I think we should get a divorce.”

Alec and Magnus have been married for years but busy work schedules keep them apart and when they do finally manage to spend time together, they fight. A divorce seems to be their only solution at this point, but neither of them is ready to give up without a fight. And a fight it might be. After all, relationships take effort.

A story about how to fall in love all over again.

Notes

Hello, you poor fools. It's us. A year of teasing later and we're here with some angst, what'd you expect?

Before you start reading, we would like to issue a formal apology to avoid any potential lawsuit. We're sorry for any heartbreak you may experience.

A big thank you to Ace and Meg for their help in betaing this chapter.
Tweet us your reactions using #LINAVM or #jecrit
Where are you?

Magnus stares at the unanswered text, the music of the party going on in the background fading to a quiet buzz. He should be used to the feeling, but where it once filled him with disappointment and unseeming sadness, now all that remains is an acid bitterness creeping through his bones, and an obnoxious sense of fatality.

This isn’t the first time it happens. He has lost count of how many times he’s waited for a reply and never got one, no matter how insistent he could be. He isn’t insistent anymore, perhaps because he knows his efforts are pointless, but there is a part of him that dwells on another reason, one that makes his stomach squirm and his heart clench in his chest. Perhaps he has just given up.

For better or worse seems to be an eternity away, a faded memory that now leaves a sour taste on his tongue.

Where are you?

The words stare back at him, still and defiant. He remembers how thrilling it had been to text Alec, once. How he had to refrain from shrieking with excitement when the three dots showed he was typing an answer. He recalls having to count to ten in his head to keep himself from replying in a heartbeat and showing too much eagerness - he had quickly abandoned all restraint, though, because Alec had been just as keen and impatient as he had.

This time has passed.

There is no more excitement twirling in his stomach as he glances down at his phone, taking a sip of the champagne in his other hand, wondering inwardly if it would be deemed inappropriate to get utterly hammered at his own corporate party. It probably would, he ponders, heaving.

“Mr. Lightwood-Bane?”

Magnus turns around to face the person who - thankfully or not, he isn’t quite sure - pulled him out of his thoughts, plastering a polite smile on his face.

“Mr. Starkweather,” he says, reaching out to shake his hand. “It’s a pleasure to see you again.”

“It is,” Starkweather says, nodding sternly.
Hodge Starkweather is an important man in the line of business Magnus has chosen for himself. He is, after all, known to make and break careers and entire companies with no other weapon than the sharp point of his pen.

Magnus has always been fortunate enough to be on the right side of Hodge’s critical glance, because the public image of Edom, his company, is faultless, and the same can be said of what little people know of Magnus’ private life.

What they know is far away from the reality of his situation, but no one needs to know that, and especially not Hodge, who would give Edom the worst kind of spotlights without hesitation.

“I can’t see your husband anywhere,” Hodge points out rather uselessly, scanning the room for Alec. “Where is he?”

*I wish I knew*, Magnus thinks but doesn’t say.

He had told Alec repeatedly during the week how important this night is for his company. After years of struggles and fallouts, Edom is finally starting to take off and Magnus is beginning to make a name for himself. He had told him that Hodge would be there, because nothing is as good for PR as a good article in Forbes Magazine.

People love Magnus’ products, but even more so, they love to comment on the CEO’s committed and loving relationship with his supportive husband who always pushed him to aim higher and dream bigger. Alec knows how important it is for him to be there by Magnus’ side, if only for moral support. These events are draining even for a social butterfly like Magnus.

But Alec isn’t there, and Magnus doesn’t know what to tell Hodge to avoid explaining that his husband bailed on him without so much as a warning.

Work. It’s the excuse Magnus always uses, because it’s the one Alec always uses, but how is he supposed to tell that to Hodge without sounding as bitter and angry as he truly feels?

He opens his mouth to reply, but can’t get a word out before gentle fingers curl around his elbow, and he turns to the side to see Camille, his head of outside sales, standing there, an almost seductive smile on her lips.

“You know how it is,” she says, voice smooth like velvet. “He was probably held back by work. He’s a lifesaver. The hospital is so lucky to have him.”

If Hodge is startled by the interruption, it doesn’t show on his face. He nods. “I suppose being New York’s best neurosurgeon is quite time-consuming.”

Magnus swallows past the bitterness in his throat and forces an easy smile on his lips. “He is the best,” he allows, sounding more cheerful than he feels. “That makes him a busy man.”

“He’s so busy sometimes I wonder how he manages to find time for his private life,” Camille says, almost teasingly. “I’ve been pestering Magnus to tell me how they manage to balance their busy schedule and their marriage, but he still refuses to share their secret with me to this day.”

There is an undertone to her statement, something accusing that Magnus can relate to, but it is concealed by her blinding smile, enough so that he wonders if the acerb clutch on his heart isn’t making him imagine things.

Magnus shrugs, a staged smirk tipping the corner of his mouth up.
“It’s all about communication,” he quips playfully, fingers tightening around his phone, where he knows the unanswered text is still there to taunt him.

The lie slips on his tongue with practiced ease, and he hides the lurching of his stomach with a wink, raising his glass in a nonchalant gesture meant to mark the meaningfulness of his words.

He wonders when exactly Alec and he stopped talking, really talking. If he actually thinks about it, he knows, but he quickly pushes the gloomy thoughts away. Now is not the time or the place to revive painful memories, not when he is standing in front of Hodge and Camille, who don’t - and won’t - know half of the problems they have been facing.

Magnus hadn’t realized before tonight - or perhaps he had but was unwilling to admit it to himself - everything that is broken between them. Once, they would have fought to fix it. Today, it seems like the right and sole answer is to throw it all away.

He shares idle talk with Hodge for a moment, talking about Edom’s new contracts, the launch of their combined campaign with Sephora that is just around the corner, their upcoming expansion to Europe. He talks business and for a while, all thoughts of Alec and their crumbling marriage finally drift out of his mind, although the dawning realization and subsequent sorrow linger, lurking in a dark corner and waiting to come out again if given the opportunity.

He is thankful Camille is by his side, charming the reporter with witty retorts he doesn’t have the energy for tonight. She is brilliant at her job, and it shows in the way she never hesitates for a second when Hodge asks a question that would catch anyone else off-guard, her smile ever so polite, bordering on provocative when she knows she has given him a professional and thought out answer while Hodge expected even the slightest misstep.

When he excuses himself, looking somehow both disappointed and satisfied, Magnus waits until he is out of his sight to look down at his glass of champagne, watching the gold of his wedding ring gleam under the artificial lights of the reception room and heaving out a deep sigh.

“Thank you, Camille,” he tells her as she follows him there. “I’m a bit out of it tonight. You saved my ass.”

Camille dismisses his gratitude with a flourish of her fingers, but her brows furrow in concern, her head tilting to the side to catch his eyes. “You look like you could use a drink.”

It’s not even a question, just a simple statement, but it is so absolutely true that Magnus’ fingers twitch around his phone, still clutched in a iron grip.

He doesn’t reply, holding up his half empty glass of champagne instead.

Camille smirks, but it is less feral and more fondly amused than it usually is. “I meant a real drink,” she says, laying a hand on his forearm and leaning in as if to share a secret. “I know you keep the good stuff in your office for important clients,” she murmurs playfully, gently squeezing. “Come on, there’s no one left to impress. You’ve done enough socializing and sweet-talking for tonight.”

Magnus twists his brain for a reason to say no, but nothing comes. He really does need something stronger than champagne, which is when his private stash of bourbon comes in handy, and with Alec’s lasting radio silence, Camille seems as good company as any.

With a shrug, he downs the rest of his glass and leads the way to the elevator.

His office is on the top floor of the building, in the heart of Brooklyn. The grey-painted walls are
made darker by the charcoal of the night, and it is only lit by the moonlight pouring through the wide floor-to-ceiling windows that offer an unbeatable view of the Manhattan skyline.

On his mahogany desk sits his laptop, a datebook lying open on the side, next to a framed picture of Alec and him on their wedding day, both tucked in impeccable suits and wearing blissful grins, their eyes shining with happiness. Magnus has to resist the urge to put it face down so he doesn’t have to witness yet more evidence of what they used to be.

He must have been staring for longer than he thought, because it is the sound of Camille clearing her throat as she leans against his desk that brings him back to his duller reality.

She holds out a drink to him, her fingers curled on the bottom of the glass.

“Thank you,” he murmurs absently.

“So, where is husband dearest?” Camille asks, circling the desk to sit on the imposing armchair, resting her long, naked legs on the mahogany. “Trouble in paradise?”

She curves an eyebrow in an almost defiant manner, and Magnus realizes there is no point in lying to her. She’ll know. One of the things that makes Camille so good at what she does is how easily she can figure out in a heartbeat the inclination and disposition of the person in front of her. It doesn’t really surprise him that she thus manages to read right through him. This is exactly why he hired her.

“I don’t know,” he says, walking to the window, watching the night wrap around New York. Thousands of lights make the skyscrapers seem more awake than ever, and Magnus wonders why it feels like he is being enveloped in darkness. “I haven’t heard from him.”

“Nothing?” she says, equally surprised and offended on his behalf.

“Nothing,” he confirms, taking a long sip of bourbon. “I wish I could say it was a one-time thing.”

His voice is barely over a decibel, because he can’t bear to hear the anguish in his own tone, but Camille doesn’t share his reluctance. She pushes off the chair and strides the distance between them until she is leaning against the window.

Magnus doesn’t glance toward her, gaze focused on his phone, which still refuses to bring him any sort of alleviation, screen stubbornly black.

“I’m sorry,” Magnus sighs dejectedly. “I don’t mean to bore you with my relationship problems. Forget I said anything.”

He goes to turn away but she stops him, resting a hand over his own to pluck his phone out of his hands, throwing it carelessly on the leather couch sitting against the opposing wall between two overflowing bookshelves.

“Magnus,” she says softly, “it’s okay. You clearly need to talk about it. Better talk to me than Hodge Starkweather or another one of these vultures waiting for the first opportunity to tear you apart because they’re jealous of your success, right?”

Magnus huffs out a quiet laugh, taking another sip. “I suppose so,” he says, the burn of the alcohol somehow soothing the tension in his shoulders. “I get that his job is important. He does save lives on a daily basis,” he confides, voice pitched low.

“But?” Camille prompts, her hand shifting to settle on his shoulder.
“But… Fuck,” he whispers, pinching the bridge of his nose. “But I should be important, too. We’ve always worked a lot - both of us - but we used to be able to make time for each other. We’re… not who we used to be anymore.”

He sucks in a deep breath, heart pounding in his chest. “Last month, we went out for dinner. I can’t even remember the last time we went out to a nice restaurant before that, and it was a disaster. We had an argument and spent the whole evening giving each other the cold shoulder.”

He doesn’t know why he is telling Camille any of that. He has never been one for oversharing, even less so with his employees, but the words are spilling out of his mouth without his brain ever agreeing to, and he finds he just can’t stop.

“I don’t even remember the last time we went to bed together,” he says in a whisper, and the realization feels like a slap to the face, even more painful than being stood up by his husband on the most important night of the year for the company Magnus has built from scrap.

He doesn’t remember the last time they said ‘I love you’ to each other either, but he doesn’t say that much, because he is afraid admitting it out loud would rip at the last strings of his already thin restraint; and breaking down in front of Camille is the last thing he wants.

He doesn’t even want to think about the reason why they stopped saying those words.

Did they cease to be meaningful? Would they be a lie? Or did they start taking them for granted at some point, and just failed to claim them back as something more valuable than three little words?

“I think -” he says, speech scattered by the lump in his throat, “I think we lost each other. We’re done.”

This is it, he realizes. The ugly truth he has refused to admit to himself for so long.

“Hey,” Camille calls out softly, taking a step closer to lay a comforting hand between his shoulder blades. “How long have you been married? Eight? Ten years?”

“Eleven,” Magnus corrects, more by reflex than genuine conviction. “But we’ve been together for fifteen years.”

“Maybe your time together is over then,” she says, in a casual tone that suggests she doesn’t really understand the impact of her statement. “You deserve to be with someone who realizes how lucky they are to have you.”

Leisurely, he is pulled out of his daze, of his torment of fatalism and misery, and as awareness comes back to his bones, making him more acute to his surroundings, he realizes Camille’s hand has moved from his back to the nape of his neck, stroking it lightly.

His breath hitches in his throat, cursing the wave of shivers that runs down his spine.

Magnus is not an idiot. He knows Camille has been flirting with him for a long while, but he never thought too much of it, because she does it periodically, and always subtly enough for him to pull away easily.

He knows, too, that he should have put a stop to it a long time ago, just as plainly as he knows he can’t do that.

Camille, with all her femme fatale demeanor and flawless physique, makes him experience what it is to be desired again, and Magnus had forgotten how good that felt, how it left him with a pleasant
warmth spreading in his chest.

It has been a long time since he caught in Alec’s hazels the spark that glimmers in Camille’s eyes in that moment, one that speaks of a craving rooted deep into one’s soul.

“Who knows?” Camille purrs, fingers curling in the hair at the nape of his neck. “Maybe that someone isn’t as far as you think.”

He knows what she is going to do before Camille even starts moving closer. Her breath smells of bourbon and a hint of mint as it lands on his mouth. His heart is rummaging in his chest.

He doesn’t remember the last time Alec and he kissed because they actually wanted to, because they were craving for the other’s touch, because it felt right.

He could let Camille kiss him and hide behind the excuse of his marriage falling apart, of his heart having been unceasingly stomped upon for what feels like a perpetuity sentence, but there was a time when Alec and he were happy, in love and thought themselves invincible.

Magnus isn’t going to ruin these memories because he feels wanted for the first time in forever.

This certainly doesn’t feel right either.

He turns his head before Camille can as much as brush his mouth, and her lips land on his cheek.

For a while, silence wraps around them, and Magnus takes the opportunity to gather what is left of his rationality and takes a step back, putting some much needed distance between them. He hadn’t even realized how close she had gotten.

“I can’t do this,” he says, as firmly as he can muster.

She seems startled by his rejection, but she quickly blinks out of it, the provocative flicker back in her gaze.

“Can’t you?” she questions, curving a dubious eyebrow. “You said it yourself: you and Doctor AWOL are done.”

“I’m still a married man,” Magnus argues, shaking his head. “And I can’t do this to him.”

“Who says he isn’t doing exactly the same thing when he doesn’t bother texting you back?”

This has the opposite effect of what Camille was certainly aiming for, and it achieves to pull him out of the storm raging in his mind.

He would be devastated if what Camille implied turned out to be true, no matter how bleak things have become between them. Some twisted part of his brain hopes Alec would be too, but he doesn’t want to see it.

He grabs his suit jacket and his phone, and flees out of the door before Camille can stop him, ignoring her calling his name after him.

Once in the elevator and on his way to the ground floor, he allows himself to breathe, slouching against the wall. His heart is rummaging in his chest, his pulse echoing in his ears, adrenaline rushing through his veins like he just went out from a boxing fight - one he isn’t sure he won. He feels restless and exhausted all at once, his whole body throbbing with despair.

Usually, he grabs a taxi or the subway to go home. The loft isn’t too far away from Edom’s office.
but if he is completely honest with himself, tonight he needs the fresh air. Nothing is ever quite as effective as a late night stroll through Brooklyn to clear his head.

The wind is biting, leaving him feeling oddly exposed. It rained earlier in the evening but it has stopped now, leaving the rain-kissed sidewalks shining under his steps.

Magnus buries his hands deep in his pockets and tries not to focus on his phone because he knows it won’t buzz. There is no need for him to keep hoping it will.

Walking home never fails to remind him of their first date. They had gone to a bar in the heart of Brooklyn, and Alec and he had spent the entire night talking until the barmaid had eventually asked them to leave so they could close. They hadn’t had enough of each other, however, so they had taken a walk, and Magnus feels like he is walking in the exact same path they had followed then. He can recall with terrifying accuracy the way Alec had laughed at his jokes, how his mind had been buzzing with a pleasant sense of comfort. Magnus had known, even so early in their relationship, that it would take him on the journey he had been aimlessly wandering for up until that point.

They had been young, and reckless, and Magnus had fallen so fast and so deep it still makes him dizzy when he thinks about it.

To see it all go to waste now tears at his heartstrings, but he has tried to fight for them, or perhaps he is deluding himself in believing so. Perhaps he stopped fighting at the same time Alec did.

This is what they have become. The thought is painful, but it also makes it clearer that they are doomed for failure. It is a hard idea to contemplate, the fact that this is a turning point in their relationship, one that will likely lead to its end. Once, Magnus would’ve had no doubt of where they were heading, and if he did, he had found peace in the knowledge that they were heading there together.

He isn’t sure about that anymore.

It seems like they are both moving forward, but on separate roads, leaving the other behind without a look back.

Magnus had believed so hard that Alec would be his happy ending, his fairy tale story, but the reality is brutal and ruthless, and he can only admit he had fooled himself, his earnest and wishful way of thinking preventing him from keeping his eyes open long enough to see his happy ending slip through his fingers. It makes the fall all the more cruel, all the more agonizing.

And he is angry. Angry at Alec, angry at himself, angry at the both of them for letting all their efforts, all the overwhelming passion fade away when it had once seemed indestructible.

What are they doing to themselves?

It takes him an hour or so to get to their building, his path slow and measured. It has been a while since he last felt a rush of warmth, spreading through his whole body and making his skin tickle, at the prospect of going home.

The loft is just like he expected it to be as he walks in: cold and empty. Silent.

For many years while they had been together and living with each other, Magnus had never felt lonely. Even in their worst moments, it had been an abstract concept to him, an affliction he didn’t have to suffer from as long as Alec was by his side.
He feels lonely now.

He goes to the kitchen, not even bothering to switch on the lights. The moonlight pouring through the window is enough for him to perceive his surroundings. He grabs a bottle of wine from the fridge and slumps in a chair at the table, pouring himself a glass that probably doesn’t classify as reasonable.

He plucks his phone out of his pocket then and unlocks it to find his still unanswered text staring back at him.

It is worse than them not talking anymore, Magnus realizes as he scrolls up their previous messages. Magnus doesn’t know what to say to Alec anymore; nothing seems good enough to interest him. His texts are succinct and soulless, and he wonders for how long he has unconsciously worried about burdening Alec — his husband, his best friend, the one person he used to always go to to talk about everything and nothing — with something as trivial as texting.

He loses track of time, but it seems like an eternity has passed before he finds what he has been intuitively looking for.

The last time they shared I love you’s is dated over six months ago. Magnus knows it has been at least twice longer since they last said it out loud. Perhaps more.

The loft is as quiet as a mausoleum, and it seems oddly fitting, for this is where they unknowingly buried their marriage, behind closed doors and unspoken truths.

Magnus still loves Alec. He will always love Alec. But as thrilling, as wonderful, as powerful love can be, sometimes it just isn’t enough. Not anymore. Not when they have let it degrade with time and lingering silences.

Once, Magnus knew all about Alec’s secrets. His fears, his favorite things, the little habits that made him cringe in people, what songs he favored depending on his mood. He knew literally everything about Alec. Now they are back to being strangers.

Maybe it’s time for Magnus to pick up the pieces of his heart and start over.

The front door opens quietly, creaking just lowly enough for Magnus to know Alec is home, if he can even call it that anymore. The digital clock on the oven indicates past 2am. They were supposed to meet seven hours ago.

He hears Alec’s footsteps heading his way but he doesn’t move, eyes riveted on the glass in his hand. He hasn’t even had a sip, too busy wallowing in self-pity to allow himself that little pleasure.

Alec walks in the kitchen and switches the light on, startling when he catches sight of Magnus.

“Hey,” he says, shrugging his coat off and hanging it on the back of the chair in front of Magnus. It’s funny how the little rituals Magnus used to find endearing now make his skin crawl in irritation.

When Magnus doesn’t reply, Alec walks to the sink to get himself a tall glass of water. “You’re up late,” he points out, as if he isn’t the one coming home at two in the morning.

Magnus hums absently, gritting his teeth. He doesn’t know why he expected an apology. An excuse to justify standing Magnus up on the one evening of the year he needed Alec to be there.

He doesn’t glance up but he doesn’t need to to know Alec is lifting an eyebrow at him. It is plain in
his tone when he asks, “Are you okay?” before downing his water in two long gulps.

One moment, he is mourning their relationship, tears brimming in his eyes at the devastating conclusion, and the next, a dormant wrath seeps through his veins, sealing their fate.

This is that tone, the one that suggests he is not even truly interested in the answer. This is the tone of a stranger, passing by someone crying in the street and asking how they are, but not stopping to actually hear the reply because they don’t really care. Because someone else’s sorrow doesn’t affect them.

Magnus has no doubt his anguish and anger are written on his features, clear as crystal.

But Alec doesn’t bother to look at him, truly look at him anymore.

“I’m fine,” he grits out through clenched teeth.

Alec nods, and puts his glass in the dishwasher. “Ok,” he says, nonchalantly. “I’m going to bed, I’m exhausted.”

He punctuates this with a yawn, and turns around to leave.

It can’t go on like this.

Magnus is hurting, his whole being aching for release, and he knows, deep down, that Alec is hurting, too. There is no way he is unaware of what they have become, how low they sunk, how the distance between them has grown into a boundless void.

The words slip out of Magnus’ mouth, but he doesn’t try to stop them. He did that for too long, and postponing it any longer would be unfair to the both of them.

“I think we should get a divorce.”

Alec freezes in the threshold of the kitchen, one foot on the stair that leads up to their room, taking a second to see if Magnus is going to say something else - anything else to reassure him that he had misheard him. After all, he did just get out of a seven-hour long surgery that put an end to an even longer twenty hour shift, it is possible he heard incorrectly. His body is tired, feet aching from standing, and he’s sleep deprived, his mind in a foggy haze from being awake for so long.

“What?” The question chokes him as he says it. He knows — deep down he knows he heard Magnus correctly. He knows that Magnus did in fact say the words he never expected to hear.

Magnus sucks in a short breath, hesitating.

Alec turns slowly in place, making sure to keep one hand on the door frame for support.

He looks at Magnus, sitting there at the table alone, and he looks- tired. It’s not a physical exhaustion. Alec can tell by the rounded shoulders, the down turn of his eyes, that Magnus is emotionally exhausted. All of his normal confidence is gone, replaced by an uncharacteristic uncertainty.

“I think we should get a divorce,” Magnus repeats himself. And even though his voice is lower and more hesitant this time, Alec hears each word loud and clear. They hit him one at a time, knocking his breath out with a force he can feel in the pit of his stomach.
The air in the room feels thick and heavy, those seven words filling the room like a cloud of smoke, making it impossible for him to catch his breath. He closes his eyes and leans against the door frame, inhaling deeply and steadily.

Things with Magnus have been strained lately, their relationship more distant than it has ever been but he never imagined that Magnus was feeling this way about them.

“Where- where is this coming from, Magnus?” he forces himself to ask.

Magnus straightens up in his seat and finally looks up from the wine glass in his hand to look at him, meeting his eyes. He draws his shoulders back and Alec can see the exact moment he erects a wall between them. The shield he uses to protect his heart- a shield Alec put time and effort into tearing down when they first met. A shield that Magnus has never had to use against him before. Until now.

"I think you know, Alexander. T-This, us, it's not working anymore.” Magnus says it with such certainty, as if it were the most obvious fact in the world, that Alec wonders how he could have missed the signs.

“No, I don't know, Magnus,” Alec says with a shake of his head. “I know things have changed between us and maybe we don't go out together as often as we used to but it hasn't gotten that bad, has it? We work and we're busy, this is normal. This is life.”

Magnus' eyes harden on him and there’s a raw anger in the clench of his jaw as he leans forward, elbows digging into the table. "We've always worked, Alec. It didn't prevent us from granting time for the things that matter before. This may be life, but it isn't a life together anymore. We're just two strangers living under the same roof," Magnus says decidedly, the voice of a man who has made up his mind.

Alec runs his hands through his sweat-damp hair, his mind racing and trying desperately to process what Magnus is saying. He knows things have been off between them. Where they once shared laughs, now there is only silent huffs of acknowledgment, empty conversation, no more flirting glances, or whispers in ears as they hold each other close and dance in the kitchen. Things between them have died ever since— he cuts that line of thinking off. He's not going there, he's not going to revive that pain right now, that’s not what this is about. This is just a phase, a rough patch that they will eventually push through. It’s what they did, It’s what they've always done. They always work things out together because that’s who they are.

He swallows roughly past the thickening in his throat not wanting to admit that this time it’s different— this time it's Magnus giving up on them.

"Why haven't you said anything before? Why are you just now bringing this up - and like this?” Alec asks, the words stammering out of him with a bitter anger he can taste.

"I didn't know how to bring it up. And I didn't want to face the truth, but I'm tired of being disappointed,” Magnus says, the response spilling out of him, full of pent up frustration. “Tonight was just the last straw, I guess.”

"Tonight? We're- we're just now seeing each other- what could I have possibly done to make this the last straw? I've been at work in surgery all day ,” Alec argues, confused and taken aback by Magnus’ sudden surrender. It isn't like Magnus to quit, especially not when it comes to something or someone he loves. The thought that maybe this is exactly the problem - perhaps Magnus is no longer in love with him - crosses his mind in a blinding flash. It roots itself in his chest, gnawing on his heart until he can feel the pain of his heart breaking with every beat.
He tries to ignore the sobering revelation and instead mentally retraces his steps to remember every interaction he’s had with Magnus over the past twenty hours. Try to pinpoint a moment in time where he could have upset Magnus or let him down.

Magnus’ eyes scan over his face, taking in the confused look of shock Alec is sure is plastered all over his face. Magnus rolls his eyes as he grits his teeth and pinches the bridge of his nose. His eyes close tightly as he heaves out a frustrated breath.

"You have no idea what tonight was, do you?" Magnus finally asks, looking up at him. He watches him and waits, a desperate hope in his eyes that maybe Alec will have the right answer; behind the hope is a resignation, as if he already knows that the answer Alec will give him won’t be the one he wants to hear.

Alec opens his mouth, expecting to have an immediate response to such a simple question but he finds that he doesn’t. Tonight? What was so important about tonight? He doesn’t even know what the date is anymore. His work schedule has left his internal clock a mess. It’s a Friday night- he’s pretty sure about that. It’s not Magnus’ birthday- of that he’s positive. It isn’t a holiday because if it was then he would likely be at work. This leaves a work related event as the next possible choice —

Alec closes his mouth and grinds his teeth together, remembering Magnus’ pleading words to him just the night before.

‘Please don’t forget the company’s end of quarter party tomorrow night. Seven o’clock.’

“Fuck,” Alec curses under his breath. Guilt washes over him, adding itself to the already sick swirl of emotions in his stomach. Of all the disappointing things he has ever done - and he’s sure he has done plenty over the past fifteen years - this is quite possibly his biggest fuck up.

He crosses the room in heavy, weary steps, and drops into the seat across from Magnus. He doesn’t even want to look at him, to look him in the eye and see the disappointment he knows is there because he feels it too. He leans forward on his elbows and hangs his head in his hands, sighing heavily.

"Shit, Magnus. Your company's party.” He wipes a hand down his face and forces himself to face his husband. “I'm sorry- I got caught up at work, it completely slipped my mind.”

Magnus’ brows jump at Alec’s justification, his mouth set in an unimpressed frown, an expression on his face that says, ‘I’ve heard that before’.

Alec drops his gaze and acknowledges the weak excuse for what it is, overused and just that: an excuse. He can't count the times he has used work as a way to get out of dinners, events, parties, or even nights alone with Magnus. He’s even volunteered to cover late night shifts for Dr. Garroway - the Chief of surgery- so that he could have time off to spend with his family. Magnus never knew about this; but Alec has found himself offering to stay instead of going home, choosing to sit in the break room to avoid this suffocating tension they have when they're together.

"Clearly," Magnus deadpans.

" Magnus, don't be that way. You know I wanted to be there.” He's telling the truth this time. He realizes that the minute he says it. Despite the distance that has formed between them, he still cares. This is Magnus. His husband of eleven years, his best friend, and the one person in the world who has the ability to see through him completely.
At least, that's what he used to be. Alec doesn't know what he is to him anymore or what they've become. His heart clenches in his chest at the overwhelming truth that he no longer recognizes who they are.

Alec reaches across the table to take Magnus’ hand in his, an affection he realizes -once his hand leaves the table- he hasn’t done in a long time. He doesn’t know why he ever quit or when it was that he stopped showing Magnus the simple, yet pivotal, reminders of his love. He wonders if it’s too late to express that now or if he can still prove to him that he does in fact still care, that he knows how much this night meant for him and how he didn’t mean to forget.

His fingertips lightly graze the back of his hand, the warmth of Magnus’ skin sparks an old, familiar memory that is instantly erased when Magnus pulls away from him.

Alec lets his hand drop to the table and he curls it into a fist, blunt nails digging into the pads of his palm. The rejection plunging like a knife in his chest.

He watches as Magnus laces his hands together and brings them up to his mouth, moving back in his seat, distancing himself from him. He wonders when his touch became a thing of repulsion. At what point did Magnus stop desiring his touch? Was it before or after Alec quit giving it to him? Does he miss it? Or is he okay with these miles of empty space that seem to lay between them now?

Brown eyes that once looked at him with kindness and complete adoration are hard and unforgiving when he eventually turns to face him again.

Magnus swallows, the bob of his Adam’s apple hitching as if choking back tears Alec knows he won’t allow himself to shed. "You know how important this party was to me, Alec. Remember Hodge Starkweather? He asked where you were, and I didn't have an answer to give him because I couldn't really tell him that my husband bailed on me and didn't even have the decency to warn me that he wouldn't make it. The only thing that saved me from completely embarrassing myself was —” He pauses and sucks in a deep but quivering breath. “You know what? Never mind. This is pointless,” Magnus finishes resolutely with a gesture of his hand between them.

The stabbing pain in his chest twists, digging deeper now.

"I didn't bail on you," Alec disputes, “we were short staffed, a head trauma came in and I had to perform an emergency craniotomy- that's a seven hour surgery. I was the only surgeon on shift, I didn't have a chance to text you or anything before having to go into prep, and when I was finished, I came straight home. You act as if I did this on purpose just to embarrass you." His voice is beginning to rise, he can feel his pain begin to shift to the low simmer of anger.

Magnus scoffs. "You're always the only surgeon on shift, because you refuse to hire another one. And don't act like you would've texted at all had you had the chance. You forgot about it. But you know what? It's probably not such a bad thing. Saved us from another fucking disaster like dinner last month."

Alec winces at the memory of that dinner. Fucking disaster is the perfect way to describe what happened that night. That entire date had been doomed from the beginning.

He remembers running late, despite his well-intended promises to Magnus that he would leave work so early they would have plenty of time to have drinks at the restaurant’s bar before their dinner reservation. Instead they ended up being twenty minutes late for their reservation, resulting in Magnus having to convince the hostess to still give them a table. Alec had tried apologizing. “Your job is important to you. It is what it is, Alec,” was all Magnus had said to him with a forced
smile before turning away and directing his attention at anything but Alec — That was the first sign that the night was not going to end well.

Alec should have recognized the second sign but it was much more subtle, one he is so used to seeing that he quit noticing. Their conversation, if you could call an ‘oh yeah?’ or a ‘Mm’ every now and again a conversation, had been interrupted all night by Magnus’ phone pinging with a new text message every other minute. Because even though Magnus would never admit to it, his work never ends.

The proverbial nail in the coffin had been when Alec’s colleague Meliorn had walked past their table. At work Meliorn was a man of few words and one of the few people at the hospital that seemed to mind his own business, which made him one of the few colleagues Alec had left that hadn’t met Magnus.

“Magnus, this is Meliorn, he’s one of our anesthesiologists. And probably the one I trust the most.” Alec had introduced him to Magnus. Magnus had smiled. Everything had seemed fine until — “Alec is one of the most professional and efficient surgeons I’ve had the pleasure to work with. Great work ethic and such a hard worker that he still refuses to hire another surgeon.” Meliorn had flashed his smile and laughed wholeheartedly, never knowing that his simple statement was enough to unravel and break the weak strands of the cat’s cradle that was holding their marriage up in its delicate balance.

The argument that followed still rings in Alec’s mind, serving as a constant reminder of his failures in this marriage. The promises he’s failed to keep.

Alec chews on his lip, his anger filling in his chest the more he thinks about the double standards Magnus puts on their marriage. Alec has never once complained to Magnus about the long hours starting his company requires of him. He has always been his biggest supporter, the cheerleader in his corner when things don’t go as planned and he wants to give up; always encouraging him to try again and to push harder. And now, he is always working, even when he’s home, his work never ends. Whether it be emails, conference calls on an early Sunday morning, or a constant stream of text messages. Magnus’ company has become his life and in the process, Alec gets pushed to the sidelines.

Still, Alec never complains.

Alec pushes his chair back and stands, needing to move. He’s tired of Magnus placing all of the blame onto him, as if he has been the picture-perfect example of a husband throughout their marriage. Lately he always feels the need to defend himself, defend his career, and his choices. Once Magnus had been proud of him. Proud to have a husband that climbed the surgical ladder and became an attending surgeon at such a young age, one of the best neurosurgeons in the state; and now- now Magnus does nothing but make him feel bad for his accomplishments- always throwing them back in his face when he was needed elsewhere.

Hiring another surgeon is something Alec is trying to do but it’s an incredible responsibility he doesn’t want to screw up. So instead he takes on all the extra work for himself. It’s something he shouldn’t do but he does, because, if he’s being honest with himself, it’s easier than going home. He’s never said this to Magnus, only ever telling him the other side of the coin, the other truth: that he’s afraid of making the wrong choice and someone’s life ending because of it. He’s tried explaining this to Magnus, time and time again, but here he is, explaining it again.

"We haven't had any decent candidates that I would trust to handle things while I'm gone. These are people's lives I'm responsible for! I can't pick just anybody. So yeah, my schedule will be busy until I find the perfect fit.” Alec paces over to the counter and rubs at his eyes tiredly. He breathes
in deeply and exhales a long breath through his nose, trying not to let his anger get the best of him. “Besides, dinner was a disaster before Meliorn showed up because you spent the whole night ignoring me and texting Camille about some work related project I don’t know about because you never feel the need to share these things with me anymore.” His voice is calmer now when he looks at Magnus, more controlled, but the irritation lingers on him like a second skin.

He notices Magnus’ shoulders tense and the subtle, uncomfortable shift in his seat as he looks away.

He doesn’t know how they got there. How they let their marriage get to this point of being in ruins. They spend more time in silence than they do sharing stories. They spend their nights together looking at their phones instead of each other. Every now and then, he has found himself wondering what Magnus is smiling at on his phone. He’d find himself wanting to ask but it isn’t that easy anymore. Before, Magnus would have shared it with him and they would have smiled or laughed about it together, their relationship simple and still uncomplicated. Now when Magnus smiles at his phone, it’s quick, almost hidden and before Alec can even think about asking, the phone is tucked away and the moment is gone. Now, Magnus doesn’t bother to share his happiness with him, hides it like a secret— a secret he no longer wishes to share with him.

Alec leans forward on the counter and drops his head into his hands.

He has been blind, so very blind.

Tears sting his eyes as the memories scurry through his mind, synapses firing making him suddenly cognizant of every detail he has failed to notice. He gasps in a breath, realization hitting him in the pit of his stomach. The knife in his chest twisting until it finds its home, piercing his heart, and puncturing his lungs to the point where he can no longer breathe. He feels like a fool— a naive, oblivious fool. The signs have been there, plain as day, for who knows how long and he never noticed, never put the pieces together, until now.

His stomach retches, the betrayal burning like acid in his throat as he tries to swallow down the sickening dread he feels. He breathes in, fingertips digging into his head, the inflation of his lungs pushing against the asphyxiating pressure wrapped around his ribs, crushing him.

Magnus remains silent and his silence is deafening.

Alec raises himself slowly to stand. He needs to be looking at Magnus when he asks him this question. He needs to see the look on his face, because Magnus can lie, but his face can’t. Alec has always been able to see his every emotion, his every truth, and so he needs to look at him now for this. No more hiding behind work, or phones, or excuses. He needs to know.

Alec presses his palms to his eyes and pushes back the burning tears, wills them to go away with every ounce of strength he has left so that Magnus won’t see him broken and in pieces. He moves his hands down to rest on the countertop and grips onto the granite edges as he breathes in a shuddering breath through a throat that feels constricted and useless.

"Magnus...it is Camille you're talking to, right? There's not—” he takes in another sharp, shallow breath— “is there someone else?” The words hurt on their way out, as if his body rejects the very notion that they even need to be asked.

Magnus bristles, his back straightening, shoulder blades pinching together. Alec can’t tell from his vantage point whether or not the reaction is out of guilt or out of offense. He’s not left to wonder for long before Magnus turns to him.
"What if there is, Alec?" Magnus sneers, his hands clenching together hard enough to turn his fingertips white from the pressure. "Don't make this about something it's not."

Alec reels back, the response catching him off guard. He didn’t know what he was expecting—a ‘yes’ that would shatter him completely or even a ‘no’ that would settle this unease inside of him—but it wasn’t this, never this. The betrayal shoots through him, running up his spine and triggering his anger yet again.

He pushes off the counter in one swift motion, tears trying to force their way out, as he shouts, "How the fuck is this not about that?! If you're seeing someone else, I have the right to know, Magnus!"

Alec brings his hands up behind his head to give his lungs more room to expand. He’s terrified of Magnus’ answer and unsure if he even wants to know the truth. He wonders if it would be best to just leave things as they are. They can walk away now without him having to hear a truth that will irrevocably tear him apart.

Magnus sighs and wipes at his mouth, the gold reflection of his wedding band catching Alec’s attention; and Alec can’t stop the unhealthy images of Magnus touching someone else with those hands from flooding his mind. Would he have bothered to take off his wedding band? Or was he so detached from their marriage that leaving it on would not have mattered to him? Alec clenches his jaw. The thought of Magnus with someone else runs through him like a caustic chemical, eating him away from the inside and the pain hurts more than he could have ever imagined.

"I'm not seeing someone else. I would never cheat on you, Alec. And I can't believe you thought I would."

"Well I never thought you would want a divorce either," Alec retorts.

Magnus winces and looks back down at his hands, dragging his eyes away from him.

Silence settles over them. Always a silence between them.

He knows he should be satisfied with Magnus’ answer, that it should be enough to relieve the weight that’s settled over his heart but an unease tugs at him, demanding his attention. Magnus had hesitated, he looked ashamed, and maybe he hadn’t cheated on him but Alec is sure there is something more there. Something left unsaid that without asking the right question, perhaps Magnus will never confess to. Magnus is an expert at saying nothing while also saying so much.

Alec purses his lips and clears his throat. "Why would you say that? If there's no one else, why wouldn't you just say 'no'? Why would you ask if it mattered?"

Magnus’ reaction is instant; he pushes his palms against his eyes and inhales deeply. His gaze is steady when he looks back at Alec. "I didn't cheat on you. I would never. But I thought about it," Magnus admits. "For a second only, but it was long enough for me to know that whatever we had is broken. Camille tried to kiss me tonight, and I almost let her. And all I could think about wasn’t 'no, I love someone else', it was 'no, I can't do this to Alec'."

This truth hurts almost as much. What difference is there if Magnus did or didn’t commit the act? If deep down he actually wanted to— had considered it? What is left for them to save if this is the point they had found themselves at?

Nothing. There’s nothing left, Alec admits to himself.
He can’t do this. He asked because he needed to know, he thought he could handle the truth and now that it’s been said, he can’t.

Alec slowly nods while he backs away towards the door in staggering steps.

"I can’t— I can’t do this. I can’t be here right now," he chokes out and turns to leave.

The cold night air hits Alec in the face and freezes against his tear-damp cheeks when he steps foot out of their apartment building. He didn’t even realize he had started to cry and he wipes the tears away before folding his arms across his chest to try and keep himself warm. He left his coat back in the loft and in it his phone, he realizes. He probably should call first, find out if it’s okay to even go over there at this ungodly hour of the night but the thought of facing Magnus again is too much—they will understand.

Brooklyn is quiet and lonely as he makes his way through it, only the occasional car passing by. Alec and Magnus had chosen to live in Brooklyn because it would be closer to Magnus’ office and it would be more affordable than to live in the city while Magnus started up his company. Then his siblings had followed suit, wanting to keep their family close so they could always be there for each other. His stomach twists into a knot as he realizes that this dream of happily ever after is now lost. Gone would be the Sunday brunches at their loft with Magnus’ famous grapefruit mimosas, Jace’s summer pool parties, Izzy’s annual Fourth of July party, and combined Christmases. The loss of Magnus would not just devastate him but his entire family.

He stops at the end of the block, thunder rolling overhead as he waits for the flashing light of the crosswalk to change. This is a path he has walked with Magnus countless times over the years. He remembers standing at this very light, the weight of Magnus’ hand in his, the rings on his fingers cold between his own. As Alec balls his fist in the stiff fabric of his scrub top, he misses it, he misses the feeling of their palms pressed together, and the way Magnus would stroke the back of his hand with his thumb, the silent way he would show Alec his love by always wanting to keep their bodies in contact.

A crack of thunder and a flash of lightning open the sky, sending a torrent of rain over the city. The stark iciness of rainfall washes over him as he stands on the corner, dropping his head back and letting the rain rinse down his face. The cold bites at his cheeks and causes a chill to spread across his skin. He wants nothing more than to turn around and go back home, to wrap his arms around Magnus and apologize— apologize for not being there, for taking him for granted for so many years, for not putting him first like he should have, for not loving him the way he deserves to be loved, for not holding him more often, for not taking the time to tell him everyday how lucky he is to have him in his life. He’s made so many mistakes and now it’s too late.

He leans his head against the street post and cries in harsh shuddering breaths. It’s too late to turn back now, there’s nothing waiting for him back home, not anymore. For years he had left Magnus waiting— always waiting for him to make time for him in his life, and tonight, he had left him waiting again. He had left him disappointed again, a disappointment Alec is sure Magnus has grown accustomed to by now. A disappointment he never should have gotten used to because he deserves so much more.
The sign changes and he takes in a deep breath, determined to make it the last two blocks.

The rain is heavy, gathering in puddles along the sidewalk, he can see the line of townhouses come into view at the end of the block. Just a few more steps and he will be there, a few more steps and he won’t have to be alone in this. The light on their porch is off when he climbs the steps and presses the buzzer. He waits a minute before pressing the buzzer again. He can hear the sound of hesitant footsteps walking down the wooden staircase by the front door. The porch light turns on and he takes a step back so that they can see him from the peephole. The lock turns and the door is thrown open.

The sight of Isabelle brings the pain immediately back to him- she’s the image of comfort that he desperately needs right now. Her hair is tied up in a messy knot on the top of her head and she’s wearing an oversized t-shirt with a pair of pajama bottoms. She had been sound asleep and now he has shown up to startle her back to reality. He didn’t realize that he had been hoping this was all a nightmare and he knows the minute he tells her there will be no denying that this is, in fact, all real.

"Alec, what are you doing here?" She looks him over and her tired eyes settle on his scrubs, widening in panic. “Why are you still in your scrubs? Oh my God, is Magnus okay?"

Hearing Magnus’ name is crushing, and her question is not one he’s sure he even knows the answer to anymore. Is Magnus truly okay with this? Is this what he wants? Does he really want to throw in his cards and walk away from Alec altogether? Alec’s sobs come pouring out before he can stop them and he brings his hand up to cover his face. The rain continues to pour mercilessly over him, splashing against the back of his neck and running down his back, but it does nothing to cleanse him of this self-reproach.

He feels Isabelle’s warm hand on his forearm as she pulls him inside, slamming the door shut behind him. She guides him further into her home and assaults him with a series of frenzied questions he can’t even hear. She urges him down to sit and he drops back onto the large gray sofa against the wall.

“Alec. Alec, please. I need you to talk to me.” She wipes his rain-soaked hair away from his face with one hand while her other hand clings tightly to his hand. “Alec, tell me.”

She’s panicking, he’s doing this to her, he needs to stop- to calm down so he can explain. His voice is raw when he tries to use it, and even though he’s trying to speak, the words are coming out broken, fighting against the cries that are stuck in his throat. “Magnus — Magnus— wants a divorce.”

Izzy startles with a gasp and Alec finally pulls his hand away from his face to look at her.

“What? Alec, what are you talking about?”

Her mouth is slightly parted as she looks him in the eyes, waiting for his response. There’s confusion in her crinkled brow mixed with shock and what looks like disappointment as her mouth closes and turns to a frown.

He pushes the heels of his hands against his eyes and lets his tears take over again. She should be disappointed in him. This is his fault, this was his marriage, the thing that was supposed to be the most important thing in his life and he let it die.

He feels her hand gently squeeze his. “It’s okay, Alec, you can tell me,” she reassures him.

Izzy with all her kindness and wisdom, has always been there for him. To listen to his problems
and give him advice - even when he didn’t want it- and he knew she would be there for him now. This was one of the many reasons he came here tonight. She is one of the pillars of strength that keeps him upright when he isn’t sure he can stand alone. Jace is another pillar of strength for him but it is the middle of the night and he didn’t want to risk waking Ariel up. And his last pillar—the one he can feel crumbling beneath him, bringing him to his knees—is Magnus.

Izzy clutches onto his hand tighter now, the pressure rooting him to her, giving him the strength he needs to tell her everything.

He nods and wipes at his eyes, taking the moment to catch his breath.

"Magnus told me he wants a divorce," he admits weakly, pausing to wipe his nose with the back of his hand before looking at her again. His eyes burn and even though he’s been crying, they feel dry and raw with every grating blink. “He doesn't love me anymore, Iz, and now- I've lost him."

Isabelle’s brows furrow even more, the wrinkle in between them deepening. "Okay," she says softly, and the fact that she doesn’t bother trying to reassure him otherwise isn’t lost on him and it hurts. "How about I make some coffee and you can tell me exactly what happened?"

Her eyes are gentle and understanding, her heartbreak for him shining in the unshed tears that line her lower lids.

Alec is about to nod when Maia’s voice comes from the hallway.

"I'll do it," she says, looking just as sleepy as Izzy did when she first opened the door.

“Thank you, Maia.” Isabelle offers her wife a quick smile before turning her attention back on Alec, brushing her hands along his forearms in long, brisk strokes meant to warm him.

“Alec, you’re freezing,” she says quietly, as if speaking to herself more than him. “And you’re soaked. Let me try and find you something dry to wear.”

He watches Isabelle retreat down the entrance hall and can hear her run up the staircase in quick steps. He feels awful and selfish for showing up here like this, soaking wet and broken, interrupting their peaceful night with his problems.

He can hear the sound of Maia setting three coffee mugs out on the counter as the coffee maker percolates loudly in the quiet.

Alec leans forward, elbows on his knees and hangs his head. He sniffs back his running nose and takes several deep breaths to calm himself. Perhaps he should have stayed home. Maybe he could have talked to Magnus and worked things out. Would he have been able to convince him that he meant it when he said he was sorry?

“Here.” Izzy is back in front of him, holding out a plush white towel. “Dry off.”

He follows her order and quickly removes the sopping wet scrub top, handing it to her when he sees her outstretched hand. The towel is warm as he dries himself off, scrubbing it over his hair so that the water will stop dripping down his neck in icy trails. When he finishes, he hands the towel over to her in exchange for a gray and white plush sweater he recognizes instantly, causing his stomach to clench. He knows this sweater. How it feels soft beneath his palms as they glide over the firm muscles that line Magnus’ spine, how thick the threads are when bunched in his grip as he tugs it over Magnus’ head, and how warm and comforting it feels beneath his cheek- soft breaths rising and falling underneath him. He knows this sweater because he's the one that bought it for
She must notice his reaction because she sees her grimace as she sits down beside him again. “I’m sorry. This is the only thing I have. Simon did leave a sweater the other day but it wouldn’t fit you,” she apologizes.

Alec nods and bites on his lips, trying to hold back the fresh swell of tears he can feel burning like sand in his eyes.

“Oh God, Alec.” She stands to leave. “Let me try to find something else—”

“It’s fine,” he says, stopping her with a hand on her arm. “Don’t worry about it.”

She settles back in by his side with a sheepish nod.

He runs his fingers along the ribbed rows of the sweater, remembering the last night Magnus wore it. It’s only been one week since they were in this very room, playing an intense game of Cranium with his siblings and friends. Simon had to use Magnus as a marionette to act out a charade and Magnus had taken the sweater off and thrown it over his shoulder, claiming his competitiveness made him sweat. He had spent the night in his undershirt and when it was time to leave he had thrown on his coat, the sweater forgotten on the couch.

The memory is painful more than anything else when Alec remembers how they had spent that night pretending to be happy yet keeping their distance. It’s a role they had unknowingly started whenever family was around. An act in a play about their life full of indirect conversations, glances from across the room, and casual brushes against the arm to make it seem like everything is okay between them.

He wonders if any of them have noticed. If they had seen the evidence of his marriage unraveling before he did. He had somehow managed to unknowingly play a passive role in all of this. He had gotten so lost in the daily routines of life that he became a passive figure in their marriage. One whose passiveness was so prominent it had become an active contributing factor to their demise without his intention.

Izzy is silently watching him and he realizes that he has been sitting here staring at the sweater. He braces himself with a deep breath, stuffing his arms in the sleeves and then pulling it over his head in one swift motion.

Magnus envelopes him—the minty smell of his skin, that mixes perfectly with the spiced scent of his cologne. The scent Alec has known for the last fifteen years of his life, the scent that lingers on his sheets, that fills his head, and invades his senses whenever Magnus is near. The sweater surrounds him in the familiar feeling of home and contentment that Magnus brings to him.

He feels the tears spring from his eyes, escaping along with a choked back sob. Isabelle is quick to place her hand on his back, rubbing soothing circles that help calm him. She’s shushing him quietly in his ear, her forehead resting firmly against his temple. He focuses on the calming sound, allowing it to drown out the sound of his cries.

“T’ve got you, Alec,” she whispers, placing a kiss on his cheek.

His breaths flow easier as he leans into her with her arms wrapped around him and supporting his weight. “Thanks, Izzy.”

Alec feels the couch sink on the other side of him and he wipes his eyes to see Maia holding out a warm mug of coffee to him, a small, apologetic smile pulling at her mouth.
“Thanks,” he mutters quietly, accepting the cup from her with shaking hands.

He wraps his hands around the entire mug, desperately seeking the heat to help settle the nerves he feels taking over his entire body. He focuses on the warmth as it wraps around the frigid cold of his fingertips and travels through his palms. His body is trembling but he no longer feels the cold, he only feels depleted — hollow, still somehow filled with sorrow. He feels like he is mourning and he figures that in a way, he is. He is mourning the death of their marriage, the death of a love that lasted over a decade. A love that was supposed to last until his dying breath.

He takes a sip of the coffee and lets it soothe him. His love isn’t dying, he thinks to himself. No. His love for Magnus will always remain, even if their marriage doesn’t. His love for Magnus is the energy his body uses to push itself forward, it’s the beating of his heart and the blood it pumps through his veins. As long as he has life, his love for Magnus will have life because the two are one and the same.

"Want to tell us exactly what happened?" Izzy asks, breaking him of his thoughts.

Alec takes another sip of his coffee before placing it on the coffee table in front of them. He doesn’t know how they are being so kind to him when he showed up at their door in the middle of the night, crying and unloading his life problems on them. He showed up like a wounded victim and now he has to be the one to tell them that he has single-handedly ruined the best thing in his life and that he's taking away a brother from them.

"I fucked up.” He draws in a deep breath, ready for the anger he knows is coming. “I forgot about his company party. I stood him up on one of the most important nights for his business.” He sighs. "He doesn't ask for much and I couldn't even do this one thing for him."

Maia stiffens up beside him, her hands clenching around her coffee cup. “What the hell, Alec? You know how important this party was for him! He's been talking about it non-stop for a month!"

Izzy’s eyes widen a fraction before settling pointedly on her wife with a look that is begging her to hold her tongue. It’s a silent communication that is understood and works instantly. It’s the type of communication he and Magnus used to have.

Alec cringes. Maia is absolutely right. Magnus’ excitement over this party has been a constant current in their lives throughout the past few months. This party had the power to make or break his business and Alec was supposed to be there by his side to show his support. He should have been there.

"I know. I was just— I was distracted and then I had a surgery…And I know these are just the same shitty excuses I've been using for years so it doesn't matter. The truth is, I don't have a good excuse.” Alec stops to pinch the bridge of his nose. “I fucked up and he's had enough of it,” he concedes.

Izzy’s hand squeezes around his.

"But, still, a divorce?” she prompts. "Has it really gotten that bad?"

Alec thinks it over for a moment. The warning signs of their failing marriage flashing at him like flares that demand to be noticed. The dinners they either ate alone or ate in silence across the table because they no longer knew how to talk to each other. The cold, distant touches. The care was no longer there when they touched each other- all affection was lost to the point that their intimacy had ceased to be an act of love. The signs had been there all along, Alec knows this, but instead of seeing them and making the necessary changes, Alec chose instead to live his life in a constant
state of denial, because if he didn’t accept that their marriage was falling apart, maybe it never would.

Alec scoffs inwardly at himself, not the least bit surprised that he had been wrong about something else yet again.

He nods at Izzy. "Things haven't been the same between us since— well, for a long time now, Iz. I let our marriage slip through my fingers."

Maia rests her hand on his shoulder, applying an encouraging pressure. “Come on, it's nothing you two can't fix. You've been through some tough times together, surely you can make it through this.”

Alec shakes his head. "I don't know if we can fix it this time. This time it’s different...Camille wasn't between us before..." he trails off, the reminder of Magnus’ confession wringing his stomach into knots.

"Camille?" Isabelle asks with a frown, doubt filling her eyes.

Alec closes his eyes, the sound of Camille’s name cutting through him with fresh slices of betrayal.

"Is he cheating on you?" Izzy’s question is blunt and to the point. She watches him and swallows roughly as if it’s hurting her to ask a question that accuses Magnus of a betrayal she doesn’t want to believe he is capable of.

Alec hangs his head in his hands. He wants to lie to her, to tell her only the simple truth that, no, Magnus did not cheat on him. He wants to leave it at that because repeating the rest and thinking about it again will cement it as an absolute truth. Magnus no longer desired him, he desired someone else. How could a marriage come back if one half has completely given up?

"No. I don't know?" He runs his fingers through his damp hair, curling his fingers in, gripping the hair at the root to ease the tension that lines his scalp. “He says he hasn't and that he never would but - he says he's thought of it. And somehow...that hurts just as much.”

He lets his hands drop, not bothering to wipe away the tears that start up again. The sharp pain of his elbows digging into his tired legs serves as a welcome distraction from the pain he feels eating away inside of him.

Izzy and Maia share a look that’s equally stunned and grave.

No one ever expected this. Not from them, not from Magnus and Alec.

"But he hasn't," Izzy tells him, gently rubbing his back. "You have to keep that in mind, Alec. He could have, but he didn't. That means a part of him is still willing to fight to save your marriage."

"Does it though? I've never considered it. I can't even imagine being with someone else.” Alec looks down at his hand, the brushed gold wedding band Magnus chose for him staring back at him. The memory of Magnus sliding it down his finger at their wedding is there and it’s a beautiful memory full of warmth that emanates in his chest. It sits beside another memory, a favorite of his, a memory that brings a rush of flutters to his stomach and a pounding beat in his heart. Magnus’ lips kiss the ring gently and then hover over it, brushing against him, telling him how he never knew happiness like this could exist as they lay tangled in bed.

He never thought that these cherished memories would now be accompanied by the events of tonight. That he would always know what hatred looked like on Magnus’ beautiful and usually
kind face. That he would remember Magnus’ face lit up with laughter, his smile of sated pleasure, and now his eyes dim and distant with heartbreak.

“Besides, you didn't see his face. You didn't see the hatred in his eyes. He's done with me,” Alec utters, remembering the haunting look of resentment on Magnus’ face.

"He doesn't hate you," Maia argues. "He was pissed off because you forgot about the party. Anger makes you act irrationally sometimes. I'm sure you both said things that weren't entirely fair. But Magnus could never hate you. You've been together for fifteen years."

"Maybe that's just it though. Fifteen years is a long time. Maybe our love has run its course," Alec sighs tiredly.

Isabelle quirks a dubious eyebrow. "Do you really believe that?"

Does he? Is he willing to believe that their love with all its intoxicating and dizzying passion has burned out?

His life was made up of rationalities and carefully considered decisions. Falling in love with Magnus had never been a choice. It was never a conscious decision he weighed the pros and cons over. It was a free fall. Alec had closed his eyes and without a single thought, let himself fall. Without tether and without hesitation.

Their entire relationship had been one exhilarating fall without stop. And even now, fifteen years later, despite the lull and despite the fact that he no longer recognizes what they had, Alec can tell that he is still falling- head first and has never stopped.

"I still love him. I love him so much "—he sucks in a ragged breath—"but I stopped showing him. Why did I ever stop?"

Alec's shoulders shake as his cries break free.

Izzy springs forward, tears flowing from her eyes as she wraps her arms around him, burying his face in her shoulder. She’s crying with him, her fingers combing through his hair. Maia’s arms wrap around him from behind, her head resting against his back and he feels himself breaking down, unable to stop.

Izzy sniffs and presses a kiss to his head. “It’ll be okay, Alec. You can make things right again. Magnus loves you. I know he does.”

He wants to believe this, he really does. More than anything, he wants to believe that some part of Magnus, even if it’s the smallest part, still loves him. That there’s still a hint of that overwhelming and consuming love he used to have for him lingering in some corner of his now closed-off heart. And if there’s still something there, Alec is willing to fight for it. He will fight to bring it back if it’s the last thing he does.

Alec nods against her and sits himself up, pulling the stray strands of her hair away from where they stuck to his face. “I’m sorry I came here like this. I shouldn’t have burdened you both with this.”

Maia wraps her arms around his neck and nuzzles into him for a warm hug. “Don’t be ridiculous, Alec, you’re our brother and you’re always welcome here.”

Izzy hums in agreement with her wife. “You’re welcome to stay here as long as you need.”
Maia stands and moves over to the trunk in the corner of the room. She pulls out a blanket and pillow and takes them over to him. “Get some sleep, you look wrecked.”

Alec lets out a small laugh. He can’t imagine what he looks like having been awake for almost twenty-four hours now.

“We’ll be here for you in the morning.” Izzy pats him on the cheek and wipes his tears. “I love you, Alec.”

Alec smiles at her. “I love you too.”

The sound of the door closing after Alec echoes long after he’s gone.

Magnus doesn’t move for a long time, staring at the wine shifting in the glass between his hands. Anger and bitterness have deserted him, and all that is left are the devastating sorrow and the smothering loneliness that came weighing on his shoulders the moment Alec left.

Alec’s coat is still hanging on the chair in front of him, and Magnus can’t help but wonder if Alec isn’t cold out there without it. It is a brisk night of October, and the wind has been howling outside. The despair on Alec’s features before he escaped the tension between them is haunting, the way they buckled to disclose his inward betrayal, the flash of sorrow in the hazel that exposed the exact moment his heart broke.

Magnus hadn’t even known he still had any kind of power over Alec’s heart.

Yet, here they are now. Both heartbroken. Both alone.

The lump that has been squirming in Magnus’ stomach all night long hasn’t subdued. If anything, it grew heavier, pushing against his lungs to prevent him from breathing properly, clutching at his heart ruthlessly until all he can think of is how they broke their word.

It has been eleven years, but Magnus remembers the vows Alec and he swore to observe on their wedding day all too well. He recalls talking about darkness, and finding light upon meeting Alec, trusting him to guide him through. If he were still as angry as he was when he first came home, he would smile at the irony. Here he is now, sitting in the dark in their kitchen, abandoned to grieve the death of their marriage on his own.

Because this is what it is. Their marriage is dead, and Magnus pulled the trigger, even though they both had their fingers hovering over it for too long.

With a sigh, Magnus pushes off the chair and grabs Alec’s coat, sliding it on. The sleeves are slightly too long for him but it fits nicely around his shoulders, and most importantly, it smells like Alec — the fresh, woody scent of his cologne wrapping around him at once.

It is warm, too, protecting him from the biting cold as he steps on the balcony. It is pouring outside, but Magnus is unaffected, sheltered by the half-roof over his head and the warmth of Alec lingering on the coat, enveloping him.

Gulping past the lump in his throat turns out to be impossible, so Magnus stops trying. Heaving out a deep sigh, he walks to the right side of the balcony, where he keeps his secret stash of cigarettes hidden behind the pot of creeping thyme Alec never touches - which is for the best, since Magnus has always been the one with green fingers in their relationship.
Magnus has never really smoked, but he does indulge in the bad habit when he is stressed, and tonight clearly calls for it. Lighting the cigarette, he inhales slowly, his shoulders relaxing as he draws out the smoke, watching it form a shapeless cloud that dissipates under the beating rain.

It is a habit of his that Alec always hated. He never understood the concept of stress smoking, but he always let Magnus be, until recently. Perhaps it is symptomatic of their downfall, and Magnus should have put it together before. Alec had been sighing, clicking his tongue or pulling a disgusted face whenever Magnus retreated to the balcony for a cigarette. It had gotten to the point where he ended up hiding his cigarettes and only smoked when Alec wasn’t there - which, admittedly, was quite often. It wasn’t that he was scared of Alec’s reaction, he knows now. He just didn’t bother to confront him about it, because he didn’t want to— so he concealed his routine.

It seems silly, but it strikes him then that his stash of cigarettes is yet another thing they don’t bother to share with each other anymore. The energy talking to one another consumes just doesn’t seem worth it anymore.

How did they come to this?

Sliding his free hand in the pocket of Alec’s coat, his fingers brush against something and he plucks it out. It’s Alec’s phone. Magnus presses the home button and immediately regrets doing it.

Where are you?

Magnus’ text flashes at the top of the screen, unread, proof that Alec claiming he hadn’t checked his phone before or after surgery was a genuine excuse.

It isn’t that Magnus truly believes that Alec would have lied to him about being in surgery and not checking his phone. It has happened enough times for him to know it is entirely plausible. Nevertheless, it comforts him somehow. Camille’s words from earlier — “Who says he isn’t doing exactly the same thing when he doesn’t bother texting you back?” — swirl back in his mind like a painful reminder. She was wrong. Of course she was, but there was a small, wicked part of him that had swallowed the doubt and let it linger in a corner of his brain with a dreadful purpose. She was wrong, and he should feel relieved, but it only makes the guilt clutching at his heart worse, for what didn’t happen, for what he said, and for even letting Camille’s spiteful words get to his head in the first place.

It stirs the bitterness back in Magnus’ throat before his attention focuses elsewhere.

Alec’s background picture is a photograph of Magnus. It was undoubtedly taken this summer, because Magnus is sitting at the edge of Jace’s pool, his legs hanging in the water. He is laughing, looking at something or someone outside the shot, his left hand curled around a cocktail glass, the gold of his wedding band shining under the sunlight pouring over him.

He looks happy there, and somehow, it is enough to bring back all the sorrow he tried to keep buried to the surface. He chokes on a sob, and tears spill out of his eyes.

When did they give up on this? Did they really give up, or do things seem so bleak because they simply and purely stopped trying?

Whatever it is, Magnus knows he can’t do this alone.

Without a second thought, he grabs his own phone and scrolls down his contacts, pressing call as soon as he finds the right one.

It rings three times and he is about to give up when Catarina’s voice answers, groggy with sleep.
“Magnus? Is everything okay?”

A groan resounds through the line. "If this is about work, I'm going to kill him.” Ragnor grumbles, voice heavy with slumber. “Or worse, if he called because he couldn't sleep so he caught up on that stupid reality TV show you two like to gush about."

There’s a small scuffle of sheets, Catarina hushing her husband before she is back on the phone. “What’s going on, sweetie?” she asks softly, with more concern than Magnus feels he deserves.

He inhales deeply, putting out his cigarette against the railing of the balcony so he can throw it in the trash later. It takes all the energy he has left not to break down again.

“Cat,” he murmurs, his voice quivering with the threat of more tears. “I… I fucked up.”

"What'd you do?" she asks, the worry in her voice almost palpable.

It is the same question he has been asking himself ever since the front door shut after his husband and he was left with a gaping hole in his heart.

“It’s Alec,” he says, sucking in a deep breath. “He’s… He’s gone. He left.”

It hurts. It hurts more than he thought it would when he told Alec the only solution he could consider to get out of the chaos they tangled themselves in was a divorce. It was his idea, after all, and it seemed like the only good one at the time.

Now, he isn’t so sure.

“What do you mean he left? What happened?”

Magnus inhales deeply through his nose, sniffing pitifully. “I told him I wanted a divorce,” he admits, voice pitched low. “We had a fight and- and some shit that happened with Camille, and he left.”

He knows he doesn’t make much sense, but everything is fuzzy in his mind, and tears are brimming in his eyes again, menacing to escape, and this is all he can offer right now.

“We’ll be right there,” Ragnor chimes in firmly.

“Yes,” Catarina agrees. “We’re on our way. It’s going to be okay, sweetie.”

Magnus nods, even though she can’t see him. “Okay,” he whispers, and the call is over.

Rain is still falling in harsh tumultuous drops, and Magnus thinks of Alec. If he still knows him even a little bit, he knows he went to Isabelle’s, because she lives the closest and he wouldn’t have wanted to go to Jace’s and risk waking Ariel up; it would be the logical place to go. He hopes, despite it all, that he made it there without getting completely soaked.

Rain falls like its sole purpose is to wash away the reminiscent dream hatched up in a corner of his mind.

Magnus steps back inside before he lets himself be consumed entirely by the depressing sight. As soon as he sets foot in the living room, he is all too aware of Alec’s absence. He lingers everywhere Magnus looks, in the book resting on the armrest of the couch, the medical journal and the box of praline-flavored chocolates - his favorites - on the coffee table.

He is everywhere and nowhere all at once, and Magnus misses him.
The truth is there. Magnus misses Alec even when he is in the same room. He misses the man he fell in love with in college, the man he married four years later, the man who made him feel loved and esteemed. He misses them, how carefree they were, how enamored, how passionate, how completely and unquestionably happy.

Blaming it all on Alec is easy, but Magnus knows he has his own responsibility to uphold in their decline.

He stopped trying. He stopped delegating the work he doesn’t have to do himself so he could either spend more time at the office or have an excuse to avoid Alec at home. He stopped telling him about his day, about his struggles and his achievements; about the company he created from scratch and that Alec has been supporting from day one.

Magnus’ eyes dart over the room aimlessly, seeking even the slightest tether to hold on to, to revive the hope he seems to have lost, and they fall on the lower case of the bookshelf, where they keep their old photo albums, the ones they haven’t looked at in years.

Magnus goes to fetch the bottle of bourbon in the kitchen, grabs one of the albums haphazardly and drops on the couch unceremoniously, taking a long sip straight from the bottle, because glasses are for people who aren’t witnessing their marriage falling apart.

The very first photograph is of their trip to London on their fifth wedding anniversary. They had still been counting money at the time, Edom being at the premises of its success and Alec going through his first year of neurosurgery residency at NYP, so Ragnor had lent them his family house to spare them accommodation fees. Their week there had been blissful and the weather clement.

The photograph was taken by a fellow tourist on the top of Greenwich Hill, London spreading behind them, the skyline reflecting the bluish color of the cloudless sky. The brightest thing in the picture, in Magnus’ humble and subjective opinion, remains Alec’s grin. He exudes happiness, arm wrapped over Magnus’ shoulder, his eyes crinkling in the corner. His ecstatic expression is only matched by Magnus’, who is looking up at him with nothing but sheer and unabashed love in his gaze.

This time is long gone now, and the last look Magnus witnessed on Alec’s features was nothing close to this. It was battered. Desolated.

Earlier in the evening, when bitterness and anger were still reigning on his mind and he rejected Camille’s advances, he hoped that Alec would be as devastated as he would were he to cheat on him. Now that he’s seen it, seen the pain and misery the mere idea of Magnus thinking about it caused, he regrets even considering it for a second only.

Magnus suggested a divorce so they would stop hurting each other, and he ended up doing just that: hurting them both, to a degree their many fights have never brought them before.

Apart from that time. That one time he has tucked in a corner of his mind and tried desperately to obliterate from his memories. In retrospect, he knows it is with that fight that they sealed their fate and condemned themselves to the dissolution of everything they had so carefully and patiently built together.

He startles when someone knocks at the front door. He has just enough time to stand up from the couch when Catarina rushes in and immediately strides the distance between them, wrapping him up in a tight hug. Magnus melts into her warmth, but his heart clenches in his chest when he realizes why exactly his friends ran to his place at half past three in the morning, nothing but a coat over their pajamas.
And he bursts into tears again.

Catarina tightens her hold around him and lets him bury his face in her neck, Ragnor laying a hand on his shoulder in silent support.

His world is crumbling, and Magnus doesn’t know what to do to stop it from doing so, so he just leans on his friends to help him, to bring him the comfort the excuses he has been fooling himself with for months now fail to bestow.

It takes a while, because Magnus has a lot to mourn for, but when he pulls back, he feels slightly lighter, enough so that it doesn’t feel completely forced when he tries to smile sheepishly at his friends.

Catarina cups his face between her hands, wiping his tears with her thumbs, and turns to her husband. “Tea, please?”

Ragnor nods and disappears into the kitchen without further ado, while Catarina grabs Magnus’ hand to lead him back on the couch. Her gaze falls on the open album. He hasn’t gone past the first page. When she glances back at him, she looks heartbroken on his behalf, and Magnus lowers his gaze.

“How did this happen?” she asks, brows furrowed in worry.

Magnus takes a minute to gather his thoughts. It was supposed to be a great evening. He had been looking forward to his corporate party for weeks. How it all went to hell so quickly and completely is somehow lost on him.

“I don’t even know,” he admits, heaving out a deep sigh. “I was angry and I was moping all the way home from the party and I just told him we should get a divorce because things have been… disastrous lately. And things just escalated from there.”

“And he wants a divorce too?” Cat inquires gently, like she isn’t sure she should even pry so far in their intimacy.

The shock, mingled with pain, on Alec’s face flashes before his eyes as he closes them to inhale deeply.

“No,” he murmurs. “No, he doesn’t. He was… shocked.”

It feels like an understatement, but this is all his brain is willing to provide.

“Is that why he left?” Catarina prompts, as softly as ever. “Because you talked about getting a divorce?”

Magnus isn’t sure he can answer that without breaking down again, so he just shrugs.

It isn’t enough to fool Catarina. She has always been too good at reading right through him.

“You mentioned Camille when you called,” she says, tilting her head to catch his eyes. “What happened with Camille?”

Nothing, he wants to say but the word stays stuck in his throat. It wouldn’t be a lie. Nothing happened. They didn’t kiss. Nothing he did could be considered as cheating. So why does he feel as guilty as he does? Why did the look of betrayal on Alec’s face feel like a slap to the face?
He did let himself be entranced by Camille’s flirting, and for selfish reasons. It isn’t even that he is overly fond of her, or that he would ever imagine himself with her the way he is - used to be - with Alec.

She just made him feel desired, and he misses the feeling. He misses the time when Alec looked at him the way Camille did tonight, with a barely disguised hunger burning in his entrancing hazel eyes.

“Camille tried to kiss me,” he blurs out before he can dive further in self-hatred. He will have the time for that later, when Catarina isn’t hanging to his every word, waiting for an answer.

She blinks quickly, her frown deepening. “And what did you do?”

“I rejected her, of course,” Magnus says, with a scoff that is more dejected than offended.

“Then what’s the problem?” Ragnar asks, trotting back in, carrying a tray with a fuming teapot and three mugs. “If you rejected her- surely, Alec wouldn’t hold something she did against you?”

Magnus pinches the bridge of his nose, heaving. He called his friends in so he could talk to them, but somehow, now he dreads to.

There aren’t many things in this world he values as much as he does their friendship. Ragnar and Catarina have been his best friends for ages, in the good and the bad times. They were the first to see something in him worth praising, to perceive the reality of him he had kept buried between walls and to come closer anyway, loving him for who he was.

They share the kind of friendship that blooms like a majestic tree, growing from a seed to blossom into something grandiose and beautiful, something too brilliant to be tarnished, too strong to be vanquished.

“I’m not exactly innocent,” Magnus admits in a whisper. “For a moment, I considered it.”

Catarina reaches out to take his hand, transpiring of the kindness she inspires in everyone she touches. “Oh, Magnus,” she sighs, but there is no judgement to be found there. “And you told him this. That’s why he left.”

Magnus nods, worrying on his bottom lip. “I didn’t tell him the whole thing,” he confesses, and if he can hear the self-dejection in his own voice, he knows they can too. “There’s more to it.”

Ragnar comes to sit on his other side, handing him a cup of tea, and under their prying but compassionate gazes, Magnus has no choice but to talk. So he does.

He tells them everything, how it all started in the greenhouse and how he let it grow until tonight when Camille tried to kiss him and he finally realized it had gone too far.

He tells them about the reason behind it all, no matter how puerile and selfish he thinks it sounds. It takes a weight off of his shoulders but it doesn’t stop the stain of guilt gnawing at his heart ruthlessly. He doesn’t try to justify his actions, and his friends let him talk without interrupting, unaware of the way every word seems to rip his insides, each enhancing the void in his chest.

His confession ends on a whisper, so low he can barely hear it himself over the pounding of his heart against his ribcage. His fingers are trembling, and it is only when Catarina reaches out to wipe his cheeks that he realizes he is crying again.

“Are you going to tell him?” Ragnar asks, squeezing his shoulder in comfort. “The whole thing?”
"I should," he says, gritting his teeth to stop the flow of tears sliding down his cheeks. "I know I should but..."

But he has too much to lose.

The words don’t find their way out of his mouth, so he closes it again, pushing his palms against his eyes.

"But you're afraid there will be no going back after that?" Catarina inquires.

Magnus’ voice is shaking when he replies, "Yeah." He pauses, inhaling deeply.

This is more than guilt. This is fear travelling in his veins, because his happiness is slipping through his fingers and he doesn’t know how to stop it. It vibrates all the way from his ears to his thrumming heart, twisting his guts and churning his stomach. He has fought too hard for this, for that peace he has found in Alec’s presence. To see it all going to waste, it is frankly terrifying. But he is tired of fighting against the tide, pushing with all his might to get out of a torrent that ends up drowning him in sorrow despite it all.

“Nothing happened but what if he doesn't see it that way?” he muses out loud, glancing up to Catarina. “I still feel guilty so why wouldn't he feel betrayed?”

He doesn’t think he can handle seeing the look of equally repressed and plain agony he saw on Alec’s face tonight again. This is more than his heart can take.

"There's no guarantee that he won't and there's a good chance he already does,” Ragnor says, always the voice of reason, his hand rubbing soothing circles in Magnus’ back. “But, mate, he deserves to know. You would want the same respect if it were you.”

"Ragnar's right, Magnus," Catarina chimes in. “No matter how this ends or how you want it to end, he deserves the truth.”

"Yeah, you're right. I know you're right," Magnus confides in a whisper. He sighs again, pressing a thumb against his temple to stop the headache he can feel simmering. "I need to talk to him with a clear head. When I'm not angry at him for standing me up again and at myself for almost caving for something as petty as feeling desired for the first time in forever." The smile on Catarina’s face is gentle, caring, and Magnus swallows hard.

"Magnus, it’s only natural to want to feel desired,” she tells him softly. “Especially if it’s been awhile since you last -" she doesn’t finish, her fingers dancing in the air in a dismissive flourish.

"Had sex,” Ragnar cuts in. “No need to beat around the bush, darling. Surely he still knows what it is.”

Catarina rolls her eyes, throwing her husband an unimpressed look before she focuses back on Magnus, wrapping his hand amidst her own. “Don’t beat yourself up over that. You didn’t go through with it and that says a lot about you. Alec will understand. Maybe not right away but eventually. He just needs time to think.”

Ragnar leans forward and sets his tea cup on the table, shifting on the couch to face him. "Why talk about divorce though?" he asks, because he clearly doesn’t intend on beating around the bush. “I know you didn't blurt it out on some whim just because he missed your party. What brought you to this point?"
It isn’t just Alec not showing up at the party, no matter how important it was to Magnus. The truth — the ugly, awful, appalling truth — is that he is almost relieved that Alec didn’t show up, because he didn’t have to stage a happiness that is only pretence nowadays.

The memories of all the signs swirl in his mind, taunting him. He should have seen it coming. Perhaps he did but he just couldn’t admit it to himself before. This isn’t the first time Alec hasn’t shown up and forgotten to warn him. Just like Magnus himself has worked late before and didn’t bother to call to tell Alec not to wait up for him. He should have known they were doomed when the few dinners they managed to have together at home were plagued with long silences only broken by the clatter of cutlery against plates. When they stopped telling each other about their day or - worse - when they stopped asking, because they figured they knew each other too well to have anything left to learn about the other.

When they started being Magnus and Alec, instead of Magnus and Alec.

"Things have been bad for a while," he says, lowering his gaze to his wedding band, twirling it around his finger. “We barely see each other and when we do, we fight about petty things. He's never home.” He pauses to pinch the bridge of his nose, thinking about to their disastrous attempt at going out the month before that ended in yet another fight. “He refuses to hire someone to take some of his hours because he never deems anyone good enough,” he sighs. As reluctant as he was, now the truth is spilling out of his mouth without filter, raw and bitter. “We don't even kiss anymore if it isn’t to show off what a perfect couple we are to our friends and family.”

Catarina’s eyes flash with compassion and she leans into him, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. "I'm so sorry. We never knew."

They didn’t. Magnus made sure that no one knew, just like Alec did. They are too private to expose their relationship problems at every opportunity - and family gatherings are already drama-heavy enough as long as they involve both Maryse and Robert.

Magnus never told them because he didn’t know how to explain to them that the love of his life, his one and true love story, was slowly succumbing to time and unspoken resentment.

“It can't have been easy for you to go through this alone,” Catarina continues, oblivious to his internal turmoil. "And a divorce...is this what you really want?"

Magnus shakes his head, but it lacks any real conviction. He doesn’t know anymore.

He has reached his breaking point, but this is it, and he can’t surmise another option than putting an end to their relationship before he winds up hating Alec. It needs to stop now.

He can’t bear the dormant agony buried deep in his chest slowly consuming him.

"I just... I want it to stop,” he whispers. “I want to be happy again."

“Do you want that happiness with Alec?” Ragnor butts in, his eyes boring straight into Magnus’, unwavering.

Magnus pushes his lips together, running a hand on his tired features. “Got anything stronger than tea?”

His mind is already buzzing from the alcohol he’s had at the party and the wine and bourbon he drank before they arrived, but if they are going to step in that unguarded territory, he needs more. So much more.
Ragnor seems to understand that because he gets up and walks to the liquor cabinet, pouring them each a glass of whisky. He disappears in the kitchen then, and comes back a moment later, balancing the three glasses in his hands.

“I think with the night you’ve had, you’ve earned it,” he says, handing Magnus his glass.

Magnus forces a smile to his lips, fully aware that he doesn’t fool them. He glances down at the amber liquid, focusing on the golden glow of the ice cubes. He pokes them with a manicured finger, if only to hear them jingle in the heavy silence.

“I don’t know what to do,” he confesses, barely over a decibel. “I don’t know what I want. I just know I can’t stand this anymore.”

Catarina takes a long sip of her whiskey, and when she meets Magnus’ gaze again, her face is painted with determination. "Well, I'm just going to shoot straight and ask: do you still love him?"

Ragnor clears his throat and opens his mouth to talk but Catarina silences him with an incisive look. Their unspoken communication makes something stir in Magnus’ chest, something akin to jealousy but he shuts it down quickly enough to wear an impassive mask when she focuses her attention back on him.

"And are you willing to lose him?" she asks pointedly, although her eyes remain kind and compassionate.

Of all the questions he has had to answer tonight, this is probably the easiest one. Yet, he knows it contradicts everything that happened ever since Alec missed Edom’s party.

No matter the odds, no matter the struggles and the pain, no matter the loneliness and the everlasting feeling of abandon that lingers in his chest every time he lets his mind wander too far in the meanderings of their decay and how it all started, losing Alec will never be an option.

Tears prickle in his eyes as he speaks, “N-No. No, I don’t want to lose him,” he manages to whisper, the words choking on the lump in his throat. “But we don't make each other happy anymore. Maybe I need to lose him—” he muses out loud, gaze roaming on his fingers twirling his wedding band around nervously but unable to focus properly—"to be happy again.”

Ragnor scoffs, throwing back the remainder of his whiskey in one swift movement. The sharpness of his gaze is unsettling compared to Cat’s softness, but it is just as affectionate. "Do you hear yourself right now?" he growls, and Magnus has the feeling he is resisting the urge to roll his eyes. "You said so yourself: he's the love of your life. Losing him is not what you need- it's you giving up because you're too afraid to fight for it.” Ragnar pushes off the couch, planting himself firmly in front of Magnus, who has no choice but to look up. ‘You don't make each other happy? Then try! Maybe the both of you stopped trying." He leans in, resting his hands on Magnus' shoulders, and levels him with steady eyes. "If you love him, if he's really the love of your life, then you have to fight for him. You're not a fool. So don't throw your happiness away with both hands."

Magnus downs the rest of his whiskey, swallowing hard. This is fine whiskey, hard, strong but leaving a bittersweet aftertaste that warms the body and the soul. Each bottle costs a fortune, enough so that Magnus knows he cannot blame the sour taste that slipped in his mouth on the alcohol.

He closes his eyes and draws a lungful of air, pursing his lips.

Happiness had been a distant concept to him before he had met Alec, tainted by the darkness of the
loneliness he had grown up in. It was what he had talked about in his wedding vows, how Alec had taught him what being loved was, and the power it held. It had been the foundations of him building a life he had finally believed he deserved. He had learned, with Alec guiding him, to hope that as comfortable in its familiarity as it was to him, being lonely wasn’t an everlasting burden, not as long as he had love.

The roughness of life, the many hardships were all surmountable if he had someone to face them with.

And that feeling of overwhelming, unapologetic happiness he had found with Alec, once, he doesn’t want it with anyone but him.

There is no feeling powerful enough to compare to what it is like to find home, not in walls of stone but in the arms of the person he loved more than he had thought himself capable of.

Magnus had tried every path, pushed every door, opened his heart to many people - men and women - but only Alec had been willing to receive and give back, to see right into his very core and still love him without reserve.

That, if anything, is worth fighting for.

“Yeah,” he whispers, opening his eyes again. “Yeah… You’re right.”

“So, what are you gonna do?” Catarina asks softly.

He is going to fight. Magnus has never been one to give up easily, and his friends are right. He can’t lose Alec. He has endured a lot, but he knows this is where his heart draws the line.

Full of liquid courage and this renewed verve, he stands up. He sways on his feet a little, the whiskey catching back on him - he probably had too much tonight, he realizes with a grimace, he isn’t used to drinking that much anymore.

“I’m gonna talk to him,” he announces, with all the passion of a man who believes, a man who hopes. “Right now!”

Ragnor chuckles and reaches out to take his hands, gently pushing him back down on the couch. “Perhaps right now is not the best time. I like the enthusiasm though.”

He has a point, Magnus ponders to himself, although he doesn’t admit it out loud. It is late enough to be almost early, and he will need some beauty sleep if they are going to have that desperately needed talk. They need to lay it all on the table, but first Magnus needs to sleep, and to figure out what it is exactly he is going to say.

With a nod, he curls up on the couch. Catarina gets up to give him more room, kneeling next to her husband to glide her fingers through his hair, stroking softly.

“Thanks for being here, guys. I love you,” Magnus mumbles, glancing up at them. “And I love Alec, too. I just want to go back to when we were happy and we had sex all the time.”

The expressions on their faces are matching looks of compassion and amusement, and Magnus smiles faintly before shutting his eyes, exhaustion dawning on him all at once.

He feels Catarina pull at the throw blanket hanging on the back of the couch and lay it over him.

“We love you too, and we will always be here for you,” she murmurs gently, and warmth spreads
through his chest, numbing some of the sorrow that had settled there. “Get some sleep and
tomorrow morning… then you’ll go and get your man back.”

Magnus hums but doesn’t reply, already drifting into a dreamless slumber.

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Magnus opens his eyes to a brightly lit room, the sunlight pouring through the floor-to-ceiling windows leading to the balcony, contrasting greatly with the dim weather of the night before. He squints, taking in his surroundings, pushing the blanket off of him as he sits up. The mere movement is enough to send a jabbing throb to his head and he grimaces, gulping to get rid of the dryness in his mouth.

He opens his mouth to groggily call out Alec’s name, but everything comes back to him and he shuts it abruptly, pushing his palms against his eyes to rub his eyes. He expects them to come out tainted with black and glitter but that is underestimating Catarina, who made sure to remove his makeup for him so he doesn’t feel completely like a failure in the morning. He makes a mental note to buy her flowers.

His brain feels like it is about to burst out of his skull, the obvious hangover certainly meddling with his breakdown of the night before and his lack of sleep to create the headache of the century.

He is pondering lying down again and preparing his will inwardly when Catarina walks out of the kitchen, a cup of coffee in one hand and a tall glass of water in the other.

“Good morning, sleepy head,” she calls out cheerfully, handing him the water and two painkillers. “How are you feeling?”

He is going to buy her flowers every day for the rest of their lives.

He swallows the pills and downs the water. “Like I’m dying,” he groans in a hoarse, throaty voice.

She smiles, holding out the cup of coffee. “Here, I think you could use this.”

Magnus grabs it gratefully. The first sip feels like heaven in his mouth, the bitterness somehow pushing through the hazy cloud in his mind.

"You're a gift to the world. Don't let anyone, and especially not your grumpy husband, tell you otherwise."

“I know, I know, you’ve told me a million times and I still love hearing it,” Catarina quips, smiling. She sits down next to him and leans into the couch, her arm resting against the back. “So, how are you planning on doing this today?”

Right. He has to talk to Alec. He isn’t sure he is in any condition to discuss the dissolution of their marriage, but it has to be done. They need to lay things down before it is too late.

“With at least two more cups of coffee,” he grumbles.

“And a breakfast for champions!” Ragnor exclaims as he walks into the living room, an apron around his waist and a spatula in hand.

Cat leans toward Magnus and makes a show of sniffing him, pulling a disgusting face. "And a shower.”
Magnus snorts, rolling his eyes, but it is only to prevent the grateful smile spreading on his lips to show too much. He doesn’t know how his talk with Alec is going to go. He doesn’t know if it is just going to cement the end of their marriage or offer them the perspective of better days to come.

But he knows, without an ounce of doubt, that he will always have Catarina and Ragnor no matter what, and that makes the leap into the void he is about to take just a bit easier.

His shower lasts twice the time it normally does, but as soon as he slips beneath the pebbles of warm water, his whole body relaxes, and his headache leisurely disappears.

Alone with his own thoughts, he forces himself not to let them wander too much. The hurt on Alec’s features before he left the night before is haunting him, but even more so is the knowledge that he was the one to cause it, that he brought pain on the one person he loved enough to pledge he would cherish him until his dying breath. The one person he promised to keep safe when the hurricanes ultimately came to blow the blissfulness away.

When his head stops throbbing, soothed by the regular flow of the water against his tired body, his heart starts aching again.

No matter how angry, how bitter, how abandoned he felt, yesterday and the months - years - before that, Alec deserves better than what Magnus offered him last night.

He deserves the truth, the blunt honesty they promised to always provide to each other without condition.

Whether they decide to fight for each other or to throw away what little is left to salvage in their marriage, they should do so knowing where they failed and how it all went downhill so easily when they had deemed themselves invincible.

The lump in his throat is there again when he steps out of the shower and wraps a fluffy towel around his waist, but it has nothing to do with hangover - or at least, this hangover has nothing to do with too much whiskey.

If he wounded Alec too deeply and he rejects Magnus’ attempt at patching things up, then so be it. He would say goodbye to their relationship knowing he tried to give it one last chance, for this is all they have now.

In their bedroom, he slips on a pair of ripped jeans and one of Alec’s oversized sweaters, puts some light makeup on, eats the breakfast Ragnor cooked for him, grabs his coat and Alec’s and just goes.

It’s already late morning. The air is cold, but the trees in the park that spreads down their building are blazing with the hues of Fall; scarlet, orange and gold lining his path as he crosses the park to get to the subway station.

He doesn’t want to walk, because he is afraid the longer it takes him to get to Alec, the more he will lose himself in self-doubt and go back to the loft, terrified of facing Alec’s rejection if it comes.

Isabelle and Maia’s townhouse is only ten minutes away with the subway and Magnus knows that this is where he will find Alec - Jace’s place would have been another option but it was almost three in the morning when Alec left and he knows he wouldn’t have wanted to wake Ariel up if he showed up there so late.

The train is packed, but Magnus finds a relatively safe place to stand, tucked in a corner where he
doesn’t have to be shoulder to shoulder with a sweaty guy clearly coming back from the gym or a teenage girl chewing gum loudly enough to give him murder tendencies. Despite his safe spot, he rushes out of the train as soon as it stops at the right station. He gets bumped into on his way out by an obnoxious businessman on the phone who barely gives him a second glance before he turns around with no intention to apologize.

This is why Magnus usually walks to work.

Isabelle and Maia’s house has always felt like a second home to him, smelling of the roses they planted by the side, warm and familiar, the wide windows giving it a luminous glow that is only enhanced by the modern decoration inside.

In the years they’ve lived here, it’s the first time Magnus hesitates at the door. He stares at it for a long time, gathering the courage to knock. He isn’t sure what they know, but if Alec showed up at three in the morning, Magnus assumes they didn’t let him get away with it without a rightful explanation and they must be angry at him. He would be too if he hadn’t been the instigator of the hurtful look on Alec’s face the night before. He would be furious.

But this is his family too, has been for eleven years officially and even more than that. He was Maia’s best man when they got married. Surely, that has to mean something, even if Alec is Isabelle’s blood. It has to mean they won’t hate him completely, no matter how he believes he deserves it.

“Get yourself together, Lightwood-Bane,” he murmurs to himself under his breath.

Releasing a deep, scattered breath, he knocks, his stomach twisting with nerves.

It’s Maia who opens the door and she freezes at the sight of him, her dark eyes widening in surprise.

“Magnus, hey.”

Magnus swallows hard, but the words escape him. He doesn’t even remember why he got here in the first place. Losing Alec is already more than he can bear, but it hits him right then that it will mean also losing the family he has become a part of throughout the years, the one that accepted him without reserve because he made Alec happy, that opened their arms to a lost boy and made him part of something bigger than himself.

He can’t see the disappointment in their eyes.

He is about to turn around and leave when Izzy comes in from the living room, walking to her wife to see who is at the door.

There is no hesitation on her features when she catches sight of Magnus standing on the threshold. She smiles at him, equally warm and sad, and grabs his sleeve to tug him against her and greet him with a hug.

“It’s good to see you, Magnus,” she says against his ear, and Magnus all but melts into her, wrapping his arms around her shoulders.

He draws in a deep breath, his heart hammering against his ribcage, anguish and relief somehow meddling together.

Isabelle pulls back after a minute, cupping his face between her hands. “Come in,” she says softly.
Magnus nods, stepping inside, immediately soothed by the familiar scent of incense Maia likes to burn in the evening.

He scans the living room, eyes darting left and right, but he can see no sign of Alec anywhere.

Isabelle lays a hand on his shoulder, squeezing gently. “He’s in the bathroom upstairs,” she tells him. “He and Jace went training this morning.”

Magnus nods blankly, rubbing his fingers together. “How is he?” he asks, because despite how they left things the night before, it is still the first thing that matters.

It will always be the first thing that matters.

“Not good,” Isabelle replies, with the blunt honesty that is inherent to the Lightwoods. “I’ve never seen him like this before.” She hesitates for a moment, but despite the internal debate she seems to struggle with, she decides to speak up again, her eyes boring into his own. “He’s heartbroken.”

Maia comes to stand next to them, lifting an eyebrow in his direction. “You look like shit too, by the way.”

For once, Magnus wonders if he wouldn’t have preferred a small lie, something that wouldn’t add to the torment already swirling in his mind like a ruthless hurricane. Just a small, innocent lie so he could live a little longer with the foolish hope that he hasn’t broken what was left between them.

But it wouldn’t have mattered if their words had held all the reassurance in the world, he realizes, for he can see the truth in their eyes, and it is what they just told him.

Perhaps, if he learns what to do with it, the truth really will see them free.

Magnus sighs, sliding his hands in his pockets before he starts ripping at his own skin with how hard he is rubbing his fingers.

“Can I… Can I talk to him?” he asks.

Isabelle gives him a small smile, patting his arm. “Give me a minute, I’ll go ask.”

Magnus nods, his body stilled in anticipation. He doesn’t even turn around to watch her go up the stairs, because if she comes back alone, he doesn’t want to see it.

If she comes back alone, then this is it. This is where they end, in a living room that will never feel as familiar as their own, regardless how domestic it feels.

“He’s going to say yes,” Maia says, gently rubbing his back, as if she can feel the need for comfort emanating of him. “He loves you too much to say no.”

Magnus shuts his eyes against the tears threatening to submerge him again. “Yeah,” he whispers. “I hope you’re right.”

Her smile grows wider as the sound of the steps crackling behind him. “I know I am,” she whispers out of the corner of her mouth. “See?”

Magnus’ stomach lurches, bile rising to his throat, but he turns around nonetheless. Slowly, giving himself the time to exhale deeply.

When he finds the courage to glance up, his eyes find hazel at once. Alec is frozen in the middle of the staircase, his gaze boring straight into Magnus’, one hand still on the handrail, hair still wet
from the shower, wearing a sweater Magnus knows to be his.

His heart skips a beat in his chest, pushing against his lungs.

Magnus remembers the first time he saw Alec. It was on the campus of NYU, in the middle of a cold September. Magnus had been coming back from a lunch date with Catarina and running late for his Science class. He had been rushing, cursing inwardly that he was going to be late to the one class that interested him the most for his future, utterly oblivious to his surroundings. That was until he had bumped into someone else, hard enough that he had swayed on his feet for a moment, only stopping when two strong hands had grasped his forearms to balance him.

He remembers Alec apologizing profusely, babbling about being late for his Science class and not looking where he was going, but Magnus hadn’t heard a word, blinking up at him in awe. Alec had stopped talking upon realizing Magnus wasn’t hurt - or bothered - and his hazel eyes had settled on him.

To this day, the small, breathless ‘wow’ that slipped out of his mouth when his eyes roamed over Magnus’ face is still carved into Magnus’ mind among his most precious memories.

The smile they shared when they walked into the classroom and the teacher paired them together without sparing them a glance, admonishing them for their lateness under his breath, is amidst them as well.

There is none of that innocent, thunderstruck awe in their gazes now.

They stare at each other almost warily for a long time, and Magnus wonders if Alec is feeling the same wave of nostalgia as he is, if he is also thinking of a time where they were still blissful, taking a leap of faith despite their fears and heading hand in hand on a journey that Magnus had never thought, at the time, would ever come to this.

When Alec finally gets down the remaining steps, it takes Magnus a moment to find his voice.

“Hey,” he whispers.

Alec’s tongue darts out to wet his lips and he clears his throat, but his voice remains raspy when he speaks, “Hey.”

Magnus’ hands twitch in the front pocket of Alec’s sweater with the need to reach out but he stops himself, balling them into fists, digging his nails into his palms.

“How are you?”

The question feels dull in his mouth, like it can’t possibly hold the true meaning beneath it, the suffocating worry that slithers through Magnus like a second skin.

Alec stuffs his hands in his own pockets, pursing his lips together. “I think I’ve been better,” he admits, voice hoarse the way it normally only is in the morning. “You?”

Now that he is standing close enough, Magnus can see Alec’s eyes are still a bit red, and the bags under his eyes darker than they are even after a week of accumulating night shifts.

Magnus has no doubt he looks no better. All the makeup in the world couldn’t hide the sorrow in his eyes, not from Alec anyway. He has long learned to see past Magnus’ guard.

“I’m… not okay,” he confides in a low-pitched sigh. “Can we talk?”
Alec licks his lips, darting a look at Maia and Izzy before nodding and looking back at Magnus. “Yeah. I think we should.”

Relief pours through Magnus in waves. It isn’t much, but if they can talk, they can fix it.

They won’t ever be able to start over, the burden of their past clutching too tightly around their marriage, but maybe they can learn to forgive each other for the things they said - and for the ones they didn’t.

With a small, bashful smile, Magnus hands him his coat and Alec shrugs it on, moving forward to press a kiss on his sister’s forehead, and another to Maia’s.

“Thank you,” he tells them softly.

Magnus hugs them tightly, before turning back towards Alec, exhaling deeply.

“Come on, boys, you’ll sort this out,” Maia says, exuding confidence. “I’m sure it’s not half as bad as you think it is. Things may seem bleak now but you need to focus on the good things.” She weaves in between them, draping each arm over their shoulders as she guides them towards the door. “Like, you always do something fun for your anniversary! What did you do this time? It was what? Three weeks ago?”

It is because Magnus’ eyes are still fixed on Alec that he catches the moment when they freeze in perfect synchronisation.

Air is knocked out of his lungs, but Magnus finds some kind of comfort, if scarce and minimal, in the knowledge that Alec is feeling the same way, his eyes blown and apologetic as they settle on Magnus.

Maia gazes between them, a frown pulling her brows together as she catches their expressions, realization slowly dawning on her.

“Oh,” she says, a simple word heavier than any spoken curse. “You guys go… talk. We’re here if you need us.”

They nod at Maia, and slip out of the door.

It is only when they are back on the sidewalk that they dare facing each other, their movements still wary and hesitant from the shock they just went through. Magnus is certain the fear and sorrow he can read on Alec’s face are mirrored on his own.

“We forgot our own anniversary, Alec,” he breathes out.

Alec heaves out a deep, shaky sigh, rubbing at the scar on his eyebrow. “I can’t believe we let this happen.”

Magnus hums as they start walking towards the road, Alec raising an arm to call a cab.

“We really need to talk.”

Chapter End Notes
Please let us know how you liked it :) Favorite parts, lines, etc are all appreciated!

You can find one of us on twitter: Lecrit

Next time: an important talk, some efforts and some mistakes.

all the love,

lu & jackie
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Hello, you poor fools. It’s us again. You’re still here? We love you, masochists.

We want to thank all of you for the tremendous response and support we received for this monster of a fic (both in terms of length and angst). We apologize for the long wait, life got in the way of us feeding you more angst.

Tweet us your reactions using #LINAVM or #jecrit

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*I know I misbehaved and you made your mistakes
And we both still got room left to grow
And though love sometimes hurts
I still put you first
And we’ll make this thing work but I think maybe we should take it slow

The cab smells harshly of pine and cigarette smoke as Alec shifts across the back seat to the opposite side, muttering the address of their building to the cab driver. Magnus follows after him, slamming the door to a close and Alec can’t help but notice the way Magnus angles his body away from him, choosing to face the window instead. His elbow rests against the door and he keeps his eyes trained on the passing buildings, unwilling to look at Alec. He sits there with his body curved, folded in on itself as if trying to take up the least amount of space and to keep as much distance between them as possible in his painfully obvious attempt at guarding himself.

The cab ride is silent the entire way home—the loft—honestly, Alec isn’t sure what he should call it anymore. So unsure that he doesn’t even know if he will still be able to call it his home after today. Magnus turning up at Izzy’s door this morning was the last thing he expected. He knew eventually they would have to see each other to finish the conversation Alec had run out on, but he wasn’t sure when that time would come or how much time he should give Magnus to calm down and have the anger of the missed party put behind him long enough for them to talk things out and figure out exactly where they stood.

Alec’s body lurches forward when the cab driver halts to a stop. He hands the driver his cash and thanks him, following Magnus out of the car.

Magnus hasn’t looked at him since they walked away from Izzy’s doorstep and Alec can tell that he is doing everything in his power now to not look at him. A notion so unfamiliar to him because he can still remember the days when they couldn’t keep their eyes off of each other. Always watching the other while one walked, talked, cooked, or even did something as simple as silently reading on the couch. The avoidance serves as a cutting reminder of where they’ve come to find themselves.

The cold October wind rushes through the breezeway and Alec quickly pulls on the door to their
building, holding it open for Magnus to pass through. He waits a few short breaths, enough time to put adequate space between them, before following after him.

In the elevator, Alec stands against the back wall while Magnus pushes the button to their floor and keeps his stance beside the control console. His arms are crossed and his thumb is rubbing against his forefinger in the usual tell that shows his anxieties. Magnus glances up at that moment and their eyes meet in the reflection of the elevator doors. He wishes he could tell what Magnus is thinking at this moment. Whether or not he feels this crippling fear that everything they had is lost, that after today nothing might ever be the same again. He wishes he could read him as easily as he used to but Magnus looks away the second he realizes Alec is looking back.

The doors chime open and Magnus swiftly walks to their door, unlocking it with keys Alec didn’t even realize he had out and ready. The loft is exactly as he left it, except for the crumpled throw blanket slung over the back of the couch that suggests Magnus had chosen to spend the night on the couch instead of their bed.

It still feels like home, he doubts there will ever come a day when the loft—when Magnus—will cease to feel like home to him. Everything feels the same yet different at the same time.

Magnus has his shoes off and is sitting legs crossed on the couch. His chin rests in his hand as he stares vacantly at the glass doors that lead to the balcony. The morning sun is shining brightly, lighting up the living area as flurries of dust dance in the streams. The open area of their loft has always been spacious and breathable but now the air feels pregnant with their argument and all of the unspoken things still left between them. So much has happened within these walls. A life was built, a love grew, a love lost, and now…

Alec sighs and scratches at the scar in his eyebrow. This silence is killing him. As much as he doesn’t want to hear what Magnus has to say that will end their marriage, he needs to hear it. They need to talk about it.

“Is this really what you want, Magnus? Do you want this divorce?”

He waits expectantly. The question is out there, hanging on the wire, and there is no taking it back now. No matter what Magnus decides. Ultimately, Alec knows he will do whatever it is that Magnus decides; no matter how much it hurts.

Magnus remains still, eyes never breaking their gaze from the skyline. The silence is deafening and Alec worries that this is the only response he’s going to get from Magnus. He’d said that he wanted to talk but a quiet cab ride is the perfect opportunity for one to think and possibly change their mind.

Magnus finally moves, licking his lips and braces himself with a deep breath. “No, Alec. That’s not what I want but with the way things have been, I can’t think of another solution. We’re barely married anymore.”

A strange mix of fear and relief stirs in Alec’s stomach. Magnus’ response is not quite what he wants to hear but it’s not a death sentence either. In a way, Magnus is right. For the past few years now their marriage had ceased to be their marriage. It turned into a shell of what it once was. But despite this, Alec still loves Magnus. He always has and he always will. Even though they have grown apart and can sometimes barely stand to be in the same room together, at the end of the day, Magnus is who Alec wants to spend his life with. Somehow—somewhere—along their journey, Alec has stopped being this to Magnus.

Alec nods. “So is this about Camille? Would you rather be with her?”
Magnus frowns and shakes his head. “No, of course not. It’s not like that.”

If Magnus doesn’t want to be with Camille, then that means there’s a chance that feelings haven’t been developed; which means there’s a chance that this never made it past a physical level. Alec’s jaw clenches and he forces himself to ask the next question he needs an answer to. “Then what is it like, Magnus? Please. Explain it to me.”

Magnus claps his hands against his thighs and he pushes up from the sofa. He makes a direct line to the balcony and gestures for Alec to follow him. Alec slides the glass door to a close and crosses his arms as he leans against the balcony railing. The balcony has always been Magnus’ safe haven, it was a space in the loft that Magnus had unofficially claimed, and one Alec had no problem relinquishing to him since he has no interest in gardening. Magnus has the green thumb in the relationship and the pots of ferns and creeping greenery that line the railing prove as much.

Magnus rustles through the stems of one of his many potted plants and pulls out a worn box of cigarettes along with an ashtray.

Alec scoffs and rolls his eyes. He should have known that Magnus’ stress smoking habit extends to their home and not just the greenhouse at Edom.

Magnus lights a cigarette, huffs out the smoke and turns to Alec. “Do you remember five months ago when you canceled our trip to Vermont for the third time?”

Alec fans the smoke away from him and receives an eye roll from Magnus in return as he swaps the cigarette to the opposite hand furthest away from Alec. “Yes, I remember. There was that spinal reconstructive surgery I had to assist with. What about it?”

Magnus grits his teeth and takes a drag of his cigarette. “Right”—he turns his head away from Alec and blows the smoke out in a long exhale—“well, I had just hung up with you after you told me we had to postpone our trip again and I was angry. So I did what I do when I’m angry and I don’t want my employees to see me like this and I went to hide in my greenhouse.”

Alec forces himself to remain neutral and calm. No matter how many times they talk about Alec’s work and what it entails, these arguments always fall back on him. He isn’t even surprised that this story circles back to him and his overloaded schedule.

“Okay, so instead of telling me you were upset, you went to your greenhouse to smoke. Then what?” Alec bites out, impatiently.

Magnus flicks the ash from his cigarette and blinks at him wide-eyed, equally disbelieving and offended. “T-Telling you I was upset?” he echoes blankly. “I need to tell you I’m upset when you cancel on me at the last minute for the third time?”

“Well, it would sure as hell be a lot better than you telling me you’re fine all the while pretending to be understanding of my situation just so that you can then run off and talk to Camille about our problems instead!”

“I never pretended to be fine, Alec! You know very well I hate your situation—we’ve fought about it enough. I didn’t argue with you at the time because I know there’s no point, because your work always comes first. It’s not my fault you don’t give a shit about whether or not I’m fine with the extra hours you take.”

Alec flinches at the harsh words that he’s no longer sure he can say aren’t true. He knows he’s done just that. He’s put his work before Magnus for years now. He never thought he would be the
type of spouse that cares more about their career than the person they vowed to love forever. He
didn’t though. He didn’t care about his career more than Magnus, he only put it first because being
alone with Magnus ever since... well, things just weren’t the same as they used to be. It’s hard. He
hates it. He wants to be home, he wants to be with Magnus, but it’s all too hard.

Even so—even with his shitty work schedule and shitty work habits, there should be no reason for
Magnus to try and find comfort with someone else. There’s no excuse for that.

“So you think the best solution is to run to Camille’s arms when you’re upset with my work
schedule?”

Magnus groans in exasperation and inhales a long drag of his cigarette. He takes his time, allows
the nicotine to relax him when he finally releases the smoke in a steady stream over the balcony
railing. His voice is calmer when he finally speaks again, “I didn’t run into Camille’s arms. She
found me in the greenhouse and immediately figured out I wasn’t okay. Because apparently
someone I’d known for a month knew me better than my own husband.”

“Of course she did. And you played right into it because I’m such a shitty husband.” Alec scoffs
and crosses his arms, a futile attempt to deflect the verbal blows Magnus is throwing at him.

How long will they keep this up? How long will they go avoiding the issue and instead insist on
hurting each other with this petty back and forth? It doesn’t do them any good and he can’t
continue attacking Magnus, he has to hear him out, listen to him and try to understand why he
would do what he did. Alec closes his eyes and draws in a deep breath to calm himself, he counts
five pounding heartbeats, and expels the air, allowing the anger to leave with it.

He opens his eyes to meet Magnus. “So Camille was there for you when I wasn’t. Then what
happened?”

Magnus’ eyes flash with annoyance but he quickly composes himself and takes another drag. “I
needed to vent... so I did. It could have been anyone else but Camille was there and I just needed
someone to talk to. So I told her that you had canceled our plans for the weekend... and she
listened.”

Alec nods and leans against the balcony railing. “I’m waiting for the part that leads to her thinking
she has the right to try and kiss you. I know that didn’t come out of the blue. You two must have
gotten close enough for her to think that was a safe pass to make on her boss.”

Magnus chews on his lip and puts out his cigarette in the makeshift ashtray. “When I was done, she
said something about someone as special as me deserving someone who sees that, who puts me
first, and is there for me when I need them... I realized she was flirting but she knew I was a
married man, so I didn’t give it enough importance to tell her off about it.”

Alec bristles and swallows heavily. He knew this was going to hurt. He knew Magnus would have
his reasons and he knew that hearing them would hurt. And he hates that he can’t disagree with
what Camille said because she’s right. Magnus does deserve better, he does deserve to have
someone who will put him first, someone who will appreciate him every second of everyday...
someone who will be there for him when he needs them most. Alec’s failed at every single one of
those points. As much as he hates it, he can’t disagree with Camille, and he begins to see how
Magnus could have fallen for that. To have someone show you compassion, friendship,
appreciation, attention after years of being ignored by your husband; it would be enough to cause
even the strongest man to falter.

His anger slowly dissipates as understanding takes its place. He knows what he wants to ask next.
He’s had plenty of time to think about this over the past twelve hours: last night as he laid on Isabelle's couch, trying to quiet his mind to sleep; and again this morning on his run and training with Jace. He carefully considered what he wanted to know and he’s decided that in order for him to move on—to get past this—he would need to know everything.

“Did you flirt back?”

The first question in the series of questions he’s braced himself to ask.

Magnus lowers his gaze and Alec feels his stomach turn and drop from Magnus’ inability to look him in the eye.

“Not the first time,” he confesses lowly.

Alec sucks in a breath, bringing his fist up to his mouth as he turns on his heels to look over the balcony, needing a minute to compose himself. He has more questions he wants to ask. He stares down at the cars passing by on the street and the people walking around below them. He watches them as they go about their morning, each one with their own problems that could potentially feel as substantial as the pain he’s feeling now.

He lets out a heavy sigh and turns back around to face Magnus again. He licks his lips and runs a hand down over his jaw. His next request is heavy and unwilling in his mouth. “I want to know—” his voice cracks—“please.”

“The times I flirted back or the times she flirted with me?” Magnus looks up at him again, brown eyes laced with regret. “I didn’t flirt back every time. Only when I was...upset? Lonely? I’m not sure.”

Alec’s breath stutters as he tries to breathe in the thick air. “I need to know how this happened. I want to understand. So whatever you think is important for me to know… I would like to know.”

Magnus nods and inhales deeply through his nose. “Okay. That day at the greenhouse, she was looking for me because she had scored a big contract with Boots in the UK and she wanted to tell me so we could celebrate. After I had poured my life problems on her, we went out for a drink.”

A sting of betrayal and jealousy burns in Alec’s chest. He remembers that night—he remembers having to cancel on Magnus at the last minute because the patient was finally well enough to go through surgery and so they needed to get started as soon as possible in order to achieve the best outcome. He can still recall the acrid, bitter taste of resentment towards his job as the phone rang. Worst of all, he can distinctly remember hearing the disappointment in Magnus’ voice and how much he wanted to make things right but was rushed off the phone by his nurse before he could try. He remembers Magnus telling him that they would just reschedule for a better time and that he would talk to him later. He stood on his feet for twelve hours that night, performing the tedious work of redirecting and rewiring the nerves of the patient’s once crushed spinal column, and thought about Magnus and how he could make it up to him the entire time. And it turns out Magnus had—Magnus had been out, having drinks with his beautiful new co-worker.

He wants to lash out but he bites down on his tongue and forces himself to hear Magnus out. He owes him that much. “So you’ve been out together,” he notes instead.

“A few times,” Magnus says. “Most of the time we went out with colleagues. Ragnor, Cat, Raphael… But it always ends up with the two of us, and that’s when she starts flirting. She never does it in front of people.”
Alec lets out a small, derisive laugh. “I wonder why that is.”

Magnus purses his lips and continues on, choosing to ignore the comment. “The first time I really flirted back was on the night we were supposed to see that musical on Broadway and I didn’t hear from you until you were out of surgery and it was too late because it was already halfway through. I was waiting for you at the office, you were supposed to pick me up. She found me waiting in the lobby on her way out. So I ended up grabbing a burger with her instead.”

Alec crosses his arms against his chest, an ineffective way to guard his heart because there is no guarding it against this type of injury. The sort of injury that can only be inflicted by someone who carelessly handles the heart freely given to them that they hold in their hands. “Don’t beat around the bush, Magnus. How did your flirting start with her?”

Magnus narrows his eyes on him. “You’re my husband, Alec. You know how I flirt.”

Alec laughs again. Yes, he knows exactly how Magnus flirts, with comments heavily laced with innuendos, fluttering fingers that dance like magic across Alec’s skin, coy smiles, and roving eyes that could make him feel as if he were the most desirable man in the world. The thought of Magnus flirting like this with Camille burns like a coal in his stomach, yet he wants to know more—needs to know more. It’s going to hurt, it already does, more than he imagined but he needs to know if Magnus said things to Camille that he’s said to Alec. Did he make her feel the same way he made Alec feel whenever he touched him?

“Stop trying to avoid the question and just tell me. What did you say to each other?” The question spills out of him angrily and he feels a pressure build up behind his eyes.

“What do you want me to tell you, Alec?” Magnus blurts out. “She said that I didn’t need my husband in order to have a good night and I replied that the company was pretty good here too, or something like that. I don’t even remember everything—why do you want to know exactly what we said? Will it change anything?”

“Yes!” Alec shouts.

It is a question Magnus doesn’t have an answer for, the kind of question he had never thought he would hear coming from the only person he ever considered spending the rest of his life with, even less so when it is laced with the same hurt that is mirrored in Alec’s eyes.
The knowledge alone that he is the one who brought that look in the hazels that once gazed on him with nothing but pure and unabashed love makes his stomach lurch and his head spin with guilt.

He went to the balcony to keep a leveled head, because he knows himself enough to recognize when he needs to be surrounded by nature and find peace in the blossoming life around him — there is a reason, after all, that he built a greenhouse in his own company’s office, and it doesn’t only have to do with being environment-friendly. Now, however, the air is suffocating.

The cigarette didn’t soothe his nerves at all, no more than the imposing bamboo plants Catarina got him for Christmas last year, so Magnus steps back inside. The air isn’t more breathable there.

Did Alec really stop being enough for him? Is that even a possibility he wants to consider?

When they got married, all those years ago, Magnus remembers thinking they were invincible. That the love they bore for each other was unbreakable, and that no one, man or woman, could ever make him feel like he was the most important person in the world the way Alec did.

But then they started drifting apart, and Magnus hadn’t realized how much he valued that look in Alec’s eyes — the one that spoke words that didn’t need to be uttered out loud, of love and devotion, friendship and inexhaustible tenderness — until it was gone.

"I just– I just wanted someone to desire me again," he admits in a breathless whisper. "I wanted someone to look at me the way Camille did. I'm sorry."

And he is. He never meant to let things go that far, never wanted Alec to get hurt because of poor choices Magnus made or didn’t make, but here they are now, watching their marriage dissolve before their eyes, powerless, as they wonder how time flew by and left them without so much as a warning.

Alec follows him inside. His skin looks pale under the morning sun seeping through the balcony doors, accentuating the dark bags under his eyes and the soft wrinkles at their corners that speak of a time when Magnus made him smile and laugh enough that it got carved into his skin as a testimony of a happiness that’s now gone.

"Why would you let this continue?" Alec’s voice trembles, despite his best attempt at keeping it composed. “Did you not think for one moment about how it might make me feel to have my husband going off flirting with someone else while I’m at work?” He pauses, tilts his head to catch Magnus’ gaze. “Or did you think you would never get caught?”

Magnus can’t lie when Alec looks at him like he is now. Omitting the truth is one thing, avoiding it to protect his harrowing heart another, but he can’t lie to his face. He can recall with terrifying clarity the night they promised each other complete honesty. They hadn’t been married at the time, but they had loved each other already; although Magnus can’t remember ever not being in love with Alec from the moment he quite literally stumbled into his life. They broke many promises since that carefree, blissful night, but Magnus refuses to accept that this is one of them.

"Yes, I did," he says because it is the ugly, devastating truth. “I knew it’d hurt you if you knew about it, but I was too angry at you to care; because every time it happened, I was mad at you."

"Well congratulations," Alec snaps, anger flashing in his eyes again in the spur of a second, "you succeeded in making your husband feel like a fool."

Magnus grits his teeth, crossing his arms over his chest. "Well, I guess that's only fair for all the times I felt like a fool because you stood me up and –when you even had the decency to call or
send a lame text—only cared to warn me at the last minute!” he fires back, feeling his features harden with every word.

And here they are again, spinning back into an endless circle of blaming each other for what they did or did not do, of snapping at each other because somehow it became easier than talking.

Alec purses his lips, his brows furrowed in irritation. "Right, because me being busy at work makes it okay for you to do whatever the hell you want," he hisses, before abruptly stopping himself. He seems to come to the same conclusion Magnus did only seconds ago because he sucks in a sharp breath, holding a hand up in a quiet moment of self-composure. "I know I should be better about communicating with you, Magnus… but why? Why wouldn't you just talk to me about this?"

Magnus opens his mouth to answer but closes it again. There are many reasons that come to mind, but they all feel dull, hollow of any essence that would make them more than a pathetic excuse.

He heaves out a deep, defeated sigh instead. In the end, it all comes back to the same thing, to the same fight that keeps playing in his mind, again and again, the memory of Alec’s handsome features twisted with hurt and anger, all of it directed at Magnus who had stood powerless listening at his rage spilling like acid.

It all comes back to her.

"I don't feel like I can talk to you anymore,” he says quietly. “Not since that fight we had last year about A—”

Alec puts his hand up at once, eyes set in anger, voice low. “Stop. I can’t— I’m not talking about this right now.”

The circle starts again, devastating in its everlastingness.

“You never talk about it,” Magnus murmurs, already giving up on yet another aborted attempt.

“That’s enough,” Alec says firmly and sighs the next second, fatigue dipping his brows into a helpless frown. “Please.”

It hurts more than he can tell, the fact that he can’t even talk to his husband anymore about what he so desperately needs to, but even more so does the knowledge that it isn’t for a lack of trying. Alec just stopped listening, like the mere idea drained him from all his energy, like Magnus has somehow become an effort, an obstacle he isn’t willing to overcome anymore.

Once, Alec had fought relentlessly to tear down meticulously every wall Magnus had erected around his heart, and Magnus wonders inwardly if he knows he is also the one who put them back there, who made it so it is closed even to him who conquered them all.

“Okay then,” Magnus breathes out. He used to be able to pick his fights, but now they all feel pointless. "We don't talk anymore, Alec,” he states instead, a desolating sense of defeat clutching at his heart. “All we do is fight.”

Silence reigns between them, only broken by the sounds of the street echoing from the open door of the balcony. Magnus stares at Alec —his husband, his one true love— and tries to find on his face a clue that they are not lost just yet, that they can find their way back to each other even though it feels like they are both drowning on opposite sides of the ocean.

Alec’s face is open, raw and vulnerable like Magnus has rarely seen it because it remains second
nature for him to hide anguish and sorrow because the feelings of the people he holds dear have always come first to him.

Magnus can’t help but ask himself when he ceased to be among those people, when Alec stopped caring about his feelings enough to dismiss them until he couldn’t see them anymore.

Alec sighs and runs his hand through his tousled hair, his brows creased into a frown. It makes him look older than he is, and Magnus realizes with a start that it might be another broken promise if it all comes to an end.

They won’t grow old together like they vowed to.

Until death do us part seems far away, but Magnus feels like something might be dying today—their relationship, everything they have built together, his happiness. He had simply ignored until then that the saying could hold multiple meanings before he was faced with the most brutal incitement.

"We've always been able to talk to each other though," Alec says, a hint of longing in his voice, and Magnus knows he misses it just as much. "It's like I don't even know you anymore. This whole thing with Camille… I never expected this from you. And it hurts."

"And I never expected you to sort out your priorities in a way that wouldn't put our marriage first," Magnus sighs again.

His body is too thin of an envelope to contain all the heartbreak and remorse he is experiencing. It is suffocating, a knife plunging at his lungs until all he can focus on is remembering how to breathe.

He doesn’t want to let it die. He doesn’t want to make the saying a metaphorical truth. They were supposed to grow old together, and die with their hearts filled with love and acceptance at the knowledge that they had lived life fully, that every day had been a new adventure, exhilarating, and bold, and just... happy.

He doesn’t want to lose that dream because of a misunderstanding, or because they have stopped trying to make it become a reality, their reality.

“I suppose we both made mistakes," he murmurs, taking a cautious step forward.

Surely, they can make amends. If it has to end, so be it, but Magnus refuses to just give up on it because it is easier. If it has to end, he will employ what energy he has left to make sure it isn’t for a lack of trying.

"I fucked up," he says. “But you have to understand that I never really wanted her, Alec."

Alec tenses slightly when Magnus approaches him, his eyes widening just a little but enough to make the fear plain. Magnus stops at once, but Alec relaxes after a split second, his shoulders slouching, his hands moving to his side in a gesture that means come closer but doesn’t manage to compel Magnus to cross the inexorable distance between them.

"I never meant to put work first. I never wanted to be that person." Alec clears his throat and licks his lips, his eyes boring straight into Magnus’, open for him to read the lingering hope that guides his words. "Do you even want me anymore? Because I do—want you."

It is a simple statement, blunt and genuine the way Alec always is because it is the only way he knows how to be.
Still, Magnus can’t help but scoff at the words, shaking his head. It isn’t mocking more than it is bitter, because he can picture clearly the words he writes in his calendar every month in black letters after Alec has sent him a schedule that he always winds up overdoing. *Sex night*. The words alone are enough to make him shudder in consternation.

“Yeah,” he huffs out, unable to keep the spite out of his tone, “when it fits both our schedules. That's surely bound to make a man feel wanted.”

Alec winces. "I never wanted scheduled sex,” he protests, and Magnus believes him, but it doesn’t change the fact that this is the reality they live in. This is what they have to do to share a moment once a month –when they can, but it has been a few months since they even made time for that—that has ceased to feel intimate a while back, and passionate for even longer. “We're just both so —”

"Busy?" Magnus cuts him off, acerb. "I wonder why."

Alec heaves out a breath, layered with frustration. "You knew when we started this that I would have a busy schedule. You were there while I did my residency. You knew what to expect."

"I did," Magnus agrees. "And I also know that you go far beyond what is expected of you. You wouldn't work that much if you just stopped being so difficult about hiring another neurosurgeon. But you refuse to. Your colleague Meliorn said so himself."

Alec grits his teeth, pinching the bridge of his nose, and his next words are as bitter as they are devastating.

“It’s easier to be at work where I’m appreciated and needed than here at home where you won't even look at me or talk to me about your life."

Magnus’ breath is knocked out of his lungs as efficiently as it would had he been punched in the guts. His head throbs, bile rising to his throat, and tears brim in his eyes but he ushers them back, blowing out a breath that doesn’t manage to alleviate the sorrow clutching at his heart.

“Oh, wow,” he murmurs under his breath.

They’ve fought before, more times than Magnus can count, but it never got to a point where Magnus felt trapped in his own body, in his own mind. He was so caught up in blaming Alec for the deterioration of their marriage that he never stopped to think about the fact that by protecting himself and closing himself off again, he made himself as unreachable as Alec himself has been.

He swallows back the sob building in his throat and slouches down on the couch.

“I didn't know opening someone's skull was more appealing than coming home to me,” he says, every word a knife twisting deeper into his heart.

He tries to say more, to put words to the despair gripping at his heart relentlessly, but all he manages is a whispered “I’m—” that remains incomplete.

What else is there to say when his husband would rather sleep on the rough couch of a hospital’s break room rather than in their bed, a bed they only share because they are accustomed to?

What could he possibly say to salvage the shreds of their broken marriage?

Alec drops into the chair in front of him, and Magnus forces himself to look up at him. Alec’s eyes are an array of guilt and anguish, wide as if he can’t believe what he just said, but plagued with the
knowledge that he can't take it back.

"It's not... I'm just an asshole," he says, equally soft and sour. "A coward that ran away from our problems rather than try and work through them with you."

Magnus pushes his tongue against his teeth, inhaling deeply. "Well... I flirted with someone else because I couldn't be bothered to try to make you look at me like that again," he breathes out, his stomach lurching. "Because it was easier... so I guess I'm an asshole and a coward too."

Alec shakes his head. Whether it is in disagreement or in despair, Magnus isn't sure, but when Alec gets up and makes his way to the couch to sit beside him, albeit reasonably far so Magnus doesn't feel like his safe space is befouled; he finds that he can breathe just that much easier.

"Would divorcing me make you happy, Magnus?" he asks in a small, gravelly voice. "Because if that's what you want..."

The words hang in the air between them, abundant with possibilities, ones worth fighting for, and ones Magnus refuses to consider for the sake of his crumbling heart.

"I didn't even know what happiness felt like before I met you," he says because it will always be true no matter what comes out of this mess. "I don't want to throw it all away because we're going through rough times. I just want it back and I don't know how."

Alec nods, a sigh of relief slipping through his lips. "I can't lose you, Magnus," he murmurs, with all the reverence Magnus had longed to hear again. "You are the best thing in my life and I know I've done a terrible job of showing you that but I want to try. I want to fight for us and make you love me the way you used to."

He doesn't move closer but he lays his hand hesitantly on the empty space between them, palm up in a clear call for peace. Hope is blazing in his eyes, shifting between his fingers, and Magnus nods gingerly, reaching up to let his own fingers brush carefully against Alec's palm.

"I want to fight for us, too," he mutters. "I don't want to give up on everything we've built together just because it's easier."

Alec's hand responds to his touch instantly, his fingers linking through Magnus' like they belong there, like he finds in his touch the tether they have always sought in each other.

He draws himself closer to Magnus, gently squeezing his hand.

"Tell me what I need to do to start making things right with you," Alec pleads, his voice low and raw.

"I—" Magnus starts, but stops himself, choking on the lump in his throat. His gaze falls on their joined hands, and he shakes his head, unable to find an answer.

He doesn't know where to start. There is so much to fix, so much to work on.

Alec drops his head, his eyes clutching shut, and sucks in a shuddering breath. "Tell me I'm not too late," he murmurs, tone strained with unshed tears. He brings their joined hands to his mouth, putting Magnus' wedding band up to his lips, and Magnus meets his gaze only to witness the absolute honesty he always relies on, blended with the longing they both share for better days to come.

"Don't give up on me, Magnus," he whispers.
Magnus runs a hand on his tired features, squeezing Alec's with the other one.

"I just want to go back to the way things were," he admits. "When going on a date didn't feel like an obligation. When we had sex because we wanted to and not because we felt obligated to. When we didn't have to stage our happiness in front of our friends and family because it was real."

Alec nods, returning the gentle squeeze on Magnus' hand. "I want that too. I miss us. I miss you. I miss being your friend and your lover. I miss the days when it was all so simple for us. But I think, with effort, we can get back there."

Magnus swallows past the lump in his throat and allows himself to nod back. "I miss you, too," he whispers. "So much."

"Will you try with me then?" Alec says, tone layered with hesitation, his fingers shaking slightly against Magnus’. "Or do you think we're too far gone?"

There is only one possible answer to that question, and Magnus finds it isn’t as hard as he thought it would be to reignite the hope that had felt vanquished by their fight the night before. They both deserve better than that sad and ugly version of themselves they exposed to one another.

They used to be invincible, and those days are gone, but that doesn’t mean they can’t grow stronger from their loss. They can start again.

If anyone deserves a second chance, Magnus has to believe it’s them.

"I'll try," he says, allowing himself a small but heartfelt smile. “Of course I'll try. For you, Alexander, always."

\textit{Always}. 

So they try.

They start with something simple.

Magnus has never been extremely superstitious but going to the same place they last went to and had a disastrous date seems like a good way to go against karma and turn things back in their favor.

They had gone there the first time because one of Alec’s colleagues, Meliorn, had recommended it warmly, which was probably how they ended up running into him and having their night ruined by an innocent comment on his part. After that, they didn’t get to really enjoy their food, too focused on giving each other the cold shoulder to avoid making a scene in the middle of a fancy restaurant.

The Wander Woods is a striking contrast to the rest of the buildings surrounding it. A wall of greenery flows behind the bar and vegetation is everywhere around them, the clear sound of a fountain running in the middle of the room buzzing pleasantly.

Magnus lets the sound relax him. He wouldn’t admit it, but he is nervous, and if the way Alec has been fidgeting with his tie is anything to go by, he knows he isn’t the only one.

It should be easy for them to fall back into this kind of routine. Have dinner together in a fancy restaurant, bicker over what to eat with teasing smiles and flirt over their glasses of wine. They have done it a thousand times before and Magnus never felt nervous or so apprehensive about it.
This time is different, though. This time, this is much more than a simple dinner. This is them trying to salvage what they can of their broken marriage. This is meant to be a new beginning. A second chance.

And perhaps they are just too aware of it, of the pressure on their shoulders, of the sword hanging over their heads threatening to put an end to this once and for all.

What are they even supposed to talk about? What did they use to talk about?

Magnus opens the menu on his lap and clears his throat, which feels tight with the need to say something, anything.

“How’s work?” he asks, and inwardly curses himself.

He isn’t sure he really wants to hear about Alec's work, and perhaps it is incredibly selfish of him, perhaps it is why things are as tense as they are, but Magnus can’t bring himself to push aside the bitterness in the back of his throat whenever Alec’s work comes to the table. It inevitably takes them to the topic of Alec’s impossible schedule and how little time he has for them, and it is bound, as always, to end in a fight. And Magnus would like to try and enjoy the food this time.

Alec doesn’t seem to worry about it, however, so Magnus allows himself to relax a little and tries to keep away any negative thoughts.

“Good,” Alec says with a smile. “Luke mentioned that the hospital might be allowing students to visit and shadow in our department. We aren’t a teaching hospital but I think it’s a direction they’re wanting to go in. So that will be interesting if it comes to pass...”

His eyes are lighting up in that adorable way they always do when Alec starts to ramble about something he is passionate about, and Magnus misses the time they would do that when Alec spoke of them, of their future.

Magnus just hums absentely, nodding along. "Sounds good," he mutters and grimaces at the lack of interest in his own voice. “I always thought you'd make a great mentor,” he adds shortly, before focusing back on the menu. “What are you having?”

Alec clicks his tongue as he glances over the menu. "I'm just gonna have the filet.”

"No vegetables?” Magnus says, and it sounds too disapproving to be an actual question. It used to be natural for him to playfully scold Alec for his love of meat –and perhaps throw in an innuendo or three– but now it just falls flat as he says the words. It sounds disapproving and cold, and everything Magnus never wanted to be when it comes to his husband.

He wishes things could be more simple, that he could just snap his fingers and everything would just magically get back to the way it was, that all the rancor and bitterness could just leave him at once. He doesn’t want to live like this, with this darkness in his heart that takes over his thoughts and blurs the reality of what they have, what they could still have if only he could allow himself to forgive Alec for his absence. If only he could believe Alec was honest in his apology.

“And I guess I will get the steamed vegetables with it,” Alec says reluctantly as he sets his menu aside, pursing his lips.

Another silence lingers between them, and Magnus almost wants to apologize for it but he sighs quietly to himself instead.

"Any news for Thanksgiving?” Magnus asks, closing the menu on his lap and taking a sip of his
wine. "Where are we going this year?"

Alec looks away from his observation of his napkin to glance up at him, a soft, easy smile on his lips. “I think Izzy mentioned we’re getting together at Mom’s this year,” he says, and he straightens against his chair as his brows pull down into a frown. “Why? Did you have something else in mind?”

"No, I just... wanted to know, I guess," Magnus replies, and barely represses a sigh of relief when their waiter walks up to their table to take their order.

Alec orders the filet and the vegetables somewhat reluctantly, Magnus the fish with some black rice and the waiter walks away with a nod and a polite smile, congratulating them on their choices as if he wouldn’t have had they chosen anything else on the menu.

As soon as he is gone, silence wraps around them again. Chatter is erupting from the couples, friends, families surrounding them, putting Magnus on edge all the more. It feels like walking in a deserted street in the peak of rush hour in Manhattan, like they are trapped in a world of their own but everything feels eerie and unattainable. Magnus wonders if the fact that they are both aware of the pressure they put on that simple dinner is what makes things so awkward or if it is just the accumulation of everything else that has gone awry in their shared life. Perhaps, he ponders to himself, it is both.

Perhaps Alec is having trouble seeing past the dreadful threat of divorce Magnus has imposed on him just as much as Magnus himself.

Blinking out of whatever dreamland he has wandered to, Alec gives him a contrite smile. “Izzy also mentioned that we are in charge of pies this year. So I was thinking we could do a pumpkin pie and maybe a chocolate pie...”

“Magnus?” a familiar voice interrupts before he can finish.

Magnus blinks away from his husband and their stellar conversation about pie to find Dot standing next to their dining table, a warm smile on her lips. He has to blink twice to make sure it is indeed her, unused to seeing her in an environment that isn’t the dance studio in Williamsburg.

“Dot, hi!” he exclaims, smiling back.

Dot chuckles, her eyes lighting up with glee. “I thought that was you but I had to come over and check!” she exclaims cheerfully, before schooling her features in a mask of staged disapproval, pointing an accusatory finger at him. “I missed my salsa partner last week so you better not stand me up this week.”

Her tone is teasing, playful and Magnus can’t help but chuckle as well.

He had been looking for a way to relieve stress a few months back, to lift the weight of the upcoming Paris expansion from his shoulders, and he had wanted to do something adventurous, to break out of the bleak routine his life had become when he read about those salsa classes in the newspaper. He had just gone to try it out the first time, but it had turned out to be more effective than he had ever imagined it would be. Finding Dot there after all these years had been a lucky hazard, and she was a marvelous dance partner so they had quickly made up for lost time and became quick friends again, although they rarely saw each other outside their weekly classes.

He had missed it the week before, but the Paris expansion was taking up most of his time at work, and sometimes even beyond that.
“I’ll do my best,” Magnus promises with a warm smile. “Sometimes with the time zones, I don’t really have another choice. Who are you here with?”

“I’m just here with a few of my girlfriends.” She gestures toward the back of the restaurant, to a small group of women gathered around their drinks, leaning into each other as they chat and laugh. “Girls night.”

Magnus is about to reply when Alec very quietly clears his throat, shifting uncomfortably on his seat.

He blinks up at Dot, gesturing to his husband pointedly instead. “You remember my husband Alec, right?”

"Oh." Dot turns to Alec, surprised as if she's just now noticing he's here. "Of course. Alec, it's good to see you again."

Alec sends her back a smile that is so forced Magnus wonders how she doesn’t notice – then again, most people are not as good as reading Alec as he is. "Likewise, Dorothea."

She smiles warmly at him, blissfully oblivious, and shifts her focus back to Magnus.

“I guess I’ll see you next Thursday,” he says gently, because he can almost feel how tense Alec is right now, and things were already uncomfortable enough as it were before Dot interrupted them.

“Don’t bail on me this time,” Dot replies with a light chuckle. “Enjoy your meal! Alec, it was great to see you again.”

She walks away without waiting for an answer, not that Alec even attempts to give her one. Magnus waits until she has fully turned around to give Alec a pointed look, lifting an eyebrow in silent inquiry.

Alec takes a sip of his ice water, but his hold on his glass is slightly too tight, his knuckles blanching. "So Dot,” he says, tilting his head in that manner of his that is meant to appear innocent. "She's your dance partner in your salsa classes?"

“Yeah,” Magnus says with a quick nod. “I told you about it, remember? We thought it was funny to end up in the same salsa classes after all these years.”

He does remember having that conversation with Alec, one morning months ago when they miraculously managed to have breakfast together. Magnus hadn’t had the willpower to make his infamous Belgian waffles, unsure they would be appreciated the way they used to be, so they had just had toast and jam and made idle, pointless conversation without barely exchanging a glance. Alec hadn’t even flinched when Magnus had mentioned Dot being his dance partner.

Now, however, his lips are pulled into a thin line, his thumb brushing against his glass, and his tone is short and almost automated as he speaks, clearly holding back whatever is swirling in that overthinking brain of his.

"I guess I forgot,” Alec says matter-of-factly, shaking his head. “Must be nice to have someone you're comfortable with as a dance partner."

Magnus frowns, his jaw flexing, but he forces himself to inhale deeply through his nose. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Alec shrugs, finally letting go of his glass to wave dismissively. "Nothing. I just assume that your
history with her is why, out of the entire class, she's your partner."

Magnus’ frown promptly turns into a glare and he rolls his eyes, huffing in disbelief. “We dated for two months before I met you over 15 years ago. There were hardly feelings involved.” He pauses, his eyes boring right into Alec’s. “And I would have gladly had another partner had you not refused to take those classes with me,” he adds, silently challenging Alec to dispute the inevitable truth.

Alec nods along. "Right," he says through gritted teeth. “Well, it just looked like someone still has a spark in her eye for you even after fifteen years."

Magnus pinches the bridge of his nose, heaving. “And you sound like you’re jealous and irrational.”

Alec scoffs, almost offended but too annoyed to truly be anything but. His gaze drifts back to the back of the room where Dot is joyfully drinking from a bright pink cocktail, laughing with her friends, before turning back to Magnus. There is a storm in his eyes, bold and dangerous, but none of the infuriation he can read there is truly directed at Magnus, so he allows his defenses to slip just slightly enough for him to relax in his seat.

"Forgive me for wanting to know who else is lined up, ready and willing to steal my husband," Alec mumbles grudgingly.

A few years ago, Magnus would have laughed. Now, all he manages is a small, but still fond smile. “Are you making a hit list?” he asks, and he finds the teasing tone isn’t too hard to muster. “Make sure you don’t get caught, I’d hate to have to visit you in jail.”

Alec’s mouth curves up in a humored smirk. "Just trying to keep track of my competition."

But Magnus sees behind it. Reading Alec is like reading a book in a foreign language: it seems impossible at first, easier once you get the basics and effortless when you finally master it. It is like a second nature to him by now. Deciphering Alec’s every little quirk, every small habit he is unaware of, every shift on his face, it is an art Magnus took years to excel in. And sometimes it can be a burden as much as it is a gift.

It is why he can see the real concern that hides behind Alec’s skillfully staged smirk, why he can feel the fear swirling in those hazels.

It is why he reaches out and brushes his hand softly against Alec’s.

“There’s no competition,” Magnus says, already pulling away, but the familiar tingle of Alec’s characteristic cold hand lingers in his fingertips. He forces a smirk, too, and wonders if Alec can see through him just as easily. “Unless we’re talking about your dancing skills, of course.”

The look on Alec’s face speaks of how greatly offended he is, but it quickly fades to be replaced by a light chuckle, and Magnus lets the sound fill his heart the way it always has.

Their dinner is served before any of them can add anything and they talk some more about Thanksgiving and then move on to what to get Ariel for her birthday on the same day, bouncing ideas back and forth, none of them managing to tune down the other’s irremediable tendency to spoil her. When Magnus is done with his meal, he excuses himself with a smile to go to the restroom.

There, he leans against the wall for a moment, heaving out a deep breath. The nerves have somewhat subdued. Things are not going perfectly, far from it, but at least they’re not fighting and
considering the last few months, it can definitely be classified as progress.

Yet, Magnus still feels dull. They are talking, yes, but not about the things that matter, not about everything he so desperately needs to get off his chest but knows Alec won’t hear, or even listen to. Once, they had talked for hours on end, nothing ever being deemed too idle or too unnerving to be mentioned, and even when they were done, Magnus could have asked Alec to say it all over again and savored the words with the same enthusiasm.

Now each passing moment only leads to the next, only adds to all the things Magnus has repressed in the pretense that it could save their marriage, only to realize too late it had only made things worse.

But platitudes seem to cut it, for now, so he will have to make do with them.

Magnus walks back to their table with a weight on his shoulders, but he inwardly chastises himself and plasters a small, benevolent smile on his lips, one that disappears as soon as he looks up as he approaches. He doesn’t know what game the universe has decided to play on them, but he is definitely not amused, nor a willing participant.

Magnus freezes altogether, his mouth dropping open.

On his chair, sitting in front of Alec is Scott Mellon. His chestnut hair is slicked back in a perfectly calculated manner, expositing his perfect tan and perfect white teeth that Magnus still feels the need to punch out of his mouth despite the years that have passed since they last saw each other.

He is leaning on the table, grinning his eternally smug grin, not a single crease on his three-piece grey suit.

And of course, he is holding sunglasses in his hand, moving them as he talks because he is just that much of an asshole that he would be the kind of man to wear them inside. At night.

Clenching his jaw, Magnus crosses the distance separating them, pursing his lips in disdain as he looks down at the man.

“Scott Mellon, you’re still alive,” he says, deadpan, making it obvious that the fact doesn’t elate him in the slightest—on the contrary.

For a moment, Scott doesn’t reply, his eyes roaming over Alec with undisguised hunger. His gaze lingers for a second on Alec’s hands picking at the tablecloth, lips curving in a knowing smirk, before he slowly looks up at Magnus, laughing that carefree, douchey laugh of his.

"Alive and better than ever," he says, and he makes no indication whatsoever that he is going to stand from Magnus’ seat. “I see Alec's kept you around.”

Magnus clenches and unclenches his fist at his side. He ponders on the pros and cons of punching him right then and there but winds up rolling back on his heels instead. He isn’t worth the potential ache in his knuckles.

“Sorry to disappoint.” He smirks, lethal. “Anyone keeping you around these days or do you still live off your father’s trust fund?”

Scott chuckles, dismissing him with a wave as if Magnus’ entire existence is the joke. "It's a family business. And for your information, I'm single," he says, finally standing from his seat. He brushes past Magnus like he doesn’t even see him and steps in closer to Alec, dropping his voice to a low, seductive undertone. "But more than willing to rekindle old friendships and see where life takes me."
“How about letting life take you away from my husband?” Magnus hisses, pursing his lips.

Scott ignores him, reaching in the front pocket of his suit jacket to pluck out a business card, sliding it towards Alec with a wink. "Call me. I'd love to catch up."

Alec glances at the card, his brows pulling down into a frown and back up at Scott with a look of pure bewilderment and disbelief. With one finger alone, he pushes the card away from him, sliding it back to the edge of the table.

"I don't think so,” Alec says. “Now if you don't mind, I'd like to get back to my dinner with my husband."

“Your loss.” Scott shrugs and walks away without another word.

Magnus is still boiling with anger, his jaw slightly flexing, as he glides back into his chair as gracefully as he can. He compels himself to take a profound breath and grabs his glass of wine to take a long sip. Alec watches him warily, big hazel eyes staring at his every move.

"What you ever saw in that stuck-up trust fund jock, I will never know,” he grumbles when there isn’t a drop left.

Alec rolls his eyes. “It was a summer fling my first year of college, Magnus,” he says offhandedly. “I was hardly looking for true love.”

"Even for a summer fling, your standards were awfully low," Magnus retorts.

Alec scoffs. “Right, cause your exes have all been a real treat.”

Magnus opens his mouth to snap back but doesn’t find the strength to. He falls back into his chair instead, heaving. "What kind of game is the universe playing?" he muses out loud, absently twirling his wedding band around his finger. "We go out for one night and run into two of our exes? What's next?"

“I think it’s safe to say this restaurant is cursed,” Alec offers, and it does sound like the most reasonable option.

Magnus snorts, shaking his head. "The food isn't even that good,” he replies. “My fish was dry. Let's just agree to never step foot in here again, okay?"

Alec chuckles, his eyes lighting up just the way Magnus can never get enough of. “Fine by me. You ready to go?"

Magnus nods quickly, pushing his chair back. "Let's go before Lydia turns up," he says, a teasing smile ghosting over his lips.

Alec stills, half sitting and half standing, and glares at him. “You couldn’t help yourself.”

Magnus smirks, wrapping his scarf around his neck. "Hey, you should be grateful I didn't mention Jessica Hawkblue."

Alec drops his head back and groans as he slips into his coat. “I never should have told you about that. You’re never going to let me live that down, are you?"

"Nope.” Magnus chuckles, as they walk to the counter to pay the bill. "I'll be on my deathbed, agonizing, and I'll still make sure to remind you not to move on from me with Jessica Hawkblue.”
The waiter gives him a funny look at the counter as they both chuckle, although Alec makes a point of rolling his eyes again, and Magnus gives him a warm smile as he holds out their joint account card.

Never stepping foot again in the Wander Woods seems like the right call. The entire date was a disaster, from pointless conversation to undesired - and undesirable - guests but at least they didn’t fight, and Magnus doesn’t feel like his whole world is going to collapse tonight.

It doesn’t count exactly as a victory, but he chooses to focus on the bright side: it still counts.

Alec admits their date could have gone better. He could do without the reminders of their past and Magnus’ current dance partner who just so happens to be his ex. But all in all, despite the excessive talk about Thanksgiving and pies, it hadn’t turned out to be a complete and utter disaster like he had expected. Although he wishes rekindling their spark and going back to the way things used to be was as easy as talking about Thanksgiving pies.

They’re back at the loft now and conversation has, yet again, dwindled.

He watches as Magnus sits on the foot of their bed to remove his shoes. He looks tired or maybe he’s just bored with all of this, or worse, with him.

_I just wanted someone to desire me again._ Magnus’ words echo in his mind as he watches Magnus stand and slip his arms out of his suit jacket that he promptly hangs on the butler in the corner of their room.

Alec loosens the knot of his tie and tosses it on the dresser, followed by his suit jacket that he discards on the bed. Magnus picks it up with a sigh and carries it over to Alec’s butler. He’s careful as he hangs it, smoothing out any creases he sees, always caring about Alec’s clothing more than Alec did himself.

They go through the bedtime motions they’ve done hundreds of times. Almost fifteen years worth of nights sleeping side-by-side in the same bed.

Alec leans against the dresser and quickly works at the buttons of his dress shirt while Magnus stands off to the side, slowly and carefully unbuttoning his. Alec’s shirt is off and tossed in the hamper before Magnus reaches his last button. The sleeves wrap snugly around the muscles of Magnus’ arms, pulling tight as he rolls his shoulders and brings one arm out at a time. The corded muscles in his back flex and tense as he removes his shirt completely and Alec’s pulse quickens with desire.

Why did he ever stop showing Magnus how much he desires him?

Magnus loosens his belt and lets his pants fall down his toned legs to reveal the fitted briefs clinging to him.

_I wanted someone to look at me the way Camille did. I'm sorry._

A heat flares in the pit of his stomach from both the anger he feels at himself for letting Magnus ever feel as if he weren’t enough and the burning hot need to touch his husband, to remember what it feels like to be with him. Truly be with him.

Fifteen years of sleeping side-by-side and fifteen years of intimately sharing his bed with the same
man. He reaches out and hooks his fingers around the crook of Magnus’ elbow. He doesn’t know when he moved from his place across the room but now he’s standing inches away from Magnus, who is looking up at him with confusion and shock swirling in his brown eyes. Fifteen years with the same man and Alec wouldn’t have it any other way. No one had ever or will ever make Alec feel desire in the same way he does for Magnus.

Alec looks down at Magnus’ lips; they’re parted, wine-stained, and inviting.

He steps in closer and dips his head down, sucking in a quick breath and pausing with his lips hovering over Magnus’. He licks them and swallows, meeting Magnus’ eyes again.

“Do you want to?” he asks, voice rough.

Magnus’ brows drop and Alec clenches his teeth together. He doesn’t think there could have been a less sexy way to try and initiate this but given where they stand, he feels he has to ask, he never wants to assume anything.

They’ve found themselves in a place they’ve never been before. They are blindly walking through an unfamiliar terrain of loving each other and wanting desperately to make this work but also knowing there’s a very real chance that it won’t, and that this could be the end of everything they’ve built together.

Magnus hesitates a lot longer than Alec would have hoped but his brows relax and his lips curve up in the trace of a smile as he nods.

“Yeah,” he says in a small voice.

“Ohkay,” Alec breathes out, his voice quieter than a whisper.

He closes his eyes and tries to relax the nerves that dance in his stomach. The nerves that tell him he’s going to fail and ruin this chance.

He closes the distance, connecting their mouths together. It feels like forever since they last did this. He tries to think of the last time their kiss extended beyond closed lips pressed together but he draws a blank. Magnus opens his mouth and kisses him back, sliding their lips together just as they used to and for a moment things are how they once were.

Alec smiles into their kiss as he walks them towards the bed. He’s missed the feeling of Magnus’ kiss and the airy happiness it could bring with it. He tries to blindly guide them but trips when his foot catches on one of Magnus’ discarded shoes and is only saved from falling by Magnus catching him with arms around his waist.

Magnus’ hands are hot as they glide down below Alec’s waistband, tugging the material of Alec’s pants down his legs before grazing back up, and scratching lightly at his hip bones when he tugs Alec down against him onto the bed.

Alec lands roughly and clumsily on top of Magnus. Magnus groans but still presses into their kiss. There was a time when they would have laughed about that. Laughed between small kisses, peppering soft pecks against smiles, and uttering joking teases. Now Magnus is laying there, eyes pinched shut, working harder than he should be when trying to have sex with his husband.

It will take time, Alec reassures himself, closing his eyes just as tight and returning Magnus’ kisses. They will make it back.

Magnus tugs on his pants again, and a few kicks and bumped knees later, Alec manages to rid
himself of his pants and underwear. He breaks their kiss and leans up, dragging Magnus’ underwear down, tossing them behind him.

He takes a second to drink in the view of Magnus’ bronzed skin against their gold satin sheets. His hair is a mess fanned out against the pillow, and his chest rises and falls heavily as he pants. Even in a state of disarray, he is the most beautiful person Alec has ever seen. He finds that his want for Magnus is there, pushing against his chest, twisting in his stomach, demanding to be satiated. It had never left, he had simply stopped acting on it, showing it when he should have.

He leans over to their nightstand and retrieves the bottle of lube from the drawer, ignoring what looks like the slightest layer of dust on the lid. He doesn’t even want to think of how bad of a sign that is in this moment. Right now he wants to make up for that layer of dust, he wants to bring back the feeling of being desired by his husband to Magnus. He wants to show Magnus how much he still loves him, how much he still desires him after all these years. His hunger for Magnus never went away, he had just been too selfish and inconsiderate to show it.

Alec coats himself and his fingers. Magnus’ eyes are still closed, breaths still heavy, arms up by his head as if he’s waiting for Alec to climb back on and finish what they’ve started. Alec leans down, resting on his forearm by Magnus’ head on the pillow. Magnus arches up, his mouth tugging back uncomfortably until he settles down.

“You okay?” Alec asks.

Magnus nods briskly, biting down on his lip.

Alec leans forward again and this time Magnus hisses. “Ow. Ow. Ow.”

Alec jerks up. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

Magnus sighs, mouth pulled back in a grimace. “You’re on my hair.”

“Oh!” Alec lifts up his arm and lightly brushes Magnus’ loose strands away. “Sorry.”

Magnus offers up a tight-lipped smile that doesn’t reach his eyes, only pulls back at the cheeks. “It’s fine.”

Alec nods and drops down to give him a kiss again, urging a response from Magnus who meets him halfway, a light grip that tightens its hold onto Alec’s waist as Alec gently works him open with one finger before adding a second. Magnus relaxes around him and Alec rocks his hips forward, guiding himself against Magnus, sinking in slowly until their bodies are pressed together and he hears Magnus’ breath hitch by his ear.

He gives Magnus a moment to adjust before pulling out and pushing back in with a steady rhythm. Magnus’ fingers clutch tightly at his ribs, digging into him as he pulls him down to bring their mouths together. His kiss is hard, pushing up against Alec in a hard press of teeth and closed lips. His body tenses underneath Alec, fingertips bruising into Alec’s shoulders, a pained cry escaping him when Alec bucks his hips forward.

Alec stops and pulls back to see Magnus wincing through deep breaths. “Magnus?” He pulls out immediately and Magnus sighs in relief, dropping his head back against the pillow. His hands go up to his hair and he rests there with heavy breaths and his mouth turned down in discomfort.

“Magnus,” Alec says, falling to his side to face him, guilt tearing through him, “I’m sorry.”

Magnus lays there silently, working through his breaths with eyes closed, fingers carding through
his own hair in self-comfort. His breaths stutter with every exhale.

Alec wants to pull Magnus into him and hold him until the pain goes away. He wonders if it’s what Magnus would even want from him right now or if his touch can even bring him comfort like it once used to. He reaches out but stops himself when Magnus’ hand trembles against his brow, and he lets his hand fall between them.

“I’m sorry,” Alec says again, softer this time.

Magnus’ eyes flick open and he drops his arms against the pillow with a quiet sigh.

“I shouldn’t have”—Alec pauses to take in a breath—“I should have known it wasn’t a good time. I’m sorry.”

Magnus keeps his eyes trained up at the ceiling, suddenly taking an interest in their ceiling fan that buffets cool air down on their bare skin, its rhythmic whir stirring through the air, creating the white noise of their silence. The clock ticking on their wall pronounces each silent second that passes. Alec has never noticed how much sound actually makes up the sound of silence, and how much he hates it.

He’s going to speak up again and possibly ruin their night even more when the wet, heavy sound of Magnus swallowing finally breaks through.

“Don’t be.” Magnus pauses for a moment. “…I should have said something. I guess I was so desperate to make this work I didn’t stop to think about it or tell you how I felt.”

Alec understands that. He didn’t truly stop to think about the moment, how their interaction was or if Magnus had even shown the signs of wanting to take things further. In his desperation to make things right, he had ended up, as usual, making things wrong. So very wrong.

It’s no wonder Magnus is tired of him.

“Maybe we shouldn’t do this until things are better between us,” Alec whispers between them. He can’t lose this. He can’t lose Magnus. He has to do this right. “I never want to hurt you.”

Magnus nods. “We should probably make sure both of us really want this next time.”

“Yeah…”

Alec suddenly feels his nudity, feels exposed. For the first time in their relationship, sex with Magnus felt wrong. Before they would have finished, wrapped themselves in their comforter, their naked bodies pressed together all throughout the night. Alec would have no problem the next morning, waking and rising out bed, walking around their room completely naked as he got ready for the day. But now… now his nudity feels shameful and like a lingering evidence of the hurt he just caused.

Magnus is still staring up at the ceiling when Alec rolls out of the bed and grabs his underwear that is lying on the floor in a heap with his pants. He pulls them on quickly and then slides back into bed, under the covers this time and being sure to keep his distance from Magnus. The want to reach out and hold his husband is still there. He wants to pull him close and bury his face in his hair. He wants to apologize for the rest of the night for… everything. He’s never wanted to have Magnus as close to him as possible as he does right now and he’s also never wanted to give Magnus as much space as he can.

He turns over in bed, opting for space, and faces away from Magnus.
Their silence is back. Everything is so quiet Alec can almost make himself believe that he’s alone in the room right now. That Magnus is out in the living room and none of this ever happened.

Magnus rises from the bed.

He could almost make himself believe.

The lights are still on and so he closes his eyes, pretending to be asleep. He can hear Magnus moving throughout the room. The lights switch off and Alec expects Magnus to climb into bed behind him and join him in ending this miserable night but he hears the door open and so he opens his eyes in time to see Magnus leaving the room, his blue satin robe trailing behind him.

He brings his fists up to his eyes and groans.

They said they would try. Magnus said he would always try for him.

Magnus still loves him, they’re just in a bad place. Relationships take effort.

He repeats this to himself, hoping it will ease the guilt and worry that’s pressing down against his chest. Maybe if he says it long enough, he will believe it as he falls asleep and puts this day behind them.

The night of their talk had ended so well. Alec had felt as if they were on the same page that night. Both still in love with each other, just desperately needing to find their way back. They had simply lost their way but they would work through it. They always found a way back to each other, that’s what they did. It’s what made their relationship so incredible. No trial was too big to break down the love they have for each other. At least that’s what he had thought. It’s what they had believed, yet here they are. Fifteen years together, all the work and effort they had put in, shot to hell.

He turns over onto his back with another groan.

“Alec - what - the - fuck - are - you - doing?” he whispers to himself, knocking his fist against his forehead, driving each word into his skull.

He drops his arms and stares at the fan like Magnus had done. Its motion is hypnotizing, comforting, but not enough to lull him to sleep. Nothing would be enough right now. The shame from how their night ended would not go away, not so easily, and definitely not with the simple, pathetic ‘I’m sorry’ he had given Magnus.

He throws the blanket off of himself and leaves the room to find him. The floors are cold against his bare feet and he realizes he probably should have put some clothes on instead of searching their home in his underwear.

He enters the living room and can see through the glass doors, the orange ember at the tip of Magnus’ cigarette. He can hear Magnus muttering quietly into the phone as he steps closer.

“Cat…”

Cigarettes and Cat. Magnus’ go-to coping mechanisms.

“It was just… so bad. No, awful.”

Alec stops and Magnus’ voice is louder now, or at least loud enough that Alec can hear each word as it digs into him.
“We never had anything that bad before.” Magnus takes a drag of his cigarette, relaxes into his seat, and then moves his hand up to rub at the bridge of his nose, the bright orange of the burning end of his cigarette moving back and forth from the motion.

Alec wonders what Cat is saying right now. Is she laughing or is she giving Magnus advice? Magnus is nodding intermittently even though he’s on the phone and only hums twice to acknowledge whatever it is she’s telling him. She has always been good at giving advice and Magnus has always taken it to heart; always holding her opinion with the utmost respect. Alec knows she has a power with her words, a way to sometimes make Magnus see reason when no one else can. He hopes she’s doing this right now. He hopes that somehow she can still see them for what they are, what they were, and what they could still be if they try.

Alec could really use someone on his side right now.

Magnus groans and drops his head back, exhaling a large cloud of smoke, and flicking the ash from his cigarette. “Cat, I think tonight ruined sex for me forever.”

Alec frowns and leans his head against the wall. He should walk away now and go back to bed. He would never have thought the day would come that he would overhear Magnus lamenting to his best friend about their sex life and using the word *awful* to describe it.

He shouldn’t put such weight into sex but he can’t help it. They had always been so good at it. Since the very beginning, sex with Magnus had never felt awkward or uncomfortable. They never had that fumbling sex that only ever served to please only one of them. Even their scheduled sex, as boring and routine as it was at times, had always felt amazing. Their hearts had ceased to be in it at some point but the act itself, the feeling of Magnus’ body arching into him, that heady feeling of pleasure that came when he watched Magnus come undone as he followed after him, had always been there.

How could tonight have gone so wrong?

“Of course I’m not gonna leave him because we had bad sex! I’m not that shallow, Cat.”

The hope Alec feels rising in his stomach is quickly washed away by the sound of Magnus’ laughter. Robust and free. A sound Alec has not heard in a while, a sound Alec is incapable of drawing out of Magnus now. A sound Alec loves and one he misses so much he feels the loss of it aching inside of him. Alec closes his eyes and listens, drinking in this small moment of happiness Magnus is having amidst the tragic events of their night. Tears prick at his eyes, a burn spreading through his nose and in his throat as he forces himself to keep it in. He can’t break right now.

Magnus’ laughter dies away and his voice softens. “No, Cat. I’d rather have bad sex for the rest of my life than hurt him like that again.”

The comfort that statement brings lasts only a second. While he’s happy Magnus isn’t going to let tonight’s events ruin what they agreed to work on, he hates the deep, festering feeling that Magnus may end up staying with him out of pity.

Alec sucks in a breath and backs away from the door. Whatever else is said between friends tonight will stay between them. It’s better that way, he thinks as he crawls into bed again, pulling the covers high up to his neck.

It had been so long since Magnus last wandered in the corridors of St. Ambrose Hospital that he
had almost forgotten the undertone of bleach that trifles in the air and makes his stomach swirl with discomfort. The Neurology department is no exception, but Magnus has come to associate it rather with the soft sky blue of the walls and his husband’s cologne that he could pick up on in any place, no matter how it is threatened to be buried under chemicals.

The break room is at the end of the main corridor, right next to Luke’s office and Magnus feels a small but hopeful smile tug at his lips at the familiarity of it all. He hasn’t been here in a long while, but he still knows these walls by heart, and they still feel welcoming, a reminiscence of all the times he came to have lunch (or dinner) with Alec during his breaks and they ended up chatting with his colleagues—or partaking in more unorthodox activities when they were certain they had the break room all to themselves for long enough. It is yet another tradition that has somehow vanished from their daily lives, but they promised they would make efforts to bring the spark back, and Magnus feels like this is as good of any other place to start.

“Magnus!” a cheerful voice calls, bursting through his wandering thoughts.

Magnus swirls around to face Luke, who is walking towards him with a broad grin, a green file tucked under his arm.

“It feels like I haven’t seen you in years!” he continues as he reaches him, pulling him in a quick hug with his free arm. “What are you doing here?”

Magnus gives him a small smile, bringing a hand up to show him the paper bag he has been carrying. “Brought lunch for Alec,” he explains shortly. “I thought we could spend his break together.”

“Great idea!” Luke exclaims, looking at the bag as if he is about to mark it with the Garroway stamp of approval. His voice lowers to a whisper as he tilts his head closer. “Don’t tell him I said this but he’s been miserable all week and even worse today. I think he really needs to see your face right now.”

Magnus gulps, forcing the smile to remain on his lips despite the painful stutter of his heart. “Well, I’m here now,” he says. If Luke picks up on the shakiness of his smile, he doesn’t comment on it. If he realizes Alec’s misery has probably very much to do with Magnus himself and their disastrous date, and their even more disastrous attempt at physical intimacy, from the last weekend, he doesn’t either. Magnus is very grateful for it.

“I’ll go get him,” Luke replies with a wink, walking backward in the opposite direction. “It was great to see you, Magnus!”


Luke disappears in another corridor with one last wave, and Magnus leans against the closest wall, staring up at the ceiling, playing absently with the paper bag in his hand. He opted for something simple. After the disaster their somewhat fancy date turned out to be, he figured it would be easier to try again with something that wouldn’t put that much pressure on either of them, in a place that is familiar to them both —and to Alec in particular— so they would feel safe enough to relax and just appreciate a moment for the two of them.

Then, perhaps he can stop thinking about how lamentably their night ended. It still replays in his head, the guilt that had been etched on Alec’s features as he laid motionless beside Magnus after what had turned out to be the worst sex they ever had. Things have been bleak since then; awkward.
They had breakfast together the next morning, and the suffocating silence was so unbearable that Magnus had pretended to have a conference call with Paris to leave for work earlier than he had to. Alec had merely blinked at him, regret and remorse flashing in his eyes, but he had nodded nonetheless, forcing a soft smile to his lips. Magnus wound up arriving an hour before anyone was even there.

The rest of the week was just as agonizing. When they did end up together at home, they barely talked. This morning had been the last straw.

Magnus was in the kitchen, sipping his coffee silently while reading the newspaper, Alec sitting in front of him munching unenthusiastically on a piece of toast when they reached for the sugar at the same moment. Their hands brushed, their eyes met, and the haste with which they moved apart had made Magnus’ stomach lurch with enough vigor that he hadn’t been able to eat anything all morning. Alec had given him another of his forced smiles and abandoned his unfinished toast to take a shower.

It was when Alec’s phone had beeped with a new text message which Magnus hadn’t meant to read but the screen had lit up and his eyes had flickered to it automatically. A single word had been enough to catch his attention and push away all pretense of personal boundaries. It had stirred other memories in him, of a time where they had never hidden anything from each other and he would have never thought twice about going through Alec’s phone because it was never with ill intent.

Then, however, it told a different story, and Magnus mentally chastised himself but picked it up anyway.

Hey, Alec. It's Scott. I hope you still have the same number. It was great seeing you the other day. I would love to catch up, the text read, first of an otherwise empty thread. The winky face at the end seemed to be there solely to taunt Magnus.

What the fuck are you doing? he had thought, dropping the phone back on the table, dread and guilt twisting in his mind.

He had downed the rest of his coffee in one go and left for work without saying goodbye, saving them both from yet another undoubtedly awkward interaction.

Still, he hasn’t been able to get that text out of his head, or even the insufferable smirk he can imagine Scott sporting as he typed it out. He spent the better part of his morning sulking, unable to listen to a word any of his employees said to him. That was until he remembered the promise he had made Alec, to try with him to mend what they had broken. A promise he feels he has already broken.

So, they had a bad date and frankly terrible sex. It doesn’t mean they have to throw their vows away and forget about them altogether. It means they have to fight harder because if Magnus knows anything with absolute certainty, it is that neither of them wants to watch what there is left to salvage dissolve while they stand powerless.

A lunch date is not much, but it is a place to start. Again.

Magnus heaves out a deep breath, wondering how many chances they will have at starting over until one of them calls it quits. It is a road he doesn’t want to venture in, a road he is thankfully saved from by the sight of his husband turning around the corner where Luke disappeared earlier.

The bags under his eyes combined with the crease tipping his brows down make a worried alarm tick in Magnus’ brain at once, but they somehow alleviate as soon as Alec’s gaze settles on
Magnus, his whole face softening at once. His smile is tired but genuine and Magnus finds himself smiling back without having to think about it.

“Hey,” Alec says as he walks up to him, “I didn’t expect you.” His eyes widen slightly, his mouth spluttering open. “Not that I’m not glad to see you,” he adds, rushing the words out. “I just didn’t expect it after… this week.”

Magnus reaches out to smooth out the collar of Alec’s open scrubs, the tip of his fingers brushing lightly against the skin of his neck. “I thought we could have lunch together,” he says, his voice hitching slightly with hesitation. “I brought some sandwiches from the place down the street we used to go to together. That is if you want to.”

His fingers twirl nervously, but Alec doesn’t let him agonize over it for more than a second.

“That sounds great,” he says softly. “I’m starving.”

Magnus perks up, leading the way to the break room. It is already past two in the afternoon, so the room is empty when they walk in. Alec slouches on the worn-out couch with a relieved sigh, stretching the sore muscles of his neck.

“Rough morning?” Magnus asks, taking a seat in the armchair next to him.

Alec shrugs. “Nothing in particular. I’m just tired.”

“Someone mentioned that you might have been in a… sour mood this week,” Magnus says, downplaying his concern to a casual playfulness.

It doesn’t seem to fool Alec. “Luke is exaggerating. And I’m fine now that you’re here,” he replies, with one of his impossibly soft and genuine smiles that always accompany the blunt compliments that he alone knows how to provide.

It never fails to make Magnus smile in delight, not even now with the new addition of the Damocles sword hanging over their relationship.

Scoffing out a small laugh, he reaches inside the bag and hands a sandwich to Alec, grabbing the other for himself. Alec wastes no time ripping the plastic wrap and biting into his sandwich. Magnus is about to tease him on his ogreish appetite when Alec’s face crumples in disgust, his features tugging into an appalled grimace.

“What’s wrong?” Magnus asks, taking a bite of his own sandwich. It tastes absolutely normal to him.

Alec shakes his head, sending him a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. “Nothing. This is– this is good.”

He takes another bite, far less enthusiastic this time and pulls a face again. Magnus lifts a dubious eyebrow. “Alec,” he growls in warning, “what’s wrong?”

Alec grabs the plastic bottle Magnus has laid on the table and downs half its contents in one go, before flashing him an apologetic glance.

“Mustard,” he says simply, gesturing vaguely at his sandwich.

Magnus freezes promptly. His eyes widen in horror. “Oh, shit,” he exclaims. “I forgot how much you hate it. I’m so sorry.”

He goes to take another bite but Magnus reaches out to swat his hand. “Don’t be ridiculous,” he sighs. “You hate it.”

Alec purses his lips, throwing him another contrite glance and Magnus pinches the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes in annoyance only aimed at himself.

“I can’t believe I forgot you hate mustard,” he mumbles. “Eleven years of marriage and I manage to forget you despise it. Some fucking husband I am.”

“Hey,” Alec says, somehow equally soft and offended. He edges closer, reaching out to grab Magnus’ hand in his and tilts his head to meet his eyes. “It’s okay, really. It’s just a sandwich.”

“Is it, though?” Magnus asks out loud, the words bursting out before he can stop them. “This, our date last week… When did we become so bad at this?”

Alec frowns, squeezing Magnus’ hand gently. “I don’t know,” he mutters. “But at least we’re trying, right?”

His eyes are filled with an impossible optimism, an urge to fight against all odds, no matter if the universe seems decided to play against them, and Magnus nods, for it is the only possible answer.

“Right.”

Alec is about to reply when the door of the break room opens and Stephen Underhill, a neurologist and one of Alec’s colleagues, pokes his head in, white pearly teeth on full display.

“Hey, Alec!” he exclaims cheerfully, hand still on the door’s handle. “Figured you hadn’t had lunch yet so I got you a bagel from that new place that opened last week.” He tosses it at him and Alec catches it effortlessly. “No mustard. Extra pickle.”

Magnus growls under his breath, letting go of Alec’s hand to run his own in his hair instead.

“Oh, hi, Magnus!” Stephen says with a warm but apologetic smile. “I didn’t know you guys were having lunch together, sorry.”

“It’s alright,” Magnus says, keeping the dejection as far away from his voice as possible. “You seem to have picked more wisely than I did.”

“Magnus,” Alec murmurs.

Magnus inhales deeply through his nose, shaking his head. “Don’t worry about it, Alec,” he says, plastering on his features the mask of perfect happiness he has learned to master in the presence of an audience. He jerks to his feet, dusting off the crumbs from his barely eaten sandwich from his jeans. “You’re working late tonight so I’ll see you tomorrow morning, okay?”

Alec looks like he is about to protest again but his gaze drifts to Underhill, then to Magnus again and he sags back into the couch. “Okay.”

Magnus leans down to press a quick kiss to his cheek, his heart thudding painlessly in his chest. “I’m sorry,” he whispers when he draws back, and he turns around before he can stop himself, giving Stephen a shaky smile on his way out.

His hands are trembling when he reaches for the button in the elevator and his head is throbbing
with the beginning of a headache.

“Fucking idiot,” he murmurs to himself, earning a disapproving glare from the old man leaning on his cane at his side.

He will make up for it tomorrow with the concert tickets, he tells himself. It is the perfect date, the two of them having waited so long to see Jem Carstairs live.

Tomorrow, he thinks with reborn resolve. Tomorrow, he will fix this.

Alec sighs as he finishes the bagel Underhill brought him, crumbling the wrapper and tossing it into the brown bag that held the discarded sandwich from Magnus. As par for the course, their lunch had been yet another disaster in a long list of disasters for them this week. It’s as if life is playing with them at this point. Testing them to see just how much shit they can take before they throw in the towel.

Alec knows he’s willing to try, as long as it takes, to make this right between them. He will fight for them forever if it comes down to it. He only hopes that’s the case with Magnus. It only takes one of them giving up to bring this relationship to an end.

Alec stops at the nurses’ station and signs off on a chart that a nurse is holding out for him. Twelve hours and then he can go home. Maybe he can make breakfast for them on his way in. It’s his first weekend off in weeks and his only weekend off this month, he can stay up a little longer to make breakfast in bed for Magnus.

He smiles to himself when Luke walks past him, shoulders sagging as he rubs tiredly at his eyes. Alec passes off the chart back to the nurse and chases after him. “Hey, you okay?”


Alec follows after him into his office, groaning as he drops onto the couch against the wall. “Yeah. Why did we pick this career?”

Luke chuckles tiredly and then scratches at his beard, pausing to think as if he’s truly contemplating all of his life choices up to this point. He sighs and shrugs in surrender. “Because we’re suckers who want to feel as if we’re actually doing some good in the world?”

Alec clicks his tongue against the back of his teeth. Save people and save the world. It’s what he always said he wanted to do when he was little. It’s what Magnus always told him he would do. It’s the reminder Magnus always gave him on those long nights of studying for exams, and when he’d come home from his stressful shifts as an intern that seemed to have no end. And thanks to Magnus’ constant support, it’s what he’s finally doing. “I guess you’re right.”

Luke laughs and then complains loudly into his hands and rubs at his eyes. “But damn, I could use a break sometimes.”

Alec chuckles. “A break. Can’t say I even know what that is anymore.”

Luke’s laughter is coming out softly between tired moans as he rubs at the back of his neck,
massaging his fingers in the tight muscles. “You are something else, son. I don’t know how you do it.”

Alec kicks his feet on the coffee table in front of the sofa. “We like to make a difference. It feels good to know, at the end of the day, that you’ve done something to make someone happy.”

Luke gives him a look, that even behind the exhaustion, holds a swell of what Alec has always considered to be a fatherly pride he has just for him. “You can’t forget to make yourself happy though.”

Alec holds back the sigh he wants to let out and smiles tightly at Luke instead. He doesn’t want Luke to know just how much he has let his work life affect his personal life. How he has spent his days (and too many nights) bringing happiness to so many people while at the same time killing his own and even worse, Magnus’.

Luke’s eyes wander to his desk and he stares blankly while clicking the top of his pen, lost in thought.

“Hey. What’s the matter?” Alec asks him again, this time leaning into Luke’s line of vision.

Luke blinks rapidly and wipes at his face, bringing himself back, and tosses his pen down on the pad in front of him. “I just… I had some plans scheduled that look as if they’re going to have to be canceled. Again. So much for practicing what I preach.”

Alec nods. He knows perfectly well how that is.

“I was going to take”—Luke stops himself and looks back down at the work in front of him—“I was going to get out of town for the weekend but...” he gestures at the stacks of paperwork on his desk.

Alec follows the motion and takes in the sheer amount of work Luke will be spending his weekend catching up on. He should finish it by Monday, if he starts now and takes minimal breaks for sleep, and if he’s lucky enough that no emergency surgeries come through the door. Luke’s face is no longer as young as it once was when Alec first met him. He’s finally beginning to show the signs of his age through the gray strands that pepper the edges of his beard.

“Is it someone special?”

Luke continues to look over the paperwork but a smile creeps on his face, slowly lifting the corner until he’s beaming widely and Alec can’t help but smile at the complete happiness that’s taken over Luke’s face. “Yes, she is.”

“Then go. I’ll cover you for the weekend.” Alec moves to Luke’s desk and begins to stack the files into a neat pile.

“What? No.” Luke jumps forward and lays his hand on top of the file in front of him to stop Alec from adding it to his stack.

“It’s fine.” Alec tugs on the file Luke is holding onto. “Let me do this for you,” he insists.

Luke’s brows crinkle together. “It’s your weekend off, Alec. You need to take it, you’ve been wandering around like a zombie and we both know you work too much.”

Alec scoffs. “What did you just say to me? ‘You can’t forget to make yourself happy’. I don’t have plans this weekend. You do, so let me stay here. Go. Be happy.”
Luke shakes his head but Alec can tell his resolve is breaking, the pressure of his hand on the file weakening. “I can’t ask you to do this. If you take mine you won’t even have time to go home before your next shift.”

Alec manages to slide the file out and add it to the others. He thumbs through them, making a quick mental count of all the cases and shrugs a shoulder. “That’s what the couch in the break room is for. Go spend time with your someone special.”

“What about Magnus?” The worry is back in Luke’s eyes and Alec can tell he’s about to protest again if he doesn’t ease his concerns.

“Magnus will understand.” Alec realizes this is a lie the second the words spill out. Magnus will not understand. Wasn’t this Magnus’ biggest complaint, the very same thing that was the root of their marital problems?

Luke rises and grabs his coat. “You sure about this?”

Alec holds his breath. *This is a mistake*, he thinks but gives Luke a quick nod anyway.

“I owe you one.”

Alec acknowledges this with a chuckle and Luke rushes out of his office, a grin on his face. He exits after him and heads towards his own office to get a head start on the work.

He closes the door once inside and instantly the sounds of a busy hospital is drowned out. No more harsh beeping or constant hallway activity to distract him. He fishes out the phone from his coat pocket and sets it on the desk in front of him. The screen lights up from the movement to show his lock screen and Alec smiles at the picture of Magnus on that summer day. He picks his phone back up to look at it more closely. He remembers the moment well, he and Jace had been manning the grill while Magnus ‘cooked’ from the sidelines, throwing out instructions and opinions on what they were doing wrong. The laugh on Magnus’ face captured in this photograph was after Alec had made some smart-ass remark just before knocking the plate of cooked burgers down to the grass. Magnus had laughed at him and Alec had laughed along because the sound was too beautiful for him to ever get mad about. That night Isabelle had sent him pictures she had taken throughout the day and this had been one of them. Magnus was beautiful in the shot. Bathed in sunlight, relaxed, and undoubtedly happy. Alec can't remember the last time he’d seen Magnus this happy.

He unlocks the phone and finds Magnus’ contact information. He needs to go ahead and get this call over with, and maybe he's wrong, maybe Magnus will understand this time. This time Alec isn't hiding away from him or their relationship, this time he genuinely just wants to help Luke.

He slides the screen up and then back down repeatedly, his drive to push the ‘call’ button paralyzed with uncertainty. What if he’s wrong? What if Magnus doesn’t see things the way he does? He knows his reasonings will sound pathetic to Magnus. Why should Magnus care about someone else’s plans when his have been canceled time and time again with no one there to offer Alec the same courtesy he often offers them.

Alec sighs. No matter how much he believes he is doing the right thing when he offers his help, Magnus will only ever see it one way.

He puts his phone away and goes over the paperwork instead. He doesn't have it in him to fight with Magnus right now so he might as well finish as much work as he can before inevitably letting his husband down.
Hours fly by quickly in relative peace. He’s only pulled away from his task once in order to go consult with Underhill on a patient he suspects needs surgery. He’s back in his office now, reading over charts and making notes on his laptop when a patient’s response to a question catches his eye. ‘Smoker? Only when stressed out of my mind’.

Alec lets out a burst of laughter. “That's something Magnus would say,” he comments aloud to himself.

He stretches his arms overhead and grabs his phone again. He wants to talk to Magnus and hear his voice. He wants to share this with him because he wants to be able to make Magnus laugh again, the way he laughed the other night while talking to Cat; and he wants to laugh with him, just like they used to. He wants to hear Magnus laugh like he did on that summer day, bring that joy back to him. He wants so badly to end this miserable day on a good note despite everything else. He knows this is unlikely and that the day will sour even more the minute he tells Magnus the plans he’s made for them this weekend that will leave Magnus alone, yet again.

He knows how this day ends but still, he wants. He wants, he wants, he wants.

He taps on the phone icon beside Magnus’ name and takes in a deep breath as the ringing starts. He doesn’t have long to worry about how he’s going to break the news to Magnus before the line connects and the sound of running water fills the space.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Magnus.” Alec can hear how high-pitched and overeager his voice sounds so he clears his throat to quickly compose himself. It won’t help his case if he catches Magnus’ suspicion before the conversation has a chance to even begin. “What’s up?”

“Hey, Alec,” Magnus says, suspicion drawling on his name. “Nothing much, I just got back home and am washing dishes. You?”

“Have you had dinner?” Alec’s question comes out forced because at some point, having a simple phone conversation with his husband had become unfamiliar to him. This isn’t how they speak to one another or maybe it is now. Maybe this is what’s left of their relationship. Awkwardness, forced conversation, and a distance between them that they cannot seem to bridge.

“Not yet,” Magnus says, warily. “What’s wrong?”

Alec shakes his head. “Nothing- nothing’s wrong. I just wanted to call and tell you not to wait up for me for dinner. I’m going to stay and work the night shift tonight…”

“Yeah, I know,” Magnus replies. “You sent me your schedule on Monday.”

“Right.” Alec hesitates. “Right… well, I just…”

“Alec,” Magnus grits out, cutting his sentence short. “Stop stalling.”

Alec sighs, consenting defeat.

“Luke needed someone to cover the weekend for him. He had some important plans and so… I offered to do it.” Alec squeezes his eyes shut once the words leave his mouth and he waits, gripping onto his phone, for Magnus to say something.

The sound of running water comes to an abrupt stop and the silence stretches uncomfortably between them. Alec waits patiently, listening to the ragged breaths on the other end of the line that
tell him that Magnus is still there.

“Sorry, I must have misheard you,” Magnus finally says. “For a second, I thought you were telling me that you offered to cover Luke’s shift on our only weekend off together this month.”

“Magnus, Luke had plans and they’re apparently important enough that he seemed disappointed in having to stay and work. I couldn’t just not offer when I know I didn’t have anything else to do this weekend besides sit around the house.” He’s not wrong about this. They didn’t have plans, he had been hoping they would find something they could do together but as the weekend drew closer, and their awkward interactions grew more frequent, he realized they weren’t going to take advantage of this small window of time off for them.

Magnus scoffs loud enough that his breath scratches loudly into the microphone. “Oh, my bad. I had forgotten that my presence is unbearable and spending time with me basically means sitting around the house and doing nothing.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Didn’t you?” Magnus retorts. “I really should get my ears checked. I seem to be hearing nothing but bullshit right now.”

Alec sighs and hangs his head in his hand, tangling his fingers in his hair. “Come on, let’s not make this personal. This isn’t about—”

“How can I not make this personal?” Magnus snaps. “After we promised we’d make an effort.”

“I am. We are. But this…” Alec grits his teeth. “This is my job, Magnus.”

“And I’m your husband,” Magnus blurts out angrily. “Your husband who actually had plans for the both of us this weekend to go see Jem Carstairs in concert so we wouldn’t have to sit around the house.”

_Husband._ Magnus uses the title with such vicious mockery that every syllable hits Alec with a seething point. He supposes that he deserves just that. He deserves to have his title thrown back in his face. He is undeserving of it. He didn’t stop to think about Magnus’ feelings in this before volunteering their time away so easily. He knew this would upset Magnus, and he had expected a smart remark but the way Magnus sounds now, a bitter anger and resentment driving his every word, makes Alec wish he had taken one fucking second to stop and think. Instead, he’s gone back on his promise to try and be better about his work schedule and he’s found himself letting down his husband yet again.

Magnus had thought about this weekend. Had made plans for them, plans to go see Alec’s favorite violinist. While Magnus enjoyed Jem Carstairs’ music he only ever listened to him with Alec. It was something they used to enjoy to do together on quiet nights when they finally had a chance to be alone. Magnus would read to himself, carding and breaking the tangles of Alec’s hair with his fingers while he rested in Magnus’ lap, enjoying the quiet peace that came from being in each other’s presence.

Alec feels defeated. His heart tired from the constant assault of their failing marriage on it. He hates what they’ve become, what he’s becoming. He wishes he could be a better husband, the type of husband Magnus deserves, that will actually do his part in helping repair this broken relationship.

“I didn’t know,” Alec begins softly, hoping somewhere along the way he will find the right words
that will prove to Magnus just how much he regrets so many of his decisions over the past years. “If I had known... I wouldn’t have...”

“You wouldn’t have what, Alec? You wouldn’t have put your work first? You actually think if you had known about my plans for us that you wouldn’t have offered to cover Luke’s shift?”

“I wouldn’t. I would have—”

“You would.” Magnus’ voice quavers and he stops to let out a heavy breath into the receiver. “Apparently choosing work over your spouse runs in the Lightwood family.”

“Magnus, that’s not fair.”

Magnus laughs bitterly. “So much for not becoming your father, right?”

Guilt riddles over him. Magnus knows exactly where to throw his daggers and seems to be taking every opportunity in this conversation to stab Alec where it hurts most. This is what he had always been afraid of and what he had promised Magnus he would never become. He never wanted to become like his father who had pushed Alec’s mother aside throughout their marriage, always choosing his work over her happiness. Drunk on money and power, pushing her away until there was nothing left of them to salvage. Cheating on her and...

“No.” The guilt flashes into anger in Alec’s chest, burning through him with every breath he takes. He is not like his father. Not even close. Alec may work too much, may hide from his feelings, but he has never stopped loving Magnus, and he has never, not even for a single second, considered disrespecting him by cheating on him.

His anger stirs in his veins the more he thinks about this. About how Magnus almost cheated on him. How he had actually considered it.

“I’m nothing like my father,” Alec spits out. “And last time I checked, you were the one who almost cheated on me.”

His anger is drowning him, permeating him, until all he can feel is the same suffocating pain he felt when they first laid everything out on the table. It floods through him, filling him with a deep, heart-gripping ache that chokes his breath away. At some point, he had stopped being enough for Magnus. At some point he had stopped showing Magnus how much he loves him, how he had handed Magnus his heart that day on campus, laid it in his hands with his beautifully ringed fingers to do with what he wanted. He is and has always been at his mercy. He had stopped expressing this to Magnus with his words, his touch, his actions, and this dissolution in which they had found themselves in had been the consequence.

"And you were the one who said you wouldn't work so many hours," Magnus fires back, Alec’s insult passing right over him and certainly not hurting him in the same way it had hurt Alec to say. "Only one of us is breaking our promise to make efforts right now and it isn't me. But if we’re getting free passes to break it now, maybe I should too, I'm not gonna let these tickets go to waste after all."

Alec’s chest tightens, his ribs closing in on his lungs, huffing out every trace of anger, leaving him with nothing but a soured feeling of betrayal in its wake. Magnus’ threat is clear. Alec’s mouth hangs open but he can’t think of what he can possibly say that won’t escalate things further and push his husband farther away and into someone else’s arms.

“Magnus,” he manages to choke out. All of this could have been avoided if he had followed
through on his promise.

Magnus heaves out a deep, defeated sigh, the fight leaving him at once. “I just wanted to do something nice for us. Clearly, it was pointless. Have a nice weekend, Alec. I’ll see you… whenever I see you.”

“Magnus, please…” Alec stops when he hears the three chimed tone signaling the call’s end. He lets his phone fall to his desk with a loud clatter amongst the files he knows he won’t be finishing any time soon.

Magnus is just angry, he tells himself. He doesn’t mean it. He would never do something like that. He knows how much it would hurt Alec, how it would kill him. He drops his head down, fingers raking against his scalp before he curls his arms over the back of his head, forehead resting in the crook of his elbows. He focuses on his breaths, forcing the air out through the tightness in his throat. He won’t let his mind go down this path again. It hurt enough the first time he thought Magnus had cheated on him, and he refuses to let this pain win again. Especially when it was so obviously an attempt on Magnus’ part to hurt Alec as much as Alec had hurt him by making him feel as if he’s an afterthought to Alec’s job.

He wants things to be like they once were, he’s tired of their relationship being such a struggle. He wants to call Magnus back and beg him to forgive him, but he won’t. If Alec knows anything about Magnus, he knows he needs his time. And Alec can give that to him. He opens the drawer to his desk and swipes his phone into it and slams it shut. He will give Magnus until tomorrow and then he will try to apologize.

Alec spends his night in and out of sleep, hours of wakefulness spent on the paperwork Luke left behind, small breaks of sleep, and then more hours of doing his rounds with his and Luke’s patients. He takes the phone out of his lab coat and checks the time. Eleven thirty. He’s tried calling Magnus three times this morning and nothing. No answer and no response to his texts. It seems he was wrong. Magnus must need more than just a night away from Alec. Time apart is something Magnus is used to by now and Alec has no one to blame but himself.

Two days pass and still no word from Magnus. He would have been downright panicked from Magnus’ radio silence if it weren’t for Magnus’ social media activity showing him that he is very much alive and well enough to comment on Izzy’s, Maia’s, and even Jace’s photos. Alec is beginning to worry that Magnus’ silence might actually mean that he’s done this time, really done with Alec and their marriage.

He’s falling asleep on the couch in the break room when his phone vibrates against his hip. Magnus’ name flashes on his screen and he unlocks his phone quickly to view the message.

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it, I hope you know that.’

Alec exhales and a smile lifts his cheeks. He can’t find it in him to even be mad at Magnus anymore. He’s just happy to hear from him and know that they’re okay.

Another message pops up in the thread and this time it’s a picture of Magnus, smiling softly into his friend Tessa’s hug. She’s nuzzled closely into Magnus, squeezing him against her and the image warms Alec even more. He’s happy Magnus has someone to be there for him.

‘The company is pretty good but I wish you were here’ accompanies the picture and Alec smiles widely before typing out his response.
In the realm of his own mind, Magnus has Alec, and Alec has Magnus. The dream of them growing together lives, of them watching silver hair slowly mark the time going by and laughing at the wrinkles sealed into their skin displaying the years gone and the ones to come. In his dream, there is no resentment pooling deep into his veins, no bitterness that forces him to be cruel to the man he loves when he doesn’t know how to be anything else anymore.

In his dream, solitude is an abstract idea, an affliction that never affects him, because Magnus has Alec, and Alec has Magnus.

In the reality he lives in, Magnus spends yet another weekend alone, putting on a facade for Tessa to hide the slow dissolution of the happiness they have built together, and the distress that he fears is making his heart grow cold again. For why else would he have tormented Alec with a threat he knows himself incapable of carrying through?

In his dream, the destination is always clear, no matter where he finds himself. There is always somewhere to go, a world to build from love and hope, and the love of his life waiting at the end of the road, when he isn’t walking with him, their hands tightly fastened together.

It is blurry now, an empty station with trains that leave where he cannot follow, and he sits all alone in the middle of their apartment, wondering when he lost the inability to share his love without it deflating and leaving a gaping hole in his chest.

The concert was beautiful, for what Magnus remembers of it. Jem Carstairs has always been Alec’s favorite violinist and although Magnus surely admires him too, he wasn’t quite able to enjoy it as much as he should have without Alec by his side, gasping in awe and stumbling over his words to share his excitement with Magnus after every act. If there were tears in his eyes by the end of the concerto, he could easily blame it on Tchaikovsky’s Violin Concerto Op 35 and how flawlessly Jem, the soloist, had performed every single note.

Sitting on their couch, a silk robe around his shoulders and the TV playing a movie he isn’t paying attention to, Magnus can’t pretend.

Every time he lets his mind wander, he can hear Alec’s voice, broken and filled with a pain Magnus put there with words spoken out of anger, and he thinks he might be slowly losing it. What sanity is there left of him, when he purposely hurts the man he loves?

And then his mind wanders some more, and it brings him back to the reason behind that anger.

Another broken promise. Another plan he had to change at the last minute because of Alec’s unreal schedule, because of his questionable priorities, and he can’t help but feel the anger rise again, inevitable.

And Magnus is tired, so impossibly tired of being angry.

Yet, still, he wants to fight. He just wishes Alec wouldn’t make it so easy for him to forget what he wants to fight for. He wishes their troubles could be consigned to oblivion with them apologizing to each other for their mistakes over text.

In his dream, he never feels like his husband abandoned him because he was too much because he ceased to matter.
It is already night time, the sky a dark charcoal scattering with the bright lights of Manhattan peeking through the window, when Magnus hears the key turn in the front door, and the small but relieved breath Alec lets out as he walks into their home.

Magnus contemplates on lying down on the couch and pretending he fell asleep in front of a rerun of Into the Wild, but Alec walks into the living room before he can come to a decision. He looks weary, but not from the kind of exhaustion that can be fixed with a good night sleep, from the same kind of exhaustion that roots Magnus to the couch and makes his bones feel heavy and his muscles knotted.

Alec pulls his sweater over his head, craning his neck to ease the soreness out, and empties his pocket on the coffee table in front of the couch, leaving his phone and his keys there before he straightens up, giving Magnus a small, almost bashful smile.

“Hey,” he says, voice hoarse and hesitant.

“Hey, yourself,” Magnus replies, hoping it comes out as playful rather than dejected.

His failure is obvious in the way Alec’s smile wavers a little, but he doesn’t say anything else. Heaving out a quiet sigh, he moves closer, and Magnus’ breath hitches in his throat as his husband presses a soft kiss to his hairline that makes Magnus’ spine tingle.

“I missed you,” Alec murmurs against his skin, his thumb trailing delicately against the exposed skin of Magnus’ collarbone.

Magnus wants to reply, he really does, but the words stumble against the lump in his throat and fail to come out, so he just reaches out to curl his fingers around Alec’s wrist and squeezes gently instead.

“I’ll be in the shower,” Alec says and plants another kiss to his forehead before moving away, all but dragging himself to the bathroom.

A few months ago, Magnus would have joked about joining him, and Alec would have glanced at him over his shoulder, a smirk on his lips and a challenge in his eyes. Now, Magnus simply watches him go.

The door closes behind Alec, and Magnus releases a deep breath, staring into nothingness.

Magnus, please...

Alec’s voice echoes in his brain, etched with sorrow and memories that now taste bitter on his tongue. He hasn’t seen Alec broken very often in their fifteen years together, but when he has, it never failed to rip him apart, to fill him with the need to annihilate anything and anyone that dared to put the slightest ounce of woe in Alec’s heart. The strain on their relationship pushes them both to the lines, and Magnus doesn’t know how long it can bend, and bend again until it breaks.

There are so many signs; it is like the universe itself is telling them to put an end to it, to let go of each other before all there is left of the love they thought would burn forever is wrath and resentment. Magnus isn’t of a superstitious nature, and he has never been one to give up, but even he knows when to fold.

Alec’s phone buzzes on the coffee table and Magnus grabs it with a sigh, half expecting to find a text message from the hospital asking him to go back. It is just a text from Maia though, with a link that probably leads to one of those dog videos she and Alec are both so keen on.
Magnus rolls his eyes fondly and goes to put the phone back on the table, but a thought flashes to his mind, and he pauses midway, a knot twisting in his stomach.

He doesn’t know what guides his movements, or if he is actually thinking at all, but he opens Alec’s text messages before he can stop himself. He expects to have to go back to a couple of days to see what happened to Scott’s message, but it is right there, in the first numbers displayed, between Magnus’ apology and a text of Luke thanking him for taking over his shift.

_Hey, Alec. It's Scott. I hope you still have the same number. It was great seeing you the other day. I would love to catch up._

The text is still there, taunting him, followed by another that consists of a single interrogation point dated from Friday afternoon to prompt a reply after a few hours of silence. And right below it, Alec’s answer.

_No thanks. Still married and very much in love with my husband. Would appreciate it if you’d stop texting me._

If Alec had any care for emojis, Magnus is sure he would have added the one rolling his eyes at the end.

Relief pours through Magnus in waves, but it is short-lived. Right after it comes guilt, swiftly followed by sorrow as he drops the phone back on the couch, disgusted with himself. Tears prickle in his eyes.

Alec still loves him. He sent that text to Scott after they fought and before they apologized to one another, and yet he still loved him. Even though Magnus let anger cloud his judgment and went too far with his words, even though they keep failing, even though he can’t remember how his own husband likes his food, even though the universe is against them. Alec loves him, and Magnus should be satisfied and alleviated by the fact, but the fact is he doesn’t know if he could return the words were Alec to tell them to him.

He is still angry, and it goes far beyond a weekend of solitude and a wasted effort. He is angry at the silence they live in, at the injustice they can’t get over, at the locked door down the corridor they never speak of. It devours him from the inside, and as long as he stays mad, he won’t be satisfied or alleviated. He won’t be able to dream again.

“I’m going to bed, Magnus,” Alec says from the bathroom door. “I’m exhausted.”

Magnus doesn’t turn around to face him. Tears, traitorous as they can be, are threatening to fall down his cheeks.

He nods instead, his eyes fixated on the screen where Christopher McCandless is releasing his last breath. “I’ll join you in a moment,” he says, cursing the tremor of his voice. Alec won’t notice, he tells himself. Alec never notices anymore. “Good night.”

There is a shuffle at his back, a moment of quiet solitude that wraps around him, and then Alec’s voice comes again, closer. “Are you okay?”

_No._

Magnus blinks to push away the tears, uses his thumb to wipe the one that managed to slip past his best will. “Yeah,” he says, clearing his throat. “It’s just that movie, you know. Always gets me emotional.”
The ending credits start scrolling down the screen, and Alec moves imperceptibly closer.

“I’m sorry about this weekend,” he says in a low, contrite voice.

Magnus nods, and his own voice is no different when he replies, “Me too.”

“I know you’re probably tired of hearing it, but I really am sorry,” Alec insists.

“I know, Alec,” he sighs, but still doesn’t turn around to face him. He can’t, not with the tears he can still feel brimming in his eyes and the anguish twisting his guts. “It’s okay.”

“Magnus? Please look at me,” Alec murmurs, almost implores.

Magnus shakes his head stubbornly.

“I’m not— You know I’m not mad at you, right?” Alec says, and Magnus bites on his bottom lip to keep it from quavering. “I fucked up, again, and you were angry. I know you didn’t mean it and I don’t blame you.”

He shouldn’t be surprised, really. No matter how bleak things may seem between them, Alec still knows him better than anyone. Sometimes, he knows Magnus better than Magnus knows himself, and Magnus knows Alec just the same.

“Why are we so bad at this?” Magnus whispers, but in the dead of the night, with no one to witness their downfall but the stars, he has no doubt Alec hears him perfectly. “How did we get so bad at this?”

“We can still fix it. Us. We’re a little rusty, but we can fix it,” Alec says, and there is so much determination and conviction in his tone that Magnus finds himself believing him. “I can’t see you like this. Can I—” He pauses, heaves out. “Can I hug you?”

There is a malicious part of Magnus that wants to say no, the part of him that is fueled by everything that went wrong, by the moment Magnus realized he would have to go through the hardest ordeal of his life alone.

But Magnus is impossibly tired, too tired to be angry.

He turns around. Alec is standing right behind the couch, his hazel eyes wide, apologetic and filled with both hope and misery.

“Yes,” Magnus murmurs, sniffing sheepishly. “Please.”

Alec sinks on the couch at his side and tugs Magnus against him, wrapping his arms around him. Magnus melts into his arms, and for a moment, it feels like a dream.

Only in his dream, Magnus never cries in his husband’s arms about the dissolution of their marriage.

Alec pauses amongst the passersby in front of the building’s glass doors. He looks at his reflection in the doors and decides to do a last minute untucking of his shirt. His entire body feels stiff yet alive with the renewed vigor of trying again and the anticipation of spending a couple of hours with Magnus in the middle of this otherwise mundane weekday.
“Third time’s a charm,” he says, giving himself a pep talk that he hates to admit he so desperately needs.

He had always thought he had his life semi-sorted out. That, at the very least, he knew how to be a good husband, if nothing else. These past couple of weeks have worked their humbling magic on him, reminding him that no one is ever perfect, no one is ever not in need of work, and that everyone could do with a little self-awakening in order to better themselves, especially him. He has never been more aware of his shortcomings when it comes to Magnus, who is and always will be, the most important factor in his life. So if there is one thing he wants to change about himself and get right, it’s this. He will be a better husband to Magnus, he will be everything and more that Magnus deserves.

So that’s what he’s doing. It’s what he’s worked on this past week.

After his mistakes from last weekend, he’s spent his time trying to do better… be better. The memory of holding a crying Magnus in his arms, feeling his shoulders shudder against him, is a fresh wound in his mind. He hates it, he hates that his actions put Magnus there and brought him to that point, and he doesn’t want to go back to that place. So he’s smiled at Magnus more with every chance he got, placed kisses on the top of his head, made him coffee in the mornings, even on days when he knew he wouldn’t be awake to see him off to work; all small things but ones he hopes are enough to show that he’s truly trying. He can’t say for certain that Magnus has noticed or even appreciated these efforts but he has seemed more at ease around him. The awkward tension they seemed to have built around each other is less prominent now, no longer a looming wall between them.

He promised Magnus that he will take him out for lunch today and he’s picked the perfect place—a restaurant they once sought shelter in almost ten years ago when they were caught in the rain in Chinatown. The afternoon had been perfect, both soaked to the bone but still exceedingly happy, laughing together while they shared a basket of dim sum. This memory and this happiness are the driving force behind him today. He feels good about this, confident even. He shakes his hands out, squares his shoulders, and opens the door to the lobby.

Magnus said he would meet him down here which is perfectly fine with Alec as he isn’t in the mood for making pleasant small talk with all of Magnus’ co-workers. Not that he doesn’t like them, but today he wants to be selfish. He wants to have Magnus all to himself for as long as he’s allowed to have him.

He nods in greeting at the security guard behind his desk and stands facing the elevators, hands folded behind his back.

The elevator furthest away from him chimes and he can hear Magnus’ warm laughter carry out over the open lobby as the doors open and he steps off, one pointed toe boot at a time. The sound alone is enough to erase every trace of nervousness Alec had bubbling inside of him and pull a smile from him instead. Magnus looks beautiful today. Alec didn’t have the chance to see him when he left for work this morning but he can definitely take this moment to appreciate the way his slim, black slacks elongate his legs and how he perfectly styled his hair up in the messy way Alec loves to run his fingers through. He hasn’t spotted Alec yet, he’s looking over his shoulder into the elevator and smiling at whatever humorous thing his elevator companion has to say.

“Magn—” Alec starts, stepping forward to greet him but stops, cold washing over him when the high trill of Camille’s laughter joins in with Magnus’ as she rushes off the elevator in her blood red, too form fitting to be considered decent for work dress, and her black heels that look like walking hazards. Her lips are painted to match her dress and Alec can feel the simmer of anger begin when
he sees the way she watches Magnus; with her bottom lip tucked between her teeth, overly lined in black eyes roving up and down his body, lingering too long below his belt line.

He clenches his fist by his side, forcing himself to remain as cool and unaffected as possible in their presence.

She’s the first one to notice Alec when her eyes flick up to meet his. She smirks predatorily and straightens up. Magnus’ eyes follow suit and he finally sees Alec. Alec tries to smile at him, he really does, but he’s afraid the normalcy he was going for is lost when Magnus returns an equally tight-lipped smile.

The jealousy and anger consuming him are more than he has ever expected in all his life. If Alec has ever prided himself on one thing, it was his ability to not be an irrationally jealous partner. His trust in Magnus had always been absolute since the day they met, and until now, he’s never had any reason to feel this way about anyone Magnus chose to spend his time with. But right now, confronted with… her and the way she’s looking at Magnus like he’s a meal she’s ready to devour and the way she’s strategically curling her fingers around Magnus’ elbow, fluttering her lashes away from Alec and back to Magnus like a living, breathing threat is enough to make him see red.

“I’ll get to work on setting up that meeting for us. They won’t be able to resist my charm.” Her fingers flutter dangerously close over the edge of Magnus’ waist as she makes eye contact with Alec one more time. “He’s all yours…for now.”

Magnus flinches from her touch. It’s a small, almost imperceptible tensing of his arm that he tucks in closer to him as he gives her a quick glance with an irked curve of his brow. She doesn’t notice, and why would she? Her words and touch made Magnus uncomfortable, that much was obvious, but she will never know unless Magnus actually says something to her. He could have said something just now but he didn’t. He’s letting her walk away as if she didn’t just disrespect his marriage in front of his husband.

Magnus’ eyes drop to his hands and he’s twisting his golden wedding band as the clicking of her heels fade away. She’s across the lobby, passing through a door when Magnus tips his head towards the exit and begins to walk. “You ready?”

Alec turns to Magnus’ back. “Are you serious right now?”

Magnus freezes and then rounds slowly to face Alec. “I’m serious about getting lunch. Yes.”

He’s turning away again and the raging jealousy in Alec is pouring out of him before he can even think. “Wow. You’re really going to let her get away with saying things like that?”

Magnus heaves out a sigh, dropping his head back tiredly, shoulders falling. “She’s all talk.”

“All talk? Did you not just see what I saw? How she looks at you? You can’t say that you don’t, Magnus. You said so yourself the other day that you liked it.”

Magnus’ jaw flexes in anger. Alec is pushing him, he knows, but he can’t find it in him to care right now because Magnus needs to know. He needs to know how it hurts to have his husband allow someone to speak to him like that.

“Do you not notice how she touches you?” Alec shakes his head disbelievingly. “That’s not all talk. She’s obviously flirting with you, and you’re letting her. Again.”

Magnus sighs and rubs at the bridge of his nose. He looks worriedly at his surroundings. This isn’t the place to be having this discussion but here they are. “What do you want me to do, Alec?”
“How about not leading her on? Not letting her talk to you like that? Ask her to respect me and our marriage. Better yet, fire her.”

He watches the shift of emotions cross Magnus’ face. Shock, incredulity, anger, stubbornness. The weight of everything—their loss, their pain, their marriage that has never recovered and is now scattered pieces, the betrayal—everything—comes falling back down, pressing onto Alec with a burden he can actually feel in the fall of his shoulders.

The request, now that it’s put out there, feels like a simple solution to all of their problems. Alec knows it’s not but it feels that way. Camille is just a single piece in the grand puzzle of their marital problems but she’s somehow become such a significant piece that Alec wants to be rid of her as soon as possible. Hearing about their flirtations had been one thing but seeing the way she is with him, the way she’s willing to flirt with Magnus in front of his own husband doesn’t do anything to ease the small worry Alec had about how she behaves when they are alone at work. No. Seeing her behavior only served to make that worry grow into a monster that Alec feels raging inside him.

He can see the war Magnus is ready to propose and Alec doesn’t want it. He doesn’t want to fight. God, he does not want to fight. He’s so tired of the fighting. But he can’t back down, not on this. This, for him, is not something he thinks he should bend on. This is something Magnus should understand. Respect.

“I can’t fire her because she flirts with me. She could make up a story about me harassing her and sue Edom. I can’t have that. Not when I’ve spent years building Edom’s public image of irreproachability. You know this.” He lowers his voice and steps in closer to Alec. “Let’s not do this now.”

Alec’s knuckles crack when he flexes, trying to ground himself to keep his voice steady and low so as to not attract attention. “She can’t stay here. Not if we want to make this work.”

He points between them. He doesn’t want to be the type of husband who gives ultimatums but this is what he’s finding himself doing, and he hates himself for it. He hates Camille for putting herself between them. He hates Magnus for making him ask this of him. He hates the thought that Magnus might actually not care enough to do this for him. And what he hates the most is the nagging, pestering thought he feels creeping in the back of his mind… that perhaps Magnus won’t want to fire her because he likes having her around.

The thought of that makes Alec’s blood boil. He hates this jealousy.

“I can’t just get rid of her like that, Alec. She’s one of my best employees.”

“That shouldn’t matter. I’m asking you—”

“Well, it does matter,” Magnus hisses under his breath, cutting him off, his patience worn thin. Irritation is coming off of him in waves that Alec can feel hitting him with every hate-filled look Magnus directs at him. “I can’t fire her without raising suspicion as to why and I don’t need that kind of publicity with the Paris expansion in negotiation.”

Alec lets out a small, mocking huff. He knew Magnus wouldn’t agree. He shouldn’t be surprised but he is. He’s shocked that his discomfort with their working relationship isn’t enough to make Magnus get rid of her. He said it himself. He likes the way Camille makes him feel. Why would he ever voluntarily get rid of that? “Of course you can’t. Why fire her when keeping her here makes it incredibly convenient for you if you ever feel like cheating, right?”

Magnus bristles, takes a step back. “Oh, wow. Okay. I’m just—I’m just gonna have lunch in my
“Yeah.” Alec grinds his teeth together and forces himself to look away as he nods. He doesn’t want to look at Magnus right now and see the damage his words just caused. He doesn’t want to see the sadness he knows is shading his husband’s usually kind and bright brown eyes. He knows if he looks at Magnus he will see the pain he caused and he will want to do whatever he can to take it away. But right now, what he needs is to be mad about this and to feel this anger and this heartache. He deserves to feel it, and have it eat away at him for throwing what Magnus was honest with him about back in his face like that. “Yeah… I think that’s probably for the best.”

Magnus walks away without another word or even a look over his shoulder and Alec watches him leave. He watches him until he’s past the open elevator doors and the lights above it show it scaling up the floors to Edom. He looks back around the lobby and at the people milling about, coming and going from the busy city streets, oblivious. The security guard he had just nodded at earlier, in all his blissful hope for their date, is still there. He gives Alec another nod but this time with what Alec can see is a frown. Not many people notice the things that go around them every day but then there are those that are there to witness your mistakes and your failings. Remind you where you were and where you are now. Alec swallows roughly and leaves the building.

He’s supposed to be off work for the night but he finds himself heading towards the hospital anyway. He’s running from his problems—their problems—again because it’s easier to hide at work and fix someone else’s problems than it is to sit at home and wait for his husband to come home and hate him.

There’s absolutely no way Magnus doesn’t hate him by now. Alec gasps in a breath, undoes a button on his shirt and pauses to lean against a brick building. He can’t breathe.

He takes out his phone and dials Jace. He needs someone to talk to, someone to talk him down from this.

“Hello?”

“Jace, I fucked up again,” Alec rasps out, the constricting air burning in his lungs.

He can hear Jace shushing someone, the sound of a chair pushing back, and then a door closing.

“I’m starting to see a pattern here, Alec, and I don’t like it. What happened?”

“I spoke before I thought,” Alec pauses to take in another breath before continuing his walk to work, “and I said something to him out of anger. Something… so offensive.”

“Offensive how? You finally dared to tell him you hate that shirt he bought you seven years ago?” Jace chuckles in the light-hearted way of his when he’s trying to lighten a mood. And it starts to work. Jace has always been good at that, somehow simultaneously holding the power to either relieve Alec’s stress or be the main cause of it.

“Be serious, Jace… I would never tell him that.” Alec lets out a breath and with it some of his panic. “Besides, what I said was worse. I—” Alec takes in a breath and he hears Jace do the same, the both of them bracing themselves for Alec’s confession. He expels his breath and the words rush out with it, “I asked him to fire Camille and when he refused… I may or may not have said something that implied he was keeping her around to have someone to cheat on me with.”

The line goes quiet. Alec can practically see Jace’s stunned silence.

“Oh. Shit. You fucked up.”
Alec groans. “Yeah, we already established that. I don’t know what to do, he’ll probably never speak to me again.”

“You fucking think?!” Jace bursts out loudly before sucking in a loud breath and lowering his voice. “Give him some time, Alec.”

Alec groans again.

“Or…”

“Oh thank god there’s an ‘or’,,” Alec says, dropping his head back to look at the bright sky full of clouds.

“Or I can talk to him if you want.”

“What are you going to say? ‘I’m sorry my brother is an asshole and you deserve better but please keep giving him second chances because maybe one day he’ll stop being such a fuck up?’”

“Something like that,” Jace says with a chuckle. “But with more of my charm in there and a little less of your self-deprecating honesty.”

“The thing is… “ The crosswalk light glows and Alec rushes with the crowd to cross the street to get to the subway station. “I don’t deserve him, Jace, and one day he’s going to wake up and realize that… again.”

He scans his card and makes his way to a pillar where he leans his weight while he waits for his train. “There’s no way he doesn’t see that and Camille is just waiting there like a snake in the grass.”

Jace scoffs. “Camille can keep waiting,” Jace says adamantly. “Magnus loves you, Alec. I know he does. Everyone knows he does. That’s not going to change any time soon.”

Alec shakes his head. “I can’t believe I said that to him—implied that I don’t trust him when I do. I do trust him… I just don’t trust Camille.”

“Can’t blame you there. She did try to steal your man.”

Alec sighs and watches as a man sets up his stool by the subway wall and takes a seat with his guitar. “Is it wrong of me to want her out? How irrational am I being? Be honest.”

“You’re scared. Fear makes us irrational. But I don’t think it’s wrong of you to want her gone. Not when she keeps threatening your relationship.”

Alec huffs. “She flirted with him in front of me as if I don’t matter and Magnus didn’t say anything. He just let her.”

“What? Why? Didn’t he tell you he didn’t want her?”

“Yeah, he told me but he obviously didn’t tell her. Does that mean something?” The man begins to play beside Alec, the chords are soft and melodic, sorrowful as they wind their way around Alec, taking up the space while he waits for whatever truth Jace has for him. A truth he’s not so sure he wants to hear.

Alec nods and tucks his chin against his chest and closes his eyes. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. That is if he’ll ever talk to me again. Who knows… maybe he’ll be more honest with you.”

“We’ll see. You work tonight?”

“Y-Yeah,” he lies. He figures it’s best if he keeps his poor decision to hide away at work to himself. He’s a big enough fuck up in Jace’s eyes right now without adding that fun bit on top of it all.

“I can go talk to him tonight. Ariel won’t be here.”

Alec clears his throat. “Yeah, I was going to have lunch with him but now that’s… not happening, so I’m just going to go in early. I don’t want to be at home right now. Will you tell me how it goes?”

“I’ll text you. Promise. In the meantime, try to think about something else. Don’t keep fretting about Camille. That’s what she wants.” Jace sounds hopeful and assertive like everything is going to work out perfectly in the end. As if this one talk might actually fix it all and Alec wishes he could feel the same way. He started out so hopeful, he still has hope, but he’s painfully aware of all the mistakes he’s made and that he continues to make. He wishes he didn’t make it so easy for Magnus to want to end their relationship. But he keeps handing him every reason to.

“Thanks, Jace.”

“Anytime, Alec.”

Knuckles white from clenching his fists too tight, teeth hurting from gritting them too hard, Magnus leaves the elevator and storms down the corridor to his office, ignoring the incredulous looks of the few employees that haven’t left for their lunch break yet. There, he shuts the door behind him, pacing back and forth, every step only serving to fuel the fire burning inside him. Grunting in frustration, he walks up to his desk, and pulls the first drawer open, grabbing the pack of cigarettes he keeps there for particularly stressful days.

This definitely qualifies.

He is about to head to the greenhouse when the door of his office opens and Raphael walks in, concern written plainly on his features. He takes one long and silent look at Magnus and curves an eyebrow.

“Weren’t you supposed to have lunch with your husband?”

Magnus brushes him off, gesturing vaguely with the pack still in his hand. “Plans got canceled,” he explains offhandedly. “More time for me to prepare for the conference call with LA this afternoon.”

Raphael stands in front of Magnus’ desk, hands clasped behind his back. “Maureen and I just watched you storm back in here like you were on your way to murder someone. Did he cancel on you again?”

“I canceled on him when he decided to act like a dick,” Magnus snaps.

He shuts his eyes as soon as the words are out, sucking in a sharp breath, and opens them again to
see Raphael clench his jaw in anger. “What’d he do?” he asks, voice low, threatening. Somehow, it soothes some of Magnus’ wrath, as if seeing his friend angry on his behalf is enough to remove some of the tension knotting in his muscles.

“He asked me to fire Camille,” he admits. If he could stop there, he thinks, it would be okay. They might be having lunch together right now, sharing one of the awkward silences that now compose their everyday life. But he can’t stop there, and it is the rest of it that hisses through his body like a painful and unbearably cold breeze. “When I told him it wasn’t that easy, he implied that I was keeping her around in case I ever tried to cheat on him.”

If he lets himself truly ponder on it, he knows why Alec is angry, he even understands why he is. They have both been guilty of speaking out of line when angry at one another before. It has been dormant for so long, but now it is like a volcano awakening and erupting, sweeping resentful words off at them in vehement waves. Sometimes, it settles down, and every time Magnus finds himself foolishly hoping, hoping for better days, for the better version of themselves that they used to be; then it burns down again, and their efforts seem to vanish into thin air, always carrying a piece of that hope with them.

They crumble slowly, piece by piece, word by word.

Raphael makes a noise of surprise in the back of his throat, bringing Magnus’ attention back to him. “That doesn’t sound like Alec,” he says, shaking his head in disbelief. “What led him to say this?”

Magnus pinches the bridge of his nose and grits his teeth. Camille. God, if he could just get rid of her and forget she ever existed, he would. Then, he wouldn’t need to face her every day and be confronted with the harrowing mistake he almost made or the knowledge that she was somehow the source of the threat of divorce ever leaving his mouth - not because he wants to be with her, but because he doesn’t want to be with Alec if they don’t fix what is broken between them, the crack she effortlessly slithered into to try and make him deviate from his morals.

With a sigh, Magnus leans against his desk to face Raphael properly, crossing his arms over his chest. “Camille was with me when I got down to the lobby,” he eludes. “We were talking about the meeting she had this morning with the Sephora guys from Paris. She talked some shit to Alec to piss him off and he walked right into it.”

Raphael hisses under his breath, narrowing his eyes. “Well, I’m willing to bet Camille said something completely inappropriate. Can’t say I blame the guy for falling in her trap,” he says, shrugging. “Not justifying what he said to you, of course, but she’s a snake. And the reason why we hired her in the first place is because she knows exactly what to say and when to say it.”

That much is true. It is what makes her such a great asset, especially for the Paris expansion. Camille has a way of talking that can entrance any audience, and a smile that, albeit deadly at the edges, shows sincerity to the untrained eye. There is always a joke in her eyes, although one no one ever seems to understand it but her, and yet that makes you feel included. Like you matter, and it took Magnus longer than he is willing to accept that the art she has mastered better than any other is seduction. She has that unique ability of making everything about her, all the while making you believe it is all about you. In marketing and business negotiations, it is a lethal weapon. Camille’s smile alone could probably sign off the Paris deal if Magnus wasn’t so meticulous about every single detail.

If he could just get rid of her, he would. For his own sake, for his husband’s. But Magnus worked too hard to give her ammunition to tear every brick apart with her perfectly manicured hands.
Magnus sighs, twisting his wedding band around his finger. “It’s just… I get that he doesn’t trust Camille,” he says, and he does. “But he should trust me. And it wasn’t Camille’s integrity he questioned. It was mine.”

“Surely he trusts you. You’ve never given him a reason not to,” Raphael says, and then his gaze shifts on Magnus and he levels him with a pointed gaze. “Or did he notice the flirting?”

Magnus blinks in surprise. He never told Raphael. They’ve been friends for years, when Edom was just a seed planted in Magnus’ brain, an unreachable star, a dreamer’s dream. Their mothers were friends before them, they grew up together, but there are still things Magnus doesn’t always share with Raphael, his marital problems being on top of the list. Not that he truly shares those with anyone. Magnus never told him, but Raphael knows him almost as well as Alec does, in that unique way that only dear friends can, where bluntness equals affection and sometimes harsh words amount to the depth of a bond time only can explain.

“Come on…” Raphael snorts, almost insulted. “You can’t possibly think I didn’t notice.”

Magnus shakes his head. “Of course you did, you prying asshole,” he mutters, because it seems like the only defense he has right now.

“Observant,” Raphael corrects.

“Fine,” Magnus allows, a smirk tugging at the corner of his lips. “You observant asshole.”

Raphael rolls his eyes but his annoyance is belied by the amused flicker in his dark eyes. They are utterly unapologetic as they settle on Magnus, though, forcing him to focus on nothing but the brutal honesty Magnus has come to associate to Raphael.

“So, did he find out?” he asks.

The memory of the hurt dancing in Alec’s eyes is too fresh. It has been almost three weeks since Alec missed the party and Magnus hasn’t been able to dismiss it from his mind. It sometimes shows up at random times during his days, flashing before his eyes whenever he wonders if it wouldn’t be easier for them if they just gave up now. The idea always dissolves with the recollection of the torment in Alec’s hazels, and the knowledge that Magnus was the one who put it there.

He huffs under his breath, offering Raphael a weak smile.

“I told him, so one could say he did, yeah,” he says, but the playful tone he was going for falls flat in the face of reality. “It’s been… I don’t know. Camille tried to kiss me at the party and I’ve been avoiding her ever since unless I have to see her like I did earlier so I’d have her report on the Sephora meeting. I stopped showing any kind of interest in anything unrelated to work, but she’s stubborn and it’s not that easy.”

Raphael doesn’t show any form of surprise at Magnus’ revelation, and Magnus can’t help but wonder how long he’s known.

“Does Alec know about that?” Raphael asks, lifting an eyebrow. His arms are crossed over his chest, his brows furrowed in a grave frown. Magnus could almost think they are talking about a business transaction.

Magnus shrugs somewhat dejectedly. “We’re trying to work things out,” he sighs. “I don’t want to upset him over nothing, especially considering things aren’t going so well between us right now.”
Raphael nods once, and heaves out deeply, dropping the stern composure. He walks up to Magnus and reaches out to grab his shoulder and squeeze gently, catching his eyes with sympathetic ones. “I’m sorry to hear that,” he says, and Magnus believes him. “What are you going to do about Camille?”

Magnus can feel the headache come from the back of his skull, slowly heading to his temples. “I can’t just fire her, Raphael,” he says. “She’s great at her job. Edom needs her. And I wouldn’t put it past her to sue me if I fire her with ‘my husband wants you to stop flirting with me’ as an excuse.”

Raphael smirks, tipping his head in agreement. “I think it’s safe to assume she would do something like that,” he replies, his hard gaze softening on Magnus. “It’s not my place to tell you what to do in your marriage or in your life, but you’ve always been there for me to give me advice or to give your objective opinion on the situation. So I’m going to do the same for you.”

He pauses, as if waiting for Magnus’ permission, as if he had ever needed it to speak his mind, be it to Magnus or anyone ever. Raphael is a great strategic asset, and an incomparable general manager, but he is no expert in human interactions. He tends to scare people off. But then, he pauses, and Magnus supposes it tells a lot about how messed up he must appear to his friend’s eyes. How bad it must be if even Raphael is concerned enough to give Magnus the option to not to be the recipient of his blunt honesty would he not want to.

But Magnus needs truths now more than ever, and if he doesn’t find them in the comfort of his own home, he won’t hide away from them outside either.

He nods, bracing himself.

“Don’t lose a good thing because of Camille. She’s not worth it,” Raphael says, and Magnus knows it, doesn’t need to be told, but somehow the words have way more vehemence coming from Raphael’s mouth than when Magnus told them to himself when she tried to kiss him. “I’m not saying you should fire her,” Raphael continues. “Business wise, it doesn’t make sense and would be a terrible move but you do have to think about Alec. If you’re working on your marriage and if it’s worth it to you, you have to put yourself in his shoes and try to come up with some sort of compromise.”

Raphael takes a step back and clasps his hand behind his back, his lips curving into a small, encouraging smile.

Magnus watches the early November lights catch on his wedding band, making it shine almost preposterously. “Then what am I supposed to do?” he asks in a breath, more to himself than Raphael. “If I fire her, I risk the company I’ve spent years to build. And if I don’t, I risk my marriage.”

He hates that he ever let it come to this, that he somehow got to a point where that same ring can’t be taken for granted anymore, no more than the company he shed tears, sweat, and blood to build. He can’t lose one or the other, and yet they are both so fragile. They could both so easily slip through his fingers.

“It’s your company and your marriage,” Raphael says, pulling him out of his morbid thoughts, “so that’s something you will have to decide on your own but I will suggest that maybe you don’t work so closely to her while you figure things out.”

Magnus hums thoughtfully, nodding. He didn’t dare to ask before, because he didn’t want to drag Raphael in his mess, or even admit how big of a mess it actually is, but Raphael is right here now, and he knows his friend won’t let him down when he needs help, not now, not ever.
“I can’t pull out from the Paris negotiations but can you take over the rest?” he inquires, straightening up on his feet, feeling a reborn confidence fluttering in his stomach. He doesn’t have to lose the things he loves to go on. He has to rely on his friends, on himself, on Alec. “I’ll get on your assignments for the time being.”

Raphael’s smile has a malicious edge to it but he clips it off with a serious nod. It is still enough to have Magnus question it, though, and he tilts his head to the side, frowning.

“I would be happy to help in any way I can.”

Magnus gives his friend a pointed glare, narrowing his eyes on him. “Why do I have the feeling you’re already ready to take over because you knew I’d ask you to?”

“I know you, Magnus,” Raphael says with a shrug. “I can tell when you need help. Maybe even before you know it yourself.” He holds his hand out, silently asking for Magnus to pass on some work to him. “I’m also your best employee, which means I’m always ready for a challenge.”

Magnus scrunches his nose up and gives him the Sephora contract he has been working on renegotiating with Camille.

“I’ll leave you to tell her she’ll be working with you from now on,” he says with a smirk. “I don’t think she’s your biggest fan. Not that I can understand of course. You’re always a ray of sunshine.”

“Well, I’m not the biggest fan of Camille, especially not now, so at least we have that in common - a mutual distaste.” Raphael takes the folder and opens it, scanning over the document on top. “And I will be sure to bring my sunny disposition to every meeting with her.”

Magnus snorts, and he realizes as he does that the weight in his stomach has somehow subdued during their talk. He needs to remember it more often, that he has friends he can count on when things seem bleak.

That he is not alone, despite what the little voice in the back of his head has to say.

“Thanks, Raphael,” he says, hoping his friend can see the sincerity in his eyes.

“Don’t mention it,” Raphael replies, shutting the file again. “Give me a raise and it’s settled.”

Magnus glares at him. “You’re paid as much as I am.”

“Exactly,” Raphael retorts, curving a pointed eyebrow. “If I’m gonna do half of your work for you, I expect half of your salary.”

Magnus rolls his eyes, dismissing him with a wave of his hand. “Get out of here, you asshole.”

Raphael scoffs dramatically, but his shoulders are shaking with laughter as he walks out.

Magnus shakes his head, slouching down on the armchair behind his desk. He chuckles under his breath, wondering when things will start to be as easy as his friendship with Raphael has always been.

He plucks his phone out to order a pizza, throwing the pack of cigarettes back in the drawer. Today is going to be a long day.
The afternoon goes by quickly. After the conference call with LA, Magnus locked himself in his office and spent the better part of his afternoon going through his files to clear up what he would pass on to Raphael and what he would keep working on himself.

Now, he is catching up on Raphael’s files and the night has fallen slowly at his back, wrapping the city in a coat of darkness. He should be home already, but after what happened earlier at lunch, he wants to delay it as much as possible. He doesn’t know how to face Alec, doesn’t know how to talk to him or how not to talk to him.

The office is dark and lonely at this time of the day, but at least it is safe.

Magnus heaves out a deep sigh, running a hand on his tired features. If he is completely honest with himself, he wants to go home. He wants to curl up on the couch against Alec’s eternally warm body—if he forgets about his eternally cold doctor hands—and nuzzle against his neck and forget about this whole thing. He just wants to forget, to let go of everything holding him—them—back, but he can’t. Or he won’t.

So he stays at his office.

That is the plan, at least, up until the door opens with a bang and Magnus jumps in his seat, looking up at the intruder and lifting a surprised eyebrow as his brother-in-law walks in with all his confidence, warm grin on his lips.

Jace never did learn how to knock. “No rest when you’re the boss, am I right?” he exclaims, slouching in the armchair in front of Magnus’ desk and leaning back into it.

He would probably lay his feet on the desk would he not fear for his life if he did.

Magnus frowns, casting a quick glance at the calendar on his desktop before looking back at Jace.

“Did… Did we have dinner plans?”

Jace slams a hand against his chest, feigning outrage. “I can’t believe you would forget our dinner plans. I am offended.” He shakes his head and laughs. “No, we didn’t have plans. Why? Do I need to make plans in order to see my favorite brother-in-law?”

Magnus rolls his eyes, but can’t help the fond smirk tugging at the corner of his lips. “I’m your only brother-in-law.”

“Still my favorite.” Jace smirks and lays his elbows on the desk, leaning in to peek at Magnus’ screen. “You almost done here?”

Magnus looks down at the screen and rubs at his temples, shutting his eyes. He finished working two hours ago, stalling to prolong his time here and he is sure he could fool Jace into believing otherwise, but he is tired of little white lies and unspoken truths.

“Yeah,” he sighs. “I’m not remotely productive anyway. I can’t concentrate with this headache.” He rolls his chair backward, facing Jace as he leans back into it, taking off his reading glasses and shoving them on the desk carelessly. “What brings you here?”

“I just wanted to catch up. See how you’re doing with… all this.” Jace gestures to nothing in particular, but the scowl on his face speaks volumes.

Magnus studies him silently for a while, brows slightly furrowed. He inhales deeply, licking his lips.
“Did Alec send you?” he asks, unsure what he wants the answer to be. Does he want to hear that Alec cares enough to send his brother to talk to Magnus to try to fix the mess they made? He doesn’t know anymore. At this point, he is just scared to realize he is going to lose the family he was made a part of when he married Alec as well as Alec himself, and it all seems to be way more than he can take.

Jace shrugs a shoulder, but Magnus sees past the apparent nonchalance easily. Jace is worried. “No,” he says. “I volunteered.”

Magnus looks away, focusing on his screen again. His background is an old picture of their family in Maia’s bar on the opening night, he and Alec huddled in a dark booth, Alec on Magnus’ lap, drinks in their hands and wide grins on their lips. It was taken four years ago, and Magnus feels a pang of nostalgia tear at his heartstrings. It had all been so much easier, back then.

Blinking at the picture, he pinches his lips. “I don’t want to talk about it,” he sighs.

He doesn’t want to hear them choose Alec. He won’t blame them for it, be it Jace or Izzy or even Maia, but he doesn’t want to hear them say it, because then it will be real. Magnus has never done well losing those he loves, and he loves this family, his family. Magnus is the interloper, the piece that was patched with the rest of them when he and Alec said their I do’s in front of a congregation of their friends and families, but Alec is linked to Izzy by blood, and to Jace by years of brotherhood and being brought up together.

And Magnus is just Magnus. He has been around them for fifteen years, has loved them unconditionally for almost just as much, but they bear of family only the name, and Magnus only shares that name because he and Alec chose to hyphenate.

It took a long time for Jace and him to become close, and they had a rough time three years ago when everything started going downhill, but they have been friends, and sometimes brothers, in the past fifteen years nonetheless, and Magnus doesn’t know how he’ll feel if Jace turns his back on him now.

It feels like the silence stretches forever, but Magnus knows Jace enough to realize he wouldn’t allow it to, and no more than a couple of minutes could have passed.

“You know nobody is taking sides, right?” Jace says, and something warm spreads through Magnus’ chest, his heart clenching. “I came because I genuinely want to hear how you’re doing. Especially after what happened today.”

It’s easy to forget that as they became his family, he became theirs too. Too easy, perhaps, for him and his insecurities which can effortlessly resume their devastating work on him at the slightest incentive.

Luckily, it is also easy to let himself be convinced by the genuine concern in his brother-in-law’s heterochromatic eyes.

Magnus bows his head, playing absently with the golden band on his finger. “I’m… I’m tired,” he admits, and just as he says it, he can feel the exhaustion weigh on his shoulders.

He wants to sleep for an entire week, preferably with Alec in his arms and their problems behind them.

Jace pushes off the armchair and walks over to Magnus without much hesitation, resting his hand on his shoulder. “I can imagine.”
Before Magnus can reply, there is a quick knock on the door and Camille lets herself in. Magnus is going to have to do something to teach people to wait for him to say it’s okay to come in before they do.

She’s already talking before he can say anything about it. “I just found out I’ve been assigned to work with Raphael on the Sephora account—” She stops in her tracks, her eyes widening in surprise as they fall on Jace at Magnus’ side. The angry set of her jaw relaxes into a sly smirk. “As much as it hurts that you won’t cheat on your husband with me… I must say, at least you know how to pick them.”

Magnus’ mouth falls open, so shocked by her poise that he can’t even think of an answer. Jace turns to face her, resting his elbow on the back of Magnus’ chair. “You must be Camille,” he says matter-of-factly.

Camille walks up to Jace, her hand extended. “My reputation precedes me.” Her dark eyes scan him up and down, stopping on his face. “Blonde hair, blue eyes. I wouldn’t have pegged you for Magnus’ type. You are?”

Magnus clears his throat, crossing his arms over his chest, his jaw flexing with irritation. That’s exactly what he needed right now. “Camille, meet my brother-in-law, Jace,” he says. “Jace, this is Camille. She’s the head of outside sales in Edom.”

Jace glances down at her extended hand and raises a brow, letting out a scoff before looking up at her. “Your reputation may precede you but probably not in the way you hope.”

Camille winks at him. “At least people talk about me.” She turns back to Magnus, the upset scowl back on her features. “Why have I been assigned to work with Raphael?”

“I have too much work on my plate right now,” Magnus says, dismissing her with a nonchalant flourish of his hand. “I need to delegate and Raphael is more than capable of taking over for me.”

Camille huffs out a mocking laugh. “You’re expecting me to believe it just happened out of the blue? After your husband made a scene in the lobby earlier today?”

Magnus’ eyes widen slightly. “How do you—” he starts, but he cuts himself off, shaking his head. “Leave my husband out of this.”

“What you said was out of line and you know it,” Magnus grits out between clenched teeth. “You wanted him to believe I’d cheat on him sooner or later.”

Camille shrugs a shoulder, the corner of her mouth tipping into a smile. “You honestly saying you won’t when he inevitably falls back into old habits?”

So everyone has apparently collectively decided that they want Magnus to be angry today. Or well, Camille has, because she was the reason behind his anger the first time, too. Every word coming out of her mouth is like gasoline being added up to an already burning fire, wrath swirling in his chest, making his limbs tremble.

He’s about to answer, but Jace takes a step forward, a deep frown on his features.

“You have no idea who he is, do you?” he hisses slowly, eyes flashing in anger. “You don’t know Magnus at all if you think he’d cheat on my brother with the likes of you because you’re just
standing there waiting for him and offering him a way out. He’s been with my brother for fifteen
years and I do believe I know him well enough to tell you you’re delusional. Magnus never gives
up on the people he loves. He’s an honest, loyal man, although I’m not sure those are concepts you
understand. So how about you fuck off and find another prey to play with that isn’t married and too
good to fall for your pathetic little charade?”

Magnus blinks in stupor, staring up at Jace from his seat. He can’t see his face, because Jace
moved forward to face Camille sometime during his little speech, but he can see the tension in his
shoulders, drawn into a stiff line. His fists are balled tightly at his sides and if he wasn’t consumed
by shock, Magnus would probably let himself get emotional at the way his brother-in-law
defended him just then, with fierceness and not a single ounce of doubt in his own voice.

Camille narrows her eyes on Jace and crosses her arms, jutting her hip out. “Your brother doesn’t
know a good thing when he has it and is completely undeserving,” she huffs out. “Someone can
only take so much disappointment before eventually quitting.”

Jace points a finger at her, eyes squinting in a murderous glare. “My brother is ten times a better
person than you could ever hope to be,” he snaps. “And he still thrives to be better. For Magnus
and for everyone around him. All you do is feed on people’s misery to feel better about yourself.”

Honestly, Magnus doesn’t even know what’s going on anymore, but he has had more than enough
for today.

“Your brother takes his husband for granted—” Camille starts, and he decides he can’t hear another
word.

“Enough!” he snaps, rising to his feet. “Both of you!” He turns towards Jace. “Jace, I truly
appreciate everything you just said but I don’t need you to defend my honor, especially if it results
in you two arguing in my office.” Then, he turns to Camille, leveling her with an impassive glare.
“As for you, do I need to remind you that I am your boss? You’re my employee.” She opens her
mouth to reply, but he raises two fingers to stop her, and she shuts it again, lips tugged in an
annoyed frown. “You have no right to pry into my private life and even less so to pass a judgment
upon it,” he continues, heaving. “I am the only one allowed to decide who is deserving of me or
not. From now on, keep your personal opinions to yourself. This is a workplace, not your
playground. Now, I believe you should go home and rest. Raphael and you have a long day
tomorrow. You’re dismissed.”

She goes to protest again, but Magnus sends her a glare that has her taking a step back.

“You’re dismissed,” he repeats firmly.

Camille stiffens and turns on her heels, sending Jace a glare over her shoulder before throwing the
door open and slamming it shut on her way out.

There’s silence for a moment before Jace lets out a heavy sigh. “No wonder things escalated at
lunch today,” he puffs, eyes still throwing daggers at the door. He shakes his head, turning to
Magnus with another one of his contagious grins. “You want to get out of here? I think I might
need a walk to let out some of this steam.”

“Buy me an herbal tea or some other relaxing shit and you’ve got yourself a deal,” Magnus says
with a smile, grabbing his phone and his keys from the desk.

Jace snorts. “Tea, tequila, pick your poison.”
“Tequila sounds great, actually.”

Jace grins and heads over to the office door, holding it open for Magnus as he shrugs his coat on. “And that is why you’re my favorite brother-in-law.”

Magnus locks the door behind him, chuckling. “Still the only one.”

Maia’s bar, the Hunter’s Moon, isn’t too far from Magnus’ work. In fact, it has hosted a few of his memorable after-work improvised evenings with Catarina and Ragnor. It was also the theater of one of his fondest memories with Alec.

The two of them had been drunk out of their minds for Maia’s grand opening, and Alec had three successive stages when he drank too much: giggly, sappy, and horny. They had made good use of all of them – and the back alley.

It has been a while since they even took the time to have a drink together.

Jace falls in the bench seat in front of Magnus, passing him his tequila shot. “It’s been too long since we’ve had brotherly bonding like this,” he says with a grin.

It’s been a while since Magnus went out, too wrapped up in loneliness. A part of him wonders if he has come to a point where the force of habit has made him complacent to it. He doesn’t say any of that to Jace, though, shrugging and downing his shot instead.

“We’ve all been busy, haven’t we?”

Jace tosses back his shot and grimaces from the burn, wiping his mouth with his hand as he throws Magnus a dubious look. “Why do I feel like that was a jab at Alec?”

Magnus scoffs, pursing his lips. “Because it was,” he admits. It seems to be all he is truly good at these days. Cursing Alec. Shunning Alec. Blaming Alec.

God, he wishes he could stop being mad for just long enough to remember his love for Alec is stronger than all the accumulated resentment built up in his chest.

Jace nods and signals for the bartender to bring them another round. “He’s trying though, right?”

Magnus feels himself nodding, and his walls fall with the genuine concern in Jace’s eyes.

“We both are and we’re both failing,” he sighs. “We tried to go on a date and it was a nightmare. I tried to bring him a sandwich at work and forgot how he hates mustard. He took over Luke’s shift again and gave up on our only weekend together in the month again. The other morning, we tried to kiss after breakfast and it was so awkward we ended up headbutting each other. It’s a disaster, Jace. We’ve become a disaster.”

The relief that washes over him as the words come out comes as a surprise, but it makes sense, Magnus realizes. He promised Catarina and Ragnor he would talk to them and not let himself fall back into silent sorrow again, but old habits die hard and he has been silent for almost three years.

No one worries if he doesn’t talk. No one knows of his pain, so no one cares. But it only works for so long.

Jace winces. “You guys were never this way,” he says, and Magnus smiles despite himself because
it’s true. They used to be so much better, so perfect and in love. “If anything, you were that couple, the one so sickeningly in love that it could make any bitter heart believe in love.” Jace accepts his shot from the bartender and motions for him to leave the bottle (thankfully almost empty already), filling Magnus’ glass himself. “You guys had—have what I can only hope to have one day. There has to be a way to get through this.”

Magnus runs a finger over the hem of his glass, humming pensively. “Maybe our love has run out,” he murmurs. “Maybe we’re over. He doesn’t trust me anymore. And I can’t talk to him without thinking about all the times he refused to talk to me, or let me talk to him. What kind of husbands are we if we can’t trust or talk to each other?”

“Your love run out?” Jace echoes in disbelief, shaking his head. “I don’t believe that’s possible for one second. I see the way he looks at you when you’re not looking, as if you’re the center of his universe. And I see you. How much you still love him despite all this.” He pauses, and the straightforwardness of his gaze is such a Lightwood trait that Magnus finds himself smiling. “No matter what happened today, he trusts you, Magnus. He knows you and he believes you when you say there’s nothing going on between you and Camille. And from what I’ve witnessed, I can vouch for you. Not that he would ever ask me to.”

Magnus heaves out a deep breath. The words hit home, as he was sure they were intended to, but the only words that can matter now won’t come from Jace, no matter how comforting. “We just keep hurting each other, Jace. It can’t go on like this.”

“I agree,” Jace says with a sigh. “Nothing’s been the same between you since…” he trails off, biting his lip. Guilt flashes in his eyes at the mere implication hiding behind his hesitation, a hint of sympathy tainting his bicolored eyes.

It’s sad, really, that no one ever wants to state the truth for what it is, the devastating reality Magnus has to face every day, alone in a silence that was imposed to him.

“Yeah,” he says, voice low and trembling. “We lost each other.”

Jace nods, reaching out to fill Magnus’ glass again. “Look, we don’t have to talk about that,” he says, and Magnus doesn’t tell him that a part of him is screaming with the need to talk about that. But not with Jace. With the person who should understand exactly what Magnus has been and is still going through, the one who used to always find the right words to bring him comfort in times of need. “I know it’s difficult for the both of you. But don’t you think this is something you guys need to work through together so you can find each other again?”

Magnus scoffs. “Yeah, tell that to your brother. He’s the one who still refuses to talk about it. I’ve tried and tried.” He pauses, forces himself to swallow past the lump in his throat. “I’m tired of hitting a wall.”

“Yeah…” Jace sighs, clinking his glass with Magnus’ before they toss them back together. “Alec can be a bit stubborn but Magnus, you can’t give up on him. I know he will never give up on you.”

Magnus doesn’t want to give up on Alec, he never has and probably never will. It goes beyond standard stubbornness, however, but he can’t blame Jace for not knowing. How could he?

“I know,” Magnus replies, heaving. “I just never thought it would ever come to this.”

Jace hums absently and straightens on his seat, staring at him with a slight frown. “So you assigned Raphael to work with Camille. I’m guessing she was right and it may have had something to do with the lunchtime fiasco.” Jace tips his empty shot glass in Magnus’ direction, lifting an eyebrow.
“I think that was an excellent step in the right direction.”

Magnus shrugs. “Yeah. Things are already bad enough without Camille adding her grain of salt in the mix,” he mumbles, motioning for Jace to fill his glass again. “I’m willing to compromise if it means we’ll fix what’s broken between us. I can just hope Alec is willing to do the same.”

“Which in this case would be— less hours at work and some actual communication?” Jace asks.

“Pretty much,” Magnus says with a nod. “It’d be nice to be able to make plans with my husband that don’t get canceled at the last minute for once.” His head is starting to buzz pleasantly. Not quite enough for him to forget the hurt and anger mixing in Alec’s accusing gaze a few hours ago, but it gives him just the right incentive to smirk at Jace. “Also, less hours at work means more sex,” he adds with a cheeky wink.

Jace doesn’t need to know that even that they cannot do properly anymore.

Jace laughs and then leans onto the table, flagging down the bartender for another bottle. “I’m going to need more tequila if we’re going to talk about my brother’s sex life.”

It takes the bartender only a minute to return with new shots, these a funny yellowish color. Jace holds his out to Magnus. His eyes are squinting a little, a sign that the alcohol is hitting him too. Magnus supposes neither of them are used to drinking anymore.

“I’m positive that less hours at work is something Alec is willing to compromise,” Jace says with more confidence than Magnus thinks the topic asks for. “Might take him a little bit to get used to the idea, old habits die hard after all but I’m sure the promise of sex will have him coming—” he pauses, a smirk tugging at the corner of his lips “–home to you as fast as he can,” he finishes with a laugh and a wink.

“If the goal was to have him coming as fast as he can, I wouldn’t need him to take less hours,” Magnus retorts teasingly. “I could just meet him at work.”

“Hey, now there’s an idea,” Jace exclaims cheerfully. “Make good use of his break room, keep the spice alive, sneak around like teenagers. I think you’re onto something here.” He taps his shot glass against Magnus’ before swallowing it in one large gulp.

Magnus snorts. “There was a time we made very good use of that break room.” He wonders if Jace can hear the nostalgia in his voice as surely as he can, if Jace recognizes the signs of misery in every quivering note. Magnus looks down at his glass, lips pulling down into a frown. “I miss that,” he sighs, and he is so tired of saying it, over and over again without the gaping hole in his chest ever lessening with the confession. “I miss him.”

Jace frowns and leans over the table, reaching out to grab his shoulder and squeeze it gently. “You’ll get that back and you’ve never lost him,” he assures him, determination edging every word. “He may have shut down a bit but you never really lost him. I can promise you that, Magnus. He wants that break room sex back. I’m willing to bet on it.”

Magnus wouldn’t be, but it is probably a good thing. One shouldn’t be able to bet on their own life. It’s not a game when hearts are on the line, when lives can be broken and made so easily. Or if it is a game, it is a cruel one, one Magnus doesn’t want to play, not if the odds are against them.

He glances up at Jace, leaning back in his seat. However, he had imagined his day going when he woke up this morning, getting wasted with his brother-in-law and talking about his lack of a sex life and his insecurities regarding his marriage were not in his plans.
“This is weird.”

Jace eyes him, lazily leaning against the table, and snorts. “You’re right. Let’s quit while we’re ahead. Another drink?”

“Might as well,” Magnus says, raising his empty glass.

Every day feels like a new trial, like a new struggle on their relationship. It would be easy for Magnus to walk away, leaving his heart in Alec’s hands, but with his sanity somewhat intact. But there is always more to do, even in a situation as bleak as this one. There is always something to fight for.

Because it is Alec, because it is Magnus, and the universe has nothing on them when they fight together.

So they might as well try, and they might as well fail. They will love each other anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Please let us know how you liked this second installment. Hope it didn't break your hearts too much. Let us know your favorite parts, lines, etc. All are appreciated!

You can find one of us on twitter: Lecrit

Next time: Thanksgiving, more efforts, and more talking.

all the love,

lu & jackie
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

You poor fools, you're still here?
It's us, the tormentors you love to hate, bringing you this long-awaited chapter.

Please be aware that this chapter deals with sensitive topics.

We love to hear your thoughts and read your live tweets so please use our tag so we can read them if you decide to do so #LINAVM

On to the chapter...

P.S. Get your tissues ready.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Time can bring you down, time can bend your knees
Time can break your heart, have you begging please,

begging please

Alec feels like they’re right back where they began. Sitting as far apart as possible in the back of a pine and smoke scented cab, staring out of opposing windows, watching the buildings of a restless city pass by in silence. The only difference this time, and what perhaps makes it worse, is that they’ve actually tried to close this chasm between them. They’ve tried and they’ve failed. So they’re back at the starting line again, tired and weary from having to run what feels like an endless marathon they were wholly unprepared for. He’s taken this time to take a step back, see his missteps and now he’s ready to go again, desperate to break through this period of silence between them with all he’s got. He’s just been waiting for a sign from Magnus; some kind of hint that he is still in this race as well, standing at the same starting line with him, muscles burning, but still in his running stance, ready to give this one more go.

Magnus is seated facing away from him, his hand rests on the seat beside him, warm and inviting with its polished nails and gold wedding band reflecting the daylight in flashes as it streams in through the window. Alec had sat on the couch last night quietly reading his book while Magnus polished his nails the deep green that matches the sweater Alec is wearing today. And for that small moment in time it almost felt like the old Magnus and Alec. The Magnus and Alec that spent many a night together, each of them doing their own thing while sitting in the peaceful quiet that comes from years of familiarity and the comfort in knowing that the one you’re with is happy just by being in the same room as you. Only this time the silence was not the kind that could bring that same comfort, it stood like a menacing presence in the room, bringing with it doubt and fear that the peaceful comfort they once had is gone forever. It was a presence that was put there by the both of them because even though they had so much to say, they were, for some stubborn reason, unwilling to be the first to bend.
Magnus rubs his thumb along his finger and then lets his hand rest again. Alec can be that person now if he will just try. He can bend for Magnus. He can take Magnus’ hand in his own like they used to, he can kiss along his knuckles and utter the soft ‘I love you’s he feels in his heart into Magnus’ palm. He can be the one to blow the whistle to start this race.

But he won’t. He won’t because he doesn’t know if this is still what Magnus wants. And what if it’s not? What will he do if Magnus is not willing to run with him? After all, how many tries is one allowed to have to make things right? How many tries is enough? How many is too many? When is enough enough?

Alec pulls his hand away and pinches the bridge of his nose to stop the overwhelming headaches he’s now all too acquainted with from forming. His mind is all over the place with this constant worry and doubt that’s been plaguing him ever since Magnus first uttered the words ‘I think we should get a divorce’ to him on a dark Saturday night. But he needs to stop thinking and to stop questioning everything before he drives himself crazy.

He rakes his hand back through his hair and then slides both of his cold hands beneath the warm boxed apple pie in his lap. The Lightwood family Thanksgiving is the last place he wants to go today. Almost everyone knows about their failing marriage but he’s still going to feel the need to keep it hidden from everyone. To pretend that things are working out and that they haven’t spent the past week and a half practically ignoring each other by responding in fragmented sentences, hums of acknowledgement or sometimes complete and utter silence. He’s going to have to smile for his parents and hope that Magnus will let him put his arm around him for the family picture in front of his mother’s overly decorated dining table complete with cornucopia. He’s going to have to play a role he’s not quite sure he has in him today.

They arrive at his mother’s building, they walk through the lobby, and share yet another silent elevator ride up to his mother’s penthouse. The doors slide open and Alec follows behind Magnus who is holding the bag that carries their pumpkin pie and a gift for Ariel. They enter the foyer and instantly the sounds of small pitter patters against tiled floors —one of the best sounds in the world — heads their way.

“Uncle Ma’’nus!”

Magnus is down on one knee in an instant, the bag he carried on the floor beside him as Ariel crashes into his open arms. She lets out an excited groan as her tiny arms squeeze him as tightly as she can.

Magnus squeezes her back and kisses the top of her strawberry blonde hair. “Happy birthday, my little turkey.”

She giggles and kisses the tip of Magnus’ nose before releasing her hug. “Carry me,” she demands in her sweetest voice that neither Magnus nor Alec have ever been able to deny.

“Ariel, say please,” Jace says, entering into the room after her.

“Carry me, please, Uncle Ma’’nus,” she corrects sweetly. “I wanna hug Uncle Alec.”

Alec sees the hesitation in Magnus’ step when he carries Ariel over to him. It is subtle, so small and simple, but its existence sears through Alec all the same. He smiles widely for his niece as they get closer. It’s her birthday—it’s Thanksgiving. He will be happy for her and he will be happy for his family.

She leans across the space between them in Magnus’ hold, wraps her arms around Alec’s neck and
squeezes tightly.

“Happy birthday, Pumpkin.” He kisses her on the apple of her soft cheek when she pulls back.

She keeps a hold on the collar of Alec’s sweater not letting Magnus move back but also not letting him relinquish his hold on her, causing Magnus to press against Alec’s side. This is the closest Alec has been to his husband all week. Even in bed they keep more distance than this between each other. It feels natural to be this close to him and Alec suddenly realizes why everything about his life the past few years has felt so empty. They were meant to be like this, the two of them, together. They were never meant to grow apart the way they’ve let themselves.

Standing side-by-side like this is what feels right. It’s what he’s been missing. Magnus is so close now that Alec can catch the scent of his hair when he moves his head to hear something Jace is telling him. It smells of sandalwood and vanilla, a combination that is altogether Magnus, and it makes Alec want to pull Magnus in even closer. He wants to leave and go back home where he can bury his nose in his husband’s hair, hold him close enough to feel his heartbeat, and breathe him in until all of their pain and all of their mistakes are forgotten. He misses his husband so much it hurts. He misses the touch of his skin so much that it makes his hands ache. If he could only reach out and touch him…then maybe things could begin again.

“I missed you—d’you bring me a present?” Ariel’s voice is sweet, she’s using all of her charm that she’s already mastered at the tender age of three. There’s no denying that she is her father’s daughter.

“Ariel,” Jace scolds.

Ariel covers her mouth at being caught and giggles.

Magnus taps his chin and brushes his fingers along the lines of his goatee pensively. “I thought we were just eating turkey today. I didn’t know we were celebrating a turkey’s birthday too,” Magnus teases and Ariel gasps.

Magnus’ expression turns to a sly grin and he winks quickly at Ariel. “Of course we brought you a present. It’s in that bag your daddy is holding.”

Ariel releases her grip from Alec and claps excitedly when Jace extracts the lavender wrapped gift from the bag. “Presents have to wait until after dinner, okay?”

“Kay, Daddy.” She nods.

“How about I put you down so I can greet the others, is that okay?” Magnus steps away from Alec, carrying Ariel in his arms away from him and towards the dining room where the rest of the family must be waiting.

Ariel shakes her head. “No. I wanna sit with you.”

“Magnus is still the favorite, I see,” Isabelle grumbles, shooting daggers at Magnus with her dark eyes.

Magnus preens, puffing his chest out, and lifts his chin proudly. “Of course I am. And you might as well get used to it because I don’t plan on relinquishing the title any time soon.”

Isabelle scoffs but she’s grinning as she reaches out and pokes at Ariel’s side. “What if Aunt Izzy gives you two slices of pie before dinner? Will you sit with me then?”
Ariel stops to think and looks between Magnus and Izzy.

“That’s not playing fair, dear Isabelle,” Magnus complains.

Ariel smiles at Izzy. “No. I wan’ Uncle Ma’nus.”

Isabelle gasps and then pretends to cry dramatically.

Magnus laughs raucously and his laughter mixed with Ariel’s causes a warmth to fill Alec. This is all he ever wanted—it’s all he wants. This family with Magnus in it. He wants the warmth that Magnus’ smile and laughter when he’s with a child brings him. He wants—

The thought causes the part of him he keeps pushed aside and buried to burn with a need to be felt. It wants to escape him and it swells into an intruding knot in his chest. He takes in a deep breath and startles when he realizes Izzy has been saying his name.

“What?”

“I said, are you just going to stand in the foyer all day?” She taps her foot expectantly at him. “Bring that pie over here so we can get this started.” She waves Alec over and he follows after Magnus and Ariel.

The dining room table is set with platters of food and Isabelle gently lifts the pies from each box and arranges them on the table.

“Alec! Magnus! You made it.”

“Maryse,” Magnus acknowledges with a smile and he lets her pull him in to a quick half-hug with Ariel still in his arms. “Happy Thanksgiving.”

Maryse is moving onto Alec now, wrapping both arms around him. “Happy Thanksgiving, Mom.”

She pulls back and brushes the fallen strands of hair away from his brow. She assesses him in the way only a mother can, with her brows furrowing in concern and her lips pulled down into a frown as her eyes follow down his face. “Honey, you look so tired. Are you working yourself to death?”

“I’m fine, Mom.” Alec turns his head to direct her eyes away from him.

She keeps her hold on his shoulders and nods slowly. She doesn’t believe him but like always, she isn’t going to push for the truth. Not yet at least. “Well I’m glad you made it when you did, it’s time to put our thanks in the bowl.”

Alec forgot about this tradition, he doesn’t know how considering it’s one his family has been doing for as long as he can remember. Not to mention that it’s always been his favorite Thanksgiving tradition.

Maia comes up to them, holding out the slips of paper they’re intended to write on. “Hey, stranger.”

“Hey, Maia.” Alec smiles at her and pulls her into a hug.

“How have you been?” she asks quietly and rubs a soothing circle on his back.

“I’m okay,” he whispers.

She hugs him tightly a moment longer and he allows himself to let go to the weight and love in her
hug. Maia has always been the best at giving hugs.

“Okay,” she whispers back and nods before breaking away.

He takes the scrap of paper from her hand, and she moves on to Magnus, pulling him and Ariel into a bone crushing hug. She holds him tightly as well and Alec assumes she’s giving Magnus the same loving feeling she just gave him. She finishes her hug with a kiss on Magnus’ cheek and moves on to Jace, offering him his slip of paper.

Magnus moves into the kitchen and with Ariel perched on his hip, he bends and writes what he’s thankful for on his paper. Alec wonders what it is. Wonders if Magnus will be honest or if he will write something generic to keep up their act.

“Son, I didn’t hear you come in.”

Alec turns to see his dad entering in from the sitting room, a whiskey in hand. “Hey, yeah, we just got here not that long ago.”

“Robert, get your paper and write yours down,” Maryse calls from the entrance of the kitchen.

Robert sighs, sips at his whiskey, and walks off to do as he’s told.

Alec watches as his dad goes up to his mother, her face is in the familiar scowl she gets whenever they spend time together. They’re better now that they’re divorced, amicable and more often than not, civil. But the underlying disdain they hold for each other is always present. The resentment has faded, and even though she looks annoyed right now, there’s an openness to her that’s not usually there, as if she is finally beginning to let go of all the pain he caused her and is moving on.

Alec smiles at the thought that maybe his mother has finally found happiness with someone else. She spots him from across the room and her face goes stern as she points at the paper in Alec’s hand and mouths ‘write yours down’.

Alec laughs and clicks the top of the pen. He scribbles, as neatly as he can, what he’s thankful for this year. It’s the one thing he can think of. It’s obvious. Everyone will know. Magnus will know. But that’s the point.

He folds it twice into a square and hands it out to his mom who has started making her rounds collecting everyone’s note.

“I’ll go mix these up,” she exclaims with a big grin.

The next twenty minutes are spent waiting on the rolls to finish baking and sharing stories of the first Halloween night they were not able to spend together. Alec stands with Jace and Maia, sipping at his cider and trying his best not to get caught sneaking glances at Magnus across the room. He’s still holding Ariel, although he’s switched her to his other hip while he chats with Isabelle by the stereo.

“Excuse me, I’m going to go help those losers pick some good music before they ruin Thanksgiving.” Maia walks off, leaving Jace and Alec behind.

Jace moves to stand in front of Alec, blocking his view from Magnus. “Did my talk help at all?” Jace is quick to the point and Alec tries to hide his disappointment by taking a large swallow of his cider.

Jace levels him with blue-brown eyes. “Alec.”
Alec shakes his head and looks over Jace’s shoulder at Magnus who is now dancing happily with Ariel in his arms, twirling her and making her squeal with excitement.

Jace sighs, moves back beside him and pats him firmly on the back. Two strong, supportive pats that do well to help drive out the despondency that’s taken over him. “It will work out. I know it will.”

Alec sips at his drink again and doesn’t bother responding.

Magnus is holding a balloon up to his mouth and Alec can hear him suck in the helium. He lets out a high pitch note to the song that’s playing and Ariel throws her head back in a belly laugh that is all tears and snorting.

Jace chuckles beside him. “Magnus is so good with her.”

“Yeah,” Alec croaks out.

Magnus would have made an excellent father.

“Jace, would you go check on the rolls for me, please?” Maryse asks, approaching them from behind, his father in tow.

“On it.” Jace briskly walks off to the kitchen and leaves Alec with his mom and dad.

Maryse steps in close to Alec and lowers her voice. “What’s going on?”

Alec goes for another drink of his cider and finds the glass empty. He sighs and looks away. “Nothing’s wrong.”

She plants her hand firmly on her hip. “I’m your mother, I can tell that something is not right with you.”

“Mom, nothing is wrong with me—”

“Fine. Then what’s going on with Magnus?”

This makes Alec finally look at her. Her eyes are narrowed in on him. “You think I wouldn’t notice that he’s quieter than normal? That the two of you have spent the entire evening walking in circles around each other, never standing in the same space?”

“Mom…”

She cuts him off with a raised finger. “Alec, cut the crap and tell us what’s going on.”

“Magnus and I… we’ve… well, we’ve been having some trouble with our marriage.” The admission hurts no matter how many times he’s told himself these exact words. Saying them out loud to his mother, seeing her crestfallen face, only makes the sting that much more evident.

His dad steps in closer. “Do you still have sex? Because that’s a good way to keep things up. It was the warning sign for your mother and I…”

“Dad!” Alec hisses.

“Robert,” Maryse warns, rolling her eyes and sending him a scathing glare. “Yeah. It’s a good method when you actually can keep it up.”
“Mom!” Alec wipes his hand over his eyes, mortified. This is not at all how he saw this conversation going.

“What?” Robert and Maryse say in unison, curved brows directed at him.

“That’s not... No, it’s not about sex. Well... that is a—you know what—no. No, it’s not the issue and I’m not talking about this with my parents.” Alec can feel his face burning. He wishes Jace would walk in and announce that the rolls are ready so he can escape this. Everyone else is in their own world, talking and dancing, and he’s... he’s getting lectured on the importance of sex in a marriage.

“Well what is it about?” Maryse asks, and her brows furrow deeper, earnest concern marring her face.

“Things have just changed between us. We’re both busy with work and so there’s not a lot of time left for us. You know how it is...” He gestures at the two of them.

Maryse and Robert exchange a look with each other. Alec knows it’s a look of experience. Of having been there and done that.

“Yeah, we do know,” Robert says. “What do you think led us to a divorce?”

They’ve made these mistakes and they’re living the results. But Alec still remembers when they were together. He remembers the tears, the fights, the late nights with Izzy and Jace in his room because they couldn’t sleep with the fighting going on downstairs. And now, they’re here, sharing Thanksgiving together, talking to their son about his marital problems. They’re better parents apart than they were when they were together. They’re better people now that they’re divorced. And they’re happier.

Fear pulls in his stomach as unwelcome thoughts creep in that perhaps this is what would be best for him. Perhaps he and Magnus would be better—happier—without each other. There’s so much history between them, so much loss, and so many haunted memories. Could it be that they may be past the point of being able to salvage what they once had?

Alec draws in a quick breath and looks away from his parents’ pitying looks. Magnus is standing by the window with Jace and Ariel and he’s happy. He is. There’s no way he can be faking it right now, Alec thinks. This family, his family, makes him happy. They can fix this.

His mother reaches out and rests a comforting hand on his arm. “We can tell you’re hurting and we can tell Magnus is hurting. We’ve seen how happy he makes you and how happy you make him. We don’t want you to lose that, Alec.”

“Work isn’t everything, Son. Don’t learn that the hard way and lose Magnus.” Robert purses his lips and shakes his head.

“Don’t make the same mistakes we did and let your marriage slip away.” Maryse slides her hand up to rest against Alec’s cheek, her thumb grazing against the scruff of his beard. She leans in close to him, keeping her eyes on his. “Fight for it.”

He nods and she lets the worry fall away and smiles at him with all the love a mother can give. “I know you’ll do better than we did. You always have.”

She reaches up and plants a kiss on his cheek. “Let’s go eat.”
They take their seats at the table, Magnus across from Alec with Ariel seated in his lap.

“Magnus, you really don’t have to let her sit on your lap. I can take her,” Jace offers from his seat.

Magnus waves him off. “Don’t be ridiculous. I hardly ever get to see my little turkey and I want to hold her as much as I can so enjoy this time for yourself and relax. Take the night off.”

Dinner is spent in multiple loud conversations all happening at once. Everyone is talking to everyone. Except Alec and Magnus. They haven’t exchanged a single word since they left the loft.

Maryse taps her fork on the champagne glass and clears her throat. In her hands she holds the glass bowl that has been in the Lightwood family for generations. The folded pieces of paper everyone wrote on are inside and she reaches in to start the tradition of reading what someone is thankful for and trying to guess who wrote it.

“I’m thankful for…the most beautiful daughter in the world,” she reads.

“Aw! Thank you, Daddy!” Isabelle dramatizes, framing her face angelically.

“That’s for Ariel, not you.” Jace winks at Ariel and blows her a kiss. She reaches out with her small hands and catches it. She presses the ‘kiss’ to her mouth and then extends her arm out as far as she can reach, blowing one back at Jace so hard her cheeks puff out. Magnus laughs and wipes the accidental spray of spit from his arm and her chin with his napkin.

Alec laughs and the sound must catch Magnus’ attention because he looks up at him with a wide smile that lights up his face and takes Alec’s breath away. It’s a look that lasts for only a single, brief, yet heart wrenching second before his attention is pulled back to Ariel.

They go down the table. It’s always easy to guess who wrote what but the tradition is always the highlight of the night.

“I’m thankful for… my family.” His dad.

“ I’m thankful for… a supportive partner.” Isabelle.

“I’m thankful for… new friends.” His mom.

It’s Isabelle’s turn and she grins excitedly and reaches into the bowl.

“I’m thankful for…” she gently unfolds the paper. “Second chances.” Her voice trails off at the end and her eyes widen, finding Alec’s instantly. She purses her red lips and folds the paper back up.

Magnus’ shocked expression softens when he finds Alec looking at him. A silence falls across the table. Alec doesn’t care though, he doesn’t care if his entire family knows just how much of a screw up he’s been in his marriage. He’s going to change. He’s going to fix it. Somehow.

Robert clears his throat to break the silence and so the game goes on. The laughter and guesses of the others around them sound muffled and drowned out as he keeps his gaze locked on Magnus.

Alec can feel his family’s hesitant, concerned glances on him but there is only one pair of eyes that he cares about. Ones that are a warm rich amber full of kindness and understanding. They’re the only eyes that have ever been able to truly see him and know every part of him. They’re the only
eyes he’s ever lost himself to—body and soul.

The bowl eventually makes it around to Jace and he opens his. “I’m thankful for… efforts.”

Magnus smiles at Alec, a simple upturn of the corner of his lips that’s enough to make Alec’s heartbeat quicken in his chest. It’s enough to make his hope take flight again.

When dinner is over, Alec finishes helping Izzy and Jace clear the table while his mother packs plates of leftovers for everyone to take home with them.

“I insist you stay here,” Maryse states firmly, fixing Jace with that motherly look that says you better do as I say, and that always worked on them when they were children. “Ariel is tired, there’s no sense in dragging her all the way to Brooklyn at this time.”

“Fine, Mom, we’ll stay,” Jace acquiesces.

Alec dries his hands and goes to find Magnus, he’s getting tired, and he really just wants to go home for at least an hour or two before having to head back into work for his shift tonight. He passes by Maia who is busy packing away Ariel’s toys into one large gift bag for easy transport.

“Have you seen Magnus?” Alec asks.

She stands up straight and dusts her hands off on her skirt. “Last I saw of him, he was in the living room with Ariel. Check there.”

“Thanks.”

“You heading out?” She crosses her arms and leans against the wall.

“Yeah, I’m tired and I have a shift tonight so I need to head back now if I want to have time to relax before heading in for twelve hours.”

Maia winces and pushes herself off the wall, patting his arm as she passes him. “A twelve hour shift after spending your holiday with the entire family. I don’t know how you do it. You’re a better man than me.”

Alec chuckles. “Goodnight, Maia.”

She waves and heads towards the kitchen.

Alec passes through the foyer into the open archway of the living room. The lights are off and only the glow of the fireplace lights the room. Magnus is alone on the sofa, cradling Ariel up against his chest, his hand patting against the small of her back as he rocks gently back and forth. Alec stops and leans against the door frame, he doesn’t want to interrupt this moment between them, and he selfishly wants it to last forever, or at the very least have it last long enough for him to memorize every detail. Like the way Magnus’ arms encase around her protectively, or how her head rests perfectly against his chest, her tiny fingers entangled in his necklaces.

Magnus begins to hum, a tune so soft that Alec can’t make it out from where he stands. Ariel nuzzles her head in deeper against Magnus’ chest and he leans down to place a kiss on the center of her forehead.

“Shhh shhh shhh,” he whispers. “Happy birthday, my little pumpkin. I love you.”

Alec’s chest tightens at the soft voice Magnus uses when he speaks to her, a voice full of all the
love and tenderness he has to offer a child. One that reminds Alec of dreams he had for them. Plans and excitement. All of the wonderful things he wanted for their life together. It reawakens the visceral pain he’s done everything in his power to bury.

Magnus looks up and spots him in the entryway. He worries that this will all be too much, that it will bring up the feelings they’ve done their best to overcome, and drive Magnus deeper into his resentment.

He sucks in a shallow breath and then… Magnus smiles at him. For the second time tonight, he smiles at him. And it’s bittersweet. There’s sadness in it but there’s also love; and maybe the love Alec sees in his smile isn’t meant for him, perhaps that love will take a while to come back. But there is a love there for what could have been and for all that they’ve lost.

Alec lifts the edge of his lips into the beginning of a smile. He imagines the look on his face mirrored back to Magnus is just as bittersweet. There’s so much he wants to say, so much he needs to say but just…can’t. Right now, all he can give Magnus is this moment, this one smile that might never be able to convey how sorry he is, but it’s open and it’s perhaps one of the most honest moments they’ve shared in weeks.

“Home?” Magnus questions softly.

Alec steps into the living room and kneels down by the couch. He brushes a sweat damp curl away from Ariel’s closed eyes, and places a kiss on her cheek. Magnus is watching him, Alec can sense his eyes on him, feel his breaths fall against his face. He rocks back onto his heels and smiles down at Ariel’s sleeping form.

“Yeah, let’s go home.”

Alec spends the remaining hour of his Thanksgiving day and the rest of the early morning hours going over patient files, familiarizing himself with their individual cases and going over CT scans and MRIs until his eyes are sore from staring at a screen. He closes his laptop and rubs at his eyes. There’s a quick knock at his door. “Dr. Lightwood-Bane…” The nurse on shift pauses and looks him over. “You okay?” she asks, concerned.

He stretches up. “Yeah, I’m fine. What’s up?”

Her concern falls away at his response and she perks up as if suddenly remembering why she knocked on his door. “Dr. Garroway asked me to get you. He needs you in his office.”

“Thanks, I’ll head that way now.”

Alec checks the time on his watch. It’s already eight in the morning. He grabs his coffee thermos on the way out of his office to refill it. He’s going to need the caffeine boost if he wants to make it through early morning rounds with patients.

After Thanksgiving dinner, he and Magnus went back to the loft, still in silence but not a silence that felt as heavy as it did that morning. He managed to stay awake long enough to see Magnus to bed and he laid beside him to take a quick two hour nap before dragging himself out of bed to make it in time for his shift at work. He should have spent the better part of Thanksgiving Day sleeping but that would have meant him missing out on spending time with his family…with Magnus. And effort is what he was putting into his relationship and if that meant losing a few
hours of sleep in order to have more time with Magnus, then so be it.

He passes by the break room on his way to Luke’s office and fills up his thermos with coffee.

He sips at the hot liquid as he knocks on the office door. “You sent for me?”

Luke looks up from his tablet and removes his glasses, gesturing at the office chair in front of his desk. “Have a seat.”

“Okay…” Alec lowers himself into the seat and takes another drink of his coffee.

Luke discards his glasses on top of the files that are stacked in front of him. He leans back in his chair and crosses his legs, regarding Alec closely, a concerned expression wrinkling his forehead.

The look in Luke’s eyes screams of disappointment. Alec isn’t sure what he did that could have caused this reaction from Luke but he finds the nauseating feeling of nervousness flip in his stomach. He combs at his hair with his fingers and waits.

Luke sighs and purses his lips. “I’m going to cut to the chase.”

Alec lets out a sigh of relief, puffing his cheeks out with the exhale and nods. Whatever it is, he would rather get it over with quickly.

“Now you know I don’t like bringing our private lives into work but your mother told me about what’s going on with you and Magnus…”

The nerves jump to his throat like a knot. He has done his best to keep things from his colleagues. It’s already too much having his entire family know about his failures, he really doesn’t want the people he works with to know them as well. Work is his safe place. It’s where he can come to escape his problems, or rather, hide from them.

The cat’s out of the bag though. It was bound to happen sooner or later. His mom just helped speed that process along by telling Luke…

Alec pauses and cants his head to the side. “Wait… my mother? When did you speak with my mother? And why?”

“Your mother and I…” Luke clears his throat with a quick cough. “we’ve been talking since the hospital charity drive she helped me organize.”

Alec remembers how much his mother helped with that event. The excitement and thrill she seemed to get at being able to do something meaningful with her time and her money since her early retirement. She and Luke had worked well alongside each other, he just never knew they got along so well that their communication would extend past that event. The event that was eight months ago. Something isn’t making sense, Alec thinks. There’s something he’s missing.

Luke begins to drum his fingers against each other. He’s fidgeting. He’s nervous.

“Talking as in…professional talking? You wanting to organize another gala talking?”

Luke’s brows jump and he scratches at one, nervously pursing his lips. “Not exactly.”

His mother’s glowing smile from Thanksgiving is the first thing he pictures. He knew there was something different about her— something happy. She had been at ease and even in the presence of his father, she’d had a confidence about her. She was no longer under the spell of resentment for
him or at least it didn’t seem that way. She had seemed to be above it, moved on from it.

Luke’s head dips bashfully, his gaze boring in on Alec expectantly.

Alec pales. “Oh my God.”

Holy shit.

His mom and Luke. Luke and his mom. Magnus is going to flip out when he tells him. Alec runs his fingers through his hair and almost lets a chuckle escape at the thought of his reaction.

Luke clears his throat again. “I’ve been losing a lot of time focusing on my career. After my wife died, I thought I’d never have anything else to focus on. And then I realized I could find… something worth leaving work aside. It took a long time for me to figure that out. You’ve had it all along, Alec, and I don’t want you to waste it the way I wasted my time. Life is more important than these hospital walls.”

Alec draws in a breath and nods. “I don’t want to lose Magnus but my job…”

“Work can only be a suitable excuse for so long, son. Work will never fulfill you the way you want it to if it means you have to give up on the man who’s been making you happy for as long as I’ve known you.” Luke hardens his eyes on Alec. “I just want you to get some sense in your thick skull before it’s too late.”

Alec laughs. “You’re right. I know you’re right.” He laces his fingers together and leans forward onto his knees.

Alec has wasted so much time, and apparently everyone has been able to see this except him. He’s been an idiot.

Luke smiles at him and shrugs his shoulder. That look Alec interpreted as disappointment is not disappointment at all. He can see now that it’s understanding, it’s the look of a man who has been in his place, who knows the pull of his passion for his career and also the pull of love on his heart. He’s older, he’s experienced, he’s learned the hard way and now he’s passing his knowledge onto Alec to help him turn things around before it’s too late.

“I’ve been wanting to take him up to the mountains for a weekend…”

“Then do it!” Luke exclaims, his smile growing. “What’s stopping you?”

“Wor—” Alec begins but stops when Luke’s smile drops and his gaze hardens on him.

Alec perks up in his seat and tries to contain the smile he feels taking over his face. “Well, Sir, with your permission, I’d like to request off this weekend so I can take my husband up to the mountains.”

Luke smirks and then dismisses Alec with a wave. “Please take a week off. I’ve seen about enough of you to last me a lifetime.”

Alec laughs and brings his hand to his forehead for a salute. “Yes, Sir.”

“Finally, the boy listens,” Luke says to himself and claps as Alec heads for the door.

Alec stops at the doorway and turns around. Luke is smiling brightly up at him.

“About you and my mom…” Alec returns his smile. “I’m glad you found someone to leave work
Luke places a hand to his chest and bows his head. “Thank you. Now get out of here before I have security drag your ass out.”

“I’m going, I’m going!” Alec shouts over his shoulder as he rushes to his office.

It’s early but Magnus is more than likely already at the office. If he goes straight home, packs, and books the trip, he and Magnus can be on their way to the mountains by lunch time.

It’s one in the afternoon before Alec can make it to Edom but with the tickets he bought, they can still be in Vermont by early evening. He pays the driver to wait outside the building. He has their bags packed and in the trunk, he has everything needed for a quick getaway. Now he just needs his husband.

His excitement bubbles in his chest as he crosses the lobby, waving at the security guard before reaching the elevators. He presses the button for Edom’s floor and stands impatiently as the doors slowly slide to a close. They’re almost shut when a thin, tanned arm with gold bangles dangling over the wrist slides in the crack, causing the doors to open once again.

He feels the cold burn of anger begin when Camille steps onto the car, a smirk on her face when she eyes him up and down. He refuses to give her the reaction she wants so he nods at her in greeting and focuses his eyes straight ahead on the lit floor buttons. He holds his hands clasped behind his back, keeps his chin up, and begins to count in his head to keep his mind off of the fact that he can feel her watching him.

She giggles beside him, a sound that’s cold and shrill. “You’re late. The party was a month ago.”

Alec grits his teeth and keeps looking ahead at the doors. “You mean the party where you tried to kiss my husband?”

He can see a laugh run through her body from the corner of his eye. “Well, someone has to since his own husband doesn’t bother to anymore.”

He considers his next words carefully. He knows she’s trying to get a rise out of him and he also knows, from what Magnus has expressed, that she is cunning. The type of snake to twist and use your words against you for her benefit. He considers them and then he finds he doesn’t care. “Don’t presume to know anything about my relationship, Camille. Because, frankly…” He turns to look at her. He’s tired of her and he wants to make himself clear. “It’s none of your goddamn business.”

The words seem to bounce right off of her because she’s smiling again, that knowing, manipulative smile of hers. “Magnus didn’t seem to agree when he told me all about what a terrible husband you’ve been.”

Alec scoffs. “And I suppose that’s when you took advantage of the situation and tried to steer it in your favor? How’d that turn out for you?” He crosses his arms and looks down at her. “Because I’m still here and you’re still… not with Magnus.”

Camille shrugs. “You may fool him now but I’m sure you will eventually fuck up again because that’s all you’ve been doing for as long as I’ve worked here. And when that happens, Magnus won’t have the energy to give you another chance to break his heart again. And I’ll be there to comfort him, although you prefer to call it me ‘taking advantage’ of him. That shows a lot about how undeserving you are of him.”
Alec bristles and clenches his fists. “I know I’m not deserving of Magnus. No one is. But you’re mistaken if you think he’s ever going to be with you.”

Camille flips her long dark hair over her shoulder and turns to cut her eyes at him. “Well, he certainly won’t be with you for long either if the visit he got from a divorce lawyer two days ago is anything to go by. Who knows what could happen then?”

Alec swallows. His throat suddenly feels thick, his tongue heavy in his mouth. “You’re mistaken. Magnus doesn’t want a divorce…”

The lack of conviction in his voice is palpable and he knows Camille can pick up on it. But he wasn’t expecting that information. For all he knows, Magnus could have been planning and filing for divorce during the silence they’ve shared since their last failed attempt at being a married couple.

“Oh. I guess he just has lunch with divorce lawyers for the fun of it then,” she says with a smirk. “That Ms. Gray looked like a shark too. I’d be careful if I were you.”

Tessa. He lets an ounce of relief flood through him. She could be wrong about this after all. He exhales and lets out a chuckle as the elevator doors open on their floor. She stops in her tracks at the sound and lifts an eyebrow at him.

“Tessa is one of Magnus’ oldest friends. I’m pretty sure lunch dates with friends isn’t cause for concern.” He turns to face her and walks back out of the door and he can’t help but smirk at the look of shock on her face. “Have a nice weekend, Camille. I’ll be spending it with my husband in the mountains.”

Camille stands, her mouth slightly open, her eyebrow twitching in irritation at not having the last word in what she thought would be damaging information. Alec turns around and continues walking down the hall towards Magnus’ office. He’d be lying if he said he wasn’t the tiniest bit nervous that maybe Magnus was trusting his divorce to Tessa. That their lunch could have been more than just a lunch, it could have been a meeting, paperwork, the beginning of a process that would end everything he cares about.

Magnus’ office door is open and so he rushes in, closing the door behind him quickly causing Magnus to jump in his seat. He paces and shakes his hands out, trying to jar the fear out of himself while Magnus’ eyes follow him until he stops in front of Magnus’ desk and breathes out, “Please tell me Tessa was just here for lunch.”

Magnus lays down a stack of papers in front of him and curves his eyebrow. “Yeah, she was in the neighborhood. Why? And since when are we speaking again?”

“I just…needed to be sure it wasn’t for professional reasons,” Alec says, letting out a relieved breath. Magnus’ features soften, he looks like he’s about to say something when Alec steps forward, a smile on his face he can’t seem to control. “Let’s get out of here.”

Magnus startles, surprised, and gestures at the stack of papers on his desk with the pen in his hand. “I’m kind of working here. And shouldn’t you be working too?” His brows drop in confusion, as if the realization that Alec isn’t at work as he should be just dawned on him.

Alec shakes his head and steps around Magnus’ desk. “I took some time off.” He looks down at the papers on Magnus’ desk. He’s so busy with this expansion project. The date is drawing close and he should let him work but they need this. Magnus deserves this. “Is there any way this can wait? Can Raphael maybe take over? Or Ragnar?”
Magnus’ surprise slowly turns into shock and wide eyes. “You took some…” He stops himself in a breath. “Okay, what’s going on, Alec?”

“I want to get away with you. And I thought we could go on that trip I owe you.” He crouches down to a knee and Magnus turns in his chair to face him. He takes Magnus’ hand in his. It’s warm and comforting. It’s what he’s missed. He meets Magnus’ shocked gaze and licks his lips before smiling up at him. “Will you allow me to whisk you away to Vermont?”

Magnus blinks down at him, a hesitant, almost bashful smile growing on his lips. His fingers curl against the palm of Alec’s hand, stroking the sensitive skin there. “For real? You’re not gonna bail on me and go back to the hospital at the first opportunity?”

“I’m one-hundred percent serious. No hospital emergency could get me to stay. Let’s go, right now. Just the two of us.” Alec bites his teeth into his bottom lip, nervously waiting for Magnus’ response to his uncharacteristic moment of spontaneity.

“I—” Magnus hesitates, his lips still parted in shock, his hand still in Alec’s. He stares back at Alec in silence for a moment, and he must see the honesty in Alec’s face or something because there’s a shift in his eyes behind his glasses. “I haven’t packed anything.”

“I packed for you,” Alec blurts out. “I’ve got everything handled so you don’t have to worry. All you have to do is say yes and come with me.”

Magnus bites on his lip and looks over at the workload on his desk. “Raphael can handle some extra work, that lazy fucker.” He looks back at Alec, smiling. “By all means, whisk me away, Alexander.”

Alec lets out a laugh and rises up enough to kiss Magnus softly on his lips. It’s an action so natural to him that he doesn’t even realize he’s done it until he pulls back and sees the blush on Magnus’ cheeks. “Thank God you said yes. I was worried you wouldn’t want to.”

He stands up fully now and pulls Magnus up with him.

Magnus throws him an exasperated look that is too etched with fondness to be remotely believable and the casual ease in which he does it makes Alec chuckle. “You know I’ve never been good at telling you no.”

Alec laughs louder this time and pulls Magnus in close to him. “Well, I’m glad you didn’t start trying today.”

He dips down and kisses Magnus again, sliding their hands together and lacing their fingers. The kiss is small and chaste, the most he’s willing to risk right now but it sends a warmth of longing through him that makes him want to curve his hand around Magnus’ face and draw him in until they’re both gasping for air. But he doesn’t. Instead he kisses him again at the corner of his smile and pulls back, tugging Magnus with him out the door and down the hallway.

“Tell Raphael his assignment for the day is on my desk and I’ll be back next week,” Magnus calls over his shoulder to Maureen who watches them with a grin she barely tries to hide.

Alec keeps Magnus close to him on the elevator ride down and once they’re in the car, he sits as close to Magnus as possible, holding his hand in his lap. This is his chance to make things right, do things the right way, and make up for what he hasn’t. He went too long not holding Magnus as much as he should have, so starting today, right now, he’ll be damned if he ever lets Magnus go again. Never again.
“Alec…” Magnus protests when Alec scoots in closer to his side, and covers Magnus’ eyes with his hands. “Is this necessary?”

“Oh.”

Magnus is a little bit right. He knows where they’re going so Alec covering his eyes isn’t exactly necessary but it’s fun. Besides, Magnus may know where they’re going but he doesn’t know where they’re going, or just how perfect Alec tried to make this. He wants Magnus to be surprised, blown away, swept off his feet.

Magnus whines. “Your hands are freezing.”

Alec kisses him on his cheek. “Sorry. Doctor hands. They’re my curse.”

He feels Magnus’ lashes flutter against his palms as he scoots back and settles in against Alec’s chest. “Well, then it’s your responsibility to warm me up.”

Magnus’ cheek lifts against his hands, smirking.

Magnus has different forms of smirking. The one he uses when he’s being a little shit about something, the one he gives when he’s being suggestive, the smarty-pants smirk he throws around when he’s right about something and knows he is, and there’s the pouty smirk he uses when he flirts— the one that caught Alec’s attention the first day they met when they would catch each other staring during that fated science class. It’s the smirk that never fails to drive him wild and Magnus has always known this, using it as a weapon against him to get his way. Alec doesn’t even have to see it now for it to work its magic on him.

He pulls Magnus in against him, and lays his head against Magnus’ shoulder.

“I think I can manage that,” he says and nuzzles his face deep in Magnus’ scarf until his nose brushes against the peep of warm skin he finds buried underneath. He plants a quick kiss on the patch of skin and then unburies his face enough to watch out the window.

Magnus giggles and tips his head back to rest against Alec’s.

The car winds up the mountain, the snow growing thicker the higher they go. It’s bright, beautiful, and peaceful. It’s just what they need.

He should have never let anything come between him and this. This, Magnus and all the love Alec feels for him, is all he has. His career is there for him now but it won’t always be, and when the day comes for him to retire, this is what he will always have. Well—something akin to fear grips at his stomach—he hopes this is what he will have. This is what he’s fighting for.

They pass a sign telling them they are only one mile from their destination.

“We’re almost there,” he whispers. “You okay?”

Magnus nods.

They ride in silence, nothing like the stressed silence they’ve lived in the past few weeks, but a comfortable silence that’s peaceful but somehow charged with excitement. Or maybe that’s just Alec.
The driver hums softly to himself as he turns the car around the bend and the cottage comes into view. The snow covers the bushes on the front and hangs heavily on the branches on the trees surrounding the home. It’s perfect.

The car pulls to a stop and the driver steps out to open the door for them.

“You first,” Alec says to Magnus who holds his hands out, blindly feeling his way out of the car with Alec close on his heels, hands still covering his eyes.

“This would be easier if I could see.” Magnus laughs and catches himself on the door frame when he almost stumbles.

“Straight ahead,” Alec guides him and they come to a stop. “Okay. You ready?”

“Please. I think my eyes are beginning to sweat.”

Alec laughs and then slowly uncovers Magnus’ eyes.

The cottage is just like the pictures Magnus had sent him what feels like ages ago now when he had tried to plan this exact trip for them. He had called it the ‘perfect cozy cottage’ and Alec had caught him, on occasion, looking at pictures of it on his phone or laptop, probably dreaming of the day when his husband would finally bring him here and not cancel on him at the last minute. Alec had to pull a few strings to get this place at the last minute but the owner was more than accommodating once Alec offered to pay twice the going rental rate. But Magnus had waited long enough for this moment, so Alec was willing to do whatever it took to make it perfect.

The smile that takes over Magnus’ face when his eyes land on the cottage, and the soft gasp of surprise that escapes him makes it more than worth it.

“It’s been waiting a long time for me to bring you,” Alec whispers softly into his ear.

“It was worth the wait,” Magnus murmurs after a moment of silence where he takes the view in, tilting his head up to press a light kiss to Alec’s cheek.

When he pulls back his eyes are sparkling, practically glowing in the light of the snow that surrounds them. Alec feels a warmth begin to bloom in his cheeks where he can still feel the soft kiss of Magnus’ lips. His lips jump into a smile, the pink blush rising in his cheeks, and he ducks his head down.

“I’m sorry I made you wait,” he says.

Magnus smiles at him, a small but genuine smile that fills Alec’s chest with so much love he finds it hard to breathe. “We’re here now.”

Alec nods and then notices the shiver that courses through Magnus’ body. He runs his hands along the length of Magnus’ arms. “Let’s get you inside before you freeze,” he says, the smile still on his face as he leans in to kiss the cold tip of Magnus’ nose.

Magnus closes his eyes and hums, smiling.

They get their luggage from the car, pay the driver, and enter the code that grants them access to the cottage. Magnus lets out a happy sigh and smiles widely when they enter the bedroom with the large bed covered in a cream colored, plush duvet. There’s a fireplace beside the bed as well as one in the living room that looks incredibly inviting. He remembers seeing a stack of logs on the porch of the cottage, perfect for firewood. He smiles to himself at the thought of Magnus chopping
Magnus drops to the floor and is already unpacking his luggage, carefully eyeing the outfits Alec picked out for him.

“I hope I did okay. I went for warm and comfortable since it’s just us and the mountains,” Alec explains; hoping the assortment of sweaters, jeans, joggers, and tees meets Magnus’ expectations. He’s not quite as good at styling as Magnus is but he’s learned a thing or two over the course of their relationship. He had to, he’s married to Magnus Lightwood-Bane who is always styled perfectly with expertly coiffed hair, and makeup artfully applied to enhance his already breathtaking beauty.

Magnus grabs the sweaters and stands with a smile. “You brought my favorites.”

Alec begins to expel a relieved breath when Magnus hums disappointedly which causes a drop in the pit of his stomach.

“But you did forget my Dolce & Gabbana butterfly sweater.” Magnus pouts.

“Wha— No, it’s in there.” Alec drops down to the open suitcase and digs through the pants. “I’m sure it is.” He pulls out the sweater in question from the bottom of the case. “It’s one of the first things I packed. I love it on you.”

Magnus’ eyes are wide as he takes the sweater from Alec. He unfolds the sweater and lays it across his chest. The shock quickly falls and he laughs quietly, an endeared smile lifting his now blushing cheeks. “Alexander, I was only joking. I didn’t mean to make you panic.”

“Oh.” Alec chuckles and shakes his head at himself.

“Thank you though.” Magnus brushes his thumb across Alec’s cheek up to the curling ends of his hair that hang against his brow. His eyes pass over Alec slowly, his lips still curled into a smile for him when he leans forward and presses a kiss to Alec’s lips. It lasts only for a breath and in the next, Magnus is off to finish unpacking their luggage, leaving Alec standing there, cheeks burning, heart beating harder than it has in a long time.

He gives himself a moment to catch his breath before joining in the unpacking efforts. They work quickly, taking the simple belongings for their simple trip and putting them in the shared space of the armoire in their room. Alec takes the last of his folded pants and sets them in the drawer, standing up with aching knees from his squatting position. Magnus is finished by now and is leaning his shoulder against the furniture, arms crossed, watching Alec with that same endeared smile on his face.

“Done.” Alec dusts his hands off. “So, I, uh, saw some logs out on the porch. What do you say to chopping some firewood and putting these fireplaces to good use?”

Magnus’ brows jump up at the request. “Chop firewood?”

“Chop firewood,” Alec repeats, a grin pulling at his mouth when Magnus’ eyes glimmer playfully. Magnus hesitates, his tongue clicking against his teeth. The hesitance turns to a humored chuckle which then slips into another one of Magnus’ coy smiles. “Depends. Are you going to do it with or without your shirt on? Because I could be convinced.”

Alec undoes the top buttons of his henley. “You know…I was thinking you would be the shirtless one but I guess if that’s what it takes…” He stops suddenly when he looks out of the window over
Magnus’ shoulder where the large, white snowflakes have begun to fall again. “Although it is snowing…pretty steadily.”

Magnus whips around to follow Alec’s gaze. He tips his head and then shrugs up a shoulder. “I guess your shirt will have to be thin enough to do the trick.” He turns and gives Alec a wink before patting him on the chest. “I’m sure even in this snow you’ll work up a sweat.”

Alec follows after him. “We will work up a sweat.”

Magnus was right about the sweat. Chopping wood, even in the snow, is enough of a workout to have them shed their coats and build up a sheen of sweat where Alec can feel his shirt clinging to him.

Magnus swings the axe down on the standing log, splitting it perfectly down its center. Out of the two of them, Magnus is the better wood chopper. Not only does he manage to do it swiftly, and cleanly in one strike almost every time but he does it with an air of effortless grace, and he looks good doing it. His coat is tied around his waist and the sleeves of his sweater are now bunched up at the elbows, giving Alec a perfect view of his perfectly toned forearms. The thin material sticks to the muscles of his back, shifting and showing every muscle when he swings his axe up and down in a single movement.

Magnus leaves the axe in the log and adds the split pieces into a bundle in the basket they brought along with them. He wipes at his brow and pauses when he catches Alec watching him.

“You like what you see?”

“Very much.” Alec takes the basket of cut logs in one arm and wraps his other arm around Magnus’ waist, pulling him in and whispering in his ear. “Let’s go make that fire.”

Magnus tosses the axe onto the stump behind him. “And dinner because I am starving.”

Alec leads the way back to the cottage and carries the wood through the open door. “I cook and you build the fire?”

“I can help you cook,” Magnus offers, kicking off his boots by the door.

“You sure?” Alec sets the wood by the fireplace. “You pretty much chopped all the firewood. You can rest and I’ll take care of dinner.”

Magnus waves him off and begins to build the fire. “The fire will take two minutes to start and besides, it’s spaghetti. Of course I’m going to help you cook.”

He rolls his eyes at Alec and then holds his hand out. “Pass me the lighter, please.”

Alec finishes putting up the now clean dishes from their dinner. A simple spaghetti and meatballs, a recipe they used to make all the time when Alec was still in his general surgery residency. The long shifts, Magnus’ late classes and then meetings for the start of his company made it difficult for them to take time to cook an extravagant dinner so spaghetti and meatballs quickly became one of their go-to meals. Alec would make the noodles and the sauce while Magnus made the
meatballs. It was a recipe they learned together as a team and one they only ever made when they were together. It’s been a long time since that last happened and the nostalgia of cooking beside Magnus was intoxicating. Things almost felt like the old days, like the simple times when they were young and foolishly in love with each other.

Magnus is beside the fire now, waiting for him.

This day could not have gone better, Alec thinks as he pours the freshly made hot chocolate into two mugs, completing it with a sprinkle of marshmallows on top.

He walks over to the fire and his heart does a flip when Magnus grins up at him and opens up the blanket he’s wrapped up in. “Come here, you.”

Alec sets the mugs of hot chocolate down on the hearth of the fireplace and curls in against Magnus who then envelopes him in his arms and the large quilt. He leans his head back over the curve of Magnus’ shoulder and from this angle he can see his soft feather-like lashes and the firelight glowing from the shimmer across Magnus’ cheek bone.

Magnus angles his chin down to look at him.

“Hi,” Alec says.

Magnus smiles in response. “Hi,” he whispers back.

“How are you?”

Magnus chuckles out a breath. “I’m doing well, thank you. And you?”

Alec closes his eyes and feels Magnus’ breath glide against his cheeks; he lets the strength of Magnus’ chest lift him up and down with every breath, rocking him gently; he feels Magnus’ heartbeat thump against his back, strong and steady and comforting.

Life has given them obstacle after obstacle, one cut after another, and now, at this low point in his life, after all the mistakes he’s made, he somehow finds it in him to feel completely content right now - right where he is - in Magnus’ arms.

“I’m perfect,” he breathes out and opens his eyes so that he can see if that put a smile on his husband’s face. And there is a smile, a small one but it’s there, and that’s enough for Alec. It raises a frighteningly exorbitant hope in him that perhaps the divorce is cast out of Magnus’ mind for good now, that they can and will find their way back to each other just like they always have.

Magnus looks away and points with a lift of his chin in the direction of their mugs. “The hot chocolate smells delicious.”

Alec sits up and Magnus adjusts his arms out so that Alec can retrieve the mugs from the hearth.

“Here you go.” Alec passes Magnus his mug and then takes a sip, blowing on it first before tucking himself in against Magnus again. “Catch me up on your life. How’s the Paris expansion coming along?”

“It’s almost complete. We’re in the final stages now and soon Edom will be truly implanted in Europe,” Magnus says with a deep breath of relief, and a glow of pride.

Magnus has worked so hard, Alec knows, and if there’s anyone in this world that deserves the great things that are coming, it’s him. “I’m proud of you. You’ve worked so hard for this.”
“Thank you, dear.” Magnus looks down as he sips at his drink and licks the traces of chocolate from his lips. He lets out a quiet sigh and then looks back up at Alec, his mouth opens and then closes, he’s rubbing his fingers together and over the smooth gold of his wedding band. “Look, I um—I have to talk to you about something and I don’t want you to get mad, especially considering recent events…”

Alec sits up fully, turning in between Magnus’ legs to face him. He rests his arm atop Magnus’ bent knee. He can feel his heart beating in his throat when Magnus expels a long breath as if to brace himself from some terrible fallout he fully expects to happen.

Fears and possibilities flurry through Alec’s brain, trying to land on a single thing this could be about. He tries to deflect the worst theories that he doesn’t even want to entertain. He waits patiently for Magnus to collect his thoughts while he stirs the hot chocolate in his mug, watching the marshmallows bob up and down through the surface. He stops and deep brown eyes meet Alec’s.

“I heard from the CEO of the North American branch of Sephora. He wants me to fly out to San Francisco so we can talk about the Paris expansion and his concerns over whether or not Edom will be able to meet the demand without affecting his stores.”

This isn’t what Alec had expected and he’s so glad to be proven wrong. He wants to laugh at the relief from it because his mind had gone to so many different places and this was the last thing he had imagined.

“Of course you can.” Alec scoffs, his worry leaving him with every word. “I can’t believe he would even doubt you. When does he want you to go?”

Magnus huffs out a half-hearted laugh and begins to restlessly work his thumb into the palm of his hand. “As soon as possible. So I’ll probably have to leave for San Francisco as soon as we get back. I’m not sure I’ll even have time to go home before I have to leave again.”

“Well, it’ll be great, you can go and prove to him that he has nothing to worry about when it comes to you or Edom.” Alec chuckles softly and takes Magnus’ hand in his. “Magnus, why do you think I would get mad about this? It’s not like this is the first time you’ve had to go out of town for a few days. It’s not a big deal.”

Magnus’ mouth twists into a frown and he looks away. Alec can feel the prodding, nagging feeling in the back of his mind return in an instant, the one that tells him that this is it. This is how Magnus is going to break things off for good. The voice that whispers those endless possibilities - all resulting in their failure. It’s discouraging and relentless in its assault of doubt. Alec’s heart stutters on his exhale. No, they’ve had a great day together. They’ve kissed, they’ve laughed, and he’s sitting closer to Magnus now than he has in a long time. Everything is going perfectly. There’s no way that Magnus is going to end things right now. There’s no way he could have been reading the entire day completely wrong.

He brushes the thoughts away and he reaches out to curl his hand around the back of Magnus’ neck because something is obviously bothering his husband. Enough to make him uncharacteristically timid. The warmth of Magnus’ skin mixed with the rough edges of the short hair at the nape of his neck is grounding. It’s familiar and it helps Alec’s focus come back to the moment. To Magnus. “Hey, Babe, what is it?”

Magnus looks up at the pet name that slipped before Alec could catch it. He purses his lips and takes in another bracing breath. “It won’t just be me that’s going. He’s also asked for Camille to go.”
Alec’s mind empties in a rush and he feels as if the floor has dropped from beneath him. His chest constricts tightly around each breath, making it harder for him to exhale. Every ounce of hatred he has towards Camille comes rushing forward, souring in his gut when his mind suddenly floods with all the ways she might try and take advantage of this situation, or opportunity as she would no doubt view it. She’s already willing to push the boundaries at their home office, what wouldn’t she be willing to try thousands of miles away with only Magnus for company?

Magnus reaches out to slide his hand up Alec’s arm, stopping just under the sleeve of his t-shirt to rub circles on the sensitive skin of Alec’s bicep, a gesture that always helps to soothe him. “If I could send Raphael in my place, I would. I don’t want to go but I can’t… I can’t risk the bad impression it might give if I don’t.”

Alec closes his eyes and then rubs his hand down his face, forcing out the trapped breath. He doesn’t want to even humor these thoughts right now, he doesn’t want to affirm the fears Magnus had over telling him. This is communication, this is honesty and trust. This is what makes a marriage work. This is the only thing that will make their marriage work now.

His mind goes back to that fateful first night and the confession Magnus gave him. They had always been honest with each other, it was a foundation of their relationship, but over the past couple of years that building block has crumbled. They’d hidden more from each other than they have in their entire fifteen year relationship. So when Magnus told Alec about Camille and his hesitant desires to actually reciprocate her intentions, he had started their new journey of honesty. They had started to repair that foundation and as much as it hurt, Alec needed to know. He needed to hear the truth, and here Magnus is trusting him with his heart again, just as Alec is trusting Magnus with his, and in order for them to overcome this, that trust will have to be tested. And life always finds a way to test them.

Alec reaches up and holds Magnus’ hand that is still resting on his arm, feeling Magnus still at the touch. He’s on edge, like Alec, always waiting for the sky to fall and bring down everything they’ve built around them.

He licks his lips and tips his chin down to kiss Magnus’ fingertips. “I trust you.” Magnus’ hand softens in his grip and his entire body seems to relax. “What I said the other day… I don’t mean that. I know you would never hurt me in that way, and I’m sorry if I made you feel like I ever truly doubted you for a second. I was completely out of line.”

“You mean that?”

“Yeah. I never doubted you before and I’m not going to start now.”

“Even though…” Magnus begins, stopping when Alec gives his hand a gentle squeeze as he pulls himself closer into Magnus.

“Even though what? You didn’t do anything. You never crossed that line even when you were unhappy with me and a small part of you wanted to. I’ll admit, it’s been difficult to look past that and to stop being angry about it. But the fact remains, you didn’t do anything, and I just had to… remind myself of that. But whether or not I trust you, there’s no question there. You’re my husband and I know you, Magnus, and I trust you.”

Magnus grips onto Alec’s hand, pressing their palms together. “Thank you for giving me your trust again.”

“You never truly lost it. Now Camille on the other hand…” Alec chuckles at the groan and eye roll Magnus gives at the mention of her name. “She’s a snake waiting on her opportunity to strike
so just… promise me you’ll do your best to avoid getting in situations that might give her that opportunity. Okay?”

“Alexander…” A weight seems to lift off of Magnus’ shoulders when he breathes out Alec’s name with a gentle adoration Alec hasn’t heard in a very long time. “You have my word. Besides, I already made arrangements for Raphael to take over my part of the Paris expansion from here on out. This trip will be the last time I have to work directly with Camille and I plan to keep it that way.”

Since their disastrous lunch encounter, Alec thought his actions and demands of getting rid of Camille had pushed Magnus too far. After all, Magnus’ arguments made sense; professionally he would be bringing his own company to ruin if he were to fire Camille without justifiable reason. Alec knows this but the thought of them working together had apparently been worrying on him more than he had noticed, even though he had put it aside since that day. He hadn’t wanted to focus on it, or bring up the topic again, because the last thing he wanted was to push Magnus to his breaking point.

But Magnus is going to make this compromise for Alec.

Alec unlaces their fingers and tries to move in closer because he can’t get close enough. He’s overwhelmed with appreciation and love for Magnus. Magnus giggles at Alec’s attempts and opens his legs wider to make more room for him. Alec unfolds his legs and opens them to rest over Magnus’ thighs. He tucks his heels behind Magnus and finally scoots himself as close as he can get.

His arms find their way around Magnus’ neck and his lips find their way to the edge of Magnus’ smile. “Thank you for doing that for me. It means more than you know.”

Magnus returns the quick peck and twines his arms around Alec’s waist. “We promised each other we would try and I will do whatever I can to get us back.”

Alec kisses Magnus again, softer and slower this time. “I’m so glad we’re on the same page.”

Magnus chuckles and returns the kiss before pulling back. “You know our hot chocolate isn’t going to be so hot if we don’t drink it now?”

Alec hums. “I guess you’re right.” He reaches beside Magnus and grabs his mug for him before leaning back to retrieve his own, being sure not to leave his position.

They sip at their hot chocolate in silence, exchanging smiles and kisses to clear away traces of chocolate, completely comfortable being wrapped up in each other.

Magnus wipes at his mouth to reveal lips that are now pulled back into a tight smile. “What about you?” he asks quietly. “Anything new at work?”

The question is forced, Alec can tell. It’s a way for Magnus to break their silence and try to return the same interest Alec has shown in his job. Alec wishes Magnus would have picked any other topic because his career only ever serves to bring the biting resentment back to Magnus’ eyes. No matter how hard he tries to hide it and work past it, it’s there. But he’s trying. Magnus is trying and that means everything.

“Not much really.” Alec scratches at the stubble on his jaw, unsure with how much information he should actually give. How much of the question is Magnus making an effort and how much is genuine interest. Not a lot, he’s sure. But Magnus watches him intently, waiting for more.
“Well, actually, I submitted an article I’ve been working on for the Neuro Summit next year,” Alec says. He decides to share because effort only works if it’s both ways.

Magnus’ eyes widen, intrigued, and he straightens up which puts a few inches between them. “An article you’re writing? What’s it on?” His brows drop and the intrigue is gone and replaced with a curious suspicion. “How come you haven’t said anything about it until now? When did you do this?”

Alec takes a quick drink from his mug and then sets it down on the floor beside them before continuing. He had wanted to keep it a secret until he knew whether or not he’d been selected but he’s getting tired of not sharing his life with Magnus. They used to share everything with each other and not doing that now feels strange, it makes things feel like a burden when they shouldn’t. He should be excited about this, and he is, to a certain extent but there has been something missing when it came to his studies, and that is Magnus’ support. He always counted on having it to push him through, to carry him when he couldn’t go on anymore, and trying to do this without him just isn’t working. He needs his partner, his husband.

Besides, Magnus is the whole reason why he chose this particular field of study. Alec was doing this for him. He’d seen the effects it had on his life first hand. He saw the damage it left in its wake. He is doing this so that maybe one day, someone won’t have to watch their mother go through what Magnus’ mother did. So that one day, a son won’t have to see his mother’s condition deteriorate in such a cruel and unforgiving way.

He takes Magnus’ hand again. “I didn’t want to say anything unless I got accepted and I didn’t even get the courage to submit the application until last week.”

“And we weren’t exactly on speaking terms last week,” Magnus responds, tucking their fingers in against his palm, regret shadowing his eyes.

Alec hums in response and shrugs a shoulder. “Well, we are now. That’s what matters and I don’t even get the courage to submit the application until last week.”

“I’m writing on the Deep Brain Stimulation procedure for Parkinson’s and on introducing a new methodology that could make it beneficial to patients in the early stages of the disease. Giving them more time and improving their quality of life.”

Magnus’ hand squeezes around Alec’s fingers. There are tears budding along the lines of his eyes. This procedure was not one that was available to them when his own mother was suffering from the damages of the disease. Money being the main reason as it is not a procedure often covered by insurance and also because it was not yet a procedure Alec could perform at the early stage of his training, nor would he have been allowed to due to the nature of his relationship with her. This was always something he regretted and desperately wished he could change. And even though he can’t turn back time to help Magnus’ mother, what he can do is use his time now to help others like her.

“So”—Magnus swallows and clears his throat, the tears don’t fall when he blinks but they spread out and moisten the lower lids of his eyes—“when do you expect to find out and what happens if you’re accepted?”

“I think they’ll start letting us know in January. And if I’m accepted, I’ll be able to give a presentation in front of the most prestigious surgeons and neurologists in the world. And if they like what they hear, I could possibly get funding to lead my own study so we can start helping improve people’s lives.”
Magnus looks over Alec’s shoulder and stares into the fire, sniffing back the tears Alec can see are on the verge of falling.

“Wow. That’s really… incredible, Alec,” he finally manages to say, voice broken.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner.”

Magnus shakes his head. “Don’t be. I get why you didn’t.” He faces Alec again and Alec feels his heart clench and ache in his chest when he sees the heartbreak and worry marred on his husband’s face. “Does this mean that you’ll be home even less now?”

Alec doesn’t want this. He doesn’t want to see this look on his husband’s face anymore. He’s tired of seeing it there, he’s tired of the furrowed brows and disappointment. He wants the smiles and laughter back. He wants the love and affection to return in every look and touch. And he can bring this back to him, one small step at a time. Starting with this.

“Well, if my study gets chosen and if I get funding, then I will have to form my research team and then we can start; but I’ve already decided that if this all happens, I’ll cut back on my surgery hours so that it doesn’t take up any extra time. And I’m going to use the time before then to finally hire that other surgeon.” Alec reaches up to wipe away a tear that formed at the corner of Magnus’ eye. “I promise I won’t let this take away from my time with you.”

He promises and he will not let Magnus down this time, not again, not ever.

Magnus closes his eyes and hums. The sound is so sad and full of doubt that it makes Alec’s stomach turn on itself. He hates himself for planting this seed of doubt in Magnus’ mind. For making Magnus believe, by his questionable actions, that he actually comes second to Alec’s career.

“I hope so. I’m happy for you either way. I know you’ve always wanted to dedicate time to research.” Magnus opens his eyes to meet Alec’s and they soften because even though his heart has been broken and trampled on by his husband, probably more times than he can count, Magnus still has the strength in him to support Alec in this.

Alec strokes his thumb along the back of Magnus’ hand. “It’s a big opportunity and can hopefully, one day, make a real difference.”

Magnus brings his other hand up to Alec’s cheek, cupping it in his palm, and smiles. “If anyone can do it, it’s you.”

“Yeah?”

“Mhm. I have no doubt.” Magnus glides his thumb against Alec, warming his cheek.

Alec leans into his palm. “I’m going to need your strength when I hit bumps on the road.”

Magnus leans in to drop a quick peck to his lips. “I’ll be there whenever you need me.”

I’ll be there. This is a promise too.

Alec leans in for another kiss, breathing in the sweet scent of chocolate that lingers on their lips and presses their lips together. “Where would I be without you?” he says, keeping their mouths close together and leaning his forehead against Magnus’.

“Utterly lost, I’m sure,” Magnus replies playfully, a teasing smirk on his lips.
Alec chuckles and pulls back to look at his infinitely patient and kind husband. “You’re absolutely right.”

They spend the rest of the evening talking about everything from future business meetings in Paris to their top choices on where they would want to retire. They talked more in one night than they have in the past two years combined. Alec laughed until he cried, he smiled so hard his cheeks hurt, and he talked until he honestly ran out of things to say. They talked until they both eventually fell asleep in a heap of cuddled bodies in front of the fire, and they would have stayed there had it not been for Magnus. Alec had felt him gently urging him awake and Alec complied, allowing Magnus to bring him up to his feet so they could go to the bedroom together.

Now, Alec has his arms wrapped around Magnus, his nose buried in his hair, smelling the sandalwood of his shampoo, feeling his warm skin against his chest.

Alec sighs heavily, relaxing his body into the mattress and up against the smooth of Magnus’ back, he’s not sure when they took their shirts off but he’s glad they did because he can’t think of a time when he has been more comfortable than he is at this very moment.

He never thought they could be here again. For the longest time, after everything that happened, after everything they had been through, he thought that he had lost Magnus. Sure their marriage survived but what was survival without living? Without this?

He never imagined he would be able to hold Magnus like this again and feel his heart against the palm of his hand, or that he would feel Magnus’ fingers curl around his wrist and hold onto him the way he’s doing now. He thought he had lost this when this part of themselves faded; but he didn’t, Magnus is here now, in his arms.

He’s already lost so much, losing this too would surely destroy him. A part of him has already been destroyed with no hope of repair, but Magnus… Magnus is the only thing keeping him together, keeping him alive.

Alec doesn’t need much to be happy, he learned early on how to survive in a world that struggled to accept him, and with parents who fought against what he is before eventually giving in. He’s had and he’s lost and he’s learned what it takes to break a man until he thinks there’s no coming back. He knows what he can live with and what he has to learn to live without. But he knows there’s only one thing, one part of him that he can never lose - and that is Magnus - Alec knows he cannot live without him.

As he arises from a heavy slumber, slowly warming up to the world materializing around him, Magnus is immediately aware of two things. One, he hasn’t slept that well in a very long time – weeks, if not months, probably years– and two, the warmth surrounding him isn’t only coming from the radiant sun peeking behind the mountain and through the cottage’s window. It also, and primarily, comes from Alec’s arm draped over his chest, resting on his shoulder, and from Alec’s face buried into his hair, his soft snores landing in delicate puffs of air against Magnus’ skin.

Magnus had forgotten waking up could be a pleasure. It hasn’t been one for a long time, for his mornings have been plagued with solitude, silence or the inexorable distance that had settled between them and felt indefectible. There is a fleeting moment when Magnus feels whole again, his body and his mind reacting to the touch and sending his heart in overdrive, and then the three relax altogether and he heaves out a quiet but peaceful sigh, shuffling imperceptibly closer to his unconscious husband.
Outside, the snow has stopped falling, but all he can see through the window are trees covered in a thick blanket of white that lead the way to the mountain, forming a breathtaking painting. It is the perfect scenery to their getaway and Magnus has waited for months to get here, had picked this exact cottage himself, but he had lost hope of ever being able to enjoy the utter silence surrounding them with Alec.

The day before feels like a dream Magnus hasn’t quite awaken from yet. Alec’s sudden spontaneity had taken him by surprise, as it always did. Alec has never been the spontaneous type, unless it involved romantic gestures, although they are usually smaller than barging in Magnus’ office in the middle of the day to whisk him away to Vermont.

It is the small things, though, that have slowly disappeared, and perhaps Alec had felt the need to do something grand enough to persuade Magnus that the small ones would be coming back too.

The thing is, Magnus isn’t sure what to believe anymore, dispossessed of the faith he once laid in Alec, in himself and in them. He can’t bring himself to rely instead on the spontaneity they have lost.

Alec shifts against him, his nose softly bumping against Magnus’ ear, and he huffs out in his sleep, humming contentedly. Mentally scolding himself for his train of thought, Magnus lets himself relax. They promised to make efforts, and this is Alec doing just that, listening to Magnus’ complaints about his insane hours at work and their time together being too scarce and working to fix it by giving Magnus something he has wanted for months.

It is not their biggest problem, and it is not the thing Magnus needs the most from Alec, but it is something, and Magnus will take it and cherish it for what it is: another effort towards fixing their fractured marriage. Magnus needs to contribute as much as Alec, and maybe Alec is right on one thing, maybe it can start with small gestures.

With that thought in mind, he slips out of Alec’s arms, missing his warmth at once, and shrugs on a shirt that he doesn’t bother to button up before heading to the kitchen. It takes him a moment to find his marks in the unfamiliar environment but after rummaging through a few cupboards, he is pouring batter into the waffle iron and the smell of waffles fills the kitchen.

He puts on his good mood playlist as he works, dancing lazily to the beat as he prepares them a breakfast worthy of such name. He’s getting into the upbeat rhythm of a Bruno Mars song, spinning his whole body as he swirls from the table where he just deposited a waffle on top of the pile back to the stove to prepare another one when his gaze lands on the calendar on the counter he hadn’t noticed before, right next to the large bouquet of winter flowers that was left there for them.

Magnus goes still, the air knocked out of his lungs, and the music vanishes, replaced by a deafening buzz his mind provides as a brutal wakeup call. It’s already the 24th of November. December is right around the corner, and… God, Magnus used to love December.

He loved the snow, the big heavy snow that silenced even New York and rendered the world so quiet and beautiful. He loved it as a child, when his mother would take him to the park, long before she got sick, and he would run and play around until he was out of breath but all the more happy to share the moment with his mother. He loved the holiday decorations, how they set the mood for the festivities to come, joyful and full of magnificent colors. One of his favorite memories with Alec still is the first Christmas tree they decorated together. Magnus had managed to convince him to wear an awful Christmas sweater –not that it had ever taken much from Magnus to convince Alec of doing anything– and they had dressed up a tree in their tiny apartment while they were still both students, but they had done more than that. That day, they had built a tradition and a home. At least, Magnus thought so at the time, but the tradition has dissolved with their marriage, and there
has been times where their home didn’t feel like one. He loved his birthday, or at least celebrating it. It was always the perfect excuse to gather all of his loved ones together and do what no one could do as well as he did: throw an epic party.

He used to love Christmas. For a very long time, Magnus had indeed thought that it was the most wonderful time of the year, if only for the blessed time he spent with his family. It had been just he and his mother for many years until he had met Alec, and then it had been Christmas Eve with his mother and Alec, and the next day with the Lightwoods who had slowly but surely adopted him as their own. The first time he had truly bonded with Maryse was on Christmas day on the second year of his relationship with Alec, not too long before Alec had proposed for the first time; they had decorated Christmas cookies together while she told him all the embarrassing stories about Alec that his partner ought to know to tease him relentlessly.

December had been all of that and more. It had been impossibly cheesy holiday movies cuddled up on the couch with Alec. It had been the pipes of the radiators of their upstairs neighbors exploding and flooding their second apartment together on the day after Christmas; and Jace, Isabelle, Ragnor, Raphael and Catarina coming over to help them salvage what they could of their furniture, and somehow managing to make them laugh in the process despite their state of distress at the damages. It had been sneaking up on Alec as they walked down the streets of Brooklyn to drop a snowball on his head and running away as soon as Alec started running after him, claiming he would get revenge but laughing as hard as Magnus was himself. It had been a month filled with happy memories and magic.

And Magnus used to love December, up until that dreadful date that seems to be staring back at him defiantly now as he glances at the calendar, cowing him into submission.

Death, Magnus has learned, doesn’t care for dates or tainting happy memories. It comes and it takes, and it leaves nothing but questions that stay pending forever.

*Why you? Why us? Why do I miss the unknown? Why couldn’t you be here with us? When will I let it go?*

Grief rips and tears and tortures, and it left a hole in Magnus’ chest that he never got a chance to heal.

It isn’t true, he reminds himself. His chance is now. Their chance is here, in this cottage in Vermont, where maybe Magnus will finally be able to open his heart again and tell his husband about the hurricane of resentment and sorrow that refuses to leave his mind alone.

Perhaps Alec will know how to fix this, just like he always knew how to fix the pieces of Magnus’ broken heart up until he was caught into the storm himself.

And Magnus just wants it gone. All of it.

Just not Alec. Never Alec.

He has lost too much already, and he isn’t sure he would survive losing Alec too.

His mother would tell him to stop doubting his nerves of steel, and to endure because it is in his blood, to bear hardship and come out victorious. But his mother is among the list of losses he overcame thanks to Alec, and who would he have to make the everyday pain of grief plunged into his heart tolerable if he were to lose Alec?

It is the smell of something burning that finally tears him out of his morbid thoughts, and he
quickly looks away from the calendar to the waffle maker, where the waffle has turned a dark, unappealing brown.

With a sigh, Magnus scoops it up on his spatula and throws it in the trash, forcing himself to focus on the music still playing from his phone and nothing else. He turns the coffee machine on, finishes the rest of the batter quickly, and rearranges the Belgian waffles and some syrup on a tray, pouring the coffee in two mugs before heading to the bedroom.

He somehow manages to open the door with his elbow and walks inside, putting the tray down on the night table before climbing back into bed. Alec is still asleep, his arm spread at his side where Magnus was laying not too long ago, but he isn’t snoring anymore and his breathing is lighter, a slight change that Magnus has learn to identify as a telltale sign that he will wake up soon.

Alec looks younger in his sleep, albeit not as young as he did when Magnus made them breakfast in bed after their very first night together all those years ago. He had made them Belgian waffles then too, and Alec had panicked upon waking up, scared of missing his morning class, but a taste of Magnus’ waffles had been enough to calm him down—and make him pliant enough that he hadn’t felt too bad about missing that class so they could have an encore of the night before.

Magnus had often thought that he had fallen in love without hope of ever turning back that same morning when he had allowed himself a couple of minutes to watch Alec’s features softened in his slumber, a mirror of peace and innocence that contrasted greatly with the man driven by passion he had shown Magnus the night before.

Fifteen years later, Alec still looks like the epitome of serenity as he sleeps, the only difference in the small wrinkles that are now lightly marking his skin.

Magnus smiles softly to himself, pushing away the heartache he almost let consume him when he saw how time had flown by earlier, and brings a hand down to card his fingers through Alec’s messy hair, rubbing his thumb against the lines of his forehead gingerly.

Alec’s hazels flutter open and he smiles sleepily as he stares up at Magnus and immediately closes them again as he stretches lazily and shuffles closer, laying his palm flat against the naked skin of Magnus’ stomach, stroking it absently.

“Morning,” he mumbles, the word half muffled by his pillow, a content grin spreading on his lips. “Something smells fantastic.”

Magnus leans down to press a quick peck to his mouth. “I made us some breakfast.”

Alec’s eyes shoot open at once, round with excitement as they settle on Magnus. “Please tell me you made your Belgian waffles,” he says, barely containing his enthusiasm.

Magnus smirks. It is good to know that despite all the hardships and struggles, some things never change.

“I made my Belgian waffles,” he states with a teasing wink.

“You’re my favorite person in the world,” Alec says with all his characteristic bluntness, absently licking his lips as his eyes flicker with joy, and Magnus smiles to himself, turning toward the tray to hide the flush he can feel prickling on his cheeks.

He moves to grab it, ignoring the stream of shivers that runs through his skin and seems to penetrate his every bone when the movement makes Alec’s hand slide from his stomach to rest on the bed. Magnus lays the tray down between them and he doesn’t have the time to settle back
against the headboard that Alec is already stuffing his mouth with a waffle.

“So, what is it that you –” Alec pauses to swallow and points a finger at him “– want to do today?”

Magnus chuckles, biting on his bottom lip, and reaches out to wipe some sugar off the corner of Alec’s lips. “You know there’s no rush, right?” he probes, gently teasing. “You don’t need to eat them all in five minutes.”

Alec sticks his tongue out to lick up the remaining sugar. “You know I’ve always loved your waffles. I’ve missed them so much.”

The corner of Magnus’ mouth curves into a fond smile. “I missed making them. Breakfast for one isn’t fun.”

Alec smiles at him, cheeks full of waffles. His eyes hold the wonder of a thousand galaxies staring right back at Magnus. He is looking at him like something rare and precious and for a moment, Magnus thinks, ‘this, this is what I’ve missed, this is what was gone.’

The first time Magnus caught that look on Alec’s face was after their very first fight. For the life of him he can’t remember what the fight was even about, but they hadn’t been together for long and Alec had waited for Magnus’ drama class (a little extra credit he had allowed himself) to end at the entrance of the building, a sheepish smile on his face. He had uttered an awkward apology that had charmed Magnus in ways he hadn’t expected. He had been so nervous that Magnus hadn’t had the heart to make him squirm any longer. He had forgiven him –of course he had forgiven him; and he wonders, idly, where he’d be now if he hadn’t but the thought is too painful and he forcefully banishes it away. He had made a joke about their silly fight and ran his thumb on Alec’s cheekbone just so he could witness the tension vanish from his body and his shoulders sag in relief. He hadn’t expected Alec to look at him like he had. Magnus had never even thought anyone would ever look at him like Alec had.

He had cherished that look Alec reserved solely for him, silently; selfishly perhaps. It had been his look, the one that made him feel powerful, beautiful and loved all at once. It had been that look that had carried him through the tough times, that had taught him that he too could be loved unconditionally, that he deserved to be loved unconditionally.

It is a look that belongs to Magnus only. It is a look that disappeared one fateful morning of December.

It is back now, and Magnus missed it so much he can feel tears prickling at the corner of his eyes.

Alec seems thankfully oblivious as he picks another waffle from the plate. “We can make your famous waffles every weekend if you want,” he says before hastily biting on it.

Magnus’ heart clenches in his chest, but he quickly swallows his sorrow back. “I think I’ll hold you to that,” he says nonetheless, and he hopes with all that he has that it won’t be another broken promise, that he won’t eat them in front of an empty seat, wondering what he did to ever make his husband stop looking at him like he was made of stars.

Alec’s face turns serious for a moment as he sips his coffee. “I mean it,” he says, his brows furrowing gravely to accentuate his words. “I want to spend time with you like this again.”

Magnus allows himself to nod. “I know.” There is nothing Magnus wants more in the world, to go back to what they were, to feel like he can live and thrive and shine from a single look from his man. He wishes he didn’t feel like he is too much for Alec to handle. He wishes he could just talk
to him and not fear he will make the look he’s worked so hard to earn vanish forever.

He feels the smile drop from his face, fear gnawing at his insides, but he quickly recovers.

“So, today?” he says, clearing his throat.

He could ask Alec to talk. He could tell him how much he needs it. How much his heart suffers from everything they leave unsaid. How angry he is that they can’t even talk properly when it had always been their strong suit. How lonely he feels in his grief.

He could, but he doesn’t. He isn’t sure why, the words that come out of his mouth are so different from the ones he should say. Perhaps he’s lost all hope.

“I was thinking about testing the hot tub this morning.”

“That sounds perfect,” Alec says, leaning forward to press a kiss on Magnus’ cheek.

Alec is giving him that look again, the one that only belongs to Magnus.

It mends Magnus’ broken heart a little.

Steam rises from the stone hot tub on the terrace in a warm, inviting cloud. It looks just like what he needs, what they both need. He can’t remember the last time he sat in a hot tub which means it’s been too many years too long.

Alec steps out excitedly, that is until the cold bite of the air suddenly hits him, shooting up through his bare feet and bare legs.

“Fucking hell,” he grits out, rushing over to dip his feet onto the first step of the hot water, sighing loudly at the relief it brings him as he sits down chest deep in the water. The water is incredibly hot if he actually thinks about it and his skin already looks a little red from the sudden change of temperature.

Magnus walks out then, a mimosa in each hand, and shivers after only taking one step out of the door.

“Shit! It’s cold.” He quickly hands Alec his mimosa and lowers himself beside Alec.

He puffs out his cheeks and then lets out a contented sigh.

“Much better,” he moans.

Alec drinks from the glass and smiles in pleasure at the taste of grapefruit juice and champagne before resting it on the stone ledge behind him. “That’s delicious, thank you.”

Magnus raises his glass to him with a wink before enjoying some of his own drink. “I make a mean mimosa.”

Alec snorts out a small laugh and then splashes some of the warm water on his face and up into his hair to get it out of his face. “It’s putting two drinks in one glass. Hardly the most difficult drink to get right.”

Magnus narrows his eyes at him. “There is an art to the ratio, Alexander, and mine is perfect.”
“You’re right,” Alec says, holding his hands up in surrender. “Your mimosas are always a hit at the Christmas brunch.”

“Oh, speaking of Christmas.” Magnus settles in and rests his head back against Alec’s arm that’s stretched out behind him. “Did you want to get a real tree this year? I know we always talk about doing it but we never do. So I was thinking maybe this year…we could?”

Alec’s stomach clenches in that all too familiar feeling he’s come to recognize as regret. He’s had a lot of that lately and he’s beginning to wonder when he will stop finding things in their relationship that he’s ruined over the years. Simple things like a Christmas tree.

Every year since they were married, they’d had plans of being that couple that goes together on a weekend morning and takes entirely too long picking out the perfect Christmas tree. But they never were. Alec never made the time for them to have the chance to be that couple.

At first it was because he was the new surgeon who had to prove himself against the others so he took extra long shifts, and he worked holidays when every other surgeon in his department wanted off. He did this for years and he missed so much of every December until he was the only surgeon left. He’d made it to the top, he’d done his time. He could have finally relaxed, hired another surgeon to help pick up some of the workload, and he had intended to. He still intends to.

They had grown so much together, their lives were full and they were finally in the perfect place in their lives to grow even more. Alec had taken off so many days that December three years ago but they still didn’t get their tree. They didn’t have the time that year, with all the preparations, and all the nights staying awake in anticipation. December was coming, the month they loved and had waited so long for that year. They were ready. December did come and then, just like that—without warning or mercy—everything they’d hoped for was gone. December had taken it.

Alec had not taken off more than a day here and there in Decembers since then. Staying busy, focusing on his career, helping the people he could save. It was the only thing that helped. The only thing that pulled him through the holiday season. A season he used to love. A season that always brought him and Magnus joy, and one they thought would bring them more joy for years to come.

December is right around the corner and the thought causes the hollow place inside him to burn and retch with sorrow. Soon he will have to make it through another December. And even though every year is the same, the same months, the same days, the same hours, and the same painfully slow and torturing minutes; even though he knows it’s coming, that day still manages to bring with it the same suffocating pain and grief that terrorizes him whenever he thinks of it.

He draws in a deep breath when he realizes he’s been too quiet for too long since Magnus asked his question.

No matter what he does, December will come and it will go, but the pain will not, and he cannot continue taking that out on Magnus. He cannot let himself get lost in his work this time.

“I’d love that,” he finally says, pushing through the thickness in his throat that comes when he lets his mind go back to that December. He chases it down, forcing it out of his mind with some of his mimosa. He won’t go there, not here, not when he’s trying to give Magnus the perfect weekend. “It’s about time I start coming through on all those promises I made over the years.”

Magnus lolls his head over to look at Alec and his brows furrow sadly when he meets Alec’s eyes. “Alexander…”
Alec shakes his head. “Don’t say it’s not true. I know it is and I want to make it right. Let me make this up to you.”

Magnus nods once, his eyes closing and then opening slowly finding Alec’s eyes again. His face is clean and devoid of makeup. There’s no glitter or eyeliner or hair product to hold his hair in place, and he looks exquisite—not that Alec doesn’t like Magnus’ made up look, he does, a lot—but right now, with the mid-morning sun high in the sky and beaming in through the snow covered maples that surround them, he reminds Alec of when they were younger. Of a simpler time when they stole away for a weekend while they were still in college.

It was Spring break and they had desperately needed a break from their upcoming exams. Magnus had been stressed sick, he’d lost sleep, and ruined his appetite with anxiety. Alec had insisted they drive out of the city to get away, so they took the little money they had, and they made it as far as a bed and breakfast in New Jersey that overlooked the harbor. It wasn’t far from their home in the city but it was far enough from their studies, their stresses, and they could be alone in peace. Which made it perfect.

They had spent those mornings in bed, lying in each other’s arms. Facing each other like they’re doing now. The sun had hit Magnus’ cheeks in the same way it is now and it brought a glow to his eyes that Alec could always get lost in, just like he is right now. They only left the room to eat and to take walks along the harbor. They spent that weekend in comfortable clothes, never even bothering to fix their hair more than necessary.

He had seen something different in Magnus that weekend, a new side of him as if a curtain had been suddenly pulled aside, no longer obstructing the view of what was truly there. Alec had known from the moment he laid eyes on Magnus when he almost knocked him over outside of his science class, that he would fall in love with him. And he had. Every second of every day had Alec falling deeper and deeper in love with Magnus. But it was that weekend away, in a random bed and breakfast on a spontaneous trip to the harbor when Magnus woke up next to him, kissing his face all over until he woke up that Alec realized he wanted to marry him. He knew when Magnus laughed and fell back against the pillows, clutching at his stomach in a fit that he wanted to hear that sound every day for the rest of his life. He knew when Magnus smiled at him, eyes still heavy in the morning with sleep that he wanted to wake up to that face forever.

Magnus’ eyes aren’t soft with laughter now like they were that weekend, and it causes a guilt to rise in Alec when he thinks about how many days he’s gone without hearing Magnus’ laughter. He wonders how he could have ever forgotten how it felt to fall in love with the wonder and light that is Magnus Bane. He can’t believe he ever let Magnus spend so many days in sadness. That he was the cause of that sadness. There’s so much he needs to make right. Even if it’s something as simple as getting Magnus a long awaited real Christmas tree. He’ll do it. Magnus deserves that much.

“We can pick one out when we get home,” Alec suggests and Magnus gives him a quick smile. “Also, can you take care of Izzy’s gift again this year? I never know what to get her and she always likes your gifts better anyway.”

Magnus’ lips pull back into a grin and his brows pull up from their furrow in amusement. “Of course. There’s no way I’m going to let you get her another awful sweater.”

Alec laughs and the pain of December fades into the background a little bit more. Teasing around with Magnus is just what he needs. He rolls his eyes at him, letting them flutter a little longer than necessary, but long enough that it works and elicits an entertained half-chuckle half-scoff from Magnus. “It was not that awful.”

“It was orange,” Magnus deadpans.
“What’s wrong with orange?”

Magnus cringes. “It was orange and had that horrible vomit-colored pattern on it.”

Alec rolls his eyes again and downs the rest of his mimosa in a single swallow. “Well, I guess we’ll avoid another fashion faux pas with you in charge of her gift.”

“Yes-we-will. Are we going to your mom’s or your dad’s this year?” Magnus asks and Alec remembers his talk with Luke the day before and he straightens up in his seat.

“I forgot to tell you!”

Magnus sits up, head cocked in confusion. “Tell me what?”

Alec laughs and then scratches at the back of his head. “Well…how can I put this? My mom has a boyfriend.”

Magnus’ eyes go wide. “What?” He blinks and then shakes his head. “Well, not that I’m really surprised, your mother is a beautiful woman, and I’m actually quite shocked she’s gone this long without having a boyfriend—”

“It’s Luke.”

“What?!” Magnus’ eyes are comically wide now and his jaw is dropped open in silence.


Magnus’ open mouth turns into a grin which turns into a raucous laughter. “Your boss is getting freaky with your mom. You know what to do next time you want a holiday.”

Magnus wiggles his brows at Alec teasingly and Alec shudders when he realizes what Magnus said is true.

“Let’s not talk about that.” Alec closes his eyes and shakes his head to try and rid the thought from his mind because the last thing he wants to think about is his boss and his mom and whatever it is they do when they’re together.

Magnus is laughing and he pinches the bridge of his nose. “I’m sorry. I have horrifying images in my mind. I can’t imagine what you’re going through.”

“Well my mind wasn’t going there until you brought it up and now I think I’m traumatized.” Alec covers his eyes and laughs again when Magnus bursts out laughing at him.

They finally settle down and Magnus fans his face and then smirks. “Come on, give me the juicy details. What exactly did Luke tell you?”

“Nothing. He didn’t tell me anything except now I know who he’s been sneaking away with all those times I covered for him.” Alec chuckles.

Magnus stills beside him. “So he and your mom have been sneaking away together?”

Alec’s shrug turns into a dramatized shudder that is accompanied by a chuckle. “It seems so. They both owe us big time.”

“Yeah,” Magnus says curtly as the amused smile falls from his face. “So can we expect Luke to be there for Christmas?”
Alec’s laughter washes away from him completely at the stark contrast in Magnus’ tone from just moments before. “I don’t know. If things have gotten serious enough then I think there’s a good chance of him being there,” he answers carefully.

Magnus moves over in his seat to reach for his drink. He finishes the rest and stares down at the empty glass. Something somewhere has shifted in Magnus and Alec’s not sure what caused it. He only knows that the light-hearted fun they had been having is nowhere to be found and he doesn’t want the day to go like this. He wants Magnus’ laughter back. He wants the happiness to glimmer in Magnus’ eyes when he looks at him. He wants Magnus to look at him.

“Hey,” Alec begins, hoping that maybe a change of subject will fix things. “Do you think you’ll have to visit Paris any time soon for the expansion? Because… I was thinking, it might be a good opportunity for us to slip away. I could go with you? We could make a trip of it.”

Alec lowers his arm down across the expanse of Magnus’ back, gliding around the small of his back to pull him in closer. He’s not sure when Magnus got so far away from him.

Magnus clears his throat and stands suddenly, causing Alec’s hand to fall away from him. “I might go after New Year’s Eve. Depends on how the negotiations are going,” he answers, crossing the tub and climbing up on the stairs to leave.

“Oh, did you want to get out now?” Alec begins to stand.

“No, no, I’m just getting a refill,” Magnus says, his mouth pulling back into a smile that has never been able to fool Alec.

Alec stares at him, watching him leave, his heart panging sharply from the quick and obvious dismissal. Magnus’ shoulders are tense, his hand balled into a loose fist by his side, the other firmly gripping the empty glass. Alec sees his jaw is set in a tight line when he passes through the door into the house. He lets out a heavy sigh. He runs through their conversation, desperate to pinpoint exactly what it was that had triggered this response from Magnus. His work. That’s all he can think of. But they’d been having such a good time, surely that wasn’t enough to ruin everything they’d built up so far.

Magnus comes back with a mimosa in each hand. Another for Alec and another for him. He climbs back in and hands Alec his glass with a quick jump of his lips when Alec thanks him, the most of a smile he must be willing to give. Alec is about to move his arm back to the ledge of the tub so that they can sit together again just like they had been when everything was still going well, but stops when Magnus takes a seat across from him on the opposite side of the tub.

This obvious rejection burns like a fire in his heart, singing with every squeeze of his heart beat. His throat tightens in on itself. He doesn’t know where he went wrong. How this all went so wrong. How they went from laughter and teasing to Magnus distancing himself from him as much as possible.

Alec sips at his mimosa. The vision for his perfect weekend is crashing down around him and he can’t do anything to stop it. There’s nothing he can do. When Magnus shuts himself off there is no bringing him back until he’s ready to. And the way he’s silent, staring into the churning, steaming water…there’s no reaching him now. Alec doesn’t want to give up though. He promised Magnus he would try, he promised himself he would make everything right, that he would fix their marriage and win Magnus back.

He glides over a tiny bit—not too close but closer—and tilts his head down to try and catch his
eyes. “Magnus?”

Magnus continues to stare into the water, lost to his thoughts. If only Alec knew what worries Magnus has running through his mind. He wants to take every single one of them and snuff them out. He wants to counter any argument they’re presenting to him that’s bringing this doubt. Because even though he’s not saying anything, even though he’s not speaking a word to Alec, Alec can see the doubt that’s flooding him.

“Magnus?” Alec tries again, this time moving forward and carefully reaching out to touch Magnus’ arm.

Magnus pulls his arm back, blinking out of his daze, and Alec has to fight to keep the hurt from his face. He doesn’t want to make this about him and his pain can wait.

He looks at Alec, the deep brown of his eyes darkened with passivity. He has the look of a man who’s giving up again and a fear plunges inside Alec.

“You okay? I lost you there for a moment.”

“We should—” Magnus begins but he pauses when his voice trembles. He clears his throat. “We should start getting lunch ready.”

Alec lowers his arm back into the water, his stomach dropping along with it at the hitch in Magnus’ voice.

“Y-Yeah. Let’s get lunch ready,” he says even though what he wants to say is please don’t give up on me, please keep fighting for us, please please please.

But there’s an emptiness in Magnus’ gaze that tells Alec what he fears the most: he’s losing Magnus again.

After lunch, Magnus stands at Alec’s side, drying the dishes Alec is washing in silence. The lightheartedness of the day before has withered away and Magnus knows it is his fault.

He let his mind wander too far, to the same dark place he can’t escape and that sometimes suffocates him. They had been doing well, perfect even, until the simple sight of a morbid anniversary coming up brought coldness to his hopes and the synapses of his brain to an abrupt standstill.

Alec noticed, Magnus knows. His eyes have lost the spark they had held the day before, the hope ripped away with the small things Magnus doesn’t allow between them anymore.

Vermont in late November is the perfect setting for their struggle. This is their winter, cold and bitter, and yet filled with prospects and dreams when one knows where to look. Magnus longs for spring and its hues, for the chattering of the birds and the buoyant playfulness of sunny days.

The trickle of the water drips into the sink, the sound reverberating around the kitchen. Every second the silence stretches lends another blow to the fragile peace they had started to build, ravaging its foundation before it really had a chance to take root.

When the silence finally breaks, it isn’t because one of them has finally managed to find the right words to put an end to this insufferable torment. It breaks with the obnoxious high pitched
FaceTime ring of Alec’s phone.

Alec looks up from a plate he has spent too much time scrubbing and gestures with his wet hand in the general direction of the device that lays on the counter.

“Do you mind checking to see who that is?” His voice is small, like he is afraid asking that simple favor from Magnus is already too much.

Magnus ignores the twist of his stomach and turns to glance at the phone, lifting an eyebrow. “It’s the less handsome Lightwood sibling.”

Alec chuckles as he dries his hands off—and the relief that washes over Magnus at such a simple sound should not be so devastatingly prominent.

“Answer it, please.”

So Magnus does, schooling his features into a playful frown. “I hope it’s a matter of life or death, Jace,” he promptly announces.

But it isn’t Jace’s face that appears on the screen, nor his voice that yells enthusiastically, “Uncle Ma’nus!”

Magnus forgets his sorrows at once, a smile slowly taking over his features. Before he can reply, however, Alec is walking over to join him, grinning widely. “Pumpkin!” he exclaims with just about the same amount of excitement.

Jace pokes his head into the screen, pulling an apologetic grimace. “I’m sorry, I didn’t want to interrupt your weekend together but Ariel, well she really wanted to share this with you and I promise it won’t be long—”

That’s all he manages to get in before the phone is plucked out of his hands and Ariel’s back, her face so close to the camera that all they can see is a mouth, a nose and a few loose strawberry blonde strands of hair falling on her face. “I can do a cartwheel!” she shouts at them, her bright blue eyes gleaming with trepidation.

Magnus melts, a broad grin splitting his face. “That’s amazing, my little turkey!” he coos.

“Wanna see?” she asks, but it’s clear from her expression she only expects one possible outcome.

They don’t have to think for too long to grant it to her. “Of course!” he and Alec exclaim together.

The camera shakes as she rushes to give Jace the phone. “Here, Daddy, hold it,” she orders, before running back to a clear space in the room. She puts her arms up in position, her face crunching up in concentration. She turns back to Jace to make sure he is following her instructions, her features twisting in disapproval. “Hold it up high, Daddy!”

Jace barks out a laugh and adjusts the angle. “Okay, don’t be so bossy!” he tells her. He lowers his voice for Alec and Magnus to hear only. “Shut up,” he hisses.

Alec, who was about to talk, closes his mouth with a smirk, snorting instead. Magnus rolls his eyes fondly and focuses back on the screen, where Ariel is back in position.

She bends over to shift her weight on her leg and kicks her other leg in the air, both hands firmly planted on the ground. It is somewhat messy and uncoordinated but she lands safely and there is nothing Alec and Magnus can do but to cheer vigorously as soon as she is done, Alec clapping
loudly to compensate for Magnus’ inability to do so with his hand still holding the phone.

Ariel rushes back to Jace and slips under his arm to look at them on the screen. “Did you see?” she all but shouts into the speaker. “Uncle Ma’nus, Uncle Alec, did you see?”

“Pumpkin, that was amazing!” Alec replies with a nod.

“Brilliant!” Magnus adds, unable to part himself from the grin that has taken over his features. “Where did you learn that?”

“At the Germnatics classes!” Ariel yells back through heavy pants. It only occurs to Magnus now that she is all breathless and that it probably means that she’s been doing cartwheels non-stop since she got home.

Jace reaches out to tuck back a strand of hair that came untucked from her braid. “Gymnastics, princess,” he corrects.

“That’s what I said, Daddy,” she replies in a beat.

Alec snorts, lifting a taunting eyebrow at his brother. “Yeah, that’s what she said.”

Magnus elbows him gently. “Be nice,” he mutters, but he knows his amused tone belies his words.

Alec gives him a smile, soft and filled with playfulness. “I’m always nice,” he retorts. “I’m just nicely enjoying watching my brother getting nicely wiped by my favorite niece.”

Magnus rolls his eyes, a smirk tugging at the corner of his lips.

It is easy, this. Caring for Ariel and sharing the joy she brings to everyone in her entourage, and the two of them in particular. It is easy but it hasn’t always been and it strikes Magnus that somehow, this is one of the things that got better rather than worse in the past three years.

It had taken him a while to warm up to her, not because she had ever been any less lovable than she is now, but simply because it had been too hard, at first. It put a strain on his relationship with his brother-in-law for too long, and Magnus still regrets to this day that he let his own misery take away from the first months of her short life. Jace had been distraught, and Magnus too angry at the injustice of it all to realize he was being unfair to both his niece and her father.

It took a lot from him to visit Jace on a fresh morning of spring and meet her for the second time. She reminded him too much of his loss, of the dreams that had crumbled for him and put the first nail in the coffin of the marriage they’re trying to salvage from a cruel fate.

Now, however, she brings nothing but light to his life; even though there is still a pang of regret and an agonizing ache clutching at his heart whenever he thinks of what they could have had.

For a while, he was angry at Jace, angry at the helplessness and pity he could read in his gaze. Now he is just glad Jace isn’t them. Glad that it wasn’t him.

He doesn’t wish that sadness to anyone, the one that flips you inside out and rips things inside you you didn’t know were there.

Ariel leans into the camera again, and Magnus forces himself to focus back on her. “When can I come spend the night?” she blurts out, with the pure innocence only children can possess. He wishes he could protect her to ensure she keeps it for as long as possible. “I haven’t spent the night in years.”
It has been a while indeed, Magnus ponders to himself. It’s just that she’s growing up fast. When she used to spend the night, she slept in bed with them, curled up between the two of them, telling them stories that could only make sense to a youthful mind. She’s getting too big to sleep with them, though, and with he and Alec barely holding their marriage afloat, they haven’t taken the time to make new arrangements for her.

A moment passes, and Magnus can feel Alec hesitate at his side before he leans in to give her a smile.

“Soon,” he pledges, with more assurance than Magnus thinks he truly feels. “We promise you can come spend the night when we get back home.”

Ariel nods eagerly, her little face lighting up with glee. It quickly vanishes as she seems to think, however, and she pauses, levelling them with a look as serious as a three-year-old can muster. “I don’t want you to have a divorce,” she says, and Magnus goes still, breath hitching in his throat. “I don’t know what that means but that sounds like a bad thing because Aunt Izzy and Daddy looked really sad when they were talking about you having one.”

She is about to blabber some more but Jace quickly intercepts the phone, his eyes wide with panic. “Okay, princess,” he exclaims loudly, as if he could cover up the words his daughter just said with his own. “Uncle Magnus and Alec have to go. Tell them bye.”

Ariel pouts, clearly unhappy with the fallout of their conversation, but Jace must give her the sternest look he can manage because she winds up waving at the screen instead.

“Bye Uncle Ma’nus, bye Uncle Alec,” she mutters begrudgingly. “I love you.”

“Bye sweetheart,” Magnus says, heart clenching in his chest at the innocent but genuine edge of her adorable voice, just as Alec utters a small, “Bye pumpkin, we love you too.”

Jace grabs the phone again, mouths a quick sorry and hangs up, the grimace on his features freezing on the screen before it goes back to the background picture of Magnus on Alec’s phone.

For a moment, Magnus and Alec just stand there in silence, blinking at the phone until it goes dark, and Magnus can see their reflection. The two of them standing side by side, immobile. Magnus has no doubt Alec is pondering on the worry Ariel disclosed just like he is.

Perhaps, he thinks hopefully, foolishly, this is the opportunity he’s been waiting for.

Magnus’ tongue darts out to wet his lips and he sucks in a deep breath, bracing himself.

“I bet Ariel and Aurora would have been friends,” he murmurs, chuckling sadly. “They would have made quite the team. We never would have stood a chance against them.”

This is all it takes from Magnus for Alec’s whole body to tense at once. It starts minutely. He goes very still, a small, breathy pant slipping through his parted lips. The air around them shifts in barely a couple of seconds, suddenly so brittle it could snap.

Alec’s jaw flexes, all the spiritliness he had displayed since the day before vanishing with the memories Magnus forced him to face.

All the suspended horror laying over their heads seems to crash down on him at once, and Magnus pushes one more time, hoping it will finally get Alec to open up to him. Hoping he will remember that Magnus doesn’t mean to burden him, but that he needs to. Because he forgot how to breathe three years ago, and needs Alec to teach him how to again. To hold him into his arms, let him pour
his heart’s contents, and murmur in his ear that everything will be okay. That the agony will end eventually and that they will find their way back to each other again, like they always have.

It is all that he needs to utter his next words carefully, without confidence but definite ambition.

“I can’t believe it’s been three years.”

He wonders if Alec can hear the longing in his voice.

“I guess we’ll never know,” Alec grits out between his teeth, coldly.

Time seems to slow down as Magnus realizes that he will not get another answer than this. That Alec has closed himself off to him, the same way Magnus closed himself off after coming to the conclusion that they had not only lost a child but also each other on that fateful morning of December.

Oh, how Magnus used to love December.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Alec continues, unaware, perhaps, that he just delivered the final blow to all of their efforts to make things better.

They will not get better. Magnus jumps away from Alec quickly, urging the need to retch away. They will not get better, because they don’t heal together. Because they both deal with the overwhelming grief in very different ways, ways that keep them apart, ways that reminds Magnus constantly of this incredibly devastating pain that just won’t go away. That never goes away, no matter how much he buries himself into work, no matter how many cigarettes he smokes, no matter how much he blames Jace, and Alec, and himself for the injustice they have to endure.

They will not get better, because as long as they suffer apart, they suffer alone.

This is too much to take in. This is more than Magnus can allow himself to grasp, for he does not want to, or he knows he will come to the same conclusion he came to on that night over a month ago when he told Alec he wanted a divorce.

Instead, he storms to the door, grabbing his coat and scarf.

“Of course you don’t, Alec,” he says, and he barely recognizes his voice as his own. It’s bitter, cold. Furious.

He doesn’t want it to end like this. He doesn’t want it to end at all.

But he has had to bend, and bend, and bend, and he has reached his breaking point.

Alec follows him to the front door with a frown, taken aback by his virulence. “What- What are you doing?” he asks in a small, baffled tone.

“What’s it look like I’m doing?” Magnus snaps, groaning in frustration when his hands tremble too much for him to wrap his scarf properly around his neck. He leaves it hanging on both sides instead. “I’m going for a walk. I can’t be here with you right now,” he continues, and there is venom dripping from every word, and a rancor he can’t control. “Maybe I’ll find a tree that will actually talk to me since my husband refuses to. I can’t do this anymore, Alec!” He pauses, sucks in a deep breath but it’s in vain. His head is dizzy, his pulse frantic and his heart broken. “I just can’t,” he whispers.

He walks out without another word, without giving Alec the chance to understand what is
happening or to try to stop him.

Magnus slams the door behind him, and his heart shatters in his chest.

He will grieve for a lifetime, he realizes, choking on a sob, and he will grieve alone.

The battering sound of the door slamming shut and the biting winter air that rushes in and blows against him is all it takes to snuff out the last of any remaining hope Alec had inside him. He stands there, staring at the back of the door. He wonders how a weekend with so much promise could go to hell in the span of a single day. Everything had started out perfectly and he really thought after their conversation last night, that things would start to get better. That they were finally going to navigate their way out of this storm they’ve found themselves in. He had actually been foolish enough to believe they would find their way out, together.

But then Magnus had pulled away from him, recoiled from his touch, and spent the rest of their morning in a painful silence. He had been too afraid to speak out of fear of saying the wrong thing so he said nothing instead. Ariel’s call was unexpected but it helped to lighten Alec’s spirits. He loved the sound of Magnus’ voice when he spoke with Ariel, the way it softened and went higher at the end of each word, always spoken with a smile on his face and the wealth of affection he had reserved inside him to bestow on a child.

The call ended and so did that brief moment of joy only Ariel could bring to them. They were almost able to forget for those simple five minutes that they are currently in the midst of a tempest that will undoubtedly bring their marriage to a crumbling end. But as soon as the line went dead, the ever present suffering they carried inside of them came to life, filling the space where just last night they had laid in each other’s arms. It called out, screaming into the silence, thrashing in Alec’s chest in violent heartbreaking pain. He hates the sudden reminders he can’t prepare for. He hates the moments when the grief overcomes him, immobilizing him when he least expects it.

He isn’t ready for this dialogue to be opened up between them. Not here. Not now.

But Magnus is.

Magnus is always ready to talk and Alec just…can’t. He wants to, he wants to be able to remember and not have the breath snatched right out of him. He wants to be able to look Magnus in the eyes and not remember with devastating clarity the happiness and excitement he’d watched rush out of him when they spoke with the crestfallen nurse. He wants to forget how that light in Magnus’ eyes left and never returned. He wants to forget how it felt to hold her tiny body wrapped in blankets in his arms. How small her hands and feet were against his hand. He wants to forget the soft feel of her skin and how the tufts of her dark hair tickled when he kissed her head. He wants to forget the pain and yet never forget her. He wants what he can’t have.

Her memory will always be there and with her memory there will always be pain.

*It will lessen with time*, he tells himself. He’s repeated and clung to this mantra over the years as a lifeline to keep his head above water. But he finds himself, standing here, alone in an empty cottage, his marriage to the love of his life falling apart before his own eyes; and he’s facing his third December and still the pain is there.

He won’t heal, he realizes. This loss that they each carry will never go away. No matter how hard he fights it or how much he hides and buries himself at work, this is a part of him—of them.
There used to be a *them* in all of this and now there’s not.

*I can’t do this anymore, Alec.*

Alec gasps in a breath, drawing in the emptiness Magnus left behind as he runs his fingers through his hair. He let himself get so caught up in his own grief that he’s pushed away the one person who is feeling what he feels, who understands what it’s like to have a void so grand growing inside of you that it eats away at you until you no longer know if it’s possible to ever feel full again.

His mind goes back to the night before with Magnus curled in against him, and how complete he felt in that moment. Full of love, warmth, peace, happiness. As if the world could remain just the two of them and everything would be okay. Because Magnus is all he needs. Magnus is his family, a part of him that he never wants to let go. He’s the one who gives Alec the strength he needs to move on and overcome.

This is what they had always been for each other. And at some point this ceased to be the case. Alec thought that if he kept his pain to himself that it would help, that he would overcome it and that Magnus would never have to worry about bringing him comfort when he was suffering just the same. He thought this would help.

He squeezes his eyes shut and takes deep, even breaths through gritted teeth. It aches when his ribs expand and it aches when they compress. He keeps his hands on the back of his head, curling his fingers into his hair until the gentle tug on his scalp helps to clear his mind, and his breaths even out.

“I’m a fucking idiot,” he mutters, lowering his arms and cracking his knuckles before shaking the tension building in the palms of his hands.

Magnus is gone because of him, and he’s never felt more alone than he does in this moment. He wants Magnus to come back. He wants to wrap his arms around him and hold him until there’s no more tears to shed. He wants to take this grief from Magnus and carry it with his own. The way he should have three years ago.

He goes to the door and opens it, hoping he’ll see Magnus standing there, unable to leave him, but he’s not there. He left him, and he’s nowhere to be seen. Alec rests his head against the door frame and lets the cold air cool his cheeks. He stands there for what feels like forever until he feels a drip run out of his nose that he quickly sniffs back as he closes the door.

He wants to go after Magnus but he doesn’t. There’s no use, not when he’s like this. Alec’s learned over the years when Magnus needs his time away from him, and he used to know exactly when that distance needed to be closed. It’s a strange feeling to find he doesn’t know these small intricacies anymore.

He paces between the sofas in the room, bare feet stepping over the hardwoods that creak under every fifth step. It’s a rhythm and pattern he can focus on until Magnus comes back. And he will. And Alec will finally talk to him, tell him everything he’s been feeling inside—every pang of dismay and every ounce of resentment—and he will let Magnus tell him everything he needs to say. He will listen and he will finally take this weight from his husband and carry it with him.

Night is starting to fall by the time Magnus feels his heartbeats finally settle back to normal. The
woods around him are getting darker by the minute, the bare branches spiked into the sky. It is still clear enough for him to see where he is going, although he doesn’t know where that is. Not anymore.

The small sounds of rustling leaves in the few bushes and the howl of the wind only add to the eerie atmosphere. He hasn’t wandered far enough to lose sight of the cottage, the dim lights of the living room a beacon at the end of his path, but Magnus can’t bring himself to cross the distance.

It had all been perfect. Too perfect, perhaps.

The day before had been bliss. Maybe today’s disaster was the only way the universe had found to balance it out.

Things might have gone differently had he not seen the calendar that morning. Had Alec not brought up how much he neglected their relationship so that Luke and Maryse could build up their own. Had Ariel not called and reminded Magnus yet again of what they were ruthlessly ripped of. There are a million ways it could have gone. A million ways they could have savored this impromptu trip to Vermont to salvage what there is to salvage.

But Magnus saw the calendar, and there was no peace for his mind after that. Not when the reminder of another relenting December to spend grieving in silence had struck him so violently.

Grief clutches his lungs with every laborious breath he expels, each of them never enough to soothe the ache in his chest, no more than the cold winter air has been.

He doesn’t know how long it has been since he left, slamming the door behind him, how long has gone since he felt powerless once more to make his husband talk. The silence only serves to deepen the emptiness in his heart, the shear of nothingness that takes over when he lets his guard drop for a moment alone.

Carefully, he brings his hand up, running his thumb on the golden band on his finger. This is a familiar gesture, one that used to provide all the comfort he could hope for, but it doesn’t serve its purpose now. He needs more than a promise, more than a hope that feels irremediably vain. Quiet coping doesn’t bode well for someone who has always lived loudly, and for his own sanity, he just needs to talk. He needs to say the words out loud, to feel them physically rip his insides apart before he works on carefully mending them back together.

Magnus casts his eyes back to the cottage. He needs his love now more than ever. He needs his embrace, his whispers and his eyes. Those same hazel eyes he fell in love with, the ones that always seemed to speak directly to Magnus’ soul.

And if Alec refuses him even that, Magnus supposes he needs to make his peace with their marriage as well as their loss.

His heart breaks at the thought, and he grits his teeth to hold back the tears threatening to spill down his cheeks.

It wasn’t supposed to end like this. It wasn’t supposed to end at all.

His anger has dissolved by now, replaced by waves of pain washing over him, and the night has almost fallen, and December will come, no matter how much he longs for it not to.

With a heavy sigh, Magnus buries his nose into his scarf and crosses his arms over his chest for a semblance of warmth, heading back to the cottage.
He hasn’t gone too far, but the walk back seems to last for an eternity, his feet dragging in the immaculate snow.

He hesitates for a moment at the door—another one he is scared to open to find heartbreak behind—but he braces himself with a deep breath and moves to open it.

Alec is in the hall in a second, rushing from the living room, eyes blown with worry, his hair that peculiar mess that tells he has been running his hands in them too much. It is the same mess Magnus fell in love with the first time he was with Alec as they awaited their exams’ results and Alec had been stressed out of his mind, as if there was even the slightest doubt of how absolutely brilliant he was.

Alec opens his mouth to talk, but stammers on his own words, and Magnus sighs, walking past him to get to the living room, throwing his coat and scarf against the back of the couch and heading to the fireplace to get himself warm.

His body relaxes immediately, and he can feel tears prickling in his eyes as he stares intently at the blazing fire, telling himself it’s the sole reason for them.

There is a quiet knock on the living room door, but Alec’s voice is quieter, so low Magnus barely hears it over the crackling wood.

“Can I come in?”

Magnus shuts his eyes, but fails at keeping the bitterness out of his voice. “Sure,” he scoffs, acerb. “Come in so we can sit here together and not talk. Apparently that’s the only thing we’re good at anymore.”

There was a time he had forgotten his voice could even sound like it does now.

Alec heaves out a heavy sigh and walks over to him, dropping into the seat beside him cautiously. He’s toying with his wedding band, too, and Magnus wonders inwardly if it brings comfort to the incommensurable sadness forcing him to hunch in his seat.

“Magnus,” he says softly, like a delicate thing, “I don’t want to sit here and not talk to you.”

Magnus brings a hand up to rub at his temples. “I can’t do this anymore. I can’t pretend everything is fine just because you brought me to Vermont. I just— I can’t,” he murmurs, barely recognizing his voice as his own. “Alec, I’m tired of fighting alone.”

Alec leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees, massaging his thumb into his palm. He licks his lips, hesitates for a moment longer. “I know and I know that I’m holding us back and I don’t want to do that anymore,” he says. “I told you I want to be with you. I want us to work so… I’m ready to talk about it.” He pauses to look over at Magnus. “If you want, I’m ready to talk to you about Aurora.”

Magnus’ head jerks up to glance at him. “What?” he breathes out, and the fact that he hears the confusion in his own tone is probably a testimony in itself.

Alec swallows. “We should talk about her,” he says again. “I can’t keep shutting you out.”

Magnus nods slowly. His mind doesn’t seem to be quite processing the words Alec just uttered almost shyly, but his mouth is opening again before he can wrap his brain around them. It is still hesitant, though, as if scared to have his hopes crushed, when he mutters lowly, “Okay. So talk.”
It is, admittedly, not the best thing he could have said. In an ideal situation, he would have reached out and grabbed Alec’s hand, to give him the courage to cross that invisible bridge between them and finally voice his devastation out loud. But there is nothing ideal about any of this, be it their loss or the point where they have found themselves almost three years after the worst day of their life together, so it will have to do.

The silence, for as long as it lasts, is heavy. Alec’s brow is furrowed, and Magnus can see him struggling to form the words in his mind, so he gives him the time he needs, watching the flames leap and hiss, trying desperately to grab and hold onto their fleeting shadows.

“I-I think about her everyday,” Alec says eventually, quietly. “I think about how you would have made an amazing father. I think about how unfair it is that we lost her before we even got the chance to know her. And I have so much anger eating away at me when I let myself ask, why- why was she taken from us? We loved her so much and”—his voice trembles as he catches his breath—“she will never know how loved she was.”

Magnus remembers that day far too well. Every single detail of it.

He remembers waking up in the morning with a wide grin on his lips. He and Alec had made love the night before, joking lightheartedly that they should make the most of it while they still could, before they had a baby to take care of that would undoubtedly take all of their time, time they would happily and willingly surrender to her. They had received the call to inform them their surrogate’s water had broken around six. Magnus had been too agitated to cook breakfast, so they had just had cereal that morning, barely able to stop grinning at each other long enough to chew their food.

He remembers their cheerful trip to the hospital. How they had talked to Maryse on their way there, promising her she could visit as soon as they had held their baby girl in their arms for the first time. He remembers Jace in the background, yelling joyfully that he would be wearing a suit because first impressions were important, and that he couldn’t wait for Ariel and Aurora to meet.

He remembers Alec had been running his hand in his hair so much that it had been more of a mess than ever. He remembers reading Raphael’s text as he stepped out of the train, how simple and short it had been, but meaningful enough to bring happy tears to his eyes.

He remembers how Alec had cupped his face between his hands in front of the hospital before they went in, how he had kissed his smile with one of his own and murmured, “I love you so much,” against his lips, eyes glimmering with happiness.

He remembers the wait. The long, interminable wait. He remembers the two of them in the corridor talking gleefully about all the things they would do with their little girl, all the love they had to give her. He remembers thinking about his mother, about how proud she would have been to see him start a family of his own, with the man he loved more than anything in the world.

And then, he remembers his world crumbling down. The crestfallen expression on the nurse’s face, and then the doctor that had followed, speaking to them about the umbilical cord and lack of oxygen. Stillborn. He remembers the word, how it had taken a few seconds for it to make sense, and a few minutes for them to understand what it meant.

He remembers the absolute, complete devastation as he and Alec had grabbed onto each other and cried.

And he remembers everything else, no matter how hard he wishes he could forget.
Pushing back the tears rising to his eyes, Magnus sucks in a deep breath. “I think about all of that too,” he says eventually. “I think about her all the time.”

He remembers Alec slowly shutting himself off, how he buried himself in his work and slowly disappeared.

“There was too much going on after she was gone,” Magnus continues, “and I had to take care of so much so she would be our daughter regardless because she was our daughter. And then when I got time to start grieving, I just… I just needed to talk to you and you were gone, too. So I was all alone and I couldn’t move on and then there was little Ariel…”

He remembers how irrationally mad he had been at Jace for having become a father when he hadn’t even wanted to, how unfair it had seemed to him, for them who had been planning it for years.

“Little Ariel who kept reminding me of what we had lost–” Magnus shakes his head, his voice trembling. “I just needed my husband. I just needed you.”

Alec closes his eyes, his jaw clenching in what Magnus recognizes as an attempt to hold back his tears. “Everything that happened after, the adoption, the funeral, it was too much and I couldn’t do it. I was barely holding myself together, Magnus.”

The funeral had been the hardest, Magnus recalls. Just seeing that tiny coffin, so small it couldn’t possibly look real. It had been a private event with their family and closest friends. Magnus had picked the music, and to this day he still can’t listen to Tears in Heaven. He probably never will. He remembers how silent the loft had been when they went home. He hadn’t known, then, that the silence would last so long.

“You think I was?” Magnus retorts, pursing his lips. He isn’t sure how he sounds anymore, nor what he feels. There is devastation, for sure, clutching mercilessly at his heart and guilt, sometimes, when he tries to understand why Alec felt he couldn’t talk to him. And, dormant but dangerous like a snake hiding under a rock, there is an anger that never truly leaves him. “Well, let me break it to you,” he hisses. “I wasn’t, but I did because I had no other choice. I had to so we would both survive this. I thought I just had to give you time and eventually you’d come back to me but you didn’t. You just… disappeared.”

Alec tenses, his shoulders crouched back defensively. “Well, I guess you’re just a stronger person than me, Magnus,” he quips. “I thought you of all people would understand that I just needed space to grieve.”

But when did that distance become uncrossable? Magnus thinks. When did Alec start feeling so far away even when they were standing in the same room?

“I gave you space!” he exclaims, shooting up to his feet. He feels restless, his whole body suddenly buzzing with all the anger and resentment he used that same space to build up. “Not that you gave me another choice! You just forgot I even existed! I tried to help you and what did I get in return? I tried, and tried, and tried again and I kept hitting a wall.”

He remembers the absence, the cold, unbearable loneliness. He remembers the doubts gnawing at his insides at night.

“I just needed time,” Alec replies, eyes following Magnus carefully. “I needed to be alone for a while, so I dived into work. You know how I am.”
Something snaps inside Magnus. “I thought you were cheating on me!” he explodes, regretting the words as soon as they are out of his mouth.

It is too late to take them back, though, and he watches as Alec’s eyes widen, completely caught off guard. “W-What?” he stammers out in a breath. “Why would you think that?”

Magnus doesn’t know how to explain how his mind had derived from him at the time. How Alec’s absence had driven him to wonder if there was something there that was more than just a need for space and time. If perhaps he had found the comfort Magnus couldn’t bring him in someone else’s arms. He had known, deep down, that wasn’t the man he had married, but his mind had worked its mischievous ways on him and he had managed to convince himself of it up until Luke had called him one morning, almost two years after that cold morning of December.

Luke had always been a mentor to Alec, a voice of reason he listened to when he needed to make sense of an impossible situation. So Magnus had been surprised, to say the least, to hear Luke tell him he didn’t know what to do about Alec anymore, because he could see him exhaust himself at work and he was afraid Alec would wind up endangering his own health.

Magnus had heard the urgency in Luke’s voice, a perfect echo to the one in his heart. He had tried to find a solution, a small step on the road of them finally moving on. Redecorating Aurora’s room had seemed like a good place to start, at the time. It had resulted in the biggest fight they had ever had, and in retrospect, Magnus knows it is the moment he gave up. Because he tried, again, and it blew up in his face when he realized he couldn’t recognize his husband anymore.

He doesn’t know how to explain to Alec all of that, how despite what Alec said earlier, he hasn’t felt strong in a long time, and how tired he is of pretending he is.

“Yes,” he bites out, deadpan and acid, everything a swirl of emotions he can’t control anymore. “Why on earth would I think that? I wonder.”

“Our daughter died, Magnus,” Alec says, the plain offense on his features making the words come out harsher than he probably intends them to be. “Do you really think that’s where my mind was?”

Magnus pinches the bridge of his nose. “I don’t know where your mind was, Alec,” he sighs. “I don’t know because you refused to talk to me. Your mind was only on yourself for all I know.”

Alec exhales, blinking his disbelief away. “I couldn’t talk to you,” he admits in a small, broken voice. “Because every time I looked at you, I remembered how excited we were, how happy we were at starting a family and all of a sudden that was gone… she was gone. It hurt too much and I didn’t want to accept that our baby girl—” Alec’s breath stutters as he chokes back a cry “—that she was dead. So I did what I could to take my mind off of it.”

Magnus nods gingerly. “That’s the thing, Alec. You took your mind off of it by pushing me away,” he says, softer. “You acted like you were the only one in pain, like I had forgotten about her as soon as she died.” He pauses to swallow past the lump in his throat. “You acted like my pain didn’t matter.”

“I know your pain mattered!” Alec protests, somehow equally hurt and panicked. “I just didn’t know how to be a comfort to you when I couldn’t even comfort myself.”

“I know, and I understand that. But when I tried to do something I thought would help us both, you just—” Magnus shakes his head, turning his back to Alec to stare at the fire. “I had never seen you like that. I didn’t recognize you.”
That day, their voices had risen above the sacred silence. It had been a hurricane of harsh words and shattered souls. By the end of it, when he was left to stare at the room he would not empty, behind that door Alec still refuses to mention, Magnus had known they were never as strong as he had thought they were. They were not invincible, they were breakable. And God, they were broken.

“I hardly recognized myself,” Alec confesses quietly, before letting out a heavy breath. “When you mentioned changing the nursery… I felt like you were trying to erase her. To make it as if she never existed.”

“I didn’t want to erase her,” Magnus retorts at once. “I wanted to move on. And you took that away from me.”

“I wasn’t ready to move on, though,” Alec argues, brow furrowing. “I needed that part of her to stay.”

Magnus lets out a frustrated growl, running a hand in his hair. Sometimes he wonders how many of his husband’s quirks he caught on over the years. “And did keeping the nursery as it is help you do that?” he snaps. “Because it certainly didn’t help me!”

Alec blinks in stupor, flinching back, and stares at him in silence for a moment, undoubtedly stunned by his anger. He scoffs quietly, shaking his head. “I think so. I mean, it certainly helped a lot more than you suggesting we turn it into an office,” he bites out sharply. “As if I could pretend nothing happened and sit to do paperwork at a desk where my daughter’s crib should be.”

“Yeah,” Magnus huffs out. “It’s much better to keep it that way so you can pretend the room doesn’t even exist and leave me to deal with it.”

Alec’s frown deepens with confusion, and Magnus knows he can’t go back. It is a secret he has cultivated in the past few years, something he never talked about with anyone. His ritual of survival.

“I didn’t ask anything of you,” Alec says, puzzled. “What are you talking about?”

Magnus huffs out in exasperation, looking back at Alec. “Who do you think keeps that room clean?” he asks, in a grim, raucous voice. “Do you think I snap my fingers and it magically clears the dust away?”

Her crib still sits in the nursery, the blanket Maia had disastrously knitted for her laying over the wooden bars. On the bed lies the onesie Jace had gotten them, the words ‘Two Dads Crew’ written in a big red heart on the front, next to the stuffed giraffe Isabelle had found ‘too cute not to buy’. It plays a lullaby when Magnus pulls the string in the back, one he now knows by heart.

Someone has to keep that room clean, so Magnus does. He never goes in when Alec is around the loft, but every two weeks, he takes that time for himself; to clean and remember the daughter they have lost, the happiness she would have brought with her. So he shakes the dust off the blanket, and he smooths out the onesie they had set out for her, and he pulls on the string and listens to the lullaby. Then, he lets himself cry. He cleans, and he cries, and that’s how he survives.

And perhaps, had Alec let him turn that room into anything else but a painful reminder, perhaps then he could move on.

But he has to be reminded of it every time he walks into the nursery while Alec gets to stay oblivious about it, and Magnus knows, without an ounce of doubt in his heart, that it is why he is
so angry at him.

“I-I don’t know,” Alec sputters lowly. “I never thought of that, never stopped to think about the room needing to be cleaned if she wasn’t there.”

He rubs his hands together anxiously, looking down.

“Well, I did,” Magnus sighs, all the fight having left him. There is nothing left but a cold, horrid December around the corner. “I go in there every two weeks,” he continues, cursing his voice for trembling. “And I do it because someone has to and I know it’s not going to be you. So maybe you needed time to move on, but I haven’t had that, because I couldn’t move on as long as that room was there.”

Alec draws in a deep breath. “Magnus, I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

Magnus believes him, knows still how to read his eyes enough to know Alec means every word. It doesn’t prevent him from choking on a sob. “I know you didn’t,” he murmurs, his eyes burning with tears that he has longed to shed. “You didn’t care enough to even ask yourself. That’s what hurts the most.”

“I did care,” Alec whispers, slowly getting up to face him. The pain in his gaze is a perfect mirror to the one coursing through Magnus’ whole body. “I did. I just lost myself in the grief. I lost sight of everything.”

Magnus sniffs, but it is in vain. A tear rolls down his cheek as he murmurs, “I just needed you. And you weren’t there.”

Alec steps forward and his hand trembles as he reaches out to rest it cautiously on Magnus’ back. “I know,” he says. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you. I should have been.”

It all comes down on him before Magnus can understand what’s happening. It is more than crying and he knows he would sink to his knees in front of the fireplace if Alec wasn’t there to wrap his arms around him and hold him against his chest as Magnus breaks down, his last defences crumbling one by one until he is drained of all strength, and desolated sobs rip out of his throat. His tears are not silent anymore, and he feels Alec’s own mingle with his, even as he whispers apologies in Magnus’ hair, kissing the top of his head as he cries, too.

There is the rawness of an open wound in their cries, their embrace certainly the only thing keeping them from completely falling apart. The distance between has been washed away, nothing left but their common grief, the loss that only they can understand, the devastation they can finally share.

There is no need to wear a mask of coping anymore, because if they heal, they will heal in each other’s arms.

Magnus pulls back eventually, wiping his cheeks, watching as Alec does the same with his forearm. He blinks back at Magnus quickly, eyes puffy and red. There is a crestfallen expression on his features, but somehow, Magnus thinks he looks more like himself than he has in years, as if he unshackled himself from a burden he has been dragging with him in every step for too long.

“I was so mad at you,” Magnus says quietly, the words heavy on his tongue, his throat dry, “and it got to a point where I was just Angry all the time. I didn’t want to hear about your work anymore because it just reminded me that you were never there. And I didn’t want to talk about my work because I felt like you didn’t care anymore.”

Alec nods and wipes at his nose. “You had— have every right to be mad at me. I wasn’t a good
husband, I haven’t been for a long time now but I never stopped caring about you. I never stopped loving you.” He sighs and reaches out to take Magnus’ hand in his, taking a moment to run his thumb over the wedding band on his finger. When he looks back at Magnus, his face is an open picture of blunt honesty, the same honesty that managed to tear down every single one of Magnus’ carefully constructed walls fifteen years ago. “I love you, Magnus.”

Magnus’ breath hitches. He didn’t think he would ever hear those words again and feel them echo in his chest. They had been a daily occurrence, once. Every occasion had been good enough to tell them, every little joy a perfect opportunity. Whispering them back had been easy, then. Magnus hadn’t even had to think about them. When they passed the barrier of his lips, they came straight from his heart, and they never felt like they could do justice to their reality. Love had never seemed big enough of a word to contain the magnitude of Magnus’ feelings for Alec.

And those feelings are still there. He knows it with every fiber of his soul, every beating of his heart.

But as he glances back at his husband, at the pure and genuine devotion in his eyes, he wonders if they can ever go back to that freedom.

“I–” he pauses, the words stuck in his throat. He doesn’t know if it is fear, or anger, or just another December right around the corner, but there is defeat in his tone as he utters a weak, “I know.”

Guilt washes over him as he watches Alec close his eyes, a single tear falling down his cheek as he nods, landing on his lips. Alec lowers his head, touching his forehead to Magnus’, cupping his face between his hands, his thumbs wiping what remains of Magnus’ tears.

“It’s okay,” he murmurs. “I’ll wait– I can wait for you.”

Magnus holds onto his shoulders, his thumb resting idly against Alec’s pulse.

He finds an anchor in his heartbeats against his fingertips, truce and solace in Alec’s presence.

The night ends early when they have nothing else to give and their tears turn to dry, silent cries in each other’s arms. Magnus’ sobs no longer shudder through his body and he gives into the embrace and lays his head on Alec’s shoulder, burying his face in Alec’s neck. He’s tired. They both are. Years spent pretending things were okay, never saying what they really meant, of unspoken laments and held back anger have left them empty of everything. But holding Magnus in his arms like this, feeling the wet of his cheeks against the skin of his neck, reminds Alec of who they used to be. The two men who told each other everything, who relied on each other for strength and always knew that so long as they were together, everything would be okay. It was all they used to need and they’d let themselves forget.

Magnus sits up and wipes at his cheeks. His eyes find Alec and they are the same rich brown as before, his lips the same soft pink, his skin is the same bronzed brown Alec knows and loves; Magnus is the same as he’s always been but his eyes are haunted with the scars of their past. These are the scars Alec can share with him though, they are scars they will wear together and neither of them will ever have to be alone with them again.

Alec reaches up and holds Magnus’ face in his hand and sweeps his thumb across his cheek to dry the remaining tears.
“How bout we go to bed?” he suggests and Magnus closes his eyes tiredly when he nods against his palm.

They stand and he takes Magnus’ hand in his. He guides them to the bedroom where they slowly undress and prepare for bed. They’re silent as they go through the motions. There’s not much more they can say at a time like this. They’ve said what they needed to. They had been completely open and honest with each other and it was the cathartic release they had both so desperately needed.

He switches off the lamp and crawls into the bed beside Magnus, pulling the plush covers over both of them. He settles in on his side and closes his eyes. He takes in the lulling sound of Magnus’ even breaths and tries to let them guide him to sleep. He tries to shut off his brain when it goes back to the moment he told his husband he loves him and he was unable to say the words back. He never knew he would find himself in a life where Magnus does not love him. It hurts more than he can say. The look on Magnus’ face when he couldn’t meet his eyes and reciprocate his feelings is a haunting thing. But Alec understands. He has not given Magnus any reason to stay in love with him. He has done nothing over the past three years of their marriage to deserve it. But he told Magnus he would wait for him and he will, Alec will wait for him forever if that’s what it takes.

“Alec…” Magnus’ voice is a quiet, broken thing. “Will you hold me?”

Alec pulls himself forward and brings his arms around Magnus who folds himself in against Alec’s chest with a deep sigh. Alec curls in around him and brings his nose down to Magnus’ hair. He breathes him in and kisses him softly against his hair. He can feel the tension in Magnus’ broad shoulders melt from his touch and in the span of a few minutes, his breaths fall into the deep, slow respirations of sleep. He has missed this so much, the comfort and love he feels when Magnus is in his arms. The peace he gets from the knowledge that his touch alone used to be and can still be enough to take the stress away from his husband and bring him to sleep. Despite everything, he can still be comfort, peace, and home to Magnus.

His heart hurts, it feels battered and broken, but he has hope that with time he can possibly have Magnus’ love again.

They lay together, Magnus sleeping in his arms and Alec wide awake enjoying the feeling of holding him again, long into the night. Alec forces himself to pull away for a moment, reaching as far as he can for his phone on the nightstand. Magnus stirs and burrows in closer to Alec again when Alec brings his arms back around him.

He powers on the screen of his phone and opens his messages. He finds Luke’s thread and clicks it. He’s done with all the broken promises. He’s going to fight to keep what he’s found again, if it’s the last thing he does. And he will start with this:

*Can you get the application files we had for the surgeon position out for when I get back from my trip?*

*I want to have a look at them again.*

Chapter End Notes

Please let us know your thoughts, favorite parts, lines, etc. They make our day and we appreciate them so much!
You can find one of us on twitter: Lecrit

We know this was a difficult chapter. We hope you will still love us.

Next time: texting, progress, and starting over

all the love,

lu & jackie
Hello you beautiful fools,

Thank you for your patience, we hope this chapter will be enough of a reward.

We love to hear your thoughts and read your live tweets so please use our tag so we can read them if you decide to do so: #LINAVM.

On to the chapter...

Did we ever see it coming?
Will we ever let it go?

We are buried in broken dreams
We are knee-deep without a plea
I don't want to know what it's like to live without you
Don't want to know the other side of a world without you

Hey :)  

Magnus looks up from his iPad as his phone dings with a new text, Alexander’s name popping up on the screen. He can’t hold back the small, fond smile that looms on his lips at the sight of that simple word. It is very much like Alec, like the Alec that used to text him in the middle of a night shift just in case Magnus was still awake enough to indulge him into a meaningless conversation that never failed to leave his whole body tingling with warmth despite the one missing on the other side of the bed.

It is a simple thing, but somehow it manages to revive a tingle in Magnus’ stomach that he had thought extinct. If he was religious at all, Magnus would dare to think it feels like a resurrection of sorts.

His fingers tickling with excitement, he picks up his phone to write back.

Hey, stranger. Did you steal my husband’s phone and teach him how to use emojis? Because you taught him wrong. There’s a thing called an emoji keyboard. Winky face.

He stares at his phone for a minute, watching the three dots telling him Alec is answering, and he feels like this is college again, the two of them getting to know each other. He remembers the long nights they spent texting back then, deep into the night until it was so late anyone would call it early and one of them ended up inevitably falling asleep with their phone still in hand.
And here I was just wanting to check in on your day but instead I get teased :’(.

Magnus grins at his phone, biting on his bottom lip. His ears feel a bit warm, and he supposes it could be the Californian weather, far more clement than the one in New York even at this late time of the year, but he knows better than to believe that. It is the thrill of weeks and months of struggle slowly but surely lifting from his shoulders because they failed many times, they made mistakes bigger than themselves, but it finally feels like maybe –just maybe– they could get back to themselves. To being that couple Jace told him about when they went out for a drink.

Don’t be sad, he sends back. You get points for trying.

Alec’s reply comes in a matter of seconds.

Good. I’ll take all the points I can get.

So, how’s your day?

Magnus looks down at his iPad, and the awful visuals he has been staring at for the last half hour, trying to make sense of how his years of hard and dedicated work to make his company the empire it is slowly starting to become have led him to this point. He isn’t sure he wants to know the answer. Instead, he focuses back on his phone, and he finds that somehow, texting his husband has managed to placate some of his anger.

I got the visuals for our marketing campaign for the Paris launch and they’re horrendous but Raphael convinced me not to close the company and move to an isolated island away from those idiots. All in all, a regular day in Edom. Yours?

Magnus barely suppresses a shudder as he looks back at the offensive visuals. He pays graphic designers very handsomely for this, and he is pretty sure he could have done better using Paint.

Haha. I’m glad Raphael is there to talk you down when you’re being dramatic. They couldn’t be that bad.

Magnus is not being dramatic, thank you very much. Dramatic would have been telling his employees that they are all fired and he’s hiring Ariel to do the visuals in their stead. She would have done better, for sure. And he would have paid her in candy, so it would have been a win for everyone, really.

They used three different fonts, Alec, he replies, because his husband doesn’t seem to understand the gravity of the situation. And I’m pretty sure one of them was Comic Sans SC. I’m surrounded by amateurs.

Comic Sans SC is the graphist equivalent of walking into a business meeting wearing a fedora and red cowboy boots while expecting to be taken seriously. Only a fool would do it.

Thankfully, Magnus’ husband isn’t a fool.

Fire the entire department.

Magnus smirks, nodding to himself. Even Alec, who once suggested handcrafting their wedding invitations themselves to “save money” despite knowing no one but Magnus and people working in the medical field can decipher his diabolical handwriting, knows better than this. Which means firing the entire department might indeed be Magnus’ only option, because his husband is a hazard when it comes to anything remotely creative.
How are the meetings going? Alec asks before Magnus can say any of that. You showed that Sephora guy how he was wrong to ever doubt you?

Magnus smiles. Despite everything they’ve been through, and everything they are still going through, for their issues are not going to go away with one weekend in Vermont where they finally had the talk they had delayed for too long, Alec is still as supportive as ever. He has been there from the get go, always knowing exactly what Magnus needed when the road was paved with obstacles, often before Magnus knew it himself, be it silent encouragement or words of unwavering loyalty like only Alec can provide.

I seem to have done so indeed. We're not quite done yet, but he had another meeting so we're meeting again this afternoon. I'm at the hotel now, working from the lobby.

How about you? How are you finding your day off?

He is somehow disappointed, if he is quite honest, that his business trip coincidentally happened right when Alec finally decided to take a few days off. They could have taken the opportunity to continue what they started in Vermont, a path towards healing together rather than apart, a return to their golden years, to communication and comfort. This is just a delay, Magnus tells himself, but still, he would rather be with his husband, broken relationship and all, than here in California talking business with people that don’t feel remotely as real as even a sliver of Alec’s soul.

Quiet. I've cleaned the loft, organized the pantry, cleaned out the closet, and now I'm sitting on the couch reading. I might go stir crazy if I don't find other things to do.

He can picture it, Alec hanging around in the loft in his sweatpants, searching for distractions. He is too used to the frantic rhythms of the hospital, and sometimes he forgets that it is also okay to do nothing and let the silence engulf and soothe him. He always needed Magnus for that, to remind him that life is more than frenzy and responsibilities, that it can be quiet and peace, too.

And maybe tease him about his habits of always reorganizing everything so it fits his perfectionist standards –which it hardly ever does, but Magnus likes to watch him attempt perfection nonetheless; it is one of Alec’s most endearing qualities.

The pantry could use some reorganizing, he texts back, a playful smirk dancing on his lips. Plus, you always said you wanted to organize our books in alphabetical order.

And, immediately afterwards, I'm joking. Don't do that.

It’s too late, though, and Magnus can only blame himself.

Now that's an idea! That can be tomorrow's task.

Magnus shakes his head, surprised at the fondness of his own smile. It has been a while since he last felt it in regards to his husband’s antics. Somehow, they had come to a point where they all annoyed him beyond measure, even the ones that used to make him swoon like a lovesick fool. He doesn’t know if he will get back there; he isn’t in college anymore, and they have been together for a long time, but if he at least can bring himself to smile over them rather than roll his eyes and huff askance, it is still a step further towards atonement for the younger version of themselves they have besmirched and dishonored.

The younger version of themselves that deserved so much better than the pathetic excuse of a marriage Alec and Magnus winded up giving their hopeful, loving selves.

This is no time to dwell on a past filled with regrets, Magnus ponders to himself. This is a time for
new beginnings and second chances. Third chances, perhaps, but who cares when the outcome is the promise of better days on the horizon?

He thinks of Maryse, how broken she had been after she divorced Robert, but how she was strong enough to pick up the pieces of herself she had scattered along the way to rise back tougher than ever. He thinks of her courage, for opening up her heart again despite having it slowly break and shatter for years. He hopes she found in Luke someone who will finally give her the love she deserves, but he doesn’t really doubt it. Luke’s heart is big enough to love her with all the passion she merits tenfold.

He would like to know how they did it, how they went from being as unhappy as Magnus knew them to be deep down, to finding each other.

And he’s in California, but his husband is not, so he supposes that’s a mission for him.

Go visit your mother and grill her about Luke instead. I want the dirt.

His brain conjures an image of Alec fondly rolling his eyes with mind-blowing ease.

I think I have more than enough information on my mother's love life.

You may have enough information but I don’t. I need to know every single thing.

Of course, Magnus is impossibly happy for Maryse and Luke, but maybe he is even happier to be able to tease Alec relentlessly with this new piece of information. No one can prove it anyway.

Well, I do have lunch planned with her tomorrow, Alec replies and Magnus can almost hear the carefully calculated nonchalance that means he will not humor Magnus on his quest for juicy details. And maybe I’ll get some information out of her. But just the normal stuff like when she decided she wanted to start dating my boss.

“Boring,” Magnus says accusingly out loud, but he is chuckling behind his hand, his mind forever grateful for the mental image of a wide-eyed open-mouthed mind-blown Alec as Luke told him he was getting freaky with his mother. Magnus has no doubt Luke didn’t word it quite like that, but hey, a man can dream for the sake of teasing his husband ‘til death do them part.

Ha! Sorry, I just can’t stop laughing, he quickly types back. I wish I could have seen your face when Luke told you. It would have been my background picture for the rest of my life.

I’m so glad you find this whole situation so amusing, Alec says, which makes it painfully obvious that he isn’t as glad as he pretends to. It makes Magnus giggle again.

Truly. And I think I kept my face pretty cool when he told me.

Magnus snorts at the blatant lie. Alec has one of those expressives faces that speak before the words reach his mouth. He speaks with his eyes, often unbeknownst to even himself, but Magnus knows every shade of green they compose, every word they whisper, every confession they allow. He knew Alec loved him long before Alec uttered the words for the first time, perhaps even before Alec knew it himself. Magnus fell in love with that look that belongs to him alone, after all.

And Luke has known Alec for years, has been a mentor and a friend to him for long enough that he has surely learnt how to decipher Alec’s expressions the way only the people who know him and love him as time passes by can.

Magnus’ phone dings with another text, Camille’s name popping on the screen (and with it, the snake emoji Magnus suspects Raphael added surreptitiously while he wasn’t looking) to inform
him that their next meeting is in thirty minutes back at the Sephora headquarters.

He quickly swipes it away, focusing back on his thread with Alec. It feels good, to have an actual thread of messages that doesn’t consist of “dinner is in the fridge” and “held back at work” anymore.

*Your face is always pretty, darling,* he replies.

Magnus waits, anticipation swirling in his stomach, as the three dots appear again. And yes, maybe he is a fool after all. A perfectly dressed fool, but a fool nonetheless. He thinks his reasons are somewhat commendable, though.

*Well I wish I could see your pretty face right now. I miss it.*

They saw each other just the day before. They landed back in New York from their trip in Vermont only for Magnus to have to leave immediately and catch another plane to San Francisco. It has been, roughly, twenty-four hours. But Magnus finds that he misses him too, and not the miracle of a husband he has conjured in his mind, not the man he fell in love with fifteen years ago, but this version of him too. The one that lives in the here and now, and who told Magnus he loved him and promised to wait for him to be able to say it back again. The one that supports him and fights against all odds to fix everything they have broken.

He sends back a single heart emoji, feeling his own punch at his ribcage, and smiles the easiest smile in months as he types back an answer.

*I have to go because being a successful business man sucks. But how about seeing my pretty face later today? I can FaceTime you when I'm back at the hotel after the meeting?*

*I'd love that. Call me whenever...I'll be here.*

There is hope, Magnus knows now, and perhaps it is the only promise that he needs.

The afternoon drags for so long Magnus wonders if he fell into another dimension where every second lasts a minute and people think a skinny, flappy, pointless bit of neck string can still pass as a stylish tie if you believe it strong enough. He doesn’t know if the young financial manager wannabe is aiming for a prepubescent British rockstar look, but it is what he achieves anyway, and it almost distracts Magnus from the matters at hand.

It is already a bit late when Magnus makes it back to the hotel, and he feels a little giddy as he slouches on the bed, turns the TV on for some background noise and plucks his phone out of his pocket to call his husband.

If he is quite honest with himself, perhaps having looking forward to calling Alec all day long is also why it seemed to drag as much as it did. He is fairly patient, but if he has to hear Camille’s seductive, silky voice trying to charm a Sephora representative or said Sephora representative stumble over his words one more minute, he might lose it and move to a paradisiac island after all. He’ll take Alec with him, and they can thrive again, drink cocktails all day, cuddle up in hammocks by the sea and forget about their many struggles.

Alec makes it painfully obvious that he had been awaiting Magnus’ call all day with the same enthusiasm as Magnus himself when he picks up on the first ring.

FaceTime is offensive as hell in that it doesn’t care if Magnus is jetlagged, has been stuck in
meeting rooms all day or that his hair is flopping down on his forehead gracelessly; it still attacks him with his own reflection before Alec’s face appears instead.

Alec’s grin is wide and God, Magnus is thankful for new technologies and high quality video calls so he can see his eyes crinkle in the corner as he exclaims, "There’s the face I love."

"Hey, darling," Magnus says, a soft smile curling on his lips despite the exhaustion, the weariness, and everything in-between. "What time is it for you? I didn't even think about that before calling."

"Not too late," Alec replies with a shrug. "Like ten thirty. I took a quick nap earlier so I could stay awake for our call."

Magnus hums, satisfied enough with the answer that he doesn’t feel bad for not checking the time, and settles more comfortably against the pillows, grabbing the hotel’s menu from the night table to flick through it. He’s starving. "Just tell me when you want to go to bed," he says, eyes darting back to the screen. "What’ve you been doing?"

"Besides being bored out of my mind?" Alec chuckles, his eyes crinkling again. Magnus can’t help but smile again at how adorable he looks with his hair messy, how it always is when he is off because he doesn’t even bother to pretend to tame it. "I almost finished the book I just started today, took a nap, ate an incredibly unhealthy dinner and now I'm just laying here. You?"

"Boring meeting, boring lunch, boring meeting and another boring meeting," he lists out, absently reading through the menu. Steak and vodka seems like a great option to finish a busy day. "The craziest thing about my day were those god awful visuals I told you about. Raphael checked and it was indeed Comic Sans SC. I may have cried a little."

Alec winces. "You hired a bunch of amateurs."

Magnus huffs, feigning offense. "It was Ragnor," he says, in a tone that suggests it should have been obvious to his truly. "I don’t always check who he hires. I learned my lesson."

Alec smiles at Magnus fondly. "You would think he'd know better. I'll have to have a talk with him."

Magnus chuckles. "Oh, don’t worry. I’m sure Raphael and Cat already gave him hell. I’m just sad I missed it."

Alec laughs, tilting his head in thought. "Oh yeah, I'm sure things got uglier than the Red Wedding if Raphael was involved at all."

Magnus nods, and he almost feels sorry for Ragnor –except he doesn’t because Comic sans SC should definitely warrant a punishment graver than the outcome of the Red Wedding. "I'm sure a lot of Raphael-level of gruesome stuff happened on Game of Thrones since I last saw an episode," he remarks. He doesn’t even remember the last time he took time to catch up on the show.

"I can't even remember how long it's been since the last episode we watched," Alec says, mirroring Magnus’ own thoughts. "I was almost spoiled by Underhill and Luke once because they were talking about it in the break room but I ran away before I could hear anything damaging."

“I can’t remember either,” he admits, “but I seem to recall you mourning Jon Snow’s pretty face? Has it really been that long?”

"I think it has," Alec says. “We should probably do something about that."
Magnus grins as an idea pops in his head, tossing the menu aside. “We can do something about that right now!” he exclaims cheerfully, feeling stupidly excited all of a sudden. “Let me check the hotel’s channel but I’m sure any decent hotel has Game of Thrones on demand. I know it’s not the same as a marathon on the couch at home but do you want to watch an episode now?” He pauses to chew on his bottom lip, hesitation tempering down his enthusiasm in a second. “Unless you’re too tired. Then it can wait until I get home and we find the time.”

Alec shakes his head, pulls a blanket up over his chest and sinks into their couch. “I’m ready. Let’s do this.”

Magnus’ grin is back in a matter of second. “Let me just order something to eat for dinner and then I’m good to go.”

“Take your time,” Alec says with a soft, tender smile. “I’m not going anywhere.”

There are both singing along to the opening credits when a knock on the door interrupts their perfect rendition fifteen minutes later.

“That was quick,” Magnus says, and glances back at the phone. “My food is here. We have to pause in 3… 2… 1… Go!”

Alec chuckles at his dramatics, shaking his head. “Paused,” he says nonetheless. “Go get your food, husband.”

Magnus nods quickly, climbing off the bed and sauntering to the door, ready to get his food and get back to his night between Game of Thrones and Alec immediately.

All enthusiasm vanishes from his body and his mind when he opens the door to find Camille on the other side.

“Hey,” she all but purrs, smiling that devilish smirk of hers. Magnus wonders how he ever let himself be fooled. Now that he can see a semblance of it back in Alec’s eyes, there is nothing comparable in Camille’s, nothing that brings Magnus’ the warmth in the pit of his stomach a simple text can bring, nothing that makes his heart slam against his ribcage. There is nothing at all, not even the entertainment of an escape from demanding times. “Want some company?” she asks, holding up the bottle of wine in her hand.

“Hard pass,” Magnus says, sending her a fake smile he knows she can read through. “I’ve got all the company I need right here right now and anytime in the future. Have a good night, Camille.”

He snorts at the insulted look twisting her features as he closes the door to her face, and walks back to his bed, tumbling on it and grabbing the phone again.

“It was Camille,” he says absently, hoping it won’t trigger another fight after everything has been going so well. “I sent her away. Ready to start again?”

“I know,” Alec says, and there is a raw edge to it that makes Magnus glance down at him. “I heard.”

“Oh.”

Alec smiles softly on the screen, staring adoringly at Magnus for a moment, with enough fervor that Magnus feels a blush bloom on his cheeks and the tip of his ears, but he doesn’t look away, somehow unable to.
Then, Alec turns back to the screen. “Alright. 3… 2…” he trails off when another knock on Magnus’ hotel door, strong and determined, interrupts him. “I swear this woman is testing my patience,” he hisses between gritted teeth.

“I’ll be right back,” Magnus says with an apologetic grimace. He flings the door open, ready to tell Camille to back off in more colorful words, but freezes at the sight of the poor hotel employee standing there.

“Here’s your dinner, Mr. Lightwood-Bane,” she says. “Do you need anything else?”

Magnus shakes his head. “I’m good, thank you,” he replies, reaching for his wallet to slide a tip in her hand.

“Enjoy your dinner,” she says, and disappears through the door.

Magnus makes sure to put his ‘do not disturb’ sign on the handle and locks the door twice before heading back to his bed, pushing the trolley as close as possible.

He picks up his phone again and stuffs his mouth with a French fry. “Alright, I’m here,” he mumbles through the food. “Do the countdown.”

They go through almost three episodes before they both are struggling to stay awake. Alec falls asleep first. Magnus can hear his breathing evening out even though his mouth is half hidden by the blanket he has pulled all the way up to his nose.

“Goodnight, my darling,” Magnus murmurs, shutting off the TV.

“G’night, babe,” Alec murmurs back sleepily.

Magnus falls asleep with an indelible smile on his face.

Alec sits at the white paper covered table, nestled in the corner against the cold tile wall in the restaurant, waiting on his mother to show up. There’s a pretty big crowd for a weekday which must be a testament to how good the food is, and if Maia’s review is anything to go by, Alec figures he won’t be disappointed.

He hears his mother from over his shoulder before he sees her for the brief moment before she has her arm wrapped around his neck and is pulling his head in to plant a kiss on the top.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” she says in a breathless rush. Her cheeks are flushed, eyes bright, her smile glowing when she turns to face him after draping her coat over the chair and adjusting her scarf over her shoulders. She is a vision of happiness, everything Alec has ever wanted for her, and the sight of it brings a swell of joy that fills his chest. He never realized how much he’s missed seeing his mother this happy.

“I wasn’t waiting long,” he says and she presses a hand to her chest at the reassuring tone.

The server is quick to arrive at their table, taking their drink orders and promises to be right back for their food orders.

“So, Jace tells me that you and Magnus snuck off to the mountains. How did that go?”

Her question is innocent enough, a simple mother’s curiosity but her brows lift a fraction higher
than normal and her eyes hold a hesitant and heartbroken expression. She is almost too afraid to ask, as if she doesn’t want to upset their lunch but he knows she’s more afraid of not asking and not being there for him should he need her. She’s apologized to him before about that—her less than enthusiastic response when he told her he was gay. She says she’s never been more ashamed of anything than of how she treated him in those early days, even when Magnus first came around.

He’s forgiven her for it, of course. She’s more than made her amends and he’s seen over the years how much she has grown to love Magnus as if he were her own son. He’s her family now and as much as she loves to be in control of things, of this—she can’t be. She has to sit back and wait and hope that her family will stay together. All she can do is ask.

Alec takes a sip of the cold water he poured himself when he first sat down. “It went well. It was up and then it was down…very down.” He shakes his head not wanting to let his mind go back to that fight just yet. “But things are up again.”

Her smile spreads slowly. “I’m pleased to hear that.” She pours herself a glass of water and then frowns before taking a sip. “Not about the ‘down’ part though. Did something happen?”

The server is back with their drinks and they quickly glance over the menus they had left forgotten beside them. They each settle on a dish without much thought. Alec can feel the weight of the conversation from the cabin pressing inside his stomach, so much so that he doesn’t care what he eats. His mother collects the menus and passes them off to the server with a thankful smile and then turns her attention back on Alec.

“You were saying what happened.” She gestures for him to continue even though he hadn’t technically ever started explaining what all happened during that short yet crucial trip to Vermont.

He didn’t think he would want to talk about it but now that he’s been asked, now that he’s actually talked about it with Magnus, he finds that he wants nothing more than to talk about it with her. He closed himself off for so long, avoided the topic for years, that he never stopped to realize that he’d never given his family the chance to share his grief with him. They had been excited too. And they had all lost something as well. His mother lost the chance at being a grandmother to two little girls. He remembers how she used to go on and on about the two little princesses she would be able to show off in the dual stroller she bought for their visits to grandma’s. He forgot about all the matching outfits she had purchased for Ariel and Aurora. She had been heartbroken and yet Alec had never let her or anyone in to grieve with him.

Alec sighs. “Something happened three years ago and we never talked about it.” He hears the small intake of breath from her but he presses on before he loses the nerve. “I never talked about it. I shut everyone out.”

“You went through something unimaginable, Alec. It’s understandable.”

Alec shakes his head. “I shut Magnus out, Mom. He was going through the same pain and instead of being there for him, I pushed him away until we got to the point we’re at now. I didn’t try hard enough to help.”

“That’s not like you,” she says resolutely, confident in her opinion of her son. “Not where Magnus is concerned.”

“Well, I did. I hid from him and just kept it all to myself.”

Years and years he spent, drowning in his own misery, focusing only on himself and not even bothering to try with Magnus again. Not daring to take the risk and seek him out or to offer his
help. Not again, not after that first time when his burden had been made so abundantly clear.

“But why?” Her eyes sadden. “Why would you do that to yourself?”

He shrugs. “I didn’t want to burden him any more than I already had.”

“Alec, you’re not a burden. Your grief is not a burden. And I’m sure Magnus feels the same way.”

Perhaps now, Alec thinks, but at one point he was. He had been too big a burden for his husband to bear. “But it was. I was. But none of that matters now, what’s done is done and… I just have to try to be better.”

“That was a”—she pauses to correct the catch in her voice with a shallow gulp—“a very difficult time.”

Difficult. A mild word to describe it. But Alec supposes there really isn’t a single word that can encompass the hardship, pain, confusion, anger, and resentment grief can cause.

It had been a difficult time for everyone.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you either…” he says, looking her in the eye. He hopes she can forgive him for this.

She looks back at him, dumbfounded, eyes wide and shakes her head. “You don’t have to apologize to me. I only wish I could have done more for you both.”

“I wish I would have let you,” he confesses with a solemn shake of his head.

They sit in a silence that’s filled with the sounds of excited chatter and laughter from the other patrons, a striking contrast to what is going on at their table for two.

“So you finally spoke with him…on the trip?” Her voice is gentle, guiding him back to their conversation.

He gives her a nod. “I almost didn’t. I almost shut down again and then he left and I thought I had lost him, really and truly lost him this time, but then he came back. And I knew...from the moment I saw him walk back through the door that I couldn’t keep shutting down on him like that. And that if I didn’t want to lose him, then I would have to talk about her. And… I don’t think I can live without him, Mom.” Alec gives her a small shrug of his shoulders, because that is the truth. He can’t live without Magnus. So he has to do whatever he can to fix this between them. Even if it means facing their ugliest demons and going through the hell of their past and back. “It hurt to go there again but we finally said everything that we needed to say.”

His mom smiles at him. It’s small at first and then spreads, gleaming with pride. “I’m glad. You can both begin again now. Together.”

Beginning again feels like exactly what they will have to do. The past few weeks have proven that they are different people from when they first met. They’re still the same at their core but they’re so very different. They’re changed. They’ve seen happiness, love, unimaginable sorrow, anger, and countless other emotions that Alec isn’t even sure he can name. They are the same yet they are too different to pick up where they left off. They’ve grown but they’ve grown apart and now they have to figure out how to grow again and how to do it together this time.

“I hope so.” His voice cracks and he coughs in the back of his throat to try and repair it. “I just wish I hadn’t pushed him away. I wish I wouldn’t have hidden behind my job...”
His eyes sting and he runs his hands back through his already messy hair to try and distract himself from breaking down in the middle of a crowded restaurant. He wanted to have a nice lunch with his mom, talk to her about her newfound love with Luke, and tell her about how hopeful he is for his future with Magnus. But now… He lets out a deep and shaking breath before leaning his elbows on the table, curving his body forward and meeting his mother’s careful eyes.

“You’d think I’d be used to it,” he finally says, wiping his eyes. “Death.” He forces a smile on his face when his mom meets his eyes. He doesn’t know why he bothers and so he lets the mask drop and he can feel the pain of it all twisting in his gut.

“Oh, honey… ”

“It’s everywhere at work. I see it all the time but yet I couldn’t even hold myself together for Magnus. I let him down and I…I couldn’t do anything for our baby girl.”

She covers his hand with hers and tucks her fingers into his palm. It’s warm and comforting. The touch brings a feeling of his childhood back to him. Of nights filled with the crashing of thunderstorms and fear that these hands settled and made him feel safe with a single touch. Of sadness over the loss of his hamster that these hands soothed away with every stroke across his back. His throat thickens and burns. His eyes sting. This is a touch he never realized he needed to help him through this.

“What happened was never in your hands, Alec. You cannot blame yourself for this. And you cannot make things right, no matter how much you work.”

Her words hit their mark and he feels himself crumble inside. He’s performed surgery after surgery for the past three years, desperate to save as many people as possible because he wasn’t able to save his own daughter. Although, she’s right, what happened was never within his power to change but yet he still placed so much blame where it didn’t belong. It was that feeling of helplessness that pushed him so far into his work that he could no longer see a way out. There was this force inside of him, determined to save anyone else from having to feel that same pain and with every surgery he sought an unattainable absolution. He never stopped to think that the only power he did have, was the power to heal. To help his husband heal.

“No parent should ever have to bury their child.” His mother tightens her grip on him and the strength of it roots inside of him, supporting him. She lifts her chin up, blinking back tears. “There is no rule book that tells us how we should handle our grief and there’s nothing we can do to change the past. We just have to do what we can and sometimes mistakes are made but you’re here for Magnus now and you’re sharing this pain with each other now. That’s what matters. And you’re not surrounded by death. You save lives. You are a hero every day, just like you always said you wanted to be when you were little.” Her voice is clear when she speaks and holds an unwavering certainty. “You are a hero, Alec.”

“But I wasn’t for Magnus.”

His mother quickly and quietly shushes him; her grip remains steel tight on his hand. “You will be now. I know you love him more than life itself, Alec. And I know you. You will do everything in your power to make things right. If there is anyone who can overcome this, it’s the two of you. You will save each other. I have no doubt in my mind.”

Her eyes are unwavering in their gaze. His mother has the ability to make things feel as if they’re absolute. She’s done it their entire lives. If she said something would go a certain way, no matter how outrageous the odds were, she would make you believe that they would. She was also, in most cases, right, the motherly intuition and knowledge second nature to her. Her words subdue the
anguish inside him; he feels calm, secure. Certain. He and Magnus will find their way through this, they’ve come too far to give up now. Alec loves him and even though Magnus can’t say the words to him yet, he knows that one day he will. If anyone can overcome this, it’s them.

“Thanks, Mom,” he says and she reaches up to pat his cheek, rubbing her knuckles against his stubble with an amused scrub of her nose.

She lets her hand fall to the folded napkin on the table that she proceeds to lay across her lap. She’s smiling contently to herself all the while, soft wrinkles permanently marking the edges of her eyes.

Alec clears his throat to draw her attention. “So, you have someone new in your life?”

Her shoulders straighten and she distracts herself by continuously smoothing the napkin over her lap. “What makes you say that?”


The surprise and shock is clear in her eyes, her mouth drops open slightly before she catches herself with a chuckle. “He’s told you then,” she remarks with a fond smile.

“Yes, he’s told me.”

She meets his eyes and her lips pull back into a nervous, tight-lipped smile. “And? How do you feel about it?”

Alec watches his bold and fearless mother twist her hands together anxiously. He reaches out and covers her hands with his, hoping that his touch can bring the same comfort hers can give him. “I think it’s great.”

She lets out a breath and her smile grows. “Really?”

“Alec watches his bold and fearless mother twist her hands together anxiously. He reaches out and covers her hands with his, hoping that his touch can bring the same comfort hers can give him. “I think it’s great.”

She lets out a breath and her smile grows. “Really?”

“Well, of course.” Alec leans back in his chair when the server approaches and sets their dishes before them. “Luke is great. He’s been like a father figure to me throughout my entire career and he’s an honestly good man. I can’t believe I never considered setting you up with him before because now that I think about it, you’re a perfect fit.”

“We are,” she gushes, a rosy blush rising in her cheeks. “He is… more than I ever expected to find in love. And he speaks so highly of you, it makes me so proud. And he’s good to me. He makes me happy.”

The last eight words are the only words that matter to him. After all her heartbreak, she’s finally getting what she deserves. Happiness.

“So it’s love?” he asks, teasing of course but she blushing brighter.

“I mean… I don’t know what all Lucian told you but it’s been going on for awhile—we’ve— it’s—yes,” she sighs out. “It’s love.”

Alec smiles. “I’m happy for you.”

She nods, black hair swaying across her shoulders. She’s wearing her hair down for the first time in a long while. She looks bright and youthful. The effects of new love in full force. It suits her well.

“I was going to tell you soon. I promise. I was just waiting for the right time. I want to have him over for Christmas. If that’s okay with you,” she quickly adds in. “I understand if you don’t want to
mix work and your private life just yet.”

Alec chuckles and picks up his fork. “It’s perfectly fine with me. Just be prepared to answer all of Magnus’ questions. He’s convinced there’s some torrid, dramatic story to how this all started.”

She lets out a burst of laughter and claps her hands together. “Magnus does love his dramatic love stories. Let me guess, he sent you with the mission of getting all the dirt on my love life?”

Alec takes a bite of his food and nods.

“Well”—she pauses dramatically as she cuts a piece of her food—“you can inform him that it all started with a wrong turn and a supply closet.”

Alec chokes on his food, different scenarios crossing his mind as to what exactly his mother could mean by their little meet cute. He chases the food down with a large gulp of water and holds a finger up. “That’s enough information.”

She laughs again and then rolls her eyes. They speak about everything from love to the upcoming holidays. They speak of their future and they do it with smiles on their faces and hope blazing in their hearts. They’ve shared more in this short lunch than they have in a long time and Alec finds that he doesn’t ever want to go back to the days of keeping things from his family. He feels lighter now than he did when he first got here. Lighter and warm with the happiness his mother is radiating. It’s a feeling he wants to carry home with him and make it last forever.

Alec’s phone chimes with a new message just as he’s finished organizing the books on the last shelf. Magnus is either going to love him or hate him for the now alphabetized by category bookshelf in their living space, but he’s willing to take his chances because the satisfaction of an organized system is too great to ever regret.

He stands, knees aching from the crouched position he has been in all afternoon, and makes his way to the sofa to retrieve his phone that rests on the cushion. Seeing Magnus’ name flash on his lockscreen brings a grin to his face and a heavy thump in his heart that has been missing for far too long.

Survived the meeting. On my way to the airport now.

Alec checks the time on his watch, heart racing faster when he realizes how soon Magnus’ flight is set to arrive, before typing out his response. Finally! I know it's only been two days but I've missed you.

His stomach flips nervously as he watches the three dots shift from light gray to dark over and over again while Magnus types up his response. He hopes he isn’t being too forward with his feelings, but after all their texting yesterday and last night—he can’t help but want to show Magnus how he feels about him in every possible way he can.

I’ve missed you too. How was your lunch with Maryse? Alec sighs in relief and then laughs because he knows exactly what Magnus is fishing for. He rolls his eyes and punches in a quick, It was nice. Didn't get too many details on her and Luke though.

He can hear Magnus’ grumbling from here.

Damn it, husband. I guess I'll just have to grill her myself.
Alec laughs and drops down to have a seat, settling in and making himself comfortable in the corner of their couch. *I'm pretty sure the details you want are not the ones I'm interested in knowing. Ever.* He throws in a quick, *Sorry to disappoint, husband.*

He swiftly follows up his apology with the message his mother asked him to pass along, *She did mention something about this all starting with a wrong turn and a supply closet. Which is already more than I wanted to know and all you're getting from me.*

*OMG!!!! I need more! Ugh.* Alec’s laugh tears through the quiet loft and then another message chimes in, *I guess you'll just have to make it up to me somehow ;)*. A heat pools in the pit of his stomach. He knows that’s not how Magnus means it exactly and flirtations have always been in his nature but Alec’s mind wanders nonetheless. To heated kisses and Magnus’ touch that always finds exactly the right spot along Alec’s hips.

Alec puffs out his cheeks and exhales loudly. “Enough of that,” he says out loud to himself and the empty loft. He can’t go there, not yet. They’ve agreed to take their time and Alec honestly wants to. He wants to forget their last failed attempt and only look forward to a time where it will be perfect because it will be what they both desire.

*Dinner. With me. Tonight. How does that sound?* A date. The first place to start—again.

*My, my, Mr. Lightwood. Are you asking me on a date?*

Alec’s hands tremble with excitement now. In just a few short hours, he will see Magnus again, he wasn’t exaggerating when he’d texted Magnus that he misses him. It’s only been a few days that they’ve been apart, they’ve gone longer than this before but now the distance between them seems unbearable. They’re finally reaching a point where they are enjoying each other’s company again and Alec never wants that feeling to fade again. He’s already spent so much time missing Magnus while he was still here, sometimes even in the next room, but this is a different type of longing. This is the type of longing that stems from a love so deep that it seems almost unbearable to be apart for very long. It’s ridiculous and insanely reminiscent of young love but this is exactly what it feels like—like falling in love with Magnus, all over again.

*Why, yes, Mr. Bane, I am. Are you saying yes?*

Magnus’ text appears instantly, *I would love that.* Alec smiles and Magnus’ next text arrives, bringing a chuckle out of Alec with it. *As long as it isn’t at the Wandering Woods because that place is cursed.*

*Wandering Woods is dead to me. What are you in the mood for?* he sends back and the casual talk of arranging dinners together is a familiar feeling but it’s no longer short and to the point, serving only the purpose of filling their bellies. This time it’s for a proper date with his husband.

*Hey, you’re the one asking me on a date, husband. You pick.* Alec can picture Magnus’ cheeky smirk when sending that comment.

*Damn, you're right. I'm out of practice.* Alec sits there for a moment and tries to run through the different restaurants they’ve been to over the course of their relationship, which if someone were to ask Izzy she would reply that they had been to every restaurant in the city. It wasn’t quite that many but they had done their fair share of restaurant hopping back in the early days of their relationship where a dinner date happened almost every night, because they couldn’t get enough of each other. Even going so far as to choosing to sit on the same side of the table like the ridiculous saps they were. Alec chuckles at the memory of them seated in the same booth, sharing fondue and having to turn awkwardly in whenever they wanted to look at each other. It caused a lot of tangled
fondue forks and spilled food, but it also caused a lot of laughter and hands in laps and arms around waists. He doesn’t remember when they decided to stop being *that* couple but it did make eating dinner together a lot easier when they did— still he wouldn’t trade those days for the world. *How does Italian sound?*

He doesn’t have a particular restaurant in mind but he’s sure with the hours he has until Magnus arrives, he can find the perfect place to take him.

*Italian sounds perfect. I’m landing at 7pm sharp so I should be at home around 8.*

Alec jumps up from the couch and sends Magnus a message saying, *I look forward to it*, which is the understatement of the year.

He scratches at his jaw on his way to the bathroom, the hair of his beard is overgrown and—he looks at himself in the mirror and grimaces—he looks rough. No wonder his mom made that face at him earlier when she brushed against his beard. He takes the trimmers and gets to work, trying his best to stay over the sink and keep the shards of hair from creating a mess all over the vanity. His phone is still open on his text thread with Magnus and the incoming sound of a message appearing cuts in.

*Only the promise of a date with you and Italian food is keeping me from killing my employees.*

Alec finishes trimming his beard and types out his response. It’s hard to keep the devilish smirk off his face when he hits send. *If you need to pick a victim, I have a name in mind. I’ll provide the alibi.*

He hopes that made Magnus chuckle. He knows he must be incredibly stressed with trying to get everything in order before taking a flight across the country that will put him two hours ahead of what he’s been used to the past couple of days.

*lol I’ll keep that in mind. See you tonight, darling.*

Alec sets his phone on the bathroom counter, turns on the shower, and quickly cleans up the stray hairs from the sink. He has roughly five hours before Magnus’ plane arrives. Plenty of time to wash up, choose the perfect outfit and try to make himself as presentable as possible.

He scans over the clothes hanging in his closet. Nothing seems quite good enough to be *the outfit* Magnus will see him in after not seeing him for a few days. He takes off his clothes, the steam is beginning to fill the bathroom from the heat of the water, and then grabs his phone to send a message he’s sure will catch his sister off guard.

*Shopping date in an hour?*

The text bubbles are instant and the message that follows not far behind. *Serious? Tell me where, I’ll be there.*

*I’m taking a quick shower. You pick the place and I’ll meet you.*

!!!!

*Okay!*

Alec steps in the shower. His body relaxes under the hot spray but his stomach is busy doing flips and tying itself into knots of anticipation. Five more hours.
It’s already dark outside by the time Magnus lands, but he isn’t tired. The thought of a date with his husband, another chance for them to take and this time do things properly, with everything out in the open and no untold burden on their shoulders, has kept him awake and quite ridiculously agitated.

He rushes through the corridor leading out of the plane, thankful that he doesn’t have to wait to pick up his luggage because he packed lightly enough to keep it with him. He just wants to get home and let his husband surprise him with whatever Italian restaurant he has picked for them.

It could be that easy, but of course the clackety of Camille’s stilettos follows him in the corridor before he can escape her. Magnus has to remind himself that no matter what happened—or didn’t happen, more accurately—between them, she is still his employee and he can’t lash out on her for everything that went wrong. He lets his guard down, and that’s on him. He lets her get under his skin and fill his ears with lies or semi-truths, and that’s on him too.

“Any plans for tonight?” she asks, in an innocent tone that doesn’t fool him. Not anymore.

“Yes, actually,” he tells her as coolly as possible. “Dinner with my husband.”

Camille snorts rather inelegantly at his side. “Assuming he doesn’t cancel.”

Magnus grits his teeth, swallowing down a curse, and walks through the exit gate, seething. “I think I have made it very clear that my private life doesn’t—”

He doesn’t finish his sentence, stunned into silence. There, leaning against the wall, carrying an imposing bouquet of flowers between his hands, is Alec. His face lights up when he catches Magnus’ gaze, and a few things happen at once: the fight leaves Magnus altogether, he forgets Camille’s very existence, and his whole body relaxes. Because his husband is here, waiting for him with a ridiculously huge bouquet, and a grin that says there is nowhere else he would rather be.

Magnus makes his way to him, a soft smile playing on his lips that turns amused and reprimanding when Alec smirks at Camille when she walks away, chin held high in the air. Magnus slides a hand to the nape of his neck and kisses him, soft and chaste and earth-shattering.

Alec’s cheeks are a bit flushed when he pulls back, and his hazel eyes are glowing with the reverence that twists Magnus’ stomach in the most delightful way.

“Hi,” Magnus murmurs, thumb stroking the little hairs at the back of his neck.

“Hi,” Alec replies, leaning in to peck his lips again, before handing him the bouquet, grabbing Magnus’ luggage before he can protest. Magnus rolls his eyes instead. “These are for you.”

Magnus takes it with a grateful smile. It is a beautiful arrangement of forget-me-nots, orange blossoms and white violets, and Magnus makes a mental note to look for their meaning later, because if he knows his husband at all, he knows he didn’t choose them haphazardly. “Thank you,” he says, and reaches out to smooth a hand along the fabric of Alec’s turtleneck. It’s a light beige that matches perfectly with the brown of his coat. “Is that new?”

Alec nods gingerly. “Do you like it?”

“You look absolutely exquisite,” Magnus says simply, but the word doesn’t seem quite enough to do his husband justice.

Alec grins, eyes roaming over Magnus. “Never as exquisite as you, though.”
Magnus shakes his head, smiling. “I just spent almost six hours on a plane,” he argues, “and I’m running on very little sleep.”

“And yet,” Alec replies with a playful shrug, the words hanging in the air between them.

Magnus shakes his head fondly, but Alec is talking again before he can argue. “Come on, you must be starving,” he says, swiftly gliding his hand in Magnus’ and guiding him towards the taxi line. “This black tagliolini is not gonna eat itself.”

His grin is a wide, pure and offhand smile that makes his eyes crinkle in the corners and Magnus finds it is contagious, a matching beam spreading on his lips. They must paint a bit of a ludicrous picture, the two of them walking in the airport, holding hands and beaming like a couple of teenagers discovering love for the first time. Magnus wonders if people can notice the slight bounce in his steps or if it is just his imagination and his elation that make it seem like he’s floating on a cloud.

It hits him all at once, and his mind blanks, his steps slowing down. Alec doesn’t seem to realize it, still strolling through the airport in search for a taxi, and Magnus follows as if set on autopilot, but his gaze is riveted on his husband’s profile, the sharp line of his jaw, his long eyelashes casting shadows on his cheeks, his messy hair that he clearly made an effort into taming for their date.

It hits him all at once, that feeling in his stomach, a special kind of giddiness Magnus has only ever known with Alec. His stupidly romantic, impossibly tender, infuriatingly beautiful husband; who went shopping especially for their date, brought Magnus flowers, undoubtedly spent half an hour picking them so they hold the perfect meaning and came to pick him up at the airport without telling him because he wanted to surprise him. Because he promised, once more, that they would make efforts to salvage their marriage and that it finally feels like there is nothing left standing in their way. The sensation stretches through Magnus’ entire body, enveloping the very core of his soul in warmth like the rays of an early summer sun. It doesn’t matter that they are well into the winter, or that the first snows are just around the corner because in that moment, Magnus feels warm, and loved, and happy.

He had forgotten what it tasted like.

He had forgotten that his husband’s mere presence, and his romantic gestures, rarely grand but always meaningful, can bring him this unique sense of serenity. It feels like the breaths he’s taking are finally full, like his smiles are finally complete, and Magnus missed that feeling. He missed the fire burning inside him, and the knowledge that holding Alec’s hand in his own is still his favorite thing in the world soothes something in him.

He is still staring unabashedly at Alec when he tilts his head to the side to look back at Magnus and lifts an eyebrow. “What?” he asks with a light chuckle.

Magnus doesn’t reply, somehow equally overwhelmed and spirited. Instead, he tugs on Alec’s hand to halt him and draw him closer and then lets go of it to wrap both arms around him, pressing their bodies together, albeit wearily enough not to crush the flowers. Alec makes a noise of surprise in the back of his throat, but it’s quickly followed by a pleased hum as he melts into Magnus’ embrace like he belongs there, tilting his head to bury it in Magnus’ neck.

Magnus’ head spins with relief and a myriad of other emotions he can’t quite put a name on. He pours them all into that embrace nonetheless, the good and the bad, the power of it all and the devastating fear that is gradually – finally – beginning to leave him.

When he pulls back, Alec is already gazing back at him, eyes hooded in contentment, in that
expression that means holding Magnus is a luxury he never grows tired of, and whose price he is more than willing to pay. Magnus leans in to kiss him, just to make it last a little longer.

“What was that for?” Alec asks, his voice barely over a murmur, hoarse and filled with surprised felicity.

Magnus watches his husband licking his lips distractedly, as if to savor every last phantasmal sensation of the kiss they just shared, and he smiles. A soft, pure, genuine smile that is delighted all the same.

“I missed you,” Magnus whispers.

There is more to it than an absence of a couple of days because of a business trip, more than an offhand confession because it is the normal thing to do. There is everything in those words, and a truth so absolute that Magnus feels it in his stomach even as the words slip past his lips. Alec knows it, too. He knows what Magnus missed, for he missed it just as intensely.

He missed them, the shameless lovers that they are and can be, when they allow themselves to be the better version of their self they can hope to be. That they can be together.

He missed the easiness of it all, and the overwhelming feeling shaking him to his core.

He missed him more than those three little words can entail, but of all the languages he knows, Magnus never found one which could do justice to the depth and fervor of everything Alec makes him feel.

God, he missed Alec and he hopes he never leaves again.

Alec smiles, soft and uncomplicated. “I missed you, too,” he says, and it holds the same essence as Magnus’ own admission. “Every second of every day.”

“Whoever says I am the most dramatic one of this marriage is gravely mistaken,” Magnus notes with a teasing smirk that allows them to relax and alleviate the mood.

“Is it dramatic if it’s the truth?” Alec retorts in the same tone.

Magnus shakes his head, unable to part from the infectious grin that seems to have taken over his features, and grabs Alec’s hand again, tightening his hold on the flowers in his other one. “Black tagliolini, you said?” he quips, starting towards the line to wait for a taxi. “Are you taking me to Scarpetta?”

“Only the very best for my husband,” Alec replies with a wink.

Magnus chuckles and shuffles closer to Alec, wrapping an arm around his waist. “Just admit you were craving their duck ravioli and you used our date as an excuse to fulfill your needs.”

Alec’s lips ghost against his temple as he glides an arm around Magnus’ shoulders, and Magnus can almost feel his smile against his skin as he murmurs in his ear, “You can’t prove it.”

Magnus laughs, equally fond and exasperated, and relaxes in his husband’s arms.

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There are very few things Magnus hates as much as he hates being woken up at an indecent hour by the sound of Alec’s ringtone blaring through the room. The only reason why he doesn’t grab it
to throw it across the room is probably that he is very comfortable right now, huddled for warmth against his husband. Adding to this the amazing, if not perfect date they had the night before, Magnus feels more relaxed than he has in what seems to be a century.

Alec blows out a deep sigh at his side and extends an arm to hunt blindly for the demonic device. Magnus catches Luke’s name flashing on the screen, and he huffs, before settling more comfortably against Alec.

“Tell him I will kill him and then bring him back to life so I can kill him again,” he grumbles, burying his nose in Alec’s shoulder. “I’ll find a way to make it up to your mother.”


Magnus can’t hear what Luke is saying, but he has no doubt it’s an apology.

“It’s alright,” Alec says after a moment. “I know you wouldn’t call if it wasn’t important. Especially after you kicked me out yourself. What’s up?”

Magnus is well on his way back to sleep but his relief is short-lived. Alec stiffens at his side and Magnus’ whole body goes on high alert at once, heart racing in his chest. He untangles himself from Alec, the two of them sitting up against the headboard in the same movement. Alec’s brows furrow in an expression Magnus knows too well. This is his doctor face, cold, calculating and professional to the core, and Magnus can almost see the wheels in his brain push away the last evidence of slumber to focus entirely on Luke’s words.

“Really?” Alec says eventually, disbelief coloring his husky morning voice. He runs a hand on his features. “That’s amazing! Did you tell him?” Another pause, and Alec gives Magnus a reassuring smile, reaching out to grab his hand and squeeze it gently. Magnus isn’t entirely sure it is made to comfort him more than Alec himself, but he holds back just as tightly nonetheless.

He can’t stop looking at him, at every subtle shift on his face, the way his eyes have lit up with joy, the kind of selfless, utter joy that the knowledge that he helps giving people a better life brings him, the same kind that pushed him towards this career. Magnus realizes right there and then that he can’t blame Alec, or his job, forever. And it isn’t the sort of realization that makes a shudder run through his spine, or that makes his whole body start. Instead it bears a sense of peace that soothes something in Magnus’ very soul.

Alec is passionate about his job in the same way he is passionate about Magnus, and when he lost his ground with the latter, he found a refuge in the first. It hurt, and it still does, but Magnus understands now. He understands that saving people’s lives, giving them better lives, brings Alec this kind of elation that they had both so desperately needed two years ago.

Alec’s face falls as he glances back at Magnus, but he blinks and the look is gone. “I can’t,” he tells Luke, clearing his throat. “I promised Magnus and–”

“What is it?” Magnus asks, and Alec looks like he’s about to deflect but Magnus gives him a pointed look that prevents him from doing so.

Alec sucks his bottom lip in, hesitating for a moment, and Magnus quirks an eyebrow, which seems convincing enough to finally prompt an answer from him. “One of our younger patients’ lab results are finally good enough for him to go through surgery and I’m the one who followed him for the months he’s been there. We have to act fast, but I took some time off to be with you. I made you a promise and I intend to keep it and–”
Magnus brings two fingers up to shush him, a soft smile on his lips. “How old is he?”

“Seventeen.”

“You really like that kid, don’t you?” Magnus asks, but he already knows the answer.

Alec nods, somewhat sheepishly. “He’s one of those patients that lights up the whole wing, you know? Always having a word to put a smile on everybody’s face. He’s also a smartass and he refuses to call me Doctor Lightwood-Bane or even Alec, but I just… Yeah, I really like him,” he finishes in a breath.

Magnus doesn’t have to think about it very long. “Go,” he murmurs.

Alec’s head whips up from where he was toying absently with Magnus’ wedding ring, his eyes widening in surprise. “What?”

“Go,” Magnus parrots, and before Alec can argue, “This is obviously important to you. Ergo it’s important to me. So go.” He pauses, tilting his head to the side. “I just have one condition.”

“Anything,” Alec replies, nodding eagerly.

“Have breakfast with me,” Magnus says.

“I can most definitely do that,” Alec says with a grin, leaning in to peck Magnus’ lips lightly. “Thank you, you’re the best.”

“That’s why you married me,” Magnus retorts with a smirk.

Alec nods in agreement, and gets his phone back against his ear. “Luke? Find me a team for the surgery, we can do it this as soon as I get there.” There is a silence as he listens to his boss, and he chuckles, rolling his eyes. “See you in a bit.” He hangs up and turns to face Magnus. “He said when they finally finish building the new wing, he’s gonna ask them to name it after you for putting up with me.”

Magnus chuckles, running a hand over Alec’s biceps to squeeze it playfully. “If they only knew what a hardship it is,” he quips with a teasing wink.

Something flashes in Alec’s eyes, something akin to a fire they have both decided to keep extinct for a while but that Magnus would recognize anywhere. It makes a familiar and pleasant warmth spread through his body, and he leans in to kiss Alec gently, savoring the way he softens so easily under Magnus’ touch.

“Thank you for being so understanding,” Alec murmurs against his mouth, kissing him again.

Magnus smirks. “Or maybe I just wanted to bribe you into making me your cheese and ham omelet for breakfast.”

Alec laughs, soft and bright and happy. “Let me hop in the shower real quick and I’ll get on it.”

“I’ll go make coffee,” Magnus hums in return, stretching lazily.

Alec is halfway to the bathroom when he swirls around, shifting hesitantly on his feet.

Magnus lifts an inquisitive eyebrow. “Yes?”

“Thank you,” Alec says softly.
Magnus smiles, easily. “You save lives, Alec,” he replies with a shrug. “What am I going to brag about if I stop you from being the hero I know you are?”

Alec sends him a smile back, warm and soft, but it quickly shifts into something playful, a teasing spark flickering in his gaze. “My abs?”

Magnus hums in agreement, throwing the blanket off his legs and jumping out of their bed, and heads towards the kitchen. “That is my third favorite thing to brag about,” he concedes. “Second is your ass.”

Alec’s laughter resounds from the bathroom, loud enough that Magnus knows it was unexpected for the both of them. “Ditto,” he calls back, and Magnus can hear distinctly the shower turning on. “Although I think your arms might come first. I’m still indecisive.”

Magnus chuckles and grabs his robe from the rack by the door. “Noted,” he answers loudly. There is a wide grin on his lips as he turns the coffee machine on. It accompanies him all the way to breakfast, and gets impossibly broader when Alec kisses him goodbye an hour later, grabbing onto his waist and lingering against his mouth like the last thing he wants to do is leave. It feels good, Magnus ponders to himself, tugging on Alec’s sleeve to pull him back against him for one last kiss, made awkward by their matching grins; it feels good to finally feel again like they are not rushing to part, to prolong their goodbyes like they did in their early days. The thought alone is enough to make Magnus’ grin linger for the rest of the morning.

Being back at work has a bittersweet feeling to it. Almost like a coming home in the sense that he’s spent so much of his time here that even he is immune and somewhat comforted by the sterile smell in the air; but walking through the halls and picturing a warm morning-time Magnus in his silk robe sends a pang of homesickness in his stomach. The warmth of Magnus’ skin and the cool silk that wrapped around Alec’s waist when he kissed Magnus goodbye is a harsh contrast to the stiff fabric of his scrubs that scratches against the skin of his arms while they swing by his side. But both are comfortable and familiar to him, and even though he had to drag himself away from Magnus’ lips, it does feel good to be back. As much as Alec hates this about himself, he’s missed his work. But the time he’s spent with Magnus was everything he didn’t know he so desperately needed. It was like hitting the reset button on his life. His mind feels clear and focused. And even though the passion for his career is still very much there and just as strong as before, Alec remembers what he’s working for now. What every minute of every long hour has been for. He knows where he stands in his marriage and who he has waiting on him at home. It won’t be hard leaving his shifts behind when he’s supposed to.

“Did you enjoy your vacation, Doctor?” A nurse greets him with a chart when he approaches the nurse’s station.

“Yes. Very much.” He takes the chart from her and begins to read the lab results. They’ve been waiting for this patient’s numbers to normalize so that they could feel safe in proceeding with the surgery. And now, after almost five months of waiting after his diagnosis, the results are finally within normal ranges.

“We were all pretty shocked when we came into work and Chief Garroway told us you were on vacation.” She giggles and although her comment is innocent and absolutely true, it sends a small shock of guilt through him. He reminds himself to check his emails later and see if Luke sent the resumes he asked for. The sooner he can get a surgeon hired, the sooner he can begin to take on the hours of a normal working person.
"I hate that you had to cut it short though," the nurse comments, following after him towards his patient’s room, and her voice actually does sound tinged with sympathy.

He thinks about the surgery he has ahead of him, and the life his patient can live once this is all said and done. Magnus was right, this is important to him and right now, this is where he should be. He puts his back against the door and shakes his head at her. "Are you kidding? We've been waiting so long for this chance. I’m glad to be back if it means I finally get to help him."

"Not all heroes wear capes," she comments fondly. "Some wear scrubs and scrub caps."

He returns her smile and pushes open the door to the patient’s room.

"Bartholomew," he announces in as serious of a tone he can muster, putting on a mask of cold professionalism. "Your lab results came back and they appear nominal. How are you feeling?"

His patient rolls his eyes like every teenager in the world does. "I told you, nobody calls me that, Dr. LB. Everyone calls me Bat."

Alec chuckles and lets his stoic posture drop, drawing out his small flashlight from his pocket and shining it in one of Bat’s eyes, checking his reflexes. "And nobody calls me Dr. LB but here we are."

Bat scoffs but remains perfectly still, allowing Alec to complete the neurological exam he’s performed what feels like hundreds of times since he’s gotten to know him. He’s not one of Alec’s longest standing patients by any means but he has become a prominent one. Almost like a younger brother. Alec tries his best to not involve himself too emotionally with any of his patients. In this line of work, emotions are nothing but a distraction; they’re dangerous. But from the first appointment he had with Bat, he’s felt a kinship with him. Sees himself in the young man.

Bat has aspirations of being a doctor, a surgeon.

Alec can still remember the night he and Bat spoke about it, Alec had come in to check on him, exhausted after an eight hour surgery, but Bat was excited. He asked a million questions which Alec took the time and tried to answer. Then he told Alec about how he always wanted to study medicine and that lately he had been thinking of becoming a surgeon, a heartwarming comment he tried to mutter as cool as possible under his breath. Alec didn’t linger too long on it though. That was how they worked. Bat would say things that made Alec light up with pride inside and Alec would try his best not to act like an overly proud father. Teenagers and their embarrassment and all that. But Alec is still sure to tell him how incredibly smart he is and that he has no doubt that he will be an amazing surgeon one day. And they’re not empty words. He truly believes that. He’s found Bat studying more times than he would ever expect out of a teenager in his situation. Being diagnosed with a pilocytic astrocytoma came as a shock but Bat took it all in stride; always one to be in good spirits. And his optimistic attitude towards his situation is nothing short of inspiring.

Alec clicks the flashlight off and slides it into his pocket. "You feeling ready for this?"

"I heard you were on vacation so hopefully you’re well rested and ready for this?" Bat effortlessly teases. Alec can tell he’s nervous; and avoiding Alec’s questions with playful jokes is something Alec can spot from a mile away.

Alec laughs along with him and he can see the calming effect laughter has on Bat. "Oh, I’m ready. My question was about you though."
Bat smirks up at him. “I was born ready.”

Alec nods and then holds his fist up for Bat to bump. “Let’s get this tumor out, kid.”

Bat’s fist knocks against his and his eyes flick over to his parents who stand attentively beside him and his expression hardens for a moment, serious and brave when he turns back to Alec. “Let’s do this.”

The O.R. is cold and the air has a hint of chemical cleanliness that burns at the edges of Alec’s nose when he takes in a deep breath. His scrub cap is secured snugly against his scalp, it’s a midnight blue with silver specs spattered across it, thin lines connecting a few to form constellations, a gift from Magnus. He remembers it was a random night about five years ago, Magnus had come home and handed him the neatly wrapped box.

*What’s this?* Alec had asked and Magnus had smiled at him, the big smile that was all teeth and scrunched up eyes. A smile that, to this day, takes his breath away.

*A present,* was all he had said.

*For me?*

The question elicited an eyeroll and a *duh* from his husband.

*Yes, you.*

*What’s the occasion?*

Alec can remember the exasperated and fond look on Magnus’ face in that moment, and the hard press of his lips from a kiss that was full of adoration and excitement. *The occasion is that I love you. Now shut up and open it.*

Alec had always worn solid colored scrub caps but he made an exception for this one. He loved this one because Magnus gave it to him.

*It can be your lucky scrub cap.* Alec isn’t one to put his faith into luck. Not when it comes to things like his work. He avoids superstitions and focuses instead on the medicine of it all. He trusts his knowledge, his skills, and his team. That is where he places all of his faith. But today, for this one surgery, he found himself reaching for this particular scrub cap. It gives him a courage that courses through his body snuffing out every anxious nerve the moment he steps into the O.R. to join his surgical team.

The consistent sound of Bat’s heart monitor is reassuring and what Alec chooses to concentrate on as he makes his first cut. He works through the tissue, bone, and finally the delicate layers that surround the brain. He’s been in operating rooms where surgeons play their music and sing and chat, but Alec can’t do that. He likes his quiet, his focus. He enjoys the attentiveness of hearing every sound that goes on around him, always carefully listening for the slightest shift in his patient’s monitors. It helps him to mentally identify every layer he comes in contact with and so he lists them out to himself in his head: *the dura mater, the arachnoid, the pia...* It’s like studying for an exam all over again but it helps keep him aware of where he is, every step of the way.

He finds his way to the tumor and he spends the next five hours meticulously cutting his way around it, separating it from the tissue it’s invaded. He wants the removal to be perfect. He wants Bat to move on from this and never have to look back. He snips and extracts until it’s all gone.
They wait to make sure the bleeding is gone and then he closes. There’s a sigh of relief that comes from over his shoulder. He lets out an exhale and takes a step back, setting his tools down on the metal tray beside him.

His neck and shoulders ache from the tense, shrugged over position he stood in for so long. He only has to wait a few more hours before Luke will be on shift and then he can take over for Alec. He’s washing his hands in the sterilization corridor, scrubbing roughly when he hears the nurse yell for him. She’s on the other side of the glass door shouting for him to scrub in again.

“Shit.” Alec grabs a face mask and ties it on over his face before rushing back to the sinks, using his elbows to turn on the water and scrubs his hands and arms again. He rushes as fast as he can through the steps and enters the operating suite with his hands up. The doors open to a rush of sounds—the sounds no surgeon ever wants to hear. The beeping is erratic, fast in distress.

“What happened?!”

The nurse dries his arms and helps him with his surgery gown and gloves.

“He’s hemorrhaging,” she explains; her brown eyes are wide in panic but she’s calm in every other way. “What do you need?”

Alec rushes over to Bat where his team is calm as they once again gather his tools by his side. He takes in a breath and asks for his blade. He reopens the incision, being quick but careful.

“He’s oxygen levels are dropping,” Meliorn states matter-of-factly, in that calming voice he has even in moments of distress.

Alec nods. “I have to remove the plate. Get him some O neg and phone the lab and order five more bags of blood. Now!” He doesn’t have much time. He’s racing against borrowed time and he knows this. “Come on, Bat,” he whispers to his young friend. “Give me just a little time.”

He works out the screws and the plate, opening the skull where the blood floods the brain tissue and runs out. The sound of Bat’s failing heart pushes him to work faster in search of the source of the hemorrhage. The blood collects around his tools, outpacing him at every turn, the suction not enough to keep it all away. He’s vaguely aware of a nurse placing absorbent pads around his feet to catch the blood that must be gathering there.

“Alec, he’s losing too much blood.” He hears Meliorn say from his post where he’s in charge of watching Bat’s vital signs.

“I’m close. Just give me a moment—more suction!”

He waits for the nurse to irrigate and suction until he can finally see the blood pooling from deeper within. “There you are.”

He holds his hand out and the nurse meets him with his tool. It’s a tricky place to reach and he has to be cautious with how he approaches the busted vessel. He takes in a deep breath as he lowers the clip in.

“Come on….” he begs.

If he can get it on there, he can stop the bleeding and maybe…just maybe, Bat will be okay. He will have a longer recovery but he can live and he can grow up and become a surgeon. He can still live the life he wants. The life Alec promised him he would have. He can’t break that promise, not to Bat. Not to his parents. They trusted Alec with their son’s life. A life full of youth and promise that
Alec can feel burning away as it slips through his fingers in streams.

*You’re a hero, Alec.* He draws in on his mother’s words. He can do this. He can save him.

He’s just about to place the clip when the rushing beep of Bat’s heart comes to a stop and his hands halt in place. His heart pounds in his chest as he waits for the sound to pick up again but it doesn’t, it continues in its high, constant shrill.

“No,” Alec pleads. “No, Bat, no.”

A nurse steps forward cautiously. “Sir…”

“No!” He places the clip but the blood continues from somewhere else, somewhere he can’t see. “No, no, no…”

He feels the silence, sinister and heavy, fill the room, everyone stopping what they are doing, and watching him. He can faintly hear the same nurse from earlier telling him to stop. He finds the source of the second bleed and clips it. Someone suctions the blood and he stops and waits, the blood is gone, but still the flat sound of Bat’s heart pushes on. He can hear himself yelling at them to push epinephrine and begin compressions. He can see them following his instructions—the rhythmic up and down of cardiac compressions being futilely given—and he can hear the sound of Bat’s heart flat and drawn out.

Alec’s chest constricts painfully when he draws in his next shallow breath. The compressions stop just like the bleeding in Bat’s brain has stopped and Alec knows this isn’t only because of the clipped vessels. The bleeding has stopped because Bat’s heart has stopped pumping the blood through his body.

“Sir, it’s been four minutes.”

*You save lives, Alec.* Magnus’ voice from this morning echoes inside him. It brings with it an overwhelming guilt because he didn’t save a life. Not this time. This time he’s failed.

Alec stands there, his hands hovering over Bat’s open skull, bloodied, useless and unable to reverse the irreversible. All of his training and long hours, the years of hard work are all for nothing because he can’t fix this. He couldn’t save Bat. He couldn’t save Aurora. The red numbers of the clock above him tick to show the passing of another minute. The sound pounds in his head, a cruel reminder that there’s no going back.

The eyes of his operating staff burn on him. There’s a labored, pent up breath from every one while they wait. Alec swallows. “Time of death”—his throat is dry and cracking when he speaks—“three twenty-one p.m.”

Meliorn’s expression is fallen as he switches off the monitors, putting an end to the harsh sound announcing the loss of a young, brilliant mind.

Everything stands still but the ticking of the clock overhead. *Time can only go forward,* is what every second reminds him. *Time and death turn back for no one.*

Alec puts down his tools and storms towards the exit, pulling off his gloves and scrub gown and tossing them in the bin on his way out. He goes into the sterilization corridor and yanks off his mask.

He drops his weight over the sink, leaning on the edge and closes his eyes. He’s angry, so incredibly angry. Everything was perfect. There was no reason why this should have happened.
There was no reason why this life should have been taken so soon. Alec grits his teeth and slams the heel of his hand against the metal of the sink. He can hear a sound tearing through him, guttural and violent that then turns to a choking sob. He’s angry and devastated all at once, and it’s impossible to breathe through it all.

He wants to leave. He wants Magnus. He wants to go back home, curl up against his husband—in the safe realm that is his arms, and pretend this day never happened. But he can’t. He has to be the one who tells Bat’s parents that they will never see their child alive again. They will never speak with him again and he will never roll his eyes at them again.

They will never have their son again.

*Mr. and Mr. Lightwood-Bane? There were complications during delivery. The umbilical cord was wrapped around her neck. All attempts at resuscitation were unsuccessful. I’m sorry.*

Alec’s stomach retches from the memory and the fact that he will have to be messenger of the cruel reality that Mr. and Mrs. Velasquez will now have to face. More than likely they’re waiting for him in the small office reserved for situations such as these. Where they expect the good news that everything went well and that their boy is okay. They expect a hero to walk through the door and deliver that news.

What Magnus and his mother said is true. It’s true that he saves more lives than he loses. He’s saved so many and yet, he was unable to save Bat. He’s the one who took his hand, promised him life, and instead, delivered him to death’s door.

Alec braces himself up and then washes his hands. They’re clean but he can feel Bat’s life clinging to them while he walks down the hall to his family. He reminds himself that he did what he could. The office door opens and he sees Bat’s parents’ eyes find him across the room. He will have to explain to them what went wrong. How a seemingly normal surgery went so incredibly wrong. There’s a hope in their eyes that he will take away. He will see that hope turn to pain, and the pain turn to anger, he will hear them say things to him that he knows they don’t mean, he will apologize, he won’t cry, and he will have to walk away. They stand to meet him, their faces drawn into worry as soon as they recognize his grave expression.

He’s been the hero and he’s been the reaper.

Bat’s mother’s eyes well with tears, her sobs break through her and she buries her head against her husband’s chest.

“I’m so sorry…” Alec begins, pushing down the grief he can feel drowning him.

Alec finds himself in the staff locker room, sitting with his head resting back on the cold metal door of his locker and staring off into nothing, waiting for the grief clenching his ribs together to subside. He feels numb and drained from his conversation with Bat’s parents. His limbs are weighted where he sits. There’s paperwork and reports that have to be made, time and the formal medical process stop for no one. He will have to go to his office and dictate what happened to the small recorder he keeps in his top drawer. He will have to explain in detail every step he made that led to the loss of this young patient. Bat.

The sound of the locker room door opening and closing fills the space, and with it, Luke.

“Hey,” Luke says, his voice soft and small, before having a seat beside Alec. He turns his head and
his eyes are filled with apologies. Ones that won’t change anything but in times like these, is all they can share.

Alec simply nods in response. His throat feels too thick for any words to come out.

Luke leans back with him and they sit. Time draws out with just the two of them, sitting side by side. Two surgeons who have lost more times than they would like to remember but that they can’t seem to forget either.

Alec remembers every death. He remembers every name and every face. He tries to draw in a breath but it’s strained and harsh on its way in. Bat’s wasn’t supposed to be one of them.

“Go home,” Luke says, the tenderness in his voice fading enough for the statement to come out with the authority he intends to convince Alec with.

Alec nods again. With Magnus is exactly where he wants to be right now. “I have to give my operative report,” he forces himself to explain. “I have to go back over every detail and make sure I didn’t make a mistake, but I know I didn’t, I know and yet he... he shouldn’t have—”

“Alec, sometimes tragedies happen and there’s nothing we can do to stop them. No matter how hard we try. You’re an excellent surgeon—the best I’ve worked with. What happened in that O.R. was out of anyone’s hands.” Luke sighs. “He was a good kid and he had the best doctor.”

“How is... How’s his family? I spoke to them but I didn’t stay long...”

“They’re upset... but not with you. They knew the risks and they know you did everything you could. They asked me to thank you for everything you did for Bat.”

Alec brings the heels of his hands up to his eyes, pressing hard, hoping to keep everything at bay, to keep himself from crippling under the pain. “He should have lived,” he mutters, throat burning with every syllable that passes through.

“Son...”

“He should have lived,” Alec chokes out again, the words brushing under his breath.

Luke rests a hand on his shoulder, the palm of his hand pressing a weight into the tense muscles spanning across. It’s a touch that he saves precisely for moments like these. Alec has felt it one too many times over the course of his career, and it has been a while since he last felt it.

Almost three years ago to be exact.

The tightness in his chest sharpens painfully. Hot tears drip from the corner of his eyes that he quickly wipes away, standing, needing to get away from the grueling reminder that next week marks the third anniversary of his daughter’s death.

“I have to go... dictate my report. And then I’m—I’m gonna go to Magnus. Finish out my vacation.”

“Of course.” Luke puts his hands in the pockets of his white coat as he stands to join Alec. “If there’s anything you need. You know where to find me.”

Alec tips his chin at Luke as he backs away through the door. He rushes down the halls, heading straight to his office. He doesn’t want to think about death anymore. About Bat. About Aurora. He wants to finish his job and go home. He wants to melt into Magnus’ arms and stay until he forgets
everything.

He fishes the recorder out of his drawer and begins.

Dictating surgical procedures is something Alec can do in his sleep, and he manages to finish his report fairly quickly. It’s easier to list everything out as a medical procedure and not let his mind wander to the reality of what happened. He ends the report with a long pause before declaring the time of death again. The pressure on his chest is back the second he stops the recording.

He has to leave.

He turns in his report, leaving before anyone can say a word to him. He walks for a while, needing the brisk pace and the crisp afternoon air to erase the pain in his chest. He walks until he can’t anymore, until the burn in his legs is too much and so he catches a cab that takes him to the only place he wants to be right now. To Magnus.

He walks through the lobby, rides the elevator and walks down the hall to Magnus’ office. The door is open and he can hear the soft murmurs of Magnus talking on the phone. He walks in and closes the door behind him. Magnus turns in his chair and the soft expression on his face gives Alec the strength to finally expel a long breath. Magnus’ brows furrow and that look is all it takes for Alec to crumble. He drops to the sofa and hangs his head in his hands, breaths shaking.

“I’m sorry but I have to let you go. There’s been an emergency.” The sound of the phone clicking onto the receiver follows and then Magnus is there, his arms wrapping around Alec, drawing him in and pressing him against his chest, and suddenly, Alec can breathe again.

Magnus doesn’t ask questions. He doesn’t say anything. He simply holds Alec against him and it’s all Alec needs. He breathes in the comfort only Magnus’ embrace can give. He matches the pace of Magnus’ breaths, the trick that always worked and works again this time. So much has changed between them and yet, this feels the same. It’s familiar and he can feel the grief that threatened to consume him—Bat’s death, the reminder of Aurora’s—dissolve in Magnus’ arms. He’s not sure how long they sit there and honestly, Alec could stay here forever if only he were allowed to.

“Come with me,” Magnus whispers, pressing a tender kiss to the top of his head.

Alec lets Magnus pull him up and his fingers lace through Magnus’ easily, following him out of the office, down the hall, and up the small staircase leading them to Magnus’ favorite place in Edom. The greenhouse.

Soft, warm daylight filters in through the foggy paned walls and Magnus guides Alec to a bench nestled in the hostas and elephant ears. It’s quiet and peaceful. Alec can see why Magnus loves it so much and why he finds his solace in here. It helps calm Alec more than he realized was possible. The greenhouse feels like an extension of Magnus.

“This place always helps me when I need to escape.” Magnus pulls their joined hands in against his chest. “Do you want to be alone?”

“No,” Alec says, the undertone of his voice a desperate thing.

“Okay,” Magnus answers quickly in a breath and brushes a fallen strand of hair away from Alec’s brow, dragging his fingers around the curve of Alec’s ear, cupping his hand around the back of Alec’s neck. “I’m going to go let Raphael know that I’m leaving early. Wait for me here?”

“I don’t want to make you leave your work.”
“Alexander.” Magnus dips his head down to level his eyes on Alec. “None of that. I’m taking you home, okay?”

Alec nods. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” Magnus pulls him in and Alec closes his eyes at the warm breath that falls on his face when Magnus presses a kiss to the hollow of Alec’s eyes. “I’ll be right back.”

The rest of the afternoon passes in a blur. Alec sits for a while in a hot bath per Magnus’ insistence and when he’s out, he finds the table set for two and a lasagna baking in the oven. Magnus is standing at the counter pouring two glasses of wine while humming softly to himself.

“What is all this?”

Magnus sends a smile at him over his shoulder. “Are you hungry?”

His heart is aching, his chest burning, he’s sleepy and exhausted, not a trace of hunger stirs inside him but Magnus is smiling at him and he’s done all of this just for Alec.

“Starving,” Alec says and it doesn’t even feel like a lie when Magnus’ smile grows, pleased.

“Great. I know you haven’t eaten since breakfast and I figured a little comfort food would do you some good.” Magnus takes up the glasses of wine and approaches him. “And wine, of course.”

Alec takes a glass from him and breathes in. “Is that the lasagna?”

Magnus smirks over the rim of his wine glass. “You mean my famous lasagna that you love so much and that finally won your mother over for me? That lasagna?”

Alec smiles at the memory. His parents took a while to warm up to his sexuality and even longer to warm up to Magnus. After months of curt comments and disinterest, on his parents’ part, Magnus had decided that enough was enough. Magnus planned a dinner with his mother and worked hard the entire day making sure that everything was perfect. He’d made this lasagna and when Alec’s mom took her first bite and moaned, it had opened the door for them. They spoke that night more than they’d ever spoken and Alec’s mom complimented Magnus on the wonderful dinner, and hugged them both goodbye. It was the turning point for them and from that moment on, their love for each other only grew.

It’s a simple lasagna but it changed so much for them; and now the aroma of it is permeating the air, and Alec doesn’t know if it’s the lasagna or Magnus’ intentions when he makes it, but he feels a sense of peace take over him.

“Yes, that lasagna,” Alec says.

Magnus nods. “It’s your favorite, right?”

“It is.” Alec takes a sip of his wine. “But I seem to remember that lasagna being a lot of work. You really didn’t have to go through the trouble—”

“Alexander,” Magnus cuts him off. “Doing things for you is never trouble.” He cups Alec’s cheek in his palm. “I want to take care of you today. So just let me, okay?”

There’s fear hidden behind the determination in Magnus’ deep brown eyes that is silently begging
for Alec to give in to his comfort and to not pull away like he did before. Alec’s heart aches at the sight, he never wants Magnus to fear for them, not ever. He won’t make the same mistakes he made three years ago. This time, today and in a week’s time when the inevitable grief returns, he will be here with Magnus by his side.

“Oh.” Alec turns his head in and presses a kiss in Magnus’ palm. “Thank you…for being here for me.”

Magnus strokes the stubble along his jaw. “Thank you for coming to me…”

His sentence trails off but Alec knows how it ends. This time.

_Thank you for coming to me this time._

Alec doesn’t know if it’s just him or if this day really is as gray as it seems. Or maybe it’s his grief that causes him to see the world with a little less color. Perhaps the fifth of December will always be a day without color for him.

He’s heading home from work early; the stifling atmosphere of sick people was too much for him today. He thought he could dive into his work shift to take his mind off of everything but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t stop thinking about her. Things only got worse when he’d assisted Underhill with a young patient of three years old. Her bright eyes and cheerful giggles when Alec shone his flashlight in her eyes brought with them a bitter reminder of what he and Magnus would have had.

They would have been planning a birthday party for this weekend. There would have been a day off work for the three of them to spend together, Magnus would have woken them up with his Belgian waffles, they would have taken their daughter to the zoo, then for a walk through the park, ending their day with a frozen hot chocolate. There were so many things they could have done with her to celebrate this day which was supposed to be one of the happiest days of their lives.

He wonders what Magnus is doing right now. Is he doing a good job at keeping himself distracted at work? Or are the memories all too much for him? Alec considers for a moment about going to Edom to check on Magnus and see if he would like to take the day off with him; but decides against it. If Magnus can work and take his mind off of it then Alec doesn’t want to take that away from him and he can be there waiting at home for him at the end of the day.

He takes the long way home, passing through a park, hugging himself to keep warm in the frigid winter air. His nose is red and cold by the time he makes it to their building and he catches his reflection in the elevator doors. The loft is warm and inviting, wrapping him in a comforting heat that begins to soothe him, settling a calm over his aching chest. He sighs deeply, leaning against the door to push it to a close. He takes his time unwinding the scarf from his neck, hanging his coat, and removing his shoes. It feels good to be home on this day. He thinks about the past two years and how he spent them alone and stuck at work, which was no one’s fault but his own, and the overwhelming loneliness he inflicted upon himself by doing so. He had alienated himself from the love and comfort he and Magnus could create together.

He’s about to have a seat on the couch when he hears the undeniable tune of a lullaby. His body freezes, heart stuttering painfully at the notes of what could have been. He can see from where he stands that the door to Aurora’s nursery stands open the way it hasn’t for the past three years. He approaches the room slowly, his heart aching and begging him to turn around and run the other way but he hears a muffled sob and all fear of seeing the room again leaves him at once.
He finds Magnus sitting on the floor of the nursery with his legs stretched out in front of him, his face buried into the small onesie Alec remembers setting out for Aurora to wear home. His shoulders shake with every cry, the sound shattered and raw.

Every ounce of strength Alec had throughout the day to keep himself from crying is drained at the sight of Magnus in pieces on the floor of her nursery. Alec kneels down beside him. He has only a second to worry that perhaps he’s intruding on a moment Magnus meant to keep for himself before Magnus melts against him, replacing the onesie with Alec. His fingers curl into the thick threads of Alec’s sweater and cling onto him as choking sobs escape him unforgivingly.

“You’re here,” Magnus mutters into Alec’s chest. “You came.”

Alec wraps his arms around Magnus, holding him close. “I’m here,” he whispers through his tears. Magnus nods against him and then his cries grow stronger. “Our baby girl, Alec…”

“I know, Magnus,” he whispers into Magnus’ hair, the tears he’d kept in all day finally finding their way out.

They sit together listening to the lullaby play until the string recedes completely into the giraffe’s back. When the song is over, Magnus sighs and lays his head against Alec’s chest. Alec can feel his broken heart beating where his husband lays and despite everything that led them here, he knows there is nowhere else he would rather be than wrapped up with his husband, sharing this together. Healing together. The way they should have been all along.

It is a slow process, but Magnus can feel his heart let go of all the rancor and sorrows it accumulated throughout the three years since they lost their baby girl. He smiles more easily, he starts to appreciate the little things again; the sight of New York under the snow, the imperceptible efforts Raphael, Ragnor and Catarina all make so that he doesn’t crumble under the amount of work Edom has become so that it stays as successful as it is; the random and overly proud texts Jace shoots him during the day to count him his daughter’s achievements. Where they once were all thorns tearing at his heartstrings, they gradually become what they were always meant to be, small sources of joy that he can rely on when his mind drifts on tumultuous waters.

They are all small things, but they feel like milestones in their laborious and tentative path to healing.

Alec is making good on his promise to work less and Magnus works on opening up his heart again so their efforts are not in vain. There are too many tears along the way –the ones he shed in his husband’s soothing arms two days prior just another drop in the ocean of misery they almost let themselves drown in– but Magnus can allow himself to spill them if it means they start mending back together the pieces they have scattered along the way.

When he gets home that evening, Magnus promptly freezes in the threshold, lifting an eyebrow in surprise. There are two big cardboard boxes leaning against the wall and Magnus wonders for a second if Alec has finally lost it and decided to redesign the loft after watching too many Queer Eye episodes.

“Alec?” Magnus calls, but it is muffled by the sound of something banging coming from the corridor.

Frowning, Magnus walks towards the source of it, his breath hitching in his throat when he realizes
it emanated from the nursery. For a moment, he stands frozen in the corridor, halfway to the ajar door. It has only been two days since he last went in, but he is somewhat used to this room, to the morbid aura it sometimes carries and the heartache that it automatically involves. He knows it isn’t the case for Alec. Alec dealt differently with his grief than Magnus did, trying to ignore the pain in the hopes that it would go away. To have him twice in the nursery in the span of two days is nothing short of peculiar.

Magnus knows how hard it is for Alec, but he didn’t hesitate two days ago when he heard Magnus crying, and he didn’t leave to mourn elsewhere like he used to, so Magnus won’t either.

Bracing himself with a deep breath, he walks to the nursery and the sight waiting for him there has him take a step back in stupor.

Alec is kneeling in the middle of the room, clad in sweatpants and a tank top, a thin layer of sweat spreading over his skin, his hair an untamable mess. His brows are furrowed in perplexity as he stares at the crib in front of him as if it personally offended him. There is a single bed against the wall, undoubtedly from the cardboard in the hall, and a box of carefully folded baby clothes sitting on it. Magnus wonders if the whole scene is a trick of his mind, but Alec swearing under his breath brings him back to the reality of it.

“Alec?”

His husband startles, whipping around to face Magnus. His hazel eyes grow wide, and he runs a hand on the nape of his neck, pulling a face.

“Hi,” he mumbles sheepishly.

“Hi,” Magnus replies, taking a step forward. “What’s going on?”

Alec seems to hesitate for a moment, his gaze shifting from Magnus to the crib and back to Magnus again. “I thought about what you said about this room and how it held you back and—” he rambles nervously, pausing to swallow, “and Ariel will need a place to sleep when she comes over. She’s too big to sleep with us now. I don’t want anything holding us back from moving on anymore and I know this was a big part of it for you and it’s entirely my fault because of how I reacted when you said you wanted to… to change it and I thought I could do this for you but I can’t figure out how to take down the crib without breaking it. I’m sorry, this is a mess and—”

Magnus’ heart clutches in his chest, and he takes another step closer to grab Alec’s hand. “It’s okay,” he mutters before Alec can babble some more. “We can figure it out together.”

They both know his words reach further than this crib, further than this room, and there is something grave and solemn in his expression when Alec nods in agreement, heaving out a deep sigh. “I thought we could give away her clothes to charity,” he says, throat tight and voice low. “But there’s some stuff I couldn’t… part from,” he adds hesitantly, pointing at the few items laying on the bed. There is the blanket Maia knitted, Jace’s onesie, Izzy’s stuffed giraffe, a few other things they had gathered for her arrival, and other mementos of a happier time when they were eagerly waiting for them—the very first ultrasound, her footprints. “I hope that’s okay.”

“Alexander,” Magnus murmurs softly, squeezing his hand gently. “Of course that’s okay. I never wanted to get rid of everything that reminds me— us of her. We both know we will never forget about her. It’s not about erasing her and acting as if nothing ever happened. I just want us to move on from that horrible day and I think it might start with this.”

Alec runs his thumb over the back of Magnus’ hand, nodding gingerly. “Yeah, okay,” he says.
“Okay.”

Sending him a scarce but genuine smile, Magnus walks to the bed, smoothing the creases from the onesie. It was the source of many a breakdown in the past three years, when Magnus would lock himself here and listen to the lullaby, roaming around the room aimlessly, letting rage fuel him at the injustice it represents. Today, it is more than that.

Today, it is another milestone.

“I thought we could use your mother’s box as a shadow box for… for Aurora,” Alec says softly, joining him by the bed and slipping an arm around his waist. “Or something else if you think that’s a dumb idea.”

Magnus leans into him, driven by not so much as a need for comfort but a force of habit returning to him after too much craving for this same familiarity.

There are not many material things Magnus cares about as much as he cares about his mother’s box; his wedding ring, the magnetic letters Alec used to propose for the first time, a vial of the very first cosmetics he created in Edom’s labs and the photo album of his most cherished memories with his friends and family. And then there is his mother’s box. It is a beautiful wooden thing, carved with a tiger from an Indonesian tale she used to read to him when he was a child. It reminds him of how much she loved him, how gentle her voice was when she would read to him and how delighted he always was when she would do different voices for the characters. It reminds him of love, and of the hope his mother never surrendered even when the disease had torn her body apart.

“I think that’s a wonderful idea,” Magnus murmurs.

Alec hums, his whole body relaxing against Magnus’. He presses a kiss against his temple and Magnus tilts his head to respond with one against his parted lips.

“Let’s do this, my love,” he murmurs.

Alec nods, planting another kiss to Magnus’ clothed shoulder. “Let’s do this.”

Magnus doesn’t celebrate his birthday anymore. It used to be a grand thing. He would throw the biggest party of the year, in Pandemonium or at the loft, be it a themed party or simply a wild gathering with alcohol flowing freely and enough craziness happening to fuel a year of gossips.

But Aurora died three little days before his birthday three years ago and with her his will to commemorate time passing by. There are still messages every year, and presents, but Magnus doesn’t have the energy to organize anything on the scale of what he used to do anymore. So he responds to messages, gives sincere thanks for the gifts, and lets the day pass.

This year is no exception. Alec made breakfast for them this morning, kissed him and wished him a happy birthday before they parted to get on their respective ways to work. He pretended to ignore his colleagues and employees’ poor attempt at sneaking a birthday cake on him during his lunch break and acted surprised when they did. He replied to every text and tweet he got, swooned a little at the picture of Ariel’s birthday drawing Jace sent him in the afternoon and worked normally for the rest of the day.

Alec is working tonight, so he has no rush to get back home and reviewing the latest lab reports on the new products Catarina has concocted for the brand has the benefit of keeping his mind off of the slight regret he feels at another year without celebrating his birthday. It is a weird feeling, but
now that things are slowly getting better between Alec and him, he finds himself wanting to do this again, as a token, maybe, that they can get back to what was once considered normal.

“Maybe next year,” he mumbles to himself, shaking his head before focusing back on Catarina’s reports.

“Are you talking to yourself?” Ragnor asks as he knocks and walks in without waiting for an answer. “Can I take this as the sign that you have finally lost your sanity and take over the company like it was my evil plan all along?”

Magnus snorts, throwing a pen at Ragnor’s face. “With your poor choices in staff, we’d be bankrupt in a month,” he retorts.

“You’re never gonna let me live down that Comic sans SC thing, are you?” Ragnor asks, resigned, as he walks to the rack behind Magnus’ office door and grabs his winter coat.

“Nope,” Magnus replies, lifting an eyebrow. “Are you planning on stealing my coat? Because one, you’re not exactly subtle and two, that’s a Tom Ford so I might have to fight you on that.”

Ragnor rolls his eyes rather dramatically and throws Magnus’ coat to his face. “Let’s go,” he says.

“I’m working,” Magnus argues, pointing at the reports. “Some of us do that sometimes.”

“They’ll still be there on Monday,” Ragnor replies. “And it’s your birthday, Your Highness, so get your royal ass off your chair and invite me over for a drink.”

“I don’t want to invite you over. You’re terrible company.”

“Still better than being alone and wallowing in self-pity because your husband has to work tonight,” Ragnor retorts tauntingly.

Magnus heaves out a deep sigh, only half staged. “Why did Cat marry you?” he asks, despair obvious in his tone, although he shrugs his coat on and puts the reports away in his desk.

“Because Clooney was already taken,” Ragnor replies.

“How old are you?” Magnus scoffs, following his friend outside. “We’re not in the early 2000’s anymore, my friend. Next time just go for Marlon Brando, don’t try to sound younger than you are because you failed miserably.”

“I hate you and I hope you step on a Lego,” Ragnor says diplomatically.

“Love you too,” Magnus answers as he locks the door behind them. He pauses to give Ragnor a small but genuine smile. “Thanks for making sure I don’t spend my birthday alone.”

“I’m only doing it because I want a raise,” Ragnor lies, walking down to the elevator. “And you always have the best scotch at your place.”

Magnus huffs out an exasperated laugh, but follows him anyway, grateful despite what their familiar banter could entail. If anything, Ragnor will make waiting for Alec to come home easier, and perhaps then Magnus can talk to him about celebrating his birthday again the next year. Perhaps it could be yet another milestone for both of them.

The loft is plunged into darkness when they get there half an hour later. Magnus shrugs his coat
off and switches on the light in the lobby, Ragnor on his heels.

“Allright,” Ragnor exclaims, wrapping an arm over his shoulders. “To the liquor cabinet, Your Highness!”

“Stop calling me that,” Magnus replies, rolling his eyes in exasperation, although it is belied by the smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. “It’s Your Royal Highness, obviously.”

Ragnor laughs, guiding him towards the living room. Magnus should probably be worried about how familiar this all seems, but it’s too late for that.

“Power changed you, Bane,” Ragnor sighs. “You used to be much more approachable.”

Magnus chuckles, and turns around to switch the living room’s lights on.

“Surprise!”

Magnus yelps, bringing a hand over his chest to vainly tame the wild beatings of his heart. Ragnor guffaws at his side, leaning against Magnus as loud, obnoxious roars of laughter escape him.

“Your face!”

Magnus elbows him in the ribs not so gently, disentangling himself from him so he can cast a glance over the room at the familiar faces looking back at him with wide grins. There is a banner over the balcony doors spelling ‘happy birthday Magnus’ and a buffet overflowing with food and drinks against the wall. Magnus can’t survey more than that because a little ball of energy smashes against his legs.

“Happy bir’thday, Uncle Ma’anus!” Ariel shouts, hugging his thigh, which is as high as her height allows her.

“Thank you, my little turkey,” he says softly, bending down to carry her and return the embrace.

His eyes find Alec’s as he hugs her, and he throws him a pointed look, lifting an eyebrow in inquiry. Alec simply answers with a shrug that poorly conveys the innocence he was going for. He must realize it, however, because his face crinkles in amusement and he winks at Magnus.

Magnus’ breath catches in his throat, and he finds himself overwhelmed with the love surrounding him, the one he can see in Alec’s gaze, the one he can touch in Ariel’s embrace, the one he can feel in his own heart, revived by the last few days, by this moment in time where he can simply look in his husband’s eyes and know, without the shadow of a doubt, that he still loves him, and that he always will.

Dropping a kiss on Ariel’s head, he puts her back on her feet, and walks the distance between them, cupping Alec’s neck in his hands to bring their mouths together, indifferent to the people surrounding them, friends and family alike. Alec hums in content, kissing him back softly.

Magnus draws back with a smile that matches perfectly the one Alec is proudly arboring.

“Happy birthday,” Alec murmurs. “I hope this is okay.”

Magnus nods. “This is more than okay,” he whispers back. “This is perfect. When did you organize this?”

“No, while you were in San Francisco. Cat, Ragnor, and Raphael helped.”
Magnus smiles, shaking his head fondly. “Thank you, darling,” he says, pressing another quick kiss to his lips.

“All right, stop being cute you two,” Catarina exclaims, although there is nothing but affection in her voice. “I want my turn.”

Alec chuckles, and Magnus swirls around to face their guests and hug Catarina. There are only Magnus’ closest loved ones in the room, the people he trusts and loves, the ones who know the struggles he and Alec faced apart and the ones they are now facing together. Those are people who love him, Magnus has learned to accept, completely and unconditionally.

Magnus is standing by the buffet a moment later, unabashedly stuffing his mouth with Maryse’s famous triple chocolate parfait cake when Jace joins him, eyeing the piece of cake with a smirk.

“I love your mother,” Magnus says in lieu of an explanation.

Jace chuckles. “She loves you too. Sometimes I even think she loves you more than her own children because she’s never baked this for my birthday.”

“Don’t beat yourself up,” Magnus retorts, a playful smirk pulling the corner of his lips up. “It’s not your fault I am very charming.”

Jace laughs, patting him gently on the shoulder, before shuffling on his feet somewhat nervously. "Hey, man, sorry about calling you guys on your romantic getaway," he says. “You know how Ariel gets though. She just had to show Uncle Alec and Uncle Ma’nus.”

His impersonation of his daughter’s name for Magnus is impeccable, and although it tears a smile from him, Magnus can perceive without trouble the gravity hidden underneath the light tone.

“It’s alright,” he says with a nod. “I think it was actually a good thing. It spurred a conversation we had been pushing back for too long.”

He doesn’t tell Jace that even then it was a hardship. It doesn’t really matter anymore, not when they finally got there. Not when the walls that kept Alec and him apart are finally beginning to crumble, the reality of their ordeal laid bare amidst them.

"So he finally opened up about it with you?" Jace asks, his bicolored eyes glimmering with something akin to relief.

Magnus can relate perfectly, but he answers with a simple nod and a hum. There are many things he wants to tell Jace, many things that, among too many others, he kept to himself for the past few years.

For a second, he allows himself a moment to watch his brother-in-law. He remembers him before he had Ariel. How chaotic he frankly was. How many times he had to call Alec in the middle of the night because he had managed to drag himself into some sort of trouble. Magnus lost count of how many times Jace slept on the couch in their tiny apartment in East Brooklyn while they were still both students and Jace was –rather disastrously– trying to ‘find his calling’.

That seemed to result in many one-night-stands, until one of them resulted in Ariel.

Magnus doesn’t think the change was immediate. He imagines it took a little while for Jace to get accustomed to his new life as a single father after Ariel’s mother dumped a new-born baby on his
doorstep with no intention of keeping or caring for her.

He imagines Jace would have liked, as he had for a long time, to be able to rely on Alec and Magnus to temper his inevitable nervous collapses. But he never did, not once. Not when they lost their daughter only two weeks after Jace himself became a father.

And if Jace didn’t seek for his usual shoulder to cry on—or pretend not to—Magnus knows that he is partly responsible, because where Alec ran away from his husband because he didn’t want to burden him with his grief; Magnus had turned his back on Jace for a while.

He and Alec might be solving their problems one by one, one apology at a time, one slow but gentle step after the other, but Magnus understands, right then, that their silence didn’t only affect themselves and their relationship. It affected everyone around them.

So Magnus clears his throat, takes a deep breath to gather what courage he can find, drawing on the sight of Alec a few steps away from him, chatting with Luke and Maryse, Ariel tangled in his arms. “Speaking of,” he says, measuring every word, “there’s something I need to tell you.”

Jace turns to face him, tearing his gaze away from the scene to give Magnus his full attention. "Is everything okay?"

Despite everything, there is nothing but genuine concern in his gaze. Magnus shrugs, his face twisting in a nervous grimace. “You tell me,” he replies. “I wanted to apologize.”

Jace's brows fall, confused. "Apologize? For what?"

“About the way I reacted three years ago,” Magnus says, chewing on his bottom lip. Jace’s face morphs into a picture of surprise, as if he doesn’t quite understand the words Magnus is saying. “How I acted towards you. Worse, how I acted towards her.” He gestures to Ariel, who is perched on Alec’s shoulders with a jerk of his chin, smiling as she playfully lets Luke and Maryse know that she is the tallest and that she very well intends to stay there.

There is something in Jace’s eyes that makes Magnus unwind at once, something understanding and filled with the affection one must reserve for family only. It tells him something Magnus almost let himself forget, something along the lines of ‘sit with us, this is where you belong, this is your family’.

"Magnus… there's nothing to apologize for,” Jace says instead, but it is just as meaningful. “I knew that you just needed time.” He rests a hand on Magnus' shoulder, giving him a small smile. "And I was right. You're the best uncle I could have asked for for Ariel and I know how much you love her and that's all that matters to me."

Magnus nods gingerly, heaving. “Still,” he mutters. “I took it out on you. Because... because I thought it was unfair that you had Ariel even though you didn’t want kids in the first place. Because we... we lost her and we wanted her… so much. I took it out on you and it wasn’t fair. And I’m sorry.”

Jace squeezes his shoulder. "I get it,” he says, with more gravity than Magnus has ever known him to possess. It is yet another testimony of how much Ariel changed him, undoubtedly for the best. “You and Alec tried for so long and there I was...with a one night stand turned into a child. It wasn't fair and I don't blame you one bit for feeling the way you did." Jace sighs. "But if you need to hear it: of course I forgive you, Magnus."

Magnus smiles a relieved smile, releasing a deep breath. “Thank you, Jace. It means a lot.”
Jace hums, nodding briefly, and his features twist into an apologetic grimace. "Now...just so you'll know, Ariel fully intends on guilt tripping you and Alec into letting her spend the night soon," he says teasingly, and just like that, the tension dissolves between them, leaving room for the playful banter layered with affection that is so much more familiar. "So be prepared for that."

Magnus casts a quick look over his shoulder at the corridor, his stomach twisting. The room is ready for Ariel, he knows. He and Alec worked on that two days ago. It was a long and tedious process. They worked more slowly than they would have had it been any other room, any other meaning behind their every move. It was a turning point, however, another step towards the rest of their lives together. In the light of yet another success in their quest to restore what they broke and what they lost, Magnus is at peace when he faces Jace again.

"We are."

It’s a little after midnight when Magnus finally finds his way back to Alec. He has been pretty busy, dancing with Isabelle, catching up with Maia, braiding Ariel’s hair upon her insistence while chastising Ragnor for his disastrous cocktail-making abilities. All in all, it was a marvelous night, and his head is buzzing pleasantly from both the alcohol and the bliss of a successful party when he slouches on the couch next to Alec.

Alec smiles and opens his arms for him with a tentative and beautifully inviting smile that Magnus returns without hesitation, cuddling against him. Humming in content, Alec presses a kiss against his hairline, his hand finding Magnus’ own on his lap to toy absently with his fingers.

“Did you have a good birthday?” he asks lowly, for Magnus’ ears only.

Around them, the party is still going. Isabelle and Maia are purely and simply destroying Ragnor and Raphael at a game of charades while Catarina watches from the side with Maryse and Luke, pretending to feel sorry for her husband when he glances her way but secretly cheering for the girls.

Alec kept things fairly confidential. This is nowhere near the overwhelming, monstrous parties Magnus used to throw, but these are the people he loves, the people he wants in his life always, so this is infinitely better.

“Perfect,” he replies, brushing his way down Alec’s palm to twine their fingers together. “Thank you,” he adds in a murmur, “for everything."

The words will be said soon, he knows, but not now, not when he can feel Maryse watching them warily from the side. For now, he is happy settling more comfortably against him, letting his body relax in the familiarity of Alec’s.

“You’re welcome,” Alec whispers back, nuzzling against his hair.

They stay like that for a while, long enough that Magnus loses track of time, happy to soak in the cheerful atmosphere around them and in the knowledge that they are back where it all started, bathing in their feelings for each other and finding in the other an anchor to forgo the most boisterous storms.

Magnus snaps out of his thoughts when Jace approaches them with a sleeping Ariel in his arms. Her little face is crammed against his shoulder, her hair a mess from having spent the night running around, but she is sound asleep now, despite the music and the chatter and laughter of the room,
clearly worn out to the bone.

“Is there somewhere I can lie her down?” he asks, gently stroking her back. “She’s gonna be cranky in the morning if she sleeps on the armchair.”

“Yeah,” Alec says, squeezing Magnus’ hand. “We have a room for her, come on.”

He presses a quick peck to Magnus’ lips before standing up, and although Magnus misses the heat of his body at once, he smiles as Alec leads the way to the corridor, Jace on his toes, and barely hesitates before opening the door to what used to be the nursery.

He just has time to watch them disappear into the room that he feels the couch dip at his side and he turns to see Maryse sitting there, a small but tender smile on her lips.

She wraps an arm around his shoulders, leaning her head against his own. “You look well,” she says.

“I am,” Magnus confirms with a smile, pressing his cheek in her hair. “You don’t look too bad yourself. Is it because your dalliance with Dr. Handsome is thriving?” he asks, his lips curving into a smirk.

Maryse laughs, shaking her head. “You make it sound so inappropriate,” she replies, as chastising as she is amused.

“Well,” he teases, dragging the word for good measure, “I was told by an anonymous source that there was a supply closet involved, so I made the only possible conclusion.”

Maryse rolls her eyes, poking him gently in the ribs. “Speaking of, correct me if I’m wrong but it seems to me that things are looking much better between you and your anonymous source,” she says, and although she phrases it as a statement, Magnus can hear the question hiding behind her words.

He knows, too, that there is a plea, despite all the affection between the two of them. He can see it in her eyes. She entrusted her son’s heart to him a long time ago, in spite of their rocky start, and with a simple gaze, steady but imploring all at once, she is asking him not to break it.

She knows, like a mother ought to, that Magnus would break Alec’s heart if he left, perhaps beyond repair, certainly not without leaving an indelible mark.

If there is one person on Earth that can pretend that they love Alec as infinitely as Magnus does, it has to be his mother, after all.

“Yeah,” Magnus says eventually, sending her a small smile. “The trip to Vermont did us good. I think we both needed to get some fresh air and to be together, just the two of us.”

Maryse grabs his hand, squeezing it gently. “Did you get to talk about everything you needed to talk about?”

She knows the answer to this already, but Magnus indulges her without hesitation. She needs to hear it from him, too, because she needs to know that he and Alec are back on the same page, in the same book they started together fifteen years ago.

“We did,” he says with a nod.

Maryse’s smile is a dainty thing, amused but tender. “But did you?” she asks, and it takes a
moment for Magnus to understand what she means.

When Magnus’ mother passed away, after months of watching her decay because of the disease, he had resigned himself to the morbid and brutal reality of a life without a mother. It took him awhile— but he supposes he is rather slow with those things, having been too accustomed to loneliness in his early years—to understand that even though she could never replace his own mother, Maryse was there, and she considered him like a son just as strongly as she did Alec or Jace.

He still, sometimes, is prone to forget.

There is a lump in his throat when he replies, but there is nothing heavy about it. It is an array of emotions, overwhelming but not trampling on his heart like it used to. It is right then, under Maryse’s careful but affectionate scrutiny that Magnus realizes that his heart doesn’t feel so heavy anymore, that for the first time in a long, long time, he doesn’t feel like he is struggling to breathe.

She isn’t his mother, but he loves her like he did his own, and knowing that she cares for him in the same way, that she wants to hear how he feels and not only confine herself to her son’s version of a story that he knows Alec would never blame on him, warms him to the very core of his soul.

“I did,” he says. “It was tough, I’m not gonna lie, but we talked about Aurora, and I think we can only move forward from there. Actually, I think that’s what we’ve done ever since we got back.”

Maryse beams, her whole face softening with a cheerful joy she doesn’t allow herself often enough. It makes Magnus happy, to know that she has found someone who put back in her eyes a look of almost juvenile delight, someone to hear her troubles, make them his own and fight along her side to make them if not disappear, at least inconsequential enough that she remembers to be happy on the way.

Her smile drops after a moment, though, and she squeezes his hand again. “I should have been there for you,” Maryse murmurs, apologetic. “I wasn’t there enough. I should have done more.”

Magnus shakes his head promptly. “I wouldn’t have let you,” he admits. “I was angry all the time. I still am, sometimes, but the only grief I’ve ever had to deal with was my own. I never realized how differently people grieve until Alec and I tried to do it separately.”

Maryse sighs. “I think he didn’t want to burden you with his pain when you had your own to suffer through already,” she says tentatively.

“I know,” Magnus replies, with a small but confident nod. “Or at least now I do. I know my husband, and how he reacts to pain. He buries himself into work and he tries to save everyone but himself. I guess I was too busy wallowing in my own sorrow to see his absence for what it was.”

There are tears in Maryse’s eyes, and this is not how Magnus envisioned the rest of this night. Not at all. She scoffs out a tearful, quiet laugh and lets go of his hand to tug him in her arms instead, pressing him tightly against her.

“Oh, my boys,” she breathes out against his ear, sniffing. “You need to stop blaming yourselves for the way you did things wrong and rather praise yourselves for fighting to fix it together. You are both so, so brave, Magnus, and I am so proud of you.”

“Stop it, you’re going to make me cry too,” Magnus chokes out, his voice trembling in spite of his best efforts.

“You’re right, you’re right,” she chuckles, drawing away from him and wiping the dampness under her eyelids.
When she glances back up, she stares for a moment behind Magnus’ shoulder, a soft smile on her lips and Magnus turns around to find Alec standing on the other side of the couch, seemingly waiting for the authorization to come closer. His hazel eyes are wide and hesitant, and Magnus holds a hand out to him, refusing to see for a second longer his husband hesitate to be by his side. Never again.

“Come here, babe,” Magnus says with a smirk. Alec slips his hand into his own, and drops on the couch next to Magnus, leaning against his side. “Your mother was just about to tell me all about her torrid love affair with your boss and I’m sure you want to hear all about it too.”

“Magnus,” Alec and Maryse growl admonishingly in the same voice.

And Magnus laughs, freely, openly, without for a second having to force the joy tittering in his chest. It takes Alec only a second to join him, and Maryse only one more.

This, he thinks, is what family is all about: unconditional love, and just the right amount of teasing.

“Someone looks happy.”

Magnus swirls around at the familiar, teasing voice, sending Dot a warm smile. He supposes she isn’t wrong. He’s been feeling invigorated, and it must show on his features because she isn’t the first one to make such a remark in the week that has passed since his surprise birthday party. He finds it isn’t too hard, thus, to reply cheerfully, “Perhaps I am, Dorothea.”

Dot winks at him, her mouth curving into a smirk. “Is it because you missed your favorite salsa partner?” she asks, lifting a suggestive eyebrow.

Magnus stills in his steps, remembering their encounter on the night he and Alec had their infamous disastrous date at the Wandering Woods and he thought Alec was acting irrationally jealous. He dated Dot a long time ago, before he met Alec, and he has never felt like there was any kind of a spark left between them in all that time but with the way she is looking at him now, like she knows something he doesn’t and is willing to act on it, he fears Alec might have been right, and he might have been blindsided by the ring on his finger that should tell people he is unattainable.

He is about to tell her just that, to let her down gently enough that he doesn’t ruin his friendship with his salsa partner and have to go on a quest to find a new one when her smirk broadens, her gaze shifting behind his shoulder.

“Because I think he’s been waiting for you,” she says, her smile turning soft and benevolent.

Magnus frowns in confusion and turns around to see what she is looking at. His breath catches in his throat at the sight of his husband standing there, looking more disheveled than usual and utterly lost. He smiles at Magnus when their eyes meet though, a small, shy thing that makes Magnus’ heart slam against his ribcage.

He forgets about Dot, about even the studio around them and the noises of the street coming through the windows. For a moment in time, there is only Alec and him, and Magnus walks the distance between them unconsciously, drawn to the man as fatally and irremediably as he was fifteen years ago when they ran into each other in the middle of campus.

“Hey,” Alec says when he stops in front of him, twisting his fingers nervously.
“Hi,” Magnus replies, feeling rather numb by the surprise. “What are you doing here?”

Alec shrugs, as if he is unsure himself. “Taking salsa classes with my husband?” he says, sounding just as doubtful as he looks. “I know you wanted us to do this together and I’m probably gonna suck terribly but I thought I could try at least once.”

Magnus almost melts here and there, but he manages, by some miracle of nature no doubt, to hold himself upright and smile back. “Oh darling,” he murmurs, for the two of them only, “you have never sucked terribly. If anything, you’ve always been quite fantastic at it.”

Alec laughs, and even the quick, fondly exasperated roll of his eyes can’t conceal the blush blooming on his cheeks. “I walked straight into that one, didn’t I?”

Magnus opens his mouth to reply, if only to let him know that his husband has never been known to do anything straight, but Alec cuts him off with a glare. “Don’t,” he mumbles in a tone that has Magnus snicker under his breath.

They finally remember the world revolving around them when the salsa instructor walks into the room.

Magnus turns towards Dot, sending her an apologetic grimace. “Are you gonna be okay?”

Dot’s smirk is nothing short of mischievous. “Oh, yeah, don’t worry about me,” she says with a wink. “I found a new partner.”

She seems so utterly unaffected that Magnus has to quirk an eyebrow. “You asked that hot guy you’ve been sporting a not so secret crush on, didn’t you?”

“His name is Alaric,” Dot replies with a wink, before sashaying away, head held high and shoulders rolling.

Magnus snorts, and turns back to Alec to grab his hand and drag him towards a spot by the window. It is snowing pretty heavily outside. “Come on, husband,” he says. “Time to put your money where your mouth is.”

Alec follows with a chuckle.

The first half hour passes quickly. They stretch, and Alec listens to the teacher’s instructions religiously, his frown dipped in concentration in that ridiculously adorable way that makes Magnus want to kiss his nose dimple. He lets Magnus teach him the beginner steps with meticulous attention, sometimes casting him a fast glance for approval, sometimes only for the sole purpose of sending him a smile Magnus is quick to return.

Then starts Magnus’ favorite part. Dancing is magical in that it allows you to communicate your emotions without ever uttering a word. The music starts, and Magnus holds out a hand that Alec takes at once, laying his other one against his waist. It is but a small touch, and yet Magnus’ whole body seems to awaken to remind him that it is the most intimate they have been in a while.

They have touched, small brushes of fingers, tight embraces to chase their demons away and casual touches that bear the meaning of all their heart’s content, but this is more. So much more.

This is the two of them losing themselves in each other as the music grows louder, their eyes drunk on the fire they can read in the other. It is somewhat clumsy; Alec is so clearly out of his depth that it should be risible, but somehow it is not. It is perfect, because they dance over the threshold of something new, something that feels like liberty. So they keep dancing, driving their remaining
insecurities and struggles away and for a moment in time, this is all that matters.

For a moment in time, there is grace among them, the grace of new beginnings meddling with something much older, something much deeper. It lights Alec’s eyes in a spark that Magnus is sure to be mirrored in his own.

They have had long years together, long enough that at some point they fell into a routine. It wasn’t a problem, because they were happy until they were not.

It tears Magnus’ guard down, leaves nothing but the steps he knows by heart and that Alec bravely and unwaveringly tries to follow.

In this moment in time, Magnus sees themselves during their wedding dance, and the months before that where they had practiced until their feet hurt and their bodies ached because Alec would never settle for anything but perfection as long as it had anything to do with their relationship.

And he remembers more. A slow dance, one evening in the kitchen of the loft after they had just moved in and called it a home. How their bodies could so flawlessly fit together, until there was nothing to them but a whole, nothing but one heart beating in unison and cursing away the malice of the world.

Sometimes, Magnus thinks he could fly with nothing to fuel him but the love Alec bears for him, the love he has carried for so long they almost risked dismissing it.

And Magnus remembers more. Why he loved him and why he still does, today and for the many years to come.

The music stops, but Magnus refuses to let go. He finds comfort in the fact that Alec doesn’t seem willing either, his hand gripping Magnus’ waist like he is scared he will leave him for good.

But Magnus won’t. If anything is clear, in this moment in time, even in this cursed month of December that he holds so much resentment against, it is that he cannot live without Alec.

“That was graceful,” he murmurs with a teasing smile.

It was far from flawless. Alec doesn’t know what he is doing, but Magnus doesn’t either and it is as close to perfect as they are ever going to get.

Alec smiles, proud and playful. “I learned from the best,” he whispers back.

Another song starts playing, and their bodies move again.

It is a peculiar kind of grace, one that can only be found in passion. It brings something to life in Magnus’ chest, something raw and so utterly powerful that he would forget how to breathe if not for Alec making it so easy. Easier.

So Magnus finds himself wanting. He wants, he wants, he wants in a way that he wasn’t sure would ever come back. He wants Alec’s lips on his own, their bodies dancing to the rhythm of their beating hearts, of the time they have lost and the time they have left. He wants the air crackling between them, unable to contain the sheer weight of their devotion to each other.

This is stronger than lust, a deep desire pooling in his belly with the intensity of a thousand fires. This is a tingling sensation starting from the tip of his fingers locked into Alec’s and spreading all the way to his toes, leaving an untamable tempest in its wake.
This is what they were always supposed to be; fierce, impassioned and in love.

This is their very own rebellion against hardship; and they won, Magnus thinks, his eyes never leaving Alec’s, his heart rummaging in his chest. They won.

The first thing Magnus is aware of as he walks into the loft almost a week later is the distinct and unmistakable scent of something burning. An alarm immediately ticks in his brain, his whole body tense with dread and anticipation as he walks warily towards the kitchen, only to have it relax as soon as he catches sight of his husband. Alec is clad in an apron that says in bold, pride-colored letters ‘Yes, your gaydar is accurate’ because Isabelle makes the best gifts, otherwise covered in flour, and he is waving a kitchen mitten frantically over the oven, trying to get rid of the heavy, black cloud of smoke drifting out of the open door. In his other hand, he holds a dish where whatever food he tried to make is now charred black and unrecognizable.

He keeps swearing under his breath, looking somehow both desolate and nervous, but freezes mid-curse when his hectic gaze flickers to Magnus leaning against the threshold of the kitchen.

Magnus bites back a laugh, chewing on his bottom lip instead.

“I’ve got everything under control,” Alec exclaims before he can open his mouth.

Magnus doesn’t hold back a giggle this time. “Clearly, darling,” he says with a teasing smirk. “If you didn’t, the kitchen would be on fire, and we’re not quite there yet.”

Alec purses his lips, lowering his gaze, a blush blooming on his cheeks. “I wanted to cook us dinner but Izzy called and then I was setting the table in the dining room and I got distracted.”

Magnus risks a glance at the dish and hums in amusement, his lips curving into a smirk. “Alright, let me try and guess,” he says tauntingly. “Was it parmesan chicken?”

Alec pulls a face. “No.”

“Shrimp?” Magnus tries again, and he knows the teasing edge of his tone is not lost on his husband.

Alec rolls his eyes, but he poorly manages to conceal his own smile. “No. Stop it.”

“Shrimp?” Magnus tries again, and he knows the teasing edge of his tone is not lost on his husband.

Magnus can’t hold his laughter much longer, a titter slipping through his mouth. He lays a soft, impossibly endeared gaze on Alec. “An infamous burnt pie recipe I don’t know of that has been passed from Lightwood to Lightwood for centuries?”

“You’re the worst,” Alec retorts, but he doesn’t seem to be meaning a single word of it.

Magnus chuckles and takes a step closer, cupping Alec’s face between his hands to cover his pouting lips with his own. “Thank you for trying,” he mumbles when he pulls back, sounding decidedly as charmed as he feels.

Alec’s reply is a small, shy smile, made all the more adorable by the flour coating his cheek and his forehead right over his eyebrow scar.

Magnus lays another kiss on his mouth before he steps away, grabbing a wet rag from the counter to wipe the flour off Alec’s face. His eyes travel further down, and he giggles again at the mess of flour and tomato sauce scattered all over his apron.
Alec laughs with him, hazels roaming over Magnus’ features with something akin to relief barely hiding behind the unconditional love. “I am ridiculous, aren’t I?”

Magnus can’t help but kiss him again, wiping down the front of his apron as well as he can considering the rather gorgeous distraction in front of him. Alec opens his legs for Magnus to settle between them as he works on the remaining flour. “The most ridiculous man I have ever met,” he replies in a murmur, kissing him again, and again, until Alec’s breath hitches against his lips and nothing else matters in the world.

“Well,” Alec whispers, his fingers tangling in the coat Magnus hasn’t bothered to take off to pull him closer, “you were ridiculous enough to marry me.”

Magnus’ hands slide up Alec’s arms and settle on his shoulders, and he draws back to gaze into his eyes. His thumb glides gently against Alec’s scruffy jaw line. “And ridiculous enough to love you still eleven years later.”

Alec gasps quietly. “What?” It is flat and disbelieving, astonished and amazed, and as much as Magnus hates that they ever got to a point where their feelings for each other were not a given, he can only savor the moment, the look of utter awe in his husband’s eyes as if Magnus had uttered the words for the very first time.

“I love you,” he says again. “Despite the struggles, despite the burnt food and your obsession with alphabetical organization. Despite all the little things that sometimes annoy me. I know you, all of you, and I love you all the same.”

There are tears in Alec’s eyes but they don’t spill on his cheeks. They shine through the dimmed lights of the kitchen and they speak of relief and of triumph. Of love and devotion.

Alec heaves out a deep sigh, his whole body relaxing under Magnus’ fingertips. “I love you too,” he says, soft and genuine and earth-shattering. “I love you so much, Magnus. I couldn’t live without you.”

“You will never have to,” Magnus replies.

And then they are kissing again, and it is a bit awkward because neither of them can stop smiling, but it is everything.

It is the solace they had been seeking in all the wrong places, finally uncovered where it was all along; in each other.

Alec leans against the counter, his hands gripping Magnus’ waist and Magnus goes willingly, pressing closely into him, deepening their kiss.

When he pulls back, cursing oxygen for being such a trivial necessity, Alec’s eyes are ablaze with the fire of lost lovers reuniting and Magnus’ hands move on their own accord, sliding behind his waist to unfasten the knot holding the apron.

Alec smirks, with the same confidence that had driven Magnus mad on their very first night together, gently pulling his coat off of his shoulders and letting it fall on the floor, forgotten already. “Is this really necessary?” he asks, teasing. “I am pretty sure nothing got past the apron.”

Magnus tugs it away nonetheless, playing coy just for the sake of it. “I have to check, Alexander,” he tells him. “You know how thorough I am.”

Alec licks his lips, and Magnus loses all sense of past and future, nothing left in his mind but the
here and now. But this moment in time, just for the two of them.

“We should check your pants too,” he says with a redolent smile. “Just to be sure.”

Alec snorts, reaching behind him without ever looking away from Magnus’ eyes to grab the bag of flour still sitting on the counter. His smirk widens as he throws a handful at Magnus, nothing short of mischievous.

“Guess we have to check yours too now,” he murmurs, voice hoarse with desire.

Magnus’ heart is beating so frantically that he wonders for a second if Alec can hear it. “Guess so,” he replies, and their mouths smash together as they melt in each other in a mess of lips, and hands, and boundless passion.

How Magnus missed this, their minds bound together, driven towards the same goal, the same destination.

In his dreams, this is exactly how it is. This is Alec, and this is him, alone against the rest of the world and stronger for it.

In his dreams, this is what it feels like to be awake.

They stumble their way to their bedroom between giggles and kisses, Magnus’ jacket discarded to the floor on the way, quickly joined by Alec’s sweater. Magnus tries to tame the raw want swirling in his stomach, if only so that he doesn’t spontaneously combust before they even hit the bed, but there is nothing to do against it.

His fingers travel up and down Alec’s naked arms, learning again the curve of his biceps, the small scar over his left elbow—a relic from his agitated childhood with Jace—, the way his muscles shift under Magnus’ touch. He rediscovers it all, and longs to extend his conquest further.

Alec draws back from their kiss, leaning his forehead against Magnus’. His breath comes out in pants, crashing against Magnus’ lips erratically. “You’re wearing too many clothes,” he murmurs, impatience layered in the roughness of his tone.

Magnus hums in approval, mapping the curves of Alec’s abs with his thumbs, the ghost of a touch that makes Alec shiver. “You should do something about that,” he replies, gently tugging his bottom lip between his teeth.

Alec all but groans, his hands jumping to Magnus’ shirt to unfasten the buttons hastily. Magnus chuckles, the sound dying in his throat as Alec hooks a finger past the hem of his pants to tug him closer and latches his lips to his neck. Magnus tangles his fingers to his hair, guiding them towards the bed, his other hand digging in Alec’s back.

They land on the bed with a dull thud and take a moment to just look at each other, taking in the sight offered to them. Magnus smiles, leaning on his arms not to crush him, and Alec sends him back a lopsided grin, full of guileless joy. Magnus glides his thumb over his cheek, his eyes roaming over his husband’s features, the slight flush on his face, the hunger blazing in his gaze, the way his swollen lips shine under the lights.

Alec turns his head to press a kiss against Magnus’ thumb, before nipping at it, equally tender and adamant.
“Are you gonna stare at me all night or are you gonna fuck me?” Alec asks, a smirk tugging at the corner of his lips. Even then, it doesn’t prevent Magnus from perceiving how obviously Alec is eyeing him too, from the skin of his chest uncovered by his open shirt to his own lips and his eyes which are, without a doubt, filled with the same hunger.

Magnus makes a show of rolling his eyes nonetheless. “Shut up and kiss me, Lightwood-Bane.”

Alec looks far too pleased with himself. “Yes, Sir,” he breathes out, and obliges, cupping Magnus’ neck in his hand to draw him closer and do just that, his other hand slipping under his shirt to wander against the skin of his back.

A long shiver runs through Magnus’ spine. From then on, it isn’t so different from their dance a few days ago. They discard their clothes slowly, reverently, until there isn’t a piece of fabric restraining them from yielding to one another. Sex, in many ways, is similar to what Magnus knows of dancing. It speaks beyond words, conveys emotions no language could ever do justice to.

And yet, Magnus tries again. When he reaches to their night table to grab the bottle of lube they keep there and comes back to hover above his husband, their lips brushing together in a slow dance that belongs to them, words seem enough, because Alec knows his heart, perhaps because it belongs to him entirely.

“I love you,” Magnus whispers.

Alec shifts under him, and Magnus doesn’t think he will ever get tired of watching his eyes light up the way they do when he tells him the only absolute truth that will forever remain a constant between them.

“I love you too,” Alec says, simply, without an ounce of hesitation. The way it was always supposed to be.

Magnus coats his fingers and opens him up slowly, taking his time to savor every wanton moan he manages to tear from his lover’s mouth, every little gasp that slips through his parted lips when Magnus isn’t kissing them.

This is familiar territory, and Magnus feels like he had forgotten all about how their bodies can move together like they were made for this. Between the two of them, every pretence falls. Their hearts race faster, and they do so together.

When he slides inside Alec with a shallow thrust of his hips, the world outside ceases to exist. They love each other with their eyes as much as their bodies, and everything else is inconsequential, a meager distraction from what truly matters. And what matters is this, their souls mingling amidst the quiet of their room, the devotion drifting from every gasp and the intoxication of a moment they never want to end.

Magnus buries his head in Alec’s neck, shallow pants crashing against the tense skin, and Alec wraps his arms around him, lips pressing heated kisses against his temple, his cheek, the hem of his ear.

“Fuck,” he murmurs breathlessly, fingers digging in Magnus’ back. “I should burn dinner more often.”

The startled laugh that slips out of Magnus’ mouth takes him by surprise, but he doesn’t even attempt to hold it back, letting it fill the air in the room. It makes his thrusts less precise, but Alec doesn’t seem to mind, choking on a chuckle against his ear before moaning unabashedly.
“Don’t get overzealous and burn the apartment to ashes, though,” Magnus replies, lips drifting over Alec’s jaw line to find his mouth again.

“No promises,” Alec replies with a complacent smirk.

Magnus retaliates with a sharp snap of his hips that has Alec’s back arching and his lips parting in pleasure. Magnus presses a quick kiss to Alec’s eyelid in apology, snickering under his breath.

“God, I missed you,” Alec murmurs, relief pouring through every word.

Magnus doesn’t have the time to answer, to tell him just how much he missed him too, because Alec slides an arm around his waist and promptly rolls both their bodies around. Magnus lands on the mattress with a surprised scoff that turns into yet another moan of sheer bliss as Alec descends on him slowly but resolutely.

There isn’t much more to say. Magnus loses himself in Alec and in the overwhelming feeling that he is not wandering alone, because Alec is right there with him.

He loses track of time, too, but it isn’t so long before they meet their climax, slipping over the edge one after the other, trembling from the intensity of it all.

Alec drops on the bed beside him, his chest heaving as he tries to catch his breath, and Magnus feels the infectious grin spreading on his lips as his eyes dart over his husband, his hair a mess, his cheeks flushed from exertion, his eyes glistening with the aftermath of his orgasm.

“Well,” Magnus all but purrs, shuffling closer to lay his head on Alec’s shoulder and his arm over his waist, “I guess we’ve still got it.”

Alec chuckles. “Guess so.” He buries his nose in Magnus’ hair and inhales deeply, humming in content. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Magnus replies easily.

For a while, they just lay there in silence, bathing in each other’s presence, finding there more comfort than any word could convey. Magnus’ fingers drift idly over Alec’s stomach, while Alec’s travel along his biceps, leaving a trail of goosebumps in their wake.

Whatever he was expecting when he came home that night, Magnus has to admit it wasn’t this, but he is most certainly not complaining. No more than he is about the image of his husband standing in their kitchen, covered in flour and looking equally nervous and lost, that will forever be implanted in his brain. He almost regrets not having taken a picture, but that might have made him lose a second of this precious moment, so he thinks he can live with that.

“So,” he murmurs teasingly, dragging the vowel out, tearing Alec out of his thoughts, “pizza?”

Alec grimaces, glancing down at his sweaty and otherwise soiled body. “I think I need a shower first.”

Magnus hums in agreement, running his fingers up Alec’s chest to cup his cheek into his hand. “How about we order pizza and then you return the favor and fuck me in the shower while we wait?” he mutters seductively. “You know how terribly impatient I can be.”

Alec’s breath hitches in his throat, his eyes already darkening again. “Deal,” he says with a solemn nod, tugging Magnus against him to kiss him again.
And Magnus relaxes against him quite naturally, cherishing the moment, all that it means for them, for their future and what it holds.

Tomorrow, Magnus knows, this memory will guide them through the path of redemption and healing. In their old age, it will be hidden in their conniving grins.

Tonight, it is a renaissance.

Alec wakes with a shiver. There’s a cold draft across his bare back and legs that he tries to cover with the blankets. He reaches down for them and sits up, confused when he finds nothing is there. The confusion only lasts for a moment when he sees Magnus, curled up in all the blankets, slumbering peacefully, unaware that his husband is blanketless, practically naked, and cold. Alec moves in closer and finds an opening in the covers. He curves his body around Magnus’ back and places a kiss on the knob of his spine before moving across his shoulder and up to his neck.

Magnus chuckles and it’s the perfect sound to hear first thing in the morning. It pulls a smile from Alec and he nuzzles in to kiss along the shell of Magnus’ ear.

“Good morning,” he whispers, voice scratchy.

“Mm. Morning.” Magnus presses back against Alec and so Alec slides in closer, tucking his legs between Magnus’ which causes his husband to groan and curl his legs up in front of himself. “Your feet are freezing, get them out of here,” he complains with a whine.

“Well, they wouldn’t be freezing if my dear husband had not stolen the blankets from me.” Alec completely curls his body into Magnus, chasing the warmth his body offers.

Magnus swats at his legs, a half-hearted movement that Alec knows he doesn’t really mean because he’s nuzzling his back against Alec’s chest as he does it. “I don’t know what you mean. I never steal the blankets.”

“Mhm.” Alec lifts Magnus’ chin with his fingers and kisses the teasing smile. “It’s okay. I’ll forgive you because I love you.”

“You better.” Magnus’ smile grows and he finally opens his eyes to look at Alec before placing a quick kiss on his mouth. “I love you too much for you to hold my occasional blanket stealing against me.”

Alec rests his forehead against Magnus’ temple. He doesn’t know if he’s ever smiled in the morning as much as he has these few minutes he’s been awake. He’s taken those words for granted so much over the fifteen years of their relationship. He never knew how much he would miss them. The possibility that he would go a period of time not hearing Magnus telling him that he loves him, was never a thought that crossed his mind. But it had happened and it had hurt, and now, he has Magnus in his arms again and those three words have him punch-drunk in love the same way they did when he first heard them all those years ago. “God, I love you so much,” he mutters against him.

The soft trail of Magnus’ fingers curving along the back of Alec’s neck creates a pleasant shiver. “You’ve got to stop calling me ‘God’, Alexander or I might begin to get a god-complex.”

Alec laughs. “As you should, because you’re pretty fucking great.”

Magnus joins him with a laugh and twists his body in Alec’s arms to face him. His eyes still have
the faintest shadows of eyeliner smudged underneath them and his hair is an utter mess but he looks every bit of divinity when he smiles, big and carefree, up at Alec. “You are an impossible sap. Did you know that?”

Alec nods because it’s true. Everyone had always joked about him being not exactly ‘warm and fuzzy’ and they were right. Alec had not been in many relationships before Magnus but the short ones he’d had, had never brought any feelings to life inside him like he has with Magnus. He’d never known what it felt like to feel stupid with love for someone until Magnus came along. And now, if you ask those same people, they will tell you that Alec, when it comes to Magnus, is exactly both warm and fuzzy. “I can’t help that you make me this way.”

Magnus kisses at the corner of his mouth. “I wouldn’t have you any other way, Alexander.”

“Is that so?”

Magnus moans out a small response when Alec kisses him again. “What time is it?”

Alec rolls over to his nightstand and lifts his phone to check the time. “Seven.”

Magnus buries his face in Alec’s chest. “Wake me up in thirty minutes.”

Alec chuckles and moves to get out of bed but is stopped by Magnus holding onto his waist. “Where do you think you’re going?” he asks, not bothering to lift his head from the pillow.

“I’m going to make coffee. I’ll be back to wake you up in thirty minutes, don’t worry.”

“Or you could just stay here,” Magnus suggests, toying his fingers along Alec’s ribcage.

Alec laughs and peels Magnus’ arm off of him. “I’ll be right back. Sleep.”

“Fine.” Magnus huffs and pulls the covers up to his neck. “I’ll wait here.”

Alec finds his pair of discarded sweatpants thrown over the foot of the bed and slides them on. His stomach is growling by the time he reaches the kitchen and starts the coffee. He had almost forgotten that he had plans to make Magnus breakfast in bed and so he’s glad that he woke up when he did. He only has a small window of time to get breakfast made and served before Magnus has to leave for work.

Breakfast in bed is only stage one in his day’s plans. He’s bought everything he needs ahead of time and now, he just needs to recreate the plate of French toast he made for Magnus on a cold December morning five years ago. He managed to dig out the recipe from the old cookbook that sits on top of their refrigerator. Magnus had loved that French toast so Alec had kept the recipe but now that he’s looking at the faded ink on the page, he can’t seem to remember why he has never made it again.

He flips the toast in the pan and lets the side turn to a golden brown before he scoops it onto a plate with the spatula. The fruit is already cut and neatly arranged off to the side, the coffee is poured and he does the finishing touches of setting it all on the gold-trimmed tray that sadly never sees much use. That changes today, he thinks while he pads slowly to their room, careful not to spill. He nudges the door open with his hip and pauses when he sees Magnus’ dozing form in the bed.

He walks over to Magnus’ side of the bed and watches him sleep for a moment before lifting his leg to nudge Magnus with his foot.
“Psst, wake up.”

Magnus slaps his foot away, groans, and then stretches. “Has it been thirty minutes?” he asks, lazily.

“Just about.” Alec lifts his leg to poke him with his foot again. “Wake up. I made breakfast.”

Magnus’ eyes snap open and he smiles up at Alec. “That smells like”—he sniffs the air and then gasps—“Alexander, is that French toast?”

Alec laughs. “How did you guess that from smell alone?”

“A wild guess.” Magnus sits up and draws his hips back to situate himself against the headboard so that Alec can set the tray carefully over his hips. “Is this safe to eat?”

Alec stops, keeping his hands on the tray handles and gives Magnus his most unimpressed stare. “Very funny. I can just take this back with me to the kitchen if you don’t—”

“Woah woah woah, let’s not be rash.” Magnus laughs. “I’m only teasing. It’s just so much fun to see you get so serious.” He pokes at the wrinkle in between Alec’s brows and then puckers his lips out, waiting for a kiss which Alec happily gives him, rolling his eyes as hard as he can as he does it.

“Thank you for breakfast,” Magnus whispers against his lips.

“You’re welcome.” He kisses Magnus again. “Good morning, my love.”

“Good morning, darling.” Magnus pats the bed beside him. “Sit and eat with me.”

Alec picks a strawberry off the plate and pops it in his mouth before crawling into the bed beside Magnus.

“Breakfast in bed on a Wednesday morning. A guy could get used to this.” Magnus takes a bite of his French toast and moans before feeding a bite to Alec. “I am not in the mood to deal with the Paris expansion today, especially not if you’re going to be home all day while I’m stuck at the office.”

Alec sips at their coffee and shrugs. “It’ll be over soon.”

“Let me call in today. Raphael can handle the meetings.” Magnus is already in work-mode, looking around him for his phone probably ready to fire off ten emails to get everything covered for the day.

Alec distracts him by putting a strawberry in his mouth when he opens up to say something, causing Magnus to stop what he’s doing and glare at him while he chews on the strawberry. He gives Magnus a grin and holds out the fork with a square of French toast speared on the end. “These are important meetings and you know you need to be there. I’ll be fine and I’ll see you soon.”

Magnus bites the food off the fork and grumbles, “I hate when you’re right.”

Magnus feels ridiculously giddy when he enters the building that houses Edom’s offices, and it has probably everything to do with the fact that Alec walked him all the way there, holding his hand
and distracting him with his presence alone from the laborious day ahead of him.

They wave at the security guard in the lobby and Magnus is about to turn to Alec to—regretfully—kiss him goodbye but Alec just keeps walking to the elevator without a word.

“Are you planning on going to work with me on your day off?” Magnus teases, unable to conceal the glee in his own voice. His whole body feels warm and invigorated, the soreness lingering a pleasant reminder of their wild night together.

Alec shakes his head as he presses the call button. “I said I was walking you to work,” he argues reasonably. “We’re not there yet.”

Magnus bites on his bottom lip, feeling wholeheartedly and perhaps a little foolishly happy at his husband’s antics. “You’re ridiculous,” he mutters, squeezing Alec’s hand.

They step in the elevator and Alec waits for the doors to close behind him to turn to Magnus, pressing a quick kiss to the hem of his ear. “We went over this last night,” he murmurs playfully. “That’s why you married me.”

Magnus sighs, feigning resignation, but he huddles closer, breathing in Alec’s cologne and letting the smell relax him. They pull away when the doors open again at Edom’s floor and Alec grabs his hand again, leading the way to his office.

Magnus stifles a chuckle when his husband winks playfully at Catarina and Maureen who stop chatting over the latter’s reception desk to stare bemusedly at them when they walk by. When they get to Magnus’ office, Alec tugs on Magnus’ hand to swirl him around and grips his hips tightly, lifting an eyebrow.

“Learned this in salsa classes,” Alec says, smirking proudly.

Magnus scoffs out a quiet laugh, unable to help himself. “You must have had quite the teacher,” he replies.

“Yup, he’s pretty amazing.” Alec nods, and drops his voice. “Great ass, too.”

The laugh that slips out of Magnus’ mouth has nothing of quiet this time, and he shakes his head in staged exasperation. It draws gazes to them, and Magnus is acutely aware of his employees’ lack of discretion as they stare at the scene he and his husband are offering to them, but he can’t bring himself to care. He’s just really, really fucking happy, and not sorry for it in the slightest.

Alec beams, pride flashing on his features as Magnus simmers down and gazes fondly at him. He leans in to press a chaste but lingering kiss to Magnus’ lips.

“I would say good luck on the negotiations but you don’t need luck because you’re the best,” he says as he pulls back.

Magnus rolls his eyes. “You are unbearably sappy when you’ve had sex, Alexander,” he says for Alec’s ears only.

“Only when the sex is mindblowing,” he retorts, private but bold and unabashed, and pecks his lips lightly again. “Have a good day, babe.”

“You too, darling,” Magnus replies. “I’ll see you tonight. Try not to burn dinner.”

“Considering what happens when I do, I can’t make any promise on that,” Alec says with a cheeky
grin as he steps away from him, walking backwards towards the elevator.

He twirls around with a flourish and Magnus takes a moment to just watch him, his stomach lurching with a myriad of emotions that almost manage to steal the breath out of his lungs, but dissolve into laughter when Alec passes by Ragnar who is now standing with Catarina and Maureen, scrutinizing him with wary eyes, and Alec simply lifts his hand to offer him a fist bump that Ragnar returns out of bewilderment more than eagerness.

Magnus waits until his husband has disappeared into the elevator to open the door to his office, shrugging out of his coat to hang it, an indelible smile playing on his lips. He barely has time to do so that someone clears their throat behind him.

Magnus is absolutely nonplussed to find Catarina, Ragnar, and Raphael standing by the threshold, wearing matching puzzled but amused expressions.

He purposely ignores them, walking around his desk to sit behind it, turning on his computer.

“Really?” Raphael deadpans.

Magnus doesn’t reply, smirking to himself.

“Are you gonna tell us why your husband decided to reenact that god awful scene from Spiderman 3?” Ragnar asks, throwing him an exasperated glance. “He fistbumped me!”

Catarina clicks her tongue disapprovingly, patting her husband on the back as she steps closer, dropping in the armchair in front of Magnus’ desk and spreading her legs over it, a knowing smile ghosting on her lips.

“So,” she says matter-of-factly, “is sex still ruined for you?”

Magnus finally looks away from the screen to settle an amused gaze on her. “I don’t know what you mean,” he replies, a blatant lie to everyone in the room.

Catarina purses her lips, scoffing. “Soft curls, lightly applied makeup,” she says, gesturing at him offhandedly. “I recognize the signs of a happily sated Magnus.”

Magnus smirks.

“The hickey on your collarbone might be a bit of a clue as well,” she adds, complacent.

Magnus chews on his bottom lip to refrain from grinning too obviously, but he must do a terrible job at it because he can see Ragnar and Raphael unwind visibly before him, shaking their head in a poor effort at hiding how truly happy they are for him.

“Sex definitely isn’t ruined anymore. Actually, sex is amazing and my husband and I are pretty great at it,” he tells them eventually, fully aware that he is gushing and utterly unbothered by it.

“Alright, I’ve heard enough,” Raphael says, raising both his hands in surrender and twirling on his heels. “Glad you’re happy and all that but sex doesn’t interest me any more when you’re the one having it so I’m gonna go back to work because *someone* has to work in this company.”

Magnus snorts, smiling to himself before he turns back to his computer. “I have to finish preparing the call with our French lawyers this afternoon.”

Catarina sighs, taking her feet off the desk. “I guess I’ll go back to my lab.” She stands up from her
seat and leans over the desk to plant a soft, noisy kiss against his forehead. “I’m happy for you, Magnus. I’m happy for you both.”

Magnus grabs her hand and squeezes gently. “Thank you.”

When she is gone, only Ragnor remains, staring at Magnus with a quirked eyebrow which Magnus returns with a curve of his own.

“What?”

“I’m not kissing your forehead,” Ragnor says flatly.

Magnus rolls his eyes, throwing a pen at his face. “Get the fuck out of here.”

Ragnor does, but the sound of his boisterous chortle resounds for a while after he’s closed the door.

It is already one in the afternoon when Maureen knocks on the door of his office and Magnus tears himself from the screen to greet her with a smile.

“I’m here to remind you about your lunch meeting, Magnus,” she says.

Magnus slips two fingers under his glasses to rub at the bridge of his nose. “What lunch meeting?” he asks with a sigh. He opens the calendar on his computer but doesn’t find anything.

“Your lunch meeting in the greenhouse,” she replies, adamant. “Your client said he wanted to see the greenhouse so I scheduled a lunch for you there.”

Magnus heaves out a deep breath. He really thought he would have at least lunch to relax, maybe call Alec to complain about the intricacies of French law, but apparently he isn’t so lucky. They shared a few texts through the morning, and Magnus hasn’t quite landed from his trip to cloud nine yet, but he wonders if that lunch meeting might achieve to do so.

“I guess I forgot,” he mumbles, gathering his phone and taking off his glasses before he stands, stretching the soreness out of his neck. “Would you mind terribly if I asked you to order us some lunch, Maureen?”

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” she replies with a light smile. “I think it’s all been taken care of.”

She is walking away before he can voice his confusion to her, so Magnus just shrugs to himself and grabs the tablet from his desk, checking his calendar again as he makes his way to the greenhouse. As CEO, he often has a busy enough schedule that he can’t keep up with it himself, but it isn’t like Maureen to forget to synchronize his meetings to his own calendar. It wouldn’t be the first time something is arranged at the last minute, though, so he doesn’t put too much thought into it.

He realizes with a start that he forgot to ask her any useful information about said client when he pushes the door of the greenhouse open. He doesn’t see anyone there, so he ventures further, losing himself among the greenery, letting the magical properties of the plants soothe away the stress of the morning. Ragnor might have called it a whim when he insisted on getting a greenhouse in Edom when they first started the company together, but Magnus surely doesn’t regret it.

He does even less when he finds his ‘client’ sitting on a picnic cloth by the wall of bamboo.
Alec sends him a lopsided grin that has Magnus’ heart slam against his ribcage.  

“Come on, Mr. CEO,” he calls, patting the empty space next to him.  

Magnus tries to speak, but the words stay stuck in his throat as he takes in the scene before him. He wonders inwardly how he ever doubted his feelings for Alec, and even more preposterous, Alec’s feelings for him. Magnus doesn’t recall ever loving someone as much as he does this ridiculous, beautiful man.  

“What are you doing here?” he asks, taking a cautious step forward.  

Alec smiles, soft and inviting. “I knew you’d forget to eat today with everything going on and I know you don’t have time to have lunch outside so I conspired with your assistant.”  

Magnus shakes his head fondly and closes the distance between them, sitting down next to Alec on the cloth and planting a quick kiss to his lips.  

“I even bought some mustard, because you like that devilish condiment for some reason that’s beyond me,” Alec says with barely disguised repulsion as he gestures to the picnic basket.  

“True love right there,” Magnus comments with an amused scoff.  

“You are so lucky,” Alec says, pecking his mouth again.  

“That I am.”  

Alec smiles, reaching in the basket to grab two sandwiches, handing one to Magnus. They eat in relative silence, comfortable enough to content themselves with each other’s presence, and Magnus takes the opportunity to push away all thoughts of work and the Paris expansion and their new line of moisturizers that is supposed to come out in the beginning of the year to review the past few days instead.  

Alec organizing him a surprise birthday party, Alec showing up at his salsa classes, making them dinner, walking him to work and now this. Magnus never asked for this much. All he wanted was for them to be them again, to find time for each other, to heal and to move on and to love. Alec is making good on his promise to work less despite his still impossible schedule, but he is doing so much more than that. It almost feels like they are young men again, learning to know one another, flirting and teasing and baring their hearts for the other to take. It feels, if he is honest with himself, like falling in love all over again.  

They have done all of it before, and yet it feels like the first time. It feels new, and exhilarating but a voice at the back of Magnus’ mind can’t help but murmur that perhaps Alec is doing all of this because Magnus never made it clear to him that his guilt is misplaced, that it doesn’t all fall on his shoulders to fix what was broken.  

Magnus washes down the last bite of his sandwich with a long sip of water and turns to Alec, laying his hand over his own.  

“Alexander,” he calls softly, tearing Alec’s attention away from a bed of pink daffodils. “I appreciate everything you’ve done lately and don’t think this is me complaining about any of it because I truly am grateful and I love you so much, but you know you don’t have to do it, right?”  

Alec’s brows dip slightly, the smile slipping from his lips to be replaced by a grave, but open expression. “Yeah, I know,” he says. “But I want to. I went so long not doing these things and I shouldn’t have.”
He may try to hide it, from both his husband and himself, but Magnus can see the guilt lingering in Alec’s gaze as plainly as he can see the soft wrinkles that are starting to mark the corner of his eyes, evidence to another promise they made to each other, to grow old together and let time flying by be their only enemy.

Alec has this irremediable tendency to carry everyone’s burden on his shoulders as long as it means they don’t have to, and although it breaks his heart every so often, Magnus loves him for it. There are some burdens that are too big for one to bear, though, no matter how strong, no matter how stubborn.

“Darling,” Magnus murmurs, “everything that happened between us in the past few weeks, or even in the past few years, it’s on the both of us.”

Alec shakes his head stubbornly. “It’s on me,” he argues. “I couldn’t help you and–”

“Stop,” Magnus says, albeit not unkindly. “It’s not on you. I wasn’t fair to you either. I blamed you for pushing me away, and I used it as a channel for my own anger and it blinded me enough that I didn’t try to understand why. It’s okay to grieve in whatever way you need to, darling. I just wished you hadn’t tried to do it alone and I wish I would’ve understood that sooner.”

“I–” Alec cuts himself off, and heaves out deeply, his shoulders slouching a little. “I didn’t want to be a burden to others, especially not to you. You had enough to deal with already and I was falling apart and I just… I just didn’t want to burden you.”

“I know, darling,” Magnus says softly. “But Alexander, there won’t ever be a world where you could be a burden to me. What made you feel like you could ever be in the first place?”

Alec licks his lips and cants his head to the side. “I– Nothing. It was nothing.”

Magnus’ brows dip into a frown. “Alexander,” he says gently, “please tell me. I need to understand. We need to understand what we did wrong.”

Alec purses his lips, hesitant, and heaves out a deep sigh. “It was a few of days after the funeral,” he mumbles, his voice hitching. “I came home one evening and… we hadn’t really talked for a few days already and it was driving me crazy. I wanted to do something, but I didn’t really know what, or even how. You were in the study filing paperwork and I tried to talk to you– see if you needed any help, if I could do something, anything– but before I could finish talking, you kind of snapped at me. And I don’t blame you,” he adds hastily, but Magnus’ stomach is already lurching. “I really don’t. You told me you didn’t have time for me and… and I didn’t want to make things harder for you.”

Magnus closes his eyes and inhales deeply. He remembers, now. He never thought too much of it at the time, but now that Alec mentions it, he can recall that day perfectly. He had been filing more paperwork for the adoption, paperwork that never seemed to end, and he had been stressed, and under pressure, and heartbroken. He remembers Alec shifting on his feet in front of him, trying to find his words, stammering, and he remembers lashing out on him and dismissing him as if Alec was another problem on his ever-growing list.

“Oh,” Magnus murmurs eventually, and he can feel himself paling. “Oh, God.”

“No,” Alec says immediately, turning back to him to grip his hands tightly, eyes widening. “No, babe, it wasn’t your fault. I should’ve tried harder.”

“Alexander. I remember how I was at the time,” Magnus admits. “I remember I was irritated at
you for breaking down, for being unable to help. That anger followed me for a while—for too long— but I never stopped to think that maybe you had tried, and I just didn’t listen.”

Alec’s smile is small, somewhat broken. “I didn’t know how to help you, and it was driving me crazy because I’m supposed to be the one people can always rely on so I just… focused on work. Because I couldn’t save our daughter, or save you from the pain her death caused, so I suppose I subconsciously decided to do my best to help others. I’m sorry.”

Magnus lays his head on Alec’s shoulder, toying with his wedding band. “Saving her wasn’t in your hands, Alec,” he says softly. “There was nothing anyone could have done. You can’t blame yourself for things that you have no control over.”

“I had control over being there for you and I wasn’t,” Alec argues stubbornly. “I could’ve tried harder.”

“I’m not sure that’s true,” Magnus murmurs. “If we’re honest with each other, I think I knew why you shut me out. I knew why you buried yourself in work because you felt like it was the only thing you could do in this situation. But I was bitter, too bitter to try and stop you from grieving alone. Too bitter to let you know I needed help. Too bitter to take into account that I had my faults in our problems too and that I couldn’t put it all on you and hope it would make me feel better about myself and this whole thing. That wasn’t fair of me. And I’m sorry.”

Alec shakes his head. “You don’t have to apologize.”

“Yes, I do,” Magnus says, with a finality that leaves no room for argument. “You grieved alone because you felt like somehow you had to, and that’s on me, too. I never want you to feel like you’re a burden to me because you’re not. Nor will you ever be. And I never want you to feel like you have to hide your pain from me. I never want you to feel like you can’t talk to me. I’m sorry I ever made you feel like you couldn’t.”

“I’m—” Alec murmurs, and promptly stops himself, licking his lips. “I know,” he says eventually. “I don’t think either of us could see clearly at the time.”

Magnus hums in agreement, carding their fingers together. “That kind of pain… it takes over everything else. You can’t die of a broken heart but it can easily bring you to a point where you lose sight of everything else. I didn’t understand that was what we were going through until recently. We are all dependent on grief and the way we cope, not the other way around. But we’re together, for better or for worse, right? Even if it’s the worst versions of ourselves.”

Alec doesn’t reply, pressing a kiss to Magnus’ forehead instead, one that speaks louder than words ever could. He slides his thumb against the back of Magnus’ hand and squeezes it tightly. “Do you think it will ever stop hurting?” he asks in a murmur.

“No,” Magnus replies, pulling away to glance at Alec, cupping his face in his free hand to brush his cheekbone lightly. “And that’s okay. It’s the pain we carry with us every day that makes us fight harder for what truly matters.”

Alec leans into his hand, the ghost of a smile on his lips. “You’re what truly matters to me,” he whispers.

Magnus’ heart clenches in his chest as he kisses him, soft and heavy with promises. He leans his forehead against Alec’s, breathing him in, immersing himself in the comfort of his presence, strong and familiar.
“We’re here for each other now,” Magnus says; and there is a finality in his words that he knows Alec hears clearly. “And I want to enjoy the present and build a future with you, the way it was always meant to be. So please stop beating yourself up about the past.”

Alec inhales sharply, and presses a lingering kiss against Magnus’ cheek. “I’ll try,” he offers.

Magnus hums in approval, knowing this is the best he will probably get from him.

“I’m still going along with the romantic dinner I had planned for tonight, though,” Alec adds faintly, dissolving in a second the mournful tension between them.

Magnus chuckles, and nods, feigning defeat. “As long as you don’t burn down the apartment.”

Alec rolls his eyes. “You do all these romantic things and you burn dinner one time and that’s all your ungrateful husband remembers,” he heaves out dramatically.

Magnus smirks, poking at his ribs. “You poor soul,” he sighs mockingly. “I’m very sorry you have such a lousy husband.”

“Yup. I think he should make it up to me.”

Magnus chuckles, shaking his head in fond exasperation. “Any ideas on how he should do that?”

The smile Alec gives him is nothing short of mischievous. “A few,” he mutters, and then he all but bounces and Magnus has no other option but to wrap his arms around him and let Alec push him down on the picnic cloth, covering his mouth with his own.

Their laughter resonates through the greenhouse; and if this isn’t happiness, Magnus isn’t sure what is, so he will let it be just that for him, for them, their own definition to chase away burdens and guilt, pain and sorrow. They never leave entirely, but they dwindle with every battle won.

Alec sips at his coffee while he watches the rain fall down over the city and onto the cascade of colored umbrellas down below. He’s on a much needed fifteen minute break that he intended on spending outside until he came out to the hallway just to find that it is raining. The sky is gray as far as he can see and the rain is coming down in a heavy torrent. There are people running to escape the rain and others who were prepared walking leisurely with their umbrellas. He thinks about how in a few hours he will have to walk home in this rain because he still, after all these years and after all of Magnus’ insistence, forgets to check the weather before leaving for work. Thus leading him here, staring at the rain and dreading the minute his shift ends.

“You know it’s a good thing you have a husband who checks the weather daily.”

Alec turns at the welcome sound of his husband’s voice. Magnus is standing at the end of the hall, an umbrella hooked over his index finger.

“Alec,” Alec says through a grin, breaking away from the window to meet Magnus with a quick peck on the lips. “What are you doing here?”

Magnus smiles, his eyes still closed from their kiss and so Alec leans in and presses another one to Magnus’ expectant lips, melding them together longer this time. Brown eyes flutter open when they pull apart, and all Alec can do is gaze into them, memorizing the rich brown and amber flecks looking back at him, the soft wrinkles that crease at the inner corners and along the edges – a map of the laughter they’ve shared over the years. Magnus blinks and his eyes lower to Alec’s lips
before he leans in and kisses Alec again, like he can’t get enough. His hand curls around Alec, fingertips tickling into the strands at the nape of his neck, sending a jolt that courses across Alec’s skin, reminding him of just how lucky he is to be married to this amazing man.

“I’m happy to see you.” He keeps Magnus’ lips close, still tasting the honey balm on his lips.

“It’s been a long ten hours,” Magnus whispers back before pulling away slightly to tap Alec on the chest with the umbrella in his hand. “I brought you this. I knew you would forget.”

“You assumed I’d forget.” Alec takes the umbrella from Magnus, thankful that his husband knows him better than he knows himself.

“No. I knew.” Magnus grins at him.

Alec rolls his eyes and hooks his arm around Magnus’ waist, pulling him close and drawing a giggle out of him. Magnus tips his head back a little and smiles up at him. His hair is damp and curling softly at his temples. He used to be self conscious at the way his hair turns in the wet weather but Alec loves it. Slightly wet with humid curls, Alec doubts there is a single look Magnus cannot pull off.

“Well, I’m glad you know me better than I do.”

Magnus laughs at that and his brows flick in agreement. “Isn’t that the truth,” he mutters before swiping Alec’s thermos and stealing a sip of his coffee. He grimaces a little and shakes his head. “Ugh. That’s strong.”

“I’m on hour twelve,” Alec says, taking the thermos back and shaking it for added effect.

“My poor baby,” Magnus coos, his tone is sarcastic at first but then everything about his expression softens and he fiddles with the collar of Alec’s white doctor’s coat. There’s a proud smile softly curving his lips when he smooths the lapel down and runs his finger over the navy blue threads of Alec’s name and department Alec Lightwood-Bane, M.D. Neurosurgery, lingering a little longer over their combined last name. “We should really do something about how overtired you are.”

Magnus has always been the one to worry about Alec’s health and well-being, more so than Alec ever has. He’s seen Alec push himself to his limits and he’s been there to comfort him whenever Alec inevitably came crashing back down. It’s a job he took upon himself in the early days of their relationship, always more than happy to be there for Alec, reminding him to take care of himself or sometimes actually doing the job for him when Alec wouldn’t. Reminders that he needed to eat, meals prepared when he knew Alec wouldn’t take the time after work, cups of water appearing by his side when he worked on notes late at night; there were hundreds of little ways that Magnus took care of him throughout their life together. Ways that Alec took away from him when he quit making himself available to them. He’d forgotten how nice it felt to be cared for this way. To be loved this much.

It’s almost too much but it’s too much in the best of ways.

This reminds him of the text he received from Isabelle and Maia just a few hours ago, a gift from them because they felt he and Magnus deserved some self-care after the year they’ve had. He’d gotten so distracted with work that he forgot to share the news with Magnus. “Speaking of, cancel your plans this Saturday because we have a spa day scheduled, courtesy of Maia and Izzy. An early Christmas present.”
Magnus’ soft smile turns to a grin. “Oh, your sister and her wife are my favorite people in the world. No offense.”

Alec frowns. “I thought you said I was?” Magnus shrugs at him with a scrunched nose and an oops smile on his face that Alec can only chuckle at. “Whatever, none taken, I guess. I kind of always suspected it anyway.”

Magnus huffs with an eye roll. “And I’m the dramatic one. People misjudge us so badly.”

“I really don’t know what you mean,” Alec quips.

Magnus hooks his hand around Alec’s elbow and they begin to walk down the hall, no destination in mind, just a stroll—a simple pleasure they don’t get to partake in that often. And while it may only be within the halls of the hospital, it feels reminiscent of their college days. When they used to walk to class together, oftentimes leaving early enough so that they wouldn’t have to rush their time together. Walking home from a long day of classes, hand-in-hand or arm-in-arm, but always side by side.

“How’s your day been?” he asks Magnus.

Magnus sighs. “Much better now that I have a couples massage to look forward to this weekend.”

“That’s where I get to massage you, right?” Alec jokes.

“I’m deeply sorry that I have to burst that bubble of yours and tell you that a couples massage is actually not what you think it is. The spa is a public place, darling.” Magnus nudges him with his elbow, and the comment is so off-hand that Alec’s sure it wasn’t meant for Alec’s mind to wander to the specific memories of public places he is currently revisting.

He’s not sure he remembers when he and Magnus discovered the thrill of almost being caught and the fact that they were both into it. But he does remember that they’ve played with that fire on more than one occasion. He pulls Magnus in tight against his side as they pass the nurse’s station and lowers his head to whisper in Magnus’ ear, purposely trailing his lips along the edge. “Who said I mind public places?”

There’s a stutter of breath and Magnus stumbles out a few ‘I’ve been fine, thank you’s to the nurses who greet him, completely unaware that the flush painting Magnus’ cheeks is not because he’s so cozily bundled up for the cold weather. Alec grins to himself and pulls Magnus further along down the hall, ready to be away from his staff’s prying eyes, until they’re back to it being just the two of them in the hospital hallway.

Magnus is silent for a few paces, then he blinks and gives a quick shake of his head. “Okay, I’m back. My mind went…somewhere else,” he says, voice low.

“Oh yeah?” Alec smirks at him. He can think of a few places Magnus could be remembering: the dive bar by campus when they went out after a late study session, the bathroom at Maia and Izzy’s wedding reception, a dressing room when tuxedo shopping for their own wedding, Magnus’ office during one of Edom’s first Christmas parties, an empty classroom during finals; but he’s pretty sure he knows which time Magnus is thinking about. “Like that time we were at my parent’s company party at the country club? That coat closet made things interesting.”

Magnus blushes again. “The coat closet is exactly where my mind went. And maybe that plane on the way back from Hawaii too.”

A half-groan half-moan escapes Alec and he dips down, brushing his lips against the shell of
Magnus’ ear again. “The on-call room has been feeling pretty lonely too.”

“Fuck, Alexander,” Magnus grits through his teeth. “Why are you working the night shift tonight?”

Alec laughs. He’s missed this. This ease between them. How they can joke and flirt and tease each other. It’s how it used to be and Alec is relishing in the fact that they are finally back. He’s in love and he’s happier than he ever could have imagined, and it’s because of this beautiful man he has on his arm right now. “Because life is cruel and instead of”—he looks around to make sure nobody’s looking and playfully grabs at Magnus’ ass eliciting a gasp from him—“fucking you in the on-call room tonight, I’ll be taking naps and checking my patient’s vitals.”

Magnus elbows him gently. “Stop teasing, it isn’t fair. I have to go home unsatisfied and to an empty bed.”

“Well…” The hallway is empty, it’s a quiet night so far, his patients are all stable and not due for him to check on them for at least another hour or so; he spots the door to the on-call room cracked open and the lights off. He grabs Magnus’ hand and chuckles at the ‘what the’ that Magnus rushes out when Alec pulls him quickly into the empty room, shutting and locking the door behind them. “I’m on break now. The room’s empty…”

He doesn’t get to finish his sentence because Magnus is kissing him, erasing every word Alec had to say with each swipe of his tongue, tangling the fingers of one hand into his hair while the other tugs off Alec’s white coat. They’re a mess of heavy kisses and short breaths, hands grappling at clothes that they can’t shed fast enough.

Alec’s pulse is thrumming, blood rushing and pooling where Magnus undoes the ties of his scrub pants. He lets out a moan at the first contact, whispering, “Oh fuck, Magnus…” quietly into his husband’s ear.

Magnus smiles against his lips. “I came to be sure you’re taken care of for the night and so that you don’t catch a cold on your way home”—he lets out a small, stuttered gasp when Alec pushes him up against the wall—“I think my doctor will agree that this is great for your health. Keeps you strong and healthy, releases endorphins and all that good stuff.”

Alec laughs, lips pressed against Magnus’ throat. Yes, Magnus is very good at taking care of him. “Your doctor definitely agrees.”

Having Magnus giggle in his ear, their hands over each other’s mouths to keep quiet so they don’t get caught, makes Alec feel young again. He’s transported back to a time when this, them being together, was all that mattered. And It feels that way again now; all that matters is the smile on Magnus’ face that twitches in pleasure whenever Alec moves against him, the sharp intake of breaths, and the low sated moans he gives with every kiss.

They’ve been here, in a small bed tucked away in an on-call room at this hospital, plenty of times before in much younger years. Alec bumps his head against the top bunk as he situates himself on top of Magnus and Magnus’ elbow knocks into the metal railings when he tries to give Alec more room. They fumble and then find their rhythm in the small bed, the crisp, cold hospital sheets shuffling as they rock, driving each other towards the crest of their climax.

Alec closes his eyes tightly and kisses his husband. “I love you,” he whispers and he can feel Magnus smile, spent but blissful, into their kiss when he whispers a breathless ‘I love you’ back.

They lay in the empty room, talking in whispers with ankles hooked around each other and fingers tickling along bare waists. Alec knows he has to go back to work soon, someone will undoubtedly
be by to take this room back for themselves, but he’s reveling in the feeling of having Magnus here with him and he wants to hold onto it as long as he can.

“I wish we could just stay here like this,” he confesses.

“Me too,” Magnus says and walks his fingers up Alec’s ribcage, humming softly as he moves in closer to nuzzle into the crook of Alec’s neck. The vibration of his humming tickles across Alec’s skin and he breaks out into a chuckle that Magnus quickly quiets with a kiss to his neck before working his way up to Alec’s jaw, chanting ‘I love you’s and peppering kisses as he goes.

Alec decides to take this time for them. They’ve earned it and he’ll leave only when he absolutely has to, but for now, the empty room will be filled with the sounds of their laughter, some shushing, and most important of all, their unbridled happiness.

When Magnus leaves thirty minutes later, Alec stays behind to tidy up the room. Changing sheets and straightening up so that no one will know what had just transpired within its quiet walls. It took every ounce of willpower to crawl out of the bed so he can go back to work. He’s running on very little sleep and his body feels like jelly after their activities. All in all, he’s not in the best state to have to go back to work. Not to mention, he’d just had a very warm and very naked Magnus curled up against him and now he doesn’t; and the hospital is cold and unforgiving and the heat of Magnus’ body after a session of lovemaking is Alec’s absolute favorite way to stay warm.

He gives the room a once-over and then turns out the light before slipping out through the door he only opens a crack. He’s almost positive he’s gotten away with it when he bumps into Underhill as he turns the corner.

“Alec,” Underhill exclaims, all too loud for Alec’s taste.

“Underhill,” Alec drawls out, mocking excitement with a nervous half smile.

Underhill’s eyes flash to the room over Alec’s shoulder and he grins. “You’re just the guy I wanted to see.”

Alec points at himself and Underhill nods in a yes, you way.

“What’s up?”

Underhill gestures with his tablet. “I have a case I wanted your opinion on. No rush though. I couldn’t find you so I just sent you the file.”

“Oh yeah, I can do that. I just had a… took a… power nap?” Alec finishes off and he doesn’t know why he posed that off as a question.

Underhill points at the on-call room. “In there?”

“Uh—yeah.”

Underhill’s face scrunches, wrinkling his nose, and pulling his mouth in a grimace. “I was about to go take a nap. Is it safe?”

Alec crosses his arms and then scoffs but it comes out more as an anxious chuckle instead. “Why wouldn’t it be?”
Underhill looks over his shoulder and then back at Alec before leaning in, and whispering behind the back of his hand, “I caught up with Magnus on his way out. Is there not a hairbrush in the Lightwood-Bane residence or should I buy you guys one? You and Magnus both seem to have a bit of bed head today. Odd.”

His mouth quirks up in a smug smirk and he pats Alec on the shoulder before heading towards the room. “I’m happy for you and also slightly jealous,” Underhill says canting his head to the side and shrugging up a shoulder. He shoots Alec a quick wink and then pushes into the room with his back on the door. “It’s good to have the old Alec back.”

Alec smiles to himself, proud, because he does finally feel like the ‘old Alec’ is coming back again. Who finally feels as if his life is falling into place like it was always meant to be and who has nothing to worry about because he has Magnus; his fun, flirty, thoughtful, and perfect husband by his side for better and for worse. And for quickies in the on-call room on his break from work.

Alec takes his off day to sleep in, put away Christmas gifts, and also do some last minute decorating to what is now Ariel’s guest room for when she spends the night. He tucks the white sheets with colorful llamas on them under the mattress and then drapes the white plush duvet over the top. Being in the room is easier now that he and Magnus worked together on it. It’s a room that is beginning to bring a smile to his face whenever he thinks of Ariel’s excitement when she will see the room for the first time. Considering she had already been asleep when she used the room at Magnus’ birthday party, they had still yet to see the sparkle in her eyes when she takes in all the work they’ve done to create a space just for her. He finishes it off by setting the large cat shaped pillow Magnus bought for her on the center of the bed and then goes back to their room.

He never quite knows what to do with himself on his off days so he usually spends them doing house chores and organizing things that Magnus insists don’t need organizing, like the junk drawer in their kitchen that now houses carefully sorted bins full of bric-a-brac he and Magnus have accumulated over the years. He finishes putting away their last load of laundry and drops onto the bed to watch TV, forcing himself to take a break on this supposed rest day.

He scrolls through Netflix mindlessly for a good ten minutes before settling on a reality show he has no interest in. It manages to hold his attention for ten minutes more and then he pulls his phone out to text Magnus instead.

Talk to me. I’m bored.

His phone is quick to buzz with a new message. Ragnor just yelled at an intern because he refused to stop calling him Sir. He went on about not being ‘bloody royalty’. I should have filmed it to show you. It was amazing.

Alec chuckles. Now that’s a hell of a lot more interesting than this reality show on TV.

You better not be watching Queer Eye without me or I will divorce you for real.

Alec laughs again, louder this time. He’s pleasantly shocked to find that the casual comment doesn’t bother him like it used to. Just a few weeks ago, that word, divorce, would have brought out an entirely different reaction from him—a gut sickening foreboding that would leave him shaken any time he so much as thought of it. And now, he doesn’t have to fear divorce anymore. He knows he and Magnus have finally made it through the brambles of their relationship. They have fixed what was once broken.
In that case, you better entertain me lest I get the temptation to watch it without you. I would really hate to make you divorce me...for real.

He smirks when he hits send, playing into Magnus’ jest and hopefully giving Magnus the same reassurance he just felt at being able to laugh through this now, while also throwing out a small threat with no real promise behind it. He would never even think about watching the show that had won the both of them over without Magnus but there’s no crime in teasing him about it just for the fun of it.

His attention is pulled back to the show on his screen while he waits for Magnus’ response. He hopes he’s not interrupting a busy work day because laying around texting Magnus sounds like the perfect way to spend the rest of his day off.

*It would be too bad if you caved. Then I guess I’d have to punish you.*

Alec sits up suddenly and stares at his phone, a little more wide-eyed to be considered smooth if his husband were actually here in front of him, so he’s really glad Magnus can’t see him right now. His cheeks feel hot with every word he types. And they somehow burn even more when he actually hits send on his message.

*Does this punishment consist of you bending me over?*

*I could but would that really be a punishment?* Magnus responds instantly.

Correction, laying around sexting Magnus sounds like the perfect way to spend his off day.

*We can pretend it is. Now... where is the remote? Queer Eye is calling me ;)*

The remote is laying next to him but Magnus always likes to call him dramatic so he’s going to play the role if it’s going to get more messages like these out of his husband.

*Alexander.*

*Yes, Sir?* Alec sits hunched over his phone, grinning like a school boy. He can imagine this is what it would have felt like to text with your crush back in highschool, if cell phones had been a thing back when he was in high school. He supposes it’s equivalent to receiving a note in class that you open as secretly as you can in your lap so the teacher doesn’t catch you.

And now he really wants to pass notes with Magnus.

*I was serious. Don’t watch Queer Eye without me.*

*I can find something else to distract you. Memories of last night for example.*

Alec blushes again. Okay, maybe this is not at all like high school, he thinks. Better though, definitely better.

*Last night is definitely a memory I would love to revisit right about now.*

He stares at the gray text bubble that flashes while Magnus types up a message that will no doubt have Alec wishing he were here instead of there. *It was quite a long night, so I guess you can just take your pick in all the memories we made. Repeatedly. And loudly.*

Alec groans and shuts off the TV. He doesn’t need the distraction right now because he has something more important to focus on. *Your naked body pressed against the shower wall. We can*
definitely start there.

Just sending that message is enough to make him revisit their previous night, sparking a heat in his gut at the thought of their time in the shower. After the shower. And then after that.

*I wish I could come over for a repeat performance but I only have an hour break in about an hour and it's too short for me to go home and be back at work on time.*

Alec looks at his watch to note the time. He can make it to Edom in an hour.

*That is such a shame. My day off would've been much more exciting.* He quickly gathers his things around the room, picking out a simple pair of jeans and a t-shirt.

*Well, having a quickie with you sounds much more appealing than the last semester's figures I've been studying for the past hour.*

Or trying to.

“Fuck, Magnus,” Alec hisses, biting back a groan and trying his best to keep himself collected if he wants to make it across town without showing the world just where his mind is currently occupying.

His phone chimes again. Three more times.

*Now I'm the one getting distracted.*

*Not that I'm complaining.*

*Sex with you has always been my favorite source of distraction.*

Alec turns on the shower and then sends another quick message. *My my my Magnus, are you getting flustered?*

뭔만 You know I am.

*And don't try to tell me you're not, I can almost hear the sound of the cold shower running, which is not such a great idea considering what we did in there last night, babe.*

Alec can't help but laugh as he holds his phone in one hand while the other rests under the cold spray of water, waiting for it to heat up. Magnus knows him a little too well. Kind of. He's not going for a cold shower this time. Things might be more fun if he doesn't cool down before he visits Magnus at his office.

*Depends on the purpose of said shower. Maybe thinking about last night is exactly what I need ;)*

*You're rude,* Magnus sends.

*You love me,* Alec sends back.

The water is hot now but Alec can see that Magnus is typing out a message and he doesn't want to miss it.

*I really do. And all the memories we made and will make in that shower.*

*I love you too.* Alec types back and he really wishes there were another way to say it because those four words don't seem to quite encompass the amount of love he feels for Magnus. The way he
feels like he’s floating in the clouds every moment they spend together. No, love doesn’t seem to be a big enough word to contain the magnitude of Alec’s feelings for Magnus.

*Enjoy that shower for me, darling. I’ll just be here dying of frustration and counting the minutes until I get off tonight. Pun intended.*

Alec chuckles to himself, tossing the phone onto the heap of clothes he left on the counter. He truly adores his husband and all of his corny, inappropriate puns.

And this time Alec can definitely relate to the sentiment because he is also counting the minutes it will take for him to get ready and get to Edom. Even though he and Magnus have spent the past three days celebrating Christmas, drinking hot chocolate, cozying up by the fireplace in each other’s arms, and making very good use of the shower and the long nights; Alec can’t wait to be with Magnus again. All of this time spent together has him craving Magnus with an intensity he almost forgot was possible. Not that anyone can blame him for wanting as much of Magnus as he can get before having to work the two back-to-back fourteen hour shifts he has waiting for him starting tomorrow night.

He finishes washing and dressing in record time, skin still damp making his white henley cling to his back.

*Okay, that shower was a bad idea. It’s way more fun when you’re there.* He sends the message and reaches for the knit beanie Maia made as a bonus Christmas present and slips it on over his wet hair. Magnus isn’t going to be happy to know Alec is leaving the loft like this in the dead of winter, but Alec is hopeful he can distract Magnus enough with his surprise visit that he won’t notice.

*Can’t say I feel bad for you, darling. No reason you should get some sort of relief when I’m stuck in the office with all the thoughts you put into my mind.*

*Wish I could’ve helped you out though ;)*

Alec throws on his coat and then opens the front door, grinning when he sends back, *I would’ve liked that.*

He shove his phone in his pocket and takes one step out of the loft when he feels the cold tile against his bare feet. “Shit! Cold, cold, cold,” he rushes out and goes back inside, hurrying to put on socks and shoes. He laughs at himself as he knots the laces of his sneakers, if Magnus only knew how overly eager he is to be with him that he almost left the house barefoot in December.

Once he’s finally fully dressed to face a winter in New York, he makes his way to Edom, brisk-walking enough that he can no longer feel the cold from the damp hair at the nape of his neck.

He’s beginning to worry that maybe Magnus is busy since he hasn’t heard from him after the last text and this was a bad idea. The last thing he wants to do is interrupt his work, especially now when he’s been so preoccupied with trying to finalize the details of the Paris expansion. He can see the tall building of windows that houses Edom and the closer he gets to its doors, the more he hopes that Magnus won’t find it too presumptuous of him to show up out of the blue like this. He’ll admit, Magnus’ texts did their job of getting him worked up but if he walks in and Magnus is busy he’ll be perfectly happy with a kiss. A fifteen minute walk for a kiss from Magnus is a small price to pay.

He pulls open the door to Magnus’ building and holds it open for three women who are leaving when his phone vibrates in his pocket. He fishes it out and smiles at seeing Magnus’ name appear on the screen.
“Dr. Lightwood-Bane!” The security guard greets him with a wave and Alec returns it.

“How’s it going?” Alec asks.

“No one’s gotten hurt on my watch today so I’d say it’s going pretty well.” The security guard chuckles. “You going up to see Mr. Lightwood-Bane?”

“Yep,” Alec says.

The guard nods. “I figured. I saw that smile on your face. Go on, I won’t keep you anymore.”

Alec waves and then jogs up to catch the elevator before the doors close. His phone buzzes once more in his hand and he finally swipes on the messages to read them.

_Tonight. I promise._

_Or I’m on my break now so we could FaceTime?_

Alec tucks the phone back in his pocket and waits for the doors to open on Edom’s floor.

“Alec!” Maureen greets him when he steps out and she reaches forward to pick up the phone she uses to page Magnus.

“I’d like to surprise him. If that’s okay?” Alec says in a hurry, putting his hand up to stop her from calling Magnus to announce him. She’s almost too good at her job.

She smiles wide and sets the phone back on the receiver. “He’s actually on break right now.”

“Thanks, Maureen,” Alec says and he really needs to send her some sort of gift for all of the help she’s given him recently when it’s come to Magnus’ schedule.

He waves at a few familiar faces as he makes his way down the halls to Magnus’ office, and he’s thanking the universe that Ragnor, Catarina, and Raphael seem to be nowhere in sight to give him away or figure out the real reason why he’s here. He’s sure they would be able to see right through him with his less than put together appearance and wet hair hidden beneath a beanie. He’s also pretty sure Magnus tells them everything, including their affinity for quickies in the workplace.

Alec does a quick look around to make sure no one is coming when he reaches Magnus’ closed office door. He knocks, waits for Magnus to call him in, and then he walks in, swinging the door shut behind him.

“Alexander, what are you doing here?” Magnus’ mouth jumps into a smile and Alec’s stomach flutters. Yes, a fifteen minute walk just to see that face is definitely worth it.

Magnus rises from his seat to meet Alec halfway. Alec didn’t get the chance to see Magnus this morning before he left for work and he’s not sure Magnus would have even made it out the door if he had. There’s something about Magnus in all black that never fails to spark a flame of unrelenting want in Alec. And those glasses. Alec lets out a groan deep in his throat as he marches forward to finally touch his husband.

Right now, Alec wants. He wants to run his hands up the length of Magnus’ arms and over his shoulders, appreciating the way the sleeves of Magnus’ shirt hug nicely around the shape of his arms. He wants to pull him in by the sharp silver buckle of his belt and press their hips together.

“FaceTime is overrated, babe,” Alec says, hooking his fingers around Magnus’ belt buckle, pulling
him in. Their lips crash together and Alec gasps in a breath, swallowing the surprised moan
Magnus lets out when he parts his mouth for Alec. Their kiss is breathless, moving slow and deep
for one minute and then picking up when Alec runs his fingers down the line of buttons on
Magnus’ shirt.

“You just had to wear those fucking glasses,” Alec mutters, nipping at Magnus’ bottom lip. “You
know what they do to me.”

He slowly undoes the buttons of Magnus’ shirt, one-by-one, drinking in each whimper Magnus
gives him when he runs his nails against the smooth skin. He takes his time, working his way
down until it’s left hanging open and he can run his hand down the hard line of Magnus’ abs down
to the belt.

Magnus’ breath hitches when Alec dips his fingers below the waistband and then he smirks against
Alec’s mouth. “What? They’re my reading glasses. What’s the matter with them?”

He doesn’t give Alec time to respond. He pushes the coat off of Alec’s shoulders and then pulls up
at the hem of Alec’s shirt, bringing it over his head with one hand, his other hand following the
path down Alec’s hip bone.

Alec shrugs off the rest of the shirt and his beanie and throws them off to the side.

“You look fucking hot in them, that’s what,” Alec groans when Magnus copies him and slips
ringed fingers under the waistband of his jeans, grazing through the line of hair leading down.

“Is that so?” Magnus moans out when Alec sucks a kiss on the curve of his neck.

“Yes.” Alec’s breath stutters and then he’s left panting when Magnus’ hand slides all the way
down the front of his pants, giving him a quick tug before he’s pulling away to lay back against the
top of his desk.

He looks beautiful like this, laying back, legs parted in invitation and Alec is reminded, yet again,
just how lucky he is that he can call this man his husband. His beloved.

Alec leans over Magnus, drawing him in for another kiss because he can never get enough of the
way Magnus kisses him. The way his lips can draw from him exaltation.

“I love you,” Alec whispers against parted lips, nails scratching lightly along the curve of Magnus’
hip.

Magnus sucks in a breath at the sensation and curls his fingers in Alec’s hair, rubbing his thumb at
the base of Alec’s ear. “I love you.”

He smiles at him and kisses his mouth one more time before trailing his lips down over the firm
planes of Magnus’ chest, and through the valleys of his abs, finally reaching the sharp lines of his
hip bones where he drags his teeth to meet the band of leather that keeps him from what he really
wants.

“What the hell!!”

Alec’s eyes shoot up at the shrill voice, the fire of lust quickly turning into annoyance.

Camille is standing in the doorway, jaw clenching angrily, eyes wide on Magnus who has situated
himself up on his elbows to look at their intruder. Alec stands, inhaling deeply while he casually
closes Magnus’ shirt, taking his time to gather himself before he speaks.
“What the hell is going on here?” she barks again. “You can’t just…do that in here when anyone can just walk in.”

She’s seething and Alec has to admit that he loves the way defeat looks on her. “Well, you could have knocked,” he says, crossing his arms and turning to face her.

Her eyes flick down to his crotch, widen, and then over at Magnus. “This is so unprofessional.”

“I do recall asking you to knock, Camille,” Magnus says, his voice still full of authority even though he has just been found half dressed, in a compromising position on top of his desk with his husband kneeling between his legs.

She stares at them. “I did. Twice,” she deadpans.

Oops. Alec chances a glance at Magnus and tries his best not to chuckle. They had apparently been so caught up in each other that they hadn’t heard her knock.

“Is it important? We were kind of in the middle of something,” Alec says and he doesn’t even bother trying to hide the smirk that takes over him. He moves back to Magnus and begins to fasten the buttons of his shirt, slowly.

She glares at Alec, dark lined eyes sharp in their hate. “It’s about Paris—”

“Whatever it is, I’m sure Raphael can handle it, considering he’s the one you work with now,” Magnus says. He meets Alec’s gaze with a smug grin before he turns his head to Camille, expression bored and dismissive.

Camille stares at them, not saying a word before she turns on her heels and slams the door behind her.

Alec snorts out a laugh and steps back to lock the door behind her, before going back to Magnus, fitting himself between his hips again. He presses forward and runs his thumb along Magnus’ bottom lip that is clipped between his teeth. “Why do I want to make you scream even louder now?”

Magnus raises a brow at him. “Is that a challenge?”

Alec rubs his hand below Magnus’ belt buckle and chuckles at the soft moan Magnus lets out. “Not much of a challenge, is it?”

He’s had to triumph over tougher challenges than this one.

In the midst of the holiday, the finalization of his company’s expansion and their still ongoing journey towards healing, Magnus didn’t see December fly by.

It is only when he gets home after a long but fruitful day in Edom to find Alec meticulously taking down their tree’s glistening ornaments that he realizes that the new year is just around the corner.

December used to be a constant hardship, each day seemingly never-ending to taunt them with the unrepentant pain that accompanied them. A ruthless agony that had left them both mute, and a safe target for each other’s frustrations. Magnus has spent too long being unaware of the vicious loop loss had thrown them in, finding in his husband and his absence an easy victim to his heart’s chagrin.
The days have finally started to feel whole again, and if they had to go back to the innocent first
days of their relationship for that, he can only be grateful for it.

Time isn’t always a cure, but Magnus is slowly learning that practice can be, for this is what they
have been doing lately. Practicing again what it is like to be Magnus and Alec, to be each other’s
friend, each other’s world. Practicing the meticulous art of putting their heart in the other’s hands
and trusting him with it. Practicing the guileless walks down a path that they discover together, for
it was built for them.

Practice makes perfect, and although Magnus doesn’t believe anything can be perfect, he thinks if
anything can come close, it has to be their love. As long as he believes that, things will be okay.

December still isn’t his favorite month of the year. It probably won’t ever be again, but as Magnus
watches his husband raise on his tiptoes to pluck out the star from the top of the tree, he thinks their
suffering, the memory of it and of Aurora that will stay with them forever, might one day make
them unbreakable. Invincible.

It was only three weeks ago that Alec picked him up at work and insisted on them purchasing a
real tree together, to make good on the promise he had committed to for years, despite the eleven
hour shift he was just coming out from. It had started snowing while they were out, and Magnus
had felt his stomach twist at the sight of his husband thoroughly inspecting each tree to find the
perfect one, snowflakes falling gracefully on his eyelashes and dusting the top of his beanie.
Magnus had remembered then that he adored the snow, but this man infinitely more.

It brought him back to the first time they went to the Urban Garden Center to buy their tree and
how Alec had had to reason with Magnus to remind him that their apartment in East Brooklyn was
far too small to contain the monster of a tree he had his eyes on. They don’t have such troubles
now, both successful enough that they could afford to give in to Magnus’ outrageous impulses.
They are gone now though, and he was just as happy to settle for a simple (albeit taller than both
him and Alec) tree this year as he was back then. Christmas brought more blessings this year than
all the trees and traditions in the world could convey, and it is only partly thanks to the addition of
Luke to their annual dinner table at Maryse’s and his homemade candy cane cheesecake.

Shrugging his coat and scarf off, leaving them discarded on the armchair by the bookshelf that is
now earnestly organized in alphabetical order, Magnus walks up to Alec and wraps his arms
around his waist from behind, pressing a lingering kiss right in the middle of his neck. Alec tenses
for a second in surprise but relaxes almost as immediately, fingers trailing along Magnus’ arms to
his hands, lacing them together.

“Hey there,” Magnus murmurs, resting his chin on Alec’s shoulder, planting another kiss to his
cheek.

“Hey yourself,” Alec replies with a quiet, contented hum.

Magnus smiles over his shoulder at their half-stripped tree and ponders inwardly on the symbolic
meaning it holds in itself. It is the first time in three years they truly celebrated Christmas, the first
time they bought a tree, decorated it and gave it a bit of the essence their home was always meant
to hoist in its walls.

They made a victory out of it, another one on their way back from the cold and desolate path life
had tried to throw them on. It is just a tree, but it was enough to bring back under their roof the
traditions they had let dissipate with time, and these are the ones that matter to Magnus, because
they belong solely to them.
“I have a surprise for you,” Magnus says when the delicate caress of his husband’s thumb brushing over his wedding band tears him out of his thoughts.

Alec cranes his head back to look at him and Magnus indulges him, slipping under his arms to settle comfortably in Alec’s embrace instead. Alec instantly places a kiss against his ear that Magnus returns against the soft skin of his neck, and raises an eyebrow in inquiry.

“A belated Christmas present of sorts,” Magnus eludes. “For the both of us.”

He reaches in the back pocket of his pants and holds the envelope out to Alec, who plucks it from his hand with an intrigued frown.

“I wanted to give it to you for Christmas but I had some logistics to settle first.” Magnus smiles invitingly, motioning for him to open it, but kisses his lips lightly first, just because he can. “Go ahead.”

Alec carefully tears the flaps open, looking no less perplexed. The dim lights of the living room reflect in his eyes beautifully, and Magnus is close enough to see surprise flash in his gaze when Alec draws the plane tickets out of the envelope.

His breath hitches almost imperceptibly, and he quirks an eyebrow at Magnus with a silent question, although Magnus can see that Alec already knows the answer in the flicker of pride hiding beneath the query.

“The negotiations are over,” Magnus explains, relief and satisfaction in his smile. “I am expected next week in Paris to sign the final deal, and since you’ve never been, I thought it could be the occasion for us to get away for a week or so. I already called Luke and he accepted your leave before I could even finish talking, saying you had more than enough days off to catch up on.”

“Magnus,” Alec breathes out, before breaking into a wide, joyful grin. “This is incredible. You are incredible.”

Magnus huffs out a quiet laugh, shaking his head. “You’re biased.”

Alec squints his eyes in disagreement, letting go of Magnus’ shoulders to cup his head into his hands instead. “Maybe I am but that doesn’t make it any less of a fact,” he opines. “You are incredible and I am so proud of you.”

Magnus smiles. Words seem trivial in the light of the utter and overwhelming delight brimming in Alec’s eyes. Words have always been trivial when attempting to encompass the immensity of the love and support that flourish between them.

“But I’m mostly proud of myself for somehow convincing you to marry me all those years ago,” he adds with a teasing smirk.

Magnus laughs, soft and carefree, and Alec’s eyes light up in that unique way they do when he manages to make Magnus laugh, filled with pride and glee and the earth-shattering, unabashed love that never fails to steal the breath from Magnus’ lungs. This is his look, the one he cherishes above all else and that Alec reserves solely for him.

A teasing smirk curving his mouth up, Magnus leans in to poke at Alec’s ribs. “Let’s not pretend your first proposal wasn’t a complete disaster.”

Alec huffs at the reminder, at this loving, taunting banter they have cultivated for over a decade but that never grows old because it is always a memento, among many others, of how ridiculous and
how perfect for each other they can be. “It’s not my fault you can’t read in the morning because your only thoughts are for coffee,” he fires back.

Magnus reaches down to playfully pinch Alec’s ass and winks at him. “Are you sure about that?”

“You make a relevant point,” Alec allows, chuckling.

“I know.” Magnus regretfully tears himself away from his husband’s warmth, reaching out to help undress the tree. “So... Paris? Are you in?”

Alec smirks, and wraps a tinsel around Magnus’ neck, tugging lightly to pull him back against his chest. Magnus goes willingly, covering Alec’s smile with one of his own. “Maia did say we were back in our honeymoon phase the other day, didn’t she?” Alec reasons. “Seems fitting.”

Magnus hums in agreement, wrapping his arms around Alec’s waist. “The honeymoon comment or the Paris trip?”

“Both,” Alec replies, pressing a quick peck to Magnus’ lips.

Magnus smiles, feeling his cheeks flush, but it isn’t out of embarrassment, or even the occasional coyness only Alec can bring out of him, but out of pure and utter content, warmth spreading through his whole body.

“I can see why she would think that,” he murmurs, pausing for a second to lick his lips and take the full measure of the meaning of his next words, “because in the past few weeks, I think I have fallen in love with you all over again.”

Magnus wonders if the blush on Alec’s cheeks is also one that comes with the peace they find in each other’s arms.

“Magnus,” he says, and his name sounds like a treasure in his mouth, “I have been falling in love with you all over again every day for the past fifteen years.”

There is not much Magnus can do but to kiss him again, savoring the taste of victory on his parted lips.

December still isn’t Magnus’ favorite month. It probably won’t be for a long time, but if there is one thing he knows with absolute certainty, it is this: the grief that comes with it will not go, and there is nothing they can do to change that.

What they can do is this, love each other.

And for every December that flies by, love each other a bit more.

Chapter End Notes

Please let us know your thoughts, favorite parts, lines, etc. They make our day and we appreciate them so much!

You can find us on twitter: Lecrit and jwrites
Next time: Paris, a grocery shopping list and new beginnings.

all the love,
lu & jackie

Ps: Fuck Freeform, bro!
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Hello, you resilient fools.
It's us again, dropping this with no warning at all because it's much more fun.

All good things come to an end. Except for Magnus and Alec's relationship.

Please use the hashtag #LINAVM if you're live-tweeting this last chapter. We hope you enjoy it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When evening falls so hard

I will comfort you

I'll take your part, oh, when darkness comes

And pain is all around

Like a bridge over troubled water

I will lay me down

As he watches the sun set over the Arc de Triomphe, the blue sky rapidly turning into a beautiful landscape of orange and purple hues laying over the roofs of Paris, Magnus sucks in a deep breath. The air is cold, the early days of January no more forgiving here than they are in New York, and from the terrasse of the Hôtel Napoléon, the wind hitting his face reminds him of home.

The first time he was in Paris, Ragnor was by his side. They were both broke young men, travelling through Europe with nothing but their backpacks and each other for company, eager to discover the world and learn the intricacies of life held in new experiences and people. It hasn’t changed much since then; there is still something magical about it that Magnus can’t quite pinpoint. He thinks it might have to do with how enchanting the city is in the evening, especially after the sun has set and the lights of Paris cast their magic.

His fingers tremble as he raises his cigarette to his lips. A couple of Parisians are talking loudly a few feet from him, chattering about something his rusty French allows him to understand as the movie one of the women saw the night before, and Magnus almost feels like he is standing in the middle of one of those nouvelle vague films Maia affectionates so much. He feels like a flâneur, this word he learned on his first trip here and that can only make sense in the cobblestone streets of Paris, discovering the joy of sauntering through the city. Years later, he still finds more to discover, more that strikes and charms him, and the fact that this time he is doing all of that with the person he loves the most simply adds to the overall allure of the place.

It’s the last one, he promises himself, crushing out the cigarette in a nearby ashtray. He doesn’t have reasons to stress so much anymore. The deal is finally signed, he and Alec are doing so much better it feels like a new beginning, and the weight on his shoulders is finally back to what it
normally should be; there but not enough to be a burden.

Leaning against the railing, Magnus watches the bypassers down the streets, wondering if he would recognize Alec from that distance. He left for the final meetings leading up to signing the final deal in the early afternoon while Alec was eagerly preparing his camera for an afternoon of sightseeing, eyes lit up with excitement. Although Alec promised to meet him at the hotel at the end of the afternoon, Magnus can’t help but worry that he somehow lost himself in the immensity of Paris, caught between his love for European architecture and the complexity of public transportation on foreign land. He just really hopes Alec made good on his promise of taking a taxi, which would be a better option for sure if Alec spoke better French than the five sentences he learned by heart in school.

As long as he doesn’t open with *Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir*, he is sure Alec will be just fine.

“Magnus.”

Magnus heaves out a deep sigh. Maybe just one more cigarette then, he ponders to himself, swirling on his feet to face Camille.

“They’re gone,” she says with a smile, pointing down to the streets dismissively as if he could see the lawyers who helped finalize Edom’s expansion from where he stands. His eyes are only trained to recognize Alec from there – or anywhere, for that matter – and for now, he is just happy to relax and rejoice in the knowledge that this is it. He’s done it. Edom is in Paris.

He sobers up, however, remembering the conversation he had with Ragnor, Raphael and Catarina a few days ago over dinner at his apartment while Alec was working the night shift.

“Sit down,” he says, not unkindly, pointing at the empty table where he left his coffee when he stood up to smoke. “I need to talk to you about something.”

Camille seems unfazed, and he almost expects to have to negotiate with her – everything with Camille always seems to be up for discussion, so that she can slither her way and play with words until you forget what you were even trying to say in the first place and she gets the upper hand. He wonders, not for the first time, why it took him so long to realize she uses speech the way she uses people: as a means to an end.

She doesn’t talk then, however. She sits in front of him, immobile, watching silently as he leans down to grab his briefcase and plucks out the contract Ragnor worked on and emailed him the day before.

Inhaling deeply, he puts it down on the table and pushes it towards her.

She looks down at it, her eyes skimming over the paper for barely a second before she gazes back up, lifting an eyebrow.

Magnus straightens on his seat, squaring his shoulders. “I talked with Raphael, Ragnor and Catarina and we would like you to take over the French branch of Edom,” he tells her, not so much to spare her the reading but mostly to spare himself from the silence he would have to endure while she did. He wants to make this as short as possible, wants to put this whole thing behind them, the guilt, the shame and everything in between alike.

Camille leans back in her chair, crossing her arms over her chest. A smirk pulls at the corner of her red-painted lips.
“Is that the only way you found to get rid of me?”

“I know you speak French fluently and you have some family here. You also know Edom and already have contacts with most of our clients and our lawyers here."

It’s only a half lie. No matter what happened between them, he knows Camille is great for the job. She is cunning and resourceful, ambitious and driven. She is, also, a reminder of a time Magnus almost lost sight of himself, almost forgot to have faith in the man he loves and what they have built together. His reasons might be askew, they both know it, just as much as they know that she is more than competent enough to do this.

She leans over the table, her smirk growing, and Magnus moves back instinctively but she doesn’t stop, reaching out to pluck the fountain pen he used to sign the deal earlier out of the front pocket of his suit before sitting back down. Her eyes skim over the contract rapidly, and Magnus doesn’t even have the time to tell her he is giving her a few days to think about it. He expected shouts and accusations, well-rounded reproaches and brutal truths thrown to his face.

Instead, she signs, and her smile morphs into something slicker.

“You know,” she says, smoother than he has ever heard her, "I’ve always loved Paris… and you know my door will always be open here if you ever need to slip away from Dr. Deadbeat."

Magnus inhales sharply, but he refuses to look away from her. If he has taken anything from the past few months, it is to look at his mistakes for what they are and not avoid them indefinitely. He knows, though, that it won’t be the kind of mistakes he will make again, because it was one he only saw through the lense of his own needs, forgoing Alec’s in this whole ordeal. Their reminders of their love they worked through in the past months also served to rekindle his empathy toward Alec’s feelings, and he sees his needs too now, perhaps better than ever, and he knows it revived his ability to make better choices for himself, for their couple, and for everyone around him too.

"I said no in San Francisco and my answer will keep being no whether we're in California, New York or Paris," Magnus says, gritting his teeth. "As for my husband, it's Dr. Lightwood-Bane to you, and you have no right to call him anything other than that."

She sighs, as if incredibly bored, and tilts her head to the side to catch his eyes. "What Dr. Lightwood-Bane," she says, voice heavy with sarcasm, dark eyes lit up with misfit, "doesn't know won't hurt him. I can be very discreet. Besides, he's always too busy to notice what's right in front of him."

Magnus pinches the bridge of his nose, irritation flowing over him with unsettling ease. He wonders if Camille knows how desperate she sounds, how oddly insistent. Camille is a beautiful woman, and with her brains and charms, she could have pretty much anyone, so why she refuses to move on from him and accept his no for an answer is beyond him. There is something truly sad about it, he ponders to himself. Something incredibly lonely.

Magnus heaves out a deep sigh, leaning back into his chair. The sky is slowly turning darker, and the Eiffel Tower lights up in the distance, illuminating Paris with scintillating radiance, indicating the beginning of a new hour. Alec shouldn’t be too long now, and Magnus wants to get out of this conversation and put Camille and this whole nightmare behind them.

“Listen, Camille,” he says, more patiently than he thought himself capable of, “this isn’t going to happen, ever. I’m sorry if I ever made you think otherwise. I was in a bad place, and I lost sight of what truly matters to me, but I won’t ever love you.”
“Love?” she scoffs, and she sounds genuinely confused and equally amused. “Love is for children.”

Magnus’ brows dip for a moment as he searches her face for the hint of a joke but her features remain utterly grave, despite the eternal smirk bringing the corner of her red-painted lips up. Then, he understands, and he sighs, out of heartfelt compassion rather than annoyance.

“The whole concept might be foreign to you but I love my husband, and he loves me,” he eludes, “and maybe for a second I contemplated the idea of it ending, but the kind of commitment we have with each other is not something I could throw away because we went through a hard time. Love is not child’s play. It’s tough and it can be painful but it’s also real and the most beautiful thing I know.”

“And yet so easily threatened,” Camille retorts matter-of-factly.

She doesn’t understand, Magnus tells himself.

He shakes his head. “You don’t know what you’re talking about and I honestly feel sorry for you,” he replies with a half-smile, “because you don’t know what it’s like to give everything to someone, and receive just as much in return. You think you can manipulate people into getting what you want. You think you can play with people because it protects you from the pain that comes when they leave you. But sometimes, they don’t leave. Sometimes, they become everything you ever hoped for and more. I hope you do find that someday. It won’t be with me, but I know that’s not what you were looking for here. I don’t exactly know what you were looking for, to be honest. I think you like to surround yourself with broken people because they prevent you from looking at your own faults and your own issues.”

“It’s a bit like you choosing to stick around a broken marriage, I suppose,” she bristles through gritted teeth. Her eyes are darker than they usually are, and her lips twitch in a vexed grimace.

Magnus shrugs. “Maybe we are a bit broken,” he allows. “And maybe Alec was too busy to notice what was right in front of him, and maybe I was too, for too long, but we learned from our mistakes and grew together, because that’s what we vowed to do. I do see what is right in front of me right now, though, and it is very sad, Camille. You are very sad.”

“You keep telling yourself whatever you need to,” she snarls with a mocking chuckle. “Until your next fight, or your next fallout. Nothing that broken can last for very long. And you know I’m right, why else would you be sending me off to Paris?”

"Because you are perfect for the job, and because I am selfish enough to want to protect my husband and myself,” Magnus asserts. “I’m sure selfishness is something you can relate to.”

There is no point arguing with her about this, Magnus knows. He hopes that one day she’ll find what he was lucky enough to find when he was only twenty-two. And if she doesn’t, he hopes she’ll learn at least that being alone is a miserable way to live.

Magnus pushes to his feet, giving her one last smile. “Have a great rest of your life, Camille,” he says, grabbing his briefcase and readjusting the collar of his jacket. “I hope it’ll be as good as you’ll allow yourself to be.”

He leaves without another word, without ever turning around.

Her choices are her own to make now. Magnus can deal with his own.

Considering the best choice he has ever made is waiting for him in the lobby of the hotel when he
gets down, sporting a warm, gleeful grin and a gaze shining like a kid’s on Christmas morning just at the sight of him, Magnus thinks it won’t be too much trouble.

Alec hooks a hand behind Magnus’ neck when he reaches him, planting a quick and delicate kiss to his mouth, his eyes shining in a way that turns Magnus entirely pliable to his touch.

“Hi, husband,” he says joyfully. “I didn’t get lost, despite your insulting lack of faith in me.”

Magnus snorts, and reaches out to pat his cheek teasingly. “I’m very proud of you, husband,” he replies.

“As you should be,” Alec retorts with a peck to his lips. “I spotted a traditional French restaurant near the hotel, I thought we could have dinner there tonight to celebrate Edom’s expansion here and my admittedly more impressive achievement.”

Magnus barks out a laugh, gently swatting Alec’s chest. “Well, I actually had plans for tonight but I think I’ll go by myself and let you celebrate your more impressive achievement on your own, you little shit.”

Alec wraps an arm around his waist, effectively entrapping Magnus against his chest. He doesn’t mind at all. “No need to be so dismissive, babe,” he says, a taunting flicker playing in his eyes. He leans in, pressing a kiss to Magnus’ temple. “What were your plans?”

“I was on Twitter a few days ago while I was preparing our trip and I saw something that was just too great to pass on,” he explains, reaching in his briefcase to pluck the envelope out. “Ragnor had to grovel to his aunt who works at the Barbican in London to get us tickets so he said we owe him in overpriced whisky and never bringing up the Comic Sans SC disaster again.”

Alec winces, but amusement flashes in his gaze. “That seems like an unreasonably high price to pay.”

Magnus hums in agreement, handing him the envelope, not without planting a kiss on his nose dimple first. Alec draws back, brows furrowed in curiosity, and wastes no time opening it.

His eyes light up when he sees the tickets, his face breaking into a wide, elated beam.

“But to see that look on your face?” Magnus says. “Worth it.”

“Thank you, Magnus,” Alec says, no more playfulness in his voice. There is nothing left but the blunt honesty on his features, the same that always leads one of Alec’s earth-shattering declarations. He never seems to realize how the words he utters so candidly can throw Magnus’ whole world off balance while at the same time grounding him to the reality of Alec’s love for him. It is, quite possibly, Magnus’ favorite feeling. “Every time I think I can’t possibly love you more you just—” he shakes his head with a sense of fatalism that he seems to welcome gratefully, “—God, I love you so much.”

Magnus shrugs, if only to conceal the heat he can feel rising to the tip of his ears. “I love you too,” he murmurs, kissing him again before reaching out to grab Alec’s hand and twine their fingers together. “Now let’s go. We just have the time to get back to change before the concert begins. It’s at the Opéra Garnier so we can walk there from the hotel.”

Alec follows him out of the lobby and nods politely at the doorman, who goes to open the door of their car for them, wishing them a good day in heavily accented English.

“You know,” Alec says matter-of-factly, after Magnus tells their driver they’re going to the
Westin, “I’m almost tempted to propose for a third time.”

Magnus laughs, loud and unabashed. “I’m not sure if I have the prospect of Jem Carstairs’ concert or the romance of Paris to thank for that.”

Alec shuffles closer in the back of the car, grabbing Magnus’ hand to toy with his wedding band. His eyes soften, and Magnus’ heart stutters with overwhelming happiness.

“All right then, my love. Only yourself.”

This is most definitely Magnus’ favorite feeling.

Close second must be the satisfaction of fortunate second chances and the perpetual serendipities being married to the love of his life entails.

Logically, Alec knows that this far in the hiring procedure, things are usually set in stone. HR has done their part, contracts have been signed, shifts have been assigned, and all that’s left is for Alec’s new neurosurgeon hire to show up. But he still feels a nervousness shift around in his gut in anticipation. He doesn’t want to think about how he’ll have to start over from square one if he doesn’t show. Alec glances at the clock on the wall… any minute now, and Alec will finally have the much needed relief he needs from his hectic work schedule and then he can share the good news with Magnus. This is it, the official start of everything new for them. Magnus has assigned Camille to Paris, a compromise that is truly the best for both of them. Alec doesn’t want Magnus to worry over whether or not he has Alec’s complete trust because he does and he always will. After their initial fight over Camille in the lobby that day, Alec let himself think about the situation and what firing her could mean for Magnus. He’s happy with this arrangement, they both are, and it spares the possibility of any trouble arising for the company Magnus has put all of his hard work into.

A confident knock comes from the other side of his office door. He smiles, relieved, and opens the door where he is met with the face of his newest hire. The man who has no idea just how much his acceptance of this job means to Alec.

“Dr. Rey, I’m glad to see you didn’t change your mind,” Alec greets him with an outstretched hand and the man takes it, giving him a firm shake.

“Dr. Lightwood-Bane, I’m honored to have been offered the position here. Being given a position under you and Dr. Garroway, it’s a neurosurgeon’s dream come true.”

Alec hitches his thumb over his shoulder at his office. “Was there anything you wanted to discuss with me before we start the day or are you ready for me to show you the ropes?”

Dr. Rey takes a step away from the door, gesturing for Alec to pass. “After you.”

They set off down the hall until they reach the central area where nurses work diligently and stop in front of a board where the schedule is posted. “Tell me a little about how shift assignments worked at your previous employer.”

Alec listens while Dr. Rey explains the basic shift assignment arrangements at the hospital he transferred from in Seattle. He’s trying to focus on everything he says but can’t when he sees Underhill waving his clipboard bearing hand high up over his head. Alec glances at him and catches Underhill pointing at Rey’s back and then following that up with an approving wink and then points at himself. Alec represses his sudden need to sigh and instead rolls his eyes to look
back at Rey who hasn’t picked up on any of the activity going on behind him, too busy gesturing at
the shift schedule on the board in front of him.

“Sorry to interrupt, Dr. Rey,” Alec says with a sigh when Underhill won’t stop and he gestures
over Rey’s shoulder, “but…this here is one of our neurologists, Dr. Underhill, you two will
actually be working a lot together this week.”

Underhill steps in to join them and Rey’s face lights up as he extends a hand. “A pleasure to meet
you, Dr. Underhill.”

“Just call me Steve,” Underhill says. “I have a spare moment, mind if I join you on the little tour?”
His blue eyes sparkle with interest and shift from Rey to Alec.

“By all means, please, join us,” Alec says, elbowing Underhill in his side when Rey turns his back
to them and begins walking down the hall.

At the end of Alec’s shift, Rey is sufficiently acquainted and talking to the nurses about the
patients that are currently admitted. Alec was sure to tell him that the nurses were an excellent
resource and the backbone of the department—and quite possibly the entire hospital—because they
can tell him anything he needs to know about any of the patients that are here; and he feels
comfortable leaving him in their charge.

Five o’clock rolls by in no time at all and Alec hangs his doctor’s coat on the rack in his office,
replacing it with his actual coat to fight off the chilled January air. He turns off the light and locks
the door behind him, pocketing the keys as he excuses himself from the nurses who wave goodbye
at him. It’s a strange feeling, leaving the hospital in someone else’s hands, but a liberating one all
the same. It’s taken him way too long to get here but he can finally say that he’s here. His schedule
for the week is one that matches Magnus’ and for the first time in a long time, Alec can tell
Magnus that he’ll be home in time for dinner every night of the week.

He exits the hospital, undisturbed, and catches a cab. He rides the cab to the restaurant he and
Magnus have agreed to meet at, wanting to enjoy a night out for dinner since they’ve spent the past
couple of weeks eating at home after their return from Paris.

He can see Magnus as soon as he exits the cab, sitting at a table by the window talking to the server
about a bottle of red wine he holds in his hands. Alec watches him for a moment; he loves when he
gets to see Magnus like this, interacting with people, a smile on his face. He loves the way Magnus
can always make whoever he’s speaking with laugh and, as if on cue, the server laughs at
something Magnus says before stepping away, taking the bottle of wine with him. Alec takes that
moment to step up to the window and tap on it. Magnus jumps in his seat and then lets out a breath
when he realizes it’s Alec. Alec waggles his fingers in a wave and mouths ‘hi’.

Magnus chuckles, the action moving his shoulders and he shakes his head fondly, mouthing back a
‘hi’ of his own.

Magnus is truly beautiful. The most stunning person Alec has ever known and Alec can’t believe
he’s allowed the honor of loving him until the end and even beyond that. This man whose smile
can steal the spotlight of any masterpiece in any museum. The smile that’s currently changing to
mouth ‘what are you doing? Get in here’ at him.

Alec chuckles and makes his way into the restaurant, only pausing for a second to let the hostess
know he’s meeting someone. Magnus stands to greet him with what was probably intended to be a
quick peck but Alec holds him close for a couple of seconds longer, breathing in his cologne
before parting and swiping a thumb along Magnus’ bottom lip.
Magnus smiles up at him. “What’s gotten into you?”

Alec shrugs and removes his coat, draping it over the back of his seat. “You’re beautiful.”

The blush that coats Magnus’ cheeks gives away how much he loves when Alec compliments him like that and Alec is reminded of that one weekend back when they first started dating that he made it a point to tell Magnus every compliment that came to mind.

It resulted in a lot of random compliments but ones that Alec felt nonetheless. It had been fun to see the various ways he could catch Magnus off guard with a simple ‘I love the sound of your laugh,’ or a ‘you really do have the most beautiful eyes’ compliment when he least expected it. Alec still thinks all of these things and he’s found even more small nuances of Magnus that he loves. Like the soft smiles that linger after his laughter, the way he cares and listens to his employees —full of warmth and respectful attention, or the way he manages to unfold the napkin onto his lap in a single graceful movement; miniscule things such as the pout of his lips when he reads over menus.

Magnus doesn’t miss a beat despite the blush, folding his legs when he sits. “How was your day?”

“Well”—Alec opens his menu, scans it quickly and settles on a burger because he can’t go wrong with a burger and he really wants to tell Magnus his news—“I had some appointments, followed up with a few patients I performed surgery on, gave a tour, and had to keep Underhill from scaring off the new neurosurgeon, you know, the usual.”

Magnus continues to read over his menu, clearly paying more attention to it than what Alec made out to sound like a mundane day spent at the office. He hums, tapping on his chin. “The citrus poached salmon looks delicious. I just hope it’s not too much or you’ll have to sacrifice yourself and share a dessert with me and—” He pauses and looks up, mouth parted. “What did you just say?”

Alec grins, pleased at his ability to catch Magnus off guard twice already in the span of a few minutes, not typically an easy feat. “Which part? The appointments I had or Underhill trying to make a move on the new surgeon I just hired?”

Magnus puts his menu down, citrus poached salmon probably long forgotten if the stunned smile on his face is anything to go by. “You hired a new neurosurgeon?”

"I did. I interviewed him a few weeks ago, did paperwork and got everything set up with HR last week and today was his first day. He had a great resume so I'm confident with my choice. I wanted to wait to tell you until it was all finalized. And he actually showed up today so... you'll be seeing me at home for dinner all week."

Magnus reaches out to grab Alec's hand, and squeezes, brushing his thumb over his wedding band. "I look forward to it, babe," he says, in a soft choked voice. "Thank you."

Alec gives Magnus' hand a gentle squeeze in return. "It was a long time coming. Thank you for waiting on me."

“It’s what I signed up for. And between you and me, you make it pretty easy.”

Alec moves to thread their fingers together. “Will you still be saying that when I’m home every day by five and off every other weekend?”

Magnus heaves out a disinterested breath, feigning boredom. “Ugh. I guess I'll have to make do with your unbearable presence. Maybe I'll institute a No Shirt Saturday rule to make it more tolerable.”
Alec chuckles. “I can work with that. Will you be participating too?”

“I suppose that's only fair.”

“You’ve got yourself a deal, Mr. Lightwood-Bane.” Alec turns their hand hold into a handshake causing Magnus to let out a small laugh. He places a quick kiss to Magnus’ knuckles before parting so the server can take their orders.

Alec orders his burger and Magnus his salmon before directing a curious brow at Alec. ”So, this new neurosurgeon, tell me more about him. Any chance he's returning Underhill's... let's call it 'attention’?"

“Dr. Lorenzo Rey; transferred over from Seattle. He was hard to read but they did seem pretty chatty together.” Alec sighs. “Just what I need, Underhill romancing my surgeon.”

“Oh let him be, husband. The man deserves some love in his life. He can only live vicariously through us for so long.” Alec lifts an eyebrow and Magnus waves dismissively. “Oh please, he keeps sighing happily every time I visit you at work and he looks at us with this big smile on his face and goes on about the power of love. He either needs to find someone or he’s on drugs.”

Alec laughs. “For the sake of all his patients, I really hope it’s not drugs.”

They chat throughout their meal and come up with nightly dinner plans for the following week, something they haven’t done in years, even going as far as sending out a family group text to see if they would all like to meet up one night and enjoy dinner as a family. It’s been too long since they were able to do that on any given night without the need of a holiday or other special occasion. The responses are almost instant, coming in a flood of surprise reactions and over excitement because they know what this means for him and Magnus.

Magnus finishes more than half of their slice of apple pie a la mode while Alec is busy replying to the messages, settling on a Wednesday night dinner that Jace plans on hosting.

“Tell Jace to make his gouda burger sliders,” Magnus says over a large bite of pie.

Alec shoots him a glare and quickly scoops up the last bite, stealing it before Magnus has the chance to finish off the entire dessert for himself. He smiles wide at the glower he gets in return and then types out Magnus’ suggestion to Jace.

It’s still early by the time they finish, Alec can’t remember the last time he and Magnus have gone out for dinner and finished by six thirty on a weeknight. He takes Magnus’ hand in his while they take the long walk home, reveling in how good it feels to be like this again.

They’re in pajamas, cuddled up with a bowl of popcorn and a movie by eight. Alec lays beside Magnus, resting his head on his chest, surrounded in the adoration Magnus gives him, enjoying the sensation of Magnus’ fingers playing in the damp strands of his freshly washed hair while a movie plays in the background. They share together a moment, as small as it might be, that felt lost to them after years of abandon, but with enough love and passion, what was once lost can always be found. And they’ve found it again, and they take it as their own. Reclaiming the small moments that build a life of love together.

Magnus leans over him, trailing his fingers through the stubble along his jaw and captures his mouth in a kiss. It’s moments like these, laying in his husband’s arms, stealing kisses whenever he can, that remind Alec that he’s won. They’ve had their wars and their wounds, but still they stand together with a love that defies all odds—a love that consumes and transcends tribulations, a love
that’s victorious.

In his thirty-eight years of existence, Magnus thought, foolishly, that he had seen it all. He has travelled to many countries, has seen the best and the worst of humankind and has taken the New York subway after 2am. Granted, it takes a lot for him to even be dazed anymore lest it come from his perpetually surprising husband. Yet, the sight of Raphael walking into work that day with a baby carrier holding a… well, baby, is enough to have him gaping in stupor.

Magnus straightens up from where he was leaning against the door of his office to chat with Catarina and blinks in shock as Raphael joins them.

The baby shrieks in his arms and Magnus melts at once, the shock melting away as he reaches out to grab the tiny hand extended towards him. He is rewarded with a wide, toothless grin.

Magnus flickers away from the adorable face and dark eyes to lift an inquisitive eyebrow at Raphael.

“Do you have something to tell us, Raphael?” he asks, teasingly.

“She can’t be his,” Catarina opines. “She’s not frowning.”

“True,” Magnus agrees. “And she smiled. Two irrefutable proofs.”

Raphael rolls his eyes, canting his head down towards the baby. “Neither of you is worthy of her smile but she’s too young to tell yet,” he retorts with a pointed glare at the both of them. “This is my niece Sofia. Rosa has a job interview today so she asked me to look after her this morning. Her nanny is picking her up in the early afternoon.” He glances back up at them. “It’s not a problem, is it?”

“Of course it’s not a problem,” Magnus coos, leaning down to poke at her cheek.

Sofia shrieks joyfully, and Magnus pouts at the unfair charm of her chubby cheeks and youthful laughter.

“You can stay as long as you want, my darling,” he tells her. “And you and I can even play some games when you’re tired of your grumpy uncle.”

Catarina snorts at his side, patting Raphael’s shoulder. “As long as she stays away from my lab, she’s obviously welcome here.”

Raphael nods in gratitude, and slaps Magnus’ hand away from his niece’s cheek. “Stop trying to charm her, I’m her favorite uncle.”

“He’s so mean,” Magnus whispers collusively at Sofia, who grins again in reply.

Raphael rolls his eyes so hard Magnus worries for a second he might stay stuck, his default mode for all that Magnus has gathered throughout their years of friendship, and he walks away, Sofia babbling happily in the baby carrier.

Magnus is sitting in his office going through the applications for the post that was left vacant with Camille’s departure for Paris when Raphael walks in a couple of hours later, his niece tucked
against his hip and a look of panic that is quite rare on his features.

“Can you look after her for the next half hour?” he asks Magnus in a rush. “The Financial Times’ journalist called me to move our meeting up to this morning instead of the afternoon.”

Magnus is reaching out for Sofia before Raphael can even finish talking. “Of course,” he says with a smile, poking her nose. It prompts a cheerful laugh from her, and Magnus chuckles in return. “We’re gonna have great fun rejecting all these applications, right muffin?”

Raphael scoffs, and hands the baby over. “Thanks, Magnus,” he says. “Don’t let her pick our next Head of Outside Sales, please. I don’t think she’s HR qualified yet.”

“Oh well,” he says tauntingly, “can’t be worse than Ragnor.”

“Touché,” Raphael responds. “I’ll see you in thirty.” He drops a bag with baby stuff next to Magnus’ desk, nods in gratitude and steps out.

When he glances down, Sofia is already looking up at him, her big, curious dark eyes wide as she stares at the necklaces cascading down his throat. She reaches out and tugs harshly and Magnus grimaces, but follows the gesture, resigned.

Carefully, he disentangles her fingers from the chain, pressing a quick kiss against her tiny hands. When he is done, he slips the necklaces off his neck and tucks them away in the top drawer, smiling down at her.

“You are a precious little thing, aren’t you?” he says, more to himself than to her.

She seems to agree, though, because she grins up at him and slams a hand against his cheek, mapping his features with the tip of her fingers in silence, blinking up curiously at him.

Magnus smiles down at her, brushing her soft, chubby cheek with the back of his index. She grabs onto the bracelet on his wrist, and he laughs.

“Allright, I got it,” he mumbles. “You’re in the grabby phase. Let’s find something to distract you with.”

He turns back to the CVs on his desk, turning her around on his lap so she is facing the table too. He grabs one of his pens, one of the cheap, colorful ones he doesn’t use very often and gives it to her, careful to keep the lid out of her reach.

Sofia takes the pen without him having to even say a word, and immediately uses it to scratch a long, messy line over the CV down on his desk.

“You’re right,” Magnus tells her with all the serious he can muster. “I didn’t think he’d be a good fit either.”

Sofia lets out a loud, sweet laugh like only babies can, boisterous and unblemished by the many obstacles and hurts of life. Her little face glows when she looks up at him for approval and Magnus nods in return, and her tiny fingers reach out to grasp the sleeve of his shirt in a tight grip with her free hand.

For a moment, Magnus wonders if this is how Aurora would have grabbed onto him, grasping for the comfort of his touch. He would have given it to her without question, without even having to think about it. He would have given her the world, had she asked for it. Magnus inhales deeply, pushes from his mind the memories of the dead silence of the long, tempestuous night he is just
emerging from. His chest feels tight, but when he looks down at the duft of black hair on Sofia’s head, he finds it isn’t so hard to let an old, familiar kind of joy find a place in the midst of his pain. She continues to draw, or at least attempt to, unaware of his turmoil and yet perhaps she feels his, because her hold tightens gingerly on his sleeve, and Magnus presses a soft kiss at the top of her head, letting that distinct smell of baby powder and shampoo fill his nostrils.

He remembers dreaming of a home filled with these joyful, innocent laughs, remembers vowing to himself that he would make room in his heart to love their daughter with his whole soul and protect her against all odds. He was powerless to do so, but there are things even love can’t fight against; or so he has learned.

He has also learned, however, that those lessons that bruise you and put you down are just another step of the way. They are tests in their own ways, cruel and brutals ones, but Magnus understands better now that it isn’t about the fall, but rather about the way you heal your broken bones afterwards and rise back up to face another day.

And perhaps start over, until the fall isn’t so scary anymore, until it becomes another step forward.

Three years ago, Magnus had a grim, morose thought that perhaps it had been the universe’s way of telling him that this isn’t what he should have, that this life he had dreamed of was but a dream, meant to remain unreachable like the stars. He has to believe now, no matter how foolish, that there is a star out there, far away from his reach perhaps but forever embedded in his heart, that is looking over him, over them. He hopes she can feel it, the love he had for her, and he hopes she will forgive him, for failing to protect her.

He hopes, also, that she will be proud that he was strong enough to heal, strong enough to continue on living, and finding in his heart a place for more love to give, more adoration to share.

He remembers dreaming of mornings over crepes, of snuggling up against Alec and looking over his shoulder to see him shape a smiley face shaped pancake for their child, of feeling so incredibly and utterly whole.

He believed, for a moment, that this was the universe’s way of telling them they didn’t deserve it, that they hadn’t earned it. But if the universe has taught him anything, it is also that Magnus shouldn’t wait on it to pave his own path.

He remembers a lot, of dreams, of wishes and of hopes, and Magnus thinks that perhaps, just perhaps, they can be more than that.

A knock on the door of his office pulls him out of his thoughts and Magnus startles, glancing up from where Sofia has simply and purely destroyed the applicant’s resume. He expects to find Raphael there, but is greeted instead by the sight of a petite, redheaded woman standing in the threshold. She isn’t one of his employees and she doesn’t really look like she knows what she is doing here, looking at her surroundings like she can’t quite decide if she should focus on Magnus’ plants or the Rothko on the wall.

“H-Hi,” she mumbles, eyes slightly blown.

Sofia shrieks in joy in his lap.

“Hello,” Magnus says. “Can I help you, dear?”

The woman nods, and shakes her head the next second. “Yes. Well, no. I can help you, actually. I’m Sofia’s nanny.” Recognition must be slow to dawn on his face, because she quickly adds, “I
think her uncle Raphael is expecting me.”

Magnus smiles, gently rubbing a hand against Sofia’s belly. “Yes, he is, but he’s in a meeting right now so I’m looking over this little muffin in the meantime. You can wait here if you want, he shouldn’t be long,” he says, gesturing to the light grey couch where he has taken naps more often than he’d be comfortable telling his employees.

“Do you want me to—” she trails off, motioning at Sofia, hands open to take her from him.

“No, we’re good,” he says with a quick smile. “Just have a seat, dear, Sofia and I have been working on some very important business.”

The nanny chuckles, raising her hands in surrender, head tipping in acknowledgment. “I wouldn’t want to disturb your very important business,” she says, and sits down on the couch. “Thanks—”

She gives him an expectant look.

“Magnus,” he says. “Magnus Lightwood-Bane.”

“I’m Clary,” she replies absently, rummaging in her backpack for a moment. Her green eyes light up with triumph when she produces a sketchbook and a pencil, settling more comfortably on the couch.

She immediately starts to draw, and the world around her seems to somehow both vanish and crystallize before her, her gaze equally sharp and evasive as she focuses on Magnus’ display of greens against the opposite wall.

Shrugging, Magnus focuses back on Sofia, tutting in disapproval when she tries to bring the pen to her mouth.

Sofia is done defiling the third resume he was studying by the time Raphael walks in ten minutes later, scoffing in amusement as he watches his niece’s œuvre d’art and lifts an eyebrow at Magnus.

“I can print them again,” Magnus eludes with a shrug. “Plus, I agree with her. These candidates weren’t adequate.”

“Don’t tell Ragnor you value my ten month old niece’s opinion more than his when it comes to HR choices or he will officially quit like he keeps threatening to.”

Magnus snorts, waving the remark away with a flourish of his hand. “Please. I’ve known him for over twenty years, and he’s been threatening to kick me out of his life for just as long. If he ever leaves my side, it’ll be because I fired him.”

“If you didn’t fire him for the Comic Sans mess, you won’t fire him ever,” Raphael points out shrewdly.

Magnus pulls a face. “I promised I wouldn’t talk about that anymore because he got me those tickets to see Jem Carstairs in Paris,” he says, with just the right amount of disappointment.

Raphael rolls his eyes, and turns to face Clary, who is watching their exchange with a bemused smirk on her lips. It occurs to Magnus that she probably doesn’t know Raphael very well and that it is very likely that she has never seen this playful, albeit deadpan, side of him. It isn’t a facet of his multi-layered personality that he allows everyone to see. It isn’t that he wants people to think he doesn’t care, Magnus knows, it’s just that Raphael doesn’t always feel comfortable carrying the weight of the expectations that follow. Magnus can’t blame him, although he is his polar opposite
on that aspect: he cares too much, shows it too quickly, and tries too hard to meet often unreachable expectations. It is something else he has been working on recently. Being kinder to himself.

“Sorry for making you wait,” Raphael tells Clary. “I had a meeting.”

“It’s fine,” Clary replies, shaking her head in reassurance. “Sofia seems perfectly content if you ask me.”

Magnus beams at the offhand compliment and gazes down at the little girl, who has stopped drawing on the resumes and settled against his chest instead, her tiny fingers wrapped tightly around the collar of Magnus’ shirt. She is drifting off to sleep already, her dark hair tickling Magnus’ neck as she settles more comfortably against him.

“Yes, she is,” Magnus says softly.

He rises to his feet with a dejected sigh and carefully hands her over to Clary, untangling her fingers from his shirt one by one and dropping a light kiss on the top of her head before he does.

Clary smiles and puts her down in the stroller Raphael brought in the morning. “We’ll get out of your hands now,” she says.

She grabs her sketchbook and rips out the page she was working on without preamble or any form of hesitation, and walks up to Magnus’ desk with a grin, handing it out to him.

Brows tipped in surprise, Magnus takes it and turns it over, his eyes widening as he takes in her work. It’s a pencil drawing of him and baby Sofia, and although it is devoid of colors, it seems full of light. It’s in the subtle layers of gray, the smile she captured on Magnus’ lips as he glances down at the child on his lap, the youthful innocence on her features. With the lights pouring from the windows of Magnus’ office, it almost seems to glow and when he glances back at Clary, her bottom lip sucked in and cheeks flushed with anticipation, he is grinning.

“This is absolutely amazing,” he tells her. “Are you an artist?”

Clary nods, reaching out a finger to adjust the blanket to cover a now drifting off Sofia. “I do some freelance work when I’m not babysitting little angels,” she says. “Mostly children’s portraits, because this is what I’m used to, obviously.”

“You’re really talented,” Magnus tells her, because he is a firm believer that these words should be said when they are deserved, as often and as truthfully as possible.

“Thanks,” she says with a smile. “It was great meeting you, Mr. Lightwood-Bane. Thanks for not trying to steal my job from me. That would’ve sucked.”

Magnus chuckles and waves at her as she walks away with the stroller, Raphael lingering behind.

“I like her.”

“That’s only because she got your good profile,” Raphael deadpans.

Magnus crumples one of the ruined resumes in his hand and throws it at his face in response, but Raphael has already fled his office, knowing that his remark would prompt exactly that reaction from Magnus.

He is starting to become predictable, Magnus muses.
He has his perfect job, his perfect husband, his perfect friends, and the road they all trace together towards better days, towards new hopes, new struggles perhaps, new beginnings.

Alone in his office, Magnus stares at the drawing for a very long time. His heart fills with a feeling he had forgotten, something deeply rooted into him, a will to trust and fall and rise back up he had thought entirely gone.

Alone in his office, Magnus smiles, and he thinks of those dreams that have a funny way of coming back to us when we least expect it.

Magnus likes going out, discovering all the new restaurants opening with his husband, going with Maia to concerts of some obscure underground band only the two of them are familiar with, or with Maryse to the cinema to see the Eastern European cryptic movies that always have Alec snoring within the first few minutes. Time passing by has taught him that there is some beauty in staying in bed on a Friday night.

Locking themselves up in the loft for a couple of days may seem a bit extreme but as he lays there with his husband, the two of them engrossed in their own little world even as they don’t really talk, Magnus thinks it might have been the best idea they’ve had in a really long time.

They are both sitting in bed, leaning against the headboard, Magnus studying the latest numbers from France Camille forwarded to him in the afternoon while Alec valiantly finishes yet another reread of Dune. It is comfortable, and peaceful, and everything Magnus wants this night, and all the ones to come, to be.

That is, without the slight impediment of the statistics staring back at him and frustratingly not making any sense. That, Magnus could do without.

“These figures aren’t making any sense,” he mumbles under his breath, as much for himself as it is for Alec.

Alec hums absently and sets his bookmark neatly into his book before shutting it down and turning to face Magnus, shuffling closer.

“Let me take a look.”

Magnus makes a motion to hand the iPad over but Alec refuses it and snuggles against him instead, planting a sweet kiss against Magnus’ silk-covered shoulder.

“Can I–” Alec starts, but Magnus is already taking his reading glasses off and offering them to him before he can finish.

He sees Alec smile in his reflection on the device, and Magnus smiles back, a grin that broadens as Alec slips the glasses on and blinks twice to accustom himself to it before turning back to the screen.

His brows dip into a serious frown as he studies the figures, but Magnus has already forgotten all about it, his fingers moving on their own accord to slither into his hair instead and play with the smaller hairs at the back of his head. It’s starting to get slightly too long, and Alec should probably go to the hairdresser, but Magnus likes his hair exactly like that, when it’s just long enough for him to wrap a strand around his fingers—and perhaps tug on it a little, when the occasion arises.

“You know,” Magnus mutters with a smirk, gently massaging Alec’s scalp, “maybe I’m starting to
see why you love these glasses so much. They suit you.”

Alec’s lips jump with the hint of a smile, hazels glimmering in amusement. “Mmh. Told you.”

He doesn’t say more than that, going back to the figures, but before he can actually study them, a notification pops up on the screen, Jace’s name followed by the word ‘Photo’.

“Open it,” Magnus mutters.

Alec obliges and the thread of messages immediately opens to a photo of Ariel in a shiny, silver and purple gymnast leotard, grinning so widely Magnus could almost count all of her teeth. He lifts an eyebrow in inquiry, though, because she is holding up a sign saying ‘Thank you Uncle Alec and Uncle Magnus’ in what is obviously Jace’s handwriting, with a bright yellow ball at the end that is quite obviously Ariel’s attempt at drawing the sun (although seeing how skillful Jace is at anything remotely artistic, it could very well be his attempt, too).

“Why is our niece looking adorable and thanking us?” Magnus asks, although he suspects he already knows the answer.

Alec chews on his bottom lip, and glances up from his spot in Magnus’ neck to level him with as innocent of a look as he can muster. “Maybe I bought her the outfit,” he admits sheepishly. “And some accessories.”

Magnus snorts, shaking his head. “You spoil her.”

“Says the guy who literally considered buying her a cat that they wouldn’t be able to have at home with Jace’s allergies.”

His tone is deadpan, but Alec’s gaze is playful, teasing. And Magnus most definitely understands Alec’s thing for glasses now. They have… a certain kind of appeal.

Magnus waves his retort off, pressing his thumb into the sensitive spot behind Alec’s ear that has him melt into him.

“Maybe we both spoil her,” he allows.

Alec hums, going back to the conversation with Jace to send a single heart emoji. Magnus smiles, pressing a kiss against his hair.

They do have a bad habit of spoiling their niece, whether it is separately or together. Jace had to sit down with them on more than one occasion to ask them to tone it down, and they tried. They really did, but if they have anything in common, it has to be their generous core. Magnus likes to spoil his loved ones, because he sometimes finds it difficult to put into words how much they mean to him, but he has learned that little attentions often speak more eloquently that he would hope for. And Alec… Well, Alec doesn’t even have to think about it. These little deeds come naturally to him, because he is nothing if not willing to spend every minute of his days caring for others.

Magnus fell in love with his soul in such an unexpected and rapid way that he still distinctly remembers feeling overwhelmed by the magnitude of these feelings. He remembers struggling to put words on them, wondering whether perhaps there was something magical about Alec Lightwood. Years later, he knows there is. And yet it is the most mundane thing one can be, and the most difficult one too: Alec is good, kind to the core.

And Magnus can tease him about it, about his unrelenting ways of always putting others first, but he admires him for it too much to put any truth behind it.
It was why he knew Alec would make such a great father, when they talked about starting a family all those years ago. Not only because he would willingly sacrifice his own well-being to ensure his family was safe and happy, but mostly for all the ways he draws his own peace of mind from the happiness of others.

Magnus thinks of the way Alec’s eyes light up when he plays with Ariel, of how broad his grin can spread when he speaks of his younger patients winning their fight against death, of the promises he had made Magnus, three years ago, to be a rock for Magnus and their child.

This was all before tragedy hit them with all the force shattered dreams can hold, but Magnus knows these words still stand. It took the time it did; it broke a few things in its path and healed others; it had them standing still for a long while. But as cruel as life can be, Magnus knows it can bring small blessings too, offer new beginnings. Chances to start anew.

“I figured it out,” Alec announces, beaming proudly as he gazes up at Magnus. He must catch the dazed look on Magnus’ features because he frowns, pursing his lips. “Babe?”

“I knew I could count on you,” Magnus replies, wondering inwardly if Alec can hear and measure the true reach of these words.

Smiling serenely, Alec tilts his head up, pressing a quick kiss to his lips. “Damn right you can.”

Magnus scoffs out a quiet chuckle, shaking his head fondly.

He remembers distinctly falling in love with Alec Lightwood, as well as he does feeling like the luckiest man in the world when he became Alec Lightwood-Bane. They have gone through many hardships since that beautiful day. They have grown and suffered together and apart, have made promises they took too long to keep and vows they struggled to live by, but they were offered a second chance to get out of this hell, a chance to start it all over again, a chance to fall in love for the second time, to rebuild a future they had lost faith in.

His heart swelling with a certain, familiar kind of bliss, barely listening as Alec explains to him the problem with the figures he showed him, Magnus smiles peacefully, and dreams of a hereafter where they take that chance and turn it into their own, personal brand of heaven.

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His mom, Luke, and Magnus are already waiting for him at the bar when Alec walks in after his shift. They sit on the high stools at the bar top and Magnus waves him over, sliding a glass of whiskey in front of him and leaning in for a kiss as soon as Alec sits down beside him.

“Hey,” he says against Magnus’ kiss, a little breathless from the brisk walk. “Hope I didn’t keep you waiting too long.”

Magnus shakes his head, smiling. “Not at all. We just got our drinks.”


His mom smiles wide at him over the rim of her wine glass. “How was your day?”

Alec shrugs and takes a much needed drink of his whiskey. “It was fine. Nothing out of the ordinary. Things have been going smoothly with our new surgeon.”

Luke nods at this, drinking his beer directly from the bottle, and Magnus gives Alec a smile, resting a hand on his forearm.
“You can’t imagine how nice it is to have Alexander home for dinner on a regular basis. This is the first night we’ve actually gone out since he started this new schedule. He’s decided to take up cooking again,” Magnus says, “and the recipes he’s been trying…” He pats at his stomach with a content smile.

Alec chuckles.

“He does burn a meal or two every now and then but we make the most of those nights.” Magnus winks at him before lifting his martini glass to his smirk and Alec’s face blooms red at the memories that follow.

Burned dinners, while never on purpose, have become a thing in the Lightwood-Bane household. No matter how hungry they are or how much they had been looking forward to that particular meal, they can’t bring themselves to view burned dinners as a point of contention between them. Instead, they take burned dinners in stride, choosing to view them as blessings in disguise, opting for pizza delivery and a night in bed instead.

“Maybe you two can make some special dinner plans for tonight,” his mom says and her carefully hidden smirk at Luke is all too obvious.

Alec raises a brow at them and sets his glass back down on the wooden bar top. “What was that?” He points at the two of them and his mom shakes her head.

Magnus hums beside him and eyes them suspiciously as well. “I saw a look”—he nudges Alec with his elbow—“Did you see a look, honey?”

Alec nods. “I definitely saw a look.” He straightens, as best as he can, on the wobbly stool. “What’s going on?”

Maryse scoffs. “You boys sure do know how to ruin a fun surprise.”

She glances at Luke, batting her lashes and Magnus gasps, his hand landing on Alec’s lap, gripping his thigh.

“Are the two of you…”

Alec’s jaw drops and he glances back and forth between his mom and his boss. “Are you—”

Luke’s eyes widen and he holds a hand up. “Whoa there, hold on a minute, hold on... this has nothing to do with us.”

Magnus lets out a displeased hum and his body relaxes. But Alec’s stomach tightens, anxiously. “If it’s not about you, then…”

Luke sets his beer bottle down and laces his hands together, leaning one elbow on the bar top to face Alec. “I got some exciting news today and I thought you would want to share the moment with Magnus and your mother.”

Alec nods for him to continue. He’s not particularly fond of surprises, the build up and anticipation only making his already anxious self even more so.

“I heard from the AANS.”

Alec lowers his hand to his lap, finding Magnus’ open palm waiting for him. His heart pounds in his chest as he tries to read into the stoic expression Luke bears before it morphs into an ear to ear
“You’ve been selected!” he announces. “You’re going to be a speaker at the 2019 conference to present your research on the Deep Brain Stimulation methodologies for Parkinson’s.”

Magnus curls his hand tighter around Alec’s, squeezing it supportively, his other hand reaching over the top of them, thumb grazing.

Alec lets out a chuckle. “You’re serious?”


Alec huffs out a breath and Magnus leans into him, resting his forehead against his temple. “You did it!”

“I did it,” Alec says.

His mom jumps down from her seat and bounces over to him, hugging him from behind. “I’m so proud of you!”

Alec reaches an arm back to pat her shoulder and somewhat return the gesture before she releases him. He wipes his free hand down his face, shaking his head. “I can’t—I can’t believe this. Out of all the applicants…”

“They chose you,” Magnus says, wrapping an arm around Alec’s waist when his mother lets go.

“I… I…” he stammers. “I really hope I don’t screw this up.”

Luke laughs, loud and boisterous. “They were impressed by your work and preliminary research. You won’t screw this up.”

“This is… a big deal,” Alec breathes out.

“It is.” Luke holds up his beer for a toast. “We’re all very proud of you. Couldn’t have anyone better representing our hospital.”

Alec raises his glass to touch Luke’s and his mom and Magnus lean their glasses in as well.

“To Alec!” Maryse cheers and Magnus and Luke chime with just as much gusto.

Alec takes a long gulp of his whiskey and Magnus throws back the last remaining sip of his martini before kissing Alec on the cheek. “I gotta run.”

Alec turns, confused. “Wait, what?”

Magnus kisses him again and Alec closes his eyes this time, leaning more into it.

“I won’t be long. Finish up here and head home. I’ll pick up some take-out, okay?”

Alec nods and slowly opens his eyes to meet Magnus who looks at him with a proud smile. “Yeah. Okay.”

Luke and his mom give Magnus a questioning look but hug him goodbye nonetheless.

“Sorry to dash out on you like this,” he explains, squeezing Maryse in his arms. “I forgot I have this… work errand.”
“Duty calls,” she says with a chuckle and an understanding shrug.

“I’ll see you at home in a bit,” Magnus says to Alec. “I love you.”

Alec smiles. “I love you too. See you in a bit.”

Magnus leaves them behind and Luke goes into the details of the phone call he received from the society who runs the conference. After everything that’s happened since Alec applied, he had let himself completely forget about the application. A good thing, considering he tends to overthink things and worry over every tiny detail.

And he tries not to do that now. He and Magnus have worked so hard to make it here, he doesn’t want this to come off as some sort of set back, but the way Magnus dashed out… it makes Alec worry. He knows it shouldn’t. They’ve talked, Magnus supports him, he supports this research, he supports Alec’s choice in following it, but…

“Alec?” his mom probes. Her brows curve up in the middle, worried just as much as he is. “Do you need to get out?”

Alec shakes his head. “No, Mom. Let’s finish our drinks.”

She cant her head and her brow softens. “Alec…”

“It’s fine, Mom.” He smiles at her. “Let’s finish our drinks. I’ll head home after this.”

He stays long enough for them to finish their drinks like he promised. His mom squeezes him on the sidewalk outside of the bar and Luke shakes his hand, patting him on one shoulder with a proud grin. There’s excitement thrumming in his veins while he flags down a cab and through the entire ride home. He glances at his phone while he waits for the elevator, checking again for a message from Magnus, and turning up empty, again. He refuses to acknowledge the niggling worry at the back of his mind. The fact that Magnus may not be happy for Alec is not an idea he wants to entertain. It’s perfectly logical that Magnus had an errand to run for work like he said he did.

Alec slides his key in the lock and enters the loft. He smiles and his body is at ease the moment he hears soft melodies come from the speakers. He tosses his coat on the back of the couch and turns the corner to their kitchen.

Magnus looks up at him from where he leans against the counter. “I was just about to text you back,” he says.

“What is all this?” Alec asks, looking around at the candles lit on their dining table, a box of pizza open in its center.

Magnus slides his arms around him from behind and kisses him on the cheek. “I wanted to celebrate with you and I know you don’t like to make a fuss, so…”

“So you went to buy my favorite pizza.” Alec turns in Magnus’ hold and wraps his arms around his husband’s waist.

“And champagne.” He leans in and captures Alec’s mouth in a kiss. “Only the best for my world-class surgeon.”

“Only in your eyes.” Alec chuckles as he kisses Magnus again, sliding his hands up his back to pull him in closer. “But that’s enough for me,” he whispers into their kiss.
Magnus pulls back and smiles up at him. “Let me pour you a glass.”

Alec lets go and Magnus flits over to the champagne bottle standing beside the crystal flutes from their wedding. They only take these out for special occasions such as anniversaries, the launch of Edom, Alec being promoted to attending surgeon; his heart pangs when he remembers the last time the glasses were used in celebration. When they celebrated the confirmation of their surrogate’s pregnancy, gleefully wrapped in each other’s arms on the floor of what would be their daughter’s nursery.

He returns Magnus’ glowing smile as he watches him hold the bottle away from him to open it with a pop before pouring them each a glass, inhaling the effervescent aroma with a content sigh. It’s true, the glasses hold a painful reminder, but wrapped around the pain are the memories of their happiest moments together, years spent in love and excitement at what their future held.

Magnus’ brown eyes hold nothing but happiness and the gleam of youthful excitement these moments carry. There’s only a hint of the reminder in his gaze but he smiles, determined, when he tips his glass up for a toast. “I want these to always hold happy memories for us,” he says, putting into words Alec’s worries and erasing them with a determined nod.

Alec raises his glass, breathing in and pulling his shoulders back, letting go of the pain so he can bask in his husband’s pride.

“To you, my brilliant, kind, and generous husband.” Magnus steps in and rests his palm on Alec’s chest. They deserve moments like these. They’ve spent so much time hurting and drowning in grief, it’s time they soared with happiness and accomplishment. “And all the lives you’re going to change.”

Alec has the door half open when Magnus rushes to him, fanning a long slip of paper.

“The grocery list,” he says, finally reaching Alec and pressing the list of items to his chest. “Don’t forget,” he adds, leaning in for a quick kiss.

Alec glances at the list, out of habit, he likes to get an idea of what meals they’re going to be cooking the upcoming week. He’s been trying new recipes but Magnus is by far the better meal planner out of the two of them.

He tilts his head, reading over the list - a hodgepodge of ingredients. “None of this can make a meal? What are we cooking for dinner?”

“The ramen.”

“A cake?”

“I have a craving,” Magnus says with a shrug.

“I’m pretty sure we still have beer in the fridge,” Alec says, still reading over the list. “And yams? Have we ever even eaten a yam? Magnus, were you drunk when you made this list?”

Magnus rolls his eyes, long and exaggerated. “No. I have recipes.”

“Apricots? You hate apricots and it’s January, where am I going to find any?”

Magnus dismisses the question with a wave, walking off. “Any apricots will do. Canned, jarred,
fresh, whatever. Just get the food, Alexander.”

Alec slides the list in his pocket. “Whatever you say. Keep your phone handy, I’m sure I’ll have to call about something on this list,” he calls out and Magnus shortles as he clears away a laundry basket of folded clothes from their sofa.

He works the half-day he promised to cover for Underhill and it’s only one in the afternoon when he makes it to the second grocery store, struggling to find a few of the items on Magnus’ list. Now he’s pushing a shopping cart through the produce section, phone pressed up to his ear, trying to figure out what a yam looks like while Isabelle rants in his ear about work.

“Sorry to interrupt your venting,” he says and she stops, “but what does a yam look like?”

“A yam? It looks like a potato. A long potato?”

“A long potato?” he hears Maia mutter something.

“Maia says It’s pointy on one end. Why the hell are you buying a yam?” she asks.

Alec shrugs. “I don’t fucking know. Magnus gave me this list of random shit to buy and now I’m strolling through the store looking for things like”—he looks at the list—”yams and mascarpone cheese.”

She hums. “Odd.”

“Odd is one way to put it. A ha!” He picks up a long potato looking thing, pointed at one end, exactly as Izzy described it. “Found the yams. Should I get one or two?”

She scoffs. “Get whatever the list says, Alec. Honestly, grocery shopping isn’t that hard.”

Alec holds his phone out to grimace at it. “Okay, well you’re distracting me and I have to get back to Magnus’ freakshow of a grocery list.”

“Whatever, call me later.”

“Bye.”

He shoves his phone in his pocket and turns his cart to the bakery department. He glances over the options on display, startling slightly when an employee pops up from behind the counter and asks if he needs help.

“Uh, yes, please. I need an upside down cake?”

The employee smiles. “Pineapple upside down cake?”

Alec checks his list again and shrugs at her. “It just says upside down cake. So, yes? Pineapple works.”

“You’re lucky, we only have one left. Let me box that up for you.” She walks off and Alec sighs. Magnus owes him big time. He’s never had so many questions while grocery shopping in his entire life and now he’s going to have to walk around with a fucking cake in a box.

He leaves the eggs for last, not wanting them to crack in the cart with the other items. The random assortment of groceries only puzzles him more as he watches them go down the conveyor belt. He pulls out the list again for a quick read through, determined not to miss a single odd request of Magnus’ while the cashier scans each item.
Water
Icing
Leeks
Lemons

Yogurt
Oreos
Upside down cake

Mango
Apples
Rice
Ramen
Yams

Mascarpone cheese
Eggs

Apricots
Grapefruit
Almonds
Iced Tea
Nuts

“Did you find everything you need today?” the cashier asks.

“Yes, surprisingly.”

She gives him a pleasant smile fit for customer service and goes back to scanning his items.

He goes back to the list reading it up and down.
“You have quite the assortment of items—”

“Oh my God,” he says, softly and with a chuckle that causes the cashier to stop mid sentence and look at him.

“It’s a proposal,” he explains, rubbing at his brow and smiling uncontrollably as he reads the list over.

The *Will You Marry Me Again* clearly stands out now that he knows it’s there.

He feels like an idiot for not noticing right away; especially with the way each capital letter is slightly bolder than the others, reminding him of his first proposal all those years ago. It had taken Magnus a few trips, frustration slowly building up over Alec continuously asking for more things out of the refrigerator, before Alec finally gave in and told him to look *at* the refrigerator and not in it. The magnets had been there for a while, friends often coming over and spelling out funny messages for them, making it easy to overlook on a day-to-day basis. But Alec can still remember Magnus’ soft gasp, and the panic that clutched at his heart while Magnus slowly walked up to the refrigerator, reading the question spelled out in the rainbow of colors - *will you marry me*?

He had been so confident that morning, sliding the letters in place while Magnus slept that he never considered the possibility of Magnus saying ‘no’ but the longer Magnus stood there, silently staring, the more he had started to question if perhaps it was too soon. But Magnus had reached out and slid the magnetic letters *y - e - s* below Alec’s proposal, replacing every ounce of panic with a joy Alec never even knew was possible.

He’s been married to this man for eleven years and still, his heart races at the question.

“He’s proposing,” he says with a laugh, patting his pockets frantically. The cashier scans the last item when he looks up at her. “Do you have a pen I can borrow?”

She takes one from a drawer underneath the register and he rushes out a thank you, hovering the pen over the paper.

“What’s a food or ingredient that starts with Y? Not yams…not yogurt…”

The question is for himself but the cashier stands on her toes and looks over at his list. “Yeast?” she supplies and Alec glances up to see her give him a shrug with a small conspiratorial smile.


He writes an *e* and then taps the pen to the paper.

“Eggplant?” the bagger suggests and Alec writes it down.

“Salmon.” His nerves settle enough for him to come up with a word of his own. He looks at the list—the proposal—and his response, smiling. “Thank you,” he says to them both, returning the pen.

“Congratulations,” the cashier says and then with a hesitant smile, “your total is seventy-three, fifty-eight.”

“Can’t believe I’m paying seventy-three dollars for my own proposal.” Alec chuckles and pays. He manages to catch a cab as someone gets out, saving him from having to stand around with a boxed cake for too long—luck’s on his side today. He’s too happy to even care that Magnus sent him on a wild goose-chase as his proposal. But then again, Magnus probably expected him to figure it out before wandering around two stores for over an hour and spending seventy dollars on it all.
He adjusts the cake box under his left arm as he takes the elevator up, offering his elderly neighbor a smile.

“Special occasion?” she asks, hinting at the cake.

“An engagement.”

Her eyes widen. “That’s nice. How’s that handsome husband of yours? I haven’t seen him in a while.”

“Magnus is great. The engagement is actually for us. He asked me to marry him again.”

Alec’s never been one to overshare, so he doesn’t know why he’s doing it now, and with Ms. McAstor of all people. He supposes it’s the excitement and the fact that she has always been kind to them, welcoming them to the building all those years ago, and gifting Magnus several plants that now live on their balcony.

She smiles, wide. “I do hope you said yes,” she tuts, “or I’m gonna swoop in and steal him from you.”

Alec chuckles. “I’m definitely saying yes.”

The elevator comes to a stop and Alec holds his arm out to block the elevator door from closing as she slowly makes her way out. She falls in step beside Alec and she touches at his forearm when he reaches the door to his loft.

“You boys keep this up. You make a lovely family.” She pats him lightly. “And tell Magnus I have some new plants that need some love.”

“I’ll do that,” he says, waving goodbye and entering the loft.

“Babe,” he calls out, kicking off his shoes before entering further into the loft.

“I’m in the kitchen!”

Alec smiles to himself and then licks his lips to make it go away. He goes into the kitchen, groceries heavy in his arms and a cake they will probably eat too much of, and Magnus watches him with an amused gleam in his eyes as Alec lays out the assortment of random items.

“You got the cake,” he notes, casually, peering into the box.

“You sound surprised. Was I not supposed to buy what was on the list?” Alec teases and tries not to laugh at the widened expression Magnus is making as he sifts through the bags.

“Uh—no… you were.” Magnus takes out the jarred apricots and the bag of rice. He turns to Alec and lets out a laugh. “Thank you for going out of your way for all of this.”

“Mhm, it’s no problem.” Alec digs the list out of his pocket. “There were a couple of things I couldn’t find though.”

Magnus’ brow curves and he takes the list from Alec.

Alec only has to wait a few seconds before Magnus’ mouth spreads into a grin and he only has a second more to brace himself for the crushing hug he gets when Magnus flings himself into his arms.
“You had me worried! I thought you didn’t notice.”

“I almost didn’t. We aren’t the best at picking up on proposals, are we?”

“Whoever said the third time’s a charm is a liar.” Magnus laughs, face scrunching with the motion and Alec’s breath catches.

“I can’t believe I’m lucky enough to have you for a husband.”

Magnus catches his breath and Alec swears he can stand here all day, looking into these brown eyes, falling more and more in love with every breath Magnus exhales against him.

“We’re both lucky.”

“I think I’m the luckiest.”

“Three proposals,” Magnus says, carding his fingers into Alec’s hair. “Did you ever think you’d find a love like this?”

Alec shakes his head. “You. This. Is better than anything I could have ever imagined. Thank you for saying ‘yes’ to me. Twice.”

Alec chuckles and is stopped short when Magnus kisses him. “Thank you for saying ‘yes’ to me this time.”

Alec trails his fingers across the smooth skin of Magnus’ neck and brushes their noses together. “It’s always going to be a ‘yes’ for you.”

Magnus closes his eyes and pulls Alec in for another kiss. It’s slow and deep, and with a hand pressed to his chest, Alec’s heart pounds heavy and hard. Still as much in love today as he was fifteen years ago when he laid eyes on his husband for the first time.

“Why on earth did you buy everything?” Magnus asks, pulling back and sneaking a glance at all the groceries laid out on their counter.

“Well”—Alec laughs and bites down on his lip—“I didn’t figure it out until I was in the check out lane and at that point it was too late and who knows if you actually needed some of the things on the list.”

Magnus snorts and rolls his eyes. “I hate apricots. Why would I ever want you to buy them?”

Alec narrows his eyes at him and prods at Magnus in the chest with a finger. “I said that! And those were the hardest things to find on that stupid list too.”

Magnus coos softly at the pout Alec gives him, teasing him when he kisses it and nibbles as he pulls away. “Would you rather stand here and complain about the apricots or”—he walks backwards and scoops up the cake box in one arm—“Do you want to come to bed with me and celebrate our engagement?”

“Pouting is over,” Alec says, voice low, shrugging off his coat and tossing it on the counter at the wink Magnus gives him before turning on his heels.

“Good. Get the forks,” he calls over his shoulder. “And lose the shirt.”

Alec kicks off his shoes, rushes to the drawer and pulls out two forks. He catches a glance at the grocery list proposal and his response, and smirks.
“I’m coming,” he calls out, working his buttons open as he follows his husband down the hall.

Alec shifts in the hard chair in the waiting area of his general practitioner’s office on the first floor of St. Ambrose Hospital. The plus side of working in a hospital is that he can schedule any of his doctor appointments during a regular work day and only have to ride the elevator down a floor to go. He adjusts his white doctor’s coat to be more comfortable and contemplates getting his phone out to send Magnus a message to pass the time.

A mother has a seat in front of him, struggling to balance the clipboard in one arm and a fussy baby in the other as she tries to fill out her patient intake forms. The baby screams, tiny fists shoot straight up in the air as she squirms her way out of the swaddle wrapped around her. The mom sighs, rocks the baby and whispers a quiet plea for her to stop her crying.

“Give me just a minute,” she whispers, desperate and tired.

Alec looks around at the other patients, who only glance up with annoyed expressions before going back to their magazines and phones, and frowns. He knows it’s not easy being a single parent trying to juggle your own commitments while also attending to your baby as well. He saw Jace do it more times than he can count. He imagines Jace has probably been in a situation similar to this before and he can’t imagine letting her struggle a minute longer.

“Excuse me,” he says gently. “If you want, I can hold her while you fill those out.”

The mother looks up at him, wide-eyed, slightly reluctant and entirely disbelieving.

“You look like you have your hands full and I’m just waiting to be called back.” He smiles at her.

She looks down at her daughter and tucks the blanket around her again. “Uh, yeah, if you really don’t mind?”

“Not at all.” He reaches out and she carefully places the baby in his arms.

“Thank you”—her eyes flick down to the front of his coat—“Dr. Lightwood-Bane.”

“What’s her name?”

“Jasmine.”

“Jasmine.” He smiles down at the fussy baby and curls her in against his chest, gently bouncing and patting her back rhythmically, the way Ariel used to love when she was a baby. He shushes her and her cries slowly taper down to soft whimpers and he sees her mom smile down at the paperwork she quickly fills out.

It’s been three years since he held a baby this small. He’d almost forgotten the enrapturement holding a baby can bring.

She quiets down, chewing on her fist until she falls asleep. She smells powdery and sweet and Alec’s heart aches when she smiles a little in her sleep.

“Wow, you got her to sleep fast. That has to be a record for her.”

Alec glances up at her mom, a smile spreading. “Really?”

She nods as she copies information from her insurance card onto the page. “You’re good with
children.” She looks up and her eyes settle on his hand that pats on her daughter’s back, and on what he assumes is his wedding band. “Do you have children of your own?”

Alec shakes his head and smiles down at the baby girl.

“No, not yet but we want to—” He catches himself, shaking his head in disbelief.

He doesn’t know where that came from. He hasn’t let himself even think about a family, the idea too painful to even approach. He’s spent the past three years grieving and dwelling on what they lost that he never considered the possibility of maybe trying to build something again.

He didn’t even know it was something he still wanted. He thought that desire had died in him when they lost Aurora. He tickles the soft tuft of brown hair around the baby’s ear and he realizes he couldn’t have been more wrong. He still wants this. He wants to be a father. He wants to start a family with Magnus. He wants the future they’ve always dreamed of.

“I’m just going to turn these in,” she says to Alec and goes to the front desk. When she makes her way back, she settles in on her chair and beams proudly down at her daughter. She sighs. “She has been fussy for the past two days, hardly sleeping a wink at night. I can’t believe she’s sleeping so soundly.”

Alec continues rocking her. “I don’t mind holding her if you want to take a break.”

She shakes her head. “I can’t ask you to do that.”

“I don’t have a baby. I slept a full eight hours last night. Take a breather.”

She settles back into her chair, crossing her legs and watching Alec as he rocks her baby. She asks him about his position here at the hospital and they have a quiet discussion about work and raising a family. He tells her about Magnus and how good of a father he’ll undoubtedly be whenever they have children of their own. She agrees, based off only the facts Alec gives her and insists that Alec will make a great father as well. Dr. Branwell’s nurse calls his name and he reluctantly passes off the baby girl to her mother, slowly so as to not wake her.

“You give your mom a break, you hear?” he whispers to her.

Her mother chuckles. “Thank you, Dr. Lightwood-Bane. You were a godsend.”

He finds his way back with the nurse, answering the basic checkup questions he always answers, stands on a scale, and has his blood pressure taken. He watches the monitor tick away, counting his heart rate and it picks up when he thinks about the unexpected feeling he had out in the lobby. The thrill of realizing that despite everything they’ve gone through, all the pain and loss, he wants to try again.

There is no sound in the room, tension so thick Magnus feels it in every fiber of his body and he walks back and forth, watching with furrowed brows as Alec hovers above his patient, movements acute and confident, years of practice and mastery guiding his hands as much as his brain. His attention flickers between his patient and the tool in his hand, and despite the precarious means they had available for the occasion and the makeshift bed they created from various pillows, he looks as professional as Magnus has ever seen him, his handsome features pulled into a frown of utter and intense absorption in the task at hand.

“Babe, please sit,” Alec asks, not unkindly. “I need to focus.”
Magnus releases a deep, shuddering breath and sinks unceremoniously into the couch. “Sorry, Doctor,” he says, playfully. “Far be it from me to distract you from your most important mission.”

Despite Alec’s best attempt at keeping the facade, Magnus doesn’t miss the slight smirk it manages to pull from his husband.

“Shh, Uncle Ma’nus!” Ariel chastises him, joining him blindly on the couch as she refuses to tear her gaze away from Alec’s patient, her stuffed rabbit, Mr. Fluffy McHoppy. Jace pretends she came up with the name herself, but they all know he named it himself, although they pretend they don’t.

“Sorry, little turkey,” he mumbles apologetically, lifting her up to put her on his lap.

Alec carefully puts down the needle on the coffee table and holds out a hand. “Scissors.”

When nothing happens, he looks up at Magnus and Ariel, wiggling his fingers impatiently. “I need the scissors.”

Magnus lifts a challenging eyebrow. “Ask politely, you ill-mannered turtle.”

Alec snorts, but rolls his eyes for good measure. “May I please have the scissors, please Magnus, love of my life, sun of my days, pain in my proverbial–”

“Here they are!” Magnus blurts out loudly, glaring at his husband as he hands the scissors over.

Alec smirks proudly and winks at him, licking his lips in that devastating habit of his that shows he is far more satisfied with himself than he should be in that moment.

“You’ll pay for that,” Magnus says, but he can’t quite bring himself to stop smiling.

Alec hums absently, cutting the sewing thread carefully and inspecting his handy work. “I’m counting on it,” he replies blithely, and grins triumphantly when Mr. Fluffy McHoppy’s eye seems to be holding perfectly. “Here you go, pumpkin! He’s as good as new,” he tells Ariel, who leaps off Magnus’ lap and whoops joyfully as she runs around the table to join Alec on the other side and grab her stuffed rabbit, hugging him tightly against her chest.

“Thank you, Uncle Alec!” she shrieks, all but crashing against Alec to press a wet, grateful kiss to his cheek, before pulling away and running to the kitchen where they left Jace to go proceed to their most important surgery. “Daddy! Uncle Alec fixed Mr. Fluffy!”

Magnus smiles as he watches her disappear in the kitchen and he hears Jace’s equally joyful exclamation, before turning to his husband.

Alec is grinning too, and he huffs as he rises to his feet after kneeling in front of the table for five good minutes, stepping over it and standing in front of Magnus with hands on his hips. “I wonder if I just won enough points to steal your title of all-time favorite.”

“Don’t you dare,” Magnus grits out, eyes narrowing on him. “Everyone knows I’m her favorite forever.”

Alec chuckles, sitting down next to him to capture Magnus’ lips in a kiss that’s all smile and no guile. “She’s got great taste,” Alec mumbles as he pulls away, leaning in to steal another quick kiss from him.

Magnus hums in content, and tightens his fingers around Alec’s collar when he goes to pull back,
tugging him back in for another, longer kiss. Alec smiles against his lips, hand cupping Magnus’ neck and thumb trailing idly against his jaw line.

Magnus could easily let himself sink into his love’s embrace for the rest of the night, forget about their commitment to Jace and everything else that isn’t Alec, or the faint, feathery touch of his fingertips against his neck. He could easily let the whole world revolve around this one man, the one that holds a stronger gravitational pull on Magnus than the earth itself.

A happy sigh, followed by a light giggle forces them apart and Magnus blinks out of his ephemeral bliss to give Jace an apologetic smile. Jace seems to not see it –and if he does he ignores it– because he is staring at them from the threshold of the living room, Ariel tucked in his arms, looking exaggeratedly emotional.


Magnus snorts, pats his hand lightly, and turns to fully face his brother-in-law.

“It’s just–” Jace sniffles excessively, “–I had forgotten how disgustingly sappy you two could be.” He lets out another happy sigh, dabbing at his eyes with Mr. Fluffy’s paw. “I just love love.”

Alec rises from the couch and walks up to his brother, holding his arms out for Ariel, who happily lets herself be passed to her uncle.

“Fuck off,” he mouths at Jace as soon as he is certain Ariel can’t see him.

Jace gaps in false offense, throwing a hand over his chest dramatically, making a show of dropping to the ground in what is a not so subtle attempt at making his daughter laugh. It works, because soon the room is filled with a delighted shriek of laughter from Ariel, followed by a loud and amused, “Daddy, you’re being silly!” as she giggles into her hand.

Alec smiles, nodding in agreement. “That’s right, sweetheart,” he tells her proudly. “Daddy is being silly. You’ll learn soon enough that it applies in every situation.”

Magnus decides to intervene before his husband and brother-in-law spend the next half hour verbally jesting until they inevitably argue over something that happened in their childhood like the time Alec took the fall for Izzy and Jace drawing all over their mother’s brand new beige couch and Jace consequently refusing to talk to Alec for a whole week because he was upset Alec had done so. They can be incredibly stubborn and equally nonsensical when they want to, but Magnus has learned throughout the years not to let it go too far.

“Alright,” he says, clearing his throat before Jace can respond and offering him a hand to pull him up on his feet. “Go before you’re late. I agreed to babysit one child, not three.”

Alec huffs in affront next to him, and turns to Ariel to whisper conspiratorially. “Children get to choose the movie and the snacks so Uncle Magnus is just jealous.”

“I wanna watch the Lion King!” Ariel exclaims without missing a beat. Her eyes sparkle with excitement.

Magnus throws an almost offended glance at Jace. “Are you trying to traumatize the poor child?”

Jace shrugs. “She likes the songs,” he explains. “And she thinks Mufasa lives in the clouds and that it’s pretty neat.”

Magnus takes a moment to lift a dubious eyebrow, but shrugs, defeated. “I guess Lion King it is.”
Alec and Ariel high five not so discreetly, but Magnus chooses to ignore them, snorting instead.

Two hours later, Magnus finds himself singing along with his husband and his niece’s approximative rendition of the lyrics to Hakuna Matata while eating homemade cookies that Maia brought over in the afternoon.

It’s fun and peaceful, and when Ariel falls asleep on his lap half an hour later, her strawberry blonde hair spreading like a halo around her head, Magnus thinks he could get used to this. When Alec reaches out over the back of the couch to brush the tips of his fingers on the soft skin behind Magnus’ ear in an absent-minded, devastatingly natural but impossibly tender gesture, he melts into the touch, and decides that he most definitely will.

“She’s too cute,” Alec murmurs, brushing his hand that isn’t skimming over the bridge of Magnus’ ear against the rosy patch on her cheek. “I know Jace told us to stop spoiling her so much but look at that face,” he huffs out, only vaguely annoyed but entirely whipped. “We really don’t stand a chance.”

Magnus hums, shaking his head at his husband’s antics but thoroughly sympathizing. “And she knows it,” he agrees. “Speaking of how cute she is, I think I figured out Jace’s birthday present.”

“Yeah?”

Alec’s absentminded answer has him smiling softly, and he nods gingerly, glancing down at Ariel. “Rosa’s nanny is an artist and she does great children portraits. I thought we could hire her to do one of Ariel for Jace.”

“That sounds great,” Alec mutters.

A comfortable silence settles between them. Alec reaches out to skim his thumb against Magnus’ cheekbone in a gentle caress and Magnus turns his head to press a kiss against it. There is an immensity that he doesn’t quite know how to name when he meets Alec’s eyes; it’s more than the usual unwavering devotion, deeper than the healing path they have finally allowed themselves to follow. It’s an entire world, bold, new but building on old promises. There is power in his gaze, not because it makes Magnus want to look away, but for the exact opposite: it makes him want to stare infinitely into the chances they unfold, to put an endless trust into the hereafter they profess. It feels almost like an end, but Magnus doesn’t fear it, not when it comes with the promise of better beginnings.

Ariel stirs awake when they put her in bed a while later. Her eyes flutter open and squint as she looks up at them, face half smashed against the pillow.

“I’m not tired,” she mumbles valiantly.

Alec chuckles softly, and reaches out to pull the blanket almost all the way up to her chin. “Of course not, Pumpkin.”

Magnus slips Mr. Fluffy McHoppy under the covers with her and she squeezes the rabbit in her arms, nuzzling against its head. “Good night, my little turkey.”

Ariel opens her eyes again, stubbornly looking up at them through the dim lights emerging from the hallway. “Can you stay with me for a bit?” she asks, voice so impossibly quiet and sweet that Magnus doesn’t have to look at Alec to know that their answer is the same.
They cram themselves into the tiny bed. It’s a bit of a hazard, both of them being far too tall and big to fit properly, but they make it work, although Magnus does fear that the slightest movement on his part could send Alec crashing on the ground. For a while, Ariel stares at them in silence, occasionally murmuring inaudible words to her rabbit, her little fingers airily seeking their own in the dark. She moves from him to Alec, and then back to her rabbit, and Magnus’ heart feels so incredibly full that he thinks it might burst out of his chest at any moment. If it were physically possible, he thinks, absurdly, it would probably fit itself in the palm of Alec’s hand, where it has belonged all along.

She falls asleep eventually, peacefully huddled between them.

They could get up, move back to their own bedroom and go to sleep themselves, but neither of them makes an attempt to do so and Magnus thinks they must both know how rare and precious these moments can be, when the world goes quiet and the heart is at peace, stuck between a realm of possibilities and a reachable dream.

“I want to try again.”

The words are barely over a whisper, and they don’t come from him; Magnus is reasonably surprised to realize that much. His eyes have accustomed themselves to the darkness, and Magnus can see Alec staring back at him as clearly as he would under the afternoon sun. He could say more, explain at length how he got to that point, what happened for him to rediscover the thrill of dreaming of a world where they make room in their hearts to love more, to love in a whole new way, but Magnus doesn’t need him to.

Because he knows. Because he feels it too.

Magnus reaches out over Ariel’s sleeping body, and Alec meets him halfway with trembling, hesitant fingers, taking his hand in a tight, steady grip.

“She too, darling,” Magnus murmurs.

Alec’s whole body relaxes, and he nods minutely against the mattress. This room is too small for the two of them, or even to contain the magnitude of their hopes and feelings for each other, but it wouldn’t be so hard to make room for a new dream they would draw together, Magnus thinks.

As they finally get out, Ariel safely asleep behind them, and Alec pulls him into a strong, loving embrace that Magnus returns just as fiercely, he can almost touch the brand new realm opening before them.

And for a moment in time, it isn’t hard at all. In fact, it feels so easy everything else becomes inconsequential.

Magnus had promised himself he wouldn’t let themselves be slowed down and beaten up by December again. For the most part, he kept his promise. They are ready to spend a beautiful month, celebrating the holidays with friends and family, enjoying each other’s presence in the quiet of the loft, making the most of it as long as they can. For a while, Magnus has been able to forget, to keep all the suffering and heartbreak this month used to bring along compartmentalized to an area of his mind he can shut down so long as the reminders are kept to a minimum.

He doesn’t quite know why this afternoon has been so hard on his nerves. When Isabelle had suggested they go shopping, he hadn’t thought twice before saying yes. It had been a while since
he had spent time with his sister-in-law and her wife, and although he had been tempted to stay at home with Alec instead, cuddled up in front of the cheesiest Christmas movies known to mankind, Alec had told him to go with a chuckle because Isabelle would never forgive either of them if he were to confine Magnus to the safety of their home, and even more appealing, the warmth of his arms.

Magnus pouted for good measure, but knew Alec wasn’t truly fooled and had read the excitement on his face. Still, it had earned him one of those lopsided grins he loves so much and a slightly longer goodbye kiss than would have been considered appropriate or necessary.

For the most part, it has been a nice afternoon. They had managed to avoid the busiest avenues, wandering in the quieter areas instead, strolling from shop to shop, hands filled with more and more bags with each new discovery.

It should have been a perfect afternoon.

Now that he’s home, however, Magnus only wants to slip into a nearly scorching bath, bribe Alexander into giving him a massage, and then cuddle up against his husband until his mind is numb and fully relaxed again.

The loft is quiet when he walks in, and he drops his shopping bags in the hallway, toeing his shoes off.

“Honey, I’m home!” he calls, and shrugs his winter coat off, rolling up the sleeves of his shirt and stretching his neck to get rid of the stiffness lingering from the cold outside.

“Back here, babe!” Alec calls back, and Magnus frowns when he realizes his voice isn’t coming from their bedroom or the living room but the old nursery.

Magnus can’t help but smile, somewhat proud, equally bittersweet, at the sinuous roads they have traveled in the past year. There was a time when Alec wouldn’t even think about setting foot in this room, unknowingly leaving the weight of its burden to Magnus.

Starting over seemed impossible back then, but Magnus should’ve known better than to question his husband, and more importantly his ability to defeat the odds and try again, and again, until he achieves what he has set his mind on.

The smile ghosting on his face falters when he walks into the room and finds Alec sitting in the middle of the room, an instruction sheet spread before him and what definitely appears to be a crib in the process of being built next to him.

Magnus goes still, and his heart pangs painfully in his chest, momentarily punching the breath out of his lungs.

He forces himself to take a deep breath, and glances down at Alec. “What the –”

He pauses, taking a moment to truly glance at Alec, who is clad in his usual attire for manual work in the loft, sweatpants and a tank top, Magnus’ glasses perched on his nose to help him read the instructions because he still stubbornly refuses to book an appointment with an ophthalmologist and get his own.

Magnus’ heart stutters in his chest, and he leans against the threshold to keep his body upright, feeling himself go ashen-faced. “W-What are you doing?” he asks, his voice a shade of horror Magnus barely recognizes as his own.
Alec is looking back at Magnus with an excited grin on his face, but it slowly vanishes when he recognizes Magnus’ reaction for what it is. “I had it delivered,” he explains, hesitation now painting his handsome features. “I was hoping to surprise you and have them put together by the time you got back.”

A lullaby echoes in the back of Magnus’ mind, soft, and low, and devastating; he shakes his head, urging it away.

”And you didn't think I'd like to have a say in that?” he replies slowly, hearing the sharpness of his own tone but unable to prevent it –unwilling, perhaps.

Alec frowns, now genuinely confused. “We picked it out months ago. So I thought with the due date being next month that you’d be okay with it.”

Magnus scoffs, gritting his teeth. "You thought I'd be okay with it? Well that's fantastic, Alec. Maybe next time think again."

He doesn’t know why he is making this more difficult than it should be. Or perhaps he does; certainly, he does. And it hurts. And it terrifies him.

Alec’s furrowed brows dip in irritation now, and he sits back on his heels, adjusting the glasses on his nose. “I was trying to do something nice for you, Magnus,” he says, annoyed and baffled all at once.

Magnus tries to swallow down the irrational wave of anger surging through him. It roots itself in his stomach, lurching and growing until he knows there is fire in his eyes, ready to burn to ashes at the slightest hint of affliction. It should protect him from drowning, allow him to sizzle even in the rain, but the inferno can be too much for his own heart, too much for the person he loves the most, despite his adoration for his sparks of passion.

"Well, you failed,” he hears himself reply, cold and foreign.

This is a stranger, speaking with his voice, wearing his features, this isn’t him. This can’t be him, and yet it is, Magnus tells himself, out of depth in his own mind.

Alec scoffs. “Clearly. I guess I shouldn’t have bothered if you’re going to be like this about it.”

The loft is quiet around them, but the silence is deafening in this room, in this month, after the anxiety that has slowly been slithering into Magnus’ mind all afternoon. This is the silence that scares him, the silence that he can sometimes forget, but that resurfaces when he least expects it.

"And how exactly am I being?” Magnus snaps back, but he knows.

“You’re being unreasonable. We can’t keep putting this off until the last minute,” Alec opines.

Why not? Magnus thinks with all his might. Why can’t we? Why do we have to take that risk again?

What if, what if, what if.

“I’m being unreasonable? And you doing this without consulting me first is what exactly then?” Magnus argues. He wants to scream, to curl himself up in the corner of the room and bask into this silence he so fears.

“Without consulting—” Alec starts, but stops himself mid-sentence, shaking his head. He heaves
out a deep breath, and glances back at Magnus, confusion and a hint of anger blending seamlessly in his gaze. “Magnus, what the hell are you talking about? We were gonna have to do this eventually.”

What if, what if, what if.

"We? Where's the 'we' in this if you don't give a shit whether I agreed to it or not?" Magnus fires back, lips pursed in annoyance. His knuckles are white from clenching his fists too hard, and he knows the animosity that is exuding from him right now must be burning, acid enough to slice through the most enduring and patient soul.

Alec’s face is slowly turning red with suppressed rage, but it is almost invisible underneath the disappointment etched on his features. Sighing, Alec puts the tools down and pushes himself to his feet.

“I’m not fighting with you right now,” he says, more defeated than angry, and he walks out of the room.

Magnus startles at the sound of their bedroom door slamming after him, and then there is silence; and the irrationality of his fears staring back at him.

He has been weaving through crowds all afternoon, holiday music and Isabelle and Maia’s cheerful grins telling him how joyous and merry he should feel. And yet he hadn’t, from the moment they had walked into a baby clothing store and Isabelle had started buying for their joyous event scheduled next month.

It had brought him back to what December had come to mean, before they had started leisurely restoring what it had broken the year before.

They came a long way, but there are still those days where Magnus fears the unexpected, the cruel, and the loneliness of it all. There are days where, even safely tucked in his husband’s embrace, he feels unable to fight the immensity of the pain he has accumulated through the years. Their therapist says this is exactly when he should talk about it and not shut Alec down. This is the darkness he lives in, the one Alec embraces beyond his own understanding, the one he accepts and cherishes as if it was what he had signed for. In return, Magnus can accept just the same from Alec, his own demons and shadows, his own fears and his bad days.

Over twelve years of marriage, renewed vows and too many hardships to count behind them, but Magnus is still learning how to love and let himself be loved in return every day, not just the good ones, but the ones where he doesn’t love himself very much, too.

It has always been one of Alec’s most unique abilities, how he somehow manages to love Magnus even more ardently, even more unequivocally when Magnus barely manages to tolerate himself.

With a sigh, Magnus gathers what energy and courage he has left and turns around, making his way to their bedroom with slow, hesitant steps.

When he walks in, he isn’t truly surprised to find Alec tidying up things that don’t need to be, rummaging in their closet looking for t-shirts to fold or anything to distract himself with and calm his nerves.

He knows Alec heard him come in but he pointedly ignores him so Magnus nods to himself and sits down on the bed, facing Alec’s back.

“I’m sorry,” he says, guilt gnawing ruthlessly at his insides.
He looks down at his hands when Alec stills in his pointless tidying and turns around to face him, walking the distance between them. His forest green nail polish is chipped from how he has been nervously fiddling with his fingers all day, and he uses his thumb to peel off another bit of it.

Alec’s hand lays over his own, strong and comforting, and he sits down next to Magnus, squeezing lightly to compel him to look up. When Magnus does, the softness of his eyes is unfairly devastating, but he expected nothing less.

“What the hell was that all about? What’s going on with you?” Alec asks, sweet and gentle and entirely too good for Magnus’ bad days.

Still, Magnus sags against his chest and Alec wraps his arms around him at once, laying his cheek against his head.

“I’m sorry,” Magnus parrots, folding his own arm around Alec’s waist and laying his other hand over his stomach, running small, idle circles against the fabric.

“Babe,” Alec whispers against his head, pressing a fluttering kiss against his hairline. “Talk to me.”

“We went to a baby clothing shop this afternoon,” Magnus breathes out, clenches his fingers around Alec’s tank top. “Your sister was so excited and she bought all those baby clothes and I just…” His voice trembles, and Alec tightens his hold on his shoulders, rubbing a comforting hand on his back. “I just couldn’t stop thinking about the last time we did that,” Magnus finishes in a whisper. “I kept remembering the box of clothes we ended up giving away to charity. And I know it’s irrational, I know it’s unlikely… but I’m fucking terrified it’s all going to happen again. That if I let my guard down, if I let myself be excited about this, it’s all…. it’s all… and I don’t know what I’ll do this time.”

His voice trails off, unable to find the words, or to utter them out loud.

“I know,” Alec murmurs against his hair, and he gently untangles himself from Magnus, ignoring his half whine of protest, so that he can face him properly, cup his face between his hands and look into his eyes when he says, “Babe, I know. And I’m terrified too.”

“I want to be excited, I swear,” Magnus vows. “And I am! Maybe it’s because the anniversary was just last week, I don’t know. I just couldn’t see past the fear today, and I just… I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, Magnus,” Alec whispers, leaning in to press a light kiss against his eyelid and another to his forehead. “I have those days too. And I’m scared too. I’m scared of it happening again. I’m scared of being a terrible father and—”

Magnus snorts, swatting him lightly on the stomach. “Now you’re just being ridiculous,” he scoffs. “You’re going to be the best dad… although you’re kind of terrible at building furniture.”


Magnus shakes his head, feeling lighter; appeased, somehow. “Please, you’ll win so many points for being a kick-ass world-famous neurosurgeon. All the other children with their boring parents are gonna be jealous.”

“Look who’s talking, Mr. CEO slash Champion of the Earth award recipient,” Alec retorts, smirking. “So much to brag about, how do you think I make friends?”

Magnus giggles, and sighs the rest of his tension away with a breath, laying on the bed and pulling Alec down with him. He goes willingly.
“I know it’s scary,” Alec murmurs, shifting on the mattress to face him. “There are days where I can’t even imagine what it’s going to be like, because it paralyzes me. Because I don’t know what I’ll do either, if it happens again. But I have to believe it’s all going to be okay. We’re going to be okay. All of us.”

Magnus nods, somewhat sheepishly, and grabs Alec’s hands, placing them between them so he can press a kiss against his wedding band. “I’m sorry for lashing out on you,” he says again. “And I’m sorry for ruining your surprise. It was a lovely idea. Thank you.”

Alec smiles, soft and warm and easy. “You can make it up to me by helping me finish building it because those instructions are a fucking nightmare and I’m ready to give up and buy an inflatable mattress instead.”

Magnus leans in to kiss him, fond exasperation and utter adoration undoubtedly plain on his features. “Dad of the year.”

Magnus thinks January could very well become his favorite month. Perhaps it already is.

The weather is particularly cold this year, the city covered with a thick blanket of snow. Still there is warmth tumbling out even through the winter. All else is cold, but Magnus feels it radiating from inside, loving and nurturing his heart. This is the kind of warmth that lingers, no matter the season, no matter the winter ice. As he walks inside their loft, his husband on his toes, it blooms, majestic like the cherry trees in spring; it spreads steady like the waves on a summer beach; it appeases, like the intermittent rain of fall chasing away the intense heat of a past that no longer holds him immovable. It lives inside of him, eternal and splendid.

A storm could be raging outside and Magnus wouldn’t notice. The world could stop spinning, and it wouldn’t matter, because his whole world revolves solely around the tiny, beautiful human being in his arms.

He didn’t know, until then, that it was possible for him to love someone else as much as he does Alec. Alec was a surprise, a mindblowing, earth-shattering uniqueness. A special kind of light, shining brighter than a thousand stars. He stumbled into Magnus’ life unexpectedly and stayed, rooted himself into his heart and made it home. Magnus had been consumed, a willing victim of Alec’s smiles and his disconcertingly blunt declarations of confidence. Magnus had always been a fighter and yet he had yielded effortlessly to Alec Lightwood, mindlessly. He had surrendered his heart, and his soul, and his graces, and let him imprint every aspect of his existence with his own without a second thought or ounce of regret.

It still is so overwhelming that until a week ago, Magnus had no idea he could love just as vehemently again. It’s a different kind of love, absolute and unconditional in brand new ways, but Magnus feels it overpowering his every thought, his very core with just as much force.

He knows, with the same certitude, that his life has been given a new purpose for this love. It brought a meaning to why they have struggled, to how they have endured.

His son is asleep in his arms, but his tiny fingers are locked tightly around Magnus’ pinkie, and Magnus doesn’t quite remember the last time his heart felt so full and his mind so devastatingly overwhelmed.

It hasn’t quite dawned on him just yet, that he is a father now, that their family of two extended, after he had given up on the idea, despite his irrational fears and their shared anxiety. Eko almost
feels like a dream as he rests in his arms, and yet more real than anything Magnus has ever touched. His hands are more delicate than he had imagined, his skin softer and rosier. He feels so light, smells like what Magnus surmises happiness smells like, and looks like a charming solace.

He is ridiculously small in Magnus’ arms, so unaware of all the dangers of the world they shield him from, so unconscious of how much he is loved, and how fiercely and passionately he will be for every day to come.

He is the most beautiful, heartbreaking, fascinating promise Magnus has ever set his eyes on.

“You are perfect,” Magnus tells him in a murmur, because he is.

He leans in to press a kiss against the fingers hooked around his own, and adds, “Daddy and I love you so much.”

He hears the tremor in his own voice, feels his heart somehow swell even more, foresees entire adventures to be lived and laughter to be shared.

A kiss is pressed against his cheek, tearing him away from the quietude of a suspended moment, making it somehow more rare, more radiant. Magnus melts into the touch, tilting his head to the side to plant one to Alec’s lips.

“Switch?” Alec asks, a smile curving at the corner of his mouth.

Magnus gazes down at the baby wrapped in a soft, mint green blanket in his husband’s arms. He chuckles, but he nods, and somehow they maneuver with an ease that could make it look like they practiced it a thousand times. Alec takes Eko from him with a care that makes the warmth in Magnus’ chest blossom further, every touch a tender caress, every move a demonstration of deep, unequivocal love. Unlike his brother, Ezra isn’t sleeping, and he looks up at Magnus with big, curious dark eyes, but just settles in this new pair of arms peacefully, blinking curiously at his new surroundings.

Their home.

Their family.

Their sons.

Alec drapes an arm around his shoulders in the process and Magnus leans back against him, unable to speak, to put into words the vastness of emotions that engulf him and appease him all at once.

It feels like a door opened for him, for them, a door to a whole new path they will walk together. A door to a dream Magnus’ mind never could have conjured on its own, for it surpasses even the wildest hopes he had allowed himself.

“Alexander?” Magnus mutters, brushing the back of his hand against Ezra’s cheek.

“Mmh?” Alec mumbles back, enthralled in his own dreamland as Eko stirs in his arms, hands reaching out aimlessly and falling back against his father’s fingers when Alec offers them mindlessly.

“I’m really fucking happy right now.”

Magnus grins back, shrugs and lets himself be submerged by the truth, the pure and absolute grace of it all.

“I’m really fucking happy too, Magnus.”

It’s been a year since he and Magnus finished their work on the box that now contains Aurora’s things. Her ultrasounds - the first when she wasn’t any larger than a raspberry and the last that showcased her profile with her perfect button nose - her tiny black inked footprints pressed onto ivory cardstock, a lock of her soft dark hair, and the onesie Jace had given her is tacked in the bottom corner.

Alec smiles while running his finger along the smooth wooden edge and down over the intricately carved tiger.

The pain has gotten better. It’s not an angry, red-hot pain anymore, it’s been tended and cared for by the love Magnus gives him every chance he gets. It’s been made easier to bear whenever they lace their fingers together and take life one day at a time. Working on this box together had been a way to put the hardened memories to rest. Instead, they want to remember the love and excitement they had for her. She will always be their little girl and they will always love her and they want to always look back on her and remember every loving night of planning. They’re ready to move on from the pain. They know the sadness will always remain. Grief. But they will care for it together. Remember her and love her together.

Alec lets out a deep breath and carefully lifts the box to return it to its home on the walls of their bedroom.

“Alexander?” Magnus’ voice drifts down the hall, gradually getting closer when he calls again, “Darling?”

“In here!” Alec adjusts the box a little to the left and gently takes a step back as Magnus steps through the door.

“Hey, what are you doing in here?” he asks even though his eyes dart over to the shadow box and then return to Alec with a fond gleam.

“Just revisiting old memories,” Alec says.

Magnus holds Eko up a bit, his little face squished and pink from where he had been fussing. “You mind taking Eko and changing his diaper?” he holds him out and Alec scoops him out of Magnus’ arms, grimacing at the odor.

“Pee-yew, Eko. What has your Papa been feeding you?” Alec leans in and kisses Magnus on the forehead, ignoring the way his smile falls into an unimpressed line. “I’ll get him cleaned up,” he mutters, kissing Magnus quickly on the lips this time.

“Thank you. Ezra just fell asleep and it’s nap time and your family is running late and they’re the ones who are going to be upset when they miss out on the boys’ awake time.” A lock of his hair falls over his brow and Magnus huffs, blowing it up and away.

“Babe, it’s okay. They’ll just have to wait until after dinner.” Alec shrugs. “Now, you go freshen up, take a break, have a drink, do something before you explode.”

Magnus drops his head and chuckles, shoulders shaking. “I’m being crazy, aren’t I?”
Alec shakes his head. “Nah.”

“I’ve become that sleep-deprived parent.” Magnus laughs louder now and he rolls his eyes, patting Alec’s butt when he passes by him to get to their closet.

“We both have,” Alec calls over his shoulder on his way out of the room and into the boys’ nursery.

Ezra is sleeping soundly in his crib and Eko yawns in Alec’s arms, stretching his own up, drawing his knees in, and mewls softly. Alec makes quick work of the diaper change; after the first couple of days, and what feels like five-hundred diapers later, Alec thinks he could change a diaper with his eyes closed.

“Your brother never lets me change him without at least one screech,” Alec comments, slowly buttoning up the footed onesie. “You should teach him some manners.”

He scoops him up once he’s finished swaddling him and settles in on the glider, rocking back and forth and humming while his son yawns in his arms.

“Get some sleep while you can, bear. I’m sure once Aunt Izzy and Uncle Jace get here they’re going to be fighting over you and your brother the entire time,” he murmurs.

Eko blinks slowly until his eyes stay closed and Alec continues humming. He’s tired—undoubtedly so—he thinks he and Magnus have barely gotten more than three hours of sleep per night since they brought the boys home, but despite the lack of sleep and showers, his chest is full and warm with a love he can barely contain. Every part of him is in love with being a dad. Magnus had joked about this when the boys first came home and how eager Alec had been at every coo and whimper, but ultimately decided that he loves how in love Alec is with being a dad and can’t make fun of him when he too feels the same way.

Just like Alec always knew, Magnus is a great father. As if he was born for the job. He hates to think on how he almost missed out on witnessing that side of his husband. Missed out on the squeals of laughter whenever the boys make funny faces or the way he smiles when he watches them sleep. Alec can’t keep his eyes off of him or the boys. He loves Magnus in dad-mode; complete with tangled hair and dark circles in the mornings when he crawls back into bed with two fussing babies.

Alec never let himself imagine living in this perfect reality where he has the love of his life and two beautiful sons. He feels as if his heart beats for this: his children, Magnus, his family.

He hears the sound of his front door opening and then closing with a click followed by soft steps tentatively making their way down the hall. He glances up in time to see Ariel peep her head around the door frame, pigtails swinging above her shoulders. She waves her fingers and Alec holds a finger up to his mouth, letting her know to keep quiet, and then waves her in.

She smiles brightly and crosses the room to him.

“Hey there my little turkey,” he whispers and leans over to kiss her forehead.

“Hi, Uncle Alec.” She scrunches her nose with a smile and looks down in his arms. She gasps softly and reaches out a small hand to stroke the tufts of Eko’s hair. “He’s so cute,” she says softly before stepping around Alec and pressing her face against the bars of the crib to get a peek at Ezra. “He is too. Is it nap time, Uncle Alec?”

Alec nods and she frowns.
“They like stories,” Alec whispers. “Do you want to hear a story?”

Her frown quickly disappears with her excited nod.

“Pick a book.”

She skips over to the bookshelf and takes down the familiar book embossed with flowers and a tiger.

“Mouse Deer and Tiger,” she whispers and holds the book out for Alec.

He smiles and gestures at his lap for her to sit. He curls Eko up in the crook of one elbow and wraps the other arm around his niece.

“You’re going to have an important job.”

She glances up at him with wide eyes.

“It’s your job to turn the pages, okay?”

She nods.

“Oh.”

He reads the story that Magnus grew up listening to, the one he first heard in a hospital room on Christmas years ago. The first story he and Magnus read to the boys. The story that Ariel always wants to listen to whenever she comes over.

“Mouse Deer, you tricked me again. But now you will be my lunch,” Alec reads in a low gravelly voice and Ariel whispers along to her favorite part of the story. He presses a kiss to her head and spots Jace in the doorway, leaning into it with his arms crossed.

Ariel notices him too and brings her finger up to her lips and shushes him quietly even though he didn’t make a sound.

Alec chuckles and finishes off the story. “The end.”

He carefully sets Eko in his crib and takes Ariel’s hand in his to guide her out of the room.

“You just had to lay them down for a nap,” Jace complains with a pout.

Alec rolls his eyes. “You were all supposed to be here twenty minutes ago.”

“Where’s Uncle Ma’rus?” Ariel questions quietly, brows pinched together as she peeks around the loft, puckering out her bottom lip when her search turns up empty.

Alec pulls her in to his side. “He’s getting a shower—” the front door opens to Isabelle and Maia walking in, chatting away excitedly.

“Aunt Izzy! Aunt Maia!” Ariel pushes off of Alec and flings herself into Isabelle’s arms.

Alec huffs. “How quickly she throws me away.”

“Maybe if you cheated for her affection by feeding her dessert before dinner...” Magnus’ voice trails from the hallway and Alec chuckles at the exasperated glare Isabelle shoots Magnus from over Ariel’s strawberry blonde pigtails.
Maia’s contagious laughter rumbles out of her and she quickly catches herself by covering her mouth and then presses her lips together to stifle her laughter. “I’m sorry, babe,” she says to Isabelle, kissing her on the cheek.

Isabelle mutters something but Alec doesn’t catch it because Magnus is by his side, smelling fresh from his soap, his body still warm from the shower when he nuzzles his way into Alec’s arms and lays his head on his shoulder.

“Did the boys give you any trouble?” he whispers.

Alec shakes his head and kisses his forehead, inhaling the clean scent of Magnus’ hair. “Not at all. Ariel even helped me read them a bedtime story.”

“Aw no, they’re asleep?” Isabelle frowns.

“You were late,” Alec says with a shrug.

Isabelle sighs, puffing out her cheeks.

“Don’t worry, I’m sure they’ll be up before we even finish dinner,” Magnus says, offering Isabelle a reassuring smile.

There’s a knock and before Alec can take a step away from his place, the door is opening and his mom is walking in, wine bottle in one hand and Luke holding the other.

Alec halfway expected things to feel awkward with his boss dating his mom but he’s slowly started joining in on family gatherings and instead of things feeling awkward or even strange, they feel right. Luke smiles warmly at him as he crosses the room to greet Alec with his palm extended.

“I’m looking forward to meeting the boys. Your mom hasn’t stopped talking about them,” he says in lieu of a greeting.

Alec shakes his hand.

“They’re pretty cute if I may say so myself,” Magnus cuts in, greeting Luke with a hug.

“They’re not just cute,” Maryse says as she guides Alec’s head down to plant a quick kiss on his forehead. “They’re perfect.”

“I have to say I agree, Maryse.” Magnus hugs her and kisses her hard on her cheek.

They wander off to the dining table and Jace carefully sets out the food he picked up from the restaurant they all love. With the babies settling in and adjusting to the new parent life, Alec and Magnus didn’t have the time or energy to prepare a dinner for everyone. Their other options were Jace preparing dinner or Izzy and everyone unanimously agreed that paying for take out would probably be the best and safest option for the night.

Ariel finds her place in Magnus’ lap while they eat dinner and talk about everything, including all of Alec’s minor mishaps like being peed on while taking too long to change a diaper or the time he managed to put a onesie on Ezra backwards. Magnus retells the horrifying moment he realized Eko had pooped in the bathtub and it’s when he puts his hand on Alec’s knee, laughing along with Isabelle and Maia that Alec wishes he could freeze a moment to save forever. This is a moment he always wants to remember, to have to look back on during dark days. Surrounded by those he loves most, excluding Raphael, Ragnor and Catarina because he would absolutely include them in his list of family, laughing and enjoying a time in their lives where everything feels as if it’s finally come
together.

He grins when Ariel drops the asparagus she attempts to feed Magnus and then cries out in her tiny voice, “Oh no, the ass-paragus!”

The room erupts in laughter and Jace is quick to correct her. “It’s asparagus, baby. Not ass-paragus.”

“Here you go, darling. More ass-paragus for you to feed Uncle Magnus,” Maia says sweetly as she swipes a few spears of asparagus onto Ariel’s plate.

Jace rolls his eyes but chuckles all the while, stopping suddenly, eyes opening wide and the room quiets long enough for a quiet whimper to be heard coming from the nursery.

“I’ll—”

Magnus stops abruptly when Jace bolts from his chair, running to the nursery and shouting, “I got them!”

Isabelle gasps. “That’s not fair!” and then she’s up and running after him.

Magnus giggles, leaning his forehead against Alec’s shoulder. “And so it begins,” he whispers.

Alec smiles down at him. “Yep.”

Where are you?

Magnus quickly sends the text, slips his phone back into the front pocket of his jacket and turns back to the party, watching with a smile as Catarina tries with all her might to make her husband’s dancing halfway tolerable. The band they hired for the night is succeeding in making the usually upright people attending those events move on their feet, and the stern affair turned a bit more joyful tonight, perhaps because Magnus left the organization of it in Maureen’s capable hands instead of Raphael, who for all his qualities isn’t exactly the best choice when it comes to planning parties.

He takes a sip of his champagne, and his thoughts take him back to that same party, almost exactly two years ago. He remembers the bitter taste of disappointment in his throat, the painful clench of his heart as he had waited, hopelessly, for Alec to show up. He remembers the dark whirlwind the night had taken him in, urging him to speak words he had never thought he would when Alec had come home. He remembers the thought, but can’t quite recall what it felt like, the sensation so foreign nowadays that it feels like a mere figment of his imagination.

For better or worse had felt like a distant, faded memory. Today, it feels like an understatement, a mockery of the true magnitude of who and what they are to each other.

Edom has continuously grown in the past two years, and Magnus wonders inwardly if his company, the result of so many hours of tenacious work, maybe reflects his personal wellbeing and set of mind more than he had realized. Since their expansion to Paris, Edom has been thriving, each quarter bringing bigger and bigger figures, and the new line of cosmetics he and Catarina have come up with that came out last spring has defeated all expectations. It is more likely that it is all the result of hard work and a bit of luck, but Magnus likes to think love and happiness had their role to play in this success too.
He chuckles to himself as Ragnor bumps into a distraught waiter as he tries to make Catarina twirl, and takes another sip of champagne. It’s a good thing they didn’t have to count on Ragnor’s social skills to achieve any of what they did in the past two years; he is much better off sticking to the HR department.

Magnus’ phone buzzes in his front pocket and excitement twirls in his stomach but he doesn’t have the time to check it, a polite voice interrupting his benign observation.

“Mr. Lightwood-Bane?”

Magnus swirls on his feet to face the reporter, and smiles politely.

“Mr. Starkweather,” he says, taking the offered hand with a nod. “Are you enjoying the party?”

“Very much so. Congratulations on this last quarter. I’ve heard rumors Edom might be introduced to the stock market soon?”

Magnus shrugs, hiding the true response this question should entail by taking another sip of champagne. “Rumors?” he parrots tauntingly. “Interesting.”

“Come on,” Hodge replies, a shrewd glint in his eyes. “You must have a bit of a clue.”

If anyone does, it should be him, Magnus thinks but doesn’t say. As much as he doesn’t take care of the financial part of the business, leaving it to Raphael, he still has both feet in it, whether he wants it or not. He is the CEO, after all, and Edom flourishes thanks to the decisions he takes, with the help of his friends and advisers.

He is about to reply, something evasive enough that it will open a door for him to change the subject, but can’t get a word out before they are interrupted by Alec storming in, cheeks slightly flushed and breaths staggering.

“I’m so sorry, love,” he utters hastily. “I swear I was on time, but when I dropped the twins at my mother’s, Eko started fussing as I was leaving, and then Ezra started fussing because his brother was, so I had to calm them down. And of course Ezra took the opportunity to drool all over my shirt so I had to change. It’s a good thing I had packed another one just in case because I know your diabolical sons.”

He expels a quick breath and seems to realize he provided quite a chaotic entrance as well as interrupted Magnus in the middle of a rather formal conversation because he smiles apologetically and leans in to press a kiss to his temple. “Hey, gorgeous,” he murmurs for Magnus’ ears only. “I missed you.”

Magnus chuckles, reaching out to cup his cheek. “Hey, beautiful,” he whispers back. “I missed you too.”

He stares for probably a moment too long before he turns back to Hodge, who is standing awkwardly at the side, and slips a hand to Alec’s lower back. “Darling, you remember Mr. Starkweather from Forbes Magazine, right?”

“Oh course!” Alec exclaims, reaching out to offer a hand to the journalist. “I read your portrait on the women of Wall Street last week. It was fascinating.”

Hodge preens at the praise, as if he doesn’t fully understand that Alec’s compliment was more targeted at the women featured in the article rather than him. Magnus manages to stop himself short of snorting. The effect a simple flattery can have on a man, and his ability to take it for
himself, is really something else.

Hodge seems about to continue his impromptu interview but is cut off once again by Raphael, Catarina and Ragnor joining them.

“Alec!” Catarina greets cheerfully as she pulls him into a strong hug. She’s probably had too much champagne already, Magnus ponders to himself, but she looks radiant, her smile lighting up the whole room. “I can’t believe you didn’t bring along my favorite nephews.”

“They’re not ready to take over Magnus’ company just yet,” Alec replies with a smirk.

Magnus nods in agreement. “Give them a few years.”

“Considering your own proficiency, just a couple of years should suffice,” Ragnor chimes in, voice heavy with his usual sarcasm.

Magnus glares at him, but softens as soon as Alec’s fingers skim lightly against his own before he intertwines them together, thumb rubbing against Magnus’.

“Be careful then Ragnor, it might take them half that to outdo you,” Alec retorts.

“Six months at best,” Magnus offers generously.

Ragnor rolls his eyes. “You two were made for each other,” he grumbles, but there is a fondness to his tone that belies his true feelings.

“You asked for it, babe,” Catarina chuckles, patting her husband’s shoulder in mock comfort.

Ragnor’s answering grunt makes Alec chuckle, and Magnus turns to look at him, transfixed for a moment by the picture he is painting. Raphael’s reply is lost to his ears, just as much as Catarina’s following chortle. Instead, he focuses on Alec. The light crinkles around his eyes, the discreet grey hairs flecked at his temple, his lips curled into an easy grin that widens when his eyes dart to Magnus and find his own already looking back. He looks as beautiful now than he did seventeen years ago, more beautiful, perhaps.

Because he looks happy, and that has always been Magnus’ favorite look on him. He suspects it will continue to be for all the years to come, even more so after having seen how he looks when crestfallen and struck with burden and grief.

This, this love, this moment in time, this family they created, of blood and of kinship, this is all that Magnus ever wanted, all he ever dreamed of. But the time for reveries is over.

There is no dream to be dreamt, no prayer to whisper, no gut-wrenching hope to help himself sleep at night. For none of Magnus’ dreams are ever as good as this.

Alec tugs on his hand gently, and when Magnus meets his eyes again, they are mischievous and equally tender. “Can I steal you away for a dance, husband?”

Magnus’ eyebrows jump happily at the pet name, and he casts a quick, apologetic glance at Hodge, who stands awkwardly at the side. He points a finger at his friends, “They are as much to blame for anything related to Edom as I am,” he says with a smile. “Ragnor aside, they can answer all your questions. He could answer them too, but he’s an incorrigible liar.”

“Only when it’s about being your friend,” Ragnor retorts without missing a beat.
Magnus ignores him and squeezes Alec’s hand gently, grinning. “Let’s go, husband.”

Alec nods and tugs him along to the dancefloor, spinning him around smoothly so that Magnus ends up in his arms, tucked against his chest.

Magnus grins, slipping a hand against his hip and the other in Alec’s. The band is playing a slow song, the singer’s voice clear and quiet and yet powerful all at once. Her voice rolls across the room, enveloping them in sorrowful waves, but Magnus can’t bring himself to feel the melancholy of the song in his heart, not when his husband is tugged closely against him, his cheek leaning against Magnus’ temple as they spin in slow, delicate circles.

Alec’s hand is warm on his back, tethering him to this reality Magnus doesn’t want to escape anymore. His lips brush against the shell of Magnus’ ears as he murmurs, “If I fall asleep, just pinch me or something.”

Magnus stifles a laugh in Alec’s neck, his shaking shoulders betraying him. “You’re going to have to fight through the exhaustion, babe, but don’t worry, I will catch you if you fall.”

Alec hums, presses a tender kiss to his temple. “I know you will,” he says, voice layered with affection. “I love you.”

Magnus’ heart clenches, quickens, and then settles again. “I love you too.”

He remembers a time when these words felt tarnished, outdated, taken for granted. They hold a whole new power now, the weight of their response to the universe, to the pain, the grief, the endless sorrow.

In the grand scheme of things, in the incessant struggle of life, they have fought their fair share. They have ached long enough. They took their reasons to be bitter, to be sad and angry, and they made something else out of it, something better. Something happy.

They fought for all the wrong reasons, feared loneliness and despair for terrible ones, but they found the right ones to stay, the ones that matter and that feel like a whole other world under Magnus’ fingertips, the gold of Alec’s wedding band made slightly rougher by the years, just like them. They don’t have the innocence of their first days anymore, and they have long lost the youthfulness of the love they shared. Instead, it grew stronger with every hardship, deeper with every obstacle, and although Magnus is certain there will be more to come, more fights to fight, more shattered hopes and more struggles they can’t have control over, in this moment in time, this awakened dream they can claim for themselves, he knows one thing with absolute certainty: Tonight, they won.

And so they dance on the threshold of the past they have cast away, on the knowledge that if their broken hearts won’t ever heal quite completely, they find solace in the other’s.

And so they rest, in the present that doesn’t wear the glooming promise of the expiry of their passion anymore.

And so they march, toward their infinity together. And it does, after all, feel like a certain kind of victory.

Chapter End Notes
We told you it was a story about how to fall in love all over again. Winky face.

There are no words to say how grateful we are for all of you who followed along through this journey. It's been overwhelming at times, rewarding at others, and undoubtedly incredible for us.
We started talking about writing LINAVM over two years ago, and it was a long and emotional process, but we finally made it and... wow. What an adventure it has been.

Thank you to all of you, for your reactions, your comments, your overall support. We weren't expecting it when we started planning a story filled with such dark angst, but you're still here and we're grateful.

We are on Twitter @_L_ecrit and @jwrites_ and we'll see you around... maybe for some extras.

all the love,
lu & jackie

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!