stuffing into a creased manila envelope.

“Very funny,” Camille says. She flips her hair, disturbing a layer of dust. Ragnor steps onto ground level and eases behind the counter.

“Can I help you?” Ragnor asks, with the obvious lack of intent to do so.

“That depends,” Camille says. She shoots Alec another glance, more weighty than the last, eyes narrowing. “You can start by telling me who this is.”

Alec quirks his brow. “You’re in a store.”

Camille gives him a sharp smile. “I’m not stupid,” she replies. Her hand grazes the countertop, and she makes a point to look disgusted. “This is a glorified storage unit. Ragnor doesn’t entertain customers, and no one would actually come in here of their own accord, much less wait around.”

“He’s a friend,” Ragnor says.

“As if anyone would want to be friends with you,” Camille snipes, looking like she’d rather be anywhere other than where she is.

Ragnor shrugs and offers a wry twist of his lips. “Well, since you know so much about me.” He gestures to Alec, eyes never leaving Camille’s face as he says, with great satisfaction: “This is Alec—Magnus’ boyfriend.” Alec waves a hand in greeting.

Despite the radiator that rattles away to Alec’s left, the temperature drops ten degrees.

A smile plays across her face, all teeth and red lipstick, sculpted from ice. “Dark hair and pale skin,” she muses, playing with her own brown locks as she appraises him. “Interesting. Does he still spread his legs for cash?”

Alec’s hackles rise and an angry blush rushes up his cheeks. Her smile grows wider.

“Why are you here?” Ragnor asks.

Beneath the must, the scent of rose perfume rises, following Camille as she brushes past Alec to approach the counter. “I sent Magnus an invitation to my wedding,” she says, addressing them both without looking at either of them. “He hasn’t answered, so I went to check on him, but he wasn’t home. I figured if anyone would know where Magnus is, it would be you.” Camille pauses, gaze drifting over their surroundings before resting on Alec. “Though I suppose you’d be able my question just as well. Since you’re keeping his bed warm.”

“Maybe he’s just not interested in attending,” Alec says, voice dry, ignoring the bait.

“Well, that’s what an RSVP is for, isn’t it, darling?” Camille replies. The endearment crawls over Alec’s skin, tiny claws raising hairs along his arms as it settles on his shoulders. She checks her pristine manicure. “Besides, he loves weddings. He’s always talked about getting married in the
botanical gardens.” Her legs cut long shadows in the murky sunlight. “He said the flowers remind him of me.”

“We just started dating, so I wouldn’t know,” Alec says, voice even.

Camille rolls her eyes. “You’re no fun. Maybe he should fuck you better—help you relax.”

“Thanks for your concern, but we’re doing just fine,” Alec grinds out through clenched teeth.

“Oh, I seem to have touched a nerve,” Camille observes, looking pleased with herself. Alec says nothing. “He makes you feel special doesn’t he? You might even love him. Too bad it doesn’t matter.” She stalks toward Alec, predatory despite the difference in their size, eyes cold. “He can be with you or with anyone else, but Magnus will always be thinking of me.”

Alec laughs, tamping down the strange panic that wells up inside of him. “Right. Can’t say I believe you.”

“That’s cute. Puppy has teeth,” she sneers. “Just ask Ragnor how long Magnus’ relationships last.”

“What do you want, Camille?” Ragnor cuts in.

“I just want to make sure he’s doing okay,” Camille says. “What, with the love of his life getting married, I was worried he’d do something...drastic.”

“He’s on vacation,” Alec deadpans, fighting to keep emotion out of his voice. “Visiting family.”

“He should feed you better lies,” Camille drawls. “He doesn’t have any family. Unless you didn’t know that; Magnus has never been good at sharing.” She leans in, as if imparting a secret. “Did he tell you how I saved his life?”

“Get out, Camille,” Ragnor says, short. “Unless you have actual business, which I doubt, leave.”

She laughs. “Oh, look at you, Ragnor. It’s about time you grew a spine.” Brown eyes flicker over Alec one last time. “And it was so nice meeting you, Alec. Make sure to finger Magnus when you suck him off. He likes that.”

There’s a clicking of heels, then a blistering wind as Camille steps back out into New York City. Somewhere in Ragnor’s shop, three grandfather clocks go off. A cacophony of noise crashes over bookcases and shelves, books absorbing the blow as silence settles over them once more, tension lingering.

Ragnor clears his throat, setting the envelope on the counter. “I would tell you to just ignore her, but I know from experience that it’s hard to do so.”

Alec collects the paperwork. “How long were they together?”

“A regrettably long time. Three years,” Ragnor says. He taps his fingers on the register, gaze traveling Alec’s face like Camille’s did. “For what it’s worth, he was miserable the whole time. He seems happy with you.”

Alec meets Ragnor’s eyes. “So he didn’t really love her?”

Ragnor stares straight back at him. “I didn’t say that.”

Alec wants to ask how long Magnus’ relationships have lasted since then, the echoes of Camille’s voice battering through rational thought. “She’s a suspect,” he announces instead.
Ragnar frowns. “That doesn’t seem quite right.”

“You don’t think it’s her?” Alec asks, surprised by Ragnar’s skepticism.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s involved,” Ragnar says with a shrug. Then, measured, “But this Morningstar business isn’t her game, Alec.”

“What do you mean?”

"Camille doesn't like to lose," Ragnar replies, words sharp despite the sleepy space around them. "If she chases Magnus, then she's already lost."

***

Alec mulls over Ragnar’s words as he heads to Magnus’ loft. There’s something off about Camille. Magnus and Ragnar both seem to think she’s innocent, as innocent as she can be anyway, but Alec can’t shake the weight draping over his shoulders.

His phone dings as he surfaces onto the streets near Magnus’ apartment. An email from the Institute: the report he asked for. He reads as he walks, muttering vague excuses when he bumps into passersby.

Camille Belcourt comes from old money, a family that’s known for their penchant for indulgence and luxury. Alec wouldn’t be surprised if his father knew hers. She lives in Manhattan, funding herself with her family’s bank account and a modeling contract she doesn’t need. She’s local, has the time, and is rich enough to drop a massive tip. Her record is clean, but that’s no surprise. For now, nothing incriminating enough to move against her, but she fits the bill as far as Alec’s concerned. He walks into the lobby when his phone sounds again. It’s another email, from Izzy this time. The list of clients.

Belcourt sits near the top, roughly 100 names organized in alphabetical order. Alec bites back a smile. Now they’re getting somewhere. That’s a small list, made even smaller by the fact that the custom wax is distributed world-wide. Alec bets that there aren’t many New York residents on that list. He takes the stairs two at a time, eager to get home and give Magnus the good news that they’re one step closer to keeping him safe.

He reaches the landing and freezes. Magnus’ apartment door is ajar. Alec’s unarmed, but he’ll have to make do.

Alec sends a text to his siblings and readies himself. He creeps inside, listening intently. Silence greets him. Alec is livid; he got too comfortable, distracted by Magnus and the domesticity of Chairman’s company. He treads through the halls and rooms on high alert, eyes and ears straining as he sneaks along. Alec finds his way back to the living room.

He’s alone, no hide nor hair of the stalker in sight. There’s no danger to him here. Midday sunlight streams into the apartment, gold catches on his fingertips, a warmth Alec cannot feel. His heart hammers in his chest. Panic pumping through his veins as he realizes what the silence means.

“Chairman?” He calls, frantic, tracking grime around with the shoes he didn’t bother to take off. “Chairman Meow?” Alec makes quick work of the apartment this time, turning it inside out, making soft noises in an effort to coax the cat out of hiding. Nothing.

Chairman Meow is gone.

***
Alec doesn’t know what he’s going to say to Magnus. He searches the entire building, knocking on doors and asking neighbors about the small tabby. No one has seen Chairman Meow, and the lead in Alec’s stomach grows heavier by the second. The doorman shakes his head when Alec asks on his way out.

His phone buzzes in his pocket. He doesn’t want to pick up, but he does.

“Are you okay?” Izzy asks.

“No, not really,” Alec answers, dread bleeding into his voice. “Chairman Meow is missing and it’s my fault.”

“Whoa, back up, I meant because you went into Magnus’ compromised apartment without backup. Who is Chairman Meow and how is that your fault?”

“Chairman Meow is Magnus’ cat, and it’s my fault because I’m supposed to take care of him, and now he’s gone,” Alec moans, trying to regulate his breathing as he strides down the sidewalk. A pedestrian eyes him with suspicion as she walks past. He ignores her.

“Wait a minute, you lost Magnus’ cat? Like the cat you were both coddling when we were there last?” Izzy repeats, the alarm in her voice feeding into Alec’s anxiety. “How?”

“I don’t know. The front door was open when I got there today,” Alec says. “He must’ve been desperate to follow me, he was so lonely, Izzy. All the stalker had to do was walk in the front door, and Chairman would’ve leapt into their arms.” He groans, running a hand through his hair as he comes to a halt. “I should’ve just taken him to my place.”

“Oh, Alec, you followed protocol.”

Protocol doesn’t mean shit to him right now. Magnus is waiting, expecting a late lunch and the safety of his fucking cat. Alec stares up at the sky. “I don’t know what to do.”

“You need to calm down first.”

“I can’t be calm,” Alec snaps. “My boyfriend’s fucking cat is missing and now I have to go tell him that Chairman Meow is with the fucking stalker, if he’s even still alive.” More people are staring now. Alec’s voice drops, mournful. “He’s tiny and tame, if the stalker tries to hurt him...” He trails off.

There’s silence, then Izzy’s voice echoes through the speaker. “You have to tell Magnus. The sooner the better. It’s scary, but he needs to know, and there’s always a chance that Chairman Meow just ran away. You never know, this might happen often.”

“Should I call him?” Alec asks, breathless.

“No. Bad news is better in person. Not for you, but for him,” she says.

“Okay,” Alec mumbles, heading down into the frenetic underbelly of New York.

“Good luck,” Izzy says before she cuts the call

***

Alec stares at his apartment door. There are a couple unanswered texts from Magnus sitting in his inbox, and Alec really doesn’t want to open the goddamn door. It’s not Magnus’ anger that Alec’s
afraid of. It’s Magnus’ sadness, devastation, and the loss of someone Magnus’ cares about so much. Chairman Meow may be gone for good.

There’s hope, sure, but Alec knows that they’ve lost precious time. The chance of finding missing persons drops exponentially as hours tick away. Alec doesn’t have any experience with animals, but he’s not feeling optimistic.

Another deep breath, and he slides his key into the knob. The door flies open before he can even unlock it. Magnus pulls him into a tight hug, knocking the wind out of him.

“I was so worried,” Magnus murmurs. “I texted you but you didn’t respond, and Ragnor told me that Camille stopped by when you were there. Don’t do that to me,” he hums, burying his face in Alec’s chest.

Alec steels himself. “Magnus, we need to talk.”

“Yes, we do need to talk,” Magnus agrees, ushering him inside. “About Camille—.”

“No, Magnus,” Alec reaches up and grips Magnus’ hands in his own, trying to figure out the best way to do this. He eases his shoes off, guiding Magnus to the couch, sitting them down on the orange cushions.

“You’re scaring me, Alexander,” Magnus says, eyes wide.

The sooner the better.

“Chairman Meow is missing.”

At first, Magnus just stares at him, then the air shatters.

“What?” Magnus whispers. “What do you mean Chairman Meow is missing?”

There were a lot of things Alec expected, shouting, crying, and everything in between. Nothing could have prepared Alec for this. Every line of Magnus’ body slumps inward, eyes blank and lips trembling. Shaking hands pull away from Alec’s and Alec feels Magnus rending his heart in two. Magnus says nothing, and Alec is fumbling, trying to find words and failing.

“The door was open when I got there. I checked the loft and it was empty,” Alec stutters. Magnus doesn’t respond. Alec takes a deep breath in a desperate attempt to calm the torrential hurricane whipping through his veins. He tries again. “Does Chairman have a habit of running away?”

“No,” Magnus says. “But it’s possible. He’s never been left alone for this long, he must have tried to follow you.”

“No,” Magnus says. “But it’s possible. He’s never been left alone for this long, he must have tried to follow you.”

“Magnus,” Alec continues, trying to be gentle. “It’s likely that the stalker has him. And I know that you feel protective of Camille, but I got the report and we cross-referenced her name with the custom wax maker.”

“Wax? What the fuck does wax have to do with anything?” Magnus asks, incredulous, voice rising. “I’m telling you, it’s not her. Can we please go look for my cat now?”

“No one’s seen him, I asked. We can’t ignore the facts,” Alec says. “She fits the bill. She has the means, and the wax sent by the stalker is made by an exclusive custom brand. Their clientele is limited to around 100 families world-wide. The Belcourts are on that list.”
“Just because she has means doesn’t mean she has motive,” Magnus says, gritting his teeth. “Alec, listen to me. It’s not Camille. You’re wasting your time. Chairman’s probably just running around the apartment building, and the longer we focus on Camille the more lost he’ll be.”

The thread holding Alec together snaps in half.

“Stop defending her,” Alec shouts. “Just because you don’t want it to be her doesn’t mean it isn’t her. We have to follow the facts to find the right conclusion. If you care about Chairman at all, you’ll look at this objectively. Camille has him.”

As soon as he says it, Alec wants to take it back. Magnus freezes, recoiling, retreating to the other end of the couch as he gets to his feet.

“What do you mean? Just because you do want it to be her, doesn’t mean it’s her either,” Magnus retorts with a hiss. “You’re twisting the facts to fit your theory. She’s my ex, not a kidnapper. The door was open, of course he’s going to run out.”

How dare you goes unsaid. Alec hears it loud and clear, a crackle of lightning followed by tremendous thunder. But Magnus needs to understand. The clientele list is damning, and Camille is their best bet. Camille with her makeup and trust fund, a living specter of a past Alec will never really know, a permanent scar on Magnus’ heart. Alec sighs and shakes his head.

“I’m just trying to do my job,” he says, frustrated. Magnus is glaring down at him, making him feel small, so he stands, looming with his extra three inches. He crosses his arms. “You’re not the professional here, I am. You said you trusted me.”

Magnus rolls his eyes, and it hurts and Alec just wishes that he could rewind to yesterday, when Chairman was safe and he was in love and Magnus wasn’t breaking his heart.

“Right, you’re just doing your job,” Magnus mocks, tears beading on his eyelashes. “I want to trust you, but now my cat is missing and regardless of whether he ran away or was fucking taken, you’re not exactly getting a five star review.”

“Camille—.”

“No,” Magnus spits, pulling on his shoes and a jacket. “I’m fucking tired of talking about Camille. Chairman Meow has never been outside before and now he’s lost. The longer we talk about this, the longer he’s out there alone, so I’m done.”

“Camille is behind all of this. The faster we find her, the better chance we have of finding Chairman Meow,” Alec insists. “We’ll find him. We just need to find Camille first.”

“No, Alec. I’ll find Chairman. I don’t care if you look for Camille or not, but I can’t be here right now,” Magnus says, quiet but firm, eyes full of fire as he opens the front door. “Goodbye.”

The door slams shut behind him.

Deafening silence fills the space between Alec’s ears. He blinks, trying to find his bearings as hot tears streak down his face. He collapses onto his ugly goddamn couch and waits, hoping that the door will open and Magnus will come back. Time passes, and the door remains shut. Magnus is probably halfway to Brooklyn by now.

He can’t breathe. The anger vanishes, remorse filling the gaps as he struggles to think past Magnus is gone. Every inch of his body feels over-sensitive, nerves screaming as God looks on and laughs. It was too good and Alec’s known all along. Magnus is too good for him. Camille is right, and
now she’s going to take advantage of his incompetence, use it to swoop in and take what she wants.

The apartment is so empty. Alec’s arm brushes against a throw pillow, so he grabs it and chucks it across the room, relishes in the sound it makes as it knocks something off of his mantle. He doesn’t bother to see what it is. It doesn’t matter.

Alec’s phone chirps, and it’s a series of texts from Jace that he does not want to fucking deal with.

His phone rings. He rejects the call. It rings again.

“What?” Alec snaps.

“Wow, who pissed in your cereal?” Jace asks. “I have footage of your cat is what. Your little furball was in the apartment this morning. He ran out of view around two hours ago and didn’t come back.”

“Two hours ago?” Alec mumbles. “That’s not possible, Camille was with me and Ragnor two hours ago.”

“Well, that’s what the footage shows,” Jace says. “The furball didn’t follow you out, that’s for sure. Camille’s Magnus’ ex right? What were you guys doing?”

Alec’s phone rings, the screen showing an incoming call from Magnus.

“I’ll talk to you later,” Alec says, switching lines before Jace can answer. “Magnus?” He asks, breathless. “Magnus I’m sorry, I—.”

“So am I,” Magnus replies, voice wet over clamor of the bustling subway station. “I’m sorry, Alexander. We can talk about this later, but I just...” He trails off. Blood sings through Alec’s veins, a flood of tentative hope.

“I know,” Alec says, softly. “Me too. I’ll meet you there as fast as I can. We’ll find him together, Magnus.”

It’s quiet, then, Magnus speaks again. “Thank you, Alexander. I’ll see you in a bit.”

Alec wants to beg Magnus to come back, but the relief of hearing Magnus’ voice and the harrowing realization that Camille isn’t the culprit has Alec scrambling to his feet as the line goes dead. He’s out the door in record time.

***

The subway is packed. Even with his height, Alec fights to find something to hold onto. He wishes he could’ve taken a cab, but one bridge to Brooklyn is gridlocked and the other is as good as, so he’s stuck here with an umbrella poking his ass. He taps his foot. Between the weight of Chairman’s mysterious absence, and the promise of reconciling with Magnus, Alec’s ready to burst.

When the doors hiss open, Alec is out like a shot. He pushes through the crowd and up the stairs when his phone explodes. It buzzes endlessly as a stream of texts and notifications pours in from all of the time he spent without signal.

He checks the screen, hoping for a text from Magnus. He has ten missed calls and at least twenty messages. The first text comes through, and Alec’s heart drops to the gum-sticky concrete, lungs pulling in polluted city air.
“Alec where are you? Magnus is back at his loft and someone just walked in. Did you guys go back early?”

“What are you guys doing there?”

“Alec? What the fuck is going on?”

“That’s not you, is it?”

“Alec where are you? Pick up your fucking phone.”

“Alec, there’s a gun. Alec where the fuck are you?”

“I’m on my way. I have three teams with me, Izzy’s providing support. Are you armed?”

He reads text after text of rising urgency, spindly fingers grasping his lungs and squeezing. His phone rings.

“Izzy?” Alec gasps, sprinting toward the apartment building.

“Alec, oh my god, where have you been?” She sounds panicked, and Alec shoves through a crowd of pedestrians.

“On the fucking subway with no signal. Where is Magnus?”

“Magnus is gone, Alec.”
Alec doesn’t like making a scene. He hates the curious gazes that question why he’s there and what he’s capable of.

But this time, he doesn’t give a shit when three full squads come to a screeching halt on Magnus’ doorstep. Alec slows from his flat-out dash as the mercs pour out in full gear and form a perimeter around the building. The doorman rushes out to protest, but his words sputter and die at the sight of submachine guns and bullet-proof armor. Alec recognizes Jace’s dour-faced lieutenant when she marches up to the speechless doorman and murmurs something Alec can’t hear. The doorman nods, still unsettled, and stands to the side.

Alec strips off his heavy winter coat, ignoring the unforgiving midwinter wind whipping around them, and dons a proffered kevlar vest. He waves away the heavier weapons but accepts a handgun and holster that he straps to his thigh. The tracking team shows up next, equipped with less offensive gear. Alec barks out orders as soon as their shoes hit the pavement. He wants a full sweep of the apartment building and he wants it now. Jace hops out after them and trots over.

“The cops are on their way. The fuck happened?” Jace asks.

“I fucked up.”

“Yeah, let’s not get into your martyr complex right now.”

Alec has no response, a muscle works in his jaw. He jerks his shoulder and guides Jace into the building. They ignore the curious onlookers. Three Lightwood agents stand guard in the lobby as Alec and Jace head up to Magnus’ loft.

The front door is still open. Chairman doesn’t appear, and there’s no music. The apartment looks spotless. There are no signs of a struggle because the perpetrator had a gun, Alec thinks. Bile coats his tongue. He spots Magnus’ phone on the floor as Jace follows him inside.

One of Jace’s squadmates rushes in after them. Jace nudges Alec with his elbow. “Here.”
Alec takes the tablet and watches the recording, powerless.

Magnus rushes into the living room of the apartment. He stands there looking around, as if hope alone could bring the Chairman back into his home, safe and sound. After a long minute, he caves inward. He pinches his eyes between his thumb and forefinger, and his shoulders quiver. Magnus’ head bows, body curving, brought low under an oppressive, invisible weight.

Alec can feel the cords in his heart snapping, one by one.

Someone enters the apartment. Magnus notices and spins around, mere seconds before the intruder enters the surveillance camera’s field of vision. The intruder has dark hair that looks just like Alec’s. He’s around the same height as Magnus, with a sickly complexion. Pain radiates from Alec’s hand as his nails carve deep crescents into his palm.

That son of a bitch.

“Sebastian.”

“Who? People actually name their kids Sebastian?” Jace asks.

Alec doesn’t laugh. He stares blank-eyed at the tablet, footage forgotten as he grits his teeth. He recalls all those careless encounters. Sebastian at the front door introducing himself. Sebastian scurrying around the building, up to god knows what. Conversing with Sebastian in the lobby, hair dyed, expressing encouragement. That imperceptible rancor lurking under his twitchy, if polite facade.

In the recording, now, Magnus looks like he’s shouting.

Sebastian holds one hand out in front of him, placating.

Magnus pulls his phone out of his pocket. Sebastian reveals the gun, and Magnus freezes. He lets his phone slip from his grasp, onto the floor. It’s obvious, even through a greyscale video, that Magnus is distressed. His defiant posture slumps into defeat as Sebastian steps closer.

Alec grips the tablet so hard that the glass cracks under his thumbs. The screen flickers, then darkens, dead. Jace takes a half step back, startled. The shattered glass grazes Alec’s thumb as he tosses the tablet to Jace’s subordinate. He can tell that there’s blood, but he ignores it and draws his back up straight, tense. “He’s the landlord. There’s a management office in the building. We need to get inside.”

“The landlord?”

“Yes, is there an echo in here?” Alec snaps behind him as he rushes out into the corridor.

“I’m trying to help, asshole,” Jace grumbles. Alec pounds down the stairs without acknowledging the insult.

“You can help by getting someone to pull up intel on Sebastian,” Alec growls out when Jace catches up. Blood thunders through his veins as the front desk comes into view. Sebastian sat behind that desk, welcoming Alec back with quiet inquiries to Magnus’ wellbeing. The crowd of civilians part and pack in at the walls, giving Alec a wide berth as he storms past.

Jace thuds after Alec. He calls out to his second-in-command as he passes. “Lagrange, pull up info on this building. We need property records, current owner, anything and everything. We’re looking for a Sebastian,” Jace says. The scowling woman nods and jogs off with two agents at her side.
Alec accosts the doorman. “Where is the manager’s office? Do you have access to it?”

He stares at Alec, nervous. “No, Mr. Verlac always kept the key with him,” he says. “Why, what’s going on? Is it safe?”

“There’s no danger,” Jace cuts in from where he appears at Alec’s back. “You’re fine.”

“Where is it?” Alec shouts, his impatience churning and boiling over. The startled doorman points down a hallway past the front desk that leads away from the lobby.

Alec turns and strides away. Bright fluorescent lights shine down on the office door. He rears up and kicks the door as hard as he can, infuriated, and the heavy wood makes an ominous cracking sound. Alec leans into it as it groans under the weight of his boot.

“Alec, what the hell?” Jace shouts. He pelts down the hallway as fast as he can.

“We need to get inside,” Alec replies as he readies himself to kick it again, harder this time.

Jace darts in front of the door. “Wait, we can’t just kick the damn door down. Protocol, dude.”

“Since when have you ever given a shit about protocol?” Alec bites back. He tries to get around Jace, but Jace refuses to move. This brand of stubbornness drives Alec nuts on a good day—it enrages him right now. His nerves are shot, and Magnus is fucking missing. He doesn’t have time for this. “Jace, get out of the way.”

“No,” Jace says.

Alec’s gut turns and he begins to see red. He clenches his fists, his breathing short and shallow. “Move.”

Jace crosses his arms and rolls his eyes. “Make me.”

Alec decks him.

“Alec what the fuck,” Jace yells. He returns the blow with one of his own to Alec’s cheek, but Alec doesn’t even feel it.

“Get the fuck out of my way,” Alec heaves Jace by his vest and slams his brother into the wall adjacent to the office door. He’s high on adrenaline and anxiety, heart in his throat.

“You can’t go around breaking the law just because Magnus is missing,” Jace says.

“That’s rich coming from you,” Alec shouts, a hair’s breadth from Jace’s face as he gnashes his teeth. Every inch of him pulls taut. “You think I should tell Clary about the rap sheet your sorry ass had before we fished you out of the gutter?” He hurls Jace down the hallway

Jace lands on his feet and launches himself at Alec. “At least I do my fucking job,” he spits, face red.

They hurl punches at each other, oblivious to the world at large. Alec feints to the left and tackles Jace to the ground. Jace is pinned on his side, arm trapped beneath him, unable to do much more than struggle. Alec reels back to slug Jace’s jaw.

“What’s going on here?”

They both freeze and look up at the newcomer. Shiny black shoes, a new suit, and a placid smile.
Alec shoves Jace, and they glare at each other as they get to their feet. Alec’s nose is bloody and Jace has a wicked split lip. They’re both wheezing.

“Underhill.”

“Lightwood. Lightwood,” Underhill says, hands in his pockets as he addresses them each in turn. He dismisses a bemused beat cop that’s standing at his side. “Nothing to see here. Go sweep the apartment.” The policeman gives the detective a sidelong glance, but heads off as ordered.

“We didn’t expect you to get here so fast,” Alec says, once they’re alone.

“Do you normally beat the ever-living shit out of each other whenever you’re waiting? Like is this standard fare at the DMV?” They don’t respond. Underhill shoots them both an exasperated look before jerking his head at the manager’s office. “Is there a reason why there’s a giant shoe print on the door to a room under my jurisdiction, Jace?”

“It wasn’t me, this time,” Jace grumbles. “Alec can’t stop thinking with his dick.”

“You’re the last person allowed to say that about me,” Alec snarls.

“Okay well, unless you want me to slap you both with bracelets you’ll step away from the door and each other,” Underhill says, deadpan. “Now.” Both men comply.

The cool air and sudden company bring Alec back in line, and he can’t help the panic that leaks into his voice.

“Please, Underhill, Magnus is missing and it’s my fault,” Alec breathes. “I need to get in there. I need to see if I can find anything that will help us find him as soon as possible.” Jace nods, his mouth shut. “If nothing else, just find us something to work with, please.” Alec whispers, wild-eyed.

“I feel like it’s a bit cruel to remind you, but I’m sorry, Alec, it’s out of your hands now.” Underhill rubs the back of his neck and gives a vague wave of the hand. “At this point, my side needs to take over.”

“Right.” Alec fights down the urge to scream until his throat is raw. He presses on the cut on his hand instead, feels the sting of it reopening.

Underhill sighs. He pulls out his phone and taps the screen two, three times. Then he checks his watch. Alec and Jace both wait, tension still high, as Underhill takes a deep breath. “Wait here.”

Underhill heads toward the lobby and disappears around the corner. A few minutes later he comes walking back over to the brothers. He holds up an odd-shaped key on a red rubber lanyard.

“Alec stares at Underhill. “We can go in?”

“You’ve got fifteen minutes. Try not to touch anything, and you were never here. No hair, no prints, nothing. And for God’s sake, please don’t leave any blood in my room.” He eyes Alec’s nose and Jace’s lip. “Got it?”

“Yeah,” Alec nods, eager as he wipes the blood from his face. “Yeah we got it. Thank you,” he
says. “I don’t—” his voice falters.

Underhill gives them a wry smile. “Hurry up, your time’s running out.”

“Thanks, man,” Jace says. He claps Underhill’s shoulder as he and Alec walk into the office.
Underhill closes the door behind them.

The room is dark and almost unfurnished, save for a single desk, a chair, and a file cabinet. There’s a triangular set of windows along the upper edge of the back wall, boarded up. Sebastian’s office is partially underground, and facing the street opposite the main entrance of the apartment building. It smells of cleaning solution and rat poison. Alec and Jace shuffle inward, careful to leave everything undisturbed.

“Sorry for the uh….” Alec starts, not quite sure what to say. There’s a bruise forming on Jace’s jaw, and Alec can feel the beginnings of a shiner under his right eye. The two have had more brawls between them than either can count. For Lightwoods, fighting is like breathing, and apologies are usually left unsaid. But Alec regrets the venom of his words, and he needs Jace to know he didn’t mean it.

“It’s fine. I get it, man, really. Plus now I know how it feels to be you,” Jace jokes. He nudges Alec’s side. “C’mon, let’s get your man back.”

“Yeah,” Alec agrees.

Jace and Alec canvass the room. They take pictures of the environment before they come to a stop behind the desk. Jace pulls out a pair of thin leather gloves from his pocket, standard equipment from the Institute for sensitive jobs. He puts them on, hands Alec an extra pair, and cautiously slides each drawer open in turn.

The first two contain stationery and writing utensils, shiny fountain pens and wells of ink, as well as stacks of pristine paper, and a series of checks sorted by occupant. Everything perfectly organized, nothing incriminating. Alec peers, on pins and needles, over Jace’s shoulder.

Jace huffs, then pulls open the last drawer and begins to poke around. He makes a face and pushes some papers aside.

“What the fuck?”

***

There’s no way out of here. Not that Magnus can see, anyway.

Chairman Meow stares up at him as he shifts in discomfort. Magnus stares at the red, windowless walls. He loves red, but he hates it now, uncomfortable with its romantic tones. Jonathan stares at Magnus from the doorway.

Chairman Meow lets out a plaintive cry. Magnus reaches down to pick him up as Jonathan offers a pastry bag from Magnus’ favorite bakery. The striped white surface curls at the top to keep out the air. A grease spot is spreading across the bottom of the bag. It smells heavenly and makes Magnus feel like retching. He holds Chairman Meow closer.

“I bought you something,” Jonathan says. He watches as Magnus uses one hand to accept the bag, open it, and look inside. “It’s your favorite.”

“So it is,” Magnus replies in quiet tones. He clenches his jaw at the sight of the chocolate and
orange muffin. It sticks to the bag, and layers of crumbs peel away with the paper as he frowns at it, desperate to get as far away from it as possible. It’s just a muffin, and it makes Magnus want to scream and cry and crush it in his hand.

Magnus glances at Jonathan and then sets the muffin down on a shinier, newer, copy of his desk.

“Do you like it?” Jonathan asks. He gestures to the space around them, an exact replica of Magnus’ bedroom. It’s identical, from the ornate crown molding joining the wall and ceiling, to the vintage furniture Magnus collects at antique shows. His one-of-a-kind bedouin rug rests beneath his feet, patterned in eye-catching diamonds and stripes on the floor beside his bed. He squints at the rug, and recognizes that it’s just a terrifyingly well-crafted replica, a sign of just how long this whole plan has been in motion.

It’s all just like his bedroom back in Brooklyn, except that there are no windows and the door is made of reinforced steel. Cozy. Jonathan stares at him, rapt, eyes wide and earnest. “I made sure to get everything right. It even smells like you.”

The gun glints in his hand, pointed down at the floor. For the first time in his life, a gun isn’t the thing Magnus is most afraid of. In a twisted way, the gun is the only real object in this room. Magnus finds that bizarrely comforting, grounding, a strange feeling he refuses to acknowledge. He shakes it off and raises his chin.

“I can’t say I do,” Magnus replies, voice dry.


“It would make me happy if you stopped waving that gun around and let me go,” Magnus says.

Jonathan looks down at the gun as if he’d forgotten it altogether. “Oh, of course. I’m sorry. I’ll be right back, wait for me.” He opens the door behind him and steps out of the room.

The lock clicks as he leaves.

***

“Who has the cash for this much blow?” Jace mutters. The two stare down at what looks like close to a kilogram of uncut cocaine, hidden under a stack of papers.

“Someone who was able to buy out an entire apartment building in Brooklyn just to stalk Magnus,” Alec points out.

“Right,” Jace says. “There can’t be that many people with this kind of ‘fuck you’ money.”

Alec doesn’t reply, too focused on the paperwork packed in the same drawer, a neat disguise for the brick of white powder sitting just beneath. The documents are legitimate, a mix of leases and property taxes.

“There’s nothing in here about Magnus,” Alec says, more to himself than Jace, though Jace makes a noise of acknowledgement. Ten minutes of investigation hasn’t turned up any evidence of a stalker. No candid pictures, no creepy shrine made of discarded hair and tissues, no journal stuffed
to the gills with oaths of love, convenient line-by-line plans, or hideout addresses.

If Alec didn’t know better, this was the office of a workaholic landlord in upscale Brooklyn, one bender away from a heart attack.

“Maybe we have the wrong guy,” Jace says. “Our perp could just look like the landlord.”

“We have him on tape, and I recognize the bastard.” Alec retorts.

“Evil twin?” Jace offers.

“Shut up, Jace.”

He feels the onset of a headache and a new wave of devastation.

***

Lamps are a poor substitute for the sun. They flood Magnus’ prison with yellow light that cuts clinical lines across skin and those red fucking walls. Magnus shifts his weight, rug and concrete beneath him, god know how many floors above.

Blue eyes watch his every movement.

“You’ve changed, Jonathan.”

“Do you like it?” Jonathan asks, expression nervous as he tugs on the ends of his hair. “You always liked dark hair.”

Magnus looks at him with a mixture of pity and horror. Jonathan sits at the end of the bed, fingers splayed on the covers, eyes begging for approval. Magnus continues to stand. He hasn’t sat down since he was thrown into this hell. Sitting, or touching, anything in this prison cell will cement this nightmare into grim reality.

He knows that there’s no one around to help him. The center was abandoned after its closure, and the facilities left to rot. It smells like the sandalwood incense he keeps by his bed, but it also smells like decay, as if the pollution of the city sank into the stone and grout.

“What happened?” Magnus asks, voice soft. “You were doing so well when I left.”

Sebastian’s lip twitches into something like a smile. There are huge dark circles under his eyes. “But then you left.”

“You know why I had to leave,” Magnus says. Chairman Meow lays in his arms, fur on end, claws sharp through Magnus’ shirt. “I know that you think this is what you want, but—.”

“I know what I want,” Sebastian snaps. “Don’t patronize me, Magnus. Please, not you.” His hands shake against the duvet. His pupils are dilated, and the muscles along the side of his face and neck spasm at irregular intervals.

Magnus’ training has him on high alert. He tried looking for these signs, tried de-escalate the conversation, tried to avoid bringing them here. Either all that training doesn’t work, or he’s personally failing this poor, sick man sitting before him.

Magnus sags where he stands. “Jonathan, you need help. I wasn’t the reason you were feeling better then, and I can’t make you feel better now.”
“I don’t need anything but you, Magnus,” Jonathan says. He inches closer, off the bed, fingers still unsteady, and caresses Magnus’ face. Magnus recoils from the touch. “It’s okay. Let me take care of you like I’ve always wanted to. Just like I promised.”

Magnus shies away. “That’s not what I said. This isn’t what you promised me.”

Jonathan smiles and ignores Magnus’ discomfort. Both hands cup Magnus’ face, eyes focused on Magnus’ own, gaze unyielding. “I’ll never hurt you like she did. I’ll never fail you like he did.” He looks at Magnus through his lashes. “I’m following my heart. Just like I promised.”

***

They scour the rest of the office. The file cabinets are full of old records and clutter that suggests a less organized predecessor to Sebastian. Other than the coke and video footage from the building across the street, they have nothing. Alec still has no idea where Magnus is.

The likelihood of the kidnapper coming back is low. He has what he wants, and Alec’s left here with a bag of narcotics and a name, Sebastian Verlac, that will probably turn out to be some poor bastard living in New Jersey.

Three knocks sound through the room, and Alec’s stomach sinks. Their time is up.

“Maybe the name will bring up some information,” Jace says, doubt clear in his face. Alec doesn’t say anything as they leave the office.

Underhill gives them a look of sympathy when they shake their heads. “Nothing at all?” He asks, voice quiet, head ducked downward to keep their conversation private.

“Nothing but paperwork and a metric fuckton of cocaine,” Jace mutters.

Underhill levels Jace with a raised brow. “I’ll see if I can get any prints off it, see if your guy’s in our system. One of yours is looking for you by the way, I told her to wait for you by your SUVs.”

“Lagrange must have pulled the information on Sebastian,” Alec says. “We’ll let you know if it comes up with anything big.” He lays a hand on Underhill’s shoulder, and shoots Underhill a grateful smile. “Thank you. Seriously, I owe you one.”

“Call it even,” Underhill replies. “You’ve helped me out your fair share. I’ll take it from here. But can you do me a favor and get your navy seal knockoffs out of broad daylight? They’re scaring the taxpayers.”

Alec gives a short, empty, laugh at that. He nods, then he and Jace head toward the cars. It’s a short walk, a familiar one, and Alec takes half the usual time to cross the lobby and step out into the city air. Lagrange waves them over, an unshattered tablet in hand.

“The building was paid for in cash by a shell. All utilities, upkeep, property taxes, maintenance and contract work, employee wages, everything is paid upfront in cash,” she says. Her lip curls into a deeper frown as she continues. “This guy is filthy old-money rich.”

“Any hits on the name?” Alec asks. It’s a tiny hope, but hope nonetheless.

“Sebastian Verlac? Nope.”

Alec takes the tablet and scans the screen. He hands it over to Jace, then rubs the back of his neck, pulling at the short hairs with his fingers, taking satisfaction from the fact that it hurts. Every hour
he wastes accomplishing nothing saps away at the chances of finding Magnus safe. Alive.

“What about the wax seal client list?” Jace suggests. “That’s the best lead we’ve got. Well, that and Camille.”

Alec freezes. A bus rushes past, the smell of exhaust rolls over them as it continues down the street, brakes squealing when it stops at a light. “No, we’re not wasting our time with Camille.”

“It’s not a waste of time and you know it,” Jace says. “You’ve got a hunch, run with it.”

“I’m not you, okay?” Alec snaps. “My fixation on Camille is the reason this all happened in the first place.”

“Last I checked, you’re not the one who whisked Magnus away at gunpoint,” Jace replies. “You need to stop obsessing over what you should’ve done better, and do whatever the hell you can right now to save your boyfriend.”

The air is awkward, and Lagrange uses the lull to skulk away and oversee the withdrawal of her agents from the area.

“How is Camille supposed to lead us to him?” Alec sighs. “Jace, I don’t want to keep chasing a dead end.”

The tablet pings in Jace’s grip. He looks at the incoming email, then taps Alec’s arm. “Looks like there’s only one other family in New York that was on the wax maker’s list of clientele. The Morgensterns, sound familiar?”

Alec racks his memory. The name does sound familiar, an association that reminds Alec too much of his father. Of the Hamptons and its modern day aristocracy.

“They’re part of the old boy network that does business with dad,” Alec says.

“They’re also all dead,” Jace mutters. “Check this out.”

Alec peers at the screen and scrolls down the list of headlines that cover all the morbid details of the Morgenstern clan’s fateful final voyage down along the Atlantic coast. “There’s not much information here,” he mutters. Further down the articles are all fluff pieces with other wealthy families expressing half-hearted condolences.

He looks for more information and finds nothing. Every article and obituary says the same thing: what a shame, what a tragedy, and yes, the stupid boat really was that expensive.

Nothing catches Alec’s eye. The Morgenstern lead needs more digging, but they don’t have the time to chase ghosts. There’s just not enough fucking time for all of this.

“Put them on Izzy’s docket, let her know that the Morgensterns are family friends. In the meantime we’ll go talk to Camille,” Alec decides, frustrated. “Even if she’s not involved, she’ll also want to find Magnus, and she has resources that we don’t.”

“Like what?” Jace asks.


***

Magnus’ back is starting to ache.
“Please, make yourself comfortable,” Jonathan says. He holds out his hand as he walks over to the bed and lays down on it, a tear across a canvas framed in gold.

“No, thank you. I’m fine here,” Magnus murmurs.

Jonathan’s eyes grow sharp, head tilted, smile tight across his cheeks. “Come sit with me. I insist. I made sure that everything is right, so it should be to your tastes.” Danger laces each word, alarms blaring louder in Magnus’ mind as Jonathan taps his shaking fingers.

Chairman Meow squirms as Magnus approaches the edge of the mattress. “Right, of course.” He inches onto the duvet, every part of him fights the movement, muscles stiff as he comes to lie on his side, back rigid as he keeps his gaze trained on Jonathan’s face.

“Isn’t this nice?” Jonathan asks.

“Yes,” Magnus whispers, the lie dying as soon as it’s borne into the air.

Jonathan tries to pet Chairman Meow but the tiny feline hisses and bats him away. The cat’s needle-sharp teeth glisten under the harsh lights. Jonathan retracts his hand. The Chairman burrows closer to Magnus.

They lay together in an unhinged version of companionable silence. The pillows sink beneath Magnus’ weight, he draws himself up against the headboard. As far from Jonathan as possible.

Chairman Meow’s hackles raise in warning as Jonathan reaches out again. Magnus notices him inching closer and closer every time he tries and fails to pet the rebellious cat.

“How long do you think it’ll take for him to warm up to me?” Jonathan asks. His voice is gentle, unsettling despite its soothing tones, a bit hazy around the edges.

Magnus shivers at the way Jonathan curls inward around him, intimate, smothering Magnus with every breath. “He doesn’t do well with strangers.”

“Well, good thing I’m not a stranger,” Jonathan says, an ever-patient smile still spread across his face. He’s even closer now; his long, pale, fingers play with the hem of Magnus’ shirt. Fondly, absentmindedly, violating Magnus’ personal space. “Your dad and I used to be close,” he tells the Chairman. “He helped me through some very hard times.”

“Jonathan,” Magnus starts. Jonathan shakes his head and shifts, closer. He comes around to face Magnus, and rests his other hand on Magnus’ neck, shadows playing on his features.

“And he’s so special to me,” Jonathan continues. He’s no longer talking to the Chairman, gaze skirting around the room. “I knew he was waiting for me, just ahead, guiding me to him. We’d be happy together someday.” He looks across at Magnus. His clear blue eyes are shot through with an electric madness. An intense, bottomless insanity that freezes Magnus’ bones. “And now we’re together,” Jonathan whispers.

Magnus feels the cool touch of Jonathan’s hand beneath his chin, the pad of Jonathan’s thumb smooths over his lips, the smooth line of a fingernail runs along his cheek. It’s reverent, worshipful, and sickening.

“Jonathan, I never wanted you to find me,” Magnus says. His eyes slip shut, the darkness a refuge from Jonathan’s gaze. “I left for myself too, I was still struggling after Cami—”

“Don’t remind me,” Jonathan replies, voice even, belying the bite of his nails along Magnus’ skin.
“She never deserved you. I waited, until I deserved you, Magnus. I’ve grown. I can take care of you.”

Magnus feels a white-hot guilt building in his gut. “I told you, you’ll find someone for you when the time’s right. That’s not me. I can’t be that for you.” He takes a deep breath, opens his eyes again and meets Jonathan’s gaze. “You can still get help. What about your family? They care about you.”

Jonathan blinks at him.

“They’re all gone now. They didn’t understand what I needed, what I had to do for myself, for you. You’re the only person I’ve ever needed in my life,” Jonathan insists. “You and this little guy right here.” He turns toward Chairman Meow, but then he pauses. A buzzing noise cuts through the tense silence in the room. Jonathan pulls his phone out of his pocket and checks it. His brows furrow. He leans over and gives Magnus a quick kiss on the cheek.

The cat pressed against Magnus’ chest hisses and takes a swipe at Jonathan’s throat. He pulls back, laughing, and stands. His weight leaves an imprint on the blankets, wrinkles and dips and warmth.

Magnus keeps his eyes on Jonathan.

“I’ll be back soon. I have some business I need to take care of,” Jonathan says, an attempt at reassurance that falls down a cliff and disappears. He waits, too long, for a good-bye. Magnus doesn’t give him one. After a long, pregnant silence between the two, his kidnapper turns and leaves. The door scrapes to a close and the lock clicks into place.

He waits. A minute passes. Then another.

Magnus slowly puts the Chairman down onto the bed covers. He gets on his feet and walks over to the door. It’s time to get out of here.

***

“I sent a surveillance team ahead,” Izzy says. Her voice goes a bit grainy as the company car passes under steel pipe scaffolding. Both Alec and Jace sit at attention in the back seat, looking ahead as they listen. Jace flicks the magazine catch of his weapon, and Alec clenches and unclenches his fists against his lap. “Camille lives in a fucking penthouse. Are you sure she’s not our girl?”

“I’m sure,” Alec replies, terse. He can hear Izzy rolling her eyes, three miles away across East River at the Institute.

“Anyway, about the Morgensterns, you may be onto something there,” she continues. “Pulled up all the information I could find. There’s only one surviving member of the family, name’s Jonathan Morgenstern. He’s twenty-four, no police record, and he did well in school. Looks like he modeled for a few years before the yachting incident. Fell off the grid after that.”

Jace chuckles a little, then stifles it into a cough when Alec shoots him a glare. “C’mon, a yachting incident?” Jace repeats. He winces as he pulls his split lip.

Alec ignores him. “Anything else?”

Izzy lets out a low whistle. “He’s definitely got the funds to pull this off. The Morgenstern estate is worth at least a five billion and this lucky bastard inherited it all.”
Alec lets out another disapproving noise.

“That’s ‘fuck you’ money, alright,” Jace mutters.

“Either way, it doesn’t look like he wants to be found, but our favorite Miss Belcourt is on the move now, I’ve got eyes. Hang tight and I’ll send over the live intel. I’ll keep you boys posted on anything juicy I dig up on Morgenstern. Good luck, and don’t do anything stupid,” Izzy says, and hangs up.

Alec and Jace sit together in silence as the SUV heads across the Williamsburg Bridge, toward SoHo.
Tools

Chapter Summary

No. I haven’t.

Chapter Notes

Thank you as always to @la_muerta and @quillstem for being the best and carrying me through this!
I hope y’all enjoy the penultimate chapter for TGR!

Izzy’s messages are sparse and brief. Camille is getting into a car. Camille is entering a boutique. Camille is shopping. Alec wants to punch through their tinted windows.

The driver carves through New York traffic. Alec, Jace, and their employees sit in silence. Jace’s nose wrinkles at the pungent scent of leather and disinfectant. Each hard stop rattles their equipment, and Alec stares at the cut on the pad of his thumb. He presses on it. The dry skin splits under the pressure, a sharp sting, a pain that serves to distract him as he waits. Jace’s phone rings, a low quality MP3 rip of a song Alec doesn’t know. He watches Jace answer the call.

“Hey, Iz. You got something for us?”

Alec leans in as Jace puts Izzy on speaker. The other employees come to attention, but stay silent.

“Yeah, eyes are up and I’ve got something you need to see,” Izzy says. “I’ll patch it through to the tablet.” Alec grabs it before Jace can. He turns it on and tunes into the feed.

Alec watches the screen with suspicious eyes. The footage is so clear that Alec can see the golden hour in the shine of Camille’s coat.

“She’s pretty hot,” Jace says. Alec scowls at him, and squints harder at the screen. “She also looks super shitty,” Jace amends with an awkward cough. “Like an absolute grade A bitch.”


Alec ignores them. He bores holes into Camille’s head as she walks up to and into a restaurant.

“What was the thing you wanted us to see?”

“Oh, nothing,” Izzy says. “Just this.” The drone shifts. At first it’s just a scene of New York streets, then the camera sharpens. Alec holds his breath as a figure comes into focus. Sebastian.

He looks more alive than any other time Alec’s ever seen him. A smile, a genuine one, stretches across his cheeks. Wind runs through his dark hair. Each step he takes is confident and even, with a cadence that sets Alec’s teeth on edge.
Sebastian checks his phone, then strides into the restaurant Camille strutted into minutes earlier. It’ll take them another half an hour to get into Manhattan if they’re lucky. Half an hour for Camille and Sebastian to do god knows what with Magnus. Jace grabs the tablet before Alec can break it.

“That fucking bastard,” he breathes. The urge to punch something returns.

Jace nudges his side. “Hey, good news. You were right about Camille.” He sits back in his seat. “Now we just have to get there before they leave.”

Alec stares at the passing buildings as they approach the bridge. He can feel the blood beginning to bead on his thumb. The seat belt digs into his hip, too tight.

***

Magnus throws all of his weight at the door. It doesn’t budge and now his shoulder hurts. He tries again with his foot, and all he gets is a dull, metallic, thud. His heel clips the hinges as his leg drops to the side. The door swings inward. Great.

Panic climbs the knobs of his spine. It bows his back and makes it difficult to breathe. Magnus can feel himself begin to spiral, but he can’t afford to. Not right now. He bites his tongue. The tang of blood floods his mouth and cuts through his hysteria.

He paces the room to burn off some of his frantic energy. What do heroes do in action movies? Not sit around and wring their hands, that’s for sure. His teeth worry his lower lip until it feels pink and a bit raw. Electricity hums from beneath the concrete. The lights flicker for a moment before kicking back on.

Maybe there’s secret passage that will set him free. Feeling ridiculous, but equally desperate, Magnus runs the perimeter of the room. He knocks on the walls, and reaps nothing but tender knuckles for his trouble.

Magnus pauses in front of the door. The knob is the same as the doorknob on his front door, not his bedroom. It’s the first lapse in Sebastian’s recreation. Magnus stares at it, a tear in the fabric of this false reality, and wants to rip it out of the reinforced steel. The keyhole taunts him. He kicks the door, once, twice, again and again as white-hot frustration churns in his gut.

“Let me out,” he spits. It stands strong in his wake, unfeeling, and unyielding.

He reaches out and sets his hand on one of the hinges. It feels heavy in his hand. The cold leeches heat from his fingertips as he considers his options. It’s a long shot, but it’s better than nothing.

“What do you think?” Magnus asks aloud. The Chairman continues to sleep on one of many decorative pillows. He taps a finger to his lips, turning to examine the room as he walks toward the bed. “You’re right. I need to find some tools.”

***

Broad windows pour sunset onto chic white walls. Succulents sit in the middle of each glossy tabletop, high-backed chairs scraping across rustic hardwood floors, with delicate light fixtures and plants hanging from beams that arc overhead. Camille unrolls the pastel blue napkin. She sets the cloth on her lap and checks the time. The scent of coffee and baked goods wafts through the air.

A waiter sets down a plate of salad, a vibrant pile of microgreens, avocado, and some breed of quinoa. Camille ignores the dressing it comes with. She picks through the toppings with a silver fork when footsteps approach her table.
“You’re late,” she says.

Jonathan beams at her from where he folds into his chair. He ignores her sour mood and opts for checking his nails instead. “Always pleasant, aren’t you?” Camille rolls her eyes and snaps her fingers. The server appears at her elbow.

“I don’t like this,” she says. “Take it back and bring me that salmon dish with the mango salsa.” The dish is swept away and a new set of cutlery drops into the vacant space. Her eyes glance over him with a marked disinterest. “So, did you get the cat?”

Jonathan watches as she takes a sip of her water. “I got something better.” He flags down a waiter and orders a black coffee. Camille glares at him over her glass.

“What do you mean you got something better? Magnus cares more about that cat than he cares about anything.” She rolls her eyes as he accepts a steaming mug. “What did you do? Steal his underwear?”

“So crude,” Jonathan jokes, voice low, feigning offense. “Though I suppose you’re not wrong. Assuming he is wearing underwear, anway.” He drinks the coffee, bitter and strong, and licks his teeth.

Her eyes narrow in disgust, anger, and disbelief. She watches as Jonathan studies the menu left for him by the server that delivers her salmon, and the strong scent of cilantro. Steam rises between them. Moments pass, silence growing over their table like weeds.

“What do you mean?” she asks, finally.

Jonathan plays with a ring that sits on his left hand. He sniffs and rubs his nose. “Exactly what I said.”

“That is not what I told you to do,” Camille snaps.

“You don’t tell me to do anything,” Jonathan replies. He stops a waitress and orders a plate of lamb bolognese, then thanks her when she tops off his drink. “You’re just the woman who hurt the love of my life,” he finishes with a shrug. “You are of no consequence to me. Not anymore.”

“This is not what you were supposed to do,” Camille insists. Her grip tightens on her napkin.

Jonathan’s smile grows tight. “I don’t care what you think I was supposed to do. But I do know what you will do.”

“And what’s that?” Camille asks, disdain obvious.

Jonathan sits back in his chair, nonchalant. “You’ll leave New York,” he says. “You’ll leave, and you’ll never see me, or Magnus, ever again.”

Camille’s eyes blaze. “Excuse me? You can’t just say shit like that to me.”

“Can’t I?” Jonathan finishes his coffee and deigns to look at her. “I can bury you and your family. I will make sure that you burn. All of your designer clothes, your precious home, and anything else a hollow, vacuous hag like you might love.” He says it as though he’s discussing the weather. The rest of the bistro continues on, customers chatting in ignorance as Jonathan leans across the table and cups Camille’s chin. “Why don’t you run along and ask Daddy if he’d like to go toe to toe with the Morgensterns. I’d love to hear what he has to say.” His smile stretches wide, vivid and bright in the fading sunlight.
A waitress appears with a plate piled high with rich-smelling pasta. “Here’s your lamb bolognese, sir. Be careful, it’s hot,” she says. Jonathan gestures to the table, and she sets the dish down in front of him. “Is there anything I can get for you?”

Jonathan looks up at her and gives her a bewitching smile. “Thank you so much,” he says. His chair creaks as he settles back against it. “We’re doing perfectly fine. Right, Camille?”

Camille’s gaze doesn’t leave Jonathan’s face as he turns to look at her.

“Yes,” she says. “Everything is fine.”

***

Magnus rummages around the room.

Jonathan’s replica is perfect, but he doesn’t know if he even owns anything required to break door hinges. He checks beneath the bed and sorts through the innumerable boxes there. There are shoes, more shoes, and an electric blue jockstrap he’s been missing for the past several months—except that this one is brand new.

Jonathan bought, and hid, a pair of underwear just for the sake of authenticity. Magnus wants to vomit. He pushes it aside, and stands.

The blue monstrosity stares up at him from the floor. Magnus walks to the tiny bathroom attached to the makeshift bedroom to wash his hands, desperate to be rid of the feeling of having even touched anything Jonathan’s touched.

Rows of bottles wait patiently to be used. His favorite lemon-basil hand soap sits by the sink. He hesitates before using it. Magnus reaches to dry his hands, and knocks the towel to the floor.

“Fuck,” he mutters. His knuckles drip as he leans down to pick it up.

There are mahogany cabinets beneath this sink, just like his own back home. Magnus opens one of the doors and finds his toolbox, all grey and black and useless since he doesn’t actually keep any of his tools in it. The last time Magnus used his toolbox was when he first got it as a housewarming present, and all of the tools are god knows where. He doesn’t even remember keeping his toolbox beneath his bathroom sink.

If Sebastian is as accurate with this as he is with everything else, Magnus is still shit out of luck, but there might something useful behind it if not inside it. He grabs the handle. When he begins to move it, something rattles inside the toolbox. The box feels heavier than he expected as it scrapes across the bottom shelf.

Magnus pulls it out and hears more rattling when it hits the floor. It pops open with a flick of his fingers.

“Holy shit,” he breathes.

There are fucking tools inside of it. Three screwdrivers—two broken, one whole—a hammer, a wrench, a pair of pliers, and some actual goddamn hope. Magnus grabs the good screwdriver and hammer. His feet stumble in his haste.

He expects it, but confirming that he can’t unscrew the hinges takes some of the wind out of his sails. Even so, his resolve is back, bright and determined as he squats down.
The Chairman watches him as he places the screwdriver head against the top of the bottom hinge. It scratches against the metal before coming to rest in the tiny divot between the base of the hinge and the door itself. He grits his teeth, prays to a god he’s not sure he believes in, and strikes with the hammer. Chairman startles, hair raised, and scrambles beneath the bed.

Magnus’ hand trembles with the impact. He squeezes the screwdriver harder, takes a deep breath, and hits it again. Each sharp clang rakes over his nerves and makes his ears ring. He steels himself and continues his work.

His fingers start to ache as he twists them tighter. The skin on his hands feels clammy. Slick palms force him to readjust his grip a few times. Sweat collects at his temples and around the collar of his shirt. His aching shoulder tenses with each rise and fall of the hammer, but Magnus refuses to stop.

The screwdriver handle breaks with a disheartening crack. Magnus slumps when he checks the progress he’s made. Even if the screwdriver was unbreakable he’s barely made a dent, and he doesn’t have time to waste. He throws the useless tool to the ground and strides past it.

Keep trying, he tells himself. His chest heaves as he sucks in stale air. Find something better.

***

Brakes screech as the car in front of them comes to an abrupt stop. Alec’s hands clench as the SUV begins to move and turns another corner. Jace holds the tablet in his lap, the live feed streaming across its surface. His feet and legs bounce with impatience as he stares at the ceiling. The engine quiets when they hit a red light.

“Just a few more blocks,” the driver says. Alec thanks them, and begins to prepare his comms. Everyone comes to life around him. Jace sets the tablet on the seat next to him to check his gun, as the other Lightwood agents check their own gear. Alec’s gaze drifts over the tablet just as Izzy’s voice blasts through his earpiece.

“Sebastian is on the move, you need to go now.” Alec watches Sebastian step out of the restaurant, clear as day, as the driver announces that they’re stuck in bumper to bumper traffic. Alec doesn’t hesitate.

He shoves the door open and leaps out into the street. Jace shouts after him, and Alec can hear the sound of feet hitting the ground, a cacophony of honks and swears all around them. Alec takes off.

“Where are they?” he asks. It’s cold as fuck, but he can barely feel it. His legs take him up along the sidewalk, not quite on it, but not quite in the street either, as he tries to find the clearest path to the restaurant.

“Continue straight, just three blocks. He’s heading due north,” Izzy says. Alec pushes himself faster. Two more blocks to the restaurant.

He hits the crosswalk as the light changes. Without a second thought, he leaps into the oncoming stream of cars. Drivers slam on their brakes and roll their windows down, their livid voices lost to the wind as he runs past and over their cars, feet heavy on the metal. He stares straight ahead. Other pedestrians glance at him before turning back to their own business. As long as he’s not outright dead, they don’t care.

One more block. Grates clank and rattle beneath him. A taxi rolls through the red light and in his way. Alec slides over the hood and rolls off the other side. He breathes in burning rubber and exhaust as he pelts across the next lane. Tires squeal as a sedan tries to stop. It clips him and sends
him reeling to the side, but he ignores the pain and the shouts of concern, focusing on the ground he still needs to cover.

Alec can see the restaurant, leaping up onto the sidewalk and plows through a crowd of fussy pigeons. He can hear Jace and the others behind him beneath the grounding sound of Izzy’s voice. “Keep going straight. He’s a couple blocks ahead of you now.”

The restaurant door swings open. Alec runs into the patron and sends their drink all over the asphalt.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” she snaps. “Watch where you’re going.”

“Camille,” Alec breathes. Anger and contempt rise in his blood as she looks him over and has the nerve to roll her eyes.

“Okay, two-bit Rambo. What even is this? Some new kink Magnus thought up?” Her line of vision settles on his gun. She bites her lip, but says nothing.

His fists tremble at his sides. “Magnus is missing, did you know that?” The space between them disappears as he corners her against a grungy bus stop. He looms over her, voice threatening as he traps her against the plexiglass. “Tell me what you know.”

She meets his gaze, arms crossed. Her heels click against the concrete. The cloying scent of her perfume tickles his nose. “I don’t have anything to do with him anymore.” Despite her bravado, there’s a nervousness in her gaze that fills Alec with rage. She knows.

Alec points at the three members of Jace’s team as they catch up. “Escort Miss Belcourt to the Institute and give Underhill a call.” Camille opens her mouth to protest, but Alec doesn’t give her the time.

Without another word or wasted breath, Alec continues to run. Jace chases after him as they blow through the last two seconds of a crosswalk.

“What about Camille?” Jace asks. “Shouldn’t we ask her to see if she knows anything? It might get us to Magnus faster.”

“Jace has a point,” Izzy notes, her voice just a bit fuzzy through the comms.

“Camille won’t tell us anything until it’s too late. If we get Sebastian, at least we know that Magnus isn’t going to be moved,” Alec replies. He shoves through a gaggle of tourists when he catches a glimpse of black hair and bright blue eyes that meet his own.

A hot dog cart rolls by, leaving a trail of steam and the smell of cooking meat. Business people swarm the intersection. Their phones beep as they swing their shiny briefcases. A street performer stands by a bench and plays guitar covers for cash. Alec doesn’t notice any of it. The cut on his thumb stings in the winter air.

Sebastian turns tail and flees.

***

Magnus removes the lightbulb and base from the floor lamp sitting in the corner of his room. Chairman plays with the wire that trails across the floor. He paws at it, swatting it back and forth as Magnus tries to tug it out of his grasp. Magnus manages to pull it free. Chairman Meow pounces on it once more.
“No, Chairman, don’t do that,” Magnus chides. He scoops up the cat and deposits the Chairman on the bed. Chairman Meow curls up on the sheets, indignant. “I’ll get us out of here. I promise. But you can’t be running around while daddy’s using tools,” Magnus says. Chairman Meow ignores him in favor of kneading a pillow with tiny claws.

With the Chairman occupied, Magnus returns to his work. He picks up the lamp post, sets it on the nightstand, and then stands over it with the hammer in his hand.

“I really hope this works,” Magnus mutters to himself. The hammer clangs against the curved surface. Chairman Meow hisses and dives beneath the sheets as Magnus continues flattening the pole as best he can. He manages to reform a few inches, the round head of the hammer leaving divots in the nightstand with each strike. Magnus eyes his handiwork. It looks thin enough.

He stalks across the room, makeshift lever in hand. Magnus places one foot against the bottom edge. A tiny gap appears between the door and the frame. He wriggles the flat of the lever into the slot, and wedges it in. It fits. With some convincing, he manages to get a fair bit of it through. Magnus widens his stance and finds a solid grip.

“Well, here goes nothing.” He leans against the lever. It resists, unyielding, as he tries to ratchet the door open. Magnus grunts with the effort, then yanks the rod backward, the outer lip of the frame bends with the pressure and ignites a spark in his chest. He takes a second to catch his breath before throwing himself back into it.

He finds a rhythm. Breathe. Push. Pull. Breathe. Push. Pull. It feels like he’s getting somewhere, when he trips over his feet, pitches forward and falls to the floor. He tries to get up almost immediately and the room tilts as he stands.

Magnus leans in to inspect the damage. His makeshift lever has bent under his weight. It’s split on one side, the other bowing inward. The door, on the other hand, is still perfectly fine.

Magnus stares at it for a moment. The quiet grows as he backs away from the door. His hands, arms, back, and chest feel numb. Sweat drips down his neck. He lurches forward and grabs the broken lever. Every muscle screams in pain as he seizes it and twists, jerking it from the door before sending it flying against the wall.

He curls up, hugs his knees, and tries to keep himself from unraveling.

***

Sebastian sprints away. Alec and Jace chase after him, darting through pedestrians, bicyclists, and cars alike. The cool winter air blisters against their cheeks as they run. Alec takes a sharp breath of the dingy city air.

He and Jace race across the street and follow Sebastian through a maze of scaffolding and wooden boards. A pit opens in the ground ahead. Safety cones and metal bars preventing access to the sidewalk. Sebastian edges around it, feet unsteady as he ducks beneath the rails and into the street.

Alec ignores the safety warnings. He launches himself over the gaping hole and then again over the protective barrier. Jace follows without hesitation. Their feet skid on debris as they regain their balance.

Construction workers yell at them as they sprint past, loud and aggressive over the sound of power tools and swearing passersby. They run into oncoming pedestrians, their shoulders clipping strangers left and right.
Alec grits his teeth as Sebastian pulls ahead and speeds into a park.

A rat scurries into a trashcan as Sebastian dashes past. He glances over his shoulder, eyes wide and manic, and Alec can see a flash of teeth as Sebastian barks out a laugh that Alec can’t hear. Gravel gives beneath Alec’s feet, pebbles and rocks now skyborne as Sebastian whips around a corner hidden behind lush tree branches, Alec just a few steps behind.

“This fucker’s really fast,” Jace spits.

“No kidding,” Izzy says in Alec’s ear. “Do you guys want me to send the drone after you now that Camille’s on her way back to the Institute?”

“No,” Alec huffs. He leaps over a hedge to cut across a strip of grass as Sebastian curves around the path. “I’m gaining on him.”

Sebastian takes them through a playground. Toddlers and children shriek as Sebastian hurtles through. Parents cry out in anger and fear. A crowd grows and blocks the open areas. People clamor as they gather their kids, Sebastian disappearing behind the wall of bodies and down a set of concrete stairs.

Alec’s shoes dig into the loose wood chips as he pushes himself to go faster, faster. He jumps up onto the ledge, eyes on Sebastian’s back. The drop isn’t that far. He leaps down and lands on the side of the stairway. He grabs onto the railing and turns before jumping the rest of the way. He lands with a thud. The fall rattles his bones and makes his joints feel like they’re about to burst.

Sebastian catches sight of him, eyes steely, and takes a left when the park opens onto the street. Alec pelts across the asphalt and into the grass. His lungs burn, arms and legs moving by sheer force of will, but Alec refuses to ease off the gas.

“We’ve got this, Iz, thanks,” Jace replies, sarcastic despite his desperate breaths. He shouts an apology that echoes through the trees.

Izzy lets out a disbelieving snort. “Right.”

Alec is so close. He can see the sweat on Sebastian’s upper lip when Sebastian looks back at him, and the determination in wild blue eyes. His fingers stretch and he feels body heat and leather. Sebastian twists out of Alec’s grasp and kicks over a set of wooden pallets resting against a building. They crash into his path. He tries to avoid the massive, heavy, boards and curses when one slams into his shin.

Sebastian ducks past a couple and into a huge crowd of foreign tourists, prompting a swell of surprised gasps. He elbows through the group and takes off. Alec tries to push through, but several people have fallen to the ground in Sebastian’s wake. Jace grabs Alec’s arm just as Alec moves to run into the street and around them, traffic be damned. A car whizzes through the space he’d been about to step into.

“Whoa there, buddy,” Jace says. “You’re no good to anyone if you’re dead by taxi.”

“That son of a bitch has Magnus,” Alec snaps. He can see Sebastian sprinting off and across the street before disappearing around a corner. “I almost had him and I let him get away.” The tourists stare up at him, confused and afraid as he yells in frustration.

“He’s on 9th street,” Izzy interrupts cheerily. “He’s getting in a car. Do you want me to ping your
Alec catches his breath. Oxygen rushes to his lungs as he and Jace exchange looks.

“Drone?” Jace asks.

“Drone,” Izzy confirms. “Now, let’s see where our little friend is going, shall we?”

***

Magnus stands with his back to the door. One hand grips his side, and the other pulls at some dead skin on his lip. Enough.

He stomps over to the nightstand nearest him, ripping through it, pulling a drawer off of its tracks as he looks for something, anything. Nothing. No magic keys or cell phones or even any damn chapstick. Magnus finds a box of incense and resolves to throw away every sandalwood-scented thing he owns. Chairman pauses his grooming to beg for attention. Magnus leans down against the bed. His hands tremble as he tugs on his hair and at his clothes.

“Chairman. What do I do?” He pulls himself back up, and treads over to the nightstand to the left of the bed. “Maybe there’s something in here,” he mutters. He goes through the first drawer and finds some spare batteries and a bookmark. The second opens and reveals a bottle of lube, some unused condoms, and an assortment of sex toys. “Ah, yes, just what I need—an ovipositor,” Magnus says bitterly. He shoves it to the side as he takes stock of the miscellaneous collection of kinky paraphernalia. One catches his eye, and he examines it, then brandishes it like a sword. “If I broke this glass dildo, I could use it as a weapon. What do you think, Chairman?”

The Chairman flicks his tail.

Magnus feels like he’s being stretched thin in every direction, drawn taut and tight. Overhead lights shine down on each useless discovery as he slumps against the side of the bed. “I thought it might pass for an actual idea.” Chairman Meow begins to groom. “Alexander would laugh,” Magnus says. A bark of wild laughter escapes him. “Not like you would know, because you’re a cat.”

Alexander. Magnus wonders if Alec is looking for him—of course Alec is, he scolds himself. Alec would never give up on him. He thinks of warm blankets and kisses, their last conversation. Regret sits heavy in his stomach.

“What if I never see him again?” he wonders aloud. Magnus stops that train of thought in its tracks, barely keeping himself together.

He wards off the return of full-blown panic by playing with the set of sounding toys he got last year just in case. No one ever requested that he use them, so he never opened them.

There are so many of them, all long and thin pieces of metal for his penis-penetrating pleasure. Maybe he should give them a shot if he ever gets out of here.

Wait. Magnus reaches out and grabs the unopened set. He runs his fingers over the thin stems and various heads. These could work. He pries open the packaging and hurries to the door. “Holy shit,” he breathes.

It takes him five minutes to hammer one end of each toy flat. Magnus sends up a prayer of thanks for whatever deity left his toolbox in the bathroom under his sink. He grabs the pliers next, and bends the toys until he’s fashioned his own lockpicking set.
Magnus sucks in a breath. They look awful, all warped and hastily shaped, but they feel right between his fingers. He carries them over to the door and kneels until he’s eye-level with the doorknob.

The moment of truth. He picks up the first of his tools—a shaft he’d flattened and bent in two—and inserts his homemade tension-wrench into the keyhole and gently tips it to one side. Magnus takes the next pick and lays it above the wrench. Delicate curves and points catch lightly as it slides in. He tests it against the pins, and lets out a soft sob. Relief floods through his system. This will work.

Chairman Meow leaps off the bed and streaks around the boundaries of the room. Magnus is very out of practice. In the good old days, he could break into Ragnor’s apartment in two minutes flat. It’s been too long.

He struggles through the first few tries, resetting with every mistake. Each time he gains more feeling for the lock and how he needs to persuade it to open.

The tension is too high. He goes too deep and misses the notch he needs to hit. His hand slips because he’s aching and tired and his fingers keep fucking trembling. It’s frustrating, but this is a frustration Magnus knows well. He welcomes it like an old friend, and Magnus can’t help but grin as he presses the picks into place, and turns them together. The lock clicks open.

He’s free.

“I bet Ragnor’s eating his words now. Useless hobby my ass,” Magnus muses, a bit crazed. “We’re getting out of here, Chairman,” he declares. Magnus takes one more look at his prison with its painted walls and tasteful decor, now laying in waste, and scowls. He picks up Chairman Meow, and steps out into the hallway.

It’s dark and quiet. His prison serves as the only source of light beyond dull red bulbs that watch him from above. Dust and dead bugs cover the floor. Each step he takes disturbs the decay settled between cracks in the wall.

The facility has the same eerie heartbeat as most abandoned places, a phantom presence, a weight to the air that lingers on shoulders and in shadows.

It feels lonely, sad, and desperate. But Magnus doesn’t have time to linger. He holds Chairman close and begins to run. The hallway stretches as he goes. Rats squeak at the sight of him and scurry away.

The doors to the stairs are boarded up, and there are no windows on this whole floor. He’s underground, all obvious exits blocked off as a way to prevent any intrepid explorers.

There has to be a way out and in. Sebastian blindfolded him on their way to the center, so Magnus has little to work with, but he has no choice but to try each door until he finds one that leads to the surface. He’s on his sixth door when he hears a door slam further down the corridor.

Jonathan.

Magnus ducks into the room behind the door, holding his breath as Jonathan runs past. Everything is still, silence crushing the air out of Magnus’ chest. He leans his back against the wall, closes his eyes, and tries to make sense of the quiet.

An awful scream echoes off the walls, guttural and barbaric and chilling. He can hear Jonathan destroying the furniture, and bides his time, trying to decide whether to wait or run.
Magnus knows the direction of the exit, but not which door to try. He waits. He waits as the screams turn into curses, and then finally into laughter.

“Oh, Magnus,” Jonathan calls, voice clear in the barren hallways and Magnus’ ears. “Always playing hard to get. Don’t worry, my love. I’ll find you.”

Jonathan’s footsteps start down the hallways, in the same direction he came. He treads slowly, carefully, past Magnus, and to the next room.

Magnus breathes, slow and even, when the Chairman begins to squirm in his arms.

“Chairman, no,” Magnus whispers, desperate. The Chairman struggles against his grip, and lets out a loud, unhappy, *meow.*

Jonathan’s footsteps pause.

Magnus’ heart hammers in his chest as Jonathan walks into the room and finds him, gun in hand.

There’s sweat on Jonathan’s brow and a brightness that lights up his eyes. He smiles tenderly.

“There you are.”

***

The SUV eases to a stop in front of the decrepit building. Alec shoves the door open and sprints toward the front doors. Locked and covered in a haphazard grid of wooden planks.

“How do I get in, Iz?”

“Go around back, there’s a maintenance entrance that leads down below ground. That’s where Sebastian went,” she says. Alec runs to the back. Jace trails behind him as they come to a stop. A metal door lays stark against the dirt. Alec grips the handle and swings it open. The rungs of a ladder and hazy darkness greet them.

“You’re right on his tail, but I don’t know if I’ll be able to keep comms going with you down there,” Izzy notes. “He’s somewhere in that building, and Magnus probably is too.”

“Thank you, Iz,” Alec breathes. “I don’t know what we’d do without you.”

She laughs. “Me neither. Good luck.”

Alec nods to Jace and begins his descent. The rungs are sturdy, if dusty, and drop him off in the middle of a red-tinted hallway. Dim red lights line the ceiling against the walls and wash over him as he takes stock of where he is. There’s a set of double doors to his left, windows revealing a larger corridor that leads to a service elevator. Jace’s feet land as Alec turns to inspect the small, windowless door to the right. Jace eyes their options.

“Split up?” Jace asks.


Jace nods, and they both unholster their guns. Each step kicks up stale air and the unmistakable stench of rat excrement.

Jace coughs. “Magnus better be worth all of this,” he jokes with a cheeky grin.
“He is,” Alec says, returning Jace’s smile with one of his own. “If you find him first, take care of him for me, will you?”

Jace rolls his eyes and takes off toward the double doors. “Do you even have to ask?” he calls, doors swinging shut behind him. Alec huffs and turns toward the uninviting door to his right.

It opens to another red hallway. Innumerable identical doors populate each side. Alec steps forward.

Magnus is here somewhere, and Alec’s going to find him.

***

“Jonathan, please just let me go,” Magnus pleads. He holds Chairman Meow tighter against his chest. The cat complies, claws out and teeth bared at their captor. Jonathan keeps his gun trained on Magnus, his expression apologetic.

“I can’t do that, my love. You know that,” Jonathan hums. He comes around behind Magnus and lays the tip of his gun against Magnus’ back. Magnus feels Jonathan’s lips on his neck. “I’m going to take you to the home I’ve prepared for us. You’ll love it. There’s even a room just for our little baby, here.” He coos at Chairman Meow, who hisses in response.

Cold metal prods Magnus forward. They shuffle together, movements awkward, as Jonathan guides Magnus down the hall.

Jonathan runs a hand down Magnus’ arm. Chairman Meow scratches him without mercy, paws swatting, and yowls. Red raises high on pale skin. He raises his arm into the light, mottled bruises and angry lines of blood laid out for Magnus to see.

Jonathan’s touch makes Magnus’ skin crawl. The soft palm of Jonathan’s hand feels nothing like Alec’s calloused one, thin cold fingers like trails of ice, so unlike the warmth of Alec’s presence.

“Alexander will find me,” Magnus says, certain. His voice disrupts the vacuum of the hallway.

Jonathan pauses, then continues on, a little faster than before. “Don’t worry about that,” he says. Magnus can smell the sweat on Jonathan’s skin. Their shoes drag through the dust caked on the unkept linoleum floor. The silence is heavier than before, an angry buzzing that swarms the space around them, loud and oppressive.

A door slams open.

Jonathan freezes. He grips Magnus’ arm and pulls Magnus next to him. The muzzle of his gun glints as he holds it aloft.

A figure runs out into the open. His chest heaves as he turns to look at them, eyes shining in the gloom.

“Alexander,” Magnus breathes.

***

Relief floods Alec’s lungs at the sound of his name.

Magnus is okay. He looks terrified and exhausted, but his eyes are sharp. His hair looks like he’s run his hands through it for a full hour. Sweat plasters the fabric of his button-up to his torso.
Chairman Meow clings to his front. Even so, he offers Alec a tired smile that sets fire to Alec’s insides.

“Magnus,” Alec murmurs.

“Enough,” Sebastian snaps.

Alec forces himself to turn back to Sebastian. He moves forward, closer, strides even as he approaches.

Sebastian lays a hand on Magnus’ hip, and Alec’s mind screams for him to remove it.


“You didn’t tell me that your dearest Alexander was a military man,” Sebastian says in Magnus’ ear, just loud enough for Alec to hear. He kisses Magnus’ cheek. “I didn’t know you liked men like that.” Magnus’ eyebrows draw together as he leans away from Sebastian’s touch.

“Let him go,” Alec repeats. “I won’t tell you again.” He aims at Sebastian and stares down Sebastian’s gun. He’ll shoot true from this distance, Alec knows, he can visualize the bullet’s path.

Sebastian eyes him with curiosity and a strange lack of concern. “And if I don’t?” he asks.

Alec glances over to Magnus. Magnus stares back at him, gaze traveling the length of his arm and down the barrel of the glock in his hand.

There’s fear in Magnus’ eyes. Alec hates that he’s the source of that fear, the person pointing a gun in Magnus’ direction—a memory painted in red.

Alec tries to breathe. The safety is off, his finger is on the trigger, and he wants to tell Magnus that everything will be okay.

*Have you killed anyone?*

Magnus looks toward Sebastian, frantic.

“Jonathan, plea—.”

*No. I haven’t.*

Sebastian fires. Alec’s body explodes in pain. The air rushes out of him. He collapses, vision fading in and out. Incessant ringing and muffled screams drift through the space between his ears, and red lights wink out all at once.
“Jonathan, please.”

The gunshot charges from the barrel. Heat from the muzzle singes the air. All he can hear is a deadened ringing in his ears. Jonathan’s arm clamps around his waist as the recoil rattles through their teeth. Blood swills around his mouth.

Chairman Meow claws free of his arms and disappears.

“Alec,” Magnus gasps, wet, soundless.

Alec’s body flies backward. The force of the bullet snaps his body to the side as sharp focus fades from his eyes.

His hand goes slack, and his gun slips from his fingers.

Alec crumples in a dull heap with a soundless thud. A cloud of dust surges up around his body. He doesn’t move.

Magnus’ knees buckle beneath him. His feet slide through dust, Jonathan’s arm digs into his chest, hand gripping his shoulder, the only thing keeping him upright.

Copper stains the seam of his lips. He wants to scream, roar, anything to purge the horror running rampant inside him.

Jonathan lowers his gun until Alec’s body is in its sights. A thin, shaking, pale-white finger rests on the trigger.

“No.

Rages burns white-hot in Magnus’ gut. He whips his palm up, and shoves Jonathan’s right arm toward the ceiling. The second shot goes wildly off the mark. It clips one of the red lights. The
bulb explodes. Heated, broken glass showers down on them. Magnus seizes Jonathan’s elbow and wrist in an iron grip.

Jonathan yanks Magnus tighter against him. His ragged nails rake Magnus’ neck in neat burning rows as he tries to choke the air from Magnus’ throat. He claws Magnus’ cheek before he relieves the pressure on Magnus’ windpipe. Jonathan shouts something, drowned out by endless ringing in Magnus’ ears. His hand curls into a fist and swings out. The blow crashes down on Magnus’ eye. Again.

Magnus refuses to yield his hold on the wrist of Jonathan’s shooting hand. He keeps the barrel of the handgun pointed firmly at the concrete ceiling.

Jonathan shoots on instinct. Rounds strike the ceiling, a barrage of noise that shakes the ground. Magnus drops down as Jonathan punches at him again.

He hooks the crook of his foot against Jonathan’s ankle and pulls with all his might. They topple backward, crashing to the ground. Magnus pulls his arms in as they fall. The force drives his elbow into Jonathan’s ribs. Bone gives with a wet crunch. Jonathan howls in pain, but Magnus doesn’t hesitate. He has to disassemble the gun.

Magnus engages the safety. He presses both catch releases on either side of the gun, above the trigger-guard. The magazine slides out as Magnus pulls the barrel assembly off the frame. Within a second, just like his father taught him. He chucks it to the side, and kicks the magazine as hard as he can.

Magnus pivots until he’s laying perpendicularly across Jonathan’s ribcage. He pulls Jonathan into an armbar and applies pressure with the back of his left knee against Jonathan’s throat.

Jonathan thrashes. He bucks and kicks, but Magnus has him pinned. Adrenaline rackets through them. Sweat drips from their skin as they wheeze.

“Magnus,” Jonathan slurs out, barely audible over the incessant ringing. His chest heaves beneath Magnus’ unyielding force. “Please, we can have a life together. I can save you,” he begs. “I love you more than he ever could.”

“You don’t know him, me, or what love is,” Magnus spits out with a wracking sob. His vision blurs as he screams at the ceiling. “Alexander is my world. And you took him from me.” Magnus feels tears drip onto his arm. He closes his eyes and ignores Jonathan’s pained breaths. Part of him wants to kill Jonathan, snap his neck, or wring the air from his lungs.

“Magn—.”

“Holy shit.”

Magnus’ head snaps up.

“Jace,” Magnus whispers, tongue still slippery with blood.

“The one and only,” Jace replies. His face is grim as he approaches. His eyes drift over the scattered parts of Jonathan’s handgun and the bullet holes in the ceiling. He holsters his own weapon.

“Alexander,” Magnus says. “He—.”

Jace stoops down to pat Magnus on the shoulder. “I know.” He’s standing over them now. His
shoe clips Jonathan’s side. Jonathan yelps. Jace considers him, stands, then gives a swift kick to Jonathan’s ribcage.


Magnus nods. He gets to his feet and hurries to Alec. Gravel rolls beneath him.

All pain drains away when he spots the shallow rise and fall of Alec’s chest.

He tears the Kevlar vest off first, then Alec’s shirt. There’s no wound, only the beginnings of a massive bruise, and what looks like a few broken ribs.

“Alexander,” Magnus murmurs. He cups Alec’s face and runs his thumb over Alec’s lips. Warm breath brushes the pad of his finger. “Jace,” he calls. “Alec’s alive,” Magnus says, louder, voice cracking. He presses a kiss to Alec’s forehead. A sob bursts from his chest. Tears pour from Magnus’ eyes as he cradles Alec closer. They splash lightly against Alec’s cheek.

Jonathan lets out a wretched cry. “Magnus, please.” Jace heaves Jonathan up and slams him against the wall before tossing him on the ground face down, cracking his head against the floor.

Jace snaps a pair of cuffs around pale, bloody, wrists. He drags Jonathan to his feet.

“Let’s get out of here.”

A jingle rings through the corridor. Chairman Meow peeks out of one of the rooms. The tabby streaks down the hallway, eyes huge, and clambers into Magnus’ lap.

“There you are,” Magnus says, relief purging the adrenaline. “We’re all together again.”

He tries to blink away the spots of black that edge in on his vision. Footsteps echo around him. The faint wail of sirens grows louder.

***

It hurts to breathe. Alec fights through each shallow intake of bitter air. His eyes open to gloom. There are no lights, only the glow of screens that show his vitals.

He hears the sound of footsteps. The uncomfortable fabric of his gown clings to the hair on his chest, sweat permeates the flimsy, paper-like material. A hospital then. Not the Institute infirmary. Alec tries to get up, but can’t. His head sways as pain blooms along his left side.

There are windows, but the blinds are drawn shut. Alec sits up as far as he can. He manages to peer out the small glass panel embedded in the door. It’s dimly lit outside his room. Sitting up fucking hurts, so he slumps back against his bed, and his eyes flutter shut. He hears the door opening as his head finally begins to clear.

“Magnus?” he grits out.

“Sorry to disappoint,” Izzy responds. A cool hand presses against his cheek. She pats at his pillow in an attempt to make it somewhat bearable. He opens his eyes. Isabelle looks wane, face bare. She’s a sight for sore everything.
Alec laughs despite himself. “You could never disappoint.”

“I don’t know, I don’t hear anyone saying my name after crawling back from the chasm of death,” she teases.

“Where is he?” Alec asks. “Is he okay?”

Izzy picks a piece of lint off the sheets. “He’s doing as well as can be expected. We’re keeping someone with him at all times.” She picks harder. “He’s jumpy. But I think he’ll be alright, in time.”

Alec bites his lip. “Is he injured?”

Izzy leans in close, the scent of her perfume cuts through the smell of disinfectant, familiar. “Nothing as serious as you.” Her voice drops. “You really scared us, you asshole.”

“I’m fine. See?” Alec mumbles. He taps his chest and regrets it immediately afterward. Agony lances through him as he wheezes. “Holy shit.”

“You deserve that,” Izzy declares without mercy. She checks his IV drip and sits at his side.

Alec lets out a deep sigh that burns beneath layers of gauze. His weight sinks into the mattress. Muscles ache from misuse as he flexes his fingers and wiggles his toes. “It didn’t hit anything major.”

“Of course not,” Izzy scoffs. “It just fucked up three of your ribs and left a bruise the size of Mars.”


Izzy rolls her eyes. “Do you ever stop thinking about work?”

Alec stares at her.

She relents. “Magnus and Jace managed to secure him, so we gave him to the police.” She says. “Camille sold him out—said he murdered his whole family.”

“Yachting incident?” Alec asks, voice dry.

“Yachting incident,” Izzy confirms. “Not as funny now, I’ll admit.”

“It was never funny,” Alec says.

Izzy shrugs. “It’s a little funny. Underhill said it looks like the other heirs apparent are ready to eat him alive.”

“Alexander?”

Alec turns toward the door. Magnus stands there, Jace hovering at his back. A paper plate of beige food falls to the shining linoleum. “Magnus,” Alec murmurs.

Magnus lurches forward, then stops short. His hair is flat, a split lip and black eye coming to light as dim monitors flash numbers in the dark. Alec ignores the bone-deep exhaustion. Magnus is here, just out of his reach, alive and beautiful.

“I’ll go get something to clean that up,” Izzy says, gesturing to the mess left forgotten on the floor.
Alec nods, unblinking, and feels Izzy’s weight rise. She and Jace leave them. The door clicks shut.

“Alexander,” Magnus whispers again. He sits down onto Alec’s blankets, warm thighs resting against the hill of Alec’s knees. His hands tremble as he gently cup Alec’s cheeks. “I thought I lost you.”

“I thought I lost you,” Alec replies in kind. He leans into Magnus’ touch, helpless to the warmth that swells in his chest. “I shouldn’t have let you go.”

“Please don’t.” Magnus presses a kiss to his cheek, eyes sliding shut. Damp lashes brush against Alec’s temple. “I shouldn’t have left.”

“I won’t—I won’t ever let anything like that happen to you ever again,” Alec swears. He cradles Magnus as close as he can manage.

Magnus trails gentle fingers over Alec’s rib cage. “But what about you?” He asks.

“I don’t plan on getting shot if that’s what you’re asking,” Alec says. “But I’d get shot a million times if it kept you safe.”

Magnus lets out a disappointed noise. “I just want us both to be safe.” The words shrivel in the air, sad, and desperate. “I can’t lose you. I won’t.”

They breathe together. Bruised.

“I can’t promise you that,” Alec admits, slowly. “But I can promise you that I will do everything in my power to protect you.” He sighs. “And I’ll try to stay out of trouble.” Magnus weighs this response.

A beat passes, and Alec begins to wonder if Magnus is finally realizing that being with Alec isn’t worth it because God was just biding his time, when Magnus smiles.

“I guess we’ll just have to look after each other,” Magnus says, voice soft. “And we’ll cherish every moment we have together.”

“Yeah?” Alec asks. His heart soars, beating far too fast for his aching ribs.

“Yeah,” Magnus replies. He kisses the corner of Alec’s mouth. “I’ve been thinking…”

***

“You’re not allowed to carry anything,” Jace says. He tries to swat Alec away with one of his feet, socks mismatching as always. “Doctor’s orders.”

“He’s right, but technically, I’m not a doctor,” Magnus calls. He and Izzy ease by, a large cabinet hovering between the two of them.

“I am,” Izzy cuts in. “And you’re not allowed to carry anything that weighs more than five pounds.” They continue on their way out the front door. A small paperweight sits on the ground to keep the entryway propped open.

“That’s bullshit,” Alec calls after them.
“I don’t care,” Izzy calls back.

“Alexander, please rest,” Magnus pleads. Alec softens at his boyfriend’s request. He nods. Magnus sends him a wide smile. Izzy tugs on the cabinet as they both disappear into the hallway.

Jace rolls his eyes. He adjusts the box in his arms. “You’re not healed yet, so sit your ass down on your ugly couch. There’s no point in aggravating your injuries.”

“It’s not ugly,” Alec replies, affronted. “It’s very comfortable.”

“Yeah, because it being comfortable makes it less ugly,” Jace retorts. “Now sit down, or finish packing up. The truck and my car should be getting pretty full, so we’re going to stop by the new place to unload them.” His expression grows concerned. “Will you be okay until we get back?”

“I’m not going to keel over if I’m left alone for more than two minutes,” Alec says. Jace’s brow furrows deeper. His gaze darts to Alec’s chest and then back.

Alec crosses his arms. “Unless you want me to kick your ass and take that box, you’ll head out now,” he says. Jace stares at him a beat longer. Alec groans. “I’ll be fine, seriously.”

Jace sighs. “Alright. We’ll be back for the rest of the stuff.” He jerks his head toward the couch as he steps out the door. “I can’t believe we actually have to make an extra trip for that thing.”

Jace’s footsteps fade, and Alec is alone.

Alec sweeps the empty living room. His life is boxed up, stowed in the back of Jace’s shitty car. A bird runs into his window with a bang, and Alec startles. It rights itself and flies away. He stares out the window. This apartment has such a shit view, but he’ll miss it.

When did he become so attached to a place that he rented just to sleep in at night? Izzy found it for him online. All the other places he’d found for this price range were much less accommodating.

He runs a hand over the armrest of his divisive couch. Its burnt orange surface yields beneath the pressure. Alec lays back. It curves around him, and accepts his weight, always has. Like he hopes Magnus will.

Magnus who proposed pairing it with his own set of sleek black furniture.

The material is well-worn beneath his fingertips. It’s lasted him for four years. Four years of dealing with Jace passing out on its cushions, drunk. Four years of him folding his legs beneath him as he eats pizza with Izzy at two in the morning. Four years before Magnus, and however many years to come.

It was his first purchase after leaving home. The first twig in his threadbare nest. Alec looks over the space. It’s quieter now. The quiet never bothered him before. He’s not sure it bothers him now, but in the emptiness of his apartment, it feels like a companion. One that he’s leaving behind.

Alec hears one of his neighbors in the hallway. He stands. His socks slip on the smooth floors. It’s a short trip to the front door. He nudges the paperweight out of the way, and the door swings shut. Alec presses it the rest of the way, long fingers around the door knob, and listens to it click.

No more loitering. He grabs a garbage bag and heads toward the bedroom.

Most of his belongings are already at the new place, or on their way. He needs to pack up the stragglers. Both night stands, his bathroom drawers, and a storage closet that’s a glorified trash can.
He turns on the hallway light. The closet stares at him in challenge. No one has poked through it since the packing process began, and he can’t put it off any longer. Alec opens the door.

Why does he have so much goddamn junk? He is many things, but a hoarder is not one of them. At least he didn’t think so.

Wrapped boxes and tissue-filled bags litter the tiny floorspace, unopened gifts he condemned to a dusty prison. He checks each one. Most of them are blank, without his name, the gifter’s name, or any other identifiable traits.

Impersonal. He’ll keep these to regift.

Alec sets those aside. There are three left. All are from his father. He hesitates, then throws them away.

Behind the gifts, Alec finds a yoga mat he bought on a whim. He’s not flexible, and the week-long stint of attempted yoga really drove the point home. But Magnus might use it. Alec decides to keep it for the time being. He carves away at the useless knick-knacks. A 1,000-piece puzzle, several jackets—all with broken zippers—and far too many defunct exercise devices Jace foisted upon him.

A long, thin, box sits in the back of the closet. Alec tries to move it. The sound of shifting glass disturbs the silence. It’s heavy, definitely more than five pounds. He squats down to pick it up anyway. The cold edges dig into his skin as he brings it into the light.

It’s a display case. Decorative prisms line the corners. Dusty fingerprints streak the surface. An unstrung bow sits inside it, dark brown, well-cared for before its abandonment.

Alec sets it down on the ground.

He started archery at a young age, a hobby that was therapeutic for him, and just masculine enough for his father. This bow was a gift from his parents. Alec undoes the latch. He eases it open, curious, and grasps the bow.

The weight is familiar against his palm. It welcomes him, resting along the lines of his fingers. Alec turns it over.

He kept up archery, even when it wasn’t masculine enough to make up for the fact that he was gay. This bow, that guided him through so much, was not enough to shield him from the expectations of his father. But he used it despite.

Alec can’t even remember why he stopped.

He wipes the glass with the hem of his shirt, then carries the case to the front room.

Sunlight catches on the edges, painting small rainbows on the floor. Alec grabs a sticky note, and presses it onto the glass. A small collection of questionable pens rests on the counter. He grabs one, shakes it, and thinks about what to say.

To keep, he scrawls. His handwriting is atrocious, but it’ll do. Alec stands. He stretches.

The movement pulls on his ribs, a now-familiar ache spreading through his chest, twinging. Alec winces. He lifts his shirt and checks on the injury. The bruises, now a disgusting green, throb. No more heavy lifting.
He lets out a deep breath before heading to his bedroom. There are some drawers he needs to clean out. Those won’t hurt him—maybe.

Alec approaches the nearest bedside table. He moves to turn on the squat lamp that sits on its clean surface. A crucifix, one he received on his confirmation day, dangles from the plain grey lampshade.

It’s odd. Alec sees this crucifix every day, but he never notices it. Even so—he wears its meaning, if not it’s physical form, around his neck. He runs his thumb over the edges of the gilded cross.

How many moments did he lose trying to make amends for who he is? All the opportunities, memories, what-ifs that he shut in the closet with him. For a long time, he felt guilty. He still does sometimes, and he’s not sure if it will ever truly go away.

But it doesn’t scare him either.

Alec takes the crucifix. The thin chain slides through the gaps in his fingers, pooling in the palm of his hand, and he finds that he doesn’t hate it.

It means something, to someone—to people he cares about. Alec contemplates the crucifix. The gold cross weighs nothing.

*To keep, Alec decides.*

***

The tupperware closes with a *snap*. Alec stows away the last of their dinner, homemade nasi goreng, and a medley of vegetables to suit Alec’s healthy habits. He straightens up as two warm hands come to rest on his hips, then traverse his abs. A kiss presses to his shoulder. Alec leans back into Magnus’ arms.

Soft lips brush against his hair before pulling away. Magnus shoots Alec a playful glance, eyelids low, makeup smudged. Alec’s heart pounds in his chest. He chases Magnus out of the kitchen and into the living room. A record, their recent favorite, plays off of the high ceilings. Alec never thought that lovely *acoustics* would ever play a part in any of his decision making. But here they are, and Alec is grateful for the excuse to pull Magnus close.

They dance. Magnus leads Alec through their furniture, each footstep highlighted by laughter. Chairman Meow watches them from the orange couch, lazily cleaning his fur. Their new cat, Church, a himalayan, sleeps on one of the many armchairs. Magnus pats each of them as he and Alec pass by.

Eventually they come to a dizzy stop by the balcony window. They sat out here after moving in, swaddled in blankets, snow kissing their cheeks. Now, spring fades into summer. Their miniature garden glows under the sunset.

“Are you ready for tonight, darling?” Magnus asks. His fingers lace with Alec’s. He peeks up at Alec through dark lashes.

“I will be after a shower,” Alec replies. He sniffs his shirt. His nose wrinkles. “I smell like kekap manis.”
“I love that smell,” Magnus says with a grin. Alec rolls his eyes.

“Well, I’m pretty sure you don’t want to get a boner every time you smell it.”

Magnus leans in closer. “Speak for yourself.” He pecks Alec’s cheek before swatting his ass. “Go hop into the shower. I’ll be in the bedroom.”

Alec watches as Magnus saunters off. He pets Church absently as his eyes follow the sway of Magnus’ hips. Alec makes a quick sweep of the apartment. He checks the locks. Then he closes the windows, deft fingers latching them shut.

“You guys watch the house while your papa and I are busy,” Alec tells the cats. Church ignores him, but Chairman Meow gives a hearty response. The tabby stretches. Alec laughs. “Goodnight, guys.”

He heads down the corridor, turning lights off as he goes. The bedroom door opens to bright lights. Magnus shoots him a quick smile before returning to his work. Alec leans in for a quick kiss, then walks to the bathroom, whipping off his shirt to an appreciative whoop.

The cold bathroom tile is a sea of blue beneath his feet. Alec strips off his pants, boxer-briefs, and socks. He scoops them off the floor, and dumps them into a laundry basket that sits in the corner. Each step echoes in the cavernous bathroom, what it lacks in floorspace made up for in height. A skylight sits above him, pinks darkening into purples. The air smells like Magnus’ favorite body butter. Alec steps into the shower.

Since moving in together, Alec’s abandoned any pretenses of understanding self-care. He let Magnus choose all of the bathroom products. Alec misses the sandalwood, but the bergamot body wash is just as nice, and it makes him feel fresh.

He turns the faucet. It starts off cold, a deluge that soaks him from head to toe, because Magnus insisted on another waterfall shower. Alec bears the freezing water. He pumps some shampoo into his hand and starts to lather it into his hair. Warm, soapy, water dribbles into his mouth. Alec spits it out. He grabs the conditioner, and rubs it in.

As it sits, he drizzles shower gel over his loofa. It fills the humid air with the scent of citrus. Alec lathers the soap over his body. He makes sure to avoid cleaning his dick for too long. Once he’s rinsed himself off, he turns off the shower, and steps out onto a purple bath mat.

Alec grabs one of the many towels hanging from Magnus’ decorative towel rack. He dries off his body. The towel bunches beneath his grip as he scrubs it along the back of his neck, then up over his head, before he ties it loosely around his hips.

He ventures back out into the bedroom. Magnus whistles at him from the bed, laying back against the pillows. “No teasing before the show,” Magnus says.

“Is that a rule?” Alec teases. He crawls up onto the bed, and leans into press a soft kiss to Magnus’ neck. Magnus watches him with hooded eyes. He pulls away, out of reach, and slides off the bed. “I’m very good at following those.”

Magnus sucks in a breath. “Now that’s just unfair,” he says with a pout. “But I have to go get ready now. Can you get in touch with Ragnor just to make sure everything is in order?” He asks. Magnus gets up and walks to the bathroom Alec just vacated. Then, he pauses, tilting his head toward the bedside table. “I have something for you by the way.” He disappears behind the door.

Alec examines the gift bag. Sparkly tissue paper wrinkles beneath his fingers. He pulls out a small
black mask, with loops to hook around his ears, plain like the white masks Magnus wears when he’s sick. It’s soft, thin and pliable.

He slips it on. Alec wanders over to the mirror hanging over Magnus’ makeup table. It’s stark against his pale skin. His eyes look a bit startling, since they’re the only thing he recognizes as his own.

Water drips down his temple. It soaks into the fabric.

Two screens sit at the end of the bed. They’re both off.

Alec’s phone rings. He can’t remember where he put it, so it takes a moment for him to find it, charging on Magnus’ bedside table. The towel around his hips slips when he bends over to answer the call.

“Lightwood,” he says. His hand dips down to adjust the cloth that threatens to expose him to the elements.

“Fell,” Ragnor replies, voice sardonic.

Alec rolls his eyes. “Hello, Ragnor.”

“Hello, Alec. Please let Magnus know everything is ready. He’s not responding to my texts, as usual,” Ragnor grouses. “When will you be ready to start?”

Alec listens as the shower turns on. “Magnus just got into the shower.”

Ragnor groans. “So in four years then. Text me ten minutes before you want to go live. I’m dropping now.” He hangs up without waiting for a response.

Alec settles himself on the bed as Magnus showers. He goes through emails, then sends off a series of texts to his family as a reminder that he and Magnus are not to be disturbed tonight. The pillows cradle him on all sides. Alec closes his eyes.

He jerks awake to the feeling of a hot mouth on his cock.

“Fuck,” Alec mutters. He’s still not fully awake, the blood rushing to his groin making the process even more difficult. Magnus swallows him down deeper. Alec tries to catch his breath. The sight of Magnus with a mouthful of his dick has him sitting up further. He props himself up on the countless throw pillows. Over Magnus’ shoulder, one of the screens displays his spit-slicked erection. Alec shivers when Magnus’ tongue enters the frame to lick the tip. Pleasure shoots through him, magnified by the visual.

“Welcome to the show,” Magnus says. “I’d like to introduce our special guest.” He directs the camera at Alec’s abs. He strokes his free hand up over the rippling muscle. Then the shot sweeps back up to Alec’s face. Magnus crawls up Alec’s body. “Introduce yourself, darling.”

Alec rolls his eyes, flustered as he always is under Magnus’ attentions. He waves. “I’m Alexander.” The other screen, the live chat, explodes with messages.

Magnus turns to look at it. “Yes, he’s that Alexander,” Magnus says. “Unfortunately this is only a one-time thing. And no, you won’t be seeing any more of his face. As beautiful as he is, he’s not one to show off, are you?” He leans in close to tug on the mask. “Believe me, he’s even more
handsome under here.”

Alec blushes a bit. More messages stream in, compliments written in big bold letters that disappear from the monitor as new ones come in to take their place. He reaches out to take the camcorder. Magnus preens, the robe he’s wearing drapes down, the thin fabric trailing over Alec’s skin. Alec tugs on the belt that holds the robe together. He runs a reverent hand over Magnus’ hip. His thumb digs into the hard muscle he finds there, then slides between brown skin and the waistband of Magnus’ underwear.

“Why would I show off when I can show you off instead?” Alec asks.

Magnus lays a hand over Alec’s own, pushing the elastic down, revealing more skin. “What a flatterer. He’s unfair, honestly,” he says to the audience.

Alec bites back a moan when the fabric reveal the length of Magnus’ hard on. Magnus grinds his dick against Alec’s. “Fuck, babe,” Alec groans. His arm trembles, the display screen making it obvious to anyone watching.

“Focus,” Magnus teases. He eases out of Alec’s grasp. “We want them to get a good view, don’t we?” Warm fingers rake through Alec’s chest hair. The soft scratch of nails tickles down his ribs, his stomach, then finally along his crotch. Alec fights to breathe as Magnus fondles his balls. The camera dips, but he manages to keep it trained on Magnus. “That’s it,” Magnus croons. “You’re so good at this already.”

Magnus looks up at Alec. He opens his mouth, tongue out.

Alec hesitates. Magnus takes Alec’s hand and guides him. He caresses Magnus’ cheek before resting his hand on Magnus’ head.

They’ve done this so many times, but Alec still waits. Magnus leans into his touch. A warm fingertip draws his instructions on Alec’s skin.

Fuck my mouth.

He eases the tip of his penis between Magnus’ lips. Magnus shudders as he thrusts in deeper. Alec groans as Magnus dips down to meet his bucking hips.

He starts fucking Magnus’ mouth in earnest, the wet sounds of Magnus’ mouth accompanied by his harsh breaths. Heat surges up his spine. Shit. He stills his movements, but Magnus continues to suck him down to the root, and there’s no asking God to save him now.

“Babe,” he stutters. “I—fuck, babe, slow down.” Magnus looks straight at him and pins him down, sucking hard. Alec clenches his teeth. He tries to think of something, anything, to prevent this. He can’t come this early, the cam show just started—but Magnus tugs gently on his balls and he’s ramming his dick down Magnus’ throat, remembering himself just enough to pull out so Magnus can breathe.

Magnus, for his part, looks completely unbothered. He lifts off of Alec’s cock with a slurp. Then, he opens his mouth. On his tongue, Alec’s come glistens in a small puddle, thick and white. The camera picks up every detail. Magnus swallows. Alec watches Magnus’ Adam’s apple bob.

A comment flashes on the screen. Alec catches it, and blushes hard.

“What?” Magnus asks. He turns as another message, the same as the last, comes up again.
“He’s delicious,” it reads, drooling emojis wink at them before disappearing. Then, another post comes in. “He’s so big. I would love to choke on that.” Alec can feel the blood creeping up his face.

Magnus perks up. His eyes flicker to Alec’s own. “Isn’t he? I’ve been telling him this but he doesn’t believe me.”

“Doesn’t matter if I keep blowing my load so fast,” Alec grumbles. Magnus frowns. He swats Alec’s thigh.

“See?” Magnus says to their viewers. “There’s no getting through to this one.” He talks like he’s gossiping, and the chat responds in kind. Enough of that. Alec grips Magnus’ chin.

“Hey, focus, remember?”

Magnus grins. He leans in and lays kisses up Alec’s neck. Playful fingers tug on the edge of Alec’s mask. “I love when you get serious,” Magnus hums. His robes slips off his shoulders, it and the chat forgotten, as Magnus clambers into Alec’s lap.

Alec rolls his eyes, but accepts Magnus’ weight. A pink tongue wets plush lips, once, the action repeating on the monitor, and Alec can feel his dick begin to stir again.

“Well, we’re supposed to give them a special show,” Alec says. “We don’t want to let them down.” He rolls up against Magnus’ ass.

Magnus sighs into the fabric covering Alec’s mouth. “No we don’t.” He moans when Alec directs the camera down, long, callused fingers stroking over his erection. They drag up over his stomach, then higher, to tweak the nipple piercings Magnus got a few weeks back. The sensation has Magnus gasping for air.

“So we have to stay focused,” Alec murmurs. His breath rustles Magnus’ hair. Magnus shivers as he tugs gently on one of the small silver bars. “Right, babe?”

Magnus manages a glare. “What have you done with my Alexander?” Alec thinks about the last few months of living together, and the fact that they’ve fucked on just about every surface of their new apartment.

He shrugs. Magnus pouts, so Alec zooms in with the camera. “I think the better question here is what have you done to me?”

“Nothing I wouldn’t do again,” Magnus says with a grin. He reaches over to the bedside table to grab a bottle of lube. The cool liquid dribbles over Magnus’ fingers, each rivulet catches the light, and lands on Alec’s skin. The lube tickles as it slides down Alec’s thighs. Magnus’ hand dips low, and back. “Ah, fuck,” he moans. Magnus’ head falls back. His chest rises with each shallow breath.

Magnus’ pleasure never ceases to amaze Alec. It’s hypnotic. Thighs tense, sweat beads in pockets of skin, and Magnus’ cock sways with each languorous movement. Magnus’ gaze finds Alec’s own. The camcorder falls to the side, and Alec scrambles to right it.

“Focus,” Alec mutters to himself. Magnus begins to lube his dick. He yelps, the cool touch both startling and arousing him.

“You’re so cute, you know that?” Magnus murmurs. His teeth nip at Alec’s earlobe. Then, a slick heat engulfs the head of Alec’s erection.
“Oh fuck,” Alec moans. Magnus rolls his hips, and takes Alec deeper.

“Yes,” Magnus breathes. He grinds down. One of his hands comes to rest next to Alec’s head, and the other runs through his hair. “Yes, Alexander, oh my god.”

Alec grips Magnus’ waist. He thrusts upward, pleased when Magnus’ grasp tightens on the pillowcase. Magnus rides him with abandon. There’s no talking, or teasing, nothing but the slap of skin on skin. Alec runs his fingers through the lube pooling in the curve of his hip bone. Then, he gently strokes Magnus’ cock, relishing the desperate sounds that break the air.

Alec watches as Magnus begins to crumble. Brown cheeks flush red. Every thrust punches a moan out of Magnus’ trembling lips. Alec won’t last much longer, but he refuses to come before Magnus this time. “Come for me, baby,” Alec whispers.

Magnus unravels. His come spurts onto Alec’s abs in streaks of white. Alec tries to keep the camera steady, but the sight of Magnus, and the peak of his own pleasure, results in a shot of rumpled bed sheets.

They grin at each other. Then, Magnus begins to laugh, breathless. “Look at you,” he says. His hand finds the camera. Alec’s face comes onto the screen, sweat plasters hair to his forehead. His mask is askew. “You look absolutely beautiful.”

“Oh just thoroughly fucked,” Alec says. He swipes the camcorder and turns it back on Magnus.

“Same thing,” Magnus retorts. “Regardless,” he says, flashing the camera a charming smile. “Thank you all for watching. I hope you enjoyed my beautiful Alexander, because this is the last you’ll be seeing of him unless he agrees to lend his gorgeous dick again.” Change jingles as the chat explodes. “I’ll see you in two days for some Truth or Dare,” Magnus says. He blows a kiss. “Good night.”

Alec cuts the feed. Magnus flops down on the bed as soon as the screen goes dark.

“That was pretty fun,” Alec admits. The mask comes off easily, a bit damp. He grabs the towels Magnus keeps for after shows. Magnus watches him wipe away come.

“Fun enough to do again?” Magnus asks.

Alec considers this. “We’ll see,” he says.

Magnus shoots up, all signs of exhaustion gone. “Really? Because I have a pair of nipple clamps floating around that would look absolutely lovely on you.” Alec laughs. He leans over and gives Magnus a deep kiss.

“I love you,” Alec says.

Magnus smiles against Alec lips.

“I love you too, darling.”

Alexander Gideon Lightwood is a twenty-five year old man with a bright orange couch, two cats, and a boyfriend who makes a living from masturbating online for thousands of people.

He gets ready for bed. Magnus kisses him goodnight. There are a million throw pillows, and maybe God doesn’t hate him after all.
Chapter End Notes

I’m so grateful to everyone who has read this, supported me, and just dealt with me as I struggled through this.
TGR is the longest, most plot intensive, and developed work I have ever written. It means a great deal to me, that anyone would read this.

There are more parts of me in this than I expected. Thank you for letting me share them.

The end.

End Notes

If you liked it even a little bit, please leave me some kudos! If you liked it a lot then a comment would be SUPER appreciated!
If you just want to yell about it with me, please hit me up on twitter @CryptidBane
If you wanna yell about the fic, I’d love to hear your feedback! I’ll be following the #TGRMalec on twitter! :indexPath) So please let me know what you think!

Thank you so much for reading!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!