a cold night for good deeds

by theprophetlemonade

Summary

[“There’s this thing that you do,” Alec says, exasperated. “This power you have that makes you look indestructible.”

“You know that’s not true,” says Magnus, his breath warm against the cut of Alec’s jaw.

“I do,” replies Alec, “But even then … there are times when I’m not so sure.”]

1992, New York, a city hanging on to politically-tinged Cold War feelings. Alec Lightwood is a Corporate - a superhero for hire - jostling with a secret identity, holding on to a sense of a normal life, and the fact vigilantes keep turning up murdered in the gutters with no explanation.

Things can only get worse when Magnus - an investigative journalist - starts peeling back Alec’s carefully-crafted mask … and then there’s the mysterious vigilante with the power to move things with his mind who keeps turning up wherever Alec goes - Alec just can’t cut a break.
A *neonoir slow-burn superheroes AU* about identity, truth, and falling in love without knowing someone’s real name (ft. everyone has superpowers because I couldn’t help myself).

**Notes**

Hello! I'm so pleased to finally share the reason why I haven't published any fic this year ... I have been writing this since January 2018 and over 400,000 words later (I never learn my lesson), I'm ready to rip off the band-aid. This is a Malec neonoir superheroes AU, an amalgamation of my every aesthetic and favourite trope: neon and noir, superpowers and love squares, identity crises and horror, politics and the most delicious, excruciating slow burn love I've ever written. There's a little bit of everything ... and hopefully it's all stuff you haven't seen from me before.

To accompany the fic, [here](#) is my inspo playlist, full of synth and electronica and strange dreamlike nightmares.

My upmost thanks to my beta, Kay, who took on the monumental task of editing this for me. I did not deserve you and the effort you put into polishing this for me.

Thank you also to everyone on Twitter who has supported this fic and encouraged the last few months of writing (and complaining that it will never be done). I appreciate your support as always and couldn't do this without you.

This fic has been pre-written (with just a few scenes left to add here and there) so will be updating regularly. I've already written the ending. I hope you would like me to join me for the journey there. It's gonna be a doozy.

Without further ado, let me introduce you to Sentinel and Nightlock. Enjoy.
a cold night for good deeds

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Qui dedit benificium taceat; narrat qui accepit ( let him who has done a good deed be silent; let him who has received it tell it ).

This is a blood-on-the-sidewalk sort of city; Alec has always believed that much. A grey and moody city, steeped in constant cloud and rain and dirty nighttime, hanging on to politically-tinged Cold War feelings, even twenty years after the fact.

Alec seeks cover from the downpour on a fire escape that could be any other fire escape, but the rain drips through the metal grates, cold and shivering. On his tongue, he tastes rust and iron, and it matches the purpling bruises that spread like oil up his ribcage.

He’s at least five stories up, and the alley below is filtered through white noise. The sheets of rain make it hard to see the pot-holed asphalt, even for someone with as keen a sense of sight as Alec. The wind, too, is unforgiving, funneled through city streets, wild and unpredictable enough that each gust catches Alec by surprise. He grits his teeth against it.

It’s a cold night for crime. Alec hopes the weather might put a damper on the chatter of the police radio, but he’s been in this gig long enough to know that’s not the case. The city sleeps and wakes in restlessness. He’s already had to intervene in one knife fight more than he would’ve liked, tonight. There’s a bruise blooming on the point of his elbow that is giving him particularly grief. Sometimes, he thinks it’s almost like people know exactly where to hit him to get through his armour.

Someone’s left their washing out, strung across the width of the alleyway on a telephone wire, sodden and flapping around in the wind like sheets of newspaper. Alec wonders if he should tell a neighbour - have it be his good deed for the night - but he glances up and there must be fifty apartments alone crammed into the grey-stone building opposite him, and he wouldn’t know where to start knocking on doors.

Instead, he curls into the poor shelter of the fire escape and busies himself with prodding at his
side, black gloved hands poking at black Kevlar armour, where his body is tender. He might have broken a rib; he digs his fingers in just below his armpit and winces. It’s not the worst harm he’s ever done to himself, but it still hurts.

His sharp intake of breath registers across the communications bud implanted in his ear.

“**Alec?**” comes a familiar voice. It’s Isabelle; it always is; it’s never been anyone else. “**Are you alright?**”

“Yeah,” says Alec, and he wonders how well Izzy might hear him over the thunder of driving rain beating the streets into submission. “It’s nothing. I’m fine.”

“You almost home?” Izzy asks, even though Alec knows full well that she has a screen in front of her that flashes with his location on a map of the city’s veins. She could pinpoint his position down to this very fire escape, if she so wished. It’s not why she asks.

“Almost,” replies Alec, “I’ll start heading back. There’s going to be … paperwork.”

“**Don’t worry about that,**” Izzy says. Alec hasn’t tried to hide the fatigue in his voice, and she can probably hear it. He’s transparent when it comes to her, and no mask he wears across his eyes will ever stop her seeing straight through him, even when she’s little more than a voice in his ear. “*Mom and dad won’t even be thinking about that tonight. Debriefing will be tomorrow instead. Jace just got back, and he’s … made a typical Jace mess.*”

Alec *tsks*, unfurling himself from his crouched position. The rain feels like it’s softened, but he can still hear it pounding into the concrete, a snare drum beat on the armour on his shoulders and on the black polycarbon of the quiver on his back - but it’s the drilling rain upon his mask that doesn’t quite match what he’s seeing, so he stands up, scanning the alleyway.

“A ‘typical Jace mess’ always becomes *my* mess,” Alec grumbles, but then he adds, a little more gently, “Is he alright?”

“**Fine,**” Izzy says, and he imagines her with her heels up on her desk, rolling her eyes. “**Not a scratch on him and grinning like he just won the Superbowl. And he won’t shut up about it, of course. I’ve locked him out of the office because there’s not enough room in here for both me and his ego.**”
“Was Muse out with him?”

“She has a name, Alec,” Izzy laments with an exasperated sigh. “But no, she wasn’t. It was her night off tonight, so it’s just a Jace mess, and not a Jace-and-Clary mess, thank God. Mom and dad will go easy on him if it’s just him.”

“I almost wish they wouldn’t,” Alec mutters, but his attention is elsewhere, and in his ear, he hears Izzy shift, aware of the tiny change in his tone. He imagines her sitting up straight in her chair.

The rain has stopped, but Alec can still feel it on the sliver of bare skin along his jaw, like a distant memory. He can taste it, beneath the wrought iron and blood on his tongue: the city’s petrichor, not born of grass, but made of sodden newspapers and fast food and an aging sewer system. It’s not pleasant, but it’s familiar.

It’s still raining; he just can’t see it. His skin prickles and his stomach clenches around something nauseous.

“Alec?” Izzy asks in his ear, concerned. Alec scans the alleyway with hawk-sharp eyes, but sees nothing. He presses on his mask at the point between his eyebrows and fiddles with his compound bow with itching fingers.

“It’s Veil. She’s nearby,” he explains.

“I’ll switch our radio frequency,” says Izzy; he hears her typing frantically on her end, fingers flying over her keyboard with effortless ease as she takes them off-the-record. “Okay, hermano. We’re good.”

If Izzy were anybody else, they wouldn’t get away with this, Alec knows. Everything he does, every arrow he nocks, every stutter in his heartbeat, every street he steals down is catalogued, from the moment he puts on his suit to the moment he takes his mask off at the end of a heavy night. Those are the rules; they’ve never been the rules, not when the person paying his bills wears a three-piece suit and sits in Congress all day, passing laws for people he’s never met.

Alec Lightwood is a Corporate. It should really be the first line of his resume, seeing as it all but defines him. It certainly explains the bruises and the broken rib.
Alec Lightwood is a *Corporate*. And so is Izzy, and Jace, and Clary, and his parents too. Corporate heroes with government sponsorship, doing Congress’ dirty work in the places where the long arm of the law just won’t reach. Keeping records of their activity is paramount; no senator wants to be caught out by the illicit activity of what his constituents’ tax dollars are paying for.

There are, of course, ways around the record-keeping, especially when you’re Izzy. It’s easy enough to turn Alec’s tracker on and off, to switch the frequency of their radio channel, and have it appear on the end-of-the-night paperwork as a blip in the system. They’ve been doing it for months now, if not years.

If Alec has been blessed - or cursed - with superpowers, then he’s going to do good with them when he can. It’s not as often as he would like, but under the cover of dark, hiding him from prying eyes … he *can* entertain a knife fight or two to retrieve a woman’s purse, every now and again.

“Thanks, Iz,” says Alec. He strains to listen for the sound of footsteps, but he hears nothing beyond the distant hum of invisible rain and wailing sirens far away. There is no commotion nearby. It settles the twitch in his nerves, but he doesn’t quite relax. He’s not a fool. “I don’t think she’s in trouble. I can’t hear anything. I’m going to see if I can find her.”

“Find who?” says someone on the level of the fire-escape above Alec’s head. His hand lunges for his quiver in a split second, fingertips on an arrow, bow prone in his grip - but he relents when he looks up.

There’s a woman and a man standing on the grate above his head: she’s in a dark blue leather jacket, and he’s in a cowl and a supersuit, looking far more the vigilante part than her.

But they’re both in masks, just like Alec.

“Veil,” says Alec. He lets the hand clutching his bow fall to his side, but he doesn’t let it go. The man and the woman make their way down the fire-escape stairs to Alec’s level, looking slightly better for wear than him. “Wolfsbane.”

“Sentinel,” says the man, a lopsided grin splitting his face. Alec gives him the once over, but he’s just a man in a mask this evening, nothing more. “How’s it going?”

*Sentinel*. That’s Alec. Or - it isn’t Alec, because Alec and Sentinel are not the same person, and Alec knows this. They do, however, inhabit the same skin and the same armour, and Veil and
Wolfsbane don’t know anyone called Alec; they only know the archer in a black mask.

“Fine,” replies Alec. He likes Wolfsbane, and he thinks Wolfsbane likes him too, because he’s always cordial and friendly, even when he’s limping along rooftops and dripping blood after one-too-many close calls. He’s a bit older than Alec - a bit older than most of the people Alec knows who don masks and sneak out into the night to try and do good deeds - but the weather he has worn has not made him cold and hard and unforgiving. His powers may be impressive, but his jokes are always terrible.

Veil, on the other hand, is the pricklier of the two of them, but Alec can never really blame her.

She’s not a Corporate, not like Alec. Wolfsbane isn’t either.

It’s complicated.

“Anything exciting tonight?” asks Wolfsbane, leaning back against the railings of the fire escape with ease. His smile is cheery, a sharp white and against his brown skin, but he folds his strong arms across his chest, muscles rippling beneath his jacket, and Alec knows he’s not nearly as laid-back as he seems. “Or can you still not talk to us about it?”

“You know I can’t,” says Alec, used to this line of teasing. “Against the rules.”

“Against the rules,” parrots Veil, rolling her dark eyes. “You Corporates are all the same. Buzzkills.”

“And how many Corporates do you know?”

Veil fixes him with a sharp look.

“You, for starters,” she says, flat, “And we just saw Arkangel down by the river. Making a mess, as usual. Didn’t let us help.”

Alec grits his teeth, but it’s more out of despair over Jace - Arkangel - and his nonsense than anything Veil might say.
“Arkangel’s on record, you know that,” Alec frowns, “Anything you say or do when you’re around him gets put on paper. It’s … just safer if we don’t get involved with y-”

“And yet here we are,” grins Wolfsbane, gesturing at Alec. “Against the rules.”

“Yeah, well …” Alec starts, but there’s light in Wolfsbane’s eyes, beneath his cowl. He seems genuinely amused at Alec’s fluster, his teasing fond. “This is different.”

“What do you think would happen if your bosses found out you were fraternising with vigilantes?” Veil says, her lips quirking up at the corners. “You’d be out of the job, huh?”

“Mom would have your balls mounted on the wall,” says Izzy, in his ear. “And Dad would give you that look. The neutral face of disappointment. You know the one.”

Alec scowls, Wolfsbane throws his head back and laughs, and Veil cannot hide her smirk.

“You man in the chair giving you grief?” asks Wolfsbane with a spry nod of his head.

“Woman in the chair!” Izzy protests loudly. Alec winces, closing one eye as he tries turns his head away from her voice in his ear.

“… Something like that,” he mutters. The sound of rain creeps closer and the cold is beginning to slither beneath his suit, even if he still can’t see it; only for so long can Izzy’s gear can keep him warm when the city is trying its damnedest to force him off the streets.

“Is it still raining?” Alec asks then, nodding towards the black and rumbling sky. He can hear the downpour, but still his eyes - or someone else - are playing tricks on him. His stomach feels tight, but Veil’s powers aren’t only to make him nauseous.

“Yeah,” Veil smirks. She tugs the leather glove from her hand and holds her palm out to Alec. Her nails are nicely manicured and she has a pretty ring on her finger. Her brown skin is smooth and not callous-worn like his. Alec always notes what he can about her, but he knows it’s of little point. She’ll never be foolish enough to reveal her identity to him.
And so, Alec does the same, tugging off his glove and pressing his fingers into her proffered palm for a split second of contact. It’s not like a spark, but he does feel it in his stomach, dropping out from within him, all that dizzying pressure emptying from his insides as soon as skin touches skin.

In a second, he is soaked to the bone.

The clouds seem to give way to all the rain at once, and Alec has to blink back the water that streams into his eyes. Veil’s curly hair is wet now, her jacket slick with the shine of rainwater. Wolfsbane looks much the same, absolutely drenched with raindrops pearling in his dark beard, but with streaks of watery red covering his knuckles and his knees.

It’s been a rough night for both of them too.

And they both look tired now, and they might look more tired still; Alec never quite knows if he’s seeing the full picture around them, or if it’s just what Veil wants him to see. He can count the number of people he knows with powers on his two hands, but he’s read a lot of files, and still Veil might be the most dangerous one. The thought of someone playing with the things that he can see without him ever realising makes him nervous.

Alec’s just grateful that she doesn’t completely hate him, even if she might hate all the rest of the Corporates out there. Best to be on her good side. Best to be on the good side of anyone who can cast illusions without even having to snap their fingers.

You can trust me, he wants to tell her then, but he knows it would be wrong. He doesn’t like making promises he cannot keep. They might be two sides of the same coin, but they’re still at odds: he’s a Corporate and she’s not, she’s a vigilante hero, and however much Alec might insist things are changing and he’s not like his parents, she has no obligation to believe him. It’s smart; she’s smart; Alec is glad of it.

He doesn’t want to see either of them hurt, and he knows what happens when people like Veil and Wolfsbane trip up and make mistakes that they cannot come back from.

It’s enough to settle for what they have now: a camaraderie balanced on a knife-edge, upon which the whole city exists that they would be Hell-bent to escape. They know that Alec won’t report them to the authorities. Alec knows that they give him more time than he deserves. He doesn’t know either of their names or either of their faces, and they don’t know his, and it doesn’t matter. They all fight to keep people safe on the streets; they all share the responsibility of powers.
One day, perhaps, they will be on the same team. That’s one of Alec’s far-fetched dreams.

“You done for the night, Sentinel?” asks Wolfsbane then, studying Alec.

Alec hunches his shoulders beneath his roaming eyes. He hoists his quiver up on his back, feeling heavier than it did before, despite being near-empty of arrows.

“Yeah,” says Alec, “I was … waiting for the rain to stop.”

Wolfsbane has many gifts, and Alec knows that one of them means he can smell the blood that Alec tastes in his mouth and that blooms as bruises beneath the cocoon of his armour. Hell, Alec wouldn’t be surprised if Wolfsbane could hear his fractured ribs creaking and groaning.

He’s thankful that Wolfsbane says nothing. It’s not the sort of relationship they have, even if Alec thinks that the person Wolfsbane is beneath the mask might really care. He has always seemed like that sort of person, a kind person, and Alec has known him a while now.

“We won’t keep you then,” says Wolfsbane. He cranes his head back, out from the shelter offered by the fire escape. He closes his eyes behind his mask and takes a deep breath and Alec watches, intensely. “It’ll stop soon.”

“Can you … smell that?” Alec asks.

Veil snickers and Wolfsbane grins, broad and white and blinding. It cuts through the gloom.

“No,” he says, “Just checked the weather forecast this morning, is all. Don’t need your powers for everything, son.”

Alec flushes, glad that his mask conceals some of his face. He clears his throat promptly and makes a show of adjusting his gear, shortening his bow and clipping it back on his hip.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he says, pushing away from the brick wall he has been hiding against. He
moves to slip past Wolfsbane and jump down into the alleyway below, but is stopped by the man’s broad hand clapping him on his shoulder. Even through his armour, the touch feels warm.


“Say hi to Arkangel from me,” says Veil, “Tell him to stop hogging the limelight, huh? He’s putting us all out of business.”

“I’ll try,” says Alec. He manages a barely-there smile, but he means it. He steps up onto the railing of the fire escape and drops down into the night.

Alec doesn’t get much sleep that night, but he expected it. By the time he’s been debriefed by his parents back at headquarters, by the time he’s allowed Izzy to stitch him back together where punches have broken his skin, and by the time he’s cleaned up Jace’s mess, it’s dawn, even if the city would protest otherwise. The sun rises low and tardy in the sky, like a man begging not to wake on a Monday morning, and the light it casts is filtered through a veil of smog and smoke and grime, somehow dirty as it dapples Alec’s skin through his curtains.

He finds an hour or two of restless sleep before his alarm clock goes off around eight, but he feels worse after waking than before he collapsed into bed. His body aches and every step is agony on his cracked rib; he can almost imagine it scratching against his lungs, pinching each breath he tries to take, rubbing him raw.

The worst part is: it’s nothing new. He’s dragged himself to work in worse shape than this; he’s well-practiced in gritting his teeth and not letting anyone know something’s wrong.

In the daytime, he works for a paper: the Daily Tribunal, one of the broadsheets, not one of the tabloids, and that’s an important distinction to make. It’s not the hardest job in the world - he’s not a journalist; he just works in finance and analytics, which is rarely more than a 9-to-5 commitment - but it’s still fast-paced in a city that never relents. They go to print at four every morning, and if not everything is at the press by then, it can be Hell to pay.

Five minutes just to breathe is a hard thing to find. Alec already feels exhausted and the week hasn’t even begun.
Coffee doesn’t help, even when he makes it as black as he can manage and the burn is near acrid down his throat. He tries to eat, but his stomach protests and he cannot manage more than a bite of some pastries Izzy must’ve left on his kitchen counter sometime late last night or early this morning. There’s this pressure in his temples too, bulging against the front of his skull that feels like the worst hangover he’s ever had, multiplied by a thousand; it’s a side effect from Veil’s illusions, but probably not made much better by the lack of sleep and the exhaustion slithering through his bones. It’s nothing out of the ordinary.

It would be easier if he didn’t have a job, Alec knows this. If he didn’t have a job, maybe he would get more than two hours of sleep a night. He doesn’t need to have one: Jace doesn’t. Clary has school part-time and Izzy works full-time at headquarters. He gets a paycheck once a month that is not terrible, even if it bares the signatures of both his parents and the stamp of Idris at the top. He has a nice apartment in the middle of the city. He lives comfortably. The hard skin on his hands is, now, just simply interesting.

But the thought of spending his days, as well as his nights, on missions he never knows the benefactor of, unable to ask questions, always on the record, is somehow quietly sickening. When he first started - longer ago than he’d care to admit - it didn’t bother him so much. That was before he met Veil and Wolfsbane, before Clary started at Idris, before he learned what the people were saying on the streets about supers - be they Corporate or vigilante heroes, it doesn’t matter.

Sentinel gets the night. Alec gets the day. That’s the deal he made with his parents, even if it involved a great deal of bloodshed. Alec gets the day; Alec puts on a button-down and takes off the mask; Alec rides the subway to an office in midtown; Alec gets to sit down at a computer and take coffee breaks and strategically use up his twenty-one days of vacation a year; Alec pretends to be normal. Alec is used to it.

It never quite works. He’s on the subway and he wonders if people can see right through him; he wonders if he’s limping too much or if there are bruises blooming like Rorschach marks where people can see or if he just exudes exhaustion, and it’s obvious why. He tries not to meet anyone’s eyes, and that’s a hard task in a city of millions, but Alec has grown rather good at it. He might not have the power to be invisible, but he’s perfected it in every other way.

People hate superheroes.

Hell, Alec can’t remember the last time that word was even used to describe what he does; it was probably before his time, when people still wrote comic books about supers, and didn’t post placards for their arrest and murder on every streetlamp on every block. People hate superheroes: Corporates, vigilantes, anyone who wears a mask. And who wouldn’t - how much trust can you place in people who operate outside the law; in people who hide their faces; in people who could kill with the snap of their fingers, and sometimes less.
The subway rumbles; Alec pretends to lose his balance like everybody else. The woman in the seat across from him has a broadsheet in her hands that Alec knows the guy two-desks-over at work did the editorial spread for; on the front page, there’s another terrible headline, another blurry photograph of someone who is probably Jace.

**CORPORATE VIGILANTE CAUSES CHAOS IN MIDTOWN CAR CHASE, LEAVING TWELVE HOSPITALISED AND THREE DEAD**

Alec is used to the slander. He’s good at keeping Sentinel out of the public eye.

It doesn’t really matter.

Newspapers in the city are slanderous. The TV runs segments about unmasking vigilantes alongside the election primaries on the news at six. On the radio, President Bush talks about banning HIV and banning supers in the same God-awful breath. Effigies of Alec’s colleagues, of Alec’s family, get burned in the street, and the people higher up the food chain have the nerve to ask Alec to run point when the riots get out of hand, even when those rioters want him dead.

Last night, Jace – as Arkangel – stopped a high-speed car chase, rescuing a girl from the back of an SUV and killing her three kidnappers in the process, yet all that matters is the cost on the city council to fill in the resulting potholes.

It’s a messy thing for a messy city: protecting people who don’t want your protection. Trying to do good when it only makes people nervous. Sometimes, Alec thinks, it’s not quite worth it.

The subway rumbles to a halt at Alec’s stop. He jostles through the crowds, shoulder-first, offering quiet apologies to the people he squeezes past. Every nudge is winding on his ribs, still twinging from last night’s knife fight, but the scowl knitted into his brow is no different to anyone else battling the underground this early in the morning. He blends easily into the background.

“Rough night?”

Alec’s eyes fly up from his computer screen - and for a moment, he thinks someone knows about
his late night dalliances - but it’s only Simon Lewis leaning over the top of his office cubicle with the most obnoxious grin on his face, but a cup of coffee held out to Alec in his hand.

“No,” says Alec curtly, taking the coffee anyway. He sniffs it wearily - Simon has a tendency for overloading his peace offerings with milk and that hazelnut syrup that he likes - but it just smells like sugary jet fuel, which is fine by Alec. “… Why?”

“You look terrible,” Simon says, folding his arms on top of Alec’s partition and cocking his head, “I mean - I’m sorry, I mean, you always look great, you’re a good-looking guy, don’t get me wrong, I just - y’know, you just look - you always look a little angry, but today you look like you’re just extra pissed and - I’ll just shut up now, right?”

Please do,” says Alec, fixing him with a flat look, but returning his gaze to his computer screen. He types a few words, but Simon doesn’t budge. “Thanks for the coffee,” he says, in a hope to make him leave. No such luck.

“Not a problem,” Simon smiles. “So … you’re not going to tell me what happened?”

Alec blinks slowly.

“No.”

“Not even if I bat my eyelashes?”

“Definitely not.”

“Well, damn, Alec, I guess I’ll just have to take that coffee back. Here, I thought we were friends.”

Simon reaches for the coffee cup, but Alec slaps his hand away with reflexes that make Simon start. It’s a routine of theirs, of which Alec is not sure when - or why - it started. Simon opens his mouth to say something, but Alec gets there first.

“Fine,” he says, keeping his fingers curled tightly and protectively around the Styrofoam cup. “It was Jace. He got in trouble with the police and I had to … bail him out.”
“D aaa mn,” Simon sings, nodding his head as if he understands perfectly, “Did he get arrested again? That’s insane - actually, no, you know what? I don’t even think I’m surprised. I’ve only met your brother, like, what, twice? But I totally see it. His head is so far up his own ass, it serves him right - no offense, of course.”

“Yeah, well,” Alec mutters, “Didn’t do much to deflate his ego.”

“Hmph,” Simon snorts, “Well, I’m glad. Not about Jace, obviously - he needs to be taken down a peg or two - but like … you’ve been walking around like a zombie for the last forever, like you haven’t been getting any sleep or whatever, and I was wondering if maybe you’d started seeing someone? But no, it’s only Jace - not that I’m glad you’re not seeing someone! ‘Cus you like, deserve to be happy, but -” Simon drops his voice to a stage whisper, “-well, it would’ve totally broken Magnus’ heart.”

Alec is good at a lot of things: he’s an expert marksman, he’s almost unbeatable in hand-to-hand combat, and his reflexes are so sharp that he’s dodged his fair share of bullets with his name on in the past. He’s good at not being noticed; he’s good at blending in; he’s good at pretending he doesn’t live a double life, a different person, once the sun goes down, to who he is the day.

Alec is not good at keeping a neutral face whenever Magnus Bane’s name is brought up. It’s a weakness. He knows it. He keeps it under wraps.

He tries to hide the way his face wants to contort behind the rim of the coffee cup, more into a grimace that anything; he takes a sip, but it’s still way too hot. He swallows it anyway.

Simon grins, tongue poking out between his teeth.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Alec says gruffly.

“You might be dense, but you’re not blind, Alec,” Simon retorts with a mischievous grin, “C’mon, Alec, this is me, you can talk to me about this. I’m not gonna say anything! I don’t know why you’re sleeping on this, dude.”

Alec spares a glance around the office, but no-one’s paying attention to this particular conversation; tuning Simon out is a well-practiced art amongst his colleagues. It does little to settle him.
“You see how he is,” Simon whispers dramatically, “I see how he is.”

“It’s not like that,” Alec grumbles, “It’s just how Magnus is. He’s being friendly.”

“Friendly,” says Simon, rolling his eyes. “Right, right. And you’re not grumpy, you’re just perpetually misunderstood.”

“No, I’m definitely grumpy when you’re here. Maybe you should try not being here.”

“I am hurt and wounded,” Simon says, pressing a hand to his chest dramatically. Alec fixes him with another flat, unimpressed stare, one which has been honed far too well. Simon is oblivious to it.

Unlike Alec, Simon is a journalist. Not your traditional guy-with-a-notebook, flinging microphones into people’s faces as they leave courtrooms sort of reporter - Simon definitely doesn’t have the gall or the eloquence for that - but he’s a photojournalist. He takes a lot of photos, especially of the supers, which always puts Alec a little on edge; the camera that is too often slung around his neck is a pressing reminder of the knife-edge Alec runs along. It’s hard to let his guard down around Simon, even if Simon has done nothing wrong.

It’s easier to present a cold shoulder and be a little abrasive. Simon seems to take it in good humour.

He never needs to know that the super with the titanium wings he photographed not even last week is the very same Jace he laughs about now. He doesn’t need to know that it was Arkangel that Alec was bailing out of police custody again last night. The dark is always a better place to be.

The telltale sound of well-soled shoes on the carpet has Alec looking up from his monitor once more, his patience running far too thin for it being before nine in the morning. Simon looks too, and where Alec’s expression softens, Simon’s flits rapidly through cheer, dread, and panic, in very quick succession.

“Magnus!” Simon squawks, leaping back from being sprawled across Alec’s partition, “Hey! Good morning!”
Alec is not the only one in the office looking tired, but Magnus Bane hides it far, far better than Alec. Today, it’s hidden behind tall hair and a crisp button-up and a beautiful black-and-red waistcoat that carves out the fine shape of his back.

He has a pencil tucked behind his ear and a stack of manilla folders under his arm, his shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows. It’s an effortless look, save for the way Alec’s gaze briefly passes over the darker circles beneath Magnus’ eyes.

“Good morning,” Magnus says, raising his eyebrows. His mouth is drawn into a terse line, and Alec imagines his morning so far must’ve been akin to how Alec himself is feeling. “I don’t see much work going on here, Simon.”

“Whatever you’re seeing here is an illusion,” Simon says, waving his hands around in front of Magnus, mimicking magic as he backs away from Alec’s desk. “I’m at my desk. I’m working hard. Your editorial will be on time. The work day is a government-made conspiracy designed to break the American proletariat into submission. Capitalism is hell.”

“I almost agree with you there,” says Magnus. There’s a slight tug in his expression, and the look in his eyes becomes amused. “Doesn’t mean the work doesn’t have to be done. Sadly, we do have a deadline.”

“As if you would let me forget!” Simon calls back.

“Who hires these people?” Magnus laughs lightly. He nods his head at Alec. “Alexander, good morning.”

“Magnus,” Alec offers, a little awkwardly.

Magnus smiles, some warmth creeping into his eyes. He leans into Alec’s partition, as natural as anything.

“How was your weekend, Alexander?” he asks. His thumb and forefinger move to his ear, fiddling with the silver cuff that catches the light.

“Nothing special,” he says with a shrug. He doesn’t really know what else to say, and he can tell by the twitch in Magnus’ face that Magnus might have been hoping for a little more. Alec usually
flounders when it comes to this sort of small talk; he’s reached the point where he might hope Magnus knows it as routine. Alec does better with routine. “Uh … you?”

“Oh, me?” Magnus says, preening at being asked. Alec finds it a little endearing. “Not much to write home about, I must say. Had a late dinner with Captain Garroway on Saturday night, which turned into me staying out far past my bedtime.”

Alec snorts, unable to help himself, and Magnus seems pleased to have made him laugh. It lessens the severity of those purple-dark circles making his face seem hollow.

“But other than that,” Magnus continues breezily, “Recovering from the night before, a couple movies with my cat, a little home cooking … what can I say, I’m a simple man.”

His smile is coy as Alec shakes his head.

“Sure,” Alec acquiesces. An email pops up on his screen from his manager, asking for updates on a report due at the end of the week that Alec hasn’t even had the time to start preparing yet. He sighs, shoulders sagging. The look he shoots Magnus is apologetic. “I’m sorry, I should - I gotta-”

“No worries,” Magnus smiles, stepping back from Alec’s desk. “I shouldn’t be keeping you from work, especially when I’m so hard on Simon. You’re a busy man. I’m also a busy man. Papers don’t publish themselves.”

“I’ll see you around,” says Alec, a little pathetically.

“Yes,” says Magnus, already walking away, but backwards, so that he doesn’t have to look away until he almost walks into another person’s desk, only to expertly avoid it at the last second. “Have a good day, Alexander.”

Alec huffs, but there’s a despairing smile on his lips as he turns back to his computer, rapidly firing off an email to his boss. It takes about thirty seconds for an email from Simon to appear.

From: LewisS@tribunal.org

Subject: not saying I told you but ...
Alec rolls his eyes and closes the email without replying. He has a lot of work to do today, and he doesn’t want to stay late. He has to call in to headquarters tonight, before he heads out on patrol. There’s probably a lot of Jace’s mess still to sort out. His mother will want to call a press conference. Alec - or Sentinel - probably won’t be home ‘til the sunrise. He already feels exhausted, the buoyancy left by Magnus’ friendly smile quickly deflating.

Magnus Bane is a lot of things: he’s the subject of all the office gossip; he’s the sort man that commands attention the moment he walks into a room; he has this way of walking that makes Alec wonder if he can bend the world around him as he pleases. He always has a curious smile and something mischievous in his eyes, as if he’s privy to a joke no-one else has earned the right to share.

Alec doesn’t know him well. He’s beautiful and witty and scathing at times - which Alec can certainly appreciate - but a little bit impossible. He walks in different circles to Alec, and it seems a fleeting chance that whatever life he might lead should cross with Alec’s, maybe once or twice a day, passing each other by in corridors, swapping friendly greetings, Alec trying to suppress a not-quite-professional smile at a subtle innuendo slid easily into conversation. He flirts - and that’s a bravery in itself, the sort that bewilders Alec, because you don’t just get to be a man who likes other men in the workplace these day - not if Reagan and Bush have had anything to say about it.

But Magnus ... Magnus has not been in the city long - a few months at most - and had arrived in the office from out of the blue and amidst a string of senior management firings, the subject of rampant speculation. He had slid right in to his role as a senior editor, effortless and capable, a brilliant journalist with an eye for a great story, and that’s enough to let people turn a blind eye to his extravagance.

It’s something that Alec envies about him: the ease with which Magnus carries himself, talks to people, makes others laugh. He seems like the sort of person who knows his place in the universe and would gallantly present a middle finger to anyone who tried to challenge that, possessing a sure-footedness both admirable and enviable.

He’s also asked Alec out seven times since he started working here. Not that Alec is counting (although Simon might be). Alec has politely - and awkwardly - declined every time and Magnus has taken it in stride, neither offended nor discouraged, his smile always charming, and his next attempt to invite Alec for drinks always just as disarming.

Despite what Simon says, and despite Alec’s seven declinations to dinner, Alec does like Magnus. And maybe a little bit in the way that Simon likes to pretend he does, but, more than that, Magnus is -
Magnus is something normal. A little pleasure that Alec finds in the day-to-day of his life, something that is far and away detached from his night-time endeavours. He doesn’t know Magnus or much about him, and in turn, Magnus doesn’t really know him either, and Alec likes that, the thought that his conversations with Magnus are something that the superpowers he was born with do not get a say in.

Magnus is Alec’s. A friendly face and a distraction, a dalliance on those worse days. Someone who doesn’t know, and will never know, that Alec Lightwood is a superhero.

No-one has called them superheroes for years. If they’re lucky, they’ll get supers; more often than not, it’s Corporates and vigilantes, even if the distinction is rarely made. Alec is Corporate: he works for Idris, an agency for those gifted with abilities, backed and funded by the government and politicians with deep pockets and big-business sponsors. Institutions like Idris have been around for a long time - all the way through the Cold War, dating back further, probably, to the turn of the century when the thought of militarising superpowers for war became an idea presented on the tables of wartime cabinets. At first, it had seemed like a good idea to keep a wrangle on dangerous, empowered people, to have them working for the right side, not for the Germans or the Russians or whoever the country might have hated at the time.

Now -

Well, things have not been the same for a while. The world Alec has grown up in does not spare time for Corporates, and for good reason.

Trust, once broken, often remains shattered.

The Circle saw to that. Corporates that went rogue - not becoming vigilantes, like Veil and Wolfsbane - with itches in their fingers to test powers and test limits and ignore sanctions.

It was before Alec’s time, but the bloody aftermath still remains quite potent. All supers in this city are the same supers. All dangerous. All deadly. All beyond the law. That’s the only public consensus that matters now.

There’s graffiti on the walls of Idris’ headquarters that Alec can make out from half a block away:
it’s red and violent and angry, and there are protesters milling around on the front steps with paint-covered hands, chanting hateful things. It’s not like anyone will arrest them for petty vandalism: not here. Not in this city. They’re a regular feature on the front porch, but as long as they don’t come in the door, Idris is more than happy to ignore their screaming and political demands.

Something threatening rumbles overhead, possibly the thunder, but probably Alec’s dour mood. He slips down an alleyway before he can be intercepted walking up the street; there’s a hatch, leading down into a basement, that he knows well. He’s not foolish enough to walk into headquarters through the front door, especially when he’s not yet in his suit, and there are plenty of back entrances to sneak in, unseen.

The basement is dark and dingy and smells of damp and mould, so Alec doesn’t linger. He scans his biometrics on a keypad hidden by an electrical box, and a door slides open in the wall, revealing a tunnel lit with harsh, white light and the smell of something chemically clean.

It used to be home. He grew up here. He still can’t shake the habit of ducking his head when he passes beneath the all-seeing eye of a security camera, even though Jace and Isabelle long since figured out all the blind spots of Idris’ security.

Alec doesn’t try to sneak in. Idris were probably aware of him approaching halfway down the street; someone, somewhere, sitting behind a computer, has probably been watching the tracker in his suit – stuffed into his holdall – bleep since he left the office.

If Idris wants to know where he is, they’ll know.

Alec hoists his bag up on his shoulder and it makes his ribs twinge. He should probably stop and see the physio before he suits up for the night, but there’s always been a part of him that clings to the dull pain of healing wounds: bruises, blisters, burn-marks, his hands rubbed red raw from stringing his bow in the training hall, finding his mark and in target after target until there’s windburn in a stripe along his cheek where his arrows flew.

The hallways are surprisingly empty. He’s still below ground level, and down here, there are only the labs and the tech department, as well as a few training halls for testing out new gadgets. Upstairs, in the stately and imposing grey-stone building that holds vigil over the streets above, the rooms are oak-panelled and his mother and father’s penthouse office is lit with sconces and a fireplace, rather than sterile electric lights.

Upstairs is the public face: where press conferences are held, where politicians are entertained, where people think Idris keeps a room full of supers, letting them out one at a time on a rota into
the streets, perhaps.

Downstairs is the place Alec knows far better. There’s a dark mark in the centre of the hallway that has yet to be cleaned up – it might be mud or it might be dried blood. From the way it’s smeared, Alec suspects it’s the result of someone staggering in late last night.

He knows Jace wasn’t hurt after yesterday’s escapade, and he’s been told time and time again that his worry over the other supers on their roster is unwarranted and not his jurisdiction, but Alec has always been the sort of person to fret about other people’s safety, especially when he could do something about it.

And what can you do about it? he can imagine his mother asking him. You have work to do. You can’t be at everyone’s beck and call, Alec. Watching their backs is not your problem. You’re Jace’s partner. He’s the only one you should be watching.

It’s not that simple. It’s never been that simple. There are so many more people out there who need his help, even if they’ll never thank him for it.

Alec wrinkles his nose, stepping around the blood stain in the hallway. Izzy’s laboratory is at the end of the corridor and he makes a beeline for it, but it’s then that one of the doors opens behind him, and Underhill pops his head out.

“Hey, Alec,” he calls, and Alec’s shoulders tense before he wills himself to turn around. He likes Underhill. The man has never been anything but pleasant to him, exchanging knowing looks with Alec whenever his father suggests something particularly uncouth or unfair, but he still works at Alec’s parents feet, doing their dirty work.

Alec turns to look at Underhill, so excruciatingly close to the safety of Izzy’s lab.

“Hey,” he says, “What’s the matter? Do you need me?”

“Not me,” says Underhill, having the grace to look guilty at catching Alec, “There’s another debrief about last night in ten minutes, and your father asked me to grab you when you came in. So – I’m sorry.”

Alec flattens his mouth into a firm line and offers up his best shrug. He’s not entirely sure how
convincing it is.

“’S alright,” he says, “Is Jace going?”

“Yeah, I just saw him on his way up in the elevator with Clary,” says Underhill. He pauses. “I’d say I haven’t seen you yet, but –” He gestures behind Alec at the security camera winking on the wall. “All-seeing eye sees all.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Alec sighs, turning around and starting back the way he came. He cannot help but hunch his shoulders as he passes Underhill, whose eyebrows pinch sympathetically. “Someone has to keep Jace from actively hanging himself out to dry. I better go.”

Alec knows how this will go. Jace caused a ruckus last night, but Jace causes ruckuses most nights. It’s nothing that his parents aren’t used to; Robert will chew him out but let him off the hook, and Maryse will call a press conference and spin the story to sweep everything Jace did under the rug. Neither of them will mention how Jace saved someone’s life.

They’ll both probably rip into Alec about how he wasn’t there to keep control of the situation and stop any of it from happening in the first place. Somehow, it’ll be his fault, because they know Jace is reckless, but Alec – Alec should be better. It’s what they expect of him. How could he let them down.

He knows the spiel like the back of his hand or the inside of his mask. He’ll even feel guilty about it, because he knows he was disarming a man with a knife halfway across the city whilst Jace was chasing that car, and he was with Veil and Wolfsbane when Jace was being questioned by the police, and Alec knows he shouldn’t have been.

It’ll be fine. His parents will be disappointed. Both he and Jace will receive a warning, one which will be conveniently forgotten by everyone the next time Jace reoffends. Maryse will take Alec aside after the briefing and tell him that he needs to have a word with his brother. Alec will stay silent, a good soldier, and nod, but -

As if Jace has ever listened to anything Alec has said.

Alec sighs wearily as he steps into the elevator, stabbing the button for the penthouse with more force than necessary. The doors are about to close when a hand flies between them with a shout.

“Alec, hold the doors!”
And then, there’s Isabelle, her dark eyes bright, her heels eye-wateringly tall, and her arms laden with ring binders and case files. Alec frowns, reaching out without saying anything to take the top three folders off the pile before it falls out of her hands.

“Penthouse?” Alec asks, raising an eyebrow at Izzy balancing her paperwork dangerously in one hand and smooths down her skirt against her thigh. Alec looks down at the folders in his hands, but all of the are stamped with aggressive red <confidential> in big, blocky letters. He wonders if that includes or precludes him.

“Yep, mom and dad called me up to the gavel too,” she says, with a fed-up sort of sigh. She rounds her mouth and inspects her lipstick in her reflection in the elevator as the doors close again and the whole thing stutters as they rise towards the top floor.

“So, it’s serious then,” Alec mutters. “Are they mad?”

“No more than usual,” Izzy replies, “Dad is more pissed about it being off-duty than anything else. He doesn’t really care what Jace did, just that he did it, and we’re not getting paid for it. Mom is – well, mom. She’ll want to know where you were and why you weren’t watching Jace’s back and keeping him from being an idiot.”

“I don’t think anyone can keep him from being an idiot.”

“Trust me, I’ve tried telling her that many, many times. Have you decided what you’re going to tell her?”

“The usual,” says Alec, “Veil and Wolfsbane stay off the record, that’s the deal. I’ll tell them Jace ran off and I couldn’t keep up with him. It’s mostly the truth.”

“In your defence, he can fly,” Izzy says, her red mouth twitching at the corners. “I think you have a pretty solid excuse for being left behind.”

Alec grumbles in response and Izzy just smiles, returning her eyes to the door and shifting her stack of paperwork in her arms again. The elevator hisses to a halt at their floor: a wide corridor, carpeted with thick, expensive rugs, and low, far-friendlier light. Izzy shoots a look at Alec over her shoulder as she takes the lead.
Alec rolls his eyes and sighs, but follows in her footsteps, his chin pressed against his chest and his shoulders hitched.

The debriefing goes exactly as he expected, and Alec’s not sure if that’s a blessing or a curse. Jace is his usual scathing self, meeting Robert’s every criticism with a scoff or a stony expression, and Clary – who had found Jace last night, when it should’ve been Alec – tries her best to get a word in edgeways in Jace’s defense, but is quickly silenced by Robert’s harsh shout.

Maryse schedules a press conference for the morning – neither Arkangel or Sentinel will have to attend; they’ll have someone from the publicity department host it – but the way she glares at Alec makes him feel remarkably guilty anyway, somehow wondering if she’s mad at him for not being able to attend and having a secret identity to keep.

Isabelle sits at Maryse’s desk and diligently types up a transcript of the debriefing and says nothing, but she does meet Alec’s eyes once or twice – once, to smirk at something Jace says, an I-told-you-so sort of look, and the second, a look of pity when Maryse hands Alec a nondescript manilla envelope, informing him that it’s their next mission, the closest thing to human contact he gets from her these days.

Alec doesn’t open the envelope in the office. He knows better than that. He just stands soldier-stiff until he’s dismissed, and then walks out of there as swiftly as he can, not waiting for Jace or Clary to rush after him.

They catch up with him in the elevator anyway.

“Man,” says Jace, palming his hand through his hair and slicking it back against his head. He leans back against the wall of the elevator, the back of his skull clunking against the mirrors. “Will they ever get off my back?”

“Will you ever stop running off into danger?” asks Alec, not looking up from the ground. He hears Jace suck in a sharp breath.

“Woah, okay, pot calling kettle,” says Jace, turning to Alec, “You were totally okay with us
splitting up last night, don’t try pretending that this was all my fault.”

“It was mostly your fault,” remarks Clary. Alec doesn’t look at her either. “But, if we hadn’t have gone, well – it would’ve ended a lot worse for a lot of people, I’m sure. I think we got off pretty lightly.”

A sharp retort arrives on Alec’s tongue, something like: you two did get off lightly, but he doesn’t open his mouth to let it out. He fiddles with the envelope in his hands instead, turning it over in his fingers. He can only imagine something terrible is inside, and he’s not sure if that’s Maryse’s idea of a punishment or not. Terrible probably doesn’t even cross her mind when doling out duties.

“Yeah, well,” grumbles Jace, “It’d be nice if we didn’t all get called up to the principal’s office every time something like this happens.” He folds his arms across his chest, but he looks less like he’s angling for a fight and more like he’s mulling over a sour taste in his mouth, realising that Alec has a point.

“Like –” he continues, gesturing with his hand, “What do they expect? We can hold our own out there, they don’t need to worry all the damn time. We’re gonna be fine. Who cares that it’s off-mission or whatever – it’s gotta be done.”

Clary murmurs her agreement with Jace, as the elevator dings and they bustle their way out, on their way towards the training hall for some warm-ups before night patrol. But Alec lingers in the back of the elevator, until the doors close again. He doesn’t move.

Jace isn’t wrong, but he’s not right either. He just – he just never sees things as Alec sees them, has no reason to. It doesn’t ever occur to him that things might be different for Alec – and they are – and Jace never tries to put himself in Alec’s shoes.

He probably can’t.

Jace is a natural. When he says that he can hold his own, he means it, he knows it, it’s as easy as breathing. He has every reason to be confident. When he says that he’s going to be fine, he will be. Alec believes that. Alec knows that.

Jace’s power is adoptive muscle memory. He can see something done once – whether it be stitching up a gunshot wound or disassembling an assault rifle or scaling a building with his bare hands – and then his body will know how to do it.
Everything that Alec has had to work for, his entire twenty-something years, through blood and sweat and tears and servitude, has been innate for Jace. It’s why he’s Idris’ golden boy, and not Alec. It’s why he gets away with murder, sometimes quite literally.

It’s probably why his parents give Jace such leeway and hold Alec to such high standards in comparison. Sometimes, it feels unfair: for every step Jace takes, Alec has to take four, and then, at the end of the day, he gets scolded for not taking five, even when his body is on the brink of giving out beneath him.

Alec presses the button to open the elevator doors again, shaking his head on a derisive sort of smile, something entirely self-deprecating.

And as if the muscle memory wasn’t enough, on Jace’s eighteenth birthday - which is too many years ago to count now - Maryse and Robert had gifted Jace with a set of hydraulic titanium wings.

Jace doesn’t even have to take steps any more - Jace flies.

Alec steps out of the elevator and makes his way towards the locker room. It’s already coming on eight o’clock and the sun is on its way down; before night falls, he needs to have forgotten all this. He needs to open the envelope and brief himself on whatever deed Maryse has signed his name away for. He needs to suit up and lock Alec away and become Sentinel.

Sentinel doesn’t mope about how much easier it is for Jace, for Arkangel. Sentinel just puts his head down and gets on with it.

Patrol is fine. Clary tags along, Alec rolls his eyes, but Jace is on his best behaviour and nothing goes wrong. Some visiting politician from the west coast with a particularly torrid media presence had requested a security detail, and so they spend the night camped out in a three block radius around the man’s apartment, earning their pay packets. They’re not relieved until two in the morning, when Aline and Helen show up, who are always lumped with the graveyard shift ‘til dawn.

Alec rarely heads back to headquarters after patrol, and so he says a gruff goodbye to Jace and
Clary at an intersection. They shoot off into the dark like a silver comet, Clary with her arms looped around Jace’s neck, and Jace’s great silver wings spread out wide.

It begins to rain; droplets pitter-patter against Alec’s mask, and it’s a long walk home for someone who only has their feet to carry them. Around him, the city melts in the encroaching downpour, with neon light spilling out of storefronts and becoming oil in the puddles. Car headlights score through the dark in an endless cascade of yellow and red across Alec’s face in the bare moments when he leaves the shadows of the city to cross the street.

His supersuit is thick and heavy-duty, but the chill always sets in after a while. The Kevlar chafes and the armour across his chest cuts into his skin when he walks, all because of the limp from two nights ago that he hasn’t yet been able to shake. In his quiver, the fletching of his arrows gather rain, glinting with dew that pearls in the pinks and the purples of flashing billboards overhead.

Alec keeps a grip on his bow, not returning it to his holster, even though the rain slicks his gloved fingers upon the grip. It’s only habit, when he’s alone. Sentinel won’t ever be caught unaware or unarmed, he makes sure of it.

He’s home by three that morning, rain-damp and sniffly. Once his front door is locked, he peels himself out of his suit and discards it in a trail to his bathroom, which would probably make Izzy gasp if she knew how he treated her gear at the end of a long shift.

His mask is always last to go, a slip of black leather that sticks to the bridge of his nose and loops around the back of his head like a second skin, and it slaps against the porcelain of his sink basin as he drops it. Alec curls his fingers around the rim of the basin, shoulders hunched, and lets his head just hang for a moment, eyes tightly closed.

Breathe in, and breathe out. There’s always a little ritual, peeling back Sentinel and becoming Alec again, raw and naked. It always requires acclimatisation, always requires the gritting of his teeth, because somehow bruises always sting a little bit more when he’s out of his suit and Alec again.

He has to be up in four hours. He feels his chest deflate, he steadies his breathing. He’s tired. Very tired. And it’s normal, because this is how every night ends, with Alec weary in his bones, staring at his scrubbed-bare face in the mirror, a hostage in a mask, wondering what it’s like to be Alec and not feel anything that isn’t slightly grey or lethargic.

Alec doesn’t get to feel many things. Sentinel will always see to that.
The thing about his job is that Alec can always do it in his sleep. He’s always been good with numbers – before Izzy took over as his and Jace’s handler, Alec used to have to file damage and expense forms at Idris himself – and so doing his day job when he’s exhausted is surprisingly possible.

A long time ago, Alec persuaded his parents to let him go to college – he studied accounting, which was awfully droll, but it was at least a normal droll experience, shared with normal people in a normal setting – and he’s always been comforted by the thought that he has other skills beyond scurrying around in the dark of the night.

Sitting at his desk and faced with an audit that needs to be completed by the end of the week is probably not something that Alec should find relaxing, but –

It is. He can’t help himself. Checking spreadsheets and typing away on his calculator is easy and mundane and entirely trivial, and for the fact that he gets to switch off between nine-and-five every day, he’s thankful.

He’s not sure he conceivably has the brain power left for much else. Slumped in his desk chair, it’s too often a task to get his fingers to even move across his keyboard.

Simon Lewis, of course, does enjoy testing him. Dealing with Jace and Clary does mean that Alec has a lot of experience in handling children, but Simon’s brand of obnoxious enthusiasm has always been particularly draining.

“So, there I was, with barbecue sauce all over my hands and face,” Simon is saying, perched on the edge of Alec’s desk for some reason, “Minding my own business at this great burger place in East Village – which we should go to together, by the way, because I reckon you’d really like it – and then suddenly people start pointing and yelling out on the street, and Arkangel just – zooms past, right down low in the street, right past the window – and of course, what do I do? Gotta try and get a photo, but my hands were super sticky so I couldn’t exactly just grab my camera –“

“Is there a point to this story?”

“What? Yes, of course! I was just saying – it’s so weird to see a super in the daylight, and then I stupidly told Magnus all about it, and he wanted to know if I had any photos of it, and for some
reason I said yes? Even though I don’t, and now I feel really bad about lying to Magnus, but really I was just panicking, but now he thinks I have these photos and I don’t and I don’t know what I should do? Move to Timbuktu, maybe? Can I ever show my face here again -?

Alec sighs heavily, closing his eyes and pinching at the bridge of his nose. There’s a fatigue migraine forming just above his eyebrows, pulsing and twitching, and he tries to will it away. No such luck.

Maybe he can will Simon away. Might as well try.

“Have you tried just telling Magnus the truth?” he asks. Simon’s eyes go wide, as if this is the most ludicrous thing he has ever heard.

“What? Are you kidding? That would be humiliating, I can’t – and Magnus would –”

Behind them, someone clears their throat. Alec realises belatedly that he hadn’t even sensed anyone approach, but – it just goes to show how tired he is. He twists around in his desk chair just as Simon’s face pales extraordinarily, and looks pretty much like he’s just stuck his foot in it.

Today, Magnus Bane is dressed in a blessing of a grey three-piece suit, the sharply pressed fabric patterned with black plaid. He’s wearing a tie, sleek and black, the knot pressed up against the divot of his throat, which draws Alec’s eyes. Maybe he has a board meeting today. Maybe he just wanted to dress up. Alec wouldn’t be able to guess which, but … well, he’s not advered to the view.

“And Magnus would what?” Magnus asks, eyes flicking to Simon, his eyebrows raised expectantly.

“Magnus!” Simon squawks, flailing off the edge of Alec’s desk. “I didn’t see you there, how long have you been standing there–”

Magnus scowls, but his lips upturn at the corners. He curls his fingers over the back of Alec’s desk chair, leaning his weight on the back. It brings him close enough for Alec to get a taste of his cologne, a soft and woody smell, somehow quite intimate. He can’t place it, but he doesn’t have the nose for these things.
“Now, Simon,” Magnus says, “In my experience, when people ask things like that, they almost always have said something remarkably incriminating that they don’t want someone else to hear.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Simon says, standing to attention. “Alec and I were just – we were just – we were just talking about this burger place I like in East Village, and I told him he should go, and maybe he should ask you if you wanted to go –“

Alec shoots Simon a look that translates as *shut up or I'm going to kill you*. It goes over Simon’s head.

“Oh?” asks Magnus, blinking in surprise. His smile doesn’t falter, but it shifts, if only minutely, into something a little different. A little more genuine. The back of Alec’s neck burns. “Is that so?”

Alec doesn’t really know what to say. He could have Simon’s back and say *yes*, but God only knows what Magnus’ reaction would be to that, and an uncomfortable niggle in Alec’s gut tells him that he’s not sure he wants to find out. Alternatively, he could throw Simon under the bus and say *no*, but he fears Magnus’ face falling in disappointment, and he doesn’t want that either.

So, instead, he just says, “uhh,” like an idiot.

Luckily – or perhaps unluckily – Simon interrupts.

“Well, this has been a great chat, everyone!” he exclaims, clapping his hands together in what is definitely mild panic. “But – you know how it is, places to see, people to go – uh, fuck, I mean – I didn’t just swear, please don’t tell HR!”

He hurries back to his desk, almost tripping over the legs of Alec’s neighbour’s desk chair in his haste. Alec and Magnus watch him go in an abject silence, which is only broken by Magnus’ breathy laugh.

“He likes to tease you, doesn’t he?” Magnus huffs, fondly amused. It takes Alec a moment to process that he’s being talked to, and he twists in his chair fully to look at Magnus.

“He – what?”
Magnus turns back to face him, a light in his eyes quite jovial.

“Simon,” he explains, gesturing with his hands, “Embarrassing you. Although, I can’t quite tell if he realises he’s doing it. I don’t think he has a malicious bone in his body.”

“He doesn’t embarrass me, I just –” Alec doesn’t have an end to that sentence. It makes Magnus smile, and he shakes his head softly.

“So,” he says, “Were you going to ask me, or was that just a hyperbole on Simon’s part?”

Alec blinks.

“I was …” Alec begins, “I was going to ask you what?”

Magnus says nothing, but he does laugh again, a breezy sound as his eyes flick to the ceiling in something Alec might later come to call fond despair. For now, however, the nuance passes Alec by.

He scowls, confused, but it doesn’t last; not when Magnus’ eyes rake up and down Alec’s body, from Alec’s hairline, to his toes, and then back to his eyes again, Alec feeling a pinch in his chest.

Truth be told, Magnus must see a state: Alec’s crumpled suit, his unbuttoned and crooked shirt collar, the stark grey colour beneath his eyes and the gaunt colour in his face. Alec could berate himself for it, if he really had the energy to care. Instead, he just accepts it, because there’s very little he can do about how he looks and how Magnus sees him, and it’s not about to change.

Besides – it’s not as if Magnus is someone who would look at Alec seriously like that. Not in the way Jace checks Clary out every time they both suit up for patrol, and Alec has to bite his teeth not to groan and roll his eyes in disgust.

Magnus is an observant man. His eyes roam Alec’s face for no other reason than habit. Playful habit, sure, but habit nonetheless. Magnus doesn’t really mean anything by it. It’s harmless.

Still – Alec cannot quash the small flutter in his chest. That spark, that barest of tickles amongst his
slowly-healing ribs, is something he depends upon. It’s something that isn’t fatigue, that isn’t grey and dreadful, and it’s a feeling of something else, something different to what he knows day in and day out. It breaks the monotony. It’s something that Sentinel doesn’t get to have, and something that Sentinel cannot take away from him.

Magnus’ eyes meet Alec’s again, and then he smiles that brilliant, beautiful smile of his, the one that has people bending over backwards at his every whim, and Alec cannot help but feel warm. It’s not real, not significant, not something that will last beyond these walls, but it’s enough to melt him. It will make a pleasant memory for the nights when he’s stuck on a rooftop by himself, clutching a rain-drenched bow between his fingers and trying to blink his way through the downpour.

Alec’s mouth twitches, almost returning a smile back to Magnus.

Magnus definitely notices; his shoulders settle, as if basking in the attention. His smile broadens into a delighted sort of grin, and Alec catches a flash of white teeth.

For a moment, Alec’s innate numbness abates. The well-scripted and lovingly-rehearsed pain in his ribs is quietened, and, in the time it takes for that smile to reach Magnus’ eyes, Alec is able to forget how much of this is only a performance.

He’s a normal man, and he’s having a normal conversation with someone decidedly quite beautiful, someone who’s smiling at him, flirty and cavalier, someone who doesn’t know any better, and it’s just so easy to forget about everything else.

Later, he’ll cling to this moment. He knows he will.

“Well, Alexander,” Magnus says then, his voice dropped low. He straightens out of the cuffs of his blazer, his long fingers ever so dexterous. He makes Alec look. “If you ever decide there is something you do want to ask me, you know where to find me.”

His eyes flick up to Alec’s.

“My office has an open door policy, as you know,” he continues, “Although, it can, of course, be closed. And locked behind us, if the need should arise.”
Alec opens his mouth to reply, but the colour in his face probably speaks loud enough. Magnus laughs, bright and unabashed, tossing his head back and opening up the column of his throat, and he throws Alec a whimsical goodbye, Alexander over his shoulder as he weaves his way back across the office.

Alec’s eyes follow him until he disappears from view. The beep of a new email arriving in his inbox almost makes him leap out of skin. It’s all so very out of character. His mother would be disappointed.

Alec has been wearing his mask for a long time now - and the one made of leather that ties across his eyes, just slightly less than that. It’s a world he’s grown up in: blood and loyalty; campaign slogans and slanderous headlines; crime scene tape fluttering high above the city.

He’s experienced a lot - more than he’d like, if he’s honest. He expected most of it: the ever-present ache in his legs, the spit on the ground, the feeling of pushing his body until it burns, and then some.

However, he never expected the waiting.

Alec is not an antsy person; he doesn’t get frustrated sitting still, he knows the value of scoping out the terrain, he has an archer’s eye. But - he doesn’t like wasting time, even if he is being paid by the hour.

If his parents had told thirteen-year-old Alec that most of his nights would be spent perched on cranes or hanging from scaffolding or sitting in trees, maybe he would’ve said no - said no to the family business then and there, saving himself a lot of hassle.

He’s on a rooftop now, and he’s just thankful it’s not raining. Jace is off somewhere, soaring through narrow city streets on wings of steel, and Alec’s job tonight is to make sure he doesn’t get in trouble, Maryse’s exact words. There is, of course, more he could be doing, and he doesn’t mean it in terms of looking out for Jace and cleaning up his messes. There’s more he could be doing for the city at large. It’s a constant thought, a nag, a twitch in his fingers resting on his bow every time he hears a siren far away and has to ask Izzy if someone has that covered. He doesn’t like not being in control.

Sometimes, he thinks that she lies just to stop him worrying. Who is Alec to know if Aline and
Helen are really taking care of it?

Tonight, he busies himself counting the arrows in his quiver - despite the fact that he did it before he left headquarters and he hasn’t shot a single one tonight. So he knows how many are there - but it’s something to keep his mind occupied. There’s catharsis to be found in running his fingers up the feathers, even if, in gloves, he misses the sensation against his skin.

The wind is picking up, another storm brewing on the horizon that will never quite break, but will soak the city nonetheless. It dulls Alec’s senses and he never likes shooting blind. The rain also gets into Jace’s wings and slows him down, and it’s not the thought of Jace’s gear malfunctioning mid-flight that he dreads the most, it’s the knowledge that Alec would never hear the end of it.

“You cold?” asks Izzy in his ear, somewhere warm and dry.

“I’m fine,” Alec murmurs. He scans the nearby rooftops, black silhouettes struck with pin-pricks of white light against a darker sky. It’s habit. It’s hard not to be on edge. “Where’s Jace?”

“Still en route,” Izzy replies, “I’ll tell you when he gets in and rendezvouses with Clary. Hold tight.”

She fizzles out, leaving Alec to the swan-like song of the wind rattling through the maze of skyscrapers. The whistle is shrill and he can feel the building beneath him shivering with it. It feels like anticipation.

He counts his arrows a second time. The number remains the same. Alec sighs heavily, entertaining the cruel thought of his lumpy mattress and threadbare pillows awaiting him at the end of the night; he longs to pass out cold for longer than six hours, but that certainly is a pipedream.

He slings his quiver over his shoulders, clipping it into place on his suit. The weight is familiar, but not all that comforting. He can feel something stirring in the air, a charge, the sort of electricity that always sparks at the skin before rain or a storm, and it wriggles its way under his skin, forcing unnatural spaces between his flesh and his muscle.

Alec clenches his hand around his bow and surveys the streets again. Nothing moves. Nothing has changed. The only water on the ground is still that collecting around the gutters.
And then, much to his abject horror and surprise, someone steps down from out of the sky to land next to him.

It’s not Jace. Not Clary either, not Aline or Helen, or Lydia or Raj, or even fucking Victor. It’s someone he doesn’t know, and that electricity in the air that he thought preluded rain, suddenly *bites*.

Alec doesn’t know how to react; when you’re in this business, it isn’t a question of turning around and just saying a polite *hello*. His whole body tenses, fingers gripping his compound bow in a vice fist, but he doesn’t even turn his head to look. He is looking of course - from the corner of his eye, intense and wary - and the breath pauses in his throat. He doesn’t know many of the other supers in the city, but it’s rare that he meets new ones. He’s not easy to follow. (Or at least - he hopes. He *hoped*.)

“*You’ve been up here a while,”* says the stranger, a man with a rich, disarming voice. “*Have you been stood up?*”

And oh, the static runs wild up and down Alec’s arms, scattering beneath his bracers and up and down his spine. He stands slowly from his crouch, his knuckles white beneath his gloves, but he doesn’t raise his bow. He knows better as he turns to face his rooftop stranger. He’s not going to make the first move. He’s not going to *pull a Jace*.

The stranger stands several feet away from him, tall and graceful and tanned. Alec clocks the strength in his arms and the broad shoulders. He wears an impressive coat, heavy, expensive, *undoubtedly bulletproof*, in a dark and muted red, and there’s a black mask sculpted to his features that draws Alec immediately to the shadow of stubble along his prominent jaw and then, to the unsettling gleam of his eyes, and the flash of dangerous colour slick through the forelock of his dark hair.

Alec has never seen him before. Not even in passing, not even in the papers – not that he checks the papers religiously, but surely, surely, he’d have seen –

*This*.

Alec clicks his tongue and taps the device in the neck of his suit that changes the tone of his voice. He’s been less cautious lately - he doesn’t need it around Jace and Clary, and there’s a foolish part of him that has come to trust Wolfsbane and Veil enough to talk to them without it - and so it’s strange to hear his words come out deeper and rougher than expected.
“No,” says Alec gruffly, “He’s on his way.”

Alec knows he bristles, but it’s also the smart thing to do: keep his wits about him, tell the stranger that there’s backup on the way, show some of his cards but not all of them, never all of them. Not all vigilantes mean trouble, but some do. You never know until it’s too late.

“I’m glad,” says the stranger, his eyes bright as they flit over Alec, cataloguing his Kevlar armour, his heavy-duty boots, his lithe silver bow. His voice is smooth, but it sounds a little forced too, like he’s faking it as well. Smart. “It’s too cold a night for waiting around.”

“Do you want something?” Alec asks then, curt. The stranger blinks quickly but then smiles, and it’s a little crooked. Alec knows well enough to call it dangerous.

“Call it … curiosity,” the stranger says, waving a hand in the air casually. He doesn’t step towards Alec, but Alec cannot move. Call it an impasse.

The stranger snaps his fingers. The direction of the wind changes.

Not so casual.

“I’ve been watching you for a while now, but you haven’t moved,” he continues, “I was hoping you weren’t up to something terrible, but given at least four police cars have come by since you’ve been here, I’d say it’s something worse.”

That makes Alec’s eyes shoot up to the stranger’s face. His composure slips.

“Worse?”

“Oh, Corporates, of course,” says the stranger, still smiling, even if it doesn’t reach his eyes. His wafts his fingers again and the wind blows south once more. “Is there something worse than that?”

Alec knows he betrays himself with a frown.
“Are you an elemental?” he asks.

“Nope,” says the stranger, popping the $p$. He waves his hand again, and this time, one of Alec’s arrows begins to rise slowly from the quiver upon his back. Alec flinches, watching it levitate into the air and then rotate slowly, until he’s looking directly down the point, a hair’s breadth from the tip of his nose. “I suppose I’m sort of a telekinetic. Amongst my many other talents.” He doesn’t let the arrow fall, guiding it carefully back into the quiver. Alec grits his teeth; he will not be using that arrow tonight. “So, are you?”

“Am I?” Alec hisses.

“A Corporate.”

Alec doesn’t reply, lips tightening into a firm line. He’s used to this sort of treatment, and he can’t say he doesn’t deserve it. If he were a vigilante, he wouldn’t trust Corporates either. It’s not a smart man’s move to rely on those who are paid for good deeds.

The stranger huffs on a laugh.


“No.”

“Ah. Just like to stay out of the spotlight, then?”

“Something like that.”

The stranger purses his lips and, beneath his scrutiny, Alec fidgets. He knows he cannot move until this man moves. He daren’t turn his back and flee over the edge of the building into the counterfeit light; he doesn’t know what powers this man has, but his skin still feels like a livewire, and the shift of the wind is no trick of the mind. Something about it breathes and moves, winding its way, even now, around Alec’s forearms, binding his shins.
He doesn’t like it: that inability to move. When flight is taken away from you, the other option is to fight, and well, Alec doesn’t rank his odds.

*Telekinetic*. This man is probably a telekinetic. Hell, he might be inside Alec’s head and messing his perception, and Alec would never know the difference: the lights on the horizon are already bleary and strange; the weight of rain already drags the air down; Alec’s gut already churns with unease and vagrant knots.

He doesn’t know many telekinetics. He’s read about a few, in the case files back at Idris, but he’s never met one in person.

He *does* know however, against an enhanced power like Alec’s, telekinesis is very dangerous. An arrow can’t do much against something who can *snap* arrows with the click of their fingers.

“Who are you?” Alec asks. Jace is meant to be here soon, but there’s no way Alec can depend on that. He only hopes Izzy can hear this instead - but she remains worryingly silent over the coms. She might not even be there. *What a great time to take a coffee break*.

The stranger smiles wryly; the sharpness of it might cut. He rubs his hands together, and then spreads his palms out, towards the sky, open-armed. It does little to make him look any less intimidating.

Alec braces for something he has no idea if coming. His fingers twitch, tightening around his bow, but it’s like his muscles have seized - some sharp shard of electricity lancing through them, locking his joints in place - and he can’t reach for an arrow, he can’t press his finger to his ear and call Izzy.

“Who am I?” the stranger asks, raising an eyebrow behind his mask. There peculiar wilderness of the city is found in his face, and his expression moves, a constant fluidity that Alec doesn’t expect - not when it’s half hidden by the leather. “That’s a loaded question, don’t you think? I can’t say you would answer me if I were to ask you.”

“Are you a vigilante?” Alec frowns. In contrast, he feels concrete.

“What do you think?”

“I haven’t seen you around here before.”
“Well, that is a shame.”

Alec grits his teeth again, working his jaw. *God damnit, Izzy, why won’t you pick up -*

Vigilantes don’t just walk up to a Corporate unless they want something. When Alec met Veil and Wolfsbane – a few years ago now – it wasn’t because they came looking for him. He had arrived at a bank robbery at the same time as them, and when someone is swinging around a gun and holding civilians hostage, there’s not much time to debate whose side you’re on. You deal with that afterwards, and petty disputes can be shoved to the side for an adrenaline moment.

Wolfsbane had jumped in front of a bullet for Veil, and it might have found its mark in his shoulder had Alec’s arrow not been swifter, piercing the glock out of the robber’s hands just in time.

They’d fought well together that night, even though Veil had glared daggers at Alec afterwards, and not offered him a single word.

This isn’t like that. Not in the slightest.

“If you’re here for a fight,” Alec says slowly, working each word through his teeth, “That’s not going to end well for you.”

Infuriatingly, the stranger smiles, as if Alec is hardly more intimidating than a dog on a leash, yapping at his boots. Which, Alec supposes, he almost is, but -

“Fight?” scoffs the stranger, “Me, fight you? Heavens, are all Corporates trained to assume the worst? Not all your problems can be solved with violence – have you ever considered polite conversation as a means to an end?”

Alec narrows his eyes.

“Is this polite conversation?”
“Well, that’s up to you,” says the stranger, clearly entertained by Alec’s wariness. “You are awfully tense.”

“Tends to happen when strangers sneak up on you in the dead of night without warning,” Alec retorts. “Forgive me for not letting my guard down.”

It’s then that the stranger moves, not taking a step towards Alec, but taking a step sideways, as if he intends to circle Alec at a predatory distance. Alec shifts sharply, and he berates himself for it, his caginess too obvious.

He needs to hold off. Jace will be here any minute – not that Alec needs Jace to deal with this, he can deal with it fine by himself –

“Saying that suggests you’re doing something you don’t want to be caught doing,” says the stranger. His smile is sharp and dangerous as his eyes narrow.

Alec’s eyes track him as he walks, his shoulders dappled in pale white light, illuminating him from behind, casting his face into comparative shadow. The deep colour of his coat is rich like wine, or maybe blood, the thick folds of it heavy but liquid as the stranger moves with cat-like grace, his footsteps silent on the rooftop. Around him, the air seems to shimmer, like there’s a force field, invisible and prickling, that clings to his hands, to his epaulettes, to the strong line of his neck, to his mask.

Alec’s heart thumps. He won’t let it show in his face.

“I’m not doing anything,” he says gruffly, and Hell, it’s the truth too. He was just waiting here for Jace, wondering how long it would take until he either gets trench foot or hyperthermia from spending so many nights out in the cold and wet. “I’m waiting for my partner. Like I said. And even if I was doing something –”

*That’s not any of your business.*

The stranger waves his hand dismissively.

“Too many hypotheticals,” he says, “I don’t like dealing in *ifs* and *maybes*, so let’s not. You clearly don’t deal with many supers who aren’t from your neck of the woods, so let me be straight
with you before you give yourself an aneurysm. That expression of yours is painful to look at.”

“Please do,” Alec presses. The stranger is almost at his three o’clock now, close to the edge of the building, and so Alec turns on the spot to face him.

The stranger’s eyes flick down past the roof edge and he considers the dark for a curious moment, a purse to his lips. He seems so relaxed, so at ease, but Alec – Alec is clenching his jaw so tight he thinks he might shatter his teeth.

It would take him half a second to draw an arrow. Notch it in his bow. Pierce through this stranger’s sleeve and pin him to the rooftop.

Is half a second enough? Is that too slow?

Would this man react faster?

The stranger waves his hand again.

“Say you’re on patrol,” he says, and the way he talks with his hands, Alec’s eyes lock onto that. He knows his stare is wide, wary. This man’s hands are dangerous. “A normal night. You take your normal route. You know the twelve block radius like the back of your hand – indeed, this is your twelve blocks and you know for a fact that there are a number of enhanced individuals who are looking to you to keep their neighbourhood safe.”

He pauses, looking at Alec deliberately. It’s surprisingly hard for Alec to maintain the stare, something unnerving about the dark colour smeared around his eyes, the blackness of his pupils, the shards of light that catch and show just how little this man is blinking.

He’s scrutinising Alec too. He’s probably counted the number of arrows in Alec’s quiver. He’s probably figured out Alec’s reach. He’s probably calculating how he has to move to miss an arrow to the shoulder, should it come to that.

The air crackles with that tension. It’s sharp against Alec’s cheek - something elastic and cutting - and it’s real. Not a figment of his imagination. He can feel it digging into his skin, the pressure, the burn.
It’s real. It’s deliberate. *A threat?*

“But,” the stranger continues, and the corner of his mouth twitches, as do his fingertips, like he knows exactly what he’s doing and *exactly* how Alec would be one flinch away from jumping out of his skin, if his resolve weren’t so mettled. “What happens when you see a suspicious fellow dressed all in black perched on the top of one of your buildings, someone you’ve never seen before, and who doesn’t move for nigh on three hours, but is clearly looking for—or waiting for—someone. What would you do in that instance? Let him be and risk him causing upset to your carefully-cultivated peace, or would you go and investigate?”

Alec frowns, but the man’s words do something to pierce his prickling defences, some tension in his shoulders deflating. He wonders if it shows upon his face, if his frown softens enough to be seen in the twilight.

“I’m not here to hurt anyone,” he says honestly. He lowers his bow hand. “I’m not here to disrupt the peace. I really am just waiting for someone.”

“And I should believe you?” asks the stranger.

“You have my word.”

The stranger scoffs, his twitch of a smile disbelieving and curt. His eyebrows jump behind his mask.

“Oh, the word of a Corporate? I can’t say there’s much value in that.”

“But the word of another super. That should mean something.”

The stranger looks at him then—really, truly looks at him. His stare is knife-like and Alec can feel the slow lance of it through his armour, through his suit, through his chest, and out the other side, as if his body is little more than made of light. It’s invasive. Violating. Strangely … *intimate*, and as his skin prickles, he feels something come over him that he doesn’t know.
The stranger’s gaze dips to his bow, and whilst Alec is not about to let it go and drop it to the ground, he loosens his hold on it, and half-considers sliding it back into the holster on his thigh. There’s a breath, held pert in his his chest, the strain of it aching, that is quietly burst. His stance, he relaxes, shifting his weight from his forward foot.

What … what is that feeling? The anticipation of who will move first. This unease and this transparency - a moment of strange existence.

He doesn’t understand it, but then the stranger seems to mimic him. The man’s shoulders fall; he stops rubbing his thumb and forefinger together like an anxious tell. A breath Alec cannot hear passing softly over his lips.

Perhaps Alec’s truth is loud enough to be heard over distant sirens and city rumbling. Perhaps this man is stringing Alec along for a naive fool who would willingly drop his guard in a situation such as this.

It’s a stalemate, but no-one gets the chance to say anything.

Alec’s com starts beeping in his ear and he flinches, the sound so sudden and loud, piercing the hypnotic moment. Somewhere overhead, he hears Jace’s telltale whirring.

The stranger looks up, face to the sky, and he scowls, and then – Alec is not sure he’s seen a man move so fast.

The man swipes his hand in an upward arc and Alec feels the electricity in the air rush from his skin, fleeing upwards into the dark. The wind swerves, and it carries the sound of Jace’s circling away, buffeted by a sudden gust.

Alec clenches his teeth, reaching back for an arrow in his quiver, but the stranger does not turn to attack. He’s not even looking skyward anymore, his eyes focused solely on the rooftop edge, and Alec realises just quick enough that he intends to jump over and disappear, turning tail and running before Alec’s backup can arrive.

“Wait!” Alec calls out, before he can stop himself. The stranger pauses, right on the brink, his foot suspended in the dark by an unseen force. “What - what’s your name?”
The stranger smiles over his shoulder, the hard line of his jaw lit up by the city beyond. There’s something about him that makes Alec wonder if he’s under a spell. It’s this glint in his eyes that exists in the moments between seconds, and Alec can only scrabble before it falls through the gaps in his fingers.

“Nightlock,” says the stranger, just before he steps out into the night. “And you?”

“I’m Sentinel.”

“Sentinel,” says Nightlock, rolling the name around on his tongue. He seems to like it; it fits. Something amused lights up his eyes, beneath his mask. “It suits you.”

And in a blink – he’s gone.

Alec tells Jace about the encounter. There’s some part of him that almost doesn’t, that wants to hold his tongue and keep the secret until he can at least make head or tail of it himself, but when Jace lands on the rooftop amidst a gust of rain-wet wind, he takes one look at Alec’s face and asks what’s wrong, buddy?

He doesn’t mind keeping certain truths from him, for his benefit, but if they’re dealing with a potentially dangerous and nosy vigilante, who has no qualms about creeping up on Corporates, it’s best for Jace that he knows what they might be up against.

“Telekinesis?” Jace whistles, “Damn, that’s pretty cool, you gotta admit.”

“It might be cool, but it’s also dangerous,” Alec remarks gruffly. “We don’t know the extent of what he can do, but judging by what I saw – it’s probably not something we want to find out.”

“I dunno,” shrugs Jace, “If we could persuade Victor to try and face up against a guy who can move stuff with his mind … Hell, I’d pay any sum of money to watch Victor get his ass kicked by some guy who doesn’t have to lift a finger.”
“Why are we talking about Victor getting his ass kicked, and how can I get in on that?” comes Izzy’s voice across the coms in both their ears. “Can we kick Raj’s ass too, whilst we’re at it? I have a lot of grievances about Raj.”

“Nice to hear from you too,” Alec grumbles. “Where have you been?”

“Oh, Meliorn stopped by with some new surveillance equipment and I got distracted. Did I miss something?”

“Distracted,” Jace snorts, “Nice.”

“Iz,” Alec presses, “I had a run-in with a new vigilante. Can you do a record check for me?”

“Fuck, are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” Alec replies, “He … didn’t want to fight, I don’t think. Just talk.”

“A telekinetic,” Jace supplies helpfully, “So, naturally, I was asking if we could get him to kick Victor’s ass. I bet it would be funny.”

Alec fixes Jace with a glare, but Jace just rolls his eyes and mimes locking up his mouth and throwing away the key.

“A telekinetic?” Izzy asks then, “Did he confirm that, or are you just assuming?”

Alec tells Izzy everything - but that doesn’t surmount to much. He recalls the change in the direction of the wind, he retells how the arrow was lifted from his quiver, he describes the weird energy in the air … like electricity, but somehow not like electricity, all prickly and static but with some sort of heavy pressure.

“Okay,” says Izzy, and Alec can hear her typing furiously on her end. “And did you get a name?”
“Nightlock,” says Alec, before adding, “Iz … no-one can trace your search, right?”

“Izzy replies, “Not unless they know what they’re doing,” which excludes pretty much everyone at Idris, but most importantly, mum and dad – oh, I have a match in records.”

“What does it say?” asks Jace. He’s started to fidget, his wings curling and uncurling around him, like he’s antsy to get moving. He’s probably going to suggest that he and Alec try tracking their mysterious friend.

Alec already knows his answer - it’s going to be a resounding no.

“Izzy replies, “Looks like there’s definitely a vigilante called Nightlock in the city,” says Izzy, “There’s not much detail, but it looks like there’s a more complete file in the records room, it just hasn’t been digitised yet. It, uh – it says he hasn’t been active for about five years … there was significant activity between 1980 and 1986, but nothing since then.”

“Okay,” says Alec, “I’m on my way back to headquarters. Think you can meet me at records?”

“Izzy confirms. “Underhill’s on duty tonight, so he won’t ask any questions,” Izzy confirms. “I’ll see you in half an hour, Alec. Is Jace coming or going?”

Alec doesn’t need to look at Jace to know his answer.

“Going,” Jace says, “Where’s Muse? Is she nearby?”

“Clary had dinner with Luke tonight, but she’s on her way out the door, apparently. Jace, you can meet her on the roof of her building.”

“You got it, chief,” says Jace, “Let me know what you guys find out about Nightlock. I’m invested now.”

“Your personal vendetta against Victor Aldertree does not count as being invested,” says Izzy, “Stay on channel four, Jace. Let’s keep this away from prying ears for a little while, okay?”
Jace soars off into the dark, but Alec doesn’t leave the rooftop for a moment. He pauses, flexing and unflexes his palm before his eyes, wondering if he can somehow summon back that strange energy that danced across his skin. He has no luck; he may have keener senses than most, but it doesn’t include sensing energy signals, and there is no trace of Nightlock on the rooftop or on the street below.

Alec has no idea where he went, but there is certainly a part of him – and not the cautious and law-abiding part – that wants to know.

He makes it back to headquarters shortly after midnight, slipping through one of the back doors and ducking his way past the security camera. He feels a lot like teenage Jace and Isabelle, when they would so often scrimp on training to steal away to bars and clubs, right under their mother’s nose.

As promised, Underhill is stationed outside the records room, clearly waiting for him. He raises his eyebrow at Alec still in his suit, but just tips his head towards the door without saying anything aloud. His eyes say enough: *Izzy is already there; I’ll keep watch*.

Alec nods his head. *Thanks*.

The records room itself is, in stark comparison to the crisp white corridors of headquarters, absolute chaos. Rows and rows of filing cabinets are overflowing with paperwork and manila folders, and the desk at the front of the room has long since been abandoned, piled high with unsorted documents.

For an organisation that can provide its employees with voice modifiers and hydraulic wings, Alec cannot help but think that Idris is ridiculously behind the times when it comes to keeping up with the computer age. Mobile telephones and desktop computers have quietly become fixtures of every family home, yet here he is, standing in a room of old school files that have yet to be transcribed over to their digital systems.

His mother would probably say it’s because they have better things to do. His father would complain that they lack the manpower to divulge work hours to this sort of administrative
Alec sighs, lifting his mask from his eyes and letting it hang around his neck. Just looking at the mess gives him a headache, but there is one good thing about paper records that he appreciates tonight.

No-one will know that he’s looked at them. The same cannot be said for reading things online.

“Iz?” he calls out into the room. His pauses to listen, and faintly, he can hear someone shuffling around, probably buried by their weight in paper. Alec begins picking his way through the boxes, wading through paper up to his knees where a row of cabinets has been toppled over.

“Iz?” he calls again, “Iz, you here?”

“Mmmph, Alec!” she says, popping up from behind a nearby row of cabinets, waving a slim folder in her hand, “I found it! Nightlock!”

“Bring it over here,” says Alec, wading his way towards her. They meet in the middle, either side of a filing cabinet, upon which Izzy splays the folder.

“God, I am going to have words with our records department later,” Izzy says, flicking her long hair over her shoulder. “This is in no way a fathomable filing system, it’s just … uncontrolled entropy at its worst.”

“You know that I know that you talk science jargon when you’re angry?” Alec supplies unhelpfully. Izzy fixes him with a no-nonsense look, much like the one Jace is so often on the receiving end of.

“That’s enough of you,” she says, flipping open the folder. It’s pretty sparse, a few sheets of paper, filled with someone’s chicken-scratch handwriting, faded with the years. But it’s what is paper-clipped to the top that attracts Alec’s attention in an instant - photographs.

They’re all old and blurry, taken either at speed or from a distance, but the figure in the photographs does seem to be the man Alec met on the rooftop tonight. The coat is different, and his hair has changed, but Alec rarely forgets a face.
“This is him,” Alec supplies, looking up at Izzy as she leafs through the paperwork. “What does it say?”

“Not much,” she says, “It says telekinesis, maybe, with a question mark. Someone’s also crossed out energy manipulation underneath, same with electrical interference and gravitational control. That’s … definitely something.”

Alec swallows thickly. Izzy’s not wrong: it’s definitely something, powers like that. Idris boasts some impressive resumes - flight, super strength, teleportation, just to name a few - but telekinesis is something they sorely lack amongst their roster.

*And what his parents wouldn’t give -*

“… Any of those could fit what I saw,” he says eventually, “Anything else?”

“Pretty much what I said on the phone,” Izzy replies, “Estimated age range puts him at about … thirty, give or take. Main period of activity was the early eighties, and then nothing. Standard vigilante stuff … responding to armed robberies and domestic disturbances … tailing police … unsanctioned private radio interference … he’s got a few cats-saved-from-trees in here too, looking at this police report. But I don’t think anyone’s updated this in a while … it was pretty buried.”

A frown appears on her face and she presses her red lips into a pout.

“I wonder,” she continues, “If someone higher up has some sort of deal with him, so that we haven’t crossed paths before.”

“You’d be able to find something if that was the case?”

“Of course,” says Izzy. “I’ll have a look tonight. No firewall can keep me out these days.”
Izzy finds nothing.

It’s not as if there’s some locked files in the database that she cannot access; there’s just nothing. And Alec even asks her if she can snoop through their parents personal files, but even then – not a mention of the name Nightlock.

Perhaps, Nightlock’s really just that good at avoiding Corporates. Perhaps, he knows someone on the inside, left unwritten so no one might find it.

It wouldn’t have made any sense. He had looked at Alec with such disdain when he realised he was Corporate that Alec doubts the man has any dealings with Idris.

Perhaps, he’s just been lucky. Or unlucky, as it were, to stumble across Alec tonight.

Alec spends a long time in front of his bathroom mirror later that night. Nightlock’s folder is abandoned on his coffee table in the living room, having been smuggled far too easily out of headquarters, but he’s read through it three times now, and has learned nothing more than what he deduced on that rooftop.

Instead, he stares at his reflection over the sink, holding tight to the edges of the basin, and tries to recreate the look he imagines must’ve been on his face when he asked if his word as a fellow super was enough to confirm he was telling the truth.

He remembers with vivid clarity how Nightlock’s expression had changed when he said that. The momentary pause, the subtle shift of muscles in his jaw, the way surprise had flickered in his eyes. At least, Alec thinks it was surprise. A good surprise, or a bad surprise, he’s not sure; but it’s stuck with him, just like the phantom tickle of that strange energy across his bare skin.

He turns the shower on scalding hot, even though he knows his downstairs neighbour will complain about the noise the boiler makes, which is fair, considering it’s approaching three in the morning. Beneath the blast of water, Alec allows his skin to redder, the scorch of it stripping the remnants of the day from his body, now grime and dirt spinning away down the drain, his thighs and chest stinging in the heat.

He stands beneath the water until his body can literally stand it no longer, and shuts the shower off.
with a sharp twist of the faucet. The bathroom is quickly silent, steam swirling all around him, making the air thick and soupy.

Alec scrubs the condensation away from part of the mirror and studies his reflection again. His skin is pinker, and the faint scars of old wounds on his chest and collar appear whiter than normal, fine whiskers criss-crossing his clavicle and blooming in strange flowers upon his ribs. His shoulders look strong, but weary, and that’s not new, but it’s the look in his eyes that’s most curious.

He’s naked, save for the towel knotted around his hips. He’s Alec, scrubbed clean of Sentinel, but the look in his eyes isn’t one Alec has worn before. There’s intensity in his stare, some strange focus, a little bit of Sentinel’s adrenaline still simmering there, an energy Alec doesn’t usually associate with … well, with Alec.

Alec is always just tired, and sure, his body feels exhausted, but his mind –

His mind is a livewire.

He doesn’t sleep easily that night. But when he does manage to close his eyes, he thinks about the man on the rooftop. He cannot shake it.

Alec returns to that rooftop the next night, but no-one comes floating out of the sky to mock him. Jace, at first, is heavily disappointed that his plan to set up some sort of botched encounter between Victor Aldertree and Nightlock is out the window, but after the third night of Alec returning to the same spot, Jace is no longer miffed, and just straight fed up.

“Alec, c’mon, man,” he complains, “This is overkill. It was probably a fluke that you met him here in the first place. He probably has better things to do – Hell, we have better things to do. You heard the police scanner, there’s an armed chase about to cross the bridge, and I wanna get in on that –”

Jace is probably not wrong, and that’s saying something. There’s nothing concrete tying Nightlock to this rooftop, other than his word, and Alec has no reason to trust that either.
It was probably just a blip on the radar. Just a small wave in the day-to-day ebb and flow that Alec follows each and every day. He shouldn’t try to swim against it. It’s not part of his routine.

He should stick to his routine.

Alec’s routine is a fairly simple thing.

He wakes with the shards of grey sunrise; he drags himself to the office on the subway and a pale four hours of sleep; he hunches over at his desk and loses himself in numbers until he really cannot stay any longer in the office without someone asking questions about what he might be avoiding at home.

His kit bag, full of his Sentinel gear and his bow and quiver, he keeps in a locker downstairs, along with an out-of-issue police scanner, which he always checks sunset on the dot.

When dark falls, he hangs Alec up in that locker and slips out into the night as Sentinel. Patrol lasts as long as it lasts – if they have a mission, sometimes Alec won’t see his bed at all. But usually, he and Jace, and sometimes Clary, will tour the city looking for trouble, which they more often than not will find.

They’re not meant to work later than one in the morning – that’s when Aline and Helen take over – but Arkangel has a habit of chasing rabbits down rabbit holes, and Sentinel …

Sentinel never likes to leave things unfinished. And nor does Alec. Especially when there’s something he could be doing to help.

Too often, he stays out late – after his shift ends, after his debriefing, after Jace and Clary have headed home for the night, because his mind just won’t settle, but that’s routine too. It always takes a long and lonely walk to wind down, and it’s not like the underbelly of this city refrains from mayhem and murder when Sentinel is off-the-clock.

Sometimes, he’ll run into Aline and Helen on their patrol, and he might stick around for a while. Other times, when he’s up in the north, Veil and Wolfsbane will seek him out, always finding him,
although Alec never stumbles across them.

Mostly, though, he’s alone.

He’s not sure if he likes it that way. Sure, the peace is nice, and being able to hear his own thoughts is better without Jace moaning in his ear about this or that. But – the wind feels so much colder alone, and when it rains, coming on three AM, it pours.

Izzy’s always with him. She never clocks out until Alec does, even if that means staying up all night until he’s satisfied. She’ll complain; she’ll tell him hotly that he’s a workaholic, or a control-freak, or has no off-switch, but she’ll never dream of not being on the other end of the line if he needs her.

Eventually though, his eyes grow too heavy; his body, however well-trained and well-honed, will begin to ache; and instead of watching cars whiz by from a perch high on a rooftop, Alec’s mind will wander to his bed. It’s then when he’ll turn in, hoping that no-one in his apartment building notices the same shadow landing on his balcony every night.

Most days are the same. He’ll have a day off every once in a while, but he always finds he’s unsure what to do with himself on those occasions, because he’s not sure what he likes – and that’s a pretty tragic thing, he’s long since realised. He’ll read, maybe watch some mundane TV, but by the end of the day, he’ll be sat on his sofa with his head in his hands and his eyes tightly closed, impatient to get back out there.

It’s all he knows.

The routine brings him peace.

And, in a city like this, Alec thinks you should seize the chance for any sort of peace, no matter how twisted and turbid, because Lord only knows when you’ll find it again.

There is only one thing that doesn’t fit in with Alec’s routine – well, not a thing, per say, but a person– and that’s Magnus Bane.
Okay, well, it’s a little bit more complicated than that.

It’s not that Alec is surprised to see Magnus every day. They might work in different departments, but they do work in the same building, and Magnus is Simon’s boss, so Alec can just about understand why they cross paths as often as they do, but –

It’s the fact that Magnus always seeks him out to talk to him that always takes Alec by surprise, every time. Which is not particularly great, because whilst Alec is more than happy to appreciate Magnus from afar, he’s not so adept at being caught out – and Magnus, seemingly possessing some sort of sixth sense as to when he’s being studied from across the room, will always turn around and shoot Alec a devious smile, which has made Alec almost knock his coffee off his desk multiple times.

His hand-eye coordination likes to take a vacation whilst he’s at work. His parents would berate him for it, he’s sure.

The teasing and the banter – and the playful flirting, as Simon likes to insist – maybe Alec could call that a routine. It happens most days.

It’s just – it’s never quite the same. Alec’s never quite sure what Magnus is going to say, and that only makes him trip over his tongue in his haste to get words out, any words, which, in turn, always end up being far too blunt or far too honest. Something about Magnus causes a short-circuit between Alec’s brain and mouth.

Sometimes, Alec wonders what might happen if he was a functioning human being.

If he were normal human being, is what he means. If he could actually respond to Magnus’ teasing that teeters on the edge of workplace-appropriate and not sound like a clumsy fool or perpetually grumpy. If he could – oh, he doesn’t know – see what might happen if he allowed this to seep beyond the rigid confines of nine-to-five.

It’s a daydream. Alec daydreams a lot. About his office job being his only job; about spending his evenings going out to bars with friends or having dinner with someone special or drinking wine on his couch, rather than licking the boots of politicians and chasing criminals down dark alleyways.

About what ifs.
This evening however, while Alec is staring at a particularly trite spreadsheet on his monitor that needs to be finished before he clocks out, a thought comes to him, something someone said to him recently.

“I don’t like dealing in ifs and maybes, so let’s not.”

And it makes him pause, his hand stilling on his mouth, and his eyes glazing over as the empty cell on his spreadsheet flashes at him.

Who said that? It certainly wasn’t Jace, and although it could be his parents, it doesn’t sound like the way they’d say it –

From the corner of his eye, Alec sees someone approaching, weaving their way through the desks – the tall, sharp silhouette is definitely Magnus –

*Oh, it was that man on the roof. Nightlock.*

“Alexander!” says Magnus, stepping up to Alec’s cubicle, a bright and lively smile upon his face. He seems in particularly jubilant spirits today, and his blazer seems to match: a beautiful, navy blue, inlaid with silver thread that glints and winks at Alec under the fluorescent office light.

Magnus claps his hands together; his rings clink together too. It draws Alec’s attention immediately, and he snaps out of his daze.

“Magnus – hey,” he says, blinking back to reality. “Uh – what can I – what can I do for you?”

Magnus smile only grows. He makes a show of folding his arms and resting his thumb against his lower lip as he looks down at Alec in thought.

The back of Alec’s neck grows warm – once again, he waits to see what Magnus might say, and finds that it makes him … nervous? Is this nervousness?
Magnus doesn’t disappoint.

“So, I was thinking,” Magnus says, still watching Alec, “That burger place in the East Village that Simon mentioned the other week –”

Alec feels a frown forming.

“What about it?”

Magnus reaches up to run his finger along the shell of his ear, tugging at the small silver piercing there. It’s a habit of his that Alec has noticed more and more lately, although he’s not quite sure what it means.

“I had a chat with Simon to get the address,” says Magnus, “And I spoke with a couple friends of mine, and it sounds like it’s received some great reviews. And then, this morning, as luck would have it, I was reading the paper and I spotted an advertisement – and do you believe in fate, Alexander?”

Alec knows he’s being teased, but he’s not sure how. His tongue feels fat in his mouth.

“Do I … believe in fate?” Alec scrunches up his brow. “Why?”

Magnus glances down at the watch on his wrist, and then leans heavily on Alec’s partition, ducking down into Alec’s space, so that his voice won’t carry across the office.

Alec blinks.

“Dinner, Alexander,” he says, hushed, “It seems like someone up there is sending me a sign, and – perhaps burgers in East Village might be my lucky charm.”

Alec knows he’s still scowling – and wishes that he wasn’t. His ears must be red.

Magnus is nothing if not insistent.
“I, uh –“ Alec starts, before clearing his throat. “Tonight?”

Magnus’ smile broadens, and Alec really wishes that it didn’t, because he feels that small flicker in his chest again, burning away grey feelings. He’s slightly addicted to it, and one day, that’s going to be a problem.

Hell, it’s already a problem. He’s going to have to let Magnus down for the eighth time.

“Oh, only if you’re free,” says Magnus, “You get off in, what – fifteen minutes? And me, I can get off any time.” He grins, but probably doesn’t get the reaction he was hoping for from Alec. His tone changes, a little more professional as he straightens up again. His finger returns to the cuff on his ear. “That is to say – I have a rare evening off tonight, and I thought I should do something nice, with company. And Simon did raise such a grand idea, after all -”

“I can’t,” says Alec abruptly. It’s true. He can’t. He has patrol tonight, and he and Jace have been tipped off to a large narcotics deal on the bayside and they really have to be there – because otherwise the mayor won’t pay them.

Magnus’ smile doesn’t even shift. Really, it’s a testament to his good humor, and Alec hates having to test it so often. But – it’s for the best.

“It’s no bother,” says Magnus, “Just an idea, and a very last-minute one at that.”

“I’m sorry,” says Alec, “I, uh – I’m just busy, and I can’t …”

“You don’t have to apologise, Alec,” he says, with a shrug of his shoulders, “Perhaps the ninth time will be the charm.”

The whole thing leaves Alec in a particularly sour mood that night – which he invariably takes out on Jace. It doesn’t interfere with their mission – because Alec is a professional – but afterwards, as they’re cooling down on a rooftop and Alec is cleaning all the arrows he’s retrieved, Jace decides
he has something to say.

“You’re in a terrible mood tonight.”

Jace doesn’t beat around the bush. Sometimes, it’s a blessing. Usually, it’s a pain in the neck.

Tonight, Alec isn’t in the mood to talk, let alone talk about things like Magnus and work, which Jace would never understand anyway. Jace’s entire life is the Corporate job and he literally stumbled into his relationship with Clary without having to navigate any of the usual pitfalls. Honestly, it’s highly unfair.

“Have you ever thought that you put me in a terrible mood?” Alec grumbles, below his breath.

“What was that?”

“Nothing,” says Alec, “I’m just tired.”

Jace shrugs back into his wings, having checked them over for damages, and stands up tall, his wings unfurling dramatically in the dark. It’s always an impressive sight, his stance powerful as the silver titanium catches all the vagrant light of the city in pools of pale lilacs, startling white, and rainy blues.

Izzy likes to call him a walking disco ball.

“You’re always tired,” Jace sighs, rolling his shoulders as he readjusts to the weight on his back. Something clicks satisfyingly, and he lets out a low whistle, before looking back at Alec. “Is it work? Other work, I mean.”

“Something like that.”

Jace frowns. Alec knows that look – it’s his look when he’s about to give an opinion that Alec didn’t ask for.
“Look, buddy,” Jace begins, “You know I don’t understand why you drag yourself to that office every day and play house with that obnoxious Simon guy. It’s not like you have to do it. You could just call it quits and move back into HQ.”

“We’re not having this conversation again, Jace. You know why,” says Alec, diligently inspecting his arrows.

Jace scrunches up his nose - which is something Clary does when she’s peeved.

“No,” Jace says slowly, “No, Alec, I don’t know why. Maryse and Robert have a point, y’know – you can’t balance being a super and that job at the same time. You’re exhausted all the damn time. I’m just worried about you.”

It softens Alec’s heart a little, but not enough. Instead, his shoulders just droop, and he proves Jace right with just how weary his next words sound.

“You don’t have to worry about me. I’m fine. Honestly. I’d … I would tell you if I wasn’t.”

“Would you?” Jace asks. Jace’s tone implies they both know the answer to that question.

“Yeah. ‘Course.”

That’s a lie.

They part ways after that – it’s late and Jace needs to head back to headquarters to file his field report, and Alec has a long walk home.

He won’t go home immediately. They spent most of tonight camped out on the quayside watching cars come and go, apprehending a number of people the police never would’ve caught given how late they rocked up. As such, Alec hasn’t really done his rounds - not that his parents know or care about that - and there are a couple places he wants to check before he calls it a night.

It’s habit. Maybe paranoia. He’ll sleep better if he just looks.
He’s deep in the financial district when Izzy’s voice crackles across the coms in his ear.

“Jace says you're in a mood.”

“I’m not in a mood. Jace is just being a pain.”

“You know him being a pain usually means he’s worried about you? It’s his way of showing his mushy feelings.”

“I wish he wouldn’t.”

Izzy doesn’t say anything for a while, so Alec wonders if that’s the end of the conversation. Maybe she’s just going to let him get on with his night, only talking to him if she’s needed.

No such luck.

Alec is on top of a hotel, lining up his sights through the scope of his zipline to the next rooftop, when she speaks again, making him pause.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Talk about what?”

“Alec…” she sighs, and he can imagine her pinching the bridge of her nose, like he often does when he’s exasperated. “Come on, Alec, you can’t lie to me. Something’s bothering you, I know it.”

He could keep denying it. He could give her the silent treatment – he’s awfully good at it too.

But – he doesn’t like lying to Izzy. She can always see straight through him and it will only make him feel terrible.
“It’s … really dumb,” he says, lowering his bow. “Magnus … Magnus asked me out again. I said no. Again.”

On Izzy’s end of the line, something clatters to the ground, and Alec imagines her bolting upright in her chair at the mention of Magnus’ name. She is insufferably invested in this saga, and Alec wishes he had never told her about it.

“*And this is the same Magnus who asked you out for dinner the other month?*” she asks.

“How many Magnuses do you think I know?” Alec replies with a scowl, but Izzy’s not listening to him.

“*And you didn’t say yes?*” she implores. “Alec!”

“Why would I say yes, I don’t have t- I don’t know anything about him,” Alec sighs, running a hand through his hair, dragging it all up on end. He looks around and finds an air vent to perch upon, and it’s like his legs turn to jelly the moment he sits down.

“Iz …”

“That’s why you say yes! So you can learn stuff about him. That’s generally how dating works.”

“Yeah, well,” Alec grumbles, “You know it’s not that easy. I can’t just … you can’t just go around asking other men if - not now. You know what people think. And besides - what happens if I said yes and we went out and he asked about me? I can’t tell him the truth. It’s just easier if I say no every time he asks. Maybe he’ll stop asking.”

“God, you really know how to suck the fun out of a situation,” Izzy pouts, but Alec can tell by her tone that she’s not going to push it. She knows that he’s right. It doesn’t fill Alec with a great amount of self-satisfaction.

“I prefer it this way, Iz,” he mutters, “It’s simpler. Makes … more sense.”
It makes more sense, because nobody gets hurt. Nobody gets hurt, nobody gets whispered about in the office, nobody becomes a pariah on the street because how do you be a gay man in a barely-post-Reagan world and not get shunned the moment someone finds out who you prefer to sleep with -

Nobody would tell his parents -

The silence across the coms extends into something deliberate. The millennium might be eight years away, but it’s like they’re living in the fifties. Izzy’s probably thinking about the same thing: the headlines in the broadsheets, the propaganda on the late night news, the number of AIDS crisis shelters that have been torched or graffitied in the dark of the night by people blinded by a ridiculous fear of the unknown … the same fear with which they accuse superheroes.

Alec shakes himself free of the thought. It’s nothing new. This has been the way of the world for as long as he can remember, and whilst he shouldn’t have to say that he’s used to it, having to keep a low profile and not let his eyes linger too long on another man in passing, he’s … he’s used to it.

And besides - Magnus doesn’t really mean any of it. He only asks Alec because Alec is easy to tease, because Alec is amusing when his face turns splotchy and his words get caught like a record player on a continued uhh. Magnus doesn’t actually feel bad when Alec keeps saying no.

Alec knows this. It’s all just a distraction.

“Alec,” says Izzy, dragging out the vowels in his name in that way she does when she’s tired, bone-tired, of hearing his excuses. “If this is … if this is about mom and dad finding out, I swear they won’t-”

“It’s not,” Alec quickly corrects. “It’s not about them, Iz. It’s just not - something I want right now, okay?”

There’s a moment of silence before Izzy speaks again, where Alec is acutely aware of the lump in his throat.

“You’re allowed to admit you’re scared, y’know.”

Alec scoffs. “Iz. Come on.”
“Alec.”

She doesn’t have to say anything else; his name holds enough weight, even over the crackle of the coms. It speaks of a truth Alec doesn’t want to address.

There’s a dichotomy between his two lives. Alec and Sentinel aren’t two sides of the same coin – they’re completely different people, striving for two completely different realities. Alec knows this, but more often that not, it’s easier to bury his head in the sand and not think about any of it.

Sometimes, he wonders if can even call the life he lives in the day a life at all. He doesn’t get to do what he wants, when he wants; he doesn’t get to say yes to drinks after work with his colleagues; he doesn’t get to look at another man and wonder what if without thinking of all the other what ifs. Instead, he spends hours thinking about what could have been his if he’d been able to make another choice in his childhood years.

Being Alec sometimes just feels like a placeholder. Something to fill the time between sunrise and sunset, a bizarre state of purgatory that Alec has just accepted as norm.

It’s numb. That’s what it is. It’s just numb, and maybe Alec has grown used to it, the vagrant buzz in all his muscles, the way his fingers notch an arrow on autopilot, but he can’t really feel it.

“Next time he asks … maybe you should say yes,” says Izzy, but her voice is gentle now, less teasing. When Alec tries to protest, she interrupts. “Just try it, Alec. Just once. Nothing’s going to change unless you do something about it. You’re willing to jump off buildings and wrestle guns out of people’s hands and follow Jace down the rabbit hole - I don’t see how this is worse than that.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“That’s not a no.”

“It’s not a yes, either.”
Magnus is his usual self the next day, as if Alec’s rejection last night was little more than water off a duck’s back. Alec’s not surprised. Maybe it was.

But still - he cannot help but feel a little guilty when Magnus pulls himself out of a particularly tense-looking conversation with another editor to shoot Alec a smile when Alec drags himself into the office, wearing his late night escapades in his dreadful bed hair and glassy stare.

Alec blushes, looking away quickly. Simon raises his eyebrows at Alec over the top of his monitor. He mouths: *did you see that? I saw that.*

It ties Alec’s insides up in knots; he doesn’t know which thread to pull for it to all unravel, so he doesn’t try at all.

If he leaves it be, it’ll pass. It always does. Simon will pester him about it, and Magnus will probably ask Alec again in about a month, and Izzy will roll her eyes in fond despair when Alec tells her about it down the line.

And Alec -

Alec will work hard to cultivate the little flame inside of himself, the one that Magnus’ attention fans, taking care to not let it go out and not let it grow too big, because he finds himself afraid of both.

Izzy is right. He is scared. He’s scared of a lot of things, but being a super? Having superpowers?

You don’t get to afford yourself things like fear. Not in this line of work.

So, he tells himself not to feel it. It’s going to bite him in the ass.
Visit me on tumblr and shout in my inbox! You can reblog the Tumblr promo post here (and it would help me out a lot!). I'm also on Twitter if you want to come chat about the fic ... and boy, do I love talking about this fic. Tweet as you read with the hashtag #FICacoldnight! :D

Here are all the super aliases and superpowers so far:
Alec | Sentinel | enhanced accuracy and marksmanship
Izzy | no alias | intuitive aptitude, indexing
Jace | Arkangel | adoptive muscle memory
Clary | Muse | imagination manifestation/artistic creation
???? | Wolfsbane | enhanced senses, super strength, beast morphing
???? | Veil | illusion manipulation

As for Nightlock ... all will be revealed, I am sure. I wonder who he could be. Heavens, who even knows.

Please leave a kudos if you made it to the end, and drop me a comment with your thoughts, your favourite line, your fears over what terrible thing will undoubtedly happen next ... feedback is so useful at the beginning of a new fic, and I would be forever grateful for it!
Chapter Summary

There's a difference between seeing someone and seeing someone, and now, Magnus is looking. And Alec doesn't know how that makes him feel, which in itself, is terrifying.

Chapter Notes

Sentinel attempts to track down the elusive Nightlock, but when an election-night rally goes south and an unknown superhero ends up dead, Alec has to come to terms with the fact he might just have a weeping heart. And that is something that Magnus is bound to notice.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Heard joke once: Man goes to doctor. Says he's depressed. Says life seems harsh and cruel. Says he feels all alone in a threatening world where what lies ahead is vague and uncertain. Doctor says, "Treatment is simple. Great clown Pagliacci is in town tonight. Go and see him. That should pick you up." Man bursts into tears. Says, "But doctor...I am Pagliacci."

— Alan Moore, Watchmen

If Alec were a switch, someone seems to have left him in the on position.

It’s something Izzy likes to remind him about – how he doesn’t have a dial, and he’s either flipped on or flipped off - so dedicated to Sentinel that he’ll either wear himself to the bone going above and beyond his regular patrol, or be so completely out of it that no-one will be able to get a word out of him for days on end.

Sometimes, it’s better if questions aren’t asked. Alec long ago learned that asking questions of himself and analysing his own behaviour only leads to misery, and that applies to a lot of things in his life, it seems.
Corporate superheroes do not get to ask questions. That’s been drilled into Alec as long as he can remember. But it was weird, when Clary first joined them as Muse last year, how much it pissed him off to have her asking so many questions about what they were doing and why they were doing it … it was only later that he realised he was angry because she was right.

Alec is used to being asked by his parents to do bad things. He’s not in the mind of pretending that everything he does is for the greater good, is morally sound, is something he could live with having done.

The government used Corporate soldiers during Vietnam, on the ground amongst the rest of the troops, and they used them after, the perfect weapon for espionage against the Russians. They were the perfect weapons, and they continue to be – because there’s no technology that can track someone who can disappear and reappear halfway across the globe at will.

Politicians and celebrities like to use them for their security details. Big business hire them to take out competition and steal secrets they shouldn’t be stealing. The local city council has them keep the peace, managing protests and riots which are, more often than not, directed at the supers themselves.

Sometimes, they’re hired to kill. It’s not often, and even Maryse is reluctant about taking on jobs that ask that much, but … Alec’s hands aren’t clean. Blood crusts beneath his nails; the only thing he can do is not look at his hands for too long at once.

Things have been better lately. The senate elections are approaching, and so Alec has been relegated to a very expensive bodyguard, making sure the electoral candidates get safely to and from their cars, watching their buildings for suspicious activity, breaking into the office of a rival politician here and there.

Mostly, they’re left to their own devices, and that’s okay with Alec. There will be missions – manila envelopes pushed across the boardroom table by his mother and father – assignments that come with a hefty paycheck, but one can hardly call what he does as a Corporate, superheroism.

But rescuing people from burning buildings and stopping car chases and helping old ladies cross the road, that counts. They don’t get paid for that stuff, and it has Maryse and Robert fuming more often than not, but it counts.

Struggling to keep up with Jace also counts. It’s what Alec spends most of his time doing.
It’s the height of summer, but even now, the wind whistles cold and it draws in thunderstorms across the bay, forks of lightning far out of sea but crackling on Alec’s peripheral.

It makes Alec anxious. So far, it’s been a slow night, he and Jace perched on a billboard overlooking a busy intersection, listening to their police scanners to try and find something of interest to fill the night.

Jace is splayed out on his back, his silver wings spread eagle and prone, and he’s turning one of his knives over and over on his knuckles, weaving it expertly through his fingers. He saw it in a movie last night, and so now, he can do it, as if he’s been practicing for years. That’s how the muscle memory works.

Alec sighs heavily, returning his focus to cleaning his bow of dirt that isn’t even there.

He’s aware of his mask on his face tonight, which is weird. Usually, it’s one of those things that he just forgets about, the way you don’t notice your breathing until you think about it. But tonight, the leather feels uncomfortable, chafing at a graze on his cheek, a momento he gained from the training room the night before.

He furrows his brow and scrunches up his nose, shifting his mask, and that’s when the police scanner at his hip starts blabbering.

“All units, we have a 211 in progress at the bodega on east fifty-fifth. Suspect is a white male in his thirties, suspected 417. Use caution. Please provide ETA.”

Jace springs to his feet faster than Alec can blink.

“Alright!” he exclaims, far too enthusiastic for an armed robbery, “Finally something good, let’s get going!”

They’re not far away, barely a few blocks, so Jace takes off into the night without even looking back at Alec, leaving Alec to abseil down the side of the billboard and set off at a run, turning the head of a drunk man staggering down the sidewalk on the other side of the street.
Alec slips into the side streets as soon as possible, thankful for the safety of shadows to hide him from the prying eyes all too keen to call the cops on him. He flips his bow to full length and grabs an arrow from his quiver, notching it in his bowstring without even looking, too focused on sliding over the hood of a car parked horizontally across the mouth of the street.

He can hear shouting from nearby, and can see bright lights where people have already gathered. Glass is shattered all across the sidewalk. First response is already there, a police car with its red-blue sirens still strobing across the street, the driver trying to calm a hysterical-looking woman, and the other officer already setting up traffic cones to stop the oncoming traffic.

It doesn’t look like anyone has been arrested. The robber must’ve fled. No-one seems that interested in pursuing him.

“Arkangel,” Alec hisses into his coms.

“Perp has fled the scene, he’s heading north,” replies Jace, “I’m tailing him from overhead but the street are too narrow for me to fly, so I’m gonna have to drop down onto foot –“

“I need a location,” Alec snaps, but Jace says nothing. All Alec can hear in his ear is the rush of wind as Jace descends rapidly towards the ground.

Alec grits his teeth, curses his brother, and starts running vaguely north, hoping he’ll intercept.

He runs for barely a block before a man comes sprinting out an alleyway across from him, running straight across the road and leaping through the traffic – and Jace follows in hot pursuit, swooping as low as his wings will take him to the ground.

The man disappears down another side street and Alec hears Jace curse in his ear, fanning his wings as he brakes suddenly, to avoid slamming himself body-first into the side of the building. He drops from the air like a silver bullet, landing in a crouch on the sidewalk.

Jace doesn’t even pause. Not even for breath - and then tearing off again, hurtling into the dark.

Alec pushes harder, his feet pounding against the asphalt and his breath coming hard in his chest.
In the dark, he sees the glint of Jace ahead of him, but somehow Jace is still faster, even with his wings strapped to his back.

“Fuck!” Jace spits across the coms, “Sentinel, the guy just scaled the building, I’m going after him!”

Alec’s thighs burn as he wills himself to run, and in the gloom, he sees the shadow of a man disappearing over the lip of the rooftop high above. Jace stands at the foot of the building, his neck craned upwards, and Alec doesn’t have time to call out – because then Jace is doing it too, leaping from the ground, to the fence, and springing onto the drainpipe, scrambling his way up the narrow space like a military commando on a rope –

“Arkangel!” Alec shouts. Jace leaps from the drainpipe to the overhang of the service platform above him, a good fifteen feet upwards, but he grabs the railing with ease – because he just saw their robber do the same.

He hauls himself up onto the rooftop and his wings unfurl upon his back, powerful and godly, and then he soars up into the sky and –

“Fuck,” Alec curses, as Jace disappears from view. He scrabbles for his zipline and knots it to his arrow, letting the arrow fly high. Alec tugs at the line – it holds fast – but knows he won’t be able to climb with just this. The line is too thin and it’ll lacerate his gloves, no matter how good Izzy’s kit is.

He maps the route Jace took up the building, but there’s no way he’ll be able to copy it. Instead, he hauls himself up onto the fence and slings his bow around the drainpipe, tugging backwards to see if the pipe will support his weight.

“Arkangel,” he hisses, pressing his finger to his ear just before he starts climbing, “God damnit, what’s going on? Come in!”

Nothing. Alec grits his teeth. If this is another night that ends up with both of them summoned to the penthouse at headquarters, Jace is going to be sorry.

Really fucking sorry.
Alec is breathing heavily by the time he drags himself up onto the rooftop - for which he berates himself because he shouldn’t feel so out of shape, but it’s exactly what happens when his nights are spent sulking in the rain acting as lookout for Jace and his ridiculous ego - but Jace is nowhere to be seen. Maybe he’s already swept their guy up into the air and is dangling him high up over the city and scaring the living daylights out of him in the name of interrogation. Or maybe he’s already three blocks down the street, still in hot pursuit.

The night is quiet and Alec has been left behind, yet again, through no fault but his own. He couldn’t keep up, and in this line of work, you can’t permit yourself the time to turn around and wait for the stragglers, especially when there’s someone you’re meant to be chasing.

He picks his way across the rooftop, clambering over ventilation piles and air conditioning units and satellite disks, but grinds to a stop with a heavy sigh, turning his face to the sky and letting his arms hang by his sides. He should probably check in with Izzy, or try to reach Jace on the coms again, but his body is sluggish and the thought of raising his voice suddenly seems like a daunting task that he doesn’t quite feel up to.

He sits down on the top of an airduct and the metal is wet from the drizzle; a wetness that seeps through his suit too quickly. If he calls it an early night, he could still head back to headquarters and get a few hours in the training room. Perhaps Izzy will put him through his paces if he asks nicely or if he looks sour enough when he drags himself through the front door with a face that could curdle milk.

Maybe by the time Jace is home, Alec will be able to scale the side of a building in five seconds too and won’t feel like such … an amateur. Maybe he’ll be able to stand next to Jace in debriefing tonight and not have it feel like every time his mother’s eyes pass over him, she sees someone who’s not up to scratch.

It’s irrational, and he knows it. It doesn’t stop the feeling from creeping up on him religiously, to the point where he can anticipate it a mile off.

Alec slumps forward, hanging his head between his shoulders as he stares at the ground. He puts his finger to his ear and presses on his com bud.
“Iz -”

The back of his neck prickles, some cold chill trickling upwards into his hairline, and he stills, the words extinguished on his tongue. The air shifts, a bloated pressure dawning overhead that pushes and prods at his temples and throat. Slowly, he lowers his hand to his bow, quietly unclipping it from his holster, a flick of his wrist extending it to its full length again.

He holds his breath, listening carefully to the tinny drizzle of rain against metal, but searching for something beyond that: for the soft tread of feet on a slick rooftop or a huffing laugh held back between the teeth. The prickle wiggles its way down his spine, pooling in the small of his back. Alec shifts and so does the night, a whumph of pressure thickening in the air behind him, filling the space he just evacuated.

Alec tenses. His fingers twitch on his bow. He readies himself to reach for an arrow and twist around in the blink of an eye, but -

“So, blondie left you out to dry again? This is turning into something awfully tragic.”

The voice comes from over his shoulder, not five feet behind him as he expected - Alec hadn’t heard anyone approach - but he does know the voice, rich and smooth and curiously pleased.

It’s that super from the other night. Nightlock.

Stiffly, Alec twists around upon the airduct, and sure enough - there is the same man with the same rain-damp hair, the same billowing burgundy-red coat, and the same dangerously amused look in his eyes.

He has his arms folded across his broad chest, gloved hands cupping his elbows, his weight leaning on one hip. There’s a tilt to his head, the corner of his mouth twitching upwards, but not towards a smile. As Alec considers reaching for an arrow again, the air crackles deliberately, as if Nightlock can read his mind and predict his movements.

Maybe he can. Alec wouldn’t know.
“He hasn’t left me,” Alec grunts. He’s not sure if he should stand his ground; he’s not sure if he should move at all. One sharp movement might be enough for Nightlock to snap his fingers and blast Alec to smithereens … or something. He doesn’t really know how Nightlock’s powers work, and he’s not exactly about to test them. “He’s gone on ahead and I’m going to catch up.”

“Right,” says Nightlock, exaggerated. “Right, of course.”

Alec narrows his eyes.

“What are you doing here?” he asks.

“A man can’t be out for a midnight stroll?”

“Because that’s definitely what you’re doing.”

Nightlock shrugs his shoulders, smiling playfully. It rubs Alec the wrong way; it doesn’t put him at ease.

“Late-night vigilantism, what can I say,” Nightlock says, “As good as I look in this mask, the getup tends to attract unwanted attention if I run around like this in the daylight.”

Alec exhales heavily, rising to his feet. It makes Nightlock stiffen, albeit minutely. Alec’s probably not meant to notice.

“I don’t mean that,” says Alec, “I mean, what are you doing here? Have you been watching us? Following us?”

“Oh, please,” scoffs Nightlock, “Of course you Corporates would immediately assume -”

“Answer the question.”

Nightlock’s fake smile falls away, all too quickly replaced by a scowl. It’s the sort that Alec is used to: the one he once received from Wolfsbane, the one he still receives from Veil, like he’s little
more than gum on the bottom of her shoe. He can hardly blame her, but when it’s coming from Nightlock, someone who doesn’t know him, it’s grating. Alec’s hackles prickle, his tongue forming sharp.

“I was a few blocks north, following up a lead,” says Nightlock, eyes narrowing. “Not that you deserve to know that, and nor should I be telling you. I saw Arkangel fly by and I was curious.”

Alec squints at him.

“You didn’t follow him,” he says, more a statement than a question.

“No” says Nightlock, “I was more interested in where he came from. Blondie has a habit of leaving wreckages behind him. Someone might’ve needed my help.”

“Well, we don’t need your help,” Alec bristles. “Everything’s fine and no-one’s in trouble. And if they were - I’m here. I would do something about it.”

Nightlock scoffs, his eyebrows raising. He doesn’t believe Alec, and it shows.

“What?” snaps Alec.

“Nothing,” says Nightlock, “I believe I already mentioned that the word of a Corporate is a finicky thing, is all.”

“What’s the supposed to mean?”

“It means exactly what it means, Sentinel,” says Nightlock. “I’ll trust myself to do what needs to be done, thank you very much. I don’t need to outsource the work to … the paid muscle.”

“I’m not here because I’m being paid,” Alec hisses.

“I find that hard to believe,” replies Nightlock.
Alec takes a step forward; he can’t help himself. Nightlock’s chin snaps up and he uncrosses his arms, his fingers curling slowly into his palm.

“I’m not being paid,” Alec presses, because apparently he’s some parts an idiot too, just like Jace, and likes throwing himself into dangerous situations. The air around him pulsates and it seems to match the way Nightlock rubs his fingertips against the curve of his hand.

“I’m not being paid. We heard a 211 in progress on the police scanner and we came to help. And good thing we did, because the cops were doing fuck all about it –”

“A robbery?” Nightlock interjects, his eyes narrowing. His fingers unfurl. The pressure in the air lessens. “That doesn’t strike me as … the best use of your Corporate skill set.”

“That’s because it’s not,” Alec grits out, “I’m just here to help.”

Nightlock purses his lips and tilts his head again, appraising Alec with a different look in his eyes. He says nothing for a long moment, long enough for Alec’s ears to start burning, but then, slowly, he begins walking forward.

He walks like a cat, his steps silent and his paces long and graced and purposeful, and Alec imagines him stalking something. Maybe he’s been stalking Alec.

Alec doesn’t move, holding his ground until Nightlock reaches him, stopping just in front of Alec. He folds his arms again, this time pressing his thumb against his lips in thought.

He smells strongly of worn leather; the wind carries it to Alec. But beneath that, there’s something softer, smokier, more woodlike, and Alec cannot place it. Up close, Alec’s eyes dart across Nightlock’s face, cataloguing everything he can see to memory: there’s a gold colour swept into his hair, and dark kohl smudged around his eyes beneath his mask, which in itself is soft, embossed leather, sitting against his skin like a film. Beneath his coat, he’s wearing a supersuit not dissimilar to Alec’s; there’s no Kevlar armour, but it looks durable and expensive, undoubtedly concealing any number of hidden tricks.

“Help,” Nightlock says carefully, the word almost dripping from his lips. “Perhaps I’m overstepping, but it looks like Arkangel is the one trying to help. You’ve been abandoned again.”
Alec tenses. Nightlock notices.

“You try keeping up with someone who can fly,” Alec grunts, and it sounds far too petty. Hell, it is petty. It’s not what he should’ve said, not to a stranger, but it makes Nightlock blink, a small frown forming behind his mask.

“Is that your job?” he asks curiously, “Following behind him and cleaning up his messes?”

“We’re partners,” Alec scowls.

“Are you?” Nightlock counters, and when Alec’s frown deepens, Nightlock shrugs his shoulders with a familiarity that makes Alec itch. “I’m just calling it as I see it, Sentinel. Are you his partner or are you his handler? He gets his face splashed across the front pages regularly, but you…”

“I’m not his –”

“Does Idris keep you in his shadow, or do you?”

Alec’s brain shuts down. He feels the words like a smack across the face and maybe he recoils like it too, because Nightlock’s curious expression changes into something grave. He doesn’t quite look apologetic, but he knows that he’s hit upon a nerve.

And Alec hates himself for laying it bare for all to see.

“I need to go,” Alec grunts, “Can you at least do me a favour and tell me which way you saw him fly?”

Nightlock’s mouth is a taut line, but he gestures with his pointer finger vaguely north, his eyes not leaving Alec.

Alec knows it’s stupid to turn his back on a stranger, especially a stranger with superpowers, but he tells himself that if Nightlock were going to hurt him, he would’ve done it before Alec even felt
him coming.

He doesn’t say goodbye, but Nightlock doesn’t either. Alec turns and he runs, leaping from this rooftop to the next, realising that Jace could probably do it faster and everybody else knows it too.

When Jace catches the robber, he delivers the man to the police precinct in midtown with his hands lashed behind his back and Jace’s signature pinned to his chest.

Alec doesn’t find out about it until he’s back at headquarters and Izzy tells him, Jace having left with Clary hours ago, bored of waiting for Alec to come back.

It doesn’t go in the field report, so his parents never find out. He doesn’t even need to ask Izzy to exclude it; she does it anyway, because Alec is feeling particularly nonverbal tonight, like his mouth has been glued shut and the words are all trapped inside.

Izzy is adept at picking up on his moods. She’s good like that – once she sees something, once she recognises something for the first time, she’ll remember it. It usually works for entire conversations overheard, or full paragraphs in heavy-duty textbooks, but it applies to Alec’s quirks too, and she calls it her gift.

*Intuitive aptitude*, is what her file says. It’s amazing. Not amazing enough for their parents to let her out on the field because they don’t know how they can apply it to combat, but amazing, nonetheless.

But Alec’s always known she was smart, with or without it. Alec’s always known that she sees him for what he is.

It’s because of that, that he stops in the doorway of her laboratory after debriefing, turning to face her before she can ask him what’s wrong.

If he tells her first, he can do it on his own terms.
“I met Nightlock again tonight,” he says. He watches her eyes fly up from the bench where she’s fiddling with a new model of his bow.


“After I lost Jace,” he shrugs, “He saw Jace go by and wanted to … see the mess that Jace left behind. Instead, he found me.”

“Did you learn anything new about him?”

Alec frowns for a moment, replaying their conversation in his head. His mind lingers on Nightlock’s curling fingers, and then shifts to the press of his thumb to his lower lip as he studied Alec in thought, as if he was trying to pull Alec apart with his mind to see how he worked on the inside.

Alec shakes his head.

“No, I … no,” he says, “It was weird, but I don’t think he’s trouble. It was probably a fluke, seeing him again.”

“I won’t include him in the field report,” says Izzy, “Not until we know more, and even then… don’t want mom and dad finding out that you like to rendezvous with vigilantes after hours.”

She offers Alec a smile and he does his best to return it.

He’ll think more about it in the morning.

It’s a mistake, thinking that he wouldn’t see Nightlock again, and really, Alec should know better
than to make assumptions about dangerous men.

It’s not like they actually run into each other again, no – instead, Alec stumbles across the aftermath.

“What,” says Jace, staring down at the two men tied to a concrete pillar in front of them, “the fuck is this?”

It’s pretty obvious what it is. Jace and Alec had picked up the tail end of a police broadcast about a sting operation on a warehouse suspected to be involved in a large-scale cocaine ring, and had planned to beat the police there and tidy up themselves.

What they didn’t expect, however, was for someone else to have beaten them, and left the place in absolute carnage.

There’s no blood. Maybe that’s what stuns Alec the most, stood in the middle of the warehouse floor with unconscious men splayed out on the floor around him.

Jace picks his way through the bodies, not bothering to check any of them for a pulse. Alec’s eyes flick to the man prone at his feet: his chest inflates as if on cue.


Did the deal go sour? Did someone double-cross them? Was it a robbery -

No. No, it doesn’t look like it. Jace weaves his way across the floor, but Alec turns to the SUV abandoned by the shutters. Its engine is still running and the trunk is wide open, piled high with at least half a million dollars in packaged cocaine. A briefcase is overturned on the ground, and the contents – wads of a hundred dollar bills – are scattered and drifting through the air, which has only begun to settle.

Jace lets out a low, sharp whistle, attracting Alec’s attention over to him.

The two men tied to the pillar are both still conscious, and both with nervous fear in their eyes.
They struggle against their bonds, trying to wriggle as far as they possibly can from Jace as Alec walks up behind him, wariness prickling at his skin.

Really, that should be Alec’s first clue that whoever beat them to the scene was also wearing a mask. The two men can’t even look at him. They’re both pouring with sweat.

But, instead of saying anything, Alec holds his tongue as Jace reaches down and pulls the gag out of the mouth of one of the men.

Immediately, the man starts screaming. Alec scowls and Jace wrinkles his nose, as if he’s smelled a particularly bad smell. He kicks roughly at the man’s leg.

“Hey,” Jace says, “Hey, no. No shouting. That’s not cool, man. We just want to ask you a few questions—”

“Help!” yells the man, “Help! Somebody, anybody! Help!”

Jace looks back over his shoulder and pulls a face. Alec rolls his eyes, and Jace takes that as permission. He thumps his fist against the man’s temple, instantly knocking him out.

The other man, still gagged and lashed shoulder-to-shoulder with his unconscious friend, looks like he’s about to die of fright.

“Alright,” says Jace, leaning down into the other man’s space. “If I take your gag out, no screaming, okay? Or you’ll end up like him. Capisce?”

The man nods vigorously.

As soon as Jace pulls the gag out of his mouth, the man immediately splutters, drool unspooling down his chin. Jace grimaces in disgust, but Alec pushes past, crouching down to the man’s eye-level.

“What happened here?” he asks, no nonsense. There’s something static lingering in the air, just a remnant, but Alec can feel it - it skitters up the back of his neck. Reality is just a little bit displaced;
the air is not quite as it should be, as if someone has churned it around and rearranged its atoms with plundering hands.

The man’s eyes jerk from Alec, to Jace, and back to Alec again, as if trying to decide who’s more dangerous. Alec should tell him that he doesn’t really want to find out.

“I – ” splutters the man, “I was – boss only asked me along as a one-off, I swear – I ain’t – I ain’t usually involved in this sorta stuff, I – I was only keeping watch, I swear, I swear –”

Jace kicks at the man’s legs; the man almost leaps out of his skin, his entire body shaking violently, snot glued to his nose. It’s not a pretty sight, but Alec knows terror when he sees it, and this man is terrified.

And not necessarily of them.

“You heard my partner,” says Jace, frowning at the man, “He asked you what happened here, so you tell him. Who did this? What did they want? Why’d they leave you guys alive?”

“I – I – he … he was – he moved stuff with his mind, man, I don’t know, I dunno, it all happened so fast, I –”

In the distance, Alec hears a siren, and that’s probably the police catching up with them. It’s their cue to leave, before they get lumbered with the blame for whatever happened here.

Alec stands and exchanges a knowing look with Jace, tilting his head back in the direction of the door they came in. Jace understands him wordlessly, nodding his head.

He turns back to the man, readying himself to knock him out too – but the man squeals, fighting against his bonds to throw his hands up in front of his face, even though it’s to know avail.

“Wait, wait, please, it was – it was another super! A big red coat, black mask, I – I don’t know his name, he just –”

*He can move things with his mind.*
Alec’s expression hardens. He looks at Jace again.

Jace doesn’t hesitate in knocking the man out cold this time.

Alec and Jace watch the police dither about at the warehouse from the safety of their vantage point on a roof across the street. There are at least five cop cars and three ambulances on scene, the entire block has been cordoned off, and it’s like the bodies just won’t stop coming, wheeled out on stretchers from inside and shoved into the frantic hands of the paramedics.

Not a single person comes out in a body bag, but every single one of them is incapable of walking. Jace remarks, off-hand, that whoever did this must have a ridiculous amount of control over their powers to inflict so much damage but not kill anyone.

“I think I know who it was,” Alec frowns, his eyes following a pair of detectives huddled by their car, talking low to one another. He wishes he could hear, but not even Jace has that sort of gift. Maybe Isabelle could invent a gadget, or something …


“It’s that vigilante I met a few weeks ago,” Alec says, “He’s a telekinetic, which fits the description that man gave … Nightlock.”

“Nightlock?” Jace frowns intensely, as if all this thinking is physically hurting him. “Oh yeah, I remember. You think he’s new?”

“No,” says Alec. “I don’t think so … but he’s been keeping a low profile over the last few years. Something … something’s brought him out of the woodwork again, and I –“
I can’t figure out what it is, but I feel like it’s important.

“Well, fuck,” says Jace, folding his arms like a child, only a whisper away from stamping his foot on the ground. “If he’s gonna keep intercepting our calls before we get to them … I’m gonna be pissed.”

Jace is pissed.

Alec, on the other hand, is bewildered.

The second time it happens, it’s a burst gas main at an apartment complex in Brooklyn. By the time they get there however, every single tenant has already been evacuated from the building, standing safely in the streets. Jace complains all the way home, his metaphorical feathers more than muffled.

The third time, it’s the foiled robbery of a jewellery store which Alec gets to read about in the papers the next morning; and then the fourth time, a gun fight in a subway station over in Queens; and each and every time, all the witnesses are singing the praises (while the perpetrators are cursing the name) of the man in the red coat who had saved them from a riddling of bullet holes.

Alec doesn’t understand it. He’s never met Nightlock before this, never even heard his name, and now, suddenly, he’s everywhere that Alec is, before Alec even gets there. But it’s not like he’s tailing Alec - Christ, Alec would know if he was, wouldn’t he? - and it’s not like he’s tapped into their coms somehow and is deliberately following them. No. No, it’s not possible.

He must be following a police scanner, like them. He’s just faster. Faster, and far more competent than Jace. No-one seems to know any more about him than what Alec already has pieced together, and that isn’t much.

He’s a God-damn enigma and it’s infuriating.
It’s a Monday, just after sunset, the city grumbling with the fickleness of the twilight, and Jace -

Jace is fuming.

Nightlock has just beaten them to their second grand theft auto of the last fortnight, leaving Alec and Jace looking like a pair of fools when they turned up on the bridge only to find their high-speed chase already wrecked upon a pylon and the police swarming.

It wasn’t a good look. Jace’s anger is probably more mortification than anything else.

Now, they’re camped out on top of headquarters, Jace’s legs swung over the edge of the building, while Alec impatiently counts and recounts his arrows. Tonight, their services have been solicited by Senator Herondale – the senator vying to hold onto her seat in the upcoming elections – and they’re supposed to be running point at her campaign rally later tonight. Her security team has tipped them off to possible rioting and their pay packet had been considerable, so it’s the sort of thing Alec is expected to accept without blinking. He doesn’t really know how quelling rioters and roughing up protesters counts as using his powers for good, but the more he thinks about it, the more he hates himself, so he doesn’t think about it.

He’s far too busy thinking about Nightlock instead.

Clary - not yet in her supersuit - has just arrived with Indian food to try and placate Jace – and although he munches angrily on a samosa – it’s still not enough to cool him. Rioting might be the least of Alec’s problems if Jace is going to be in a mood all night.

“If he turns up at the rally tonight, I am literally gonna kill him,” Jace grumbles, around a mouthful of flaky pastry and potato that crumbles all down his front.

“And get yourself thrown in a holding cell again,” Alec remarks offhandedly. Jace grunts something intelligible in response, which earns a pointed look from Clary.
“Why would he turn up at a public rally?” she asks, “You said he only appears when you’re answering emergency calls, not when you’re actually on a mission.”

“I dunno,” Jace complains, “But I’m not gonna put it past him. If he wants to steal our spotlight, he should just fucking ask.”

Alec snorts, but not because he’s amused.

“I heard that,” says Jace. “What are you laughing about?”

“Spotlight,” says Alec. His expression is more a grimace than anything. “That’s very … you.”

“I think you single-handedly might be the reason everyone hates supers,” Clary says with a nod, her mouth pressed together in a flat line. Jace has the gall to look wounded.

“Hey,” he says. “Hey, c’mon, that’s not fair. I’m nowhere near that terrible. I can only be responsible for, like, fifty percent of the hatred, max.”

“Only fifty?” Izzy pipes up over coms. “Stop being modest. Seventy-five at least.”

“Kiss my ass, Iz.”

“ When I know where it’s been? Gross, no thanks.”

Alec knows full-well this game of theirs, and he doesn’t want to have to spend his night wrangling protesters as well as listening to Jace and Izzy trade playground insults with each other. It always ends in horrendous amounts of giggling, which is somehow worse than if they were actually trying to get at each other’s throats.

“Are there any updates to the mission brief, or are we good to move out?” he asks, putting a stop to the next terrible thing Jace is about to say. “I want to get in position before the crowds arrive.”

Izzy switches into business mode with the drop of a hat, and even Jace has a few useful things to
say about their patrol route tonight; he suggests Alec and Clary swap lookouts, because the building across the street from their target will give Alec a better line of sight, and Alec has to give him that. It’s a good idea.

When Clary disappears to suit-up and Izzy drops off coms, Alec helps Jace into his wings.

“It’s fucked,” Jace says, with his back to Alec as he buckles his harness across his chest. “Don’t you think?”

“What is?” Alec asks with a frown.

“People hating supers for no reason at all,” Jace says, “I get it if they hate us, Corporates, if they hate Idris, I get that, but - getting nervous because you don’t understand people who do good just ‘cus it’s the right thing to do?”

Alec doesn’t really know what to say to that. It’s awfully true, after all.

“It’s messed up,” he mutters.

Jace huffs, rolling his shoulders as his wings flex outwards. Alec is forced to take a step back.

“Guess that makes me a hypocrite,” Jace adds, but then he smiles, that Jace smile of his, the one that is brackish and boyish and angling for a fight. “For hating Nightlock for sticking his nose in when he’s only trying to do the same as us.”

“Guess it does.”

“I still hate him though. Bastard.”

“Of course you do,” says Alec, “C’mon. We’re gonna be late.”
Alec hates public rallies. They’re loud and heated and election fever always drives people to do things they would not normally ever do. They bring out the worst in people, Alec included.

But in all honesty, it’s the politicians that he hates more, boastful and goading and lying as they are - but the bright strobe lights and loud music don’t exactly put him in a much better mood, completely skewing his senses.

Herondale has attracted a big crowd tonight; Madison Square is *thrumming*. The primaries are in full-swing and the election for the senate and the Presidency is only a few months away; there’s fervour brewing on the streets, a fever pitch closer to boiling with every day they approach November.

It’s the barest moment away from erupting into violence.

All it might take is someone looking at someone else wrong, or a cop reaching for his gun, or a kid spotting Alec hidden up on the rooftop. He’s sitting on a tinderbox, and he can see the sparks rummaging through the streets below.

“*We’ve already got protesters, coming down from Times Square,*” says Izzy in his ear. “*Nothing crazy yet, but expect a clash.*”

“*Fucked up that Herondale is paying us to keep pro-vigilante activists out of her rally, but okay,*” grumbles Jace across the coms too. He’s circling high above Madison Square, but he keeps dipping in and out of Alec’s sight, swallowed up by the blinding columns of lights that pierce the cloud.

Alec says nothing. He squints against the lights, against the massive blue-and-red billboards that flash across the outside of the stadium. The street is almost impassable, crowds at least a thousand-thick jostle at the doors, vying for tickets and a quick photograph of the Senator. An enormous jumbotron overhead flickers into life, its live-feed showing Imogen Herondale waving to the crowds inside the hall as she makes her way up to the podium to begin her address.

The roar of the crowd is deafening, but Alec cannot tell if it’s cheering or booing. Hell, it’s probably both.

“*Police dispatch just issued a 10-34,*” Izzy informs him. “*It looks like they’ve assembled a riot-shield line up the street from you guys, but there’s a lot of protesters. I doubt it’ll hold.*”
“So much for an easy mission,” sighs Clary, positioned on the building across the way from Alec. “I’m going down to street level to get a bit closer.”


“I’ll be careful, Alec,” Clary says, sounding a little exasperated. “But if she didn’t want people seeing us, maybe she shouldn’t have hired Corporate manpower for peacekeeping - it’s not like Jace is particularly subtle.”

The coms spit with static as Clary drops off radio. Alec rolls his eyes, but he unclips his bow from its holster and makes his way to the edge of the roof, picking his way down the fire-escape, because he’s not about to let her head out there alone at Herondale’s behest.

There’s something not right about what Alec’s doing but, still, he’s doing it - living in the worst parts of himself and ignoring the whisper of his conscience in his ear: what’s it like working for a woman who wants to see supers kicked off the streets?

He can’t afford to listen to it; he doesn’t have the time. If he blinks, Clary will be too far ahead of him, farther than an arrow can fly, and getting herself into all sorts of trouble.

Alec hears the rumble of the protesters before he sees them, and before he’s half way down the fire escape: it starts as a murmur, and then it’s heads turning, looking the other way, craning over shoulders to see where it is that the clamour becomes a chant.

People are beginning to press back, away from the oncoming line of police, and behind them, the tide of placards and angry voices. The crowd is compressing, condensing, and that only makes Alec worry.

Too many people. Too many people in too small a space.

He knows he’s a great shot - an impeccable shot - but it becomes difficult to use a bow and arrows when he can’t predict someone stepping in front of him at the last moment.

The people outside the stadium are beginning to crackle, electricity rippling through them as some return shouts to the dark. Alec’s heard them all before: fuck you, democrat scum, Herondale’s gonna have the lot of you put in jail when she’s elected -
Alec quickens his pace down the fire escape, clinging to the shadows as an empty beer bottle gets lugged down the street, shattering behind the ankles of the police line. The broken glass crunches.

“Here we go,” says Jace in his ear.

The crowd begins to surge, people pushed backwards into one another, others shoving forwards. Angry fists raised. The shouting more incensed, more violent. Alec chances a look up at the jumbotron, but someone's already whispering in Herondale's ear on stage, no doubt already alerted to the incoming chaos. People are booing. He feels the ground shaking beneath his boots.

And then, Alec smells the tear gas. He smells it before he sees it: acrid, vinegary, and somewhere deep in the crowds. The green-grey haze of it wafts up into the air like a ghoulish fog; his eyes begin to sting; he tastes it at the back of his throat, a tar, a gravel burn. Herondale's security detail hurry her off stage and the crowd inside the stadium boos ferociously. But outside, the police line continues to push backwards as the protesters move forward.

Alec focuses on one placard in particular, jimmed through the riot shields.

Say it loud! Say it clear! Vigilantes are welcome here!

The line is buckling. He can see it.

There are protesters hammering at the riot shields, screaming profanities at the ralliers, who only scream them back, ever louder. There's pushing, there's shoving, there's men holding other men back from doing something truly stupid. There’s a helicopter whirring overhead with its strobe light searching the crowds, blinding people in white, making them manic.

It’s only a matter of time before an officer gets trigger-happy with his taser - or his gun - and there are a lot of people here. A lot of potential casualties.

Alec grits his teeth. Focus. Focus, Alec. His eyes dart through the crowd - a woman jeering with a placard, a man dragging his friend back by the waist, a policeman reaching for his holster -

“Alec?” says Jace. “Should we intervene?”
“Yeah,” says Alec, already tried and bruised and he hasn’t even met one punch. “Standard formation. Form a line behind the police. Don’t let it break-”

Another beer bottle hurtles through the air, the rag stuffed in its neck alight with a ball of red fire. The heat of it sears Alec’s skin as it soars by, colliding with the placard that had drawn his attention.

The cardboard goes up in flames. Smoke pillars up into the sky and people leap back on all sides. Someone shouts out in horror or in pain.

And the police line just snaps.

The protesters burst through the wall of riot shields like a spearhead, thumping their signs on the asphalt, jeering and chanting, spilling over the police in wave upon wave. Alec curses beneath his breath, drawing an arrow. He lines up his sights, following the placards with the tip of his arrow, and he doesn’t shake, no, but the fire escape does, with the beat of people running and pushing in the street below. The thunder of feet echoes in his skull. He can’t hear himself think.

The rally crowd floods forward to meet the protesters, the police line shoved backwards and compressed between the two riptides. They're screaming, shouting, squaring up in each others faces - hissing, spitting, waving fists. The iron beneath Alec's feet trembles. The jumbotron sputters out into blackness as a brick is thrown at the screen amidst a shower of sparks. More people swarm out from inside the stadium, an apex led by a man with his face painted red, white, and blue - no, not a man, barely a man, a kid -

And then, Jace lands in the middle of the street.

Jace lands in the middle of the street with his wings unfurled and his gun already in his hands - and it is a sight, it always is. The breadth of his wings, the bullet-shine of the titanium in the neon lights, the dark and dangerous cut of his mask - it’s threatening power, it’s a spectacle, it’s glorious, in a way. Danger clings to him like sweat: it's in his eyes, in the roll of his shoulders, in the way he stares them all down like he's bound to swallow up the sky.

The crowd parts like the sea around him, people shrieking, stumbling backwards, falling over each other to stay out of his way. But the shock and the panic doesn’t last - and Alec knows it won’t.
Jace turns in a wide circle, his glock pointed at the ground and his finger not really resting on the trigger. No-one else really knows that. Alec can see it in their eyes as panic solarflares into hatred.

He checks his sights again, the arrow on his string pulled taut against the anchor of his mouth. The fletching indents upon his lower lip. He can land an arrow right at Jace’s feet if anyone gets too close -

“Corporate scum!” someone in the crowd yells. "Get fucked! Get outta here!"

Another bottle shatters against Jace’s boots, spattering his suit with piss and beer.

Jace sneers, cricking his neck. His jaw works. His wings flex. He's pissed.

Alec’s fingers twitch. Focus.

“Muse, that’s our cue,” he whispers. “Don’t get scrappy -”

It’s then that Alec sees the man at the front of the crowd, the man with his face painted for war on the street, lunge at Jace from a mile off, some suicide mission - he’s clumsy and brutish and not a threat to Jace at all -

- but suddenly, it’s not what Alec’s looking at. No.

No, it’s a protester behind him, behind Jace, not even caring for Jace and his spectacle. It’s a woman in a balaclava who yanks the riot shield out of the arms of a police officer, slamming it to the ground, stamping on it. The plastic splinters. The police lunge for her, wrenching her back by the arms, but she still kicks, flailing wildly, trashing her head - screaming -

And then all Hell breaks loose.

The protesters leap forward, slamming into the crowd like a tide against a brick wall, crashing against a barricade that just won’t move. Alec watches in horror as police officers tumble head over heels, ploughed down by wave upon wave of people trampling them, and yeah, normally, he wouldn’t care, these are the cops who want him dead just as much, but -
There’s a gunshot. And then another, ringing out somewhere else in the crowd. He doesn’t know where, and he snaps around in horror, but he can’t see anything, the crowd is too damn thick, the noise just bounces - Alec doesn’t know if it’s a sparkler or BB-gun or something real. He doesn’t know if a bullet finds a home in someone’s thigh, if blood spurts high into the air. There’s only the chaos.

Go. Go now.

Oh, God save them all.

He leaps down into the fray, wrenching two policemen off a woman and shoving them to the side. He takes an elbow to his gut, but barely blinks, booting an unexploded tear gas shell high into the air.

Ahead, there’s Jace, ducking out of the way of the man with the painted face, twisting the man’s arm behind his back and shoving him into the crowd, only to be accosted by two more men with angry snarls. Alec doesn’t know if they’re protesters or from Herondale’s rally, but it doesn’t matter - he shoots an arrow towards Jace and it pins one of the men to the ground by his pant leg, and his momentum has him slamming onto his face.

Jace flips the other one high over his shoulder, smacking him broadly with the flat of his wings as he wheels around, taking out three more people and making half a dozen leap back.

Then, there’s a glimpse of Clary, her red hair vibrant and unmistakable despite her mask, and she’s wielding a shield in her hands, something magicked out of thin air, pushing protesters away from the fight, but people are clambering past her too, blood in their mouths.

It’s a war on three fucking sides. The marchers are going for throats, but the ralliers are swinging punches, and the phalanx of police don’t care who is who, they’re slamming their riot shields into anyone’s chest, yanking people to the ground, pinning their hands behind their backs and leaving them there.

Alec ducks an oncoming fist and smacks his bow into someone else’s back. He spins on his feet and fires another arrow without blinking. Duck again. Take another shot. Grab a woman by the back of her shirt and heave her away from spitting in another girl’s face -
He clocks the police officer with the gun before he can really process it - just a glimpse, just a glance, but it’s like a signal flare inside his head: *gun*. There’s a gun. There’s a gun, and the officer is breathing heavily, his shoulders heaving, his eyes wild as he *stares* at Jace through the throng, lining up the shot.

He’s gonna take it, claim it was an accident. He's gonna say he shot a man with wings from the sky. Alec sees it in his eyes.

“Arkangel!” Alec shouts, but the arrow in his bowstring is quicker. He looses it, and then he dives, through the crowd, towards Jace, grabbing Jace by the shoulder and pulling him down as the gunshot rings out and the police officer reels back in pain as Alec’s arrow pierces through his hand.

Alec’s ears ring. There’s blood on Jace’s cheek, a bullet graze. Jace stares back at him, his mismatched eyes bright and wild and uncontrollable. He breathes. Nods. Pushes away. Alec has no time to pause.

Alec twists back towards the officer, recoiling on the ground and clutches his bloody hand, but Alec has no time for that either. He lunges for the gun before a dozen other hands can find it, snatching it off the ground and shoving it into the belt of his suit.

All around him, police sirens are wailing, people are screeching, tear gas is blooming in enormous, grey-green clouds, swallowing up the masses of people like a monster, like some sort of Lovecraftian beast, consuming as it goes. People are stumbling, falling to the wayside, but more people are powering forward, fists in shirt collars, words violent and spittle sprayed upon faces.

Alec knows Jace is at his back - even if he can’t see him, he can *feel* him, he can hear the zing of his wings, the grunt he makes when he smacks someone with the butt of his gun. It’s always been second nature, fighting alongside Jace, knowing where Jace *is*, an extension of himself - but Jace is a firecracker, and Alec knows that well too.

“Get back!” yells Jace, firing off three rounds from his glock into the air. The first is swallowed up by the noise, but the second is a bang, and the third pierces a splintering silence as space forms around both him and Alec, suctioned like a vacuum. Jace's hair is wild across his mask. His shoulders heave, his pupils blown wide and dark. Anger drips down his chin, crackling at his skin. “Get back, the lot of you!”

Alec hears the bullet casing clink to the ground. And so does everybody else.
The crowd parts, the marchers pushing and shoving at their ranks, trampling over those squished to the ground. The police struggle to reform a bent and broken line, clamouring for their riot shields. Herondale’s supporters rally back together too, pulling each other back to their feet as the cloud of tear gas disapparates in the wind. The shouts are those of panic now.

"Get back, get back, he's got a gun!"

Alec sees Clary, a long way down the line, breathing heavily, her hair in disarray. She’s still on her feet. No blood. She flinches. The group of protesters nearest her all reel backwards, as if spooked - and rightly so. There’s a sneer on her face and Alec knows just how scrappy she can get with balled fists or a makeshift weapon.

But she’s okay; she’s holding their line, their buffer between one side that wants them dead, and the other, who probably do too. She's alive. Still standing. Her safety is one less paperwork problem for Alec at the end of the night.

Good. Good. Alec’s breath still comes hard; his chest still hammers. Adrenaline lances through him, flaying him from the inside out.

The beam of the helicopter overhead lights up her face then, and then it comes for Alec, blinding him for a moment. He squints against it, white and eye-watering, and lifts a hand to shield his face. The whoop of the blades is deafening. The jumbotron on the side of the stadium is flickering with static where the screen has been smashed by a vagrant beer bottle. Somewhere nearby, there’s a bright red flare burning in the gutters, the violent light of it staining all the faces in the colour of blood and neon. He can only smell burning. It turns his throat to ash.

The depths of the crowd are still bellowing, a murmur returning to a roar, surging forward with a swell. Alec’s finger twitches on his bow. He watches Jace. Jace doesn’t watch him. Jace touts his gun on his finger, spinning it around in his hand. Cocksure.

Reckless.

Alec sees it then - that man again, the man with the painted face, elbowing his way through the crowd as Jace turns a circle. Alec sees the hatred in the man’s eyes, the hatred he has for Jace, for Arkangel, for every Corporate and every vigilante he daren’t distinguish between. Alec knows that hatred, because it’s in the Senator’s eyes, it’s in the city newspapers, it’s in the graffiti on the outside walls of Idris, it was the look Nightlock wore that night on the rooftop -
The man charges for Jace, head down and bullish. Jace doesn’t have to do anything; Alec doesn’t have to yell. It should be slow motion, but it’s not - it happens so quick. The crunching glass, the grey smoke, the shout from the crowd, the howl -

Jace launches his gun up into the air, throwing it high, and before it crashes back to Earth again, he grapples the man around the waist and throws him to the ground. The air is expelled from the man’s body, Jace slamming his painted cheek into the asphalt, into the shattered windows, into the spilt beer and trampled rubbish. He wrenches the man’s arm behind his back and presses his knee hard between his shoulder blades.

The man is pinned, his teeth red with blood. He can’t move. He didn’t even get a punch in.

That’s not what the crowd sees. No.

No, they see a defenseless man lunging at a super with his bare fists, and they see a man in a black mask and enormous titanium wings slam him to the ground, and they see the man’s split open cheek and busted nose leaking liquid cartilage into the street.

Alec can’t move. His eyes meet Clary’s. Panic.

Jace looks up, his blonde hair flopping forward over his mask. The smoke and the tear gas rises up behind him as the searchlight illuminates him in a spotlight, white and bright and dangerous, and he looks like he’s the harbinger of the end of the world.

“Arkangel!” Alec snaps, yanking an arrow out of his quiver and locking it in his bow. There are a hundred eyes on Jace, on Clary, on Alec too. He doesn’t know which way to face.

Jace leaps away from the man’s back, but the man doesn’t get up, still face down in the dirt and the pool of his own blood. He’s making a strange gurgling sound, and he’s trying to push himself to his feet, but he’s not getting up, there’s a river of blood streaming from his hairline now -

“Get fucked, Corporate scum!” someone screams, and a beer bottle smashes at Jace’s feet. A shard of glass shoots up into the air and catches Jace on the temple.

Alec stares at the bead of blood as it blooms and then rolls down Jace’s cheek, a line of bright crimson dripping off his chin. Alec stares, and the shiver rattles up his spine, wringing him for all
that he’s worth.

“Murderer!” another shouts from behind Alec, “Murderous pig!”

The flash of a camera too close makes Alec sees stars for a moment. He wheels round, pointing his arrow into the crowd and they all stumble backwards, away from him, but there’s at least three camcorders staring him down with black, unblinking eyes.

“Kill the supers!” comes the chant. "Don't let them get away with this!" Alec knows it well. All too well.

Jace curses, grabbing a new magazine from his belt and reloading his gun. There’s a snarl on his face now, and as he scrubs his knuckles across his cheek, he smears blood across his curled lip.

“Alec,” says Izzy over the coms. She doesn’t need to say anything else. Alec wonders if she’s watching on the TV from the safety of her lab.

This is going to end badly, and Alec - Alec doesn’t want to let his arrow fly, but he doesn’t know what else to do. He braces himself for the onslaught. He digs his heels into the concrete. His bow cuts into his fingers. Sharp. Pain.

*Focus*.

He has to keep Jace and Clary alive, but everyone else wants them fucking dead.

There’s a smear of blood on the sidewalk. It’s turning brown and darkening in the rain, but Alec knows that his fingers would still come back red if he rubbed his hand through it and smudged it into the cracks on the pavement.

The street is silent.
The street is silent, the crowds gone, run away, arrested, he doesn’t know, but beyond that, there’s rain that hisses on the still-hot concrete, ringing on broken glass and tiny of upturned dumpsters and torn-off car doors. Placards and balaclavas are soaking in the puddles, cardboard turning to mush.

Somehow, the air still shrieks the song of burning. Acrid, violent burning that stinks of rubber and sweat and vomit. He’s been out here for hours, but he doesn’t know how many. The night is wearing away at his skin. Dawn will find the horizon soon enough. Maybe.

There’s a part of him not too sure.

Alec crouches down to yank one of his arrows out of a trash bag, the shaft all bent and twisted, the fletching ripped clean off. The arrowhead is sticky with something black, or a deep, deep red.

Alec’s stomach churns.

The street is silent, and the emptiness deafens him.

And New York is never this quiet, never this seething. He’s never seen Madison Square without its lights piercing into the sky, a column of yellow, hazy light. He’s never seen 7th Avenue devoid of taxi cabs and car horns.

He’s standing in the middle of the road, right on the dotted line. He looks up the street, and there’s only dark. He looks the other way, towards the sea, and there’s only the distant beam of a roaming helicopter. The skyscrapers loom tall above him, black, shadowy, goading as they vie to swallow him up.

Silent.

Jace lands with a heavy oomph behind him. He’s just taken Clary to safety, somewhere up high. Alec wants to be up high.

“Fuck, I don’t know about you, but I’m gonna sleep well tonight,” Jace grunts. The blood on his face hasn’t been allowed to dry; the rain smears it, watery red streaks across his chin and mask. His
hair too, is stained pinky-red at the ends. There’s a dent in his wings. His suit is ripped.

At least he’s not smiling. He knows this is serious, and even if he doesn’t, one look at Alec’s face will tell him otherwise.

Alec doesn’t turn to look at him. Maybe he can’t. Maybe he can’t stop his hands curling into fists, maybe he can’t stop the shaking as adrenaline wrings him dry.

Alec stares at that bloody smear on the ground again. It’s mixed with paint, red, white, and blue. Brown now. Everything is brown, dirty, disgusting. It makes him want to pick as his skin, pull it clean off.

“Man, the Senator better pay us double for dealing with that,” Jace says, “Kinda cheap only hiring three of us out if she knew it was gonna turn nasty, even though we had it under control and everything.”

Alec says nothing. Jace continues, oblivious.

“That kid who ran at me at the start though? That was pretty crazy. I saw that move on TV, y’know? Raj and I were watching WWE the other night after shift and I’ve been itching to try it out, superflex someone’s ass -”

“You could’ve killed him.”

Alec almost hears the snap of Jace’s head as he turns sharply to stare at Alec.

“Yeah, but I didn’t,” Jace protests, and Alec knows the affront in his voice, the offense, the prideful anger. “Kid’s gonna have a fun night in the cells and a splitting headache tomorrow, but he’ll get out scot free. Me, meanwhile, I have this damn cut on my face and it won’t stop bleeding, and you know how easy I scar, Sentinel -”

Maybe he’s joking. Jace always makes awful jokes at awful times, the gift of sarcasm definitely lost on him.
Tonight, Alec suspects it’s lost on him too.

“If you kept your face outta the papers, a few scars wouldn’t be a problem,” he mutters, “A lot of things wouldn’t be a problem.”

“C’mon, Sentinel,” Jace smarts. He steps up to Alec’s side and slaps a hand on Alec’s shoulders, forcing Alec to face him. If Alec has a face like thunder, Jace doesn’t react to it. “Lighten up. Mistakes were made, no big deal. It’s not our problem, this sort of thing happens all the time. It’s a protest, things gets violent … what do people expect?”

Mistakes were made, Alec thinks, by you. He doesn’t say it.

He doesn’t say it, because he’s the one holding a bloody arrow, so mistakes were made by him as well.

He’s not sure if he hates himself for that. Deep down, he knows he does, he knows he will be reeling at himself this time tomorrow, but now? Now, all he feels is numb. His head is spinning, his eyes are aching from the tear gas, his throat is hoarse and dry.

He wants to ask Jace if he’s scared - but he already knows the answer, even if Jace will never admit it if asked. Jace knows the situation is fucked, Jace knows they shouldn’t be here, Jace does it anyway, because it’s all they know.

It’s all either of them know. The mask, the job, the pay packet at the end of it, the sense of guilt that comes afterwards, the hatred. Alec understands why people want them dead.

“Hey,” says Jace then, and his voice is softer. He’s known Alec long enough to recognise his spirals. “Buddy. C’mon. Don’t think about it, you know it doesn’t help.”

“I’m not thinking about anything,” Alec mutters.

“Sure you’re not,” Jace agrees, patting Alec’s shoulders again. “Sure you’re not.”
Alec heads home alone. And that’s normal, because he and Jace always say goodbye at the end of the night, either on a street corner or at headquarters after a debrief, but tonight, Alec hears the loneliness in his own footsteps. The thought of his empty apartment isn’t one of sanctitude. His living room will be dark, his kitchen silent. There’s no-one waiting for him at home, and oh - inhale, Alec.

Ignore the hitch of your heart, Alec. Ignore his desperation for a simple touch, a hand on his shoulder that isn’t Jace’s. Ignore the way the thoughts rattle around inside his empty head with nowhere to go.

He thinks about his parents. He wonders if they’re going to chew Jace out; he wonders if they’re going to congratulate him for a job well done. He wonders if Senator Herondale will hire them out again in a week’s time to run point on another protest and the night will play out again as it always must.

He thinks about the headlines that will splatter tomorrow’s front pages in slander. What horrible things will they say about Arkangel, about Muse, about Sentinel? Will the front steps of headquarters be splattered in rain-wet newspapers, plastered to the door like papier maché? Will Alec see his own masked face in the broadsheets on the subway tomorrow on his commute to work and have to pretend that it’s the movement of the carriage that makes him queasy?

Alec picks up the pace. He’s five blocks away from home and his legs are aching, his bow arm twinging in pain, a bruise blooming on his hip where he took a blow, maybe the scrape of a butterfly knife. He’ll find out later in the shower if the damp spots on his suit are rain or blood.

There’s a part of him, an insidious, ugly, deserving part of him that wants the blood, that longs for the cuts, that needs to feel the sting, because that’s real. It’s not numbness, or hatred, or anything like that: it’s just pain, and that, he can focus on. He can let the shower wash the blood away. He can pick at the scabs as they heal. He can look at each white whisker of a scar in the mirror and remember.

Five blocks to go. Instead, he has the wind, and it’s billowing, growling in the gutters and shaking telephone polls and sounding something like laughter.

Why does it feel like he knows that laughter? Why does it sound like that super on the roof, like Nightlock, laughing at him, telling Sentinel that he was right? All Corporates are the same, the
paid muscle, deplorable, moraless, violent, untrustable -

It makes Alec angry - being laughed at, being proven wrong, being made to feel … like this. But beneath that compacted anger, he knows there’s so much more, a sadness, a longing, that damn loneliness, and the more he thinks about it, the more it feels real, and he can’t have that.

Ignore it, he tells himself, over and over and over again, all the way to his front door. Ignore it, squash it down, lock it away. Don’t think about what you’ve had to do to keep people safe. Don’t let it interfere with the job.

He does these things to keep Jace and Clary alive.

He does these things to save people, even if they don’t know it and never thank him for it.

He does these things because he doesn’t know how to live with himself if he doesn’t try.

He doesn’t have time for it to get in the way.

The media will milk tonight for all it is worth. Maryse will find a way to spin it, painting those protesters as dangerous and the rally-goers as innocent bystanders, even if they were all the same. Senator Herondale won’t comment on it when she’s asked about it at her next public appearance, insisting that she had no idea why the Corporate supers were ever there. The police will still hate Arkangel and Sentinel.

But give it a week, and everyone will forget. Something worse will happen. Someone else will distract the papers and the people and the placards littered in the streets and propped up outside Idris. Arkangel and Sentinel will be back on patrol and no-one will hold them accountable for tonight because no-one calling the shots really cares what the Corporates do or do not do -

It will be the same as always. The wind is still howling. Somewhere, Nightlock is still laughing.
For someone with such keen eyesight, Alec sees the figure strung up above the glass doors of the Tribunal far too late the next morning.

From across the street, it genuinely looks like a body - the lifeless slump of a dead man something Alec is unable to mistake. His heart surges into his throat and his stomach falls out from within him, suddenly unable to feel the ground beneath his feet, but definitely able to feel the biting sting of his nails digging into the palms of his hands where he curls his fingers into fists.

It takes a moment or two of blind, blank-faced horror for him to realise it’s only a dummy, because no-one else is stopping to give it more than a cursory glance over - this effigy, a straw man with his arms stretched out in crucifixion, his head bowed between his shoulders, and a placard roped around his neck.

Alec hurries across the street, weaving between taxi cabs that blast their horns at him and drivers who throw middle fingers out their wound-down windows, but his breath still comes hard when he makes it to the sidewalk, and it’s not only on account of exertion.

He stares up at his office, the big, brassy letters of The Daily Tribunal dulled by the overcast skies, the letters T and L bound with rope to string up the fake body above the door.

Alec has seen many of these effigies in his time; he’s seen them on pikes in angry crowds; he’s seen them burning at the centre of a bonfire; and he’s seen them abandoned on street corners, home for rats and city vermin.

But this - this one is right here. Hoisted up above the door to his place of work, staring down at him with a blank and broken and soulless stare, its eyes, two black pits of permanent marker scored by an angry hand.

It’s too high for anyone to reach without help, but that only means that someone planned this; it wasn’t a passing fantasy. Someone made this dummy for the sole purpose of hanging it up here, for everyone to see.

Alec takes a step closer, squinting as he takes in the dummy’s tattered black jeans, old leather jacket, its head of yellow yarn, and its floppy legs swaying in the wind. And then, on its back -

A pair of cheap, costume angel wings, made of plastic feathers and fine mesh. None of it is true to
life, but the point still strikes Alec in much the same way nausea does, a smarting backhand, and he feels sick to his bones.

It’s meant to be an effigy of Arkangel. Of Jace.

Alec tries to make out the words of the placard around the dummy’s neck, but he’s too far to really read anything but the title - but he knows the front page of his paper when he sees it, and the headline is inky black and bold.

_Corporate Super or Violent Mercenary? Arkangel Causes Chaos at Herondale Rally_

There’s a red handprint on the placard too - not blood, Alec knows the colour of blood, both wet and weeping and long since dried - but in its crimson, equally violent and equally terrible.

The sickness in Alec’s bones calcifies, becoming anger, becoming hatred, simmering away just below the boil. He feels it scorching, searing him on the insides where he cannot reach and cannot stop it, and it’s all he can do to grit his teeth and bear it, like he always does, ducking his head and stalking into the office lobby without another look up at the greying heavens.

There’s a strange mood in the building, like there’s an elephant in the room but no-one wants to talk about it. Alec weaves his way through the cubicles, fingers gripping the strap of his bag tighter and tighter with every step, until his knuckles turn white.

No-one looks up, heads bowed and eyes focused on keyboards, but Alec can feel it in the air: the tension, the knife-edge, the want to gossip. It only fuels the simmer in his gut, but it’s not just that.

It’s not just the resentment and the fury and the disgust for this damn city, he realises, as he all but throws himself down in his desk chair. It’s not just the guilt and the way he didn’t sleep last night because his mind kept replaying over and over again Jace slamming that kid’s cheek into the concrete.
It’s panic too. Just beneath the surface, but there: an aftertaste for an afterthought.

And Alec hasn’t felt the phantom grip of panic in a long time.

He turns on his computer on autopilot, but even as the dial-up screeches, all he’s doing is staring at his screen, numb from the mind down.

Of course he’s scared - who wouldn’t be?

There’s a straw dummy of his damn brother in a hangman’s noose strung up outside the place he works. This has never happened before. This, he can’t ignore.

His fingers start trembling, and so he ties them up in knots, curls them into fists, does anything he can to fidget, to keep the tremors from creeping up his arms and burrowing deeper, to a place where he cannot control them. He has no time for fear, he tells himself on endless repeat. It’s probably not the truth, but perhaps it’s better than acknowledging the other reasons why it’s so hard for him to accept the hitch in his breath and the heave in his stomach.

This is because of last night. He knows it. Someone wants Jace dead because of that riot - and Hell, probably far more than just some one. This was a planned and collaborative effort.

He should call Jace. No, not Jace, he should call Izzy. Yeah, that’s a plan. He needs a plan.

God, he feels sick -

It’s then that the doors on the other side of the office swing open, and Magnus floods into the room, and Alec’s eyes fly to him on instinct. Magnus’ head is held high and his jaw cuts a sharp profile; his dark suspenders cut into the crisp white linen of his shirt; and his strides are fast and purposeful as he flies across the room, a dozen manilla folders pressed beneath his arm.

He looks cool and calm and collected on the surface, yet, as Magnus stops abruptly, spinning on his heel with the arrival of a sudden and crucial decision, Alec hones in on something in the set of his jaw that is just more than a little tense.
Alec watches him raise a hand, pinch his thumb and forefinger together, and then close his eyes to take a deep, steadying breath. He drops his hand again. Another breath.

And then he says, loudly, “Everyone, good morning - could I have your attention, please?”

It’s almost comical, the way Alec sees a dozen or so heads pop up from behind their partitions, all eyes curious upon the lone figure of Magnus standing in the centre of the room, commanding their attention.

Magnus doesn’t say anything until a few more heads rise, incensed by the prolonged silence more than anything, but when he does, Alec feels the tightness in his throat seize right up.

“By now I’m sure you’re all aware of the lovely new addition to the front of the building, following last night,” Magnus says, his voice strong and resolute. “But have we decided how we’re going to take it down?”

A low murmur ripples through the office, undoubtedly harsh with words that Alec is glad he cannot hear - but what he can see is Magnus folding his arms across his chest and beginning to tap his foot, pointed and deliberate. His jaw clenches, the muscles in his face shifting, and he quirks an eyebrow as he surveys the room of people too afraid to reply.

He doesn’t look like a patient man.

“Don’t all talk at once,” he remarks bitterly. “Can I get some volunteers to take the thing down, or not?”

Another murmur, and this time Alec hears the man next to him grumbling about leaving the dummy up there, because it will serve someone right, because it will send a message -

Alec curls his palms into fists again, pressing his knuckles into the wood of his desk, hard. Across the room, he sees Simon’s hand pop up into the air.

And then Magnus smiles.
It’s brief and it’s fleeting, but it’s there, and Alec feels it like a puncture. Magnus nods at Simon, curt but thankful, and then his eyes begin to roam the room again, landing, at last, on Alec.

When their gazes lock, Alec swallows hard, and splays his palms out flat on his desktop. He thinks about keeping a low profile; he thinks about letting those disgusting whispers from his neighbour pass through him like it feels the wind in the treacherous city does; he thinks about looking away. Ignore, ignore, ignore.

He doesn’t. Slowly, he raises his hand too, not nearly as enthusiastically as Simon, but it’s enough for Magnus’ expression to shift, as if he’s somehow pleasantly surprised, but relieved, and grateful too, and just the barest flash of something else -

Alec is hard-pressed to name it, but it’s not unlike the feeling of a spotlight, with Magnus’ fixated stare the strobe. It’s not like the beam of the helicopter from last night, not blinding, but it shares the same scrutiny. He feels just a little bit transparent, as if Magnus can see right to the centre of him for the very first time.

It lasts but a moment, because then Magnus is serious and severe again, saying something barbed to the rest of the room about how *that* will have to do. He clicks his tongue to get Simon to follow him as he breezes from the room once more.

He doesn’t look back at Alec, but Alec wants him to look back.

Alec wants him to look back and raise his eyebrows in expectation and tilt his head just so, a *what are you waiting for, are you coming or not?*

Magnus always knows what he’s doing.

Alec is positive that Simon is going to fall off his ladder and break his neck on the sidewalk - or at least give himself a nasty concussion. Alec isn’t so fussed about *that*, but knows that Simon hurting himself is going to be something that Alec will have to deal with, and that definitely grates on him.
He wants to tell Magnus that he should be holding onto the bottom of Simon’s ladder, and not Alec’s, but Alec can’t bring himself to turn and look down at Magnus, because he’s already made that mistake twice so far, and -

Well. The first time he’d looked, Magnus’ eyes had snapped from somewhere that definitely wasn’t where they were supposed to be, to Alec’s face, and he’d raised his eyebrows and shot Alec the most guilty smile Alec had ever seen. The second time, Magnus didn’t even realise he’d been caught staring, his eyes completely glazed over and preoccupied when Alec had looked back over his shoulders.

So, Alec doesn’t look back. He grits his teeth and tries again to shake the ropes free of the big brass letters of the Tribunal. Blood rises in his face, most certainly betraying him. He yanks a little bit harder, and the knots comes loose, the dummy swinging down as its weight is released on one side.

Simon yelps something unintelligible, but then he manages to get the other rope free without overextending himself too far off balance, and the dummy falls to the ground with an unceremonious thud. A couple pedestrians on the sidewalk stop to look for a moment, silent and robotic, but they carry on walking without saying a word, because the wind is too cold and the clouds too grey to linger for long.

“Well,” says Magnus, as Alec eases himself down the ladder. Magnus moves to inspect the dummy, nudging it onto its back with the toe of his brogue, and frowning at the placard on its chest. He pulls his coat tighter around himself, the collar flipped up around his cheeks. The sight of his suspenders is definitely missed. “I’d say we should burn this, but I fear that would be what it was intended for.”

Simon climbs down from his ladder, almost tripping over the last rung in his haste to get to Magnus’ side.

“Could always try feeding it to the paper shredder,” he suggests, unhelpfully. “Piece by piece, very slowly, and very agonisingly. It’s what it deserves.”

“Just put it in the trash and be done with it,” Alec sighs, sounding as weary as he feels. He folds his arms across his chest, hunching his shoulders as the wind lances right through his thin work shirt. It’s no super suit. His teeth chatter. “Let’s just get back inside.”
Simon squawks about Alec being a buzzkill, but he hauls the dummy up into his arms and drags it inside, insisting loudly that he’s going to deal with it in a way he sees fit - but Alec doesn’t really care, because Magnus turns to him, something curious in his eyes.

No, not quite curious. It’s more like -

It’s more like he’s looking at Alec and trying to understand something, what with the way there’s a tiny crease between his brows and a tilt to his head, his eyes slightly narrowed. He studies Alec a moment, and Alec wonders if it’s possible to drive himself insane wondering with obvious thing Magnus sees upon his face: gravel burn? the dark outline of his mask? a splattering of blood from the streets last night he forgot to wash off?

He doesn’t want Magnus seeing any of that, and yet -

Magnus takes a step closer to Alec, slow and careful, but nothing further, and Alec is glad of that, because he’s already uncomfortable, his eyes anywhere but Magnus’ face.

“I, uh - “ Alec says clumsily, “I should get back to work.”

He turns to leave, probably a little too quickly -

“Alexander, wait -”

- and stops just as fast.

Magnus steps to his side, his hand hovering near Alec’s shoulder, but not quite touching. He guides Alec away from the bustle of the sidewalk, beneath the arch of the doorway. The shadows smell like cheap cigarettes and ash, but as Magnus moves, there’s the waft of his cologne too, more cloying than Alec remembers.

Alec blanches, and Magnus starts to say something, but the words smoke out before they even leave his mouth. Magnus takes half a step back, giving Alec the space again to breathe.

And then, Magnus frowns, pursing his lips together in a firm line, frustrated - and it surprises Alec,
because Magnus is always someone so deft with words, so confident with what he has to say, so sure-footed when it comes to dazzling Alec with clever turns-of-phrase and whiplash smiles.

Instead, Magnus folds his arms around himself, rubbing his thumb and index finger together. It’s a tick. It’s a *tell*. For nerves, for doubt, for - Alec cannot claim to know, but it throws him off-balance nonetheless.

*Why is Magnus nervous?*

“Magnus?”

Magnus eyes snap up to meet his in a heartbeat, so fast that Alec startles.

“I didn’t know,” says Magnus below his breath, turned away from the street deliberately. There’s something about his voice that is simultaneously tentative and hopeful. He speaks slowly, as if sounding out each word, not only in his own mouth, but for how they fall upon Alec. “That you were sympathetic.”

“Sympathetic?” Alec asks, confused.

“To the supers,” Magnus clarifies, waving his fingers, his eyebrows raising on that last word. “You didn’t strike me as the sort of person to be on their side. Going against the grain is - *well*. I … didn’t assume it was your style, per say.”

Alec frowns, shifting his weight and clasping his hands behind his back. He straightens up, settling his shoulders.

“What made you think that I wouldn’t care?”

He means for it to come out more gently than it does, but it’s defensive, curt to a point that even he can hear it in himself, and he’s never been the most discerning. He sucks in a sharp breath, his tongue feeling fat and stupid in his mouth, but swallows down any further things he might say to stick his foot in it. He watches Magnus’ face instead.
Magnus doesn’t say anything. He’s still frowning, but it’s inwards this time, his thoughts clearly muddled. The silence goes on so long that Alec starts to itch, an uncomfortable feeling starting in his toes that goes hand in hand with the way he feels just a little bit too vulnerable standing out on the street where every passerby seems to be looking.

Why does Magnus want to know if he’s sympathetic to supers? What does sympathetic even mean?? Is he trying to sound Alec out? It’s the sort of thing that gets people fired, openly supporting vigilantes, but Magnus isn’t that sort of person - is he?

Maybe he was at the protest last night. Maybe he saw Arkangel in the crowds, maybe he saw Sentinel with his bloody bow and arrow, maybe he saw that boy with his cheek pressed to the concrete, and he can’t get it out of his head either. Maybe he wants Alec to tell him he’s not crazy for not knowing which side of the law the Corporates stand on -

He needs to make an excuse to leave again, but then Magnus speaks.

“I don’t know,” he says, and Alec blinks. Something left unsaid remains in the air, but Alec is not quite sure what it is, or how to read it. “I don’t know why I thought that. I was … evidently wrong.”

His eyes roam over Alec, searching Alec’s face, slow over the line of his hair, the cut of his jaw, the gulp in his throat. He lingers on the knot of Alec’s tie at the base of his neck, that tiny scowl appearing between his brows again for just a second.

Perhaps, Alec realises, beneath the way that obnoxious heat starts to rise up the back of his neck once more, Magnus is seeing him for the first time all over again.

Magnus looks like he wants to say more. He doesn’t, but he makes a humming noise that sounds satisfied (and leaves Alec nothing but stumped), and then tilts his head in the direction of the lobby.

“Back to work?” he almost whispers.

“I -” Alec mumbles, “I should probably … go make sure Simon isn’t breaking the paper shredder.”

He doesn’t have much time to wonder why the Hell did he just say that, because then Magnus is
laughing, a soft, quiet thing, a little bit contained, and he shakes his head in dismay, but his eyes still shine.

“Quite,” Magnus says, and Alec is not sure Magnus has ever looked at him like that before. It’s new. It’s different. Something in Alec’s chest aches, and it matches all the mottled bruises he suffered last night. It makes Alec feel a little breathless. “Thank you for help, Alexander. I’ll see you later.”

Alec is not the sort of person to dwell on things too much: if there’s not an immediate answer to a problem, then the thought can be quashed down and compacted, to be dealt with on later date. It’s probably not a healthy coping mechanism and likely the latent cause of most of his issues - which Izzy likes to remind him of - but it’s worked, more or less, for most of his life.

That look on Magnus’ face is another matter, however, because Alec’s still thinking about it when he gets back to his desk; when he’s gearing up that night; and then again when he’s sitting on a rooftop waiting for Jace, for Arkangel, to confirm that the floor of the building across the street they’re supposed to be breaking into is empty. It’s not something he can ignore, not like everything else.

Alec’s not one to let his mind wander, but he comes back to himself with a start. He realises that he’s been staring down the length of an arrow for the last five minutes, but not seeing anything.

He blushes, because there’s no-one around to see him, but he still can hate the way his cheeks flare so warm. He feels like he wants to peel his skin off for how his mind keeps returning to that curious, unexpected look in Magnus’ eyes, a look that has now burrowed its way deep into his flesh - and he’s not oblivious to this morbid need for self-flaying that has possessed him two nights in a row.

He wants to say the feeling is different to last night: last night, he wanted rid of the flaking dirt on his skin, and tonight, it’s the heat, but really, it’s all the same. He wants rid of sensation.

But even his blood runs hot to the touch, and it’s not something he’s ever felt before, and it makes him antsy.
“Alec?” comes Jace’s voice in his ear. “You still there?”

“Yes,” Alec replies, a little too snappishly. “Are we in the clear?”

“Looks like it,” Jace replies, the sound of the wind rushing past his radio dying out as he comes into land on another building. Alec scans the rooftops for him, looking for the telltale glint of silver metal in the night, but spots nothing. He turns his attention back to the skyscraper before him.

“You got one of those special arrows of yours, Sentinel?” Jace asks, “Sounds like Iz was right, the security system up here is electromagnetic. You’re gonna have to zap it, bud.”

“Of course I was right,” replies Isabelle, “And for the love of God, Jace, please don’t say ‘special arrows’ ever again.”

“It wasn’t meant to be an innuendo, that’s your fault. Get your mind out of the gutter, Iz.”

“Can we please focus?” Alec grits out. He adjusts his grip on his bow, drawing back the string to the corner of his mouth, anchoring it against his lip. Despite what Izzy might say, the arrow he has notched is a special one, one that will release an EMP pulse upon impact, and hopefully knock out most of the electronics within a fifty-foot radius.

Tonight, that’s how they’ll get into this building without being seen, and Alec has to admit he’s thankful for it, because it means no-one has to get hurt. It’s an in-and-out mission. Maybe it’s an apology from his mother for selling them out last night, or maybe it’s her careful plan to keep them out of the spotlight for the moment.

Alec’s not about to complain. It’s quiet, all the way up here. All he has is the wind and the buzz in his ear and the thought of that unreadable look in Magnus’ eyes -

“Where’s the target?” he says briskly into his radio, gaze focused down the shaft of his arrow. The empty fifteenth floor of the building across is aglow in the dark with the blue haze of computers on standby.

“According to the blueprints, the security hub is on the other side of the room you’re looking into,” Izzy replies. “So … four windows down from the west should be alright. If you hit the glass, the pulse should be able to disable the system from there.”
“If I hit the glass,” Alec mutters, as if the window he’s aiming for isn’t twice his height and far, far bigger than any practice target he’s used in years. He draws the bowstring back until the tension digs into his fingers through the leather of his gloves, and then he lets the arrow fly, no sound but a quiet *whoosh* as it slices through the dark.

The arrow flies so fast that it goes straight through the glass, splintering the window with spider web-like fractures. It doesn’t break, but suddenly all the lights of the city are warped upon it, spindly yellows and strange magenta, refracting in different prismatic colours to all the other windows.

All the computers in the office flicker into darkness. Alec lets his breath hiss out over his lips and gently lowers his bow.

In his ear, Alec hears Jace let out a low whistle.

“Nice shot,” says Izzy, equally impressed. “Alright, everything’s fried, electronic locking and alarms are both offline. Jace, you should be able to get in from the roof and walk down without tripping any wires. I’ll talk you through the rest.”

Alec hears Jace take off from wherever he is, the whir of his wings unmistakable, and then, in the dark, he sees a metallic glint landing silently on the roof across from him. He huffs out a breath and it mushrooms in the cold that has arrived in the city too soon for winter.

Alec doesn’t really know what they’re here to collect; the dossier handed to him by his mother hadn’t been all that informative, but that’s nothing out of the ordinary - Alec is used to not having all the facts and turning a blind eye. He suspects that someone out there is after some financial records and is willing to pay big money to get them, as this building is occupied by a bank, or a law firm maybe, but definitely someone with access to a lot of information and a lot of capital.

It’s fine. He’s not the one who has to get in there and get out, and he’s more than happy to leave that to Jace while playing the lookout. His ears have only just stopped ringing from the protest, from all those booming flares and all that screaming. The light of the city is softer this high up, all white and icy blue, and the pounding in his head finally lessens.

Espionage is quieter, and Alec trusts his arrows to fly true and his footsteps to be silent and his body to sink into the shadows.
He likes to think his hands are less dirty this way.

It’s a lie.

And the moment he realises it, the pressure in the air changes. There’s a taxi down on the street that blasts its horn, violating the quiet; orange light flashes upon the glass of the skyscraper, catching and sticking in the broken window of the fifteenth floor.

The cool damp of the night alights with an eddy current. It almost arcs from the ground to Alec’s fingertips like lightning.

*It feels … familiar -*

“You know, you’re not doing all that much to dispel the idea that you’re a glorified burglar, Sentinel.”

Alec starts, his hand already grabbing for his quiver, but behind him, stepping out of the veil of night, Nightlock just raises his gloved hands in surrender. He laughs bitingly, the sound conjured up from out of the gloom.

“Easy there,” he says. Tonight, the collar of his coat is popped against the wind, there’s a streak of red colour through his hair, and in the soft light, the shadow around his mouth isn’t as stark as before. He’s smiling crookedly. “I’m not here to interfere, but that EMP of yours certainly caught my attention. Couldn’t ignore that. Was that one of your arrows?”

“You felt it?” Alec asks, narrowing his eyes. He doesn’t draw his arrow, but damn it, he’s getting a little frustrated at being snuck up upon.

Nightlock only shrugs.

“Of course,” he says, “I was in the neighbourhood, but I am *particularly* in tune to changes in the dispersion of energy, after all.”
His flicks his wrist and the air convulses around his fingers, coiling out of nothing into a loose ball that begins to slowly glow with a faint white light. He tosses it up into the air like a baseball, catching it with ease, and Alec’s eyes follow.

*So it’s not just telekinesis*, Alec notes, *it’s energy manipulation, probably … probably kinetikinesis*. He’s never seen it before, but he’s read about it, and he knows enough about the Law of the Conservation of Energy to guess that Nightlock has just transferred the kinetic energy from his hand into the light that he now toys with in his palm.

*Energy can neither be created nor destroyed; energy can only be transferred or changed from one form to another.*

*That’s an infinite power.*

“So, what terrible deed is on the cards tonight?” he asks, rocking forward on the balls of his feet. Alec can feel the vein in his temple twitching. Instead, he grits his teeth and swallows the temptation to make a rash decision. That’s Jace’s forté.

“In what universe do you think I could tell you?” he replies, “And even if I could, why would I want to -”

“Oh, not even to whet my curiosity?” Nightlock says, his smile turning sharp. He nods towards the building across the street. “You do know that Jia Penhallow’s campaign headquarters are in that building, don’t you?”

So, that’s it. Not a bank, not a law firm, but political mind games. That’s why they’re here tonight. They couldn’t even leave the election and last night behind if they tried.
Alec tries not to let it show on his face.

“That’s irrelevant,” he says. “And I’m not saying any more.”

“Oh, that hits a nerve. Alec clenches his fist around his bow.

He wants to argue that Senator Herondale isn’t paying them handsomely to steal whatever they’re stealing from that building across the street, but he doesn’t know that. The dossier didn’t say. He didn’t recognise the name of the sponsor on the mission file. Maryse and Robert wouldn’t think it pertinent for him to know anyways.

Nightlock’s probably right, and that makes Alec bristle.

“You need to leave,” he bites.

“Now, now,” Nightlock says. The air crackles with something dangerous, the sound of static. “I’m not causing any harm. I just stopped by to make sure you’re not, either. Why ever would you want me to leave?”

“You know why.”

“I do?”

Alec exhales sharply through his nose, his nostrils flaring. The man is infuriating, but Alec’s never been the sort of person to lash out. He coils up the feeling in his gut, until the knot is so tight that it throbs.
“You keep getting in the way,” he says, deliberately slow. He wants to sound threatening, but he’s not so sure he succeeds. “Beating us to our jobs, showing up when you’re not meant to - we don’t need your help, so whatever game you’re trying to play here -”

“Am I stealing your thunder?” asks Nightlock, his lips quirking.

“Wha- what, no ,” Alec sneers, “There’s no thunder to steal, you’re being a nuisance, and I’m - you can’t compare it -”

Nightlock ignores him. “Or,” he interrupts, with a glint in his eye, “Is it Arkangel’s thunder that I’m so cruelly stealing, and you’re the one who has to answer to Idris at the end of the night when blondie doesn’t get his face in the papers as planned?”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“And you seem a little reluctant to see the truth, so I’d say we’re at an impasse, Sentinel. I am only trying to do my best for my fellow citizens, after all. Can’t blame me for being faster in a crisis, can you?”

“Can’t you just -” Alec starts, cutting himself off with a heavy, grumbling sigh. He pinches the bridge of his nose through his mask. “This city is plenty big enough for all of us.”

“It is,” says Nightlock with a dismissive shrug of his shoulders. He pretends like he’s inspecting his gloved hands, admiring his fingers, rubbing his thumb and index finger together nonchalantly. “But that has never stopped Corporates before, has it?”

Alec’s eyes flash to his, but he’s already looking, already staring, and it’s unexpectedly firm and unyielding.

He doesn’t blink, not until Alec does, and then he says, “You were all over the news last night, after all. I don’t think there’s anyone in the city who didn’t see that .”

In Alec’s ear, the coms crackle and Jace says, “Alright guys, I think I’ve got what we came for. Piece of cake. Is Lydia still dealing with that car accident on the bridge? I know it’s not our jurisdiction but think we could swing by for a bit, I wanna take a look and we got time. I promise I’ll behave .”

God damnit. Nightlock is right, and judging by the smug look on his face, he knows it too.
“Do you enjoy this?” Alec asks, gesturing sharply with his bow. “Do you get some … some kick out of messing with me, rubbing it in my face? Is it fun to you?”

The harsh amusement in Nightlock’s face quietly changes. A frown forms in its wake.

“I’m merely making observations,” he says.

“Well, then, stop,” barks Alec, “I don’t want to have to fight you, but this is obstruction -”

“Do you want to fight me?”

“Wha-what?”

“Do you want to fight me?” Nightlock repeats. “Given the choice between me, and say - your blond friend who keeps outrunning you and leaving you stranded on rooftops, or Idris, who puts you in that position to begin with? Is it me that you want to fight?”

“That’s enough!” Alec snaps, stepping forward, holding himself tall. Nightlock doesn’t even flinch. “If you don’t get outta here -”

“Sentinel?” comes Izzy’s voice in his ear, sounding wary. She must’ve just tuned into this conversation. “Everything alright over there? Do you need backup?”

Alec presses his finger to his ear, a cutting reply on his tongue, but he never gets that far. Nightlock holds up one finger, a soft shake to his head, and anything Alec was about to say is forgotten.

“Alright,” says Nightlock, “Alright, alright.”

His voice is soft, softer than it has any right to be, softer than Alec can understand. Nightlock sighs heavily.
“That sounds like my cue to leave,” he laments. “No need to get aggressive, Sentinel. You’d regret it.”

“I didn’t mean -”

There’s a snap - fingers or thunder, Alec doesn’t know, but he blinks nonetheless, taking his eyes off Nightlock for a moment. It’s a moment too long.

The bright lights of the city swallow Nightlock up into the fitful darkness with ease; his shadow melts into it, a blur that makes Alec’s head spin and his ears ring as the pressure on his temples abates in an instance. Suddenly, he can breathe again.

“Wait -” Alec starts, lurching forward towards nothing. His feet won’t move. Somehow, he doesn’t think that’s Nightlock’s doing, just his own incompetence. If Alec didn’t know any better, he’d think the man could teleport too, as well as move things with his mind, because the turn of his coat is so fast.

“Sentinel?” Jace is saying now, “Sentinel, come in, are you alright? Buddy, do you need my help?”

He can’t respond to that. He won’t. He doesn’t need Jace’s help. He doesn’t.

He just -

Alec hates him, hates Nightlock. Whoever he is, he hates him.

Nightlock has no clue what he’s talking about.

“Fuck,” Alec curses, paperwork scattered all over the floor and the coffee table upturned. He stares dumbly at the mess, fighting back the urge to stomp all over it and make it worse. The pages are
hardly crumpled, still too white, still too clean, the typed text still too neat in regimented rows. “Fuck.”

Jace doesn’t look up from where he’s slumped in a leather chair, engrossed in some bizarre children’s’ show on the boxset television mounted on the wall. They’re in the breakroom at headquarters, a boxy, neglected room tucked away in one of the deeper underground levels that hasn’t been refurbished since the mid-fifties, and Alec has been trying - and failing - to file his overdue field reports.

All he wants to do is scrunch them up into paper balls, every single one of them, every single one that omits that time and time again, Nightlock has beaten them to a dispatch call.

He’s been off-kilter all night, and it’s all Nightlock’s fault, the way he thinks he can just see right through Alec, the way he thinks he knows what’s best, the way his words just pin Alec up against that wall that he’s too afraid of backing in to -

The pile of paper on the floor doesn’t budge. Alec stares at it a while longer, hoping that it might if he wills it hard enough - when it doesn’t, he stoops to gather it all up again with a weary sigh. His mother wanted these on her desk two hours ago, but Jace had taken so long to fill out his parts that Alec still has to spot-check them all for slip-ups.

Lord knows he trusts Jace to watch his back, but never not to say something incriminating.

Breathe, Alec. Just breathe. Put your head on straight.

Alec rights the coffee table and settles back down into one of the chairs, spreading out his field report again into some semblance of order. It’s the rustling of papers that finally distracts Jace from his TV show.

He looks at Alec, then down at the paperwork, and then back at Alec again, decidedly unimpressed.

“Listen, Alec,” he starts, the sort of drawl that immediate jimmies its way beneath Alec’s skin. Alec knows he doesn’t want to hear whatever Jace is about to say, but Jace is going to power on anyway. “I hate the guy as much as you, but - you gotta cool it. Jesus Christ, it’s been four hours already and you’re still in a pissy mood. I’m trying to watch my show.”
“Saved By The Bell is not your show. And I’m trying to fill out our field reports, thanks,” Alec grumbles, “The one that’s already two hours late. Emphasis on our, by the way.”

Jace scowls, folding his arms across his chest and sinking down in his chair until his chin is pressed against his chest.

“I don’t wanna talk about work,” he pouts.

“We always talk about work. We’re at work.”

“Fine, I don’t want to talk about field reports,” he says, “I don’t know why you always check them, Iz has already looked through them all. They’re fine. You’re just a worrywart.”

“Ever think that I have good reason to be worried?” Alec mutters, finding his report from the cocaine bust the other week, scanning over the portion scrawled in Jace’s messing handwriting. He’s already read it three times this week, but he just wants to make sure that Nightlock’s name hasn’t magically popped up since then.

It hasn’t. Jace’s apathetic expression tells Alec that he knows exactly what Alec is doing.

“Y’know what?” he sighs, and what he says next is so alarmingly close to what Nightlock dared him to do on that rooftop that it makes Alec grit his teeth. “Fight me, Alec. Or fight Nightlock, I don’t really care. Just go do something - something that isn’t angry sighing or glaring daggers at anything that breathes, just because you’re pissed at the dude. We’re all pissed, but we don’t all take it out on our poor, undeserving brother.”

There’s a quip on Alec’s tongue about how Jace is anything but undeserving, but he doesn’t say it.

Instead, he just mutters, “He’s infuriating.”

Jace doesn’t look away from the TV, still engrossed in Saved By The Bell.

“I don’t know why you’re complaining,” he says, “He’d be a useful guy to have on our side. I thought you had a soft spot for vigilantes anyway?”
“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Don’t you have a bunch of vigilante friends that you and Iz try to hide from everyone else? What’re their names - Wolfman and Never-Gonna-Cross-Her-On-A-Dark-Night?”

“I wish you’d cross her on a dark night,” Alec mutters below his breath. He’d pay a substantial amount of money to see Jace’s ego take a beating at Veil’s hands. Or Veil’s mind, as it were.

“You say something?” Jace asks.

“No,” Alec sighs.

“Well, can you either sit down and watch or leave, because this is a really good episode and your grumpiness is distracting me.”

Alec likes to pretend that grumpy isn’t one of his defining character traits, but -

When Simon greets him at work this next day with a cheery “good morning, grouchy guts!”, Alec wonders if the world is out to spite him.

Honestly, he wouldn’t be surprised.

Alec slumps down in his desk chair and glares at his computer as the dial-up tone shrieks. Each note is excruciatingly shrill, shivering all the way down his spine. He curls and uncurls his hands over his keyboard, but his knuckles feel stiff. Every muscle in his arm is poised for something, but he doesn’t know how to act upon it.

_Damnit, he’s not grumpy. _He’s angry - and he has a perfectly valid reason for it.
Senator Herondale, the rally, and then Jace, and now Nightlock stepping on his heels, having the
gall to tease Alec about it -

“Penny for your thoughts?”

Alec’s hands spasm in surprise and his fingers stab down on his keyboard. His computer makes a
displeased beep.

“Magnus,” he says, eyes wide and a little breathless as he spins in his chair. And Magnus is there,
leant casually against Alec’s partition with one ankle crossed over the other, wearing a fond smile,
but a small, perplexed frown knitted between his brows.

And God above, these days, it isn’t only Nightlock who can apparently sneak up on Alec without
being heard.

“That frown of yours, Alexander,” says Magnus, tapping on his own forehead. He has a beauty
mark there. “It speaks of something terrible having happened. What has dear Simon done now?”

Alec deflates.

“He hasn’t done anything. It’s nothing,” Alec says, shaking his head and sighing. “You don’t have
to worry about it, Magnus.”

“Now, now,” says Magnus, “I don’t have to worry, no, but I want to. I’m not one to turn a blind eye
when someone else is clearly having trouble, despite what I’m sure the office gossip might say.”

He slips around the side of Alec’s cubicle to perch on the edge of Alec’s desk. His ringed hands
rest on his thighs, and Alec doesn’t know if he’s supposed to look there or at Magnus’ face.

Really, he just wants to stare hard at his own shoes, but that’s not an option. Magnus’ attention is
like a spotlight, more blinding than normal, and Alec longs to slink away from it.
“Alexander?” Magnus probes, a tilt to his head. When he looks at Alec, he looks at him for longer than Alec is used to, lingering on the twitch in Alec’s cheek, on the movement in his jaw, on his mouth, on his eyes; he considers Alec carefully, and his next words are cautious. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. I’m overstepping.”

Alec’s words stick in his throat - and that’s for the best, he knows it is, because he can’t exactly say: yeah, actually, there’s this vigilante following me around and getting in my way and telling me things I don’t want to hear because they’re far too true, and it’s driving me insane, because that will only make Magnus regret ever asking.

But then - there was that look in Magnus’ eyes yesterday, when he asked if Alec was -

Sympathetic.

“It’s - ” Alec begins, and Magnus’ keen-eyed focus doesn’t waver. “It’s just my new neighbour. He’s keeping me up at night, making too much noise. It’s really nothing.”

Magnus frowns.

“Sounds like you should talk to him, if he’s disturbing you so much.”

“I’ve tried,” says Alec, “He’s … difficult. I don’t … really know how to approach him. Or when I’m going to see him next, and then whenever we run into each other, it -”

“Catches you off-guard?”

“Yeah. I never know what to say.”

“You don’t really strike me as the sort of person to not know what to say,” Magnus offers, and that makes Alec scoff, because it’s so ridiculously untrue. He’s always suffocating his own words, always biting his own tongue. Just because he’s good at snapping at people and ordering Jace and Clary around and being too brusque with Simon doesn’t mean he’s good at … talking. Feelings. Stringing words together to form those tricky things called sentences.
Magnus raises his eyebrows. He toys with the necklace looped around his neck, dangling in the open neck of his shirt. He hooks his finger around the chain, toying with the charm.

“What’s so funny?” he asks, like he really doesn’t know.

“I’m not exactly,” Alec starts, gesturing feebly with his hands, “Y’know.”

Not exactly in the best frame of mind whenever he’s had a run-in with Nightlock? Not exactly in the position for civil conversation? Not exactly thinking straight -

“Sounds like you need an olive branch,” Magnus suggests. He reaches back and grabs a pen from the pot on Alec’s desk and uses it to tap Alec on the shoulder. And then, he smiles, cheerful and encouraging, as he twirls the pen expertly through his fingers and holds it out for Alec to take back.

Right, a peace offering.

Alec swallows thickly, his long fingers feeling clumsy when he reaches for the pen - but Magnus doesn’t give it to him. He lifts it out the way of Alec’s hand and leans forward, tucking the pen smartly into the breast pocket of Alec’s shirt. He doesn’t pat Alec’s chest, but with the way the breath catches in Alec’s throat, he might as well have.

Magnus smiles, amused tucked into the corner of his mouth. He looks pleased with himself.

“You,” Alec asks, his voice caught. It’s barely a whisper. “You, uh, got any ideas?”

“Ask him what he wants,” Magnus suggests with a shrug. “Put the ball in his court, perhaps leave him a note or write him a letter or invite him out to coffee to introduce yourself properly.” His finger runs around the shell of his ear, toying with his ear cuff. “I happen to think you’re a good listener, Alexander. Perhaps it’s a skill you could utilise to your benefit. I’m sure your neighbour would be charmed.”

Alec nods. The pen in his pocket might as well be a candle for how it burns.
It’s difficult trying to find answers for questions that cannot be asked. And there are many, many questions Alec wants to ask about Nightlock.

He can’t ask his parents, and even then, he doubts they would know. Vigilantes probably don’t even register on his father’s radar, little more than dirt on the sole of his shoe, and as for his mother …

If Alec brought up his investment in Nightlock, it would come back to bite him in the ass. Maryse would want to know how they met, why they met, what Alec was doing when they met. She’d want to know how they might use Nightlock for their benefit, or how Nightlock might be using Alec for his. And then, it would all somehow become Alec’s fault, a risk Alec is taking that will cost the rest of them dearly, he’s sure of it.

Izzy, too, has also reached a dead-end, trawling through every Idris archive she has access to, and almost every one for which she didn’t, coming up with nothing save empty hands.

And as for Jace - well, anytime Alec has tried to have a conversation about Nightlock, Jace doesn’t want to hear it. His attention span clearly doesn’t stretch that far.

However, there are other avenues worth exploring.

Unfortunately, these other avenues have Sentinel hunched on a rooftop in the pouring rain, blinking through the refracted neon that clings to his eyelashes, and debating with himself how concerning it is that he’s lost feeling in his toes.

Jace is on patrol with Clary tonight and neither of them really question it when Alec decides to slip away without them. Rarely do they tread this far north during their normal hours, and Alec isn’t exactly about to ask Jace along when he’s looking for Veil.

When all is said and done, Jace is still Alec’s brother and best friend and he doesn’t actually wish him dead. Veil wouldn’t pause if given half the chance. There’s a reason Arkangel steers well clear of her.
Alec has tried many times to track down Veil and Wolfsbane, but it always ends with them finding him, rather than him finding them. In truth, they probably already know he’s here, scouring the streets for them, and they’re sitting perched on top of some high rise laughing at him in his drenched misery.

If they don’t want to be found, they won’t be found, and however inconvenient that might be for Alec, it’s all the safer for them. There are people out there who wouldn’t hesitate to turn vigilantes into the cops or throw broken bottles, or worse. There’s only a matter of time before the bodies strung up on buildings are no longer made of straw.

But if there’s someone left in this damn city who might know a thing about Nightlock - it’s going to be them.

Alec’s just not sure how much longer he can afford to wait to find out. The rain is unrelenting, dredges of a summer storm that is particularly violent and ruthless, a blood-seeking wind. Telephone wires jitter and spark in the streets below, bottles and plastic bags tearing down the pavement, head-over-heels-over-head again and again, lashing around lamp posts and smacking against windshields. Windows are yanked shut and shop shutters are drawn as the city stands plastered up against itself, turning a hard cheek to the thunder and the rain, eyes pinched closed.

Alec wishes he could do the same, because the downpour cuts at his skin where his mask stops, razor-sharp and whipping. His suit is slick and shiny. The wind howls with a wolf-like endeavour. It makes him flinch.

But it’s the rain on the rooftop that warns him too, warns him of boots splashing into puddles, the wet smack of someone picking their way across ventilation shafts and gas lines towards him.

A part of him expects it to be Nightlock, but the other part of him rationalises that Nightlock, time and time again, has shown that he can slip through the spaces between the rain, unseen and unheard, a spectre at will.

This time, Alec hears someone coming. He turns, adjusting his grip on his bow, the wind buffeting him particularly violently - but his shoulders relax when he sees that it’s exactly who he wants it to be.

Wolfsbane. And then, shortly behind him, scowling something fierce, is Veil too. She’s even holding an umbrella, although the wind battles it, desperate to tear it in two.
“Sentinel,” says Wolfsbane, with a smile that Alec rules as genuine. “How are you tonight, son?”

Rainwater rolls freely from Wolfsbane’s cowl, rivulets over the leather, dripping down from his jaw to the ground. His boots are muddy, speckled with dark grit. There’s a bruise beginning to welt on his dark jaw, some deep shade of plum purple. It’s probably been a busier night for him than for Alec.

Alec opens his mouth to reply, but Veil is quick to interject.

“What do you want?” she frowns behind her mask. Her hair is only a little damp and her jacket is far cleaner than Wolfsbane’s.

Wolfsbane glances at her, as if to say come on now. Veil scoffs.

“What?” she demands, “He’s been sitting here for almost an hour, he’s clearly waiting for us.”

Alec was right; she has been sitting somewhere, watching him get soaked to the bone. It might make him a little grumpy, but either he knows better than to play the victim around her, or the week’s just taken it out of him. It sounds like a colossal effort to feel much at all.

Veil looks Alec up and down, unimpressed, pursing her lips. “So,” she says, “Why are you here? We all know that Harlem is out of your normal patrol route. What exactly is Idris up to?”

“I’m not here for Idris,” Alec says, “I’m following up on a lead of my own. Idris … isn’t involved in this one.”

Veil raises her eyebrows and Wolfsbane chuckles beneath his breath, clapping Veil on the shoulder. She bristles, but doesn’t shrug free of the touch.

“Alright, alright, cool it, kiddo,” says Wolfsbane, “What is it that we can do for you, Sentinel?”

“I want to know about the super called Nightlock,” says Alec. He’s not going to beat about the bush, but judging by the way Wolfsbane’s easy smile slowly slips away, getting the information he needs may not come willingly.
And why should Wolfsbane give it willingly? A Corporate demanding answers about a vigilante has never resulted in anything good. They all know how Corporates usually treat vigilantes. They all know that Idris isn’t above paying its employees to hunt down supers acting beyond the law. They all know the sorts of things Alec does in the name of blind duty.

Alec hopes his earnestness comes across on his face, but it’s difficult when half his expression is obscured by his mask.

“I’m not looking for him,” Alec clarifies, “I don’t want to find him. I just - want to know if you know him.”

Wolfsbane folds his arms across his broad chest, his biceps straining against his suit. He stands up straighter, and he’s one of the few people Alec knows with a height advantage over him. He knows how to make himself look intimidating, but Alec is not daunted.

“And if I do?” Wolfsbane asks, “What are you going to do with any information I give you?”

How does he explain what he needs form Nightlock when he doesn’t even know himself? How does he say that he’s had a terrible week in a terrible year and he just wants to put one thing right, before he grinds himself into the ground trying to stay afloat above it.

It’s a paradox. He hates the way Nightlock makes him feel, exposed, vulnerable, answerable, and yet, he’s seeking him out for … more?

Because that is what he’s doing. Looking for more.

Maybe he’s some part a masochist. It makes sense.

The rain slices sideways through the air, billowed and bludgeoned by the wind, and Alec feels it as a hundred tiny pinpricks to the side of his face. He grimaces.

It makes Wolfsbane’s hard lines soften, fading into something sympathetic. “Why do you need to know in the first place?” Wolfsbane asks. His voice is softer now too.
Alec decides not to lie. Honesty always comes far more naturally, however clumsy it might be, and given the way Veil is still glaring at him, he expects lying wouldn’t go over well anyway. They’re suspiciously close to the edge of a roof and he doesn’t want to test her strength. He knows she has it.

“He’s been interfering in Corporate business,” Alec says stiffly, “I need to know if he’s a threat or likely to do anything rash.”

But to Alec’s surprise, Wolfsbane just laughs, a dry, derisive rumble as he throws his head back and pats his belly.

“Nightlock, a threat?” he chuckles, “Hell, he’s not usually the sort to get involved with Corporates deliberately, but - well, I dunno if I’m all that surprised. He doesn’t like to make it easy for Idris, I’ll give him that.”

“So he is deliberately getting in our way?” Alec bites.

Wolfsbane shrugs, but he’s still grinning at a joke to which Alec figures he’s the punchline.

“I’ve known Nightlock for a while,” Wolfsbane explains, “He’s a smart guy. He wouldn’t be doing anything to jeopardise the safety of anyone, I know that. But he’s not as friendly with your lot as we are, and you know that’s for good reason, son.”

“Yeah, I got that impression,” Alec mutters, “It’d be nice if he could just trust me to do my damn job and stay outta the way-”

“God, you Corporates are all the same,” Veil bemoans, rolling her eyes. “Have you even tried seeing this from Nightlock’s point of view?”

Alec scowls; he chews the inside of his cheek as he folds his arms across his chest defensively. “What do you mean?”

Veil shares a look with Wolfsbane that is worn-in, like she’s heard the same belligerence many, many times before. The look in her eyes says: can you believe this? and Wolfsbane’s answering
shrug replies: he’s from Idris, what do you expect? He doesn’t get it.

“I mean,” Veil presses, “How does Nightlock know he can trust you, trust _Sentinel_ , to work the city, when he already knows he could do it himself and do a damn good job of it? He doesn’t know you. You’re a Corporate. You’re probably in his way just as much as he’s in yours, except, for you, he’s just a nuisance, whereas to him, you’re very likely someone who wants to throw his ass in jail. _Or worse._ Just saying.”

Alec opens his mouth to retort, to say that’s ridiculous because he would _never_ , but hot words are extinguished by the rain. He doesn’t want to argue with her … especially when she’s _right_.

An olive branch. He needs to offer an olive branch.

“Remember how long it took for us to realise you weren’t a total ass?” chuckles Wolfsbane, and Veil chimes in with, “Still not totally convinced, by the way.”

Wolfsbane shoots her a dirty look, but she shrugs unapologetically. “What?” she retorts, “Only an idiot would let their guard down around a Corporate. You wouldn’t tell me to do the same to a cop, would you?”

Wolfsbane sighs and rolls his eyes, but Alec knows that he’s not going to disagree with Veil. When they look at Alec, they don’t see _Alec_ , but they also don’t see his powers; they don’t see his track record or the fact he turns off his radio whenever he runs into them. They don’t even see Sentinel, not at first anyway.

They always see a Corporate first. They always see Idris, they always see the front-page image of Jace slamming an unarmed protester to the ground and getting away with it scot-free, they always see privilege that Alec too often forgets that he has.

Yes, Idris is downright _miserable_ at times, and yes, there’s blood money stuffed in his pockets, and yes, Nightlock beating him to every single scene he’s been assigned in the last month is causing him nothing but problems, but -

Well, it’s still better than being stopped and frisked on the street by the police, or being hounded by Corporates for using your superpowers in a way the government has not mandated. It’s still better than not being able to leave your house without having to look over your shoulder.
Guilt dawns on Alec, spreading slowly through his gut; he ducks his head and works his jaw, if only to stop himself from biting his cheek again. The flush of shame creeps up the back of his neck, pinkening his ears, and it’s not a far leap to say that he’s been talking like a bit of an idiot.

He hasn’t been listening - to them, to Nightlock, to anyone really. Magnus was right. Magnus was -

“Sorry,” Alec murmurs, chewing on his words. “It’s, uh - yeah. Maybe I didn’t think.”

Veil purses her lips, her stare flat and begrudging, but it doesn’t linger. She shrugs her shoulders again, at least trying to pretend that she’s apathetic. The rain beats a snare drum rhythm on her umbrella that disrupts any silence that tries to slither in.

“Yeah, well,” she says, “As long as you know now .”

The city stirs in the awkward moment that follows, the rain hissing and metal pipes groaning, and it makes Alec want to fidget with his hands again. God damnit, he’s just another clumsy Corporate sticking his foot in it when he wasn’t ever asked, and there’s that shame again. He tries not to imagine the withering glares and disgusted looks; he tries not to think about the people he’s put behind bars; he doesn’t want to remember the blood on his hands. Ignore it. Ignore it.

*Don’t ignore it, that just makes you part of the damn problem -*

His fingers pick at his bow and he wonders, briefly, if he should just leave, muttering something about needing to get back on patrol, but then -

Then, the police radio clipped to his belt begins to hum - static noise before it becomes words - and so does the one strapped into Wolfsbane’s suit. Wolfsbane frowns, pushing his earpiece deeper into his ear.

“All units, we have 10-54 on East 103rd. Looks like a back-alley deal gone wrong. It’s a code 1, no hurry. Patrol, please respond.”

It’s nothing out of the ordinary, nothing Alec hasn’t heard a hundred times before. Possible dead body. Police told that it’s not urgent. The complete and utter disinterest in the dispatcher’s voice.
It could be any other night, but maybe it’s that shame in his gut, or Veil’s cutting stare, or this twitching need he now has to prove himself to both her and Wolfsbane, and the absent Nightlock too, that has Alec shaking his bow out to its full length and plucking at the string. Its familiar twang vibrates all the way up his arm in a way he knows.

“Are you coming?” he asks.

“Your friend Nightlock might be there,” Veil remarks dryly, but she’s already folding up her umbrella and tucking it beneath her arm. She sighs, put out as the rain drenches her wild curls in an instant. “Fine. Yeah, why not. Tonight’s been a bit of a blow-off anyway.”

They’re not far from the call-in, maybe only a dozen or so blocks north and the night is encroaching upon 3AM, so the streets this deep in Harlem are quiet. The light is always more orange up here, less artificial than the beating heart of the city and its neon and high-tech gallows; the air is thicker, the silence eerier, the strange croon of jazz disorienting in the distance.

Alec moves ahead of Wolfsbane and Veil, caught in this awkward half-jog, where he’s not sure if he should be walking or running, or if he’s the one even setting the pace. Somehow, he suspects Veil would not bat an eye if he were to take off into the dark without them.

East 103rd is a narrow street, lined by red-brick buildings peeling at the edges. City council has done a half-assed job at covering up the graffiti, but the white-out has been washed away in places by the rain, leaving streaks of patchy paint across the windows of an old pharmacy that hasn’t seen service in at least ten years.

Puddles of dirty streetlight splatter across the sidewalk, illuminating shadows of people out and about past curfew, while the cracks in the pavement smell of stale liquor and stubbed-out cigarettes.

Despite having walked, they’ve beaten the cops. Alec is not surprised and Veil mutters something unsavory under her breath, but Wolfsbane nods his head towards the chain-link fence on the side of the street - and the crudely-cut hole torn through the centre of it.
“There,” he says, and Alec follows his eyes to the black, unmoving shape laying in the middle of the parking lot behind the fence. It looks distinctly like a body.

“God damnit,” Alec grunts, slinging his bow over his shoulder and ducking through the hole, the sharp edges scraping along his back and catching on his quiver. Veil ducks through with far more grace, whilst Wolfsbane vaults over the top, landing on the sandy asphalt with the splatter of water beneath his boots.

If there were someone still here, loitering in the shadows, Wolfsbane would smell them, so Alec rushes over to the body and presses his fingertips to their throat - but as his fingers squelch through black and tarring blood, his eyes fall upon the face.

A young man.

In a mask.

_A mask just like Alec’s._

“Fuck,” whispers Veil, somewhere over Alec’s shoulder. “It’s another super.”

Alec doesn’t want to ask what she means by _another_. He doesn’t really need to, because the implication is unspoken and like the cold plunge of a fist to his gut, clenching around his insides and tugging everything sharply up through his mouth.

He’s not an idiot. The life expectancy of vigilantes isn’t high.

But something about this is different, different to every dismissive front-page headline and leading story on the news, not just another amateur hero caught off guard.

This was violent.

The man’s throat is slit and his body is cold, rigour in his joints and muscles, contorting his face in a way that tells Alec he died in fear. Blood is oily all across his jaw, smudged by scrabbling hands and running watery in the downpour, and a dark stain also blooms in the centre of his chest, from
beneath his makeshift suit … but the cut itself, the one slicing his vocal cords in two, is clean and sharp and well-executed.

It’s like a dissection.

Alec hasn’t seen anything like this in a long time; he’s stumbled across dead supers before, but it’s usually a mugging-gone-wrong, a gang attack, a few frantic thrusts of a knife to the gut before anyone can react: acts that are far messier than this.

This looks like it was done by just one person, and all this dead man could do was scrabble at his throat in a futile attempt to keep all his life from spilling out between his fingers. He wasn’t lucky.

Alec sits back on his haunches, resting his hands on his thighs as he takes one deep, steadying breath. The stench of death is almost as strong as the stench of iron; it makes his throat close up.

On the street, a car trundles past, wipers driving through the rain and headlights roaming across Alec’s face and Wolfsbane’s back just a little too slow, casting their shadows long and bleak. Alec squints, hand reaching for his bow, but the car keeps on moving, the hum of the engine disappearing into the downpour.

“How long has he been laying out here?” she asks without looking.

Alec grimaces, rubbing his thumb and forefinger together, the sticky black blood adhering to his gloves. It’s already turning tacky. Too long without help, is the answer he wants to give.

“Smells like a few hours,” remarks Wolfsbane, “Sentinel, do you know him?”

“No,” says Alec, “Not one of ours.”

“I don’t know him either,” mutters Wolfsbane, “Must be new on the scene. Wrong time, wrong
Something about *wrong time, wrong place* doesn’t sit well on Alec’s shoulders. Wrong time, wrong place is when someone steals your purse in the middle of the street, or you get in a car wreck at an intersection - not when someone cuts you from ear to ear and leaves you drowning in a pool of your own blood in a parking lot.

Especially without removing the mask.

“This will be all over the tabloids by morning,” says Veil, “Unmaskings are front page stuff. You can bet that’s the first thing the cops’ll do when they get here, before they’ve even looked to see how he died. Rip his mask straight off his eyes.”

“Is there anything we can do?” Alec asks, looking over at Wolfsbane.

“Not unless we move the body and take him with us,” he says, “Which would only mean this getting buried on some sergeant’s desk even quicker, because if there’s no crime scene, there’s no crime. At least if the press gets wind of it, people will know. Someone might come forward with information.”

“Doubt it,” says Veil. She swallows thickly, as if the smell of blood is making her nauseous, and she shoves her hands into the pockets of her leather jacket to stop her fingers from twitching.

Alec looks back at the body, his eyes trained on the man’s face. The rain is diluting the blood; Lord only knows what else has already been washed away.

He doesn’t know what to do, and the thought of leaving this man out here makes him sick, but Wolfsbane is right. Disturbing the crime scene is as good as sweeping the whole thing under the rug, a guarantee that it’ll get thrown out by the first cop who sees it come across his desk.

But how does he just blink and walk away and call this *just another night*? If anything, Jace will take one look at the state he’s in and makes some crass remark, and then Izzy will wheedle the truth out of him in seconds, and then tomorrow, at work - *Magnus - the sharpness of that stare of his - questions Alec doesn’t want to answer* -

“I’ll make some calls,” says Wolfsbane with a heavy sigh. He reaches into his utility belt and pulls
out a police-issue transponder. “See if we can’t get some stringers out here to cover the story as it breaks.”

Magnus is gonna find out about this anyway. It’ll be on his desk before daybreak.

*I didn’t know you were sympathetic -*

“I know someone who works at the Daily Tribunal,” blurs Alec, causing Wolfsbane to pause. He doesn’t know why he says it or where it comes from, but there’s a part of him that thinks he must say it, because it’s important. Magnus Bane would do right by this dead man. Alec knows that inherently. “If you wanted someone to pick up the story, I could … get in touch with someone. It wouldn’t be a problem.”

There’s a stretched moment of silence where Wolfsbane just stares at him, his eyes dark and inscrutable, and Alec is acutely aware of the mud on his knees and the gravel digging into his shins.

“The Tribunal,” Wolfsbane repeats slowly. He nods, more to himself than to Alec. “Right. They do have a few good eggs still working in editorial. Sounds like as good a place as any.”

He turns away from Alec, bringing his police responder to his lips. His voice drops an octave as he speaks quickly into the radio, something about an officer down at the 10-54 and for all units to proceed to the scene quickly. Alec knows that they will be long gone by the time the police arrive, but at least it will mean their dead friend won’t be lying out here alone for much longer.

Alec doesn’t include the murder in his field report that night. Izzy doesn’t notice because she’s used to doctoring the details to leave Wolfsbane and Veil out of the night’s proceedings, but as Alec signs his name at the bottom of the briefing and scoots it across the table to her, he feels distinctly guilty.

It’s one thing to lie to his parents about what he’s been doing. It’s another thing to lie to Izzy and Jace, not telling them about what he saw.
He can’t shake the image of the dead super’s face from his head, however hard he screws his eyes shut. That, Izzy notices.

“Alec?” she asks, her pen paused above the page. Ink wells in the nib and drips with a splat onto the paper. “Are you alright? You look a bit pale.”

“’M fine,” he lies, “Just tired.”

Izzy’s eyes narrow. She has a remarkable - and insufferable - predilection for detecting bullshit.

“Busy night with our second and third favourite vigilantes, huh?” she asks, “Did something happen? Did you run into Nightlock again?”

He doesn’t know what good telling her would do. It wouldn’t save the man’s life. It wouldn’t stop it from happening again. It’s not like her knowing would save people.

Maybe it would make the picture in his head less vivid. Maybe it would make it more so. He doesn’t rightly know.

“No,” he says, “No, we just - walked a lot. I just need an early night. You alright finishing the report and giving it to mom?”

“You know, I don’t think 4AM constitutes an early night for most people,” Izzy says, shaking her head as she signs her name on the field report, with both flourish and a smile. “But I suppose we aren’t most people.”

“No. Guess not.”

Izzy rolls her eyes. “Have a good night, Alec. Get some rest.”

“Sure.”
It’s far easier said than done.

Sentinel never walks through the front door of his apartment. Alec has a number of pairs of jeans and spare jackets stashed around the city for late-night costume changes in phone booths, but some nights, he’s too tired, and he just hopes and prays that no-one sees him drop onto the balcony in full gear.

Sometimes, he wonders what his neighbours must think, if they wonder about his comings and goings at stupid o’clock in the morning. Most times, he doubts they care. They don’t notice him. He lives alone, keeps to himself, doesn’t say a word.

Tonight, he wishes he weren’t alone.

But the thought of Jace, of Clary, of Isabelle - he can’t stomach that either. He can’t stomach their exuberance, their blindness, their love for him. They take up too much space, far more than him; they know how to occupy it and he doesn’t. So, it’s a paradox again: he doesn’t want to be alone, but he doesn’t want any of them to see him either, because he’s in a state, a state he’s now allowed to be in, and how is that fair?

He’s a mess. He’s not meant to be a mess, because he sees dead men all the time, he’s grown up in the world, he’s fought in this world, he’s been the man doling out the death sentences himself, he doesn’t deserve to feel terrible about it. He’s meant to be a leader. He’s meant to have his head screwed on his shoulders. He’s meant to be cool and calm and collected, because that’s Alec, that’s Sentinel, that’s what they have in common.

He’s meant to be coming up with a plan for what to do next, even though he’s sure his mother and father would say nothing, because this is not your jurisdiction.

Alec strips out of his suit as he wanders through his apartment: quiver on the couch, bow on the coffee table, mask flung into the kitchen sink for all he knows. He peels his suit off in his bedroom, draping it over the bed frame where it drips dark water onto the floor. It’ll leave a stain.

His work clothes are abandoned on his bed and he knows he should hang them, but he can’t - he
can’t bring himself to do that, so he just kicks his shirt and pants to the floor, a problem for him in the morning.

Something hard bounces off the hardwood floor. Alec pauses with his knee on the mattress.

It’s a pen. It’s the pen, the one Magnus tucked in his shirt pocket this morning.

Alec slides off the bed and stoops on the floor, his knees smarting where he’s been knelt in gravel all night. He picks up the pen and holds it up to the shard of weak light that slides through his blinds, eerie, grey, and cold upon his skin.

It is just a pen. Not a dove carrying an olive branch. Not a life raft. Not a peace offering, not really, because he hasn’t seen peace tonight.

*If he were better at listening -*

Something in Alec’s chest still has the nerve to flutter. Something small, something foolish, right above his heart, right where the pocket of his shirt would sit, right where Magnus touched him, if only fleetingly.

He wants to throw the pen to the floor, but he can’t, so he puts it in the glass on his bedside table and rolls over, smushing his face into the pillow. Behind his eyelids, he sees Magnus’ smile again, he sees the way he looked at Alec like he was figuring Alec out all over again, he sees -

This feeling, it makes him feel sick. Don’t feel that. Not tonight. *You don’t deserve to feel that.*

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for all the really positive feedback on the premiere chapter! It means so much that people are excited by this fic ... I am going to try my damnedest to live up to expectations! :D Also ... would you look at that Plot! Only took me 50k words to set it up gjkfdahasdgfh

Visit me on [tumblr](http://example.tumblr.com) and shout in my inbox!
I'm also on Twitter if you want to come chat about the fic ... and boy, do I love talking about this fic. Tweet as you read with the hashtag #FICacoldnight! :D

Please leave a kudos if you made it to the end, and drop me a comment with your thoughts, your favourite line, your hopes for what will happen next ... I would be forever grateful for it!

In the next chapter: Magnus makes Alec a proposition and Alec discovers Magnus is more involved with the supers than he thought. But that can only spell trouble when he's trying to keep Sentinel a secret ...
“It’s an epidemic. Don’t you see it?” Magnus continues, “People are being murdered, left for dead out there in the streets, on our front porches. Students, teachers, lawyers, children. Friends. Innocent people, by the dozens-”

His anger is jarring. He throws back the rest of his whiskey and sneers. It might not be his first glass of the night.

“-and we’re spinning stories and celebrating it in the streets like we’re happy to see them gone whilst the police are shoving case after case into dark corners and forgetting all about them.”

Alec has never seen him like this before. It’s strange, this undone side of Magnus, and it’s throwing Alec off balance. There’s something about it a little terrifying, but something more about it that draws Alec ever closer.

Chapter Notes

Magnus makes Alec a proposition that changes everything, but nothing more so than the way Alec stomachs his grief. And oh, Alec has too much of that for just one person.

On the other side of the coin, Sentinel fights both the feeling of guilt and the itch of blood on his hands for letting that unnamed vigilante die, and Nightlock finds that this compassionate side of Sentinel does not match up with the picture he has painted in his head of who a Corporate is meant to be.

&&&

Tweet as you read with the hashtag #FICacoldnight!

"Once, I was
afraid of death and would wash my hands until they welted
and the skin scraped
off. I know so much about blood I can sense it before it is
spilled, can feel the
wounds before they are made."

— Brynne Rebele-Henry, *Self-portrait as a broken Venus statuette*
If there’s one thing Alec hates most about his line of work, about mercenary deeds, about bows and arrows in the dark, about superheroism, it’s the thought of blood on his hands, blood that he’s unable to scrub off.

And he doesn’t mean it as a metaphor for guilt; he has shoulders of that, long ago resigned to wading bow-legged in the trenches when it comes to getting through every day, only for every night to make it worse, that penitence. What he means is the vibrant red stain that seems to cling to his fingertips no matter how hard he goes at his nail beds with a scrubbing brush. It’s not a metaphor for anything, and if it is, he doesn’t want to know.

He knows the blood’s not really there. He wears gloves when he’s Sentinel, leather gloves, which means the blood never touches his skin.

And last night, last night in that parking lot in Harlem, they had been so late to the scene that all the blood had already congealed black and sticky in the rain, and had peeled apart between Alec’s fingers like wax. By the time he had made it home, the only remnant had been a red-brown smear on his thumbpad that smelled faintly of sweet rot.

None of that stops Alec from spending ten minutes in the bathroom when he gets to work the next morning, lathering cheap soap into his hands and avoiding his dark circles in the mirror, made darker by the cheap fluorescent light overhead. The soap is harsh and his calluses harsher, and he rubs the foam into his dry skin until it stings, the water from the tap running crystal clear and bloodless.

He looks like a mess and he knows it. He didn’t sleep, his eyebags are here to stay, and the colour of his face is a very peculiar shade of grey; he would forgive someone for thinking he’s crawled out of the night as if a grave. His shirt and tie haven’t fared so well either, thrown on in a hurry this morning: his shirt is crumpled, sleeves shucked up about his elbows, and his tie knotted like a noose around his throat, hanging crooked beneath his collar.

Alec’s never cared much for his appearance, but this is different. This is like he’s been wrung dry and left in a boneless heap in the corner. Just gotta push through it, he tells himself, get the blood off his hands and he’ll feel better, even if it’s far more than optimistic to think there’s even one moment ahead of him when he won’t feel so wretched.
And that’s not even the tragedy of it all. The tragedy is that he’s used to it.

So, Alec scrubs harder at his fingers and the faucet runs freezing, numbing the skin he has rubbed red. He can still feel blood crusting under his nails. He can still feel gravel digging into his kneecaps.

Behind him, a man in a much smarter suit leaves a stall and eyes Alec suspiciously in the mirror, but doesn’t say anything, washing his hands far quicker than Alec. The water is so cold that Alec’s knuckles are starting to ache, but he doesn’t dare move.

Then, the bathroom doors swings open, and Alec’s morning goes from bad to worse.

“Alec!” chirps Simon.

He’s got an insipid smile on his face, his shirt tails hanging out from his belt like he got dressed in a hurry this morning. He has today’s paper tucked beneath his arm. Alec can hazard a guess as to why.

Simon makes a beeline for Alec, hopping up onto the sink next to him, which creaks alarmingly under his weight.

“You see today’s front page?” he asks, thrusting the newspaper under Alec’s nose, so that Alec has no other choice but to look. “That’s my photo, y’know? Magnus rung me up at five in the morning like I’m some damn stringer, can you believe -”

The photo on the front page is a side-by-side of a man, the same man lying heavy in Alec’s mind: on the left, he’s smiling and happy with his arm slung around a woman; and on the right, he’s on his back, bloody and breathless in last’s night parking lot, covered in some policeman’s jacket and surrounded by guys in white boiler suits. The photo was probably taken at dawn, the barest glow of a rust-coloured horizon turning the photograph fuzzy at the corners. The shadows it casts are long, and Alec thinks he can make out the scuffs in the gravel where he was knelt in his supersuit, not six hours ago.

The headline reads: **HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER-TURNED-VIGILANTE UNMASKED IN FATAL CARJACKING**. But Alec knows it’s a pallid truth. Alec knows that the man wasn’t unmasked before he was murdered, and there were no signs of any broken-in cars or tire tracks on the asphalt.
Almost all of it is a lie. Alec supposes no-one really cares. The inset article is titled: BUSH ON FIRST TERM AND THE FUTURE: GULF WAR, CLINTON, AND FAMILY VALUES, and continues on page three. There’s a smaller piece teasing an interview with Senator Herondale where she talks about her stance on vigilante justice on page seven. At the bottom of the page, there’s an ad listing a sold out tour for a pop star Alec doesn’t know at Madison Square Gardens. More people are going to flick to that.

“Police were already turning the cameras away when I got there, y’know?” Simon continues, “But I managed to swipe a good shot, and I know for a fact those greedy bastards at the Herald didn’t get anything usable, so guess who gets a bonus this week -”

Alec stops scrubbing at his hands, letting them go limp beneath the ice-cold stream of the faucet. He hangs his head and sucks in a deep breath, feeling it inflate his chest. There’s a lot of hollow space there to be filled.

“I heard about it on the radio,” he says carefully, his voice dipped low. He imagines if he talks any louder, Simon - or someone else just as nosey - will hear that he’s not quite right this morning. “Did the police release any details?”

“Not really,” Simon shrugs, squinting down at the newspaper in his hand. “I was talking to Magnus about it earlier actually, and he was saying he’s been on the phone with the city morgue since sunrise trying to get details from a guy he knows. He said most of the sources for this were this morning’s influx of stringers, but he was kinda pissed that the office had to overpay to get anything of use, but if you ask me, this all sounds like a police cover up, Hell, it sounds to me like a load of bullsh-”

“Hm,” says Alec noncommittally. With an iron-tight grip, he turns the faucet off, his red hands smarting in the dry air.

It’s grounding, that sting. It distracts him from the insidious what if that claws at the back of his mind, hooking its claws into where it’s tender.

What if we’d done something different?

What if people actually cared when another dead super appeared on their doorsteps?
What if there was some way Alec could’ve done more last night and he missed it?

That sort of thing.

“It’s kinda terrifying, y’know?” says Simon, hopping down from the sink and tapping Alec on the shoulder with the newspaper rolled up. He doesn’t notice the state of Alec’s hands. “I mean, I knew this city was fucked up - excuse my French, I know we’re at work, please don’t report me to HR - but if there are bad guys out there going after vigilantes, what’s to stop them from deciding to knife me on my way home, huh? Maybe I should start taking self-defense classes, what do you think?”

Alec doesn’t really think. He grabs a fistful of paper towels from the dispenser, acknowledges Simon with a grunt, and leaves the bathroom as quickly as he can.

Alec reads the paper at lunchtime, tucked in a back corner of the cafeteria, a stony glare on the seat opposite him so that no-one dares come near.

HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER-TURNED-VIGILANTE UNMASKED IN FATAL CARJACKING

It’s exactly as he suspects: bullshit, as Simon so aptly phrased it earlier. A scene is painted that never happened: a criminal man in a mask, hiding his face and skulking around in the dark, breaking into cars and slashing tires for no other purpose than, what, mischief? Because that’s the goal of every vigilante, isn’t it, beckoned by a life of crime just because they can read minds or grow claws or fiddle with gravity when it pleases -

When he reaches the final paragraph of the article, there’s only a dimly-lit part of him relieved to not find Magnus Bane’s name attached to the end, instead palmed off to some other editor more concerned with fanning a lie than uncovering the truth. There’s a police tip line printed in bold black letters: please contact us if you have any information. Alec wonders just how long it will stay manned.

He cannot dwell on it, all of it, any of it; he can only let it fester, because he knows the truth, he knows that nothing short of prejudice and hatred killed this man, and yet no-one cares to listen. No-one wants to listen to Alec. No-one wants to listen to another Corporate in a black mask either.
He flicks to page three instead, and George Bush shouts back at him from behind a podium in front of an audience of thousands, and that makes Alec’s skin crawl. He begins reading before he can stop himself, because the day is already terrible, because he already feels like half the city is gunning for his blood for something he cannot change about himself, so why not -

The article is part of a longer interview with the President and Alec skims the sections about foreign policy, about Berlin, about Iraq, about Pat Buchanan’s poor attempt at a coup, about the deficits left behind by Ronald Reagan - until he comes to a cold stop.

Q: Is it wrong for people of the same sex or unmarried people to be parents? And why?

A: Yes, it’s -- in my set of values, people of the same sex to be parents?

Q: That’s right, or unmarried people.

A: No, not unmarried people at all. But I can’t accept as normal life style people of the same sex being parents. I’m very sorry. I don’t accept that as normal. [...] To glamorise life styles that are, in my view, not the normal life style, I don’t approve of that. Our nation much defend the sanctity of marriage. I think it’s very important that we protect marriage as an institution between a man and a woman.

One day, Alec wonders, will it stop feeling a cold punch to the gut? His hands are still numb; he’s been hoping he starved himself of feeling today, his body blighted by the sickness of last night, but he was wrong.

The words taste bitter on his mouth; they feel tight in his stomach; he clenches his fingers into the newspaper and wills himself not to hang his head or rip the paper. The blow is always the same, how things like this always appear right next to some anti-super rhetoric in the papers, how it’s always so hand-in-hand.

The millennium is eight years away, and yet here they are, still living in the fifties, hating gay people and hating superheroes in equal and insidious measure, because being different is dangerous.

Whoever killed that vigilante last night, whoever sliced his throat from ear to ear, does he wield a straight razor in the same way when it comes to HIV, to abortion, to two people walking down the
street arm in arm?

Alec closes the newspaper, and then he folds it, first in half, and then in half again, and finally, once more, until it won’t stay folded any longer and wants to spring free when he removes his hands.

Hands that feel sticky with blood again. Letting that man die, it makes him complicit in all of this.

Doesn’t it?

It’s late now, the sunset a fond and distant memory, one that Alec missed for all its orange promise of lost causes and second chances. The silence that pervades the office corridors is pulsing, the echo of every footstep a synth beat in the temples. Lights flicker grainy and blue overhead, artificial and cloying, a little unsettling. There are no windows. The veil of reality seems to shimmer, but what is to be found on the other side is dark and grimy.

Something builds, both thick in the air and heavy in Alec’s stomach, ruminating as it has been all day and since the night before. It tastes like nothing and feels like pressure, slow in its approach to a bursting point. The walls of the world - or the walls of the corridors - seem to flex and strain with it.

Alec hasn’t left the office yet; he doesn’t want to.

He doesn’t like the thought of swinging home for a lonely supper or cramming onto the rush hour subway with a thousand other rain-drenched people to make the commute across the city to Idris’ headquarters. Wandering dumbly into Izzy’s office to collect his stack of overdue paychecks is not something he wants to think about, and even less, his sister hounding him as to how he slept, when they both know he didn’t.

But he can’t sit still, because in the silence, his thoughts are loudest. He has to do something, but his options are few and far between: staring a spreadsheet or sneaking out on patrol.
Sentinel’s gear is in his locker downstairs. The cold and numbing wind calls to him; it doesn’t demand a ransom for his suffering. Freedom, it whispers, a well-practiced lie, freedom from dead men’s cries in the dark, freedom from God’s answering silence.

The office is almost deserted: there’s Alec, hurrying down the hallway, and there’s the security guard just starting his rounds, whistling an off-pitch tune as he spins his keys on his finger. And yet, there’s the sense of someone watching, matching Alec’s footsteps and ducking barely out of sight when Alec glances back over his shoulder. It’s unnerving, that sort of quiet that makes Alec feel just a little on edge, like there’s that same someone waiting around the corner with a straight razor ready to cut his throat from ear to ear.

He picks up his pace as he weaves through the building, taking a shortcut down the fire escape stairs when the thought of being stuck alone in an elevator gets under his skin. He turns a corner into another identical corridor, and in this one, two of the lights have completely died, pooling shadows on the floor, illuminated only by the eerie green of an exit sign.

Alec hoists his bag and hunches his shoulders, yanking down the cuffs of his shirt sleeves. His com bud beeps in his ear with the telltale tone of an incoming call from work - not this work, the other work - but he doesn’t pause to answer it. If it were Izzy, she wouldn’t wait for him to pick up. It’s probably Jace, wondering where he is.

He doesn’t have an answer for that - or at least, not one that would make sense to Jace. One harsh breath away from a panic attack makes him sound pathetic.

Alec almost makes it to the end of the corridor - and to the exit - when a fine beam of light cutting out from under the second-to-last door catches his attention. He doesn’t mean to stop - something prickles, telling him it’s a bad idea to stop in the dark - but it says Bane, Politics and Current Affairs on the door and the light is still on, which means Magnus is still here too, playing chicken with a clock striking late.

The fading blue of cooling argon lights casts a soft glow across Alec’s face, catching in the hollows in his cheeks, and the feeling of being followed is kept at bay for a moment. He ignores the incoming message from Jace and glances back at the sliver of light beneath the door.

It’s closer to midnight than it is sundown. The only people still here are those hiding secrets or those not wanting to go home. Alec is both. He wonders which one Magnus might be.

A soft knock on Magnus’ door, and Alec holds his breath until he realises he’s the one knocking. There’s the sound of rustling papers on the other side, someone hastily tidying up a messy desk.
“Come in,” Magnus calls. His voice a little pinched. Alec hasn’t seen him in a day or two, not since they spoke about olive branches. He must’ve been busy.

Alec is cautious as he opens the door, mindful not to move too quick, but it’s worth it to see the change in Magnus’ expression. Magnus stands from behind his desk, pushing a towering pile of paperwork hurriedly into his drawer, before he seems to blink himself back to reality, as if he’s not quite sure why he moved. A palpable shift from something tense to something pleasantly surprised appears in his eyes.

A bout of tension seeps from Alec’s shoulders in the same moment. He thinks, again, of one word. *Sympathetic.*

“Alexander,” Magnus says, the unfurling smile quite genuine. Alec returns a small one of his own, quietly stepping into the office. He doesn’t close the door behind him, leaving it slightly ajar. It’s habit. An escape route. His nerves are still prickling like a live wire. “Not still working, are you?”

“Just finished,” Alec shrugs. He glances at Magnus’ desk and the sheets of tabloid paper shoved hastily into a manila folder, and then back up at Magnus, who notices him looking. “And you? Is … everything alright?”

“Hmm,” Magnus says. Sometimes, he moves too quickly for Alec, still one moment and fluid the next, and it can be jarring at times. He steps away from his desk with long strides and retrieves a bottle of whiskey and two glasses from the top of one of his filing cabinets. “Nothing much to worry about. Just something a little troubling passing across my desk far too late at night. Drink?”

He’s pouring Alec a whiskey before Alec has the chance to say no. Alec takes the glass with a quiet thank you, not oblivious to the brush of Magnus’ knuckles against his, but doesn’t take a sip. Magnus is less shy, draining half his glass with a grimace.

The colour of the whiskey is not far off the colour of Magnus’ eyes beneath the yellowing light, although Magnus’ gaze is harsher and burns a little stronger.

“Troubling?” Alec asks. His com bud vibrates in his ear again, undoubtedly another message from Jace with tonight’s rendezvous point. It remains ignored. “Can I help?”

Magnus’ expression softens at that; his eyes cast down and the smile on his face becomes less
tight, perhaps a little fond. He shakes his head imperceivably.

“I don’t want to keep you,” Magnus says, somewhat coy, “From home. From your bed. I’m sure you have plans.”

Alec shrugs again, letting his bag slide down from his shoulder. He lets it softly fall to the floor by his feet. He is brave enough to take a half-step forward, away from the door, and finds that the horrors of last night are left upon the threshold. The next breath he takes is uninhibited.

“Nothing really,” he lies, although it doesn’t entirely feel like a lie. Arkangel can manage without Sentinel, and Jace can manage without Alec, and Alec can manage not putting on his suit, probably still crusted with blood, for another few hours: he’s caught by other things tonight. There are no windows in Magnus’ office; there is no glass for the wind to beckon and sigh against. “Late sleeper. I’ve got time.”

Magnus purses his lips and doesn’t say anything for a long moment, long enough for Alec to second guess himself.

“But if I’m overstepping, I can-”

He doesn’t get to finish that sentence, because once again, Magnus is suddenly moving. He’s back behind his desk, and with what looks like a flick of his fingers, his pile of manila folders is flung open and his quick hands are spreading newspaper clippings out across the tabletop.

Alec steps right up to the edge of the desk, the corner pressing into his thigh. He cocks his head, trying to read the headlines upside down.

**HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER-TURNED-VIGILANTE UNMASKED IN FATAL CAR-JACKING**

**TEENAGE GIRL ACQUITTED FOR MURDER OF TROUBLED SUPER**

**D.A. REFUSES TO USE JAILHOUSE RECORDINGS IN MIDTOWN MURDER OF THREE SUPERS**
MAN HELD FOR QUESTIONING IN TORTURE AND MURDER OF TELEPATHIC VIGILANTE KNOWN AS “SYMPATH”

BOY, 14, FOUND GUILTY FOR DEATH OF VIGILANTE, CITY-WIDE PROTESTS TO ACQUIT CONTINUE

AUTHORITIES CRACK DOWN ON SEARCH FOR SECRET VIGILANTE HIDEOUTS

RED-BLOODED KILLING OR JUSTICE IN THE NAME OF THE PEOPLE: MURDER OF VIGILANTE ELLIOT MARSH GOES TO TRIAL

BODY FOUND IN DOWNTOWN SEWER, LIKELY ‘SUPER-FELON’ KNOWN AS ‘EQUINOX’

CITY INQUEST: MURDER VICTIM USED POWERS TO ORCHESTRATE STRING OF ARMED ROBBERIES

MURDERED CITY BARRISTER, RAGNOR FELL, UNCOVERED AS SECRET SUPER, POLICE INVESTIGATION ON HOLD

Alec reaches for the last headline with wide eyes and rigid fingers. Not all the clippings are from the Tribunal, but this headline is their own, their front page from yesterday. The front-and-center photograph is a headshot of the missing lawyer made up to look like a mugshot. It’s not real, but most people won’t notice that. Won’t care. Yet again.

“What … is this?” Alec says slowly, something nauseous stewing in his stomach. If he blinks, he’s back to last night, to this morning, on that grey and muddy street with Veil and Wolfsbane as the dawn rolled in, with swaths of red upon his hands, and it’s that memory that laps, now, at the doorway behind him. He thinks of the dead man at his feet; he thinks of his knees in the dirt and a blade at his throat; he thinks of panic seized.

His other hand, curled over the edge of the desk, clenches, knuckles turning white. He knows the press spins stories. He knows to take everything with a pinch of salt. He knows the world is hungry for his blood. He knows it’s bullshit.

And yet, he doesn’t think it’s all sensationalism this time. There is a pattern here, a darker pattern that he hasn’t yet seen, but now -
“These are all clippings from this last week,” Magnus says, voice low. His eyes are focused on the tabletop; his mouth is set into a hard line. Picking at the corner of today’s front page, the same one that Simon was waving at Alec this morning, Magnus’ face is a blank slate. “It’s an epidemic.”

Alec looks up, surprised.

“A what?”

“An epidemic,” Magnus repeats. This time, he meets Alec’s gaze, and the look Alec finds is seething and quietly furious. It’s not directed at Alec, but it’s not what Alec was expecting either. He’s never seen Magnus anything other than cool and calm and collected; never seen his emotions get the better of him; never seen him anything less than perfectly put-together.

He’s never seen Magnus so intense that he might be hot to the touch.

“Don’t you see it?” Magnus continues, his tone clipped. “People are being murdered, left for dead out there in the streets, on our front porches. Students, teachers, lawyers, children. Friends. Innocent people, by the dozens.” His anger is jarring. He throws back the rest of his whiskey and sneers. It might not be his first glass of the night. “And we’re spinning stories and celebrating it in the streets like we’re happy to see them gone whilst the police are shoving case after case into dark corners and forgetting all about them.”

Magnus smacks his hand across the desk, sending the clippings flying. Alec tries to catch the ones he can, but they scatter around his feet as leaves. Magnus doesn’t care. He treads on them as he crosses the room once more to refill his whiskey. Heated anger bristles down his back.

Alec has never seen him like this before. It’s strange, this undone side of Magnus, and it’s throwing Alec off balance. There’s something about it a little terrifying, but something more about it that draws Alec ever closer.

“They do you have these?” he asks, but finds it’s half a whisper as he gathers up a few more clippings and stacks them back on the desk. The article on the top of the pile has a gruesome picture of an arson, a room blackened and burned around the edges by a super whose power might have been fire, but which reeks of fear.

Alec frowns. There are no excuses to be made; the reality is a chilling one.
“Personal project,” Magnus says. He drains his next glass and Alec hears him hiss. “Do you know why I took this job, Alexander?”

“No ... I don’t,” Alec frowns. “... Why?”

“I was fired from my last one.”

Alec blinks in surprise, but Magnus continues without pause.

“And sued for defamation, I should add,” he adds flippantly. “That’s why I moved back here, to New York. Home. My last editor-in-chief wasn’t a fan of the pieces I was trying to push through under her nose. Can’t say I’m surprised.”

“What do you mean?” Alec asks, “What were you trying to publish?”

Magnus shrugs, gesturing with his glass in one hand and with the fingers of the other.

“This and that,” he says casually. “A few rescued children, saving kittens from trees, foiled burglaries, an apartment block or two saved from burning to the ground.” He meets Alec’s eyes again over the rim of his whiskey glass. “The things supers do when they’re not being killed in Harlem parking lots and being blamed for their own murders. The positive stories. The good that they do. The truth.” And then he adds, as a murmur, “It deserves to be told and not shoved under a rug to be forgotten about.”

“You haven’t given up,” Alec says. It’s more of a statement than a question. He considers the pile of papers on the desk in a new light, a realisation tussling with the remnants of last night that still cling to him like dust motes. “You still want to publish the stories that got you fired? Can you do that?”

“At this point, I don’t think it’s a question of can I do it,” Magnus shrugs. He aims for indifference, but his eyes are still focused and sharp on Alec, watching him warily. “I’ve been told I’m quite stubborn about getting what I want. And besides - it’s easy enough to slip the odd thing into the papers now and again, even on the front page, it turns out. Call it perks of being an editor.”
Magnus sees the *bullshit* too. He sees the word in the papers, the slanderous headlines, the libelous interviews, and he knows there’s no an ounce of truth. He sees the city killing supers and covering it up with gang crime and carjacking and unfortunate accidents that cannot be explained. He sees the bullshit, but it doesn’t make him spiral, not like Alec.

“But,” Magnus continues then, dangerously low, “What I’m doing, it’s not enough. Not yet.”

Alec looks back at the pile of clippings. “Why are you …. showing me this?” he asks carefully, “If it got you in trouble the last time someone noticed?”

Magnus’ smile is rueful.

“I need help,” he admits after a beat. He runs his finger around the rim of his glass, pretending like he’s focused on the way the glass sings. But his body language tells a different story; it’s too rigid for that, pulled taut like the line of a bow Alec knows well.

“There are stories that aren’t being told,” Magnus explains, “A lot of unread case files pass across my desk, a lot of crimes that don’t get reported, a lot of murders relegated to page three. Something insidious is happening in this city and I need to get to the bottom of it. But I can’t. Not when it’s just me.”

Unflinching, Magnus’ eyes flick up to Alec’s. He looks severe, piercing in his intensity that cuts straight through Alec like a shard of sunlight through fog, and it’s that sharp edge that catches Alec’s breath more than he would like.

Alec’s not entirely sure what Magnus is saying, but if there’s one thing he knows about Magnus, it’s that nothing he does or says is ever accidental. Magnus wants something. There’s a question about to be poised.

And yet, it still catches Alec off guard.

“I was hoping,” Magnus continues, “That you might be interested in helping me out. I can’t offer anything more than the pleasure of my company. There’s no extra pay, and it would mainly be research, helping me sift through police records and man the tip line. But, I would be grateful if you would consider it.”
Alec blinks. Then frowns.

“Wait, what?”

Magnus presses his mouth into a thin line. He looks at Alec in that same way he looked at him after they took the Arkangel effigy down from the front of the building: like Alec is something to be seen, not just looked at, but he’s only just realised as much. Like there’s something there, inside of Alec, bright at his core, and it’s worth consideration; it speaks of sympathy.

And maybe, just maybe, they’re finally stepping out of this routine of teasing banter, and flirtatious comments, and pleasant smiles that make Alec’s head thump, but never progress to something more. This is something more. Magnus wants his help in bringing the city to justice, holding it responsible for its crimes. That’s definitely something more.

Because Magnus looks at him, looks at Alec, like his hands aren’t drenched in blood and wasted effort trying to pick it free. Just like that, Magnus presents a solution to one of Alec’s indelible what ifs.

What if I could do more to keep everyone safe?

It makes something flip over in Alec’s gut. His mouth feels a little dry.

“Why me?” he asks, curling his fingers into his palms at his sides.

“I suppose trust makes you do strange things,” Magnus answers. A small lilt of a smile picks up the corner of his mouth, maybe beyond his realising. “And I think I do trust you. You’re … quite surprising.”

Alec’s skin warms and he scrubs his hand across the back of his neck to try and smother it.

“There are - there’s gotta be others here, who would want to help,” Alec subverts. “Not everyone hates superheroes.”

“No, they don’t,” Magnus agrees, “But lots of people lie about their prejudices. They don’t tell you
because they don’t want to be called out, and that fear is a dangerous thing. You can never quite be sure if you know someone like you thought.”

“How do you know I’m not one of those?”

Magnus doesn’t miss a beat. “You volunteered to help me take down that dummy of Arkangel the other week. Simon did too, of course, but I question his ability to keep his mouth shut, so you were the first and obvious choice to ask.”

“Anyone would’ve -”


It’s a straight razor of a different kind pressed against his throat now, and Alec finds himself wanting to move against it, so that it might bite into his skin.

Last night, he asked himself: *what else can I do?* And where Wolfsbane and Veil said *nothing*, Magnus now offers an invocation. It’s almost too good to be true, an answer to Alec’s guilt presented to him on a silver platter like this, but -

“Look, I -” Magnus says, rounding the side of his desk. He half-raises his hand, as if he’s thinking of touching Alec on the arm, stroking his palm down to Alec’s elbow, but doesn’t quite find the courage to do so. His shoulders sag and he becomes a little less confident, a little more resigned. “It’s a lot to ask. It’s your free time with little incentive, and it’s not exactly by the books. It’s under the table and it might be troublesome down the line. It got me fired before. Getting involved with vigilantes and their world is … dangerous. You don’t have to say yes. I understand.”

“You’re looking for justice,” Alec says slowly, and when Magnus looks up and nods, Alec continues, “How … how can I say no to that?”

It takes a moment, but when Magnus’ relieved smile blooms, it’s a miraculous thing, leaving Alec just a little breathless. It’s the sort of smile that makes Alec wonder if it’s even possible to say no, when someone looks at you like *that*, like you’re the answer to all their late-night and early-dawn prayers - and then he chides himself for the errant thought. Too much, too far.

Still, Magnus’ eyes come alive in the now-honeyed dark. The room has become warmer, the light
softer without Alec really noticing, and it smooths some of the weight that has been bearing upon his shoulders away with the same sort of touch as a whimsy breath. He feels his skin prickle. For a moment, his hands are clean.

“Tall, dark, and handsome and with a sense of right and wrong?” Magnus says coyly, tucking his smile into the corners of his mouth and covering it once again with his whiskey glass. The rim leaves an indent in his lower lip. “Seems like I’ve lucked out.”

Alec rolls his eyes but he cannot help his smile, shy and crooked, colour high in the apples of his cheeks. His com bud buzzes again in his ear; apparently Jace won’t take no for an answer.

“I, uh - “ Alec says, gesturing awkwardly at the door. “I have to go, but -”

“Of course,” says Magnus with a wave of his hand, “Of course, it’s late. Why don’t you stop by after work tomorrow evening? We can talk a little more, maybe get a drink, see where the night takes us -”

“That - sounds good,” Alec interrupts, face warming. “Yeah.”

Magnus’ smile is blinding. “Well, alright then.”

The queasy feeling in Alec’s gut is still there, but for a different reason. It’s not his fault he gets the sweats when beautiful men smile at him. Sometimes, feelings get through the cracks. He’s working on it.

He hoists his bag up a little higher on his shoulder and - after a decidedly awkward pause where he’s not sure if he should say something or keep looking at Magnus or not keeping looking at Magnus - he decides he should probably leave. Before he says something either incriminating, or worse, embarrassing.

“Alec?”

Alec pauses in the doorway and looks back over his shoulder. “Yeah?”
“Thank you,” says Magnus, and oh, it’s been such a long time since Alec heard those two words. He hardly thinks himself deserving of them, but Magnus has never struck him as the sort of man to lie. “For stopping by tonight.”

And Alec feels it, his strange and foreign gratitude. He feels it absolving him of the blood on his hands, and whilst he knows it won’t last, probably not steps beyond the door, all he can do is cling to the moment.

Alec calls it an early night on patrol, but Jace and Clary don’t really care, too swept up in a world of their own to offer Alec more than a parting farewell when he heads home.

Tonight, Alec doesn’t really mind. His thoughts are elsewhere, and when the door of his apartment is safely closed behind him, he marches into his bedroom, tossing his mask onto the mattress, and goes digging in the bedside drawer for the pen that Magnus handed him before.

It’s exactly where he left it.

Alec drops onto the edge of his mattress with a quiet huff and holds the pen up - his olive branch - between his thumb and forefingers. He spins it around, twirling it between his fingers like he’s seen Jace do. He’s not quite as good, but he’s practiced enough not to drop it now.

The masochistic part of him searching for the rough, familiar edge of panic, but he can’t get a good grip. It’s still there, wriggling and squirming in his gut, still in the ache of his knees and the newspaper print on his fingertips beneath his gloves, but it doesn’t have him in a chokehold.

But he doesn’t feel numb. He curls his fingers around the pen and presses it into the palm of his hand until he can feel it, feel it and nothing else. He closes his eyes; behind, there’s the parking lot again, there’s Wolfsbane and Veil in the rain, and Sentinel kneeling in the hemorrhage of blood-red light. Then, there’s Nightlock, strange and out of place, smiling that judgemental, seething smile of his, the look in his eyes goading, surrounded on all sides by the bodies of his dead friends, whilst in the distance, Arkangel walks away with his back to the chaos.

And then, behind that, beyond that, in a quiet fluorescent corner, there’s Magnus, and the promise
of justice a whisper on his lips, a wishbone in his hands.

Alec’s heart hums with adrenaline.

Alec has known Magnus for a few months, but he doesn’t know Magnus, not in the way Alec suspects people like Magnus deserve to be known.

There’s this routine they’ve cultivated over time, one where Magnus will flirt and laugh while Alec will blush, and then steal secret glances at Magnus as Magnus walks away, a sway in his shoulders and a hum on his lips. It’s one where Magnus will ask him for dinner or drinks or a coffee in the cafeteria and he will force himself to say no every time, because he’s scared of people seeing, because he knows what the papers say, because he doesn’t have time to waste when he barely gets three hours sleep a night, because - he’s afraid of letting someone stray beyond these carefully coloured-in lines. There’s a whole plethora of reasons. Alec only has to pick one.

It’s a routine that’s always been safe for Alec, something always confined to the hours of nine to five, never leaving the walls of the office; always something he can pick and choose when to come back to. It’s a routine in which he doesn’t have to give up too much of himself, doesn’t have to let someone else in, doesn’t have to feel bad about lying when he’s not asked to tell the truth in the first place. He gets to look, to feel these flares of warmth in his belly and these gentle stutters in his chest, but it’s always been smothered and squashed down, a feeling little more than pleasant.

It is pleasant. Their relationship - if Alec can really call it that - has always been pleasant.

But Magnus is a different person after hours.

No, that’s not entirely true - he’s not completely different. It’s not like the mask he wears at work, the smile he greets his boss with or the voice he puts on over the telephone, is all fake. After six o’clock, he’s still flirty and playful and smart and exquisite, all the things that have always made it hard for Alec to look away whenever he’s in the room, but he’s also -

He’s also far more intense, and it’s that severity which surprises Alec, the next night.
Alec is hunched over in the leather wingback pulled up to the opposite side of Magnus’ desk, in a windowless office just a little too small for two people to share comfortably. Maybe Alec was expecting Magnus to offer him a drink that became more drinks, and then they would sit here until late, until it became comfortable, and maybe Magnus would make a pass at him that Alec would have to politely decline (or maybe accept, he can’t really say), but there’s no whiskey in sight.

Instead, there’s a pile of manilla folders stacked dauntingly high in front of him, the first of many open on the table. And now, Alec has a pen in his hands that he’s squeezing just a bit too tight, and a glaze across his eyes that is decidedly blank.

He’s not really sure what he’s looking at. It’s some sort of police report, but he’s never really seen one so crudely Tipexed, and damn, he’s been taking Izzy’s commitment to bureaucracy for granted. He’s been staring at it for almost twenty minutes now and has done little else other than circle the date at the top of the page.

It’s from last week. Something to do with that murdered lawyer, Ragnor Fell. Alec had barely skimmed that story when it first broke, and now he regrets it.

Magnus is sitting on the other side of the desk, head bowed over a stack of paperwork that he flicks through with well-practised ease. His thumb is pressed against his lips in thought and he hasn’t looked up at Alec in a while. Alec finds himself surprised by that.

Magnus had been surprised too, when Alec had turned up at his door after work, just as he’d promised. It had taken Alec a good few minutes to psyche himself up outside the door and his knock had been weak at best, but Magnus’ expression when he had opened the door had been open and unguarded, like he wasn’t expecting Alec at all.

“I’m actually surprised you came back,” Magnus had said, after inviting Alec in and offering to take his jacket, which Alec had relinquished clumsily. “More surprised that you’re willing to help.”

Alec had frowned. “Why’d you think I wouldn’t stick to my word?”

And Magnus had paused, frowning to himself as his eyes roamed the length of Alec’s body, slow and questioning, before settling just over Alec shoulder.

“I don’t know,” he had said, “It wasn’t that I didn’t think you would honour your word. It’s more - that I’ve been let down too many times and it becomes a habit to assume the worst.”
So, yes, Alec is surprised that Magnus hasn’t looked up at him since they sat down - but it’s admirable too, he realises latently. Magnus clearly takes his work seriously, and maybe Alec’s not here for them to get to know each other in the traditional sense at all.

Some small part of him is mildly disappointed, but the much larger part of him is put at ease. He hasn’t felt the urge to rub his hands raw beneath the faucet all day.

Staring down at the police report on the table, Alec decides that he’s not going to be one of those people who let Magnus down. He just ... doesn’t exactly know what he’s looking for.

“You’ve been staring at that page for the last half an hour, you know,” Magnus says without looking up, jolting Alec back to reality. Magnus is still scanning his own notes line-by-line.

“Sorry, I -” Alec swallows. He taps his pen against the table to get the ink flowing again. “I’m not used to this sort of stuff … audits and financial records are more up my alley … and I don’t really know what I should be seeing.”

Magnus’ lips turn upwards into a quiet smile. “I’m sorry to throw you in the deep end right away,” he says, “But I have, shall we say, a personal interest in this case, and there’s a lot of information to sift through to catch every detail.”

“The Ragnor Fell case?”

Magnus nods, but Alec notices the way his smile falls just a bit.

“Yes,” he says, “You would think a high profile murder like this would get more attention from the press, but it’s been a month, we haven’t even had the trial yet, and already people have stopped talking about it. I was planning to have an exposé run on page two of next Sunday’s issue, not that the editor-in-chief knows about it yet.”

“What sort of exposé?”

Magnus sets his own pen down on the desk and grabs a clipping from the middle of his pile. He scoots it across the desk to Alec, folding his arms as he leans forward.
“That’s one of my articles,” he explains as Alec inspects the newspaper headline he’s been handed. “The Herald, the Times, and the Gazette all ran similar pieces on their front page that day, but none of them mentioned in the title that he was murdered. That was relegated as far down as paragraph two. All they were interested in was the fact a high-level public official was a vigilante on the side. The Tribunal was the only paper to mention him by name in the headline.”

“That’s … messed up,” says Alec. He decides to take a punt. “So … you want me to help you figure out what happened? Who murdered him?”

“That would be nice,” shrugs Magnus, “Unfortunately it’s not likely, but it would be a welcome discovery.”

“What do you want then?”

Magnus’ steely eyes flit to his.

“Justice, Alexander,” he says, resting his chin in his palm in a way so at odds with the words in his mouth. “I want justice, and not just for the murderers and the arsonists and the petty criminals. I want to hold the press and the politicians and the police force accountable for their lack of care, for never prosecuting anyone, for their willingness to let crimes like this slide just because the victim was a super. Heaven knows Ragnor, the old crone, deserves some closure on his miserable existence.”

Alec frowns. “You knew him,” he says, more a statement than a question.

Magnus’ shoulders stiffen, his jaw moving, but his gaze darts away and back again to Alec, where Alec holds it deftly.

“Yes,” Magnus admits, “We were old friends. He was also a rather valuable source, and procuring records from City Hall without him is going to be far more difficult moving forward, I can assure you.”
Alec studies Magnus for a moment. He’s not sure what he’s looking for: grief, maybe? Mourning? Alec certainly sees the anger, but he can’t find the regret, the longing, or the sadness, and maybe that’s because Magnus has all those emotions meticulously stashed away, somewhere Alec cannot reach.

Alec supposes he wouldn’t want someone like him rooting around his misery either, if their situations were reversed.

He thinks again about his dead super in the parking lot, but it’s not the same. Alec didn’t know him; they weren’t old friends, and he can’t compare that loss to this. That guilty feeling is too black and white.

He tries to imagine what it would be like if he lost Jace, only to wake up and find his unmasking all over the front pages the following morning.

And that - well, It doesn’t bear thinking about.

“Okay,” says Alec, looking back down at his police report. “What sort of stuff do I need to be looking for then?”

Magnus blinks, and then he searches Alec’s face. It only makes Alec wonder if he’s surprised again by Alec’s willingness to get stuck in. There’s a small voice in the back of Alec’s head telling him that he’s not doing this for Magnus, or for justice and honest integrity, but instead, it’s all for him: to relieve himself of the guilt over leaving his dead man to the mercy of an incompetent police force, of not being there in the first place to stop this all from happening.

And then, there’s a voice smaller still, telling him that the longer he stays here, the longer it will be until he has to suit up as Sentinel and risk history repeating itself. But he does his best to push it back, to numb it, to silence it.

He’s good at that. Silencing things. Bottling up his feelings and dutifully ignoring them is something he has got down to an art.

“Anything,” says Magnus. “Everything. Anything that leaves a sour taste in your mouth.”
Alec stays late, that first night. He’s a slow reader at first, puzzling over the gaping holes in the police reports too long, where information has clearly been redacted from the witness testimonies that Magnus managed to procure from a friend-of-a-friend at 1PP.

They work in silence, most of the night. Sometimes, Magnus will mutter beneath his breath and Alec will look up, only for a moment, but Magnus never notices, immersed in whatever he’s reading. Magnus’ pen will scratch over the paper, and Alec will huff whenever he flips a page, and the building will creak when the heating comes on after nine.

But Alec doesn’t mind the silence. It’s not awkward, not like he feared it might be. There’s no pressure for small talk or noise to fill the gaps, no police sirens or people shouting in his ear; just breathing is enough, and Alec’s mind wanders to when that last was the case. The strangest sense of calm washes over him, submerges him, drags him slowly down with a soft pressure pulsing against his skin. He feels … contained.

He’s so engrossed that by the time he looks at the clock above Magnus’ head, it’s midnight. He bolts upright with a small noise of surprise.

“Hm?” Magnus says, glancing up. He’s been leaning on his fist and now there’s a red mark blooming along his jaw, which Alec finds strangely charming. Magnus follows Alec’s eyes to the clock. “Do you need to go?”

“I, uh - how much later are you staying?” Alec asks with a frown. His stomach grumbles, but his thoughts are more on how pissed Jace will be that Alec completely ditched patrol altogether, rather than the fact he’s skipped supper. Hopefully Izzy will have come up with a good excuse to cover him. Hopefully.

Magnus shrugs, but it extends into a full on roll of his shoulders as he stretches his arms above his head and his joints click in satisfaction.

“I’ll probably work a few more hours,” he says, “Usually I stay ’til we go to press, and then pop home for a few hours sleep and six or seven coffees.”

“We go to press at four,” Alec gawps, and worse, this is what Magnus does most nights. No wonder Alec noticed those grey marks beneath his eyes before; he stays at the office until dawn
every night and never once has he said a thing about it. Does anybody else know?

Magnus shrugs again, his resigned smile a little bashful. His gaze follows Alec as he stands and shrugs back into his suit jacket, eyes lingering on the buttons of his shirt and the crooked line of his tie.

“There’s a lot of work to do,” he says, “No rest for the wicked, Alexander. Or for the good, unfortunately.”

Alec doesn’t make it to patrol that night, and Jace is pissed for about ten minutes when Alec talks to him on the radio in the early hours of the morning. Luckily, Izzy is there to placate them both by telling Alec he didn’t miss much, save for Jace flying face first into a billboard again.

Alec wonders how much of that is true. Not that Jace doesn’t regularly fly into infrastructure when he’s showing off, and not Izzy would lie to him, but -

There must be a dozen dispatch calls to the police every night that go unanswered, that Jace and Alec don’t pick up, that get ignored in favour of something more exciting. Something more superpowered.

When Jace hangs up, grumbling about how next week will be his turn to play hooky, Izzy doesn’t miss a beat in asking Alec where he’s been.

“I stayed late at the office,” he says, and technically, it’s not a lie.

“You want me to believe you stayed an extra six hours?” she scoffs, “At a job I know you don’t really like and only have to spite mom and dad?”

“I do like my job.”
“Uh-huh. I bet you like it almost as much as I believe you. C’mon, Alec, spill.” She gasps. “You weren’t on a date were you?”

“What? Of course not, I wouldn’t skip patrol for something like that.”

“Jace certainly does.”

“Case in point,” Alec grumbles, “No, Iz, it wasn’t a date. I don’t have time for that and you know it.”

“Don’t have time for it or have you just given up trying to find Mister Right in order to dedicate your life to fighting crime? Because those are two very different things.”

“It’s three in the morning, do we really have to have this conversation now? Again?”

“The more you get cagey about it, the more I’ll think you really were out with a mystery man,” she laughs. “Did you at least get laid?”

“I’m hanging up.”

Alec returns to Harlem two days later as Sentinel. He goes alone, because Jace decides he would rather mess around with Clary and a bank robbery downtown, and Alec doesn’t feel up to arguing with him about it. Alec knows Jace and Clary will be alright and he doesn’t fancy being third wheel when they inevitably foil the robbery and make out afterwards, high on endorphins.

It’s happened too many times before. Alec is a little scarred.

Besides, Jace and his huge metal ego aren’t so good at being inconspicuous and Alec is rather fond of sticking to the shadows. The feeling in his chest isn’t as volatile as it was, but it’s still thick and dark and tarish and Alec doesn’t want Jace wading around in that, churning it up only now it has
finally settled into something he can manage.

It’s raining tonight and the chalky gravel beneath Alec’s boots has turned to muddy slush, the yellow light of the streetlamps cloaked grey and dreary. The sidewalk hisses in the downpour; Alec’s hair sticks to his forehead, water drip-drip-dripping into his eyes, rolling down his mask.

The city is less neon this far north, the blue glow that floats above the skyscrapers downtown smoked out by car exhausts; the rain smells putrid and petrolic, propanoic in that way gasoline stings in the bridge of the nose when breathed in too deep. It mingles with the smell of fast food and greasy run-off and hot metal. Alec grimaces. He briefly contemplates whether he can get salmonella just from breathing it in.

The parking lot is dark and deserted; the bulb of the single street lamp above has been smashed or blown out in the last few days whilst Alec’s been wallowing. The rain refracts the light from buildings across the street, sickly yellow and just enough to outline the bumpers of a few abandoned cars and the sloping roof of the old church next door.

The body is gone, but the blood stain on the asphalt is not, too ingrained in the cracked tarmac to have been washed away. It’s a scar on the Earth, a dark and vicious in its vague, humanless shape, and Alec comes to a stop with the toe of his boot pressing up against the very edge.

He’s not entirely sure why he’s here; the panic has left him, somewhere on the threshold of an office with no windows, but the guilt still stagnates. He cannot shake it, but it’s been a long, long time since he entertained thoughts of doing just that.

He has very little hope of finding any clues that haven’t been drowned and decomposed by the rain, and he’s not so sure it will absolve the festering feeling in his stomach either. There has been nothing in the papers since the night the body was found, no follow-up reports, no talk on police radio about any leads - just silence.

The crime scene tape is gone - or maybe it was never here to begin with - and Alec knows there’s no cop stationed on this block keeping watch, because he made sure to ruthlessly check the whole perimeter before he came down from his rooftop vantage across the street.

Maybe he should talk to Izzy about it. It’s not like she would say no if he decided he wanted to confess his sins, if he decided he wanted to -
Wanted to follow through with this? To where? He doesn’t suppose there’s anywhere else to go but here; there are no leads, there is no trail to follow. Robert and Maryse would never sign off on an investigation like this. Jace would probably tell him it’s a waste of time. Clary would look at him with that pity in her eyes she sometimes wears, pity which never fails to make Alec feel both pathetic and disgusted.

But Magnus -

It’s a small, strange voice in his head: but Magnus. Magnus would know what to do and where to go from here - there’s no rest for the good either, Alexander - Magnus speaks of sympathy and Alec lingers in the aftershocks of that word still -

“Why am I not surprised?” says a voice from out of the rain.

Alec jolts.

The thrum of the rain on the concrete muffles the sound of approaching footsteps, and Alec twists sharply, snatching his bow from out of his holster.

He’s not an easy person to sneak up on, and so of course here is the one person who does it so well.

He doesn’t reach for an arrow.

Nightlock appears from the dirty-coloured dark, the collar of his overcoat turned up to guard against the cold. His supersuit is clean and bloodless. The faint shadow around his lips is crisp. His eyes are sharp and unconvoluted. And his hands - his hands are stuffed in his pockets, and that takes Alec aback, because it means he’s not prepared for a fight.

“Of course you’re here,” Nightlock answers himself, “For something sinister, no doubt.”

His steps are brisk and Alec tenses, but Nightlock glides right on by, his shoulder only an inch from brushing Alec’s. He walks around the stain on the ground until he’s opposite Alec, and the width of the bloody mark is a remarkably good buffer, one which Alec knows he won’t cross. Alec knows that Nightlock knows this too.
“So,” Nightlock asks without pretense, “What does Idris have to do with this?”

“Sorry, what?” Alec retorts. “What the Hell -”

Nightlock clicks his tongue. “Don’t play dumb with me, Sentinel,” he says, more curt than usual. “What business does Idris have with this murder? That’s why you’re here, isn’t it?”

“Not everything I do is Idris’ business,” Alec grumbles. He remembers what Veil and Wolfsbane said to him, the night they were last here, about seeing things from Nightlock’s perspective, he remembers Magnus’ olive branch with a phantom ache, but God, it all feels half a year ago and it’s so much easier to be defensive.

Still, Alec relaxes his grip on his bow, trying to recall what it feels like to hold a fountain pen and not a weapon of war in a tightly clenched fist. He forces himself to imagine the tension in his shoulders unspooling. He’s not sure if it works; to Nightlock, he probably just looks mildly uncomfortable.

Nightlock narrows his eyes. He withdraws one of his hands from his pockets and Alec fixates on the slow drum of Nightlock’s fingers against his thigh; he’s probably probing for something Alec cannot feel, rolling invisible energy between his fingertips.

“Arkangel isn’t around,” Nightlock observes. His voice is flat. The city feels like it’s encroaching upon their space, crawling up behind Alec where he cannot see, his attention focused solely on Nightlock.

“No,” says Alec, imagining a phantom shank pressed up against the small of his back. “No, it’s just me.” And then, perhaps stupidly, he adds, “He doesn’t know I’m here.”

*Rule number one, Alec*, he can imagine his mother scolding him. *Don’t tell a potential threat that you no backup in the area*.

Nightlock slides his hand back into his coat pocket. The sharp, juddering tension in the air - which Alec thought was the rain - suddenly disappears. That creeping of the city abates in an exhaled breath. He can hear the drizzle once again, rather than just static noise.

“You know what happened here?” Nightlock asks.
“Yeah. I was here that night. We found the body.”

“We?” Nightlock repeats. His eyes flit to Alec’s with a golden sort of focus that pierces through the murky haze. “Oh, I see. You’re Wolfsbane’s pet Corporate. Makes sense.”

“I’m not anyone’s anything,” Alec snaps, but it doesn’t come out as cutting as he means. “And I’m not here to cause trouble. I’m just looking for anything the cops might have missed, but it looks like there’s nothing, so I’m just gonna go.”

Alec turns away, shoulders hunched, but he doesn’t make it two steps.

Blunt pressure loops around his shins, stopping him from running. He looks back over his shoulder, and sure enough, Nightlock has his hand outstretched, fingers curling into his palm. He smiles something that Alec doesn’t think is apologetic at all, but relents his invisible grip around Alec’s legs as he does.

A violent tremble rushes through Alec’s body. He grits his teeth not to let it show.

“That makes two of us, you know,” says Nightlock. “Trying to fight this before it goes cold. There’s a backlog of bodies at the City Morgue, so they won’t do an autopsy for another week. Any useful trace evidence will probably have degraded by then.”

“And the case will get passed on to some beat cop’s desk, who will ignore it until the statute of limitations expires, when it’ll get thrown into a pile with all the others, into the trash,” Alec bites, “I know the drill.”

Nightlock raises his eyebrows behind his mask. “So you do,” he remarks. Surprise makes his voice softer. “Corporates don’t usually go out of their way to -”

“We’re not all the same!” Alec barks. The smallest note of surprise crosses Nightlock’s face; for some unequivocal reason, it reminds him of Magnus, that same quick candor just as surely hidden away again in the same moment. It reminds him of Magnus, and in turn, of olive branches and peace offerings and prejudice, and so, he adds, “But, I mean - it’s probably safer … to assume that I’m …”
Nightlock’s lips curl up at the corners, lines appearing at the apex of his eyes. His steps are slow as he drifts around the edge of the asphalt’s bloody stain. He moves with a coiled grace, the sort that is meant to be deliberately disarming.

Alec stiffens, his body on high alert. He knows better than to not be wary.

“You’ve been talking to Veil about you and me,” Nightlock assumes correctly. His tone is sly and slithers up Alec’s back, toying with the hair on the nape of his neck. Alec clenches his teeth to stop himself from shivering again.

“She’s right, of course,” Nightlock continues. “Everything she says about you, about Idris.” He doesn’t stop moving, his steps slow and prolonged, and he circles Alec with a wide berth.

The urge to follow Nightlock with his eyes is overwhelming, but Alec’s pride has other ideas; he tilts his chin upwards and resolves not to move an inch until Nightlock appears in front of him again. Alec is not sure if he appears stubborn or just petulant.

Judging by the amusement cradled in Nightlock’s eyes, it’s probably the latter.

“Trusting Idris is naive. It’s foolish not to think that every Corporate is out to catch you,” Nightlock says, “Or worse, of course.”

“I’m not interesting in catching vigilantes,” Alec protests, “I just want to do my job.”

“Oh, I’m not so sure you do.” There’s a flash of teeth as Nightlock’s smile briefly broadens. “You wouldn’t be out here if you were doing your job. You would be across the city with Arkangel and the press with their fancy cameras. Corporates don’t get involved with vigilante murders unless there’s money on the line.”

“And how do you know there’s not?”

Nightlock scoffs, lips pulling back as his smile turns provocative. “Please,” he drawls, “There’s nothing about this that would ever pique Idris’ interests. A dead amatuer all the way in Harlem is not even a blip on Idris’ radar and you know it.”
“So if I’m not doing my job, why am I here?” Alec counters. His eyebrows are pulled down so low that he can feel an ache forming behind his mask. “If you know so much.”

“My question exactly, Sentinel,” Nightlock says, almost a purr. He definitely has an answer. Alec can see it in the way he flicks his fingers in midair, the rain around them trembling. “Would it be a stretch to say you have some innate desire to do the right thing for once?”

He’s not wrong. But Alec doesn’t know how to relinquish all that without admitting that his duty to Idris isn’t a desire to do the right thing; his stubbornness is both a pitfall and a blindness.

Instead, he mutters, “Keeping people safe is still part of Idris’ code.”

“Is it? Even the vigilantes?”

“Of course it is! They’re still people, aren’t they?”

Nightlock moves before Alec can blink - one moment, he’s five feet away, and then the next, he’s invading Alec’s space, the rain suddenly perfumed with the scent of cloves and sandalwood and clean leather. Alec inhales sharply, his breath near whistling, and stands so straight and still that he could probably be snapped in two at the middle.

He can feel Nightlock’s warmth. It’s so very … human.

Alec cannot move.

But it’s not because Nightlock is working his magic, holding him still, or at least - not in the way Alec understands.

Nightlock is a few inches shorter than him, but he holds Alec’s gaze with molten intensity, bright and dangerous in the drizzle. His black mask is slick and rain-wet, so dark that Alec can hardly make out the contours of his face beneath it; it bleeds into the grey makeup smudged around his eyes and Alec is unsure where the leather really ends. Nightlock’s boots nudge against Alec’s own, and Alec has to shuffle half a step backwards at risk of toppling over.
“What -” Alec starts, but his voice catches.

“Who are you?” Nightlock demands. He folds his arms across his chest but he doesn’t step away. “Sentinel. Why haven’t I heard of you before now?”

“I already told you,” Alec grits out through his teeth, “I don’t like the spotlight.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

Alec lifts his chin a little higher. “Then what do you mean?”

He holds Nightlock’s gaze - a second, two seconds, longer - but as the moment stretches, Nightlock flinches and steps away, holding up a palm in Alec’s direction.

A surrender.

Almost instantly, Alec’s shoulders sag and the breath he draws is deep as his fingers go lax at his sides.

“Maybe I would prefer it if you were here to kill me,” Nightlock mutters, more to himself than to Alec, but Alec hears him anyway.

“What the Hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means, my Corporate friend, that I don’t understand -” He waves his hand in Alec’s general direction. “All of this. You make no sense.”

“What’s there not to understand?” Alec snaps, “You’re the one who - you’re the one who just appeared out of nowhere, with no records of you anywhere -”

Nightlock huffs on a laugh that’s both dry and disbelieving, his eyebrows shooting upwards towards his hairline. He shakes his head, but Alec doesn’t get it. Alec doesn’t get him.
“Are you always this cryptic?”

“Cryptic?”

“Yeah,” stress Alec, “Just say what you mean.”

Nightlock hums, a low note in the back of his throat, and he folds his arms across his chest again, appraising Alec. His biceps fill out the thick fabric of his coat, his shoulders straining just enough at the seams for Alec to notice. He tips his head to the side, and it highlights the strong line of a tendon up the side of his neck.

“What I mean?” he asks.

“Yes,” pleads Alec.

“Corporates aren’t supposed to care about us,” Nightlock says simply. “And yet, here you are. Caring. A paradox.”

Alec’s mouth snaps open to retort, but the words don’t come. Instead, Nightlock arcs his arm in a swift and dramatic slice upwards, and his feet lift from the ground and his rises up into the rain, water dripping from his boots.

He can fly.

“Hey, wait -” Alec starts, rushing forward as Nightlock continues to rise. “You can’t just leave -”

Ten feet into the air, and Nightlock looks down, his smile quickly coy.

“Oh, I think I can,” he replies, “But I’m sure I’ll see you around. This city isn’t as big as you think it is.”
He spreads both his arms out, palms facing skyward, and before Alec can blink back the rain that clings to his eyelashes and blinds him, Nightlock soars off into the sky, consumed all too fast by the darkness.

And then, the Heavens open, the drizzle becomes a thunderous encore, and Alec is soaked to the bone before he can even look away.

“Achoo!”

“Tissue?” Magnus asks, nudging a tissue box across his desk with the tip of his pen.

“Thanks,” Alec grumbles, snatchin a handful and blowing his nose loudly. He groans as the pressure in the bridge of his nose doesn’t abate in the slightest. “Sorry.”

“If it’s something going around the office, I’m going to catch it sooner or later,” Magnus sighs, turning his attention back to his stack of paperwork.

It’s already pretty late and Alec suspects he shouldn’t still be here, especially with how terrible he’s been feeling all day. But he had run into Magnus in the canteen at lunch and Magnus had asked, ever so nicely, if he’d be interested in another late night study group, as he so unsubtly called it. (Simon’s eyes had bulged, but Alec had glared at him so fiercely that Simon had been smart enough to value his life rather than needle Alec about that definite innuendo later.)

“No,” Alec says, dabbing at his nose again and sniffing loudly. “Got caught out in that storm last night. ‘S just a chill.”

It better just be a chill. Lord knows that Idris doesn’t grant sick days unless someone is literally dying.

Magnus sets down his pen and folds his hands beneath his chin, leaning forward with a gentle frown. Alec blinks, quite the picture with a tissue shoved up one nostril.
“The storm didn’t hit ‘til after midnight. You were out that late?” Magnus asks.

“No,” Alec sniffs, “I mean yeah. I, uh - met up with a friend, I guess, we got caught up, didn’t realise the time ‘til I was walking home.”

“Met a friend?”

Alec doesn’t miss the way Magnus eyes drop back to the desk and he scribbles something illegible on the paper in front of him, his mouth pursed.

Alec feels himself blushing even before he cottons on. “Not like that,” he chokes, before muttering, “God, you and my sister would get on so well.”

He sneezes loudly, which makes him jump, his elbow knocking into his neat stack of papers and tipping them all across the desk. It’s followed by a disparaging groan, which only makes Magnus chuckle, handing Alec another tissue without being asked.

“Thanks,” Alec grumbles, “And it wasn’t a friend like that - I mean, I’m not seeing anyone, it was just - ugh.” He hacks all the snot back up his nose, particularly unattractively. “That case, from last week? The super murdered on East 103rd?”

“Yes, I’m familiar.”

“Yeah. After all you said the other day about - about someone having to do something, because no-one else is bothering. I went to see a guy. Thought he might … know stuff. He didn’t. Or at least, not about that.”

“Sounds mysterious,” says Magnus, raising his eyebrows. “I’m surprised, Alexander. I didn’t think combing the streets at night was your scene. It’s very vigilante of you.”

Alec tosses his tissues into the bin. “Yeah, well. Not gonna make a habit of it if I’m gonna get sick,” he mutters darkly, “The information was a dud anyway.”
“Oh?”

Alec hesitates. He’s been thinking about his interaction with Nightlock all day, trying to make heads or tails of it, but as hopped up on cold medicine as he is, he can’t exactly spill it all to Magnus.

Magnus doesn’t need to know that Alec is a part of that world. And Alec doesn’t want to incriminate himself, but - perhaps more importantly - he doesn’t want to incriminate Nightlock either. That’s one of Alec’s unspoken rules, no matter how infuriating Nightlock might be.

He’s not going to talk about things that should be secret, and Nightlock’s comings and goings are certainly that. And after last night, a part of him wonders if Nightlock might return him the same courtesy.

Alec picks at the corner of the paperwork he’s been reading, or trying to read, seeing as he’s been having trouble concentrating and stopping all the words from bleeding together.

Magnus watches him steadily for a moment, before quietly deciding Alec’s not going to elaborate. He doesn’t seem particularly put out, returning to diligently copying across some notes into his binder labelled Ragnor Fell.

Alec’s finger slips and he rips away the corner of his page. His hand stills.

It’s not like he can talk to anyone else about last night with Nightlock, or what he saw with Wolfsbane and Veil, or the omniscient guilt that blocks out every other feeling and rots within his chest because he can’t get it out. He still hasn’t told Izzy about the dead man. Jace would probably just laugh about it. And he’s nowhere near ready to get that chummy with Clary just yet.

Maybe he could tell Magnus. He thinks Magnus would probably listen.

“What, uh,” Alec starts, clearing his throat, “What do you think of Corporates?”

“All Corporates, or Idris in particular?” Magnus asks without missing a beat.
“Idris.”

“Glorified mercenaries, if I’m honest,” says Magnus. He doesn’t look up from his notes until he’s finished writing his sentence. “They use their powers for money, rather than for good. Usually a hallmark of the morally reprehensible, in my experience.”

“It’s not like they have a choice,” Alec frowns. “They’re only following orders.”

“The claim that ‘they were only following orders’ has been used to justify too many tragedies in our history,” replies Magnus, “Everyone has a choice. Some people value their privilege too much to see it.”

Alec chews at the inside of his cheek, staring hard at the words on the page in front of him. His knee-jerk reaction is to retaliate, even if Magnus has a point, and it’s a point both very true and very damning.

Magnus interprets his punctuated silence as Alec biting his tongue. He’s correct.

“You’re a fan of the Corporates, Alexander?”

“Not a fan, I just - I don’t think they’re all like that,” Alec murmurs, “They can’t be.”

“In my experience, they can be,” says Magnus, before adding, “Well, perhaps not all. I suppose it’s the institution that’s more corrupt than anything.”

“What do you mean?”

Magnus taps his pen thoughtfully against the desk.

“Let’s say a Corporate and a vigilante both try to quell some riots during a protest,” he begins, and Alec knows where this is going. “They succeed to some degree, probably preventing a significant amount of property damage and some unfortunate injuries. But when things get out of hand, a man is killed, through no fault of either of them, it’s the Corporate who still gets his pay packet whilst the vigilante gets picked up by the police and thrown in a cell - if he’s lucky. It’s a double
standard, where one person is legal and the other is not, despite them doing the same damn thing.”

Alec doesn’t know what to say to that, so Magnus continues.

“It’s not the money I have issue with. Times are tough, you take what wage you can get. I understand that as well as anyone, I work in publishing. It’s the lack of critical thinking that that terrifies me. The thought that someone, say, with the ability to flip a car with their pinky could do just that at the behest of someone with power or wealth. Or worse - kill another person, should someone with the right connections ask it of them. And it’s not questioned. It’s just the norm.”

“It’s -” Alec starts, but it feels like there’s cotton stuffed down his throat, which he suspects is not just because of his cold. Suddenly Magnus’ office seems too small. “Idris start training when they’re really young. It’s not like they know any other way.”

“That’s true,” Magnus acquiesces, “And it’s dangerous. Teenagers have impressionable minds, and it’s certainly not fair to have politicians and multinational corporations moulding them as they see fit.”

“Younger than teenagers,” Alec finds himself admitting. “They’re children when they start. Five or six, if they can get them.”

Magnus’ expression softens. “I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah,” says Alec, ducking his head so that he doesn’t have to look Magnus in the eye. He goes back to picking at the paper in front of him. “So, I don’t - I don’t think it’s that simple. It’s not black and white.”

Magnus hums, the noise nondescript, but he doesn’t say anything. Alec fears he’s offended him. It’s all too rare to meet someone who values the work supers do, but there’s always been a divide between vigilantes and Corporates, because they’re all supers but not the same sort of supers, and maybe Alec was an idiot for hoping that Magnus wouldn’t draw it.

Alec can’t exactly blame him, but still, the disappointment stings. And worse, he’s sure he deserves it.

“It’s not like the supers can just leave Idris,” he murmurs, “Congress already has Idris rounding up
vigilantes … I don’t think someone would chose to leave Idris when that’s the alternative. Choosing to risk your life just seems … counter-intuitive.”

“Human desire for self-preservation certainly outweighs a lot of things,” Magnus admits. “You make a good point.”

“Yeah, well,” Alec murmurs, fiddling with his hands. The air is thick with something Alec doesn’t know how to cut; Alec never does well under scrutiny, and he runs hot and itchy in the knowledge that Magnus is looking at him, teasing him apart with his eyes. Maybe Magnus can see that thick black tar pooling in Alec’s chest; maybe it’s beading out of Alec’s skin already and staining his shirt like some guilty Rorschach.

And that’s if Alec hasn’t already offended him. Maybe he shouldn’t have opened his mouth.

Does he really have a right to talk about all this -

“It’s not really my business, I - forget it,” he mutters. “Pretend I didn’t say anything.”

He starts picking at a loose bit of skin around his thumbnail, scratching at it with his index finger. It catches and tears too deep; Alec smothers a quiet hiss, his nose wrinkling. Blood gathers around his nail bed.

Magnus sets his pen down again, laying it parallel with his paper. He pushes away from his desk, his leather chair squeaking, and Alec hunches in on himself as Magnus stands and walks over to his filing cabinet. He uncovers his whiskey decanter and two glasses from behind a row of lever-arches, and tilts one glass towards Alec, eyebrows raised expectantly.

“Drink?”

Tongue-tied, Alec nods. He doesn’t hesitate to take the drink once it’s offered, if only for something else to do with his hands.

The stark hiss of whiskey down the back of his throat is a momentary pleasure: it burns, strong enough that he forgets himself for a fractal moment. He tries to imagine it sterilising his insides.
But when he looks up at Magnus, still leant against his filing cabinet and watching Alec curiously, Magnus doesn’t look like he wants to turf Alec out of his office for overstepping the line.

In fact, he looks -

He looks puzzled - and it’s the same sort of puzzlement he wore the day they took the effigy of Arkangel down from the front of the building, the same puzzlement from two nights ago when he asked Alec to help him bring the city to justice for the murder of his friend, the same sort of puzzlement he wears always, now, whenever he’s peeling Alec apart at the seams with his eyes to see what makes him tick, to see what comes spooling out.

It’s puzzlement like he’s not really sure who he’s looking at, or why he hasn’t looked at Alec like this before.

And it’s a sentiment Alec often shares, but usually when he’s alone and looking in the mirror. He’s not really sure who he is either, caught somewhere in the crossfire of wanting to defend Idris with a dying, blindly-patriotic breath, no matter the consequences; of the urge to confess all the terrible things he has done in the name of corporate superheroism, never not bubbling up at the back of his throat, just one terrible night away from spilling forth; and of clamping up and not saying another word, because he’s this close to sticking his foot in it.

Alec is all of those things in equal measure. Maybe Magnus sees that contradiction as clear as day on Alec’s face. Maybe Alec is a real Catch-22.

The silence stretches just a little too long. Magnus’ fiddling stare errs upon the burning, roaming Alec’s face and chest and jaw, and Alec’s eyes flick to the door, his way out - he can’t help it. It’s habit. Maybe not Alec’s habit, but Sentinel’s -

Maybe he should just go -

“You clearly know a lot about Corporates,” Magnus says then, and Alec’s eyes snap back to him so fast he might as well have brought down the guillotine on his own escape plan. He sits so damn straight in the chair that he’s sure his muscles have atrophied.

“I don’t,” Alec says quickly, hoping he doesn’t sound too strained. It’s a lie he’s told too many times, but he’s never been good at it. Jace and Isabelle are always so breezy about it, lying and laughing it off when they’ve been caught out, but Alec’s honesty has always bitten him in the ass.
“Not that much. Just what I’ve read in the papers.”

“No tabloid in this city would be caught dead publicly endorsing Idris,” says Magnus, “Even if they are accepting donations from the same sorts of people.”

“I don’t know,” Alec says, shrugging it off the best he can. “Guess I’m just curious then. They get a bad rep. I don’t always think they should.”

“Most of them do deserve it.”

“But not all of them.”

Magnus hums, and then, to Alec’s surprise, he throws back his entire glass of whiskey, his face screwing up as he swallows with a swift exhale. Magnus’ eyes widen in the way that one often reacts when a tequila shot goes down too quick, and you feel your sinuses incinerate themselves in efficient succession, and then he drops back down into the chair across from Alec.

Immediately, he leans forward with his elbows on the desk, and Alec’s eyes linger on the glint of silver chains strung around his neck, slipped between the open wings of his shirt collar.

Alec swallows thickly. He doesn’t know why. His skin feels like it’s bubbling.

“Which ones? Which ones are the good ones?” Magnus asks, and maybe Alec physically recoils or his face wrinkles up into grimace, because Magnus quickly adds, “I’d like to pick your brain, if that’s alright? I want to know more about what you know.”

Alec squints, clearly sceptical. “Magnus -”

“It’s always good to have all the facts,” Magnus adds. “And I’m not above admitting that I’m wrong, every now and again. So, which of these good Corporates should I be trying to scoop for a tell-all interview, hmm?”

And God, something about that is so fucking ridiculous that Alec can’t help but laugh, even if it’s a dry scoff at best. Jace would be all over an offer like that.
Whether he’s a good Corporate or not, is another question, Alec’s brain helpfully supplies. Sentinel too.

“I don’t -” says Alec, “I don’t really know … I don’t really keep tabs of who’s who. I see them in the paper, sometimes - there’s the one with the wings?” Jace.

“Arkangel.”

“Yeah. And the one with super strength?” Lydia.

“Apex. Yes, I’ve seen her on the news. Formidable woman. I don’t think I’d cross her on a dark night, even if she is a public servant.”

“There are a lot of newer ones,” Alec adds, thinking explicitly of Clary and the newly-hired Victor, and even Raj, who’s only been with them a few years since his transfer. “You don’t really see a lot of the well-known ones anymore.”

“Yes, well,” says Magnus, “either they’ve retired on their mountains of blood money, or they defected with Valentine Morgenstern in the 70s. Probably for the best.”

“Maybe the new Corporates will be different.”

Magnus smiles at that, but it’s tight. And, Alec thinks, he looks at Alec like he pities him, like he both rues and admires his naivety. He probably thinks Alec is a fool, like he’s blind, like his privilege is making him blind, but he’s humouring him anyway, because Magnus is too polite to say it to Alec’s face.

“Maybe,” says Magnus, “but I don’t think we can hold them to that though, however much we might hope for it.”

He pauses, considering the rings on his hand in thought. He twists one around his index finger, a gun-metal silver signet engraved with the letter M. In the yellowing light of the office, it doesn’t look nearly as grandiose as it probably does under the flashing lights of a nightclub or in its prime position on Magnus’ dresser at home.
“What do you think would happen if Corporates stopped existing altogether?” Magnus asks carefully.

Alec holds his tongue, but Magnus is astute enough to notice.

“Purely speculative question,” he clarifies. “Indulge me.”

“Is that what you want?” Alec asks slowly, “For there to be no more Corporates?”

Magnus leans back in his chair, and he stares at the ceiling listlessly. Alec watches him in silence, mapping out the length of his neck, the underside of his jaw, the way his brows furrow, just a bit.

“Maybe,” Magnus says eventually. “Or maybe we’re already so far gone that removing institutions like Idris from the equation wouldn’t make a blind bit of difference. I suspect the hatred is already too deeply ingrained, whether you’re a Corporate ordered to run down vigilantes in the street, or a vigilante tired of seeing Corporates walk all over you and not suffer the same discrimination, or you’re just a civilian who despises anyone who lays claim to the superhero moniker.”

“It sounds like you’ve thought about this a lot,” Alec says.

“It’s a rather depressing truth,” replies Magnus, “Until everyone can see everyone else from all sides at once, I don’t suppose peace or truth or justice is on the horizon.”

“But that’s why you’re doing what you’re doing. It’s not just for your friend. You … you want to make a difference.”

Alec has always had a penchant for honesty and he knows it, but Magnus doesn’t know it - not yet at least. He doesn’t know the way words can trip out of Alec’s mouth untested; he doesn’t know the black and white way in which Alec feels; he doesn’t know how Alec can focus on one thought so much that it can grow too big for his chest to keep contained.

He doesn’t know that Alec sometimes just says what he feels, and then suffers for it afterwards, when all eyes land on him.
Sometimes, Alec doesn’t know that either. It still takes him by surprise. He tries not to let it show. He sets his mouth into a firm line and holds Magnus’ stare when it lands back on him. If Magnus’ mouth falls open, just a little bit, Alec tries not to linger on it.

“That’s why you’re working to change the press and how they talk about supers,” Alec continues, gesturing with his hand like he does when he’s nervous. Why is he nervous? “So that people can start seeing the full picture and hearing the whole story. It has to start with someone, and - and that’s ... you.”

The you borders upon a whisper. Alec doesn’t mean it to, but that’s the way it comes out, held upon a breath. He meets Magnus’ eyes and finds his focus sharp and electromagnetic.

And then he wonders: is this the difference between looking and seeing? Is this the person Magnus hides behind sharp suits and sharper smiles and concealer-laid dark circles?

Who else knows that Magnus spends his nights behind his desk trying to uncover a conspiracy so deeply buried that the city rests upon it as its own sewer system?

Who else knows that Magnus isn’t someone to let sleeping demons lie?

What if it’s only Alec who knows?

Magnus looks away from him, twisting his ring around his finger again. Perhaps Alec is mistaken, but some faint colour blooms along the curve of his cheekbones, trickling down his neck, despite how hard Magnus tries to batten it down. Maybe Alec’s words slip through the nails and the bolts of those defenses; maybe those three-piece suits of his are only paper thin, but no-one’s dared to touch him to find out.

“For now, I suppose,” Magnus murmurs. “Perhaps those good Corporates might just help me yet.”

He pulls another folder from the pile and flips it open, but there’s still colour in his cheeks, and it’s definitely colour, not just a trick of the light.

He can’t be embarrassed by the attention, because he revels in it; he moves through spotlights like
he was born for it; he paints dark colour around his eyes because he wants everyone to see -

\textit{Doesn’t he?}

Or maybe that’s the point. Perhaps Magnus is the sort of person to command attention because he knows it can be commanded: he can make people look where he wants, and not at what he’s doing, where he’s going, who he is beneath it all.

That’s the real trick of the light. Alec is just no longer caught by it.

There are far more extraordinary things to see in the shadows.

And so, Alec stares. Maybe it’s shameful, but tonight, maybe he’s shameless. Maybe he stares because it strikes him, in a strange, out-of-body moment, that he has never met anyone like Magnus Bane before, and how has it taken him months to realise.

Alec stays late, but the silence never stagnates. It’s filled with quiet breathing and the rustling of paper and scratching of pens and these things on the tip of Alec’s tongue that he wants to say, but cannot find the words for.

He wants to ask Magnus more. He wants to ask what is was that pushed Magnus onto this path, because so very few people wake up one day and decide to care about the supers. He wants to ask about his murdered friend, the barrister. He wants to ask Magnus about his parking lot super - because surely, surely, Magnus would have an answer.

He says nothing. He stares down at a transcript he’s supposed to be highlighting, but he spaces out into memory.

In the memory, he sees the parking lot again, he sees the dirty streetlight pooling on the tarmac, he sees the dark and bloody stain and he sees the body with the slit throat. He sees the blackness of the night - but instead of that strange yellowing dark, murky with deceit and terrible secrets, the
night is Genesis-dark and as deep as a dream, an incomparable blackness, incapable of puncture.

In the memory, it’s him standing over the body, and then it’s Nightlock, and then, shifting, the figure becomes Magnus standing vigil with a candle and an umbrella, whilst Sentinel and Nightlock slip off into the shadows, turning their backs on the scene.

In the memory that isn’t a memory, Magnus stays. Magnus says a prayer for the dead man with no name, accused of something he didn’t do.

Magnus absolves Alec of some of his guilt.

Not all of it, but some of it. Maybe that’s not fair on Magnus. He shouldn’t be a prop for Alec to -

Alec has to make it up to him. Magnus, Nightlock, his nameless dead friend.

He can’t just sit around and do nothing. Not when vigilantes are dying in the street. If he does that, he’ll rot too, down there in the gutters with all the piled-up corpses.

When the clock strikes twelve, the daze is broken. Magnus sits back in his chair with a sigh, running his hand through his hair and messing it up. Alec has never seen him disheveled, and it’s strange, but it’s nice too, because it’s crossing those neatly-coloured lines again.

Magnus breathes; it’s deep; his whole chest rises. He flicks a button undone at his collar and leans his head back against the spine of his chair, eyes falling shut for just one moment.

“It’s getting late,” Alec remarks. His voice sounds clumsy. He hasn’t said a word in hours; the last word he said still lingers.

“You .

Magnus hums. He cracks open one eye and smiles at Alec, crooked, all teeth. Raw, again. The real him. The brutally tired and yet still striving for better, him.
“You don’t have to stay,” he says. It’s a little fond. “I forget normal people need sleep instead of surviving on a caffeinated drip feed.”

Part of Alec wants to stay. Wants to stay until Magnus calls it a night, wants to stay until they go to press at four, wants to stay until Magnus decides he’s done as much as he can do in one night, which might just be more than Alec has done in all his nights.

The other part of Alec is Sentinel, and is late for patrol.

“Yeah, I should go,” Alec says, thumbing at the door. He stands awkwardly, shrugging into his suit jacket and then his coat and scarf, and all the while Magnus reclines deeper into his seat, reaching for his empty whiskey glass to drum his fingers against the rim, whilst his gaze lingers where it shouldn’t.

Or maybe it should. Alec cannot say what things he thinks when he stares so long and lazily at Alec’s burning face.

“I’ll, uh - see you tomorrow, then,” says Alec, grabbing his bag and making to leave. Magnus says nothing, and Alec thinks that’s that, wondering if Magnus, too, has zoned out into some memory, but -

“Alec,” Magnus calls, when Alec is in the doorway. “Thank you again. For tonight. For talking to me.”

Alec frowns, a little confused. “You don’t have to thank me for that,” he says. “Ever.”

Alec doesn’t see Nightlock that night. It’s probably something to do with Sod’s Law: the one night he wants to run into Nightlock, and Nightlock is nowhere to be found.

Alec wants to apologise. He wants to swallow back his pride and tell Nightlock that he was right, is right, the Corporates aren’t doing enough, saving vigilantes isn’t on Idris’ radar.
Alec wants to say help me do what’s right. He’s just not sure how to phrase it like it’s not a demand, but instead, the plea that it really is.

Sentinel and Arkangel respond to a multi-car collision on the bridge that night, where they end up having to drag a dozen people out of burning bus, and Alec thinks, surely, they’ll run into Nightlock here - but they don’t.

The silence is damning, or would be damning, if Alec wasn’t so focused in getting in and getting out of the carnage as fast as possible, before police backup arrives and Jace commits to something stupid.

The cops don’t try their luck, not this time. Alec is sure that Jace sometimes gets arrested purely for the thrill of it, but Alec isn’t willing to risk it or entertain Jace’s ego in any capacity. The moment Alec sees a detective getting trigger-happy with his finger on his handgun, Alec pulls them out of there and they disappear into the night with a strange combination of satisfaction and disappointment echoing profoundly in Alec’s chest.

“For fucking once, it’d be great if the police could actually let us do our jobs before they turn up and try to pretend like they can do it better,” Jace complains loudly, once they come to a stop on a rooftop a few blocks south of the river. Aggressively, he begins scrubbing the soot from his supersuit, huffing unhappily.

“Technically not our job,” Alec adds, although he mainly says it just to play Devil’s Advocate. He scans the dark for movement, but there’s nothing, no creeping spectres watching them from a distance. “Road traffic accidents aren’t in our jurisdiction.”

Jace just rolls his eyes. “Stop being difficult,” he says. “You know what I mean and I know you hate it as much as I do.”

He’s not wrong. But he’s not right either, and Alec isn’t about to explain that the ones stopping them from doing the job they need to do is, well … them.

Jace rolls his shoulders - Alec’s not sure whether it’s his bones or his wings that click satisfyingly - but Jace groans anyway. He wriggles his arms around, shaking out his fingers at his sides.

“Well, at least your buddy Nightlock wasn’t up our asses and stealing our thunder tonight,” he says
with a heavy sigh. He pushes his mask up into his hairline as he scrubs at his bare face. There must be soot on his gloves, because his fingers leave a streak of grey down his cheeks. “Cops are one thing, but that dude needs to understand that this is our turf and too many cooks spoil the cake, or however the saying goes.”

“Broth,” corrects Alec, but Jace just stares at him blankly. “Nevermind. And I think we should cut him some slack.”

“Slack?” asks Jace incredulously. His hand pauses in his roots; the wind has other ideas, however, ruffling up his hair. “Dude, why? That’s not what you were saying before. The guy does nothing but get in our way and beat us to half our calls. Next, he’ll be taking our paychecks. I have mouths to feed. My own mouth. I’m very hungry all the time.”

“He’s only trying to do the same as us,” Alec grumbles, thumbing at his bow. The bowstring presses into the leather of his glove; he wonders if it will leave a red line across his thumb beneath. “And it’s harder for him because he doesn’t have mom and dad covering his ass, keeping his mask on when he gets thrown in the cells.”

He looks pointedly at Jace. Jace attempts the perfect picture of innocence, but doesn’t succeed.

“I’m just surprised you’re defending him, is all,” he shrugs, “I’m not hating on the guy for saving people, I’m just … hating on the guy for being an asshole whenever we run into him.”

“It’s probably what we deserve,” Alec mutters.

Jace either doesn’t hear him or chooses to ignore him. “I’ve said it before and I’ll definitely say it again. You’re the one who actively hangs out with Wiley Coyote and Madam Mim, so I already know you like to keep terrible company.”

“If Veil ever hears you call her all these names, she’ll kill you and I won’t stop her,” Alec deadpans, before adding, “Also, pot calling kettle. You hang out with Clary.”

“Y’know, one day you will actively have to start liking her. She’s been on our team for almost six months.”

“You mean on your team,” Alec mutters, “Just tell me when that day comes, because I’ll make
“Here,” says Magnus, slapping down a newspaper in front of Alec a week later. “We go to press in the morning. What do you think?”

Alec blinks, his pen stilling in his hand where he was busy scratching on a report sent to Magnus’ office from Captain Garroway at the 99th, something about an increase in unexplained arsons all over the city. He steals a glance up at Magnus, but Magnus is staring at the headline, drumming his fingers against the front page. Tonight, he feels restless in a way Alec cannot pin down, and it seems to make the tiny space of Magnus’ office tremble around them.

Alec looks at the newspaper: it’s tomorrow’s edition and the front page is blindingly familiar - Alec has been watching Magnus stare at it from every conceivable angle for the best part of the last fortnight, after all.

It’s his exposé on Ragnor Fell.

“LAW ENFORCEMENT BETRAYS POPULAR CITY DISTRICT ATTORNEY”, reads the headline in
Alec picks up the newspaper to inspect it more closely. Below the headline, in smaller print, it reads: *written and edited by Magnus Bane, Senior Crime and Politics Editor*.

“Wow, you got front billing.”

“A few of the gentlemen in the cutting room owed me a favour or two,” Magnus shrugs, “I doubt the board has seen this yet. They don’t usually review the week’s issues until Sunday, and by then, it’ll be too late to repeal.”

Alec frowns as Magnus rounds the desk and settles into his chair opposite, rolling his shoulders and stretching out his legs beneath the table, nudging Alec’s toes.

“Isn’t that dangerous?” Alec asks, but Magnus just shrugs his shoulders, seemingly ambivalent. “You could lose your job.”

“I could,” agrees Magnus, “But I won’t, not for this. I’ve snuck far worse into print and the editor-in-chief knows it.”

He reaches out and pinches the newspaper from Alec’s grip, spreading the headline out on the table and taking care to flatten down the corners. He purses his lips, eyes focused on the photograph of Ragnor.

“It’s a divisive piece,” he explains, “It will sell well, people will talk about it, the board will be angry for a little while, but they’ll forget about it soon enough. Besides ... if this were to be the piece that puts the final nail in my coffin, then so be it. It may not be much, but we’ve certainly managed to scratch the surface of the truth. His case was swept under the rug and now everybody knows it.”

“Ragnor would’ve appreciated it,” says Alec, although he doesn’t really know that. Magnus’ mouth twitches at the corners, his expression going somewhere fond and distant.
“No, I don’t think he would,” he remarks. “The old crone would’ve complained that it’s too much attention, that he would’ve preferred to have been murdered in peace.” Magnus glances up then, meeting Alec’s gaze. His smile grows. “But I appreciate it,” he continues, “Sifting through all those police reports would’ve taken double the time if you weren’t here to help, Alexander.”

“‘S nothing,” Alec shrugs, cheeks warming. He scratches his hand across the nape of his neck. “Like you said before, it’s ... it’s necessary. For a good cause.”

There’s a pinprick of light flickering inside Alec’s chest, fanned by Magnus’ praise, dancing back and forth with more vigour than Alec has felt in a long while. It feels good to be doing good, to have done something for someone he never knew, who deserved his help regardless.

It feels good to have spent his time writing notes and helping Magnus with the wording in his paragraphs, rather than getting soaked to the bone loitering on some city rooftop in the rain and the cold.

It feels good to have Magnus smiling, just for Alec. Magnus has … a great smile.

“Well, I should thank you anyway,” continues Magnus. He wets his lips; Alec definitely notices. “Perhaps we could get takeout, my treat. Or - a drink sometime, if you’re free.”

Alec swallows thickly and tries to pretend his toes don’t curl in his shoes. He hears the usual no begin to form on the tip of his tongue, cloying on the backs of his teeth.

*But it’s just a drink ...*

“Yeah,” he says, staring hard at the tabletop instead of Magnus’ face, “Uh - that sounds. That sounds good. I can … let you know.”

Magnus’ eyebrows shoot up; that’s not the answer he was expecting. “Oh,” he hums, still smiling to himself, but it’s freer now. “Okay then.” He looks down, eyelashes feathering shadows across his cheeks tinged with colour, and Alec wonders if it’s meant to be coy - because if it is, the dimples formed around his mouth are all too genuine for that. Someone should say something.

Belatedly, Alec realises that he’s been stabbing his uncapped pen into his page, and the ink has bled into a large blue dot. He curses beneath his breath, poking his finger at the mark, but his skin
comes away stained.

It draws Magnus’ attention to Alec’s work, and to Alec’s disappointment, his expression quickly sobers. “Are those the transcripts Lucian sent over?” he asks, “The arsons?”

“Yeah,” says Alec, frowning at the blue on his finger. He rubs his index finger and thumb together, but it only smudges. “I started making notes, but - yeah. There’s not much to go on and the police aren’t really doing anything, but I don’t think it has anything to do with vigilante crime so I don’t -”

“I wonder if we could tie all of that into a larger piece about police negligence over that parking lot murder too,” Magnus muses, reaching out for one of the sheets of paper in front of Alec. He inspects it carefully, his eyes flicking over the words, another hum on his lips. It’s like a switch, flipped, for how quickly he’s back in work mode.

Alec is not sure if he’s impressed or disheartened by that. Still, he wishes he could tune out everything else like that to give him tunnel focus.

“Yes,” Magnus continues, and Alec’s not entirely sure if he’s talking to himself or not because his voice is low and distant, “Yes, this could work. I have some ideas for a headline already. There’s space in next Saturday’s issue that would be perfect for this.”

He talks with his hands and Alec is swept up in it like a sailboat at sea.

There’s something about Magnus, this bizarre hypnotism that he has never known before, that makes Alec realise he could listen to Magnus talk for hours. And Hell, Magnus doesn’t even really need to talk; Alec could just sit across the desk from him and watch him work for longer still and remain enraptured by his pull. He’s always known Magnus to be magnetic, the sort of person who commands all the attention in a room just by existing, light bending around him with the honour of casting his shadow.

But this, now, is different. It’s magnified. It’s not something Alec can awkwardly laugh off or leave behind when he switches his computer off at the end of the day.

Magnus is not like anyone else that Alec knows: he’s all sharp edges and whip-crack wit, but at the same time, he’s cautious, careful with revealing just a little too much, raw in a strange way that throws Alec off-kilter. His smiles are coy and gentle when he looks at Alec, when he thinks Alec
isn’t aware. His sense of justice, of right and wrong, does something funny to Alec’s heart. It makes Alec stumble when he’s normally so sure-footed.

(And yeah, he’s still just as unfairly beautiful in his suspenders and shirt sleeves as ever … and Alec is only human.)

But it’s not just that. All that, Alec knew before, knew from watching Magnus from across the room; from Magnus dropping by his partition every morning and gifting him with that Hollywood smile of his; from Magnus’ incessant flirting to the way Alec’s eyes would linger on the shape of his legs beneath his dress pants as he walked away.

But it’s also the little things, the small precious litanies that Magnus only bares behind closed doors, and Alec is somehow allowed to be privy to them all: how he’ll sweep all the papers from his desk in bouts of frustration; how he has a habit of tossing things he no longer needs over his shoulder leaving his office in disarray by the end of the night; how he works too hard and too late, completely oblivious to the tick of the clock on the wall, and Alec knows that when he goes to leave, Magnus probably isn’t going home to sleep.

He rubs his fingertips together when he’s thinking. He fiddles with his rings when he’s searching for the right words to pen. He runs his fingers over the shell of his ear, toying with his silver cuff when there’s something he doesn’t want to admit, but that he still wants Alec to guess.

Magnus is passionate, dedicated, and resolved; he’s clear and present in the endless swath of night in a way that leaves both Sentinel and Alec envious; he’s angry and eager to change a small part of the world that stretches far and beyond them both, and Alec wonders how, how on Earth did he not see it all those months before. It seems so fundamental to who Magnus is.

He returns to a previous epiphany: he wants to know that person. Really know him.

“You could’ve just said, you know,” says Izzy in his ear, after Alec finally bites the bullet and tells her why he’s been late to patrol so many nights this week.

He’s perched on a ledge underneath the B-train bridge, with the last train of the night rumbling
above and his legs dangling freely over the street below as he picks at his arrows. Taxis pass by on the street and the streetlights scatter across their hard yellow shells. On the corner of the block, some young kid is already laying out the papers at his kiosk for the pre-sunrise rush.

Magnus’ headline is there, front and centre: LAW ENFORCEMENT BETRAYS POPULAR CITY DISTRICT ATTORNEY.

It’s been a long time since Alec recognised pride as the feeling blooming in his chest, but he’s not sure what else it could be. He feels like he’s done something good, however small, however inconsequential, and it’s an anaesthetic for everything else that putting on the mask forces him to feel.

“ It’s not like I’m mad,” Izzy continues. “Or surprised, for that matter. I don’t blame you, Magnus is hot. Get some.”

“You’ve never met him,” Alec grumbles, but it’s easier to have this conversation when they’re not face-to-face. Secretly, he’s just glad he’s telling her now, and it’s not coming out way down the line when it wriggles out of his control and she corners him in the elevator at HQ.

“Yeah, but from the way you talk about him, he definitely is,” replies Izzy, “seeing as you never talk about anyone, Alec.”

“Hey,” Alec warns, fiddling with his arrows again.

Clary and Jace have run off to investigate an arson downtown, and Alec is stuck patrolling a block-wide radius, keeping a lookout for anyone who might give them trouble. The air is wet but devoid of rain, and the police dispatch is remarkably quiet. Perhaps it’s the storms that always bring the trouble, and whilst they wait for the next one to break, poised for thunder, the radio remains silent. Which is fine with him, it’s nothing he’s not used to, being left to his own devices, but it does give Izzy an in to grill him about his personal life, about his Alec life.

“Look, can you keep covering for me with mom and dad, or not?” Alec asks, “We don’t need to talk about this.”

“No, we definitely do,” says Izzy. “Also, yes, I’ll keep covering for you, but it’s not like mom and dad actually ever read any of my field reports ... I think they both still operate under the idea that when you say you’re doing work, you’re actually doing work. What I wouldn’t give for mom’s
“Thanks, Iz,” Alec grits out, “It’s only gonna be a few nights a week, probably. I don’t know how much of my help he really needs. I won’t stay at the office later than ten.”

“Stay as late as you want, Alec. Make the most of it. Get laid.”

Alec closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose in despair. Briefly, he thinks that he should introduce Isabelle to Simon, because they’d probably get along like a house on fire, but then Alec realises that’s a fucking terrible idea that would cause him all sorts of unending headaches. Note to self: never let them cross paths. Ever.

“I told you, it’s not like that,” Alec grumbles, “I’m helping him with some work … attacks against vigilantes have been on the rise lately, you know that, and we’re - Idris aren’t doing anything to help and the cops are covering it up. Magnus just wants the truth, but it’s - it’s under the table stuff.”

“Ooh, sounds very under the table.” Alec can hear the tease in her voice.

“Izzy. No.”

“Look, Alec,” she says, “Honestly, it sounds great and I’m very proud of you. You’re doing a good thing, fuck Idris, stick it to the police, etcetera, etcetera. But, like - come on. This is a chance. Please tell me you’ve at least got his number?”

Alec sighs begrudgingly. “I have his number.”

It’s only a half-lie. Magnus’ desk phone totally counts.

“Nice. I knew you weren’t completely useless.”

“We’re work colleagues, Iz,” he grits out. He presses his gloved fingers against his mask, first pressing against his temple, and then feeling his way along the edge of the leather. He doesn’t like the strange note in his voice when he speaks again. “I don’t want it to be anything else. I can’t - not
with this job. You know I have to focus on Sentinel.”

Izzy makes a *tsk* noise on her end of the line and Alec can imagine her rocking back in her chair at headquarters as she inspects her nails and rues the day she was ever born with a brother like Alec.

“Says the man who described to me - no less than three times - what Magnus was wearing tonight whilst you were ‘hanging out’. Note that ‘hanging out’ was in air quotes, by the way. I want to make sure that you know that.”

“Izzy.”

Izzy sighs. “Not everything is about Idris, you know. Your entire life isn’t meant to be in service to mom and dad.”

“It’s not.”

“Live a little. I’m not saying - I’m not saying use Jace as example, because no sane human being should ever do that, but - just, for once, have fun, don’t think about the consequences. Do something that you want to do.”

“I am. This is - I want to do this. Helping Magnus. It makes me feel -”

*Makes me feel like I’m not on the wrong side of this fight*, he wants to say. *Makes me feel like I have purpose, like I’m not letting people down.*

*Makes me feel like I can wash the blood off my hands.*

Instead, he says, his voice forcibly droll, “It makes me feel like I’m not wasting time waiting around freezing my ass off for Jace and Clary in the cold every damn night. You think you could upgrade my suit to keep the heat better? Can you install a radiator?”

“Jesus, Alec,” Izzy mutters, before adding, “Yeah, fine. I’m working on a new prototype for you anyway, I’ll see what I can do. Don’t say I never do anything for you. You’ll owe me.”
“Obviously,” Alec replies. The word tastes a little sour in his mouth, so he tries not to swallow it.

It’s a Thursday night, sometime after six, but ask Alec and he would insist that he hasn’t been paying attention to the time.

It’s a lie, of course - he’s been checking his watch incessantly for the past half hour, waiting for the office to clear out so that he might slip away down the corridors and find Magnus without being intercepted by someone too nosy for their own good.

There’s a thrill to be found in it, one which Alec has long since lost playing Sentinel, but probably the same one that Jace still covets, seeking adventure as he does: it’s the thrill of doing something he’s not supposed to do, the thrill of disobeying orders, the thrill of doing something right when everyone else demands it wrong.

*Is it the thrill of getting caught?* Alec’s not sure about that, but he feels his heart beat in his chest as he finally pushes up from his desk and shuts down his computer for the night.

He’s not usually the sort of person to go chasing things like thrills, but nor is he the sort of person to sit idly by and watch bad things happen around him, or so he’d like to say. He knows there are still parts of him that don’t speak up when it matters, but this - this is some penance, something to absolve that guilt; and helping Magnus write his articles feels like that balance between Alec and Sentinel he’s been looking for, however precarious.

He needs that. Sometimes, he needs it quite desperately.

Alec grabs his suit jacket and his bag, slinging them both over his arm, and heads towards the stairs leading down to Magnus’ office. Lights flicker in and out of existence, still not repaired by the custodial staff, but the stuttering yellow only serves to make Alec walk faster and not look back. He hops down the stairs two at a time, light on his feet, and slips out into the corridor without making a noise.
There’s always a quiet pride to be found in the way he can trust his body to move and hide and slink around, but apparently, it’s not quite dark enough for him to go unnoticed tonight.

“Hey, Alec! Wait up!”

It’s Simon Lewis.

Alec’s shoulders hunch up on reflex. And Alec was so close to Magnus’ office. God damn it.

“Lewis,” Alec says, hoisting his bag higher onto his shoulder. Simon bounds straight towards him, his arms overflowing with a box of raw negatives he’s ferrying to the printers; he comes to a stop in front of Alec like an over-excited puppy. “Why are you still here?”

Simon squints at him. “There’s no way you can ask that without it sounding suspicious,” he laughs, “Oh, you want me out of the way, I get it - secret rendezvous in the basement after hours, I can be sworn to secrecy -”

Alec rolls his eyes, moving to step around Simon, but Simon just spins on his heels, jostling the box in his arms.

“Hey, wait, hang on -” Simon chirps, “Are you going to see Magnus?”

Alec narrows his eyes. “Why do you ask?”

“Oh, I just came from there,” Simon chimes, keeping pace at Alec’s side, even as Alec deliberately lengthens his strides. Simon tips his chin down and bumps his nose against the lid of his box. “Magnus is running a piece on those arsons, right? He wanted me to dig out some raws from the archives and pick out the ones that look best - but he couldn’t stop to chat, there was some swish-looking guy in his office waiting to see him.”

“Swish-looking guy?”

“Oh, yeah,” Simon elaborates, “Tall, buff black guy, like, movie-star handsome. But like, if he’s the sort to have secret meetings on a work night after hours, that’s a liiiittle sketchy to me -”
“Did you get his name?”

“Huh? No, Magnus kinda pushed me out before I could get a word in. Shook the guy’s hand though. Strong grip. Great forearms.”

“I’ll bear that in mind,” says Alec. He glances down at Simon’s box and nods his head. “Don’t you need to get those back to the darkroom?”

“What? Oh, shit, yeah!” Simon stops so suddenly that Alec almost gets whiplash. He spins around again to start off the way he was originally going. Looking back over his shoulder - and only barely saving himself from dropping the box as he holds it single-handedly - he waves at Alec, calling out, “Have a good night, Alec! Say hi to Magnus for me - and tell me all the hot gossip tomorrow, alright?”

Alec holds up his hand in farewell, but says nothing, with Simon disappearing through the double doors at the end of the corridor preceded by a muffled oomph. It always takes a moment for the air to remember how to settle after Simon has left a room.

Alec doesn’t move straight away, curling his fingers around the strap of his satchel as he stares down the corridor towards Magnus’ office door. The lights still flicker overhead, reflecting in the poorly-polished linoleum floor, humming with disquieting static.

Secret meetings after hours, he thinks, but then shakes his head and starts walking again. He knows better than to listen to Simon’s gossip. Magnus is a busy man, a busy man with secrets needing to be kept, and he’s probably involved with far more interesting people than Alec and Simon see in a week.

Alec falters midstep however, when the door to Magnus’ office opens at the end of the corridor and a tall, well-built man ducks out from inside. The man says something over his shoulder, flashing a smile that is both white and dazzling, and then shuts the door behind him, only to meet Alec’s eyes in the next moment.

Alec quickly clamps his mouth shut. He knows that Magnus often calls witnesses into his office for testimonials, but this man is -

Actually, he’s unnervingly familiar, and Alec has no idea why. He’s tall, dark-skinned and dark-
haired, a well-trimmed beard framing his mouth as his smile slowly fades. He’s dressed in slacks and a blazer, his shirt still tucked despite it being after hours, but Alec isn’t blind to the shape of a handgun beneath his arm.

Who the -

The man’s face lights up into another megawatt smile as he crosses the distance between him and Alec in a few lengthy strides, his hand already outstretched in greeting.

“Alec Lightwood,” he says, which thumps Alec’s brain back into gear. The man takes Alec’s hand and shakes it firmly - and yeah, he has an alarmingly strong grip, just like Simon said - but Alec just stares at him, his frown undoubtedly frosty.

“I don’t think we’ve met before -” Alec starts, but the man just laughs, a low deep rumble.

“Yeah, no, we haven’t,” says the man. “My name’s Luke Garroway - you’re Jace’s brother, aren’t you?”

Alec blinks - and then he backtracks, because his first thought is how do you know about Jace, and then his second thought is oh yeah, Jace has a life outside of Arkangel, and then his third thought is -

“Captain Garroway,” Alec says. Right. Jace and Clary are dating in the widely understood definition of the word. Most people don’t automatically assume that plays second fiddle to superhero duties. “Clary’s father. Of course.”

“For a minute there, I thought I’d got the wrong man,” laughs Luke, “Jace was ‘round for dinner the other night and he showed us all your pictures -”

Of course he fucking did.

Alec squints an eye, looking skeptical. “The one he keeps in his wallet?”

Luke laughs again.
Alec knows the photograph - it’s of him, Jace, Isabelle, and Max, some years ago - when late puberty was still doing Alec few favours, while Izzy and Jace had, of course, lucked out. It’s a photograph they took on a trip across the river to Jersey City for an afternoon, because their parents had forbidden them from going any further or for any longer. Alec had won Max a stuffed monkey on a claw machine, thanks to some very unnaturally sharp reflexes, but then Jace had watched some kid win big on the skee-ball and proceeded to blow everyone in the arcade out of the park, because that’s what Jace does best: see someone else do something well, and then do it better.

“The very same,” says Luke, still smiling broadly. He looks Alec up and down, noting Alec’s loose slacks and rumpled shirt, but his eyes don’t really linger, not like Magnus’ do.

“Well,” Luke then says, “I need to get going. Night shift tonight and the precinct doesn’t run itself. Hey - next time we have Jace over for dinner, why don’t you come too? We’ll invite Isabelle as well. Make it a proper family thing, I’m sure Clary would like that.”

“Uh, yeah,” says Alec. “Sounds - sounds good.”

It doesn’t sound good at all. (So many people with superpowers crammed around a dining table can only end one way, and that way is badly.)


Alec doesn’t move for a moment, listening intently to the retreating footsteps, the distant ding of the elevator, and then silence. He rarely hears silence, and truthfully, this isn’t it, because the argon still hums in the lights overhead and the water pipes in the ceiling still creak. But with no windows to the outside world, this is probably as close as Alec is going to get.

He takes a deep breath and walks the rest of the corridor, not hesitating to knock sharply on Magnus’ office door - but he waits, not touching the handle, until Magnus calls him in.

“Yeah, I’m still here,” calls Magnus, sounding more than a little fed up, “Come in.”

Alec eases the door open with his shoulder, poking his head in somewhat gingerly. Magnus is sitting in his chair, his feet up on the desk with his ankles crossed, and the soles of his Oxfords shiny and new. In his hands, he fiddles with a fountain pen pressed between his index fingers and
thums, but he tosses it blindly onto the desk, swinging his legs down off the tabletop when he sees Alec.

“Alexander,” he says, delighted, as Alec eases his bag off his shoulder, dumping it on the ground. Magnus’ mouth curves up into a smile, the sort that says he’s genuinely pleased to see Alec at his door. “To what do I owe the pleasure? It’s a Thursday, I thought you would be busy. You don’t usually stop by.”

The chair opposite Magnus creaks as Alec sits down - but the seat is still warm, and Alec suspects it’s only just been vacated by Luke.

“I’m not busy,” Alec says, perhaps a little too quickly, “But, I mean, it sounds like you are. I saw Simon with the negatives .”

“Right, yes,” says Magnus with a wave of his hand, “About that. I’ve just received some new information, so there’s been a slight change in plan, actually. Regarding that piece were were talking about on those arsons?”

Alec frowns. It’s not difficult to assume that Magnus’ meeting with Luke has turfed up something that has put a spanner in the works, but Alec will wait for Magnus to raise it, if he wants to.

“I’ve got some free time tonight, if you need me to help out,” says Alec instead, with a small shrug of his shoulders. “I still need to call the coroner’s office and get a statement about the guy from the parking lot .”

“I think we’re going to run a separate piece on that murder now,” says Magnus swiftly, and Alec’s words die on his tongue. “Captain Garroway came by with some … disturbing news.”

“Disturbing news?”

“The task force that Lucian put together finally tracked down an alias for our Harlem vigilante - and they traced it back to a social security number and an address. An address more than twenty blocks away from where he was found.”

Alec frowns, but he can feel his vision clouding, his ears filling up with sodden cotton thoughts. He tries to push it back, but it seeps through the gaps between his fingers like rainwater. His hands,
resting on his lap, press into the fabric of his trousers: he feels the indentations of his blunt fingernails digging into his thighs.

He doesn’t like where this is going. He can read it in Magnus’ face, the approaching plummet in his stomach. Magnus works through every word far too carefully, as if he’s waiting to judge Alec’s reaction.

“Twenty blocks is ... pretty far,” Alec manages, scowling down at his fingers which are slowly turning white at the knuckles. “But I guess, if he was a super, he was probably on patrol, or something.”

“Lucian doesn’t think so,” says Magnus, “A couple of his detectives paid a visit to his home this afternoon. There was more blood at the scene.”

Alec’s eyes snap up. He feels his stomach drop. “He was attacked at home? Was there any sign of a trail to where the body was dumped?”

“No,” says Magnus, flicking through paperwork and waving his hand dismissively as he talks. “Unless our dead man was a teleporter - which may have been possible, of course - but all signs suggest that he was taken to that parking lot and left to bleed out. But, that’s not the only thing.”

Oh, Alec knows. This was never a case of wrong time, wrong place. He just didn’t want to believe it, because then it would be true.

If Magnus continues, Alec doesn’t hear it. White noise rings in his ears, a blaring sort of silence that vibrates all the way through him. He glares so hard at his hands that his eyes begin to ache, a pulse forming in his left temple, but all he can see is that rainy night with Veil and Wolfsbane, a man with his throat slit at their feet, his blood pooling on the yellow-lit tarmac, already soaked into the ground.

It’s not like he’d forgotten - you don’t just forget about something like that, not ever - but it’s been different, working with Magnus, reading about it in the paper, following along with whatever police reports they can get their hands on from Magnus’ friends at City Hall -

He still hasn’t told Isabelle about that night. He hasn’t seen Veil and Wolfsbane in weeks. And then, there was the night he last saw Nightlock -
Alec can feel the rain trickling down the back of his neck, down his spine, beneath the supersuit that he’s not even wearing. He can smell the blood and the concrete wet through. He can feel Veil’s invisible hands churning up his insides again.

He can feel the blood crusting beneath his fingernails. He can feel the tar. He can feel the panic again -

Alec turns his hands palm-up on his lap. It’s like the blood that had caked his gloves that night is smeared across his palms now, slowly seeping back to the surface, beading out of the pores in his fingertips. Tiny red rosaries.

Alec curls his hands into tight fists, biting down hard on the inside of his cheek. Magnus notices. He can’t not notice.

“Alexander,” he asks, and worry passes over his face, “Alec, are you alright? Did you hear what I said?”

Alec blinks, and it’s like something pops in his ears, reality suddenly far too loud and crashing.

“I - what? Sorry, I just -”

“The man’s apartment,” Magnus says with a frown now. He hesitates before he continues, his eyes roaming across Alec’s face, lingering on the set of Alec’s jaw and then drifting lower - his throat, the rigid line of his shoulders, the tension in his arms -

Alec does his best to relax his posture, but he digs the heels of his shoes into the carpet so hard he wonders if he’ll leave dents in the floor.

“It was torched to the ground.”

Ironically, Alec’s blood runs cold.

“What?”
“That’s what Luke told me,” Magnus continues, rubbing his finger into the grain of his desk, picking diligently at the wood. A fleck of his nail polish chips way; he frowns, curling his fingers back into his palm, before looking back at Alec. There’s a firmness to his stare now, something resolved, unyielding, calcified. He doesn’t blink for a long moment, waiting to see how Alec will react.

Alec doesn’t know how to react.

“Torch’d?” Alec manages, not believing his own words, “Someone burned the place? What? Why?”

“All the furniture, the wallpaper, the floors,” Magnus explains, “It’s a miracle there isn’t structural damage to the building itself. But that’s why none of the neighbours noticed. You would’ve thought someone might’ve seen the smoke, but -”

Magnus pauses, pensive. His eyes flick over something Alec’s cannot see.

“I’d like to go have a look,” says Magnus. “It’s no longer a crime scene, so there’s nothing to stop us from dropping by. I think it would be useful for my story. Our story.”

“You … you want to go now?”

“If you’re free,” says Magnus. If you’re okay, says his eyes.

Alec frowns, unable to stop himself from glancing at the clock. It’s not late, and Izzy knows to expect him on patrol closer to midnight, but still, there’s a voice in his head that tells him this is a terrible idea.

It’s not your business.

It’s not your jurisdiction.
The voice sounds awfully like his mother’s.

“I’m not a journalist, Magnus,” Alec mutters, “You should take Simon, he’s probably still in the building.”

“I don’t want to take Simon,” says Magnus quickly. His eyes seize Alec’s and hold his stare deliberately. If Alec’s hands were on the desk, maybe Magnus would reach out and touch them. “I’d like it to be you.”

Alec hesitates.

“Why?”

Brushing imaginary lint from his waistcoat and pants, Magnus stands with far too much grace. He steps out from behind his desk, reaching for his coat - a heavy black trench coat - and swings it over his shoulders, arms not in the sleeves.

“I trust you, Alec,” he says simply, “And I’d rather not go alone.”

Magnus hails a cab from the front of the *Daily Tribunal*, but the ride is silent. The cabbie doesn’t try to make small talk, the engine hums and splutters in potholes, and the drizzle pitter-patters against the windshield, rolling down the dirty windows in meandering rivulets, and yet Magnus says nothing.

So, Alec says nothing either. It’s not an uncomfortable silence, and Alec is lulled by the sway of the car and the rustle of Magnus’ coat as he shifts in the backseat next to Alec, but he can’t relax.

He leans his head against the window; the glass is cold, damp against his cheek, vibrating against...
his skull, while the streetlights blur into a smear of yellow and white and then red as they come to a stop at an intersection and taillights refract through the prism of glass.

It’s a bright red, proud, unyielding and unintentionally violent; it makes Alec squint, wincing away from its harshness. It’s the colour of blood.

His stomach clenches, haunted still, by his own damn hands, but he’s not in a position to scrub them clean, not here. Quietly, he kneads his palms into his thighs, but it does nothing save distract him from the urge to fidget. The world outside is blurred by rain; the immediate universe is reduce to the backseat of this taxicab and the thoughts with which Alec fills it.

They’re not great thoughts. There’s remorse and there’s shame and there’s fear, because he doesn’t know what he’s doing, he doesn’t know how to rid himself of all of this, or even if he deserves to. He feels ... nervous. Like he’s not so sure he wants to step out of this car by the time they get where they’re going.

He doesn’t know why. He doesn’t know why this dead man still lingers like a spectre with this grip on his shoulders, knocking and tapping at the window pane, howling look at me, look at me, see me over and over again. Why this one - and not any of the others before?

Stop it, he wants to tell himself. Stop thinking about it.

It’s always been difficult not to dwell on things that throw him so off-kilter. It’s an ugly feeling, black and thick and oozing, clinging to his insides. Part of him wants to reach down inside his own throat and pull it out from his gut, all its strings and tendrils, and fling it out the window into the gutters.

Normal people don’t think about this sort of stuff. And what he wouldn’t give to be -

He turns his head to look at Magnus, just enough that Magnus won’t notice that he’s looking.

There’s this beautiful leather notebook in Magnus’ lap, one that he always keeps on his desk but never opens, and he’s drumming his ringed fingers on his thigh, deep in thought. The smallest of creases cuts between his brows and he stares intensely into back of the driver’s seat, not blinking as often as he should. His face in profile is sharp, but Alec’s eyes flick down, just as Magnus’ tongue wets his lower lip: an action so small and subconscious that Magnus probably doesn’t realise he’s doing it, his mind elsewhere.
Alec wants to know what he’s thinking. He wants to know how his mind works: whether he’s stringing words together, even now, for his next piece; whether he’s seen so much death in the press that each one just blurs into the next; or whether he doesn’t have an off switch, just like Alec.

Does he go to bed at night, thinking about people he didn’t save, too? Alec might have a bow and arrow whereas Magnus wields a pen and paper, but surely it’s the same, that dizzying what if.

What more could I have done?

It must not make Magnus dizzy though, not like it does to Alec. Magnus’ eyes are steeled and focused - Alec could probably fling open the cab door and leap out into the rain and be swallowed up by the city and Magnus might not even notice - his concentration so intense on the back of the seat in front of him.

This is Magnus in his element. Late-night crime scenes and rendezvouses with witnesses; one man digging through the rubble of police conspiracies; what’s the next story gonna be and how can I make people read it?

He’s a good journalist. An exceptional journalist. Alec’s glad the vigilantes of the city have someone like him on their side, so dedicated to their cause and their humanity in equal measure, because Idris certainly hasn’t been there for them as it should’ve been.

“Alexander?”

Alec blinks, his eyes refocusing on Magnus’ face. Magnus has turned towards him, the small frown still there, the curve of his mouth perplexed.

Alec rubs his hands harder against his thighs, his palms a little sweaty. Magnus’ eyes flick down, and then he smiles a half-smile, crooked and still confused. He reaches out with his leather notebook to swat Alec on the arm.

“Stop,” he says, his voice low like he doesn’t want the driver to hear him from the front seat.

“Stop what?” Alec asks unconvincingly. He stops digging his fingers into his thighs, knotting his
hands together on his lap.

Magnus raises an eyebrow.

“Fretting,” he says simply. And then, he turns his stare back to the seat in front, like he said nothing at all.

A strange, rough heat prickles in Alec’s chest and arms, scuttling out to his fingertips and up along his neck, and he stares, for a moment at Magnus’ profile again: the sharp cut of his jaw, the shape of his Adam’s apple, the bow of his lips as they flatten into a tight line, betraying his nerves too. Alec stares, yet Magnus doesn’t look back.

He lets his cheek fall flush against the cold window again, vibrating with passing traffic. He closes his eyes and tries to envision Magnus in the rain again, lighting a candle for a vigilante, for the city, for Alec.

Alec doesn’t have to jump out the car at all.

The apartment of their dead man is on the top floor of an ugly tan-coloured building with bars bolted across all the windows. The ground floor is a discount mattress shop that reads Express Delivery and Super Mattress Sale in bright orange writing in the storefront. There’s a crack splintering through the front window, as if someone has taken a baseball bat the glass, if only for the kicks.

Alec holds his umbrella up above their heads as Magnus fishes in his coat pocket for the keys that Luke has given him. Alec doesn’t say anything, because this is clearly an arrangement that they have, and it’s not like Alec is in any position to talk about legality, but still he holds his breath as Magnus pushes on the door and it scrapes open with a rattling creak.

Inside, and the stairwell is narrow and smells of piss and greasy food, and the wallpaper peels, dirty and musty-yellow, revealing chewed brickwork beneath. There are cigarette butts kicked against the stairs and Alec can hear the sound of a TV on low in one of the other apartments, some rerun of Golden Girls if he’s not mistaken, and he’s not, because Jace likes to pretend he doesn’t
watch that show religiously. Alec knows the theme song by heart.

“Watch your step,” Magnus says, glancing back over his shoulder to point out an errant floorboard angled upwards. Alec nods and mumbles *thank you* anyway, even though he knows he never would’ve tripped.

Alec doesn’t even smell soot until they’re stood outside the door of the top floor apartment, still crossed by an X of black-and-yellow caution tape. Magnus considers the key in his hand and hums, then presses his palm to the door, only to find that it swings open, left unlocked.

“That doesn’t seem secure,” Alec murmurs as Magnus ducks beneath the police tape, careful not to mess up his hair. Alec follows, the sleeve of his coat brushing against the door-frame; a smear of black charcoal catches on his cuff.

“If the police are finished here, I’m sure they don’t really care what happens now,” Magnus muses. “They’re not going to pay to see this place cleaned up, and I doubt any bill for restitution will pass through City Hall for months.”

Alec’s shoes crunch on the chargrilled carpet; he sucks in a lungful of ash. The walls are streaked with black, the paint seared away by fire to reveal the plasterboard beneath, and there’s rubble strewn across the floor, and it reeks of burned synthetics and wiring. A couch is pushed against the far wall, the upholstery melted away and distorted and its cushions either warped or violently ripped upon, their insides a sticky puddle of plastic dripping down through jagged tears in the carpet. There are books and old newspaper everywhere, but they’re all incinerated beyond recognition. The room is *carnage*, like a beast or a storm or both perhaps has careened right through, only inches from ripping straight through the walls as if they were paper.

Nothing about is says *a superhero lived here* - but what is Alec expecting? A cape hung up on the back of the door? A supersuit in the laundry basket? A mask looped over the end of a bed?

*Exactly.*

Magnus stands in the centre of the room and turns a full circle. His expression is too hard to read, so Alec can only watch. Magnus hums to himself, not a happy sound, and then, he whips out a pen from his coat pocket and begins scribbling furiously in his notebook.

Alec wonders what he sees, and what he sees that’s worth writing about. How it can be anything
but some horrid and abstract destruction of a dead man’s house? Does he write about how the pattern in the couch cushions has been burned away? Does he write about how the television screen is smashed in where the boxset has crashed to the floor? Does he write that the smell of incinerated rubber would make Alec feel sick to his stomach, if he wasn’t already feeling queasy?

 Does he write that, vigilante or not, the man who lived here must’ve done something terrible to warrant his apartment being torched and his blood let in the streets? 

Something terrible. Alec clenches his teeth so hard his jaw throbs. Sometimes, in their line of work, something terrible is just existing.

He picks his way across the room towards one of the doors leading deeper into the apartment. The floorboards creak in betrayal beneath his feet.

Sometimes, something terrible is not having anyone to guard your back.

“Do you do this regularly?” Alec calls over his shoulder, his voice a little hoarse. He tries the knob of the door and it opens, but it paints his palm black.

“It’s not my preferred idea for a first date, if that’s what you’re asking,” Magnus replies, from somewhere out of sight. “Third date, maybe.”

Alec huffs, rolling his eyes, and pushes through into the next room. The door crunches against debris that has fallen from the ceiling. He tests the floorboards with the stomp of his foot; they creak again but do not break, and when he’s confident enough that the floor won’t give out from beneath him, he creeps forward.

The room he stands in now is a bedroom. The cover of the bed is singed and the sheets are browned, but it looks like the brunt of the fire burned in the front room, not here. The air is still stale, thick with dust particulates that Alec can feel gathering in his throat, but there’s an underlying smell that Alec can pinpoint all too easily.

He kicks back the duvet where it’s draped across the floor.

And sure enough, the dark brown mark in the carpet is blood.
There’s not that much, not as much as there was in the parking lot that night, but there’s enough for Alec to know this was no accident, no stubbed toe, no bitten tongue. There’s spatter too, arcing high across the headboard of the bed, clipping the edge of a picture frame that has been blanketed by a thick layer of ash.

Arterial spray, he suspects. Izzy would know. He doesn’t feel like he needs her to confirm it.

This was a hate crime. This was a murder. This could’ve been any one of a number of supers - vigilante or Corporate - and Alec doesn’t know how to stomach that, thinking about Izzy or Jace or even damn Nightlock lying throat-slit in that parking lot instead.

Alec’s fingers itch at his side and he curls them into his palms, squeezing hard until his bitten nails leave rough, crescent-shaped grooves in his skin. There’s something wriggling, digging its way beneath his cuticles and under his nails, rooting around below the top layer of his skin. It feels like fire. Just a small, single flame, yet still, it’s red-hot, blistering as it lances up his arm, excruciating as he grits his teeth and squeezes his eyes shut.

He should tell Izzy about this, tonight. He will tell Izzy about this tonight. He’s going to take a cab over to headquarters and grab Izzy from her lab and march right on down the hallway to slam this field report on his mother’s desk, and he’s going to ask what are we doing about this?

And his mother; she’s going to arch one eyebrow and frown at him, and ask back, what do you mean? This wasn't in your briefing.

Alec exhales slowly, opening his eyes, and walks back out of the bedroom without a word. Magnus is still in the other room, inspecting the burn patterns along the edge of the ceiling with admirable diligence, but he glances back at Alec as he emerges.

“Anything?” he asks. Alec’s face is clearly pale, because then he adds, softer, “Alec …”

“There’s blood in there, like the police said,” Alec murmurs, thumbing over his shoulder, his head ducked and his eyes trained on the floor. His footprints stand out on the carpet where the soles of his shoes have picked up all the soot.

“Not as much as in the street, and there’s no trail out here,” he adds, “If there was, I guess it was destroyed by the fire.”
“You’re probably right,” Magnus says, tapping his pen against his lips. He seems to drift away into thought, speculating out loud. “When I spoke to Luke, he was pressed to say whether the fire even happened on the same night as the murder. This could’ve easily been a cover-up and we would never know.”

Alec swallows thickly, plunging his hands into his coat pockets and hunching his shoulders. He stands as close to the only window of the room as he can, careful not to touch a thing.

“The fire doesn’t make sense,” he says below his breath.

“Are you an expert in fires now?” Magnus teases.

“No, I … it’s just what you said earlier, about no-one else noticing the fire. How did it not burn the whole building down?”

Magnus huffs. It sounds a little derisive. “I was wondering the same thing,” he admits. “The fire department were never called. I’m almost more curious to know who put out the fire than who started it.”

It’s a good question. Alec is wondering too. How does something this violent and destructive burn so well-contained?

But he’s not so sure he wants to know the answer.

It makes him feels tense all over, like his veins are pulled taut like puppet strings; his arms and legs won’t move as he wants them to, so he doesn’t move at all, despite how that blood stain shrieks at him from the other room.

The window behind Alec is squalid, grimy with soot and smoke both inside and out, but the light from the street filters through: yellow, from the streetlamps; red from the tail lights of cars waiting at the intersection; and then white and neon blue from a sign across the way that reads Tobacconist, flashing with a the outline of a cigarette drawing smoke. The light pulses soft about the glass, softer still upon the warped furniture and the motes of ash and the sleeves of Magnus’ coat, but it’s unable to shake that cold and lonely and jittering unfeeling that the fire has left untouched in Alec’s chest.
Magnus moves around the room, following the scorch marks on the walls like he’s been here a hundred times before. Hell, maybe he has. Maybe he’s numb to it in the way Alec craves. He never once looks at the floor but always knows where to plant his feet and not stumble, as if on instinct. There are shadows to be sculpted out of his jaw, his thoughtful frown exaggerated by the blue and yellow glow. It catches in his eyes as he turns to find Alec still watching him.

He doesn’t say anything, not at first. He tilts his head, appraising Alec, or maybe appraising the way the light highlights Alec from behind, sticking to his coat like lint, casting a halo around his head that is comically out of place. He swallows up the sight of Alec surrounded by ash and a violent conscience, and that makes Alec shiver, because it’s too close to the truth, and that’s a truth about himself that he doesn’t want Magnus to be seeing.

He doesn’t want to look like he fits in amongst all this carnage. Maybe Magnus will interpret his brewing panic as something else.

Alec feels a little helpless beneath all of it, but it’s the weight of Magnus stare that he doesn’t know how to contain. Magnus looks too long.

Alec takes a breath. “Are you all done?”

“Yes, I think I’ve seen enough,” Magnus replies, although his brow does furrow. His mouth parts, as if he wants to say something more, but he decides against it. He slips his pen into his pocket and his notebook beneath his arm.

“Come on,” he says, “What do you say we get out of here?”

Rain splatters against Alec’s umbrella as he steps of the doorway, squinting up at the canvas as a particularly cold stream of water trickles down the back of his neck. Alec grimaces, but extends his umbrella over Magnus instead as he locks up behind them.

The rush of the downpour is loud and bleak, crackling on the sidewalk. An SUV speeds past,
sloshing gutter water up across the kerb. Magnus scowls, stepping closer to Alec beneath the umbrella, his shoulder brushing Alec’s. There’s not quite room enough for the two of them so Alec takes a half-step back; the rain soaks into his other shoulder.

Neither of them says anything for a moment. Alec relishes in the cool of the night air, not quite fresh, but fresher than the apartment: it’s no longer steeped in smoke and the putrid stench of burned polyester. Something about four walls and close proximity always makes him antsy, even when he’s not dressed in full gear with a bow in his grip. Out of doors, he has room to run.

He’s not sure if he feels like running. His body moves slow and lethargic, like he’s wading through something he can’t see, but his muscles are aching with all the expending energy. He’s just not sure whether it’s that guilt again that he’s pushing through, or whether it’s the way Magnus’ eyes still linger, still trying to figure him out or offer him sympathy for all the wrong reasons.

“Would you like to go somewhere?” Magnus murmurs at his side. His shoulder nudges Alec’s again, and this time, it might be deliberate.

Alec glances at Magnus, but Magnus’ eyes are forward now, watching the rain bounce off the slabs of the sidewalk. He burrows into his trench coat, hands deep in his pockets.

“Go somewhere?” Alec asks, unsure.

This sort of proximity is jarring too. The walls might not be real, might not be tangible, but they’re made of other things, of human warmth. Magnus smells faintly of sandalwood; it’s the cologne he likes, and Alec has smelled it before and knows it now in passing, but he’s never stood close enough for so long as to breathe it in this deeply.

In fact, he’s not sure he’s ever stood this close to Magnus before. Usually, there’s Alec’s partition, or Magnus’ desk, or Heaven forbid, Simon Lewis, between them, a physical wall that Alec can count on to not let his thoughts wander.

This time, they’re squished side by side beneath an umbrella not nearly big enough for two people, and Alec doesn’t know if that scares him, or if he craves it more, because there’s always going to be that one part of him that longs to be seen before he has to explain himself with words.

At his side, Magnus huffs, maybe because of the cold. Maybe not. “I don’t really want to go back to the office,” he admits, “Do you?”
If it’s an opening, Alec’s not sure. He’s still stiff as a rake, a tension drawn out across his shoulder blades and taut in his knuckles where he grips the umbrella too tight, but he wasn’t sure that Magnus had noticed. Usually, people don’t notice.

Usually, people don’t notice him.

“There’s an Ethiopian place I know, a few blocks from here,” Magnus adds, “They do the best ful medames I’ve found in the city by far.”

When Alec doesn’t say anything, he continues, a little faster, “Or a friend of mine has a Mexican bistro, down in the East Village. Beautiful traditional food, family recipes, all home-cooked. We could split a cab.”

“I’m ... I’m alright. I’m just gonna - get the subway home.”

It sounds too harsh, the moment the words leave his lips, but he doesn’t regret it. Magnus blinks, looking up at Alec. Alec is not blind to the flash of surprise, and then disappointment, that parts Magnus’ mouth, before it’s quickly tucked away.

Magnus summons a smile instead. It’s soft, understanding, and a little resigned, but he nods like he gets it, even though he doesn’t get it, because the reason Alec looks so pale and queasy is not what Magnus thinks.

“Another time, then,” Magnus offers, and Alec smiles a tight smile that is hardly believable. He doesn’t want to sound rude, but there’s an itch gnawing at his hands and there’s soot beneath his fingernails, and all he wants is to go home and scrub his hands until they’re clean and the only blood swirling down the drain is his.

“I’m sorry,” says Alec. “It’s not that I -”

“No, no, I get it,” Magnus interrupts gently, “Not everyone is so desensitized to this sort of thing that they can step out of a crime scene and go straight to dinner. I didn’t think. That’s my fault, and I’m sorry.”
Alec bites his tongue. He can’t say anything; he can’t say actually, I’ve seen worse just as much as he can’t pretend like he could sit across a table from Magnus and decide which wine he wants to drink with supper, when he’s thinking about vigilante blood instead.

One doesn’t play well with the other, and Alec is forced to choose. He’s always forced to choose, and that choice -

Well, it’s always going to be the same.


An approaching taxi cab flashes its headlights at them and Magnus holds his hand out from underneath the umbrella to flag it down. It slows, pulling into the kerb, just as Magnus pops his collar against the rain.

“Well,” says Magnus, hesitating before he steps out into the downpour. He looks up at Alec again, eyes searching Alec’s face. Alec can only wonder what it is he sees there, and whether it’s worth anything at all. “Have a good night, Alexander. Stay out of trouble.”

“You too,” says Alec, “I’ll, uh - see you tomorrow?”

The inflection is there, right at the end of his sentence, that betrays a little too much hope. Magnus hears it, but, to Alec’s surprise, it draws out a smile on his lips. Dimples like quotation marks frame his mouth, but his smile is not crooked nor coy, not this time. Instead, it’s sweet.

Alec feels a little sick.

“Tomorrow,” Magnus agrees. He considers Alec for a moment, before patting his hand on the sleeve of Alec’s coat, and letting his palm run down Alec’s bicep, and that’s his kindled farewell. He turns quickly, hurrying out into the rain with long, swift strides, and ducks into the taxi cab amidst the flurry of his coat.

Alec watches from beneath his umbrella as Magnus leans over the partition to give the driver his address, and then settles back into the seat, unbuttoning the front of his coat with what looks like a slump of his shoulders.
The taxi’s blinkers flash orange in the dark, pulling out into the street, and Alec, too, feels his shoulders fall. Magnus doesn’t look back, and soon enough, the red taillights dance away into the distance and the constant motion of the city. And then, his arm still burning from a simple touch, Alec is alone.

He stands there for a while, just breathing in the ruddy petrichor, the way fresh rain is polluted by car exhausts and sodden cigarette butts, noxious before it hits the ground. The puddles on the sidewalk soak through his work shoes, not nearly as heavy duty as his Sentinel boots, and his socks and hems are already damp, a darker shade of grey than the legs of his pants.

He needs to go back to the office. His gear is still stashed in his locker there, and whilst the thought of traipsing back across the city to go and retrieve his stuff is a heavy, bruised cloud looming above his head, he knows he has to. He has patrol tonight, and tonight, more than all other nights, he has to be there.

He wouldn’t forgive himself if Jace and Clary found another dead man downed and Alec wasn’t there with them. He wouldn’t forgive himself if he could get there in time to stop it happening all over again.

Sighing heavily, Alec collapses his umbrella and shakes it off in the rain, even though it does very little to dry it. The rain slicks his hair to his forehead in a second, but the subway is only a few blocks from here, and Alec knows he’ll be quicker if he runs without holding his umbrella. He’ll be soaked on patrol later anyway, so what does he really care.

Truthfully, he should know better than to jinx it.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for all the great feedback on the last chapter! I love reading about everyone's interpretations of the moral dilemmas and murky politics going on in this story ... it always give me food for thought and I'm like a hamster stuffing those comments into my cheeks to save for later ok

There's a lot of Magnus and Alec and not much Nightlock in this chapter, but that will all change soon enough! There's a lot of Nightlock content to come next time ... and the time after that ... and the time after that ...

Visit me on tumblr and shout in my inbox!

I'm also on Twitter if you want to come chat about the fic ... and boy, do I love talking
about this fic. Tweet as you read with the hashtag #FICacoldnight! :D

Please leave a kudos if you made it to the end, and drop me a comment with your thoughts, your favourite line, your hopes for what will happen next, your advice for poor old Alec ... I would be forever grateful for it!

Until next time, in which Magnus' fears about an epidemic of vigilante violence gain traction, and Sentinel and Nightlock find some common ground, which will inevitably bloom into something more.
metaphor for the falling sky

Chapter Summary

“Do you think,” Alec begins, “if someone wants to do good, that’s enough to make a difference?”

Magnus makes a wounded noise.

“Straight in there with the philosophical conversation, alright. What’s brought this on?” he asks, but his playful frown quickly softens. He smiles at Alec reassuringly. “Do you really want to know what I think?”

“Yes,” Alec says without thinking, “Always.”

Chapter Notes

Alec and Clary make a shocking discovery, Nightlock and Sentinel share a brutal moment of vulnerability and discover some common ground, and Alec wonders whether good intentions can ever be enough if you never act upon them.

But Magnus - Magnus always has the answers Alec seeks.

&&&

Tweet as you read with the hashtag #FICacoldnight!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Dearest Father, what becomes of the boy
   no longer a boy? Please –
   what becomes of the shepherd
   when the sheep are cannibals?"

— Ocean Vuong, *Prayer for the Newly Damned*

“You do realise this is meant to be an emergency frequency, right?” Alec deadpans, speaking into the radio sewn into the collar of his supersuit. His eyes scan the horizon, jumping from window to lit-up window, all empty beyond the soft blue glow of clunky computers powering down for the
night. Not a soul moves above street level. Even the rain has faded, but the city still shimmers in it’s afterimage, refracting light in unnatural ways that keeps catching Alec out. He sees something there that isn’t there, a spectre in dream colour.

On the other end of the line, Izzy clicks her tongue and Jace barks a laugh.

“Spoilsport,” Jace says, and Alec rolls his eyes as he adjusts his quiver on his shoulder. He’s not sure where Jace is, exactly, but he does know they were meant to meet up half an hour ago and Alec is still alone on a rooftop on Lexington Avenue with cold, still-damp feet.

“If you two are constantly using the com for your gossip, no-one is ever going to hear when someone actually needs to get through with a real problem,” Alec says matter-of-factly. Even though Izzy and Jace are not in the same room - let alone the same side of the city - he can feel them exchanging that look of theirs that they have when Alec is being a stick in the mud, ruining their fun.

He’s used to it. It’s the bane of being the oldest sibling.

“It’s a quiet night, Sentinel. Lighten up,” says Jace.

“And you’re acting like this is not an actual emergency?” Izzy cuts in, circling the conversation back to that which Alec had just unfortunately interrupted. “When Raj gets back to headquarters tonight, I’m gonna -”

“All I’m hearing is how much you want to punch Raj, and not why you want to punch Raj,” says Alec.

“Y’know that protection gig he had for that lawyer at that press conference the other week?” Jace says. There’s a faint whirring on his end of the line, which might mean that he’s finally on the move. “The News Corp guy who took out that big contract with Idris that Robert didn’t shut up about?”

“What about it?”

“The absolute moron formerly known as Raj thought it’d be smart to offer himself up as free real estate seeing as he’s getting paid so much.” Jace laughs. “He’s started advertising his
sponsorships. As in - ”

“ As in, Raj ruined the beautiful suit I made for him by sewing a fucking News Corp logo onto the back of his jacket like it’s some sort of cheap motorcycle leather and not my high-tech equipment!” Izzy exclaims. “He says he’s gonna start a collection. A collection! He’s going to look like Times Square on a Saturday night!”

Alec rolls his eyes again. It sure sounds like something Raj would do, and at this point Alec needs to stop being so surprised.

He knows full well how fond Izzy is of her gear - as she so often cares to remind them - and even if Alec doesn’t quite understand her attachment, he does understand that wearing your clients’ logos around the city like a walking billboard is not only moronic, but asking for trouble.

Tonight, however, he’s far too tired for trouble. His hands are still itching from earlier and he hasn’t had the chance to clean away the soot he’d traipsed back from that apartment with Magnus.

“ Just you wait, Iz, ” Jace is saying, “Once all the dirty political money dries up, it’ll be McDonald’s hiring us out for corporate espionage next. Can you imagine Raj with a big yellow M on the front of his - ”

“I swear to God, Jace, once I’m done with Raj, I’m gonna kill you too if you so much as put that idea in his head. ”

“Okay, okay, no McDonald’s. Burger King, on the other hand -”

“Jace!”

There’s a beat of silence, and then Alec remarks dryly, “Pepsi would probably look better on my suit.”

Jace howls with laughter.

“ If either of you ever come home with so much as a mark on your suits,” Izzy fumes, “I’m telling
mom immediately that you’ve both been skiving missions and using your powers for good and she’s going to fire both of your asses.”

“You realise she would fire you too, right?” Alec points out.

“It’d be worth it.”

Jace is still cackling - Alec hears the telltale sound of him almost certainly flying into something he doesn’t see coming, probably a billboard - but Alec’s lingering smile doesn’t last for long. He can hear Izzy angrily tapping away at her keyboard on her end, but his eyes and thoughts drift back to the city below.

He’s in the affluent part of midtown where the skyscrapers are tall and the egos are taller, and the blue and white neon lights up the sky with an eerie, holographic glow that never fails to push Alec off balance. Cars crawl the streets far below, the red of their brake lights a long, winding tail that cuts and weaves through the intersections and dark alleys. The horizon leaks the ephemeral colour blue, but the underlying unreality casts a long retrograde shadow.

There’s a billboard a block east of Alec; he has a good view of it from here, all stars and stripes and sickening patriotism. An enormous photograph of Senator Herondale leers down at passers-by, stern and self-righteous; Alec has never known her to be a person who can manage a smile, even when she’s trying to encourage people to re-elect her to the Senate for a second term.

In big, bold, pulsating writing, the billboard reads: Staying Strict on Vigilante Crime: Herondale ’92.

The Senator has been one of Idris’ key clients for as long as Alec can remember. The contracts she takes out with them are always substantial, the pay packets generous, and the deference with which his mother and father treat her has always thrown Alec for a loop - but he’s not in a position to question that.

He thinks about Raj advertising his clients as patches on his back, and then he looks back at the billboard and imagines all that red, white, and blue smeared across his shoulders.

Choosing to have something like that emblazoned on his supersuit feeling decidedly dirty. Or dirtier, at least, than the way they all fool themselves into believing that accepting under-the-table money to do these jobs is somehow better than advertising that they do.
Doesn’t really matter tonight. Alec feels filthy already.

“At what point do they start making us walking political campaigns?” he muses. The wind is picking up, rattling windows and making the neon shudder all around him. It muffles his words, but Izzy still hears him.

“I'll let you know after Raj gets back,” she says, barbed. “I'm gonna have words with him, I swear to - oh, hang on - Clary's patching through. I'll put her on this frequency.”

“Muse,” says Alec in stern greeting. There’s a moment or two where all he can hear is breathing, but then Clary’s voice trickles through. She sounds a little clipped.

“Hey Iz, hey Sentinel,” she says, “Is Arkangel with you guys?”

“Over the river but en route to Sentinel, maybe twenty minutes away as the crow flies,” says Jace. Alec sighs audibly at the terrible pun he’s heard at least seventeen thousand times. “Why, what’s up? Where you at?”

“Empty lot up in Harlem. East 130th street,” she replies, and Alec can already hear her frown and the way it scrunches up her nose. He tries not to think about how that’s only a few blocks north of where he was earlier this evening. It’s a coincidence. Must be. “There’s, uhm - something weird here. Can anyone come take a look?”

“Alec’s closest,” says Izzy, “He’s on his way.”

“Am I?”

“Did I or did I not just threaten to get you fired?” Izzy retorts back, quick as a whistle. Alec imagines her tossing her hair over her shoulder. “Alec’s on his way, Clary. He’ll be with you in half an hour, if he runs. Which he will.”

Alec mutters something below his breath about having to run all the way up town when Jace has a pair of fucking wings, but if Izzy hears him, she chooses to ignore him. Clary goes silent, and Jace clocks out as he decides to gain some altitude and the wind starts screwing with his coms.
Alec sighs, making his way back towards the zipline he has strung up between this building and the next. It’s a shame he can’t take the subway when he’s in his supersuit.

It takes Alec twenty five minutes to reach Clary, and that’s partially out of spite: if Izzy’s going to make him run, he’s going to show her that he can run faster than she gives him credit for. He’s petulant like that.

Running, too, has always been a sure-fire way to clear his head, too focused on breathing and the way the cold air hurts in his chest to fixate on much else. Maybe it’s not quite dealing with his problems, but it’s ignoring them, and sometimes that’s what he has to settle for.

The smell of Harlem is as he left it: petrol, tobacco, a late-night barbecue nearer to the river serving up the last of its fragrant sangria before the store closes for the night. There’s a faint ache in Alec’s legs by the time he slows to a jog on East 130th, but the cold sting in his throat in grounding. It takes more than that to leave him out of breath.

This part of town is a lot less neon, a lot less glossy, with dull and grainy street lamps illuminating the potholed pavement and abandoned syringes trampled into the dirt. Alec does not pretend like he isn’t scoping his surroundings, his fingers hovering about his bow. He spies an empty lot across the street and makes easy work of the padlocked fence by vaulting over it. The ground is rain-soft and muddy beneath his feet; brown rainwater splatters up against his calves and he sneers.

The empty lot is deserted and derelict, once a basketball court that has now been fenced off and left to overgrow with weeds worming through the cracks in the concrete. Now, it’s a square of dark shadow between three red brick buildings that block the light. Graffiti scrawls the brickwork and the wreckage of a dismantled car has been left to rust against the fence. The foul smell of burned rubber lingers.

Clary’s bright red hair is a beacon in the dark, but her supersuit is black and dark khaki green and difficult to spot, soft leather and lightweight suede where Alec has armour plating and thick Kevlar. As Alec jogs over, he can’t help but think her suit wouldn’t look so good with a Pepsi logo ironed onto the back either.

She’s crouched in front of an enormous structure of cardboard and corrugated iron leant against the
crumbling brick of the building next door; the closer Alec gets, the more it become apparent that this may have been a homeless camp, but it has since collapsed upon itself.

Clary looks over her shoulder when she hears Alec approaching, and pulls down the mask that covers the bottom half of her face.

“Hey,” she says, but her eyebrows are still pinched together. Carefully, she straightens, brushing dust and wet gravel from her knees. “Thanks for coming.”

“I’m not here just to dig through trash, am I?” Alec remarks. His tone is not as biting as it used to be - not when she really was a newbie and stepped on his toes at every given opportunity - but he’s still learning how to break the habit. She takes it in good stride however, and Alec hopes she knows that he doesn’t always mean it.

Sometimes, of course, he definitely does.

“You really think I would’ve called for backup if I needed help sorting through someone’s recycling?” she retorts, but when Alec glances down at her, he sees that she’s not in the mood for teasing him.

Instead, her eyes are still fixed, quite severely, on the landslide of cardboard before them.

“There’s a body under there,” she says without pretence. Alec immediately sober.

“What?”

“He was dead when I found him, I didn’t see what happened,” explains Clary. She rubs her thumb and forefinger together, as if trying to spark flint - it’s a pretty nifty trick of Izzy’s, these reservoirs of dark ink that are sewn into Clary’s long gloves that she can access with just a bit of friction - and then she rolls down her sleeve to expose her skin.

There are already a few marks there, other things she’s drawn upon herself tonight and since scrubbed away - but now, with her pointer finger, she draws the crude outline of something on her forearm. A moment later, and she’s holding a flashlight in her hand that wasn’t there before.
Muse. It’s the power of artistic creation. Anything she draws will come to life. Anything she imagines can be made real.

And it’s a *useful* power, something that not even Jace can compete with, but Alec’s not exactly about to tell her as much. She still has to earn that from him.

Clary clicks on the flashlight and its beam falls on the rubbish pile before them. Alec does not miss the way the earth is stained a darker brown in places; it’s not just the rain. Clary moves the torch around and the light catches on the edge of a sheet of iron slick with red. Alec knows the colour of blood to inherently to ignore.

And that’s when Alec sees it: someone’s bare foot sticking out from beneath a crumpled cardboard box. Mud and black soot are caked onto the sole, the toes scored raw with gravel burns and *are those burn blisters?*, Alec thinks, but it’s too dark to say. The distant smell of smoke irritates the inside of Alec’s nose; beneath the stench of rubber, something else has been burned. The stench is slightly sweet, slightly meaty.

Alec’s voice is unsure when he speaks again. He knows he sounds hesitant, even if he can’t afford to be.

“Did you already take a look?”

“I couldn’t move it all by myself and I didn’t want to summon some sort of forklift out of thin air to help me,” replies Clary. “Figured someone might notice.”

“That’s reasonable.” Alec tightens the strap of his quiver over his shoulder and adjusts his gloves. Deep breath. He has a job to do.

“Don’t get cut,” he then instructs, “Look out for sharps and needles, alright?”

They dig carefully through the rubble, Clary shining her magic flashlight over the both of them as Alec does the heavy lifting. It’s not as nasty as Alec expected, but after he’s tossed two or three sheets of corrugated iron to the side, the stench of cooling blood hits him with a rotten waft. He tries not to gag.

Clary’s nose wrinkles as Alec pulls away the last few damp sleeves of cardboard concealing the
body from view. She exhales slowly, as if trying to temper herself.

“That’s a lot of blood,” she remarks. Alec does have eyes, even if he would rather not be seeing what he’s seeing right now.

Tonight, of all nights.

It’s not like he’s never seen a body; he’s seen his fair share of dead men and held more than his fair share of dying men in his arms. Poor souls pulled out of car accidents, dragged from the scenes of shootings, and hauled from burning buildings; Alec has dallied with other people’s death enough to know it well.

But it doesn’t stop the cold chill of familiarity from rippling down his spine and seizing in his gut. This is his second dead body in just as many months, but it will never become just another fact of life. And perhaps that’s for the best: the moment he gets complacent about death is the moment it becomes more than just a stain on the city he tries to protect.

A disease, he thinks absently. A plague. An epidemic, even. Magnus’ words.

Tonight’s dead man is old, but not too old; white, but not white enough for his death to ever reach front page headlines; and poor, judging by the state of his clothes and the patchiness of his beard. Alec would guess that he’s been sleeping rough for quite some time.

It’s not uncommon for the homeless to die on the streets: the city spares little sympathy for them, the governor even less. It’s a fact that grates on Alec’s nerves, but always as an afterthought, and that irritates him even more, because that only makes him part of the problem.

He’s seen stabbings before, muggings gone wrong, people getting killed for sleeping on the wrong front porch. Messy. Frantic. Violence imbued in panic and prejudice left unchecked.

But this is different. This man has a clean, swift cut across his throat, splitting open his vocal cords and severing his jugular almost from ear to ear. It’s neat and proficient, made with slow surgical precision. It’s purposeful. Premeditated.

And Alec has seen it before.
“This is a murder,” he says plainly, taking a step back and squashing down the rummaging feeling inside his chest. He curls his fingers into fists at his side, squeezing tight. Clary looks a little green, but she’s trying hard to hide it from Alec. “Call it in. This is police business now, it’s out of our jurisdiction.”

“Have you … ever seen something like that before?” Clary asks instead, not doing as she’s told. “It … God, Sentinel, it looks like - a dissection -”

She leans as far forward over the body as she dares, using the end of her torch to lift up the edge of the dead man’s coat. A wallet still sits in his pocket and there’s a gold chain around his neck that should’ve been stolen if this was opportunistic in the slightest.

It’s not what Alec notices, no.

No, that’s the strange black singing along the hemline of the man’s clothes as if he’s leapt through a fierce-burning fire whilst running away from something else.

The burning smell is polyester. It’s flesh. Alec can taste it now.

What ... is this?

What the Hell is going on?

Alec swallows back the words in his mouth. He still hasn’t mentioned his last dead super to any of them, and now it feels too late. Izzy will have already read about it in the paper and she’ll make the connection without even blinking. And then, Alec will come clean because he can’t lie to her, and someone else will ask him why he didn’t say anything, and he’ll have to explain himself, explain the inoperable guilty feeling in his gut when he doesn’t even understand it himself.

This man doesn’t look like a super, Alec reasons, looking back at the body. He’s not in a supersuit, he has no mask, and Alec doesn’t recognise him - although that doesn’t mean much. These murders are not related. This might be a hate crime. It might be an accident. His throat being slit is just a coincidence.
It has to be. *It has to be.* Why is he thinking about this? He has a job to do.

Alec presses his finger to his ear, activating his coms.

“*Iz,*” he says, his voice gruff. “We’ve found a body. Can you call the police to our location?”

“*Shit,*” Izzy says immediately, “*Of course, I’ll get right on it. What’s cause of death?*”

“*Exsanguination, probably,*” Alec says, “*The throat is cut.*”

“*I saw something like that in the paper the other day,*” Jace remarks, still elsewhere. Alec tenses. “*The paper you left in the locker room at HQ, Sentinel? You remember?*”

“Not really,” Alec lies, “*Iz, could you … could you look into it?*”

“*Sure,*” she says, “*Do you want me to call any particular police department, Alec?*”

Alec pauses, and almost says *no,* until he glances down at Clary again. He sees her turn her face into her shoulder and squeeze her eyes shut, a deep, shuddering breath trembling down her spine.

“Actually,” he says, “*Call Luke Garroway at the 99th.*”

Alec stumbles back home late that night, the clock on his nightstand goading him with quarter-to-four. He tosses his bow and quiver onto the couch as he traipses a trail of rain water through his apartment, dragging his feet along the creaking floorboards.

It feels like he’s been upright for days, if not weeks, in that his body hardly feels his own anymore, more a cadaver than anything living, breathing, and useful. His trip with Magnus to that burned-
down apartment feels like a year ago, and the morning might as well be a world away for all he feels like he has aged since.

He strips down in his bathroom, throwing his wet armour and gauntlets into the tub, but then he stops. All the gears inside his body that keep him working just grind to a halt. Some cog in his mechanism catches. His body starts shaking. Won’t stop shaking. Alec’s hands find the sink bowl to steady himself, fingers clenched over the rim, and the breath pulled from him is quivering.

What is this? He’s not scared. It’s not panic. Maybe it’s fatigue, but even that he hates, because he shouldn’t be. He shouldn’t be fatigued. He’s trained for better.

He hangs his head between his shoulders, staring at the drain, but the jolts keep on coming, like someone’s jabbing him in the ribs with an electric cattle prod, each one catching him off guard. His body is too tired to do anything about it. His fingers press into the porcelain; he jerks forward again, his knee clunking against the undersink cabinet with a thud.

Maybe he’s just overwhelmed. That homeless man hadn’t been dead for more than an hour before he and Clary found him - or so the police said later over the radio as Alec listened in. If they’d been there earlier, if Alec had decided to patrol Harlem tonight instead of Midtown, if he’d gone to dinner with Magnus somewhere nearby, maybe he would’ve been in the right place at the right time -

No, he can’t think it. He’s coped with worse. This is nothing new.

So why can’t he cope with it now? Why can’t he fucking think straight?

Alec grips the sink tighter, but he doesn’t have the super strength, not like Lydia, to yank it from the wall.

Maybe he’s always been like this. Maybe this is what happens every time he’s faced with a death he could’ve stopped, every time the voice in his head says not good enough, and maybe he’s just been better at clamping it down, letting it take another knick out of him, ignoring it … letting it rot and fester and turn his insides black. Maybe he’s been letting it build and swell and slick up the inside of his throat and now he needs to expel it; his chest wants it out, his body wants it out.

Alec takes a steadying breath and raises his head to stare at himself in the mirror. He’s still wearing his mask, the leather slick with rain, but he rips it off and flings it into the bathtub with the rest of
his gear.

His face is gaunt and his skin is grey, the dark circles beneath his eyes near purple. He looks hardly better than either of the two dead men he has come across recently - God, he looks terrible.

It’s not what bothers him. He doesn’t care how he looks. He cares how long he can keep this going until someone notices, because his mask can’t keep him safe all hours of the day.

Nobody notices him at work the next morning, but it’s no big surprise. Alec’s just another man in a suit a little too big and a tie a little too loose, dragging himself into the office off the last train he could take without being late.

Simon’s not in the office, his coat missing from the back of his chair, but today’s paper is already front-page-up on Alec’s desk, so either Simon has come and gone, or there’s some cruel onlooker desperate to revel in the way Alec bites down on his tongue until it stings.

Alec is something of a masochist. Jace and Isabelle tell him this regularly - and in good humour - but it’s hardly a joke when Alec slumps down at his desk and grabs the paper straight away, his eyes immediately drawn to the headline.

It’s about the election. The text reads: PENHALLOW SLIPS IN CRUCIAL POLLS, HERONDALE SEIZES KEY NEIGHBOURHOODS.

Alec’s shoulders sink further. It’s not about the dead man from last night at all, and why was Alec expecting it to be?

He flicks through the paper: the election coverage spans the first three pages, followed by an article about an AIDS crisis shelter looted by protesters, and a piece about Hurricane Andrew levelling Louisiana. At the centrefold, a headline that reads: CEO OF BELCOURT HOLDINGS INDICTED FOR MONEY LAUNDERING. Alec skims across the financials, and then - then, on page twenty three, he sees it. A tiny paragraph at the bottom of the page mentions the police being called to Harlem last night on account of a ruckus, and -
And well, that’s it. He reads the newspaper from headline to horoscope. There’s no mention of a body, no mention of a murder. The rest of the page is filled up with a story about how the WHO has officially declassified homosexuality as mental illness, but half the continental United States could still legally fire Alec from his workplace.

Alec clenches his teeth, as his grip tightens, until the newspaper in his hand crumples. There’s black ink on the pad of his thumb.

What did you expect? the voice in his head taunts him again.

Not this, he wants to plead. Not this.

In truth, he expected exactly this.

The morning passes in a grey haze. It’s not a blur, because Alec is all too aware of the tightness in his chest that makes it difficult to breathe, and the itch beneath his fingernails that makes him want to scrub his hands raw. There are only so many times he can disappear to the bathroom without it looking weird to his neighbours.

The skin on his hands hurts already, the backs of his knuckles dry and peeling where he’s used too much soap. He throws the newspaper in the trash, but then fishes it back out an hour later when his mind won’t stop racing; he tears out that paragraph on page twenty three and stuffs it into his wallet, even though he’s not sure what he’s going to do with it.

He feels like he’s been pulled thin, the length of him so tense and drawn that he would make a sound if plucked; every shift in his seat and flex of his hands on his keyboard emits vibrations, rattling in his bones.

His boss drops by his desk to ask how the audit is coming along, and Alec has to bite his cheek and just nod, because all the words in his throat are screwed up in knots and he doesn’t know how to get them out. He’s lucky, he supposes, because his boss long ago stopped telling him to smile.
Lightwood, and now just accepts Alec’s scowl as a permanent fact of life.

Just before lunch, his leg starts tapping, his knee bouncing up and down so violently that he cracks his kneecap against the underside of his desk more than once. Alec’s eyes are only on the clock; he’s waiting for that minute hand to hit twelve. Because as soon as it does, he’s going to get up and grab his coat and sprint out of here - he doesn’t know where yet, but it doesn’t matter. Outside might be cold and reek of cigarette smoke and the same disappointment, but it’s an escape from the confines of four walls and an ever-lowering ceiling.

Alec only has thirty minutes for lunch. He won’t be able to get far.

Ten to twelve. Across the office, he hears Simon bundle through the door, laughing loudly at something one of the junior copy editors has told him. The sound wriggles under Alec’s skin, making him feel restless. He closes his eyes and sucks in a deep breath, his fingers twitching for his desk phone, wondering if he should just call Izzy.

But even then, what would he say?

The clock ticks too loudly on the wall. Simon’s laughter is too brash. The guy in the next partition eats his lunch at his desk and it smells strongly of curry. Alec’s gut churns.

Rubbing his thumb and forefinger together, he swears he can still feel the rough flake of soot and tacky blood on his fingertips.

Five to twelve. He could take his audit home for the afternoon, read through it with pen and paper, hunched over on his couch. He could take the rest of the day off sick.

Behind his eyelids, he can still see the foot of the man sticking out from that pile of rubble last night. The smell of singed skin -

His senses are in overload.

A polite, unassuming cough makes him open his eyes.
Alec blinks against the light. Leaning over his partition is Magnus, his eyebrows pulled down into a worried frown.

“Alec?” he asks. Maybe he’s already asked, and Alec didn’t hear him, judging by the look of confusion on Magnus’ face.

Alec says nothing. He just stares, forgetting how to talk. *He must look like a prize idiot -*

Magnus rounds the side of Alec’s desk and stops close enough for Alec to smell his cologne, both woody and powdery. He sets something down beside the keyboard: it’s warm and roughly container-shaped, wrapped haphazardly in tinfoil.

“What’s this?” Alec asks. His voice comes out more strained than he’d like.

Alec frowns at the tinfoil covered package, but it smells so good it makes his stomach growl. Magnus definitely hears it.

“I ordered too much takeout last night,” Magnus says, as if that explains everything. “I couldn’t bare to watch you poke at another tragic salad for lunch.”

Alec’s own frown deepens. “They’re not that bad.”

“That’s because you have nothing good to compare them to,” Magnus retorts. His eyes soften. He must see something in Alec’s grey complexion that summons pity, and honestly, it makes Alec feel a little wretched.

“It’s Ethiopian,” Magnus says, “I have more, in my office. Would you like to join me?”

“I -” Alec starts.

Magnus casts his gaze quickly around the office. Simon’s annoying laughter has disappeared.

“Looks like Simon already left for lunch,” Magnus muses. He turns back to Alec and switches on
his smile again. It's always been charming, but now, it's both warm and beckoning too, and a flicker of self-preservation deep down in Alec’s chest urges him towards it. He thought he’d lost that.

“Seeing as we didn’t get dinner together last night,” Magnus adds, and it comes out just a little pleading, as if he knows he can insist and Alec might just say yes this time, despite having said no so many times before. “I wouldn’t want you suffering in that God-awful cafeteria alone now.”

Is he pitying me or is he just being kind? Alec wants to ask how much of his sleep deprivation is evident beneath his eyes. But Hell, he knows the answer to that question already: he spent a long time staring at it in the mirror last night too.

It doesn’t matter. Alec looks terrible either way. Magnus probably doesn’t want to be seen in public with him, and at this point, Alec feels like he might vibrate out of his skin if he sits at his desk a moment longer. Lunch in Magnus’ office sounds like the best thing he’s heard all day.

“Okay,” says Alec.

Magnus’ double blink clearly means that he was expecting another no, but he recovers remarkably quickly. His smile broadens, somewhat delighted.

“How?”

“Okay,” Alec repeats. It’s more like a breath as he presses his hands into his thighs and pushes himself out of his chair a little too quickly. His mouth is dry, and that’s not normally a sign of fatigue or self-wretchedness.

Magnus blinks again. “Oh,” he says. He fights down this peculiar little smile and just about succeeds. “Okay. Excellent. I’ll lead the way.”

A whole pantry of Ethiopian food is spread out across Magnus’ desk, takeout containers full of
curry and lentils, and tinfoil torn open to reveal thick-cut slices of sourdough bread. The smell of spices is warm and comforting - not overpowering - and it tickles at the back of Alec’s nose as he pauses in the doorway. He notices the two plates already laid out on Magnus’ desk, as if he were hoping for company even before asking Alec.

Alec throws a sideways glance at Magnus, but Magnus is pointedly not looking at him. If there’s colour to be found in his face, Alec isn’t quick enough to catch it - and Alec is so awfully quick.

“Take a seat,” Magnus says. He pulls out his chair, but doesn’t sit, holding onto the headrest as he watches Alec caught on the threshold between coming and going. Magnus inclines his head, nodding at the food. It does smell good. Alec’s stomach rumbles again.

“What … is it?” Alec asks cautiously, nudging the door closed behind him. He’s hesitant as he settles into his usual chair, hoping that his unease can be pinned to his lack of knowledge of ethnic food rather than everything else.

It’s not even half a lie. He really doesn’t know what he’s looking at, and he supposes Magnus was bound to find out how sheltered he is to the ways of the outside world sooner rather than later. His childhood in Idris wasn’t exactly a cultured upbringing.

“It’s called wat ,” Magnus explains, “It’s like a stew or a curry, some are meat, some are vegetable … I have a few, so you can try whichever you like.”

“No cutlery?”

Magnus laughs breathlessly. Some tension in his shoulders settles.

“Traditionally, you eat with your right hand,” he explains, “Use the bread, it’s called injera .”

Alec nods, sucking his lower lip in between his teeth as his eyes roam. Whatever is in the container closest to him - wat , Magnus called it - looks good, buttery, fragrant, and a vibrant ochre-yellow. It makes Alec’s mouth water, but he can’t bring himself to reach for it.

“Are you gonna join, or are you just gonna … stare ?” he asks.
Magnus laughs again, and it flips a switch in him; he moves to grab two glasses from his filing cabinet, pouring himself a generous whiskey and a water for Alec.

Something deflates within Alec that he hadn’t realised was pressing up against the inside of his chest; the air escapes his lips almost a whistle as Magnus settles into the chair opposite him.

Alec feels safe.

*Is that the right word?*

Why does it feel so fragile?

The door behind him is locked and no-one’s going to come looking for him. The city is kept at bay by this windowless room and, here, he’s tucked away from the outside world. The extent of this universe shrinks down until it’s just him and Magnus and the food on the table.

Alec tears away a strip of flat bread and scoops up a mouthful of yellow curry. He pops it into his mouth, messily enough that it smudges on the corner of his lips and gets all over his fingers, but he doesn’t even notice. The taste of saffron and buttery chicken – it’s heavenly. He murmurs his gratitude and across the table, Magnus smiles down at his food, his cheeks dimpling.

“Do you cook much?” Magnus asks.

“No, I don’t really get the chance,” Alec says around a mouthful. Most nights, it’s either a Pot Noodle after patrol or whatever he can scrounge in the Idris’ kitchens when he’s tired and cold and sleep-deprived, and that’s usually Izzy’s handiwork and irreparably inedible.

“No, me neither,” Magnus confesses, “I love this job but sometimes I wonder what my mother would say if she saw how many takeouts I eat because of it.”

“I’m pretty sure when I started here, I survived on coffee alone for the first two weeks. So you’re still doing better than me.”

Magnus smiles again, but it’s a little forced. His attention clings to Alec, deliberate and unshakable,
and Alec’s leg begins to jitter.

“This … this is good though,” Alec says, low in his throat, “If you get to eat stuff like this every night, it’s not all bad -”

Alec’s sentence fragments, and he watches Magnus’ hands form brief churches around words before he says them - but Alec hears them coming.

“I want to apologise,” Magnus says.

Alec winces. “What … what for?”

Magnus rolls the words around on his tongue, pushing them up against the inside of his cheek. He waves one hand blasé through the air, but Alec suspects it’s not as nonchalant as Magnus pretends.

“For dragging you out with me last night to that arson,” Magnus says, “For getting you involved in all of this, because it’s not for everyone, and I do know that, and I shouldn’t have pressured you into this. So for that, I’m sorry.”

Alec blinks. He opens his mouth to protest, but closes it again. Blinks a second time. Restarts his brain.

“Wha - what?”

He’s never claimed to be eloquent.

Magnus rubs his thumb and forefinger together incessantly. “It’s messy business and I don’t think I explained that to you properly when you agreed to help with this pursuit of mine,” he says, “And that’s on me, so I -”

“Magnus. Magnus, no .”

It’s Magnus’ turn to look alarmed, his eyes snapping up to Alec’s. His mouth parts with a note of
“I mean - I’m not - I still want to do this,” Alec backtracks, his face flushing warm, “You don’t have to be sorry for getting me involved, I wanted to be involved. I wanted to come with you last night, I just - I want to help.”

“Alec,” Magnus says pityingly.

“I’m serious,” says Alec, and he can feel the honest truth simmering in his belly, the smoke rising up his throat, the blood coagulating back on his hands. It’s a little bit dangerous and a little bit untapped, but there’s most definitely a part of him that just wants to spit it out: the truth.

He can’t, of course. He has to compromise.

“I just,” he murmurs, gesturing vaguely, “wish I could do more. I feel useless.”

Magnus’ eyes soften, his brows pinching up in the middle. His hand, resting on the tabletop, seems to twitch, as if he’s half considering extending it across the desk, encroaching upon the space Alec is usually so swift to bundle up to his chest.

He’s interrupted by the shrill ring of the telephone on his desk.

At the sound, Magnus snaps to attention, drawing his hand back so sharply it makes Alec wince. Magnus reaches for the phone with a heavy sigh, his gaze flicking to Alec just before he answers. Alec supposes it’s apologetic.

“Good afternoon, you’ve reached the office of Magnus Bane - oh, hello Dorothea -”

Alec’s shoulders fall and he’s not really sure why. He hunches forward and picks at his food again, taking another piece of flatbread and dragging a different foil carton towards himself, this one warmer and spicier, chilli flakes sprinkled liberally across the chicken. It doesn’t make it to his mouth; his hand falls to the wayside on the table.

Magnus is talking quickly to whoever is on the other end of the line - he’s familiar and cordial, a
sprinkling of *darlings* that suggests he knows the caller well - and he *uhms* and *ahs* over whatever is being asked, but Alec can’t bring himself to listen. He stares hard at the food on his plate, but he’s not really focusing on it, not at all.

His leg is jittering beneath the desk again. He’s thinking about scratching at the back of his hands. His stomach growls, but he doesn’t want to feed it.

Alec knows his eyes glaze over.

He’s sitting here and *pretending*, whilst two men have died in the last few weeks, their throats slit, their bodies left abandoned in empty parking lots. Only one of them was a superhero, but violence predates this city and it’s putrid foundations, and he knows that – so it can’t be a coincidence.

He just can’t see how it all connects. He can’t do anything to help, because both men are dead, and he can’t do anything to stop it from happening *again* if he’s sitting here feeling like he just wants to slither out of his own skin. The clock on the wall is ticking down towards the end of their lunch break, and then Magnus is going to unlock the door: that’s when Alec is going to have to go back out there. Hell, he can feel that insidious dread beckoning beneath the door already, seeping in like black tar that sticks to the underside of his shoes and glues him to the carpet.

“Dorothea, darling,” Magnus says then, and it interrupts Alec’s thoughts, “It’s lovely to hear from you but I’m ... going to have to call you back.”

Alec looks up as Magnus places the receiver back in its cradle. Magnus stares at the phone for a prolonged moment, flexing his fingers in the silence, but then he turns to face Alec.

“Alexander,” he says without pretense, “Are you alright?”

*No, not at all, and I don’t really know why,* is the truthful answer, but that would beg a great deal of vulnerability that Alec doesn’t know how to bare - to Magnus or to anyone, really. He’s not even sure he can admit it to himself. Opening oneself up to that sort of scrutiny is terrifying, so Alec prefers to bury the shovel and batten the hatches. It’s always been easier this way, and even if it hasn’t, he has to keep telling himself that it is.

But ... there’s something about Magnus that always demands a little honesty.
Alec’s not sure what it is exactly - the charming smiles, the whip-sharp wit, the disarming way he looks at Alec and Alec feels momentarily transparent because Magnus is no fool. He’s smart and quick and, as Alec has swiftly learned, has an unfathomable capacity for kindness.

And so, Alec finds himself upon a knife’s edge, with one side not talking about it, and with the other spilling his guts across the table. His body is afraid of teetering too far one way and falling. He’s always been afraid of slipping up. Making a mistake that he can’t recover from. The plummet to the ground. It’s a problem.

Magnus says nothing, but he watches Alec, his lips pursed into a flat line. Perhaps he sees the turmoil on Alec’s face; perhaps he doesn’t even have to go looking for it, because it’s as plain as day. Perhaps he already knows that Alec cannot talk about it, not this time. Maybe not any time.

For a moment, Magnus looks a little sad, but it passes in the way all rain should pass, in places other than this where storm clouds don’t smother them and plutonic downpours don’t drown them.

Magnus’ expression clears and he leans forward across the desk, seizing hold of the takeout container right in front of Alec. Alec blinks, opening his mouth to say something reflexive like hey, I wasn’t done with that, and it surprises him, because it’s a thought unbidden and not at all morose.

Magnus meets his gaze, deliberately bold, but his eyes tell Alec that he knows Alec is struggling, and if Alec cannot tell him something as simple as I’m okay, then Magnus can find other ways to keep vagrant thoughts at bay. It seems that he can touch places in Alec just by looking – and Alec is okay with that.

He’s … more than okay with that.

“Let’s eat,” Magnus says, “Before it gets cold.”

There’s a fire that night - some old warehouse on the quayside that’s been out of business for too many years to remember, and so no-one cares enough to save it from burning to the ground. Alec hears the dispatch call twenty minutes before he and Jace are due to return to headquarters for the night – so when Alec says he wants to go check it out, Jace gives him a look.
“What?” grumbles Alec. “We’re still on the clock.” *We’re always on the clock.*

“Alec, I’m always up for a car chase or a bank robbery or, Hell - catching an arsonist whilst he’s still at it, but you heard the dispatch,” says Jace. “It’s been burning for an hour already and the fire department has it handled. It was abandoned, no-one’s hurt.”

Alec fixes him with a glare. Jace always likes to call it his *hardass* glare. Alec is rather good at it.

“Oh, come on,” Jace moans, “It’s almost two in the morning. Aline and Helen have the graveyard shift tonight, let them deal with it. I’m tired, wet, and hungry, and not in a good way.”

“How can you be any of those things in a good way - wait, nevermind.”

Jace grins and winks at Alec.

Alec rolls his eyes. “You don’t have to come with me,” says Alec, “I’ll see you back at HQ.”

There was a point, way back when, when Jace and Alec were far more green than they are now, where Alec would never volunteer to go off on his own, and Jace would be yapping at Alec’s heels to come with him, the glory hound that he is, but -

Well, they’re a lot older now, and Jace yawns dramatically, covering his mouth with the back of his hand, and Alec is a half-second away from impatiently tapping his foot. This is how it goes most nights. Jace is only ever interested when it’s exciting, and Alec can never find his own off-switch.

He supposes it’s somewhere near the switch that allows him to stop feeling guilty if he ignores dispatch calls like this, but he’ll be damned if he knows where that is either.

“Well, I’ll see you at home then,” Jace yawns, rolling his stiff shoulders as his wings begin to whir. “You can tell Iz. Call me if anything interesting happens.”

Alec doesn’t wait around to watch Jace disappear into the dark; the quayside is only a few blocks away. He’s quick and silent across the rooftops, swinging between buildings as little more than a vague shape in the night, the sort of movement that is only ever caught from the corner of one’s eye.

He stops on a roof opposite the riverside, where the vantage is good and the smell of salt water mixes with smoke. There are two fire engines still on the scene, but the firemen are rolling up their hoses, the ground slick with water and wet ash. The warehouse itself is blackened and nothing more than a derelict pile of steel bones and corrugated iron now, the roof completely caved in, but it’s neither smoking or cindering. It’s just a dark shape against the backdrop of the river, quietly rippling.

Alec inhales deeply. Not a petrol fire. He can’t smell gasoline. Maybe there was something flammable on the inside; packing peanuts do like to burn, almost as much as dried-out wooden pallets and old cardboard boxes.

Still a building made of metal doesn’t usually go up in flames as quickly as this place clearly did. Someone wanted it to burn, and burn fast. Alec squints into the dark, but it’s hard to make out details when everything is incinerated black and the bright lights of the fire engines are disorienting at best.

No-one was killed, as far as he knows. Dispatch is quiet and he cannot see any ambulances. There was no-one inside - which is a momentary relief, because these abandoned buildings on the quayside are usually hot real estate for squatters and teenagers out past curfew - but if the fire was hot enough, Alec supposes no-one would ever know if someone had been unwittingly cremated.

That’s a sour thought.

Alec’s gut clenches and he presses his mouth into a flat line, willing himself to forget it. He doesn’t want to think about that.

It’s far more likely that someone wanted to get rid of evidence - and there’s no better way than to turn it into ash. Or better yet, maybe someone was just bored and their idea of a kick is a spot of arson on a work night.
Alec watches a police officer lash crime scene tape across the front of the building before he drives off into the dark in pursuit of the fire engines. Alec waits a moment - a moment that probably stretches out into fifteen or twenty minutes of silence - before he clips his grappling rope to the edge of the roof and abseils down the face of the building. His feet are soft when he lands and a short, swift tug on his rope has it retracting into his hand with a hiss.

All the overlooking buildings are office blocks, but Alec has a cursory glance at all the windows, just to check for an nosy onlookers peering out from between the blinds - he finds none. The night is quite still.

He jogs across the street and ducks beneath the yellow tape, the soles of his boots quickly slick with wet charcoal. He leaves footprints in the blackened ground. The stench of melted plastic and hot iron is acrid.

Buildings and brickwork don’t burn this well on accident.

It’s easy enough to find his way into the warehouse - or what’s left of it - and the burned metal sings quietly in the beginnings of a drizzle, which will soon escalate into white noise if Alec lingers too long. He’s careful to lift his feet over felled steel beams and duck beneath charcoaled timber, ash dusting his hair and mask, but it’s when he pushes his shoulder against the remnants of a door, that something above him gives with a sickening crack .

Alec freezes. He slowly lessens his weight on the door and takes a half-step back. Again, the ceiling shifts above him, a groan and a creak and then a loud boom that shudders all the way down his spine. The sound has nowhere to echo. It seizes in the small of his back, his whole body rigid. A breath is held at odds in his throat; he doesn’t quite catch it. The air vibrates, and above him, below him, all around him, metal shrieks as it bows and bends beneath the weight of building.

Alec takes another step back, sliding his feet back in the footprints he’s already made, but whatever is left of the roof seems Hell-bent on collapsing. Another step back. His heels catches; he clips an electrical wire yanked taut by the destruction. The whole building trembles around him.

“Fuck,” he grits between his teeth. Black rubble tumbles from the ceiling, dust motes mushrooming around him in the dark.

Alec takes a third step back and his foot goes straight through the floor; he stumbles to the side, catching himself with palms pressed into a pile of debris, and it’s the ceiling that gives way, an enormous slab of slate roof piercing through the tiles above with a crash.
Alec is quick - quick enough to roll out of the way - but there’s a spike of pain in his knees and palms and he chokes on a mouthful of soot. Coughing into his elbow, he looks up, eyes tearing, but the shard of the roof that has struck through the ceiling is - well, it’s floating.

Alec’s hand snaps to his bow. He knows he’ll be hard-pressed to draw an arrow in such close confines, but -

- all he’s met with is a familiar and disembodied laugh.

*Nightlock*.

“Not funny,” Alec grumbles, pulling himself to his feet and dusting his suit down. His gloves are smothered in ash and it makes little difference. He glares daggers at the caved-in ceiling, but holds himself stone still.

“I just saved your life, and that’s how you thank me?” comes a voice from out of the gloom.

Alec’s senses prickle, the air crackling as it always does when Nightlock is close, but Alec feels it on all sides, turning in a full circle as he searches for his shadow.

“You didn’t save my life,” Alec scowls, “I had it under control.”

Footsteps to his left. Alec turns sharply as Nightlock ducks beneath a fallen beam, his smile lopsided and irritatingly handsome. There’s a devious glint in his eyes, despite the darkness.

“Says the man who was moments away from being sliced neatly in two,” Nightlock says as he rolls his wrist, curling his fingers in the air for show, and the large slab of roof is carefully lowered to the floor. The ground is too wet for it to kick up any dust.

Alec drags his stare from the black smear he’s left on the floor to Nightlock’s face. “What are you doing here?” he asks.
“Same reason you are, I suppose,” says Nightlock, still smiling. “I overheard the call on the emergency frequency and I came to have a look. I wasn’t following you, if that’s what you’re implying. Believe it or not, I have better things to do with my time.”

“It’s an abandoned building,” Alec says, eyes narrowing, “And no-one was hurt or killed.” He thinks of Jace. “It’s nothing … exciting.”

“Exciting?” Nightlock scoffs. He purses his lips into a pout. “Well, I can’t say I’m surprised that’s how the Corporates decide what is and isn’t worth their time.”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Hmm. Yes, you are.”

Nightlock takes a step forward as Alec takes a step back – but Alec quickly realizes that Nightlock’s attention is no longer on him. Nightlock is scanning the room, eyes dancing across the gaping hole in the ceiling where the night and the rain sprinkles through, but he ends up frowning at something over Alec’s shoulder.

“Arson has been on the rise lately,” he says slowly. There’s a very dark mark just above the doorway, burned deep into the wall like a violent and explosive scar. Nightlock steps past Alec to get a closer look. He waves his fingers and some of the soot lifts from the wall, particulates suspended in the air.

Alec tries not to be impressed. “What is that?” he asks instead, “That mark?”

“Ignition patterns,” replies Nightlock, “Where the fire started, most likely.”

Alec frowns. He’s had this conversation before. He’s had it in a different room, in a different flat, on a different side of the city. He’s had it with Magnus. This is one fire too many; the thought nags. The anaphora is not lost.

“This wasn’t a petrol fire,” he says slowly. “You’d be able to smell it.”
“Indeed,” agrees Nightlock. The strange scar twists in an erratic pattern across the wall, from floor to ceiling and back again. “And these are high up on the wall ... if someone had used gasoline to start this fire, they would have poured it on the floor.”

“What did this then?” Alec asks, “An electrical fire? There are probably wires in the plasterboard ... or what’s left of it.”

“Probably,” says Nightlock. “Hopefully. The alternative is ... not particularly savoury.”

“A flamethrower?”

“Yes. But ... perhaps not in the traditional sense.”

“Oh.” Realisation dawns on Alec. Ironically, it’s brutally cold. “A super.”

“Could be,” says Nightlock, “An elemental, maybe. A pyrokinetic. Thermodetonation or heat vision might also do this.”

“I’ve not heard of any pyrokinetics in the city.”

“What about at Idris?”

Alec fixes Nightlock with a glare, but Nightlock holds firm and fast, not blinking. He’s entirely serious.

“None at Idris either,” Alec scowls. “That’s a dangerous power in the wrong hands.”

“All powers have the capability to be dangerous,” Nightlock retorts, “Fire might be physically destructive, but it’s also loud and unsubtle. I’m sure a well-placed arrow can be both silent and deadly in the wrong hands too.”

“Well, what about all your-stuff? You could probably cause a fire ... if you wanted to.”
“Good thing I don’t want to, then,” Nightlock mutters, before adding, “My powers don’t work like that, anyway.”

Alec can’t help himself. “How do they work?”

Nightlock’s brief laugh is dry and mocking and it makes Alec tense up.

“Why would I tell you that?”

“Forget it then,” Alec grumbles, turning away to inspect the wall where the scorch marks spread. There are scars criss-crossing over one another, some carved out and creviceal, others shallower but more tattered around the edges. Fire rarely has the patience for the things it burns, and these - oh, these look like war wounds left to fester.

Nightlock, however, isn’t finished. The air fizzles as he takes a step towards Alec. He feels Nightlock’s eyes focused upon his cheek, but wills himself not to look. Nightlock is presented with his face in profile, fuzzy around the edges in the gloom.

Alec can feel Nightlock searching his face, scrutinizing every tiny twitch in his jaw, every single one of Alec’s tells that he’s not even aware of, but that undoubtedly give the truth away.

“If I tell you,” Nightlock says slowly, “will it end up on my permanent record at Idris by the time you get back to headquarters tonight?”

Alec snaps to look at him, both incensed and appalled. “What? No. Of course not!”

“Once you know how something works, you can start figuring out how to make it un work. Which is not something I would put past Idris.”

Alec opens his mouth to retort, but no words come out. Nightlock continues.

“Idris doesn’t like vigilantes, Sentinel. We both know that. Who’s to say they
aren’t experimenting down in the sublevels with vaccinations to mutate our powers, or designing
armour and weapons that will render our defenses obsolete?”

“I wouldn’t do that.”

“Wouldn’t do what?”

Alec stills. The silence stretches so long between them that he’s sure Nightlock will think he’s not
going to say anything and turn away, because Hell, Sentinel’s a damn Corporate who talks before
he thinks - but Nightlock’s gaze doesn’t waver. It summons honesty out of Alec’s chest, tempered
one moment, and bubbling forth the next.

“I wouldn’t - I wouldn’t tell them about you. I wouldn’t sell you out to Idris just to get a leg up on
you. I wouldn’t do that. I … I was just -”

“Curious?” Nightlock’s mouth quirks, a thin dimple appearing at the corner of his lips.

“No,” Alec says instinctively, the back of his neck warming, but then, “ … Yeah. Yes.”

Nightlock’s teeth clip his lip as he turns away. But Alec catches a glimpse of it, Nightlock’s sudden
smile, before he reigns it back in, and Alec finds that it is a rare spell of a thing. He smiles like his
has pennies hidden in his cheeks.

“As the saying goes,” Nightlock says, “I’ll show you mine, if you’ll show me yours?”

Alec scowls but cannot hold it; he betrays himself, his own half-smile in the dark. He looks away
so Nightlock can’t see it either.

“That doesn’t really work in this case,” he murmurs.

“No, no, you’re right,” says Nightlock. He moves his hand through the air, curling his fingers into
his fist, and above their heads, the hole in the ceiling slowly peels back at the edges. No moonlight
pours through - the clouds are too dense for that - but the soft and eerie glow of the city casts the
destruction around them in a chalky haze. Shadows finally pool again on Nightlock’s face,
illuminating his expression as he spins on his heels to face Alec. The look in his eyes is both star soft and star bright, even though the sky is hidden.

“What do you want to know, Sentinel?”

Alec blinks, half-convinced he has whiplash with how fast Nightlock has changed his tune. The question still remains suspended in the air, a pendulum swinging back and forth, back and forth, waiting for Alec to catch it; for a clock to chime and tell him it’s gotten too late, it’s time to go home, the night is too dark; that he’s treading too close to a line that Idris would scold him for.

Nightlock is offering him an olive branch that Alec probably doesn’t deserve and definitely hasn’t earned, and it’s a vulnerability that he doesn’t have to permit Sentinel to see, yet still, he does.

Alec realises, belatedly, that he must handle it with care.

He nods towards the doorway. They don’t need to have this conversation here, not when all Alec can smell is soot and wet smoke that reminds him of worse things.
Nightlock clears his throat. “Your friend, the blondie,” he begins, “I’ve been assuming he has some sort of psychometric reflexes? The flying is surely just for show.”

“It’s adoptive muscle memory,” Alec admits, “If he sees something done once, he can do it straight away. It’s … it is what it is.”

“Hmm,” Nightlock muses, “Incredibly handy and downright irritating?”

“Something like that.”

“And you - do you have any other hidden talents beyond your bow and arrows?”

Alec shrugs, but his shoulders hunch. “Enhanced accuracy and reflexes,” he says stiffly, but then sighs. “It’s not quite as … exciting, I guess. I’ve been training all my life to be half as good as Arkangel in combat.”

“I don’t suppose the genetic lottery is ever fair,” Nightlock murmurs. He turns so that he’s facing Alec, his elbow leant on the railing, and his considers Alec with a small frown.

Ingenuously, Alec blinks again.

“Do you know what energy manipulation is?” Nightlock asks plainly.

“Yeah,” says Alec, “Is that what you do?”

Nightlock nods with a hum. He considers his hand again, flexing and unflexing his fingers.

“It’s easier to let people think it’s telekinesis,” he says, “Easier and safer. Better if people are wrong about me, because they can’t make contingency plans. Kinetikinesis is probably closer to the truth of the matter.”

“So you can control kinetic energy?”
“Control, shape, manipulate, as long as I can physically move to transform it,” Nightlock explains, “It’s easier to generate my own kinetic energy and use that, but I can transform heat and light too. Not so useful when you live in a city where it’s always raining, but beggars cannot be choosers.”

“Does it work with other types of energy? Like … sound energy? Chemical energy?”

“Well, sounds like someone paid attention in high school physics class,” Nightlock laughs a little ruefully, smiling to himself, but his face sobered after a bare second. “You know what, sound is something I’ve never tried, but chemical energy, yes.” He gestures at himself, down the length of his body. “I do have a store of it, after all. For when times get desperate.”

Alec doesn’t get it right away, but when he does, he knows his eyes widen and his mouth parts on instinct. He looks at Nightlock, and then snaps his gaze immediately back to the water, his fingers curling around the railing.

“Oh,” is all he says. Nightlock can turn the chemical energy stored in his body into kinetic energy. That’s what he’s saying. He can quite literally use his life force to supplement his powers, and that -

That sounds terrible. Using his powers to help people, whilst at the same time, it hurts him just as much - Alec’s chest twinges.

“Have you … ever had to do that before?” he asks before he can think better of it.

Nightlock’s smile softens and he glances back out across the bay, some other memory licking at his heels. It’s hard to tell from his face whether it’s pleasant or not.

“Once or twice,” he admits.

“Isn’t that dangerous?”

“Oh, probably. It leaves me with the worst hangover, it’s utterly vile. Which is why I usually just stick to the kinetic manipulation.”
“Huh,” Alec murmurs, but he says nothing else. Water laps against brick somewhere below his feet, black and deep and unending. On the horizon, bleary lights wink at Alec and the soft blue glow of the city seeps into the clouds, blending with the drizzle. The rain collects on Alec’s mask and mists against the prickle of his jaw.

He thinks again of the dead super from the parking lot. He thinks of the man Clary found, with his throat slit beneath that pile of rubbish and refuge, blood seeping into the ground still sticky. He thinks of all the newspaper clippings Magnus had laid out upon his desk that first night when Alec went to him, looking for - looking for what? Solace? Forgiveness? Escape from this constant feeling of being adrift at sea, tossed and turned by the same gentle lapping of the waves as he struggles for balance, even if he never quite falls?

He closes his eyes, even though he shouldn’t. He has his back to a crime scene, and his hands folded on the railings and not on his bow. There’s a man at his side he doesn’t know enough - and still, he closes his eyes.

Nightlock doesn’t move, but the threat is still there. With a click of his fingers, he could reassemble the warehouse behind them, he could forge a path through the water, he could lift Alec off his feet and incapacitate him. He doesn’t, but he could, and Alec feels it, feels it in the way the air still shimmers whenever he’s near, light and heat and kinetic energy pulled and pushed around according to his gravity, whether he wills it or not.

And what can Alec do? Alec can fire an arrow and hit a target. Comparatively, he is powerless.

Helpless.

Useless.

It’s not new information and it doesn’t hit him like a winding punch because his body is already bruised by it. Twenty years bruised, he supposes. You can’t save everyone.

(But maybe you could, if you were better.)

The question he wants to ask comes to him at last and interrupts the quiet. It’s the one that he wishes he could’ve asked Magnus over lunch, but the one he didn’t know how to phrase.
It comes easier now.

“Do you think,” Alec says, his voice barely above a whisper, “you can save people with that power?”

Nightlock doesn’t even hesitate.

“It’s not power that saves people.”

Surprised, Alec blinks, but it contorts into a surly frown as he looks at Nightlock. “Well, what is it then?”

“Intention.” Nightlock’s gaze roams and it lingers on Alec, the hard set of his jaw, the coolness in his eyes; he picks his words carefully. “I think that matters just as much, if not more. Power with bad intentions leads to hatred on the streets, to people dying, to … warehouses being burned down late into the night for no apparent reason.”

He pauses again to read Alec’s expression; it’s probably more telling than Alec realises. Alec feels acutely vulnerable despite all his armour and leather. His mask feels thin and flimsy, and he doesn’t want Nightlock to look, he doesn’t want Nightlock to see; and yet he’s still overcome by this incomprehensible, morbid need to sink his fingers into his chest and tear it open. To bleed out into the rain, the blood-on-his-hands be damned. At least it’ll be his own.

He wants to wrench a hole in himself so that someone might be able to see all the way through, or so that the sparse light of dawn might seep all the way in, should he still be awake to see it when it rises.

He is neither so strong nor so lucky.

Instead, Alec mutters, “Power with good intentions seems to lead to all that anyway.” He grits his teeth, curling his fingers into his palms, wishing he could feel the bite of his nails against his skin. His gloves are too thick, too well made for that. “People have been dying and I can’t do anything about it with a bow and arrows.”
“And you think Arkangel can do any better flying around the city like a hooligan? You think I can do any better with a snap of my fingers?”

“… What?”

“Do you think my power makes me any more capable of saving people's lives than yours?”

Alec feels a little bit stunned.

Well, yes, he wants to say. Yes, obviously. Look at what you can do. It’s amazing. It’s terrifying. It’s so much more than me.

Nightlock’s stare is unequivocal; it doesn’t flinch. Alec feels pinned by it, nails through his hands and feet. Yes is not the right answer here.

“I’m in the same boat as you,” Nightlock says, and though his voice is softer now, it still bares an edge of frustration, the same one Alec cuts himself upon so diligently. “We’re both at a loss here, Sentinel. We’re both one step behind whatever is going on here, we’re both picking up breadcrumbs that have been scattered by the wind. We’re both arriving too late to help people who are already dead, and what use are any powers then?”

He takes a step nearer to Alec and Alec tenses. Nightlock’s eyes are so sharp, so focused, that Alec fears he must see right through him, no bloody wound needed.

“Don’t judge yourself so harshly, Sentinel,” Nightlock says. “You have a good heart.”

Alec’s breath lodges in his throat. He stares at Nightlock, bewildered, but Nightlock doesn’t lose his balance. He says what he means. He’s not lying to Alec. He’s not saying it just for the sake of saying it, to comfort a man he shouldn’t be comforting, who has done nothing to deserve kind and reassuring words.

Alec is a Corporate. Nightlock should want him judged. He should want Alec to hold himself accountable and lose sleep, to hate himself for things both beyond and not beyond his control. Does Nightlock forget that?
Alec says nothing. Nightlock hums, and maybe he’s pleased with himself, or maybe he’s just said what he needs to say and since Alec hasn’t protested it, that’s enough. He turns away from Alec to watch the water, caught easily by the way the waves catch the light of the city upon their crests.

Alec keeps his mouth shut. A strange feeling gathers in his chest, far different to the tormented one that swirls in his gut. This feeling is calmed, like someone has placed their hands over his ears and over his eyes, and the world around him has been muffled.

Perhaps, it’s comforting, however fleeting it might be. Alec’s not so sure, because it bleeds across the line drawn inside of him, that one that divides Sentinel from Alec, polluted by his guilt.

Good intentions are more important than sheer power.

Alec wakes the next morning with this singular thought, but it’s not reassuring. His mind is quiet but the thought is loud, and he repeats it over and over again to himself as he brushes his teeth and dresses for work on autopilot, navigating the subway with a cheap coffee clutched in his hand, and sliding into his office chair with little more than a grunt to his neighbours in greeting.

He stares long and hard at his computer screen but he doesn’t read any of the words. There are emails to address and an audit request from his boss waiting in his in-tray, and at some point in the morning, Simon drops a newspaper on top of his monitor; on page three, Alec finds a brief mention of the warehouse fire from last night. There isn’t even a photograph.

By the time six o’clock rolls around and the office has all but emptied for the night, Alec knows he’s been staring at his screen for a good few hours without doing anything, his fingers seized, crooked over his keyboard.

How long did he stay out with Nightlock last night? He’s not entirely sure; he thinks about the energy scuttling between Nightlock’s fingertips instead, how he had distorted the water and peeled back the hole in the roof with just the curl of his palm. He thinks about the way Nightlock had looked right through him, the sincerity in his eyes upon admitting that he still struggles with the
same thing that Alec does: uselessness. He thinks about the silence after that, how they had stood overlooking the bay until dawn had slunk along the horizon, not saying a word, a strange and strengthening peace settled between them.

And here, Alec thought he hated him. He was so sure that Nightlock wasn’t someone to be trusted, wasn’t someone who could remotely understand Alec and his Sentinel struggle. A Corporate and a vigilante, working together, it should be odd. Hell, it should be laughable, and maybe Alec knows a handful of people who would laugh, but -

Alec finds he doesn’t hate Nightlock. Not like he thought. Maybe not at all, because how can he hate someone striving for the same goal as him -

“Earth to Alexander?”

Alec’s head snaps up, sharp enough that Magnus, on the other side of his partition, blinks in surprise - but Magnus collects himself with a bright smile. He looks tired, but he wears it well, like today, for once, it’s not a burden, but the remnants of a night well spent.

“Are you free tonight?” he asks. In his arms, he clutches an impressive stack of manila folders; his biceps strain at the fabric of his shirt as he adjusts them in his grip. Alec’s brain short-circuits and white noise lances through his ears. He feels a little breathless, a little lighter than before.

It’s certainly enough for him to forget his train of thought.

“Luke Garroway sent over some more witness reports on the arson cases,” Magnus continues, frowning at Alec’s blank face. “I thought we might take a look through them tonight - Alec?”

“I’ll, uh -” says Alec quickly, and Magnus can only smile perplexed. “Oh yeah. Yeah, uh no, that sounds good. Great. I’ll be right there.”

Staring at police records is no different to staring at his computer screen, Alec discovers. In fact,
it’s probably worse because all this talk of arson makes it that much easier for Alec to replay last
night’s conversation with Nightlock in his head.

Magnus is focused, as he always is, flicking through files across the desk from Alec. There’s this
perplexed pinch between his brows that would distract Alec on any other day.

Alec’s thoughts, however, are a mile away.

Or, well - about three and a half miles away, at that warehouse fire last night, and then further
north, up in Harlem, with two dead men whose murders make no sense and keep him up at night.

Can good intentions really make a difference?

Alec doesn’t know. So rarely do people in his line of work have things as noble as good intentions.
It’s taken him so damn long to notice.

But more importantly, can good intentions make a difference when the end result is still the same:
two people dead on Alec’s watch - and doesn’t Alec deserve to take the heat for that, no matter
how noble his cause?

Alec’s hand tightens around his pen; the plastic splinters, but Magnus doesn’t notice. Across the
desk, he keeps writing, his cursive fluid and basically illegible, making notes next to a transcript
that goes on for forty pages. He taps the nib of his pen against the paper in thought, his mouth
forming a taut line.

Magnus has good intentions. That’s something Alec does know, something that is indisputable,
something Idris and senators and self-preservation have no bearing on.

Magnus truly does have more good intentions in the tip of his pinkie finger than Alec has in his
entire body and Idris, in its whole institution.

Magnus has the best intentions and he has them in droves and he needs no superpowers to harness
them either. He does good without being able to manipulate energy in his fingertips, shoot fire
from his palms, or fly. He doesn’t need a bow and arrows. He doesn’t need any of those things.
That is something Alec does know.

How does Alec go about borrowing something like that? How does Alec go about taking something like that and not giving it back?

*Does Idris have good intentions?*

That’s far less clear. If Idris doesn’t have good intentions, then by proxy, nor can Alec, because he’s working in their interests. That’s also something he knows, and it’s a painful thought, isn’t it, to wonder if he can ever really claim to be doing good when he’s only following orders.

He has no choice; he has to do right by Idris because … what other option is there? He’s said as much to Magnus before, here in this office, on another late night hidden away from prying eyes, just like this.

Alec doesn’t know how to do anything else but this. He’s only ever known Idris. He doesn’t know how to strike out on his own, without rules and regimen guiding his arms and legs like puppet strings. He doesn’t know how to make his own choices, because what happens if his own intentions are bad – and then what happens if he never realises in time?

*Hell, what does Idris even do to deserters?*

Alec doesn’t know. There haven’t ever been deserters, other than Valentine Morgenstern, and look how that turned out. It’s stupid to think about.

“Penny for your thoughts?”

Alec looks up, blinking back to reality. Across the desk, Magnus has stopped writing and Alec flushes.

“Uh - what?”

“You’re very quiet tonight. Something on your mind?”
Alec can read the concern in his face, the same as yesterday. Not pity, just kindness. It makes Alec blush and feel mostly like an idiot. He worries last night with Nightlock has left him mostly see-through.

“Do you think …” Alec asks carefully, “… if someone wants to do good, that’s enough to make a difference?”

Magnus makes a wounded noise.

“Straight in there with the philosophical conversation, alright. What’s brought this on?” he asks, but his playful frown quickly softens. He smiles at Alec reassuringly. “Do you really want to know what I think?”

“Yes,” Alec says without thinking, “Always.”

Magnus makes another curious noise, his eyebrows raising. He looks away from Alec, focusing on straightening out the papers on his desk, but Alec watches him intently, cataloguing every movement, every twitch in his fingertips, every clench of his jaw.

“Magnus?”

“Hm, yes,” Magnus says quickly, “Yes, I do think good intentions matter, and truthfully, nothing can ever be achieved without them.”

“But?”

“But,” continues Magnus, “without the ability to act upon those intentions, they can fall rather flat.”

Alec’s face turns grave. His mouth settles into a thin line and he presses his finger into the desk, rubbing at the grain.
“Right,” he says, “Figured as much.”

He turns his attention back to the police report in front of him, but the words swim on the page. He can’t think about arsons when this feels … so much bigger than that. He grits his teeth, willing himself to make heads or tails of it, but Magnus isn’t done.

“That being said,” and Magnus speaks slowly, particular with every word, “the assumption that grand gestures are needed to do good in the world is a misconception.”

Alec looks up.

“What?”

Magnus shrugs. “If you leave saving the world to the people with superpowers or the people with money - well, nothing ever gets done. They’re either corrupt or too thinly stretched on the ground to be everywhere at once. The former, more than the latter. In my opinion, good intentions are most valuable from the ground up.”

He sounds a lot like Nightlock. And that’s not a shocking realisation either.

It’s not the first time Alec’s noticed either, and maybe that’s a sign. A sign that Alec has to listen, however much his own conscience might protest and tell him he cannot be redeemed from a slip-up like this.

Magnus studies him, his gaze roaming Alec’s face, dipping down to his mouth, straying to his throat, tripping back up to his eyes and meeting his gaze for a moment that lasts longer than it should. Alec fidgets under the scrutiny.

“Alexander,” Magnus prompts gently, “What’s going on-”

The phone on Magnus’ desk begins to ring, cutting off whatever Magnus is about to say. It’s just like yesterday, and maybe - maybe that’s a sign too.

A sign that someone up there doesn’t want Alec to grasp at straws and fool himself into thinking
there’s a way out of the one thing he’s only ever known with certainty.

Don’t fool yourself, Sentinel.

Magnus frowns at the phone as if he can will it into silence - it’s late, way past office hours, and whoever is calling either has a tip or a problem or can’t be caught saying what they want to say in the daylight - but he picks it up on the fifth ring with a short sigh.

“Hello, you’ve reached the office of Magnus Bane -”

Magnus’ frown deepens.

“Hello, Simon.”

Alec’s hearing is sharp, but not sharp enough for him to hear exactly what Simon says, other than something very rushed and very excitable on the other end of the line - but when is Simon not either of those things? Alec is already exhausted.

“No, I’m still in the building,” Magnus says slowly into the phone, “Well, you could, but I imagine it will be of little use, seeing as he’s not at home and is in fact, sitting right opposite me. Mm-hm. Okay.”

Magnus locks eyes with Alec across the desk, his dark nails tapping against the plastic shell of the receiver. Alec glances up at the clock. It’s nearly nine already, and Simon should be long gone for the night, tucked up in bed with his SNES - or whatever it is that he does with his spare time that Alec doesn’t really care to know about.

“No, I’ll tell him,” Magnus says then, “Transfer the call through. Okay. Bye.”

Magnus hangs up, resting the phone back in its cradle, but his hand doesn’t leave the receiver.

“What was that about?” Alec asks.
“Phone call from an outside line,” Magnus replies as his phone starts ringing again. “Simon said he was just leaving for the night and your desk phone started ringing, so he answered it.”

“Who is it?” Alec frowns at the ringing telephone. Magnus picks it up and holds the receiver out to Alec.

“Your brother, by the sounds of it,” says Magnus. His tone is unreadable but there’s something in his eyes that’s curious, as if he’s trying to anticipate how Alec might react to whatever he’s about to hear.

It won’t be good. It’s never good when Jace is phoning him at work. Alec quickly takes the phone, his knuckles brushing Magnus’, but he doesn’t have time to think about it.

“Hello? Jace?”

“This call will be recorded and monitored. You have a collect call from an inmate at a New York City Corrections Department. If you would like to accept this call, please dial one now.”

Alec’s fingers clench around the receiver, just shy of splitting the plastic in his fist. Oh, God fucking help him.

He looks up, but Magnus beats him to it, already spinning his finger in the rotary dial all the way round to the number one. Alec sets his mouth into a hard line as he turns away from Magnus’ obvious intrigue, hunching his shoulders and curling his hand around his mouth to muffle his words.

The phone line beeps three times with a dial tone, and then there’s noise on the other end: the hum of voices, the general raucous of a police holding cell, the commotion of a city precinct that Alec knows far too well.

And then Jace pipes up, and honestly, Alec curses the very day they met.

“Alec!” Jace barks, “Jesus Christ, I’ve been trying to call you for like, twenty minutes - you know I only get three shots at this, right? I already called the apartment and your desk but Simon fucking Lewis picked up instead -”
“You’re seriously going to complain about me when you’re the one calling from a holding cell?” Alec grits out between his teeth. He glances back at Magnus, and whilst Magnus busies himself inspecting his nails and admiring the ceiling, it’s clear that he’s listening intently to this conversation.

“Please tell me you didn’t get arrested again,” Alec hisses. There’s really no point beating around the bush.

“Listen,” says Jace, dragging out the word. “Listen, okay, this time it wasn’t my fault - some cop was waving his gun around at a kid and I may or may not have got in the way and smacked it out of his hand, but like - c’mon. It was a kid. I’m not a monster, I can’t ignore that shit.”

Alec closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose.

“Do you have your stuff with you?” he asks, very deliberately. Jace knows what he means.

“Oh. Yeah. I’m still in my suit, full gear and everything. You know how it works, they take my guns and my wings, but I get to keep the mask. They’re still too scared of Idris to try anything when I’m in lock-up. I just hope no-one is messing with my kit in the evidence locker, because you know Iz will literally kill them -”

“Have you called her?”

“Iz? No way. She’d kill me too,” says Jace. “Look, Alec, can you just come bail me out already? I’ll pay you back this time. Promise.”

Alec sighs. “Does it even count as a lie if I already know it’s not true the moment you say it?” he mutters, running his hand through his hair. “Okay, fine. I’ll be there in half an hour. Do not cause any more trouble, or I swear to God, I will leave you there.”

“Thank you,” Jace chimes, “You’re the best. Can always count on you.”

“Yeah, well,” Alec grumbles, “I’d say don’t get used to it, but. You don’t exist to make my life easy.”
“I exist to make it exciting,” Jace corrects, “C’mon, what else were you planning on doing tonight? Typing up audits in your cubicle at nine o’clock at night and then dragging your sorry ass home on the subway for cold noodles for dinner? Nice. Real thrilling.”

Alec bites his tongue. He’s not going to tell Jace that he’s spoiled Alec’s evening with Magnus - because that might suggest that there is something to spoil, and really, they’re meant to be working - not Alec staring off into space, enraptured by the way Magnus fiddles with his pen, or how the tangle of necklaces in between the open buttons of his shirt glint in the yellowing light, or the way he somehow knows exactly what Alec needs to hear to quiet the demons whispering in his ear.

Alec’s lucky. Jace is too oblivious to ask why Alec wasn’t at his desk to pick up his phone call, and he’s much too dense to ask whose number this is now. Izzy clearly hasn’t told him about the arrangement with Magnus. Izzy clearly hasn’t told him anything about Magnus, and Alec knows full well that he’s gushed to his sister plenty about Magnus in the past.

Heat blooms in Alec’s cheeks, blotchy and uncomfortable. He chances another look at Magnus, but the embarrassment only prickles. He looks away just as quickly.

“Half an hour,” Alec repeats again, trying to make his voice as stern and threatening as possible, even if Jace won’t care one bit, “No talking to anyone, no trying to rile the police, no getting in fights with the guy in the cell next to you. ‘Cus I can still tell mom and dad.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“I would.”

Truthfully, it’s an empty threat, and Alec knows it.

Jace knows it too, even if he always fails to acknowledge it. Maryse and Robert know about all his brushes with the law; they know that the nights he doesn’t return to HQ aren’t actually spent in someone else’s bed like he boasts, and it doesn’t take a genius to see where his suit tracker has been. They know and they turn a blind eye anyway, because it’s Jace, the golden boy, he doesn’t know any better, but you do, Alec. You know better than that, and I know you would never put yourself in the same position because you’re the responsible one. That’s why we expect more of you, because we know how capable you are.
Alec bites hard at the inside of his cheek until the voice of his mother in his head is silenced. What she says now - what she has said in the past - isn’t wrong. Alec is long familiar with the knowledge that they will let Jace slide for things Alec would be crucified for.

Not that Alec - or Sentinel - would ever put himself in a position to get arrested in the first place. He is far too careful for that.

“If you do this for me, I’ll trade patrol shifts with Lydia for a whole week ,” says Jace. “I’ll go with Raj, and you and her can hang out and talk about painting your living room walls grey, or whatever it is you like to talk about-”

“Good bye , Jace.”

Alec clunks the phone back into the cradle before he can hear whatever spluttered words Jace frantically tries to say before he’s hung up. Alec squeezes his eyes tightly shut again, just for a moment, just to will himself back into sanity.

This is not how he was hoping his night would go. Well, he’s not really sure what he was hoping for - maybe the tickle of some weird warmth in his chest again, or the delight that comes in seeing Magnus’ face light up with a breakthrough in the case he’s working on - but it sure as hell isn't this.

When he opens his eyes again, Magnus is there to meet him.

“Forgive me for eavesdropping,” he says without pause. “Am I correct in understanding your brother has been arrested ?”

Oh, it doesn’t matter if Izzy wants to kill Jace - Alec is going to make it his sworn duty to kill him first. Jace can count on it.

“Something like that,” Alec grumbles, “I, uh - I need to go. Bail him out or - whatever he needs this time. He got in a fight with a police officer … again . I’m sorry about this, Magnus, I know I said I’d stay - and we were talking -”

Magnus rounds the desk with careful steps and Alec’s fixates on his hands, this twitch in his fingers that makes Alec wonder if he’s going to reach for Alec’s arm, gently cup Alec’s elbow in his palm, offer Alec a warm condolence - but he doesn’t. Magnus’ arm falls back to his side and
Alec wonders if he’s being a little greedy (and a little foolish too) for wanting such a thing. It’s a stray but unignorable thought.

“Alexander,” Magnus says, searching Alec’s face. Whatever he’s looking for, Alec is not sure he’s going to find. Alec has long since passed the point where fear and worry are the first emotions he feels when he learns Jace is spending the night in the cells. Instead, it’s mainly regret.

Regret that Jace was ever born at all and Alec was cursed to be his partner and brother.

“Alec,” Magnus continues and the severity in his voice is both moving and mortifying for the exact same reasons. Alec feels his cheeks begin to redden, heat tingling in the tips of his ears. “Is it serious? If it’s an infraction against the police, you need to be careful how you deal with it - the police never play fair and they always cover for their own. If you need a lawyer, I can put you in contact with a few friends of mine, pro bono -”

Alec sighs heavily, rubbing wearily at the scruff on his jaw. Magnus tracks the movement, staring just long enough that Alec’s mortification about Jace brims over into bashfulness.

“I -” Alec starts, before sighing again, “Whilst I appreciate the sentiment, you’re implying that Jace doesn’t absolutely deserve this.”

“This happens regularly?”

“More regularly than it should,” Alec replies, “My brother is -”


A superhero.

“- a moron.”

Yeah, that works. And it makes Magnus smile too, this tiny little confused thing, tucked away into the corner of his mouth like he knows he shouldn’t be laughing at the mess of what Alec considers a normal family bonding experience, but he just can’t help it.
Beyond the amusement, however, Alec also finds relief in Magnus’ face: relief for someone he doesn’t know, relief that the police aren’t going to try something whilst Jace is locked up in a cell, relief that Jace will not be just another number on a page buried by the system, passed across desks and into the trash.

But behind that, Alec sees Magnus’ wariness. There’s his disbelief, a scepticism he’s rightly earned because there’s no way Alec is telling him the whole truth, and maybe they both know that.

“I could drive you,” Magnus says then. He takes a half-step closer, cocking his head to the side. He considers Alec curiously, earnestly, still waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Alec’s mouth goes dry. He can’t help it. There’s this slip of Magnus’ collarbones that draws his attention like a magnet: a deep vee of brown skin, soft shadows rolling over his sternum, and three fine gold chains dipping into the same valleys and disappearing into his shirt - and this close, Alec has an awfully good view.

Izzy would laugh at him. Jace would yell at him for not taking this situation seriously.

Alec really wants to know if the ground could open up and swallow him whole.

“I -” Alec stumbles, “What?”

“I could drive you,” Magnus urges again, “since my car is in the garage downstairs. It would be quicker than taking the subway, I’m sure.”

Alec almost says yes - it’s the part of his brain without a filter that sometimes likes to speak before reason, before dignity can catch up and clamp his mouth shut. Luckily, this time, he’s too tongue-tied to say anything.

And he’s also too angry about Jace to agree. Alec kind of wants to take the subway if it means Jace will have to wallow longer in police custody. And if that makes Alec petty … well, so be it.

“No, it’s - thanks, but no. It’s my problem - well, it’s Jace’s problem - and you’ve got all this -” Alec waves vaguely at the piles of paperwork strewn all across the desk, “- to deal with.”
Magnus makes a low noise and turns away from Alec, hooking open the bottom drawer on his desk with the toe of his shoe. He grabs a stack of Post-Its and a pen, the cap of which he flicks off with his thumb, and scrawls something quick and messy.

“If you need something,” he says, folding the Post-It in half and handing it to Alec between his index and middle finger, “then call me.”

“Magnus, you don’t have to -”

“I insist,” says Magnus, “Please.”

Alec takes the note from his fingers and slides it into the breast pocket of his shirt. Magnus’ gaze lingers on his chest.

Alec reads the note on the subway.

*Alexander*, it begins, followed by the scrawl of Magnus’ number, and Alec is quick to realize it’s not the one for the telephone on his office desk. Hunched up against the subway doors with his Sentinel gear looped over his shoulder in a holdall, Alec pinches the tiny square of paper between both his thumbs and forefingers.

*Alexander*.

Magnus has signed the note with his initials only: *M.B.* in curling loops and a flourish of deep purple ink. The last digit of the phone number is a zero and there’s a spot, right where the pen left the page, where Magnus had pressed too hard and the ink has bloomed, a dark, bruised blotch, still slightly damp to against Alec’s thumb.

Alec stares hard at those eleven digits and almost misses his stop, barely leaping between the door
“Y’know, you’re a hard man to get a hold of these days,” Jace says, rubbing at his wrists where the red welts of handcuffs mark his skin. They’re on the rooftop of the detention centre; Jace is in full Arkangel regalia, and Alec -

Well, Alec is wondering how he can ever live down marching into a police precinct dressed as Sentinel and looking a cop straight in the eye as he demanded to let Jace go free.

It wasn’t like he could do it as Alec. Sure, he could’ve told Izzy or reported it to his mother and father, and they would’ve sent over some suit from headquarters with all the proper paperwork and a briefcase full of cash, but -

Alec groans, dragging his hand down his face, digging his gloved fingers into his jaw.

“Staying out past curfew without us, rolling up late to patrol three nights a week, and now disappearing off-grid entirely?” Jace continues, oblivious. He rolls his shoulders and his wings unfurl with a metallic creak, steel ailerons flexing with a hydraulic sigh. “Since when do you play hooky, Mister Always-Gotta-Be-In-Control? Who yanked the stick out of your ass?”

“I’m not playing hooky,” Alec grumbles as he hoists his quiver higher onto his shoulder, deliberately turning away from Jace to survey the city. “Maybe sometimes I’ve had enough of putting up with your shit and want a night of peace and quiet.”

“Yeah, well,” Jace pouts, “Shut up.”

“Says the guy who got himself arrested for the third time this year, but okay.”

Alec flicks over the frequency on the police dispatcher strapped to his utility belt, thankful for the thrum of static to fill the semi-quiet. From the corner of his eye, he sees Jace open his mouth, no doubt to say something petulant, but Alec tries really hard to make it look like he’s listening to the
Jace’s shoulders fall and he crosses his arms about his chest as he gets the message. “So,” he mutters, “Are you free to go on patrol tonight or what?”

Across the radio, a dispatcher calls in a civil disturbance somewhere in the south. It’s about fifteen blocks from where they are now; they could be there in five minutes if Jace flies and Alec’s stomach holds out.

A pair of patrol cars answer the dispatch call with dawdling urgency, one of them even going so far as to say they’re swinging by Starbucks and doing a donut run en route.

It’s just so typical and all Alec wants to is turn the radio off. He doesn’t want to be out here, not tonight.

But he can’t drag himself back to the office now. Magnus might have already left for the night. And Alec -

Alec’s not sure he can swallow his pride enough to admit to Jace that he wants to ditch him in favour of sitting hunched at a desk in near-constant silence reading about mysterious fires instead.

Jace wouldn’t understand - to him, making a difference is this, running around in the dark wearing masks, chasing emergency calls, breaking noses and accepting the consequences, despite just being sprung from a jail cell only hours before. To Jace, making a difference is not a pen, some paper, a telephone, and that strange and unforgiving drive that ignites in Magnus’ eyes when he’s so focused he sometimes forgets to blink for a minute.

If Alec were to tell Jace all of that - well, he wouldn’t hear the end of it.

Alec pinches the bridge of his nose one last time, but his gloved fingers squeak against his mask. The dispatcher upgrades the civil disturbance call to a drunk and disorderly. Jace’s wings begin to whir, and even though Alec’s not looking at him, he knows the expression Jace wears. It’s impatient, one eyebrow quirked in belligerent expectation.

Alec clicks his scope onto his bow but doesn’t notch an arrow. Squinting, he peers through the lens, the night laid out before him in unforgiving green and thermal signatures, an alien contrast to the blues and coquettish pinks that rise from nightclubs and late-night bars into the stratosphere, only seen from a perch as high as his.

Down on the streets below, there are people massing, jeering loudly and drunkenly, waving beer cans in the air and sloshing hops all over the pavement. He can smell it, that sickly sweetness of ale and lager, sticky on the soles of shoes and frothy in the gutters where the light is yellower, dirtier. He cringes with each reckless shout, too vulgar and uncouth. He grimaces when one drunk man takes a meandering swing at another who looks at him funny and it devolves into a grappling match, surrounded on all sides by childish cheering.

It’s not violent, not quite a riot yet - just the humdrum of men turfed out of the downtown bars, commiserating a loss in whatever football or hockey was played on the TVs tonight.

But it teeters on the edge of control, and so Alec is wary.

Wary and tired, because no-one ever tells you that being a super and keeping the peace means this, if it can be called peace-keeping at all.

He follows the crowds slowly towards the metro station at the end of the street, walking parallel with them across the rooftops, a scowl sewn into his brow when the drunken chants become more derogatory than inebriated fun. He’s not sure where Jace is, but he knows he’s nearby for the flash of silver that bullets through the dark, caught from the corner of his eye. The cops still haven’t arrived, and whilst that’s not a surprise, if Alec has to step in and stop anyone from looting the shuttered storefronts, he can only imagine how bad it will end up looking, no matter his good intentions.

Another patched-together press conference for Idris, another lecture in his parents’ office, another night staring at his mask in the bathroom mirror and wondering how he ended up here, even though there’s nowhere else he could’ve found himself ...
arrow from his quiver and securing one end of his grappling line to the fletchling. The bubbling crowd has begun to thin, the less drunk meandering towards the subway station, and the more rowdy lingering further down the street, stumbling into each other, arms looped around necks, voices carrying aggressively. Alec keeps one eye on them and the other on his arrow as he notches it in his bow and lines up the shot.

The gap between the buildings is some twenty feet - and Jace could probably jump that, even without his wings, because he’s seen people do it on TV and it’s just that easy for him - but Alec is stuck taking the layman’s route. It frustrates him as the night has already dragged on, and he longs for bed and his cold noodle dinner more than he’ll admit out loud.

The building opposite is all smooth brick and plate glass windows, winking in the neon dark - there’s nowhere really to land his arrow, unless he cares to commit public vandalism.

“Need a hand?”

The hairs on the back of Alec’s neck jump to attention, but he doesn’t turn around, not immediately, not this time. He settles his shoulders into a rigid line and lowers his bow towards the ground, letting his bowstring slacken.

“What is it with you and creeping up on me?” he asks, half wondering when this turns into a running joke, and half wondering if they’re already there. He turns and there’s Nightlock, with his hands stuffed in his pockets and collar popped to the whistling wind.

He looks at he always does: nonplussed, artfully ruffled, somehow still elegant in the crisp lines of his supersuit, wearing it rather than letting it wear him. There’s a slight purse to his lips, but it slips away quietly as his eyes rake over Alec, probably tracking the twitch in Alec’s jaw and the dark circles that peek out through the eyeholes in Alec’s own mask.

“I revel in the drama, what can I say,” Nightlock shrugs. His strides are long and purposeful as he approaches Alec, a tilt of his chin in greeting as he steps up to Alec’s shoulder and peers down over the edge of the rooftop, into the street. His nose wrinkles just a little.

“Protest?” he asks.

Alec allows the tension in his shoulders to dissipate. “No, but it might turn into looting, so we’re keeping an eye on it.”
“Hmm,” Nightlock considers, and he scans the sky then. “I don’t see blondie around. Has he ditched you with the grunt work yet again?”

“He’s around,” Alec mutters darkly, but it’s entirely believable that something shiny has diverted Jace’s attention elsewhere. “Somewhere.”

He better be.

Nightlock picks up on Alec’s mood easily; maybe he can feel the way Alec is prickling, picking and pulling at the unseen energy in the air. Maybe he can feel it distorting across Alec’s skin, or maybe he can just read it that plainly in the hard set of Alec’s jaw.

“Rough night?” he prompts, his voice a little softer than Alec expects.

Alec grunts in response. “Not rough,” he says, “Just … troublesome.”

“How so?”

Alec squints, looking to Nightlock to see if he actually cares for Alec’s answer or if he’s just making polite conversation, but -

Alec is surprised to find something genuine held carefully in Nightlock’s eyes. He blinks; it doesn’t fade; Alec finds it somehow familiar. You have a good heart echoes inside his head. He feels it like a pulled hair, a burning nerve, a warehouse smoking at a distance. For reasons he doesn’t understand, the Post-It note with Magnus’ phone number - which he has tucked carefully into the inside of his supersuit - begins to burn against his skin too.

“Should I not have asked?” Nightlock probes, his tone a little flippant, “I suppose we’re not quite ready for small talk yet .”

“No, I - it’s alright,” Alec mumbles. “It’s just - I had other plans tonight. Now I’m here. Go figure. It’s … Arkangel’s fault.”
“I’m not even remotely surprised,” Nightlock remarks. He’s amused, Alec can tell, but there’s something embittered about his smile too. “What did he do? Save too many people for Idris’ liking? Punch a cop in the face and get away with just a caution?”

Alec can’t even argue. Nightlock is absolutely right, and it only harkens back to their conversations before, about privilege. Because it wasn’t really Alec who got Jace off the hook tonight, no.

“Something like that,” Alec mutters, just below his breath. But Nightlock hears him, and laughs this dry, derisive bark of a laugh. It trawls up Alec’s spine unexpectedly.

“Well, it’s certainly nothing new,” Nightlock chuckles, “Although it is refreshing to hear you moan about it, so thank you for that.”

Alec squints one eye. “... Anytime?”

Nightlock huffs again, but Alec doesn’t miss the slip of his tongue pressed against his teeth. It’s the sort of dangerous smile that makes the world pause, just for him. It’s a smile that doesn’t even fade as he nods his head towards the streets below, his gaze fastened on something Alec hasn’t yet seen.

“A half dozen men just turned away down that alley across the street,” he says, and the amusement still in his voice means that Alec doesn’t process his words right away.

“What?”

Nightlock nods his head again.

“There, look,” he instructs, and Alec lifts his bow again to peer through the scope. Sure enough, Nightlock is correct: a group of men who have been hanging back at the back of the procession have peeled away down a side street, although their loud and jeering voices still echo. He knows these sorts of men: brackish and boisterous and fraternal; team colours in their shirts and their facepaint and the grazes on their knuckles. The sort of men for whom one too many drinks and dangerous; the sort who Izzy would dismiss in a nightclub with a tiresome roll of her eyes after one or two try to get too feely, or who might might spit at Alec’s feet if he dared look too long at another man -

Maybe they’re just taking a shortcut home. Alec thinks nothing of it, and is lowering his bow
again, when Nightlock speaks.

“A woman just turned down that way, not a minute before them. Walking by herself, head down, very fast. They’re following her.”

Oh. Alec’s stance shifts, his shoulders tensing, stomach churning unpleasantly. He pulls his bowstring taut again, the arrow flat along his sights. Peering through his scope, he lets the arrow fly, silent and swift through the dark. It finds its mark, a notch in the brickwork in the opposite roof, with pinpoint accuracy; it doesn’t making a sound. Alec knows how to move through the air without disturbing it. It’s second nature.

The zipline tugs against Alec’s belt. He unfastens his end and loops it in a knot around the ventilation piping at his feet.

Nightlock lets out a low whistle. “Nice shot,” he remarks.

Alec yanks on his zipline and it doesn’t budge; it will take his weight.

“Yeah, well, not all of us can fly everywhere we want to go,” he says. Nightlock raises his eyebrows pointedly - a challenge, perhaps - but says nothing.

Alec takes a few steps back from the roof edge, only to take a run up. He leaps off the edge into the argon-soaked abyss, and for one exhilarating moment, he’s in free fall. But then he catches the zipwire with his bow like a hang glider and his shoulders jerk upwards as he’s propelled forward along the line. He doesn’t look back; doesn’t see if Nightlock watches him go; doesn’t call back are you coming or not? He doesn’t wonder about the look on Nightlock’s face, not when the wind is whipping against his mask and his legs are dangling a hundred feet above street level.

Alec slows his slide down the wire as he nears the opposite rooftop and hauls himself up onto the ledge with a silent grunt. He rights himself, gathering the wire up into a coil on his belt, and Nightlock appears next to him, an apparition from out of the dark. His hands are still shoved deep in his pockets; not a hair is out of place on his head.

His eyebrows are raised as if he’s impressed, but he doesn’t say anything, and that makes Alec roll his eyes. Instead, Nightlock turns towards the far side of the roof and starts walking, and Alec can only hurry after.
Sure enough, there is a woman in the alleyway, walking parallel with Nightlock and Alec. She’s walking fast enough that Alec knows she’s aware she’s being followed. Her hand is tight around the strap of her purse, clutched to the side of her body, and she has her keys between her fingers, the clink of tarnished bronze unmistakable. She doesn’t look back over her shoulder, but Alec can tell she’s on high alert - and it’s not like the men following are trying to be quiet.

Someone hollers; it could be a catcall, but the words are too slurred. The intention is not.

It raises Alec’s hackles, as it always does. This is not an unfamiliar sight, but too often does Alec arrives too late, when these incidents have already been called in to the police and the worst has already been done and tears already shed.

But it’s not going to happen this time. Alec won’t let it.

His good intentions will matter this night.

Alec selects another arrow as he lines up his sights with the group of drunk men. There are six of them, which isn’t really a problem when both he and Nightlock excel at long-range combat, but it’s still more than he’d like if things go sour.

“At least three of them are armed,” Nightlock remarks, almost in Alec’s ear. “Two in the waistband, one beneath the arm.”

Alec watches the man in question through his scope, tracking him as he staggers forward. Immediately Alec spots something large and bulky beneath his arm, filling out his jacket strangely.

“Looks like a semi-automatic,” Alec murmurs, “At least 9 mm. Why the Hell does he have that?”

“Hmm,” hums Nightlock, adjusting his gloves. “Let’s not give him the chance to show us.”

Alec nods. And with a pinch of his fingers, he lets his arrow fly.

The arrow zips through the air, piercing into the concrete at the feet of the man with the gun.
“I think I woulda preferred if you’d hit him,” Nightlock remarks with a click of his tongue. Below, the man is shouting, another is scrambling backwards from the arrow on his hands and knees, and the others are pointing wildly at the rooftop where Sentinel and Nightlock stand.

The woman, much to Alec’s relief, has bolted, taking her chances with Alec’s distraction. Part of Alec wants to go after her and see her safely to a train station or her apartment, but he also doesn’t want to leave Nightlock alone to deal with whatever this is about to become -

His ears aren’t sharp enough to hear the release of the safety on a handgun, but the bullet that explodes into the brick below his feet is plenty loud enough. Sparks fly and Alec’s ears ring, his vision spinning. He leaps backwards, away from the edge, but Nightlock doesn’t budge, rolling his eyes at the drunk man’s terrible shot.

He glances back at Alec, looking him deliberately up and down.

“But don’t get shot on me, Sentinel,” he says, and then he steps off the edge of the building, plummeting towards the street as another gunshot rings out, clanging off a ventilation pipe.

The air is sharp as Alec sucks in a breath, grabbing another arrow. His fingers twitch, the arrow flies, but Nightlock waves his hand in a sudden arc and the handgun goes hurtling out of the drunk man’s hand, skidding into a dumpster. Alec’s arrow misses its mark, but clips the man’s empty hand with a spurt of blood.

There’s no time to watch him reel back or watch him charge at Nightlock in blind anger. Two other men immediately wrestle with the guns in their waistbands, and as much as Alec wants to see Nightlock single-handedly flatten a person, Alec needs to get down there, stat.

Grabbing his zipline, Alec lashes the end around the closest ventilation shaft and jumps. He falls, ten, fifteen feet, until the line goes taut and swing him against the side of the building. Another loud gunshot pierces through the dark. Snapping to look over his shoulder, Alec sees another man shaking with a revolver in his hand, frantically reloading it as he points it at Nightlock, and Nightlock -

Nightlock, with one hand outstretched to pin two men to the ground with invisible force, is staring at the a scorch mark that has singed the epaulette of his coat.
He looks pissed.

Alec loosens his grip on his zipline, dropping fast and dangerously until his boots hit the ground with a heavy thud. He rips his bow from his shoulder and notches another arrow before he has even turned to the fight.

He doesn’t have to pause to find his mark. That’s his gift. His arrow pierces straight through the sleeve of the man scrabbling on his hands and knees for the handgun Nightlock sent flying. He pins the man to the ground.

It’s a perfect shot.

Alec’s blood is pumping.

He grabs another arrow, and that one too, lands where he wills it, clipping the temple of another man. The man stumbles, blood streaming into his eyes, his sense of balance uprooted as he trips over his own feet. His head bounces off the concrete with a sickening thunk.

There’s no time to stop; there’s only fever, only instinct. A second man rushes Alec, aiming to tackle him around the middle, but Alec is faster. Alec is always faster.

Alec wrenches the man’s arm behind his back, throwing him to the ground and smacking him across the back of the head with his bow. The man is knocked out cold.

Another gunshot rattles Alec’s brain.

And then a thrusting gust of wind embeds itself in the stomach of the man with the revolver; he doubles over at the middle, spitting up clear fluid and gagging, dropping his gun in the same instant.

Alec wheels around to look for Nightlock, but Nightlock is already there, gliding through the frenzy, unbothered. He arcs his hand dramatically and another surge of energy ploughs into the man like a tidal wave, and he thumps to the floor with a winded gasp, clutching his stomach.
One of the other men lunges for Nightlock, but Alec sees him and kicks low at the man’s knees, smacking him in the face with his bow. Blood erupts from the man’s nose, hands pawing at his face as mangled cartilage streams out into his palms.

Alec fires another arrow. He doesn’t wait to see if the man falls; the loud, grunting cry from behind lets Alec knows he hit his bullseye. He spins around, shoving another man backwards and his skull cracks on the ground, the whites of his eyes rolling back in his head.

The breath is coming fast and painful in Alec’s chest, but he feels alive, radiating with triumph. He looks to Nightlock, and Nightlock tears the last gun out of the man’s palm and flings it down the alleyway with his magic. And then he’s lifting the man from his feet and dangling him in the air, tossing him into a nearby dumpster with a loud and rattling clang.

There’s a smile blooming on Alec’s face: not a good smile, not an honourable smile, but one that’s crooked and fearless and alight. It’s been too long since he felt like this; since he felt adrenaline trampling through his veins, running rampant in his blood. The fine spray of blood not his own is warm across his cheek, and he smells it too, that ferrous taste seeping into the gutters and the asphalt.

Someone shouts. Nightlock answers with the thrust of his palm, a volley of energy parting the remaining men on their feet, all of them leaping for cover. Close quarters mean nothing to him. He’s unstoppable. Unflinching. Incredible.

Metal scrapes across the ground as someone collides with a dumpster. Alec can taste the electricity in the air on the tip of his tongue. It’s like he can feel Nightlock, feel how the air moves and shifts around him; he can sense where he is without even having to look, but look he still does, because why would he want to miss this.

Absolute power crackles in Nightlock’s fingertips, it drips down his chin, it pools in his upturned smile that courts the devilish.

He’s just like Alec. He gets high on this too.

And then, from the corner of his eye, Alec clocks the first man, still sprawled on his belly, dragging himself across the ground towards his handgun, his fingers reaching desperately for the grip.
Nightlock hasn’t noticed, knocking back another man with a blast from his hand and ducking out of the way of a punch from a second. He seizes the man by the cuff of his jacket and throws him over his shoulder, his whole body crumpling on impact. He groans, arms spread out wide, but he doesn’t get back to his feet.

The man lying on the ground finds his handgun, his fingers curling around the trigger as he lines up his sights with Nightlock’s chest.

The arrow barely trembles in Alec’s fingertips before it whizzes over Nightlock’s shoulder. It’s a brush of fletchling against Nightlock’s cheek, burying itself in the shoulder of the man on the ground. Nightlock doesn’t stop moving, wheeling around and dredging power up from the ground through his body, before blasting the man into the wall.

Nightlock looks back over his shoulder, eyebrows raised, hair a little windswept. His eyes are dark and provocative, something a little out-of-breath about him. Alec’s mouth falls open.

“I had that,” Nightlock says, clicking his fingers to snap the arrow stuck in the man’s shoulder, bending the shaft so that it won’t be removed easily. The man cries out, groaning with his hand clenched tightly over the wound, but Nightlock doesn’t spare him a look.

Nightlock nods his head at Alec. “One left,” he says, and Alec turns around: the last man is staggering towards the mouth of the alleyway, the revolver loose in his grasp.

Nightlock tilts his chin, a silent shall we? left poised in the air as it settles.

Alec’s chest heaves. He feels red exertion in his face, sweat beneath his mask, a sting in his chest from the cold air.

He strings another arrow in his bow. His mouth forms a half-smile. And then starts running, because he knows Nightlock will catch up.
The ground seems to vibrate under Alec’s every footfall, his pace fast and burning in his thighs. The air is so cold that he could mistake its taste for blood in his mouth, and the drizzle begins to cut at his cheeks like tiny shards of glass.

He picks up his pace. The man with the gun has a good headstart on them, but it won’t be enough, not with Nightlock easily matching Alec’s stride, the only sign of his exertion the burn on his coat and a faint tinge of red in his cheeks disappearing beneath his mask.

Part of Alec knows he should call Jace, tell him their location, get Jace to catch their guy before he bursts out into the main street - but Alec’s not listening to that part.

No, this one’s Alec’s catch.

Alec bows his head into the chase and runs faster. The mouth of the alleyway opens up before them, bright lights piercing and violent against Alec’s face, making him squint and his eyes water. The man ahead veers sideways into a dumpster, tripping in his panic to escape.

Nightlock pulls ahead of Alec - *is he even running anymore, or is he floating?* - and beneath his heavy coat, Alec can see the muscles working in his back.

He’s dangerous. God, he’s dangerous, more dangerous than anyone Alec has ever met. He’s so tentatively balanced between exhilaration and anger and control, and he’s on Alec’s side.

Not Idris’ side. *Alec’s side.* He’s shoulder to shoulder with Alec, pushing Alec to run further, run faster -

What is this thrill? Why has he never felt it before?

Why does it feel like rust and friction and teeth at a tender spot and why does he want more of it?

Why does it feel like a desperate arrow, aimed not for the target, the man with the gun, but for the darkness of longing behind him?

Alec hears his heartbeat in his ears. Pulse in his fingertips. Adrenaline surging through his veins.
His blood is boiling. He wants more of it, but then he drags his eyes from Nightlock’s back to the fleeing man again, and -

There’s a car parked at the end of the alleyway, two men lounging on the hood.

_Fuck_, Alec thinks, _civilians_, but then he looks at the car again. Looks at its deep blue paint, how freshly it’s rolled out of a car wash, how it’s mirrors are a little bulkier than normal -

Restricted plates.

_Lights in the grill._

_Department issue model._

_Fuck, they’re undercover cops._

Alec reenters reality so sharply that he’s sure he’s incinerated upon impact. His stomach plunges. He feels the bucket of cold water, the answering crush as the thrill of the chase collapses in on itself.

He thinks about Arkangel in a police holding cell, and then he thinks about Nightlock, and he knows those two stories don’t end the same way.

_Fuck._

Alec lunges for Nightlock’s arm before he can step out of the shadows, yanking him back into the dark. Nightlock staggers backwards, caught off balance, and he snaps around to stare at Alec.

“Let go of me,” he says dangerously, that provocative blackness unfurling in his eyes - but Alec holds fast, gripping Nightlock’s arm ever tighter.

“There are cops out there,” Alec hisses, “Are you an idiot? You can’t go out there, they’ll see you. They’ll see _us_.”
“Oh, what can they do?” Nightlock snarks, but his eyes are bright and inflamed and he’s still riding that high, “Shoot me? No-one can shoot me -”

He tries to rip his arms from Alec’s hand again, but Alec just grabs his other elbow, twisting Nightlock back against the wall of the alleyway. He doesn’t want to be doing this - and he knows Nightlock could push him away with the flick of his fingers, have him blasted into the brickwork with just a snarl - but Alec presses his hand flat against Nightlock’s chest anyway, and tries to plead with his eyes.

Don’t do this.

“You -” Nightlock hisses, his jaw twitching. He wraps his fingers around Alec’s wrist. Static leaps in arcs from his fingertips and he pushes back against Alec’s hand. Alec steps forward again, crowding Nightlock against the wall, hoping the shadows will swallow them up.

“Please,” Alec insists. “We can’t be here, come on. Do you want to get arrested -”

He hears the policemen laughing, something low and gaudy and undoubtedly insidious, but they’re still perched on the hood of their car, sharing a cigarette. Alec can no longer see the man they were chasing. He grits his teeth as he presses his finger to his ear.

“Arkangel, come in,” he says. Nightlock’s fingers tighten around Alec’s wrist; he can almost feel his bones shifting. They’re pressed so close that Alec can feel the heat radiating from Nightlock’s chest. It’s white fucking hot. “Arkangel, do you have eyes on 63rd, come in.”

There’s a moment of torturous silence where Jace doesn’t reply and Alec’s coms sing with static and Nightlock’s eyes bore right into his, furious and hurt. And yet - it’s not enough to fling Alec back against the wall. And Nightlock could do that. What’s stopping him -

“Hey, yep, I’m here,” comes Jace’s voice then, even if Alec hardly hears it, swimming in the tunnel vision created by Nightlock’s unfathomable stare. “I’m hovering above 63rd, what’s up? Some woman just hailed a cab and I just saw some drunk guy trip over a fire hydrant and knock himself out, it was pretty funny. Is there something I’m meant to be looking for? There’s a couple of undercover cops parked at the end of the block, are they causing trouble -”

“Keep an eye on them,” instructs Alec. “Follow them.”
Roger that, boss.

Alec pulls back from Nightlock abruptly. The loss of his weight against Nightlock’s chest has Nightlock seizing the opportunity to shove him back - but it’s with his hands, and not with his powers, and maybe that’s worse.

Alec stumbles back a few steps, breathing hard. Nightlock doesn’t move. Alec can see him trembling as if electricity is running frantic up and down his arms, too much to be contained in his veins alone. His gloved fists are clenched at his sides.

“How dare you,” he hisses, his voice so low that Alec feels it reverberate in his chest. The thrum of the police car pulling away, plunging the alleyway into deafening silence, is not enough to make Alec turn away. Instead, he is rooted to the spot, scolded by the look Nightlock forces upon him now.

“How dare I?” Alec asks, feeling his lips curl. Waves of heat roll through his body; he can’t distinguish fear from anger or anger from shame. “Arkangel has it under control, what else do you expect me to do -”

“All you Corporates are the same,” Nightlock snaps, gesturing sharply at Alec as he takes a step forward. Alec holds his ground. “You only do what’s right so long as it’s going to help you.”

“That’s not true -”

“Oh, isn’t it?” Nightlock snaps, “Why else do you skulk in the shadows and only intervene when there’s no risk to your pay packet, hmm? Why else would you not step in -”

“Because I’m not some idiot with a deathwish!” Alec bites, “Because, hey, maybe there are consequences to - to galavanting around in front of the police with your powers on full show, I don’t know!”

Nightlock scoffs, throwing his hands up in disbelief.

“Please. You know nothing of consequences,” Nightlock laughs bitterly, “The police stop you, and
you get maybe a night in the cells before Idris come along and bail you out. You do whatever you want and nobody bats an eyelid, and meanwhile, the rest of us get shot in the street just for daring to think we might save someone’s life, because _double standards_, right? You have no idea what it’s like to exist knowing there’s a part of you that you cannot change but very well might get you killed, so don’t pretend like you’re in the right here, Sentinel. You _don’t_ get to tell me what I can or cannot do.”

Alec bristles. He clenches his fists at his side, a ringing in his ears that drowns out the wail of distant sirens - but Nightlock doesn’t step down. In fact, he steps closer, settling his shoulders and raising his chin. He meets Alec with a look that says _go on, I dare you to tell me I’m not right._

And he is right - _almost_. He’s right that the consequences for him are far worse than for Alec; he’s right that using his power in public may cost him his life whereas it only costs Alec a stern warning and a dock in his paycheck from the next client who is looking for someone a little more conspicuous to do their dirty work. He’s right that Arkangel’s nights in a police holding cell are a running joke now.

But he’s wrong about Alec knowing nothing of having to hide some part of himself in fear of how other people might react. Alec knows better than most how it feels to lock some part of himself away from the world, because the price might be his job, his home, his friends, his family - a price too high, a cost too dear. And it might have nothing to do with his superpowers, but it has everything to do with _him_, and that’s one thing that cannot be divided by the line drawn between Sentinel and Alec. It’s the one thing that always spills over.

All those newspapers headlines. All those burned-down AIDS crisis shelters. All those times President Bush has told Alec on TV that who he loves and who he is is not natural, like his superpowers don’t already make him all that -

_All the times Alec has spared a scared glance around the office before daring to respond to Magnus’ insistent flirting_-_ 

Nightlock’s stare smoulders. There’s no way that Alec cannot say it now. The air is strung with tension and it dares Alec to break it.

“I _do_ know what it’s like,” Alec says, barely a whisper, because at least it means his voice won’t shake. He clenches and unclenches his fists at his side; he fights a losing battle to keep his eyes on Nightlock. Staring at the ground terrifies him less. “Of course I _know_ what it’s like to not be able to be the person you want to be because of everyone else. I’m-”
Even now, he can’t say it. He doesn’t really know why, but it always sticks in his throat, a lump that he can never swallow, however long he’s been out of the closet. That one little word.

Nightlock raises his eyebrows expectantly, but something in his resolve shifts, just a bit. Uncertainty takes root in his eyes, the firm line of his mouth softening. Perhaps realisation blooms before Alec summons the courage to spit it all out.

Which is worse, Alec briefly wonders. Being told you don’t deserve to live because you have superpowers, or being told you don’t deserve to live because you’re gay?

As it turns out, it’s all pretty much one and the same. There’s always going to be an overlap.

“I’m -” Alec mutters, averting his gaze. He takes a deep breath. He feels it yanking on a fishing line that travels down his throat, the hook caught somewhere in his stomach. “Let’s just say … I’m not going to fall in love with a woman and have tiny baby superheroes, however much my mom wants it, okay? She’s not happy with me being out here doing my own thing, let alone - all of that. So, I do know. What it’s like to have to - to hide part of yourself because it might … cost something I don’t know if I can afford. Okay?”

“You’re gay,” Nightlock says, not a question. His eyes are wider now, his mouth slightly parted. It’s a shadow of the look his mother and father wore when he came out to them all those years ago. It still makes Alec flinch.

“Yeah.”

“Have you ever said that out loud before?”

“Not … that word,” Alec admits, “It’s not something I can just … tell people. Not now. Not with - everything that’s going on in the world.”

Nightlock pulls his eyes away, focusing fiercely on the ground. He folds his arms across his chest, pressing his thumb to his lip until his skin discolours.

Alec doesn’t know if he should move or if he should wait for the world to move around him; suddenly, he doesn’t know if he’s really standing on his own two feet anymore. That fishing hook is yanked loose without warning; he almost chokes on it, but Nightlock gets there first.
“I’m sorry,” Nightlock says abruptly, after a beat of silence that threatens to flay Alec, layer by bloody layer. “I think I spoke out of turn.”

“No, I -” Alec splutters, “You didn’t, you’re right - about me not knowing what it’s like to be - to be like you. I’m never gonna know, and I get that. I shouldn’t have held you back, I shouldn’t have touched you, but I -”

Nightlock sighs heavily, cutting Alec off with a dismissive wave of his hand. He spins away on his heels, and Alec opens his mouth to say something that sounds too damningly like wait, don’t go, but Nightlock doesn’t walk far. He fans out his coat behind him with the flick of his hands, and settles down atop an upturned trash can, crossing one leg over the other. In his lap, his fiddles with his hands, rubbing his thumb and index finger together in thought.

“Makes you wonder,” says Nightlock then, not looking up, “Whether people are more scared of gay men or of supers.”

Alec sucks in a breath and his whole body trembles with whiplash. The anger has been sucked from the air, and maybe that’s Nightlock’s doing with that fathomless power of his, but Alec doesn’t know, and he doesn’t know what has replaced it. There’s terror, the terror of coming out that never gets easier - but here he is, confessing to a stranger in an alleyway, and it’s both horrifying and liberating, and he’s not sure which of those things is making him want to vomit.

Izzy and Jace and Clary know, and he suspects Simon and Magnus do too, and his parents pretend like they don’t, and -

Alec has never just come out and said it before. He can’t. He doesn’t ever get that freedom in the daytime. Doesn’t get that freedom without the mask.

“Sometimes …” Alec mumbles, “Sometimes I wonder how this city survived both Reagan and the Circle at the same time.”

“I’m not so sure it did,” says Nightlock, still looking at his hands, “I don’t suppose I have enough fingers to count the friends I’ve lost on either side. Prejudice is a far greater killer than anything else I know, and that includes both my foolishness and yours.”

“I’m sorry,” says Alec, because he doesn’t know what else to say. Still, Nightlock glances up at him and Alec is winded by how quickly the anger in his eyes has diminished too, leaving behind
dark shadows that attest to long-tended pain and a wound that Alec knows all too well. He feels the same crevice upon his heart.

“Don’t be,” Nightlock says, “That’s not your fault.”

Some of it is. Alec knows it, and he knows Nightlock thinks it, deep down inside. Idris will have cost Nightlock friends along the way, just as much as President Bush has, and that is a guilt Alec might well bear for the rest of his life.

How does he explain that he wants to do right, but he’s too afraid of putting himself out there and not have it seem selfish, when it undoubtedly is? How does he explain that he’s afraid of being in the spotlight, because that light might catch upon the parts of himself he doesn’t ever want anyone to see, and then he’ll be scrutinised for all those disgusting faults of his, and he can imagine nothing worse? How does he explain that he doesn’t know if he can give up all the comfort of his home, his job, his family for the sake of justice, because he’s just damn terrified of being alone if it’s all stripped away?

Without all those things - he’s nothing. He’s no-one. He’s just a thin leather mask that means so very little. Who can do so very little.

Good intentions be damned.

That’s why the shadows are safer. That’s why he feels so damn terrible when these supers keep turning up dead on the streets. That’s why.

Alec must be turning white, his eyes glazing over, because Nightlock frowns behind his mask and then pats the space on the trash can next to him with the flat of his palm.

“Sit down, Sentinel,” he says, and the strength in his voice lets Alec pretend that it’s a command, and who is he to do not as he’s commanded. “Before you black out on me and I have to lug your body back to the steps of Idris.”

Alec’s pride is a lump slowly sliding down his throat, but he folds up his bow and clips it back into his holster, before settling down next to Nightlock. Nightlock shuffles to make room, careful to leave the space afforded to strangers between them, even if he radiates a warmth that Alec can still feel through his armour.
Letting out a deep breath, Alec leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees, and closes his eyes. He lets the sounds of the city wash over him, never the gentle lapping of waves, but more a riptide that pulls and tugs at his ankles, drawing him out into deeper waters, even if he knows he struggles to swim against the current.

Argon lights hum with a very distinct sonic note, and car horns bleat off-key at the intersection three blocks north, the cacophony carried by the wind that cards through Alec’s hair. He can hear music too - the deep, shaking pulse of bass, the synthetic chime of an electronic keyboard, subtle things that are usually drowned out by the rain. Now, he imagines the night shimmering with it, that strangely euphoric sound, willfully haunting and seeping into his veins until he imagines himself threaded with vibrant blues and soft pinks, rather than the red of his blood.

He says nothing, but nor does Nightlock, the only sound the rustle of his coat as he shifts, resting back on his palms and looking up at small slip of sky above them. Alec turns his head, cracking open one eye, just so he can watch Nightlock watch the clouds in piety.

Behind his mask, Nightlock closes his eyes, just basking in the soft underglow reflecting off the belly of the clouds. Faint yellows and blues bathe his cheeks, but sculpt out the sharp lines of his mask, the prickle of his jaw, the shadow around his mouth. There’s this faint shimmer of colour in his hair - Alec’s not sure if it’s gold or if it’s a deep royal blue, because it seems to change in the light and in the dark, shifting from colour to colour and never deciding, perpetually iridescent.

The dark colour that lines Nightlock’s eyes is the same. Alec supposes it must be black, but in the gloom of this alleyway, it seems to catch every colour, deep greens, wistful blues, the more violent purples, the dark red of Nightlock’s coat, the shine of his leather mask.

For the first time, Alec finds himself wondering how anyone could walk past this man on the street and not realise who he is. He’s striking; the world always seems to bend and fold around him, reality distorted where it comes in contact with his skin. And it’s his will. He requires it. He requires the universe to accommodate him.

At last, Alec finds a name for the desperate longing in his chest. What he wouldn’t give for the very same thing ...

The song in the distance shifts; it grows more nostalgically triumphant, more longing, more familiar. Alec recognises it as something Izzy has played before on the radio - it’s Queen. Alec likes their music.

Nightlock opens his eyes.
“Did you know,” he says quietly, as if unwilling to interrupt the faint music with words too loud. “Freddie Mercury was a super.”

“No, he wasn’t,” mutters Alec, but Nightlock just nods.

“You honestly believe a man like that didn’t have superpowers?” he scoffs softly, still searching the clouds overhead, “If he wasn’t some sort of psionic, I would be very surprised.”

And then, to Alec’s surprise, Nightock begins humming. He doesn’t find the rhythm or the tune right away, but after a bar or two, it blends into the far-away croon of Freddie Mercury seeping out of some late-night club and into the street, whispering and warbling through the alleyways and the gutters.

He hums; the song rises from out of the neon-split puddles at their feet; Alec listens. He closes his eyes again and lets the vibrations in Nightlock’s chest settle over him, drawing across his back and pressing down with firm but yielding fingers, invisible upon his shoulder blades and in the divot of his throat.

Something strange and muddled exists within the hollow of his chest, not quite sure how to fill the space completely. It echoes like sadness, pinches like guilt, but it’s not heavy - perhaps he would call the lightness relief or gratitude or just the way it can feel so terrifyingly good to confess a secret to someone else and not have them hate you for it.

There’s numbness too, white and willowy, swirling around Alec’s wrists and ankles, tingling in his fingertips. He feels all those things, but Nightlock’s gentle humming makes him forget how to feel present and he’s caught, in an updraught, by the sensation of floating just outside and above his body, drifting upwards into the city’s blue haze. His arms and legs are buoyed by air, by invisible strings, by the spaces within his body he does not know how to fill; behind his eyelids, he falls upwards, higher and higher, until he can see the city spread out before him, a tangled mess of threads and arteries, pulsing with a circadian rhythm bound by synthesisers and sirens.

The wind that sweeps across the back of Alec’s neck carries the cool caress of rain. He feels a speckle, and then another, against his forehead, the back of his eyelids, the bow of his mouth. The clouds begin to hiss in that way they do when they’re about to release a downpour.

Alec opens his eyes again and sits up. This time, he’s not shy in looking at Nightlock.
Nightlock is still leant back on his palms, his face bared to the sky. If the moon was out, Alec is sure his face would bask in it, but instead, he only earns the drizzle.

“‘The time has now come,’” Nightlock murmurs, as the song comes to an end and the guitar fades out into something else, a blur. “For my friends and family around the world to know the truth.’ It’s fitting, don’t you think?”

The words sound familiar. They’re not Nightlock’s words. They still ring true, nonetheless.

“I changed my mind,” Magnus says, “I think good intentions alone can be enough.”

Alec blinks away from his computer screen, eyes focusing on the Styrofoam cup held out to him over his partition. He smells coffee overloaded with creamer.

Magnus is peering over his desk at him.

And Alec can’t help it, how his eyes trail up Magnus’ arm, lingering on the way his shoulders fill out his shirt sleeves and his waistcoat fits snugly over his chest, but pausing on the earnest and honest look in his eyes.

It’s barely ten in the morning, and Alec has already had three coffees but he’s not yet awake. He keeps slipping in and out of a spreadsheet-induced coma spliced with memories of the night before, Queen still humming distantly in his ears. Magnus, however, pulls him back to the present.

Alec carefully takes the coffee from Magnus, knowing his fingers are probably warm and clammy where they touch. He mumbles a small thank you.

The first sip is disgustingly sweet, just as he likes it. He’s not sure how Magnus knew that.
Instead, he asks, “Enough for what?” and takes another sip, coffee foam sticking to his upper lip.

Magnus’ eyes darken. “We never finished our conversation last night. Before your brother called.”

Right. Jace’s arrest. It feels suddenly so long ago.

Magnus reaches out and plucks a tissue from the box on Alec’s desk. Heat blooms in Alec’s cheeks and he ducks his gaze, taking the tissue with another muffled thank you, quickly wiping the coffee froth from his mouth.

“Oh,” he says awkwardly.

Magnus says nothing at first, just gazing down at Alec, silent and appreciative. It only makes Alec want to bite the inside of his cheek. Pointedly, he turns his eyes back to his screen and hopes it doesn’t come across surly, when the truth is that he’s just flustered by the attention.

“Are you not going to ask me to elaborate?” Magnus probes.

“Do you want me to?”

Magnus shrugs with a lightness about him that is fondly amused. A smile still tucks away into the corner of his mouth, just for Alec.

Alec rolls his eyes fondly, but tries his best to be serious. “You think good intentions are enough?” he asks, and Magnus’ smile twitches again, because he’s gotten what he wants. “No matter whether someone can act on them or not?”

“Yes,” he preens, “I think so. I gave it some more thought last night, after you left. Good intentions are enough - sometimes. I don’t mean it in the sense that we should all just sit on our laurels and tell ourselves oh, it’s the thought that counts, even when we do nothing to prevent something well within our means. It’s just that -”

Magnus pauses, taking a moment to study Alec’s expression. Alec wonders if he gives anything away.
“I suppose some people aren’t always in a position to act upon the goodness in their hearts,” Magnus continues. “Perhaps we shouldn’t hold people accountable for things they cannot control, or expect people to put themselves in dangerous situations in order to do that good we demand of them. We should focus on someone’s capability to … be kind when circumstances are stacked against them.”

“Sounds like you thought about it a lot,” says Alec.

Magnus just shrugs, a little meek and sheepish. “Well, it’s always good to see things from as many points of view as possible. Sometimes I struggle with that, but it’s a character flaw I’m working on.”

“I kinda find that hard to believe,” Alec teases. “You’re pretty open-minded.”

“And also incredibly stubborn,” Magnus admits, laughing below his breath. He fiddles with the silver cuff on his ear. “It’s been said that I’m known to hold a grudge or two, in my time.”

It’s then that Alec almost says something ridiculous. The words form in his mouth as but you’re so kind, but he doesn’t manage to spit it out, catching it between his teeth. Still, his face flushes, and he stares diligently at his knees instead.

Magnus laughs again, softly, to himself. It’s not the first time Alec has noted the sound of his laugh, but it might be the first time he realises how … nice it is. How pretty it is. Alec doesn’t hear much of it in his line of work, and it’s a welcome reprieve in any form.

“Well, then,” Magnus says then, pushing away from the corner of Alec’s desk. Alec’s eyes follow him. “I can’t stay to chat, I have a busy day - the copy room messed up my editorial for the morning’s issue yet again, so that needs a patch job before we go to press.”

He steps away, but he seems to reconsider it; he spins back around on his heels just as quickly.

“Will you be stopping by my office tonight?” he asks. His tone is something strange, something round and full and hoping. It makes Alec’s chest flutter with a feeling honest and a little unfamiliar.
“I, uh - yeah,” says Alec with a small frown, “Uh, around six? If that’s alright?”

Magnus’ face lights up with a smile. “Perfect,” he says, “Absolutely perfect.”

Magnus is whistling when Alec knocks on his office door, six o’clock on the dot. He doesn’t stop when Alec pokes his head in; he just keeps on smiling and skewing the note offkey, enough that Alec doesn’t realise what the song is until he’s sat down.

“Is that … Queen?” he frowns, pausing as he shrugs out of his suit jacket and drapes it over the back of his chair. It’s not the same song that Nightlock was humming last night, but it’s still a remarkable coincidence.

Magnus pulls a face that looks like mock offense. “Oh, Alexander, I can cope with you liking Corporates, but if you don’t like Freddie, we’re going to have commitment issues.”

“I like Queen,” Alec laughs, shaking his head, “Izzy likes to play it in her lab when I visit.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” says Magnus. “And your sister has good taste. I haven’t ever met her, have I?”

“Oh, no,” Alec replies, “She works a lot so she doesn’t really get the chance to come see me here. You should, uh - you should meet her sometime though, I think you’d get along. She’s very -”

Alec waves his hand in a flourish, not really sure what he’s trying to say about Magnus, but Magnus still beams nonetheless.

“She sounds wonderful. Less trouble than your brother, I should imagine?”

“Oh, God, yes,” Alec scoffs, “Jace is adopted. Very adopted.”
“Can’t say I’m not curious,” Magnus laughs gently, “Perhaps we should all go out sometime - I know a few bars on your side of town that are quite good. I could meet your sister, and see if your brother lives up to all those terrible stories I’ve been told about him.”

Small talk about Izzy is easy enough: it’s the one thing Alec will always feel comfortable talking about, given how proud he is of her. And he can talk about Jace too, because Alec will never pass up the chance to moan about his misdemeanors - but it’s not what he really wants to talk about, not if he’s being honest with himself.

“Yeah,” he says, choosing one of the manila files from the pile and opening it up to a random page. It looks like a case file that Magnus has been preparing on a vigilante named Salem - Alec doesn’t know her and has never heard of her - but he doesn’t exactly read any of the words. “That, uh, sounds nice.”

Magnus goes to smile, unexpectedly pleased that Alec is interested in his invitation - but it doesn’t quite meet his eyes, not when Alec is staring hard at the table.

“Alec? What’s the matter?”

“Sorry, I, uh - that does, that does really sound good,” he says, waving his hand, “I just -”

_I’m just not so sure how to be that person, even though I want to be._

And he wants it. He does. He wants that normalcy, he wants that space. He wants it uncompromising and unapologetic, just like Nightlock. He sees that now.

Magnus’ expression sobers and he leans in, resting his hands on the table. Alec focuses upon the rings on his fingers.

“Is this about yesterday?” Magnus asks, as vigilant as always, “Or about the night we went to that arson?”

Alec could talk about how he’s still haunted by it, how he’s still plagued by those murders. He could, because Magnus is leaning across the table, his focus singularly on Alec.
Alec could talk about it, but he can’t talk about everything. He can’t tell Magnus everything, and that’s frustrating because he needs to tell somebody the truth, the truth about Sentinel. And here he is, Magnus, a somebody who might listen, and Alec knows it’s only going to fester and turn him rotten from the inside out if he doesn’t say something.

“Alec,” prompts Magnus. His voice is too gentle; it’ll get spoiled by the things stuck in Alec’s gut. “Alexander.”

Alec smiles softly to himself. He is so succinctly divided down the middle. He sees that too. One half of him runs around in the dark pretending to be a superhero and telling Nightlock all sorts of secrets, and the other half of him is here in this office with Magnus wishing for the same thing, and yet both parts of him wear the mask.

He can never be himself, only shadows of the person he thinks he has to be. He’s stretched so thin, and there’s never enough of him to go around, not when he needs it.

But - he wants to be himself. He sees that reflected in the ardency of Magnus’ eyes, his defiant concern, his worry, emotions that he doesn’t try to reign in when he looks at Alec in the way that he does. Alec wants to be himself because, in these last few weeks of knowing Magnus, really knowing him, Magnus has given that back to him in droves.

Magnus reaches across the table. He reaches for Alec’s hand to hold, and he does it without pretending it means something else – but Alec withdraws his hand to his lap in the same instant.

His fingers burn with a touch that never even happened, his chest made intimate. One day, loneliness and longing will outstrip his need for self-preservation - but not today.

Not today. So why does Alec’s stomach still flip like it does -

If Alec’s refusal affects Magnus, he doesn’t let it show. He’s so good at that, so good at making people look right as he moves left. His hands reach for the folder in front of Alec, sliding it back across the table.

“I was thinking we could get an interview with the coroner who assessed our dead super for Sunday’s issue,” he says, and it’s completely irrelevant to whatever he’s reading, a deliberate change in subject. Alec lets out a breath of relief. “Maybe a column or two, it would look great with
“Alright,” Alec nods, and maybe it’s more to himself than Magnus. He wills himself back together; he’s precariously close to slipping up and that’s not something he can afford right now. “Alright, yeah. That sounds good. What do you want me to do?”

If Magnus is looking at him, he doesn’t say anything. If Magnus stares at him as he busies himself in paperwork, in his mysterious dead men and strange fires, in his beloved *good intentions*, then Alec doesn’t take notice. If Magnus flexes his fingers on the tabletop, regretting his attempt to touch Alec, or regretting not being able to touch Alec, then Alec will never know which is the truth.

But Alec can still wonder.

The clock on the wall ticks on. Alec loosens his tie from around his neck, eventually discarding it on the table. Magnus doesn’t try to raise the topic again, and for that, Alec is not sure if he’s thankful.

"*Arkangel and Muse are calling it a night*,” says Izzy over the coms. “*You can rendezvous with them back at HQ, or we can debrief tomorrow night before patrol, I don’t mind.*”

Alec sighs heavily, flicking away the rain that has been collecting on his gloves and the guard of his bow. Water clings to the bowstring, drip-drip-dripping onto Alec’s boot. He blinks away the drops upon his eyelashes, and sniffs heavily, hoping he hasn’t been standing out here long enough to catch another cold.

“Nice of them to tell me in advance,” he grumbles, but really, he’s too tired to argue. It’s Jace. He’s not surprised by anything Jace does anymore, and that definitely includes forgetting he left Alec on the roof three hours ago to ‘*keep watch*’.

“*Yeah, I know,*” sighs Izzy. “*I’ll talk to them about it tomorrow. Are you done for the night?*”
Rain drips from Alec’s hair too as it flops forward over the edge of his mask. He slicks it back against his head, but it just falls limply to the side, droplets rolling down his temple and across his cheekbone.

It’s late, but not too late, and he might be cold and wet, but he’s still got a few hours left in him. Nightlock is probably still out somewhere else in the city, and Alec - and Sentinel too - can’t quite stomach the thought of turning in for the night when someone else is still working.

“No, I think I’ll stay out a bit longer,” he says.

“You’ve been staying out ‘a bit longer’ every night this week,” Izzy says, “I love you, but you have a switch that’s always on. You can’t be Sentinel twenty-four hours a day, Alec.”

“I don’t think the city cares about my schedule.”

Izzy makes a tsk sound on her end. “That murder, huh?” she says, “Are you still thinking about it?”

He should say yes, but even that would be a lie, because it’s not just the body he found with Clary that he’s thinking about when he closes his eyes. It’s the dead super in the parking lot, it’s the warehouse that burned down, it’s every other unexplained arson that has passed across Magnus’ desk lately. It’s the murder of Magnus’ friend, Ragnor Fell.

It’s Nightlock shouting at him for having the luxury of choosing when he gets involved and when he doesn’t.

It’s Magnus placing his trust in him, not knowing all the secrets Alec keeps.

It’s all connected, a thready mess tangled inside Alec’s chest – and whenever he tugs, the whole mass shifts. Closing his eyes and seeing it all is second nature now. He can’t even escape it when he sleeps, because the unease lingers in his dreams too.

“You could talk to someone about it.”
Alec scoffs. “Who?” he asks dryly, “It’s not like mom and dad have a department psychiatrist on call for us. Besides - I’m fine, Iz. It’s nothing we haven’t seen before. It’s just a lot on top of work and the investigation with Magnus-”

“Could you talk to Magnus about it?”

“What? No, of course not.”

“He doesn’t need to know all the details,” Izzy says, “But you said you guys were running a few pieces on it, and - well. You sound close, and you don’t have many friends, Alec. Not to rub salt in the wound, but-”

“Thanks,” Alec deadpans, “Thanks for letting me know.”

“You know you can talk to me about it too,” Izzy corrects herself, “That’s a given, Alec. I shouldn’t have to say it, but we both know you’re never going to take me up on it, so - just talk to someone, alright? And don’t stay out too late. It’s bad for you.”

“Fine,” Alec sighs, “Can you turn my trace off?”

“Are you meeting up with Wolfsbane and Veil?”

“I don’t know,” Alec shrugs, and then he adds, carefully, “Maybe Nightlock.”

Izzy doesn’t even react. “Okay, I’ll switch you over to the secure frequency in a sec,” she replies. There’s a click in Alec’s ear, and when she speaks again, her voice is a little more tinny. “There, all set.”

“Anything on the emergency frequency?”

“Nothing of interest so far. Car chase on 23rd, but the cops are already in pursuit. Couple of domestic disturbances. Low level stuff. I’ll keep you posted.”
“Alright,” says Alec. And then, after a pause, he adds, “Thanks, Iz.”

He can practically hear her frown. “What for?”

“Nothing. I’ll talk to you later.”

The vastness of a lonely city is a strange and eerie dream, blue neon shimmering in puddles, and rain, clinging to the dull and present ache in Alec’s stomach that swims with the sound of Freddie Mercury crooning in his memories.

He walks for a while, from rooftop to bleak rooftop until the gap between buildings is too far for his guideline and he has to descend down a fire escape to street level, stealing away into the dark. He heads for an old basketball court across the street from the police precinct on East 5th, and whilst there may not be shelter from the rain, the view will be good of the patrol cars coming and going. Alec tunes into the buzz of the emergency frequency, waiting for something to happen. Something will always happen.

And he’s not wrong. He’s a block away when he sees it: a strange shadow on the other side of the street, just beyond the pool of light spilled by a dirty streetlamp. From the corner of his eye, he thinks it’s a man crouched over on the sidewalk, perhaps a homeless man who hasn’t found a bed for a rainy night amongst many.

Alec almost keeps walking, uncomfortable at the thought of being seen on street level, but the shadow doesn’t move, not even a twitch, and that’s when Alec realises it’s not what he thinks it is.

He stops. A glance over his shoulder tells him that he’s alone, the street is deserted, at least for the moment. Still, he unclips his bow and sets an arrow against his finger, even if he doesn’t pull the string. A car whizzes by at the intersection, yellow beams and then red taillights in fast succession, the engine like a hum.

The shadow on the sidewalk is too large to be just one man - and definitely not a man crouched on his haunches. Alec steps carefully into the road, his boots splashing in stagnant rainwater pooling in the gutter. He readies his bow. The shadow still doesn’t move, but as Alec steps out of the glow
of the streetlamp, his eyes adjust to the gloom.

Oh. Oh no.

He stops abruptly in the middle of the street, sucking in a sharp breath that hurts his throat, the air far too cold.

There are two men tied up to a fire hydrant on the sidewalk.

And they’re lashed together with chain links and polyester webbing that cuts into their Kevlar suits, and Alec smells both blood and burning in the same horrible reckoning. Neither of them move, but as Alec’s hand tightens around his bow, he knows why: they’re both dead, their masks lying at their feet, soaking up the blood that the sidewalk cannot take.

Supers. Two more supers. Two more dead supers.

Alec’s finger moves to his ear, but he can’t press his coms. His arm seizes, tremors beginning in his elbow and shuddering up to his wrist. His teeth chatter on the breath he exhales, his jaw clenched tight enough to ache.

He takes a step forward; his toe stubs the kerb. Clumsy. He’s never clumsy. Glancing down, he finds his boots is scuffed with blood not allowed to dry in the drizzle.

And oh, God, the sidewalk is black with it.

When he inhales sharply, he tastes it, that ferrous tang in the back of his throat. He drags his eyes back to the two men, starting at their feet, up their legs splayed out on the sidewalk; across their hands lying limp in their laps with their fingers snapped; up their chest where their suits are shredded and singed around the edges; to their throats.

Their throats are slit, their vocal chords exposed to the dark, their bodies rotting in the twilight. Alec has seen this MO before.

Twice is a coincidence, three times is a serial.
And he feels sick. Around him, the city screams like an abattoir, and he’s made the foolish mistake of stepping blindly into the centre of the killing floor. There’s blood, slick and sticky, along the soles of his boots. The wind whips up, launching the smell of death high into the smog and the beat of synth that plagues the city streets. The drizzle cuts at the parts of Alec’s face not hidden by his mask.

He scrunches up his nose, a grimace, and brings a gloved hand to his mouth.

He’s seen violent lives end violently before, but not like this. Not strung out in the streets for all to see. The sidewalk reeks of bad consciences and worse consequences.

He slings his bow over his shoulder and bends to close the eyelids of the dead supers who stare up at him, fear still frosted in their wild eyes. His fingers shake, but he pushes it back, right back, as far down as it will physically go, *squash it down and smother it*.

Don’t feel it.

Ignore. *Ignore*.

He doesn’t know them. Either of them. Izzy will, he’s sure - she remembers everyone, everything, even if she’s seen it once - but Alec doesn’t know if their anonymity makes him feel better or worse.

He’s glad he’s not staring down at the bloodied corpses of Veil and Wolfsbane, but he knows these two people are the friends of someone else. Someone else knows them, is waiting for them to come home, who may never know what has happened here tonight.

Torture. Murder. Everything worse than that. Their hands are battered with defensive cuts, their knuckles shredded and bloody. Their suits are scorched by searing black marks. Their throats are torn wide open.

Alec should call Captain Garroway. He deserves the heads up before this reaches the dispatcher on the emergency frequency, before some civilian stumbles across this on their drunken walk home. Alec doesn’t want any old cop handling this scene, especially when he can already predict the headlines that will flood the city’s papers tomorrow morning, a dollar-fifty for a sheet of slander.

He should call Izzy and Jace and Clary after that. Jace will be pissed at him if he’s already gone to bed, but it won’t last; he would never turn down a case like this. Clary will set her jaw and try to look fierce in that way that Alec knows she really isn’t. And Izzy - Izzy will know what to do. She won’t freeze. These two dead supers aren’t Corporates, but it’s important to know who they are. Who they were. There will be leads to follow up on, Alec is sure, and *Izzy will know what to do*.
He, however, does nothing. He doesn’t call Luke; he doesn’t call Izzy. Something stops him from moving, keeping his heavy feet glued to the ground. He can’t stop looking. His eyes fixate upon the ragged slash across the throat of the super who faces him: the tattered skin, the crusting blood, the violence of a jagged knife. No-one with powers did this - or if they did, they didn’t use them. They just used anger. Violence. Seething hatred. One swift slice.

Alec clenches his fists at his sides. The night is dark, but he’s standing on the sidewalk in full Sentinel gear, towering over the bodies of two men. Someone will see him and assume the worst. He has to leave, but he can’t. It feels dishonest, dishonourable, disloyal.

Useless, the rain whispers. Powerless.

A wind from behind scoops up the bloodied masks lying in the dirt; Alec watches as they twist and fold, the blood wrung out of them, pulled out of them, by unseen hands. They float, guided, back to the faces of the two dead men, and settle back across their brows where they belong.

Alec glances back over his shoulder; it’s no wind. He still feels rattled enough that it might as well be.

Nightlock steps out of the dark just as he lowers his guiding hand. Alec doesn’t know how he’s here, but he’s stopped asking that question. Of course he’s here.

His face is grave, the mask across his eyes symbolic for the way his expression is guarded. Alec cannot read him, but energy pulsates in the air, rolling, bursting, ready to crack like thunder. It presses down on Alec’s shoulders and seems to pound like a dangerous heartbeat.

“Do you know them?” Alec asks, but his voice is strained, ragged in a way he cannot hide. He sounds wretched. He knows it.

Nightlock doesn’t look at him, eyes focused on the dead men. He stops at Alec’s shoulder, close enough that the warmth from his body is palpable, but not a relief.

“Yes,” says Nightlock, clipped. “But not well.”
“I don’t know what happened,” says Alec.

“I do,” replies Nightlock. His voice is dangerous. “Someone is picking off costumed heroes.”

It hits Alec like a winding punch - the blow, first, and the pain, secondary. There’s that peculiar moment of cold, backhanded shock before Nightlock’s words settle in, but once they do, Alec wonders why he never saw them coming.

“We … we don’t know that,” Alec whispers.

“Yes, we do.”

Blood has a unique shine in the dark and the rain, slick and black like oil and just as slippery. Alec’s eyes linger on the man’s slit throat. This is the third time he’s seen this signature.

An epidemic, Magnus had once said. What would Magnus say if he were here right now? Would he reach for Alec’s hand in solidarity and tell him how to stop it happening again? Or would he tell Sentinel that he hates him for letting it go unchecked?

Alec frowns. “I don’t think this is just a hate crime,” he murmurs, “Someone is killing supers so that we can’t stop them from whatever happens next.”

“Yes,” agrees Nightlock, “And passing it off to look like a lynching.” He sighs heavily, turning away from the bodies and looking up at the foreboding sky. “Not that I would ever put a lynching past the people of this city, but -”

“This wasn’t an accident,” says Alec. “Or a frenzy. It was brutal, but … it was planned. Someone knew how to inflict the worst amount of pain. Someone well-equipped, well-funded. Well-trained.”

“Sounds like someone we both know,” Nightlock remarks coolly.

Alec prickles. “This wasn’t Idris, if that’s what you’re implying. Corporates have nothing to do with this.”
Nightlock turns to him, his body angled between Alec and the dead men, but it’s not anger Alec finds in his bright eyes, and that catches him off guard. It’s something desperate, almost pleading. Sympathetic. *There’s that word again.*

“They did once,” Nightlock says carefully. “The Circle happened, and we didn’t see it in time. It’s ludicrous to think it wouldn’t happen again, that it *isn’t* happening again. Sentinel ... open your eyes.”

Alec clenches his jaw, gritting his teeth. Nightlock is not wrong; he’s hardly ever wrong, as Alec is slowly learning. He tells the truth, as harsh and damning as it is, one which Alec has tried with all his might not to see.

And it frustrates Alec to know that he can still be so stubborn in the face of it. He knows he’s not that person. He knows he shouldn’t be that person, and he wants to do better, he really does, but -

He wants to strike out, bust open his knuckles on a concrete wall and feel the dull burn of torn skin leaching into his blood, but he doesn’t. He never does. He keeps it all inside and it rots.

Instead, he says, low and trembling, “Their suits are marked. It looks like ... it looks like burn patterns.”

“Do you smell fuel?”

“No.”

Nightlock exhales heavily. He closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose through his mask.

“The arsons,” he says, maybe to himself. “They are all connected after all. It’s probably the same person - or people - doing all of this”

Alec swallows back the bile in his throat and crouches down. One of the men was dressed in blue, before his blood stained his supersuit red and black. Fastidiously, Alec reaches out and peels back the crisp edges of the man’s suit where it’s slashed across his chest; the stiff fabric crunches between Alec’s fingers, breaking away as charcoal. The flesh beneath is blistered and burned.
How -

How is he always too late? How have they gone so long without hearing any of this? How do you not hear the sounds of someone being torn open and burned on the streets, their body lashed to a fire hydrant on a public sidewalk?

The man that he and Clary found buried beneath all that cardboard and refuse - he must’ve been a super too. He wasn’t dressed for it. Maybe he hadn’t donned a cape or a mask in decades. It didn’t matter. Whoever killed him knew who he was. What he was.

A serial killer is running around in their midst, killing supers, and no-one has fucking noticed.

“The city has lost its damn mind,” Alec mutters. He stares down at his hand, soot and blood amalgamated into a paste on his gloved fingertips. He tries to rub it away, pressing his fingers into his thigh, but the stain hardly shifts. Alec hisses, but then Nightlock’s hand appears on his shoulder, giving him a gentle squeeze. Alec tenses at first, the touch foreign and unwelcome, but then he feels some of the energy coiled in his body begin to dissipate. He imagines it being stolen.

Nightlock lets him go before the touch can linger. Above their heads, thunder rumbles and the air sags with the sort of heaviness that preludes a downpour. Alec counts to three before it arrives like bullets on the pavement and upon his skin, passing right through him, searching for a sky reflected in the puddles. He’s drenched in seconds, but Nightlock remains dry, some invisible force conjured above his head with a wave of his fingers. The curtain of rain bounces straight off and onto the ground.

“There’s a payphone on the corner of the block,” says Nightlock, “I’ll call this in and then we need to get out of here. We risk too much by lingering.”

The blood caked around the dead men’s necks begins to run. The rain carves smears and rivers through the mess, but it still pools at Alec’s feet.

“We’re meant to save them,” Alec hisses, “We’re meant to save these people. And we’re always two steps behind.”

“No, we’re not,” says Nightlock firmly, “We’re just looking in a different direction.”
Alec turns to him, and if his eyes beseech, Nightlock does a good job not to react. Alec’s wet hair is plastered to his forehead and he must look a mess as it is.

*People are dying*, Alec wants to shout. *And I don’t know how to get rid of the blood on my hands*.

Nightlock must hear it anyway. His expression softens for just a moment, kind words on the tip of his tongue. Alec’s not sure he wants to hear them.

He almost wants to hear Nightlock blame Idris. He wants Nightlock’s scathing remarks and damning truths told to his face, in a way he cannot ignore, not this time.

*Idris isn’t doing their job, Idris doesn’t care about murdered vigilantes, Idris is leading the charge themselves* -

It makes sense. Alec is desperate for the blame. *It makes sense*.

“We’ll figure this out,” says Nightlock instead. He says it with conviction, enough to lead a dying man to water, but Alec still has trouble believing it. It’s not water that he wants.

Because in the downpour, he has plenty as it is.

Chapter End Notes

Today’s chapter is brought to you by "may justice be done though the Heavens fall", which is where the chapter title comes from. This chapter is all about Nightlock and Sentinel: it’s about Alec realising his superheroism is defined by his actions and not Idris'; it’s about Nightlock realising Sentinel is not everything he first thought; it's about the both of them realising they need each other going forward into whatever sinister thing is happening. It’s about one single moment of vulnerability being the spark for something more ... and boy, THERE'S MORE

Thank you so much for all the feedback from last time! I can't express how much it helps to read people's thought and feelings on this fic, as everyone has a different take on the moral issues and it's so interesting!

Visit me on [tumblr](http://www.tumblr.com) and shout in my inbox!
I'm also on Twitter if you want to come chat about the fic ... and boy, do I love talking about this fic. Tweet as you read with the hashtag #FICacoldnight! :D

Please leave a kudos if you made it to the end, and drop me a comment with your thoughts, your favourite line, your hopes for what will happen next, your advice for poor old Alec ... I would be forever grateful for it! If you want an alert next time there's an update, please hit that subscribe button!

Until next time: the temperature rises as more bodies start piling up and Alec realises he can't cope with it as well as he thought. Luckily, Magnus is his voice of reason in the dark, pulling him back to the path he needs to walk. And as for Nightlock - perhaps he's not as infallible and indestructible as Alec first thought.
Magnus’ expression softens. It doesn’t do anything to dispel the lethargic ache in Alec’s chest, but it reminds him, for just a moment, how to breathe. And then, before Alec can bundle that pliant, vulnerable feeling back into his chest, Magnus reaches for Alec’s fidgeting hands, pressing his fingers lightly to the backs of Alec’s knuckles, stilling them for a moment.

“Our sense of justice is something too many men claim to have, but fail to act upon,” Magnus says, “It’s rare for someone to have the integrity and tenacity not to settle for just anything.”

The touch doesn’t last. It’s a fleeting thing, barely there, barely warm, barely beautiful, but Alec’s heart is in his throat nonetheless. The warmth of skin on skin, the briefest arc of static, the tender throb of a first touch - it makes his pulse stutter in staccato, and maybe he’s surprised, but he doesn’t know why.

**Chapter Notes**

Alec and Magnus come to terms with the realisation that they're dealing with a serial killer, and maybe, just maybe, Idris is involved too. And how can Alec live with that? How can he bear to look Magnus in the eye?

Meanwhile, Sentinel and Nightlock are stumble across something that leaves them both reeling. For Nightlock, it's a realisation that he's alone in this, but for Sentinel, for Alec -

Well, he always has Magnus and the promises he makes in the dark.

&&&

Tweet as you read with the hashtag #FICacoldnight!

This chapter contains graphic descriptions of crime scenes. Please always read the tags. :^)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"That was [...] the year I dreamed of empty coffins and went mute,

when the bodies washing up on the riverbank
with burned soles and welted backs were called suicides,
and no-one told the children any different.”

— Traci Brimhall, from “Peace Be With Us,” Saudade

“Double murder,” says Magnus the next day. He presses the front page of the day’s paper down on Alec’s desk, his ringed fingers splayed across the page, his nails painted a deep, dark blue.

The office murmurs around Alec, chatter and rustling paper, but suddenly, everything is white noise.

A blurry photo of last night’s crime scene stares up at Alec. Yellow police tape, and a blackened sidewalk, and the dirty light of a streetlamp at odds with the violent blue of a police car siren caught in the moment the camera flashed.

In the centre of the photograph, there’s a fire hydrant. It could be any street corner, any other grimey hydrant stained grey with soot and car exhausts, plastered with graffiti and sprayed with paint.

Only Alec knows that it’s not. Only Alec knows how his two dead men looked, lashed together and slumped over that hydrant, blood oozing down the kerbside, the gutters littered with the remnants of torn-up supersuits. Only Alec knows how it looked before the police came. Only Alec knows that this photograph is a watered down version of what really happened.

The thought goads and the newspaper headline gloats; how many people saw this on the kiosk stands this morning and reached for a magazine with their coffee instead? How many people are that complacent?

How many people are that used to it?

Not Alec. Alec can still feel the blood sticky on his hands. He can still feel the chill of the rain
down the back of his neck. *When can he not?*

He doesn’t touch the newspaper, too afraid of leaving wet and bloody fingerprints amongst the text, but he makes a show of scrutinising the headline nonetheless. As if this is the first time he has seen this; as if he’s fighting with all his might to keep his eyes open after a terrible night tossing and turning; as if he and Nightlock weren’t there, standing on that sidewalk with viscera on the bottoms of their shoes in the downpour of a realisation that someone is hunting supers.

It doesn’t seem real. Maybe Alec’s too stubborn to believe it. Maybe Alec’s too *scared* to believe it. His entire body still feels cold to the touch, still rain-chilled, still reeling from the shock of something he should’ve seen coming - but he’s not the one occupying it. He’s watching this all unfold from somewhere high above and he’s unable to reach out and do anything about it.

Now, he can feel Magnus watching him, awaiting his reaction, awaiting some jerky movement that says Alec’s not entirely present in his body, *awaiting a slip-up*. A quick glance around the office tells him no-one is looking, but he doesn’t dare raise his voice above a whisper for fear of saying something he can’t take back.

The fear possesses him. It makes him hunch his shoulders, as if battening down the hatches of himself. He wants to lock it away, last night, Sentinel, *whatever*, but -

It’s just seeping through the cracks he’s too damn tired to press a hand over in order to stem the flow.

He wonders if Magnus can see that. If Magnus can see the bone-deep exhaustion, if he can see the hollowness, the emptiness, the directionlessness that has Alec wavering like a needle in a broken compass. If Magnus can see the way he’s itching in his own skin with the need to scrub it raw and be rid of the feeling of dried and tacky blood.

He wonders if the purple crescents beneath his eyes speak of any of that, or if his mask is just too damn good and no-one dares look close enough.

“Both supers?” Alec asks, despite already knowing the answer. He saw their suits; he saw their masks. He was the one who dragged his fingers over their faces so shut their blank and lightless eyes.

Magnus’ answering nod is grave. He shifts on his feet, angling himself closer to Alec, affording
them a little more privacy. There’s a thread of tension pulled taut all the way through him. Alec
doesn’t miss it.

“It seems so,” Magnus mutters. “Both vigilantes, low-level profiles, not well known. Young too.
 Barely out of college, I’d imagine.”

Magnus’ voice is low as he leans into Alec’s space. His cologne is too strong and it makes Alec’s
head swim. And not in a good way. It’s overpowering and suffocating and Alec’s already feels
vaguely nauseous. It mixes with the aftertaste of iron that still clings to the back of Alec’s throat
and makes his eyes water.

Alec’s stomach clenches. His toes curl in his dress shoes where no-one else can see.

“The police are keeping this one pretty tightly underwraps,” Magnus continues, oblivious, “They
haven’t released any details to the press yet, which is … unusual.”

“Captain Garroway?” Alec asks.

Magnus shrugs, running his finger over the shell of his ear, his eyes flicking over to Alec’s screen,
to Alec’s desk, away from Alec’s face. His worry is painfully obvious and that - that hurts to see.

“He’s a busy man and I already have him working a few favours for me,” Magnus murmurs, “If he
knows anything, he’ll get in touch, but I think the silence speaks for itself.”

“No-one knows who they are? The dead men?”

“I’ve asked around, but not much luck. There are a few other avenues worth trying, but … I fear
we might have to remain patient on this one.”

Nightlock’s words from last night echo too loudly to be ignored: this has the hallmarks of someone
we both know . Alec sucks in a breath, but it tastes of sour truth.

“What-” he begins carefully, unable to raise his voice or even look Magnus in the eye, because his
shame speaks just loud enough. “-about Idris?”
He doesn’t mean to say it. He’s not asking *do you think they can help us?* He’s asking *do you think they’re involved?* It’s been weighing on him all damn night.

Magnus blinks, and then he blinks again, before pulling away from Alec and standing up straight. He opens his mouth as if to speak, and then decides otherwise, a frown appearing between his brows. Slowly, he curls his arms around himself, pressing his thumb to his lower lip; he studies Alec for a long moment that makes Alec want to squirm.

“They weren’t supers from Idris,” is eventually what he settles on, his focus resolute on Alec.

And it’s not fierce, the look in his eyes. It’s not repulsed or irritated or anything that might attest to his feelings about Corporates. Instead, the look is perplexed as he tries to figure something out that Alec cannot even guess.

“I know,” says Alec, dropping his voice. “I meant - is it … is it worth asking Idris if they have any records? They haven’t released a press statement about it either. There might be … something.”

*Something*. As if. Last night, Alec handed his field report to his mother his damn self and she’d just placed it on a pile on his desk, unread, and informed him of his next mission. She could so obviously read it in his eyes - the trauma, the shock, the blood still splattered on his boots - but she didn’t ask about it. She just pretended it didn’t exist.

*As usual.*

Magnus tilts his head, sceptical in just the same way. Alec cannot blame him. “Do you think so?” he asks. His voice is unreadable.

“I think it’s worth it,” Alec lies. He curls his fingers into his palms, pressing his blunt nails into his skin; he clings to the dull sensation. “Someone has to know something, and I can’t -”

The sentence fragments; maybe it already knows its a pipe dream, or worse, a lie.

*I can’t sleep, I can’t eat, I can’t focus on anything else -*
I can’t help but blame myself.

Alec looks around, but still, no-one’s looking at him, at them. And yet, how is it that he feels so excruciatingly visible? He fights to settle the twitch in his jaw. Hopes that Magnus can’t hear the rough catch in his voice. Prays for something more than lethargy.

Magnus says nothing, and that in itself forces Alec to continue.

“I can’t,” he says very carefully, “I know this happens all the time, but there’s a part of me that can’t -”

“Sleep at night?”

“Yeah,” Alec says on a breath. “Knowing that someone’s out there doing this, killing people, and the fact that no-one is doing anything to find them, I just -”

He finds that he’s been staring hard at a point in the centre of Magnus’ chest, a small wrinkle in his shirt – it must be where his necklace lies beneath, flush against his skin. Alec drags his eyes back up to Magnus’ face and finds fond sympathy in his soft expression.

Magnus offers him a small sad smile. “Someone will know something. You’re right. It’s just a matter of finding them.” The line of his shoulders falls, as if in quiet relief. He seems to take a breath to steady himself, realigning his thoughts into the sort of order Alec can only be jealous of. “I can call Idris tonight,” he continues, “I can’t say that they’ll give us anything - their PR department is notoriously difficult when it comes to nosey journalists - but we should try. It’s a good idea, Alexander.”


And for a naive moment, Alec believes it is, it is a good idea, if the way Magnus’ mouth twitches at the corners is anything to go by. Magnus always believes there’s a way forward; and that’s something Alec has come to learn and appreciate, one of Magnus’ small precious litanies. He
doesn’t know how Magnus keeps hold of it when the city, when the government, when people passing by on the street want to wrestle it from his hands, but Magnus is not someone to let go of an idea without a struggle.

There’s heat rising in Alec’s cheeks - equally uncomfortable as the tight knot in his gut - but try as he might to wrench himself from the spotlight of Magnus’ stare, he cannot. He remains rooted to the spot, entrapped by the glint of hope that blooms in Magnus’ dark eyes.

They won’t get anything from Idris. Not as journalists, not as two people just trying to do the right thing, not as Magnus and Alec. Alec knows this. Some lies, some conspiracies, they’re bigger than him, bigger, even, than the presence with which Magnus lights up a room and emboldens Alec to tell the truth. Alec fears the worst, and the thought of it, of some corruption he hasn’t noticed until now, trickling black from the top down, until it lands on his shoulder, is repulsive.

But Alec is not just Alec. If someone needs to get dirty to stop this from happening again, well -

Sentinel can try. Sentinel can be better, Sentinel can ask the questions that need to be asked and bear the bruises so someone else won’t have to.

Alec isn’t the only one hooked by the determined look in Magnus’ eyes. Someone must know something.

That night in Magnus’ office, the Idris PR department keeps Magnus on hold for over an hour, only to present him with a curt dismissal, advising him never to call again.

Alec shifts in his chair, unable to get comfortable, and fights the urge to pick at the skin of his hands. He can hear the faint rasp of conversation, but can’t place the voice - but fuck, it could be Underhill, Lydia, or even Aline for all he knows - not over the hum of the argon lights overhead and the incessant tick of the clock on the wall and Alec’s breathing -

He feels like he might jump out of his damn skin any second -
Magnus slams the phone back into the cradle. He stares blankly at his hand for a solid minute, and Alec is about to ask him if he’s okay, *who was it that you spoke to*, when Magnus turns sharply on his heel to pour himself a double whiskey, slamming it back in what cannot be good conscience.

Magnus levels Alec with a flat stare when he sets his glass back down on his desk.

“God,” he gripes, “I hate Corporates.”

Alec swallows that as well as any man keeping a secret can. Words like that stopped leaving marks on his skin long ago, but from Magnus, they still bruise like fingerprints, speckling his skin with purple in the more tender spots.

The achy feeling in his chest is uncomfortably real, and slowly, it’s spreading down his arms, up the back of his neck, seeping into every little nook and cranny. He knew Idris would be of no help, but maybe Magnus had been hoping for some sort of divine intervention, some luck at last -

*Divine intervention*. Alec could scoff. As if there’s any higher power looking out for them. And even if there were - why would Alec care for their help when they’re letting all of this happen again and again?

Alec would never call Magnus naive, but at what point do you start clinging onto anything, even the remotest hope of finding answers to your impossible questions? At what point does disappointment stop hurting and just become another fact of the job? At what point does it feel a little foolish?

Leads must not pan out all the time. Magnus must spend half his time on the phone getting nowhere; he must send countless letters out to countless sources, only to get nothing back in the mail; he must knock on so many doors and have most of them slammed in his face.

Magnus pours himself another whiskey; it sloshes up against the side of the glass, splattering onto the desk and staining Magnus’ paperwork with flecks of oaky-brown. Magnus wrinkles his nose but doesn’t seem to care. He’s always like this, tossing things over his shoulder when he no longer needs them, a hurricane through his office when he’s on a mission, but tonight that same carelessness isn’t a quirk. No.

No, it makes Alec feel like he’s raised Magnus’ hopes for no reason, knowing full well that Idris would be fruitless and he’s just sat here itching to transform into Sentinel and head over to
headquarters and root through the mess himself.

“That bad?” Alec asks instead, faking a wince as Magnus swallows back another gulp of whiskey that makes him sneer at his glass.

“They didn’t say enough for it to be bad,” Magnus explains. He gestures widely with his hands, only barely keeping all the whiskey in the glass. “It was the usual spiel about privacy policies and advising me to contact seventeen thousand other people instead, which I’m sure would just lead me in endless circles back to the same person, not only wasting my time, but leaving me somehow knowing even less than I did to begin with.”

Magnus takes a breath both sharp and irate, pressing his finger and thumb across the span of his temples. It gives Alec a chance to speak, to say something fake like: it’s okay, maybe someone else will come forward, but what he says is not what he plans.

“Magnus, I’m sorry.”

Magnus looks up sharply, wide eyes flicking to Alec’s.

“You’re sorry?” he demands, “Why?”

Alec shrugs, but it doesn’t feel easy. He feels stiff and awkward all over. He feels like he’s lying to Magnus, even though he’s not - not in the usual way - and Magnus deserves better than that. Alec only wishes he knew how to give it.

“For suggesting you call Idris. I guess it was a bad idea after all,” he murmurs. Bad idea, pointless idea, waste of time, what’s the difference.

He glances briefly at the clock on the wall. His patrol starts in a few hours. His leg begins to jitter.

“Do you want me to try calling back the guy at the 99th?” he continues. “Maybe Captain Garroway will be back at the precinct by now and be able to talk.”

Shoving his pile of police reports to the side, Alec reaches for the phone, dragging it across the
desk - but then Magnus’ hand comes down on the wire, stopping Alec from pulling it any further.

“Alec.”

Alec hesitates. “... Yeah?”

“It wasn’t a bad idea,” Magnus presses, “Idris might not have told me anything, but that’s not to say they revealed nothing.”

He doesn’t blink, leaning forward across the desk. His necklace unspools out of the collar of his shirt and swings like a pendulum in the empty space before realisation.

Suddenly, Alec understands what he means.

“You think they’re hiding something. Idris.”

“If there was nothing to say, they would’ve hung up on me straight away,” Magnus explains. He sets his whiskey down so that he can splay both palms flat on the tabletop. “Keeping me on hold for so long makes me wonder if some poor intern was running around behind the scenes trying to find out what they should tell me, in order for the correct story to be spun in the press.”

Alec frowns. That can’t be right -

- but he knows full well that it’s possible. It’s exactly the sort of thing his mother and father would do.

There’s no way that they haven’t noticed these vigilante murders: not between the press coverage and Alec’s field reports and the fact that they’re not blind, but deliberate. His father is a businessman and his mother is clever, calculated, always thinking five steps ahead of everyone else and making contingency plans for all eventualities. If they know something about all this, then that’s knowledge they’ll be holding to their chests until the opportune moment, until they can reap the benefits of it, until it will make them a fucking profit. They would be selective in what they tell to the papers, tactical in scheduling press conferences, purposeful in writing the narrative they want to star in -
And if Idris are involved in covering it up -

*How does vigilantes being killed on the streets help Idris? How does hiding it from the public work in their favour?*

Corporates are hated almost as much as vigilantes. Surely, *surely*, encouraging violence against them is going to bite them in the -

“You think,” Alec rasps, “Idris is investigating these murders too?”

“Maybe,” says Magnus, “I don’t know in what capacity. I have a ... *contact* in Idris, shall we say, but it seems that all investigation is off the record. I don’t think he knows anything of use.” Magnus pauses, thinking carefully about his next words. “But ... who’s to say things aren’t different higher up the food chain? Maybe someone knows something and is working hard to control the flow of information in the way they see fit.”

Alec doesn’t know what to focus on. Magnus has contacts inside Idris? Does Alec, *does Sentinel*, know them? Is it another super or are they in weapon development with Izzy or could they be in security, like Underhill? Should Alec ask for their name -

- or is that too revealing of his vested interest?

And then -

It’s not that someone is playing the press or spinning stories or keeping secrets, no. The sudden feeling of *revulsion* that floods into Alec’s chest, dark and twisted and disgusted, is that someone in Idris knows about these murders and is choosing to turn a blind fucking eye. Choosing to put business and politics and money before, what, empathy?

What if it’s his mother? His father?

And all the while, Alec is working right under their nose to investigate the exact same thing, driving himself into the dirt when there’s someone out there deliberately closing doors on him, on Sentinel -
“Alexander?” Magnus pries. “Are you okay?”

No. No, he’s not okay, and he suspects he hasn’t been for a while. He doesn’t know why he’s surprised at the thought of Idris being involved in these dead vigilantes, in these strange arsons. They have their fingers pressed to the pulse of every scheme of this insidious city, in every back pocket of every vile politician - why not this too? Why does it shock Alec so damn much?

Is it because it speaks to his guilty conscience? Because it makes him complicit?

Alec thinks of Nightlock then. He thinks of Veil and Wolfsbane too, and of all those nameless, murdered vigilantes he hasn’t been able to save. But out of all of them, it’s Nightlock’s face, morphing into something full of hurt and betrayal that simmers Alec’s nerves, setting them alight and cauterising the frayed ends in turn.

“If Idris knows … ” Alec starts, “and they’re not doing anything about it, then - I don’t understand how they can live with themselves. It’s fucked up.”

“It is,” Magnus agrees without hesitation. Alec watches as he slumps back in his chair. “And is it better or worse that those pulling the strings at Idris are entirely aware of the fact? The promise of a large sum of money will make people turn a blind eye to a great many terrible things.”

Magnus starts spinning the ring on his thumb around and around his knuckle. Alec has always wondered if it’s more a nervous tick or a sign of deep thought, but Hell, maybe it’s both.

Magnus has been a journalist for a long time now. He must’ve seen terrible, horrible things over the years: unjust war and vile hate crimes and federal violence and more. There must’ve been so many times where he’s stood on the roadside with his legal pad jotting down notes for a story that he fears won’t make an inch of difference. He’s dedicated his life to reporting crime and politics, to the dissemination of truth, to the weighing scales of justice when the law forgets them, but -

Has he ever seen something as dark as this?

Alec hasn’t. But Alec has never gone looking before.

How does one man go about fixing that? How does one man save everyone?
“What-” Alec whispers, clenching his fingers into his palms. “-what can we do?”

It’s not a question he should be asking. One day, Idris will be his, more than it is already. He’s supposed to be a leader: he should already know the answer to this and more; he should already have a damn plan. He should already be on the rado telling Jace and Clary what they need to do, and not asking Magnus for help when he won’t even realise the extent of what Alec’s asking.

That’s not fair on Magnus. Magnus hates the Corporates.

“It’s not your responsibility to feel guilty for Idris’ shortcomings, Alec.”

Alec looks up, but Magnus is already watching him, his mouth pressed into a firm line. It attests to things being said that he doesn’t believe are all true.

“Isn’t it?” asks Alec, daring to tread that line. “I mean … it’s the public who let them get away with it. No-one ever holds them accountable …”

Magnus’ expression softens. It doesn’t do anything to dispel the lethargic ache in Alec’s chest, but it reminds him, for just a moment, how to breathe. And then, before Alec can bundle that pliant, vulnerable feeling back into his chest, Magnus reaches for Alec’s fidgeting hands across the desk, pressing his fingers lightly to the backs of Alec’s knuckles, stilling them for a moment.

“Your sense of justice is something too many men claim to have, but fail to act upon,” Magnus says, “It’s rare for someone to have the integrity and tenacity not to settle for just anything.”

The touch doesn’t last. It’s a fleeting thing, barely there, barely warm, barely beautiful, but Alec’s heart is in his throat nonetheless. The warmth of skin on skin, the briefest arc of static, the tender throb of a first touch - it makes his pulse stutter in staccato, and maybe he’s surprised, but he doesn’t know why. He doesn’t have time to think about it, because Magnus draws his hand back and folds his arms on the desk, tucking his fingers into the crook of his elbow.

He doesn’t look down at Alec’s hand. He doesn’t even blink. It’s a match, let and snuffed out in the same second, but has left Alec’s palm with a flash burn all the same.

“I admire that about you, Alec,” Magnus continues, “Your sense of what is right and what is wrong.”
And oh, Alec doesn’t know about that, he doesn’t think he has a good grasp on that at all - but when Magnus says it -

When Magnus says it, it sounds like truth, doesn’t it?

There’s a long pause before Alec asks, on a defeated sigh, “How do you do it?” He feels immensely vulnerable, like he’s bearing his soul, or at least his ugly insides. “How do you know that this is a fight worth fighting? How does it not … y’know .”

Kill you?

“Sometimes I don’t know that it’s worth it,” Magnus admits with a small shrug. “Sometimes I think there must be more than spending my life staying up ‘til five in the morning every night trying to solve something that I fear can’t be solved. Sometimes I do think about shoving this all into the bottom drawer of my desk and ignoring it. I do. But -”

He sighs heavily, rubbing his fingers against his temple. Alec doesn’t know what he’s thinking about, but he can probably take a good guess. It’s the same sort of thing that leaves Magnus with the same bruise-coloured shadows beneath his eyes as Alec, ones that he thinks he can cover with makeup and not be noticed.

But Alec has always noticed. Magnus has always been the one to go above and beyond for other people, people who won’t ever thank him - and God, he’s not even the one with superpowers. He’s just one man trying to make a difference with a pen and a pad of paper, one man with a newspaper and an ideal. He’s more brave than Alec. It goes without saying.

Alec has noticed all of it. He’s just never known what to say about it before.

“But if someone doesn’t take the law into their own hands, who else will?”

Magnus smiles tightly, but he nods. “Precisely. I think I owe that to a lot of people. A lot of people who can’t speak for themselves.”

That’s a lot for just one person to take on, Alec thinks. Because there are a lot of people out there, disposed by the government, locked up in jail cells without the chance to call a lawyer, murdered on the street, persecuted for kissing another man - treated as pariahs for powers they were born
That’s a lot. And as Magnus sighs something heavy and burdened, cricking his neck and steadying his shoulders as he settles back into the pile of paperwork on his desk, Alec can only wonder how it’s fair for him to have to carry all that weight alone.

It should be Idris’ job. It should be the Corporates’. It should be Sentinel, it should be -

Alec.

Alec knocks on the door to Izzy’s laboratory quietly, body curved in on himself. On the other side, he can hear the hum of music, muffled guitar making the air shiver, a bass pulse felt just behind his ear. Dizziness makes his head swim, not enough for it to hurt, but enough for him to notice the twitch, the ache, the sunspots when he looks at the fluorescent lights above too long. It started on the threshold of Magnus’ office, stalked him on the subway all the way here, and now, the white corridors of headquarters only make it worse.

Alec winces. He glances back down the corridor behind him - but there’s no-one there. The hallway is as vacant as ever, and whilst the security cameras above wink and revolve, he’ll be in and out before someone notices he’s here and accosts him for not being out on patrol.

Alec pulls the collar of his overcoat up about his throat, shrinking into the fabric. He goes to open the door, but then there’s a crash. The floor vibrates.

“Fuck!” Izzy swears from the other side of the door. “Every time!”

Alec doesn’t knock again. Izzy can’t hear him. He pushes on the door and slips in unseen, but is immediately deafened by rock music - and it’s Queen, because it of course it is, because Alec can’t cut a break - and the unmistakable smell of smoke.

Alec wrinkles his nose. “Is something burning?” he sneers. He looks around for his sister, but she’s
there nowhere to be seen. “Iz?”

There’s another clatter, and then a bang that shoots down Alec’s spine. His entire body tenses on instinct, his fingers twitching for his bow that isn’t even there. Heels click on the linoleum and Alec turns fast, only to see Izzy emerge from the back room, clutching an enormous piles of metal in her arms. Her lab coat is black with soot and there’s a smear of grease across her chin.

“Izzy wipes the back of her hand over her cheek, but smears soot everywhere. Alec goes to gesture to his own face, but decides against it. She probably already knows it’s there.

“I think it’s on fire,” he says instead. Which is equally unhelpful, judging by the annoyed quirk of Izzy’s lips.

“You don’t say,” she grumbles, “I thought the smoke was just for fun.”

She teeters over to her computer and prods a few buttons with her fingertips, wrapping her knuckles against the screen when it takes a second to load. She hums, and then turns to the fire alarm on the wall, reaching behind it to yank out a handful of wires.

Alec is … confused. And slightly concerned, but that’s nothing new.

“So,” Izzy says conversationally, wandering over to her stereo to turn down the music. Freddie Mercury is silenced abruptly, and what replaces him is a hissing sound, like metal heating and expanding. “I heard we have two more bodies.”

“Right,” says Alec with a scowl. He glances at Izzy’s engine and hesitates. “Same … same area as the others. The MO was similar -”

“Cut throat and burn marks?”
“Right. Yes. I thought you might be able to cash in a favour at the city morgue and have a look at them -”

“I’ve got a rendezvous with Meliorn tomorrow to pick up some gear, so I’ll pay them a visit while I’m out.” She glances back at Alec over her shoulder and narrows her eyes. “I noticed you didn’t file a report about it.”

“No. I didn’t.”

“That’s not very you .”

Alec opens his mouth to retort, but the words aren’t quite there. He wants to say something like: would anyone really care if I had? and that surprises him, because it’s mutinous. It’s not by the book. It’s against protocol, it’s -

Keeping secrets from his friends, from his sister, from his parents.

Even if that’s only returning the favour.

Alec folds his arms behind his back, just so Izzy can’t see him toying with his fingers and tugging at his knuckles.

“I wanted to keep this low profile. Handle it myself. Until I know what we’re dealing with.”

“I’ve been asking around,” says Izzy, scraping her hair up into a ponytail with the scrunchie on her wrist. She seems utterly unperplexed by the smoke, now thick and black, pouring out across the bench. “But either no-one knows anything, or they’re all purposefully ignoring it -”

“I can take a guess which it is,” Alec mutters. He watches in bewilderment as Izzy grabs a fire extinguisher from under the bench and begins tugging at the nozzle. Her long nails make it difficult, so she presents it to Alec with a pout.
Alec rolls his eyes, and yanks the pin, before handing it back.

“Thank you,” Izzy chimes. She squeezes the nozzle and blasts the smoking engine with a spray of white foam. And it goes everywhere, splattering all over the engine, the worktop, and the wall behind. Alec feels the cast-off flick against his cheek.

When she’s emptied the entire canister, Izzy heaves it up onto the bench and then turns to Alec, hands on her hips.

“Mom and dad don’t see a problem,” she says. Alec’s eyes dart between the pile of foam dripping down over the bench, and her face, and he raises an eyebrow, but Izzy keeps on talking. “Crime against vigilantes has always existed, it’s not out of the ordinary. They don’t see the pattern, so therefore, it’s not any of our concern. Which is, of course, bullshit-”

“Sometimes it feels like Idris are just sitting back and watching,” Alec replies. “It should be our job, keeping people safe, using our powers for -”

Good, he thinks, but good has been a long-held dream never quite realised. There’s a sour taste in his mouth, and worse, a heavy pitfall in his stomach, so condensed and painful that he can feel it, even when standing still and gritting his teeth.

He can only think of Magnus.

Magnus, and his quest for truth, for justice, for vengeance, in a way. He wants recompense against the city with blood on its hands, against the press for its slander, against Idris for their apathy.

“It just feels like -” Alec begins, tilting his chin up so he stares at the ceiling and not at Izzy. “Like other people are out there doing more than us to stop this, and they shouldn’t have to.”

Izzy tips her head. “People like your vigilante friends? Or people like … Magnus?”

She reads him so easily, and oh, isn’t that’s unfair. He wishes his stony silence wasn’t so full of cracks and the light inside wasn’t a hemorrhage he’s unable to stop; he wishes the way his face contorts into a frown wasn’t the answer to the question she doesn’t even need to ask.
Izzy’s lips pull up into a small, sympathetic smile.

“You can’t always do everything for everyone, Alec,” she says, “Maybe we should accept the help and just … say thank you. Given how little Idris cares, we probably need it.”

*But it’s not about that*, he thinks. Or it is, a little, but it’s also the frustration of feeling like a waste that makes his head hurt like it does. Like these gifts he was given by pure chance are withering away the longer he doesn’t put them to good use.

Because what is the point of him, Alec the superhero, what is the point of *Sentinel*, if not to save? If not to bare the burden so nobody else has to?

How does he say *Iz, I feel useless*, and have it mean as much as he wants it to mean, and not just be a cry for help?

“You think you can have a look through the archives for any more murders with the same MO?” he asks instead, steeling his voice. It’s meant to be the voice he uses with Jace when he’s giving orders, but Alec knows it’s a poor imitation now. He can hear his own waiver of weakness. “Anything remotely similar, I … I want to know.”

Izzy scrunches up her nose, but acquiesces. “It’ll take me a while, sifting through all that paperwork, but I’ll see what I can do. I can probably blackmail Underhill into helping me.” She pauses, narrowing her eyes. “What are you going to do?”

Alec flattens his mouth into a tight line, clenching his hands behind his back. He should talk to his parents, address the problem head on, but he already knows what they’ll say:

‘It’s a waste of time, Alec. Just stick to your briefings and keep your head down.’

‘This is not our problem. Vigilante disagreements are not in our jurisdiction.’

‘Those supers are illegal, they had it coming.’

And that - that leaves him back at square one: waiting for another person to end up dead in the
same way, and for him to stumble across the trail long after its cold. That leaves him alone, cold and alone, and drenched on a rooftop or in a parking lot. That leaves him with nowhere to turn, wanting desperately to just give up, because wouldn’t that be easier -

*How does Magnus do it?*

“Alec?”

“I don’t know,” Alec says honestly. He closes his eyes for a brief moment of respite not to be found. The dizziness persists. “Iz, I don’t know.”

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Alec finds himself on the southeast corner of 4th and Broadway a few nights of insufferable silence later, staring up at the bright red and yellow sign of *Tower Records* that glows like a beacon. He loosens his tie around his neck and hoists his bag higher on his shoulder as his bow digs into his side through the canvas.

Broadway is always loud and invariably too busy; it makes him feel visible, and he’s never been well-practiced in that. Headlights paw at his back and every blaring horn makes him jolt and twist back to look over his shoulder, fearing that someone is shaking their fist out of a rolled-down window at him. There’s a gaggle of teenagers on the curb with their cheap deli coffees, huddled around the enormous LCD screen in the window as it plays loop footage of Michael Jackson’s *Remember The Time*. Alec pauses for a moment, less distracted by Jackson’s blindingly gold outfit, and more by the *Re-elect Herondale ’92* badges that his audience all seem to be sporting.

One of them catches him staring and shoots him a dirty glare.

Alec in turn, has to look away. He doesn’t want to get into it with a kid.

Hunching his shoulders, he ducks into the bright white light of the record store before he can reason himself out of it, and the rumble of the traffic and Michael Jackson’s fey trill give way into the hum of synth and low bass, playing inoffensively over the indoor speakers.
Alec doesn’t listen to much music, and he has even less cause than most to be here in a record store in the first place because it’s not like he owns a record player or a stereo either.

But he’s not here for himself.

There’s a spotty kid at the register who tries to catch his eye and offer him some cheery help, but Alec keeps his gaze ducked, quietly stealing into one of the aisles. Shelves of tape cassettes and shiny CDs tower over his head, taller than he suspects he could even reach, and his eyes rake across the spines: *Patty Smith, Paula Abdul, Pet Shop Boys* …

It’s a gesture. For Magnus.

In order to show what, exactly, Alec doesn’t know, but it’s to show something, to show Magnus that despite everything, despite Idris and President Bush and the state of the world, Magnus is not alone in carrying it all on his shoulders.

… *Phil Collins, Prince* …

Queen.

Alec’s fingers brush reverently across the row of albums; they’re all there, not one missing. *A Night at the Opera, Greatest Hits II, Innuendo* … Alec recognises most of them from Izzy’s record collection back at HQ. He selects a cassette at random and turns it over in his hand.

*It’s a Kind of Magic* .

Alec almost laughs to himself.

He stares hard at the strange, garish colours on the jacket, the dark background flecked with bright, dizzying colours, and then scans the track list.

The song Magnus was humming the other night isn’t there, but -
The one Nightlock was - that’s there. First track on the B-side. It makes Alec’s stomach flip in a way he doesn’t really understand, but it feels important. For a moment, he can feel the soft drizzle from that night on his face again, the tension bleeding out of his body as they sat side by side on that upturned dumpster, the faint glow of a fake set of stars gently lapping at his feet in the puddles.

The feeling tingles, a memory altogether distant now, but no doubt fond. It was only a few days ago, but it feels like far longer; the world doesn’t pause for Alec, not like it did for that brief hour, sat together under the city’s blue haze, Nightlock’s face turned to the sky.

Alec feels like he’s aged a year between the two dead heroes against that hydrant and all this discussion about Idris. And Magnus -

“Hey, it’s me,” says Izzy, crackling into quiet existence in his ear. He almost doesn’t hear her, though it’s no fault but his own. “We’ve got a police chase along the bayside, Arkangel’s already in pursuit. Might need you on patrol early tonight.”

Alec turns away from the shelf, ducking his head as he presses his finger against his com bud. There’s only one other man in his aisle and he’s nodding his chin along to whatever music is blasting through his headphones.

“Jace alright?”

“He’s fine. Nothing out of the ordinary,” says Izzy. “We might not even need you, but there’s a police cordon down south that you might need to oversee, so just hang around somewhere near by and I’ll call you.” She pauses, and Alec can hear her thinking. “Were you busy tonight?”

“No,” says Alec. He digs for his wallet and spies two crumpled bills stuffed alongside his subway pass. “No, I’m not doing anything. I’ll be there in ten.”

Alec perches on the rooftop of what he thinks is a hotel - a stout, geometric building of grey limestone, ruled in by rows of regimented rectangular windows glossy with yellow light. Across from him, the glass of a skyscraper winks at him in its post-modernist juxtaposition, and below, a
police cordon stretched out across the street, slowing the traffic to a crawl.

There are five marked police cars and two undercover Mercedes with dark-tinted window blocking the way, and a lot of people in high-vis coats, looking more and more pressed as the night wears on. Alec’s not sure what they’re doing, but they’re stopping every third car that creeps through their funnel of traffic cones, pulling some off to the side to check beneath the wheel arches for Lord knows what.

Izzy muttered something about a terror threat in his ear a few hours ago, but his ear piece has otherwise been silent, Jace keeping out of trouble and Clary staying silent, wherever she might be. The night itself is unusually temperate; it’s not warm, never warm, but Alec’s teeth aren’t chattering and his mask hasn’t adhered with frost to his skin, so he might as well call it tropical.

It won’t last, and he knows it; the warmth will bring lightning before daybreak. If he licks his lips, he suspects he might taste that thunderous charge already in the air.

But it’s always the cold that carries the tension. Unremarkably, Alec is glad to be rid of it, if just for a moment. It allows him to settle, his legs dangling over the edge of the building, his heels knocking haphazardly against the brickwork. His bow is still slung over his shoulder - not out of reach, but it’s the most off-guard someone might ever catch him.

In his hands, he crinkles a bright yellow plastic bag, his gloved hands feeling the rectangular outline of his cassette tape inside. He was going to stash it with his work clothes, but at the last minute, had stuffed it into his supersuit instead. And now he can’t stop looking at it.

Or, at least - looking at the bag. He hasn’t quite worked his way up to taking it out of the bag, because that makes it more real that he’s bought Magnus a gift.

He’s bought Magnus a gift. It’s not his birthday or Christmas or Easter Sunday or Kwanzaa or anything of the sort. He really has no excuse. He heard Magnus humming: it made something in his chest trip, and that’s really it.

He wanted to do something that would make Magnus smile. He wanted -

He wants to make Magnus feel like he’s recognised. Like someone appreciates the work he’s doing, and like someone still sees him a person beneath all that. He wants to make Magnus feel seen.
Alec curls his fingers into the plastic bag and it crinkles. His fingers distort the plastic. His teeth clench.

*What are you doing, Lightwood* -

He folds up the bag and slides it back into his boot, but now, he’s acutely aware of it. Acutely aware of the look Magnus might have on his face when Alec gives this to him: curiosity, confusion, pity, maybe? *Happiness?* Alec finds that he’s not sure what that looks like.

Below, a fire engine hurtles through the police blockade, sirens wailing and lighting up the dark with knife-sharp blue. The street is straight and long, all the way to the horizon, and Alec watches it go with a minute frown, until bright lights and bleariness swallow it up.

How does one find time for happiness between all this? Between emergency calls and the hot flush of adrenaline; between slowly seeping dread and unzipping at the end of the night and falling into bed; between story after story, lead after lead that peeters out to nothing.

Between match strike and extenguination.

There’s hardly a moment to breathe, led alone consider the strange swirling feelings in his chest.

Magnus must suffer from that too. His world revolves around that newspaper; he cannot have time for anything else.

In that regard, he’s just like Alec. They’re two sides of the same coin.

The warm thrum of a threatening storm rumbles over head, the air laden with it. The siren of the fire engine still rings in Alec’s ear, a Doppler effect still dissipating. His voice of reason whispers in his ear, even now: *have you checked the dispatch? Do you need to go where they’re going? You don’t have time to pause and think about this.*
Alec’s finger is halfway to his coms when he tastes that thunder calling on his lips. A prickle, a shudder, a simpering familiarity -

*It’s not a storm at all.*

Sometimes, Alec half expects the clouds to part above his head and for a column of strange, dream-deep light to appear as Nightlock materialises from out of the dark. It never happens, but Alec never stops wondering, the spark of anticipation rippling down his spine as he climbs to his feet, stuffing the cassette further into the side of his boot for safe keeping.

He searches the dark for a familiar shape, energy scuttling up and down his forearms, slithering beneath his bracers and lying flat between his suit and his skin. He searches for a shadow he finds he already knows the shape of. He’s still thinking of Freddie Mercury. It softens him at the edges, blurs all his carefully composed lines.

“Well, hello, stranger.”

Nightlock never appears in the place where Alec is looking. Maybe Alec should start looking the other way. Maybe he should just stop searching altogether and just wait to be found.

He turns. It’s not been long since they saw each other last, the two of them standing in horror over that fire hydrant, although it hardly feels it. Those days in between have not been kind to Nightlock.

Behind his mask, Nightlock looks exhausted. It’s not a passing shadow that hangs beneath his eyes. His whole body bears the weight. Alec wonders if he’s supposed to be seeing it.

“How do you always know where I am?” Alec asks. “Can you do that with your powers too?”

Nightlock rolls his eyes. His smile is thin. “I think you’ve been grievously misinformed about my powers.”

“Twice is a coincidence. Three times is not,” Alec points out. Then, in a lower voice, he adds, “And I think we’ve passed that now.”
“I suppose the next step is dinner and a movie.”

Alec rolls his eyes. “Don’t push your luck.”

Nightlock scoffs, as close to a laugh as Alec has ever heard from him. He steps to Alec’s side, pausing a moment as if in silent greeting, and then moves past him, peering out over the edge of the roof. His half-quirked smile becomes a frown.

It’s hard to say what Nightlock is thinking - as it always is, because he’s a man who plays his cards close to his chest, because that’s who you have to be to survive this long in a city out for blood - but tonight, Alec can easily hazard a guess.

And that’s because Alec shares the same preoccupation. Those same vivid nightmares, the same caress of a noose tightening around his throat, the same fear that good is just not good enough.

Alec turns quietly, moving to stand shoulder-to-shoulder on the edge of the rooftop. Nightlock doesn’t move away. Alec ducks his head a little to steal a glance at his expression.

Does he still feel the rain from that on the back of his neck? Does he still smell the burning of leather and charred skin? Does his throat sting too with the thought of a straight razor?

Does he blame Sentinel, blame Idris, for all of this? Or does he blame himself for not doing enough, just like Alec?

What does fear look like on a man who can level buildings with the flick of his fingers? Not wide eyes and terror; nor pale and mournful either.

It looks ungodly. That’s the word Alec settles upon, because Alec reads the unnatural tension in the air like braille, indentations against his fingertips. He sees the stiffness in Nightlock’s shoulders, the clench in his jaw as he looks out over the city, the way his silence is loud and deliberate.

And oh, doesn’t Alec know feeling that all too well.
“Have you got any leads on those two supers?” Alec asks, trying to catch Nightlock’s line of sight. “The ones strapped to the fire hydrant?”

“No. No, none,” replies Nightlock. His words are clipped. Terse, but not angry. “I’ve asked around, but - nothing. You?”

“Not yet,” Alec admits, “I’ve got … someone looking into it. She knows someone at the city morgue and could pull a few strings. She’s the best of the best.”

“Does Idris know?”

Alec frowns. “No. It’s off the record.”

“Good,” says Nightlock thoughtfully, “Good. What I said before - about them being involved -”

He doesn’t look at Alec, not in the pointed way Alec would expect. Instead, he seems to avoid Alec’s gaze obliquely, and Alec knows the look of a man struggling with his own restlessness, a twitch in his fingers, a pounding in his chest. He’s fighting hard not to meet the questioning look in Alec’s eyes.

Nightlock is neither the first nor last person to make that accusation in the last few days. Magnus said just as much. Idris might be involved in this, someone higher up the food chain than Sentinel’s good intentions and Arkangel’s bravery and even Izzy’s intuitive aptitude.

*And Alec would be a fool not to consider it -*

“And tonight?” Nightlock interrupts Alec’s internal barrage of doubt. “Is Sentinel on duty or off duty?”

Alec gestures at the police cordon below them. As he shifts, he feels the cassette tape shimmy down inside his boot.

“I was in the neighbourhood,” he says coolly, even though there’s a burning sensation in his fingertips and he fights not tobusy his hands. “I’m keeping watch.”
“You were in the neighbourhood? Is that code for can’t sleep?”

(Can’t sleep at night? whispers Magnus in his memories.)

No, Alec immediately goes to bite back, but as Nightlock turns to face him, the word extinguishes on Alec’s tongue.

There’s this look on Nightlock’s face that is almost meek. It throws Alec for a loop.

Nightlook is tired. His shoulders are hunched up against a cold that isn’t even there; his half-smile is resigned and weary; and this rare moment of openness, this freedom to show feeling, is a vulnerability Alec doesn’t know how to handle. Alec’s hands are too big, his touch too clumsy; he’s sure it will sift through his fingers.

“ haven’t been sleeping,” Nightlock says then, and he waves his hand in a manner dismissive and so obtuse that it’s irritating. “Pacing the pavements seems like a better use of my time.”

Is his candor a trap? Alec doesn’t feel like it is. Maybe Nightlock’s just as tired as he looks.

Alec presses his hand to his mask, pinching the bridge of his nose. He closes his eyes for a moment, before opening them again. He wonders if, when he opens his mouth, things will start pouring out too. It’s always a risk.

“When you close your eyes and you see … all of it,” Alec murmurs in agreement. Distantly, there’s another siren, growing closer, and then growing further in its vanishing echo. “All of them ... dead.”

Nightlock’s eyes turn sharp. He considers Alec for a long moment, and then, he says -

“Do you know when something’s worth it, Sentinel?”

Again. Again, here is the echo of Magnus, and Alec stares dumbfounded at Nightlock, his mouth
dropping open on a noise of surprise that doesn’t quite come. The silence stretches enough to have Nightlock shift, clearly uncomfortable, away from Alec.

“Of course you don’t,” he says quickly, and this is him throwing up his walls, this is him getting defensive and prickly and throwing out his elbows at the easiest target, and that’s Alec, that’s all his damn Corporates. The night is dark, but Alec sees that as plain as day. “You get paid not to think about that.”

“Nightlock,” Alec warns.

“Are you going to deny it?”

Alec narrows his eyes, but it’s Magnus that echoes tonight in his head, the press of that cassette tape in his boot a reminder, so it’s not anger that he feels, not hurt, not a wounded pride, not anymore.

*I admire that about you. Your sense of right and wrong.*

And Magnus had said it with such conviction that Alec might almost believe it. Perhaps, if Nightlock heard Magnus too, saw the determination ever present in Magnus’ eyes, he might believe it also.

“I don’t need to deny it,” Alec says low. “I know right from wrong. It doesn’t matter if you believe me or not.”

Nightlock swallows thickly at Alec’s words. Alec watches it in the bob of his throat, the prominent outline of his Adam’s apple, and then, as Nightlock turns his head to the side, Alec sees him in profile against the glow of the roaming city.

Nightlock chews his cheek in thought. “It must be nice to feel things so black and white,” he murmurs, “Everything just feels so many shades of grey right now, it’s hard to find something … concrete, to hold onto.”

“Is that an apology?” Alec dares. It makes Nightlock scoff.
“Not likely,” he says, but then hesitates. “Perhaps a surrender. If I’m feeling generous.”

“I’ll take anything I can get,” replies Alec, and oh, doesn’t that echo truer than he would like. He’s always strayed from the spotlight, but when it’s the one cast by Nightlock looking at him, staring at him like he deserves to be deconstructed, like the both of them are standing in the centre of a slow motion car crash, well -

Despite the long, dark shadow that stretches out behind him, filled with all sorts of unholiness and suffering thought, Alec finds that he cannot pull himself away.

Another fire engine speeds down the street. The blinking blueness refracts in Nightlock’s dark eyes, making them glow, making Alec’s head spin. He waits for the siren to fade, before anything can be said, but it’s Nightlock who beats him to it.

“That’s the third fire engine I’ve seen in the last half an hour,” he says, and that’s enough to break the strangest of stupours. The wail of the sirens in distant and unmistakable, and it disappears off in the same direction of the first.

Alec frowns, reaching for the police radio clipped to his belt, fingers turning the frequency to a different channel.

There’s nothing at first, just the hiss of white noise and static. But then, the croaky voice of the dispatcher crackles through, and reality is cold and chilling.

“… dispatch calling … available units to … suspected arson, no casualties …”

“That’s not far from here,” Nightlock says, although Alec didn’t hear the street address. “It’s a church in midtown.”

Nightlock steps back from Alec, putting space between them that Alec hadn’t even noticed disappear. Immediately, he’s searching the horizon, seeking the uptrail river of smoke seeping into the sky between buildings.

He’s not going to find any. Even Alec’s keen eyes cannot make out plumes of purple smoke against the clouds lying low over the city’s head. The smell of burning never carries far enough to mean much.
“Did they say arson?” Alec grimaces, “Do you think it’s -?”

“Maybe,” replies Nightlock, smoothing out his coat and adjusting his gloves. “I can go. They said no casualties, and you’re busy here, I’m sure.”

“What? I - no, no, I can go,” Alec says, too quickly, too telling. “Arkangel and Muse won’t be back for hours. I can go.”

Nightlock fixes him with a curious look, but it softens quickly. He smiles a so-be-it smile, and yes - it does feel like a surrender. He was right.

“Well, alright then. As long as you can keep up.”

Alec smells the burnt carcass of the church long before he even reaches the block. Running up the street and the spire pierces between plate glass skyscrapers, pitch black and shadowless, but the billowing smoke is blinding: Alec cannot make out any definition between the windows and the brickwork until he’s staring up at the ruins and the cold hand of shock rummages around in his belly.

Scorched ground and incinerated brick smell so very different to the stale tobacco and marijuana that clings to the city’s dark alleyways and underpasses; and in that, Alec is made nervous.

This sort of smoke is arid and dry. Alec wrinkles up his nose, the wind chafing at his skin. Sirens light up the side of every building for a half-block radius, flashing strobe against the underside of the heavy clouds. Alec’s head already aches, his eyes threatening to water.

He scales the side of an old brownstone with less elegance than he would like, and hauls himself up onto the roof only to find Nightlock already there, having flown. Nightlock stands tall on the very edge of the building, the wind whipping up his coat in violent shapes behind him, and he exchanges a look with Alec that consists of too many layers.

Alec takes a few measured breaths - and grumbles to himself that he had to run all this way when Nightlock can just lift his hands and fly, and that’s hardly fair - and then joins Nightlock at the
edge, looking out upon the carnage below.

It’s an old church, blackened and ashen, that crumbles before them, and is it the act of starting fires, or the aftermath, that bodes more violence, Alec wonders. Something about looking upon the skeleton of a building, ribs made of rafters and bleeding smoke, that whispers of destruction and sacrilege.

There are not many churches left like this in Manhattan, a world made of agnostic concrete and glass, and it’s been a long time since God and good faith found a home here. Churches are Sundays relics, pretty things to admire in passing, but left to fade in the corner of the eye.

And because of that, Alec already knows this wasn’t an accident. Someone wants this place noticed. A fire set to attract attention ...

A dozen fire engines and police cars are abandoned in the ruined shadow of the church, lights blaring, but the night is blue and black, and not the red of angry fire. They’re definitely too late to catch the culprit, but it doesn’t stop something dark contorting Nightlock’s face.

“What is it?” Alec asks, because he’s paying too much attention to miss it.

Still, Nightlock is surprised to be noticed. “Probably nothing,” he says. Alec watches as Nightlock worries his lower lip with his teeth, and then swipes his thumb across his mouth, catching upon the corner. He pinches his thumb and forefinger together then, his glove squeaking as he inspects his hand for some sort of residue Alec cannot see.

“Do you taste that?”

It’s an odd question to be asking but Alec obliges, tentatively wetting his lips. What he tastes is smoke, burning rubble, something ashy and charred. Hot metal, wet brick. Sweat cooling on his upper lip from running. Whatever cologne it is that Nightlock douses his coat in to keep himself hidden.

And Alec’s about to say no, no I only taste smoke , but then, as he pokes his tongue out between his lips once more, there’s something else, a faint sweet, leathery taste that creeps just below the surface of everything else, and it makes Alec stiffen.
He’s trapped by the same sensation as before, as in that charred warehouse, as on that street with the two dead man lashed to a fire hydrant, where the air felt heavy with human fat. And now, that same taste sticks to Alec’s lips like flesh and sinew, and he can almost feel it gluing his mouth shut.

Burning brick and burning skin smell so very different. He can taste the cooked fat again.

Someone was burned here.

“The dispatcher said no casualties,” Alec mutters, but down below, more police cars are pulling up, and one officer is unrolling a strip of yellow caution tape. A few men in dark trenchcoats are talking with heavyset frowns and war-grim faces, and Alec thinks they must be detectives.

“Yes,” says Nightlock, “But what remains is the question of whether there were any casualties to find.”

Alec’s throat tightens and he clenches his fists at his side. There’s that dread again, sickening and insidious, but it’s worse this time, because it’s hand in hand with anticipation.

Not again, he thinks. Not again, please not again. But he already knows the answer to a question not yet posed. Still, he sees it curling Nightlock’s lips up into a sneer, just as Nightlock’s fingers twitch and make the air shiver and tremble against the back of Alec’s neck.

Below them, a group of weary looking firefighters emerge from the remains of the great arched doorway, and one of them only makes it five or six steps before he falls abruptly to his knees and wretches on the ground. One of the other firefighters pats him sympathetically on the back, but Alec doesn’t need keen eyes to see that they all look green.

“I don’t think this was an arson,” Alec says low. He feels the bile churning in his gut too, and whilst heat still radiates from the burned-out church, the air has dropped ten degrees. Alec is chilled to the bone.

He looks to Nightlock, expecting him to be facing forward, his face contorted like thunder, the gears in his head turning.

Instead, all Alec finds is the dark brown of his eyes, somehow soft in the barbed-wire light.
“No,” Nightlock agrees, and his voice is a whisper. “Old churches don’t burn like this; they were built to last, but this is just charcoal.” His eyes drop to Alec’s chest, spanning Alec’s shoulders, the length of his arms, the strength in his hands. He pauses at last upon the bow still strapped to Alec’s thigh, and Alec can only guess at what he’s thinking.

You can trust me, he finds himself wanting to say against his better judgement. This bow belongs to me, not Idris. Whatever it is you think we need to do, I’ll do it.

Nightlock’s gaze flicks back to Alec’s, sharper now. “I suspect our assumptions were correct,” he states. “We have a pyrokinetic amongst us.”

“Killing people,” says Alec.

“That remains to be seen,” Nightlock says, “But I fear as much.”

They stand on the edge of that rooftop for what seems like hours, and although Alec’s legs begin to ache, he cannot move. The fire engines leave but the police escort remains, and Alec watches the detectives come and go, accompanied by men in white suits and face masks who carry silver briefcases and large cameras.

Alec hasn’t seen anything like this before, and it worries him. Izzy has always said he’s a bit of a worrier, and he’s always fitfully denied it, claiming that he’s only appropriately concerned about things that he needs to be concerned about. But as the police don’t stop moving and the lights don’t stop flashing, the situation below feels like his concern is dearly warranted; it doesn’t sit well in his stomach. He feels uneasy, made only worse by the fact that, once the smoke starts to dissipate into the overcast sky, Alec can still taste that char on the tip of his tongue.

He pulls his bow and shakes it out to full length, aware of Nightlock’s eyes on him. Alec clips his scope lens on and peers through, hoping for a clearer view.

The telltale shape of a body covered by black plastic never appears, but not even that can quell Alec’s nerves. Something’s not right, and he has no clue what that might be, not unless he gets a closer look -
His boot inches forward towards the rooftop’s edge – he doesn’t even notice until Nightlock speaks.

“I’ve been told that I have a gift for distractions.”

Alec looks up. He lowers his bow, confused. “Huh?”

Nightlock’s mouth lifts into a small, wry smile, although there’s no humour in it. Perhaps if they were stood close enough, he might nudge Alec with his elbow. Alec’s not sure why that feels significant.

Nightlock tilts his chin towards the church, briefly exposing his throat. Alec’s stare doesn’t leave him.

“Do you want to go down there?” he asks, already knowing the answer. “Unfortunately, neither you or I have the power of invisibility, so we’d undoubtedly be caught if we did, but I can cause a distraction. If you’re interested.”

Alec nods and Nightlock clicks his tongue. He takes a step back, anchoring himself with a wide stance, and then sweeps his hand through the air, clenching his fingers into an abrupt fist. Alec can’t help but hold his breath.

The next thing Alec knows, an empty police car is sucked up into the air and sent *hurtling* down the street with the shriek of metal and screech of asphalt, followed by frenzied shouting from police officers suddenly panicked into action. The police car collides with a distant streetlamp in a fountain of bright orange spark, the roof and engine crumpling on impact.

Alec’s eyebrows shoot up.

Nightlock smirks and, as all the police officers run off in the direction of their runaway car, he raises his other hand. With a hard, fast strike of his fingers, he seizes another car in his telekinetic grip and launches it down the street in the other direction.

It’s chaos below, and Alec almost wants to laugh, but finds himself slightly breathless. Still, a smile betrays him, and Nightlock seems pleased, dusting off his hands on his coat as if it were nothing.
“That might have been overkill,” Alec remarks.

“No-one was hurt,” Nightlock replies, fixated on Alec’s reluctant smile. It seems to spark an idea in his dark eyes; Alec watches at it takes root and blooms with more excitement than he has seen on Nightlock before.

And then, Nightlock steps to the edge of the roof, toes curled over the edge, and he extends his gloved hand out to Alec, face up: it’s an offering.

Oh. Oh, he wants Alec to -

Fly?

Alec stares at Nightlock’s hand, bewildered for a moment. He doesn’t have time for staring, but his mouth parts and his fingers curl into his palm, nails pressing into the meat of his thumb.

Nightlock raises his eyebrows as if to say get that stick out of your ass or worse, come on, Sentinel, I dare you. When Alec doesn’t move, he rolls his eyes dramatically.

“Come on, Sentinel. We don’t have time for trust falls. Best we get in and out before they realise what’s going on.”

Alec nods curtly. Hesitantly, he places his own gloved hand in Nightlock’s. Nightlock’s fingers curl around his.

Warm. They’re warm.

Was Alec expecting them to be cold? Like everything else?

Nightlock smiles again, and it’s crooked and a little devilish, enough to make Alec tense all over.
He knows that sort of smile. It’s an unhelpful thought, and the tight feeling cramps in his chest. *If it were Magnus smiling like that, he’d surely have something flirtacious or mortifying to follow -*

But it’s not Magnus, and Nightlock’s grip on his hand is slightly too tight, his smile slightly too dangerous, running along the knife edge of that fear he still wears like a cloak. They’re about to take a leap off the edge of a building.

And that - that fear makes it that much easier for Alec to settle his heart, even when Nightlock raises his other hand and the ground slips away from beneath Alec’s feet, and he finds himself buoyed by forces unseen. Alec can’t stay his sharp intake of breath, his heart lurching up into his throat and catching there as his entire body goes rigid.

He’s flown plenty times with Jace, but that’s slightly easier to stomach. Because at least he can see Jace’s wings; at least knows what’s keeping them afloat and would trust in Izzy’s tech until he dies, even if the turbulence always makes him feel sick.

This, though, has his stomach doing somersaults over itself in the way his legs dangle in the air as Nightlock guides them both over the edge of the building, slowly descending towards the ground. Suddenly, he has no control over his hands and feet, no ground to brace himself on, no way to pull back his bowstring if he needs to. He’s so aware of his own weight and how he should be plummeting towards certain death right now, how something that makes *no sense* is keeping him aloft, but his brain cannot make left or right of it, let alone up or down.

He squeezes Nightlock’s hand without realising; it makes Nightlock grin, flashing his teeth as he squeezes Alec’s fingers right back, his grip strong. He pulls Alec a bit closer in mid-air, slowing their fall towards the ground. Alec’s chest feels like liquid, all his insides floating around inside, untethered and buoyed. He definitely tastes acid reflux at the back of his throat.

“Someone might say you’re scared of flying,” Nightlock teases, his mouth twisted up at the side as they descend the front of the building.

Alec grits his teeth. “Not flying,” he says.

Nightlock gives Alec’s hand another squeeze, and Alec feels his nails through his gloves, pressing into Alec’s palm deliberately. It feels more like a pinch this time.

“Scared of letting someone else have control?”
Alec doesn’t answer that.

When his feet finally meet asphalt, he breathes a sigh of relief that is far too loud.

Nightlock scoffs. He drops Alec’s hand with a parting there, there tap to his knuckles, and steps away from Alec, putting space between them.

“Remind me not to do that again,” Alec says weakly, swaying as all his internal organs right themselves again. “I’m fine with walking.”

“Suit yourself,” says Nightlock with a knowing look, “But we can discuss the merits of air travel later.” He nods towards the simmering remains of the church. “Let’s see what’s going on.”

It’s easy enough to hurry across the street unseen. Alec is a ghost in black and Nightlock doesn’t make a sound; and as all the cops are dispersed halfway to the wind anyway, no-one notices the two of them ducking beneath the caution tape and ascending the steps of the burned-down church.

The arch of the doorway casts them both in deep shadow, and Alec looks up, just briefly, craning his neck back to see the spire disappearing into the dark high above. In its blackness, in the strange and unnerving way its burned flesh seems to absorb all the light pouring out of the city like an abyss, Alec swears he sees the whole building tremble, a full body shudder.

Perhaps it’s just smoke. Perhaps it’s the last whisper of piety evaporating into the clouds. Perhaps it’s something more sinister than that, wreaking havoc in the gloom.

The stench of burning rubble and charred rafters is stronger inside, enough to make Alec choke and cough into his fist as he ducks through the door, into the entryway. Nightlock sneers, his nose wrinkling up, and he waves his fingers around to move precariously balanced timbers out of the way, dislodging a thick layer of sediment from the ceiling.

It hits the ground with a soundless puff.

The inside of the church is painted black; there’s a mural of the Virgin Mary above the door that was once yellow and gold and powder blue. Her skin, now, is flaky and ashen, peeling across her
bare hands and pinkened cheeks. Alec suspects that if he were to reach out and touch the walls, his hand would pass right through and they would crumble around him, reality dissolving into ash between his palms. It makes him wonder if the world outside still exists at all, or if there’s just vacuous black space, fragile, unfinished, half-erased. His boots alone leave dark footprints in the carpet of soot, muffling the normal sort of echo one would expect to hear in vaulted halls as high as this.

It’s eerie. The silence is deafening, seeping up from the tombs likely below his feet. It’s all so wrong, so unnaturally still, because he knows how the police sirens outside wail and how the wind howls and how his footsteps should sound, a beat like a heart on concrete. But the soot absorbs it all like snow, like fog, like the unmoving shroud of death and it’s like he’s stepped out of time; like the world around them has stopped; like Alec has slipped between two windows in time to a state of purgatory, paused right upon the veil of reality and disillusion where hidden listeners wait in ambush but never seize the chance. He can almost imagine the petals of ash falling from above, stilling in mid-air, long enough for him to be able to reach out and grab a fleck between his thumb and forefinger in some sort of daze.

_How much fire did it take to do all this?_

Nightlock leads the way, weaving a path through the wreckage. They pass a number of scorch marks on the ground, carved into the stone and the wood. And then, a litter of small yellow crime scenes cones amidst the rubble marking out evidence, already blanketed with a thin film of fallen ash.

Alec barely dares to breathe. It doesn’t seem right to make a sound, for fear of putrefaction. He focuses, instead, on matching his footprints with the ones Nightlock treads, careful not to disturb anything else.

But it’s when they finally reach the skeletons of the large, towering oak doors that lead into the nave and Nightlock creaks them open with another wave of his hands, that Alec’s entire body stills. His heart ... stops.

He can hear nothing. Endless, drowning, silent _nothing_.

And then, far ahead, in the gilded shadow of the sanctuary -

Ash is falling from the vaulted ceiling in clumps, pillowing on the ground and mushrooming as clouds of gritty smoke, the rows and rows of pews little more than a pile of smouldering and shattered wood, and the air hangs heavy with suffocation and broiled flesh -
But it’s not what Alec stares in horror at.

“What … is that?” he finds himself saying, his voice breaking upon the last word. He doesn’t know why he asks. He has eyes.

He can see.

At the far end of the church, suspended high above the chancel and the altar by long cast iron chains, is the unmistakable shape of a body.

And it’s too hard to tell from a distance if the body belonged to a man or a woman, an adult or a child, because it’s disfigured beyond recompense, flesh warped and blackened and crisp. The head lolls forward and the skin, blistered and weeping blood, has crusted dark and brown. Chains lashed about the wrists stretch the arms out wide, wrenching at the shoulders, pulling the bones free of the sockets and slicing into the softened flesh of the palms - and the analogy to crucifixion is not lost, not in a place such as this.

“By God,” Nightlock whispers. “What circle of Hell …”

This is not consecrated ground anymore. Alec is by no means a man of God - not in a city such as this where God has clearly abandoned them for all their Earthly horrors - but he knows this is no longer a place of worship. Fire has seared all the holiness from this ground, without care for the cries and prays of that which it has burned.

Someone has been burned at the stake, the stake being the altar. Does the blasphemy ring louder, or does the silence -

Nightlock starts walking, striding purposefully up the aisle, and Alec half expects the bellow of an organ to accompany him, to shatter the numb and terrifying silence - but it doesn’t come. Alec can only follow in blind despair, his mouth dry and his heart seized in his chest, picking his way over splintered wood and the remains of an enormous chandelier, crashed from high above.

At the steps of the chancel, Nightlock stops abruptly and stares up at the body. It’s strung up a good ten feet off the ground; a shake of the head is all the reaction Nightlock can muster, but Alec sees the tremble in his fingertips. Words whisper over Nightlock’s lips that Alec can’t quite catch, but which he suspects might be prayer, the sort spoken to people whose souls have been damned.
and need safe passage to the other side.

Alec remembers being told that people who die violent deaths don’t tend to be given the chance to move on. They remain trapped, anchored to the city – in much the same way as him.

As he thinks it, his whole body shivers with a tremor of impact, of horrendous epiphany, rather than with the cold.

“I knew something wasn’t right,” Nightlock mutters, “The energy here feels all wrong.”

“It’s definitely not the only thing that’s wrong,” Alec says darkly.

He braves looking up, but this close, he can see the way the flesh has been seared from the bones and left to crack. He sees clothes incinerated, flesh bubbled, and hair torched, all remnants of an identity stripped away from whoever this once was. The smell of burned skin is putrid. The stench is nauseating and sweet, like leather tanned over a flame, so thick and heavy that Alec can taste it on his tongue. He leans forward, bowing his head as he tries not to gag, finding purchase in the edge of the font, once gold and ornate, but now black and crumbling.

Nightlock waves his hands again, the set of his face harsh and stern, and if Alec weren’t trying not to wretch, he would say something about not disturbing a crime scene. But he can’t; he can’t even bring himself to think it.

The chains holding up the body begin to sag. Slowly and sorrowfully, Nightlock guides the blackened corpse down to Earth, laying it to rest on the plateau of the altar before them.

Alec measures his breathing, looking up from where his head is bowed between his shoulders to watch Nightlock approach the altar. Nightlock tips his head and gazes down at the deformed face, and his expression is so carefully blank.

Numb. It’s numb, and that’s what Alec’s feeling too: the shock devolving, mutating into numbness.

And it manifests as a heaviness in Alec’s gut, an ache, a sickness that he’s sure he’s catching the longer they stay. He can’t keep looking; he can’t stomach the realisation that fire doesn’t burn human skin, it peels it; he never wanted to know that incinerated hair smells like sulfur.
Something *wrong* has happened here, and it goes beyond the evil and the violence that has been allowed into these walls.

Alec needs to leave, but he won’t leave without Nightlock, unwilling to abandon him, unwilling, even, to take his eyes from the lines of his back.

His stare does shift, however, because as he tries to right himself, pushing away from the font, he notices something drowned in the holy water. A small dark shape at first, a shadow beneath the murky surface.

Alec frowns. The water is cold as he plunges his hand into the font, almost icy to the point of paradox, as he pulls out a soaked scrap of fabric. He squints at it, unfolding it in his clumsy hands. It feels like soft leather, and it has two holes in it, and -

*Oh no.*

*Oh no, not another one.*

He balks, almost throwing it back into the water. It’s only a testament to the horror he has already seen that he keeps a hold.

It’s a mask.

It’s a fucking *mask*, and he sees that as he unfurls it in his hands, holding it up to the shards of faint light that pierce through the windows.

It’s a small black mask, not unlike the one he’s wearing right now.

He drags his eyes back to the immolated corpse.

“It was a super.” His voice rings out too hollow in the enormous hall, but the walls are blackened and thin and fragile and there’s nowhere for his voice to echo. His words are all but swallowed up.
He tastes the bile that is left behind.

Nightlock turns back to him, visibly confused for a moment, until his stare locks upon the mask in Alec’s hands. And Alec sees it wash over him: the horror, the dread, the heresy of all of this, and then, thereafter, the hatred and the anger, a slow and simmering thing that will only be stoked as the night drags on.

“I knew it,” Nightlock says, his voice dangerously low. He seems to tense, not a breath of movement in his entire body, so usually fluid and graceful, and then he says, “We need to leave.”

Alec doesn’t need to be told twice.

Nightlock doesn’t speak for a while, but Alec can’t say he’s any wiser as to what should be said. Walking does little to clear his mind, and the city still screams like a slaughterhouse, sirens bleating in the distance, tires screeching on the asphalt, the slow thud of heavy bass seeping from the walls of seedy nightclubs - but Alec finds he does not long for silence, not anymore.

That church was silent. Too silent. And that same silence hangs heavy in the space between him and Nightlock now, unbroachable and as vast as an abyss, unnerving as it echoes across Alec’s skin, scoring him down to the bone. The wind, now beckoning thunder and downpour, sweeps through those crevasses in both the city and Alec with no apology.

They walk three or four blocks, cutting through darker alleyways where they won’t be seen, until the increase in drunk people staggering between bars becomes all too much. They’re forced to climb upwards then, taking to the rooftops once more.

Alec expects Nightlock to leave. He’s not sure why Nightlock hasn’t yet taken off, disappearing without a word. Alec can tell he’s in shock. He walks ahead of Alec, quiet and quipless, his eyes elsewhere and his fingers spasm between still and restless. Surely, surely, he doesn’t want to be here. Surely he has family and friends at home, surely he wants company that isn’t Alec and this Godless space of a city.

Alec stops.

He’s not sure why he does, on this rooftop rather than any other, but he does; he doesn’t want to
keep walking. Hell, he can’t feel his legs, but he can feel his tender stomach, one harsh breath away from having him bent over on the ground and retching. He swings his quiver from his shoulder and unclips his bow and throws them both to the ground, and then he runs his hands through his hair, dragging it up on its end.

_Godless space indeed._ The city blinks at him with some dumb facade of _not knowing any better_, although Alec has long since fallen for that pretense. He’s not fooled. There’s blood in the gutters and churches steeped in fire and people dying in the streets, and there’s no way the city turns a blind eye to that. It’s complicit too, just like Idris, just like him. It has to be.

He slumps to the ground with a huff, and that’s when Nightlock stops walking, turning back to see where Alec has gone. His face softens in an instance when he sees that Alec has given up, and he retraces his steps, crouching down in front of him.

“Sentinel? Are you okay?” he asks, and Alec looks to the sky, exasperated.

“No,” Alec says, far too simply. “Are you?”

Nightlock mulls over a reply, and it swills around inside his mouth. Perhaps, he’s thinking about lying, ready to say yes and pretend that he’s not as disemboweled as Alec -

- but then he closes his eyes and shakes his head.

“No. No, I - certainly not,” he replies. “I can’t … get it out of my mind.”

He rolls off his haunches, sitting back on the rooftop across from Alec. His shoulders slump and he looks tired as he leans back on his palms, turning his face to the sky too. He breathes in and out, slowly, and somehow, it strips him down, because the man Alec sees before him now is just that: a _man_, not a vigilante or a superhero or a mask.

In the distance, thunder rolls, the purple clouds above brewing for a storm. Alec can hear the curtain of rain approaching. Even the air feels weighted, oppressive upon his shoulders, a hand about his throat that tightens with every swallow.

He doesn’t know what to do right now. He’s seen things - so many things he wishes he’d never seen, people dying, people _dead_ - but this is different. This is something else. This is a murder,
preempted and deliberate. This is a hate crime, this is political, this is demanding for attention. This is a scar on that church, on this city, on Sentinel, and on Nightlock that they will see whenever they close their eyes, a scar so bloody and gruesome, Alec doesn’t know if he’ll ever be able to scrub it free from his hands.

But it’s a thread too. And Alec’s been searching for one for so long, since he found the dead super in the parking lot one rainy night weeks ago. And now that he’s found it, Alec knows in his heart that he dreads to pull it, but in his head, that he must.

This is just the start.

Whoever is out there burning down churches and setting people on fire and carving out throats, they’re going to do it again. It’s going to get worse. They have to be found.

And Alec - well, Alec is lost somewhere in this city, in this labyrinth of stone and thunder, bound to encounter the minotaur who lies waiting at the centre. The beast will never be the one he wants, but it’s going to have horns and teeth and fire in its eyes nonetheless.

The only way out is back or through. And Alec wants to go back, but Sentinel needs to go through – and that’s the dichotomy of him, his two parts that will never equate because they pull him too thin in two directions all the time.

If he runs, someone else ends up dead. If he yields, he has to shoulder the guilt for the rest of his life. If he pushes forward, who’s to say he won’t find something out about Idris he doesn’t want to know, who’s to say he’s not the next super with a straight razor against his throat or staring down a torrent of fire. If he pulls on this thread, he might unravel himself, and he doesn’t know if he’s capable of stitching that mess back together when he doesn’t know how to sew.

Not anymore. Not … alone.

The thunder rolls closer. Alec wonders if that body in the church was burned alive. Did they suffer, or was it over quickly? What does it feel like to have flame sprouting from your skin before your very eyes? What is it like to have your lungs fill up with smoke until you’re left gasping for breath -

“Sentinel.”
Alec looks up. Nightlock’s eyes meet his, firm and unyielding, already watching. Alec’s chest hitches.

*You’re not alone*, a voice in his head supplies.

“What?” he asks instead.

Nightlock frowns at him, but it’s not cutting. He sounds soft, caring even. His words are tender. “Stop it. Whatever you’re thinking about, it’s not going to help.”

Alec swallows thickly, but finds himself nodding. It’s ironic, he supposes, how he had once been the one to roll his eyes and bemoan Nightlock’s very presence, and now he can’t think of anyone else who he could stomach in a moment such as this.

Well, almost no-one else.

“I need to - call this in,” he says, pressing at his ear to activate his coms. “Idris probably already know, but -”

Maybe he expects Nightlock to protest, but he doesn’t. He sits across from Alec and just nods. A small twitch of his mouth is all he can summon in solidarity.

Maybe he’s as lost as Alec feels right now. And that isn’t a particularly reassuring thought.

“Hey,” Alec says instead, pressing at his coms, wishing he could call Izzy’s name aloud, but he holds it back on his tongue. He waits for her voice, hoping that it will bring the steadiness his covets. “You there?”

A moment passes until there’s a reply.

“Oh, Alec!” Izzy trills, and she sounds a bit flustered on her end, as if she’s been running circles around her lab, up to her elbows in God knows what. “I was just about to call you, I have an update for you on those hydrant heroes of yours. The ones with their throat slit? I’ve just finished the autopsy - ”
“Oh.”


“I -” He looks up, searching for words, but of course, they’re not be found. Nightlock maintains a steady gaze, but Alec cannot hold it for long, flitting back and forth between his eyes, dark as they are, and the sky as it rumbles. Specks of rain begin to spatter the rooftop. “Yeah, I’m - it doesn’t matter. Did you find anything?”

Izzy pauses just long enough for Alec’s gut to flood with worry. He stiffens, and knows that Nightlock has noticed him straightening his back.

“Hey -”

“Are you somewhere you can talk?”

“I’m … with Nightlock.”

Again, another pause. Izzy’s hesitation speaks loudly enough; Alec can picture her frown, the red purse of her lips, the way she’ll grill him about taking unnecessary risks when he’s back at headquarters.

“How well do you know this man, Alec? He’s a vigilante. Can you really trust him?’

She knows about Nightlock - she’s no idiot, and not one to forget a single detail of past conversations - but Alec doesn’t tell her everything. Alec’s not sure how he would go about telling her everything. How to go about replying: ‘yes, I think I can’.

Alec glances back at Nightlock, but his expression is too guarded to guess, especially hidden away behind a mask. But he’s listening intently, Alec knows it, and it makes Alec’s skin itch.

“Okay,” says Izzy.
He’ll have to thank her later for not asking questions.

“Can you put me on loudspeaker?”

Alec frowns, but does as he’s told, tapping the radio affixed to the neck of his suit.

“Hey, are you there -?”

“I got you,” Izzy replies, her voice more tinny than it was in Alec’s ear. She doesn’t sound like herself, which can only be a good thing because that means she can’t be recognised.

Nightlock appears appropriately surprised to hear her. He draws himself a little closer, stopping when he’s within touching distance in front of Alec. Alec can feel the warmth of his body, the wary prickle of his powers skittering across Alec’s skin.

“Nightlock’s here,” Alec says then, feeling a little foolish to be talking into his suit. “Uh, you can - say what you have to say. About the - about the autopsy.”

“Okay ,” Izzy says, perking up noticeably, “Also, Nightlock, hi. I’d say I’ve heard a lot about you, but that’s not really how this job works .”

“Likewise,” Nightlock replies, forcing a wry smile. He sobers quickly. “Is this about the double homicide?”

“Yes ,” says Izzy, “The two from the fire hydrant, with their throats slashed and their suits
burned. So, I don’t know if Sentinel told you, but the guy at the city morgue owes me a few favours, so I was able to borrow the bodies after he was done with them.

“Yes.”

“Yes, well - I found some weird things about their injuries. A lot of the wounds were inflicted from the front, but there were no signs of a struggle or anything defensive really. And then there’s the angle of the blade that made the throat incisions. The cuts were made upwards.”

“What does that mean?” Alec frowns.

“I mean,” Izzy stresses, “Usually when someone attacks you like that, cutting your throat, you’d expect them to slash in a downwards motion. But an upwards motion suggests an attack from below -”

An attack from below? That doesn’t make sense. Those two supers weren’t exactly tall, barely out of college or finished growing -

Alec’s clearly missing something, and he knows he is, because Izzy’s silence is baited.

“So it was done by someone shorter?” he asks anyway. “What about a woman?”

“It’s possible, but as much as I would like to give my own gender credit for their ability to commit serial murder just as well as a man, I don’t think that’s the case this time.”

“It was self-inflicted,” says Nightlock.

Alec’s eyes snap to Nightlock’s face, but Nightlock is deliberately looking away, staring hard at his hands as he fiddles with his gloves.

“Self-inflicted? What? What are you talking about?” Alec demands.

“That’s what I thought too,” interrupts Izzy, “But that’s not everything. Once I peeled away their
supersuits, I found more. Some third degree burns and a lot more incisions." Her sigh is steadying. "Someone carved words onto them. Or made them do it themselves, I'm not sure. They carved their aliases into their chests. Their super names, Al-Sentinel."

"The church," Alec says then, looking to Nightlock. "Do you think -"

"I don't know," Nightlock replies, clearly on the same wavelength. He presses his thumb to his lower lip in thought. "I didn't notice anything on the body, but it's not outside the realm of possibility. It seems too much a coincidence to think there are two people out there with such a vendetta against vigilantes."

"The church?" Izzy asks, "What's going on? What church?"

Alec sighs. He opens his mouth, his words catching in his smoke-hoarse throat, the thought of retelling the story already enough to make him nauseous – but Nightlock beats him to it.

"A church in midtown burned down tonight," he explains, his voice clear. "Inside, we found a body, it was made up to be … a spectacle. We have reason to believe it was another super, although I can't say who."

"Oh, God," Izzy whispers, "The same MO?"

"Not sure," says Nightlock, "The body was burned beyond recognition. But that's not to say it was the cause of death. We didn't want to hang around long enough to find out."

"If it ends up at city morgue, I can get my hands on it," Izzy replies, "If not, I know a couple detectives at the 99th, and they'll get us an in. Are you guys both okay?"

"Peachy," says Nightlock.

Alec raises his eyebrows pointedly. Nightlock ignores him.

"We're fine," Alec says instead, "Can you put a trace on the fire department?"
“Already done,” says Izzy, “And I’ll reroute their dispatch calls through to your suit once you’re back.” Alec can hear her clacking away on a keyboard at her end. Then, she adds, maybe more to herself than anyone else, “If someone’s going around burning people, there’s got to be a way to track these fires before the fire department … maybe I can figure out a way to track heat signals …”

And then, despite the hiss of the approaching rain, despite the fat droplets of water that are beginning to roll down Alec’s mask, despite the cold that has settled in to stay in Alec’s bones, it’s all too easy for Alec to think of another church, smoking in the open air; all too easy to imagine the city engulfed in flames; all too easy to see another blacked body hung by the wrists from a statue of the Virgin Mary.

But what if, next time, it’s someone Alec knows? Jace, Isabelle, Clary, literally anybody else. Nightlock. The next vigilante who finds themselves alone in a dark alleyway will be the next victim.

And that could happen. So God damn easily. If Nightlock is correct and all these murders are connected, this violence is not going to stop. They can’t catch this killer after the fire has been set. They have to be able to preempt it, catch them in the act - but how do you do that when you don’t know where they’ve been until a building goes up in flames or a body turns up dead by its own hand?

Alec feels sick to his stomach. He leans forward, hanging his head between his shoulders, and knots his hands around the back of his head. He closes his eyes. He doesn’t care what he looks like, crouched on a rooftop in the rain.

He breathes deep.

“Sentinel?” Nightlock prompts. And then, careful and hesitant, comes the light touch of a hand to Alec’s arm. It doesn’t linger, but it sparks.

Alec presses his lips into a tight line. “It’s nothing,” he says, “I just … I don’t understand how we can have no leads on whoever is doing this.”

“If I’d heard anything, I would’ve let you know,” says Izzy, “But it’s been completely quiet here. You would’ve thought supers taking their own lives would attract someone’s attention, but we all know how little Idris cares-”
“I don’t want to be the one to say it, but there is one man who could be behind this,” Nightlock interrupts, “Silver Tongue. Valentine Morgenstern.” Alec’s eyes snap to his, but Nightlock doesn’t blink. He stares at Alec, and the horror stirs once more in Alec’s chest.

The Circle. Alec was only a child when they defected from Idris in the seventies, amidst the height of the Vietnam War, but it’s always been Idris’ favourite cautionary tale. But an abstract one too, because Alec has no really memories of that time, not beyond his parents always being so tense and angry, not beyond the horrible images on the television -

But they’re all ex-Corporates. Valentine, himself, is a super, just like Alec. Why would he be killing other supers -

“*What?*” says Izzy, “*There hasn’t been any talk about the Circle in fifteen, twenty years. Not since - not since back then.*”

“This fits his MO,” says Nightlock, “Not only killing supers, but persuading them to do it by their own hand? I’ve certainly seen it before.”

“But the fire-” Alec starts.

“Again, I don’t think it’s outside the realm of possibility that the Circle have found themselves a pyrokinetic,” says Nightlock, “There are too many similarities here for it to be a coincidence. We have to consider it.”

“*It … Dios mío, it’s not impossible,*” Izzy says, “*But why now, why after twenty years? It doesn’t make sense.*”

“I wouldn’t put much faith in the logic of madman,” Nightlock says, low. “If this is the Circle, then this is only the beginning. They’ll kill again.”

“We need to figure out who, where, and why,” Alec continues, “If it’s a vendetta, or if they’re just selecting random supers, I … I should -”

He should what? comes the vagrant thought. *What can he do that will make a difference?*
How does he tell other people what to do when he doesn’t have the slightest idea how to fix this?

How does he make people listen to him when they don’t care what he has to say?

“- get back to headquarters and brief everyone,” he finishes lamely, but the words already feel weightless, and not in a good way. It feels like an empty promise, swallowed up by the wind.

He already knows how it will go. He already knows that his mother will dismiss him, that his father will shoot him down, that any information he tries to dig up in the archives about Valentine Morgenstern will have mysteriously vanished by the morning.

But he can’t just ignore this. Not this time.

He can’t keep living with his head in the sand or his fingers in his ears or this want in his heart to do better, to save more people, but never act upon it.

“Alright,” says Izzy then, and she sounds stern, as if she somehow already knows how Alec’s resolve is wavering, and that he needs a command to follow before he gets lost along the way. “I’ll recall everyone in from the field and go talk to the boss. I’m rerouting Arkangel and Muse to intercept you on the way, so I’ll see you in a bit, then.” Alec hears her clicking away on the keyboard, multitasking as she talks. Usually, it’s a sound that settles him, but tonight, he feels it scampering across his skin.

“I’ll be back in an hour,” he manages, pushed out between his lips. “See you.”

“Take care,” Izzy replies. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

He says it on autopilot, tapping his finger against the radio on his suit. It cuts out with a hiss of static. He doesn’t meet Nightlock’s gaze, reaching instead for his abandoned bow and quiver, before hauling himself to his feet and realising what it is he just said.
What he just revealed to a stranger.

*Your identity is all you have*, whispers his father in his ear. *When you’re in that mask, you’re not Alec. She’s not Isabelle. Don’t let yourself slip-up just because you’re emotional. Just because you think you trust someone -*

That scampering sensation begs to turn violent, a tension trampling across Alec’s armour. He forces himself to scan the horizon, but all that stirs is faintly-rising steam and a gathering of crows.

Nightlock hesitates a moment; he doesn’t move from the ground, held unnaturally still by a pilgrimous four words - *but Alec feels his eyes*. They follow Alec’s every move as he slings his bow over his shoulder.

“Sentinel.”

“I need to get going,” says Alec. He holds himself so still, so stiff, that the thought of moving sparks pins-and-needles in his legs and arms already. He does not follow through. He thinks Nightlock knows why.

Slowly, Nightlock rises to his feet, drawing himself into Alec’s space. Alec fixates upon the rooftops beyond his shoulder, but cannot help lingering on the threads in his coat, the wild fly-aways in his hair, the way Alec can feel his presence distorting the very air around them, warm and solid and real.

Nightlock doesn’t take a step back.

*Close*. He’s close, but not close enough to stop the wind from cutting straight through Alec, still carrying the grey trace of smoke. Alec grinds his teeth so hard his jaw aches.

This night has become a nightmare, and the city gutters are swimming in blood and murderous intent – and it overflows, swelling and swelling until Alec can feel it staining his own hands red. He feels it beneath his skin, all that dirt and grime and viscera, and he’s overcome by this morbid need to sink his fingernails into his flesh and peel it back, just so he can be rid of the filth, so he can be rid of being seen.

His fingers twitch with the need to pick at his skin, and so he clenches them around the strap of his
quiver as he buckles it to his suit, and holds tight for dear life.

For a moment, Nightlock just watches him, and perhaps, that makes it worse. Alec can feel Nightlock staring at his hands. Alec’s head swims.

Don’t look at me, some part of him pleads. Please.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure,” replies Alec through gritted teeth.

A pause. And then:

“That woman,” he says, “Who is she to you?”

It’s the question he was expecting. And it’s not unwarranted, not after all that has been said and done here tonight.

Alec looks up from the strap of his quiver. Nightlock stands with his arms wrapped around himself, a curve to his mouth that is troubled, but not with violence, as Alec’s must be.

His expression, it’s distant, a little melancholy, encroached in this sweeping sense of old sadness that Nightlock can never seem to shake.

Once again, he’s not a vigilante, not a super, not a danger who stands before Alec, no.

No, he’s just another lonely man in a mask, pretending to be larger than the life he’s forced to live, because it’s the only way he knows how to survive.

He’s someone Alec has learned to trust. And maybe he shouldn’t know why - because he can hear his father scolding him - but he does, he does know why, and it always summons words to his mouth, unbidden.
“That’s my engineer. My handler,” he says. A breath. Trust. “She’s … she’s my sister.”

This might be the most he’s ever let Nightlock know about who he is behind the mask, but somehow, it feels safe. It feels … okay. Or maybe he’s just so bone-weary that he forgets himself, loose-lipped as he is.

Still, Nightlock’s face softens, and he smiles that crooked, quiet smile of his. Finally, he breaks his stare, looking down as he shakes his head.

“Your sister,” he muses, “It’s good that you have someone.”

“You don’t?” asks Alec, “You don’t have anyone in your ear?”

Nightlock huffs, either a breath or a laugh or a sigh, but it’s derisive. “No … no, it’s just me.”

It strikes Alec then that he’s lucky, that Sentinel is lucky.

Tonight, he will drag himself back to Idris, and Izzy will be there, and Jace, and his parents too, and even if he doesn’t want to talk to them, their presence and the thought of them all so close by is enough to temper Alec’s frazzled nerves. He won’t be alone after all that he has seen. He probably won’t go back to his apartment tonight; maybe he’ll sneak into his old bedroom at headquarters and fall asleep on his lumpy mattress, lulled by the murmur of people coming and going at all times of the night to pull him under. The thought of his home, empty and dark and silent, won’t settle him tonight.

But that’s all Nightlock probably has. Saving the world has always been a lonely business.

Suddenly, Alec is torn. His head says leave, but his heart says -

Why does his heart say anything at all?

Perhaps Nightlock can hear it too, that traitorous beat, the one that has Alec caring about
everybody else, no matter who they are or what they’ve done.

“It’s okay,” says Nightlock quietly, as he finally takes a step back from Alec and that mask, those walls slowly begin their reformation and Alec loses his chance to say, well, anything at all. Nightlock smiles a little, but it’s dry, self-deprecating compared to the last. “In my experience, bringing other people into this business gets messy. It may be lonely, going alone, but it’s also - “


Nightlock’s mouth tightens. His eyebrows lift, as if to ask, is it?

Alec’s not so sure of an answer to that. He’s not so sure Nightlock wants him to answer it either. He’s vulnerable right now. He won’t appreciate Alec’s honesty. They’re both still reeling.

“I’m … gonna get going,” Alec says awkwardly, thumbing over his shoulder in any old direction. He feels spilt, like it’s his blood all over a church altar; his insides are all a mess.

Stay, whispers his heart again. Don’t leave this man alone. “Are you … are you gonna be okay from here?”

Nightlock huffs loudly, rolling his eyes. “When am I ever not okay?” he asks, presenting Alec with his best fake smile.

Alec wonders if he, as Sentinel, is as transparent.

Alec, somehow, isn’t surprised to find that Magnus already knows about the church, the body, and the rumours of the Circle by sunrise the next day; an entry wound made in the night is always far wider come the morning.

The arson at the church is front page news. And Magnus knows enough people in the police to get his hands on all the copies of all the casefiles he needs: all those other arsons, other hate crimes, and other murders that have been swept under the rug.
It must’ve been all too easy for him to connect the dots. He’s sharp, far sharper than people already think, far sharper than he lets people think … especially if he was able to reach the same conclusion as Sentinel and Nightlock, but with half the facts.

Alec is not sure if that fills him with pride or with shame for not being the one to see the bigger picture sooner.

The night before is a blur, and he remembers little beyond dragging himself back to headquarters, his head overflowing with thought of dead bodies strung up in crucifixion, with the smell of burning muscle, with the regret of leaving Nightlock alone on a rooftop after that, all mixed together into one gruesome slurry. Alec’s feet had moved on autopilot as he marched through Idris’ white-washed corridors, barking commands at anyone who would listen, summoning them all for an emergency meeting. The clamour and commotion that had followed had deafened him; Clary had started shouting, and Victor played Devil’s advocate, while Jace had gotten into it with Raj again, and Alec had just … stood there. He’d stood there in the middle of the briefing room, blank, and the aftershocks of something terrible ricocheting down his bow arm. Stood there and not known how to move, just as he’d feared, just as he’d expected.

Or at least, that was until his parents had taken over and Izzy had tucked her arm into his and led him from the room to her lab, forcing a glass of water down his throat until he could see straight again.

Alec doesn’t want to imagine how other people, how normal people will react to the whispers that the Circle is back. That the Circle is back and doing this -

Will they even care? If the Circle is only targeting supers -

It doesn’t matter.

Normal people knowing too much of anything about supers, Valentine or otherwise, has never ended well in the past.

“Tomorrow’s headline,” Magnus says as he tosses a mock-up down onto his desk, snapping Alec out of his tumultuous thoughts. The clock in Magnus’ office strikes six. The whole day has slipped through Alec’s hands in a daze. “What do you think? You’ve been terribly quiet tonight.”
Alec can only frown. He shouldn’t be surprised that the Tribunal is taking a running leap at this and hoping something will stick, when all they have to go on the matching MO, but Alec knows better than to wrestle sensationalism out of the hands of a less-than-free press. If there’s a whisper than Valentine is back and killing supers, any editor would be fool not to run that story.

“Did you write this headline?” Alec asks.

“God, no,” says Magnus, waving his hand in the air as he circles around his desk, falling back into his chair with a huff. He knocks his head back, exposing his throat, before briefly pinching his eyes closed. “My suggestion was far snippier: Circle burns man at the stake in violent hate crime. But would you believe it, the board wasn’t all that enthused. They told me I was clutching at straws.”

Of course they did, Alec thinks bitterly. It echoes the excuses his mother gave him last night.

“Valentine’s not back, we have no proof of that. Everyone needs to calm down and not get sucked into borderline hysteria. Especially, you, Alec, I expected more -”

Magnus begins sifting through the stack of files on his desk, seeking a distraction, but something doesn’t settle well in Alec’s gut. Alec worries his lip, fingers picking at the edge of the newspaper, but he’s unable to flip the page. He can almost feel Magnus watching him over the edge of whatever it is that he’s pretending to look at, waiting for the words that Alec clearly wants to say.

Alec sighs. It’s heavy. His shoulder slump.

“Do you -” he starts quietly, “Do you think telling people that the Circle might be back is a good idea?”

Magnus doesn’t hesitate. “Yes and no,” he says with a shrug. His tone is flippant, but his flippancy should never be taken for lightness. Alec can see the steel in his eyes. “But at the end of the day, if there’s one thing people hate more than this city’s supers, it’s Valentine and the Circle. Perhaps all
“People will panic,” says Alec, thinking back to the way last night’s news had refracted: as terror across Raj’s face, as a stony silence in Lydia, as panic in Victor as he single-handedly tried to reorganise the patrol roster right under Alec’s nose, until Jace had yelled at him to within an inch of his life.

Alec thinks back to the way he’d fought to control the shake in his hands as he held that glass of water Izzy gave to him. It has him slowly curling his fingers into a fist on the desk now.

Magnus notices. He frowns, his jaw moving minutely. “In my experience, the best defense is always information,” he says carefully. “If you know what you’re to be facing, you’ll know where to look for evidence, for proof. You can always prepare for it.”

Alec thinks back to the church, to that rooftop thereafter, to Nightlock’s grim determination in the face of such heinous evil. Alec thinks back to the way fear had pooled in Nightlock’s eyes too, behind his mask, beneath the anger and the fury. Alec thinks back to the way empathy for the most powerful man he knows had made a home in his heart for reasons he knows all too well.

“I don’t know how you can prepare for something like this,” he whispers. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

His gaze shifts from the headline, down to the photograph in the centre of the paper’s front page. It’s an old mugshot of Valentine Morgenstern from twenty years ago, the colour of his skin made darker, the shadows under his eyes made blacker. All to make him look scarier.

He doesn’t need it.

Alec was young when the Circle first formed - too young to remember all that much, nothing beyond the way the versions of his parents he recalls from back then were always stressed, always snapping, always biting heads. Alec remembers being relegated to the training room with his teachers, being cooped up in the library a Idris with his books, overhearing adults whispering harshly in the corridors and stopping when he would round the corner, so everything is in bits and pieces. He remembers the way his father had changed almost overnight into someone solemn and cold; he remembers how the stress had wreaked havoc on his mother’s pregnancy with Isabelle; he remembers hearing the name Valentine said with such hatred that he was in no place to question it; but nothing beyond that.
It hardly matters now. He’s heard all the stories and he’s read all the files on the Circle that Idris has to offer.

Alec knows what it was like: the depths of the strained Cold War stalemate; the conflict in Vietnam rearing its ugly head amidst the caustic smoke of Agent Orange; the aggravation bleeding over into paranoia and prejudice in the city streets. Idris had been involved, because of course they had been, what desperate politician wouldn’t have considered the employment of superheroes in a time of national crisis? And Alec’s parents had been on the frontline of it all, the ones paid to patrol the streets and keep the peace, to quell the anti-war riots before they boiled up and and bubbled over into carnage on home soil too.

Supers had been in high demand. Espionage, intelligence, mass destruction - things not unlike what they’re paid for now - and there was talk, at the time, of shipping volunteers out to the humid depths of the jungle, to instill fear: how would communists and innocent farmers alike take to the sight of a man walking through the burning fields with the power to flatten countries in the snap of his fingers?

Valentine had been a part of that Idris. He worked with Alec’s father, not unlike the way in which Izzy works with Alec now, except -

Well, it can only end one way when the person whispering secrets into your ear has the very literal power of persuasion. Silver Tongue was his alias back then for good reason. He could suggest a building to be a good place to jump from, and a part of you wouldn’t think twice about doing it …

The rest of the story is history. Valentine and a group of descenters had defected from Idris in the middle of the war, selling their skills to the Russians. The killing of a handful of nuisance vigilantes and high-level anti-Vietnam politicians alike had been something all too easily concealed within the chaos that had consumed the city. No-one knew they were acting outside of Idris until it was too late, the damage already done, the hatred for superheroes already sewn.

By all means, the city should have forgotten in twenty years, as fickle as it is, but the fear has only festered. After all, one prejudice might as well be all prejudices and no-one is ever going to split hairs about defining supers, categorizing them as good and others as bad. Idris was at fault for Valentine, and Valentine, of course, spoke for all supers, and -

“Alexander?”

Alec looks up, broken out of his thoughts by the sound of his own name. Magnus has the receiver of his telephone held up to his ear. His long fingers are coiled in the wire and doubt briefly flashes
across his face.

“Yeah?” stutters Alec.

Magnus chews on his lower lip. “If you really think this shouldn’t be published, then I won’t,” he says, “I know this is fast. There’s limited evidence. It’s basically hearsay, and the editor-in-chief is only pushing this to beat the Herald for Sunday sales, I know that. I can’t change the headline but there’s still time for me to call the printers and move it to page six. I have an alternate lined up - the Belcourt money laundering case goes to court tomorrow. Just say the word.”

“What? No, no, I - why would you think I - Magnus, it needs to be said,” Alec blurts. “You’re right. Even if we don’t know it’s true … people still deserve to know.”

And it’s true, despite everything to the contrary, and that’s what makes this whole thing all the more wretched.

People may despise Alec, or at least who he is when he wears a mask, but his duty is to keep people safe - and if not them, then the other vigilantes out there, the ones who don’t work for Idris, who had no say in the war, who may not have even been alive twenty years ago. They’re the ones who could so easily be the next body strung up in a church, blackened beyond recognition, or the next corpse left to rot in a parking lot with their vocal chords sliced open.

Alec swallows hard. He feels out of his depth. He’s trained twenty-something years for this, broken bones and shed blood and sweat and tears, and worked so hard to be half the person that Jace is with an easy, cheeky smile - and still he feels out of his damn depth.

He doesn’t know how to deal with insurgency groups and government conspiracies covering up serial murders. He doesn’t know how to cope with the weight of it resting squarely on his shoulders because no-one else wants to bear the burden, or Hell, even sees it need bearing.

No-one said decisions in the face of catastrophe would be easy, but Alec had been hoping they would be easier than all this.

Where do I go from here? Who do I turn to when I can’t talk to anyone -

“Alec.”
Alec doesn’t realise he’s been clenching his fist so tight that his knuckles are trembling until there’s a hand covering his. His heart stammers and stutters to an abrupt halt, and his head shoots up, only to find Magnus watching him in a manner that Alec certainly doesn’t deserve, but, oh, which he longs for.

Magnus’s fingers press into his skin. His thumb rubs a small circle into the bone of Alec’s wrist. His touch - his touch - is warm and strange and yet something Alec is already used to. That same familiarity, solidarity, and affection that so easily sweep into Magnus’ cavalier words and heartfelt smiles is here, now, in the uncomplicated weight of his hand on Alec’s. Don’t forget, I’m here with you, it says, without anything needing saying at all.

Alec sucks in a slow and steadying breath. He lets his hand flatten on the desk, the tension bleeding out of him and into the grain of the wood. A small, heedless part of him considers turning over his hand beneath Magnus’, just to feel the soft skin of Magnus’ palm against his own.

He doesn’t, but this - eyes flicking from their joined hands, to Magnus’ gaze, and back again - is suddenly enough. Suddenly, it’s everything. The only thing. Alec can see nothing else.

And, oh, right, says Alec’s head in such a way that it sounds so simple, so normal; in such a way that it negates the way his heart skips a beat for reasons he cannot fathom.

Oh, right, says his heart in the space of that same missed beat: he’s not alone in this. Sentinel may not know what to do or who to trust, but Alec, Alec does.

Oh, right, Magnus is touching him with a soft and sympathetic smile that seeps into his dark eyes and gildes them strangely gold in the light and which turns Alec’s insides to liquid.

Oh, right, Alec thinks, his fingers arching beneath Magnus’ hand, just barely, just enough for Magnus to feel it, to know that Alec feels it, just breathe.

(This catharsis won’t last, whispers the devil on his shoulder.)

“This is new territory for me too,” says Magnus softly. He gives Alec’s hand a little squeeze, drawing his fingers up the slope of Alec’s thumb. His rings are cold, but his touch is warm. Alec is not sure which to focus on, so he focuses on Magnus’ mouth instead. “I fear we’ve stumbled into something a lot bigger than both of us here, but the decision as to whether doing the right thing will
keep people safe is not one to be made lightly.”

It doesn’t make Alec feel better, but nor does it make him feel worse. Maybe it’s still shock, slick to the soles of his feet like a shadow he cannot shake, or maybe it’s numbness, and he’s reached the extent of things that he can feel. Or maybe this is just Magnus, and that incomprehensible ability of his to remain a realist in the face of insurmountable odds, but still seek out a glimmer of hope in the darkness, which sheds just enough light for Alec to find his way.

“How do you decide what to do then?” Alec whispers.

“With difficulty.” Magnus says, drawing his hand back, but Alec is not one to miss the way his fingers linger. The focus in his eyes is momentarily distant. Alec doesn’t miss that either.

“I, myself, am bound by the responsibility of the free press, although it could be argued whether any press in this city is free,” Magnus continues. He reaches over to his phone to dial a number he knows by heart. “But the dissemination of knowledge always comes first.”

“Does that makes it easier? Having a rule you can’t break?”

Magnus hums, neither here nor there, and presses his ear to his telephone. Alec watches him, waiting for an answer that he supposes should be read between the lines.

He finds himself surprised.

“Not always,” Magnus says candidly. And then, he adds, “I’m going to order takeout. I think it’s going to be a long night. What would you like? It’s my treat.”

Alec is summoned to the boardroom at headquarters later that night. He shuffles into rank like a good soldier - mask in place across the bridge of his nose, arms folded behind his back, and shoulder to shoulder with Isabelle, followed by Jace and Clary, Raj, Lydia, Victor, and all the rest - as Maryse paces the room and fumes. She has a copy of tomorrow’s Tribunal in her fist, the newspaper creased up and crinkled between her fingers. Alec does not know how she has it, not when it won’t go to four-AM-press for a few hours yet, but he can take a good guess at how many
pockets Idris has their hands in across the city.

He tries not to stare too hard or for too long. He knows he’ll give himself away. Instead, he watches his father on the far side of the room, sat silently at the other end of the table with his fingers steepled like all-too-familiar churches beneath his chin. He gives nothing away, his face a mask, even when his eyes catch Alec’s, but Alec still feels judgement.

Alec returns his stare to the floor as his mother passes him by, stalking down the line of them, all with their heads bowed. She brandishes the newspaper like a weapon, like it’s fire in his hands.

“This is why we don’t get ahead of ourselves,” she snaps at no-one in particular, or maybe at all of them at once, Alec can’t be sure. “This is going to be a PR nightmare for Idris. Those press dogs aren’t going to let us sleep.”

Her anger is understandable, in some weird, twisted way. It speaks of fear, of worry, of a dying need to keep them all safe, and Alec gets that, he does.

Maybe it would have been better to keep the rumours of Valentine and the Circle under wraps until they know more, until they’re absolutely sure it’s him. Maybe it would’ve been better to resolve it quietly before whispers had even begun to reach the tabloids.

The Circle is Idris’ sin and it’s theirs alone to bear, Maryse says. And Alec can’t argue with that, especially when he knows it’s true.

He can only wonder if she already knew about all of this, and whether this, now, her anger, is her way of justifying not telling them, or her way of seeking penance for something she must know was wrong.

“Congress is going to have a field day,” she sighs. “We’ll be losing contracts left, right, and centre once this is made public.” She turns to look at Robert, who has remained silent all the while. It hasn’t gone unnoticed. Not by Alec.

Does his father’s silence speak of his indifference? Or his guilt?

Or is that Alec’s guilt, reflected back at him in his ever cold and stoic father?
He tries to think about Magnus, but it’s hard, because words of affirmation can mean so much when they’re alone in that office, but here, they don’t get to echo with such ease. Alec stares hard at the opposite wall. He doesn’t look at his mother. He ignores Clary’s offended gasp at the proposition that contracts matter more than people’s lives.

He can feel Isabelle bristle beside him, clearly edging to say something, anything, but Alec knows anything she says will be silenced by one fierce look from their mother. He wants to know what Magnus would tell him here, now, what the right thing to do might be - but the closest thing he has to Magnus is that newspaper in Maryse’s hand, and the mask across Alec’s face exists only to pull him further away.

The night before weighs heavy on Alec’s shoulders, and his stomach feels like it’s full of the ash he inhaled at the church. His body is quiet, solemn, and morose, and he forces himself to adhere to his parade rest, his hands folded behind his back, his fingers clenched.

“People to gossip are like hounds to blood,” Maryse says, “If illegal vigilantes weren’t out on the streets after dark, maybe this wouldn’t be happening, and imaginations wouldn’t be getting so riled -”

Either brave or oblivious, Jace nudges Alec in the shoulder; he wants Alec to say something too.

“Alec,” he whispers, “This is fucked.”

Alec cannot move. He can still smell that church, but he can feel his leather gloves cutting into his palms too. He can still hear blood squeaking beneath his boots, but he can hear his father reminding him of his duty to wearing the mask too.

His mother’s words fill his ears, all this talk of money and contracts and legality and justice, and yet he thinks of Magnus and his responsibility to the truth, and he doesn’t know who is right; who is the one he’s supposed to believe; who will save more people in the long run? Believing the Circle has risen from the ashes of their Cold War world to finish what they started and must be stopped, or hiding all of that from the people who it will impact the most? Telling the truth to save someone, or ignoring it, to save someone else? What if the someone else is himself? His family?

Who is he meant to believe?
Idris, or - 

Magnus.

They can’t both be right. But maybe there is no right answer here; maybe both choices are bad choices, but still choose, he must, because the shame of standing still and treading the line between them is slowly eating him away from the inside out.

Jace nudges him again with a pointed look. He wants Alec. He wants Alec with the mutinous thoughts that aren’t allowed to see the light of day. He wants Alec to put his foot down and say no, you’re wrong, people deserve to know who’s killing them. We need to see this through, even if it goes nowhere.

Alec cannot. He’s in his supersuit, he has his bow slung over his shoulder, he has the weight of his father’s expectations pinning him to the spot. His mother brandishes that newspaper like she’s going to flagellate him with it. His loyalty to Idris lauds over him. He’s still wearing the mask. He’s Sentinel. The law is the law.

Isn’t it?

He doesn’t know.

But what he does know, is this.

Sentinel and Alec cannot both exist on the same page, but he doesn’t know how to take a step away from one in the other direction. He’s stuck. It’s not a crossroads; it’s purgatory.

Izzy corners him in the locker room and tells him that she’s taken him off patrol for the night. Alec opens his mouth to protest, but is interrupted when Jace barrels into the back of him, swinging his arm around Alec’s shoulders and drawing him into a headlock. Alec goes somewhat unwillingly.
“Buddy,” says Jace, dragging Alec down so that he can smooch Alec’s temple against his scratchy cheek, “Clary and I have got this. Go home and get some sleep before you pass out on us. I saw you shaking in there. Too much caffeine, huh?”

Izzy shoots Jace a look. It’s a look that suggests Jace is only pretending not to know what’s going on, and they’ve always been good at that, the two of them having conversations behind Alec’s back just with their eyes.

Alec decides not to put up a fight. Not tonight. He knows how difficult they can both be when they’re using their untapped psychic sibling bond to plot against him, or whatever they like to pretend this is.

He sighs, wriggling out of Jace’s grip. Jace slaps him squarely between the shoulders and grins.

“Don’t forget to record tonight’s Golden Girls rerun on the VCR for me, yeah?” he says, and then he swans off, shouting something antagonizing at Raj down the other end of the room, who only gives as good as he gets.

When Alec looks back at Izzy, she has her hands on her hips.

“What?” he asks, but he doesn’t sound as terse as he means.

“That’s my line,” she says flatly, but she doesn’t expand on it. She looks as shaken as he feels after that briefing, and she doesn’t need Alec to call her out on it. Instead, she shakes her head. “Go home, Alec. I’ll call you if anything comes up, okay?”

Alec nods. He feels dizzy again.

By the time Alec makes it back to his apartment, he feels no better. He’s been on his feet for hours;
the last two days have blurred into one long nightmare, and Alec can hardly remember if he went to work today, let alone if the church with Nightlock was last night or the one before.

As he staggers through the front door with his kit bag slung over his shoulder, he flips on the living room light and it all but blinds him. He winces, seeing sunspots, and flails for the switch again, plunging the room back into darkness.

Immediately, the pulsing behind his templates abates. He can’t quite ignore it, but it’s quieter now, like listening to someone knocking on a door three apartments down the hallway, the sound fainter and more distant. If he turns the TV on, he can probably drown it out altogether.

He tosses his bag in the direction of his bedroom and heads straight for the couch, tumbling over the arm and sprawling out face-first across the cushions. His cheek presses into one of the musty pillows, criss-crossing lines onto his skin, and he toes his shoes off without looking, hearing them thunk-thud against the floor.

Alec doesn’t move for a moment. Maybe it’s longer than a moment, just lying in the dark, but he doesn’t count the seconds. His body is a weight, difficult to stomach. At last, he has ground to a halt, and only now does he feel the ache in his legs and the stiffness in his arms. Only now does he feel this dull pain in his head like someone’s dragged him by the hair through the streets, past the front steps of Idris, past the offices at the Tribunal, past burnt down churches and gutted cars, past the burning straw bodies hung like flags from shuttered windows -

The cold settles deep into his bones, but he closes his eyes and sees fire.

The easy solution is to not close his eyes.

Alec feels around the coffee table for the remote, but instead almost knocks it to the floor. Blindly, he stabs a button and the TV flickers into grey-green life, highlighting the room in chalk.

The static hums in the dark, a low, soft buzz that Alec can feel in his fingertips just as well as he can hear it. The picture is fuzzy. He’s not sure if the picture is in black and white, or if his old TV has just lost colour at last, but he doesn’t turn to look at the screen. The murmur of voices is barely here nor there, incoherent in the way late night conversation often is when you’re falling asleep in the corner of the room or the back of a car, and no-one’s really watching.

In the dark, Alec feels invisible. He is buoyed by the faint laugh track on the television, by the
whisper of the wind lapping against his balcony windows, by the way he dreams in slow motion, but he doesn’t feel safe.

His body won’t relax. His muscles are still coiled. His fingers have curled into fists in the couch cushions and he hasn’t even noticed.

He feels like he’s still wearing his mask, even though he tore it from his face the moment he left that boardroom tonight. He still feels his bow in his hand, his quiver on his back, his boots crunching through soot.

*The church. The body. The smell.*

He lunges for the remote again, and this time, it’s him that almost careens off the sofa. Stabbing the Teletext, he scrolls frantically through the bright green text for something akin to local news - and there’s nothing, so he flips the channel to CBS, to CNN, to God damn *Fox*, hoping, praying perhaps, for just one newscaster to say something about what he witnessed last night.

Nothing.

He turns over onto local cable, but the wind must’ve taken down the nearest transmitter because all there is is white noise and trembling static.

*Why would anyone care about an arson?* the voice in his head supplies. *Why would that make national news, who are you kidding?*

He’s trying to kid himself. That’s the truth of it. He’s trying to fool himself into believing that someone out there cares, that someone else has noticed what’s going on and wants to stop it too, that he’s not suffering through all of this in vain -

- *because what if he is?*

The phone begins to ring. Alec doesn’t startle, but he groans, burying his head in the couch cushion and wondering if his neighbours will hear him scream if he muffles it.
The phone trills, louder now. He’s taken his coms out, so it’s probably Isabelle, or Jace, or Hell, even his mother with yet another order he cannot stomach to follow, but must. His splitting headache is coming back. He feels it behind his eyes, in the bridge of his nose, at the base of his skull.

He knows it takes ten rings to go to the answering machine; he counts each one.

On the ninth, he pushes up onto his elbows and reaches for the receiver. The TV laughs at him.

“Hello?” he grumbles.

“Alexander,” someone breathes in relief on the other end. “I wasn’t sure you were going to pick up. You sure know how to keep a man in suspense.”

Alec blinks. On the TV, three old women are sitting around a kitchen table, drinking cups of tea. One of them might be Betty White.

Outside, the wind howls.

In his chest, his heart -

His heart, atrophied, remembers how to beat again, but it takes a moment for Alec’s muddled brain to catch up.

“Magnus.”

Alec glances at the clock on the wall. It’s only been a few hours since they saw each other last; since Magnus showed him tomorrow’s headline in the safety of his office; since they shared takeout across Magnus’ desk and Alec made a fool of himself with a pair of chopsticks.

He can’t be missing Alec’s company already, and Alec doubts he’s found a lead so important that it can’t wait for tomorrow.
So why -

“Simon gave me your home number,” Magnus explains, as if reading Alec’s mind. “He was awfully quick to relinquish it when I asked. Don’t hold it against him.”

“I -” Alec begins, but he doesn’t know what to say. He pushes himself up on the couch, swinging his feet onto the floor. He cradles the phone close to his ear as he ducks his head, picking at the thread in the fraying cushion.

In the end, he settles on, “Magnus, I don’t mind.”

He hears Magnus smile. A breath of relief.

A police car wails in the background of Magnus’ call. Alec thinks he can hear the wind howling on that side of the city too. It sounds like Magnus is outside.

He looks at the clock again. Press is in two hours. “You’re not in the office,” he frowns.

“No,” murmurs Magnus, “But I couldn’t stomach the thought of going home.”

Alec understand that. He understands that all too well, forcing himself to work until he’s too exhausted to remember why it is that he didn’t want to sleep in the first place.

“This arson,” Magnus continues then, “This murder. The Circle. It’s different. Different to all the rest, and - what you said earlier, Alexander, perhaps I’m not as prepared for this as I thought.”

“I think you’re better prepared than most,” whispers Alec. He leans back into the couch, letting his head fall back. He covers his eyes with the palm of his hand, blocking out the glow of the TV. He focuses solely on Magnus’ voice when he talks, and on Magnus’ breathing when he doesn’t.

“How come you called?” he asks.

Magnus laughs quietly. “I needed to talk to someone about it.”
“Don’t you have -?”

“No,” says Magnus softly, “I didn’t really realise until recently, but - there’s no-one I can talk to about this. Besides you, of course. ”

Alec wants to say he understands that feeling too. That loneliness. That muchness. That suicidal need to cradle all the gunfire and not let anyone else see the bullet hole-ridden chest he keeps to himself.

The way the Sentinel switch has to always be on, even if Alec will suffer for it.

Alec’s being eroded by the festering guilt that he’s never doing enough; by the fear that torments him that, if he falls asleep, something equally terrible will happen whilst he’s dreaming …

He wants to tell Magnus that he can’t get these thoughts out of his head either. That they’re the same.

That there’s no-one else who really gets it like he does -

“Forgive me, Alexander ,” Magnus breathes then, and it sounds like steps away from the phone he’s using for a moment, before curling back in again. The phone line prickles with static electricity. There’s the rustle of heavy fabric. The squeak of what sounds like leather between two fingertips. Another roaming cop car. “I know not everyone likes to bring their work home with them. If I could leave all this in the office, then - ”

“No,” Alec interrupts. He blushes. He retraces his steps. Tries again despite the way his words suddenly tremble with the intimacy of whispering across the phone in the dark. “No, I mean - no, I’m - I’m glad you don’t. Do that. I’m glad you don’t just leave it on your desk, because - that’s why everything is such a mess, isn’t it? Because it’s everyone else’s 9-to-5 problem, all these dead vigilantes, all this hate, but you - you … you’re good.”

Magnus hums. “I would consider that flattery if our reality wasn’t so dreadfully macabre ,” he says, but Alec can hear the tilt of his mouth, ever so slightly upwards. “I’m … well, I’m touched that you think so highly of me.”
“Why wouldn’t I?”

Dry laughter tickles Alec’s ear. He feels it down the slope of his neck. The hair on his arms prickles to attention.

“You don’t want me to answer that question, Alec,” Magnus murmurs.

Alec doesn’t understand what he means.

An automated voice on the line tells them both that Magnus needs to insert more quarters before his time runs out.

“Are you on a payphone?” Alec asks with a frown.

“Yes,” says Magnus, and Alec hears him pressing quarters into the slot with his thumb. Each one clinks on the way down. He must put in four or five, enough to keep this call going a while longer yet. “I’m … following up on a lead, so to speak. It hasn’t panned out.”

“For the Valentine story, or another?”

“I think they’re all connected at this point, don’t you?” Magnus reasons, but then he sighs. “I wanted to stop by some of the Circle’s old haunts. But they’re either all empty or abandoned, or have been refurbished into these overpriced, absolutely horrid apartments. It was a long shot at best.”

“Magnus, Jesus, that’s dangerous. It’s way past midnight. Are you by yourself? Do you want me to come find you?”

Alec is already sliding off the sofa when Magnus laughs again. But this time, there’s more humour to it. This time, he’s laughing at a joke to which Alec doesn’t know the punchline.

“How very noble of you,” he chuckles, “But don’t leave your apartment on account of me. It’s cold outside tonight. Besides - I’m more than capable of looking after myself. Don’t you worry.”
Telling Alec not to worry is like telling a bird not to fly, or gun not to fire, or Jace not to stick his foot in it. Sometimes, worrying feels like what Alec was built for.

Still, he slumps back down on the couch with a heavy humph. Magnus’ light laughter is there again, right in the shell of his ear, like a breath, like a whisper meant for between the sheets or the back of a cinema. He feels far closer than he actually is.

Alec finds himself holding tight to Magnus’ voice and each breath of his makes Alec’s chest rise. He hangs on every word, every absence of a word. He wonders if Magnus is twirling the payphone cord in his fingers. He wonders if Magnus remembered to bring an umbrella on his late-night exploit.

Alec feels warm again.

Warm and weird, because his heart is thumping again, but it’s slow and sticky, like each beat is an effort. Like it’s having to push through other parts of him to make itself heard.

He pulls his legs up onto the sofa and rearranges the cushions around himself to build a wall. He cradles the phone against his ear, his touch light against the plastic. The TV bathes him in its translucent glow, silhouetting him alone in the dark.

“What …” Alec begins slowly, his breath hitching, “What did you want to talk about? Did you want to talk about the lead? Or about the church-?”

“No,” says Magnus, “No, none of that.” A beat of silence. Alec inhales to say something, but Magnus speaks again. “What are you doing, Alec?”

It’s not fed to him like a line. It’s not said in the same way as a lover or a stranger might ask so what are you wearing?

It’s said like Magnus is desperate for a story to distract him, and he’s asking for Alec to hear that in his voice. It still makes Alec shiver. He’s not familiar with intimacy. He’s never had the time to become acquainted, but -
But there’s a part of him that’s been saving a space for it. Purely out of hope, he supposes.

“Lying on the sofa,” he says, “I kinda just stumbled in and collapsed. Put the TV on.”

“And what are you watching? No, let me guess - you’re a man who loves the classics. Something serious and severe, but something intelligent -”

Alec laughs. “No, no, I - I think I’m watching *Golden Girls*?”

“You think?”

“Yeah, I just switched it on for background noise, but - my brother wanted me to tape it for him because he’s on a night shift tonight. But I haven’t, so he’ll be pissed tomorrow.”

Magnus exhales shakily on his end, but it sounds like he’s still smiling. Alec can hear the squeaking of leather against metal, like Magnus is running a gloved finger up and down the side of the phone box a little coyly.

“And your brother is how old? Sixty-something?”

“Either that, or five,” says Alec. “Depends on the day.”

“Alright, alright. Tell me what’s happening in this episode, then. Describe it to me. ”

“I think I missed the first five minutes.”

A breath, exhaled. Alec can almost feel its caress against his cheek.

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Okay,” says Alec, just as low, just as unspooling. He pulls one of the pillows onto his lap and
hugs it to his chest. He imagines every dark thought on the other side of the window, pushing and shoving up against the glass, and the glass bends, but it can’t get in. Not for a moment. “So, Betty White just pulled out a chocolate cake from the fridge …”

He talks for an hour, maybe two. Maybe a whole year passes out there in the dark with no sunrise to mark it, and still, it’s not quite long enough for Alec. He longs for minutes, for moments, for hours and eternity pressed in pause, if he can have it. He talks until his voice goes hoarse, until he’s explained the plot of three episodes of Golden Girls and lost interest halfway through an episode of Cheers, until Magnus’ commentary becomes far more interesting and Alec punctuates it with his quiet laughs and sighs.

He talks until his eyelids grow heavy. His lullaby is the sound of outside traffic, the rain lashing against the window, the TV screen fading to black as end credits roll. The rare shard of moonlight slipping through the curtains for a moment passing but just enough to illuminate a path across the floorboards.

He wonders if Magnus can see it too, wherever he is, whatever he’s doing, however he’s feeling. Whether he’s feeling the same as Alec …

“Are you falling asleep on me?” Magnus whispers into the dark.

Alec goes to rub his eyes, straightening upright against the sofa.

“Mm - no,” he slurs, “No, I’m awake. I can talk -”

“Go to bed,” Magnus says. On the other end of the line, Alec hears the rustle of a heavy coat, imagines Magnus popping his collar to brave the elements, pictures the silver of the moon like a ghost across his cheek. “Thank you for humouring me, Alexander.”

“Humouring you?” Alec doesn’t dare to raise his voice, afraid of breaking something that suddenly seems so immensely fragile. “I wasn’t - I’m not humouring you, Magnus. I’m -”

There’s nothing you could say that I wouldn’t want to hear.

“I just like talking,” Alec admits. “With you.”
Magnus laughs breathlessly. The sound still tickles Alec’s ear. “You do sound pretty sure.”

“I am sure,” says Alec. The words ring out in the empty room, disturbing the shades of grey that have fallen, thick and powdery and fuzzy across all that Alec owns. The light slipping through the blinds catches on his abandoned kit bag, his bow discarded on the floor. The bowstring looks like wire in the moonlight, razor sharp and glinting.

Alec cradles the phone closer to his ear and closes his eyes, focusing on the sound of Magnus breathing, knowing there will be deafening silence again soon but hoping he might stretch this - whatever this is - one moment longer.

“Well, then,” Magnus hums, “Thank you for not humouring me, and for just keeping me company. It means more than you know.” He yawns then, and it’s infectious, as Alec covers his mouth and does the same. That makes Magnus laugh again, but this time, it’s both delighted and it’s wistful. “Go to bed, Alec,” he insists. “I’ll see you at the office tomorrow.” A pause, then. Deliberate. “Dream of something nice for me. For the both of us. Goodnight.”

Yeah, Alec thinks, as the line slips into silence with the telltale beep of Magnus placing the receiver down.

Yeah, he thinks, as he sits there in the dark a while longer, his cordless phone squished between his ear and shoulder, his fingers pressed just a touch too tight against the plastic.

Yes, he thinks, as he scrubs his hand across his jaw, feeling his stubble, letting his thumb catch on his lower lip - and pause. He wets his thumbpad with the tip of his tongue and trails it across his mouth.

How is it that his chest can feel both full and empty at the same time? How can he feel so aware of what exists outside the window, and yet feel like he’s floating high above it, beyond its reach, buoyed by an impenetrable feeling that curls around every bone, every muscle, leaving him firm to the touch?

How is it that he can exist in two places at once: out there, on the streets, in the rain, in that worn leather mask staring up at burned down churches, and here. Here, in the dark, surrounded only by the cocoon of Magnus’ voice, that inexplicable terror of being known as he is, when everything is stripped away, and that wonder of whether this rhythmless, erratic beat of his heart is normal -
- or something with the potential to be extraordinary.

And oh, Alec knows a lot about being just that.

Chapter End Notes

I thought that I'd be quicker at updates having pre-written this entire fic, but never underestimate how many times you can edit the same 61 pages lmfao

Anyway, this is one of my fave chapters! I had some fun with the horror aspects, but more fun with the tender moments, because fuck me I love a slow burn. This is also the start of "Act II" of the fic (there are 6 Acts total fyi) and marks the plot kicking into gear, and the Sentinel/Nightlock and Alec/Magnus plotlines overlapping ... prepare yourself for the Love Square, because it's probably my fave thing in the entire world ??? ?? ?

Chapter title comes from "Always & Forever" from "Night Sky with Exit Wounds" by Ocean Vuong. Truly a visionary poet.

Thank you so much for all the feedback from last time! I can't express how much it helps to read people's thought and feelings on this fic, as everyone has a different take on the moral issues and it's so interesting!

Visit me on tumblr and shout in my inbox!

I'm also on Twitter if you want to come chat about the fic ... and boy, do I love talking about this fic. Tweet as you read with the hashtag #FICacoldnight! :D

Please leave a kudos if you made it to the end, and drop me a comment with your thoughts, your favourite line, your hopes for what will happen next, your advice for poor old Alec ... I would be forever grateful for it! If you want an alert next time there's an update, please hit that subscribe button!

Until next time ... in which Magnus meets Sentinel. That's all you need to know.
And Alec is caught by it, caught by that moment of unchecked happiness that he has never seen on Magnus before. He looks infinitely young then, no tension in his shoulders, no old sadness lingering in his eyes, no thoughts of anyone but himself. It’s enthralling and Alec decides, in one dizzy moment, that this is how Magnus ought to look, always.

“I can’t believe you noticed,” Magnus murmurs.


I see you.

“Alec,” says Magnus, still smiling so broadly. He holds the cassette tape against his chest and steps forward, closer to Alec, into a beam of white light that spills in through the windows that might as well be the moon. It paints Magnus’ face in shades of pearl and alabaster blue. “Alexander.”

Nightlock is desperate for Sentinel to help him track the Circle, but for Alec, it’s just not that simple. There are things that Alec wants, and there are things that Sentinel wants, and rarely do they overlap, and it’s killing him.

But when they do overlap ... oh, of course it's Magnus standing at the centre of those crossroads.

&&&

Tweet along with #FICacoldnight!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Creo que estaremos mucho más vivos si nos atrevemos a darnos cuenta de que no estamos necesariamente obligados a saber en todo momento quienes somos. (“I think we would be much more alive if we dared ourselves to recognise that we are not obligated to know who we are at every given moment.”)

- Jorge Bucay
Senator Herondale’s next rally pushes the church fire from out of the front pages within a week. Arkangel and Sentinel are employed to keep the peace again, keeping watch from above; this time, luckily, the rally doesn’t devolve into violence.

It feels like only a small victory.

Herondale addresses the crowd with grand sweeping gestures and powerful words as Alec glares at her on the jumbotron. She doesn’t say anything about her stance on vigilantism. Her PR agent has probably told her to avoid it. She doesn’t mention the arsons. She doesn’t mention the murders. She doesn’t mention Valentine Morgenstern, but she has the nerve to remind people how unified, how together, how undefeated they were back in the good old days – as if such a time ever existed.

Jace laughs and says something bitter. Izzy mutters about Herondale being a hypocrite loudly in their ears.

And Alec - Alec supposes they all have different memories of what the world was like back then, but then again, he was only a child. Who is he to know what it was really like.

Oh, but he can take a good guess.

Afterwards, back at HQ, his mother slides his pay packet across her desk with a scowl. She’s always scowling lately, and not just at Alec. She’s snappier with Jace, more brusque with Izzy, and actively ignores Clary whenever they’re in a room together. Raj and Aline have taken to ducking down a different corridor whenever they see her coming. Even Victor has learned how to keep his smarmy comments to himself, now and again.

Tonight, however, it’s just Alec and Jace, and her and Robert. His parents’ penthouse office feels very small, the world dark beyond the windows and the old paintings on the walls squinting at Alec with beady eyes.

Alec stares at the brown manila envelope without touching it. Maryse pushes a second packet forward, and at Alec’s side, Jace reaches for it, not buoyed down by the same hesitation.
Jace rips the seal with his finger and peers inside, his eyebrows raising. His purses his lips and nods, closing the envelope again.

“This is more than we were contracted,” he notes, and Alec can hear how he’s trying to play it cool. “This a down payment on the next job?”

“Senator Herondale’s security team was pleased with the job you both did,” says Robert, “They were glad to avoid a repeat of last time. Idris’ presence was a good deterrent to any more fracas.”

Alec doesn’t know what to say to that, so he says nothing. He reaches for his envelope and tucks it beneath his arm without opening it. He hears sheets of paper crumple; there’s another mission brief inside there too, alongside some hefty wads of cash.

*Or blood money -*

He steels his expression into something that won’t bend, folding his arms behind his back and staring forward, finding a spot on the wall above his father’s head to focus on.

“Herondale would like to extend her contract with us,” Maryse explains, “She would like both Arkangel and Sentinel on her private security roster as we approach the election, and there’s discussion on the table about bringing in Apex and Muse further down the line if all goes well in November.”

“Private security?” Jace frowns. He doesn’t like the sound of that. Alec hear it in his voice, his hackles rising. “And what’s that entail, exactly?”

Maryse narrows her eyes at Jace. “Patrol routes are to cover both her campaign headquarters and her home, with Arkangel on fly-by at regular intervals every night. You’re both to start accompanying her security team to any large-scale public engagements, but are to stay out of sight unless the Senator’s life is explicitly threatened. I suspect there will also be some reconnaissance work as well. We’ve received a tip that Jia Penhallow is polling well in more marginalised areas. Senator Herondale wants to see that change.”

Alec closes his eyes and breathes through his nose. If his mother sees him do it, she pointedly ignores him.
“And what about our deal?” Jace complains, “You said Alec and I could continue to pick up police dispatch calls as long as we turned in a couple contracts a month - what, is that off the table now? Is this you tightening our leash?”

“Jace,” Robert warns, steepling his hands into strict churches where he still sits behind the desk. “That’s enough.”

“The Senator can kiss my ass,” Jace seethes, “She doesn’t get to decide how we use our powers, right, Alec -”

“No, she does,” Maryse interrupts. She folds her arms across her chest and stands tall. With her hair slicked back into a ponytail and the lines of her dress sharp and sleek, she cuts an imposing figure. “Considering she’s one of our few clients who hasn’t pulled her contract after all that nonsense over Valentine Morgenstern and the Circle. She’s the one paying your commission. Don’t forget.”

“All the talk about Valentine is finally dying down,” continues Robert. Alec makes the mistake of looking him in the eye, but finds there’s nothing of substance there. “He’s not our concern, but we have to focus on getting Idris’ public approval rating back on track after all those stories in the press. Proving yourself with the Senator will help restore faith with some of our other political clients.”

Jace looks at Alec, his eyes bulging as if he wants Alec to say something, anything at all. The words stick to the inside of Alec’s throat and just won’t budge.

Across the table, Robert sighs. He rubs his fingers against his temple in the way Alec often does, but here and now, it just makes Alec feel small. Like Alec’s throwing ideas up against a brick wall and hoping to make a dent.

Neither of his parents are listening. Not really.

“I’ve been lenient with you and Jace,” Maryse frowns, “Giving you Isabelle, letting you work pro bono. It’s noble of the two of you to want to engage in … mindless vigilantism and help people, I understand, but I can’t have you chasing ghosts anymore. You need to start picking up more hours on the clock. Especially you, Alec. One day, Idris is going to be in your hands, and we need to be sure that you can carry that weight.”
Alec’s mouth goes dry. Numbness resides in his fingertips, and so he finds that spot on the wall again, and wishes he could count optic blasts amongst his superpowers so that he might bore a hole through the cement and stone.

Where Alec retreats into himself, however, Jace pushes forward. He throws his pay packet down in the desk in dramatic fashion.

“This is bullshit!”

Neither Maryse or Robert blink.

“This is business,” says Robert cooly. He leans forwards, resting his chin on the backs of his clasped hands. “We’re trying to keep ourselves afloat here, Jace. Idris offers us all a certain degree of protection from the rest of the world, you know that. Look at all these vigilante murders splashed all over the papers. That’s what happens if the Corporation goes under and we’re all turfed out onto the streets.” He gestures at Alec in his silence. “Alec clearly gets it. He sees how serious this is.”

Jace twists to Alec, already gaping, already wanting to demand that Alec is on his side, already saying back me up, buddy - but he stills when he sees Alec is barely breathing. When he sees Alec standing to attention like a soldier, when he sees Alec setting his jaw, when he sees Alec just waiting for it to be over.

Alec doesn’t look at him. He doesn’t want to see Jace’s disappointment.

“The Senator’s contract won’t be forever,” Maryse appeases. She tries her best to smile. Maybe her expression is meant to be reassuring, but it’s not. It’s a far cry from that, and just looks tight and forced. “This is only temporary until we’re out of the red again. Just think of it like you’re doing a service to Idris, for every single person who works here. For everyone here with powers. They need you to do this.”

She looks at Alec deliberately. “Alec?”

“I get it,” says Alec. “I understand.”

Maryse smiles again, but this one seems more believable. “I knew I could count on you.”
Alec and Jace ride the elevator down from the penthouse in silence, but Jace fills the space with his fuming. His fuse is lit and Alec knows that it’s only a matter of seconds before he jettisons off into the ceiling if he doesn’t get his wings open stat, and soar up into the stratosphere to blow off some steam.

Alec doesn’t dare prod him. It will only make the situation worse. Instead, he clutches the manila envelope with white fingers and picks incessantly at the ripped corner. The paper slices into his skin and makes him wince, just as the elevator doors open. Jace takes off like a bull down the corridor.

Alec doesn’t move. He doesn’t even move when the doors shut with a sigh, and the elevator stays on ground level, going nowhere. Alec turns his hand over and brings it close to inspect his index finger, and the fine red scored across his fingertip; a bead of blood wells up and slowly slides down towards his palm.

The sensation brings him hurtling back down to Earth at breakneck speed. He hisses on a sharp and telling breath now that he’s alone, and clatters backwards to lean against the handrailing. Tipping his head back, it thunks against the mirror just a little too hard.

Suddenly, he’s him again, he’s Alec, he’s not driving his body on autopilot like it’s some sort of machine. This time, there are silent shakes. This time, it’s like his whole hand is vibrating as he brings it up to drag across his jaw.

It’s not like he blacked out up there in the office, no, it’s worse. He could see the room, he could see his parents, he could see Jace glaring at him like that, but he couldn’t respond. His heart could’ve been hammering on the inside of his chest, he thinks, and still his body would not have moved.

How is it that he can be so aware of his surroundings, and at the same time so complicit to the numbness?

God, he misses being Alec, because Alec feels. Alec would feel anger and hurt and betrayal. Alec might’ve turned back to his parents and put his foot down and said no, we need to go after
Valentine and the Circle and we need to do it now.

But Alec is hung on a peg at the front door, and when he’s here, in Idris, he’s Sentinel, and he’s Sentinel only. All those Alec feelings, they’re all compartmentalised, organised into black and white and nothing in between, but they’re there, simmering, just out of reach, but hot enough to feel when he stops to breathe and breathe hard. The fear, the worry, the loneliness ... 

And the rare moments of peace, the unpracticed laughter, the pretense of normalcy - the whisper of phone calls in the dark -

Alec thinks about Golden Girls. He thinks about cradling the phone against his ear in the dark of the night like he’s a teenager and up past his curfew, trying not to wake his parents. He thinks of Magnus’ low laughter and deliberate questions, goading Alec to talk more and reveling in Alec’s dry humour. He thinks about how Magnus made him forget Sentinel, if only for a few hours.

He thinks about that night and realises, God, I felt so real. I felt so me.

Alec tears open his envelope again, and the paper is smeared with the blood from his finger. He drops two fat bundles of fifty-dollar bills on the floor, but he ignores them. He pulls out the mission brief and scans it, and the sickness that Sentinel doesn’t permit him to feel finally strikes him with full force.

The overview says something about infiltration, about evidence for a court case, about Sentinel needing to steal something. Private documents, important clients, confidential information that can’t fall into the hands of the wrong person. Belcourt Holdings - that company currently accused of money laundering, wasn’t it? Of course Idris is involved with that. He’s read this all before, a hundred times. Alec already knows all he needs to know from this first page.

He wonders what terrible deed is in Jace’s folder. Probably something similar.

Probably something they’ll both still do anyway.
On the first night that Alec can taste autumn in the air, Nightlock finds Sentinel again.

The wind is colder, and the cold is wetter, and the loamy taste of leaves rotting in the gutters molds on Alec’s tongue. Tonight has been one of the grin-and-bear-it nights, except there’s no grinning involved. Jace and Alec have hardly spoken a word to each other, both of them in silent agreement to get in and out of the Belcourt building with the necessary files as quickly and silently as possible.

Don’t get caught. Get the deed done. Remiss about it later.

After they retrieve the files, Jace takes them back to headquarters. “Don’t worry, I’ll take one for the team,” he said as he left, and truthfully, Alec appreciates it. He’s not sure he can look his mother and father in the eye again, and not fracture in some way that can’t be bolted back together again.

So he’s alone on a rooftop. He hasn’t been able to make it home and his hands are shaking again. There’s a loose thread in the stitching of Alec’s gloves that he’s been picking at for hours now, which only means he’s going to have to ask Izzy for a replacement later when they ultimately fall apart.

Stop, he tells himself, but he doesn’t really listen. He rubs his thumb against the seam of his finger hard enough to catch a spark if the air weren’t so wet.

So, move. So, go home, he thinks again, but he can’t do that either. Home is not a home; it’s a threadbare apartment, scattered with momentos that are supposed to mean something, supposed to represent a whole person. Home is a place with a mirror in the bathroom where he’ll spend the rest of his night staring at his reflection and wondering how it is that his mask leaves such a dirty mark across his eyes, even after scrubbing his face clean raw.

And moving from this rooftop - well, that requires an effort he just can’t quite dredge from within himself, so here, he stays.

Skyscrapers shimmer in the mist, a slowly-brewing fog that blends from white to blue as it rises. Alec watches windows flicker in and out of existence, yellow like candle flames and less like lighthouses guiding him towards a shore he’s searching for.

That’s the pain of living life at sea. He’s tossed and turned and never the right way up for long
enough to know which way to swim to find the surface.

Alec’s gaze drags across the building on the other side of the street: old and grey and stained with black city fumes. A bustle of pigeons roost amongst the stonework, enjoying a peace far deeper than Alec. He watches as a straggler flies home to nest, cooing softly. Its wings are mottled and flecked with green, emerald green, amongst the feathers, and a purple burgundy around the neck, a colour Alec rarely sees.

The pigeon disappears into a hole in the wall. When it doesn’t reappear, Alec’s gaze drifts up, towards the roof, and it’s there, too, that he finds a shadow in that same strange burgundy.

Alec frowns. The shadow shifts, billowing in the wind until the winds vanishes, snuffed out like a flame or gobbled up by New York’s hungry mouth.

Alec doesn’t look away and the shadow doesn’t move. Alec prides himself in his keen eyesight, but all he sees is the colour: that deep red-purple, the same shade as wine.

But then the shape moves again, stepping forward into the light cast upwards by the busy street below, and it’s Nightlock who materialises from out of the fog, scattering the pigeons up into the air in all directions.

Alec feels the pressure in the air change like a tell now, but this time, from all the way across the street, Nightlock waves at him, a single raised palm in greeting. There’s a shift, not tectonic or worldly or significant in any way, in Alec’s chest, that feels like the soft lapping of a wave. A sense of calmness ripples through him.

He’s not really sure why, but the air tastes less thick on his tongue, less like it’s been dredged from the bottoms of the sewers. It’s simply crisp and cold, enough to clear the cobwebs from his head.

Alec’s missed him. Sentinel has missed him. And neither of those fragments of himself should be feeling something akin to ardency, but here Alec is, pushing himself to his feet.

Nightlock holds up two fingers: wait a minute, he says from across the street.

Alec swings his bow over his shoulder and lets his shoulders slump, as if a weight has been taken off him.
It’s relief, he realises quietly. Relief to see Nightlock here, to find in him a familiar face, and maybe that familiarity is dangerous, but Alec’s exhausted in a place he cannot soothe with an ice pack or a hot shower.

When was it that Nightlock became a constant? When was it that he become a mooring?

Alec shakes his head. He watches as Nightlock lifts his palms at his side and guides himself over to Alec’s rooftop, stepping down out of the air with poise and grace.

“I’ve missed you on your usual patrol routes, Sentinel,” he says, and although his smile is wry, it’s weatherworn too. Alec doesn’t miss the way his overcoat and supersuit are slick with rain already passed. “You’ve been a hard man to catch for once. You’ve upped your game.”

They haven’t seen each other since the church. It’s been almost a fortnight now, a fraught fourteen days where Alec hasn’t had time to pause and think and recover from the things they saw together that night. No-one else understands, not Jace, not Isabelle, not his mother and father, not even Magnus. Alec finds himself remembering the look on Nightlock’s face as they both collapsed on the ground in front of one another, shock gripping their ankles, hearts in their mouths and stomachs in their throats.

He wants to ask: are you okay?

He doesn’t get the chance.

“I’ve been keeping myself busy, following up on some leads on Valentine,” Nightlock continues, “I’ve asked around for the location of a few of his old haunts, spoke to some friends of mine who were working back during the coup. I haven’t found anything concrete, but I’ve heard a lot of whispers.” He gestures with his hands as he paces back and forth in front of Alec like a metronome. Alec watches him tick. “Apparently, there’s been a lot of interest in vigilantes with certain powers since the incident at the church, someone’s out there trying to recruit anyone who fits the bill - nefarious purposes, I’m sure - but the details are either scarce or anyone who knows something is too scared to talk. But, I’ve been tipped off on a rendezvous point over in Brooklyn that I think would be worth checking out.”

Alec’s not sure Nightlock takes a breath until he’s finished talking. He stops abruptly in front of Alec and looks up at him. The fear and the shock from before, from that night, it’s gone, and in its place a fire of a different kind.
“You are going to help me, aren’t you?”

And oh, that’s a winding punch that Alec didn’t see coming, and he prides himself in his reflexes. Suddenly, his mask feels paper thin.

He takes a step back, and realises too late what that looks like, as the vigour in Nightlock’s eyes turns wary.

He narrows his eyes at Alec. He’s too sharp for his own good.

“I saw Idris didn’t release a statement about the incident at the church. Or about the Circle, for that matter,” he says. “I found it rather … telling, shall we say, with regard to their stance on Valentine. Or lack of stance, so it seems.”

“They don’t think the arson was Valentine,” Alec whispers, but he doesn’t believe himself; the words are a pale imitation of anything resembling confidence.

Nightlock shakes his head. The dark purple streaks in his hair tonight catch the city light. He sees straight through Alec.

“What gruntwork punishment do they have you doing for thinking that it was?” he asks.

Alec has nothing to say to that, because the answer sounds something like: my brother hates me for saying too little, my parents hate me for saying too much, and we’re contracted mercenaries now, although I guess we always were and I just didn’t see it.

So instead, Alec asks, “You’re going after Valentine and the Circle, then?”

Nightlock nods. “Yes. I refuse to let them get away with this. And even if I turn out to be wrong, and we’re looking for some renegade working alone, it won’t be wasted effort.” He pauses for a deep breath. “Unfortunately, I don’t make a habit of being wrong if I can help it.”
“And you really think you can catch them?”

“Not by myself,” replies Nightlock. “Although, if that’s my only option now -”

Alec’s chest aches. There’s a splitting pain in his ribs now, a phantom pain, sure, but it must feel like being slowly torn open, someone pulling on each of his arms. His skin is laddering, his bones fraying; he’s being pulled in two directions he cannot walk.

*How is it that he can exist in two places at once and yet not at all -*

“Listen, I -” he begins, walking away from Nightlock, if only so that he can hide his face. He curls his fingers into his palms, focusing on the squeaking leather of his gloves, that frayed edge again. “Nightlock, I want to help. I do. I can’t - I can’t just let whoever is doing this get away with it, but it’s just - *Idris* -”

“You care what Idris thinks?”

“No,” says Alec, and it comes easier than expected. *But it’s all he’s ever known, and he can’t just walk away. People are depending on him. His mother and father would judge him.* “Yes. Maybe.” He pauses briefly before he continues, haltingly, “It’s not that simple …”

He sees that same look of disappointment in Nightlock’s eyes as he did in Jace’s, but this time, it’s worse, because there’s betrayal too.

And it makes Alec want to shout: why does it have to be him? Why does Nightlock need *him* to do this, why is Nightlock asking for *his* help, Sentinel who is bowed beneath Idris’ shadow and conflicted in his morals?

Why does he need Sentinel?

Alec thought he worked alone.

The wind rustles through Nightlock’s coat as he steps up to Alec’s side. There’s a moment of hesitation - Alec feels it in the way the pressure in the air exists upon a precipice - but then
Nightlock’s hand is on Alec’s shoulder, and he’s turning Alec to face him.

Alec keeps his head bowed. Nightlock ducks to meet his gaze.

“Look at me,” he insists. “Sentinel.”

Alec looks up.

“It’s your choice, what you do with your gifts. Not Idris’,” Nightlock says. In his eyes, there’s a glow, and it borders upon the yellow, upon golden, and that’s a colour Alec so rarely sees amidst the rain too. “I don’t know what they have on you, and I probably will never understand, but the moment you give them your agency, you’re a dead man. You have a choice to make.”

Alec laughs dryly. “A choice? Try telling them that. They won’t listen.”

“I’m not telling them that. I’m telling you. Because, believe it or not, and despite - despite what I might have said in the past, you’re not them. Not if you choose not to be. Change can start with just one man, and God above, this world needs it.”

Alec will circle back to that, later, in the waning hours: he’ll think about Nightlock saying you’re not like the rest, and he’ll cling to it, he’ll dismantle it, he’ll try and fail to understand what it means.

For now though, he thinks about change and he thinks about how he knows so little about it. Nightlock is asking for too big a thing.

Standing quietly on the sidelines, being the dutiful soldier, not speaking out against the odds when they’re stacked high against everyone else but him … it’s all he’s ever been taught.

Idris is all he’s ever known, and you can’t just throw all that to the wind and be rid of it with no repercussions. It’s not a grey area. There’s only black and white, there’s Alec and there’s Sentinel, and there’s no middle ground between them where Alec can afford to run off into the dark, chasing rumours and mindless vigilantism, as his mother says.
“Think about it,” says Nightlock, “If you change your mind, if you decide Sentinel exists outside of Idris - come and find me. But I won’t be waiting.”

Alec scoffs dryly. “And how exactly do I find you?” he mutters. “You’re nowhere.”

Nightlock purses his lips for a moment. He hums.

“Good point,” he says, before he turns to leave. Alec’s body teeters forward, as if Nightlock’s mere proximity is keeping him upright. Something in his legs wants to follow after him, but something in his head is like a gravity, a force both cruel and harsh, keeping him pinned to the spot.

Nightlock looks back over his shoulder and waves his hand airily. But in his eyes, Alec sees that disappointment again, and can only wonder if it’s a reflection of what Alec hides beneath his own mask.

“I suppose I’ll have to find you,” Nightlock says. “Send me a smoke signal. Something that will grab my attention.”

And then he vanishes, swallowed up by the dark. Suddenly, Alec is painfully aware of the empty space in front of him.

The wind howls cold. It seems to be laughing, mocking him for missing his chance to move forward.

The next day is terrible.

When Alec dresses for work, he struggles with pushing his hands through his shirt sleeves and buttoning the fly on his pants because it feels too much like he’s still Sentinel, like he’s shoving Sentinel into his Alec skin and it just won’t fit. His jacket feels both too small or too big; his office shoes pinch his toes; his back feels naked without his quiver, only his satchel as substitute.
This hasn’t happened before, this feeling of otherness. He has a line, a line he’s carved through his middle, and it’s meant to keep Alec and Sentinel neatly parted, two poles of a magnet that should never touch. But now, today, Sentinel has overstay his welcome. There are cracks in him, and Sentinel has bled through from the night before.

On the subway, the turbulence of the carriage jostles him around, but he stands too rigid, his balance too good to be swayed. He doesn’t notice if it looks unnatural. He stares hard at the dirty floor.

There’s a tear in him. He realises that as he emerges from the subway into daylight, and the Tribunal looms over him, casting a large shadow across the street.

How does Alec go to work and sit down at his desk and stare at audit reports all day when Nightlock is out there, canvassing all of Manhattan and Brooklyn for leads on Valentine and these murders? How does Alec ignore the fact Nightlock is doing everything and he - Sentinel - is doing nothing? How does Alec make peace with the things that Sentinel is asked to do and the toll it has on him -

Alec drags himself into the office and throws himself down into his cubicle. He rests his elbows on his desk and smothers his face with his hands, pressing the heels of his palms into his eyes until he sees stars.

This is purgatory, or it would be, if it wasn’t blasphemy to find God’s silhouette in the city skyline. It’s purgatory, because Alec is stood somewhere on the bridge between two countries where he has planted stolen flags, and he cannot step foot on the shores of either for too long. He is both his arrow and the civilian caught in the crossfire. Both the corpse in the alleyway and the fruit flies feeding upon it.

Both a desperate cry for help, and Idris’ answering silence.

How does everyone else do it? How does Jace do it? Clary? How does Nightlock do it, how does he exist as two identities at once and not lose himself somewhere along the way to endless, echoing what ifs.

Alec’s watch beeps. It reminds him that he has no time for breakdowns; he’s on company time, snap out of it. He scrubs his hands down his face, pulling at the skin of his cheeks and the rough stubble below his jaw, and exhales shakily.
Later, he tells himself. Later. Push it all down, smother it, compartmentalise. Organise it into something that can be understood. It’s always worked before.

He turns on his computer, but the screen flashes with white numbers on a black page, and then fizzes into blue with a dial up screech. The blue hurts Alec’s eyes, but he stares, for a moment longer than necessary, because his head won’t process it, his body is numb all over, and there’s something’s burning away into ash inside of him but he can’t quite tell what.

He doesn’t even notice Simon swan his way over and drape himself across the top of Alec’s partition. Not until he grins, too cheery:

“Hey, Alec!”

Alec looks up. Simon looks like he dressed in a panic: his hair is a bird’s nest and his shirt might be on inside out. But his smile is broad and only dims when Alec doesn’t immediately reply.

“You alright?” Simon worries. Alec can only imagine what Simon can see of him, the way he looks like a car wrapped around a telephone pole. Simon leans further over the partition to get a closer look at Alec’s monitor. “Damn. You having computer problems?”

Alec slumps back in his chair and gestures flatly as his desktop’s blue screen. “I guess,” he sighs.

“Let me have a crack at it,” Simon says brightly. “Usually you just gotta hit ‘em just right -”

He presses the flat of his hand to the top of Alec’s monitor and closes his eyes, as if he’s trying to focus his mind into - whatever he’s about to do. Alec doesn’t have the mental capacity to deal with Simon’s dramatics today.

Simon’s nose wrinkles and his temple twitches. Then, he smacks his hand down hard on Alec’s computer, and the whole thing shudders, but the screen flickers into the ever familiar Windows 3.0 start menu.

Alec blinks slowly. “Okay,” he says.
Simon peers around Alec’s computer again and beams at his handiwork. “Don’t mention it,” he smiles, “I’ve always been good with tech. I have a magic touch!”

Alec drags his mouse over to open up his emails. He makes a low noise of acknowledgement, but Simon doesn’t go away. He probably came over here for a reason, after all, although Alec isn’t about to ask for it.

Doesn’t really matter. Simon will tell him anyway.

“Sooo,” Simon says, dragging out the word. “All that stuff in the papers lately about vigilante murders. Pretty crazy, huh?”

Alec sighs and fixes Simon with a flat, unforgiving stare. Simon shrinks back.

“What? C’mon Alec, I’m just making polite conversation about current affairs -”

Unimpressed, Alec raises his eyebrows.

“Okay, okay, you got me, I just - did you hear Senator Herondale on the radio this morning? She did a breakfast segment on WNYC … ?”

“I didn’t have time to tune in,” Alec mutters.

“Well, anyway!” continues Simon, “The DJ was taking calls in, right, and this one caller brought up the topic of her opinion on supers … and then they got discussing anti-vigilante legislation that she wants to bring to the Senate if she gets re-elected …”

Simon swallows thickly, and Alec notices. In the blink of an eye, Alec goes from feeling nothing at all to hyper focused on the way Simon palms his hand through his hair and looks anywhere but Alec’s eyes. Simon is nervous.
Why is Simon nervous?

“What about it?” Alec asks carefully.

“I just … you know what she said? That she wanted to bring in some sort of record … like a public register for anyone with superpowers and that’s - I just figured it was kinda screwed up, y’know? Like, I get that there are vigilantes out there with some really dangerous powers but - I just keep thinking of my nana. She lived in Germany when she was a kid. My family’s Jewish.”

Alec doesn’t know what to say to that. He knows about Herondale’s stance on vigilantes, and he knows she’s a hypocrite because she still works with Idris, because they’re the right sort of superhero, the contracted type, the owned type - but he hasn’t heard about any plans for legislation before. Hasn’t really been listening.

He would’ve thought his mother might have warned him -

“And the more and more I thought about it, the more and more angry I got,” Simon continues, “But then when I chatted to Charlie in sales this morning, he just completely blew me off and said Herondale has a point. But you’re on side with the supers, right, Alec? I know you don’t hate them, so I just wanted to - you don’t think I’m being crazy, do you?”

Simon’s eyes are pleading; Alec realises he’s looking for reassurance and he’s quietly desperate for it. And Alec doesn’t have it in him to deny Simon today.

“No,” he sighs, “No, I don’t … think you’re crazy.”

Simon whistles a sigh of relief. “Well, that’s good to hear! I’m just worried, y’know? The next step after a register is always rounding people up and segregating them from everyone else and I’m … scared, I guess, for - people. For other people. No-one I know, of course, but - the general population of New York - hey, actually, it would be really good to pick your brain on this a bit more -”

“Simon,” Alec presses. “I have work to do.”
“I know, I know, I just - I don’t really have anyone else to talk to about this stuff, and it’s always a risk, bringing it up, because you don’t always know if people secretly want to kill you, y’know? But I know you don’t - not really - ‘cus you, like, get it.”

Get it means something different to Simon than it does to Alec. Or maybe it means half of the same thing, because judging by the way Simon tilts his head vaguely in the direction of Magnus’ office, he’s alluding to the other reason people would rather Alec be incarcerated. But for Simon, it stops there: it stops at you get this, ‘cus you’re gay, and that doesn’t even touch upon the rest of it.

Alec gets it so much more than Simon realises. He gets it because his own freedom is hanging by a thin, thin thread, if it hasn’t been snipped already. And there’s nothing he can do about it.

He feels powerless.

Again.

“Listen, this isn’t a great place to talk, but,” says Simon conspiratorially, “Maybe me and you can get lunch and chat more? Or we could go for drinks after work, I dunno. There’s a couple things I wanna run by you actually …”

Alec doesn’t really listen. He nods along and says okay when the pauses Simon takes for breath demand it, but he’s not sure what he is agreeing to.

He thinks about Nightlock again. He scolds himself for not going with him last night.

Magnus isn’t smiling when Alec slips into his office that night. His nose is buried in a substantial pile of documents as he furiously scribbles notes in a yellow legal pad, and doesn’t even look up when Alec dumps his bag in the corner.

“Come in, come in, I’ll be with you in a moment,” Magnus says, frowning fiercely at the page. His hair has begun to wilt and the black kohl around his eyes is smudged more around one eye than the
other. His nail polished is chipped and his cravat has been loosened around his throat. Judging by the noticeable dent in his chair, it looks like he hasn’t moved in hours - or maybe longer.

It’s clearly been a long day for him too.

Alec clears his throat. “’S only me,” he says.

Magnus immediately looks up, his pen stilling on the page. He offers Alec a small, crooked smile. It doesn’t quite illuminate his whole face, but maybe that’s a trick of the poor light.

“I wasn’t expecting you tonight,” he says gently, tapping the nib of his pen. “No Golden Girls to get home to?”

“Not tonight,” Alec says, “That’s Tuesdays.”

“Of course it is,” says Magnus. “Well, I must say I’m glad to see you. I’m not sure I’ve seen a single living person all day … or maybe I have, and I’ve just forgotten. Frankly, I can’t remember the last time I went home.” He gestures widely at the paperwork spread out across his desk as Alec lowers himself into his usual seat. “I hit upon a new lead last night regarding Valentine and the Circle. It looks promising.”

Ah.

Alec stills, his weight not quite settled. He wonders if it’s obvious, but Magnus is quick to scribble a few more notes. Magnus hasn’t noticed, but Alec -

It’s like Alec can’t escape it: the bleeding line, Sentinel, the Circle, all of it. Perhaps that’s the nature of the beast; even Valentine’s name has the power to not let you forget it, whether or not it be from his tongue.

The universe must have it out for Alec today, prodding its fingers into all of his open wounds. If only he could tell whether it’s some higher power testing him and his loyalty to Idris, or serving him karma for not standing up for what he knows is right -
“Yeah?” Alec asks in a small voice. He picks at the grain in the desk. “Anything interesting?”

“Hard to say yet,” says Magnus, choosing a number of sheets of paper to hand over to Alec, all of which are plastered with Post-It notes and Magnus’ looping handwriting. “Last night, I visited one of the Circle’s old haunts. There was no-one there, of course, but canvassing the neighbours proved to be somewhat useful. I have some descriptions of some ‘suspicious individuals’, if you’ll pardon the phrase, but a number of witnesses report someone who fits Valentine Morgenstern’s description -”

Magnus pushes two grainy CCTV photographs across the desk to Alec, and then glances up to catalogue Alec’s reaction. One look at Alec’s grave face, however, and his excitement disappears.

“Alexander?” he frowns. “Is something the matter? You don’t look well.”

Alec stares down at the two photographs in his hands. The angle is difficult and the contrast is bad, but it looks like two men having a heated conversation in the pool of a streetlamp. The man facing the camera is younger, a full head of hair, a black tattoo stark against his neck, but the other, the man with his back to the camera, is older, his head closely shaved.


“How - how is it going?” Alec asks, his voice a little hoarse. His fingers tighten on the photographs, creasing the shiny paper. “The investigation? Do you think we’ll -”

“Slower than I would like,” says Magnus slowly. His eyes narrow as he studies Alec and the way Alec won’t look at him. “I’m still getting calls on the tip line, but most end up being duds. All the interest in the Fell case has died down, and I fear the incident at that church has already been lampooned from the public consciousness.” He rubs his thumb and index finger together in thought. His expression pinches. “I was hoping I’d be able to cover more ground with tracking down witnesses, but someone I assumed might help turned me down last night. Not that any good journalist should expect help when chasing a story, because it’s a surprisingly lonely business, but -”

“You’ve … you’ve still got me,” says Alec.

“Yes. Yes, I do. And I am incomparably grateful for your help, Alexander, you know that. I wouldn’t be able to sift through half this stuff without you.”
He pauses, considering Alec carefully. He puts his pen down and lays both his palms flat on the desk.

“Alec, what’s this really about?”

“It’s nothing,” says Alec automatically, because it’s like a reflex, catching himself from opening up out of fear that he won’t stop pouring once he does. He exhales shakily, and resists the urge to scrub his hand down his face. *Pull yourself together, Lightwood.* “I just - I wish I could do more. To help.”

“You do plenty,” says Magnus, and Alec is sure they’ve had this conversation before, and maybe that means something. Something like: *you’re going to end up going in circles if you don’t step over that carefully crafted line of yours, Alec.* “Far more than most people, and far more than I deserve, considering how I roped you into this with little reward other than my dazzling company.”

Alec wants to tell Magnus how wrong he is. How Alec sitting at this desk is the only thing that stops the guilt from literally killing him. How he has the capacity to do so much more and he’s wasting it, and doesn’t that make him just as bad as the people they’re hunting? He’s complicit to their crimes, because he has the power to stop them.

“Can I ask you a question?” Alec asks.

“Of course,” Magnus says without hesitation. He tilts his head curiously. “Alec, *always*. I think we can be honest with each other, don’t you?”

“How do you -” Alec begins, “How do you get to be Magnus the journalist and Magnus the - everything else?”

“I don’t think I understand the question. Are you asking me about my work-life balance, or however HR likes to phrase it? Because trust me, I’m the last person you want to ask about that. My social life is surprisingly pitiful, despite what you might hear on the grapevine.”

“No, it’s -” says Alec, but then he sighs angrily, because it’s just not coming out right. And it won’t ever come out right, not whilst he has to keep Sentinel a secret. Magnus is only ever going to get half the picture. “You said before, that it’s easier to know what to do because of your responsibility to the press, but - what happens when who you are outside of the office doesn’t - doesn’t agree
with that person you need to be? If that ... if that makes sense.”

Magnus blinks slowly and then he leans back in his chair, folding his hands together. He frowns as he stares at the ceiling, and the silence prevails just a little too long to be comfortable.

“Sorry,” Alec backtracks, “That’s stupid, I didn’t -”

“No. No, it’s not stupid. It’s a good question,” Magnus muses. Alec’s eyes are glued to his face now, caught by the shift of his jaw and the movement of his mouth as he thinks. “In this line of work, it happens a lot. You’re asked to write stories that you think don’t matter, and to ignore ones that clearly do. You’re asked to cover up the truth, to make things that will sell even if they’re sensationalist. I don’t agree with any of that, but - well, what can I say. I usually just go under the board’s nose and do what I want anyway. I don’t know if that’s good advice.”

Alec nods. It sounds so simple when Magnus says it. For him, doing the right thing and being himself are the same circle in a Venn diagram, but for Alec - his two circles don’t ever overlap. Hell, they’re not even circles at all, they’re two parallel lines, side by side into infinity, but never once meeting, and that’s some part a tragedy.

It’s hard to know what to do when you don’t even know who you are.

“It’s like … “ Alec begins, wringing his hands together. “It’s like, you can have this plan for your life. You know what you need to do and what your responsibilities are, and you think, you know, if you follow the rules, everything’s gonna be fine.”

Magnus’ gaze drops to his, diamond-sharp and quietly piercing. It lances straight through Alec, and Alec stills, his next breath hitched.

He’s too late; it’s all about to come pouring out anyway.

“But then … “ he whispers. “Then, somebody, some thing comes along, something like this case, these murders, and ... it pushes you off that path, and you just ...”

“Don’t know what to do?” offers Magnus. He leans forward again. He sounds sincere. “Alexander, listen to me -”
“I know. I know, it’s dumb, I’m just - afraid of change, I guess. When you’re -” He swallows thickly. “When you’re like me, it’s … intimidating, putting yourself out there when you’re not even sure who -”

The words are stolen from Alec’s mouth by Magnus reaching across the desk to grip his hand, separating Alec’s knotted fingers with a gentle tug. He clenches Alec’s fingers in his palm and draws Alec’s hand towards him.

“There’s a saying that comes to mind,” says Magnus, and he’s still staring at Alec, and Alec cannot look away, even though he can feel his pulse in his fingertips. “By an Argentine dramatist I read a long time ago. I think we would be much more alive if we dared ourselves to recognize that we are not obligated to know who we are at every given moment. I think it’s rather profound.”

Alec’s heart hammers with the speed of something so much more than a simple touch. Magnus squeezes his fingers; his hand is warm, but the pads of his fingers are calloused by many years with a pen in his grip, scribbling furiously on tiny notepads.

This is like before, like that night on the telephone, with Magnus whispering in his ear. Just them, alone in the world, but a world that doesn’t feel too big for them to fill.

*Why - why do you look at me like you understand everything -*

“Sorry, I - I feel like I kinda just dumped that all on you,” Alec half-laughs, palming his free hand through his hair. He gently tugs at his own hand, but Magnus doesn’t let go. If anything, Magnus’ grip tightens, and then he lays his other hand over the first. Alec is stuck in between, but it’s really Alec’s heart that’s trapped behind his teeth.

“I’ve - I’ve been stressing about it all week,” he presses on. “And it was gonna end up coming out to someone … and I don’t think my brother is as good a listener as … you.”

“Thank you for telling me,” says Magnus with a smile. “There are very few people I get to talk to like this. Thank you for trusting me.”

*Trust*. There’s that funny old word again. Magnus throws it around so freely, and Alec doesn’t understand it, because trust precludes letting people in, letting people get their hands on his bruised skin, letting people see behind the mask, and that’s something he doesn’t give away as easily.
And yet, here he is, wanting to tell Magnus everything, just because Magnus is willing to listen.

And isn’t that selfish? Making Magnus listen to his problems when Alec won’t even tell him the whole truth?

Making Magnus listen when he’s probably been stuck at his desk all day and just wants to go home and -

“I do,” says Alec, speaking before he thoughts get in the way again, “Trust you, I mean. And uh -” Deep breath. The room suddenly feels a little suffocating. He doesn’t know why. “If you wanted someone. To talk to. Then, well - I’d do the same for you, although your problems probably aren’t as melodramatic as mine.”

“Darling,” Magnus drawls, but the affection sounds forced, and whatever warmth was within his eyes is quietly tempered. Alec cannot help but think it's his fault. “Believe me, melodramatic is my middle name.”

Carefully, he untangles his hands from Alec’s and withdraws back across the desk. Alec’s hand is left palm-up and cold between them.

Alec opens his mouth to say something, anything clumsy enough to fill the sudden silence, but the only thing that comes to mind is that he wants Magnus’ hand back on his. He glares at his own fingers like they’ve personally betrayed him, and they have, fingertips tingling in the same way they do when he’s stringing his bow and stroking the fletchling of his arrows.

It’s an eager feeling. Alec calls it anticipation. He doesn’t understand why.

Then, Magnus sighs. He sighs, and it’s a heavy, weary sigh, as he leans back in his chair and rolls his stiff shoulders, before stretching his arms out above his head. His rings catch the light, chrome and silver coins rolling across his knuckles, and as he shifts, the light finds the fine chain tucked beneath his shirt collar too. He cricks his neck, and Alec’s eyes follow the exposed column of his throat.

Time seems to slow, just as white noise rings out in Alec’s ears like a siren. Alec snatches his empty hand back across the table like he’s been stung.
“What do you say to a bit of fresh air?” Magnus asks, and he’s already climbing to his feet, reaching for his coat. His voice is lower than expected. “I don’t know about you, but the stuffiness in here is making me lightheaded.”

“Oh,” says Alec, “I can go if you want some peace and quiet—”

“I’d rather you didn’t,” says Magnus. He offers Alec a strangely shy smile, but there’s something off about it, something that feels a little distant. He shrugs into his coat, buttoning it up to the base of his throat. “Stay. Please. If you have a moment.”

And it sounds so much like Nightlock from the other night that Alec freezes for a moment. How come with me and stay can feel so much alike that he’s doused in the most surreal sense of deja vu that there’s no other answer he can give but yes.

He grabs his coat and follows Magnus out the door without locking it behind them.

Magnus holds the fire escape door open and leads Alec out onto the rooftop of the building, where a wall of bitter cold greets Alec like frostbite that immediately makes his eyes sting. Alec squints, nudging the door closed with his shoulder and burrowing into his coat, but Magnus disappears on ahead, slipping into the dark with phantom strides.

The roof is puddled with rainwater turned stagnant and leaves caught in the gutters. They’re still erring on the side of green, but Alec doesn’t know where they might have blown in from; Central Park is a while away from here and autumn has yet to turn them brown.

Ahead of him, Magnus steps gracefully over ventilation pipes and grates in the roof, picking his way over to the edge. He casts a long and lonely shadow, thin and black as it stretches back and licks at Alec’s shoes. The wind ruffles at his hair and his coat, but it’s not quite enough to be violent tonight, not enough to shift the strange mass that has settled in Alec’s chest.

Alec’s had so many bizarre conversations on rooftops lately that this shouldn’t feel so out of the
ordinary, and yet this is the one that feels most surreal, most private. This time, he’s the one sneaking up from behind and intruding upon solitary feelings not his own.

At the edge of the rooftop, looking down over a dark, narrow alleyway, Alec joins Magnus at his side. Magnus wraps his arms around himself to ward off the cold.

The city ripples out around them in a blue daze, heady, intoxicated, saturated in colour, swaying with the wind that whistles like a siren song through the streets. There’s always been a sense of unreality about the distance, a shimmer of violets, of cobalts, of strange white blinking lights that run like barcodes up the side of skyscrapers. The city bleeds anticipation, the whisper of violent, exciting promise - the breathlessness of a disposed God - and yet, it seems so inherently lonely.

Alec loves it and hates it in equal measure, but it swallows him up anyway, smothering him in quietness. All that exists is distant sound; and his eyes falls shut as he sways to a stop next to Magnus.

Alec breathes deep. His body settles into a rhythm that he knows. He chances a look at Magnus, if only to tip himself straight out of it again, faithful to the rush of the fall.

“I come up here to think, now and again,” Magnus murmurs. “Simon doesn’t seem to know anything exists above the fifth floor of the building, so it’s rather quiet. Peaceful, I suppose.” He stares out into the dark, searching for something Alec wants to know. Then, he adds, “It’s surprisingly beautiful up here too.”

Alec swallows thickly. “Yeah.”

“Yeah?” Magnus asks, tilting his head towards Alec, smiling a little. “Yes, it’s beautiful, or yes, Simon, for all his good graces, can be a nuisance when it pleases him?”

“Both?” says Alec with a shrug. “But it is pretty nice up here. It makes you forget - everything else that’s going on down there, I guess. It’s … like a dream.”

“And you don’t want to wake up.”

“Yeah. Yeah, something like that.”
Magnus steps a little closer. Maybe he doesn’t realise it, maybe it means nothing, maybe he’s just drawn towards Alec’s body heat against the wind. His shoulder brushes against Alec’s in silence.

But Alec watches him, his face in profile, the slope of his nose, the clench of his jaw, the bob of his throat as he swallows, highlighted by twinkling lights beyond. Those lights, they dance, flickering in and out of reality like the slow flashes of a camera, or of lightning, bright one moment and gone the next.

When Magnus speaks again, Alec almost doesn’t hear him, either his voice too soft, or Alec too far gone into the strange dream of blue.

“You prefer it up here.”

It’s not a question, although it certainly weighs like one in Alec’s chest. He glances away from the swell of the city, but Magnus looks away from him in the same instance, staring out into the dark, his arms still tightly wrapped around himself, but his fingers drumming restlessly against his elbow.

“I’ve noticed. You breathe deeper when you’re outside.”

The wind blows harsh and cold and straight through Alec. Magnus is both wrong and not wrong.

Alec thrives in that windowless office, when it’s just the two of them bowed over the casefiles strewn across Magnus’ desk and the rest of the world is kept at bay by four walls in a way that Alec cannot see, yet feels like a temperance.

But Sentinel -

Sentinel wants the wind and the cold and the way the rooftop plunges away into neon obscurity far below. He’s a raindrop in an infinite ocean.

Of course Alec and Sentinel are different in this way too. Maybe that’s just how it has to be.
But Magnus has never been someone so easily confined to boxes and to walls and vast and endless skyscraper seas. His fingers are still twitching, his foot still tapping, his eyes flitting from building to building, from flickering lights to roaming sirens: he doesn’t want to be here, just as much as he wanted out of his office too.

*So where?* Alec cannot help but wonder, *Where do you want to be that isn’t here?*

His chest tightens at the thought. It shouldn’t, but it does, because he thinks of Magnus longing to be somewhere else, away from here, away from Alec. Who does he have waiting for him at home?

He said before, that he doesn’t have anyone he can talk to about all this, but -

He must have *someone*.

“Alec?”

Alec looks up, snapped out of tumbling thoughts. Magnus is watching him again, his eyebrows pinched, his mouth downturned. The city highlights him in purple and blue from all angles, but the shadows on his face are still so dark and pooling, black in the sockets of his eyes and the curve of his cheeks.

And briefly, that shadow looks like a mask, and Alec thinks again of Nightlock and the night at the church. He thinks of Nightlock turning away from him on that rooftop and how Alec’s own heart ached for him in a way he knows far too inherently to ignore.

‘*You don’t have anyone in your ear?*’

‘*No. No, it’s just me.*’

“Sorry,” says Alec, clearing his throat. “Yeah, I guess I do. When I need to clear my head. The cold’s good for that.”

Magnus murmurs in agreement, but he doesn’t say anything. Alec is acutely aware of the glint of his rings in the dark as he continues to pick at his coat sleeve.
Magnus is definitely not okay. And Alec -

Alec has a good idea why. Suddenly, the reasons why Magnus throws himself so selflessly into his work makes perfect sense. The reason why he stays for press every morning to see the sunrise can’t be mistaken for anything else. And now, he offers himself up to Alec’s deluge of problems and it just makes Alec feel so tremendously sad.

“Are you lonely?” Alec asks, before his sense of self-preservation catches up with the murmur of his words. Still, it’s not quiet enough for Magnus not to hear and he looks at Alec sharply.

Sharply, and then softly, because resignation quietly replaces those well-fortified defenses of his, and his shoulders slump.

“Isn’t everybody, in one way or another?” he replies, “Why do you ask?”

Judging by the way Magnus’ jaw clenches, Alec knows he’s prodded upon a sore spot. It’s probably cruel of him to keep poking, but sometimes, once he’s started talking, it’s difficult to stop, as if the courage in his blood wants to make the most of a rare moment where he doesn’t feel like burning up.

“You look ...” Alec begins, waving his hand aimlessly, “Distracted. Like you want to say something, but can’t. Or won’t. I dunno which.” He curls his fingers to his palm. “Magnus, I was serious back there, if you wanna talk about something –”

Magnus lets out a dry laugh. “Is it that obvious?”

Yeah, is what Alec thinks about saying, yeah, it’s in your eyes. But he doesn’t suppose it’ll make Magnus feel any better.

Instead, he says, “No. I just … know what to look for, I guess.”

“Hmm,” murmurs Magnus, spinning one of his rings around and around on his finger. “Well, like I said, I suppose my personal life must make for semi-decent office gossip.”
“What?” Alec frowns. “No, I -”

There’s a difference, Alec wants to say. There’s a difference between someone seeing the dark circles beneath Magnus’ eyes not covered up by makeup, thinking that’s he’s tired, and knowing that it’s all because he’s been working himself to the bone. There’s a difference between watching Magnus in his element in the office, barking orders to the copyeditors, and knowing it’s only because he’s a workaholic and he doesn’t know how to make room for anything else.

There’s a difference, Alec wants to say, between Simon looking at Magnus, and Alec looking at Magnus. They see different things.

Alec sees someone incomparable. Someone who gives and gives and gives, but when it comes to taking for themselves: nothing. Magnus carries the weight of the world on his shoulders and yet won’t let anyone do the same for him. Won’t share, because he’s too kind a person to want anyone else to suffer under the things he suffers. Won’t tell Alec, because he’s -

Is he afraid? Like Alec?

Is he afraid to let people get too close and see what’s under the mask?

Magnus huffs, and as if reading Alec’s thoughts, says, “Well, I’ll start preparing myself for Simon staging an intervention then. Thanks for the warning.”

Alec shakes his head. “I think there’s a difference,” he murmurs. Magnus’ shoulder brushes his again. “Between looking at someone and … seeing someone.”

Magnus is smart. He catches onto Alec’s meaning before Alec has to explain himself, and for that, Alec is grateful.

“And you can see me?” he scoffs.

Alec looks up. He meets Magnus’ curious stare. “I think you deserve to be seen, Magnus.”
And Magnus shifts, Alec’s honesty rippling through him like a fracture, revealing the briefest of windows. Alec catches a glimpse of the way the breath pauses in his throat before he swallows it back and wills himself to be calm.

He laughs, that same, quiet, slightly despairing laugh as always, but his eyes betray him. “Flattery will get you everywhere, Alexander,” he says, his voice rough around the edges.

“I mean it,” says Alec, “Everything that you do, all the stuff you do for the supers, to keep people safe, to get justice for them - and nobody knows. That - I dunno, it just feels wrong to me. Like you deserve to be able to tell someone, like other people should know. They should be grateful -”

“I tell you .”

“That’s different,” Alec says quickly, “I’m different. I mean - being able to have someone you talk to about all the stuff you see every day -”

Magnus steps in front of him then, obscuring the skyline, narrowing Alec’s vision right down to the tight line of his mouth. Alec sucks in a sharp breath, folding his arms behind his back. He stands tall, body pulled taut like a bowstring.

Magnus tightens his arm around himself. His eyes flick briefly down from Alec’s gaze to somewhere lower: his chest, his throat, his lips maybe, but doesn’t linger. He finds Alec’s eyes again, and opens his mouth to speak.

He says nothing, and Alec is left dangling over a precipice he never even saw coming, his focus glued to the round pause of Magnus’ mouth.

Magnus says nothing, because whatever it is that he wants to say is better kept locked away, shuttered between four walls and no windows. Whatever he wants to say is something he thinks Alec doesn’t want to hear.

Alec wants to hear it. Anything that Magnus will give him, he’ll take it. He knows that now. It doesn’t come as a surprise.

“It’s about to rain,” Magnus murmurs then, but he’s still standing so close and Alec can feel the heat of him, a tremble of energy in the air that usually precludes a storm, but maybe not this time.
Some small part of Alec, attune to the sorts of people who can command energy with a snap of their fingers, wonders if this strange prickle ruminates across Magnus’ skin too.

“Back to work?” Alec hedges.

Magnus’ eyes drop again, this time definitely focusing on Alec’s mouth. He reaches out, the barest press of his fingers against Alec’s arm. It doesn’t last, and Alec is not sure whether it’s a comfort or not.

“Back to work,” Magnus confirms, and then he turns to leave, heading back towards the faint glow of light escaping the fire door behind them. The warmth leaves with him, as does the shiver in the air.

Alec turns his face to the sky, just for a moment, just for a breath. He doesn’t taste rain. Not tonight. There’s an incision in the clouds above, through which he can see the faint outline of stars.

They seem very far away.

Solitude and loneliness are two very different things. Solitude is a choice, a penance, a moment to readjust amidst breathing; but loneliness, that’s time spent at odds with the world.

Alec understands loneliness better than most.

It’s a selfish sort of feeling, because he has Isabelle, he has Jace, he has both his parents still alive and breathing. There’s Clary and Max and Underhill too. Even Simon.

Even Magnus.
He knows he’s not alone in the world.

He knows he’s always got Izzy’s whisper in his ear. He knows that Jace would have no-one else fighting at his back. He knows he’s not standing in the foreground of a burning church like Nightlock and having no-one there to call at home.

Alec knows he’s loved.

And yet, he still knows loneliness intimately. There’s a second pillow always laid out to the empty space on his mattress beside him; there’s a cold indentation in the covers waiting to be filled. There’s always a prolonged moment of silence in the roof of the city when everyone else sleeps on and he finds himself behest to the wind and the skyline.

There’s always an ache in his chest, and Magnus -

Something about Magnus only makes it hurt more, and it doesn’t really make sense, but at the same time, it makes total sense. Superheroes are meant to have broken hearts and tragic backstories and perhaps Alec doesn’t have all that, not yet, but he does have bulletproof empathy that drives him into the firing line for someone else.

Magnus isn’t someone who should feel lonely. He’s the sort of person who drags people into his orbit like stellar bodies; and the sort of person brave enough to leap off a tall building in a single bound and expect people to follow into the fire. People turn to look at him when he enters rooms; his opinions are sought after, coveted, a man who everyone must want to know -

And yet none of that matters.

Magnus is still lonely, and Alec shares that, finding himself wanting to strip it away with his bare hands and claim it as his good deed. There are walls around Magnus, walls drawn up perhaps to keep people out, to keep himself protected from the world. Alec sees those walls in the sharp flick of makeup at the corner of Magnus’ eyes, in the gun-metal glint of his rings, in the crisp suits and tall hair and untouchable smiles that never reach his eyes.

Magnus is lonely. He bears the weight of the city on his shoulders and has no-one who listens when he needs to talk.
No-one except Alec, but Alec is different; Alec might be his friend but he’s his work colleague first; Alec is terrible at conversation. *What little help must he be -*

It hurts to think of Magnus as lonely, because Magnus deserves more than the same blue that lingers in the lonely city and in the punishment of rain. Magnus always deserves more, he deserves the *world*, but held up by someone else, just for him. He deserves someone to do for him what he has been doing alone for years for everybody else.

He deserves compassion, appreciation, *love* -

That’s a heavy word.

It’s a heavy word for a heavy feeling, and it’s probably not Alec’s to give, but his chest still clenches tightly.

Alec’s alone on a rooftop, another rooftop, another night in the same mask. He wonders if his loneliness isn’t the only selfish feeling with which he’s galavanted lately as the wind howls around him, the silhouette of the city surrendered to the fog, flirting with the rain yet to arrive.

He presses his gloved fingers to his mask, pushing the leather against his skin until he can feel it, sticky and cold at the same time. His radio is quiet tonight, and he resents himself for thinking that’s a terrible thing, because it means no leads. It means that he’s no closer to solving what happened at that church. No closer to the Circle.

*Not that Alec’s allowed to chase that ghost in the taillight -*

Below, the street is lined with bars and nightclubs, red light slicking up Alec’s shoulder, a darker indigo cradled in his hip; neon flashes and deep bass pulses, and the air, soupy with low-lying cloud, trembles with that same heightened fever. That saturated colour seems to cling to Alec, curling around his legs, making every movement feel like wading through waist-high water.

It’s going to be a late night, but the people spilling out of the bars are more ready and willing to chase the dawn than Alec, their boisterous laughter and shouts muffled by the thickness of the air. They don’t know loneliness tonight, protected from heartache by a beer jacket draped across their shoulders, isolation staved off by someone else’s hands on their hips. There’s a dream of synth, a lo-fi bass, a guitar soaring off into the dark, Freddie Mercury’s familiar croon again swooping up into the stratosphere where no-one else can reach.
The *Queen* cassette tape sitting in Alec’s desk drawer at the office is like a homing beacon from across the city. He still hasn’t given it to Magnus. Maybe he should, if only to build a bridge between two lonely people, because there are only so many ways to talk about heartache without opening the mouth. Maybe it would make Magnus feel better; it would make Alec feel better in truth, to say the things that Alec is afraid to say, cannot say, cannot think.

It should be a sign.

Alec’s eyes roam the street again, flitting from one drunken man to another, frowning at the women who laugh and cling to lamposts to keep themselves upright. He watches a man drag his fingertips up the back of his companion, playing with the hair at the nape of her neck. She laughs into his shoulder. They whisper conspiratorially in each other’s ears, and then stagger home in search of sheets to tangle around their ankles, and Alec wonders if that green and twisted feeling was merely his jealousy all along.

*And what does that feel like*, he wonders, *curious hands trailing down his back, mapping the shift of muscles in his shoulders, tracing the scars and whisker lines of duty on his skin, prickling a path of goosebumps all the way down into the small of his spine?*

That’s not a life he knows. He could go out to a bar and meet a stranger, like what Jace used to do before Clary, but that’s not what he wants. He doesn’t want one-night-and-done. He wants *connection*.

That’s what everyone wants, isn’t it?

His gaze falls, at last, upon the door to a basement bar that oozes illucid red and pink light, teasing of tongues and lust sans the hot flush of panic behind.

A few people are crowded in the shadow of the doorway including someone breathing out smoke, the cigarette between their fingers glowing like a firefly in a place where fireflies should never be. There’s three of them: two women, and a man. Alec’s not sure why he watches them for so long; the hush of their conversation is too low to overhear; maybe it’s the way they sway against each other, a little drunkenly, a little giddy, a little care-free. The bob of the woman’s cigarette pulls Alec into a strange trance, hypnosis ebbing and flowing against his better judgements.

The woman with the cigarette is objectively beautiful, a soft rust-orange coloured dress whipping around her thighs, her hair straight and dark. Her grin is crooked as she leans in to whisper to the
other woman; it makes them both laugh. The man though, still draped in shadows, does something with his hands that looks like he’s throwing them up in fond despair.

It’s only when the man steps out of the dark and into the pool of a streetlamp do Alec’s eyes widen, because, well.

It’s Magnus.

It’s Magnus, and he’s wearing a black and gold shirt done up to his throat, with his jacket draped over his shoulders, the sleeves hanging loose by his sides. His hair is tall and imposing, his makeup smoky, and there’s a glint of metal biting into his neck and around his knuckles. He looks expensive, his silhouette powerful, his legs long and lean in jet-black pants. His smile is sharp; the blade of it cuts through the haze, even at a distance.

It’s Magnus, and Alec has never seen Magnus when he’s ... Sentinel.

And it’s full-circle irony, isn’t it, because of course Magnus would be someone else outside the office too, just like Alec. Alec had only asked as much the other night. Magnus doesn’t spend every waking hour behind that desk of his, sifting through case notes: he has a life as well. He goes dancing, he goes drinking, maybe he does the one-night-and-done.

Alec doesn’t even notice the woman in orange extinguish her cigarette. He doesn’t notice her lean in to kiss Magnus on either cheek as he supports her by the elbows. Then, she loops her arm together with the other woman, and throws a cackling goodbye over her shoulder as she steers them away down the street.

Alec does notice that Magnus turns to walk the other way. He’s not going home with his two stumbling friends; he’s not going to hail a cab with them to another bar, because the night is still a little young, but nor is he accompanying someone back to their apartment for a nightcap.

He’s just walking home alone.

Alec throws his bow over his shoulder and scrambles to keep pace with Magnus, parallel along the rooftop. Magnus walks fast, faster than a man who’s had three beers and a whiskey should. Alec struggles to pick his way over gutters and drainpipes without catching his boot and earning a facefull of rainwater for his troubles.
Alec shouldn’t be following him. He’s meant to be on duty, waiting for Izzy’s call or Jace’s fly-by, but he can’t stop himself. It’s just curiosity. It’s just a pale imitation of intimacy at a distance.

The pink lights of the bars disappear behind him, replaced by the far colder, far unkinde...
Alec’s seen this sort of thing enough to know what’s about to happen.

Magnus is probably an easy target: well-dressed, alone, the few drinks in his system affecting both his hearing and his balance. A wallet in his pocket. Jewelry around his throat. A ring or two that could be pawned for quick cash at a brokers.

Alec’s stomach clenches. He moves silently, but at speed, and his breath catches when he briefly loses sight of the man ahead. The small alley reeks of garbage, but above, a regiment of crows on a telephone wire screech in a minor key, eager to see how the main event will turn out.

Alec’s not about to let it get that far.

He locks his arrow in his bow as he ducks around the corner, just in time to see the man following Magnus reach into his coat for something threatening. It could be a gun or a knife or a toothpick for all Alec cares, but he doesn’t wait and see; he draws his bowstring back to his mouth and lets the arrow fly, silent and sure. The air parts for him.

The arrow pierces through the man’s coat sleeve with a force so swift that it pins the man against the wall of the alleyway. The sound of metal into brick rings out with clarity.

The man yelps in surprise. He drops the silver thing in his hand - a kitchen knife, serrated edge, rust around the handle. The loud metallic clang of it hitting the ground is shrill too.

For a moment, the entire world is completely still.

Alec exhales. The man pinned to the wall stares at him in horror, but Alec doesn’t stare back for long. He looks up, expecting Magnus to be stopped in the mouth of the alleyway, staring back at him in surprise, but he’s not there. He’s gone, he kept on walking; likely five drinks deep enough not to even notice that he was being followed, and that Alec, that Sentinel, took care of it.

Alec’s shoulders fall. He walks up to the man pinned to the wall, and the man flails backwards, holding his empty palms up in surrender, babbling a mile a minute. Please, please don’t hurt me, is what the words look like, falling out his mouth, but Alec doesn’t hear them. He thinks about pulling his arrow out of the wall, but it’s stuck fast between the bricks. This man isn’t going anywhere in a hurry.
Izzy always tells him to retrieve his arrows - because her tech is too dangerous in the wrong hands, and that’s true - but Alec doesn’t want to let this man off with just a fright and a warning tonight.

Instead, Alec stoops to pick up the knife. He flings it away down the alleyway, and it ricochets off brick and dumpsters further away than he can see.

And then, he walks away.

The man shouts from behind him:

“Hey! Hey, come on, you can’t just leave me here! Wait!”

Alec hoists up his quiver and doesn’t look back. It’s not too cold. The man will survive a night in the elements: either he’ll be picked up by the police in the morning or he’ll rip his coat free of the wall. It doesn’t really matter. Alec doesn’t really care. This man won’t be trying his luck again, not whilst Sentinel’s on watch.

Alec wanders down the alleyway until the man’s shouting fades into the rumble of distant traffic. Street level is a dangerous place to be in a suit and a mask, but all the windows above him are dark, lights off and curtains drawn, and he’s alone right now, or as alone as he can be.

He feels like he’s floating. Not in a good way. He’s separate from his body, halfway to dissociation somehow, like his feet are moving but his mind is not, quiet as the grave. He imagines seeing himself from above, but the angle keeps changing like the blinking of an eye as some part of him hangs in midair over the city and rises with the distant cackling of crows.

He imagines a metropolis breathing. He imagines rising high enough to see the cars already lining up at the toll booth on the George Washington bridge. He imagines a late-night-news helicopter slicing through the layer of smog on the horizon.

And above, through that odd, recurrent gap in the clouds, the moon is a thin white monolith alone
What are you doing, Alec? he asks himself, but it’s not a question with an answer. His hand tightens around his bow and he fights the urge to throw it away into the gutter and be rid of it. He wants to feel that moonlight on his face. His mask obscures it.

Instead, numbness lingers and the question echoes. That was bold and risky, what he just did. Unnecessary. His parents would scold him; he already feels their shame, Pavlovian in nature, but that’s all he ever feels.

He wants to feel more. There’s got to be more. More than just the wind, the rain, the grey fog of longing; the brief thrill of risk and the even briefer trembles of the heart that come and go like passing headlights.

What are you doing here, Alec? What are you doing to yourself? What are you letting happen?

He looks again at the moon and a heavy, defeated sigh escapes him. The clouds knit themselves together again, a wound sutured, swallowing up that quicksilver colour. He shouldn’t still be here, but here he lingers, and he cannot bring himself to press his finger again his coms and call for Isabelle. Alec looks upwards, toward the rooftops, one more time.

“Are you following me?”

When Alec turns the corner, he nearly misses Magnus leant against the wall, arms folded across his chest. Magnus’ eyebrows are raised, chin tilted upwards.

Alec’s heart catapults into his throat. He leaps backwards, grasping for his bow on instinct -

And then he freezes.

Magnus doesn’t laugh, but he pushes himself off the wall and steps in front of Alec, in front of Sentinel, squaring up to him with the confidence of a man who has either met too few or too many supers in his time.
Panicked, Alec looks both ways down the street. It’s deserted. No cars. They’re alone. No witnesses. The shadow of the alleyway still clings to Alec’s back. His eyes widen.

A stuttered “Magnus” almost escapes his lips. He almost breathes.

But Sentinel doesn’t know Magnus’ name. Sentinel doesn’t know Magnus, and this is their first meeting. He catches himself just in time, forcing himself to scowl.

Another almost.

“Says the man waiting to ambush me on a street corner,” Alec grumbles, steadying his voice, glad that his modulator pitches it lower than normal. “I’m not following you.”

Magnus still has his arms folded across his chest, his ringed fingers pressed against the crease of his elbow. The gold lines on his shirt look sharp. So does the look in his eyes.

It’s sharper than the way he looks at Alec in the office. Sharper, colder, more wary, less apologetic. Unfamiliar, calculated, and definitely not welcoming.

And it’s how it should be, but Alec doesn’t like it. He wishes only that his mask were bigger or that the ground might swallow him up, because he’s breaking one of his cardinal rules.

Don’t let the parallel lines cross.

But he’s already fucked it up.

“You need to be careful,” he says below his breath, because he thinks if he talks any louder, Magnus will hear a tremble. “It’s not safe alone at this time of night. For anyone.”

He glances both ways down the street again, and yes, it’s still empty, but he knows that if he hesitates any longer, he’ll run out of escape routes. His heart feels tight; it beats too loud; it betrays the shake forming in his hands. Take a step back, it warns him.
This is dangerous. Magnus and Sentinel and a crossroads.

*God, why did Alec decide to follow him -*

“Oh, I believe you,” says Magnus, raising his eyebrows. “Being followed home by a super with unknown intentions would unnerve even the most foolhardy, I’m sure.”

He stays his ground. He still doesn’t step back from Alec. It’s a challenge.

Is he angling for a fight? Sentinel is a Corporate after all, and Alec knows how Magnus feels about -

Him.

*Magnus hates him.*

Alec huffs. “There was a guy following you. He had a knife,” he presses.

“And it looks like you had a handle on it,” Magnus retorts, tilting his chin towards the alleyway. “What did you do to him?”

“I didn’t *kill* him, if that’s what you’re asking.”

The look in Magnus’ eye is probative. He’s pushing, expecting Sentinel to push back. Magnus is somehow not surprised that Sentinel’s standing there, or if he is, he sure as Hell is not going to let Sentinel see.

He reminds Alec of Nightlock, or how Nightlock used to be, on that first night on a distant rooftop. It’s that razor-sharp edge, that poise, that anticipation, that *I’ll show my cards, if you show me yours*, waiting for Sentinel to make the first move. It’s that way he’s so far hidden behind those walls of his that Alec cannot trust anything he says for truth.

This is not the Magnus he knows. Alec’s fight-or-flight response flares up, but still, he can’t move.
If he moves, if he shifts at all, he’s sure the blue light will catch the side of his face in a way that will make Magnus realise in an instant who he really is.

Sweat begins to collect in his palms. He can feel the steady thump of his pulse in his thumb where he squeezes it into his fist.

Alec is not the sort of person to panic, but he’s no longer numb, not anymore.

Magnus hums on a low note, his eyebrows briefly jumping. He looks Alec up and down then, quick over his mud-shot boots and the lines of his supersuit, his utility belt, the quiver on his back, the bow in his hand. He lingers longer on the mask. It makes Alec’s stomach churn, his jaw tightening.

Don’t look, a part of himself is whispering. His heart scares itself out of its own silence and begins to thrum again. Don’t look at me. Don’t figure it out.

I don’t want you seeing all the dirty things I’ve done.

“What’s your name?” Magnus asks.

“Sentinel,” lies Alec.

“Corporate or vigilante?”

“I’m with Idris.”

“And dealing with poorly-attempted muggings at one in the morning is on Idris’ radar?” Magnus asks. A sly smile is tucked into the corner of his mouth, not necessarily friendly, but certainly daring. Leave now, chants the voice in Alec’s head. “I find that hard to believe, Sentinel.”

If Nightlock had said it, Alec would rise to the bait, fight back. He knows he would; he knows he has. But when it’s Magnus -
He needs to leave. Right now. He’s treading a line that should never be tread, and it hurts, because he’s thinking about Magnus being lonely, and he’s thinking about the cassette tape in his desk, and then he’s thinking about what might’ve happened if he’d not followed him from that bar -

Would that have been the right thing to do? Hell, he doesn’t rightly know. Magnus is fine, he’s all in one piece; that’s a reassurance Alec clings to. He recalls the clattering sound of the knife as he’d thrown it away down the alleyway.

Maybe his own expression softens, and for once, it’s Alec seeping out between the cracks in Sentinel’s armour, and not the other way around. And the bleeding’s more gruesome this way, because Alec is flesh and blood where Sentinel is only leather; and Alec feels, and those feelings are ugly.

He can feel himself unravelling the longer the taut silence stretches.

And worse: Magnus sees it - and Alec knows he does - because hesitation appears in the slight parting of his lips.

Alec should leave.

“I’m just doing my job,” he mumbles, “Look, I have to go -”

And Alec turns, because one second more and he’s afraid Magnus will realise that he knows his hair, the shape of his jaw, the way his fingers can’t stay still. He’s staring at Magnus with fear in his eyes, and Magnus will call him out for it.

“Wait,” Magnus says. He doesn’t shout; he doesn’t need to. Just one word and it’s enough to get Alec to turn back. It always is. Alec can’t help himself. “Walk me home, will you? I had a few too many to drink tonight, and if we’re really having this conversation, I can already tell you my wits aren’t about me.”

“I’m on duty,” Alec argues weakly.

Magnus ducks past Alec, making sure not to let their shoulders brush. “I can’t imagine someone’s keeping tabs on you tonight if you’re already all the way out here,” he says pointedly, and then he smiles a bit, but it looks like a fake smile, a barbed smile, and it does nothing to settle Alec’s
nerves. “You don’t have to, of course. I’m sure I’m perfectly capable of -”

“No,” says Alec immediately. “No, it’s fine. I’ll do it. How far is it?”

Magnus smiles again, but this time it speaks more of the things he’s had to drink. It’s a little easier, a little looser, a little closer to the truth. There’s this look he always wears so well that makes Alec realise he’s not privy to a secret joke.

“Ten or so blocks,” Magnus grins, but Alec sees the whiskey stirring in his eyes. Magnus isn’t quite sober. “Not far.”

Alec huffs. He looks around again, but the street is still empty and the lights of upstairs windows are dying out for the night. All that’s left is the blue halo of neon that illuminates Magnus from behind.

Ten blocks is a long way to go when Alec’s head is urging him to run but his feet just won’t move, not when Magnus is looking at him in a way he doesn’t recognise and Alec has to be a person he is not.

What are you doing, Alec?

Not leaving a drunk Magnus out on the streets, that’s what.

He’s not convinced by his own answer and he knows it. But regardless, he isn’t leaving Magnus here alone.

“Fine,” Alec sighs. Immediately, he starts walking away, shoulders hunched and fingers gripping his bow so tight that the tendons in his wrist ache.

And then, Magnus calls out, darkly delighted, “Not that way, Sentinel. Follow me.”
There’s a space between them as they walk, a no-man’s land that stretches no more than several feet but feels a mile wide. It makes Alec feel weird, so used to the brush of Magnus’ shoulders when they pass each other in the office, or the smell of Magnus’ cologne when he leans across the desk to bat Alec’s hands out of the way to make a point. *So used to these casual touches -*

Not quite the space of strangers, but still enough for the air to blow cold through the centre of them. Silence too. Alec fights the urge to wring his hands; instead, he keeps them clenched at his side, senses on high alert.

Perhaps he was expecting Magnus to talk; a glass or two of whiskey has always loosened up the tie about his neck, if not his tongue. Alec knows how he gets in the office late at night after he’s opened up his file-cabinet scotch. He looks at Alec longer. He lingers. He makes Alec wonder what he’s thinking, *how* he’s thinking it.

He’s not looking at Alec now. As they walk, Alec peeks at him from the corner of his eye, but Magnus is focused on the road ahead, on putting one foot in front of the other, on something that has sobered him quite severely, if the downturn to his mouth is anything to go by.

His walls are back up, Magnus’ walls, the ones that shutter away the brightness in his eyes that Alec has come to long for in earnest.

Now, when he catches Alec looking, the smile he plasters on is fake and inebriated.

Alec clears his throat. “So,” he says awkwardly, “Date night?”

Magnus snorts. “Hardly.”

“I saw you with some people at the bar,” Alec offers. “But you didn’t leave with them.”

“Friends of mine,” explains Magnus with a wave of his hand, “We needed an excuse to go for a drink, and, well. They had some leads they thought I might find useful. I’m a journalist.”

Alec hums quietly. He already knows that. *What sort of questions should he ask if he were to be pretending otherwise?*
Magnus doesn’t give him the chance to ask.

“I’m sure there’s some old saying about mixing business with pleasure that I should take heed of, but I’ve had three too many whiskies tonight to bring myself to care.” He laughs dangerously, a punctuated sound in the dark. “-or bring myself to remember, for that matter.”

“Isn’t that lonely?” Alec asks, before he can help himself. He flushes behind his mask. “I mean -”

“I know what you mean,”interrupts Magnus, “Constantly trying to live two lives and never quite succeeding at living one?”

“Yeah,” mumbles Alec, “That.”

The silence descends again, but Alec can’t be sure if it’s more or less awkward than before. It feels heavy, a weight on Alec’s shoulders that he cannot shake and it’s bowing his back, folding him up into tiny pieces right before his eyes.

He wonders if Magnus can see it too. Hell, he wonders if Magnus is even looking, because he’s Sentinel, and why would Magnus want to look -

A taxi hurtles by, it’s white lights striking Magnus from behind, lancing through his hair and catching in the net of necklaces draped around his throat. The gold glitters in supple silver, and then, just as quickly, the brake lights cast his face in red, and then fade. Alec watches the colour disappear from Magnus’ eyes.

He doesn’t want Magnus to look. Doesn’t want Magnus to look at him, doesn’t want Magnus to see that duality in him too, for Magnus to ask a question of him that he cannot answer without lying through his teeth, and when -

When did it get to that? When did it become a fear of his to lie to Magnus? He already does it every damn day. Magnus has stood with him on bleary rooftops and confessed the loneliness he feels, whispered to him across telephone wires like a secret in the dark not wanting to be left alone; bare parts of himself that he has never shown anyone else. But here Alec is, unable to afford him the same courtesy. Unable to give him that same honesty, even though Alec hopes Magnus would handle it with care and comfort, with gentle, reverent hands.
And oh, Alec hates himself. He hates himself for letting Sentinel bleed over onto Magnus and stain him with that same black ink and red blood that can’t be washed from Sentinel’s hands; Magnus, this one relationship Alec has that makes him feel like a normal person and not like he’s losing his damned mind -

Magnus notices him staring. “Oh, spit it out,” he says, half a laugh.

Alec blinks himself back to reality, his mouth gently parting in surprise. Magnus has stopped on the sidewalk and is watching him with more lucidity than a drunk man should be afforded. He slowly folds his arms about his chest again, perhaps one dry comment away from tapping his foot. He looks at Alec, at Sentinel, expectantly.

“I, uh -”

“What’s the matter?”

Alec swallows thickly. Magnus doesn’t blink, unwilling, even, to miss a single twitch of Alec’s expression that might betray him.

“I’m just - I’m surprised,” Alec stumbles. There’s a fragility to his words he knows he doesn’t mask. He rubs his gloved hand across the back of his neck and Magnus tracks it.

Magnus’ eyes narrow. “Surprised about what?”

“Usually people are a bit more wary around supers … they don’t just … ask us to walk them home.”

“And how many people have you offered to walk home, hmm?” Magnus bites, but then he rolls his eyes. “I’m a friend,” he says, as if it’s obvious. “Of supers. You don’t have to be so -” he gestures drunkenly with his hand, “-antsy around me. Relax.”

Relax. It doesn’t quite sound like Magnus means it, but Alec has a hard time not listening to him. He lets out a slow, shaky breath and Magnus smiles a bit as Alec’s shoulders visibly drop.
Alec doesn’t feel much better.

“I don’t usually … work at street level,” he admits, glancing back over his shoulder. He half expects a police siren to come hurtling around the corner at any second. “Sorry.”

“Oh, I’ll protect you, don’t fret,” Magnus chuckles, but as he starts walking again, he staggers, an amused “oh” escaping him. Alec reaches for him on instinct, gripping his bicep before he goes tumbling into the gutter. He pulls Magnus firmly into the centre of the sidewalk, but Magnus is looking at Alec’s hand on him, a pout to his lips.

He looks up at Alec from beneath his lashes, his focus so intense that Alec swears his palm simmers, like he’s been burned, like Magnus is still burning him.

“Scared?” Magnus asks.

“Only of you walking into oncoming traffic,” Alec huffs, but it’s without heat. He presses his hand between Magnus’ shoulder blades - and if his heart lurches upwards in his chest, he swallows it back down, right down - and gives Magnus an encouraging push.

He thinks Magnus rolls his eyes, but he can’t be sure; it happens so quickly and he misses it, he second guesses it in the dark. Alec begins counting the pace of Magnus’ steps as they follow a drowsy too-even beat: one-two-three, one-two-three, like a drunken waltz. His shoulder brushes Alec’s.

Alec’s not sure what is happening here. He didn’t get training for this. Magnus is tipsy, but not in the way Alec knows. Nothing about this is what Alec knows.

“Can I ask you a question?” Magnus says, making a dramatic show of rolling his shoulders and cricking his neck. Alec stares hard at the ground. “Tell me if I’m overstepping.”

“Go ahead,” Alec mumbles, if only for the distraction it permits. Magnus’ arm nudges him again, he steps a little sideways, and Alec is half-inclined to offer his arm for Magnus to hold onto. The thought doesn’t quite get that far. His mouth is dry.
“What is your real life like?”

“Wh- what?”

“Oh, don’t look so shocked,” Magnus laments, “Doesn’t everyone always want to know what it’s like being a super? Isn’t it all: can you fly? Can you shoot laser beams? Have you ever been caught by the police? Forgive me for wanting to know what’s on the other side of the coin. What is normal life for someone in Idris’ employment?” He pauses, and then his voice is softer. “Does my question surprise you?”

“It doesn’t surprise me,” Alec mumbles, gently pushing Magnus back into the middle of the sidewalk, aware that he’s hovering. “But there’s not much to talk about.”

“How old were you when you started at Idris?”

Alec twitches. “Five,” he relinquishes. “My … my younger sister was three.”

“And you’re, what -” Magnus squints at his mask, as if that might help him see through it. Alec deliberately looks away. “Twenty-five, thirty at most? And you’ve never wanted to do anything else? What about school? College?”

“I went to college. Is this twenty questions?”

“Well, if you’ll permit me twenty, then I would be a fool to pass up the opportunity,” says Magnus. “What did you study?”

“Alec narrows his eyes. Dangerous territory, says a modulating voice inside his head. In the same instance, Magnus stumbles again, grabbing hold of Alec’s arm and squeezing. He laughs to himself, but something about it sounds off.

“Business and finance,” Alec says, vague enough that Magnus won’t think twice about it. Hell, Magnus might not even remember this conversation in the morning, and perhaps Sentinel will be relegated to a blurry shape amidst his hangover, but -
Magnus doesn’t let go of Alec’s arm for a moment. It’s not a friendly squeeze of Alec’s elbow; his grip is tight. Deliberate. Almost painful.

It feels too forced.

“Hmm, I was an English major,” Magnus hums, “Journalism in grad school. And what about your day job? Do you have one? Does Idris let you have one or is it skulking around in the shadows from 9-til-5 too?”

“I don’t think that’s any of your concern,” Alec mutters, but he can feel his face heating up. They must’ve walked ten blocks by now -

“And what about your friends?” Magnus is saying, “Do they know you’re a super? Or are all your friends supers too?” His eyes narrow with a mischievous glint, but there’s something underneath that is far darker and more severe. He says it with the poise of a man who went out drinking with his friends in the hope of acquiring a new lead for his story. He’s always thinking one step ahead. “What about vigilantes?”

Alec sighs tiredly. One of these buildings must be Magnus’ - “What about them?”

“What do you think about vigilantes?”

That’s not a conversation Alec wants to have, not here, not on a street corner where anyone might hear or see or walk into them. He doesn’t have the time to say everything that would need to be said.

“They’re not my enemies,” is what he settles on, and it might just be the most honest thing he’s said all night. “But they’re someone’s. I’ve seen all the murders in the papers. I want to help.”

Magnus hums softly. His mouth forms a smile. His expression shifts to something unreadable, but it’s not hostile. “Quite right,” he says, and the conversation ends.

Perhaps he has the answer he’s been fishing for. Perhaps not.
Behind them, Alec hears a horn and the squeal of brakes, someone behind a wheel that shouldn’t be. He tenses, turns, to look back over his shoulder, but then Magnus pulls in closer to him, two seconds before a car zips by.

Magnus moves without thinking. The sway in his shoulders follows a predictable pattern. There’s a crack in the sidewalk and he steps over it with ease, not looking once at his feet.

Oh.

Magnus makes people look right when he wants to move left -

“Okay, so this is me,” Magnus announces, gesturing widely up at the brownstone that towers above them. Alec is surprised: the building is old, but not too old, and there’s no man at the door, just a buzzer corroded grey with people’s fingerprints. The penthouse is dark, save for a few twinkling lanterns lit on the balcony, and Magnus uses the excuse of looking up to press into Alec’s side once more.

His body is warm, but he doesn’t smell of beer and spirits, not really. Alec’s seen him put away more than a few whiskies before and be perfectly coherent. This is a game.

It’s not just that. It’s a test.

Magnus is testing him. Testing him, testing Sentinel, seeing how Sentinel might push if he pulls ... he wants to see what Sentinel will do when Magnus is pretending to be vulnerable.

Of course he is. Magnus is smart. If it were anybody else and their situations were reversed, Alec would do the same damn thing ...

Alec doesn’t pull away, but he does gently unpeel Magnus from his arm and push him towards the front steps of his building, guiding him by the shoulders.

“I know you’re not drunk,” Alec whispers, under his breath, somewhere too near to Magnus’ ear. He’s not exactly sure if he means to say it, but part of him - the Alec part of him - longs for Magnus to hear it. For Magnus to know that Alec can’t be fooled, not by him, not anymore. Alec sees him, even if he might be the only one in the world who does.
“Hmm?” Magnus says, peering back over his shoulder at Alec. “Oh, I beg to differ.”

Alec shakes his head. “You’re not.” He laughs softly and it makes Magnus pause. “You’re just pretending. Probably to see how I’ll react. I can tell.”

The amusement in Magnus’ eyes fades quickly and Alec watches as he straightens up, standing taller than before. His smile grows wry. He offers Alec a meek shrug.

“I must’ve sobered up on the walk home,” he says knowingly.

“Oh or you just don’t want a stranger to see the real you,” Alec suggests, not breaking eye contact. “Which is probably smart.”

Magnus hesitates, and then, in a voice surprisingly quiet, he murmurs, more to himself than to Alec, “And you might just be smarter.” He laughs quietly, disbelieving, oddly beautiful. “I don’t like relinquishing the upper hand, you know.”

Yeah, I know, thinks Alec.

Magnus looks up and he’s grinning again, grinning at Sentinel, and it’s fake and they both know it. Magnus knows that Sentinel knows it.

And that hurts, doesn’t it, just a little. It hurts because it’s not just Alec who has to suffer this duality; it’s Magnus too. It’s Magnus hiding from him, playing him, him the stranger, him the super, him who is not Alec, Magnus’ Alec.

It’s Magnus who smiles that droll smile and shakes his head, and says, then, “You’re kinder than I expected.”

Alec’s traitorous heart dares to beat. “What were you expecting?”

Magnus’ lips turn thin. His disbelief is palpable and it surprises Alec.
Magnus says nothing for a moment, weighing his words before he says them. He says them anyway.

“Not this.”

And then he disappears behind his front door, a brief stream of light blinding Alec enough to shield his eyes as the latch catches and the door clicks closed. Alec blinks away the sunspots, eyes stinging as the black, amorphous shadows of the night begin to reform. He’s left feeling dazed.

He always feels dazed. It’s the effect Magnus has on people and he knows it, but a part of him can’t help but wonder if anyone else ever feels as swept off their feet by a sudden gust of wind as him.

And he never seems to hear it coming.

Alec stands on the sidewalk, staring up at this brownstone building, for a moment that becomes many moments, too many moments. His heart aches and hurts in the same instance, and he feels both rooted to this spot and yet swept away.

He wonders if Magnus stands on the other side of that door, with his head leant back against the wood and his hands palming through his hair and his eyes tightly closed. He wonders if Magnus hasn’t moved either.

Alec’s fingers twitch as he thinks about loosening his mask and following up the steps, knocking on the door.

That urge has never been so powerful before. Why here? Why now?

What are you doing, Alec? says the voice again, and it must be getting tired of warning him against the same mistakes. What do you expect to happen here?

No good will come of Magnus knowing Sentinel. It won’t cure him of his loneliness, and it won’t cure Magnus of his either, because Sentinel is based on a lie, just like Alec. He’s not real, just like Alec. He’s a vague impression of a person, but nothing more. Nothing concrete.
And Alec doesn’t want Magnus knowing the things that come with this version of him, those whispery, watery, bloody things with no substance. That’s not something Magnus deserves, not on top of every little other thing from which he suffers.

Alec watches the penthouse until the lights flick on, gold and yellow and seeping out into the night, before he turns away. Then, he leaves.

He doesn’t look back.

Alec goes straight home. It’s not even two in the morning when he collapses backwards onto his ratty couch. He splays his palm across his mask, shielding his eyes from the cheap fluorescent light that floods his apartment.

He’s breathes deeply, concentrates on the rise and fall of his chest until he inhabits his own body again; he tries so desperately to close his eyes as he pushes back into the lumpy cushions of the couch, but they’re pried open.

Strange shapes wiggle at the edges of his vision. The next breath is sharper, harsher, more prone to a panic he doesn’t want to face.

What was that?

Did he really just -

What if he gave something away that he can’t get back?

This isn’t good. This isn’t good at all, and he can hear his father’s voice in his head - ‘that was an amateur mistake, Alec’ - and at the same time, he can see the disapproving twist of his mother’s mouth into a grimace.
'The less people know about Idris, the better,' she would say, 'Your identity is all you have. It's all that keeps you safe. Don't do anything to compromise that.'

It’s too late for that. Alec is long past compromised, he’s -

He’s -

But oh, God, if he hadn’t followed Magnus home, who knows what would’ve happened between him and that man with the knife, and Alec wouldn’t have found out until tomorrow at the office, and -

*Oh, could you imagine the guilt?*

Alec stands at a crossroads; he knows that to be true. The intersecting roads are labelled *Alec* and *Sentinel*, and where they meet, instead of Alec’s divided body, now stands Magnus, and Alec should never have let him stop there. Never should’ve let him see Sentinel, because Sentinel’s road leads somewhere dark and bloody and unforgiving. Alec cannot see its end.

He doesn’t want Magnus stepping a foot on that path. Not if Alec can help it.

Alec grinds the heels of his palms into his eyes and swallows back a groan of frustration that borders upon despair. He sees flashes of bright colour where he presses too hard on his eyes. He thinks about Magnus pretending to be drunk, about Magnus testing him, about Magnus grinning, *like that*, on the front steps of his building.

*How did it come to this? How did Alec get here*, of all damn places?

His heart flips, but doesn’t land quite right. There’s a sprained-ankle ache in his chest; it twinges as he moves, and it pushes him up off the couch, unable to fight the urge to fidget.

He paces the length of his living room, but he lives in New York and not even Idris’ stipend can afford him more than twenty feet of space. He meets the opposite wall in a few short strides and lurches to smack it with his fist, but stops at the very last moment.
He presses his palm flat to the wall; behind it, the water pipes creak and groan. His fingers drag
down the plaster, and then tips his head forward, resting his forehead there a moment too.

Eyes closed, and the world stops spinning again. Eyes closed, and he can’t see the rain-soaked state
of him, can’t see the mud on his boots, the scuffs on his supersuit, the bow clipped to his thigh.

Can’t see Sentinel with his eyes closed.

_Magnus is already involved_ , a small voice in his head says. It sounds distant, but also brave. _You
can’t keep him out of this. He’s too stubborn and you know it._

And Alec does know it: he knows Magnus’ tenacity and his dedication, his want to do good in the
world. He knows Magnus is a friend of vigilantes who holds a cache of suspicion about Idris, and
he knows, somewhere down the line they’re walking, flanked on either side by murder and arson,
that Alec’s secret is going to come out whether Alec wants it to or not.

He’s unlucky like that.

But, God damnit, he’s going to hold onto it for as long as he can, because who is he but the mask?
That person has done terrible things, inexcusable things. That person lives in a dark, bleak world,
not the same world that Magnus still insists can be absolved.

Magnus cannot be a part of Sentinel’s world.

_Does that mean -_

_Does that mean Alec cannot be part of Magnus’?_

Alec’s flat palm becomes a curled fist again, pressed knuckle-first against the wall. Suddenly, his
throat is tight and something behind his eyes burns hot.

And his reaction scares him, of course it does, because he doesn’t know this feeling or its source;
but he also knows he cannot give Magnus up either, and in turn, he’s afraid of the things he might do or the risks he might take to remain in Magnus’ orbit just a moment longer, even if he’s on a trajectory to crash.

This divide. This thick, black line through the centre of him, slicing him in two. He calls it survival and at the same time consequence, he calls it the red apex of a wound long tended and now finally hurting.

He holds a quiet, unknown wish within himself to be seen as he is, despite all the bad that will come from it. Just as he sees Magnus, there’s a part of him that wants Magnus to see him.

*Is that foolish? Or just a deathwish?*

A knock on Alec’s window pulls him upright, and what a sight he must look, bowed over with his head against the wall and his eyes closed, still in his full Sentinel gear.

At the window of Alec’s tiny balcony, Jace is standing there, smiling crookedly, doing this dumb little wave. His Arkangel wings are already abandoned against the balustrade.

*Let me in,* he mouths to Alec, pointing at the latch on the balcony door. Alec makes a point of scowling and gesturing at the clock on the wall, but Jace’s smile just broadens, unrepentant.

Alec sighs and meanders across the room to let his brother in, along with half a gutter’s worth of rain water.

“Fuck, it’s getting cold, huh?” is the first thing Jace says as he bundles past Alec and into the warmth. His supersuit is drenched and his hair is slick to his forehead, but with a dramatic flick of his head, its back in its place, whipping Alec across the cheek with the spatter. “Now don’t tell Iz, ‘cus I trust her tech, but my wings always start creaking when it gets below forty, and it makes me kinda worried, y’know?”

“I thought you and Clary were heading back to HQ?” Alec grumbles, turning away from Jace and heading towards his kitchenette to turn the kettle on. Jace follows him like a wet dog at his heels, grabbing one of the clean dishcloths from the sink to towel himself dry. But he hesitates before he leans back against the kitchen counter, and Alec frowns: Jace’s nonchalance is clearly forced. He’s never been great at the art of subtly.
Alec grabs two mugs from the cupboard above his head and sets them down a bit too loudly on the countertop. “What?” he deadpans.

“What do you mean what?” Jace asks, the tea towel now draped over his head. He looks like an idiot. “I can’t just stop by to visit my second favourite brother unannounced?”

“Second favourite?”

“Maryse would be mad if I dropped in on Max at two in the morning, c’mon. I don’t think she’s noticed that he’s sneaking out past curfew yet.”

Alec fixes Jace with a flat look. It makes Jace squirm.

“Okay, okay,” Jace says, “You win! Iz said you didn’t check in tonight and I was worried, alright? You’ve been skipping out on me a lot lately - and yeah, I know, I deserve it - but I just wanted to check in, y’know? I feel like we’re -” He gestures roughly between them. “-missing each other at the moment. You’re trying to go somewhere where I’m … not.”

With the towel on his head and rainwater dripping from his hair onto his nose, Jace looks a little pathetic and Alec can feel himself thawing. The kettle whistles just loud enough for Alec to think he can be honest without the whole world overhearing.

“It’s these fires,” he says, “The murders. The Circle. I don’t - I don’t know how mom and dad can just look the other way.”

“You’re preaching to the choir here, Alec,” Jace says, “Listen, if you wanna do something about it, if you wanna go after the Circle or whoever - just say the word. I’d go with you. I don’t care what Maryse is gonna say. We can deal with that later.”

*It must be nice to live without fear of consequences,* Alec thinks. He doesn’t know how Jace does it, but Alec envies that part of him, just another thing in a long line of small jealousies.

“Did Iz tell you about … the stuff I’m doing at work?”
“The stuff with that Magnus guy? Yeah, she did. It’s cool and all, and don’t get me wrong, it’s important to be getting all that out in the papers, but -”

“But,” repeats Alec, “Not direct action.”

“No. ‘S not,” says Jace. “Sentinel and Arkangel could do more. Maybe if people saw us not taking this shit lying down, maybe if they saw me and you actually trying to find who’s doing this, if they saw us in the papers - yeah, maybe then someone might listen.”

Alec’s mouth goes dry. Jace is not entirely wrong, and the thought of Sentinel and Arkangel making a stand for what is right ... that’s powerful.

Powerful and noticeable, and whilst Jace must’ve been a glory hound in another life, Alec has a pretty glaring reason for not wanting to do that.

He thinks about Magnus’ faux-drunken smile again. The kettle stops whistling. The apartment is suddenly unerringly silent.

Jace notices immediately.

“Buddy?” he asks, tilting his head to try and catch Alec’s line of sight. “You okay?”

Alec begins pouring them tea; three sugars for him, black and bitter for Jace. Usually people think it would be the other way around.

“Yeah, fine. Why?”

“Alec. C’mon.”

“What? I said I’m fine.”

“I think you’re full of bullshit,” says Jace, folding his arms when Alec tries to hand him his tea. “How long have we known each other? I know when you’re pretending not to have feelings. You
did it every day from age thirteen ‘til you moved out.’ Alec rolls his eyes, and so Jace adds, a little softer, “I was out on your balcony for a good five minutes watching you stand here with your face pressed against the wall, Alec. I was half-wondering if I was gonna have to stop you from doing damage to your drywall.”

“It’s nothing. I’m just tired. Patrol was busy.”

Jace presses his mouth into a flat line. He knows Alec is lying to him; Alec can see that plain as day in Jace’s face, because Jace has never been good at lying to him either.

But Jace is not going to push it. Not tonight. That’s not really who they are.

“What time you gotta be at work tomorrow?” Jace asks instead. At last, he accepts the proffered mug from Alec, welcoming it into his cupped palms as he brings it to his face and basks in the sweet-smelling steam.

“Nine-ish. Why?”

“NBC has *Golden Girls* reruns this time of night. You wanna cool down and watch a few? I’ll get out of your hair after, promise.”

Jace is already moving towards Alec’s ratty couch before Alec really has the chance to reply. Jace flop down into the middle of the cushions, expertly not spilling a drop of his tea, and then he kicks his boots off and puts his feet up on the coffee table.

He pats the cushions for the remote, uttering a triumphant “aha!” when he finds it and points it at Alec’s TV. The cackle of a sitcom laugh track fills the room with life again.

Alec hesitates a moment in the kitchenette, but then he grabs his tea and joins Jace on the couch, shoving him in the shoulder to budge over and make room. He props his feet up on the table too, kicking aside a manila envelope full of briefings, as he settles into the familiar warmth of Jace at his side and the fizzle of the TV.

This, he knows. This is where the crossroads between Alec and Sentinel should be; him and Jace, side by side on the sofa, still in their supersuits, bickering about Jace’s geriatric taste in television.
This is where Alec should be. This is what he should want. But whilst the longing in his chest is
distracted, it isn’t quietened. Not at all.

Still, Alec is grateful. He won’t say it and Jace doesn’t need to hear it, because Jace knows well
enough that his presence on Alec’s couch is enough, because it stops Alec from doing something
reckless. And a someone to stop him is what Alec needs right now, before he really does make a
hole in his drywall.

*Eyes forward*, he tells himself.

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Alec doesn’t know how to face Magnus the next day, but he knows if he stays away, it’ll only risk
Magnus noticing something is wrong.

Magnus can’t notice. And after last night’s fitful sleep, that is the only thing of which Alec can be
sure.

Magnus can’t notice that anything is different between them.

That feels too much like an unwinnable battle and he can’t just pretend like last night never
happened; but it did and he’s changed by it, in however small a way that might be. Magnus is
observant and Alec has always been an easy book to read, his spine already bent, well-creased. He
falls open on the same few pages with just the flick of someone else’s fingers.

“You seen Magnus today?” Simon asks that evening as he’s packing up his cubicle for the night,
taking his sweet time stuffing his camera into his bag.

He and Alec are the last two people in the building - which is not unusual in itself - but it’s well
past home time, and Alec is dragging out the minutes until he’s meant to stop by Magnus’ office.
Minutes which have already come and gone, but Alec still has to work up the nerve -
“No,” Alec replies, glancing at the clock like it’s a tell, “I was gonna go say bye before I left -”

“Tell me if he’s still being weird tomorrow, yeah?” Simon swings his bag up on his shoulder, almost taking his desk PC out in the process. “I’ve gotta run, the electrician is coming to look at the wiring in my apartment because everything’s on the blink and I have no idea why, but - heck, you’ll see what I mean. You know Magnus gave me an extension on that Penhallow editorial we’re doing? An extension ‘til Sunday! Forty eight whole hours, Alec! An extension! Someone either spiked his coffee or -”

Alec squints at Simon until he disappears into the elevator, the doors quite literally cutting him off mid-sentence. Alec lets the silence settle for a moment or two - maybe more than that, because he’s quite sure there’s sweat forming on the back of his neck - and then he sucks in a deep breath.


The bottle of scotch is already open on Magnus’ desk when Alec knocks on his office door. Magnus doesn’t try to hide it, throwing back his glass and pouring himself another one dry as Alec slips into the room.

It sets off warning alarms in Alec’s head.

“Magnus?”

“Alexander!” Magnus announces emphatically, standing up to fetch another glass. Alec shakes his head and waves for him to stop. “I was wondering where you got to. I’ve got something you’re going to want to hear.”

Alec eases himself into the chair across from Magnus. Magnus, on the other hand, doesn’t sit down. He holds the back of his chair and drums his fingers against the leather, restless. His eyes are bright and his gaze flicks from desk to Alec to corner of the room and back again, but won’t stay still long enough for Alec to catch it. The level of the scotch in the bottle speaks to a number of glasses drunk before this.
On the surface, nothing has changed since the day before: Magnus’ suit is crisp and pressed, a beautiful slate grey with a matching tie; his hair is swept upwards and the dark colour around his eyes is bold; he sweeps his paperwork across his desk without a care in the world, grabbing a legal pad from the bottom of the pile and pushing it towards to Alec.

“A new lead?” Alec asks slowly, leaning forward to glance at the legal pad. It’s covered in Magnus’ illegible scribble, all looping purple letters that Alec cannot read without squinting.

Magnus moves again, unable to stay still. He pushes his chair away and leans forward over his desk, both hands gripping the edge, reading his notes upside down.

“I caught up with some old friends last night,” Magnus explains, “After a few drinks, they had some interesting stories to tell.” Magnus glances at the locked door over Alec’s shoulder, and then pitches his voice low. “Witchlight and Salem, if you catch my drift.”

“Oh,” says Alec, and then he says it again, with a bit more realisation. “Oh. I didn’t realise you -”

“You tend to meet a lot of people in this line of work,” Magnus shrugs, “Some more interesting than others.” He looks at Alec through his eyelashes darkly. “But that stays in this room.”

“Of course,” says Alec. He swallows thickly. “They’re vigilantes …?”

“Yes. Witchlight is retired, but Salem still does the rounds in Brooklyn - you might not have heard of her -”

Alec hasn’t, but that’s not a surprise. He’s well aware that there is a whole world of supers beyond what he knows from Idris.

“Did she know anything about the fires?”

Magnus shakes his head, but Alec can still see that tell of his in the whitening of his knuckles as he clenches and then releases his fingers around his desk. Magnus hesitates, as if he can’t quite decide what he wants to say.
“Never has Alec sat so still.”

“No, not about the fires,” explains Magnus, “But she did have something interesting to say about one Hodge Starkweather. You may not know, but -”

“Ex-Idris. Defected to the Circle in the 70s, then the Governor made a big deal when he was arrested. I know the story.”

Magnus looks impressed. “Alright then,” he says, “Apparently Starkweather is no longer incarcerated and was released on parole about two months ago. And apparently, he’s now back out there looking for a super with a very particular set of skills … teleportation, to be exact.”

“Teleportation,” Alec muses, rolling the word around in his mouth. The only teleporter he knows is Raj, and whilst Raj is an idiot, he’s not so much as an idiot to get caught by the Circle, not when he can literally disappear with the blink of an eye.

Why would a known member of the Circle be after a teleporter? It’s a question with an easy answer, even if it’s not one easily swallowed: what’s the best way to set fires and get away without being seen or caught?

He looks at Magnus again, wondering if he’s reached the same conclusion as Alec. Maybe it would explain the way Magnus is drumming his fingers on the desk again now; maybe it would explain this strange furor, if Alec didn’t already know the reason for it.

“Do we know why Starkweather was paroled?” Alec asks. His voice only a pinch above a whisper.

“I’m looking into it,” says Magnus, “Most of the court records are public because they’re over ten years old.” He gestures at the enormous pile of folders balancing precariously on the edge of his desk. “There’s a lot to sift through, but hopefully between the two of us, we’ll find something. I have a few contacts at Riker’s who might know something too, so I’ll ring them in the morning, but I’m not holding out hope. If only I could…”

He trails off, the sentence left undone, and that’s unusual in itself because Magnus is someone so careful with his words. It’s a thread Alec cannot help but pull.
“If only you could what?” he asks, “Magnus?”

Magnus’ eyes flick up to meet Alec’s, searching, hoping. Alec doesn’t dare to blink. Magnus holds his gaze for a moment that stretches thin, but it is enough for Magnus to find whatever he’s looking for, in that moment.

Magnus sighs heavily, the strong line of his shoulders slumping. Running a hand through his hair, he draws his roots up on end and falls back into his chair at last, the back of his head hitting the leather. He stares upwards at the ceiling, exposing the underside of his jaw to Alec. The restless twitch in him suddenly stills.

“I met someone interesting last night.”

Alec’s hands form fists in his lap. He takes a moment to steady his voice, clear his throat.

“Someone who can … help?”

“Maybe,” says Magnus, “Hopefully. It was someone from Idris.”

“Oh,” says Alec, raising his eyebrows. “I thought you didn’t like -”

“I don’t. Or at least, I don’t like the people he serves. But, he was - he is - it was curious. A good sort of curious, mind. Someone who wasn’t like what I expected.”

Alec swallows thickly. He fights the urge to pick at the skin on his fingers, but he knows Magnus will notice that.

Instead, he says, “If anyone were to have information on Hodge Starkweather, it would be Idris.”

Magnus hums half-heartedly, but Alec’s not sure he’s really listening. Magnus is still staring at the ceiling, absently toying with the rings on his fingers, twirling one round and around his thumb.

He’s thinking about Sentinel.
But Alec doesn’t know if he’s thinking about the way Sentinel dispatched that man in the alleyway or if he’s thinking about the warmth of Sentinel’s hand pressed between his shoulder blades as he steered Magnus home.

Is he thinking about how Sentinel lent over his shoulder, whispered in his ear to call his bluff?

Is he wondering how Sentinel saw right through him when he doesn't even know him?

“I wonder,” says Magnus slowly, “what it would take to get someone like that on our side?”

“A Corporate?”

“A Corporate who maybe doesn’t want to be a Corporate as much as he first thought,” Magnus corrects. He looks at Alec again, a half-smile forming on his lips. “If someone were to speak out against Idris like that, someone from their side, imagine the weight it would have. People would stop and listen.”

“I don’t … I don’t think it’s that easy,” Alec mutters, “You can’t just ask a Corporate to betray - why would they risk all that?”

“Because of what you said before.” Magnus’ dark eyes flare bright again, this time with an earnestness bordering upon excitement. “You were right, Alexander, as you always are. Perhaps there are good ones at Idris. Perhaps things are changing. Perhaps, if I were to ask-”

Alec’s heart thumps loudly. His throat is painfully dry.

“You think this super would help us if you asked? That’s all it would take?”

Magnus’ smile grows. “I think so, Alexander. I really do think so. He’s halfway there already, I’m sure of it.”
“There’s nothing on record about Hodge after ’75,” says Izzy later that night, when Alec is perched on a rooftop and waiting for his police dispatcher to start crackling. “It doesn’t look like anything’s missing from his file either, so I doubt we had anything to begin with. I’m sorry, Alec.”

“It was a long shot,” replies Alec, his finger pressed to his ear. “Don’t worry about it. Thanks for checking.”

“There’s one thing that might be of interest, though,” Izzy continues, and Alec can hear her flicking through a file on her end. “Hodge’s last three contracts with Idris were all ordered by Senator Herondale, back when she was still vying for State Senate. That might be worth looking at in more detail, don’t you think?”

It doesn’t mean anything, not to Alec, but it does leave a bad taste in his mouth. He only wishes he could pinpoint why.

“Mom and dad have been doing business with the Herondale campaign for years,” he says, “It’s probably nothing.”

“I hope so, but I’ll keep digging,” says Izzy, “Neither you or I are dumb enough to let something like this slide, and you know it. You’ll be thinking about it instead of sleeping tonight.”

“Alright,” Alec sighs, and he feels the heave of his body all the way down in his toes, the effort of it aching. There’s a tension headache forming in the bridge of his nose and he hasn’t been able to shake it all night, not since talking to Magnus. It’s beginning to make his eyes water. He’s already told Jace to patrol with Clary, because Alec is one slip-up away from snapping, and he doesn’t want to take his mood out on either of them, not when they don’t deserve it. “Thanks, Iz.”

“What are you gonna do about Magnus?”

The dull pain pulses through Alec’s temples. He winces. He didn’t mean to tell her, not about Magnus, but he had to tell someone before he accidentally opened his mouth and spilled every last secret to a stranger on the subway.

It doesn’t mean he doesn’t regret it, however. But telling Izzy is irrevocably better than telling Jace.
or Clary, because at least Izzy might have some advice.

“What do you mean?” he asks now.

“I mean, you can’t just turn up at the office tomorrow and tell him, ‘oh hey, that Hodge thing is a dead-end but don’t ask me how I know that’.”

“I know that, Iz,” Alec presses, “But I can’t let him get close to Sentinel, I - it’s - it’s dangerous. For him.”

“Dangerous for him, or painful for you?”

“You really think I should help him? As Sentinel? Really?” Alec scoffs, “If mom and dad found out that I’m tracking the Circle -”

“That’s not what I’m talking about, and you know it.”

A retort dies abruptly on Alec’s tongue, extinguished into smoke and swept away by the wind that buffets him. He bites the inside of his cheek.

“You don’t care about whether mom and dad approve, not really,” Izzy continues, “If you did, you and Jace wouldn’t spend every night foiling bank robberies and chasing hit-and-run drivers on company time. Disappointing mom and dad isn’t the thing that’s hurting you most.”

Alec grits his teeth. He tugs at the fingertips of his gloves for something to do with his hands.

“Sometimes your superpowers are more annoying than Jace’s,” he says.

“You know my powers don’t work like that. This is just me caring about you, Alec. And sometimes you don’t hide your feelings as well as you think you do.” Izzy sighs despairingly. “Does the thought of letting Magnus get to know you as Sentinel scare you?”

“No,” lies Alec, “Why would it?”
“Because,” says Izzy, “that would make Sentinel someone real? Make you more vulnerable than you’re used to? Maybe even make you realise that you can’t always separate yourself into parts like this because it’s exhausting you and one day it’s going to cost you something?”

“Okay, thanks for the psychoanalysis. Appreciate it.”

“You ass. You sound like Jace.”

“Low blow.”

“I mean it, Alec. This isn’t about you and Magnus, or about you and Jace, or about you and Idris. This is about you understanding that Sentinel isn’t a bad person that has to be kept under lock and key, just as Alec isn’t someone you have to hide from mom and dad because you’re scared of his - your - feelings being too loud. Sentinel is who you are and I know you’re good. You don’t have to shield people from that and give them this watered-down, half-version of Alec to appease them.”

He wants to make a snide point about how people are being killed for revealing their super identities, but he knows it would be in bad taste and it’s not the lesson Izzy wants him to learn either.

It’s easier said than done. It’s easy for her to sit in the safety of her lab and tell him that he should just let go, let Alec and Sentinel collide and coalesce, two halves of one whole that will only ever be ugly when pushed together. The red in Sentinel’s ledger will always prevent him from living the normal life that Alec craves; and Alec’s sense of duty will always stop Sentinel from being as loyal to Idris and his family as he knows he has to be. He is a paradox, and yet Izzy still believes that’s something that can be rewritten. An honest sort of hope that could only belong to a person who doesn’t have blood on her hands, not like him. She’s never -

She’s never -

*Has she ever worried about someone in the way Alec worries about Magnus?*

Because the thought of Magnus discovering who Alec and is and what he does, and then being repulsed by him, is - well, it’s not a rejection Alec thinks he can bear. And he’s not sure when that became the case, when this respect for Magnus evolved into admiration, which is slowly changing into something else again, a pressure in his chest for which Alec doesn’t have a name and doesn’t
understand. It makes him dizzy. Confused. Unsure of which way is up, because he’s not sure what it is he wants anymore.

“Maybe one day, Iz,” he mumbles, because it’s all he can really say. He hears her sigh again, but it sounds a little sad. That stings him too; her words tend the part of him that still longs to hear his secret on someone else’s lips. “I should get going.”

“Okay,” is all she says, “I love you. Stay safe and I’ll see you later.”

The coms go dead with a hiss and a crackle, and then Alec is left to the mercy of the wind again, unforgiving in the spiral of its howl tonight. Echoing, it bounces off the plate glass of distant skyscrapers, whirling around ankles and tying New York up in knots. The city is submerged in autumn; frost is already forming on the rooftops and Alec can feel it tingling in his fingertips, slowing turning numb the longer he sits without moving. It won’t be long before the snows come and turn to sleet and slush on the streets. Alec has always been one to feel the cold. Max used to laugh that it’s because Alec’s so tall, that the blood in his body can’t reach all his fingers and toes.

Now, it just feels like another thing wrong with him.

*Ignore it,* says the voice in his head that sounds sometimes like both his mother and father at once, or like a younger him when he was more naive and before all this guilt turned gangrenous. *Ignore it, don’t feel it, you have a job to do -*

He has a job to do. That’s why he’s here, on this rooftop tonight, and not any other - because this is where he met Nightlock, all those weeks ago. It feels like a different lifetime now. Standing here and hoping probably isn’t the smoke signal that Nightlock was asking for, but it’s the best Alec can come up with; he hopes it will grab his attention, wherever he might be.

If he can’t tell Magnus about the things warring in his chest that leave him a bruised and bloodied battlefield, he can at least tell Nightlock. Because Nightlock *knows* Sentinel. Nightlock doesn’t have any misconceptions about who he is. Nightlock understands all his faults and fallacies already, without Alec having to say a word, and Alec -

Alec doesn’t want to have to come out a second time.
Alec doesn’t know how long he waits on that rooftop. The passage of time at night is an abstract thing with no sun to chart across the sky, with no moon to guide him, and with no stars to map the turning of the Earth. His suit gleams with rain and falling light. The city hardly wavers in its blueness, stuck and poised in a strange and arbitrary moment.

His police radio hisses and hums; there’s a car chase on the Brooklyn bridge, but Arkangel is already in pursuit. Civil disturbance in the south, but Apex is already there. Robbery attempt at the bank on 48th -

“I’ve got it,” says Clary in Alec’s ear. “Nobody fret.”

Alec doesn’t move. He sits down on the edge of the roof, legs dangling over the void, and turns his cheek away from the slicing wind. His knees are aching, like they’re telling him he should be out there, running to help Clary, making sure Jace is not getting into trouble, and not just sitting on his ass and waiting for something he doesn’t even know will come. Something that is purely for himself. It feels selfish. He knows it does. It’s an ugly feeling.

It must be nearing three o’clock when the drizzle threatens to become a downpour, and Alec knows he risks hypothermia if he stays out here much longer without moving. Nightlock might not even be on this side of the city tonight. He told Alec he wouldn’t come looking for him.

Maybe Alec was a fool to hope for -

Almost as he thinks it, the air pressure shifts.

Alec twists around as a phantom hand scampers up the back of his neck and into his hair. He’s ashamed by the relief that lights up inside him like a signal flare when he identifies his ghost.

Even behind his mask, it must be obvious, because as his eyes find Nightlock, floating down from out of the sky, Nightlock’s grave expression shifts into a smirk. There’s a levity to him that Alec wasn’t expecting, not after how they left things the last time.

“Oh, I didn’t stand you up, did I?” Nightlock says, slinking over towards Alec. “I wasn’t sure if this was supposed to be a gesture to get my attention, or if you were just hanging out here looking
like a wet pup by pure coincidence.”

Alec stands to meet him, shaking his hair free of rain as if to prove Nightlock’s point.

“I needed to find you. I didn’t know how else,” he says. “You said to light a smoke signal, but -” He gestures with flat palms to the sky. “It’s raining. Flint wouldn’t catch.”

“Of course it wouldn’t,” Nightlock hums. He plunges his hands into his coat pockets and steps up to Alec, rocking forward on the balls of his feet. It’s closer than he usually dares, but tonight, he dares. He tips his head coyly to the side. “And why did you need to find me?”

Alec pauses. He can see it in Nightlock’s eyes: how he expects Alec to have changed his mind. He truly expects Sentinel to have summoned him here to say I’m sorry. I made a mistake. Of course I’m going to help you find the Circle.

Alec’s silence is loud. Nightlock’s smile falters, his face sobering.

“How many cats have you saved from trees this week?” he demands, surprising Alec. He lifts his head to make himself seem taller, so that he can meet Alec’s stare head-on. The light in his eyes has turned to steel. “How many?”

“What?”

“How many muggings have you stopped since I saw you last? How many people have you pulled from car wreckages? How many drunk men have you walked home out of the kindness of your heart?”

Alec’s mouth goes dry. Nightlock doesn’t budge. It must be a coincidence -

“What are you trying to say?”

Nightlock tsks. “I’m trying to show you that Sentinel exists outside of Idris, rather than just tell you, seeing how well that didn’t work last time we saw one another,” he sighs. He moves to rap his knuckles against the centre of Alec’s chest plate, but decides against it, curling his fingers tightly
into his palm. “All those good deeds, you’re not doing them because Idris told you to do them. You’re doing them because you want to do them, because it’s the right thing and you want to help, I know you do. You’re kind. Don’t make me out to be a fool for believing that you might want to do good -”

“You’re not a fool-”

“I know I’m not. But it doesn’t stop me from feeling foolish for trusting you,” Nightlock insists. “Because I don’t understand you, Sentinel. I don’t understand how every time we’ve met, you can do something heroic without even thinking twice, but then when I ask you to act on that, to help me track the Circle before they kill more of my people, you just ... hide.”

Alec tenses. “I want to help,” he pushes out between his teeth. “You know I do.”

“So then, just do ,” pleads Nightlock, taking a sudden step forward that surprises Alec. “Idris will never understand, but I do. You stood in that church with me and we saw the same damn thing.”

“I know,” says Alec weakly, “I know.”

Melancholy and disappointment take root in Nightlock’s eyes, but he doesn’t let them out.

“You’re perhaps the most stubborn man I know. And I know me ,” he sighs again. He takes a step back from Alec, making sure to give him a wide berth as he stalks to the edge of the rooftop. He stops with his boots curled over the edge. “Why exactly did you want to see me tonight, Sentinel? Just to prove everything I thought I knew about Corporates right?”

The words are meant to sting; they’re barbed, meant to wound, but some part of Alec knows that Nightlock doesn’t really mean it. He’s lashing out because Alec has hurt him, and Alec cannot blame him for that. Alec has let them both down in equal measure.

“A name came up in Idris’ investigation,” Alec says softly, “I wanted you to know.”

Nightlock wheels around on him, eyes narrowed. “Idris’ investigation?” he demands, “I thought you said -”
“It’s off the record. Only people I trust. I just - I couldn’t do nothing. You were right about that. And even if I can’t … do what you’re asking of me, I can still - do this. It’s not much, but … maybe it can be an olive branch. Please.”

“Sentinel -” Nightlock begins, but he doesn’t finish it. He doesn’t seem to know what to say.

“It’s Hodge Starkweather,” continues Alec, and he’s not blind to the way Nightlock’s eyes widen slightly. “I had my sister look into a few old Circle members from the 70s, and she noticed that he’d recently been released from prison. Maybe it means something, maybe it doesn’t, but it can’t be a coincidence that it happened at the same time Valentine resurfaced and these fires started.”

“Idris don’t know why he was released?”

“No, it wasn't in any of our records,” says Alec, “But, there was something -” He pauses, only to find Nightlock hanging on his next word. “Senator Herondale’s name came up too.”

Nightlock’s expression shuts. Suddenly, it’s like his eyes are grey to match the clouds overhead, and just as impenetrable. And Alec finds himself reaching out, before he can stop himself, to brush his fingers against Nightlock’s elbow. The touch is brief. Nightlock still shudders. He moves his arm out of Alec’s reach, deliberately looking away, stare focused on New York’s sepulchral horizon.

Alec feels cold. His hand forms a fist at his side; he won’t touch Nightlock again. Instead, he asks, in a hushed, tentative voice, “Do you know something about that?”

“I need to go make some calls.”

“Nightlock -”

Nightlock looks back sharply, and Alec stills, his mouth falling open. He feels strangely disappointed and scolds himself for it, and then scolds himself again for the way he must so opaquely wear a look of hurt.

Pain softens the fire in Nightlock’s eyes. When he speaks again, his words are softer, more apologetic. “I mean it, Sentinel,” he says, “I need to go.”
Alec nods, pressing his mouth into a flat line. He looks at the ground and folds his hands behind his back. “Yeah, okay,” he says, “I’m sorry I couldn’t be of more -”

“No,” Nightlock interrupts, “No, Sentinel, don’t do that. This is helpful.” He looks both ways down the block, preparing himself to jump off into the night and disappear, just like that. “You should ask your sister to cross-check Herondale with any other known Circle associates. I will do the same on my end -”

“Nightlock -”

Nightlock pauses on the precipice of the roof, peering back over his shoulder.

Wait, Alec wants to say, let me come with you.

No, scolds Sentinel. You can’t. Idris told you not to.

Why are you so afraid of change? whispers the wind.

There’s nothing he can say, no way he can finish that half-plea of a sentence that starts and ends with Nightlock’s name far too familiar on his lips. Instead, he winces against the hot sting in his eyes, and turns his face away. The frustration is sudden and terrible and it throbs, throbs as an ache in both his temples, buried deep within his skin, desperate to be let out.

He doesn’t know what it is anymore.

But he does see Nightlock hesitate, taking a half-step back from the edge of the roof. Nightlock’s fingers twitch in a way that betrays want: a want to stop Sentinel from looking at him like he is, far too open and honest for the relationship they have.

For a moment, Nightlock looks afraid. He looks like he doesn’t know what to do.

“Listen … listen to me, Sentinel,” he starts, and the rasp to his voice is unfamiliar to Alec. It no longer speaks of anger. “Every corner we turn, every stone we flip over, every thread we pull is revealing something more, something bigger than both of us is happening here. I don’t know how
far this goes, or who is sitting at the centre of the spiderweb, or how we stop them from killing someone else, but I do know that you will want to be on the right side of this fight at the end of it. And that side won’t be Idris, you know that. I know you do, but that side can’t be your guilt either. Do you understand?”

It’s not that simple a question, Alec wants to say, but he doesn’t. He can only nod his head again, rendered mute by his constricting throat.

Nightlock looks at him a moment longer; he searches Alec’s face for something Alec cannot be sure if visible from behind his mask.

I’m good, Alec thinks. I’m a good person. I swear I am. I want to be.

For the first time in a long time, Alec wants to be seen. He wants Sentinel to be seen. He doesn’t want to fade into the background like another solemn shadow who won’t speak up when it matters.

He wants Nightlock to see who Alec wants to be, and not just who he can be.

Nightlock says nothing, but it looks like he wants to say everything, words curving the shape of his mouth. They don’t come; he swallows them back with a minute shake of his head that anybody else might miss.

Not Alec. He doesn’t miss it.

Nor does he miss the slow plummet of his heart as Nightlock takes the final step forward over the edge, vanishing quickly in the flutter of his coat and the black pool of night far down below. He doesn’t say goodbye. He doesn’t say that he wants to see Sentinel again.

Alec is not sure he is deserving of either of those things. But Alec -

God, Alec only wishes that he would stay.
Before, Alec called it a line, the thing that divides his body in half: one part for the day time and one for night, never touching save for rare moments at dusk and dawn.

He sees, now, that he was wrong. It’s no line. It’s too violent and visceral a thing for that; it’s a torn and tattered scar through the middle of him, something that has not been allowed to heal.

He just wishes he knew what it was that rips it open afresh every day: the putting-on of his mask, or taking it off again.

Tonight, the office is quiet. It’s a Friday, a whole week since he met Magnus as Sentinel, and most people have ducked out early to spend the weekend with their families, to see their friends, to go to a late-night bar with the excuse of sleeping in tomorrow. Alec doesn’t have that luxury; days off are few and far between.

So, instead, over the top of his partition, he watches as Simon packs his bag and switches off his computer for the night, its blue screen fading with a shrill dial-up tone. And as Simon whistles and swings his bag over his shoulder, Alec feels jealous.

Imagine that: feeling whole, feeling human. Simon will probably spend the whole weekend on his SNES and then he’ll tell Alec all about it on Monday morning, because he’s not ashamed of the person he is outside of work hours. He doesn’t have to hide himself from the sun.

What must that be like?

Well, that’s not a question Simon would be able to answer if Alec were to ask. Simon doesn’t know any different. All he knows is how to be himself.

And oh, how Alec envies.

“You still working, huh?” Simon says, striding up to Alec’s desk on his way out, “Well, I’m off for the night! Don’t stay too late - one day you are literally going to overwork yourself to death, and then they’ll have to hire someone else and I’ll be miserable!”
Alec smiles thinly, offering Simon a half-wave, unable to fully look away from his computer, because he feels, if he did, he might not be able to control the muscles in his face.

“Yeah,” he says, “I got it. Have a good weekend.”

“You too!” Simon chimes, “I’m gonna sleep for forty eight hours straight! I swear, I must be going through a second growth spurt because I am so tired lately - is that even a thing? I’m twenty-five, not twelve, but -” Simon’s wrist watch beeps with an alarm; it’s already seven o’clock and apparently Simon has somewhere to be. Alec won’t ask him about it. “Oh! Shoot, I’m running late! Busy night today, I gotta go - see ya Monday, Alec!”

Alec has a busy night ahead too. Arkangel and Sentinel have a new mission. Their latest commission is with a defense contractor, but Alec knows what that really means: arms dealing. When Maryse handed him the brief, he vaguely recognised the company name, but sometimes, the less he knows, the better, and he doesn’t want to think about it any more than he has to.

Arkangel and Sentinel, in and out. Arkangel to secure the files, Sentinel to stand guard and watch the perimeter. It’ll be an easy job, one that they’ve done a thousand times before -

It’s already making Alec feel sick.

But ...

He doesn’t have to be there for another few hours and the rendezvous point is close. He glances at the clock on the wall, and then switches his computer off without finishing the email he was typing.

There’s not enough time to go home, but there is time to play pretend. He has twenty years of practice, after all.

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Alec knocks quietly on Magnus’ office door, but the lights are on and he can hear Magnus
muttering to himself on the other side.

“Alexander!” Magnus calls, “That better be you, because I am in no mood to see anyone else tonight.”

Alec pokes his head around the door and smiles weakly. Magnus’ desk is piled high with paperwork and open binders littered with Post-It notes. His telephone is off the hook and there’s a mark on his chin that looks like newspaper print lifted from his thumb.

“Good thing it’s me, then,” says Alec.

Magnus looks up, rolls his eyes, but then grins, and Alec feels it like a spark, lighting up the dark.

It dies, of course, all too quickly, because in Alec’s hollow chest, there is nowhere for it to go.

Alec lowers himself into his usual chair, dumping his coat and bag on the ground by his feet. He scoots himself up to the desk and peers over Magnus’ notes from upside down.

There are a lot of familiar names to be read: Starkweather, Morgenstern, Herondale, and others that Alec has not yet heard, ringed in bright red pen and annotated with a lot of question marks. Beneath that, there are copies of old police reports to be looked over for the dozenth time, hoping to find something new; a number of articles lifted from the papers about the ongoing murder trial of Ragnor Fell; and a series of photographs of their burned-down church, which seem to bear Simon’s hallmark.

Magnus has been busy. Alec would expect nothing less.

“Anything?” Alec asks wearily. He picks up the edge of a tabloid to peer under it, but there’s just another headline there too: \textit{VIGILANTE MENACE UNMASKED BY HERO COPS}. All he gains is a black inky smudge on his thumb.

“Nothing concrete,” says Magnus, but he’s still writing as he talks, not looking up. Whatever he’s scribbling is distinctly furious. “I’m still looking into Starkweather, but I’m not expecting to find much. I suspect it’s going to be another all-nighter tonight.”
It’s a different tune to the way he spoke the other night, so enthused about getting answers from Idris. Now, he sounds terse. Incensed. Horrendously tired, like he hasn’t sat still in days for the chance to catch his breath.

Alec hums a low note. He doesn’t know what to say, because *are you alright?* isn’t enough, and *where do we go from here?* will never be a question with an answer. Speaking feels like too much an effort; he just wants a moment to exist, here, with Magnus’ companionship and nothing else.

So instead, he reaches for a file on Magnus’ desk and pulls it towards himself and reads the first few lines. He makes it one paragraph - *something, something, Jane Doe, Caucasian, 25-30, found in church* - before his tension headache begins to bloom.

Alec pinches the bridge of his nose and closes his eyes, willing the pain away, because it’s not the sort he can cling to, coming and going in waves. It’s not the rough and ready ache of grazed knuckles or the sting of his bowstring snapping back against his fingers; it’s not rubbing his skin raw beneath a faucet; it’s not even stitching up a bullet wound in his bathtub, trying not to alert the neighbours.

No, this is like a tight band around his head, like his mask is covering his face and pushing back on his eyes, pressing on his sinuses until it becomes an struggle to breathe. Of course it feels like that. It’s a Goddamn metaphor.

Magnus’ pen stops scratching. He puts it down. Alec can hear him hesitate.

“Alec?”

“Headache,” says Alec. He squints open one eye, and sure enough, Magnus has forgotten all about his writing.

Magnus ducks his head to try and meet Alec’s line of sight. “You’ve stayed late every night this week,” he says, “If you want to go home, go home. I’m not forcing you to stay.”

“‘M just tired,” mumbles Alec, palming at his jaw. It’s prickly with stubble; he overslept this morning and didn’t have time to shave as well as shower away last night’s city grime. “‘Sides, like you said, there’s a lot to go through …”
Magnus purses his lips and picks up his pen again, but doesn’t start writing. He seems to consider his notes, and then his pushes it all aside. Alec blinks in confusion.

“It’s nothing that can’t wait a moment,” Magnus says. “Or an hour, or a day, if that’s what you need.”

“The vigilantes getting killed don’t have an hour or a day,” Alec mutters. “Magnus, it’s fine. Tell me what you need me to look at.”

_I need the distraction. I need to just be._

Magnus pulls the file away from Alec, swatting Alec’s fingers when he tries to grab it back. He fixes Alec with a stern look.

“You’re overworking yourself.”

“Says you.”

“This is not about me. I’m used to it,” Magnus retorts. “What time did you get to bed last night?”

Alec can’t remember. He was at headquarters until late for the briefing, and then Jace had kicked off in front of Maryse and Robert again about them _wasting their time on stupid missions_ , and Alec hadn’t been able to sleep, replaying their disappointed faces over and over again behind his eyelids.

What would they say if Alec stood up for Jace? If Alec had said something and not just faced forward with his hands behind his back and his chin raised?

What would their faces say if Alec told them how desperately he wants to do what Nightlock asks of him?

What would they do if Alec just said … _no_ ?
“Late,” Alec rasps, his voice betraying him. He gestures vaguely with his hand. “How do you do it, Magnus? How do you … stay afloat in all this?”

Magnus smiles ruefully, and there’s a brief moment of pause, enough for Alec to look up, just as Magnus speaks. “I think that’s a matter of perception, Alexander.”

Magnus is fiddling with his rings, rubbing his finger into his page of notes curiously, inspecting the grain of his desk. Frown line forms between his brows.

Alec sees that loneliness again, but now, it’s more than that. It’s the weariness he asked Magnus about on that rooftop; it’s that strange longing that crept into his voice that night on the phone; it’s that frustrated anger that Alec can sometimes feel bubbling beneath the surface when they hit yet another wall -

He’s not indestructible. He’s not infallible. Why did Alec ever think that he was, he’s only human.

Alec’s not human. Not in the same way. He’s not allowed to be.

Alec feels the word vomit pushing up inside his throat. He starts talking without really meaning to. “Sometimes … sometimes, I know what I need to do, but it doesn’t always align with what I want to do.” He sighs desperately and scrubs a hand down his face, shaking his head. “I’m sorry, that probably makes no sense …”

Anyone else would say it’s an easy choice, choosing what he wants, choosing to do the right thing, rather than the things Idris demands of him. Jace baits him with it; Izzy scolds him for it; and Nightlock judges him for it in a way that Alec can’t quite stomach. But Magnus -

Magnus is not just anyone.

“No, I get it,” says Magnus softly, “Some responsibilities are too big to throw away, especially when they’re all you’ve known your entire life.” For a moment, he looks wistful, the look in his eyes straying into the past. Alec can only wonder who or what he thinks of. “It can be difficult for other people to understand that.”
Alec laughs, but it sounds all too fragile, all too-telling. It teeters upon the brink of exhaustion and a breakdown he’s been putting off for far too long. He feels it now, creeping up on him from behind like a shadow eager to cling to his back, and he can only hope he’ll make it home in time before it latches.

“Alec?”

“Yeah, sorry,” says Alec, sniffing loudly, “I’m okay.”

“I don’t think you are.” Quietly, Magnus pushes out of his chair and steps around his desk, crossing the distance that it has created between them until now. He leans against the corner, and with his foot, he turns Alec’s chair to face him.

His words are feather-soft, sad, a whisper: “I don’t think you’ve been okay for a very long time.”

And oh, isn’t that the inconvenient truth.

Tilting his head, he looks at Alec with that kind and endless expression of his that says you might be able to fool everyone, but you can’t fool me. But this time, Magnus has consciously taken a step over yet another line that Alec has drawn, and he’s slowly smearing his hands through Alec’s insides, blurring all the things Alec thought he knew.

And what does that feel like? The thought of someone with their hands inside your chest, rummaging around between your ribs and coming up with palms full of secrets and sinew? Vulnerable, intimate, bloody, all these sorts of things that scare Alec, that speak of the dreadful mortification of being seen, and -

And yet, which are yearned for.

Alec feels pinned to his chair. Magnus’ eyes are so bright, so quietly desperate for some sliver of truth, so endlessly selfless that Alec can’t help but hate him a little bit, because he gives too much for one person to truly bear. He gives away these parts of himself like flowers, knowing they might wither and die once cut, but also knowing that in the brief moment Alec holds one of his smiles, the world somehow feels a little better, a little more beautiful.
In those moments, Alec feels real.

“You sit here with me every night,” Magnus continues then, his voice a whisper now. He holds Alec’s gaze with tenderness and understanding. “And I can’t help but wonder where you go when you do. What you’re thinking about, what those bags under your eyes mean, what makes you frown like you do when you zone out from what you’re reading and clearly don’t realise -”

“Magnus …”

“I care about you, Alec. I admire you for your sense of right and wrong, for your willingness to go out of the way for other people - you know that, and I - before all this, I didn’t know you, I didn’t know the person that you are and I regret with every fibre of my being not finding out who that was sooner -”

“I care about you too,” Alec splutters, gesturing clumsily with his hands in the vain hope of stopping his words from spinning out of orbit. He thinks about standing, just to be eye level with Magnus, but his legs won’t work. “You do so much for everyone, Magnus, you grind yourself into the dirt for them, and I wish other people would see it-”

“So, tell me how I can help you.”

Alec’s heart lurches, he knows it does. No-one has ever said that to him before, and that’s because he’s never asked.

A superhero isn’t supposed to need help, not when the fate of a city rests in his palms. He’s supposed to be the one protecting everybody else, not wallowing in feelings Idris was meant to strip out of him at birth.

Maybe that’s been the problem all along. He’s not meant to feel this fear, or this self-hatred, or this tiresome longing, and maybe that’s why Magnus looks at him as he does: someone so vastly out of their depth.

Boldly, Magnus continues on. “I’m asking because I’m worried about you, Alexander. There’s always going to be something going on: another election, another fire, another murdered vigilante, but if you don’t make time for yourself, if you sweep all the things you’re feeling under the rug and ignore them - you’ll lose yourself.”
His eyes linger on Alec’s cheek, drifting down towards his jaw, his mouth, then the span of his shoulders slowly.

When his gaze returns to Alec’s eyes, he says, “You always look so sad, Alec.”

And so do you, Alec wants to say, but he doesn’t, because the both of them already know it to be true. When it rains as much as it does in New York, when the world outside feels this bleak, how do you become any other thing but sad?

Alec is so, so tired of it.

"It's like,” he begins, and his voice is already hoarse. He watches as Magnus slouches on the desk, his shoulders falling, but his honesty, his compassion laid bare. It summons words to Alec’s mouth that he hadn’t been planning on saying. “It’s like you have this plan for your life. You know what you need to do and what your responsibilities are, and you think, you know, if you follow the rules, everything’s gonna be fine.”

Alec swallows thickly.

“But it’s not fine,” he continues, “I’m doing the best I can, but it’s not good enough. It’s never good enough, and - I dunno. It hurts. Then I feel guilty, because other people are hurting more, and that just - makes it worse. I don’t want people to see me … like this.”

“You shouldn’t compare your suffering to other people,” says Magnus, “Just because someone might have it worse doesn’t mean yours is invalid.”

Alec’s answering sigh is shaky. He pulls at his knuckles, wringing his fingers in his lap. There’s a loose scrap of skin on his thumbnail that demands to be picked. “I’m just so … confused.”

“I know. I know. So am I,” says Magnus. “But you’re not alone. You have me.”

Alec looks up from his hands just as blood begins to well along the side of his nail. He hides it in the palm of his other hand. “And you have me.”
Magnus smiles. “That means more than you know.”

Warmth floods into Alec’s cheeks, but it’s not that itchy, uncomfortable warmth that so often comes with Magnus’ cavalier smiles and crude flirting in the office, no.

No, it’s an unyielding sort of warmth, intimate in a way Alec has long craved but never imagined for himself. He imagines words like that pressed into the palm of his hand. He imagines them rolling down the nape of his neck. He imagines them against his ear, suddenly breathless.

Magnus holds out his hand. Alec stares at it. He stares at it in the same way he once stared at Nightlock’s hand, except Nightlock was asking him to step off the edge of a roof with him.

And Magnus -

Magnus isn’t asking him that, but he is offering Alec something far more terrifying: the name for the unanswerable feeling in his chest, the one that doesn’t just cross lines, but bends them, breaks them, smears them into a colour that is all Alec, only Alec, and the way he feels when Magnus pauses to look at him in the centre of a busy room.

“Come on,” says Magnus. He nods at the pile of unread documents on his desk. “All this can wait for tomorrow.”

It can’t, but Alec reaches for Magnus’ hand anyway. He’s never been the one to reach before. Magnus’ fingers are warm, his rings cold, and his heartbeat steady in his wrist.

Magnus gives his fingers a comforting squeeze. “Do you want to get out of here?” he asks, not letting go. “Get a drink, some dinner?”

Alec wants to say yes. His first real, unassuming, uninhibited yes, an apology for all the times he’s let Magnus down before, too afraid to step out on his own, but at the same time, he feels fragile. He feels like glass, transparent, letting all the light seep through, and he doesn’t want anyone else to see that. He doesn’t want anyone else to see how Magnus is looking at him now, all full of hope, refracts through him and splits into a myriad of colours.

He doesn’t want anyone else seeing all the resulting scuffs and chips and broken pieces but Magnus.
“Maybe we can just stay here?” Alec offers, because outside, there a whole number of innumerable things he doesn’t want to think about, doesn’t want to face, but here, within the four-wall confines of this office, he knows exactly who he is, however briefly. He can see the whole room at once and the world doesn’t extended beyond that.

“Okay,” says Magnus. His gaze drops to Alec’s hand and becomes reverent as he runs his thumb over the backs of Alec’s knuckles. Alec’s skin answers to him like braille to a blind man, rising to the touch. Magnus only hums. “Okay,” he repeats. “What about some takeout then? There’s this thai place I’ve been dying to try.”

The light in the office is low: dusty, yellow, a little bit intimate. There are empty takeout containers on the desk, but somehow, the room smells of smoke and bad but indulgent choices. Magnus’ case files are still spread across the table top, sheets of paper woven together, one on top of another, on top of another, tangling with chopstick wrappers and paper napkins, but they’ve been largely pushed aside.

Magnus is slouched in his chair, slumped low into the cushions with his feet up on the desk, crossed at the ankles. He has a legal pad in his lap full of colourful scribbles, and a half-drunk glass of whiskey in his hand, which he’s slowly swirling with the curl of his wrist. And he’s humming, but it’s not something that Alec recognises and it’s a little out-of-tune. Besides the tick of the clock on the wall and the rustle of paper as Magnus quietly flicks through his notes, it’s the only thing Alec can hear.

Alec feels pleasantly full, his waistband snug about his hips. Sleep is catching up on him and the thought of a nap isn’t a terrible one, even if this chair is horrendously uncomfortable. He’s been awake far too long, but he doesn’t want Magnus to see his eyelids droop.

Falling asleep in someone else’s presence seems like a vulnerability he’s not sure how to permit himself, so he settles for the quiet, for counting his breaths, for soaking in Magnus’ company that doesn’t require words to be a comfort.

He’s not sure how long they’ve been here, him and Magnus. A couple hours at least, but there are no windows in this room, and beyond that, only silence. The universe, in this moment, is very small: there is no city, no rain, no police crime tape fluttering in an unforgiving wind, no place to be after this, however much Alec knows that’s not true.
But for now, for this single, incomparable moment, there’s just him and Magnus and the fatigued ache that is forming between his temples. He can pretend.

Magnus runs a hand through his hair and it catches Alec’s attention, as if Alec’s focus hasn’t already been stretched across the table since they sat down, since Magnus took his hand and held it. Magnus sighs to himself, fingers threading through his roots. His eyes are cast down, flitting over the document in his hand, eyelashes casting feathery shadows on his cheeks. The soft, artificial light paints harsh shadows on his skin, and it’s striking.

He’s beautiful.

He’s always been beautiful. Alec has been aware of that ever since they met, but this is - this is different, now, and Alec knows it is. It’s in the dark circle beneath Magnus’ eyes, and in the carded mess of his hair, and in the way his suspenders cut into his broad shoulders, just a little too tight to be comfortable. It’s in the way Magnus licks his fingers to flip over a sheet of paper, and in the focus that is carved out in the marble of his face, and in the dedication he has to this, to this cause, above all else, including himself.

Magnus is amazing. Alec sees it now, for all that it is. Sentinel and Arkangel and Nightlock - they’re all people who put on masks in order to help others in trouble, but Magnus doesn’t hide behind a persona. He doesn’t need that; he knows exactly who he is and what he must do. He cares more than all of them put together, and yet nobody sees him. Nobody knows.

Alec knows.

“Alexander,” says Magnus, not looking up from his legal pad, “You’re staring.”

*I’m not*, Alec wants to insist. He tastes the words on his tongue and might have said them once. But he doesn’t want to lie anymore. He already holds too many secrets to his chest, and he just wants to be Alec when he’s alone with Magnus in this office. It’s the only place he can be.

He just wants to dip his hand in the river called possibility, even if he cannot follow it all the way to the sea. The cool relief is enough for a moment.

So, he murmurs, “Yeah.”
Magnus looks up from his notes, the soft roundness of his mouth shifting into an easy, tender smile. “Yeah?” he asks. Amusement is a glint in his eyes. “Like what you see?”

Heat clouds Alec’s face and the back of his neck, so it’s all he can do to shrug and drop his gaze back to the table, picking up an article he’s sure he’s already studied. Magnus laughs musically, shaking his head.

And it’s a funny old thing, how detached from the world Alec can feel, and yet so present, and so Alec, he can be. There’s no sense of Sentinel here: this is Alec and a beautiful man, alone in a room and side-stepping around things that flutter inside Alec’s heart and chest.

Maybe … maybe there’s no pretending going on here after all. This is all Alec.

He feels normal. He feels human. He wants it to last, but knows that it won’t.

It’s a little scary.

Magnus’ humming fades away; a frown is its replacement as he focuses too intently on something written on the page. His fingers clink against his whiskey, drumming against the glass, and he shifts in his chair, flexing his shoulders and exposing the vee of his throat as he gets more comfortable. His tie is long discarded; his jacket too. Alec admires the long lines of him with a boldness that doesn’t feel his own.

Magnus takes a sip of his drink. Alec watches the indentation the glass leaves on his lips; it’s red, dark purple almost, the same colour as a wine stain. He pauses in thought before placing the glass back on the table and reaches blindly for his pen without taking his eyes off the page. There’s a flourish as he circles a paragraph in his notes and then he murmurs to himself, satisfied, tapping the pen against his mouth.

He starts humming again, something different. A song Alec knows, a song which takes Alec back to a quiet moment in an alleyway that feels eons ago now.

“I have something for you.”

The words leave Alec’s mouth before he can catch them. He sounds quite breathless.

Magnus glances up, his pen still poised in his hand. “Me?”

“Yes, you,” says Alec. “It’s, uh, in my desk drawer though -”

He stands too quickly, too awkwardly, and Magnus blinks in rapid succession, swinging his legs off the desk and looking rightly confused. Alec’s heart begins to hammer, his sudden focus spurred by adrenaline.

Magnus moves to rise from his chair, looking confused, but Alec stops him.

“Just,” says Alec, staying Magnus with a wave of his hands, “wait here. I’ll be … right back.”

Alec’s feet are a steady rhythm in the dark corridors, but his pulse is louder in his ears, heady and exhilarating. All the lights in the office are off, so he finds his way by the green glow of fire exit signs and by the neon light spilling in through the windows.

The office is empty and eerie and blue, haunted by the hum of electronics, the gleam of computers-on-standby, and Alec’s partition is outlined in that strange ephemeral colour too. The city overlooks him through the floor-to-ceiling windows, a sea of rooftops all bathed in white light, roaming car headlights lancing through the dark and wandering across the ceiling in transient beams of silence.

Alec weaves through the cubicles, a little out of breath, and yanks open the bottom drawer of his desk. He pulls out a stack of paperwork and dumps it on the floor, reaching into the back of the
drawer for the rustle of a plastic bag.

He hasn’t looked at this since the night at the church, but he has thought about it.

He’s thought about it a lot. He was just … waiting for the right moment.

*Is this the right moment? How is he meant to know?*

He doesn’t really understand what a *moment* is, but as he rocks back on his knees, holding the yellow Tower Records bag in his hands, his heart begins to beat with a different rhythm and his neck turns clammy.

He feels extraordinarily nervous. He leaps off buildings and wrestles fires for a living, but nothing is quite so bewildering as this: that peculiar need to be known, and not just for his good deeds.

“Is that for me?”

Alec looks up at the sound of Magnus’ approaching footsteps, not surprised that he’s been followed.

Magnus hesitates, a few steps from Alec’s desk. He twirls the ring on his fourth finger around and around the knuckle. His eyes are dark, steeped in shadow, and it makes him difficult to read.

Alec looks at the cassette tape again, small and breakable in his large hands. The bag is crumpled and he’s pretty sure the receipt is still inside. He doesn’t know what to say: what might sound clumsy or too rehearsed or too caring. He doesn’t want to come across as any of those things, and it makes him feel a little bit like a child - but maybe that’s okay.

He hasn’t had the chance to learn these things before: how to do, how to be, how to want. He hasn’t had the chance to, well, *feel.*
“Yeah,” he says, rising to his feet. He steps closer to Magnus, and Magnus’ eyes dip, first to the divot of Alec’s throat, visible through the undone button of his shirt, and then to the plastic bag in Alec’s hands.

Alec fights back the urge to smile, a pleasant ache in his cheeks blooming from the heavy weight that has settled in his chest: it’s a contradiction, and he knows it, is confused by it. He fights back the urge to tell Magnus that he had this bag shoved down his boot for the good part of five hours whilst running around as Sentinel the night he bought it, and there might be soot still caught in the creases of the bag from the decimated halls of that church. He fights the urge to say I think of you, even when I shouldn’t, because that sounds too much like -


God, it sounds like possibility, the sort of what ifs that Magnus has always teased him with but never acted upon. A chance that doesn’t yet have a name, but which makes Alec’s skin warm nonetheless.

He holds out the bag to Magnus, and Magnus shoots him a suspicious look that devolves quickly into a crooked smile, all teeth, all real.

“I’m pretty sure it’s not my birthday yet,” he says, sliding the cassette out of the bag and tossing the bag haphazardly over his shoulder. He turns the cassette over in his hands to look at the album cover, and sucks in a sharp breath.

“I don’t know if you have that one already,” says Alec, rubbing the back of his neck, “Or if you even have a tape player, but -

Magnus scans the track list and then taps the first song on the B-side with his fingertip. He looks up at Alec and there’s untapped magic in his eyes.

“This one’s my favourite,” he says. Who Wants To Live Forever.

“Yeah,” says Alec clumsily, “I figured. I heard you - I heard you humming it, back there.”

Magnus turns the cassette over in his hands again, running his thumb appreciatively over the case. His wets his lips, unable to reign in the smile that strains at his cheeks.
And Alec is caught by it, caught by that moment of unchecked happiness that he has never seen on Magnus before. He looks infinitely young then, no tension in his shoulders, no old sadness lingering in his eyes, no thoughts of anyone but himself. It’s enthralling and Alec decides, in one dizzy moment, that this is how Magnus ought to look, always.

“I can’t believe you noticed,” Magnus murmurs.


I see you.

“Alec,” says Magnus, still smiling so broadly. He holds the cassette tape against his chest and steps forward, closer to Alec, into a beam of white light that spills in through the windows that might as well be the moon. It paints Magnus’ face in shades of pearl and alabaster blue. “Alexander.”

Alec glances at Magnus’ mouth as it curves around the sounds in his name so eloquently. And oh, how Magnus smiles, how he looks at Alec in a way Alec has never been looked at before. Suddenly, the only thing Alec can hear is his own heavy breathing, and nothing else; he wonders where noises go when they are no longer needed.

Magnus’ shoulders sway as he takes another step closer. Alec feels his warmth now. Another pair of car headlights scour the ceiling, wandering across Magnus’ face, catching in his eyes as he gazes up at Alec.

And Alec -

Alec’s coms start beeping loudly in his ear. The static makes him flinch, jolting in a way Magnus cannot miss. Alec only just has sense not to press his fingers to his ear as Jace crackles into existence.

“Hey buddy, you about? Rendezvous was ten minutes ago. I dunno if there’s been a change or plans, or -”
“Alec?” Magnus asks softly. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m -” Alec starts, but reality winds him like a punch to the gut. He blinks, and the disappearing space between him and Magnus is no longer warm, but hot, too hot, he burns. It’s a warning and he knows it: *don’t get too close now, you’ve had your moment*. When he speaks again, his voice is raspy. “What, uh … what time is it?”

Magnus frowns but glances at his watch. “It’s just gone midnight.” Alec watches as Magnus’ shoulders fall. “It’s getting late. I should probably get going.”

“Right,” says Alec weakly, “Yeah, me too, but -”

“But?” Magnus asks hopefully. He still holds the cassette tape tight to his chest.

Alec swallows his heart back down into his chest, but finds it doesn’t go all that willingly. “Thank you,” he manages, “For tonight. It really … it really means a lot.”

Magnus smiles a close-lipped smile, his eyes creasing up. He tilts his head to the side, appraising Alec with a gentleness that becomes him.

“All right, Alexander,” he murmurs. “Any time.”

“So, I don’t know much about this company, but Iz says they’re arms dealers,” says Jace, a half hour later. “Which, if you ask me, is pretty fucked. I am at least 99% sure what we’re doing is not only illegal, but a federal crime.” He gasps, dramatically slapping a hand to his chest. “Oh my God, have we become supervillains?”

Alec rolls his eyes and shoves Jace in the shoulder, but it only makes Jace laugh at his own terrible joke.
Alec is not in the mood for laughing.

But he’s not in the mood for snapping at Jace either, or for brooding on top of buildings, or for being Sentinel in any shape or form. Not tonight.

No, the feeling in his chest is just empty, like he’s been pulled away from something far too soon. It draws a very deep sigh from someplace barely touched but now exposed to the elements. The white light of the city is no longer moon-soft, but harsh and artificial and glaring. Freddie Mercury no longer croons or beckons; his background noise is the wind and the distant whoop of helicopter blades. His face is no longer comfortably warm, but uncomfortably cold.

Jace notices almost immediately, pausing as he readjusts his goggles and flexes his wings. He pouts at Alec. “You doing alright, buddy?”

Alec doesn’t really want to talk about. He knows Jace means well, but Alec has been honest tonight in a way he’s never been honest before, exposing a tender part of himself to the brisk air, and now, it feels like it’s rendered him mute. He can force words up his throat as much as he likes, but they’re cloying in his mouth and his lips won’t open.

“Great,” he manages, and the word is short and sharp. He presses his fingertips to his mask, making sure it’s secure. It doesn’t budge. “Let’s just get this over with.”

Jace nods. Unlike Izzy, he doesn’t try to wheedle the truth out of Alec when Alec clams up in one of his nonverbal episodes. Alec is not sure if that’s better or worse, but he doesn’t want to think about that either.

Instead, Jace unfurls his steel wings and taps two fingers against his mask, their call sign. *Eyes open*, it means. Alec taps his mask right back, and then Jace shoots up into the sky like some silver bullet, piercing through the clouds.

Alec waits for the air to settle. The riptide in the wind tries to pull him under. He won’t let it, not before the mission is over, but it’s difficult. His hair is already damp with mist; his fingers already chilled in his gloves.

His head is elsewhere. He wonders if Magnus made it home safely.
He wishes he were back in the office where it’s warm.

The mission goes well. Alec takes out the security cameras with a few well-placed arrows, and Jace busts open the door with his shoulder, and they creep their way into the top floor of a dark, imposing skyscraper without being caught by security.

And Alec should be thankful, but there’s this tightness in his chest that won’t abate, this tension, this worry, this anticipation as he stands guard at a doorway and Jace rummages around in a filing cabinet, that something terrible is just around the corner.

Nothing ever comes, but Alec has a feeling that whatever it might be is not necessarily visible. Not necessarily *tangible*. He tastes it like a storm waiting to break and imagines the sheets of rain spooling in from across the bay.

It’s only a matter of time before wind will lash across the plate glass windows and the whole building will trembles, and Alec doesn’t want to wait around for that. The feeling in his gut is dread, and its flavour, bitter.

“Hurry up,” Alec hisses, glancing back over his shoulder. Jace empties out a desk drawer onto the carpet and curses under his breath. Even the rustling of papers sounds too loud; Alec winces.

“I’m looking as fast as I can,” Jace retorts, “You know how hard it is to find what we’re looking for when I don’t know what we’re looking for? Maryse giving us the bare minimum to work with as fucking usual. All these files look the same - wait.” Jace holds up a manila file stamped with the name of the defense contractor they’re interested in. He waves it at Alec. “Looks promising?”

“Just get all of them and then let’s get outta here.”

“Roger that.” Jace grabs a few more files and stuffs them under his arm, before looking at the mess he’s made on the floor and shrugging. Alec’s not about to tell him to tidy up.
They sneak up to the rooftop, Alec taking the lead as he peers around each corner in the stairway with a hunter’s ease, his feet silent and an arrow set in his bowstring. His breath is drawn just as tight in his throat. But there’s nothing, there’s no-one, there’s not a sound at all, dark shadows in the corners of the stairwell swallowing everything up and not spitting it back out again.

These are the sorts of shadows that play tricks with the mind; from the corner of the eye, one could mistake the shape of a man loitering in the dark, but blink again, and he’s gone. Alec’s jaw is tight; his finger would tremble on his bowstring if he weren’t trained for better.

The climb the last flight of stairs towards the roof and Jace’s wings scrape against the wall and it almost gives Alec a heart attack. His arrow shudders violently, and he snaps back to glare at Jace. Jace throws him an apologetic smile, shrugging his shoulders as they both still, waiting for the screech of titanium against concrete to stop echoing.

Alec holds his breath. He expects an alarm to blare, or shouts to come shooting up the stairwell from down below, feet suddenly thunderous. There’s nothing.

Jace tucks his wings back against himself meekly. “Sorry,” he whispers.

Alec presses his mouth into a tight line. He taps his fingers against his mask - watch it - and then signals for them to keep moving.

The feelings of being followed trails behind. If Alec looks back over his shoulder, he’ll see nothing, nothing save the faint ripple of shadows reorienting and sliding back against the walls.

Whatever is watching them is not real. It’s in Alec’s mind, in Alec’s gut, in the curl of Alec’s toes in his boots.

The sooner they’re out of here, the better.

On the roof, Alec breathes deeper, lowers his bow, but still pinches his arrow tight. The wind and
the cold call of rain usually calm him, but tonight he feels them rolling off his skin like oil, lacquer-black and beading on his armour. The tightness in his chest persists. His breaths are only half breaths. He feels off-kilter, and finds control only amongst the fletching, held between his thumb and forefinger.

He scans the neighbouring rooftops for moving shadows as Jace coils a heavy chain around the handle of the fire escape door so that they won’t be caught off guard if someone finds them. The chain rattles against the door, metal on metal, and Alec feels it beneath his fingernails.

“That was surprisingly painless,” Jace says, oblivious as he turns back to Alec and brandishes the stolen files. “You wanna take a peek?”

“Not particularly.” Alec clips his scope onto his bow for a better look across the city. He’s not sure what he’s expecting to see.

Who he’s hoping to see.

The pressure in the air doesn’t shift like he wants it. It’s not a familiar weight pressing down on the back of his neck like the touch of a palm, but instead, the skittering of nerves like fingertips across his shoulders.

He grits his teeth, jaw clenching. In the distance, there’s nothing but the blinking of bedroom lights turning off for the night and the dance of rooftop flags whipping around in the wind. Jersey City is alight in the distance, salt blows in from the ocean, and New York stinks of its own ugly brand of petrichor, but nothing is amiss.

Save for the way Alec doesn’t feel like himself, but can’t figure out why.

His armour feels crooked, like he’s missing a piece. The weight of his bow is different, unfamiliar in his hand. There are so many specks of light across the bay that he can’t quite focus on one.

Why does it feel like he left a part of himself behind at the office? he thinks. He lowers his bow and guides his hand to his ribs, fingers grazing across the lines of stiff Kevlar there.

“C’mon, Sentinel,” Jace is saying, “Not even a little bit?” He’s already opening one of the files, licking his gloved finger to turn the page. “I wanna know what was worth paying us so much to
steal for them. It must be something good. Or bad - guess it depends how you see it, huh?"

Alec’s hand trails across his stomach, but his suit feels as it always does: rain-damp leather, impenetrable, not a buckle out of place. The part he’s missing is not here; it’s not made of something he can touch.

No, it’s a chip. A tiny, vacuous space inside of him, and he can feel it rising like an air bubble in his chest, stretching and enveloping around his heart, and then higher, ‘til it’s in his throat.

He can still breathe. It’s not that bad. Hell, it’s something he could ignore, if he really wanted to, it’s only the smallest nagging feeling in the back of his mind -

But it still feels wrong .

“Alec?”

Alec snaps out of it as a clap of thunder booms in the distance. Jace’s eyebrows raise in surprise, but he says nothing. Instead, he gestures with the open file towards Alec, and Alec rolls his eyes. He stalks over to Jace’s side to read over his shoulder.

The documents inside are all things Alec has seen before: contracts of sale, blueprints for aircrafts and helicopters, details on surface-to-air missiles and ballistic weaponry, even the raindrops that soak into the paper and turn it translucent, the typewritten ink blooming in purple splotches. All of that, it’s a terrible truth, but it is a truth, one fundamental in his line of work. It’s not the worst state secret he’s been employed to steal.

What Maryse wants with this, he doesn’t want to know. He doesn’t need to know. He’s not in the business of asking questions of the people who pay his bills and line his pocket, but -

But then, Jace flips over the page and Alec hones in on something that can’t be overlooked.

It’s a contract of sale. That much is clear. And Alec stares hard at the list of signatures at the end of the document: lawyers, negotiators, officiants -
There, written in scratchy, black ink: [REDACTED], on behalf of the office of Sen. Imogen Herondale.

“Redacted?” Jace scowls, holding the page up to the light to see if he can see through the thick black line scored through the name. “Way to spoil my fun. This suddenly got interesting! Why d’you think the Senator is buying and selling weaponry through a private company? Isn’t that illegal?”

“Yes,” says Alec. His entire body is stiff; there’s dread seizing in his joints. He swallows but his mouth is dry and it hurts on the way down. There’s a strain in his voice when he talks again. This can’t be good. “Definitely illegal.”

“Huh,” Jace muses, completely ignorant to the tightening of Alec’s fist around his bow. Jace grins wolfishly. “Would be crazy if this got leaked to the press, right? Can’t imagine what that would do for the election campaign.”

Probably nothing, Alec wants to say. Probably not make a damn bit of difference. He’s staring at the words, hoping they’ll rearrange on the page. They don’t budge.

But this - this must mean something. Alec is not stupid and he’s not blind and he’s definitely not naive enough to call this a coincidence when it’s clearly not.

Alec knows how much Herondale campaigns for militarised police and a crackdown on vigilantism and anarchy; he’s seen all her billboards, he’s been to most of her rallies, Hell, he fought his way through the middle of a protest that turned bloody and violent and it still fucking haunts him to this day.

And then, Isabelle had found that link between Herondale and Hodge Starkweather.

And now -

Now, Jace is holding physical evidence of Herondale’s corruption in his hands, but it doesn’t make sense. Alec feels like he’s staring down the barrel of a gun, but he has no idea whose finger is on the trigger.

This is something people deserve to know - right?
Or is it Alec pulling the trigger on his own damn gun and he’s going to end up shooting himself in the foot?

“I always knew Herondale was skeezy, but this is a new low,” Jace remarks, slapping the folder shut. He tucks them into his suit and zips himself up to the neck, before unfurling his wings wide across the roof. Alec steps out of the way blindly. “What do you think she wants with surface-to-air missiles, huh?”

“I don’t know,” Alec murmurs. There’s a block in his mind that’s stopping him from thinking about it, stopping him from seeing the bigger picture. On autopilot, his eyes scan the horizon again, but still, he finds it empty. “We should get back to headquarters.”

Alec knows Jace won’t follow up on his threat to go public with this, not if there’s a contract on the line. If a word of this leaves Idris, they won’t get paid, and Alec can only imagine what Maryse and Robert would do to them both if that happened. Jace won’t risk their wrath, and Alec won’t risk their disappointment.

The wind whistles, oh, wouldn’t you?

Alec shakes his head to be free of the thought. He struggles to ignore the way the whispers sounds so much like Nightlock inside his head; they thread all the way through him, through that tiny chip in his armour. That piece he’s missing, that Sentinel piece … it leaves him vulnerable.

It leaves Alec’s guilty conscience exposed.

“All right.”}

“Arkangel,” he says gruffly, “Let’s go.”

Headquarters is busy when they make it back. Jace heads up to the penthouse with their spoils, but Alec falters. He slips away and takes the stairs down to the basement levels, if only to avoid the hum in the corridors and the way he’s constantly ducking out the way of people staring at him. He’s sure he hears Underhill call out his name, but he ignores him, doing what he does best and
disappearing into the shadows before he can be cornered.

It’s quieter, below ground, but he feels the claustrophobia more keenly. The white walls and white lights do nothing to stop his skin from crawling; those unreal fingers upon his shoulder are still there, ghost-like and unignorable.

He fights the urge to tap his own fingers against his thigh as he stalks the corridor. The dread of meeting something around the next bend that he doesn’t want to meet has followed him all the way here. Paranoia is slick in his footsteps but his arms and legs are pulled taut with it. His skin feels hot. He wants to tear off his mask and fling it down the hallway for how wrong it feels upon his face.

He can still hear Nightlock cajoling him, his taunts bleeding over from Alec’s memories into reality. He can hear Nightlock’s damning questions and his burning accusations, can still see the look of disappointment and vertible anger in his eyes, beneath his mask. He imagines Nightlock laughing at him: ‘you really think you get to pick and choose when you care and when you don’t? You’re really not going to help me, and then turn tail and run home to cover up Herondale’s misdeeds? That’s the person that you are?’

But then, more softly, he can hear Magnus say: ‘some responsibilities are too big to throw away.’

That pain from before, phantom in his ribs, around his heart, it echoes again. Magnus called it sadness, but it’s more than that. It’s a sort of grief Alec will never be able to name. 

Help, he thinks. One word, like a beacon.

His legs bring him to Izzy’s lab. Upon the threshold, he draws in a deep, sudden breath and it almost whistles; it tastes of stale panic. He holds it in his chest for a long moment, long enough for it to begin to hurt and for his vision to swim, and then he lets it all out in one fell rush, reaching for the handle of the door in the same instance.

If there’s one person who can tell him what he needs to hear -

There’s soft music playing in the lab, all romantic and whimsical and completely wrong. It makes every hair on Alec’s arms stand on end, and his gut is clenched so tight that he can barely walk without looking like he’s limping.
“Iz?” he calls out. His eyes immediately search for a chair, caught by the abrupt need to sit down. Something doesn’t feel right, but he knows panic attacks, and this is not that. This is too slow, too strange, too at-odds with the way he was feeling not an hour ago, safe and warm and with Magnus.

This feels like - like he’s piloting a body that’s not his and it’s not quite doing what he’s telling it to do, each step a fraction too long. Every movement he makes is too stiff. Every noise too loud in his ear.

Whiplash. It feels like whiplash. The back of his neck may not be smarting, but he’s stunned. Sunspots in his vision. That’s what this is.

“Alec? Is that you?” comes Izzy’s voice. She sounds too peppy and energetic for nearing two in the morning, but she’s always been the sort of person to forget to sleep because she’s too busy studying. Alec can hear her heels clicking on the floor before she appears in front of him, draped in her lab coat and with a welder’s mask pushed up on her forehead. In her hand, she’s definitely holding a blow torch.

“Hey,” she says, breaking into a smile when she sees him. Alec offers a weak one back. “I didn’t know if you were coming tonight, but good thing you did - I have a new toy to show you and I think you’re gonna like it.”

She disappears again, but Alec doesn’t follow. His feet won’t move.

No, it’s more than that. He can’t summon the energy to move his feet himself, and he remains rooted to the spot.

Izzy doesn’t seem to mind, hurrying back with a quiver of arrows in her hand. The fletchling is different to his usual arsenal: all the feathers are striped with green. Alec squints at her.

“They’re all tipped with fast-release neurotoxin,” Izzy explains proudly. “Not enough to kill someone, but definitely enough to maim them and stop them coming after you. Thirty seconds and speech is slurred, five minutes and walking is out of the question. Neat, huh?”

Alec smiles thinly at her again, reaching out to run his fingers through the fletchling, but he can’t feel the tickle of it through his gloves, not as he wants it.
“When did you have time to make these?” he asks.

The question makes Izzy preen as she hands the quiver over to him and swans back to her lab bench, pulling herself up on a stool. She abandons her welder’s mask and blowtorch in favour of her microscope.

“Oh, in between projects,” she says, “It was nice downtime in between fixing up Jace’s new prototype glider and dealing with Victor’s inane comments about how his suit is chafing him where the sun doesn’t shine.”

Alec shakes his head. “Downtime,” he huffs, but his smile hardly lingers. He slings the new quiver over his shoulder to join his other one. “You’re insane, Iz.”

“No, I’m an engineer,” she retorts. “The difference is a PhD.”

Silence fills the lab then, but it doesn’t settle Alec as it should. He’s spent so many nights at peace here, sat alone with Izzy in her lab, neither of them obligated to talk; he’s always been happy enough to exist, solely, in her presence and listen to her music as she works with a hum on her lips.

Tonight, however -

God, he needs to sit down.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Alec looks up sharply at her question, plucked like a taut bowstring. But Izzy doesn’t turn to look at him, peering down the lens of her microscope with one eye shut.

Alec is glad she can’t see his face behind his mask, although it’s never stopped her reading him like a book before. Tonight, he’s visible. Too goddamn visible.

“I’m fine,” he lies, “It’s nothing.”
“That’s not an answer I’m going to accept, and you know it.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say,” Alec grumbles, swaying a bit as he stands. He hears Izzy click her tongue as she hops down from her stool and puts away her microscope slide.

“You’re sleep deprived as all Hell and your eyes aren’t focusing on anything,” she says. “You can hardly stand. You’re exhausted, and -” She pauses for dramatic effect, glancing back over her shoulder with a flick of her hair. She looks him up and down. “You’re wearing the same expression you had the first time mom let Max go out on a mission. Like you want to bundle him up and hide him from the world and rip off his mask, and then your own.”

She’s so on the nose that he almost hates her ... except it’s Izzy, and he could never, because there’s no-one he loves or admires more in the world.

But it’s too hard to tell the truth; words fail him, as they often do. If he speaks, things never come out as he wants, always too blunt, too honest, too raw, too much.

Alec staggers over to Izzy’s vacated stool and slumps down in it with a drawn-out sigh. Leaning forward, he rests his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands, but the pulse in his temples won’t go away, however hard he scrunches his eyes closed.

He can’t explain this feeling. Explaining it requires knowing what it is, finding words that carry the same weight, and here he is, empty handed.

*How does he explain that the person he has to be to do the things that they must do isn’t someone he knows how to be?* he thinks. *How does he explain that every time he wears a mask, he feels like an imposter, and every time he takes it off, he feels like an imposter again there too?*

When he opens his eyes, he smells Izzy’s perfume. He sees her shoes where she’s stood in front of him, her hands on her hips. He can tell by her stance that she’s not in the mood for bullshit; he can read her just as well as she reads him.

“Say whatever you need to say,” she says, “It’s me, Alec. It doesn’t matter if it takes you five minutes or five years, but it’s me. I know you. I know when you’re stressed out, I know when something’s eating you. You can tell me.”
She grabs her desk chair and wheels it over to him, sliding her arm around Alec’s shoulders as she sits. There should be some dent to his pride, Alec thinks, to be comforted by his baby sister and be told the things he wishes he could believe, but there’s not and never will be. This is Izzy. She’s the one who patches up his scrapes and bruises, not the one who causes them.

The one person he trusts most in the world.

She’s too small for him to lean his head on her shoulder, but he rests his temple against the crown of her hair, and she rubs her hand up and down his arm, and the words escape him on a breath.

“Iz, I … I don’t know how to be Sentinel anymore.”

Izzy squeezes him a little tighter; she’s warm, skin and bone and all things real. “What do you mean?” she asks, “You’re great at what you do. Best in Idris, that’s for sure.”

“No what I mean,” Alec mutters. He closes his eyes again; he needs her to understand the dichotomy that exists between Sentinel and Alec. He needs her to tell him that he’s not gone mad with it. “The things that Idris does, that they ask us to do … I don’t know if I know how to do those things anymore. I’m not … that person.”

“No. You’re not.”

Alec pulls away abruptly.

But Izzy’s iron-dark stare is fierce. Adamant.

“You’re not that person, Alec,” she insists. “I know you’re not. Nor am I, not really. Those are the people mom and dad want us to be, but they’re not us.” She twists on her chair to face him and gathers both his hands into hers. His fingers feel so much bigger than hers, but her grip is tight. “So, why don’t we just leave? Idris doesn’t need us. Idris doesn’t deserve us. It doesn’t deserve you.”

“Iz, we can’t just leave.”
“Why not?”

“It’s our responsibility,” Alec fumbles, “The city, everyone who lives here - the Circle - Mom and dad need our help -”

*Family*, he thinks. *Family, duty, honor -*

This again. His head is so mixed up, he just keeps spinning in circles; he doesn’t know which way is up anymore. The ground might as well be above his head, the sky slick along the soles of his boots.

He groans, prying one of his hands from Izzy’s to press at the pain in his temples.

“I don’t know what it is you want to hear,” Izzy says, and then her voice softens, “You can’t have it both ways, and I know you care about Idris, I really do, but - Alec, it doesn’t care nearly as much about you in return. You know that too.”

“Iz -”

Izzy sighs, rolling her eyes much in the same way he does. She pulls her hands back. “You’re so stubborn,” she whispers. Perhaps it’s pitiful. Alec doesn’t like that. “You need to do what makes you happy.”

Alec doesn’t know how to reply.

He doesn’t know how to reply because he *doesn’t know what makes him happy* and that’s a tragic realisation to be making at any age. So much of his life has been dictated by training, by running himself into the ground to keep up with Jace, by blood and sweat and tears. He listens to briefs from his parents without asking any questions, his head bowed down and his body made-Kevlar pushing forward -

Sentinel doesn’t get to be happy. *Who is he fucking kidding?*

*But …*
There are things. There are things that make Alec happy, things which Sentinel doesn’t get to bleed all over. Swift moments, flashes of an alternate future, quiet words with deeper meanings. Truth, justice, a stolen good deed.

Golden Girls reruns with Jace at two in the morning. Simon’s indomitable cheer even on the rainiest of afternoons. Magnus’ pen leaking ink onto his lower lip as he taps it against his mouth in deep thought -

_Magnus._

Alec can feel his honour and his dignity falling through his empty hands like sand, and neither he or Izzy are there to catch it all. He feels it crumbling amongst the briefest desire to put those happy endings before the safety of everyone else around him.

What becomes of the man who puts himself before protecting the innocent? What becomes of the man who doesn’t try to stop the likes of Valentine and the Circle, who move other people’s hands with nothing more than words and take away someone else’s sense of autonomy?

What becomes of that man? Oh, he can’t live with himself.

Alec looks at Izzy again, but her expression says enough. She knows he’s difficult to reason with; the ball and chain around his ankle weigh him down, and she knows - _she must know_ - that he can’t be rid of it, whatever hopeful things she might say to him in comfort.

A knock on the door behind them makes them both turn. Underhill peeks his head in, momentarily glancing at the state of Alec, rain-damp and masked, but at least he has the grace to look a little sheepish at disturbing a private moment.

“Hey, Alec, Izzy,” he says, and Alec feels preemptively exhausted, all the way down to his bones. “They’re asking for you both upstairs.”

Izzy shoots Alec a look. She would never judge him unfairly, but right now she’s staring at him with an expectation that’s just too much, and Alec already has cities worth of that balanced upon his shoulders.
Alec sighs, slipping off his stool. The feeling has yet to return to his legs; he stands a little shakily.

“We’ll be up in a minute,” he nods to Underhill. “Thanks.”

Arkangel and Muse are already in his parents’ office, and that should be enough of a sign that this is not going to go well. Jace is silently fuming and Clary is red in the face, but both of them have been shouted into silence; they stand in front of Robert’s desk with their heads hung and shame rippling down their spines like gutter water.

Robert sits behind the great oak table with his fingers steepled beneath his chin. Maryse is perched on the corner of the desk, her mouth pursed with something sour. Her eyes flick straight to Alec and Izzy as they slip through the door. There’s no point trying not to make a sound.

Alec hates this room. He only has bad memories of it; the feelings it stirs in his stomach are always guilt, shame, failure, and that has left a mighty bruise on him over the years, one that is mottled and brown and begs to be touched. He settles into parade rest between Clary and Izzy and raises his chin as high as he dares.

Maryse says nothing. It’s deliberate, letting them stew, letting them know who’s in charge, letting them know that she’s disappointed, and maybe that’s worse. Alec’s only ever wanted to do right by her - she’s his mother, he’s the eldest, surely it’s his duty - but sometimes it feels like he’ll never hit the mark.

Alec watches as she takes a deep steadying breath. Her voice will be measured. She’s never anything but prim and proper. Oh, this is going to be bad.

“I’m taking the four of you off the patrol roster.”

Alec’s heart plummets. Jace’s, on the other hand, shoots out of his mouth.

“You’re not serious!” he barks. “That’s not fucking fair -” Robert’s eyes snap to him, and the
ferocity in his glare has Jace clamping his mouth shut.

“I’m perfectly serious,” continues Maryse, looking at them all in turn. She looks at Alec last. She lingers on him, a second longer than the rest, and then her eyes flit away, forever sharp. “I told you before that I was being lenient in letting you do your own thing. Answering 911 calls, tailing the police, getting involved in … messy situations. People are noticing. It’s dangerous.”

“For Idris’ reputation, you mean,” Clary seethes, her cheeks puffed out.

“Yes,” says Maryse. Alec is not surprised that she doesn’t deny it. “Having you run around out there like a bunch of … vigilantes - that’s not savory. We need to think about our image now, more than ever. I can’t have you engaging in car chases or dealing out your own idea of justice on petty criminals in alleyways late at night.” With that, she looks again at Alec. Alec remains silent, ever the dutiful soldier, hands clasped behind his back. “- or chasing whispers of Valentine Morgenstern down the rabbit hole. But this is about more than that. This is about your safety.”

Alec can hardly blame her. The work they do is dangerous and she knows it. She’s seen the reports of all the murdered vigilantes, and she knows they’re one step away from the next dead body being a super from Idris, being one of them, someone that she loves.

And Alec knows it too. He thinks, briefly, of that man he pinned to the wall of the alleyway with his arrow, that night he found Magnus. He wonders if that man went straight to the police. He thinks, briefly, of that’s what triggered this, and somehow, all of it is Alec’s fault.

_But benching them -_

_Taking away the only thing Alec has that makes him feel like he’s repenting for all the dirty deeds he’s done -_

“I only want the four of you on sanctioned activities from now on,” says Maryse. “No leaving your posts, no taking detours on the way home. I want you to turn in your police radios too. Isabelle, I’m moving you to oversee Raj and Lydia. Muse will be partnering with Victor from now on. Arkangel and Sentinel will be focused on the Herondale security detail for the foreseeable future.”

“Mom -”
Alec doesn’t realise he’s said it, that one damning word, until everyone is looking at him, waiting for him to say more. He doesn’t have more to say. Anything he says will sound pathetic.

He says it anyway.

“People are dying, mom.” You have to let us help them. You have to let me.

Maryse tells him that it’s foolish. And it is, it really is; Alec knows it’s hopeless, chasing someone who can’t be caught to find justice for people nobody cares about, risking his life in the process. Alec sees the fear in her eyes, seeping through her judicial anger, and he feels that very particular pang of dread one feels when it seems as if a parent might cry.

She doesn’t. She’s too composed for that, but this is the most love he has felt from her in a long time, and that winds him. She just wants him safe, and to her, safe means no freedom. He understands, in a horrible and twisted way. It’s logical. It makes sense.

Jace and Clary try to protest: Jace starts arguing, his hackles raised, his arms folded across his chest in seething distaste, his lip pulled up into a sneer; and Clary insists that they can’t spend all their time and all their power only helping the people who can pay.

Maryse hears none of it - “if you’re not following protocol, how will anyone know where you are when you get in trouble?” - and then she turns on Izzy, scolding Izzy for turning off their trackers and allowing them to run around off-grid without the ability to get in contact in a hurry, because of course Maryse has noticed that too. Izzy scowls, and tells their mother that she’s not a fool: she knows where everyone is at all times, she has a plan for every conceivable emergency, but then Robert speaks up, at last, and tells her in his monotone voice that this is “not about that, Isabelle”. 

Alec understands every word, he really does, but it still stings when Maryse tells them again that they’re all suspended until she commands otherwise.

Jace storms out, Clary hot on his heels, but Isabelle stands firm, turning her attention on their father. Alec slips from the room when Izzy starts pleading her case, and he leans up against the wall outside, letting his head tip back as the shouting starts, both Izzy and their mother competing for who can be the loudest.

He hits his head back against the wall with too much force; it smarts; his eyes start to water.
Maryse is right, this is the smart decision, it has to be, but -

God, it feels so wrong. And Alec hates himself, hates the person he has to be in this mask, who has no say in his own damn self, so he tears it off his face and scrunches it up into a ball in his fist.

Because Alec, Alec beneath the mask, wants to march back in there and tell them all how it has to be. What they must do. How he’s not going to take no for an answer.

His powers are his. They’re his, they’re Alec’s, only he gets to decide what to do with them.

But Sentinel and Alec cannot coexist without the cost of something terrible. This, he knows.

Chapter End Notes

How long is too long for a single chapter, you ask? 38,000 words? Fight me.

(No, please. Please do fight me. Don't let me do this again, it takes so long to edit.)

This chapter is a lot of conversations but I'm gonna make up for that next chapter ... because chapter 7 accelerates to one hundred miles an hour and there's no slowing down after this. Not that Magnus is paying much attention to the fact this is meant to be a slow burn ... he wants some romance, who can blame him, their lives are miserable.

Chapter title is derivative of binary code and logic gates because I'm a nerd but also because Alec is suffering a real bad identity crisis and desperately needs help. Also last third hasn't been beta read so all typos are my own!

Thank you so much for all the feedback from last time! I can't express how much it helps to read people's thought and feelings on this fic, as everyone has a different take on the moral issues and it's so interesting!

Visit me on tumblr and shout in my inbox!

I'm also on Twitter if you want to come chat about the fic ... and boy, do I love talking about this fic. Tweet as you read with the hashtag #FICacoldnight! :D

Please leave a kudos if you made it to the end, and drop me a comment with your thoughts, your favourite line, your hopes for what will happen next, your advice for poor old Alec ... I would be forever grateful for it! If you want an alert next time there's an update, please hit that subscribe button!
Until next time ... in which Alec comes face to face with the person setting these fires, and of course he's not Sentinel when it happens. Luckily, Nightlock is in the neighbourhood ...
Chapter Summary

The world shudders.

And God - Alec has never seen Nightlock like this.

Alec’s always known he’s powerful, but not this powerful, not surrounded on all sides by rippling fire, not almost as horrifying as the pyrokinetic himself. The air crackles with licking flames, and even Alec can feel the thrum; he can only imagine how it must be pounding through Nightlock’s veins, an endless, untapped supply of energy he can transmute to kinetic force, coiled in his very fingertips, volatile and immeasurable and dangerous.

Nightlock is dangerous.

And he’s here to save them. Save Alec.

Chapter Notes

Alec has a run in with the pyrokinetic. Sentinel has gone missing. And Nightlock meets a beautiful man in an alleyway on a particularly terrible night.

&&&

Tweet along with #FICacoldnight!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Stranger, palpable

echo, here is my hand, filled with blood ... "

- Ocean Vuong, Thanksgiving 2006

“One piping hot coffee, extra sugar, extra cream,” Simon says, placing a styrofoam cup down on Alec’s lunch tray. “What? You look like you need it.”
Alec’s eyes briefly flick up to Simon, but he doesn’t really see him. A phantom pain curls through Alec’s temples, enough to make his brow twitch, and the yellow light of the canteen does nothing to help: he knows fatigue intimately, the way it can make him arms and legs feel like slush, a feeling he’s grown up with.

He grimaces, exhaling heavily through his nose as Simon drags out the chair opposite with a screech and sits down without so much as being asked. Simon starts unwrapping his packed lunch with greedy glee.

A sharp twinge fragments through Alec’s forehead, spreading like lightning through the bridge of his nose and lancing down his jaw. He flinches away from the light and from Simon’s obliviousness, and by closing his eyes for a moment, rearranges himself into a resemblance of a human being, when the truth is he’s never felt further.

It’s been nearly a week since Alec was benched. Since Idris suspended him, since his mother said:

‘I’m taking the four of you off the patrol roster.’

And it should be a good thing. He hasn’t worn Sentinel’s mask, hasn’t picked up his bow, hasn’t counted his arrows in seven days. There have been no more ruined churches to step into, no more bodies burned in dark alleyways. Alec hasn’t missed any calls because there haven’t been any calls - Robert demanded his police radio from him, and Maryse had looked at him with so much scorn that he shouldn’t want it back.

It should be good and it should be easy. No longer having to be Sentinel should be what he wants ... but it’s not: it’s not easy at all.

He’s wanted Sentinel gone for so long, and now that’s he’s lost him, he finds himself unmoored, untethered. Alec has been dislodged in the shake-up, as if Sentinel was the one thing left keeping Alec’s only sense of identity bundled up inside his body.

‘People are dying, mom. You have to let us help them. You have to let me.’

Despondency gnaws at the betters parts of him, the worse parts long since swallowed up.
And it must be evident on his face if Simon has noticed.

“Thanks,” Alec mutters, curling his hand around the coffee and sliding it closer. He takes a tentative sip, but it’s painfully sweet just as he likes it. Simon is the only one brave enough to make it with as many dollops of creamer as Alec likes. He’s not embarrassed by the weird looks he gets at the coffee station, as Alec is.

Alec eyes him skeptically from across the table. Simon unwraps a sandwich that looks like it could induce a heart attack – but it doesn’t seem to deter Simon at all as he takes an enormous, messy bite, ketchup smearing across his chin. Alec pushes his own sad salad around his plate with his fork.

“So,” Simon says, “What’s going on?”

“I can’t understand you with your mouth full,” Alec deadpans.

Simon takes another bite which he swallows without chewing. “I said, what’s going on with you? You’re in a mood. A worse mood than usual. And those are pretty terrible, dude, I gotta say.”

“I’m not in a mood.”

“Yeah, okay, whatever you say, man,” says Simon. “But like - yesterday morning I straight up walked into one of the girls from finance and her papers went everywhere but you weren’t looking, I didn’t even get an eye roll. I humiliated myself in the middle of the office and I didn’t even get an eye roll, Alec. All week, you’ve had a face like your grandma died, and I - oh God, your grandma didn’t actually die, did she? I’m so sorry-”

“I don’t have a grandmother,” Alec replies, flat. “And it’s none of your business. So you can leave it.”

Alec turns his attention back to his salad, scraping the prongs of his fork against his plate. One day, he thinks, he will challenge Simon to remain quiet for a whole five minutes, but somehow he knows that’s a bet he’d win far too easily.

Simon barely manages thirty seconds before he speaks again.
“If I guess right, will you tell me?”

“No.”

“Okay, so, I’m thinking it’s not a breakup,” Simon continues, regardless, “Because I know for a fact you’re somehow as tragically single as the rest of us mere mortals, and if you were dating someone, we both know who that would be and as if Magnus would ever want to break up with you, have you seen the way he -”

“Do you understand what *be quiet* means?”

“So, now I’m thinking it could have something to do with Jace? I know he usually puts you in a shitty mood - which I totally understand by the way, he’s probably the most annoying person I’ve ever met in my life - but that’s usually a I’m-so-done-with-the-world sort of mood? And not a - well, this is not that, so maybe it’s something to do with Izzy? I haven’t seen her in a while, is she okay-”

“Isabelle is fine,” Alec grits out. “Simon.”

“Oh, that’s good, that’s really good - but if it’s not sibling drama, then it’s probably the parentals, am I right?”

Evidently, something twitches in Alec’s expression that gives the game away. Simon’s face lights up in an *aha!* moment.

“There we go!” he says, far too joyously for someone profiting off Alec’s misery. “Did you have a fight with your folks?”

_Not really_, Alec muses, at the same time as he thinks, *It’s far more than that*, but he’s not about to tell Simon, of all people, anything about that. He’s not mad at him for asking, not per se, but exasperation and fatigue have made a home in the hollow of his chest.

Talking about it means acknowledging it, which means accepting that it’s real, that he feels it and it’s ugly. Talking about it feels like a grander effort than it’s worth.
“It’s nothing,” Alec says, and that’s something he’s said far too much lately. He gives up on his salad, dropping his fork onto his plate, but making sure to grab his coffee. “I have to get back to work.”

“Okay!” Simon says, far too cheerily, “I’ll see you later, then.”

His tenacity is exhausting.

Simon isn’t the only one who notices.

Alec hasn’t seen Magnus much this week, and when he has, Magnus has been busy, frantic in that way he gets when he’s taken on a little too much work but will never admit it. He juggles too much work when he’s trying to not think about something else, and that’s something to which Alec can definitely relate.

They manage to carve out some space in the evening. On this evening, however – and it should be nice, the quiet companionship devoid of small talk, the croon of Freddie in the background where Magnus is playing his new cassette – Alec’s mind is wandering and his eyes are dragging across the page in front of him. He’s not absorbing anything. He taps his pen on the page and a smudge of blue ink spreads into the corner of the paper. The clock on the wall ticks on. Magnus shifts in his chair, huffing softly as he eases out a crick in his neck.

But Alec’s mask is still the only thing he can think about. His mask, Sentinel’s duty, Herondale’s under-the-table dealings, Nightlock’s disappointment, his mother’s hidden fear, all the people he must be letting down -

The want he has not to be Sentinel anymore -

- and the answering need he has to run back into the arms of the very thing that’s hurt him all these years.
It’s all a damn contradiction.

How is that remotely fair?

Magnus sits at his desk, reading through a pile of police transcripts that arrived in an unmarked envelope this morning. Alec is across from him, a number of witness statements spread out across the table, although he’s sure he’s read none of them. He has a pen clenched in his hand, a notepad under the heel of his palm that is decidedly blank, and a vague notion that Magnus asked him to highlight every instance of a particular name, but he can’t remember what that name is for the life of him.

The rustle of papers brings Alec back to the present and he reaches for the closest document, trying in vain to refocus his eyes on the text. Something about a witness seeing two men in masks loitering around the back of her bodega ... or so Alec thinks, because he makes it two lines in before zoning back out again, and then he sighs.

“Alexander,” Magnus says, not looking up from his work, “If you don’t stop sighing, I’m going to have to kill you.”

“That sounds a bit extreme,” says Alec, putting his pen down on the table and massaging his temples with his fingers.

“Extreme, but necessary and effective.” Magnus’ eyes scan across the page he’s reading, his lips twisting into a small frown. “It’s either that, or you tell me what’s got you so ... hot and bothered.”

“M just tired,” Alec says, and it’s only half a lie. He gestures vaguely with his hand, trying to summon words from the air. “It’s, uh - been a long week.”

“Unfortunately it’s not over yet,” Magnus remarks, still reading. Alec watches him for a moment - lets himself watch for a moment - following the way Magnus’ eyes flick so quickly from word to word, how he drums his fingers absently on the desk, and how he works his jaw as if holding a sour thought in his mouth.

Alec sighs again - he doesn’t mean to - and is about to bury himself back in his own work when Magnus abruptly tosses the papers in his hands onto the pile, and stands. He turns to his file cabinet where his whiskey and two glasses rest.
He expertly decants whiskey into one of the glasses, which he slides towards Alec using his pointer finger. Alec’s eyes fixate upon Magnus’ ring, the silver signet embossed with the letter B, as Magnus settles against the side of the desk. Magnus is close enough for Alec to touch, should he wish to.

Magnus pours himself the other whiskey. Over the lip of his glass, he says, “Do you care about how I feel?”

Alec frowns. It’s a trick question, but he can only give an honest answer. “Yes,” he says, “Obviously.”

If Magnus smiles, he hides it well behind his glass, and it doesn’t last long. Alec gets the impression he’s trying to be serious.

“Then, Alexander, permit me to return the sentiment,” he says, “Something’s troubling you. Talk to me. Is it still the same thing that was worrying you the other night?”

Alec doesn’t want to say a thing. He’s had this exact same conversation with Simon - which was terrible - and with Isabelle too, even though she didn’t quite get it. He doesn’t know how he can explain all the things going on in his head to Magnus, when he can only tell Magnus half of the things he’s feeling. He’s already tried.

Already tried, already failed-

No. No, that’s a lie, and Alec knows it is the moment he thinks it.

Things have shifted; Alec knows they have. Ever since that night he gave Magnus the cassette and they shared Thai food and Magnus held Alec’s hand in both of his - they’ve been different. More genuine, less rehearsed, more … vulnerable, Alec supposes.

But then, as if reading Alec’s mind, Magnus reaches out and Alec stills, his thoughts petering out into smoke. Magnus’ fingers find the collar of Alec’s shirt and flip it over where it’s folded in on itself. A small, while careful smile is cradled in the corner of his mouth. Magnus flattens the fabric with the flat palm of his hand, catching the edge of Alec’s jaw with his fingertips when he pulls back.
Perhaps it’s a spell; Alec has seen stranger things before, things that are far more inexplicable.

“My mother -” he begins, words forming before he can think better. My mother said - she wants me to -

Magnus immediately sets his drink down on the desk and offers Alec his full attention. “Have you fallen out?”

“Yes,” Alec says, “And no. We - she’s not particularly happy with … what I’m doing with my life.” That’s one way to put it.

“Should she really get a say? You’re hardly a child anymore.”

“That doesn’t matter much.”

Magnus frowns thoughtfully. “She doesn’t know about the good work you do here? With me?”

“It’s part of the problem,” Alec replies, “She doesn’t want me to be the one doing it. She wants me to - I don’t know. Come work for her, I guess. Keep me under her thumb, and I - I’m sorry. This is … this is pretty pathetic.”

“It’s not,” Magnus insists. He leans forward, attentive, his expression entirely serious. “What is it that they do? Your parents?”

“… Civil service.” Half a lie.

“Civil service,” Magnus remarks, taking another sip of his whiskey, a slight turn to his lip in distaste. The glass leaves a water ring on the desk but Alec’s gaze doesn’t stray for long. “Well, I for one can’t imagine you there.”

“You can’t?”
Magnus shrugs noncommittally, but there’s something in his eyes that seems intense.

“I can understand why others would,” he says, “You’re focused and organised and enjoy bureaucracy. You want to help people. It’s one of your most admirable character traits.”

“I -”

“But, I know you - or at least, I know enough of you to realise this has been getting under your skin. You also want to help people, but you also want to do what is right, and I dare say there’s a difference, however subtle that might be. And giving yourself over to that - what your parents expect of you - would cause you to deviate from that path.” He pauses for breath. “Am I wrong?”

Alec blinks, and his tongue is too heavy for his mouth, and so his words come out too clumsy and too candid.

“- how do you do that?”

Magnus tilts his head and smiles, running his finger around the rim of his whiskey glass. “Do what?” he asks.

See me, Alec thinks. See right through me like I’m glass, like I’m clear sky, like masks don’t matter one tiny bit.

“I don’t know,” Alec says instead, turning his eyes to the desk, needing to keep his fidgeting fingers busy with something - a pen, a piece of paper, anything will do. “You just - you always know what I’m thinking before I’ve said it myself.” He laughs to himself, once, and it’s a little bitter. “It’s frustrating.”

“For someone so honest with others, you’re remarkably unable to be honest with yourself,” Magnus says. He nudges the untouched glass of whiskey on the desk towards Alec. “Drink?”

Alec grimaces. “You know I don’t like that stuff,” he says.

“I do,” Magnus says, “But it’s worth it for your facial expressions alone. Allow me the
indulgence.”

Alec frowns at the whiskey glass, but the fight in him fades quietly, hardly a shadow to begin with. Sighing, he takes a sip, nose immediately wrinkling up, the hot burn of oak and malt down the back of his throat entirely unpleasant.

“Also good for taking the mind off other things,” Magnus says, amused. He lifts his glass and clinks it against Alec’s, and then drains the rest. He’s all too quick to pour himself a refill.

Alec pauses. “Is there something you’re trying to take your mind off too?”

“Is there another reason people drink?” Magnus quips, but then he surrenders. His honesty has Alec sitting up straighter. “A friend of mine is missing. It’s been over a week since I last heard from him, and with all these suspected sightings of the Circle -”

Alec stares up at him. “Magnus, why didn’t you say anything?”

Magnus hums, and he moves to take a sip of his refilled drink, but then he stops. The rim of the glass presses against his lips again, forming an indentation.

Alec fights hard to drag his eyes away from Magnus’ mouth to Magnus’ eyes, and it’s a fight he wins, just about. Once there, he searches Magnus’ expression for something he recognises.

It’s always a lot, the things he reads therein.

There are layers and layers behind every expression, and however much Alec tries to peel them back, there’s always something more, something that draws him deeper, something more incomprehensible beneath: threads of sadness and longing, fire and drive, compassion; and this one last thing that Alec never can place, but which looks a bit like admiration.

It doesn’t dampen Alec’s want for trying, though. If there’s more to be found, more to be learned about Magnus, he wants to know it all.

“I suppose,” Magnus says at last, swirling his drink and staring into the vortex. “I didn’t say
anything for exactly the same reason as you.”

*I can’t be honest with myself*. It goes unsaid, but loud enough.

Alec finds himself nodding as he takes another sip of his whiskey. His heart still hurts, torn in two as it is, but it’s numbed somehow, by the strangest sense of solidarity. The remnant warmth of Magnus’ hand against his collar lingers, tickles at his skin, makes him flush up the back of his neck, but perhaps Magnus’ words are warmer.

They’re not happy words, not always. Nothing ever is.

But when Magnus smiles at him, sympathetic, Alec feels like he’s understood. He’s been seen.

Jace doesn’t take well to his grounding, but that shouldn’t come as a surprise to anyone at Idris. His foolhardiness is both his greatest asset and his greatest detriment.

Jace employs both Underhill and Izzy’s help (and the ability to pick locks that he learned from watching a movie the night before) to sneak his wings out of storage and before the week is out, he’s back on unsanctioned patrol.

No-one tells Alec at first. He finds out when he drags himself to headquarters - where he’s acting as man-in-the-chair for Victor, who has never been anything less than an arrogant prick - and finds a very haggard and exasperated looking Isabelle. She’s in front of her computer, watching Arkangel on a dozen security monitors as she talks him through rescuing a family from the top floor of a crumbling apartment building. Alec pauses in the doorway to watch, but doesn’t say a word. He’s gone before Izzy ever turns around and notices him there.

It’s easier for Jace, Alec thinks bitterly, because Maryse and Robert are so used to turning a blind eye to his misdeeds. And his good deeds.

The same can’t be said for Alec. He thinks about ducking into his parents’ office and asking,
begging to go back out on the field. Because he hates this: being stuck behind a desk when Victor won’t listen to a word he says, knowing that Nightlock is still out there, somewhere, doing what Alec should be doing - but Alec knows the answer his parents will give won’t be a positive one.

*Your duty is to Idris. No-one else. You know this.*

Alec doesn’t miss Sentinel. He doesn’t miss the mask, he doesn’t miss pretending, he doesn’t miss having to split himself in two in order to half-live two separate lives. No longer does he have to sit out on cold, rainy rooftops and risk hypothermia. He won’t have to stare upwards in horror at another blackened church. He gets to go home to his bed early most nights.

And he has to remind himself of all of it, over and over again like a mantra, in order to make himself remember. In order to make himself believe it. He’s never been a convincing liar.

It’s the feeling of limbo that he hates most of all.

He’s not free. The person he’s left with after Sentinel has been stripped away doesn’t have power, doesn’t have agency: he can’t *do* anything. Without his mask, the Alec that remains is only but a shadow, using all sorts of excuses as crutches.

He’s neither here nor there, stuck halfway between the dark underbelly of the city and the far-away dream of the life he always wanted, but he can’t reach for either.

*What do you want?* he asks himself. *What do you need? Do you need Sentinel or not? Do you hate Sentinel or not?*

He wonders if the answers to those two questions are the same or different.

New York descends into autumn with a slow crawl. The trees fade from green to brown to slush in the gutters, and every billboard on every high rise bears either the face of President Bush or the face of the democrat, Clinton, swathed in red, white, and blue. The polls say it’s too close to call,
but the November election looms in the distance, cold wind from the north forewarning its arrival.

It’s been two, maybe three weeks since Alec last put on his mask; he would say that the days are beginning to blur, but that’s a lie. He’s excruciatingly aware of just how many hours it has been since he last picked up his bow and quiver.

He’s been relegated to a desk, pushing paperwork as he tries to organise Herondale’s security roster under his mother’s nose. She’s one of the few Senators yet to declare her support for a Presidential candidate, and it weighs heavy on Alec’s mind. He scans through her finances, through her personnel, through her private meetings and daily timetable, just to see - just to see if there’s anything that might raise a red flag or link to those files he and Jace retrieved - but her records are as clean as a whistle.

His stomach may be uneasy, but at least Alec has something to do; he thinks Clary might be going stir crazy, confined to headquarters and beating the living shit out of every single punching bag she can find. Maryse and Robert, they trust Alec to do the right thing, and they’re willing to overlook Jace doing the wrong thing, but with Clary, they know she’s hot-headed and reckless and gnawing at the bit, and that’s why they’re keeping her on a leash. Alec feels bad for her, like this suspension is somehow his fault and she’s paying the price for it.

And maybe it is, he thinks. Maybe if you hadn’t shot an arrow into that man’s sleeve and saved Magnus that night in the alleyway …

Izzy is kept busy too. Maybe Raj and Lydia need that much help, trying to cover all the ground that Alec and Jace have left untended in their insubordination, but Alec is wary of each and every security camera in the hallways of Idris, an extension of his parents’ eye watching Izzy’s every move. Alec barely finds time to talk to her, let alone ask her if she’s heard anything on the police frequencies that might of interest.

“Of interest?” she asks him, as they pass by each other in the hallway late one night, him on his way to Victor, and her on her way to hand in a field report to their parents. There are grey circles beneath her eyes, the hallmark of one too many late nights. “Like what?”

Alec just shrugs. He doesn’t really know what to say; Circles, fires, dead vigilantes, it doesn’t matter. He doesn’t really know who might be listening. Somehow, anything and everything said between these white walls ends up upstairs.

Izzy squints at him for a long moment, pursing her lips into a thin line. Then, she says, “I haven’t heard anything. Things have been quiet.” A pause. “Would you want me to tell you if they
weren’t?”

It’s a trick question. She doesn’t mean it maliciously - she never would - but it’s meant to trip him up. If he answers yes, she’ll know that she was right and Alec isn’t the loyal soldier he pretends he is.

And if he answers no - well, Alec doesn’t want to imagine the disappointment in her eyes.

So, the answer is nothing. He lets the silence speak for itself. It’s likely very damning.

Magnus is restless too. He’s never been one to sit still, not as long as Alec has known him, some months now, but this is different. The buzzing that exists inside Alec’s head seems to be present in Magnus too, and Alec can see it. He can see it in the way Magnus’ mouth tips downwards, or his fingers drum on the desk, or his eyes glaze over when he’s reading, disappearing somewhere far away, somewhere Alec is not.

“I finished checking those reports Luke sent over,” Alec says, on one night of many. The heating is on too high in Magnus’ office in an attempt to ward off the cold, but it has them both stripped down to their shirt sleeves. Alec has long since lost his tie and he watches Magnus fidget with his suspenders where they cut uncomfortably into his broad shoulders. “Magnus?”

Magnus is not paying attention. The radio is humming in the corner of the room, spitting out static over traffic reports and weather forecasts, but Alec can tell that Magnus is listening intently. Alec glances at Magnus’ legal pad, but finds his last sentence unfinished, a blot of dark purple ink upon the page.

He has written something that Alec doesn’t understand: AA, twelve o’clock, fly-by at Brooklyn Bridge. Alec thought he had been drafting a follow-up article on the recently-concluded City vs. Fell indictment. Alec was wrong.

“Magnus?”
This time, Magnus snaps to attention with gentle, “hmm?”. His severe focus blooms into a smile, but Alec cannot return it. No, instead, Alec frowns.

“I finished making notes on those police reports Luke sent us,” Alec repeats, gesturing as his neat pile of paper. “I highlighted any dates that matched appearances of our pyrokinetic, like you said.” He pauses, biting the inside of his cheek. “You’re distracted.”

Magnus glances down at his legal pad and Alec sees the briefest tightening of his jaw. Magnus rips the top page away and crumples it up into a ball in the palm of his hand, tossing it over his shoulder without looking. It misses the trash can.

Alec narrows his eyes, but then the radio crackles again, announcing the nine o’clock news. Magnus’ shoulders tense. He fights the desire to turn towards the radio to listen.

Alec says nothing, not until the headlines have been read out, and Magnus sighs softly to himself, a disappointed shake to his head.

“What are you waiting to hear?”

Magnus doesn’t look up, pulling one of his ring binders towards himself and flipping through the pages. “Nothing in particular,” he says, “More bad news. Another fire, perhaps. It seems inevitable at this point; I only wish I knew when it might happen.”

Me too, Alec thinks, but still, his throat feels tight. He watches Magnus a moment longer: the stiff grip he has on his pen, the white in his knuckles, the restless way in which he thumbs his ring on his free hand.

His friend is missing, Alec remembers. That’s what he said.

“Magnus-”

“I do wonder when it’ll be someone else I know. When one of the friends I haven’t seen in a while becomes a friend I’ll never see again because they were caught in the wrong place at the wrong time,” Magnus interrupts, before Alec can finish forming his name. His dark stare flashes to Alec. “I bought a new police scanner for my apartment, you know. Just so I can listen to it before I go to bed, if only to give me peace of mind. Leaving all of this at the office is getting more and more
difficult, so it seems.”

Alec knows that feeling too. Fear swirls in the back of his mind that the next dead super will be Veil or Wolfsbane or even Nightlock, and Sentinel will be not be there to help them when it matters.

He wonders who it is that Magnus is scared to lose, or who he fears he’s already lost.

Maybe he doesn’t even know. It’s as he says: you might not ever know your friend moonlights as a vigilante until it’s too fucking late.

“It’s been weeks since the last fire,” Alec says low. “Maybe that’s a good thing. Maybe it’s stopped.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“No,” Alec whispers, “No, I don’t. But I -”

“One man stops killing vigilantes and another will take his place,” says Magnus, “It’s the cycle of violence, of hatred towards those that are different. It never stops, just goes round and around again and again. There will always be something.”

“And always people who need protecting,” Alec mumbles. He reaches for another folder, this one full of newspaper clippings that he needs to look through. “Your missing friend -?”

“Still missing,” says Magnus, but then he corrects himself. “An acquaintance, really, more than anything. I have no way of getting in contact with him. I never asked.” He smiles ruefully to himself. “So now I’m relegated to listening to police reports, wondering if I’ll hear his name. I’ve even started visiting a few of his old haunts, hoping I would maybe run into him, but -” Magnus huffs. He sounds vulnerable. “He was a good man and I was quite fond of him.”

“Magnus, I’m so sorry. I wish I could - is there anything I can do -?”

Magnus raises his eyebrows and laughs, softly, bitterly, but it’s not at Alec’s expense. They’re both
helpless when it really matters.

That’s what Alec understands now.

And if Sentinel were here, would he be able to find Magnus’ missing friend?

The question goes unanswered. Still, it tastes bitter and acerbic as it slides down Alec’s throat, only to be swallowed up so that Alec no longer has to think it. It’s the only way he knows how to cope.

Bottle up the feelings. Ignore, ignore, ignore-

If Sentinel were here, if Alec could promise Magnus something meaningful like his service and his duty and the very power in his fingertips, would he be able to make Magnus smile again?

“I don’t know what else we can do but this,” Magnus whispers, gesturing at the mess of paperwork strewn across his tabletop. He nudges Alec’s foot beneath the desk, hooking the back of Alec’s ankle in a move that is supposed to be reassuring, comforting. He offers Alec a thin smile and fragile colour blooms in Alec’s cheeks.

“Sometimes,” Alec says boldly, “It feels like I … like I can’t - nevermind.”

“Tell me.”

“Like I can’t breathe.”

It’s a feeling not unlike drowning: a slow, panicked death, but instead of a sea or a river charging towards its own end, Alec has the puddles in the gutter. As it turns out, a millimetre of standing water is enough, and a man’s hand is on the back of his head, forcing him under.

Sometimes, that hand is Sentinel’s. Other times, it belongs to their faceless pyrokinetic, or to his parents, or to Jace.

“Alec,” Magnus whispers to him, “Alec, listen to me. We can’t protect everyone.” It hurts him to
say. Alec can tell. He can hear the tear in Magnus’ words, ripping down the spine, the pain it costs him to admit such a thing to himself. He’s said it to Alec before, but not like this.

I need to try, Alec thinks. He shakes his head, blinking back the sudden heat in his eyes. He clenches his jaw until his teeth hurt and he pulls the file of newspaper clippings back towards himself.

The feat, laid out before him, feels Atlasian. He can’t see the magnitude of it for the curve of the horizon, but he can still feel its weight.

Alec stays late that night. He knows Victor will be pissed about missing his man in the chair, but that part of Alec is numbed now, exposed to the cold; he is distant to it.

He doesn’t step out of the office until gone midnight and there’s frost already forming on the cars pulled up on the sidewalk. The streets are never empty in New York, but in the dark it also feels immaterial, especially at street level. Alec feels inconsequential, a small footnote in an ever expanding hallucination.

He pulls his overcoat tight around him and starts walking towards the subway. The wind licks his ankles and the nape of his neck, a shiver wriggling down his spine that he can’t call back. A red sports car hurtles past him, loud music flooding from its open window; the blast of its horn bounces off the traffic lights at the intersection. A man on the sidewalk hits him in the shoulder as they pass by and hisses, “watch it”.

Alec stares up at the sky. He feels tired to the bone.

And then, on a rooftop at a distance, he catches the barest shift of the shadows. Fabric moving through the wind - a coat, perhaps, a tall dark shape moving across the roofs, weaving in and out of sight. It’s not something anyone else would notice, not unless they were trained, like Alec, not to let up his guard, but Alec hones in on it with missile-like precision.

He stops, dead still, on the sidewalk. No-one passing him by bothers to look up at what he’s staring at. They don’t even notice him.
The shape is a person - a man, probably, judging by the height and the build - and they’re moving quickly, but not running, in the direction of the Brooklyn Bridge. Alec watches as they bound over a fire escape, from one rooftop to the next, and land in a half-crouch.

A super, he realises, tracking them as they go. And it feels so strange, a strangeness he might call jealousy: he doesn’t know who they are, or where they’re going, or what they’re doing under the shadow of night.

No-one knows.

The days blur.

Alec hasn’t seen or heard from Veil, Wolfsbane, or Nightlock in weeks. Sometimes he wonders what they’re doing, if they’re okay, if they’re still alive, and then realises he’ll never know for sure. Not when his days follow the same well-trodden path of waking, working, and wasting hours in the sublevels of headquarters, listening to Victor’s tiresome soliloquies.

Do they think about him? Do they wonder where Sentinel is? Do they worry that he’s gone and gotten himself killed, or do they think he’s finally turned tail and run back to the people shaking the food bowl behind his back?

He wouldn’t blame them if they did. It’s not far from the truth.

But things have been quiet on all fronts. Alec catches snippets of information from Jace as he sneaks back into headquarters after curfew, Jace fooling himself into believing Maryse doesn’t know exactly where he’s been; and Captain Garroway is always a reliable authority on suspicious arsons and unnamed John Does turning up in the gutters; and then there’s Magnus and his web of mysterious sources threaded throughout the city -

- but despite all that, there’s no talk of Valentine, no talk of people cutting their own throats, no talk of strange and inexplicable fires. No talk of the Circle.
Alec should be relieved, but it only makes him feel antsy. Perhaps it’s the reason why he moves his old police radio, the one Maryse doesn’t know about, from his desk at home to his locker at work; he feels better to have it close as he’s rarely at home these days as it is.

He’s in the locker room now, alone and after dark. There’s something to be said for the way the eerie silence can unsettle even him, but something more to be said about the way he feels like he’s running on fumes: he’s already spent a few hours tonight with Magnus, pouring through old blueprints and planning applications of their burned-down church, and he still has some hours to go at headquarters, trying to tune out Victor’s crowing as he holds Alec’s suspension over his head like a guillotine.

But Magnus was in a better mood tonight, he thinks, despite it all, opening up his locker. Magnus has been distracted these last few days, spacing out too much and blinking himself back into reality only when Alec speaks. His missing friend has been weighing on his mind and his playful quips have been replaced by long stares and subdued sighs, the sort that fill Alec with a dreadful melancholy. But tonight, Alec had asked to play the Queen cassette on the tape recorder in the office, and it had made Magnus smile his first proper smile in almost a week.

Alec’s kit bag full of Sentinel’s gear is stuffed at the bottom of the locker, as it always is. He might be off-duty, but he never goes anywhere without it, not willing to be caught unprepared. But this time, he swaps his suit jacket for his winter coat, flicking on his police radio out of habit more than anything.

It hums and spits with static. Alec is inclined to let the white noise fill the silence as he dresses for the rain, but then a dispatcher’s voice croaks into existence.

“... calling all units ... we have a 246 in progress ... corner of fifty-sixth and ... suspect armed ...”

Alec stops, one arm in his coat, and stares at his radio. A nearby patrol car responds, saying they’re in the area, but it gets lost to the static. Alec throws his coat to the ground and thumps his fist hard on the radio, twisting the dial on the box to try and match the frequency again.

After a moment or two of suffocated silence, he finds the dispatcher again.

“... repeat ... 246 ... possible hostage situation ... fifty-sixth and seventh ... proceed with caution ...”
Fuck, Alec thinks, spinning the frequency dial all the way back and grabbing the receiver. He takes one quick look around the locker room, but it’s empty. Magnus is probably the only person left in the building. Alec presses the button down on the top of the radio as he holds it to his mouth. He hasn’t been wearing his coms bud lately, so of course it would come back to bite him in the ass.

“Arkangel,” he hisses into the receiver, trying his best to disguise his voice, “This is Sentinel on emergency frequency, do you copy?”

There’s no response, so Alec tries again, his voice more pressed.

“Arkangel. Come in Arkangel. I know you’re out there, damn it.”

Still nothing. He throws the receiver back into his locker and slams the door shut, breaking into a jog as he heads for the fire exit that leads out onto the street. There’s a payphone on the corner of the block, and he’ll be able to get through to Izzy, and Hell, if he’s lucky, Jace and his recklessness will have already heard the report and be en route.

It’s cold outside, far too cold for this time of year and Alec’s breath plumes in the light drizzle. The rain mists upon his face, the sort of rain that an umbrella or a hood cannot keep him dry from, and so Alec grits his teeth and moves faster, wishing he’d taken the time to grab his coat after all.

He cuts through the alleyway down the side of the office, and is relieved enough to see that the phone booth on the corner is empty, although its open door creaks in the wind. The booth offers little shelter, the glass split and fractured enough to let through thin draughts of cold air as Alec digs deep into his pockets for change.

He really needs to get one of those mobile telephones that everyone seems to be buying lately. Sure, they look like a nuisance, a great big brick he’d have to lug around, but relying on public payphones is not practical in times like this. He shoves his quarters into the slot and dials Izzy’s desk phone without blinking.

She answers after two rings.

“Hello? Who is this? How’d you get this number?”
“Iz, it’s me,” Alec says quickly, “Can you get frequency 145? It’s urgent.”

“Good evening to you too, big brother,” Izzy says, and she sounds like she’s frowning. “Are you in tonight, by the way? I think Victor and Lydia switched shifts, so I guess that’s some good news for you -”

“Izzy -”

“Alright, Alec, give me a moment,” she says. In the background, Alec thinks he hears the sound of a radio broadcast. “A hostage situation?” She pauses noticeably. “What do you know?”

“Nothing more than what was on the dispatch,” Alec retorts, “They said the suspect was armed, possible shooting. Can you get Jace over there?”

“Done and done,” says Izzy, “Sending him the coordinates now. Are you going to join him?”

“I’m still at work, but I have my suit,” says Alec in a breath, “I can catch up. Make sure - make sure mom doesn’t overhear.”

“Do you really underestimate me so much?” Izzy teases, “It’s fine. Mom already knows Jace is breaking her rules and doesn’t seem to care, and she still thinks you’re the good son. Let me know when you’re en route and I’ll give you an update. Oh, and if you’re still in the office, say goodnight to Magnus from me?”

“Goodbye, Iz,” Alec says, perfunctory, before he hangs up. He grips the sides of the phone for longer than he should, pressing his fingers into the cold metal and black plastic, pausing to unscramble his thoughts. His mind is focused solely on his bow and quiver sitting in the bottom of his locker.

Are you really going to do this? You’ve barely lasted a month, says the voice that sounds like his father.

I expected better of you, warns his mother.
C’mon, Alec, catch up! I’m not waiting around for you! crows Jace.

*You’re the one who gets to decide how you use your powers. Not Idris*, whispers Nightlock.

It takes a moment, as he steps out of the phone booth, for him to notice that he can smell smoke.

It’s faint. A small fire, but not far away. Not woodsmoke. Not bricksmoke either.

There aren’t many people on the streets: it’s late and it’s raining. In Alec’s experience, the sort of people out at this time of night aren’t the ones worth making friends with. The drizzle is starting to seep into his shirt, plastering it to his skin with a bone-deep chill, turning it translucent. He doesn’t really care. He cranes his head, searching for any sight of soot that might be rising into the air - but finds nothing - and he has to blink the rain out of his eyes.

*What use is good eyesight in a city where it never stops raining*, Alec thinks to himself. He wishes he had Wolfsbane’s keen sense of smell at a time like this, because whilst the smell of smoke mingles with the city’s petrichor, Alec has no way of telling from where it comes. But it’s growing slowly stronger. It’s not a shot car exhaust or someone warming their hands on a burning barrel.

His mouth goes dry.

Alec starts up a brisk jog again, eager enough to get out of the rain and put on his supersuit. Once he’s got his coms running and he’s found Jace, he’ll check in on the fire brigade dispatch and maybe he’ll catch something. There aren’t a lot of big empty buildings in this part of town, no old churches to go up in flames; but whilst his head says it’s probably nothing to worry about, his heart beats with the smallest pulse of worry.

He’s turning into the alleway down the side of his building when he hears the screaming.

Shrill and sharp and *disembowelling*.

The sound is smothered by the rain on concrete, almost indistinguishable from that same hiss. But Alec’s body reacts on impulse, suddenly on high alert. He ducks down behind a dumpster, plastering himself against the dirty metal. Another scream, this time muffled by what could be a hand, and then, *then*, a flash of bright orange lights up the steep alley walls and a puff of dry heat engulfs Alec’s arm.
Alec peers around the side of the dumpster, but he can’t see anything. Whatever is going on further down the alleyway is hidden by overflowing trash bags piled high and sheets of old cardboard gone soggy in the rain.

He creeps forward, keeping his body low and his back as close to the brick wall as he can, and even though his office shoes aren’t made for stealth, the sound of his footsteps is thankfully muffled by the wet asphalt.

He definitely smells smoke. There’s another cry again, anguished and tortured, and Alec cannot easily mistake the sound of someone in pain.

And here, of all places -

Alec curses beneath his breath, fingers itching for his bow. He rarely goes anywhere without it - the price is too high to be caught empty-handed, even when he’s benched - but of course tonight would be the night when he has to make a dash for the phonebooth and all he has is a switchblade tucked in the waistband of his pants.

Bright orange light flares again and Alec feels the answering heat against his face now. Someone cries out amidst the sound of searing flesh. Alec’s jaw clenches so hard he’s sure he’s shattered his teeth.

The smell of charring skin is unmistakable now. Alec’s stomach churns.

“Quiet,” someone hisses, and then there’s a thump, a body hitting brick as it’s shoved backwards, to the ground.

Alec ducks behind the shelter of another dumpster, and then slowly peers over the top, catching the briefest glimpse of a man on the other side: a man alone, with a crop of blonde hair and dressed simply in black pants and a leather jacket, but with a bandana wrapped tight around the lower half
of his face. He raises his hand, and in his palm, he summons a ball of tormented fire. A man stepped out of the inferno.

Alec drops back behind the safety of the dumpster, pulling his switchblade from the band of his pants. The blade glints dull and silver in the low light, collecting a fine sheen of rain, obscuring Alec’s view of his own reflection. He grips the handle in a clenched fist, his knuckles whitening.

This man is a pyrokinetic. Probably the pyrokinetic; Alec’s not a fool. Nor the sort of person to believe in coincidences. There can only be so many pyrokinetics in one city. Alec has never met one before, and he knows he stands no chance against one without backup and a bow.

The pyrokinetic shouts something snappish that Alec cannot make out, and then a torrent of angry fire veers off into the sky, a pillar of bright and sudden heat that sears into the side of the building. The blaze scorches dark black trench marks into the brick.

“Look at what you made me do!” the pyrokinetic shouts, and there’s the sound of flames roaring again, but more controlled, more closely-confined - “You’re gonna pay for that.”

Someone screams out in pain again, wretched and writhing and so jarring that Alec swears it flays his skin on contact. He bites down so hard on his lower lip that it draws blood.

This man, this pyrokinetic is burning someone.

Right here, right now, in this alleyway with Alec not more than ten feet away.

He’s burning someone alive.

Alec needs Jace or Clary, but he has no way to contact them without his coms. Wolfsbane and Veil never come this far across the city, sticking to their own territory. Nightlock -

Alec is alone and someone is dying and he should turn and run, try and get back to his supersuit before this ends in misery, but he knows that he cannot. He will not.

If he leaves now, a man will die. But if he stays -
He breathes deeply, turning his knife over in his hands, adjusting the grip of his fingers. God, he wishes he were Jace right now. Alec hates fighting close-range, but Jace - Jace who can see something once and adopt it in the blink of an eye - excels at this sort of thing, knows how to use his fists, how to spit in someone else’s eye -

There’s no time for that. God, Alec’s mother is going to kill him for this, providing someone else doesn’t get there first.

The pyrokinetic summons another handful of Hellfire, the flames a ritual around his fingers, and Alec takes his chance. He throws his knife and it hits its target with pinpoint accuracy, embedded deep in the back of the thigh of the pyrokinetic. The flame extinguishes in his hand and he yells out, crumpling to the ground on his knees, one hand splattering into a puddle to keep himself from falling.

Alec makes a run for it, almost skidding in his office shoes as he rounds the side of the dumpster. He finds what he feared, collapsed against the side of the building: a young man in the remains of a supersuit, his mask yanked free from his face, breathing hysterical and skin blackened and blistering and weeping all sorts of horrible things.

The man’s eyes are dazed - a cloudy, milky white - and his body trembles violently, the last few moments of life desperately seeking purchase in an eviscerated corpse. Alec flounders, kneeling on the puddled ground at the man’s side, not knowing where to place his hands. He tries pressing his palm down on the man’s stomach, where his suit is drenched with blood, a dark, disgusting black, but there’s nothing solid beneath Alec’s fingers, the squelch of flesh and guts giving way beneath his touch. The man’s insides are just … gone.

“Hold on,” Alec urges, “Hold on.”

The pyrokinetic grunts. Alec hears the telltale sound of a knife being yanked from a wound and thrown to the ground, clattering on concrete. Alec twists around, angling himself between the dying man and the pyrokinetic. The pyrokinetic drags himself to his feet, blood seeping through the jagged rip in his pants.

He’s breathing heavily, almost haggard, his bandana slipped from his face, his mouth hanging open but his eyes brimming with fury. Alec’s eyes flick to his knife, but it’s too far out of reach, and he has nothing else.
Fire sparks between the fingers of the pyrokinetic, and all Alec can think is: *fuck*. *He really fucked up*. Izzy is never going to forgive him.

He’s not entirely sure what happens next. He knows he sucks in a sharp breath and screws his eyes tightly closed. He knows he feels flames engulf his hand and scorching hot heat against the side of his face as he turns away, but then - then, above the roar, he hears someone shout,

“Get down!”

Alec doesn’t think twice.

He grabs the dying man by the shoulders and pulls him down to the ground as the wall of fire rears upwards into the sky, deflecting off some invisible force. Alec presses his cheek to the asphalt, gravel and dirt cutting into his skin and soaking his work shirt. The ground shakes with tremors of impact. The air ignites with another surge of fire, but it collides with the building overhead, missing its target once again.

Alec pushes himself up on one arm, gritting his teeth around the pulsating pain in his right hand, but what he sees winds him: the pyrokinetic, staggering to his feet across the alleyway, blood dripping from a slick cut to his temple. And before him, an enormous circle of fire, held back by an invisible shield that surrounds Alec and the dying man - and between them all -

Nightlock.

The flames roar all around Nightlock, but he keeps them at bay with outstretched hands, the wind whipping violently through his hair and the tails of his coat. The pyrokinetic throws another blast of all-consuming fire from the heel of his palm, but Nightlock swipes his arm through the air and the fire ricochets off to the side, soaring over Nightlock’s head and engulfing a nearby dumpster.

Nightlock strikes out with his other hand, clenching his fingers into a sudden fist, and the pyrokinetic hurtles into the wall, the back of his head meeting brick. The man crumples to his hands and knees, retching as a mouthful of blood surges up his throat and splatters out onto the ground. His palms smoke on the wet tarmac, but Nightlock doesn’t give him another chance to stand again, blasting him to the ground with another sharp thrust of his hand.

The world shudders.
And God - Alec has never seen Nightlock like this.

Alec’s always known he’s powerful, but not this powerful, not surrounded on all sides by rippling fire, not almost as horrifying as the pyrokinetic himself. The air crackles with licking flames, and even Alec can feel the thrum; he can only imagine how it must be pounding through Nightlock’s veins, an endless, untapped supply of energy he can transmute to kinetic force, coiled in his very fingertips, volatile and immeasurable and dangerous.

Nightlock is dangerous.

And he’s here to save them. Save Alec.

Alec looks back, but the dying man is face-down on the concrete and not moving, blood seeping into the puddled ground. Alec scrambles onto his knees, heaving the man over onto his back, but he can no longer tell what is skin and what is dirt and what are the remains of his tattered suit. Everything is charcoal and viscera. His hands flail.

The man’s not breathing. Alec can see as much, but still he tips the man’s head back, opening up his airway, and leans over the man’s mouth hoping to feel the weakest puff of breath against his cheek - but there’s nothing. It’s like a stab to Alec’s gut.

“Hi.”

Alec looks up from his bloodied hands and finds Nightlock crouched across from him, eyes wild, and hair swept up by the blaze of fire. There’s a smear of soot across his temple and something formidable in the way he shakes with untapped energy.

“He’s not breathing,” Alec says, frantic, “His heart’s stopped.”

Nightlock immediately sweeps the man who lies between them. Pity seeps into his eyes, followed by a flash of righteous anger.

He leans forward, then, guiding the flat of his palm down over the man’s face, closing his eyes.
“Get down,” he says again. So soft, it doesn’t sound like a command.

And Alec barely has a moment to register it before a pulse of kinetic energy is pushing him onto his back as a stream of fire veers between them, impaling the brick wall just inches from where Alec’s face had been. Alec gasps, no room in his chest for oxygen. He twists around onto his stomach, laying himself as flat to the ground as he can. Scrambling, he reaches out – and he finds his knife lying point-down in a pothole.

Adrenaline courses through Alec’s body. The roar inside his head is deafening.

Another blast of fire comes at them, but Nightlock swerves out of the way and thrusts out his palm, launching the pyrokinetic into the air. The man comes down hard on a pile of smoldering trash bags and blackened cardboard, the air shoved out of him. He rolls to the ground, landing with an undignified splat amidst the rubbish, and struggles to his feet, slipping in the rain as he tries to run.

Nightlock fires another wave of energy after him, but it’s met with a wall of answering fire. Alec hides his face in the crook of his arm as the heat makes his eyes stream. Nightlock waves his hands, pulling the fire apart at its very seams, but the pyrokinetic has a good head start down the alleyway, running as fast as his legs will carry him in the opposite direction.

_Breathe_, Alec’s head is telling him, over and over until it’s all he can hear. The rain soaks him. His shirt is drenched in another man’s blood. _Breathe, stay alive, stay alive. Don’t move._

Alec looks up. Nightlock doesn’t chase after the pyrokinetic. He raises his arms slowly, prophetically, and it’s like all the oxygen in the air is sucked away, leaving Alec gasping for breath. His head spins, vision blurring. The fire around them shrinks, fighting valiantly but compressed by unseen forces, down and down until it extinguishes with a croaky hiss of smoke.

Alec stabs his knife into the ground and uses it to push himself upright, every breath heaving in his chest, the taste of ash like sand in his mouth. His eyes don’t leave Nightlock’s back: he stands in the centre of the alley, staring off into the direction the pyrokinetic has vanished. Power still ripples through his shoulders.

“Nightlo-”

Nightlock grasps his fingers into a sudden fist, snuffing out the last of the smoke, and the world falls silent. Alec’s ears ring. He is bewildered.
His head is spinning and he tastes blood in his mouth now too. His hands are sticky, his knees are bruised. Everything is in disarray, his mind unable to catch up with what he’s just seen. Pressure pounds in his temple and a rawness lacerates his cheek; he’s sure it’s scraped up real bad. He looks down to where he has one hand clamped firm over the wrist of the other, squeezing tightly, and realises that slow squelch of blood out between his fingers is his own. The pain in his right hand is a burn, horrible and ugly over the backs of his knuckles, smeared with dirt and God knows what else.

Alec hisses, gripping his hand tighter. He’s had worse. He’s had worse.

Somehow, he’s alive. Somehow, it’s not worse. His eyes fly back to Nightlock, who hasn’t yet moved. Alec’s chest heaves, irritated by all the smoke he has inhaled.

And Nightlock -

Why isn’t Nightlock going after the pyrokinetic?

“Aren’t you - aren’t you gonna go after him?” Alec wheezes. It yanks Nightlock back to reality, because he blinks and then spins on his heels, stare snapping to Alec’s. That wild look is still in his eyes, but it’s more manic now, and Alec sees it in the way Nightlock’s face contorts beneath his mask.

He sees fear.

Alec opens his mouth to say something, anything, but Nightlock beats him to it, all too quick as he rushes to Alec’s side.

“Are you alright? Are you hurt?” he demands. He reaches for Alec’s wounded hand but Alec draws it back against his chest, staring at Nightlock with wide eyes that probably betray too much.

Fear. Why fear?

“I’m fine,” Alec states, but he can feel the cold scrape of shock down his spine as the adrenaline bleeds away. “It’s just a burn.”
Nightlock freezes. Realisation and alarm flood his face and he takes a step back, as if he’s the one suddenly burned.

Alec has never seen Nightlock like this before. Spooked. Worried.

Why is he worried?

The cold night air chafes Alec’s raw skin, an open and tender wound. He grits his teeth. Nightlock’s eyes move to his lips at the sound of his hiss, but neither of them know quite how to move.

Nightlock just saved his life. Alec’s life, not Sentinel’s. This is their second first meeting.

If Alec doesn’t say something, Nightlock is going to know something is wrong.

But how does he talk to Nightlock when he’s not Sentinel -

“I-” Alec starts, empty words on his tongue that are stolen from out beneath him just as soon as he opens his mouth. “I should -”

Nightlock stares at him. “Do you make a habit of this?”

Alec blinks, surprised that that’s Nightlock’s question. They’ve not met before - not as Nightlock and Alec, so how could he -

“What?”

Frustration pinches in Nightlock’s expression. He looks pained, as if grappling with a realisation that cuts him deeper than expected. He looks like he feels it right down in the epicentre of his chest, a deep and unforgiving lesion, and it stings. And Alec doesn’t understand it, that warped emotion in Nightlock’s eyes, but he hates it, he hates it in only a moment.
“You shouldn’t, if you do,” Nightlock says then, far more gentle than Alec was expecting, hardly more than a whisper. He dares a step closer again. “Make it a habit of putting yourself in risky situations, I mean. It’s dangerous enough for people like me, especially against men like that.”

His voice is what throws Alec - it’s not his normal register, the one that Alec knows as Sentinel, so often flippant and teasing. It sounds a little pleading, a little wretched. There’s this faint tremble -

Alec doesn’t get it.

Nightlock fixates upon Alec’s wounded hand again. The attention makes Alec’s skin crawl; he folds his arms, slipping his hand beneath his armpit, out of sight. His blistered skin catches on the fabric of his shirt and he winces.

“People … like you,” Alec repeats, trying to keep his voice steady. “People with powers, you mean.”

“Yes.”

“What do you call yourself?”

“Nightlock.”

“I’m Alec,” says Alec.

“I know,” Nightlock breathes, too fast and too easy. Alec’s wide eyes cause Nightlock to backtrack in an instant. He reaches into the pocket of his overcoat and pulls out Alec’s wallet, holding it out to him, just as Alec pats his slacks, realising he must’ve lost it sometime in the fight. “You dropped this. Consider it returned.”

“Thanks,” Alec says slowly, careful not to let his fingers brush Nightlock’s as he takes back his wallet. He quickly checks that all his credit cards are still intact but notices his hands are trembling. “Are you … okay?”

“Nothing a long bath and a double martini at home won’t fix,” says Nightlock. He’s searching
Alec’s face now, lingering on the scrapes on Alec’s cheeks, the stranger’s blood slick against the side of his throat. Nightlock’s mouth downturns at the corners. His fingers twitch at his sides, as if fighting the urge to reach out and touch Alec, and it does something funny to Alec’s chest, seizing up within the bruised hollow of his ribs, not unlike the sensation of a short sharp blade easing into his skin.

Alec can’t take the scrutiny. “I -” he starts, unsure of where he’s going. “The man -”

They both turn to look at the dead man, laid out upon his back, eyes closed as far from peace as one can be. Alec’s stomach plummets once more with the realisation that he was too late; they both were too late, despite everything.

Another dead man’s blood on his hands. How much scrubbing will it take to be rid of it this time -

“I think he was a super,” says Alec, as Nightlock double-checks for a pulse, his gloved fingers sliding through the congealed blood at the man’s neck. There are no signs of life to be found, and Alec watches Nightlock’s shoulders fall, however minutely. The quiet shift is tinged with sorrow, and perhaps, relief.

Who is it that Nightlock feared might be lying here -

“It certainly looks that way,” replies Nightlock. It’s a difficult task, and a morose silence, as Alec scans the body for a sign of who it might once have been. The man doesn’t seem to have a weapon, and no visible utilities attached to what remains from his supersuit, so Alec can only assume he was gifted with some sort of useful power, or he was a novice, and Alec is not sure which is worse.

Either way, this man was killed despite it.

Alec looks up, and finds that Nightlock’s attention has shifted from the body and returned to Alec’s burned hand. There’s this furrow in his brow - or so Alec imagines - that is severe and still pained, but he focuses upon Alec’s injury with such intensity that it seems like he’s trying to sear it to memory. He cannot bear to take his eyes off Alec for a single moment.

“I … I should go,” says Alec, thumbing over his shoulder. He takes a few steps backwards, but is unable to fully turn away. His legs don’t want to work. His body is heavy with the rainwater and blood plastered to his skin. “I should call this in, call the cops or something -”
“Wait, please.”

Alec stops moving. He’s not sure why he does - he knows why Sentinel would, because Sentinel knows Nightlock, might even deign to call Nightlock his partner, if not his friend - but Alec is meant to be a stranger.

And yet, that note in Nightlock’s voice -

“Let me at least help you with your hand,” Nightlock says, taking a careful step towards Alec, as if he scared of spooking him. He doesn’t broach Alec’s personal space, aware of the way Alec’s skin prickles, waiting patiently for Alec to decide what Nightlock is permitted to do.

Alec is not so sure himself, but he finds himself extending his hand out towards Nightlock nevertheless.

“You can heal?” he asks skeptically, knowing full well it’s not something Nightlock has ever professed that he can do.

Nightlock’s mouth curls up at the corners into a wry smile, his gaze ducked on Alec’s hand. He shakes his head, imperceivably, and tugs off his gloves before carefully taking Alec’s fingers in his. His skin is warm and Alec cannot help but notice faint blue-green stains around the base of a few of his fingers, the telltale marks of rings once worn but probably hastily discarded as the costume was donned.

Alec curls his fingertips into Nightlock’s palm, tensing his entire arm. He remembers doing this before, as Sentinel, the two of them stepping off the edge of a rooftop with Alec’s hand in his - but Nightlock’s grip was stronger then. Now, it’s soft and wary.

Alec’s hand pulses.

“No,” Nightlock says, reaching into his coat with his free hand. He pulls out a small metal flask and unscrews the cap with his teeth, before sloshing the contents - water - over Alec’s burned skin. Alec hisses again, which makes Nightlock pause, verifying that Alec is okay, before he continues washing the wound. The water runs black, then red, then clear.

He tosses the flask away over his shoulder once it’s empty, immediately forgotten, before
producing a roll of gauze from somewhere else in his coat.

“Hold still,” he murmurs.

Alec is slightly impressed. “You’re pretty prepared,” he remarks. “Does this happen often?” Nightlock turns Alec’s hand over, gently cupping Alec’s wrist as he begins bandaging his palm. His touch is tender. It’s not what Alec was expecting.

“Rescuing pretty boys in alleyways, you mean?” Nightlock says, eyes flicking up once more, his smile flashing coy. Alec immediately flushes, a choked huff escaping his lips as he deliberately fixes his stare elsewhere, anywhere. “Not as often as I would like. But, as you say - always good to be prepared, just in case. Gives me a chance to get a name - and a number, if I’m lucky.”

Alec snorts. “Yeah, n- … no. I don’t think so.”

“It was worth a shot,” Nightlock grins, turning his focus back to Alec’s hand. He tucks the end of the bandage in, and then he’s just holding Alec’s hand in both of his, inspecting his work. His fingertips are stained the same colour as the cuffs of Alec’s sleeves.

A curious heat rises up the back of Alec’s neck; he tries to will it away, but has little luck.

“Uh - thanks,” Alec says awkwardly. “For this. For, uh - stepping in.”

Nightlock lets Alec’s hand drop, the warmth of the touch too suddenly lost. Nightlock busies himself with pulling his gloves back on, shrugging as if to say it was nothing. It doesn’t quite feel like nothing.

“I’d rather you don’t do it again,” Nightlock says. He meets Alec’s gaze. His voice changes minutely, serious again. “It’s not something I thought I - it’s not something I want to be worrying about. But I’m quite familiar with handsome men and their hero complexes.”

“I don’t have a hero complex,” Alec frowns.

“I don’t know.” He shrugs again, but the coy, flirtatious smile is back. “I wouldn’t mind being
saved by you, Alexander.”

Oh .

Alec scrambles for words, but the noise he makes make no sense whatsoever. Nightlock lets out a low laugh, a smile with a flash of teeth as he looks away, gracefully amused. Alec is not sure he’s ever seen Nightlock smile like that before, not around Sentinel -

There’s no time to say anything else. A siren blares, too close for comfort - maybe someone already overheard the commotion and has called it in - and both Nightlock and Alec turn to stare at the opening of the alley. A police car whirs past, but it’s destination is elsewhere, blood spilt in another gutter most likely.

Alec lets out a held breath. There’s still a dead man twenty feet away from him who is owed proper respects, but when he turns back to Nightlock, only the night remains. He has vanished, leaving Alec alone and speechless.

Twelve hours later and Alec is back in the very same alleyway, the smell of charred flesh still lingering in the coppering air. It's cold - cold enough to hurt the inside of his nose when he breathes in - and he tries to shrink down behind the upturned collar of his coat, hands thrust deep into his pockets. His cheek still stings from the night before, but he’d let Izzy clean him up as good as any, whilst she had loudly complained about their lack of knowing anyone with healing powers.

Magnus seems far less fussed by the cold, a notebook in one hand and a pen in the other, flying across the page with his elegant scrawl as he takes rapid notes of the crime scene.

Because it is a crime scene, and the two of them stand behind the black and yellow tape that flaps around in the wind and smacks into the sidewalk with the same sort of biting sound that leather makes against skin.

Alec had only just made it into the office this morning before Magnus found him, Alec barely out of his coat and gloves before Magnus whisked him out into the street with this look in his eye that was unquestionably determined. And Alec had been somewhat glad of it, because he’d heard the
whispering of gossip making ripples in the office, everyone keen to discuss the crime scene outside their windows, and everyone just as keen to debate the state of Alec’s face. No-one, thankfully, was quite able to make a connection between the two, but the possibility still hangs in the open air, waiting to be plucked.

Alec hasn’t told Magnus he was here last night. It seems like a mute point and would beg too many questions that Alec doesn’t really want to answer, with the first and foremost being: *why would you do something like that?*

It’s a question that has far too many answers, and at the same time has none at all.

Alec is broken out of his thoughts when Magnus raises his hand to try and attract the attention of one of the police officers on the other side of the tape. Alec watches one of the officers say something to his colleague and pat him on the back with a cheery smile, before making a beeline for Magnus - and Alec realises latently that it’s Captain Garroway.

“Magnus,” says Luke in greeting. His eyes skip to Alec, and his eyebrows raise. “And Alec Lightwood. I didn’t realise you two knew each other. Let me guess - you’re looking for a story?”

“You make me sound tasteless, Lucian,” Magnus remarks, “And besides, I already have my story - I’m only looking to fill in the gaps.”

“You know I can’t tell you anything on record,” Luke says, folding his arms across his chest. His voice is just loud enough to make sure he can be heard; Alec knows it’s purposeful, especially when Luke then drops his voice into a low whisper. “I can’t talk long. We think it’s that pyrokinetic again - certainly looks like his handwork. One victim, male, in his early twenties, looks like a super as well. He wasn’t in good shape.”

Magnus scribbles it all down on his notepad, nodding gravely.

“Any leads?” Alec asks.

“We think there was someone else involved, but it’s hard to say at this stage,” Luke replies, “Possibly another super, but there’s not much that hasn’t been burned to a crisp for us to take back to the lab.”
“Was the body burned, like the others?”

Luke frowns at Alec - not angrily, but instead, thoughtful - and even Magnus stops writing to listen to what Alec has to say.

“No,” says Luke, slowly, “He was burned, but not chargrilled like the rest.”

“Sounds like someone arrived and got in the way, then,” Alec remarks coolly. “Before he could finish the job.”

Luke nods. “It’s as plausible as everything else I’ve heard today,” he says, “I’ll ask around, see what else I can dig up. Magnus, I’ll let you know if I find anything. I gotta run.”

“Always a pleasure,” says Magnus, and Luke turns away and jogs back over to the other detectives.

Alec nibbles his lip. It’s more than likely that they won’t find anything in that alleyway, any and all trace of him incinerated by the fire, but Alec cannot help but worry. It’s second nature by this point, and the last thing he wants is for the police to figure out he was the one here last night, and then proceed to drag him down to the station to give a report in which he’ll have to lie through his teeth.

Absently, he rubs at his sore cheek with the back of his finger, the skin already scabbing over. Magnus must notice because he stops writing and slides his notebook into one of the deep pockets of his trenchcoat, before turning to Alec.

He looks unfairly good in that coat too, because of course he does - he exists to make Alec’s already difficult morning all the more difficult - but what Alec is drawn to isn’t that. Instead, it’s the slight narrowing of Magnus’ eyes as he scrutinises Alec’s face, lingering on his bruised cheek.

He’s been watching Alec like that all morning, and when he hasn’t been studying Alec like he’s a puzzle he’s trying to deconstruct, he’s just been looking, as if Alec is a magnet and he cannot draw his eyes away. It makes Alec feel … not vulnerable, per se, but aware. Aware of himself, how he stands, how he breathes, how his thoughts must be written clear as day on his face or something; it’s the only explanation as to why Magnus hasn’t stopped staring.
“What?” asks Alec, uneasy.

Magnus squints at him. “That was very astute of you there, Alexander. A second super.”

“I was just making connections from what we already know,” says Alec with a shrug. “Seemed logical to me. Maybe Luke will come back with some evidence.”

Magnus hums, sliding his hands into his coat pockets. The wind rustles his coat, but where the howl makes Alec want to curl into his collar like a hermit, it just cards through Magnus’ artfully ruffled hair.

“You must’ve left the office around the time of the attack, last night,” Magnus muses then, and Alec stiffens. “Did you hear anything?”

“Not a thing,” Alec lies. “It was raining.”

They’ve been waiting some four hours by the time the police decide to pack up for the evening. Alec’s been keeping a weather eye on the horizon, waiting for rain, and Magnus has been drifting between people, notepad in hand, with that easy charm of his that fools others into thinking they’re lifelong friends.

There’s work that needs doing, but it’s easy to fall into the stupor of watching Magnus in his element. He has this unrivalled ability to make people feel at ease; he can laugh or twirl his fingers in a whimsical gesture or smile just enough, and people feel like they can trust him. And they can - which is the fundamental difference between Magnus and everyone else that Alec knows - because Magnus has never shown himself to be a malicious person. He’s impatient and standoffish, begrudging at times, but Alec knows that he would never use someone’s trust against them. If Alec has learned anything of Magnus these past few months, it’s of his good heart.

Alec watches as Magnus chats easily to another police officer, nodding thoughtfully as he makes notes as the officer talks, undoubtedly telling Magnus all he needs to know. Magnus makes a snide remark and the officer laughs; strangely, Alec feels his own face warming as if he’s the one on the other end of Magnus’ playful teasing.
“Hey, Alec.”

Alec yanks his eyes away from Magnus, finding Luke approaching from the other side of the caution tape.

“We’re done here for today, so if you and Magnus want your scoop, I can give you five minutes before I gotta go.”

“That’d be great,” says Alec, not having to look when he feels something brush up against his back - a wandering hand, perhaps, dipping into the small of his back in quiet greeting - and then Magnus appears at his side.

Luke lifts the caution tape and they both duck beneath it, stepping into the cordoned-off alleyway. It still smells like smoke, stale in the same way cigarettes stick to clothes long after they’ve been extinguished, combined with the smell of damp, rotting rubbish. It’s not pleasant, and Alec grimaces.

Luke leads them both down the alley, Magnus at Luke’s side. Magnus is asking pertinent questions as Alec trails behind, the odd man out, eyeing the black marks seared into the side of the building. The torrents of angry fire feel some part a fever dream to him now. The wind whistles through the narrow street, and it’s eerie, the otherwise silence, so different to this time last night.

Alec’s head still aches from it. The echo of a dying man’s screams amidst a field of roaring fire is dissonance in his ears, unable to fully fade away. His bandaged palm throbs in time with his heartbeat.

Luke points at the burn marks upon the walls and at their feet, explaining to Magnus how odd the incendiary patterns are as they don’t follow the ways in which a fire should burn. Magnus hums, but doesn’t say anything decisive on the matter, an observation which Alec does not miss.

There’s a mark on the ground in the vague shape of a body, and matching shadow of soot on the wall behind it. Luke steps away to answer the radio clipped to his shoulder as it beeps, leaving Alec and Magnus alone with the buffeting wind.

Alec’s not sure if it’s blood or ash that marks where the man died, but he doesn’t really want to know. He can still smell the gore, the violence. He hardly slept last night, bowed over his
bathroom sink, scrubbing his hands and face until raw and clean, until his vision had blurred and his eyes stung. Now, his stomach churns, and he wonders if there’s a point at which he’ll become used to seeing this sort of horror. He hopes not.

Magnus’ hand cups his elbow. The touch is delicate but reassuring.

“Alexander,” he says, “What do you say we get out of here?”

“What?” says Alec, surprised. “Did you get everything you need?”

“I have enough.” He squeezes lightly at Alec’s elbow. “Even for me, this place is a touch too morbid. I’m all for ditching if you are.”

Alec wants to protest - for the sake of some latent pride of his - but he doesn’t want to stand here longer than he must. So he nods, and Magnus tucks a smile into the corner of his mouth, his hand sliding from Alec’s elbow to Alec’s gloved hand, where he grabs Alec’s wrist and tugs him.

Mischief appears in Magnus’ eyes, distracting Alec momentarily from how his heart rams itself into a brick wall.

“There’s a bar I know, not far from here,” Magnus murmurs, stepping close to Alec, shielding him from the wind. He tilts his head in invitation. “And happy hour started five minutes ago.”

“Aren’t we on the clock?”

“Let’s call it reconnaissance.”

Magnus isn’t lying - he does know a bar not far from there, tucked away in a basement that can’t be seen from street view, hidden behind a heavy steel door and shuttered windows. It looks most definitely like the sort of place someone would drag Alec to murder him. The only thing of note is
this small, blinking red light that winks provocatively at Alec as Magnus knocks softly on the door.

A small window slides open and someone on the other side asks, in a gruff voice, “Yeah?”

“Magnus Bane,” says Magnus, before looking over his shoulder at Alec. His eyes trail from Alec’s toes to his hair, before he adds, “And friend.”

The small window slides shut, and there’s a moment of silence before someone unlocks deadbolt on the other side, and the door is heaved open. Magnus smiles sunnily and gestures with his fingers for Alec to follow him, and Alec is certainly not keen to be left on the doorstep alone.

The door is shut and locked behind them before Alec can even blink, but Alec can only focus forward on the hazy, smokey corridor that he now stands in, eyes adjusting to the low light. It’s habit to scan his surroundings for threats, but they’re alone, just him and Magnus, and the only thing he can hear is the faint pulse of music and the sound of clinking glassware.

Magnus clicks his tongue, pulling off his gloves and shrugging off his coat, which he folds over his arm, prompting Alec to do the same. He then starts walking, walking with the purpose of a man who has been here many times before.

The corridor is not wide enough for them to walk abreast, so Alec clips his strides to stop himself standing on Magnus’ heels. The walls are plastered from floor to ceiling with newspaper cuttings, layer upon layer of old, fading articles, some of which have turned brown with age, some of which date back longer than Alec has been alive.

Alec realises quickly what they all have in common: all the headlines are about supers. He spots one or two of Magnus’ own work, and then, more than a couple photos of Arkangel, interspersed between the rest.

There are none of Sentinel, which is a good thing because he’s always been very careful, but some part of him can’t help but be slightly disappointed, secretly hoping to see a piece up on the wall speculating on his identity for once.

They turn a corner in the corridor and it opens up almost immediately into a domed, exposed brick room full of wooden tables and leather benches, low lights and lower music, a beautiful old mahogany bar running the length of the far wall. The cabinet directly behind it is stocked with a myriad of coloured spirits.
The bar is not busy, but it’s not empty either, and Alec spots a couple of men in black aprons wiping down tables, gearing up for the rest of the night.

“What is this place?” Alec asks, stepping up to Magnus side.

Magnus tilts his head in Alec’s direction, his shoulder brushing against Alec’s, his voice a little too close to Alec’s ear. “Reconnaissance, didn’t I say?” His hand once again finds Alec’s elbow, and he begins guiding Alec in the direction of the bar. “Come on, let’s get a drink and I’ll explain.”

Once Alec has managed to drag his eyes away from the point at which Magnus touches him, he realises that the girl behind the bar is watching him, as if she already knows he’s an outsider. She has brown skin and wild, curly hair, and glares daggers at Alec when she catches him staring, sneering as if to say: *what do you think you're looking at, huh?*

Alec ducks his gaze, embarrassed, as Magnus plants a tall glass of something clear and petrolic into his hands.

“The table in the corner is my particular favourite,” he says, weaving his way across the room with Alec in tow, “Perfect for having the sorts of conversations you don’t want anyone to overhear.”

They settle into a booth, tucked away in the corner of the room where the lights seem to be at their lowest. They contrast each other: Magnus sinks back into the plush leather, twirling his glass around by the stem, but Alec sits ramrod straight, his eyes glancing back towards the bartender who still seems to be scowling at him.

This feels scarily … intimate. Like something Alec’s doesn’t want to put a name to, but that he knows he does anyway.

A date. It looks like a date.

He reprimands the flutter of his heart. They’re still on the clock. This is business. Don’t think it’s anything else. It’s not. It can’t be. *Traitor.*

“So, uh -”
“Not many people know about this place,” Magnus interrupts, with a cavalier twirl of his fingers, “Most people who come here tend to be … sympathetic to the cause, in one way or another.”

Alec squints back at the bartender. “You’re saying this is a bar for supers?”

“No. Just their friends,” Magnus says, taking a sip of his drink and smiling to himself at the taste. “Also happens to be a very good place to pick up information, and is certainly our best bet regarding last night. I wasn’t lying when I said we were doing reconnaissance, Alexander.”

Alec fiddles with the stem of his own glass, hunching his shoulders. It’s not like anyone will notice him here, but the thought of being recognised is still like a stone in his shoe, and he can’t quite get comfortable. He’s a Corporate, and he’s got the distinct impression that this is sort of place Corporates aren’t supposed to know about.

“Are we waiting for someone?” he asks instead.

“No-one in particular,” Magnus shrugs, “Just seeing who turns up. Maybe someone will have heard something.”

“Doubt it,” Alec says, before backtracking, “I, uh - I mean. If I didn’t hear or see anything, then I doubt - I doubt anyone else was around.”

Magnus fixes him with a flat stare. “Alec.”

“Yeah?”

“You’re lying to me.”

Alec’s brain shuts down in that moment; he can almost hear the tires screeching, an engine crumpling on impact, see himself flying through the windshield of bad, absolutely terrible ideas. He’d like to have something clever to say, some quick retort, some snappish dismissal of whatever it is Magnus is accusing him of, but the only thought - the only thought that he can focus on is this:
“Oh God. He knows I’m Sentinel.”

“W… what?” he manages to say, albeit weakly. Magnus is watching him, following every change in his expression, his own face carefully unreadable.

Should Alec just get up and leave? He could make a run for it, but that implies he has control over his legs right now, which he definitely does not. He could just shut down - he’s been told by both Jace and Isabelle many times that he’s ever so good at pretending emotions don’t exist and closing himself off to the outside world - but this is Magnus, and Magnus has his damn fingerprints all over Alec’s insides already; he’s got fingers beneath Alec’s skin, and Alec knows exactly how they got there - because Alec let him. He knows how to peel Alec apart, and he knows how to make it excruciating.

But then Magnus’ eyes dip, settling instead on Alec’s hand, specifically, the one tightly bound in a wad of gauze.

“Your hand,” Magnus says.

“I cut it,” Alec says, too quickly. “Uh, cooking.”

Magnus quirks an eyebrow. “You really expect me to believe that you cut yourself that badly chopping vegetables?” he asks. “You, Alexander, with your focus and diligence, slipped with a knife? I don’t believe it.”

Alec swallows thickly, but he doesn’t know what to do. He’s stuck between a rock and a hard place, and there’s no way he’s going to get out of this with all his secrets intact. He wants to shrink away. Shrink away, or find a mask to plaster on over his eyes, one made of leather, one that he can feel.

Magnus’ finger runs around the rim of his glass; it sings a quiet tune that shoves itself straight beneath Alec’s fingernails, making him shiver.

“I…”

Again, Magnus raises his eyebrows. Expectantly.
Oh, fuck it.

Didn’t he only just think that Magnus is the sort of person who doesn’t betray a trust?

“I didn’t cut it,” Alec says, low, “I, uh - last night I had a run-in. With a super. I didn’t want to say anything.”

It’s a partial truth, but it’s not all the truth, and Alec thinks that Magnus knows as much, because something dampens in his expression. He looks disappointed, as he were expecting more from Alec.

And the thought of that - well, it hurts. It’s a short and sudden ache in Alec’s chest from out of nowhere, and he’s reminded of the fact that as long as Alec and Sentinel exist simultaneously, Magnus will never get what he wants. And nor will Alec, it seems.

But Magnus, as ever, is unpredictable, and ever so good at rendering Alec both honest and speechless.

“You don’t have to hide things from me,” he says, and he reaches across the table to take Alec’s bandaged hand between both of his. His touch is soft, rings cold and fingers warm, and it makes Alec’s skin feel like it’s buzzing with the soft kiss of static electricity, much in the same way one can feel the electric field around a lightbulb ebbing at the fingertips.

The touch reminds Alec of the night before, of Nightlock cupping his hand in much the same way, both gentle and reverent; it’s the same feeling and the same gesture, imbued with the same profound sort of comfort.

It’s like Magnus knows something is gravely wrong, even if Alec won’t admit it. How does Magnus know? What is it that he can see in Alec that Alec cannot see in other people - or even see in himself? What sort of toll does it cost to be so endlessly … kind? Alec’s not sure that’s the word he searches for, but it’s the word everything always seems to come back to, the word at the centre of all things, whenever Magnus is involved.

Caring. Considered. Patient. Kind. Willing to go to Hell and back for everyone else, even if they wouldn’t do the same for him.
But Alec - Alec thinks that he would. For Magnus.

Magnus’ thumb sweeps across the backs of Alec’s bruised knuckles, and he fixes Alec with a gaze far too soft to abate the things stirring in Alec’s chest. The dutiful march of Alec’s heartbeat must reverberate from the point at which they touch. He can hear it in his ears, after all.

“You know-” says Magnus. Alec’s eyes are locked on their hands, but Magnus’ eyes are on his face, unwavering, “-there are security cameras in that alleyway. Tapes. I’ve seen them.”

Alec looks up, and he doesn’t mean to clench his hand in Magnus’, but he does, and he knows he’s caught.

“You were right. About what you said to Luke earlier,” Magnus continues softly, however, “There was someone else there last night. Two people, actually, although the footage was too grainy to really make out who. One was another super, like you said, but the other, on the other hand -”

He trails off, although he doesn’t need to speak for Alec to get the picture or for the question he is indirectly asking to be poised. It suspends itself in the air between them, something tangible and weighted, but Magnus doesn’t press. He doesn’t force it. And maybe, if Alec weren’t hiding a hundred other secrets that might come tumbling out if he opened this box, he would confess, right here and now, to all the things that hinder him.

So, he says nothing. That response alone says enough.

Magnus drops his gaze and ducks his head, huffing on a quiet, embittered laugh. He knows of what isn’t said. He doesn’t let go of Alec’s burned hand.

“Magnus, I -”

“It makes me curious,” Magnus interjects, “About that second man last night. He didn’t have super powers, but he knew the other person in that alley did. Why would someone who stands no chance against such odds still risk their life for someone they’ve never met?”

“Maybe … maybe he has a hero complex.”
Magnus looks up sharply and it’s like he knows those words aren’t Alec’s own. They’re not something Alec would say of his own volition—*they are Nightlock’s words, after all, and Alec is a petty thief at best*—but then Magnus settles into a smile.

“I’m very fond of that,” he whispers.

Alec can hardly look at him, but he can’t not look at him, the look in Magnus’ eyes something extraordinary, something lovely, some gravity Alec cannot help but orbit. It’s like looking into the sun: you shouldn’t but you do; you look just for the briefest of seconds before your eyes begin to water and sting because maybe you have some morbid curiosity for hurting yourself, and because it’s worth it to see the colours that dance across your vision in which you can see nothing else.

“Fond of-?” Alec dares.

“A man’s need to protect someone even if he doesn’t really know them,” Magnus elaborates, “It’s something that the police should be doing, something that the supers of this city are at least *trying* to do, and yet he still takes it upon himself. Saving lives, or at least - trying his best, which is all we can ever ask. I’m fond of *that* .”

Alec feels himself blushing. He can’t help it. Magnus presses three fingers to the pulse point on Alec’s wrist, above where the gauze bandage is tied. Alec wonders if Magnus can feel his heartbeat.

“Alexander,” Magnus says, very quietly. A beat of silence, quite terrible. “You amaze me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Alec murmurs, just as soft. His ears burn hot. He feels his heartbeat again: temples, wrist, fingertips, chest.

Magnus shakes his head on a subtle smile.

“No. No, of course you don’t.”
They stay for a while, and one drink becomes two, which in turn becomes three. No-one who stops by their table has any information on the pyrokinetic, but most are pleased to see Magnus, and the rest are at least curious, eager to know what Magnus knows about the attack last night. Alec doesn’t recognise any of them - and why should he, because none of them are wearing masks, and they might not even be supers, and it’s not like he knows each and every vigilante in this city - but some of them he tries to imagine in Veil’s jacket, in Wolfsbane’s cowl, in Nightlock’s magnificent coat. None of them quite fit.

It’s late by the time Alec says he has to leave, knowing if he leaves it any longer someone at Idris will start getting panicked about his whereabouts. Magnus shuts his notebook on the table and swallows back the last dredges of his drink; there’s a pink flush in his cheeks, but his eyes are bright.

Not happy. He hasn’t been truly happy in a long time, but Alec sees the haze of drink in him that acts like a shield, protecting him from sourer thoughts. He seems content, pleased with the information he has gathered, but his focus keeps on slipping.

Alec watches it happen a few times: the way his pen would stop mid-sentence and his gaze would drift across the table, clinging to the water ring of Alec’s glass. The bandages on Alec’s hand that he keeps carefully tucked against his chest. The tie around Alec’s neck.

Alec swallows. Magnus snaps out of his reverie.

He blinks; his eyes are dark again. “Let me walk you back to the office at least,” he insists, standing suddenly and reaching for his coat. He moves too sharply. “It’s not safe to go alone.”

Night has fallen. When they step back out onto the street, it’s into a blur of rain-drenched colour, puddles on the sidewalk refracting the hazy glow of street lamps and neon signs that make Alec dizzy. The clouds threaten a downpour, but Magnus insists they make a run for it before the heavens open and ruin his hair, so the walk back is brisk and not punctuated with conversation, as it was on the way there.
Alec doesn’t mind. Silence with Magnus has never felt awkward, and he finds himself relishing the moment for a breather, the chance to watch Magnus from the corner of his eye and just admire him. Magnus’ eyes catch on shop windows and in bright lights, unable to help himself from fawning over beautiful things. He fiddles with the silver cuff on his ear. He flicks his hair from his forehead with a nimble grace.

It’s such a far cry from last night that Alec wonders if he’s dreaming. He certainly feels like he’s dreaming: there’s a shimmer in the rain and bright New York lights that makes him wonder if he’s fallen into a hallucination, blacked out in that alleyway amidst the fire.

How did Alec get here? He doesn’t remember how he moved from their strange stalemate to this - this, not looking away when Magnus touches him deliberately; not tripping over excuses not to be around him; saying yes when he asks, only, for the pleasure of Alec’s company -

He doesn’t remember because it’s not the sort of plummet that he knows. It’s not the same drop in his stomach as when he jumps over the edge of a building into the dark, or when he takes to the sky with Jace, or when he loses his breath while watching Nightlock level buildings with the flick of his fingers. He doesn’t remember, but quietly, he finds himself wanting nothing else but this, a lingering moment of normalcy.

Alec tucks his bandaged hand into the pocket of his coat. Out of sight, out of mind has never really worked for him, cursed, always, to overthink and overanalyse, but he can push it back for now. He can believe himself suspended, in the same way the night air threatens downpour, on the brink of reality.

And in this reality, he finds himself wanting little more than to be near Magnus, to feel that spark that always flares when he looks back at Alec over his shoulder and his eyes catch the light.

The floodgates seem to open the moment they step into the lobby of the office, rain cascading down onto the streets just behind them with the sound a train thundering through the station. Alec laughs in his relief, breathless, and Magnus’ gaze turns liquid too. He lets out a low whistle as he sheds his coat and presses the button for the elevator to their floor.

Soon, the thrum of rain becomes the whimsy yet metronomic jingle of elevator music, and that’s when things seem to slow, the need to rush seeping from Alec’s body like rainwater. He leans back against the hand bars of the elevator, Magnus across from him, and submits to the slow drag of time, numbing his sense so usually sharp and honed.

He’s very aware of himself: of his fingers curled over that bar, of the creases in his dress pants, of
whether he’s thinking too much about breathing and whether he looks awkward. Magnus’ gaze is low, hooded and lazy, and he’s not shy in letting his eyes roam Alec, lingering unabashedly on the buttons of his shirt, on the knot of his tie, on his mouth - he wets his lips, or so Alec thinks. Everything seems a little blurred, in and out of existence; Alec’s heart beats sluggishly, pulling itself through syrup.

“I never asked,” Magnus says then, unwilling to punctuate the strange silence with too-loud words. He leans back against the wall of the elevator in a way that has Alec looking the length of his body, from crossed ankles, to shrugged shoulders, to throat. His mouth. “The other super that you met in that alleyway. He calls himself Nightlock, if I’m not mistaken?”

He’s not playing the game anymore, pretending Alec wasn’t there. But Alec doesn’t want to play either, and he feels dangerously loose-lipped and fluent with the truth.

“Yeah,” says Alec, “He’s, uh - telekinetic, or kinetikinetic, or something. I’ve … read about him in the papers before.”

Magnus hums, smiling to himself over some inside joke. Though he doesn’t share it with Alec, Alec likes the expression it leaves on Magnus’ face anyway.

“What was he like?” Magnus asks, but then rephrases, “Did you like him?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Alec scoffs. “He saved my life.”

Alec doesn’t miss the way Magnus jaw tenses at that. It’s the first time Alec has admitted how close he came last night to not walking out of that alleyway alive. He recalls the cold flush of the adrenaline, the panic, the clear and sudden focus on the fire and the fire only. Blood caked beneath his fingernails. Pain searing up his arm and through the base of his skull. He remembers the way it felt to breathe again when Nightlock had sent the pyrokinetic running -

Alec hasn’t come that close to death in a long time. He’s not sure if it’s shock - or something else entirely - that has him so numb to that realisation.

Magnus feels enough for both of them. There’s worry in him, a fear not unlike the one Alec saw beneath Nightlock’s mask. There’s a shred of anger too.
But it vanishes just as quickly as it arrived, and Magnus smiles again.

“I don’t mean it like that,” he explains gently. He pushes off the wall and steps carefully into Alec’s space. He waits for Alec to move away. Alec doesn’t move away. “It’s not often you get to meet a super up close and personal, or at least, not whilst you know that they’re a super. Was he friendly?”

Magnus reaches past him to grip the handrail where Alec’s fingers are; they do not touch, but they could, if Magnus wanted it. If Alec wanted it.

*Do you? Do you want him to touch you?*

Alec’s eyes flick down to Magnus’ lips. Magnus tilts his head to the side, watching Alec curiously.

“Was he *handsome*, Alexander?”

“What - I … I guess?” Alec splutters, his cheeks warming. He gestures pathetically at his face with his hand. He breathes in a lungful of Magnus’ cologne. “He was kinda wearing a mask, so, I - I couldn’t - uh - are we really having this conversation?”

The elevator dings as they arrive at their floor, just as Magnus laughs. He takes a step back and Alec inhales abruptly.

“Just trying to figure out if I should be jealous, Alexander,” he says candidly, over his shoulder.

Alec tugs at his collar where his tie grows tight.

They part ways on the office floor, Alec weaving through the partitions to collect his bag, and Magnus ducking down the hallway towards his office. Alec has one last scan through his emails - and is relieved his one-day sabbatical hasn’t left him missing much - before Magnus returns, his
coat draped across his shoulders like a cloak and a wide-brimmed hat tilted upon his head, his briefcase in hand. He looks effortless.

Alec knows he sucks in a breath. He knows he does, but Magnus doesn’t hear it, so it’s fine.

“Plans for the rest of the night?” Magnus asks, leaning his hip against Alec’s partition as Alec finishes packing his stuff.

“I’ve, uh - gonna stop by and see my sister,” Alec half-lies, feeling Magnus’ eyes trailing him. “She’s gonna be mad that I’m late.”

“Tell her I’m sorry for keeping you, then.”

Alec hoists his bag onto his shoulder, and then they stand, facing each other. His heart thumps. His hand stings. Alec is unsure if he’s the one who should leave first.

“Goodn-”

“You know as much as-”

They both stop. Magnus grins as Alec ducks his head and rubs the back of his neck.

“Sorry,” Alec says, “You first?”

Magnus raises a hand, his finger curling over the shell of his ear to fiddle with his silver cuff again. It’s not the first time Alec has noticed him do it tonight, and belatedly, he wonders if it means Magnus is nervous.

That’s a strange thought.

“I was going to say, as much as I admire a man’s desire to throw himself into dangerous situations for the sake of others, I would appreciate it if you gave my heart a break.”
“Magnus,” Alec warns, a surprising laugh punched from his chest.

Magnus’ eyes light up at the sound. “I mean it. I’ve told you before and I’ll tell you again: not everyone in this city is your responsibility,” he adds, “And I would very much prefer you alive, all things considered.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” says Alec, still smiling.

Magnus shakes his head in fond despair. “Goodnight, Alexander. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Goodnight, Magnus.”

Magnus leaves and Alec stays, rooted to the spot until the automated lights turn out and he is plunged into darkness in the middle of the office. Outside, cars purr and the city hums with its argon undercurrent, always buzzing, always moving.

Alec cannot move. He’s stuck, a lynchpin in New York.

He knows playing Atlas is his detriment; perhaps that is the folly of all older brothers, and the need to protect those smaller than him extends far and beyond his own siblings, his own family, his own friends. Somehow, it has become the whole city, his city, even though it wriggles and squirms from his grip.

But Alec also knows this: when Magnus asks him to do something - especially something as honest as keeping himself alive - Alec can want for nothing more than to do just that. To stay alive. Because it would hurt Magnus if he didn’t and Alec cannot stomach the thought of that. It hurts his heart – and that’s a feeling, a devotion he cannot yet name, as inexplicable and fast-falling as it is.

He wants it. He’s not so sure he can give it.
Sentinel remains in a bag at the bottom of Alec’s locker. It’s been easier ever since the incident in the alleyway.

There was guilt before. Guilt eating Alec alive over not being able to catch this man, this pyrokinetic with an appetite for blood. And now - now that Alec knows a single culprit actually exists, now that Alec has seen him with his own two eyes and knows what this man can do, surely the want to put on his mask again should be stronger than ever before.

But it’s not. And the guilt feels completely different from before. Before, it was panic, it was mania: it was chasing a ticking clock that would strike twelve upon another dead body in an alleyway before Sentinel could reach it.

Now, the guilt has shifted, and there’s relief to be found in not being Sentinel. He can fool himself into thinking Jace and Clary have these murders covered, defying Maryse as they are and sneaking out on patrol night after night. Being Sentinel was slowly killing him, his skin already stained with the blood of so many people that he will never be able to scrub it free.

He can feed this newfound guilt with thoughts of Magnus, and Magnus asking him not to put his life more at risk than it needs to be.

It doesn’t grant him absolution. It makes him feel selfish.

He finds himself in his bathroom on a night like many others before it. He stands with his head bowed over the sink, his wet hands on the basin, and the eyes of a man he’s never sure he knows staring back at him in the mirror.

Scars and bruises, lines of lightning, faded burns litter his bare chest. The only thing he wears is the bandage around his palm.

*Maybe you’re allowed to be selfish,* says the voice in his head. *Maybe you’ve done enough, given enough, and you deserve this. You deserve this quiet.*

Louder, there’s another voice and it sounds a lot like Nightlock: *if you forsake everyone, who’s left to save them?*
And then quieter, Magnus would whisper in the dead of the night, *not everyone is your responsibility*.

He thinks about the look in Magnus’ eyes, the warmth of him standing close in that elevator, the care in his touch as he held Alec’s burned hand in his.

He thinks of that pull, inexplicable and confusing as it is, that always draws Alec inwards, towards Magnus’ wishes and his wants.

Alec closes his eyes tightly. He squeezes the rim of the basin and winces as pain flutters through his palm and up his arm.

There’s an ache inside of him. Not one born of fatigue or regret or broken bones just about healed. It’s not an ache that he knows, not one that has been around long enough for him to grow used to it like the rest.

*‘I would very much prefer you alive.’*

There are a lot of people who would prefer that, Alec thinks darkly. But none of them - none of them, not even Isabelle and Jace, make him feel like *this*.

Like he might be - like he might possibly be -

Alec shakes his head and turns away from the mirror before he can catch sight of his reflection again. His alarm will go off in a few hours and his bed calls to him; he slumps down onto the mattress, burying his face in the pillow and his whole body sags.

A promise is a promise. Keep yourself alive. *Swear it.*

If not for his word, Alec has so little left to his name. He has the guilt, the shame, the fear that wrings him dry, and if he unlocks that part of himself so carefully compressed and crushed down inside his stomach, he is not so sure he’ll survive it. Not this time. Not again.
“Why are you still on the bench?” Jace asks him one night when they run into each other in the empty corridors of headquarters. Jace has his wings strapped to his back, and Alec is on his way to make his third coffee of his shift because heaven knows Victor is making him need it.

It’s been over a month since Alec last wore his mask.

Alec keeps walking, but Jace quickly falls into stride next to him, nudging Alec in the shoulder.

Alec rolls his eyes. “Because I’m not a glutton for punishment?” he retorts, but it only makes Jace raise his eyebrows, as if to say: that all you got?

“Y’know, no-one benefits from you sitting out and hanging up your mask on the door,” Jace says, “It’s not like people are gonna stop doing shitty things to each other, just because you’re on desk duty.”

“I know that.”

“So why,” Jace laments, “are you still letting other people tell you what to do? That’s not the Alec I know. They’re your powers, man. Not Maryse and Robert’s, and not Idris’ either.”

Jace pats Alec’s shoulder, squeezing him tight. Earnestness is alive in his eyes, bold with that stubborn recklessness of his that only ever sees things in rights and wrongs. Maybe it’s the better way to live. Things must seem all the more simple for it.

Alec glances both ways down the corridor. He can hear footsteps approaching, so he nods for Jace to follow him into an empty meeting room. Alec shuts the door behind them, listening to someone pass by on the other side until they disappear into silence. When Alec turns back around, Jace is leaning against the table with his arms folded across his chest, eyes narrowed.

“What happens when shit goes down and you’re caught with your pants around your ankles, huh?” Jace continues. It’s not his best metaphor, but Alec’s heard worse. “Clary and me, we need you.
You’re the one with the plan, you’re the one who always keeps us in check, saves our bacon when we’re neck-deep in trouble. We’re not a team if you’re not out there with us.” His frown deepens and he worries his lip in a moment of vulnerability that Alec rarely sees. “We miss you, buddy. I miss you.”

Alec feels that. He does. He knows Jace means it too, knows that Jace misses having Alec at his back, where he can always count on him. Arkangel and Sentinel. There was always a thrill, the two of them against the world, running around in the dark and in their masks: a team, as Jace says.

But it’s not enough. Jace doesn’t understand what it feels like to arrive too late to save someone - because Jace is always fast enough. He’s never been anything but.

Jace clearly hasn’t noticed Alec’s bandaged hand. The raw blisters have healed, but Alec’s skin still pulls taut and stings, the backs of his knuckles wrapped in gauze and plaster.

And why should Jace notice? More often than not, one of them is walking around with stitches in their hairline or their arm in a sling, but -

Alec’s not Sentinel right now. Jace should notice that he’s hurt because of that, not in spite of it.

Alec folds his hands behind his back, falling into stiff parade rest. It makes Jace sigh, rolling his eyes. He pushes off the table and closes the distance between them, lifting his head to look Alec fiercely in the eye.

“I don’t understand you sometimes,” he says, “You’re the one who used to sneak out after hours because your guilty hero complex wouldn’t let you sleep, and now you won’t put your suit back on because … you don’t wanna upset mom and dad?”

“You know it’s more complicated than that,” Alec grumbles, “It’s not just about mom and dad.”

Jace probes Alec’s face for a sign of weakness. When he doesn’t find it - or it isn’t given to him willingly - his shoulders slump and he cards a hand through his hair.

“Well, if I were you, I sure as Hell would have a migraine by now, thinking about me running around out there doing whatever the fuck I want,” he says, puffing out his cheeks, much like Clary does when she’s peeved. “And considering you’re a fucking worrywart, that’d be enough of a
reason to get me back in the saddle.”

He gives Alec a look that is both teasing and severe, an expression uniquely Jace. He’s always been very good at hiding the things he wants the most beneath lofty humour and playful jibes.

Alec doesn’t really want to unpack it now, and Jace probably doesn’t want him to either. Squishy, mushy, and vulnerable feelings aren’t really his forte.

Instead, Alec raises an eyebrow. “Suddenly,” he says in a deadpan, “I understand how mom and dad feel. You’re a nightmare without supervision.”

“Exactly,” says Jace with a wink. “Much more exciting than boring old let’s-stick-to-the-rules Victor, huh?”

“Besides Victor, you might be the worst person I know.”

Jace doesn’t reply to that, but he does smile, close-lipped and dismissive. He moves to step past Alec, knocking their shoulders together, but then he pauses. Alec cannot see his face.

“You really … you’re really gonna give up on this Circle thing?” he asks, “Just like that?”

“I don’t want to give up on it,” Alec says honestly, “But I made a promise.”

“To mom?”

“No.”

“Oh,” says Jace. He pauses; the silence is loud. “Your friend Nightlock?”

That makes Alec look back.
“What?” he asks, but Jace is scowling at the floor, his forehead creased and his nose scrunched up in a sneer. “What’s the supposed to mean?”

“It’s not supposed to mean anything, Alec,” says Jace. “I’m just - I’m trying to figure you out. I thought - I thought I knew you, I thought I knew how you ticked, but ever since you met that guy - yeah, Izzy’s told me all about it - you’ve … changed, I guess.”

“This is not because of Nightlock,” Alec insists, and Jace raises his eyebrows, unconvinced. Alec powers on, “He’s the one who needs our help. My help. He keeps asking but I - I can’t - and it’s -”

A promise, Alec repeats to himself. He closes his eyes and steadies the shake in his breath. A promise. Don’t get hurt. Keep yourself alive. It’s not your responsibility.

Think of my heart, Alexander.

Alec opens his eyes. “I made a promise not to die.”

“As if the Circle gives a fuck about that.”

Jace brushes past him, the sharp edge of his folded wings catching on Alec’s sleeve, pressing into his arm. It makes Alec wince, but Jace doesn’t look back, slipping out the door without another word.

Alec listens to him stomp his way down the corridor, and then after, he listens to the silence, punctuated only by his own breathing, which is deeper, more ragged than he realised. He takes a few steps back, thumping against the side of the table. He grips the edge with both his hands, fingers curling tight against the wood.

He stares hard at his feet. He’s still wearing his work shoes. The leather is clean and shiny. His combat boots are nowhere to be seen.

What is he supposed to do here? There are two futures extended out before him: one is waterlogged, and the other, burned, burning, still on fire.
He can choose this: spending every night behind a desk, barking commands at Victor who will never listen, wasting his powers as his mother and father dictate when or where he can use them. His mask gathering dusk, the rain building up beyond the window, his guilt festering - but his promise to Magnus remains intact, or -

Or, he breaks that promise. He breaks that promise, and follows Nightlock into the fire and into dark, away from Idris, away from both Sentinel and Alec, towards some end he doesn't yet know. It terrifies him more than he can admit.

*If Magnus knew, would he understand? Would he understand that Alec can’t just sit idly by and wait-*

Would Magnus understand if he had been in that alleyway and seen the power of that fire for himself? Would he understand if he could feel Jace’s righteous anger? Would he understand if he had heard Nightlock’s disappointment when Sentinel turned him down that night on the roof?

The silence is suddenly so searing, so lethal, that Alec finds it difficult to breathe. His entire body trembles, fingers gripping tight the table. He closes his eyes, screwing them shut.

He tries to think of Magnus. He tries to remember the feel of his hand, tries to recall the delight in his eyes the night Alec gave him that cassette, and the stuttered beat of his own heart; the longing, the *ache* for -

He stops himself. He doesn’t get to have that. He can’t.

It’s selfish. *Selfish*.

Nightlock is right, *Jace is right*, but Alec doesn’t want to admit it, because he knows it’s going to tear a hole in him as wide and wavering as the sky.

And maybe -

Maybe in Magnus too.
Alec has a decision to make. It’s going to hurt, as all noble choices tend to do.

Magnus isn’t in the office the next day. Alec tries to pretend that he’s not disappointed, not as untethered as he is, but the knowledge that he’s going to have to break his promise so soon after making it kept him up all night, and he wants -

He needs to tell Magnus. Explain it to him somehow without words and without telling the truth: without proving Magnus right.

But Magnus is nowhere to be found. It puts a damper on Alec’s mood for the rest of the day – he spends most of his lunch break frowning at his salad, wondering if it always tasted this bland, or if it’s just him.

“He said something about a witness who couldn’t wait, something to do with a missing super he’s trying to find,” says Simon around a mouthful of sandwich. “Left a Post-It on my desk this morning - honestly I’m surprised he didn’t leave one on yours. But then again, me and him are doing that editorial for next Sunday’s issue together, and he wanted me to get a headstart on the layout -”

Alec zones out, the crease between his eyebrows only deepening as Simon starts blabbering on about how he thinks he’s getting sick because he keeps getting these jittery tingles in his fingertips and dizzy spells whenever he’s around a computer.

Alec’s eyes fall upon his own hand then, wrapped tightly in fresh bandages and looking less like a snowman’s fist than it did the night he met Nightlock. Izzy redid them for him earlier this morning and Alec had stared at the strange marbling of his skin in morbid curiosity, caught somewhere between nausea and fascination.

There’s still a dull ache there. Mostly, he can ignore it, because he’s ever so good at gritting his teeth and getting on with things, and he’s dragged himself through so many days with broken ribs and bruised shins before, but -

When he stretches his fingers, it hurts. His skin feels hot to the touch beneath the bandages, like
some of the same angry fire from the alleyway is trapped beneath the scar tissue with nowhere to go.

A part of him he knows all too well is curious about how far he can push until the pain makes him wince. He flexes his fingers deliberately; the sensation sparks in his tendons, shooting all the way up his arm, and pricking behind his eyes.

He knows he shouldn’t; it’s the worst form of coping mechanism. He knows that it would be better to talk about, to really talk about that pyrokinetic, about that man dying in his arms, about his own deathwish, charging into that fight armed only with a pocket knife -

- about how the pain is different this time, more than just surface level, because he knows he’s going to have to face it again and again if he’s decided given up on his promise, and drag himself back into the office each and every day after with fresh cuts, fresh burns, and explain himself to Magnus.

Alec curls his fingers into his palm; the skin on the back of his knuckles stretches where it’s still raw and new.

“Alec, are you even listening to me?” asks Simon.

Alec doesn’t tear his eyes away from his hand.

Alec stays late at his desk that night. Magnus doesn’t return; no-one has seen him since he stepped out this morning, and his office door is bolted, all his case files safely locked away from prying eyes -

Including Alec’s.

Still, Alec sits at his computer until after hours, staring at a spreadsheet in the hope that it might contain all the secrets to the universe. It doesn’t. His hand just aches. He knows why he lingers.
Why he doesn’t head back to headquarters for the early shift -

He exists on a precipice, the edge of a decision. He feels himself wobbling across the ridge of it, his body ready to take a step, but his head, his heart, holding him back.

His knee hammers against the underside of his desk. He drums his fingers on his keyboard, the wired energy untapped and unfading. It’s almost like electricity rummaging through his veins, through his bones, making him jitter and stutter and pick at the bandage on his hand.

At least the office is empty. No-one will notice that he can’t sit still.

It’s around eleven o’clock that he finally throws in the towel, pushing back from his desk with a shaky sigh. The glow of his computer illuminates the sea of cubicles; whoever was last out clearly turned off the lights and didn’t notice Alec - and Alec didn’t notice either, too engrossed in the dark to feel it creeping in.

It soothes him, the blackness. Sounds are muffled and light is softer, the twinkle of the city dancing on the other side of the floor-to-ceiling windows, full of decadence and whimsy and entrapment. There’s a sense of unreality about being left in a place of work after hours; it dallies with the knowledge that you’re not supposed to be there, that no-one is supposed to be there, and you might see things you are not meant to see if you stay beyond your welcome.

This is Sentinel’s world, after dark, and yet here he is, still in his suit and tie, still with the day’s stubble prickling his jaw, still wearing his Alec skin. Sentinel is in a bag and Alec is pretending.

Maybe he shouldn’t.

Maybe it’s time to accept the person he is, and that person - that person isn’t Alec. Alec is a moment, a dream, a glimpse of another universe without superheroes, without death and diatribes.

Maybe it’s time to bear it, so no-one else has to.
Alec hoists his bag higher on his shoulder as he leaves the office. He can feel his bow poking into his ribs through the canvas, and so he tightens his grip on the strap and picks up the pace. His footsteps ring out on the linoleum as he hurries through the empty lobby, giving the nightguard a cursory nod as he passes. The guard doesn’t look up, but Alec hardly notices.

His heart is loud. Each and every beat reverberates through his chest.

Slipping out the side door, he steps out into the alleyway that cuts down the side of the building, a wall of cold air greeting him like an old friend, slapping him on the back with a familiar hand. Alec sucks in a deep breath. The cold is icy, stinging in his throat and the bridge of his nose, but he doesn’t stop to pause.

He needs to find a good place to change into his supersuit. This alley is too open, too visible, but there’s a rooftop not far from here where he used to stash his gear - Jace will know it, once Alec calls in and tells him you were right, you’re always fucking right, aren’t you, and Jace will give him grief about it for five minutes -

And then he can find Nightlock. He can find Nightlock, he can light up a beacon in the dark, set up his damn smoke signal, and taste his heart in his mouth as Nightlock floats down out of the sky and Sentinel will say -

I’m sorry.

Alec’s shaking. He’s very visibly shaking. He feels it in his fingers, in his knees, in each splash his foot makes as he hurries across slick concrete. It’s like his body is begging him not to go, dragging his heels, still holding on tight to the signpost in the middle of the crossroads where he has stood for so long -

And so Alec stops, letting a breath whistle out across his lips, the note sharp. The air is too wet for it to cloud and mushroom like smoke, but the cold still laves over him, filling up his lungs and making his chest heavy.

It’s not raining, but the omniscient neon does shimmer like oil pulled through puddles. A haze of strange and eerie blue drifts through the streets, snagging on lamp posts and curling in tendrils within the gutters. The city exists underwater, an indigo-coloured silence that smothers and drowns.
And yet, the strange weight doesn’t quite reach Alec’s bandaged hand; his fingers are clumsy and bound, and yet it’s the oddest thing: he can look at his hand and know that it is his hand, but there’s the buoyancy in his palm and lightness in his fingertips. As if his hand is not really there, detached from his wrist, like it’s no longer a part of him, floating up, up, upwards - which is a gruesome enough thought for a night like this.

The illusion makes him dizzy; if he stares too long at the bright lights overhead, he forgets himself, he loses a part of himself, and finds it hovering above his head like a spectre. Is that Alec leaving him, or Sentinel, ushering him forward? He doesn’t know, but he imagines that ghost high above the city and the skyscrapers, drifting through the clouds and watching the streets fade away into twinkling midnight infinity as he dissipates into the air at peace.

That sounds like a good dream. A good dream, and a selfish dream, and that’s what makes it feel so far away from his body.

Alec closes his eyes and turns his face to the sky. He wishes for a downpour to bring him back down to earth. He longs for the sharp curtain of rain slicing into his cheeks and grounding him. It’s that desperation for pain again, one that will take him away from the edge he dangles over.

Breathe, Alec. Just breathe.

Just ... be.

Something shifts overhead, clinking against the cast iron of a fire escape. The rustle of heavy fabric, the click of a tongue, a stolen breath in the dark -

Habit has Alec tensing, shifting his weight onto his back foot to brace himself before he’s even opened his eyes again. Habit, self-preservation, the fact he’s still Sentinel even without his mask, even after days and weeks of lethargy. He tightens his grip on his bag strap as if it were his quiver.

For a moment, his heart stops. The last time he was here, he wasn’t alone in this alleyway, having nothing at his disposal but a switchblade. How fast could he pull his bow from his bag? How fast to notch a moment like an arrow? Maybe two, three seconds, tops -

Alec opens his eyes. Above him, the shadows shift, a coat catching in the wind. He has an audience - but it’s not the pyrokinetic again.
On the fire escape three stories up, there’s a man sitting with his legs dangling over the edge, his arms pillowed on the balustrade. Alec squints into the dark.

He knows who it is.

And oh - why is it that Alec has stopped shaking? Why does it suddenly feel like a breath -

“Are you waiting to ambush me?” asks Alec, his voice far too hoarse. He sounds like he does when he has his voice modulator switched on, his words low and raspy, mingling with the strangeness of the night.

The shadow above shifts with the sound of squeaking leather, and it’s then that Alec feels the familiar pressure in the air. It pushes and prods at the back of his neck, at the divot of his throat, like curious fingers. Alec swallows thickly.

The man above steps into the faded light, orange and blue dappling his face from different angles.

It’s Nightlock. Here.

Why is he here?

Nightlock leans gallantly over the railing of the fire escape, preening beneath Alec’s attention. He rests his chin in the cup of his palm and smiles a crooked smile.

“An ambush?” he says, and his voice sings in a way Alec has never heard before, “Heavens, no. I just wanted to see you again.”

Alec raises an eyebrow, and then lifts his bum hand in Nightlock’s direction. “Was the other night not enough for you?” he asks.

Nightlock’s smile broadens. “I’m not a one-night-stand kind of guy, despite what people - and the tabloids - might say,” he replies. “I was hoping you might be interested in a second date.”
Alec scoffs. “Last time wasn’t a date.”

“Not with that amount of fire and near-death experience, no, I suppose you’re right,” agrees Nightlock, but he’s grinning down at Alec and it’s all too cavalier and charming.

He’s never smiled like that in front of Alec - in front of Sentinel - before. And it’s so different to the last few times Alec has seen him, so different to the anger and the frustration and the disarming look in his eye as he judged Sentinel so succinctly for his sins.

Nightlock vaults over the railings of the fire escape, landing gracelessly before Alec, his coat billowing magnificently. He brushes his hands down his supersuit, smoothing out the creases and wiping away the imaginary dust.

Alec’s fist tightens around the strap of his bag again. Nightlock’s smile doesn’t falter.

“So, let me make it up to you,” says Nightlock. He takes a step towards Alec and there’s a shimmy in his shoulders. “Put that business with the pyrokinetic behind us and start afresh.”

Alec squints at him. “Has anyone ever told you that you’ve very … forward.”

“Oh, every day of my life, I assure you. But I’ve found that it’s worth being forward if there’s something that you want.”

Alec doesn’t budge, and Nightlock’s expression softens into bashfulness. The sharpness of his smile becomes something more fond, but more open too.

“I just want to talk,” he says gently, “Nothing untoward. I promise.”

He takes another slow step forward. Alec tucks his kit bag behind his back, but his eyes don’t leave Nightlock’s face.

And that’s when Alec see the dark colour beneath Nightlock’s eyes, peeking through the holes in
his mask. No-one would ever notice, not on first glance, nor second, but only after a hundred glances, looking past the tall hair and the dark coat and the crackle of kinetic energy in his palms and the pure lightning that exists, sometimes, in his eyes.

Only then might someone notice how Nightlock actually looks, drawn so very thin.

Alec can only wonder if he’s been pursuing their pyrokinetic as relentlessly as Alec fears.

And all alone.

“There’s a spot I know that I think you might like,” Nightlock says then, “Amazing views of the city, I think you’d quite like it. Consider it a thank you for not reporting me to the police the other night, if that makes you feel any better. We could talk there without being overheard.”

Alec blinks. He waits for the other shoe to drop, but it doesn’t - there isn’t one - and Nightlock just smiles at him, tilting his head to the side.

Alec doesn’t get it. Alec doesn’t get him, but that’s always been the case, hasn’t it? The enigmatic, infuriating, addictive Nightlock with his white-hot anger and his coy grins and his magnetism that Alec cannot stray far from.

What is it that he sees? What is it that he wants?

*And from Alec, of all people - Nightlock doesn’t know Alec, not like Alec knows him.*

There’s a part of Alec that scolds himself for even considering Nightlock’s proposal, but then, there’s this other part of him -

There are few people in this city who he knows like he knows Nightlock. Fewer, even, that he actually wants to see tonight. Only one who is owed his apology, whether he can give it or not.

*It’s not too weird to say yes, is it?*
Nightlock offers his hand to Alec. The air around him seems to shimmer and tremble, as if pulsing around a quantum point held in the centre of his palm. It draws Alec’s eyes. He loosens his grip on his bag.

“Do you trust me?” Nightlock asks.

And oh, Alec trusts so very little these days - himself included - but he’s been hearing this word so much in the last few months that it has to mean something. It can’t just be a coincidence.

And Nightlock? Alec knows where Nightlock stands: in the middle of all of this chaos made of Alec and Sentinel, the Circle and Idris, promises and justice; and Alec may not know his face or his name, but he knows who Nightlock is.

A superhero. A good fucking person who only wants to save people.

Alec rests his bandaged hand in Nightlock’s waiting palm. Nightlock’s fingers curl around his, his thumb running across the backs of Alec’s knuckles.

“Yes,” says Alec, although it sounds far more like another promise, and one that is far too revealing. But this one - this one, he can’t break. Won’t break. “I don’t know why, but yeah. I trust you.”

“Oh, you won’t regret it.” Nightlock pulls him closer, raising their joined hands between them, his smile lifting at the corner, becoming playful. Warmth rises in Alec’s face, uncomfortable and splotchy, so he stares hard at his hand in Nightlock’s. His bandages and Nightlock’s glove eclipse the rush of skin on skin, but Nightlock’s touch is still hot, still crackling, electromagnetic in that way he can always distort the fibres of reality to fit his will.

“Hold tight,” he says, voice softer now, closer to Alec. Alec can feel his breath. “We’re going up.” He gives Alec’s hand a reassuring squeeze, and then slowly begins to arc his other arm upwards. The wind comes flooding through Nightlock’s coat while rootling through Alec’s open jacket and ruffling his hair.

Alec’s done this all before, stepping off a rooftop with his hand in Nightlock’s – but it doesn’t stop the want in his fingers to shake furiously. His feet lift off the ground and he dangles, for a moment, like a helpless creature caught in the silk thread of a web. A noise escapes him, something between a grunt and a gasp, and he grips tighter at Nightlock’s hand, locking their fingers together. He can
feel his stomach swaying as if it has come unbound within his insides, moving around freely within him, as he presses his mouth into a tight line. His eyes fall shut on instinct.

Nightlock squeezes his hand again, his thumb stroking all the way down the length of Alec’s index finger. “You know,” he says unhelpfully, his breath tickling Alec’s ear, “Maybe it would be better for both of us if I could put my arm around you.”

Alec’s opens his eyes and fixes Nightlock with a withering look. They both know that’s not necessary, but judging by Nightlock’s impish smile, he clearly knows when to try his luck. Alec only wishes he could focus on that, but he he looks to his feet, searching for the ground. It’s a lot farther away than anticipated.

Nightlock twists his free hand, his palm angling towards the ground, and they slow, almost to a stop. They’re almost fifty feet in the air now, and whilst Alec has leapt off many, many buildings, bridges, moving vehicles in his time, felt the thrill of falling, and lived to tell the tale, he’s always had a guiderope clipped to his suit before. This time, however, all the sweat in Alec’s body feels like its coalescing on the inside of his palm, squeaking against the cuff of Nightlock’s glove.

It’s not that he’s scared of heights - far from it, he thrives in the roof of this city, able to see all and everything at once, every roaming car headlight, every twitch in the shadows - but flying always leaves much to be desired. Or at least, flying with someone else who has control over whether he soars or lands or plummets is what makes his stomach flip. Nightlock could so easily let go of his hand. That’s the part he doesn’t like.

But Nightlock seems to read it in his face, laughing below his breath and drawing Alec into his chest with the barest effort. Alec has an inch or two on him - but he feels far smaller than that, in the way his lungs huff out all the air as Nightlock’s presses their clasped hands between both their chests, his legs dangling freely in the nothing. He briefly wonders if Nightlock can feel his heartbeat against the backs of his knuckles.

“Not so bad, hmm?” offers Nightlock, so close that Alec can almost taste each word.

“Shut up,” says Alec.

Nightlock curls his hand sharply and then they rise, higher and higher into the dark, piercing through the veil of blue that clings to the city streets and hands like a fog over the billboards and the strobe lights from downtown. Nightlock says nothing - or maybe he can’t be heard over the rush of wind too loud - but he guides them upwards with the flick of his fingers, navigating the updraughts and air currents with ease.
It’s not like flying with Jace, who just barrels head-first into the storm and hopes that the wind will send him tumbling where he needs to go.

The air seems to part for Nightlock, weaving between his arms and legs, billowing through his coat, combing through Alec’s hair like the hand of an overly fond friend. Alec can still hear his pulse in his ears, louder and louder as he counts higher stories and harsher breaths, but then he steals a glance over Nightlock’s shoulder, and -

It’s beautiful.

The shadow of an enormous black skyscraper looms before them, the plate glass so shiny that Alec can see the pale shock of his face in excruciating detail. The glass catches the reflection of the city in diamond colour, iridescent and petrolic, splitting and fragmenting into a hundred different reds and purples and blues. He can see the skyscrapers, the twinkling hotels, the World Trade Centre in the distance, the bay and the glow of Jersey City beyond that. New York bleeds out into the water, spilling yellow and white across the waves. Strobe lights from rooftops catch the clouds, licking them like smoke against a ceiling.

Alec finds himself mesmerised, his hold on Nightlock’s hand briefly loosening. His mouth parts beyond his reasoning. Nightlock’s eyes flick to his, and Alec watches as his smile becomes a little more coy. Not quite shy, but - softer, somehow. Quietly thrilled, delighted in a way Alec cannot comprehend.

And warm. It’s so warm, so fond, the look in his eyes, that it makes Alec’s skin burn, and he knows it’s not just with the wind rush. He doesn’t want to look, so he squeezes Nightlock’s fingers again, pulling himself closer. He presses himself against Nightlock’s shoulder, and feels Nightlock shake with a light laugh.

But still Nightlock guides them higher, all the other skyscrapers falling away around them, until only this one is left, its rooftop clearly their destination. It appears from out of the dark, a surprise, and before Alec can blink, Nightlock is lowering him down over the edge of a guard rail onto a narrow service platform made entirely of iron mesh.

He twirls Alec away from his chest, extending their joined hands like a waltz. Alec’s feet meet the ground, his other hand flying for the railing to steady himself against the suddenly violent wind. Above their heads, a radio tower extends up into the night, piercing the belly of the clouds; but as Nightlock comes into land next to Alec, it’s not what Alec’s looking at.
They’re so high up. The sky is a cloak upon their shoulders and Alec wonders if he might be able to see the whole of humankind from up here. The wind is icy, cold enough to cut right through him, but he can hardly hear it, not when the city and all its secrets are sprawled out like this before him, off into the distance, hallucinogenic and prone under Alec’s gaze. There is romance to be found in its bright and ephemeral lights, something nonsensical and magical, and perhaps it is magic that makes the distant lights thrum to the same beat as a heart. New York has its own charm when it doesn’t taste like exhausts and cigarettes and blood on the tip of the tongue; instead, it tastes like water, like unpolluted rain anticipated, fresh and unspoiled.

Alec has never climbed this high as Sentinel. Jace has probably been higher, has probably tested the limits of the stratosphere, but when you’re a man who can’t fly …

Alec feels a little breathless. He can’t quite blame it on the altitude. No-one else has this view right now; no-one else can see every dark skyscraper and every flashing neon billboard in this city at once, how each colour is brushed on top of the next, delicate strokes of yellow on black and white on blue. How the light bleeds into deeper shades of night, as if the city were some spectacular painting that can only be seen from afar and not when one is caged in by the streets below.

He turns back to Nightlock, expecting him to be admiring the city too, but it’s not the city that Nightlock watches with silent and too-familiar fondness.

His eyes meet Alec’s and he smiles, caught.

This is not the vigilante that Alec knows. Not the vigilante that Sentinel knows.

This man is softer and he laughs below his breath; he’s stricken by the beauty of a terrible city so much so that he has a favourite spot. And his eyes keep flicking down to Alec’s bandaged hand like he just can’t help but blame himself for something that was never his fault.

*Is this the real Nightlock?*

That’s not a question Alec can answer, and in truth, not one he’s sure he wants to know the answer to. It would say too much about whether Nightlock trusts Sentinel enough to be himself when they’re together, and the thought that Nightlock might still be erecting walls around his heart is not something Alec wants to consider.

Or maybe – maybe, it’s this Nightlock who is the fake. The Nightlock that Sentinel knows has
shown his messy side; he’s shown his anger, spite, and violence, the things that might make someone turn away in disgust.

This Nightlock though. This Nightlock is still smiling, a barely-there thing that makes Alec wonder if he realises it at all. The shape of him is illuminated by the glow of the city soaking in the clouds above; the skin around his mask is bathed in supple shades of purple and white. Artificial starlight dances in his eyes. Some part of him is smitten by a feeling Alec doesn’t understand.

“How is your hand?” Nightlock asks, and it strikes Alec that Nightlock’s not just asking to be polite.

Alec clutches his hand to his chest. His wariness is a stark contrast to the way Nightlock is fighting back the urge to edge ever forward.

“It’s fine,” Alec says, “I had my sister look at it – she knows about this sort of stuff. She said it’s fine.”

Nightlock steps closer; Alec’s hackles prickle. There’s a scamper running wild up and down his spine: nervous energy, a bright white light, a quixotic amalgamation of the two – he cannot say. The feeling possesses him, and around him, suddenly, there’s nothing but pin-prick stars stuck to the sides of skyscrapers. The city might spread out behind him as he turns fully to face Nightlock, but the universe compresses them, right down to this single point in time.

Nightlock closes the space between them. His steps slow and careful, his footsteps silent as he shields Alec from the wind. He moves with an inhumane grace and Alec is entranced.

“Can I see?” Nightlock asks, his voice a murmur drifting in the dark. The wind carries a distant synth: it’s a song of namelessness.

Maybe this Nightlock isn’t the person who he truly is, Alec thinks again. But Alec isn’t Alec either, and no-one has to know that. He’s not fully Alec, not fully Sentinel, only that nameless person inside of him, face to face with a man who is somehow both a stranger and a friend.

In the dim and smoky shadow of the rainclouds above, Alec can no longer tell whose hands are whose. He struggles to hold all these different identities at once and they’re falling between his fingers like sand in an hourglass and one of these days he’s going to lose them all and run out of time.
His tongue becomes loose; he speaks before he thinks.

“Sometimes,” he whispers, and then laughs, humourlessly, to himself, “I wonder how you look in the daylight.”

And it is a truth - they only ever meet in the dark, and a part of Alec will always wonder if Nightlock is some strange phantom conjured up by the bright and dreamy reflection of neon in storm drains - but a truth far too stark and telling for a moment like this.

Nightlock’s expression doesn’t change, but he searches Alec. His gaze flits up from Alec’s hand to Alec’s eyes. Maybe he hasn’t noticed Alec’s slip up at all. His face is illuminated by the twinkling of distant skyscrapers, and Alec finds that far-away look present in his eyes too.

“Wondering if I might fade away with the dawn?” Nightlock asks. He takes another step closer to Alec, a soft and tender amusement found in the curve of his mouth. It’s confusing. It’s confusing, because there’s delight in his eyes at the same time there’s melancholy, and he smiles at Alec like he’s never quite smiled at Sentinel, and Alec cannot quite take his words for teasing. He’s looking at Alec like he knows something Alec doesn’t know; he’s looking at Alec in a way Alec doesn’t think he deserves to be looked at.

Nightlock’s eyes drift to Alec’s mouth.

As quickly as it comes, it leaves. He reaches out and cups Alec’s elbow instead, gently prompting him to release his hold on his bandaged hand.

And God –

It’s the most human contact Alec has had in years. Not that he hasn’t been touched, hasn’t been hugged or kissed on the cheek or had his hand shaken, but - it’s this care he has missed. His chest aches tragically for it, all too sudden and damning.

“Some Cinderella fantasy indeed,” Nightlock whispers. His fingers slide up Alec’s forearm and hook around the curve of Alec’s burned palm, easing it away from his chest.
Alec doesn’t resist; the gravitational pull is too strong.

*Who are you?* The question is dizzying, it’s magnitude too large to comprehend.

Nightlock holds his hand between them, Alec’s palm presented to the sky — *and how did Alec end up here?*

This was not the plan for the night. He still has his kit bag slung over his shoulder, everything about Sentinel knocking against his hip, his mask within an arm’s reach, but -

Here he is again, suddenly not wanting that. Here he is again, letting his bag slide from his shoulder all the way to the ground, questioning the same damn decision as before.

Does he want to be Sentinel, does he want to help Nightlock track the Circle, or does he want -

A moment more of this?

Carefully, Nightlock begins to unwind the bandages from Alec’s hand. Nightlock’s hands are gloved but Alec imagines a gentle touch, fingertips not calloused by bowstrings like his own. Alec wonders if he might wear his nails painted; he wonders if his fingers are still stained copper-green with the marks of rings.

He wonders *why me*, because surely Nightlock cannot be this gentle with every foolish man he saves from immolation in an alleyway. He wouldn’t have the time.

*What makes Alec so special?*

Alec cannot stomach the silence or the tension. He has to speak; a question surges up his throat, unchecked and dangerous, especially when he’s asking not in a mask. He asks anyway.

“The … the pyrokinetic the other night,” he says, and Nightlock only hums, his fingers gentle upon Alec’s. “You think he’s the one who – the one who’s responsible for all these murders?”
“I think catching him in the act was proof enough,” replies Nightlock.

The night air is cold against Alec’s raw skin; he chances a look at the state of his hand. The flesh is pink and blistered, mottled and wrinkling and beginning to peel. It’s not a pretty sight.

And yet, Nightlock holds his hand reverently in both of his.

“He’s targeting supers,” Alec whispers, not looking up, “That night in the alleyway, the way he displays the bodies … the things he was saying to that man before he killed him. It was hatred.”

“The Circle has always been anti-vigilante.”

“It’s more than that. They’re trying to make it look like a hate crime, but it’s … it’s more systematic. More purposeful. I don’t know how to explain it.”

“You’ve been thinking about this a lot,” states Nightlock; it’s not a question. That worry from the alleyway is back in his voice, a sharp edge that is simultaneously too invested and quickly pulling back behind hastily thrown up walls.

His fingers ghost over the swell of Alec’s thumb, curving in a slow circle.

“I have to,” says Alec. It’s my job.

No, not his job. He hasn’t worn his mask in weeks, but that hasn’t stopped him from thinking about this, hasn’t stopped him from being unable to sleep at night, hasn’t stopped him and Magnus working into the early hours of the morning trying to figure out who is burning people alive in the gutters.

Hasn’t stopped people from dying.

It’s not his job. It’s his duty.

“I said something about hero complexes before,” Nightlock murmurs, turning Alec’s hand over to
feel his palm, “I meant it. And I appreciate the help, I do, but getting involved with these things is dangerous. You shouldn’t be doing this.”

“No-one else is doing anything about it,” replies Alec, “No-one else understands what’s going on, sees the pattern. I don’t think … I don’t think I have a choice.”

They’re both looking at his hand now, and it’s curious, truly, how something so ugly and grotesque can still somehow look beautiful when the light is just right. The blues and purples bleeding out from the city collect in his palm, and from the right angle, make the blistering of his skin almost look purposeful.

Nightlock wants to say something - and Alec can sense it, because he’s grown accustomed to smelling blood before it’s spilled and enduring wounds before they’re made - and it sounds like Alec, this choice is going to cost you dearly.

But Alec already knows that. In fact, it’s probably already too late because Alec’s already made his decision and accepted the consequences. Tomorrow, he’s Sentinel again. Tomorrow, Alec doesn’t get a say. Tomorrow, yes, it will cost him.

But Nightlock doesn’t know that Alec has already sacrificed a great deal for not much at all.

Does he realise that a burned hand is nothing in the grand scheme of things that Alec has suffered?

Nightlock doesn’t say anything like that. Alec might say it, if their positions were reversed, because Alec has never been very good at holding his tongue in moments like this, untethered honesty let loose inside his chest. Nightlock is stronger than him; Nightlock has better control.

This, Alec already knows too.

“Does anyone know that you’re doing this? That you’re risking your life for strangers late at night?” Nightlock asks then, “Do you speak to people about it? You shouldn’t be doing this alone.”

Does someone else know you’re trying to start knife fights in dark alleyways with pyrokinetics for a thrill on a weekday night?
“I don’t go exclaiming it from the rooftops, if that’s what you mean.” Alec shakes his head. “There are people, there are good people who care, who want to catch this guy just as much as me and get justice for those vigilantes, but I don’t - I don’t know if it’s enough, however hard they’re trying.”

“We are going to catch him.”

Alec looks up. Nightlock squeezes gently at his fingers, curling them back into Alec’s palm. The look in his eyes is both incensed and earnest.

“I swear to you that I won’t rest until it’s done,” Nightlock promises.

His sincerity is strange. The severity, too - it’s too much for two people who have only just met, but plenty enough for two people who have found themselves bound by things beyond their control, like masks and murders.

“Did you … did you find any leads?” Alec asks then. “There were security cameras in that alleyway, maybe they caught something. And you saw his face.”

“It’s something,” Nightlock admits, “It’s certainly the most we’ve had so far. And you’ve seen his face too. In my business, that can give you a lot of power over someone.”

He taps his finger against his mask, drawing Alec’s attention, at last, away from their hands.

“Do you need help?” Alec asks, “Tracking him down?”

Nightlock smiles tightly. “Yes,” he says, “But not from you.” He pauses, studying Alec, but Alec knows he doesn’t say it to hurt him. And nor is it hurt making Alec’s chest feel this full and convoluted either, no.

No, it’s the way Nightlock’s smile saddens, more vulnerable and more honest than the usual melancholy he wears like a cape. This is something real, built both of worry and of affection, but not quite strong enough to weather whatever it is that troubles him.

“I can see it in your eyes,” Nightlock adds. “That stubbornness. You’re not going to listen to me,
“I can’t, Alec thinks. He decides to be brave. ‘Do you have anyone? Anyone who can help? Other vigilantes, other supers?’

He thinks back to the church, to the lonely moment thereafter on the rooftop when his heart lurched for Nightlock and begged Alec not to leave this man alone. He thinks of every time Nightlock asked for Sentinel’s help and Sentinel presented him with a platter of silvered excuses that should’ve meant nothing.

What must it be like to be the only person out here trying to do the right thing?

‘At what point does it start to feel like the wrong thing? At what point do you just give up, through exhaustion and fatigue alone?’

Nightlock lets Alec’s hand fall, although not without the brush of his fingers and the slump of his shoulders as he breathes out. The slope of his back is curved, no longer the proud posture of a man who wants for compliments and insults alike to rush off of him like water, feeling nothing, letting no-one in.

Nightlock walks up to the railing of the service platform, draping his arms over the edge as he bows over it. He gazes out across the city and its blue mirage. He rubs his thumb and index finger together like a tell, and Alec feels the air pressure shift, if only minutely. It presses more firmly at the underside of his jaw.

‘Can I be honest with you, Alec?’

Alec hesitates a moment, but then he steps up to Nightlock’s side, folding his hands behind his back. The plummet down to the street below makes his stomach lurch, but he doesn’t look down, forcing himself to watch the way Nightlock’s jaw clenches and his throat bobs as he swallows.

‘Of course,’ Alec says, but he doesn’t really understand why.

Nightlock’s mouth lifts, distantly amused. He snaps his fingers, and a ripple of kinetic energy boomerangs out into the night, distorting the neon colours in waves that remind Alec of heat on tarmac.
“There is someone,” he says, “Someone who I didn’t expect to have, someone who I thought I couldn’t trust, but he surprised me.”

_Oh_ , Alec thinks, glancing back at his kit bag. _Me_.

“I thought I could see it in him, the same want to do what is right,” Nightlock continues. “Someone who has seen struggle and guilt and knows what it’s like to - to hate themself for not doing enough. I thought for sure, _oh, he’s the one, he’s just like me_. Maybe now, I won’t be so -”

“So?”

“Alone.”

Nightlock looks away, turning his head deliberately as if to prevent Alec from seeing the expression on his face - _but does he forget he wears the mask?_ Alec won’t be able to see it all, however much Alec realises, then, that he wants to.

Alec unfolds his hands and leans forward over the railing, angling himself to face Nightlock. He picks quietly at the peeling skin on his hand, flexing and unflexing his knuckles as he watches the blisters contort. He weighs the words he wants to say on his tongue, not because he has learned how to hold them, but because he fears they might give away too much.

He doesn’t dare think about what it means to want that.

“What happened to him?” Alec asks quietly. “To your friend?”

Nightlock looks back, and he’s smiling thinly as he shakes his head. “I don’t know,” he says, and Alec _feels_ it. “He’s gone missing. I haven’t seen him in weeks. I told him I wouldn’t go looking for him, but he’s never been difficult to find before.” He meets Alec’s eyes and Alec cannot look away, caught suddenly. Ensnared, captivated, all of that, by the bruising admission that he’s -

He’s -
God, Nightlock’s worried about Sentinel. And he shouldn’t be. He doesn’t deserve that. Not because of Alec’s goddamn selfishness.

“A part of me fears that the next body I come across will be his,” Nightlock murmurs. He snaps his fingers again, but this time, the pulse of energy peters out before it gets far, huffing out like a wisp of smoke. Nightlock’s shoulders droop. “That this pyrokinetic will find him first, and that’s something I’ll have to deal with, stumbling across his cold body in an alley, feeling his throat for a pulse, or finding out who he is without his consent because his mask has been ripped from his face, flung into a gutter somewhere.”

Why, Alec cannot help but think, why are you telling me this?

Nightlock is never like this in front of Sentinel. He’s always so strong, so indelible, so concrete and unyielding in his sense of self. He flings police cars around with the flick of his fingers with Sentinel, never afraid to let his words cut to the bone or for his anger to sizzle, never letting Sentinel know which way is up.

What is so different about Alec that it makes Nightlock feel like he can tell him all this? What makes Alec worth telling?

Because how can just Alec be worth anything?

That line inside Alec feels blurred for the first time in a long time. Sentinel bleeds into Alec, and Alec bleeds into Sentinel, and he’s neither one or the other, or maybe none at all - but at least it isn’t numbness. His kit bag is a heavy weight on the floor, only a few steps away, but there’s a disconnect between that distance and its contents: perhaps his bow and quiver don’t exist if he cannot see them. Maybe he’s not obligated to know who he is right now.

Maybe that’s the long-craved dream, or maybe this is just the moment when he’s supposed to peel back the metaphorical mask and reveal all to Nightlock about who and what he is. Maybe Nightlock is supposed to do the same, and he’s trying, now, with all his might, and Alec’s only just realised.

Alec can trick himself into believing he can see it in Nightlock’s eyes: that same longing, hidden away behind the lights of the city and the glint of hope he carries now, hidden deep beneath the soft candour with which he still watches Alec.
Could Alec ask now? He’s never wanted to ask before.

*Who are you really and why does it feel like I -*

“I feel like I know you,” Alec murmurs, softer than he’s ever permitted himself to be with Nightlock before. It doesn’t feel wrong. Not tonight. “Is that weird?”

“Not weird,” whispers Nightlock. “Not weird at all.”

A strange white light begins to bloom on Nightlock’s face then, spilling across his mask in aldurescence. For a moment, Alec wonders if it’s the passing searchlight of a helicopter, but it’s neither bright or transient enough for that, a colour he’s not familiar with.

He looks to the sky, only to find a fragment in the clouds above and the light of the moon peering through. No wonder he doesn’t recognise it. He can’t remember the last time he saw the stars.

The colour of quicksilver dapples in Nightlock’s dark eyes and Alec cannot help but stare. This strange longing is so far removed from everything he knows.

It’s confusing. That’s the only thing Alec’s certain of, this pure bewilderment as to why Nightlock looks at him for so long in the way that he does, and why Alec’s mouth feels so dry because of it.

He looks at Alec like he’s *amazing*, and Alec bites back the urge to laugh, because if he knew - oh, if he knew the truth, he’d leave Alec up here on this rooftop with no way to get down.

The clouds roll across the moon then, obscuring it from view and swallowing up its silvery light, as if it were a gift to be experienced by the only two people in the right place at the right moment to see it. Nightlock shifts, turning his face to the sky, and then frowns when he feels the first pitter-patter of rain misting upon his cheek. He looks to Alec, eyes raking over Alec’s flimsy work shoes and thin jacket, and then straightens, flipping out his coat tails in the same instance.

He leaps up onto the railings, balancing precariously on the silver bar, looking down over the sea of concrete and neon below, and rubs his hands together as he warms them. He doesn’t fall - his balance is too good for that - but Alec holds his breath as he watches Nightlock walk the bar like a tightrope and then turn back once he reaches the end, making his way back to Alec.
The urge to reach out and grab the edge of Nightlock’s coat to reel him back in to safety is there. It’s present. Alec doesn’t act on it, because it feels like a step too intimate.

“I think we should get going. There’s going to be a storm tonight,” Nightlock says. “You’ll want to be somewhere warm and dry before it breaks.”

*And you won’t be?* Alec thinks, but he doesn’t say it, only nods. He wonders if Nightlock can already feel the purr of thunder and hiss of lightning in the distance, electrical energy sparking to his fingertips as if he were some superconductor. Alec wonders how far away Nightlock can sense storms.

“Where can I take you, Alec?” Nightlock continues, making a show of extending his hand down to Alec with an exaggerated bow. Alec rolls his eyes, but grabs his bag and takes Nightlock’s hand, buoyed by weightlessness only seconds later as he begins to rise. “Back to the office?”

Nightlock guides Alec up onto the railing too, allowing Alec to teeter, briefly, with the thought of falling. It doesn’t make Alec’s stomach churn as before, not with Nightlock by his side, not with Nightlock’s hand in his.

Nightlock won’t let go.

So Alec says, “home”, and he watches as Nightlock’s eyes widen a fraction behind his mask, surprised that Alec would ask such a thing of an almost-stranger. He hopes that Nightlock understands: the unnerving familiarity in the way Nightlock rolls Alec’s name around in his mouth, this truth between them, what Alec meant by *I know you*.

Nightlock is not going to be alone. Not anymore. Sentinel won’t let him down again.

“Home it is then. Although you’ll have to show me the way,” says Nightlock, taking a step forward into the dark - but he doesn’t fall, walking forward on an invisible bridge into the blue, until he’s as far as he can go without letting Alec’s hand fall free. He gives Alec a reassuring tug, and Alec breathes deeply, taking that first step too: away from himself, away from his promise to Magnus about risking his life, away from his duty to Idris and the orders of his parents, and towards -

Uncertainty.
Nightlock lowers Alec down onto the fire escape of his building with a grin, not letting Alec’s fingers go until the last possible moment.

It feels good to have solid metal beneath his feet, to be able to feel brick beneath his hands again. Alec looks up at Nightlock floating just above him, Nightlock’s hand sifting through the air as he keeps himself suspended.

“This is me,” Alec says awkwardly, thumbing over his shoulder to the window behind him. “You shouldn’t hang around, someone might see.”

Nightlock pouts a little, but Alec can see the playful spark in him. “You’re not even going to invite me in for a nightcap?” he teases, floating down, until he’s eye level with Alec, the railing of the fire escape the only thing between them.

Alec rolls his eyes. “Maybe next time,” he says. “It’s late. The neighbours will complain.”

“Oh, well, we best think of the neighbours.” He seems to hesitate, not quite ready to push himself away and say goodbye. “Alec -”

“Thank you,” says Alec quickly, “Again. For saving my life. I didn’t get to say it before.”

“You don’t have to thank me for that.”

That makes Alec frown. “Of course I do. You put yourself in danger for someone you didn’t know, that’s -” He swallows carefully. “- not everyone does that. Not for just anyone.”

“You’re not just anyone.”
A droplet of rain lands somewhere in the crown of Alec’s hair, a cold surprise, and then another rolls down his cheek, and another splatters on the leather of his shoe. Alec looks up at the same time Nightlock does, just as the hiss of a downpour scours the alley between his building and the next.

Nightlock waves his hands and a veil of energy shrouds him, the rain spraying off in each and every direction, but he smiles at Alec almost meekly, shrugging his shoulders as if to say *what can you do?*

Well, Alec can do one thing.

“Nightlock,” he says, leaning forward on the fire escape, the rain soaking his hair and jacket in a second. He smears his hand across his face, pushing the water from out of his eyes, but it does little to help. “About your friend. The one who’s missing.”

Nightlock tilts his head, smiling through a frown at the general state of Alec. “What about him?”

“He’ll be okay,” says Alec. “If something had happened, you would know by now.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“But,” Alec continues deliberately, and maybe the rain drowns out his voice, and maybe Nightlock doesn’t quite hear him, reading his lips instead, but the sentiment must be clear in Alec’s eyes. He grips tight to the railing, feeling it press into his stomach and he leans out into the rain. “You’re not alone. Not in this. Not ever. There are - there are so many people out there, so many people who want the same thing, and I just -” Alec shakes his head ever so slightly. “You can count on me. Always.”

Nightlock smiles wistfully. “Thank you, Alexander,” he says, and Alec doesn’t miss it, the way his heart flutters with the sound of his full name.

But it doesn’t sound wrong. It just sounds weird, deeper, more melancholy than he’s used to. It just sounds … *different*.

Different to the way Magnus says it.
“Go,” says Nightlock then, “Get inside, before you catch something.”

“Don’t stay out too late,” replies Alec.

“Oh,” drawls Nightlock, waving his hand dramatically. “Don’t make me promise that.”

The rain parts above him, split up the middle and pushed aside like curtains, and Alec watches as Nightlock rises into the sky again - but he doesn’t look away, not from Alec, not from the ardency in his eyes, until the last possible moment when the rain and the dark and the white noise swallows him up whole, and Alec loses the shape of him to the shadows.

Alec drops back against the wall of the building, slicking his wet hair back against his forehead. The fire escape offers little shelter, the rain still drip-drip-dripping through the slats above, but Alec doesn’t want to go inside, not just yet.

He lets his head tilt back against the brick, closing his eyes as he focuses on the roughness against the base of his skull. His bag is getting waterlogged, heavy enough to make his shoulder ache. He wonders if he’ll have to restring his bow, wring out his mask.

He hasn’t done either of those things in far too long.

The choice is easy now.

No, not easy. Nothing about this is easy, but -

The choice is not a choice now. There is only one option, because there’s no part of him that can justify sitting on the bench a moment longer, not when Nightlock is out there in the rain right now, hunting for the Circle without anyone watching his back.

Nightlock needs him. He needs Sentinel, he needs his help.

And Alec may not know who he is at the best of times, but he does know this: he cannot sit idly by
whilst someone else is in need. His conscience won’t allow it.

Perhaps that will get him killed. Maybe he’ll get lucky, maybe he won’t. He doesn’t have the luxury of knowing that right now, and it’s that unknown variant, that distinct lack of control, that terrifies him, but means he has to push forward.

Because there’s only forward. There’s no backwards, no going around, no sitting down on the wayside and giving up as the world passes by. Only forward.

The next night, Alec tells Izzy and Jace about the fight in the alleyway with the pyrokinetic. He tells them about the guilt, about his promise to Magnus, about Nightlock in his entirety, recounting every meeting of theirs since the beginning.

Izzy and Jace both listen in silence, Izzy with her hands on her hips and Jace with his arms folded, his mouth screwed up into a knot. He says nothing, but Alec can feel him ruminating, simmering, but not out of anger.

He’s not mad at Alec for not tell him everything. But there’s always been a restless energy about Jace, one that has pushed them into trouble so many times before, but also one that urges Alec to do better, be better, fight better.

Alec is not sure why it’s taken him so long to tell them. Maybe some part of him wanted to keep it a secret between him and Nightlock just a moment longer, a want to keep Nightlock away from Idris, away from all the ways in which Alec might hurt him, a possessiveness that Alec decides is ugly but honest.

They don’t have time for keeping secrets. Not from each other. Alec would trust Jace and Izzy with his life, and right now, his life is this.

“So, this is you off the bench, right?” Jace says, afterwards. “Sentinel’s back?”
Alec nods. Izzy’s lab is empty save for the three of them, and it’s the only place in headquarters he would have this conversation: the only place he’s sure isn’t bugged because if it was, Izzy would’ve found them all.

He can’t have his parents overhearing this. Not when he’s about to let them down.

“Idris isn’t going to do anything about this pyrokinetic,” Alec insists, “Or these murders. They’re just going to let them keep happening until the vigilantes are wiped out, and I can’t - I don’t think I can live with that. Not when I can do something.”

“Not when we can do something,” Izzy interrupts gently, reaching out to touch Alec on the arm. She gives his elbow a soft squeeze. “Jace and I are with you in this, Alec. Three go in, three come out. You know that.”

“We’re gonna catch this fucker together,” Jace vows, raising his fist and slapping his bicep. “The Circle won’t know what hit them.”

Alec flattens he mouth into a thin line. “We can’t let a word of this slip to mom and dad. Not anyone involved in Idris. We can’t trust them, even if we think we know them.”

“We can trust Clary,” says Jace, “But I’m not gonna complain if we’re leaving Raj and Victor behind on this one.” He rolls his shoulder dramatically, cricking his neck. “They kinda cramp my style.”

Izzy shoots Alec a withering look.

Alec rolls his eyes. “Clary is fine,” he says, “No-one else. This stays between us. Iz, I need you to gather all the information you can find on the Circle and their known associates. If you find any information on Hodge Starkweather or Senator Herondale, I need to know. You should also check through the database and make a list of anyone with superpowers that might be able to create and manipulate fire. I don’t want to miss anything.”

“On it,” says Izzy, “You need to get in touch with Nightlock again, so that we can figure out what he already knows. He probably has more leads than us, but we have more resources.”

Alec nods firmly. He has a feeling he won’t need to go looking for Nightlock: once Nightlock
catches wind that Sentinel isn’t dead in some gutter, or strung up in another burned-down church, he’ll come to Alec.

*If last night is anything to go by, at least,* Alec reasons. He clenches his hands behind his back, squeezing at his fingers. He’s nervous, nervous about having to answer to Nightlock and his fear and his worry and the vulnerability that Alec knows he carries now. Alec doesn’t try to pretend otherwise.

Not this time.

“We need to look for a pattern,” Alec commands, “Where the murders happened, what time of night, how the pyrokinetic might have gotten in and out without being seen. All of that. I’ve seen his face, so I’ll prepare a composite we can use. Jace, you and Clary should start by revisiting some of the old crime scenes, looking at things with fresh eyes.”

“Roger that,” says Jace with a mock salute. His expression softens and he smiles at Alec, one of those real, genuine, golden smiles that only Jace can deliver. “I’m glad you’re back, buddy. Arkangel without Sentinel is just -”

“An idiot in a mask?” supplies Izzy, raising her eyebrows.

“An idiot in a mask and wings, thanks.”

Jace laughs, loud with his head thrown back, and Izzy grins, ushering him over to her bench to talk him through some upgrades she’s been making to his suit. Alec listens to them talk shop, watching the way Izzy’s eyes light up as she explains some complex mechanism in the new engine for Jace’s wings. Jace can hardly stand still, bouncing on the balls of his feet in his readiness to give the new kit a test run, and he grins when he pokes at some of the wires and Izzy slaps his fingers away, snapping at him not to touch and break her hard work before it’s even on his back.

Alec listens and feels strange. His body is still hollow, and maybe he was longing for something to fill it, hope or relief or foolish determination. Anything solid. Anything tangible.

He knows he’s doing the right thing. There’s no question about that. He knows that stepping back into his Sentinel skin is what he must do, because in no universe will he ever be able to walk away from it and live with himself.
But doing the right thing has never always felt like -

*What do you want, Alec? You can’t have everything.*

“Alec!” calls Jace, and Alec looks up. “Iz and I are gonna take some of this new gear for a spin in the training hall, you in? Or you going home?”

“I’m going home,” says Alec, “I’ve got a lot to do.”

“Fair enough,” says Jace, “I’ll see you on patrol tomorrow night then? Sundown in the usual spot, yeah?”

“Yeah,” agrees Alec, and he steps aside as Jace makes for the door, Izzy hot on his heels. He sees in them that same confusing enthusiasm as always: what they want and what is right is the same thing. Their world is black and white like that.

It makes Alec jealous, but it also makes him scared.

“One … one last thing,” says Alec, and Jace pauses in the doorway, looking back over his shoulder. “Do me a favour and … don’t get hurt. Not if you can help it.”

“Between Izzy’s gear and your neurosis?” Jace grins, “Alec, we’ll be fine.”

The door swings shut behind them, and Alec is left alone in the middle of the lab. The automatic light will turn off if he stands here too long without moving, but he can’t quite budge. He lets his hands fall loose from behind his back to his side. He flexes and unflexes his fingers.

*Can you promise that?* he wonders. *Can I?*

Chapter End Notes

You know something is gravely wrong when you start thinking a 30k word chapter is too short ... anyway, here we are! This is one of my fave chapters of the fic for two
reasons: (1) finally Alec has his run in with the pyrokinetic he's chasing, a very real and very dangerous person, and (2) Alec and Nightlock meet at last. Their final scene together on the top of the skyscraper is entirely indulgent, full of aesthetic and neon and lingering looks and purple prose ... it's very Me.

This also marks the end of Act II! We are speeding through this, but Act III is where all hell breaks lose ... and maybe the slow burn won't burn so slow anymore. Well, you'll have to wait and see!

Thank you so much for all the feedback from last time! I can't express how much it helps to read people's thought and feelings on this fic, as everyone has a different take on the moral issues and it's so interesting!

Visit me on tumblr and shout in my inbox!

I'm also on Twitter if you want to come chat about the fic ... and boy, do I love talking about this fic. Tweet as you read with the hashtag #FICacoldnight! :D

Please leave a kudos if you made it to the end, and drop me a comment with your thoughts, your favourite line, your hopes for what will happen next, your advice for poor old Alec ... I would be forever grateful for it! If you want an alert next time there's an update, please hit that subscribe button!

Until next time ... Sentinel returns to the fray, but the Circle catches up with Alec. And there's something very strange about Simon ...
Chapter Summary

It’s been years since Alec last had a panic attack.

He knows the symptoms well enough.

Throat, burning. Eyes too. He pinches the skin between his thumb and forefinger hard enough to bruise, but it’s not hard enough, he wants to puncture himself, draw blood.

Alec scrubs his eyes and groans, willing himself into blackness. The bold lights of the city are too much all at once and he needs silence, he needs absolute nothing. Eyes shut, he tries to remember the way Magnus held his burned hand carefully in the both of his, how it felt to have his thumb trace Alec’s knuckles.

‘Promise me. Keep yourself alive.’

Chapter Notes

Sentinel and Nightlock reunite after Sentinel’s suspension. Simon drops a bombshell. Alec faces the consequences of his alter ego ...

... and his feelings too.

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… an archangel with two hearts

in his chest. When he asks for a sacrifice, I offer

another woman’s son.

— Traci Brimhall, from “The Blessing”, Our Lady of the Ruins
Summer storms are fiercer, but autumn storms are far colder; Alec has never needed to spend his night camped out on a rooftop to know this, but he finds himself on a rooftop tonight.

There will be snow soon, or sleet perhaps, enough to turn the streets into rivers of grey slush. Already, the damp cold seeps into Alec’s boots and fingertips. He feels it between his skin and his mask, a thin layer of foreboding winter, but fierce wind battles adamentally to rip the mask straight back off his face - and he’s only just put it on.

But his gear doesn’t feel as foreign as he feared; his gloves had slid onto his hands with ease, his armour still sits snug against the planes of his body, his fingers know his bow like a missing limb. He feared himself changed: by Nightlock, by Magnus, pulled taut in two directions by the pair of them, but the net movement had been minimal. It worries him in a way, how it feels like stepping back into Sentinel is like an exhale, because it shouldn’t be. It shouldn’t be so easy to put Alec back on the shelf, especially when Alec has made promises lately, and not only to himself. He needs to move forward; if he stagnates any longer, he will die. Perhaps not in body, but there are other ways to go.

It’s easy to be Sentinel, and at the same time, it’s terrible. It has never been any other way. But tonight, Sentinel is back and Alec has no other choice. The pyrokinetic, the Circle, his own withering sense of right and wrong … they all depend on it.

It’s not late, but Alec feels tired, a lingering fatigue deep in his bones that he hasn’t been able to shake for a while, which makes him feel slow and lethargic. He’s not alone.

Jace stands on the rooftop edge, his wings mighty and unfurled to the burgeoning storm, staring out into the night, but Clary has her arms folded around herself, the bare sliver of skin between her gloves and suit sleeves pin-pricked with goose pimplles. She shivers, but tries not to let anyone see.

From a glance at her face beneath her mask, drawn and gaunt, Alec figures he’s not the only one exhausted. She looks as if she hasn’t seen her bed in too many long days.

Alec knows the feeling. Sleep is found in hours few and far between, shoved in the spaces between daylight and Idris, which are thin and narrow and interrupted.
The human body can last three or four days without sleep before hallucinations kick in. Alec and Jace and Clary are trained better than that - Idris made sure of it - but he can’t remember for the life of him, the last time he slept in a bed longer than four hours.

*What time is there for sleeping when that pyrokinetic is still out there?* the voice in his head reminds him. *Do you think he wastes his time sleeping?*

Alec really needs to get better at hiding it. Like Jace.

Alec knows that Jace is worn just as thin - and he hasn’t had as long a break as Alec, out most nights on the hunt for someone he can never seem to find until it’s too late - but Jace is good at standing with his hands on his hips, an abrasive frown knitting his brows, and downward turn to his lips - all of it, a shield. His shoulders flex with the enormous weight of his metal wings. His intensity always makes for a good facade.

Jace, *Arkangel*, will run himself into the ground before he collapses from pure exhaustion. Alec would push himself further still, if that’s what needs to be done.

The wind howls. It catches Clary’s red hair like a flame, like a candle bent over backwards by a sudden puff of breath. It seems to snap them all out of their daze.

“Allright,” says Alec. In his hands, he has a map of New York and he spreads it out on the roof, Jace and Clary both crouching down to hold the corners. New York’s leylines spread like a spiderweb on paper, which is more than apt: what is to be found at the centre of the city is never good. “I’ve marked all the previous reports of the pyrokinetic and the murders we’ve attributed to the Circle. There must be a pattern.”

Jace and Clary both squint down at the map of the city, but are more focused on trying to stop the wind carrying it away into the night than actually deciphering the mad array of red Xs Alec has drawn all over the gridlines. Alec grits his teeth, rocking off of his haunches and onto his knees to keep the map pinned down.

He wishes they could do this at Idris. He wishes they could do this indoors, but part of him fears his parents bugged his apartment years ago, and nowhere he usually goes is safe. They cannot have anyone overhearing them; at least the wind will assure that much.

There is no pattern to the attacks. If Isabelle can’t see one, then there’s not going to be one, and this
discussion is futile. But Jace and Clary are looking to Alec for leadership and guidance, and - he’s not about to tell them both that he has no idea what they’re doing. He’s supposed to be their fresh pair of eyes.

“I guess most of the attacks seem to be uptown,” Clary suggests, although she hardly sounds like she believes it. “Not so many downtown, so maybe that means they’re centered in the north.”

“Yeah, but look at all these,” Jace interjects, pointing at all the Xs that fall beyond the river. There is no rhyme or reason to them, and Alec knows this. “Why are they going so far out for all these? Brooklyn, Queens ... Hell, we don’t know if they’ve been as far as Jersey, the cops over there won’t cooperate with Luke’s investigation.”

“Even if the Circle were based in the north, it doesn’t help us,” says Alec, “More than a million people live on Manhattan island alone, and then another three million on the other side of the river.”

“Needle in a damn haystack,” Jace mutters. He looks up at Alec. “So what’s the plan then, if we don’t know where they are, and we can’t predict where they’re gonna be next?”

“Patrolling,” Alec says, and at Jace’s unimpressed squint, he adds, “It’s the best we’ve got. I like it just as much as you do.”

“Izzy said she spoke to Meliorn about extra cameras,” Clary notes, “He has a lot of Soviet tech. We can make sure we have an eye on every block corner. All it’ll take is Izzy seeing the right person once.”

“Right,” says Alec, “And Iz is going to look into any leads we have on Hodge Starkweather’s movements. If we can find him, that will give us someone to follow. Maybe he’ll lead us to the pyrokinetic, seeing as we know his face now. In the meantime, it’s going to be best if we split up. Divide up the ground, cover it quicker.” Alec draws two lines on the map with his pointer finger, slicing the city into three. “I’ll cover midtown and Harlem. Jace, you and Clary are going to work downtown: you take east, she takes west.”

“This is going to take a fucking year if it’s just the three of us,” Jace grumbles.

“Can’t we ask Raj and Lydia to help out? Or Helen and Aline?” Clary asks, “It would go a lot quicker between seven of us.”
“We can’t include anyone who might tell mom and dad,” says Alec, firm. “This is under the radar. Only people we can trust.”

He thinks about Hodge Starkweather again, someone who was loyal to Idris at one point in his life. He thinks about Valentine, who used to work alongside Alec’s father, and he thinks about Senator Herondale, whose name exists as a whispering undercurrent beneath all of this.

They don’t know who in Idris can be trusted. They don’t know who might be in the Circle’s back pocket, paid to turn a blind eye to all the killing.

“What about Nightlock?” asks Izzy over the coms. Alec stills, working his jaw through his next words.

The memory of a night on top of a skyscraper stirs. Alec can still feel the rain and the wind and the plummet of his insides as he peered down over the edge of the railings. As he took Nightlock’s hand.

Heat entreats upon the back of Alec’s neck, beneath his supersuit. “What about him?”

“Clary’s right,” Izzy says, “We are going to need more people, and whilst I agree we can’t be sure Lydia won’t turn us in, and Raj is useless on a good day - you trust Nightlock, and I do too. He’s worked this case as much as any of us. We both know he wants what’s good for this city.”

“Okay, well, if we get Nightlock, then he can cover midtown with Alec,” Jace says, dividing the map into four quadrants with his finger. “And there are others right? You guys are friendly with some of the other amateurs - the chick with the visions and the wolf guy? Could they help out? Get Alec to call in a favour or something.”

“We should at least try,” says Izzy, “But we don’t have any way to get in contact with them, so we’re probably going to have to start without -”

She continues talking, something about changing their radio frequency so that they might stay in contact without anyone overhearing, but Alec zones out, her voice a buzz in his ear.
He knows Nightlock wants this. He knows Nightlock is breaking himself apart, tracking the Circle on his own and returning home at the end of each night with empty hands for all his trouble. Alec can still hear the disappointment and the anger in his voice the night Sentinel turned him down, but it’s not as loud as the weariness that Alec had found in its stead the other night on that skyscraper.

And Alec thinks Veil and Wolfsbane would want this too, if he were to ask them. Alec hasn’t seen either of them in weeks, and whilst he knows Veil’s trust is hard-won, she has a sense of justice stronger and more righteous than anyone Alec knows. And Wolfsbane - Wolfsbane has never done anything that wasn’t in service of the city, not as long as Alec has known him. They’re both stubborn people, and, more importantly, they’re both good people, and maybe -

That’s what Alec doesn’t like.

They’d offer their help in a heartbeat, and they’re the ones most at risk in doing so.

So far, Valentine and the pyrokinetic have only killed vigilantes. They haven’t touched any Corporates. It’s not something that has gone unnoticed, but Alec doesn’t want to think about what it means.

*You know Idris is involved in this. You know it, and you still won’t face it.*

The thought of asking Nightlock, Veil, and Wolfsbane to work alongside Corporates doesn’t sit too well in Alec’s chest. He can already picture the sneer of an expression that would appear on Veil’s face at the suggestion. He doesn’t want Clary and Jace taking advantage of Wolfsbane’s good humour.

And then, there’s this twisted, nonsensical thought about having to *share* Nightlock with the rest of them, and it has Alec stewing.

He’s already split himself in two: one part Sentinel and the other Alec, but here he is again, whittling Sentinel down some more, parting him into Idris’ Sentinel, and Nightlock’s Sentinel. Two more separate lives, two more roads he wishes never would meet.

Alec already knows that Jace doesn’t trust Nightlock; they spent too many weeks chasing Nightlock around the city, trying to catch up with him and he sped ahead, and Jace has always been someone who knows how to hold a grudge. If they met, if Alec allowed himself to be their crossroads, Jace would say something too curt and cutting, or get into his head about proving
who’s the more powerful of the two of them, and Alec knows Nightlock would rise to the bait. Clary’s bad temper can sometimes get the best of her, and her recklessness and ingenuity can so easily be tiresome. And even Isabelle’s nosiness has had Alec cringing. She would be the one with the most questions for Nightlock, the one hounding him for answers, and Hell, she’s probably already started designing Nightlock a new suit based on the few scant details Alec has given her about him.

This wariness, this selfishness, it makes Alec feel childish. It’s been easy, so far, to keep Nightlock separate from the sort of superhero Sentinel truly is and has to be. A Corporate.

Alec doesn’t want that to change, but he reckons that it’s about to.

“- okay, then,” Jace is saying, “So let’s go with Alec’s plan for now, but once we get Flashy, Scary, and Furry Spice on board, we can split patrol routes with them. What sort of stuff are we looking for anyway?”

“Anything suspicious?,” Izzy says, which makes Jace roll his eyes, “People coming and going at weird times of night, anyone working out of abandoned buildings, high levels of superpower activity, any domestic disturbances, any calls to the fire service, no matter how small - we also need to check out some of these previous crime scenes, figure out how the Circle managed to do all this without being caught, if there are any similarities -”

“A common thread,” Clary nods, “Maybe we should talk to Luke too, he could probably get us access to CCTV files, and maybe he can get a team together of people he trusts -”

Clary breaks off abruptly as the map is yanked from her grip. She and Jace both lunge for it - but it isn’t the wind that carries it upwards into the sky. The air pressure shifts like a landslide, sudden and deliberate, and Alec twists around, panic in his throat before he can rein it in.

His heart thumps. His body is barrelled over by it, and his mask, paper thin.

Nightlock drops down onto the roof from out of the sky. With a brusque flick of his fingers, he ushers the map through the air and into his gloved hands. Alec and Jace are on their feet in a moment, but for entirely different reasons.

“Who the fuck -” Jace starts. His metal wings unfurl, his fingers twitching over the gun strapped to his leg. “Sentinel -”
Alec steps forward, putting himself between Jace and Nightlock, his palm raised at Jace to stay his trigger finger. He feels Jace’s stare bore into the back of his neck. He wills himself to ignore it.

Nightlock’s expression is cool and collected, a mask beneath a mask, but his eyes darken at the sight of Sentinel. He doesn’t move, stone-still with the map still in his hands. The wind billows through his coat behind him, contorting the tails into furious shapes. He’s not the man Alec met on the rooftop, soft and melancholy and surprisingly beautiful. Whoever that was, real or not real, it has been smothered and suffocated, and this Nightlock, here and now, is the one Sentinel knows well.

Tension in the air exists on a knife-point, pressed against Alec’s jugular.

Alec feels entirely exposed. He takes another step forward, swallows thickly, and feels that invisible knife bite into his skin. “What are you doing here?” he hisses. “You can’t be here, it’s not safe with all of us on radio-”

Nightlock quirks his eyebrows beneath his mask, focusing on the map in his hands, studying it with icy disinterest.

“What part of this city is safe these days?” he states, without looking up. His tone is acrid. “I’m pretty sure my worst worries aren’t going to be whether Idris knows we met. Somehow, I feel like most of them already know.”

Jace bristles. Alec hears him unclip his gun from its holster, so Alec reaches back to shove him in his shoulder, telling him with a firm look to stand down. Jace glowers at him, an unspoken argument plenty loud enough. His nostrils flare, but he relents, holding up his hands in surrender.

“Oh,” says Clary then, and Alec’s attention briefly snaps to her. She’s still crouched on the ground and Alec sees inky smudges on the tips of her fingers, but then she springs to her feet. “You’re Nightlock!”

There’s a beat of silence where no-one says anything. Alec stares at Clary, and then he stares at Nightlock, and his hand is still hovering, outstretched, towards Jace, and he waits for someone to make the first move.

Nightlock huffs. “See,” he says, his lips pulling back over his teeth in a sneer. “My reputation
precedes me.” When Alec glares at him, he rolls his eyes. “Enough with that. You don’t get to glare at me when you’re the one who’s been missing for weeks, Sentinel.”

Any retort Alec has dies on his lips, a splutter.

There it is.

He was waiting for this, he knew it would be coming, but suddenly all his nerves are surging back up his throat again with the acidic taste of guilt. He thinks of the way Nightlock looked on the roof of that skyscraper, gazing out towards the horizon and looking lost, all whilst confessing his fears to Alec, not knowing that it was Alec who caused them to begin with.

Nightlock tsks, folding up the map in his hands as he walks forward. The air pressure bends to his will, the wind parting before him, and Alec feels that knife edge relent from his neck, only to graze across the breadth of his shoulders and then down his back, all the way down his legs until it disappears into the ground.

Jace adjusts his stance, his wings still dramatically spread. His wariness is palpable and Alec knows he’s counting in his head just how long it will take to draw his gun, and if that fails, his knife. He’s calculating just how far he is from Clary, in case they need to make a hasty getaway.

Alec doesn’t move - he’s not entirely sure he can - and Nightlock deliberately doesn’t look at him, which only makes it worse. He’s angry. Angry at Sentinel.

Alec can’t blame him.

Beside them both, Clary relaxes. Jace grunts at her as she pushes past Alec and walks up to Nightlock, happy to take the map back when it’s offered to her.

Nightlock smiles a tight smile at her. “So,” he says, “I see you’re going after the Circle.”

Clary nods. Alec’s insides are all in knots.

“Yes,” says Clary.
“And does Idris know you’re doing this?”

“No,” she replies.

“Good,” Nightlock says curtly. And then, “I, of course, would like to join the hunt.”

“Nightlock - ”

Alec says it without meaning to say it: Nightlock’s name just falls from his lips, unbidden, and he’s too late to stop himself, too late to mask the note of desperation in his voice. Nightlock’s eyes snap to his face, his expression changing in a flash. Gone is the nonchalance - or the poor attempt that Alec had seen straight through - and in its place, intensity, the sort that is simultaneously furious and wounded.

Alec has never seen him so clearly before. There’s this hurt in his eyes, naked and unmasked, and it’s vulnerable, too vulnerable for the company of strangers like Jace and Clary.

It’s Izzy who comes to Alec’s rescue, as is so often the case.

“Arkangel, Muse ,” she says calmly in their ears, “Why don’t you guys start by checking out the church tonight? Sentinel can catch up.”

“You got it, chief,” Jace murmurs, but he’s still glaring at Nightlock, unwilling to take his eye off the ball. His wings begin to thrum and he nods to Clary, who is still staring wide-eyed at Nightlock. “Al- Sentinel , we’ll see you later. Call me if you need back up, yeah?”

“I’ll be fine,” says Alec, although he’s not sure how well he believes it. It’s not really back up that he needs right now.

Jace nods anyway. Clary tucks herself beneath his arm and wraps her own arms around his neck, and then in a gust of silver wind, they soar into the night, launching up into the darkness.
Alec is buffeted by their liftoff, wind rifling through his hair. He listens until the hum of Jace’s wings fades into the city’s metronome, swallowed up by distant music and car horns, and fixates upon the distant horizon, unable to blink until his eyes sting. The night is murky, stained with cigarette tar, and the city that reflects off the underbelly of the sky is little more than a veiled glow.

He wants to move, but cannot. Instead, he works his jaw, feels out every muscle in his body and how they lock like gears that just won’t move.

When he looks back at Nightlock, Nightlock’s eyes are black.

Slowly, Nightlock folds his arms across his chest, his biceps straining at the seams of his coat. He raises an eyebrow, expectant, fingers drumming against his elbow.

“So,” is all he says.

“So,” Alec repeats, his own voice less sure. He knows this feeling that cements inside of him: it’s heavy and damning and amounts to twenty lashes, but maybe, he thinks, he deserves it this time. A string of mutilated apologies clings to the walls of his throat.

*I’m sorry. I know you were worried. I didn’t think.*

*You’re not alone.*

“Do you want to tell me where you’ve been?” Nightlock takes a step towards Alec, but that sway he usually has in his shoulders is not to be found. His holds his chin aloft, as if to say, *I’m fine, you can’t possibly hurt me, don’t ever think that you could.* Alec knows that lie well enough; he tells it to himself daily. “How you disappeared off the face of the planet, for all intents and purposes, for almost a month?”

“I’m sorry.” It sounds just as pathetic as Alec expects. He cringes for it.

“You’re sorry,” Nightlock scoffs. “No-one has seen head or tail of you in weeks, I hope you know that. I’ve asked around, far more than I should. I might have thought you were dead if I didn’t know blondie was still out here causing his usual, oblivious havoc.”
“I was benched.”

“Benched?” Nightlock frowns. “What does that mean?”

“It means,” Alec says slowly, “I was taken off active duty. Punishment. My mo- Idris wasn’t happy with what we were doing. All of us. Going off mission. That sorta stuff.”

“And yet they let those two continue running around the city doing whatever they like, and not you?” Nightlock presses, gesturing sharply in the direction Jace and Clary flew. “And that’s a just punishment in what way -”

“I wasn’t sure if I wanted to come back.”

Nightlock’s eyes widen, but he says nothing, clamping his mouth shut. His black eyes burn, but Alec doesn’t shy away.

This is the truth. Nightlock deserves to hear it.

“I do - I do now, but. But for a while, I wasn’t sure. There was a lot going on. In my real life. I wasn’t sure.”

Whatever Nightlock reads in Alec’s face, whatever grief or desperation, is enough to soften him. His shoulders sag, the strain in his arms disappearing as he lets himself relax. The fire in his eyes smokes out into ash.

Alec has seen him at his most powerful, his most Hell-bent and furious, and as a result, he forgets Nightlock has the capability to be tender. He shouldn’t. He remembers how it felt to have Nightlock unbandage his wounded hand and hold his fingers like he might just be the most important person in the world, at least for a moment.

Nightlock takes a step forward, cautious, like he’s hoping Alec won’t flee. His head tilts to the side.
“Next time,” he says, and his voice is a whisper then, “Next time, please tell me.”

“I wasn’t hurt,” Alec mumbles. “I was okay.”

“I know that now. But I didn’t, I haven’t, and it’s been Hell. I can’t say that lightly, Sentinel. I’m not … I’m not used to feeling so powerless. I was just waiting for the next fire, for the next dead super, and for it to be you.”

His words tug on something in Alec’s chest: a red string that has knotted onto one of his lower ribs without him noticing. He’s not sure where the other end goes, but he knows the string trembles, someone on the other end pulling, tugging, gently and desperately seeking his attention.

He’s not sure when they became this way, the two of them, Sentinel and Nightlock. It’s a partnership he cannot put a name to. Lines are blurred enough as it is.

“I’m sorry,” Alec says again, less resolute than before. “I didn’t … I didn’t think. Didn’t mean to worry you.”

_I’m just a Corporate and you’re - you shouldn’t care about me._

Nightlock smiles then, soft and somewhat sad, in a way that makes Alec’s heart ache. Nightlock reaches out to touch Alec’s arm; he squeezes gently, his thumb pressed into the juncture of Alec’s elbow, and it’s not quite enough; not when Alec already knows what it feels like to be pressed against Nightlock’s body mid-flight and to feel Nightlock’s shameless grins shaping the air between them, summoning a smile from Alec too. Even if it’s a little guilty.

“I’m just glad you’re back,” says Nightlock, his fingers lingering just a moment too long for it be subconscious. “You’re the most tolerable Corporate I’ve met in a long while and I’d hate to seek out a replacement. I’ve grown quite used to you.”

He lets his hand drop, but takes another step closer. Alec is quick to catalogue him: his eyes, his lips, the shape of his mask where it cuts into his cheeks, the line of his neck, the colour of his coat against his skin. It’s all still the same. He hasn’t changed, but something in Alec wills him to pin it all to memory anyway, and it’s scary to wonder why, but dreadful to _know_ why. They might be running low on chances.
“We’re going after the pyrokinetic,” Alec murmurs. Nightlock angles himself so that Alec is urged to shuffle just a bit closer. The space between them is not a space made for acquaintances, this Alec knows, and it makes his heart beat in a determined, marching rhythm. The red string tugs with a need to be close, an innocent sort of close where the familiarity of another body you know so well breeds warmth and comfort and a safe place where you would want to wait out the end of the world.

That’s what this is. He’s missed Nightlock a lot. Not the one who saved him in that alleway, but this one, real and uncompromising and even brutal at times, but gentle and honest too. Their thread, a common loneliness.

Alec has missed him a lot. He just hadn’t realised until now.

“I want to help,” replies Nightlock. His fingers twitch at his sides and Alec feels the air answer; an invisible touch pushes and prods at Alec’s arm, hesitant at first, but then it moves across his body: his shoulder, his chest, the divot of his throat, the space between his shoulder blades. It has Alec standing taller, and Nightlock adds, “You and I, we’ve been chasing this ghost for far too long.”

“Arkangel and Muse want to help too,” Alec breathes, “Is that okay?”

“You trust them?”

“Yes.”

“Then, so do I.”

“Idris can’t know.”

“Well, they won’t hear it from me,” says Nightlock with a frown. That touch of his, his invisible power, presses against the back of Alec’s neck like a cupped palm. “Sentinel? What is it?”

Alec breathes out, shakes his head to clear his thoughts. “If the Circle catches wind of this, they’ll come for you first - you’re a vigilante - .”
Nightlock’s eyes meet Alec’s. Alec is reminded of the power Nightlock had wielded that night in the alleyway, cradled in the palm of his hand. He knows Nightlock is not easily buffeted off course. Not easily threatened. Not easily scared, or at least, not in a way people can see.

“But I haven’t been caught yet, have I? Don’t worry about me,” Nightlock continues. He wrinkles his nose into something of a sneer. “Especially when you’ve got blondie to keep an eye on at the same time. How you’ve kept him alive as long as you have is truly a superpower, if ever I’ve seen one.”

“He’s not that bad,” Alec says, unable to help his own crooked smile.

“Remains to be seen,” Nightlock quips, “As long as I don’t have to work with him one-on-one, I’m sure we’ll all be fine.”

“Arkangel and Muse are going to patrol downtown,” says Alec, “And we thought - I thought, you and I would take midtown and Harlem. See what we can see, ask around, try and figure out if there’s a, y’know. Pattern.”

Nightlock’s lips curl up into a smile. “Is this you finally agreeing to be my partner?” he grins, and Alec knows he’s teasing, but he blushes nonetheless.

“I didn’t know that was a thing.”

“Oh, it is. All the best crime fighting teams are partnerships, I’ll have you know. Batman and Robin, Superman and Lois, even our dear Wolfsbane and Veil -”

“I’m pretty sure most of those are from comic books,” Alec deadpans. “From fifty years ago. You know those things aren’t accurate at all, right?”

“I don’t know,” says Nightlock thoughtfully, twirling his fingers aimlessly in the air. Alec’s skin prickles. “There are people out there with that old-school, completely irrational and self-sacrificing sort of superheroism about them. There’s a man I know who could certainly give Clark Kent a run for his money - he just doesn’t have the glasses.” He looks down as he says it, still smiling, but fiddling with his gloves, and Alec finds it curious. He might call it bashful, but perhaps fond is a
better word. He’s not sure if Nightlock realises.

“Yeah? Another super?”

“Not in the conventional sense,” Nightlock says, his grin turning sly. He looks like he did in that alleyway, when it was Alec he was talking to, and not Sentinel. Bright, untapped, manic in places, Nightlock when he’s a touch unravelled. “There was another attack, a few weeks back. I had to intervene.”

Alec is careful to school his face. “Yeah,” he says, “I heard. Over by the Tribunal?”

Nightlock nods. “That’s right. I was too late to ... I was too late to save the other super, but I wasn’t the only one there with good intentions, shall we say. It turns out that superpowers aren’t a prerequisite for heroism.”

“Didn’t think that still existed in this city,” Alec mutters.

“Yes, well,” says Nightlock, “It was both a pleasant and terrible surprise. But, my point still stands - it seems like you have quite the team forming here already. I would like to respectfully request membership.”

Alec rolls his eyes. “I thought you said you worked better alone?”

“It’s not impossible for me to be mistaken, believe it or not,” Nightlock retorts, “And besides, I missed you when you were gone. Things aren’t half as interesting when you’re not around.” He shrugs, but Alec knows he means it.

Alec means it too, even if he doesn’t say it.

“Do you want to start there?” he asks instead. “Tonight. At the Tribunal? We can work south from there and meet up with Arkangel and Muse later.”

There’s a question posed without words. Alec knows Nightlock hears it, because it’s much the same as the one already asked: you know I’m on your side now, but will you be on mine?
I need you, Alec thinks. In some weird way, I do.

Nightlock searches Alec’s eyes: he’s bold, curious, desperate too. An edge of mania, the same sharp knife that Alec stands upon. A small, intimate fear. The feeling slowly slides into Alec’s chest like a blade.

Are you still lonely? he wonders, but then Nightlock’s mouth picks up, his lips, crooked.

“Sounds perfect,” he says. “Lead the way.”

Magnus is happier.

And Alec knows there are other things he should be thinking about - he has patrol routes to organise, new gear to discuss with Izzy, and Jace to wrangle, an often impossible task - but all of that bleeds out of him the moment he steps into Magnus’ office the next night and finds Magnus grinning.

Grinning and humming along to his radio, and oblivious to Alec for a moment as he dances around his desk, newspaper clippings in his hand as he arranges photographs for the morning issue.

Alec stands in the doorway, thumbing at the strap of his bag. He lets his eyes roam over Magnus’ back, fixating on the day’s thin creases folded into his dress shirt.

Magnus palms a hand through his hair, sweeping it back across his head, and Alec wets his lips.

“Magnus-”

“Alexander!” Magnus beams, but he doesn’t stop moving, gliding over to the cassette player and
turning the volume down. He seems freer, not just in the way his necktie is loose and his suspenders hang around his hips - no, there are knots in him that have been undone, combed free, and tonight, his eyes are bright. “I was hoping you’d stop by tonight. I was just about to go searching for you.”

Alec steps gingerly into the office and sets his stuff on the floor. He shrugs out of his jacket hesitantly.

“Did you ... find a new lead?” he asks, nodding at Magnus’ desk. “The pyrokinetic?”

Magnus blinks, then blinks again, eyes darting from Alec, to his desk, and back to Alec again. His smile slips, as if reminded of an inconvenient truth, but it doesn’t vanish.

“No. No, unfortunately not.” He gestures at his draft. “It’s for a far less exciting piece on Jia Penhallow’s latest polling. Supposedly she’s taken the lead in both Queens and the Bronx, but apparently that’s not front page news. Page six, in fact. I don’t doubt Senator Herondale has paid someone upstairs to keep her political opponents humble.” Magnus meets Alec’s eyes. “Why did you ask if I had a new lead? I haven’t watched the news today, has something happened?”

“No, I-” Alec begins, waving his hand clumsily. He swallows, and tries again: “You were just - you were smiling.”

“Smiling? I’d like to hope that I smile often enough that it’s not newsworthy.”

Alec blushes. “That’s not what I mean -”

“What do you mean?”

Alec drags his eyes up from the linoleum and finds Magnus has stepped closer. Magnus raises his eyebrows expectantly, but there are dimples bracketing his mouth, lips quirked with a fond sort of amusement that Alec cannot read, but which scrambles his insides.

“Well?”
“You haven’t smiled like that in a long time,” Alec says honestly. “Not since - not since all this started, with the fires and the murders.” Not since the most pressing part of my day was figuring out how to let you down when you would swan up to my cubicle and flirt with me - “Your spark’s back.”

“My spark, Alexander?”

Alec can’t stay still, so he shrugs and moves around Magnus, wandering over to the desk to pick at the piles of paperwork and the sprawl of newspaper clippings. He doesn’t read any of it, but he feels Magnus’ attention raking down his back, and it makes him hunch his shoulders.

“Yeah, you - you know. The way everyone looks at you when you walk into a room, the way you make them all light up, whether they want to or not. You always seem like you can make the world do exactly what you want. That spark.”

He cannot see the look on Magnus’ face, but he does hear him suck in a breath, one too short to be heard by anyone other than Alec. It sounds not unlike the rush of an arrow leaving a bowstring.

Alec waits.

Alec waits, and he’s rewarded, because Magnus circles the other side of the desk until he appears before Alec again, stepping into his line of sight, unavoidable. He leans forward, both palms flat on the table, and ducks his head just enough to catch Alec’s eyes.

There’s warmth in Magnus’ face and his smile has shifted. No longer a grin, white and toothy, but now small, private; thankful.

“I received some good news late last night,” he explains, “A reliable source informed me that my missing friend has turned up, alive and well. Turns out he took an ... unplanned vacation and forgot to tell anyone.”

Missing friend.
Alec wonders if it’s a coincidence, but then he scolds himself, because coincidences are always for people who cannot see the bigger picture. Nightlock’s friend was missing too. Nightlock’s friend was Sentinel.

Oh.

He’s only met Magnus once as Sentinel, but what if -

It wouldn’t be out of the realm of possibility that Magnus was keeping tabs on Sentinel’s whereabouts. It would be the smart thing to do. And Magnus is always one step ahead of everyone else, so it would make sense -

“Alec?”

“I’m glad your friend’s okay,” Alec breathes, “I had … I had a feeling.”

“I know you did,” Magnus smiles back. “I can only thank you for your good faith. I know I haven’t been in the best of moods these last few weeks, so I appreciate you putting up with me.”

Magnus drops down into his chair behind his desk and begins reorganising his newspaper clippings, swapping headlines and swapping out one photograph for another. He starts humming again, and Alec just stands there, like an idiot, dumbstruck, unable to move. His knuckles press into the desk until they whiten.

What if Magnus’ missing friend was Sentinel?

Immediately, Alec tries to backtrack through every conversation they’ve had, but he’s not like Izzy, he can’t remember everything he’s ever seen or heard. He recalls vague snippets: Magnus describing him as a friend, but then changing his mind to an acquaintance; Magnus mentioning he had started visiting a few of his friend’s old haunts in the hope of catching him-

Alec berates himself for not paying more attention, but his concern was never about the missing friend: it was always about Magnus, his mournful sighs and sour moods. It was always about the way it made Alec’s heart ache for him.
What was it Simon said the other day? *Something about a witness who couldn’t wait, something to do with a missing super Magnus was trying to find.*

Oh, Alec has been a fool. A blind fool. But Magnus -

“What do you think of this layout for page six?” Magnus asks, tilting his chin at the arrangement on his desk. “I think I prefer this shot of Penhallow at the podium, rather than that one of her and Herondale glaring at each other. It’s terribly contrived. Sometimes I really do question Simon’s eye for this -”

Alec doesn’t really listen, but he nods and maneuvers himself into his usual chair on autopilot. Magnus doesn’t seem to notice.

“Great,” he announces, sweeping his clippings up into a pile. “I will ferry that down to the printers later, then. For now, I have a whole stack of open arson cases that Luke sent over from the precinct that I will need your help with.” He inhales sharply. “But first, I’m going to need a drink. Maybe two.”

He jumps up out of his chair again, light on his feet and overflowing with an exuberance that has been missing for so long, and begins pouring himself a drink and one for Alec too, but Alec -

Alec finds himself holding onto the arms of his chair and staring at something he cannot see.

He’s not in shock. He’s not horrified, he’s not even scared, it makes sense. He should’ve seen it sooner, connected all the dots.

There’s just -

Just a realisation.

Magnus was worried for him. Magnus was fearing for his safety, for his well-being, for his life, without even knowing it was Alec - to him, to Magnus, Sentinel is a strange man in a mask he met one night of too many drinks, a super with a tongue too loose for his own good, and a heart too big, and a sense of duty too damning.
Magnus met Sentinel once, only once, and still, he was worried for him.

*If Alec were the one to go missing, what would Magnus do? Alec, not Sentinel. Alec, the man who sits in front of him right now, throat clogged up with confessions he can never make.*

Maybe Magnus would look for him. Grieve for him. Turn the world upside down for him.

Alec thinks so. Alec *knows* so.

Before, he didn’t know. He didn’t know what they were, him and Magnus. There wasn’t really a name for it and it scared Alec to try and think of one. But Alec’s not stupid, and he can’t ignore the feeling coiled in his chest much longer.

It’s nonsensical, as everything always is.

*Nonsensical, but you know exactly what it is,* says a small, patronising voice in Alec’s head. *Has anyone else ever made you feel this way? Like you’re scared, scared of falling, of the plummet, of not being able to control it but you want nothing more than to fling yourself off the edge anyway -*

*No. No, no-one.*

Magnus slides back into his chair and Alec looks up abruptly. In Magnus’ right hand is a whiskey, but in his left, a tall, thin glass, tinted slightly blue.

Alec scowls at it, but Magnus brings it to his lips, taking a quick sip. His eyes flutter closed and he hums happily, before he sets it down on the desk and slides it over to Alec.

*“Humour me,” he says slyly, “You’re not a whiskey man, I know, but I will find something you like. Try this.”*

Alec stares at the fading imprint of Magnus’ mouth on the rim. The clock on the wall ticks slowly, it’s second hand dragging itself across the clock-face, too loud. Magnus’ radio, turned down low, thrums with a baseline note.
Alec takes a drink. The liquor burns, but the taste is cleaner, not as oaky or cloying as whiskey. It tickles Alec’s nose. He sneers. The back of his neck grows warm.

Behind his own whiskey, Magnus smiles.

Alec has always thrived in routines. Control, clear-cut rules, *keep everyone safe or no matter the cost*. He is no longer standing atop a pile of choices waiting to be made; it makes sense to him, it allows him time to breathe.

Three late nights a week, Alec helps Magnus sift through his ever surmounting pile of casefiles and transcribed police reports that pass across his desk. Some nights, a call will come in and Magnus will grab his coat as they rush out the door, and they’ll stand behind the yellow-and-black tape at a police line, waiting to see if another burned body will be wheeled out on a gurney.

There are no more bodies though. Their pyrokinetic is in the wind, but it hardly matters: the sense of dread, of foreboding, it never leaves, only lingers. Alec will traipse back to the office afterwards, and Magnus will hold the door for him and offer him another drink, and the hours will pass with the sound of a pen scratching, or the clock ticking, or quiet conversation that never makes it above a murmur as Magnus waits with bated breath for his next article to go to press.

On the other nights, Sentinel scours the city with Nightlock. He retraces the steps of the Circle, following a trail now little more than cold, empty streets and dried blood on the asphalt. Valentine, the pyrokinetic, whoever they are - they’re ghosts.

Frustration simmers in Alec’s gut and curls in Nightlock’s fingertips. Jace is prone to snapping and Clary goes silent for hours on end, walled up within herself every single night they come home empty-handed.

“There’s no corner of Manhattan we haven’t fucking searched,” Jace complains, each time. “We’re gonna have to start flipping manhole covers and searching the sewers at this rate.”
He’s not wrong. It certainly feels that way.

Maybe Valentine has fled the city. Maybe they’ve gone into hiding, maybe they know they’re being hunted.

All Alec has to go on is the memory of the pyrokinetic’s face in the alley and the feeling of dread in his stomach.

“We’ll catch him,” says Nightlock, touching Alec on the elbow to hold him back, a silent wait a minute. He doesn’t speak until Jace and Clary are out of earshot. He says it each time too. “I promise you. All we have to do is find the right thread. It’s out there. I know it is.”

You’ve made that promise to me already, Alec thinks, although Nightlock doesn’t know it. You swore you wouldn’t rest until it’s done.

At least Alec isn’t lonely.

And he knows he shouldn’t fixate upon that, but he does; it’s habit and he’s been long desperate.

Sentinel has always been a lonely creature, perched high on rooftops in the rain, always taking the first watch, always the one left waiting for Arkangel’s heroic deeds to be done. Dressed all in black. Silent as the grave. His head bowed, his face out of the dogged press.

And lonely; terribly, terribly lonely, a friend only to the thoughts inside his head and the bitterness eating him up inside -

Until now.

He finds himself tempered.

Racing across city rooftops always gets his blood pumping, even though Nightlock is always faster and always cheating. Alec’s so used to sitting around, waiting for Arkangel to drag havoc over the doorstep with him, but this is real.
At last, he feels worthy of his powers. At last, he feels some part a super.

He feels it in the way his thighs burn after a night spent chasing police dispatches. Calluses bloom on his well-worked fingers and he has to ask Izzy for more arrows because he’s gone and spent them all. Alec feels it in the way Nightlock will throw him this unabashed smile every time they manage to lose a tail, or every time they save a person who doesn’t want to say thank you, or every time Nightlock sees Sentinel for the first time in a few days.

Nightlock smiles more now. Gone are the bitter acerbic smirks, and now it’s Sentinel who gets to share in his eyerolls at Arkangel, and not be on the receiving end of them.

*Partners*, Alec thinks. *Friends*. *He and I* -

It’s easy not to think about anything else.

And it would be foolish to forget that the rest of the world exists, Alec knows it, but sometimes he just can’t help but entertain the thought, as wild and reckless as it is.

It could be this way, *always*.

He helps Nightlock stop a bank robbery: the pair of them leave a trio of muggers leashed to a lampost for the police to find; Alec offers to walk a pregnant woman home after her purse is snatched and is surprised when she says *yes*. Izzy covers for him at Idris and his parents don’t ask anything of him that he doesn’t think he can do. It feels good to be doing good.

Maybe the Circle won’t come back.

Maybe he knows how to be a hero after all.

Maybe he *can* do all of this, and not have it cost some dear part of himself that he won’t miss until it’s gone.
With Nightlock, he knows who he is. Or who he’s meant to be, a taste of it now on his tongue, and he craves more of it.

And then, he’ll think of Magnus, and he’ll choke.

The calendar on Alec’s desk reads October now. Almost three weeks to the day since Nightlock saved his life in that alleyway. Alec’s hand has almost healed, but he still wears the burn-blisters on the backs of his knuckles, a strange, shiny and wrinkled scar that flares out across his fingers. It doesn’t hurt anymore, and he’s managed to regain the strength in his grip that he feared he might’ve lost: his arrows still fly true.

He still catches Magnus looking at it from time to time, a fine crease between his brows, his tongue pressed against his lips. He never says anything, but maybe that’s worse, and Alec always has to look away.

Distracted, Alec rubs his thumb over the gnarled skin curving around his thumb. It feels tough, like leather, and he presses in with his nail until it stings - but it doesn’t, not in the way it should bite.

Nerve damage. Alec sighs, rubbing at the red crescent mark until it fades. It’s not a pretty picture. He’s caught a few of the stares, the wide eyes, the scrunched up noses, the palid disgust, but as long as no-one asks him how it happened, he doesn’t have to tell any more lies.

Outside, the rain thunders down on the sidewalk in thick grey sheets, a downpour so impassable that half the office is still empty.

Alec relishes the quiet. Waiting for his dial-up to connect, he inspects the discoloration that creeps around his palm again, frowning at the marbled pinks and whites. He wonders what Nightlock would say about it, but he can’t exactly take off his glove as Sentinel to show him.

Has it healed well? Would that same fear flicker through Nightlock’s eyes again? Alec’s not sure.
Beyond the rain, the sound of someone breathing heavily draws Alec’s attention upwards.

It’s Simon.

Simon, bundling out of the elevators, drenched to the bone, his hair plastered to his forehead and his glasses hanging crooked off his nose. His satchel is thrown carelessly over his shoulder, his suit jacket is definitely on inside out, the label sticking up against the back of his neck, and he sneezes so loudly then that half the office jumps out of their seats.

He looks completely unraveled. Alec curls his fingers into his palm and frowns.

This is not the first time Alec’s seen Simon stumble into the office looking like he’s just fallen out of a moving vehicle on the freeway - Alec’s used to that now, even though it’s been happening more and more in the last few weeks - but whilst Simon Lewis is a lot of obnoxious, trying things, he’s rarely late to work.

Alec glances at the clock. It’s half past nine already. Simon is very late.

He’s told Alec plenty times how much he needs this job. He’s not about to do something like blow it.

Alec watches Simon slump down at his desk and press the heels of his hands into his eyes, hanging his head over his keyboard. He seems to be having a pep talk with himself, but not even Alec’s hearing is good enough to eavesdrop.

Alec waits a moment, until all the other curious stares have turned away, and then slips out of his chair and pads quietly across the floor to Simon’s desk.

Simon stiffens, but doesn’t acknowledge Alec’s presence. There’s a small puddle of rainwater forming around his shoes. A single droplets rolls from his hairline down his nose.

He looks pitiful.

“Lewis,” Alec says gruffly. He glances at the poor attempt at a knot that Simon has made of his tie.
Something is severely wrong; his voice catches. “You’re late.”

Simon jolts as if someone has jammed jumper cables into his ass. He bolts upright and sends his keyboard flying with the swipe of his arm - but luckily Alec is quick enough to catch it.

Alec’s frown deepens as he sets Simon’s keyboard back on the desk. Simon doesn’t say a word, his focus snapping from his computer to the overwhelming stack of folders in his intake tray that are overflowing with photographs. Immediately, he starts digging through them, muttering under his breath.

Alec doesn’t know what to do. “Simon?”

“What are you, my boss?” Simon snaps, but then the air whooshes out of him, and Alec watches him physically deflate before his eyes. Simon is shaking. Not to the untrained eye, but Alec can see it, these tiny tremors like static electricity that have his fingers twitching and the side of his neck spasming.

Simon sighs heavily, palming his hand through his wet hair. He slumps back in his desk chair and swivels to face Alec. “I know, I know. My life’s a mess, you don’t have to tell me, I own a mirror. Shit’s been terrible, Alec, all my fuses at home keep blowing and this morning we had a power surge and it made my TV short-circuit and the screen blew out, and then my carpet caught on fire.”

Alec blinks. “Are you being serious?”

“As serious as a heart attack!” Simon wails, throwing his hands in the air. “My landlord is going to kill me, and that’s if my mom doesn’t kill me first because she always says my apartment is a death trap, but hey - if I’m late once more this week, maybe I won’t have the apartment anymore because I’ll lose this job and won’t be able to pay my rent -”

“Okay, okay.” Alec frowns. He glances around and finds a few people watching. He steps in front of Simon to shield their conversation from prying eyes. “I’m sorry I asked. You need to calm down.”

His words seem to have the opposite effect. Simon lunges forward in his seat, grabbing Alec by the wrist.
“Please don’t tell anyone I was late,” Simon begs, as Alec slowly pulls free of Simon’s hand. “If anyone asks, say you saw me bright and early, seven-thirty on the dot? Pretty please?”

Alec rolls his eyes, but he nods, and Simon takes a deep breath and slumps back in his chair.

He looks a Goddamn mess. It’s stressing Alec out just looking at him.

“You’ve been all over the place for weeks now,” Alec says carefully. Simon just lets out a pitiful sort of squeak as he opens up his email inbox and sees a very bright and bold message from Magnus at the top, informing Simon that he needs some photographs for his next editorial yesterday. “Is … everything okay?”

“Everything’s peachy, just peachy,” Simon babbles, although he certainly doesn’t sound okay. His voice keeps getting higher. “Absolutely a-okay.”

Alec isn’t about to go digging for the truth. He’s not particularly good at condolences or warm and fuzzy feelings, only at standing by Simon’s side like a lemon. But he can’t say nothing -

“Well … you want to go get coffee?” Okay, maybe nothing would’ve been better.

Simon waves him off with his hand. “No, no, I’m alright, you go without me,” he says. “I’m up to my eyeballs, but if I don’t get this done right now, Magnus will definitely make sure I no longer have eyeballs.”

Simon begins frantically typing away at a reply, and Alec watches him for a slightly stunned moment, before sighing heavily.

“Alright,” he says. “Your jacket’s on inside out, by the way.”

Alec doesn’t usually spare much thought to Simon Lewis, so it’s strange that the interaction sticks
with him for most of the day. It’s probably just a side effect of having spent his twenty-something
years chasing after Isabelle and Jace, and then Max, and now Clary … he can’t help but feel like
he needs to step in and make sure Simon is making sensible life choices, or what have you. Izzy
calls it his big brother instinct. He likes to futilely deny that, but he reckons she’s probably right.

She’s rarely wrong.

Izzy is also far better at reading people, especially people who might not be telling the whole truth,
and so Alec can’t help but wonder what she might make of Simon’s disarray.

Alec feels out of touch. These last few weeks, his only thoughts have been about Sentinel, about
Nightlock and their patrols, about Magnus - and maybe that’s a mistake of sorts. He’s not sure he
knows how to have normal conversations, about things like blown fuses and paying rent and
civilian life.

He’s never really known how to do any of that.

Alec carries the thought into Magnus’ office that night, settling down into his usual chair. He flips
open the case file he had been reading the night before, but doesn’t digest any of the words.
Magnus is not around, but his coat is still slung over his chair, there’s a half-drunk coffee still
steaming next to his Filofax, and Alec knows he wouldn’t have left for the night without telling
Alec.

In the quiet, Alec’s thoughts tick back to Simon with the second hand on the clock.

He’s known Simon for a while now, a year or two of cheery smiles and endless gossiping by the
coffee machine (all Simon, never Alec). Longer than he’s known Clary, and longer than he’s
known Magnus too. He’s grown quite used to the way Simon greets him each morning with a wave
or a salute or more recently, a frown, a pause, a prolifered, “hey, Alec, are you okay? Late night?
You look terrible.”

Alec can never answer that question with the truth, but it’s the question itself that still counts for
something: it touches him in an abandoned place beneath his stern and stony facade, a place rarely
tended. It’s nice knowing there’s someone interested in his well-being for literally no other reason
than wanting to know.

Alec should really return the favour. Ask Simon what’s going on. Maybe suggest they go get a
drink after work. Simon’s always asking, and Alec’s always declining, and what would one night hurt? Things have been slow, searching for the Circle. The closest they’ve come to a lead was when Jace and Clary found matching tire tracks at two different crime scenes, but all Izzy could trace them back to was the most common-place model Ford Mondeo in the city.

Alec flicks the page in the file he’s reading, only to realise that he remembers nothing on the page before. He’s supposed to be making notes for Magnus: there’s been a string of unmaskings lately, and Magnus wants to write an exposé about the police vendetta for revealing the identities of vigilantes at the expense of preventing crime. It’s just yet another problem ...

A heavy sigh deflates Alec’s entire body. He scrappes his hand through his hair and turns the page back over, begging himself to concentrate.

He doesn’t get far. He hears footsteps long before they arrive outside the door, and then a loud huff. Magnus nudges the door open with his hip, his strong arms overflowing with manila files and lever-arch folders. His face lights up when he sees Alec waiting.

“Oh! Alexander, you’re already here!” he beams, kicking the door closed. “Excellent - help me with these, would you?”

Alec is quick to his feet, holding out his arms as Magnus dumps half his files into Alec’s hands with a quiet oomph. They all smell like dust and old mothballs, and Alec wrinkles his nose, which causes Magnus to smile.

“I went digging for these,” Magnus explains, letting all the remaining folders fall from his arms with an unceremonious thud onto his desk. “You would be astonished by what you can find in the city archives. They really do keep a hold of everything, bureaucracy is both a blessing and a curse.”

Alec raises an eyebrow. “And what did you do to get access to all these?”

“Ah, ah. What you don’t know can’t hurt you.” When Alec shoots him a withering look, Magnus scoffs. “Fine, spoil my fun; I have a contact in City Hall who owed me a few favours. As long as I can return all these by opening hours tomorrow, we’re in the clear. Never disregard what you can get done by having people owe you things, Alec.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Alec says flat, but it only seems to amuse Magnus. “What is all this, anyway?”
Magnus flips effortlessly into work mode, his smile sobering. He straightens up behind his desk and shoves his shirt sleeves up to his elbows, and if Alec’s eyes linger on Magnus’ toned forearms, well. It’s a weakness of his, he can’t deny it.

“Idris’ public records,” Magnus announces, “Before it was all privatised. Service records, employment history, financial mumbo-jumbo that I’m sure you’ll love - everything from ’71 to ’75, right when the Circle defected.”


“Indeed.” Magnus fishes out a nondescript blue-leather folder from the top of the pile. He flits over the first page, his mouth pursed into an unreadable line. “I haven’t had a chance to look at any of it yet, but I figured there might be something usable here. Valentine was an employee of Idris for many years before his coup. The records may be redacted, but what’s here is bound to be meticulously kept, if I know anything of Corporate heroes.”

Alec pauses where he’s reaching for a file for himself. He glances up at Magnus, and tries his luck.

“Do you know many Corporate heroes?”

Magnus twitches. A tiny smile tucks itself into the corner of his mouth. “I’ve met one or two in my time,” he says, “Most of them have been terribly trite, of course.”

“Of course.”

Magnus rolls his eyes. “Enough, we’re not having that discussion again,” he teases, “I’ll have you know that my opinion on Corporates is vastly improved since you last tried to change my mind. Unfortunately, Valentine and the Circle still count as the bad ones.”

There’s a part of Alec that wants to tell the truth. He wants to say: you know, there are Corporates out there doing the right thing. Looking for the Circle. Going against orders. Doing what they should’ve been doing all along -

He’s not sure what Magnus would say. Perhaps: good, it’s about time. Or worse: you honestly
believe that to be true?

Or even: I already know.

Alec swallows thickly and ridgs himself of the thought. “What do you need me to do?” he asks instead.

Magnus must see the conflict on Alec’s face, because he looks up from his folder and tilts his head.

“If you’re busy tonight, you don’t have to stay,” he says simply. “It’ll be a late one, but I can get through all of these myself before sunrise if need be.”

“No. No, it’s good, I’m good, I can help. You need my help. I just -”

“You just?”

Unbidden, Alec thinks about Simon again. He’s not sure why Simon’s distress pushes Sentinel from his mind, but - it does. It’s a stone in his shoe, but only now has it taken a nick out of him.

“It’s just ... Simon. I wanted to … check on him, I guess. He’s been kinda weird lately.”

“Oh? Weirder than normal?”

“Magnus.”

“I can’t say I’ve noticed,” Magnus says quickly. “Perhaps I’ve been asking too much of him lately … but his photographs are the best, he’s really only got himself to blame.” He glances up at Alec and his gaze softens. “I’ll try and give him some slack on the deadlines. Happy?”

“Yeah,” says Alec. “Yeah, uh - thanks. I’m sure it’s nothing.”
Magnus hums, sinking down into his desk chair with the folder on his lap. He crosses one leg over the other with effortless grace, and then says, without looking up:

“He’s lucky to have someone like you looking out for him. A guardian angel, indeed.”

“I - what?”

Magnus smiles. “You and your selfless heroism, Alexander,” he explains, “Running after pyrokinetics in dark alleyways late at night, bailing your vagrant brother out of jail, and looking out for Simon Lewis when he has a bad day in the office. It’s admirable. Simon is lucky.”

Alec hunches his shoulders, folding in on himself as he sits down in his chair opposite Magnus. He drags a folder towards himself, barely reading the cover as he opens it; acute heat slithers up the back of his neck, pooling in his cheeks, all splotchy and red.

“It’s not like -” he starts, “Nevermind.”

“It’s not like what?”

Alec swallows thickly, hoping that, if he mutters, he won’t be heard, but Magnus has stopped thumbing through his pages, clearly awaiting Alec’s response.

Alec stares hard at the desk in front of him. “It’s not like he’s the only one I care about,” he mumbles, and Magnus’ accompanying “oh” is somehow too loud and too soft for Alec’s poor heart.

He chances a look up, but Magnus is pointedly looking down again, pretending like he’s reading, but there’s colour in his face too, unguarded and rare.

“My brothers and my sister, I mean -” Alec finds himself amending, because of course he has to spoil it.

Magnus’ eyes crinkle up at the corners. “Of course you do,” he says, then whispers, “Of course you do.”
Alec doesn’t know how to break the silence that follows thereafter, and the longer it goes on, the more he can’t bring himself to say a word, if he even knew which words to say.

Magnus settles into his chair, fingers drumming on his coffee cup as he thumbs through the folder on his lap. Alec lets himself sigh. It’s a quiet thing, a steadying thing, but he’s not so oblivious anymore to not know why he needs to be steadied.

Magnus’ eyelashes cast feathered shadows on his cheeks. He twirls the ring on his thumb around and around his knuckle, and there’s this ever-so-slight purse to his lips as he reads, and Alec can’t help but steal glances.

Magnus isn’t wrong. Just like Alec’s need to protect people extends beyond his siblings to Simon, it also extends to Magnus. But it’s -

Well, it’s different. Alec’s not sure if he could put his finger on it, or explain why it feels different if anyone were to ask, but where Magnus calls his vigilance of Simon *selfless*, Alec is quite sure that the same thing he affords Magnus is quite *selfish*.

When did it get this way? When did they change from what they were and into - *this*?

*This* should be confusing, and it is, but it isn’t. It’s a paradox as easy as breathing. *Why is it so easy to exist in Magnus’ space?*

In this city of neon lights, of artificial blues and cold and unfeeling whites, where the night eats colour and the daylight writhes in concrete and in mud, Magnus is a rare moment of gold. *That’s why*. Alec cherishes that. He cherishes it, and he covets it, because that gold is both warm and untouchable.

*I want to keep you safe more than I want to keep anyone safe. If only because you’re the only real hope this city seems to have left.*

*Sentinel and Nightlock, Muse and Arkangel, good Corporates, bad Corporates - when they’re all gone, when they all fail, you’re the one who’s going to save everyone.*
Across the desk, Magnus sighs and switches the folder in his lap for another. Alec hasn’t been caught, but he flushes much the same, ducking his head back into the words he’s meant to be reading. His heartbeat still flutters; off-putting, the way it makes him feel delicate. Human. He’s not used to the thought that someone else’s fingers could leave bruises on him that might never fade.

He glances down at his burned hand, recalling the way Magnus had held it so gently between both of his, the morning after the night before - and how much of the red scarring on the backs of his knuckles is from fire, and how much is from something else?

How much of it is from trying to prove himself worthy of - of whatever this feeling is, wherever it might go, the way Magnus looks at him sometimes -

Alec chews on the inside of his cheek and tucks his hand beneath the table, digging his fingers into his knee. He tries to focus on the file in front of him again, but some devious thought is prodding and poking at his heart, asking him insistently: *have you noticed yet?*

*Have you noticed the way you feel about him now?*

Oh, he’s noticed.

Alec forces himself into work: it’s the only way he knows to rid himself of the things he’s scared of thinking, the only way to stop himself blushing everytime he feels Magnus steal a glance at him and pause too long. But Alec is nothing if not diligent and tireless once he gets going, always focused and dedicated to the task at hand, scribbling neat notes on a legal pad as he flicks through the City Hall files and hopes for something that might help Sentinel.

It feels normal; it feels rote. Studying late into the night until his eyes burn. Glancing at the clock on the wall and suddenly finding it one in the morning. Reaching the end of a case file and leaning back in the chair, feeling his *actual soul* flood back into his body as he straightens up with a disgusting crick of his neck.

It feels like he should stay and never step outside the door again, because here, once more in the confines of Magnus’ office, Alec experiences the fragments of it, so dearly missed: *a human life.*
The clock above Magnus’ desk greets midnight with a quiet *click* as the minute and second hands align at twelve. Alec barely looks up. There are still four hours to go ‘til morning press and Alec intends to stay awake to see the sunrise.

He can sense Magnus growing restless, his attention slipping. Magnus swings his feet down off the desk and spins from side to side in his chair, twirling his pen between his knuckles as he fidgets. He grumbles to himself about whatever he’s reading, before tossing it to the floor, grabbing himself another binder from the file - but he’s not interested in that one either, barely reading a paragraph before flinging it away as well.

Alec raises an eyebrow but doesn’t comment. He refocuses on his work, but there’s an itch, now, where he can feel Magnus watching him. It starts on Alec’s hand, scuttling across his knuckles and the still-healing burn scar, and then up his arm, across the breadth of his shoulders, feeling up the side of his face and into his hair.

“Magnus,” Alec scolds, not looking up. He hears Magnus laugh, light and breathless.

“Sorry.”

Alec rolls his eyes and flips the page, scanning an article from the Herald a few months old. Magnus pushes away from the desk, wheeling himself in his chair over to his filing cabinet, returning with a new stack of envelopes and a bottle of scotch on his lap. He pours himself a drink and Alec listens to the slosh of alcohol against the glass - and then a pause. Magnus is watching him again.

*What game is this?* Alec wonders, *Distract Alec?* He scribbles a few notes on his page but doesn’t really process them.

Magnus settles back into his chair and swirls his scotch in one hand, thumbing through another file with another. Alec steals a quick look and regrets it, if only for the few extra buttons Magnus has undone around his throat, his tie discarded.

Magnus wears a thin silver chain beneath his shirt; it winks at Alec in the fluorescent light, fluid like mercury, moving as Magnus moves. Alec huffs loudly, his pen scratching on the page.
This can’t be intentional, he tells himself. Get a grip.

Then, Magnus drops the file in his hands onto the desk with a mighty *thud* and Alec stabs his legal pad too hard as he looks up. He frowns at Magnus, and then he frowns at the blue ink splodge on the paper; the nib of his pen is bent out of shape.

Magnus shoots him a coy grin and stretches his arms up above his head, rolling his shoulders, leaning his head back against the spine of his chair. He hums to himself, and Alec watches it vibrate intimately down the column of his throat: the lines of ligaments press against Magnus’ skin, the swell of his Adam’s apple both prominent and distracting, diverting Alec’s attention from a half-read sentence. Magnus sighs to himself as his back cracks, a satisfied noise just a little too provocative.

Okay, no, definitely intentional, Alec thinks, shooting Magnus a look that says *can you not*. Magnus raises an eyebrow in return - *what?* - but there’s a smile tickling the corners of his lips, which makes Alec roll his eyes a second time.

Alec snatches another file from the slowly-receding pile they still have yet to check, muttering beneath his breath as he flicks it open without really thinking about what’s he’s looking at.

Magnus seems oblivious to it too, making a show of shifting in his chair, sinking lower so that his necklace might bite into the side of his throat and stand out beneath this thin cotton of his shirt. He reaches down and undoes the buttons on his waistcoat with dexterous fingers, and then uncrosses and recrosses his legs, rubbing his hand absently against his knee, thumbing at the fabric of his dress pants.

Alec prickles. If this is a game of chicken, he’s not going to lose.

Okay, maybe he *might* lose, but -

His eyes catch on the page below him, sudden enough to halt his thoughts in whatever they were becoming. Alec blinks, and then blinks again, but the words on the page don’t change.

Certified Copy of Birth Record for Dependent(s) of Idris Employees: 1970 - 1975

“Oh,” says Alec. He flips the page. Under the heading, the text reads: employee name.
“Did you find something?” Magnus says, sitting up straight. He is immediately serious again. “Alec, what is it?”

“Yeah, I - maybe,” Alec frowns. The next line reads: date of birth. The line under that: sex, weight, eye colour, hair colour.

It looks like a birth certificate.

Alec turns a few more pages. More records, dozens of them, spanning the same five years. And all of them detailing different people, different names from Idris, some of whom he recognises: Underhill. Branwell. Blackthorn.

Magnus is out of his chair and at Alec’s side before Alec can blink. He peers over Alec’s shoulder, one palm pressed flat to the desk, the other splayed against Alec’s shoulder blade.

It’s not the reason Alec goes cold. He knows what sort of record he holds in his hands: it’s a list of all the children born to those employed by Idris in the seventies. Twenty-odd years ago. The same age as both him and Isabelle.

There could be a record for Lightwood in here.

“Birth records?” Magnus murmurs, leafing through the pages when Alec’s hands still. “I know you said Idris took supers on young, but this is really pushing the boat out. I dread to think what sorts of clauses Corporates have in their contracts that give Idris hold over their children.”

“There was -” Alec struggles to find his words, but pushes through. He can’t react. He hasn’t seen his own name yet. Maybe these records are too early, or too late, to catch either him or Isabelle. But Jace and Clary -

Alec nudges Magnus’ hand out of the way and flicks back to the first page he saw, near the beginning of the file. “There was one with Valentine’s name on it.”
He wasn’t mistaken: the certificate details the birth of the child of an employee named Morgenstern. There’s no first name listed, but Alec doesn’t need it to know. The date of birth is the spring of 1975.

Just before the coup. Valentine was still employed by Idris as a Corporate at the time. And he had a child.

Not just a child.

A son, a son about the same age as Alec: sex: male, eye colour: green, hair colour: blonde. And in the box near the bottom of the page that reads: is the dependent likely to have inherited supernatural abilities, someone has ticked yes.

The child’s name is Jonathan. It hasn’t been redacted. Alec doesn’t have time to wonder why.

“The bastard has a son,” Magnus breathes, too close to Alec’s ear. He reaches out, running his finger across the very last line on the page, and pressing against Alec’s shoulder too liberally. The air prickles with static.

“Could be our pyrokinetic,” Alec breathes, “He’s the correct age. Same physical type.” Did the man in that alleyway have blonde hair and green eyes - God, maybe - maybe -

“Could be.”

Alec glances up at Magnus, but Magnus’ thoughts are far away and a mile ahead, even if his fingertips are still digging into Alec’s shoulder blade. It’s in his eyes.

“Idris might have other records,” he says slowly, but then he shakes his head, banishing an unspoken thought. “They have nothing on any pyrokinetics, but they might have something on Valentine Morgenstern’s son. It’s an avenue we haven’t yet checked.”

“How are we going to check?” Alec has to ask. “Idris’ current records are all … still at Idris.”
Magnus hums, seizing the folder from Alec and stepping back. His hand drops from Alec’s shoulder, but Alec’s chest still feels like it’s compressed within a vice. His eyes follow the folder around the edge of the desk with burning focus; he can’t let it out of his sight.

*God, what else might Magnus have unearthed at City Hall -*

“Like I said before,” Magnus says with ease, “There are a few Corporates I think I can get in contact with, one or two that might owe me a favour, or be persuaded to let me owe them one.”

Alec nods. He knows what that means. “Do you think this could really be something?”

When Magnus looks up, his stare is sharp and unwavering, holding the fuzzy edges of the night at knifepoint.

“Oh. Almost certainly.”

Alec doesn’t wait for Magnus to track down Sentinel. He doesn’t want to think about it. About what *that* would mean.

That night, he goes to Izzy and asks her to run a search of Idris’ databases for Jonathan Morgenstern.

Crowded in front of her computer, the dial-up shrieks and it makes Alec shudder. The only thing they find is an electronic copy of the birth certificate, but some of the information is blacked out. Alec’s not sure what he was expecting, but his shoulders slump anyway. Absurd, that misplaced sort of optimism to be hoping for something more.

“There might be more stuff in the records room,” Izzy tells him, trying to remain positive. “Not everything is electronic yet, there’s still a massive backlog that hasn’t been filed. I’ll keep digging. This can’t be it.”
“Thanks, Iz,” he says, but there’s nothing quite like raising one’s hopes, only to have them dashed hours later. Alec feels exhausted. He pinches the bridge of his nose, rubbing at the skin as he closes his eyes. “I thought we’d have him.”

“We still might,” Izzy insists, “Everything we know, it adds up. Valentine defected with the Circle only a couple months after his son was born. The child didn’t grow up in Idris, which is why we have no other records, but it could mean he’s still out there. You know as well as I do that people don’t just get to walk out of Idris without some serious consequences.”

Alec runs his palm across his jaw, covering his mouth. “I need to tell Magnus.”

Izzy swivels around on her desk chair to face him, and he’s glad they’re alone in her lab because it’s coming up sunrise, he hasn’t slept yet, he’s still in his work clothes, he must look a mess, and now, he’s bringing up Magnus of his own accord. His inhibitions are shot, and he doesn’t trust himself around many people when he’s like this ... including himself.

“You do, or Sentinel does?” Izzy asks.

“I don’t know. I don’t know what to do. I don’t want him near Sentinel, but -”

“Wait and see if he gets in contact with Sentinel to ask,” she says, “Or you could just say that you went to Idris to ask for information, but then he’d know that you know someone on the inside. He might start asking questions.”

“He knows a lot of supers,” Alec says, “What if he asks the wrong person about Jonathan Morgenstern? What if he doesn’t ask Sentinel? And it goes badly?”

Izzy frowns. Alec can see the gears working behind her eyes.

“You said he got those birth records from City Hall?” she asks. Alec nods. “Alright. I’ll send him a letter, something along the lines of us being aware that he checked out those files, maybe warn him not to dig too deep, that sort of thing. I can tell him we’re handling it, but let him know at the same time we’ve not found anything. *Vaguely threatening* is my middle name.”
“He won’t listen,” Alec sighs, “It’ll only make him dig deeper, being told that we don’t want him nosing around.”

“Are we not counting on that? You and Magnus are doing a way better job investigating this case than Sentinel and Nightlock are. Maybe we should just employ Magnus. He’s clearly got an eye for this.”

“I think he’d rather chew his own foot off than work with Idris.”

“Wouldn’t we all,” Izzy mutters, before perking up. “I’ll get Meliorn to swing by the Public Records Office, see if he can find any more information on anyone called Jonathan Morgenstern. Might be able to find a social security number, or bank account details, or an address, if we really luck out. I’ll keep looking here. I’ve still got a few hours on the clock before Victor finishes his patrol, God help us all.”

Alec claps Izzy on the shoulder, giving her a grateful squeeze. She smiles up at him, resilient and resourceful as ever.

There’s a whole flock of mourning crows perched on the telephone wires over Alec’s head, squawking and guffawing as it begins to drizzle. Dusk is a distant memory of a distant world, and the sky is swamped in the dirty purple of twilight. Wind blows in from the north, its ruthlessly long tongue whipping around Alec’s ankles, creeping into the gaps between his gauntlets and his gloves with an uncomfortable chill.

Sentinel is alone tonight and he has twelve blocks to patrol by himself. Clary and Jace are halfway across the city, investigating a tip from Meliorn about a man called Sebastian Verlac who lives south of the river and fits their profile for the pyrokinetic, who also has a passing resemblance to Alec’s memory from the alleyway.

Nightlock said he would be late: he’s been distracted the whole week, and had muttered something to Alec a few nights ago about his day job keeping him too busy to suit up. It had been the first time Nightlock had mentioned anything about what he does in the daytime, and Alec had fought hard to keep his curiosity in check. It wasn’t his business. Isn’t his business , however much he wants to know.
Alec hasn’t worked by himself in a long time. Ever since there has been a Sentinel, there has been Arkangel at his side, and after that, there was Muse, and now there’s Nightlock. It’s strange to hear only his own footsteps in an alleyway as he darts between buildings and between shadows, and it’s kind of unnerving, like his heart might jump out of his chest if he so much as hears a stray cat topple over a trash can behind him.

He can’t shake the thought of being followed, even though he knows there’s no-one there. It doesn’t really matter; each turned corner has him imagining running head first into Magnus, out on the streets looking for Sentinel for one wretched reason or another.

“Alec, you alright?” says Izzy in his ear. Okay, so he’s never totally alone, but her voice is always tinny and distant sounding, and it’s not enough to settle his nerves. “I can hear you breathing hard.”

“M fine,” says Alec, “Still en route to that B&E on Fifth. Police there yet?”

“Probably,” says Izzy, “Best keep your distance.”

The pauses between her words are too deliberate, and so Alec slows his jog to a walk. The line of crows above him squawk loudly, and he’s half tempted to shoot an arrow up there to get them to scatter and not give away his position to any nosy onlookers.


“They’re fine, it’s nothing,” Izzy says, clearly lying. Alec knows his look can’t be heard through the coms, but he does know that Izzy can imagine it on his face anyway. She sighs heavily, unprompted. “Actually, there is something. I’m not sure if it’s anything yet, but you should know.”

“Iz?”

“So, I’ve been in the records room all day today,” she says, “Underhill was asking too many questions, but I just told him I need some documents for your suit upgrades, and he let me be. Anyway - I found all the old personnel files from the seventies, and something weird came up -”
“The pyrokinetic? Valentine?”

“Unfortunately, no,” she replies, “Another super, I think, from around the same time as Valentine’s coup. I’m not sure if he was Circle, it doesn’t look like it, because his files aren’t blacklisted. He did ten years of service, but he just disappears from the records in 1975, just after Valentine left - ”

Alec slows to a stop, eyeing up the fire escape above his head. He clammers up on top of a nearby dumpster and makes a leap for the bottom of the ladder, grabbing the bottom rung with ease and heaving himself up. Izzy says nothing, so he continues to climb, pulling himself up onto the first level. He makes his way higher, the full force of the wind almost taking him off his feet when he emerges onto the roof.

This deep downtown, the streets are split with fluorescent colour, and Alec can hear a busy intersection not two blocks over, a cacophony of car horns and squealing tires making noise in the light rain. He feels better up high, he always does. People are less likely to notice him. It’s easier to have secret conversations.

“Iz?” he tries again. He hears her inhale on her end of the line.

“So, this super’s alias was Lycanthrope, some sort of beast morphing ability, which is kinda on the nose,” she says, “His full name has been scrubbed out everywhere I’ve looked, same with whoever was his partner and whoever was his handler. It doesn’t look like he died in active duty, it’s just - it just looks like he left. Vanished. Idris one day, gone the next. It makes no sense.”

No-one gets to leave Idris. Not without a fight or without spilling blood, more likely than not, your own. Valentine Morgenstern is the only person Alec knows who has ever been able to walk away and not be pulled back by some invisible chain around the ankles.

There must be something else at work here. Something he and Izzy cannot see.

“Undercover?” Alec suggests, “Maybe he was moved out of New York. Vietnam?”

“I mean, maybe? I don’t know, Alec, it just seems weird. I’ve got a feeling it’s connected, but if I’d seen Lycanthrope mentioned anywhere before, I would remember. Obviously.”
“Any links with Hodge Starkweather? Or the Senator?”

“Not that I can find. I can keep digging.”

Alec frowns. His fingers twitch against his bow for no real reason. “You said his alias was Lycanthrope? I’ve never heard of him before. Not even in the papers.”

“Me neither. I had a look in the database at known vigilantes, and he didn’t come up there either. But … when I typed in his powers, without his name, I got a hit.”

“What? Who?”

“Wolfsbane.”

Alec says nothing, so she continues.

“They’re both about the same age, right? Mid-forties, black, tall enough that you notice it, isn’t that what you said? Enhanced sense of smell, eyesight, hearing, retractable claws, and they both have an apparent penchant for wolf motifs? I don’t think it’s a coincidence.”

“I’m on his side of the city,” Alec says then. He learned long ago not to second-guess Izzy. When it comes to seeing patterns where no-one else can, she excels. Alec, on the other hand, excels at coming up with plans. He’s already weighing up his options. “I haven’t seen him or Veil in a while.”

Not since the first murder, that night in the parking lot. It’s been months. They might not even know what’s been going on -

No, of course they’ll know. But they might know more than Sentinel, more than Alec. They might know a lot more.

“If Wolfsbane used to work for Idris at the same time as Valentine, he might know something about the Circle or about Jonathan Morgenstern. He might know where Valentine moved him after the coup,” Izzy remarks. “And if he doesn’t, we still need to get him and Veil onside with our
manhunt. The more hands, the better. Do you think you could find them?"

“Maybe,” says Alec. He’s meant to rendezvous with Nightlock on the other side of the river, but if he’s to find Wolfsbane and Veil, he needs to venture north. It’s the opposite direction. “I don’t have any way to contact them and Nightlock’s running late.”

“The last few times you’ve run into them has been within a three block radius of the police precinct up on 99th,” Izzy says without pausing. “Good place as any to start. Veil usually comes to you. But be careful. If Wolfsbane is ex-Circle - well. Just be careful.”

Alec has never tried to seek out Wolfsbane and Veil before: Izzy is right, they usually stumble across him, and that’s only when Veil is in the mood to be seen. Heaven only knows how many times she’s kept her presence hidden from Alec with one of her illusions and sat on a rooftop and laughed at him running around in the streets below.

Alec would rather not think about it. And besides, he’s not here to be chewed out by her tonight. He’s looking for Wolfsbane.

“Muse to Sentinel,” Clary crackles across the coms, just as Alec arrives on the rooftop of a squat, grey-concrete apartment block just south of where he wants to be. He swipes his gloved fingers across his mask, smearing away some of the rainwater that is beginning to drip down his cheeks. “Sentinel, you there?”

“I’m here, go ahead,” Alec answers. “Any news?”

“Only if no news is some news,” says Clary, “We just made it to Sebastian Verlac’s apartment. The place looks abandoned. Like no-one has been here for months … maybe Meliorn’s tip was bad.”

“Have a look around, see what you can find,” Alec instructs, “Make sure Jace doesn’t attract anyone’s attention.”
“Hey!” snaps Jace. “Come say that to my face.”

“As much as I’m sure you two need a supervisor -”

“Uncalled for.”

“- I’m following up on a new lead. Izzy might’ve found a contact who knew Valentine when he worked at Idris. I’ll catch you up later -”

Alec breaks off when he feels a familiar pressure building in his gut; he lets his coms cut out without signing off. He scans the rooftop for signs of movement, but nausea swarms in his stomach and he grunts, doubling forward with his hand pressed to the hollow of his hip. The buildings aglow around him seem to shimmer and dance, like he’s looking at the world through a heatwave. God, he hasn’t fucking missed this -

But at least he’s in the right place.

“Veil!” he calls out, strained. “Cut it out! It’s me .”

A sharp laugh bounces over Alec’s shoulder and he twists around, only for Veil to materialise out of thin air, frayed edges of reality flickering around her. Fullness shoves up against Alec’s diaphragm from below, the need to vomit feeling like the only way to expel it from his system. He fights the urge to double over in front of her, if only because it would make her laugh more.

“God, this never gets old,” Veil cackles, folding her arms across her chest. Her bare fingers squeak against the wet leather of her jacket; her jeans are already rain-damp. Same as her mask. “You Corporates make it so easy, y’know? Where’s Arkangel, he around?”

“It’s just me,” Alec wheezes. Another surge of nausea rushes up his throat and he screws his eyes shut. The world still spins, the ground swaying beneath his feet. Static clings to the image of her like television colour, like she’s a mirage he might pass straight through, and he staggers, catching himself with both palms pressed to his thighs, his back bowed forward.

Annoyed, Veil clicks her tongue. She reaches out and jabbing her fingers against the side of Alec’s neck, painful against his fluttering pulse.
“Easy, tiger.”

Alec flinches and she barks with laughter again, but then, the weight in his stomach drops out from within him, and he can breathe again. Alec gasps like a man emerging from the water.

Veil solidifies before his eyes. The distortion fades and the shimmer vanishes, and all that’s left is a young woman with a sneer. Alec glares at her, although it’s probably weak and green-faced. His stomach settles and he cautiously straightens his hunched shoulders, standing up tall again. The world remains on its axis. All good.

“Thanks for that,” he bites.

Veil raises an eyebrow and ignores him. “What are you doing this far over?” she asks. Her hip is jutted and she crosses her arms once more, a tilt to her head as she considers him with complete disinterest. “I thought we had an agreement. Your lot stays on your turf, and we stay on ours, and no-one has to get their brain turned to mush.”

“I’m here about the vigilante murders,” Alec grumbles. “The fires.”

“The pyrokinetic?”

Alec was right. Of course she already knows. Maybe Nightlock already told her, Alec knows they’re friendly. Or maybe she figured it out on her own.

“Yeah,” Alec says after a moment. He watches for any change in her expression. She’s carefully guarded, giving nothing away, but the corner of her mouth does twitch downwards. “We’ve got a lead.”

She cricks her neck. “About fucking time. Who is he? Where does he live? I’ve got no plans for the rest of the night.”

“We don’t know yet. There’s a chance he could be the son of Valentine Morgenstern. We - I thought you’d want to know. You and Wolfsbane.”
“Want our help too, no doubt,” Veil tsks. Alec does his best to hold her glare, and it unsettles her, because she narrows her eyes at him. “No. I’m not working with Corporates. No way.”

“We’re not working with Idris on this. It’s just me and Arkangel, and Nightlock’s helping out too,” Alec says instead, but then he bites his tongue. He doesn’t want to tell her the real reason he’s here tonight, even if a volatile combination of irony and spite lights a match beneath his tongue. “Is Wolfsbane around? I need to talk to him.”

Veil squints at him. “Why?”

“Can you get in contact with him or not?”

Veil bristles, but reaches into her back pocket for what looks like a police-issue radio. She presses a button on the top and brings it to her mouth, all whilst holding Alec’s stare.

“Calling all units. I’m on 99th and 3rd,” she says into the mic, “Our soldier friend has dropped by to say hello. You around?”

There’s a moment of fuzzy static before the response.

“Just him?”

“Yeah, no blonde asshole tonight,” says Veil, “Says he needs to talk to you. They’ve got a lead on the pyro.”

“Alright. Sit tight and I’ll be with you in a few. Try not to kill him before I get there.”

“No promises,” Veil replies.
Alec is terrible around people on the best of days, but the fifteen minutes he spends in excruciatingly awkward silence with Veil on that rooftop are probably the worst in his life. Sticking needles under his fingernails might be less painful. He wonders if she could make him feel that, if she wanted. (The answer is probably yes, in a heartbeat. Do you want to try?)

He breathes an audible sigh of relief when he hears someone clambering up the building’s fire escape and a familiar cowled head pokes over the lip of the roof. Veils’ stance seems to soften, tension slipping out of her shoulders. Alec shares the sentiment.

“At evening,” says Wolfsbane as he hauls himself up on the roof. He’s in his supersuit, but he has a dark navy windbreaker thrown over the top and a backpack slung over his shoulder, and Alec cannot help but watch him warily. He’s never felt unease around Wolfsbane before.

What if he was involved with the Circle? he thinks, but then he scolds himself, because how can he think that? What reason would Wolfsbane have to be involved in the Circle? He hates Valentine as much as the rest of them. He was there with Veil and Alec the night they found that man with his throat slit.

But it’s impossible not to look at Wolfsbane differently now. Alec can’t imagine him as a Corporate. In a flashy Kevlar suit like Sentinel and Arkangel. Working alongside Maryse and Robert in their prime. No, it doesn’t work. It doesn’t make sense.

“I’m surprised she didn’t have you writhing on the floor in agony,” Wolfsbane chuckles then, with a nod towards Veil. Alec meets his eyes. The laughter doesn’t quite reach there. “What’s going on? Idris has a lead on these murders?”

Yes.

Yes, but.

Yes, but it’s not what I need to know. How did you leave Idris and live?

Alec doesn’t know how to say what he needs to say. The words tumble out as blunt as ever.
“Did you used to work for Idris?”

The wind howls, but Wolfsbane doesn’t flinch. He doesn’t even blink, his face a blank slate. Alec straightens up, hoisting his quiver higher on his shoulder, his fingers itching at his thigh where his bow is clipped to his leg. He raises his chin and holds his ground.

Veil, on the other hand, simmers.

“And why the fuck do you need to know that?” she demands, “The Hell is this, a shakedown?”

Alec knows he should be watching her, but he keeps his eyes on Wolfsbane. If Veil plans on casting another spell on him, there’s really nothing he can do.

He already has his answer, whatever happens.

“So, it’s true,” he says. “We found files. A super called Lycanthrope. Worked for Idris around the time Valentine defected and then disappeared. Was that you?”

Alec has known Wolfsbane for a while now, and he would like to think Wolfsbane knows Sentinel enough to trust him in return. They might not be friends, but they’re fighting on the same side of this war: the enemy of my enemy is my ally, after all.

Wolfsbane folds his strong arms across his chest, his biceps flexing beneath his windbreaker. He’s the only person Alec knows who can look down on Alec.


“Wolfsbane!” Veil protests.

Alec squares his jaw. “Did you know Valentine Morgenstern? Silver Tongue?” he asks, “Did you know his son?”
“I knew Valentine,” says Wolfsbane, “There was a time when he and I were partners, like you and Arkangel. It was just before the uprising.”

He shrugs his backpack from his shoulder and then strips out of his windbreaker, taking his time to stuff it into his bag. He says nothing, not looking at Alec, but Alec finds he cannot move, even as the north wind buffets him, hissing through the fletchling of his arrows. Sharpness cuts the air, a whetted tension, and for the briefest moment, Alec wonders if he’s going to be able to walk away from this without drawing a knife on people he calls his companions. His allies. His halfway friends.

There’s disquiet in his gut, turbulence churning up his insides, and he can’t be sure if it’s him or if it’s Veil messing with his head. He looks to her; her fingers flex against her elbow. It’s all it ever takes for her to cast a spell.

Alec swallows the fear back. He won’t let it show on his face. Veil and Wolfsbane might be dangerous, but Alec, but Sentinel, he’s dangerous too.

“Did you know Valentine had a son?” he asks again, his voice lower now.

Wolfsbane nods. “I did. Born just before the coup, but I never met him. He never lived at Idris whilst I was there. Why?”

“We have reason to believe he’s still alive and might be our pyrokinetic,” says Alec. “We have a manhunt underway, but so far, we’ve found nothing. You’re our first lead.”

Wolfsbane’s eyes narrow, his jaw working. He holds himself higher, and Alec has always been aware that he’s tall, the sort of man who can pack a punch, but now he looks intimidating, the shadow of him large and foreboding against the fluorescent glow of downtown.

“I left Idris,” Wolfsbane says carefully, “And I’m not going back. Do you understand?”

“I’m not asking you to,” Alec retorts. “But I do need your help. This is not Idris asking, this is me. Arkangel, Muse, and Nightlock too. We need to find Jonathan Morgenstern before he kills again.”
Wolfsbane throws a look at Veil. She sighs, but surrenders to a question asked without words. As she starts walking away, Alec’s eyes widen in confusion.

“Wait -”

“Come on, son,” says Wolfsbane, gesturing for Alec to follow with a wave of his hand. His expression settles into something resigned, but it doesn’t seem hostile. He just looks tired. “This is no place to have this sort of conversation.”

Alec knows very little about Wolfsbane and Veil when it comes down to it, and it makes their relationship very surreal. He doesn’t know their names, or where they live, or what they do in the daytime, but he does think that they would come to his rescue if he ever asked it of them. And that’s a strange imbalance to find himself relying on, but they’re both good people and he thinks he trusts them, even as Wolfsbane leads him through the tangled backstreets of downtown, alleyways lit by dirty pink neon shaped into the outlines of naked women and cocktail glasses and turn-a-blind eyes.

Veil is a little way ahead, but she kicks a can down the alleyway that rattles off a dumpster with such a loud clang that all the hairs on the back of Alec’s neck jump to attention.

Wolfsbane can’t help but chuckle at Alec’s flightfulness. “Calm down,” he says, “If we wanted you gone, you would know about it. She doesn’t hold back.”

“I’m aware,” Alec mutters.

Veil comes to a stop outside a pair of bolted steel doors that lead down into a basement beneath streetlevel. She pulls a key on a chain from inside her top and unlocks the padlock, before heaving the doors open with a grunt.

Alec follows Wolfsbane inside, glancing back over his shoulder as Veil locks up behind them, and his one obvious exit is lost to him. Absently, he rubs his fingers over his chest where his tracker is embedded in his suit, and then he reaches up and switches off his coms. Izzy knows where he went, but if he wants Wolfsbane to be honest, he knows he can’t be on record.
Wolfsbane leads the way through a narrow corridor that opens out into a small room: the ceiling is low and the only windows are very small and barred and let no light in, up near the roof. In the centre of the room is a large round table, looking a little worse for wear, and upon it is an enormous cork board taken down from the wall. It is covered in photographs and newspaper clippings and is laced with a number of different coloured threads, pulled taut between drawing pins.

Alec’s attention flicks to the back wall: a workbench and what looks like a soldering gun, and mounted on the wall, an array of different handguns, a revolver, and a semi-automatic assault rifle. Shelves of ammo reach from ceiling to floor, and in a glass case in the corner, there’s a mannequin wearing a prototype version of Wolfsbane’s supersuit.

This is their hideout.

Alec has no homeground advantage here. It’s a smart move on Wolfbane’s part.

“Make yourself comfortable,” says Wolfsbane, nodding to one of the mismatched chairs around the table. “You want anything to drink? Tea? Coffee? Bourbon?”

“No, thanks. I’m fine.”

“Suit yourself,” says Wolfsbane. He grabs an old bottle of bourbon from a shelf on the wall and pours himself a glass. Alec glances over his shoulder to look for Veil, and finds her stood by the door, lent against the frame, her chin tilted up and her expression daring him to try anything. Guarding the exit. He’s not going anywhere until they’ve said what they want to say.

Wolfsbane takes a sip of his drink, hums at the welcome burn in his throat, and then turns back to Alec abruptly.

“I don’t know much about Valentine’s son,” he says all at once, “But I do know that Valentine didn’t want Maryse Lightwood to get her hands on him. If his son had powers, which I suspect he did, he didn’t want Idris capitalising upon that, turning him into their weapon, when he could be Valentine’s.”

Alec forces himself not to react at the mention of his mother’s name. “Why do you suspect the son had powers?”
Wolfsbane takes another sip. “I know his mother. She has powers too.”

“You do? Does she know where Jonathan Morgenstern is? She could tell us.”

Wolfsbane shakes his head. “She didn’t follow Valentine when he defected with their son, but she wasn’t safe at Idris either, not with what was being asked of us to do at the time. It wasn’t right. Wasn’t moral.”

“What was being asked of you?”

“What do you think?” Veil snaps from behind him. Wolfsbane throw her another hard stare. She groans loudly.

“You know what happened in Vietnam,” Wolfsbane continues, “The White House had a very specific idea of what they needed from us, both here and over there. When the war was over, we were deployed in Berlin, Warsaw, Moscow, hunting for Russian agents, for the Circle. After the wall fell, they brought us back here, tracking and arresting vigilantes, doing politicians’ dirty work - all the stuff they still have you doing by the sounds of it.”

“So she left because she didn’t agree with Idris. The mother,” Alec surmises, “And you?”

“That’s why I left too. I left because she left.”

Alec opens his mouth and then closes it again. He frowns. Wolfsbane finishes off his drink and sets the empty glass down; he doesn’t stop to watch Alec process this information. He begins inspecting the cork board on the table, following a red string of yarn with his fingertip.

Alec imagines that same string tied beneath Wolfsbane’s supersuit, perhaps hooked around his third and fourth rib. The other end of it disappears out of one those small windows in the ceiling.

It hits Alec less like a lightning strike and more like the slow atrophying of every muscle in his body.
Ah. He gets it now.

“You left with her because you were in love with her.” Not a question, only a conclusion. It causes Alec’s frown to deepen. “You walked out. You went into hiding. And Idris let you go?”

“Idris doesn’t let anyone go,” says Veil. “They ran.”

They ran. They ran from Idris and escaped. They ran because - because the people Idris made them be were not the people they wanted to be.

Something unsettled and acidic brews deep in Alec’s chest; he feels the simmer of it inside his heart, slowly corroding away his arterial walls. Alec rubs gently at his sternum with his hand. The pain doesn’t retreat; beneath his supersuit, his skin would be hot to the touch.

Wolfsbane worked for Idris, worked with Alec’s parents, and now he doesn’t.

Now, he’s a vigilante.

And he left because there was someone he cared about protecting more than he cared about duty, about loyalty to the city, about lining his pockets. He left because the person he was no longer meshed with the superhero Idris needed him to be. He left because, to him, there was no other alternative.

The envy burns. Caustic, green, rather vile.

“You risked your life,” Alec murmurs, “If Idris had caught you -”

“They haven’t yet,” Wolfsbane interrupts, “I stay out of their way, they stay out of mine. They know who I am just as well as I know who they are, Maryse and Robert Lightwood aren’t gonna try anything when I know their names. And besides, they have more on their plate right now than dragging me back there and locking me up for making a damn good decision. It’s been almost twenty years since I left.”

So, it is possible.
A vagrant thought, but it bubbles to the surface nonetheless, and Alec almost flinches at the way it feels like a blow to the chest, winding him with realisation and …God, is that relief?

It is possible to leave Idris and continue to do what is right. Continue to help people. Continue to be a superhero.

Continue to hold onto a job, fall in love, raise a family ... *have a normal life*.

Alec feels his throat closing up. He wants to pretend that he doesn’t know why, but he does. He does, more than anything.

“Are you still -” he begins, but he falters. He clears his throat and tries again. “Are you still with her? The mother?”

Wolfsbane grins, completely enamoured. “Fifteenth wedding anniversary next month and our kid’s in college,” he says. “The missus hung up her cape a while ago, but we’re still going strong. She was worth it. Every last bit.”

“Y’know, however many times you tell that story, I still want to gag,” Veil remarks, “True love, how *disgusting*.”

“Pessimism is not a good look on you, Veil,” Wolfsbane retorts, still grinning.

“Bite me,” she replies.

Alec stays for a while. He tells Wolfsbane about the night in the alleyway with the pyrokinetic, seeing his face, Nightlock coming to the rescue. He mentions how their lead on Hodge Starkweather has gone cold, and Wolfsbane nods, and then Alec mentions Senator Herondale, and Wolfsbane scowls. He asks if the name Sebastian Verlac means anything to them, but it doesn’t,
and in return, Wolfsbane wants to know if they’ve heard anything about a surge in underground arms dealing, but Alec hasn’t.

Alec picks Wolfsbane’s brain about what Idris was like, back in the seventies, in the years just before the coup. Veil seems to relax into his presence too, eventually leaving her guardpost by the door to go sprawl out on an old, moth-eaten sofa in the corner of the room where she has a pile of textbooks perched on the arm.

Alec does look - and with just a glance, he can easily see the title of what she’s reading, a marine biology revision guide for one of the universities in midtown - but he doesn’t say anything about it. He files the information away in his head as one of the few things he knows about her, but he won’t act on it, he won’t tell anyone else, not until Veil herself permits him.

Wolfsbane diverts his attention back to the table when he begins explaining the enormous corkboard in front of them: it looks like something straight out of a police precinct, grainy photos of all of the crime scenes they’ve associated with the Circle pinned to the board, scribbled upon with black marker and messy handwriting. There are mugshots of suspects and police reports too, and a large map of the city, much like Alec’s, marked with red Xs for every murder. The yarn strings spread out from it like a spiderweb.

It seems like Wolfsbane and Veil have been running the same operation as Sentinel and Nightlock, but for far longer. And far better.

“We’re canvassing the city,” Alec explains, tracing over the map with his pointer finger to divide up the streets. “Arkangel and Muse are patrolling downtown, and Nightlock and myself are doing midtown and Harlem, but there’s a lot of ground to cover. We still need people to go south of the river and revisit the crime scenes down there.”

“Veil and I have already been back to most of them,” says Wolfsbane. “We’ve asked around, but whatever witness reports we get are always unreliable. We’ve been trying to figure out how the Circle get away so easily without being seen.”

Wolfsbane tugs a photograph off the board, ripping it out from beneath a drawing pin. It’s a pair of mugshots, one of an older Hodge Starkweather, dated before his parole, and the other of a man Alec doesn’t recognise. He has the mark of the Circle seared violently into his neck.

“This is Azazel,” says Wolfsbane, “He’s not Circle, not originally, but Hodge Starkweather has been busy. Apparently they met in prison, but I haven’t been able to confirm that yet. This guy’s a vigilante, and a right piece of work at that, but I reckon he’s working for Valentine now, whether it
be out of choice or not. He can create portals. Teleportation, basically. Was handy in a bank
robbery or two, I’m surprised he ever got caught in the first place.”

“Good way of getting in and out of places quickly,” Alec mutters, taking the mugshot from
Wolfsbane. The man in the photograph is unremarkable, white, thin-faced, with fair features not
quite attractive enough to ever make anyone stop and notice him. He’s not the sort of man that
stands out in a city like this.

Alec has never seen him before - or maybe he has and he just doesn’t remember. Isabelle will
know better.

“Can I take this?” Alec asks, “We can run him through our database and see if we have any records
on him.”

“Be my guest,” says Wolfsbane, but his expression does sharpen. “Am I right in understanding that
we have an agreement, then?”

“An agreement?”

“Shared information,” he elaborates, “We’ll share what we know with you, and you share what you
know with us, and no-one shares anything with Idris. Everything remains need to know.
Reasonable?”

Alec doesn’t have the time to be picky. He holds out his gloved hand to Wolfsbane, and Wolfsbane
shakes it.

“Very reasonable,” Alec agrees.

With no view of the city and the outside world, it’s impossible to keep track of the passing of time.
It reminds Alec a little of Magnus’ office, although the feeling here is not the same: with Magnus,
the outside world ceases to exist, time itself grinds to a halt, but here, Alec is acutely aware of
seconds scrolling by beyond the tiny windows, a pyrokinetic getting further and further away from their grasp, the Circle moving chess pieces in the dark. Here, he doesn’t feel that same sense of calm, and he stares, in a long silence, at the cork board on the table, willing it to memory as he rubs at his knuckles.

Midnight has come and gone by the time Alec leaves the basement, despite Veil asking if he wants to stay for late-night takeout. Alec squints at her - *do you really order takeout to a secret hideout*, he asks - but Veil just shrugs it off and says that they have an understanding with the local pizza parlor that works out in their favour.

Wolfsbane walks Alec out whilst she’s on the phone, ordering more pizza than two people should reasonably be able to eat. The night is late and the air is cold, frost already forming on window frames and fire escapes like a thin sheen of diamond glass. The bracing wind makes Alec’s cheeks sting. He hunches his shoulders and thinks that it’s about time he asked Izzy to design him a coat like Nightlock’s to go over his suit. The approaching winter is more unforgiving by the day.

“No-one else knows about this place,” says Wolfsbane, shutting the cellar doors to keep rain-soaked leaves from blowing down the stairs behind them. “I’d like it to stay that way.”

“Of course,” says Alec. “You have my word.”

“But if you need us, we’re here most nights when we’re not on patrol. If we’re not here, talk to Nightlock. He has my number.”

Alec nods, unsure if a *thank you* would be out of place. Instead, he just shuffles awkwardly on his feet.

His fidgeting has Wolfsbane smiling. He reaches out to clap Alec on the shoulder, benevolent and fatherly in a way that never makes Alec not feel strange, like he’s on the receiving end of something he doesn’t know how to process.

“You can count on us, Sentinel,” Wolfsbane reassures him, “I’ll make some calls tonight, see what we can find on Jonathan Morgenstern. And then we’ll start south of the river tomorrow night. We’re gonna catch this guy. We’re gonna stop the Circle. I believe that.”

For a moment, Alec wholeheartedly believes it too.
Alec checks in with Izzy on the roof of a department store four blocks south of his apartment complex, and she tells him that Jace and Clary have finished at Sebastian Verlac’s house and are on their way back to Idris for debriefing.

“I need you run a search on a vigilante called Azazel,” Alec tells her afterwards. He has a stash of spare clothes somewhere on this rooftop, and he hopes they’re still here, because something in his gut is telling him tonight’s not a night for sliding in his window still dressed in his supersuit. Call it paranoia, but he’d rather be safe than sorry.

“Azazel? Yeah, I’ve seen him in the papers. He got arrested in ‘89, if I remember correctly. Thin, creepy looking man.”

Alec murmurs in agreement. Of course she remembers correctly.

“Hodge Starkweather was looking for a teleporter. This might be him. Wolfsbane gave me the tip.”

“On it. I’ll give you a ring at home if I find anything. Get to bed, Alec, you’ve been up for hours.”

“’M fine,” says Alec, but he feels a yawn building in his lungs. He deliberately fights it back, so as not to prove her right.

“Sure you are,” she says, “Swing by HQ after work tomorrow, yeah? Stay safe, love you.”

“Love you too.”

Alec finds his stash of spare clothes and strips out of his suit with clenched teeth, the wind particularly cold and biting, the threat of rain misting upon his skin. He stuffs all his gear into the holdall and swings it over his shoulder, before picking the lock on the fire escape, hoping that
whatever security inside doesn’t catch him and ask him questions he really doesn’t want to field right now.

His mind is elsewhere, and it’s always been difficult for him to switch off, but tonight it feels cloying, a noise in his head that just won’t shut up: the pyrokinetic and Azazel, and Valentine and Idris, and Veil and Wolfsbane -

‘She’s hung up her cape, but we’re still going strong. She was worth it. Every last bit.’

Alec’s mind keeps sticking on that one thing; he can’t shake it.

The woman Wolfsbane loves was worth leaving Idris. Worth the risk of Idris coming after them both, of Alec’s parents paying one of their own to bump Wolfsbane off in the night when no-one else would notice, worth a life lived constantly looking over the shoulder.

Is that a life I could live? Alec finds himself wondering. And then, is that a life I know how to live?

For Isabelle, for Jace, he would. If they needed it of him, he would walk away. For them.

Are they the only ones?

What about leaving just for you?

Alec nods to the receptionist of his building as he slips in the front door, his hair slick with rain. The receptionist doesn’t look up, chewing loudly on her bubblegum, feet up on the desk as she watches late-night TV on her grainy boxset.

The elevator up to his floor creaks and groans, and Alec leans back against the wall, tapping his fingers against the handrail restlessly. His reflection in the mirror is haggard, pallid face and sunken eyes with some sort of torment he can’t put a finger on but which always exists just beneath the surface of his skin.

A long time ago, he accepted the fact that Idris is the thing slowly corroding him, slowly killing
him as he turns necrotic from the inside out. Life expectancies are never that long in his line of work, and if it’s not a bullet that does him in, it’ll be a premature coronary, or a slip and fall because he’s too tired to find his feet.

It’s inevitable. It has been for years, if not longer. A truth he learned as a child.

He blinks tiredly and sees a weary delay in his reflection. The thought of having to get up and go to work in a few hours, and then head to HQ afterwards without a breather, fills him with a heavy, grey feeling, lingering in his afterthoughts. After that, it’ll be patrol, more ghosts to chase, more storms to bare, rinse and repeat.

*Does it have to be this way?*

He lets his eyes fall closed, just for a moment. Just a moment, he can afford himself that. It’s been a long day, a day of people needing him and depending on him, and he wouldn’t change that, he never would, but he just -

He imagines what it could be like, coming home from work to something different. No secrets and no deridable despair and without feeling so worn to the bone that he’s not quite sure how much of him is left. He thinks of coming home to a place where death doesn’t cling to his fingers as the elevator dings with his floor and he hoists his bag over his shoulder and steps through the doors. He thinks of a place where he’s not greeted by gravestones every time he opens his front door and every time he closes it. He thinks of a place where he gets to hang up his cape and his mask and celebrate twenty years of peace.

Alec pauses in the hallway, closing his eyes again, swaying on his feet. He thinks of coming home to a place where Idris no longer exists, where people no longer ask terrible things of him. In that place, everyone he knows and loves is safe.

And no, maybe that isn’t a world he knows how to occupy, but his body has been much the same for many years now, more a cadaver than a home. He wants to relearn it. He wants to sleep for eight hours a night without needing an alarm clock, and he wants the time to spend a whole day on his couch watches shitty B-movies. He wants to not worry about the election. He wants to trust in the strange fluttering of his heart that he has never felt before -

And he wants to learn how to kiss the man he fears he might fall in love with, and not have it taste like regret.
Wolfsbane has stolen it all for himself. Alec wants to steal it too. Does that make him a criminal? A
thief?

Maybe that’s the price of it all.

He opens his eyes. Ahead of him, all the lights in the hallway are out, all the bulbs shattered. They’re not blown.

They’re smashed from the outside, as if someone has raced along the corridor with a baseball bat, taking out each and every one. Glass covers the carpet; it sparkles in the low orange light creeping in from the single window at the end of the corridor.

What the -

A chill creeps up Alec’s spine, ousting the weariness and replacing it with apprehension. Alec’s steps crunch. The fire alarm on the wall has been caved in and the sprinklers in the ceiling have been bent back on themselves by a hefty swing.

He looks at the door to his neighbours’ apartment as he passes it: there are tool marks around the lock, aggressive scratches on the keyhole. The wood of the door frame torn and splintered around the hinges.

Alec’s not sure how much more dread he can take. His mouth is dry. He picks up the pace.

His own front door has been kicked in.

The doorknob is smashed, glass all over the floor, and the door hangs free of one its hinges. It sways with a creak. Alec feels a cold draught against his face.

No, this is not my apartment, he thinks, but it is. It can’t be, but it is. His gold numbers above the peephole, his old doormat, his home.

He lets his bag full of gear fall to the floor, and he just stands there, reeling, in complete disreality. The hallway is empty, eerily quiet, and Alec can hear himself breathing. The dark is aglow with
lamplight bleeding in through the single window at the end of the corridor, both the light and the glass dirty and grimy, and Alec feels like he’s not quite present, not quite all inside his head. He’s dissociating, he’s going away inside, he’s staring at the wreckage of an apartment that can’t possibly be his. He’s numb to the hard-cast beat of his heart that strains agonisingly with each palpitation inside his chest.

He feels the whiteness in his face seeping into his insides; into his blood; into his bones, and it turns him translucent and blank and nothing. He’s turning pale inside and out, and he wonders if soon enough he will be white enough to fade away without ever being seen again.

Someone has broken into his home. Someone knows he lives here. They might still be inside.

Alec reacts on impulse, pulling his buck knife from the back of his boot. It feels so small and feeble clutched in the palm of his hand where he wants a bow, but bows and arrows don’t do well inside crummy apartment walls and tight confines. Alec clenches his fist around the knife grip, the blade dull in the low light. He presses the palm of his hand flat against his front door and gives a little push; the door swings open with creaking ease.

His skin feels like it’s burning; white noise fills his ears.

He pushes forward, shoulder first, back sliding up against the inside wall. The door swings shut behind him, loose on its hinges. Alec is plunged into the not-quite-darkness, but his senses prickle. He doesn’t stand on the torn-open mail scattered across his doormat; he doesn’t crunch the broken glass of his lamp into the floor. His knee hits the side of his couch, shoved over onto its side, halfway across the room, but he does not grunt.

The curtains are blown open, one of the windows leading out onto the fire escape flung wide and willing to the elements. The rain is billowing in as heavy sheets and drowning his littered books in a puddle of grey water.

Alec dips into his bedroom, flinging open every cupboard, his knife drawn, but finds no-one. He checks the bathroom too, behind the shower curtain, and then the kitchen, and then the closet in the hallway, but there’s no-one there.

But someone was.

Someone has torn through his belongings, upending all his furniture, ripping open his couch cushions, clearly looking for something. Alec heaves the sofa upright, but it’s spilling stuffing all over the room, and then he remembers his bag left in the corridor and hurries back to get it.
He flicks on the lights when he enters his apartment for the second time. The carnage is worse that he expected. That cold chill is running rampant up and down his spine, sharp and painful and dreadful, but it’s the only thing he knows is real.

He stands, bewildered, in the remnants of his bookcase and his wardrobe, black clothes and paper pages at his feet, and tries to reason that he’s lucky. He wasn’t here, there’s no blood to be scrubbed out of the cracks between the floorboards. He is lucky that he takes his bow and his quiver with him everywhere he goes, never leaving any trace of Sentinel unattended at home.

He’s lucky that he’s not one of those poor bastards that he and Nightlock found tied to a fire hydrant in the middle of the street.

He’s lucky he’s not a burned and blackened corpse strung up from the rafters of an abandoned church.

*It’s an epidemic.* Alec remembers Magnus’ words from a long time ago. *Someone is out there killing supers, and no-one cares.*

Alec is trained to function under duress, but it doesn’t stop the shaking, not this time. He moves on autopilot, scrambling beneath his kitchen sink to find a hammer and nails, jamming his front door back together as best he can. The lock is busted beyond repair, the door handle falling off in his hand, but the chain still works, and he shoves a doorstop beneath the corner so that it cannot be opened wider than an inch and he will hear anyone who tries otherwise.

Next, the windows: he slams them all shut, locking, *double-locking* them, and then tries his best to wring the curtains free of rainwater. But they’re sodden and filthy, and so he yanks them down from the rail and bundles the ones he can salvage into the washing machine, and the others, into the trash.

His focus is steely as he grabs the broom and starts frantically sweeping the strewn fragments of light bulbs and crockery into a pile, but when he stoops to grab a photo frame that has been flung to the floor, he freezes. The glass has cracked and torn the photo: it’s him and Izzy and Jace and Max, from way, way back, happy and carefree, or at least as carefree as they could ever be in their line of duty. It’s a copy of that photo that Jace keeps in his wallet, that day they went to Jersey City and played in the arcades all afternoon.

Fear floods him. His fingers spasm and he drops the frame again, the crack of it against the floor
like a gunshot.

Someone knows who he is. He’s compromised.

Everyone he knows is in danger.

Alec almost trips over his own feet as he scrambles into his bedroom, ripping open his holdall and shedding his clothes as quickly as he can. The black leather and kevlar of Sentinel’s suit is still wet from the rain but it cuts into him like wires, and he doesn’t take the time to re-adjust the fit or tighten his gauntlets or count his arrows. He slings his quiver over his shoulder and pulls his mask down into place and he shivers now, because the room is freezing, his blood is freezing.

Someone knows who he is. They’ve been here. They know where he lives. They must know where he works. Where he’s been. Who he knows.

Who he cares about.

He jams his coms bud back into his ear, a hiss seeping through his teeth that sounds like Izzy’s name as he waits for it to come online. It takes a moment too long - he can hear his heartbeat in his temples, deafeningly loud - and when Izzy crackles into existence on the other end, he wonders if he can speak at all.

“Hey, big brother, I said I’d call you on your home phone - ”

“Where are you?” he demands, not letting her finish. He yanks on his boots and moves to shove his battered couch into the hallway, pushing up against the front door; its feet screech on the floorboards. Izzy can definitely hear it.

“What? Why?” she asks. No doubt she can hear the panic rising in Alec’s voice. “I’m at headquarters with Jace and Clary for debriefing, like I said. Alec, what’s going on? Are you okay?”

“Stay there.” Alec returns to his bedroom to grab his bow, snapping it open with a violent flick of his wrist. He plucks the string once and it feels just as taut at him. “Someone’s been in my apartment. I’m compromised.”
“Shit, Alec -” Izzy starts, “Are you okay, are you hurt? Do you need backup?”

“They’ve been and gone whilst I was with Wolfsbane and Veil. I don’t know if they found what they were looking for.”

“I’m going to send Jace to meet you -”

“Don’t.”

He unlocks the window onto the fire escape, and steps out into the dark with too little composure to call himself Sentinel tonight. He’s Alec in a poor man’s mask. He’s going to make a mistake because of it. He doesn’t have the time to think about that.

“Alec -”

“Don’t,” he insists, “If someone knows where I live, they might have eyes on Arkangel too. It’s not safe. Tell him to stay there.”

The fire escape creaks and groans in the rain; the metal hisses in shrill song. It takes only a few seconds for Alec to be soaked to the bone. His teeth begin to chatter, but it’s panic, rather than the cold.

Hands fly across a keyboard on Izzy’s end as she begins typing frantically. “I’m getting access to all the traffic cameras between you and headquarters. We’ll pull your building’s security footage too. Do you want me to tell mom and dad?”

“No. No, don’t.”

“Alec -”

“This might be the Circle, we can’t risk it.”
Izzy hesitates a moment and Alec can imagine her chewing on her lip. “Are you on your way over here?” she asks. From the sound of her voice, Alec knows that she is already aware of his answer.

“Not yet,” he says, “I need to - I need to check on something first.”

“Stay safe,” Izzy says, “Call me if anything happens.” She pauses, her voice then dropping into something secretive. It sounds as if she’s covering her microphone with a cupped hand. She knows what’s in his head without him having to say a word. She always does.

“Don’t take the bridge … the subway tunnels will be better, no-one will see you. I’m going to turn your tracker off so mom and dad don’t see, but I want to know where you are, okay? If you leave Brooklyn, tell me. And let me know if he’s alright.”


Alec avoids the Brooklyn Bridge, even though it’s near empty of traffic in the early hours of the morning. Instead, he disappears down into the subway tunnels and sneaks his way under the river in the dark, his heart pounding in his ears with ever rumble of the train tracks behind him. No-one follows him, not bar the rats that scurry and scuttle in and out of view. It doesn’t matter.

It takes him too long to get to Magnus’ loft. It’s nearing 2AM by the time he surfaces again, gasping on a lungful of frigid night air.

Magnus’ building is as he remembers: a tall brownstone with a view of the river and the twinkling lights that line it; the front steps where Magnus pretended to be drunk and clutched Sentinel’s arm; the spot on the sidewalk where Alec stood and gazed up at the loft for a moment too long to forget.

Alec peers in through the front doors, but the lobby is silent and dark, and the only thing that catches his attention is the blinking blue LED on the security camera, guarding the elevator. There is no-one around and it doesn’t look like anyone has broken in, but -
But, if it’s the Circle, they have a teleporter now, Alec thinks. His heart clenches; he feels volatile. It’s like there’s gunpowder in his blood, beneath his fingernails, a bullet between his teeth. He’s waiting for a spark.

He could call Magnus. He remembers his phone number. He could find a payphone and thumb a couple quarters into the slot and dial the number and wake Magnus up and hear his voice - but it’s not enough. What if Magnus doesn’t pick up? What if it goes to voicemail?

Alec needs to see him for himself.

He’s panting by the time he finds the fire escape, legs burning, head pounding, but he can’t stop running, can’t stop climbing. He almost misses a handhold as he drags himself up onto the roof of the building opposite, fingers slipping in the rain and his distraction; his stumble flings his heart into his mouth.

New York is deathly silent, smothered by the downpour that has swept in since he left Wolfsbane’s hideout. Manhattan is a blue and white glow in the distance, but Brooklyn is darker, streetlights muffled and rumbling car engines distant. The air doesn’t smell of cigarettes and sewage here; it only smells of nothing, of rain. The city is lifeless, unnatural, still in a way the streets should never be; it has been beaten into submission, the clouds above a purple bruise. Alec cannot feel the tender sting yet, but he waits for it, he knows the pain is coming once the adrenaline leaves his system and allows him to breathe.

He can’t breathe now. Someone might hear him. Someone might see the white cloud escape his lips. No time for breathing, no time for -

A warm, yellow light flickers on in the penthouse across the street, the hallway first, then the kitchen, and last the living room, and Alec inhales so sharply that the cold pinches in the bridge of his nose and makes him gasp.

He grabs his scope from his bow and holds it to his eye like a looking glass, but the rain is heavy and beads upon the lens and he can see nothing. Alec grunts and tosses it away, and does he best to squint into the dark. He shields his eyes with his hand, blinking away water on his eyelashes that rolls away down his mask. He searches for movement in the penthouse. He searches for Magnus, he searches for not-Magnus, for the same people that ransacked his own apartment, but -

The rain seems to lessen. Water hisses on the pipes and ducts around him, whispering on city-slick concrete, but for a moment, there’s a window in the downpour, and Alec sees straight through.
And he sees Magnus. He sees Magnus swan into his living room, obscured every other step by thick, pooling curtains and tall, exotic lamps - but Alec exhales all the same. His fingers squeeze so tight on his bow that he figures he might break it, but he cannot look down at it.

Magnus is on the phone, gesturing widely as he walks aimlessly back and forth across the sprawl of Persian rugs, at least as far as the telephone cord will extend. He looks serious for a moment, a frown sewn between his eyebrows, but then his expression slackens, a moment of relief at something said. Laughter colours his face, creasing up his eyes in a way Alec rarely sees. He picks up a book from his coffee table and tosses it up in the air, catching it by the spine with ease. As he returns it to his bookshelf, his head begins to bob to music that Alec cannot hear, but which he can imagine. He imagines it crooning, effervescent, oblivious.

Magnus smiles against the telephone, twirling the cord in his fingers. It’s a beautiful smile, intimate and tender and private. There cannot be many things that make Magnus look like that.

*He’s alive. He’s okay. Maybe he was never in any danger at all.*

Alec’s heartbeat slows, the coiled energy stretching him taut slowly dissipating, turning into water pooling at his feet. There’s a soft ache in his shoulders and his thighs now, which he allows himself to feel. He shifts his weight from foot to foot. The rain flattens his hair, rolls in rivulets down his mask and cheeks, seeping into the neck of his suit. He doesn’t really care.

Magnus’ eyes never once turn to the window; he has no need to look. The sleeves of rain obscure Alec from view all the way across the street, but there’s a part of him hoping, pleading, for Magnus to look his way. Just for something to *click*.

*Look at me. Just look at me. Just this once. Please.*

The world outside Magnus’ window doesn’t exist, and despite the warring inside his chest, Alec is forever thankful for it.

Magnus is safe. *For now, at least.*

“Alec?” comes Izzy’s voice in his ear. He presses on the coms bud to let her hear him.
“Yeah,” he whispers, in answer to a question that was asked without words. “He’s okay.”

“Good,” she says, “I’m glad. Do you want me to get some cameras set up? We can canvas the block. Meliorn has some Soviet tech that mom and dad won’t be able to trace. He could help you out.”

“No,” Alec says, closing his eyes. He exhales shakily. “No, it’s okay. I don’t - I don’t want to do that.”

Izzy doesn’t need to ask why. Alec doesn’t want Magnus to be involved in this: that’s been the point from the very beginning. He doesn’t want Magnus knowing about Sentinel; he doesn’t want Magnus worrying about his well-being when he disappears for weeks at a time.

He doesn’t even want Magnus to look at him, to find him through the rain, not really, not now. He can’t want for it. He can’t.

*No matter what Wolfsbane said*

Magnus is a ship in the night. Alec watches him pass by from a distance at the edge of a sea of skyscrapers, admiring the fleeting glimpses of what could be, in that other life, in another world, another city where the streets aren’t gutters full of blood, and knowing Alec’s name isn’t a life risked, and Alec is brave enough to dream of a universe where he could hang up his mask for another person without it ending in catastrophe.

Possibility ebbs and flows like a tide against his feet, lapping against his boots. In the dream, he wades out, but in the real world, Alec doesn’t leave the shore.

The heavy rain has lightened to a drizzle, but the grey and rumbling clouds have swooped down from above, flooding the streets, by the time Alec finds himself perched on the fire escape of Simon Lewis’ apartment building. The nag in his conscience got the better of him, an itch in his hands that was becoming harder and harder to ignore and not scratch bloody. He knows it would have killed him to leave Magnus’ loft and not come by to check on Simon, just in case. Just in case.
What does it say about him, he wonders, that the second person he has to check on when his life is threatened is Simon fucking Lewis? Alec knows too many superheroes.

He doesn’t mean it, of course, but his fingers and toes are slowly freezing and he’s gritting his teeth and his patience is not weathering well. He doesn’t feel safe out here alone, and that’s not right, not right at all, he lives and breathes in shadows. But his legs and arms don’t feel like his own and he doesn’t trust his grip or even his ability to shoot an arrow straight right now. He’s breathing in and exhaling fumes.

Heaven knows being out of control terrifies him.

All the lights are off in Simon’s apartment, which doesn’t help in relieving the dread that has quietly settled beneath Alec’s skin. He presses up against the window, one hand shielding his eyes from the rain, and tries to peer in.

The room is a bomb-site. But not the sort of bomb-site caused by a struggle.

Just the sort of bomb-site caused by someone with little regard for their own welfare. It certainly matches the state Simon has been in these last few weeks. Alec huffs a heavy and exasperated sigh, breath misting on the window, and leans back, turning his face to the sky. The rain patters against his mask, rolling off onto his cheeks far too cold.

Ah, he thinks. Maybe this is shock settling in. He can feels his fingers and toes again, but they’re stiff. It’s difficult to make a fist of his palm.

What a Goddamn night.

He exhales slowly. His shoulders droop. And he hears the telltale sound of someone slipping down the fire escape stairs above his head.

“God, fu- Jesus! Ow, that hurt!”

Alec jumps back, plastering himself against the wall, bow drawn and an arrow locked, eyes snapping to the figure sprawled out on the level above him. It’s a man, Alec thinks, but he has
something drawn over his head that looks like a cowl, hiding his hair and face, save for what looks like a pair of glasses balanced crookedly on his nose.

The man groans as he pulls himself to his feet, only to slip over again on the wet metal of the fire escape almost immediately, and Alec is torn between making a hasty retreat or staying put, because he still doesn’t know where Simon is, and he doesn’t trust strangers skulking around on rooftops in the dark, even if those strangers are hardly skulking, and more … floundering and flailing all over the place and making a right old racket.

The man manages to right himself long enough to start down the next flight of stairs, but he doesn’t make it very far before he spots the arrow poised, ready to fly, at his face, and freezes. He raises both his palms very slowly in surrender.

“Oh,” says the man, and Alec cannot believe what he’s seeing. “Hi there. Uhm.”

The man is dressed in head-to-toe green and white spandex, a pair of Timberland boots on his feet, and an enormous white lightning bolt emblazoned across his chest. There are shin pads strapped to his legs beneath his costume, and he has a holey-looking backpack slung over one shoulder, overflowing with what looks like stolen wiring and pieces of computer circuitry.

He has no weapons that Alec can see. But Alec knows better than to drop his guard, because what super needs weapons to be dangerous.

Well, probably not this one.

Alec glances at the device strapped to the man’s forearm: it looks like it’s made from the components of a SNES, a floppy disk, and a spool of dollar-store copper wire, but it’s not a night for taking chances.

Still, Alec lowers his bow just enough that the arrow is pointed at the ground. He scowls.

“Who are you?” he snaps, just too late to realise that he hasn’t turned his voice modifier on. He tries again, a half-octave lower. “What’s your name?”

Better, but it still doesn’t sound as certain as Alec would like it. No matter. The other man is practically gawping at him.
“Ho-ly shit,” exclaims the man, eyes wide behind his glasses. “You look sick!”

Alec doesn’t really know how to react. He’s met a number of vigilantes over the years but never … this. He’s not had the training for this. “What’s your name?” he tries again, more stern this time. “Who are you and why are you here?”

“Oh, right!” the man gasps. Glancing at his palms, he wipes them on his suit, even though he’s just as drenched as Alec. He thrusts out a hand for Alec to shake. Alec stares at it blankly. “Name’s 8-Bit! Nice to meet you! And I, uh - kinda … live … here?”

Realisation dawns far too slowly on Alec, but when he blinks, he sees it as clear as day. The ill-fitting suit, the thrift store boots, the toothy grin. He releases the tension in his bow and scrubs his hand across his jaw in despair.

“Simon.”

As if tonight couldn’t get any fucking worse.

“Huh?” says Simon, “Who’s Simon, I’m not Simon, I’m 8-Bit! Who’s Simon?”

Alec fights the urge to groan. “I can’t -” He gestures vaguely at Simon’s face. He’s even wearing the same Goddamn glasses he wears at work. “- be around this.”

Alec moves to vault over the edge of the fire escape and scale down the side of the building, but as he reaches for the railing, the telephone wires overheard spit and spurt, a spark of electricity leaping from the wires and onto the wet metal. Alec leaps back, the air around him fizzling.

“What -” he starts, turning on his heel to find Simon with his hand pressed up against the wall of the building, a firm frown on his face. “Simon?”

“Technopath,” Simon explains, far more severely than Alec has ever heard him. He’s between Alec and the locked window now, preventing his own easy escape. Not a smart move. Alec tries not to shift too suddenly and startle him. “Can’t make electricity, but if something’s got it running through it, I sure as Hell can feel it. Lucky for me all this water is a pretty sweet conductor.”
Oh, this is really happening.

Folding up his bow with a flick of his wrist, Alec sighs heavily. He clips it back to his thigh holster and holds up both palms in defeat. Simon nods as if he’s proud of himself and steps away from the wall of the building, hands on his hips, triumphant.

An ache is forming behind Alec’s temples; a blood vessel threatens to burst. Alec almost wishes that it would. The only thing he can think is: it’s a miracle Simon’s not gotten himself killed, the events of tonight be damned.

“Simon,” Alec says pointedly.

“8-Bit,” corrects Simon, “Sorry, but - I thought really long and hard about that name, okay, so we should use it. Please? Wait, no, not please, I should be more firm -”

“I should leave.”

“Wait, no! I mean - no, you can’t - who are you, how do you know where I live? More importantly, what’s your name? You’re the first super I’ve met, y’know!”

And hopefully the last, Alec thinks. He glances around, but the heavy rain still shields them from view of the surrounding street. Still, he doesn’t like being out in the open, not when someone could be watching him.

But he can’t exactly invite himself inside Simon’s house like this.

(He could always knock Simon out and drag him inside, but that might raise even more questions that Alec really doesn’t want to answer.)

“I’m Sentinel,” says Alec, but then he sighs again, shaking his head. This is not going to work. “Simon, it’s me.”
Simon squints at him. “You say that like you think I don’t have more than one friend,” he says. “Which, can I just say, I do, I have loads of friends -”

_Alright_ , Alec thinks. _Knocking him out it is._

Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately for Alec, Simon is only out cold for about half an hour. However, it’s far longer than Alec would like on a night like this when he has much more pressing things to deal with, the state of his apartment and the safety of Izzy and Jace and _Magnus_ all weighing on his mind. Alec has laid Simon out on the couch after dragging him in through the window and it takes a bag of frozen peas from the freezer pressed to Simon’s cheek to wake him up with a start and a yelp.

He almost kicks Alec in the teeth in the process, but fortunately for them both, Alec has quick reflexes. He knocks Simon’s foot out of the way with ease.

“Simon. Calm down.”

“Ah!” Simon yells, sitting bolt upright, “Alec! What - what are you doing here? I just -”

Simon spins around on the sofa, frantically searching his mess of an apartment. He’s still in his ridiculous homemade costume - Alec wasn’t exactly about to take him _out of it_ - but Alec has discarded his own mask, as well as his quiver and gloves. His burned hand is on full display.

“Simon.”

“Where’s -? I swear to God, Alec, there was just - right here in my apartment, there was just -”

Simon stops, mid-sentence, and slowly turns back to face Alec. He clocks the black armour strapped to Alec’s legs and chest, the bow in his holster, the knife on his belt. Almost comically, Simon’s eyes drag upwards to Alec’s face and then it dawns on him.
Alec only wishes he had an inside voice.

“Alec! Alec Lightwood! Holy shit, you’re a-!”

Alec moves to shove him and Simon yelps again as he dives out of the way.

“Quiet!” Alec hisses. He immediately regrets taking his mask off. The repercussions of this are going to be terrible, if only for the fact they work together. What the fuck was he thinking - “I should never have come.”

Simon, on the floor now, having fallen off the sofa, looks up at Alec with wide pathetic eyes. His awe is almost sickening.

“This is amazing! You’re a - I can’t believe you’re a - oh my God, this explains so much.”

“I’m not going to ask you to elaborate, so don’t bother,” Alec deadpans.

Simon ignores him. “God, no wonder you’re always ready to kill something,” he continues, snapping his fingers like the universe has just reassembled before his eyes. “And why you’re always busy after work when I wanna go for drinks, and - oh my God, is Jace a super too? And Izzy? Oh my God, that is so h-”

“Please don’t be an idiot about this. This is serious.”

“Oh my God, does Magnus know? Please tell me that he knows - no, wait, please tell me that he doesn’t know! Wait, no, I don’t know which is better.”

Alec runs a hand over his face in despair, slicking his wet and tangled hair back against his head. “Magnus doesn’t know,” he says sternly, “And he can’t know. Do you understand?”

“Oh my God, you have a secret identity.”
“Simon.”

“Have you ever been in a gunfight?”

“Simon!”

“Holy shit, is Jace Arkangel?”

“Alec!” Simon snaps, and Simon shrinks back, miming locking his mouth and throwing away the key. Unfortunately, it doesn’t stay locked.

“I’m sorry,” he says, “This is just really, really cool. I’ve been dealing with this all on my own, these powers - they came outta nowhere, y’know - and it was really getting in my head and I had no-one to talk to about it -”

Alec blinks. Suddenly, every instance of Simon bundling into the office looking like a state, or Simon trying desperately to make Alec go out for drinks, or just Simon wanting so badly to talk makes both alarming and tragic sense.

“When did your powers manifest?” Alec asks sharply.

Simon looks to the ceiling as he thinks, counting on his fingers. “Uh, three months ago, maybe?” he says, “It didn’t start off as much, I just thought all the lights in my building were on the blink, but then when I realised I could change the TV channel without the remote -”

Alec is hit with the rush of terrible guilt; he feels it low in his chest, like the dull blow of a fist, punching the air out of him. Three months. And he only just noticed in the last few weeks that something was up, and even then, he did nothing about it. Magnus had said Simon was lucky having someone like Alec looking out for him, but that’s not true in the slightest.

Alec hasn’t been there for him at all, at a time when he undoubtedly needed protection more than anybody. Another vigilante right under his nose ...

Alec tries not to let it show on his face, but his voice still comes out strained. “How long have you
been -” he starts, gesturing up and down at Simon’s God-awful supersuit. “Doing this?”

“Not long,” Simon says, but then his eyes light up. “I made this suit myself, y’know? I never knew how hard it was to find gear in New York without people looking at you weird, so I’ve been trying to scavenge parts so I can make something better, something with a battery supply so that I don’t get caught off guard if I’m somewhere with no electricity -”

“You can’t keep doing this.”

“I can’t - wait, what? Why?”

“Because ,” Alec stresses, motioning again at Simon’s clothes. The situation should speak for itself, and Alec feels sick to his stomach in a way he can’t explain, but Simon just won’t get it .

He thinks he’s doing a good thing, a service to the city. He hasn’t seen what Alec has seen.

Does he even know that Corporates are employed to keep vigilante heroes off the streets -

“If this is about those vigilante murders, I promise I’m being careful,” Simon insists, “It’s not like I’m actually out there stopping crime - well, not yet. That’s the next step, after I fix up my suit, right?”

“No, not right ,” Alec snaps. Simon’s eyes widen. “There’s nothing right about this, Simon, you’re wearing a Goddamn mask, they won’t discriminate if they catch you! It’s not safe to be doing this.”

“But you’re doing this.”

“I’m -” Alec starts, but there’s nowhere for him to go. His apartment was just broken into, he would’ve been killed by the pyrokinetic a few weeks back in that alleyway if not for Nightlock, and just hours ago, he was possessed by the thought that he could leave Idris and stop doing this for good.

“I can’t have this conversation,” Alec mutters, turning away, reaching for his mask and quiver on the floor. He sets his mask back in place on the bridge of his nose, but it’s cold and rain-wet and
doesn’t feel right at all. “Not tonight. Not any night.”

He moves towards the open window and the call of the night, but Simon is quick to jump between him and it. Alec could so easily shove past him, but he doesn’t want to test Simon’s new-found power, and he doesn’t want to -

He doesn’t want to hurt Simon, despite how much his frustration is telling him: oh, you absolutely do .

Hurt him to keep him safe , he thinks, then. Shout at him, yell at him, threaten his safety, whatever it takes. Whatever it takes.

“You can’t go,” Simon pleads, reaching out to grab Alec by the arm, but Alec jerks away. Instead, Simon tugs his cowl down from over his head, his dark hair all a mess underneath. The seam of the suit has left a red line across his forehead. He’s a disaster.

Alec really can’t leave him like this.

“Please, Alec. You can’t. We need to - we gotta talk about this, you and me. I don’t know anyone else like me, and you - you know what you’re doing, and I want to learn, and you can be, like, my superhero sponsor? Please? I swear I’ll listen.”

Alec reaches into the back of his utility belt and pulls out his spare radio. In case of emergencies , he thinks, and shoves it into Simon’s waiting hands. This probably counts as an emergency.

“If you want to listen to me, then you won’t do this anymore,” he says. “No more running around in a mask, no more leaving your apartment after dark, no more using your powers anywhere but here. At home.”

“But -”

“No buts. You can contact me on that radio, it’s set to the frequency I use. Emergencies only. You don’t talk to me about this at work. Understood?”
“Understood,” Simon says, clutching the radio to his chest. “Alec, are you -”

“It’s not Alec when I’m in the mask.” He feels wretched, but he has to say it. He has to make Simon understand. “Your identity is all you have between being alive and your body being dumped in a gutter somewhere. You call me Sentinel, and you don’t tell anyone that we met tonight. Okay?”

Simon’s face falls, but he nods. The fight drains out of him and Alec watches it seep into the carpets. The last three months catch up with him all at once and he looks -

Lost. So lost. So defeated. And it’s Alec’s fault somehow, he knows it is.

And now, Alec’s hands are beginning to shake, so he clenches them into fists; he can’t stay. He has to leave, because the sun will be coming up soon, and he needs to get back home, or to headquarters, somewhere, anywhere, before his legs give out, and the night catches up with him and scalps him for all its worth.

“Okay?” Alec repeats, his voice far too thin.

“Okay,” Simon acquiesces.

Alec darts for the open window and doesn’t look back.

Alec makes it as far as the roof across the street before the tendrils of shock tighten around his calves and his whole body seizes up. A violent shudder ripples down his back, and he folds in on himself, ducking his head and squeezing his eyes closed.

Breathe, he tells himself, as his whole body shakes. Breathe, c’mon.

He doesn’t know what to do. He should probably take Simon back to headquarters with him, keep
him out of trouble, but then he thinks about going back to Veil and Wolfsbane, and asking them if they might take him on, they have space in their hideout, maybe they’d know what to do. Alec needs to do something. All he knows if that he definitely can’t leave Simon alone, not after he’s seen … whatever this is.

Simon’s going to get himself killed, or maybe he’s going to run his mouth and get Alec killed, or maybe Alec’s led whoever broke into his apartment straight here, and he’s going to get Simon killed, and does it even fucking matter.

Alec can’t stomach that blood on his hands. It hasn’t even been spilt yet, but -

It’s his job not to let this happen, and it’s happened, and how can this possibly end in any other way but disaster? It’s the only thing this world, this city of his can ever promise with any certainty.

He can’t escape it. He’s a fool for wanting. Wanting what he can’t have -

And oh, now he wants to break something. He wants to snap his arrows in half, he wants to punch the wall, he wants to smash the bones in his fingers if that’s what it’ll take to numb the pain inside his chest, this bubbling, wretched feeling that he is not enough. He tries so fucking hard, and he’s never enough. Will never be good enough.

Breathe, he pleads again. Breathe, Goddammit, there’s no time for this. No time! You’re supposed to be able to make tough choices, so make them and stop complaining!

Sentinel is meant to protect people, that’s what he does. There has to be a right answer here. There has to be; he doesn’t know what to do if there isn’t one. He’s been playing too long with rights and wrongs and he’s had enough of weighing them up in either hand, God help him.

He has to keep Simon safe, but how does he do that when there are people out there who want Sentinel dead -

Breathe.

It’s difficult.
It’s been years since he last had a panic attack.

He knows the symptoms well enough.

Throat, burning. Eyes too. He pinches the skin between his thumb and forefinger hard enough to bruise, but it’s not hard enough, he wants to puncture himself, draw blood.

Alec scrubs his eyes and groans, willing himself into blackness. The bold lights of the city are too much all at once and he needs silence, he needs absolute nothing. Eyes shut, he tries to remember the way Magnus held his burned hand carefully in the both of his, how it felt to have his thumb trace Alec’s knuckles.

‘Promise me. Keep yourself alive.’

Behind closed eyelids, it’s all too easy for Magnus to fade into Nightlock on that night in the alleyway.

‘I’m fond of a man’s need to protect someone even if he doesn’t really know them and I’m quite familiar with handsome men and their hero complexes.’

Nightlock said that. Or maybe it was Magnus. Oh, does it matter -

Alec focuses on his breathing. In, out, in again, he counts each beat and forces himself to calm down.

And that’s when a gentle pulsation of energy finds the small of his back, and then the creaking space between his shoulder blades, and then the back of his neck. The sensation of an invisible hand sweeping round to find his cheek, cupping his face like a prayer answered -

A thumb, brushing the skin beneath his eyes, trailing beneath his mask. It’s not really there, but -

Alec’s shoulder fall. His body unspools with a tug on just one knot.
The unseen pressure curls around his jaw. The wind strokes the skin beneath his ear. A light touch against his pulse point. He feels it. He does.

He doesn’t need to look to know he’s no longer alone on this rooftop. Nightlock’s silent presence is as easy as breathing should be, familiar like a home, grounding like a touchstone, and Alec feels him there long before he speaks. Nightlock’s footsteps are light, soft and soundless, and Alec waits until the gentle, curious prod of energy becomes a real, tangible hand curling around his shoulder. Then, he turns.

*How is it that you always find me?*

Nightlock looks just as he ever does: the deep red coat, the thin black mask, the effortless coiff to his hair that the rain never seems to dampen. The look of quiet consternation on his face that one would never notice at first glance.

Alec’s glad to see him. The world seems to right itself on its axis.

But Nightlock’s hand doesn’t stay on his shoulder for long. His fingers press firm, only once, and then retreat.

It’s hours since they were meant to meet and Nightlock hardly ever stays out this late. Alec’s voice is hoarse when he asks, “How did you find me?”

He must look a mess, but worse, he sees that torment reflected back in Nightlock’s eyes. Nightlock takes a half-step back from Alec and the air around them seems to prickle.

“What is it?” asks Alec, “What’s happened? Did something happen?”

Nightlock doesn’t say anything. The way he looks at Alec now makes Alec feel about three feet tall, a child, whatever shadow Alec has, played out in neon light, shrinking down to nothing.

“For God’s sake,” Alec whispers. “Don’t look at me like that-”

“I spotted you lurking outside Magnus Bane’s apartment,” Nightlock interrupts. “I’ve been
following you since there.”

Alec’s entire body goes rigid. “You … you know Magnus?”

“I don’t know him. I know of him,” Nightlock murmurs, shifting on his feet. “It’s always wise to be aware of your allies. Those who are sympathetic to the vigilante cause, you might say.”

Sympathetic. Alec’s heard that word before.

“He writes for the Daily Tribunal and, well, his pieces aren’t terrible,” Nightlock adds, too heavy-handed to coax a smile from Alec.

Alec tries anyway, his mouth twisting in something more like a grimace.

Nightlock almost mimics it. “But, you knew that,” he adds cautiously. Wary, even. “You’ve … met Magnus Bane before?”

Alec nods. He doesn’t know why it feels like a secret to be confessed: he knows Magnus as both Alec and Sentinel; he’s not giving himself away by saying that they’ve met.

And yet -

Why does it feel like he’s balancing so precariously on a tight line? The wind blows too strong. He fears falling.

I had to check in on him, he worries he might say. I had to make sure he was okay. I don’t know what I would’ve done if he wasn’t, because of me. Because he knows me.

An honest truth. Does Nightlock deserve to know it? Probably. Yes. Alec wants to say yes. He’s ever so good at honesty, at snapping at people, at being blunt with the facts, but he fails when it comes to vulnerability. He doesn’t know how to let other people know where to stick their knives to find a tender spot because it sounds so much like a mistake.
Who would ever want for that?

Instead, he finds himself saying, “The guy who lives here is a super.” He nods his chin in the direction of Simon’s apartment. “Not a good one.”

An emotion Alec recognises seeps back into Nightlock’s eyes: Alec watches it cross his face like a curtain, like a wall again. And it’s strange, because Nightlock relaxes, the tension he carries in his shoulders lessening, the crease Alec imagines between his brows disappearing, but it’s like he’s stepped back from an edge Alec cannot see.

A retreat.

“8-Bit?” asks Nightlock, peering around Alec’s shoulder to look across the street. Simon’s light is on and his mask is off and he’s pacing around his apartment having a serious conversation with himself. He’s still in his supersuit. Anyone could see.

Alec sighs heavily, his heart still heavy.

“Yes,” Nightlock continues then, gazing at Simon. His voice is surprisingly soft. “I know about him. I’ve been keeping an eye on him since he started running around, just to make sure he doesn’t fall foul of his own excitement.”

Nightlock turns back to him and Alec is met with a moment of inquisitive silence. Nightlock studies him. The phantom touch reappears just below Alec’s ear, more hesitant than before, more likely a trick of the mind, but it travels upwards. It finds the edge of Alec’s mask, that fluttering kinetic feeling. It picks at the edge of the leather, but does no more.

Alec blinks. They’re a lot closer than Alec expected, and Alec’s not sure when Nightlock stole that half-step back into him. He catches this faint waft of sandalwood clinging to Nightlock’s coat, both homely and familiar. Beneath his mask, Alec imagines Nightlock raising his eyebrows, as if curious as to where Alec’s expression might take them.

Alec can hardly say where that is: so much has happened tonight, he hardly knows where to start. But he knows that he wants to be honest with Nightlock because, sometimes, it feels like there’s no-one else. There are secrets he cannot even say to Izzy, and things Jace will never listen to, but with Nightlock …
Alec wants to get it all off his chest, and a part of him wonders if Nightlock will listen, but another part of him knows that Nightlock will understand everything he has to say. He only wishes that he knew what that was in order to feel the relief and solidarity he longs to chase.

“I … that’s good of you,” Alec says carefully. “Looking out for him.”

He is drenched, now, in a silence steeped in the rain that falls beyond the roof of energy that Nightlock has cast above their heads, a hum on all sides save for in the space between them. The prickle in the air that Alec felt as wariness before, it’s not wariness, and if it was, it’s transformed.

Maybe it’s curiosity. Maybe it’s sympathy. Alec knows them both so well. Maybe it’s Nightlock’s want to ask the questions that will get Alec to open up, and then be asked them in return.

Nightlock is the one to break the silence with a click of his tongue. “Someone has to do it,” he says. He steps away from Alec, spinning on his heels with some panache and gesturing wide and irreverently with his hands. “There are a lot of children with powers out there, putting on masks and capes, unable to smell just how much the night reeks of prejudice and hatred. We don’t have regulations to keep us in check, not like your lot.”

“It’s not like th-”

“You know that’s not what I mean.” Nightlock fixes Alec with a look. Alec gulps. “What I mean is: people like him, people like your friends Wolfsbane and Veil, those are my people. I have a duty to keep them safe when I can. They get accused of the same mistakes made by your people, except, for them, no-one has trained them, no-one has taught them how to play the game, what the rules are, how to leverage themselves out of police hands.”

“It’s unfair,” Alec murmurs, but it’s an understatement too, if the events of tonight are anything to go by. Veils’ distrust of Alec, and Wolfsbane’s past, and the threat that now hangs like a guillotine over Simon’s head … where Nightlock fights their corner, Alec feels like he’s let them all down.

Who’s to say he didn’t lead the Circle - or whoever broke into his apartment - straight to Simon, or to Wolfsbane and Veil’s hideout, he thinks. Who’s to say that he hasn’t already cost them all their lives -

He should be better. He needs to be better, but what if it’s too late?

But Nightlock -
Nightlock looks back at Alec as if he’s surprised. He knows the sort of man Sentinel is, and Sentinel has said things like this around him many times before, and the guilt gnawing in Alec’s chest must be so very clear to see upon his face, but there’s something different in Nightlock’s eyes now. It looks like belief.

“When unfair, yes. Yes, it is,” Nightlock agrees, turning slowly back to Alec, watchful, but maybe hopeful too. “The people in this city paint us all with the same brush. Kill us with the same knife, as it were. It’s the pyrokinetic this time. Next time, perhaps Idris. The time after that, it’ll be 8-Bit’s downstairs neighbour. There’s no real difference.”

“I want-” Alec starts, and then stops. He looks down, picking at his bow, strapped to his thigh. He frowns, but Nightlock doesn’t push him for words until he’s ready to speak again. “I want to help you. Keep them safe. Keep the city safe. But I don’t know how-”

The sentence fragments before it can be finished. It’s meant to end: but I don’t know how to keep doing that in the way that I’ve been taught, and that makes me selfish, and so it terrifies me because I can’t have that blood on my hands. Not anymore. It’s going to kill me.

“It’s noble,” Nightlock remarks. “No-one will deny you that. But what the Corporates have done to this city can’t be forgotten.”

Oh, but Alec doesn’t want people to forget. If people forget what the Circle have done, what Idris did to Wolfsbane, what the Corporates will do in the shadows of this city for the right dirty price, then no-one will ever learn. The horrors will keep happening; the mistakes will keep being made.

Alec doesn’t want to forget what Idris has taught him. He knows his powers can be used for good. He wants to-

He wants to learn how to be the person he needs to be because of Idris, not in spite of it.

“I’m not asking people to forget,” Alec murmurs. He straightens up, sucking in a shallow breath of cold night air. He meets Nightlock’s eyes, a challenge, but Nightlock doesn’t look away. “I’m asking them to change.”

“Change? How so?”
“I don’t want to let it - this - I don’t want to let this consume me anymore. Or anyone else. I just want to keep the people I care about safe.”

A slow and dawning smile stretches out across Nightlock’s lips: a volatile thing, constantly shifting as if some part of him wants to suppress it - but he can’t. He ducks his head on a light laugh that makes Alec shiver, but it’s not cruel. Nowhere near.

The softness becomes him. Alec recalls a night on a rooftop not so long ago.

“You never cease to amaze me, Sentinel,” Nightlock says, and then scoffs, as if disbelieving. “If more Corporates were like you, perhaps we would see an end to this stupid war. A change in perspective is exactly what this city needs. What we all need.”

Across the way, the light in Simon’s living room goes out and reappears two windows down, a square of yellow gold in the drizzle. Distantly, a police siren wails; another answers it like a stray dog’s howl. The rain hisses on the rooftop, a thrum fading to a pitter patter, fading to a gentle silence. The night glows purple, as if dawn is battling upon the horizon, a liminal moment that the dark has yet concede.

Nightlock waves away the barrier of kinetic energy above their heads, converting it into heat that Alec feels pulse against his cheeks.

Nightlock meets Alec’s eyes, dead on. “Why were you at Magnus Bane’s apartment tonight?” he asks. No trick questions. No hidden meanings. Just this.

The weight on Alec’s tongue is so easily lifted.

“Someone broke into my apartment.” He’s not going to lie and beat around the bush. Nightlock deserves to hear the truth and Alec knows, bone-deep, that he can be trusted. It’s a funny old thing, being able to leave your life in the hands of someone whose face and name you do not know, but Alec has learned one or two things about faith in these months of late. “I needed to know he was okay. If whoever is going around killing costumed heroes found my address…”

“Was anyone hurt?”
“No,” says Alec. “I live alone and I wasn’t home. I should - I need to get in contact with Wolfsbane and Veil, check they’re okay. You should tell the people you know too. I don’t know how far this might spread.”

“I’ll drop in on Wolfsbane on my way home,” Nightlock says, “He’ll get the word spread. Is it insensitive to say that the twilight bark works surprisingly well?”

Alec can’t help but snort; he turns his head away to try and reign in the ridiculous expression that threatens his face in such a serious moment. Nightlock laughs, pleased with himself, rolling kinetic energy in his palm and threading it between his fingers. The air answers, shuddering against Alec’s bare skin.

“Don’t tell him I said that,” Nightlock adds, “I think he still has a modicum of respect for me, which I would rather keep hold of.”

Fondly, Alec shakes his head. The panic in his chest from earlier has been washed away by the rain; the tremors that shook him bloody and violent, standing in the remnants of his living room, have been extinguished by the levity in Nightlock’s eyes.

“I should get going,” he murmurs, thumbing over his shoulder. He doesn’t step away. “Before they send Arkangel after me.”

“I would rather they didn’t.” Nightlock takes a step forward and then, they’re toe to toe. Alec glances down at the ground and then up at Nightlock’s face, his own eyes impossibly wide as Nightlock clasps him on the shoulder. His thumb brushes against the curve of Alec’s throat, up and down, only once, but it’s not nothing. His touch is lighter than Alec expected. It’s tender and concerned and it returns a warmth to Alec’s rain-chilled limbs that has been lost.

Who are you? Alec wonders, not for the first time.

He longs to see the face beneath the mask. He wants to uncover the truth of the expression there because he knows he only sees part of it now - even if that part of it is enough, more than enough, to lodge something Alec cannot explain in his throat.

Don’t give up, it tells him. Don’t you ever give up.
“Don’t worry about 8-Bit,” Nightlock says, “Or Magnus Bane, for that matter. I’ll see to it that neither of them are harmed. I promise. You should go check your sister and your friends are okay.”

“Yes,” Alec breathes. Nightlock’s hand ghosts along the wings of Alec’s collarbone, cupping his shoulder, fingers curling into the sleeve of Alec’s suit with just enough pressure to be noticeable, and Alec has to fight not to turn his head and look. “Thank you.”

“Stay safe, Sentinel. Keep moving, don’t look back. Don’t let them catch you.”

“I’d like to see them try,” says Alec.

Alec returns home to a police cordon and flashing lights illuminating the belly of the cloud-covered sky in bright blue. He’s thankful to find that the spare clothes he keeps stashed in a telephone box down the street are still there, and he hangs back in the shadows of the alleyway across from his building after he’s changed, his supersuit stuffed into a backpack that has its fair share of water damage.

The street is swarming with people, angry shouts and cacophony in the air. Alec’s apartment building has been evacuated, and whatever is going on has the police shaking their heads and getting snappy with every person who demands to know why they cannot return to their homes.

Alec slinks across the street, keeping his head ducked and avoiding eye contact. The commotion is a good enough disguise: there aren’t enough officers to keep an eye on everyone, and Alec reckons he’ll be able to sneak his way to the fire escape without being caught. Maybe creep back into the building, have another look through his apartment before the CSIs arrive and trample over all the evidence. The police have yet to put up any caution tape; they’re still shrieking into their vest radios about back-up. He has a shot.

Alec slips through the crowd, muttering a quiet apology to a woman in her slippers who glare at him for pushing past her, until a hand catches him on the shoulder and yanks him backwards.

He’s ready to fight back, his elbow jabbing into the person’s gut, but he stops at the last second.
It’s Jace. Jace, with wild eyes and wind-swept hair and bare-faced panic, gripping Alec by the shoulder so hard he’ll bruise. The clothes he’s wearing are not his own; he’s changed out of Arkangel in a hurry. But he’s safe.

Behind him, with fluttering eyelashes and charming smiles, both Izzy and Clary are sweet-talking a policeman. Clary is wearing Isabelle’s clothes. They’ve come here in a hurry.

But they’re all safe.

“Buddy,” Jace says, gathering Alec up into a rough hug. He slaps Alec on the back, but Alec appreciates the body heat where the rain has chilled him to the bone. In Alec’s ear, Jace whispers, “You didn’t show at headquarters and we were worried. Iz said you went off grid?”

“I made a detour,” Alec says briskly, pulling back from Jace as Izzy and Clary join them. Alec opens his arm and Izzy slots herself into his side, holding tight onto his shirt. She gives him a little squeeze and he squeezes her back. “There were some people I had to check up on.”

“Was everyone alright?” asks Izzy, looking up at him. He feels her fingertips press against his spine.

“Fine.” He’ll tell her about 8-Bit later, when they’re alone. He looks back up at his building, ominously dark against the night sky, all the lights extinguished. He sighs heavily. “Same can’t be said for my apartment.”

“Whoever broke in really did a number on it, huh?” nods Jace, folding his arms across his chest.

“It wasn’t just your apartment,” Clary interjects, “The cops said whoever was here went through at least ten other apartments, not just yours. They might not’ve even been looking for Sentinel. They clearly didn’t have any reliable information about what they were after.”

“They had enough,” Alec frowns. If what Clary says is true, maybe he’s slipped by with the skin of his teeth. Maybe whoever was here, perhaps they knew he lived in the building but didn’t know which apartment. Perhaps they’d seen Sentinel coming and going and hedged their bets. Perhaps Alec got undeservedly lucky, yet again.
“You’re going to have to move,” says Izzy, still hugging him tight. “It’s definitely not safe here anymore, and you’ll never get any sleep because you fret too much. I spoke to mom and dad and they said you can stay in your old room at HQ, you don’t even have to ask.”

“That’s nice of them,” Jace sneers. Clary knocks him in the ribs with the point of her elbow. He glares at her without heat. “What’s the catch? Suspended again? Who’s gonna save all the cats from trees if it’s not Alec?”

“My mom is letting out her old studio space,” Clary says, deliberately ignoring Jace, “It’s not much, but it’s downtown and close to your work and it would tide you over for a little while. There’s no furniture, but -” A wry little smile appears on her face. “Luckily I can magic up a few things short notice.”

Alec nods and says a quick ‘thank you’. He’s not in a position to protest, even if he doesn’t like the feeling of taking handouts from Clary Fray. For once, she’s right. He just needs somewhere to tide him over and lie low for a bit, and the thought of crawling back to headquarters with his tail between his legs make him feel a little sick, especially after all that’s been said and done tonight.

He looks back up at his building with another sigh. He hoists the slightly wet backpack higher on his shoulder, the strap making a disgusting squelching sound in his grip. He’s sure his gear is going to reek of mildew the next time he puts it on.

“I just need to get my stuff,” he muses, “I need clothes for work tomorrow.”

“If only we knew a guy that could teleport in ‘n’ out of a tight spot,” Jace snorts. “Oh, wait, we do.” He fishes in his pocket for a couple of quarters and spies a payphone across the street. “I’m gonna call Raj!” he calls, “He owes me a favour!”

By the time Alec drags himself into the office the next day, not only is he running on half an hour of sleep spent on the floor of Clary’s college dorm room, but he is positive he has the flu, brought on by the rain the night before, and it just makes a terrible mood worse. He doesn’t really drink, but he imagines this is what the worst sort of hangovers feel like. Sticky and gross and disoriented enough that every bright light makes him wince.
Turning his cranky desktop computer on and wincing at the dial-up screech, Alec wonders why he didn’t call in sick, and then Simon appears, leering over the top of his partition with the most infuriating grin, and Alec remembers exactly why.

Heaven help him.

“Good morning, Alec,” Simon beams. “How are you this fine day?”

“Go away, Simon.”

“What?” Simon pouts, “How is that a nice way to greet not only your favourite colleague, but you new-found best friend, huh? We have so much in common Alec, you gotta start being nicer to me-”

Alec glances around the office, but no-one’s paying them any attention. Still, he drops his voice to a growl. “Did you even hear a word I said last night -”

“Before or after you knocked me out?”

“Don’t,” Alec warns. “Do not.”

“Don’t what?”

“Simon.”

Simon smiles innocently. “Don’t worry, don’t worry, I’m only messing with you, I remember the rules. Your secret is safe with me.”

“Whatever you’re terrorising Alexander about, it better be worth it, Simon,” comes Magnus’ voice, moments before Alec spots him. He swans up to Alec’s desk in a sleek pinstripe suit straight out of the pages of one of Izzy’s glossy magazines, but he looks so much better than that. His vest tapers in at the waist at just the right point, making his shoulders look broad and his legs a mile long. Alec cannot help the flicker of his eyes down to Magnus’ feet and back up again, but the relief he feels just to see Magnus in the flesh is unparalleled.
Magnus catches him. He smiles, eyes creasing up. Heat swarms in Alec’s cheeks and he pointedly returns his stare to his computer screen.

“Something on my face, Alexander?” he teases.

Alec presses his mouth into a flat line. “No,” he says, a little too quickly. “I’m just - it’s good to see you.”

*It’s good to see you? Oh, God, kill him now.*

Magnus’ eyes light up. His tongue wets his lower lip. Alec definitely doesn’t watch.

“It’s good to see you too,” Magnus replies, softer than Alec would like.

For once, Alec is glad of Simon’s incessant talking.

“We were meant to go out for a drink last night, but he totally stood me up!” Simon interrupts, although the glint in his eye is far from subtle. Magnus’ attention flits from Alec, to Simon, and then back again, like a tell. His eyes narrow.

“Water main blew in my apartment block,” Alec mutters. It’s the most mundane excuse he can think of. “I had to sort out somewhere to stay. Sorry.”

“Yeah, yeah,” says Simon, “That’s what they all say. I know you just wanted an excuse to bail on me-”

“Simon, don’t you have work to be doing?” Magnus asks.

Simon grins guiltily and ducks down behind Alec’s cubicle, scampering back to his desk without another word.
“Thank you,” Alec mumbles. Magnus circles the partition, perching on the edge of Alec’s desk. Alec watches him carefully from the corner of his eye, acutely aware of where Magnus drums his fingers mere inches from where Alec’s hands rest on his keyboard. He looks up at Magnus and finds him in thought.

“Magnus?”

“I have a spare room,” he says, not looking at Alec. Alec wonders if he meant to say it at all, because the expression on his face appears bashful. He toys with the cuff on his ear again, a habit now. It’s endearing. “That is to say, I have a spare room, and if you need somewhere to stay for a while, I would be glad to have you. I’m sure it would be better than whatever couch you’ve got yourself set up on.”

Alec’s heart thrums, both at the thought of sharing Magnus’ space, and at the thought of Magnus sharing his. Sharing Sentinel’s. The thought is terrifying for a number of different reasons.

He can’t say yes, even if Magnus is fiddling with his earring and his cheeks are faintly coloured, demure in a way Alec does not recognise on him.

Alec wants to say yes.

“I can’t. My, uh - my brother’s girlfriend, she already offered me a place for free, and I, uh - I was gonna move in tonight. I think she’s already … moved some of my stuff over …”

“A shame.” Magnus angles his body towards Alec and finally meets his eyes. The playful look is one Alec hasn’t seen in months. “But I am glad you have somewhere to sleep. Although, if you’re ever in want of a particularly warm bed, Alexander, my bed is certainly -”

“I’ll know who to ask,” Alec smiles shyly. Magnus mouth opens into a round oh, but then he grins, properly, showing his teeth. Alec treasures the moments when he makes Magnus smile like that.

“Well then,” Magnus says. He reaches back, plucking a pen and a Post-it from Alec’s desk. He holds them both out to Alec. “Your new address, then? I’m sure your brother can handle moving couches all on his own, but I certainly can help supervise.”
“You - want to come over?”

There’s something thrilling about the way Magnus’ crooked smile doesn’t seem the slightest bit forced. He doesn’t recant his words, he doesn’t repeal them with a cautious ‘if that’s alright?’ He asks like he means it, like he knows it’s what Alec wants, and, well, he’s not wrong.

Alec does want that. A whole lot.

“Yeah,” Alec mumbles. He’s smiling too now, his tongue wetting his lips, beyond his control. He finds he doesn’t want to suppress it anyway. He takes the pen from Magnus. “Yeah. Sounds good.”

The city is the same blue colour as smudged ink where it unfurls beyond the windows of Alec’s new apartment; gone is the dirty orange glow of street lamps caked in soot and car exhaust. The view, here, is not bad; even Alec can admit as much, basking in the feeling of being up high, but safely indoors. The apartment is smaller and draughtier than his old one: there are cracks in the window frames enough to let through a breeze, and the glass is too thin to keep the heat inside the apartment without curtains, but he has a balcony now, and it looks out over an uninterrupted view of Manhattan island.

Alec presses his hand to the glass and it fogs up around his fingers. Cold. There will be snow soon. He wonders if he will stay the entire winter here.

He wouldn’t be able to afford a place like this on his own, not without Idris’ stipend. It’s probably why Clary’s mom sold the place, but he’s thankful for it, because he’s not so sure his pride would’ve allowed him to crawl back to Idris and strike a bargain with his mother to have his old room back. He doesn’t want to think what the price might’ve been.

A loud snort from behind him has Alec turning away from the window, followed by Clary snapping, “Shut up, Jace!”

Izzy meets Alec’s eyes and throws her head back and laughs.
It’s at Alec more than anything, and the way his face contorts into a grimace as Clary sits back on her thighs, looking far too proud of herself. On the hardwood floor, she’s sketched the shape of a couch in chalk, although most of it is on her jeans now, a fine coating of pale green dust.

A gnarly looking dining table and a pair of kitchen chairs that look like they will never be comfy, no matter how long one fidgets, are shoved up against the wall, the first additions to Alec’s new living space. Alec fights hard to bite his tongue as Clary closes her eyes, presses her fingertips against her drawing, and summons the sofa into existence.

Alec’s brain always needs a moment to catch up when she uses her powers. In battle, it’s different, because his heart will be pumping and arrows will be flying so fast that he can’t watch her at all times, but here, sat in a circle on Alec’s floor, is different. One moment, the space is empty, and the next, he’s staring at a couch, without having needed to blink.

He blinks now. The couch is the ugliest thing he has ever seen.

The cushions are green and leathery, and he knows they will squeak violently when he sits on them, and maybe stick to him in the summer months if he doesn’t get an air con. It’s the sort of couch that looks like it’s seen too many decades pass in the front window of a second-hand shop, gathering dust and pitying stares. In fact, Alec is quite sure his parents owned something similar in the 70s.

Izzy’s laugh is a cackle now, and even Jace, sprawled out on the floor on his back, has to roll away, shoulders shaking as he tries not to make a sound. Clary stands back from the couch with her hands on her hips, appreciating her work.

Alec has never claimed to be a man with much taste, but he has taste enough to question hers. She’s supposed to be an artist. Hell, she’s supposed to use her powers for good.

Not committing crimes against interior decorating.

“Allright,” Clary smiles, looking back at Alec with this spark in her eyes far too good-intentioned for her own good. Izzy has to turn away, leaning on Jace’s shoulder as the two of them hide their sniggering. Alec schools his face into neutrality. “What else do you need, Alec? I can summon you a bookcase, if you want? I know you like to read.”

“It’s fine,” he says curtly. “This is enough.” He glances back at the ghastly sofa again, his
expression pinching. “Could you make it more …”

“More not that?” Jace supplies, creasing up around his eyes, his grin blinding. “Honestly, Clary, that’s the ugliest fucking couch I’ve ever -”

“Shut up, Jace.” Clary flops back onto the sofa, sinking into the leather, and it squeals just like Alec expected. Izzy and Jace both wince. Clary pointedly ignores them. “It has character. A comfy couch is the only sort of couch you want. But if you and Alec want to go out and buy another one and try to get it up those stairs, please, be my guest. I’m more than happy to stay here and have a nap.”

Jace opens his mouth to retort, but Izzy and Alec both fix him with a look that says: well, that’s you told.

“I’m sure I’ll get used to it,” Alec mutters. He has another look around the apartment and, well, it’s not terrible. Sure, it’s bare and not particularly welcoming right now, but it has everything he needs to survive, and that’s more than enough. Clary had apologised bashfully for the paint stains on the floor and the way the kitchen sink still smells faintly of white spirit, but secretly, Alec finds it charming. The space isn’t perfect and that’s good. It suits him well. Once his shelves are stocked with books again, he figures it will start to feel a little more like a home.

He’s already half-way there. Having Izzy, Jace, and Clary in his space, in their jeans and t-shirts and faded sneakers, without a supersuit in sight, allows him to pretend that he comes home to this every day: laughter and bickering and take-out food. Talk about their day jobs, the annoying guy at the office, Izzy’s latest boyfriend, Clary’s upcoming college exams. A normal evening with his friends and family, where yesterday never happened. Maybe it could be like this more often.

Alec doesn’t think he’d hate that.

“What about table football?” Jace is asking then, “Darts? A Sega Genesis? Do your powers work like that?”

“We both know that if I summoned a Sega, it would be for you, and not Alec,” Clary retorts, “Alec probably doesn’t even know what a video game is.”

“Alec doesn’t even know what fun is,” Jace laments. He earns a glare from Alec - probably proving his point - and a thump to the ribs from Izzy, just as there’s a sharp knock on the front
Both Izzy and Clary look up in surprise, whilst Jace scowls and rubs his side.

“Are we expecting company?” Izzy asks, and truly, it’s incredible how fast her gaze can become laser focused on Alec’s face. Her lips slowly curl into a smile, red and telling.

Alec feels heat creeping up the back of his neck and tries to scowl it into submission.

“Yes,” is all he says, but it’s enough for Izzy’s eyebrows to shoot up into her hairline, and her closed-lip smile to become a grin that dazzles. Alec deliberately turns his back on her and stalks to the front door, throwing it open.

Magnus looks startled, but it breaks easily into the wave of a smile both pleased and fond. He looks great, dressed down in a loose silk shirt, mottled with a faint grey pattern, softer and more free than the crisp lines of his work suits and close-fitting waistcoats. Dark colour lines his eyes, smokey and dramatic, and he holds up a bottle of expensive wine when Alec stares just a little too long to be proper.

“Happy house warming,” he beams. Alec swallows thickly, dragging his attention back from the lean lines of Magnus’ legs to his face, trying fiercely to keep his focus on Magnus’ eyes and the way they crease up at the corners - “May I come in?”

“I, uh- yeah,” Alec says, stepping to the side and holding the door. “Come in, we were just -” He pauses, just before he says something ridiculous about Clary summoning ghastly furniture out of thin air. “Decorating.”

“Decorating?” Magnus repeats gleefully, casting a look back over his shoulder at Alec, “Sounds like I came at just the right time. I’m told I have an eye for colour.”

“Yeah,” Alec mutters, locking the door and hurrying to Magnus’ side before he can turn the corner and be bombarded with something straight out of a science-fiction story or worse: Izzy’s probing questions and Jace’s ability to stick his foot straight in his mouth.

Alec is relieved - and that’s an understatement - to find both Jace and Clary flopped together on the ugly couch, feet stretched out as far as possible, and Izzy in the kitchen, very obviously retrieving
wine glasses from the cabinet that definitely weren’t there thirty seconds ago. Alec squints at her as she props only two on the countertop, pointedly avoiding meeting his eyes.

Already halfway through a sigh, he opens his mouth to introduce everyone, but then Magnus gasps, “What is that?”

Alec starts, a moment of panic that Jace has left his wings out or there’s a mask lying on the dining table. He turns to Magnus, who looks the most affronted Alec has ever seen him.

Magnus is fixed on the couch.

“I didn’t choose it,” Alec says in his defence.

Magnus shakes his head. “Oh, I can tell,” he says, “Not even you would choose that - it’s a crime, Alexander, where on earth did you find it? If you needed furniture, you should’ve just called.”

Jace is laughing again, his face buried in the crook of his arm, trying valiantly to smother his hysteria, but it just sounds like he’s wheezing. Izzy’s smile is so taut that Alec knows she’s fighting the same battle. Clary, on the other hand, has her mouth pressed into a tight knot and her cheeks puffed out, and it only makes Jace laugh harder, his shoulders heaving. He makes a high-pitched sound like a kettle.

“It was … a gift,” Alec decides upon. Clary glares witheringly at him. “Uh - Magnus, this is Clary and Jace, and Isabelle, my sister.”

Izzy is already halfway across the room before Alec finishes the sentence.

“Magnus,” she grins, exchanging kisses on either cheek. Magnus mimics her with grace. When she pulls back, she has both her hands on Magnus’ upper arms, holding him at reach so that she can admire him unabashedly. “I’ve heard so much -”

“Only good things, I hope.” Magnus glances at Alec. Alec feels his face flush and deliberately focuses his stare on the hardwood floor.
“Of course,” Izzy says, “You know what Alec is like.”

“Honest to a fault?” Magnus teases.

“I am right here,” Alec presses, which makes Izzy laugh as she takes the bottle of wine from Magnus’ hands and returns to the kitchen. Magnus smiles that blinding smile of his, turning to Alec, his palm smoothing across the shoulder of Alec’s jacket, brushing away imaginary lint.

“It’s a compliment,” he says easily, “Accept it.”

His touch vanishes just as quickly as it arrived, and he spins on his heels to appraise the room, a hum in his chest. He takes in the terrible couch, and the sad dining table, and the cramped little kitchen in the corner, and Alec finds himself embarrassed. Even from across the street in the dark, he had seen into Magnus’ home last night: Persian rugs and soft amber light and enormous paintings as high as the ceiling. He knows that Magnus breathes colour and finesse into everything he does, and his home was no different. The most exciting thing in Alec’s apartment is probably the potted plant in the corner that came with the place and looks a little worse for wear, drooping sadly and browning at the tips of the leaves. What Magnus must be thinking, Alec doesn’t know, but he can take a wild guess -

“The view is to die for.”

“Wha- … what?” Alec says, snapping back to reality. Magnus is standing in front of the windows, the breadth of the city laid out before him, a map in the night pitted with stars and the white light of windows far away. The way he spreads his hands makes it seem like the city skyscrapers flicker into life at his fingertips. The slope of his shoulders, silhouetted against the dark outlines and blue glow of buildings on the horizon, is magnificent. Alec almost forgets that they are not alone in the room.

“The view,” Magnus repeats, looking back over his shoulder at Alec, his eyes twinkling, “It’s amazing. Better than the one at my place, certainly. You don’t often get to see the city like this.”

“This used to be my mom’s studio,” Clary pipes up from the couch. “She’s an artist.”

“I can only assume this was her inspiration, then,” Magnus says with a kind smile. Clary smiles back at him, the incident with the couch clearly forgotten. Magnus’ focus moves then, finding Jace, and he frowns. Alec can see the gears turning inside his head.
“It’s Jace, isn’t it?” Magnus asks. In the kitchen, Izzy pauses where she’s uncorking the wine.

“Yeah,” says Jace, his face still creased with the remnants of laughter. For once, it’s a good thing that he’s as observant as a brick wall. “Alec’s brother. Sort of. Kinda complicated, actually.”

“I feel like I recognise you,” Magnus muses. Alec sucks in a sharp breath, but luckily no-one notices. “You’re not on the television, are you?”

“He, uh - he sometimes comes by the office,” Alec cuts in, “You’ve probably seen him around before.”

_and not because his dumb ass is always on the front page of the papers, just with steel wings strapped to his back and a mask pulled down over his eyes._

Magnus snaps his fingers. “Right!” he says, “The brother that Simon mentioned, I remember now.”

Alec breathes a sigh of relief, and he thinks Izzy does too, her hand cupping Alec’s elbow as she reaches his side, gently grabbing his attention. He looks down at her from the corner of his eye and they have an unspoken conversation - not that Alec really knows what is said, but he trusts her judgement, and that’s enough. She squeezes his arm in reassurance, and then steps away towards Clary and Jace.

“Shall we get going then?” she asks, extending a hand to pull Clary to her feet. Jace shifts his gaze from Magnus to Izzy, and it turns into a frown.

“What? I thought we were getting pizza?” he asks, sinking petulantly deeper into the squeaky cushions, “Are we done with the decorating?”

“Yes,” says Clary, reaching back to pull Jace up from the sofa too. “Don’t you have a shift tonight, anyway?”

“A shift? What, no, Alec and I are off tonight -”
“And besides,” Izzy interrupts loudly, looking at Magnus with something of a glint. “It seems like Alec has some expert help on hand. I don’t think he needs us anymore.”

“Don’t let me kick you out,” says Magnus, but he’s smiling back at Izzy like he knows this game all too well.

“You’re not,” Izzy says. She nods at Jace. “He really does have work to do, and so do I. Unfortunately our boss is a little less sympathetic than yours. Late night shifts really are the worst.”

Jace snorts, and Clary moves to jab him in the side again with her elbow, but he sees it coming this time, side-stepping out of the way. Alec rolls his eyes, a warmth high in his cheeks.

Alec hugs Izzy goodbye, and thanks Clary beneath his breath for helping with the furniture, and gets a slap on the back from Jace in good measure as he sees them all out the door. He lets his forehead fall against the peephole, eyes fluttering shut, and he steals a moment between moments for a breath, long and deep and drawn-out.

Relax, he tells himself. Sentinel is all packed away beneath bed. There’s nothing to worry about. He’s not sure if it works, but when in his life has he ever been relaxed? He knows well-enough how to cope with it, and he knows it’s not the thought of Sentinel making him feel so bow-taut right now.

He sucks in another deep breath and stands up straight. Being alone like this is no different than them being alone together in the office.

Except, of course, it is -

Magnus is stood by the window when Alec returns to the living room, his back to Alec, admiring the view out into the night once more. His shirt, barely clinging to the lines of his shoulder blades, distorts the light. With his arms folded across his chest, his fingers drum absentely against his elbow. The silver links of a chain glint against the back of his neck, biting into his skin.

Alec notices it all. He breathes in to compose himself.
It’s a miracle that it isn’t raining. Between the purple wounds in the clouds, Alec is sure he catches the glimpse of distant fleeting stars. The light in his apartment suddenly seems too bright and too harsh and he longs to soften it, perhaps light a candle, whereupon he and Magnus would play the two black wicks against the flickering glow of a flame.

He, of course, has no candles, and he can’t make fire from his fingertips, like others can.

Carefully, he steps up to Magnus’ side, aware of the space between them: a finger’s worth of night seeping in from the outside through the single-pane windows. Magnus smells of smoke and sandalwood as he always does, not cigarette smoke, but instead the ashy aftertaste of a city on fire. Alec too often sees the same thing in his eyes, but tonight his gaze is tempered.

“What are you thinking about?” Alec dares to ask. He scans the horizon out of habit more than anything, praying that nothing moves. Maybe lights in the distance twinkle; maybe the blue-dark shifts. The events of last night still make his skin prickle, but the horizon is quietly still. He lets out a slow breath, his shoulders falling.

“That couch,” Magnus replies after a beat. “It really is hideous.”

“Magnus.”

Magnus laughs softly, turning his body towards Alec. His eyes rake over Alec’s face, unabashedly roaming the full length of his body, finding distraction in the way Alec’s arms are taut, his hands clasped behind his back. Alec’s heart has the audacity to stutter.

This could be normal, the voice in Alec’s head whispers, a tickle against his ear. This could be your normal, you know it could.

When Magnus’ gaze returns to Alec’s, his smile unfurls exceedingly slowly. “Split the wine with me?” he asks, half a purr. It feels like it’s more than a harmless question.

Alec doesn’t suppose anything about Magnus is ever harmless.

“Oh, Alec breathes. He doesn’t dare move, not for a moment, caught by the way Magnus tilts his head to the side, his mouth lifting, his gaze straying lower than Alec’s eyes and then flicking back up again. Deliberate. It’s deliberate. He’s meant to notice. Alec wrings his fingers behind his
Alec moves too fast across the room towards the kitchen, he knows he does. He feels clumsy and sudden, but Magnus lingers at the window, watching him go. Izzy has left two glasses on the kitchen countertop, both generously full. Alec is no wine expert; it just smells like wine, sour, fruity, alcoholic. He grabs both glasses and the half-empty bottle, and heads back to Magnus.

“Magnus,” he says, handing him a glass. With a quirk of his smile, Magnus lets their fingers brush. Alec knows that’s deliberate too.

“This is one of my favourites,” Magnus says, although he doesn’t take a sip, not yet. He holds the glass with both hands, his rings clinking. He looks up at Alec. “Malbec. Better for drinking at this time of year, when it’s getting cold outside.”

“I don’t -” Alec begins, his voice low, “- really know much about wine.” Never really had the chance to.

Magnus’ smile curls. He raises the glass to his mouth, but he just lets it sit there, pressed against his lower lip with a darker indentation, until heat begins to bloom up the back of Alec’s neck and into the tips of his ears.

Alec swallows, looking away: at the floor, at the glass in his hands, towards the safety of the horizon again, but as always, he is drawn back to Magnus.

Finally, Magnus takes a sip. His eyes flutter closed and he hums. He looks serene in a way Alec has never seen before.

It leaves Alec’s mouth dry. He should take a drink too.

It starts as a sip, but then it’s a glass, and a second, and then a third, with Magnus tapping the end of the bottle to get every last drop out as Alec laughs at his commitment.
And the ugly couch is comfy - so comfy that Alec genuinely fears the many nights ahead of him where he will fall asleep right here and forget about the compound bow currently locked in his wardrobe, until his mother herself comes rapping at his door - but Magnus still makes a face every time he moves and the leather squeaks.

Alec almost wants to keep the thing for that fact alone. Three glasses ago, that would’ve been a scary thought. Another dangerous red flag. But now he feels bleary-eyed enough not to care so much, raptured by Magnus’ easy smile and the way his laughter bubbles as if all the times he has laughed before he has been holding himself back. That freedom, it makes him look beautiful, the way it lights up in his eyes and he doesn’t hide the breadth of his grins and the whiteness of his teeth behind propensity. Here, alone in the privacy of Alec’s apartment, it feels as if a mask has been lifted.

And perhaps not just for Magnus. The line between Sentinel and Alec is blurred too, and Alec is seeping over into the space usually occupied by blood and war and rot and iron.

*It could be like this, always*, comes the echo still. It begins to sound like Wolfsbane again, his same deep timber. ‘*The missus hung up her cape a while ago, but we’re still going strong. She was worth it. Every last bit.*’

“Alexander, you *must* have a favourite,” Magnus is saying, leaning into Alec’s space and invading his senses. The wine glass is held so loosely between his fingertips that Alec is sure he will drop it, but Magnus has more grace than that. “Everyone has a favourite, even if they never admit to it.”

“I’ve just never really thought about it,” Alec digresses, the pinkness is his cheeks a cocktail of alcohol and other things both less and more conspicuous.

“That better not be a roundabout way of saying Arkangel is your favourite, but you’re just too ashamed to admit it out loud.” Magnus’ arm is draped along the back of the couch, encroaching upon Alec’s space too. “Believe me, if that is who your favourite super is, I *will* judge you for it. Do not doubt me.”

“It’s not Arkangel,” Alec snorts, “I don’t know - I like the - the ones that are less … flashy?”

“Of course you would,” Magnus murmurs, amusement still alight in his eyes. He hides his smile in another sip of wine, and the bob of his throat as he swallows is magnetic. “Perhaps,” he continues, “I think, perhaps, *you* might make an excellent superhero, Alexander.”
Picking at the couch cushions, Alec rolls his eyes. “Me? I don’t think so.”

“Alexander means defender of men, does it not?” Magnus grins, “It’s practically your birthright.”

Alec shakes his head, his smile crooked. “And what does Magnus Bane mean?”

Magnus leans down to put his wine glass, and the one he plucks from Alec’s fumbling hands, on the floor, but when he rights himself, he curves towards Alec, bringing his leg up onto the couch. His arm, still stretched along the back of the cushions. His fingers, near enough to the nape of Alec’s neck that Alec can feel them move.

Alec sucks in a sharp breath through his nose. So sharp that it near hurts.

His own fingers twitch. He considers a touch, a casual touch, a touch in the way Magnus sometimes brushes against him in the office, even when there’s more than enough space to pass each other by. Magnus’ other hand is right there, resting in his lap. His hand, his arm, his thigh -

He leans in closer. Alec’s gut reaction is to lean back, to gain ground in a fight that isn’t even a fight anymore, but -

He can’t. He doesn’t. It’s been a long time since he’s wanted to shy away from the way Magnus looks at him. Now, he’s quietly desperate for it.

“Ruin, scourge, calamity, take your pick.” The words drip from Magnus’ mouth, honey-gold and intoxicating. Alec is looking at his lips now. He would be a fool to look away. “More suited to a supervillain, don’t you think?”

“Are you a supervillain?”

Magnus throws his head back and laughs. He flops back against the cushions, withdrawing his hand from behind Alec’s head. His fingers catch the short hair on the back of Alec’s neck. Or maybe it’s just a draught.
“I should hope not,” he chuckles. “Although supervillains always do dress the best, so perhaps you
are onto something.” He lets himself sink back into the couch and Alec watches him give in to it,
the way he lets his head fall against the spine, a fine arch to his neck. “What powers would I have
is, of course, the obvious question,” he ponders, his voice a little softer. “Telepathy has always
seemed like it would be useful.”

“I don’t think I’d like that,” Alec says softly. He chases the shiver that came from an almost touch;
he edges a little closer. The squeaky leather couch gives him away. “I mean, hearing all those
voices all at once, that sounds ... pretty terrible.”

“The chance to know what everyone around you is thinking doesn’t tempt you?” Magnus asks. He
looks directly at Alec. “Is there not one person whose head you’re desperate to see inside?”

“Yes, but - I would want them to trust me enough to want to tell me what they’re thinking. I
wouldn’t want to go looking for something they don’t, don’t want to share.”

The soft smile on Magnus’ lips falls away in surprise. He must know that Alec is blunt with the
truth; he said as much in this very room, not hours ago. And yet, still, he looks like his whole
understanding of gravity has shifted.

“Alec ...”

“Like ... I don’t know,” Alec continues carefully. “Reading people’s thought feels like an invasion
to me. I’d want to - I guess I’d want to know someone well enough that they’d feel ... happy ...
telling me what’s going on inside their head ... what?”

Magnus shakes his head and laughs breathlessly. He fiddles absentely with the silver cuff on his
ear. “How is it that you can always say things like that with a straight face?”

Alec frowns. “Things like what?”

“The most amazing part is that you don’t even know. You don’t even realise,” he chuckles, quiet
enough that he might be talking to himself. He clicks his tongue. “What about you, then,
Alexander? Given the gift of superpowers, what would you choose?”

Alec pauses, a wave of cold rippling through him. The force of it isn’t sudden, and nor does it
catch him by surprise, but it feels like being doused in rooftop runoff. His tongue is suddenly heavy in his mouth. His three glasses of wine might be catching up with him.

“I - uh -”

He doesn’t know what to say. Whatever he says will be a lie. And that sits strangely in his mouth too, like a mouthful of rainwater he cannot swallow, but cannot spit out either. He has to hold it there.

If he tells the truth - enhanced reflexes, pin-point accuracy, exceptional hand-to-hand combat - that would still be a lie. If he had the choice, he wouldn’t have chosen any of those gifts to be his superpowers. Not when Jace can replicate anything he sees done once, and Isabelle can remember every word of every book she has read, and Clary can summon ugly couches out of drawings on the floor, amongst innumerable other things.

Yes, Alec would’ve chosen something better, something grander, something that can make a bigger difference. Powers that can be used for good; powers that can save Simon Lewis from himself and stop men with flames in their hands from murder. He would’ve chosen superpowers that come without the burning muscles and aching bones that so many years of training have left him with, whilst Jace soars overhead on wings of steel, always effortless and free.

But if Alec lies, if he says that he would’ve chosen fire in the cradle of his palms, or the gift of flight, or the chance to stop time and space in the blink of an eye - well, that’s hardly any better. He wants none of those things. They’re not him.

“I don’t think I would want anything,” he says at last, fiddling with his hands for something to do with his fingers. “I just - I dunno. I don’t know if superpowers are for me. I’d like to just feel normal, I guess.”

The skin between Magnus’ eyebrows pinches together, his lips set in a firm line. “Do you not feel normal?”

It’s a question too often asked by Alec himself; the answer is usually a concrete no. But, tonight, here on this couch, it’s not raining and the city beyond the window sleeps for once and there’s a tremble in the air that preludes change. He’s not Sentinel right now, he’s not the man chased from his own apartment, and he’s not the man that Nightlock met on the roof last night, practically beside himself in bewilderment.
He’s Alec, just Alec, sat alone with a beautiful man, red wine lapping against his better judgement, and he feels the way he thinks most people his age should. A bit drunk, a bit raw, a bit confused -

Spellbound and longing. Desperate and falling, falling, falling.

A sense of anticipation he cannot name is teasing him, a feather-light touch, a tickle, a flutter of his heart. Feelings too light and too gentle to know what to do with, because he’s never quite felt them before. His hands are too big, too covered in calluses and scars to handle them with care.

“I do feel normal … at the moment,” is what he says, and at least that is a sliver of truth. Moments like this, they feel good, they feel like what could be, and Alec allows himself to be fooled. He can pretend that this is how it always is. Alec gestures between them. “This … like this.”

Magnus studies him. Alec is not sure what it is that Magnus sees in him when Alec will not let him see the whole truth, only parts. But there must be something - and Alec supposes there always is something when you’re a man in a world that forbids you from loving other men, and yet you’re at the mercy of a man like Magnus - because Magnus’ face softens and he lets out a slow, shaky breath, as if gathering his nerve. He leans forward again. The sofa squeaks.

And for a moment, Alec wonders if Magnus is going to kiss him.

But he doesn’t, and Alec’s heart skips a frantic beat. Instead, Magnus finds Alec’s clumsy fingers. He tangles their hands together and pulls them both onto his thigh and looks like he half expects Alec to pull away and pretend that it’s nothing, like it has been every time before -

That’s not who Alec is anymore. He can be vulnerable, just this once. He can admit what he wants; he can recognise the quiet pang of disappointment that Magnus didn’t kiss him for what it is.

Alec doesn’t retreat.

He lets Magnus hold his hand, palm, warm, his rings, stark-cold. Magnus rubs his thumb in concentric circles over the backs of Alec’s knuckles, and Alec watches, caught, indefinitely, in the back-and-forth rhythm that soothes him into stupor.

If Magnus were to ask him a question now, Alec would tell him anything, anything at all. He wouldn’t be able to stop it. He should fear it.
And yet, he doesn’t want this moment to end.

Alec lets himself forget what it feels like to be stretched between two points as far away from each other on a map as they can be. Corporate heroes and superpowers and people dying on the streets are kept at bay by the thin windows and a simple touch. He feels so human. So real.

“What are you thinking about?” Magnus whispers. He turns Alec’s hand over in his and circles his thumb across Alec’s palm. It’s his burned hand. The scar tissue is tough and leathery, but Magnus doesn’t seem to mind.


“You, me, Sentinel, Nightlock. The Circle and Wolfsbane and Veil. Idris. All of it, none of it. Just this.

“What are you thinking about?” Magnus whispers. He turns Alec’s hand over in his and circles his thumb across Alec’s palm. It’s his burned hand. The scar tissue is tough and leathery, but Magnus doesn’t seem to mind.

“Do you ever think about the future?”

“The future?” Magnus asks, feeling his way along a ridge of wrinkled skin along the side of Alec’s pinkie. “All the time. With the election so close now, I’d be a fool not to.”

“I’m not talking about the election,” Alec mumbles. “I mean - a year from now, five years, ten years. Long term.”

“Long term?”

“Yeah. Like - are you gonna stay in New York? Do you want to write for the Tribunal forever? Do you want to -”

“Leave all this behind? The supers, the vigilantes, the terror of it all? The loneliness?”

“That depends.”

“Depends on what?”
Magnus glances up at him. “Who might be in that future with me.”

“Oh.”

Magnus’ smile colours his cheeks and he looks down again, focuses on turning Alec’s hand over, inspecting the burn ripples that stretch and contort across the backs of Alec’s knuckles.

Alec doesn’t really know what to say. He imagines a pendulum swinging back and forth in the space between them, small as it is. And yet, it’s stuck, waiting to swing back the other way and Alec can feel it’s weight as if he’s the one gripping it in his hand.

_The person I am when I’m with you is the person who I want to be._, Alec thinks. _How am I supposed to tell you that? How am I supposed to give up Sentinel and Idris and all of it to even have a shot?_

Magnus’ touch curls around Alec’s fingertips, feeling out his bow calluses. A tiny frown appears between Magnus’ brows as he squeezes the pad of Alec’s thumb between his own thumb and index finger.

Briefly, Alec wonders if Magnus knows how to recognise an archer’s hands.

“Sometimes,” Magnus begins, hardly a murmur, “the thought of the future seems insurmountable. I can’t imagine it. Perhaps it scares me, perhaps it intimidates me. I don’t really know. It seems like such a volatile thing. We don’t know who will be in the White House this time next year. We might be fighting another war halfway across the world. There’s so much that might change, so I must be changeable too.”

“Isn’t that exhausting?”

“Indefinitely. I wish I could just lie down and let the world keep turning without me. I wish I could go to sleep for a millennia and wake up in a time where this is all over, where the people I - where the people I care about are safe, where they won’t be thrown in a cell for the crime of merely existing. I wish I could stop, but I can’t. I have to keep moving.”

_‘I’m asking them to change.’ That’s what Sentinel said to Nightlock on a rooftop last night. It rings true even now. Of course it would. I’m asking for the world to change, even though I’m scared of_
“Magnus,” Alec begins, and already, his throat constricts, holding the words back, begging him not to say them - but the urge - this urge to tell the truth, to be free - “Listen, I need to tell you something -”

“There’s one constant though,” Magnus interrupts. He lets go of Alec’s hand suddenly, letting it flop onto the cushions. He looks up at Alec with a severity and a need that Alec has never seen in him before. “One constant I have that keeps me centred, keeps me grounded. When everything else is spiralling out of control and I don’t know which way is North, there’s one thing I can always come back to and I’ll know it’s there.” He smiles a half smile. “Cooped up in my office until ridiculous o’clock at night with takeout and police reports strewn all over the desk, sure, but - it’s you, Alec. You’re always there, aren’t you?”

Alec swallows thickly. He can’t talk, so he nods, and Magnus’ smile broadens, lighting up his entire face, pooling in his eyes, and oh, God, he’s beautiful. He’s beautiful and Alec wants to tell him, but can’t, doesn’t know how. You’re beautiful, but it’s not enough.

Magnus leans back into the couch. He tips his head to the side. “What was it you needed to tell me?” he whispers.

Alec shakes his head. “Nothing. It’s nothing, doesn’t matter. I just - d’you wanna stay and watch a movie or something? Izzy lent me her old VCR ‘til I get a new one and I think Jace left a couple tapes for me.”

Magnus smiles, reaching for his unfinished glass of wine on the floor. He settles into the couch cushions, making himself comfortable. “I’d love that.”

Alec pulls himself up off the sofa, his muscles still aching, his skin mottled with purple bruises beneath his clothes, and trundles over to the tiny TV against the wall. He fiddles with the VCR and slaps the top of the boxset when it spits static and he doesn’t look back at Magnus, even as Magnus sinks into silence.

It’s not what Alec wanted to say. It might as well have been a lie.

The life I have when I’m with you is the life that I want.
That’s it. That’s what he wanted to say.

Chapter End Notes

aubade
/əʊˈbɑːd/
noun
a poem or piece of music appropriate to lovers separating at the dawn or early morning.

Hello, hello! It's that time again ... another stupidly long chapter ... although technically not the longest single chapter I've ever published so I'm still valid, okay? Okay.

Finally some answers about Simon! And about Luke! It's been fun dropping hints about their respective subplots ... and both are super important to the upcoming story, but for different reasons. Once again, Alec will be torn in two: Luke represents a happiness that can still be obtained by giving up Idris for love, whilst Simon represents the exact reason why Alec can never ever run away from his mask. Alec is duty bound to protect the people who can't protect themselves, and even those who can. Anyway, I'm excited, especially about Luke's plot which gets a lot more convoluted with the political background of the fic ... you will see ... you will see ...

Only half the chapter was beta read, so please forgive any typos! My lovely beta Kay is on a well-deserved break from my bullshit.

Thank you so much for all the feedback from last time! I can't express how much it helps to read people's thought and feelings on this fic, as everyone has a different take on the moral issues and it's so interesting!

Visit me on tumblr and shout in my inbox! Please reblog the tumblr post for me too!

I'm also on Twitter if you want to come chat about the fic ... and boy, do I love talking about this fic. Tweet as you read with the hashtag #FICacoldnight! :D

Please leave a kudos if you made it to the end, and drop me a comment with your thoughts, your favourite line, your hopes for what will happen next, your advice for poor old Alec ... I would be forever grateful for it! If you want an alert next time there's an update, please hit that subscribe button!

Until next time ... in which Alec realises that Magnus' investigation of the Circle and his association with supers make him a target too, and then - well. Something quite terrible happens. Things get a little bloody. A little messy.
“Magnus …”

“I think about running, you know,” Magnus whispers, “Every day, I think about not picking up that phone. I think about moving out of New York and away from all the people that want to see me fired, who want to do me harm. There’s a life out there where I wouldn’t have to fear unmarked parcels on my desk. I think about putting myself first, choosing what I want, instead of - instead of all this. Every day.”

“But you can’t,” Alec breathes, “Because that’s not you.” Your capacity for selflessness is too damn big. Your heart -

Magnus’ hand smooths down the front of Alec’s chest, picking at the cheap silk of Alec’s tie. Alec opens his eyes.

“It could be. It could be me,” Magnus says. “Maybe it would be a choice that haunts me. I wouldn’t know until I made it. Until I walked away. Do you understand?”

Chapter Notes

Alec and Magnus make headway in their murder investigation when Senator Herondale’s name comes up, Magnus becomes a target (and not just of the Circle), and Sentinel realises the lengths he would go to keep Magnus safe. This ache, this longing in his chest, he knows what it is now.

He can’t ignore it.

And then ... the body count rises.

&&&

Tweet along with ficacoldnight! Please also mind the tags for this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There’s only one thing I want, don’t make me say it, just get me bandages,

I’m bleeding, I’m not just making conversation.

— Richard Siken, from "Wishbone", Crush
GOV. JIA PENHALLOW jumped back into the campaign for the Senate today, instantly criticising and creating uncertainties for Sen. Herondale in the final 33 days before Election Day. "The people of New York are good," Gov. Penhallow said, "but they have a Government that is a mess. Everybody in Washington makes excuses for the continued wave of violence against superhumans, but nobody takes responsibility, even when they have direct responsibility."

Gov. Penhallow and her strategists insist that they are gaining ground on Sen. Herondale’s early lead in the polls, as support amongst youth voters continues to rise. But Sen. Herondale’s poll taker and several other aides said today that their own surveys showed Gov. Penhallow’s new-found popularity has soured, and that Sen. Herondale still retains a seven point lead over her opposition. This comes just days after Gov. Penhallow lambasted Sen. Herondale’s divisive remarks about the implementation of a district-wide register for superhumans should Sen. Herondale retain office on November 3rd …

CONTINUED ON PAGE SIX, COLUMN ONE


Magnus looks up from where he’s reorganising his filing cabinets, Manila folders piled high on every available surface, sheets of paper scattered all across the floor. His frown morphs instantly into a delighted smile.

“It may be almost winter, but it’s never too late for a spot of spring cleaning, Alexander.” He gestures widely to his office. “I woke up this morning with a spark of motivation. Today’s the day we’re going to crack this Circle case wide open. I can feel it.”
Magnus pulls another file from the cabinet and tosses it over his shoulder. It lands somewhere behind his desk.

Alec’s not sure how to say that he wasn’t talking about the mess.

Not the mess at all. In fact, it wasn’t even the first thing Alec noticed when he opened the door.

No, *that* was Magnus’ sleek three-piece suit, the same rich burgundy as a bottle of Malbec shared between two people side-stepping around an invisible line drawn between them and wondering how, or if, to cross it.

Alec knows he’s never seen Magnus wear this before, because if he had, he would *definitely* remember the way it fits him around the shoulders. The slim cut of it against his waist. The taper at his ankles, highlighting the shine of his shoes. The colour is magnificent on him: rich and deep and brooding, the same shade as a thunderstorm, as bloody quinacridone, as Nightlock’s heavy coat. Magnus tends to favour blacks and greys and blues - and Alec likes those well enough - but this ...

Well, this is something different.

*Good different.* Just like that whispered, wine-tinged evening they shared on Alec’s couch last night. They had stayed there for hours; it had been almost sunrise by the time Magnus had reluctantly managed to leave.

The memory of Alec’s hand resting in the both of Magnus’ stirs. He recalls the disappointment of a kiss that never came, and then the thrill of better confessions: ‘*there’s one constant though. it’s you, Alec. You’re always there, aren’t you?*’

Alec shakes himself free of the thought. Quietly, he closes the door behind him and picks his way across the floor, trying not to step on anything.

Magnus hums, tossing another unneeded file to the side. Alec would comment on his questionable methods of organisation, but-

The suit is so distracting.
“You, uh - you’re in a good mood today,” Alec says instead, dropping his bag onto his usual chair. He sheds his jacket too, rolling up his shirt sleeves, and looks around. He’s not sure where to even start on cleaning up.

“What can I say,” Magnus remarks, raising his eyebrows at the sight of Alec’s bare forearms. “I had a good night last night. A few drinks, excellent company-”

Alec rolls his eyes and flushes. “Magnus.”

“What?” Magnus grins. He turns and walks up to Alec, brandishing another folder in his hand. He uses it to tap Alec playfully on the chest. “Oh, you’re not hungover, are you?”

“What? No.” Alec takes the folder from Magnus and puts it down on the desk. When he turns back, Magnus has stolen half a step closer, his mouth pursed and his eyes alight with amusement. Alec feels himself blush, but gestures up and down at Magnus. “I’m just - this is. This is more. Than usual.”

Magnus runs his fingers down the length of his lapels and shrugs his shoulders. “Do you like it?”

Alec clears his throat. “I mean, it’s -”

“A bit much for the office?”

“No,” Alec says, too quick. “No, it’s good. It looks … good. On you.”

’On you'? Really? You really just said that?

Magnus’ eyes darken. His voice is low when he speaks again: “I’m thinking of putting an editorial piece in next Sunday’s issue.” He flicks open the single button on his jacket in a way he must know Alec will notice.

Alec does notice. And Magnus beams, but then he steps away, cruelly out of Alec’s orbit and
beyond Alec’s reach. He collects a few discarded files from the floor and returns to his desk, spreading them all out to see.

_Whiplash._ That’s the most accurate way to describe how Alec’s head spins as if he’s just suffered a violent jolt in the front seat of a car. Hell, maybe he _is_ hungover. Maybe three glasses of wine is his tolerance now.

It’s that, or Magnus is leaving him dizzy.

_After last night, that doesn’t seem so far out of the question_, Alec thinks.

“So, this is an overview of everything we have so far on the Circle and Johnathan Morgenstern and the murders,” Magnus continues, oblivious to the dumb expression on Alec’s face. He leans over the patchwork of files and spreads both hands flat on the desk. Alec watches his muscles shift beneath the cut of his suit. “And perhaps if we can see everything at once, it will help us figure out what avenues we have yet to explore. I want this piece to be thorough. Comprehensive.”

Alec frowns. “Did the editor-in-chief sign off on it?”

“He will,” says Magnus, “He won’t have a choice.”

His determination is convincing. Too often than not, Magnus’ unwavering belief that there’s a light at the end of this tunnel is enough to make Alec feel steadfast, even when the wind and rain threatens to bowl him off his feet.

Today, however, Alec feels a draught: a wily gust of wind slipping through some crack in him he hasn’t before noticed, not until last night at least. There’s a fissure in his heart, widened.

_The life I have with you is the life I want. The person I am around you is the person I want to be._

_A man at peace._

The Circle tracked Sentinel to his apartment building; they didn’t find him, but they came close. He can’t ever return to that place he once called home. He can’t ride the subway with headphones
in anymore; he has to be alert, he has to ask himself if that man reading the paper is following him, or if that woman holding onto the overhead rail has a circular tattoo on her neck.

The Circle know that Sentinel is searching for them; that’s more than clear now. And Sentinel has been careful, he’s had to be, Nightlock and Arkangel and Muse’s lives all depend on it. They’ve been quiet, they’ve kept to the shadows, covered their tracks - and still, the Circle caught wind of them.

And if they know about Sentinel, then of course they must be aware of Magnus Bane and his one-man crusade to find justice for his murdered friend Ragnor Fell, and Magnus does far less than Sentinel to keep his identity secret.

The thought of a tell-all editorial feels too much like waving a flag around, desperate to attract attention. Alec’s apartment this time. What if it’s Magnus’ office next -

Alec’s doesn’t want that.

“What if he doesn’t? Say yes, I mean,” Alec says. “You said yourself that everything’s about the Election now, no other newspapers in the city are publishing on the fires anymore. Doesn’t that-?”

“Worry me?” Magnus finishes. Alec nods. “Yes, a little, if I’m to be honest. But you don’t get heard if you’re always saying the same thing as everyone else and getting drowned out. There’s not much point in doing anything in life, Alexander, if there’s not a little risk involved.”

Alec’s not so sure if that’s true. Finding the Circle, saving lies, changing the way people treat the supers, yes, but -

_Last night_, Alec thinks, curling his fingers into his palm as he remembers the electric tickle of Magnus’ fingers exploring his, of Magnus lingering at the door when they finally bade goodbye at far-too-late o’clock. That didn’t feel like a risk at all.

“So, here’s what I’m thinking,” continues Magnus, “We need some backstory on Valentine, the coup, Idris, all of it - and I want us to look into Hodge Starkweather again. Senator Herondale too. Then, maybe a few pages on the victims, a paragraph or two for each of them. I want to discuss with Captain Garroway whether we can get a joint tip line set up between us and his precinct-”
Magnus talks and Alec tries to listen. He does.

He just feels so off-kilter, that’s all. Magnus is running hot, overflowing with this impulsive, restless energy, but Alec is -

Alec is still in a late-night haze. He was late to the office this morning, sleeping through his new alarm, barely remembering to grab his kit bag on the way out the door. He spent half the day in a stupor, staring at his computer screen, and as for thoughts of Sentinel, of Nightlock, of the Circle, well.

They haven’t exactly been on his mind.

‘The missus hung up her cape a while ago, but we’re still going strong. She was worth it. Every last bit.’

Alec’s heart thumps painfully. He wishes it would be still, but there’s always going to be a part of him hungry for the hurt of it all.

Something changed last night. A path Alec has long believed closed off to him is - there. There, just out of reach, but not by far. The one street at the crossroads he hasn’t tried to walk for fear of the cost.

And at what point does longing outweigh fear? the voice in his head asks bitterly. At what point are you going to stop asking yourself that over and over again? At what point does wondering kill you?

Magnus can step back into this world of heroes and villains like it’s nothing. He doesn’t need to take a breath between curling up on that couch with Alec and turning his office upside down in delirious dedication to his work.

There’s not a divide between those two things for Magnus.

Alec is in less of a rush to return to reality. Not when his unreality has him feeling more like himself than he has felt in years.
More than years. Forever, really.

Alec glances at the floor, still strewn with paper. *Selfish*, he scolds himself, to want to put all this on hold, even for a moment. Selfish, naive, not like him at all, and yet, he has been little else in these days of late.

Alec palms his hand across the back of his neck. He sucks it all up and compresses it down inside himself as best he can. “Where, uh - do you want me to start?”

Magnus shoots him a winning smile. Alec’s heart still flips.

“How about you start from the most recent, and I’ll start from the beginning, and we’ll meet in the middle?” Magnus suggests, “If we can establish a complete timeline of events, maybe we’ll see something that we didn’t see before.”

Magnus hums as he works. Alec knows this, and he’s grown used to this, and it’s why he bought Magnus that Queen cassette in the first place, but tonight, it’s a distraction.

Alec can’t focus.

Surrounded by stacks of files on all sides, he sits cross-legged on the floor in the centre of Magnus’ office, his tie discarded and his top button undone, his hair raked up on end by his fingertips. The fluorescent light above the desks keeps flickering, on and off every couple of minutes, and its yellow-white glow pulses against Alec’s temple; his head feels full and stuffy. He has a highlighter in one hand and a pen tucked behind his ear, but the words on the page in his lap are swimming, sentences blurring into one another. The binder full of police reports and witness statements from the church fire is to his right, and on his left, a mountain of newspaper clippings about Idris and the Circle from the seventies that gives Everest a run for its money. Alec swears he had a list of Idris’ public expenditure in his hand a moment ago, procured from archives at City Hall, but he can’t for the life of him remember where he’s put it, and Magnus -

Magnus keeps humming. Alec doesn’t know the song anymore, if it’s even a song at all; it’s all very out of tune.
Magnus’ desk is swamped in paperwork. Alec watches as Magnus rearranges the files, tossing some back to the floor, darting across the room to grab more; the paper flutters as he passes by. He stands back from his desk, surveying his work, and then messes it all up again, muttering under his breath - and he does it again and again, over and over until Alec realises he hasn’t looked away from Magnus in almost an hour, and his own stack of work remains untouched.

Magnus has his blazer rucked up about his elbows. The button is undone, so Alec has a good view of the waistcoat underneath and the thin silver chain the loops from the fastenings to the breast pocket, glinting in the yellow light. Absently, Magnus hooks two fingers around the knot of his tie and wriggles it loose.

Alec swallows thickly, readjusting the tightness in his slacks.

*What … what was he meant to be reading again?*

Izzy would tease him if she were here. And then she’d say: *hey, why’d you stop looking? You clearly want to look*.

And Alec does.

Desire, longing, *want* - those are all strange words. A Corporate doesn’t *want*; they have everything they need, money, power, a home and a job. A gay man doesn’t want, not freely, not if he wants to live in peace. Reagan and Bush saw to that.

*But things are changing* , Alec thinks. Last night, Magnus had said much the same. The Election polls are too close to call, and Idris is shuddering under the weight of itself, and people like Magnus exist, Hell-bent on leaving the world a better place than he found it.

And unequivocally, Alec finds himself wanting, and it’s no great surprise at all. Perhaps he had been expecting an epiphany; perhaps not.

It’s as easy as breathing.

*And how long did you spend trying to look the other way? Not looking at him when he was so*
clearly looking at you? How long did you spend feeling scared?

I’m still scared, Alec thinks.

“Alec, do you have the autopsy report from the fire anywhere?” Magnus says without looking up.

That, Alec has seen recently. He shimmies the report out from the bottom of a pile and picks his way over to the desk.

Alec slides up beside Magnus and holds out the report. Magnus sets it down in an empty space in his mind map, but then he scowls. He swaps the report for another, shuffling some pages around. Alec watches, unable to make heads nor tails of what Magnus is trying to do; if Magnus can see a pattern, Alec is blind to it. Instead, Alec frowns, the pulse in his temples beginning the bloom.

Magnus drums his fingers against the desk, matching that same beat inside Alec’s head. He sighs heavily, shoulders deflating, but beneath the suit, he still looks powerful, all coiled muscle and rolling lines, tapered towards the slim vee of his waist. He hands the same file back to Alec.

“Can you put this over there with the rest of the arson clippings?” His voice is low. It creeps up the back of Alec’s neck, scampering across the underside of his jaw.

Alec nods, but Magnus doesn’t move out the way. He reaches for another document, assembling and disassembling ideas as if he’s the only person in the room, alone in his own private universe.

The suit clings to him in the small of his back. Alec shouldn’t notice, but he does. There’s no way he can’t notice as he steps around Magnus in the narrow space between the desk and the wall, careful not to let them touch as he sets the file neatly atop a stack of duplicates.

Magnus glances back over his shoulder, briefly looking Alec up and down, but says nothing. He returns his attention to the table. Alec’s fingers burn. What’s a little risk.

The space behind the desk is small. He can’t really move without touching Magnus. He has an excuse. He doesn’t know why he needs an excuse.
Alec sets his hand just above the low curve of Magnus’ back as he leans over the desk, nudging his shoulder against Magnus’. Alec’s fingers arch, just the touch of his fingertips at first, but then he exhales, and relaxes the flat of his palm light against Magnus’ spine. And he feels it. The want. He feels it, and he doesn’t dare look, focusing religiously on the paperwork before him, forcing himself to scrutinise every line.

He doesn’t read a single one.

Alec feels the surprise ripple through Magnus like an storm surge, Alec’s hand the epicentre of some earthly shift. Realisation shivers up his spine and tightens the line of his shoulders. He pushes back against Alec’s hand, heightening the touch. It’s deliberate.

Magnus says nothing. He doesn’t look at Alec, he doesn’t pull away, he doesn’t acknowledge Alec’s hand in the slightest, but when Alec glances at him sideways, the corners of Magnus’ mouth are upturned and colour marbles the cut of his cheek.

Alec exhales deeply. He doesn’t let the touch linger, his hand sliding away just as tentatively as he let it settle there, but he hopes it expresses … enough.

Enough. What exactly is enough? he thinks. Whatever they might’ve shared last night on the couch at Alec’s apartment? Was that enough or did it just leave Alec wanting more -

Magnus’ fingers arch up upon the desk. He shifts, minutely, his body turning a fraction towards Alec. Magnus takes a deep breath, as if he wants to say something, but doesn’t know how to say it at all.

“Alec, I need to ask -”

His sentence fragments, unfinished and unuttered. A headline catches Alec’s eye, hidden beneath another newspaper and a stack of Post-It notes. Alec leans forward and tugs it from the pile.

**CORPORATE SUPERHUMANS, IDRIS, SPEAK OUT ON RECENTLY PROPOSED ANTI-VIGILANTE LEGISLATION**

The headline dates back to the Spring of 1975. Alec frowns. His eyes flick down the page, skimming the article. He feels Magnus tense, but then turn towards him, his chest brushing Alec’s
“Found something?” he asks, his voice a whisper, a breath, closer to Alec’s ear than he was expecting. There’s a waiver there. Small, unpurposeful, meant to be hidden, but there. Alec’s frown deepens. “Alec?”

“Look at this,” says Alec, reading from the clipping, “‘Following proposed legislation laid out by State Senator Imogen Herondale, representatives from Idris were approached for comment. Idris refused to release a press statement, but the Corporate super known as Silver Tongue had this to say…’” Alec looks up at Magnus. “Silver Tongue. That’s Valentine’s alter ego.”

The change in Magnus’ eyes is instantaneous. He snatches the article from Alec and holds it up to the light. His expression sobered.

“This is almost twenty years old,” he says, and then he continues reading, “‘It is the responsibility of enhanced individuals to turn themselves into the authorities for appropriate registration,’ says Silver Tongue. ‘The changes to the current vigilante law proposed by Sen. Herondale are in the best interests of the city, where vigilante crime is on the rise and needs to be stopped. Control should be restored. Vigilantes should be rounded up to protect all of us from their lawlessness.’”

Alec’s gut clenches on nothing. Herondale again. Her name keeps cropping up. All those contracts with Idris, her name in Hodge Starkweather’s file, her anti-vigilante stance. Hell, Alec’s told Nightlock as much, but, this -

“This sounds an awful lot like Valentine Morgenstern and the Senator share some political ideologies,” Magnus mutters. “Damn it, why didn’t I think of that before.”

Magnus slams the article down on the table top and strides over to his filing cabinet again, wrenching open one of the drawers.

Alec stares at the desk. He stares at the headline, but his vision swims. Suddenly, all he can think about is that day Izzy called him on the radio to tell him about Herondale sponsoring Hodge’s last three contracts at Idris, just before he defected with the Circle. That was in 1975 too.

All he can think about is Simon fretting over the anti-vigilante legislation that will be implemented if Herondale gets reelected to the Senate next month.
All he can think about is that contract that he and Jace stole from the defense contractor all those weeks ago, the one that read: [REDACTED], on behalf of the office of Sen. Imogen Herondale as the signature on the dotted line.

And what if that redacted name was -


What is that name was -

Maryse and Robert Lightwood.

Alec closes his eyes tight and wills the thought away, even though he knows he shouldn’t. Even though he knows it’s possible, more than possible; he has no idea how far this goes.

Because it must go somewhere. Herondale’s name has come up too many times in their investigation to be a coincidence now. She’s involved. She has to be.

Maybe she doesn’t want vigilantes arrested and rounded up. Maybe she wants them dead.

“You think,” Alec begins, begging his voice to stay steady, “You think Senator Herondale is financing the Circle?”

“It’s not outside the realm of possibility,” replies Magnus, still rummaging around in the cabinet. He doesn’t stop to look back. “My friend in Idris told me a similar thing, not too long ago. I didn’t really look into it at the time, but -” Magnus makes a noise of triumph when he finds the file he was looking for. It’s old and battered and Alec has not seen it before. Nor does he recognise the scrawling handwriting on the front, as Magnus brings it back over to the desk and lays it flat.

“There are too many similarities here to ignore,” Magnus continues, “Herondale and Valentine sharing political ideologies is one thing. A lot of people want to see vigilantes catalogued or locked away or dead. That’s not unusual. But the fact that the Circle have re-emerged right at the same time as her reelection campaign? Especially when she’s fanning all this anti-vigilante sentiment and fearmongering to try and increase support for that bill she wants to pass, well.”
Magnus flips open the file on the desk. It seems to be full of financial records, but a lot of the text is blacked out.

“What is this?” Alec asks.

“Something my dear friend Ragnor compiled, just before he died. He was preparing a civil suit to take to the Supreme Court.” Magnus leafs through the pages, only to stop on one and stab it with his finger. “The Senator’s public spending during her first attempt at the Senate. Most of it is a matter of public record, if you know who to ask.”

Alec frowns. He scans the page; it’s a list of campaign sponsors, contributors who donated to the Senator’s election fund, that sort of thing. There are a number of well-known companies on the list - News Corp, Bank of America, Belcourt Holdings - as well as a number of political offices that Alec recognises, but Idris is not there.

He doesn’t know if that surprises him or not. Magnus flicks over the page to reveal a run-down of campaign expenditure.

Alec’s mouth goes dry. “That’s a defense contractor,” he says, pointing to a name on the list. And then another. And another. “That one too.”

“Yes,” says Magnus, “Which begs the question, why is a federal candidate spending campaign money on contracts with companies who lease military equipment? I’d rather like to know the answer to that, but I can certainly guess.”

Magnus taps his finger on another name. Hodge Starkweather. Alec’s mouth runs dry.

“Does it say why her campaign was giving him money?” Alec whispers. “He was still in prison.”

Magnus shakes his head. “No. This record’s incomplete. I don’t know if Ragnor had more, if he did, they didn’t make it to me.” Magnus groans. “Christ, I hadn’t thought to look at any of these - I filed them away after Ragnor’s funeral, expecting to go back to them one day, but - of course there’s a reason he gave them to me in his will. Of course. This information is probably what got the old fool killed.”

Alec continues down the list. He pauses on a name near the bottom.
“The Police Commissioner is on here too. Malachi Dieudonné,” he says. The taste in his mouth is acrid now; he bites his tongue. “Do you think Herondale is paying off the cops? Paying them to look the other way -”

“It certainly would explain a lot,” says Magnus. He glances at his telephone, and Alec can see the gears turning a mile a minute inside his head. Whatever he’s thinking, whatever he’s realised, he’s miles ahead of Alec already. “I think I better make some calls.”

Magnus spends an hour on the phone to Luke Garroway, his voice low and his words hurried, his hand cupped over the receiver. Alec only listens to half of it.

The file of newspaper clippings from the seventies is spread out across the floor. Alec stands in the middle of it all; he turns in a slow circle, scanning the headlines, searching for any other mention of Senator Herondale in conjunction with Idris - but so far, nothing. Half the clippings are faded and sun-bleached, the print lifted by someone else’s fingers, the edges curled and time-afflicted. Others have suffered water damage, shrunk and wrinkled, ink bled across the pages. They’ve not been well cared for, but it’s a miracle that Ragnor and Magnus collated as much as they have.

New York public library will have more, Alec thinks. They have newspaper archives dating back centuries. But if anyone is watching either his or Magnus’ movements - they’ll know the moment Alec goes looking.

Alec scrubs his hand across his jaw, palming at his scruff.

Idris will know about this. There must be more in the records room at headquarters: old files, redacted contracts, field reports from back in the day. Alec and Isabelle just haven’t found them yet. Maybe such things have already been destroyed.

But they don’t have to be on paper to still exist. Someone will remember.

His parents will remember.
The Circle didn’t just defect from Idris because there was ideological disagreement. Idris was already rounding up vigilantes in the seventies; all it would’ve taken from Valentine was a gentle shove in the wrong direction, and Maryse and Robert Lightwood would’ve been right there with him, exterminating people as they saw fit.

*Why did they defect?* Alec reasons. *Why go rogue when Idris was already financing them, turning a blind eye to Valentine’s insurgency, protecting them under law -*

Money. Power. Incentive. Valentine must’ve been offered something too great to ignore to leave Idris when he did and make it all worthwhile.

*Someone in power must’ve made a deal with him,* Alec realises. *And if Valentine’s coup was politically backed -*

Who’s to say it’s not happening again. Who’s to say that someone, Senator Herondale, her office, the government, the fucking President, *whoever*, is not financing the Circle again; arming them; instructing them to take the law into their own hands and rid the city of vigilantes in case Herondale’s legislation to have them all locked up doesn’t get passed -

Oh.

Oh God.

The pyrokinetic isn’t a single man working alone with some vicious vendetta.

No, he’s far more dangerous than that.

Alec feels sick. Sick that he didn’t think of this before, didn’t notice this before. Hell, none of them did. Not Izzy with all her gifts; not Nightlock and his stubborn crusade for justice; not even Magnus and his dedication to doing what is right despite every terrible cost.

*And now it’s almost too late,* Alec thinks. *Fuck, perhaps it already is - so many people have died already, all because Alec was too slow on the uptake, didn’t connect the dots in time -*
Maybe it’s not true. Maybe it’s merely a coincidence, maybe Herondale is just a run-of-the-mill corrupt politician, and not -

This.

Alec needs to get back to headquarters. He has to tell Jace and Izzy. Sentinel’s mask and suit call to him, scream at him: get back out there, find Nightlock, do something that isn’t this, just standing in the middle of this office and slowly pulling his hair out strand by agonising strand.

And his night was going so well -

“Be careful, Lucian,” Magnus says into the telephone, “If you get caught, you know what the repercussions will be. Once this goes to press, there’ll be an investigation and everyone high profile in the NYPD will be under suspicion, and that includes you. We can only hope your bid for the Commissioner’s office won’t be derailed.” Magnus pauses, listening to something Luke says. He nods his head. “Yes, I know. I’m going to try and get in touch with him. I’ve probably missed him tonight, but I’ll try tomorrow. If you run into him first, make sure you fill him in and let me know. Alright. See you, take care.”

He puts the phone down and closes his eyes, inhaling and exhaling heavily. Alec watches the rise and fall of his shoulders, the way he reels himself back in and draws all his emotions back under control.

When he opens his eyes, he meets Alec’s gaze in an instance. The fire’s there, still golden, but now tempestuous. It sets Alec’s nerves alight.

“Magnus? You okay?”

Magnus huffs on a laugh. “I’m fine. Same probably can’t be said for my career for very much longer.”

Alec walks back over to the desk and slips into his usual chair across from Magnus. He leans forward, eyeing Magnus’ fingers where they drum restless next to his telephone. He thinks about grabbing them. “What did Luke say?”
“I asked him whether anyone upstairs has tried to hush the Circle investigations. He said he wasn’t aware of any pressure, but he wouldn’t be surprised. So, we shouldn’t rule it out,” Magnus mutters, “It goes without saying that Luke isn’t a fan of Commissioner Dieudonné either. He was appointed on the recommendation of the Senator and Luke suspects he’ll keep the position if Herondale is re-elected. Luke is going to do some digging and get back to me.”

“We have to tell people,” says Alec. He watches Magnus’ fingers again, the arch of his hand as he presses his fingertips incessantly into the wood of the desk. “People need to know before the Election. This could change everything, Penhallow might have a chance.”

And people will finally see the Circle for what they were. What they are. Not superheroes, not vigilantes. Criminals.

Magnus rubs his fingers over his mouth in thought. His five o’clock shadow is beginning to come through on his jaw even though it’s nearing midnight. Alec can see the resignation in his eyes; he’ll be here ‘til long after sunrise.

“We go to press in under five hours,” says Magnus. He glances back at the clock. “I think I can come up with something.”

Alec grabs a copy of the Daily Tribunal from the kiosk at his subway stop the next morning. The headline reads: SENATOR HERONDALE IN POLICE CORRUPTION SCANDAL, and underneath, in bold type: Senator’s campaign records reveal secret links with NYPD, major arms dealers, and anti-super terrorist group, the Circle.

Alec grabs a coffee to go - no milk, three sugars, but not sweet enough for his tastes - and skims the front page as the subway jostles him around like a sardine in a can, shoulder to shoulder with a hundred other people staring bleary-eyed at the morning paper.

Written and edited by Magnus Bane, Senior Crime and Politics Editor, says the final line. Alec takes another sip of his coffee, swaying on the spot as the train jolts to a stop at the next station. People bundle out of the carriage and more push in, and Alec squishes himself against the door without looking up, oblivious to the rest of the world.
It’s a good piece. Magnus is an engaging and dynamic writer, not overtly sensationalist, but not dry and droll like the articles in the WSJ that Alec usually reads. Magnus is vague in naming his sources, and cautious when it comes to making accusations, but the truth is there, plain and simple on the page.

Senator Herondale was involved with the Circle during the coup and the press demands a statement from her office about it.

In a way, it feels like a small victory.

A small victory, and a small loss, because if the press turns their attention to Herondale, then they’re going to look at Idris, and that means Arkangel, Muse, and Sentinel too.

And maybe that’s what Idris deserves. Maybe they all deserve that scrutiny, maybe they need to be held accountable for every past sin swept under the rug, but -

Alec is still scared. He can admit that to himself now, but it doesn’t make it any easier to bear. Being seen, as he is, is a peculiar sort of fear. It leaves him open to all sorts of things: accusations, realisations, declarations. It leaves him vulnerable.

_Vulnerable or just scared of change?_ the voice in his head remarks, and today, it sounds an awful lot like Isabelle. He could almost mistake it for her voice across the coms, but the radio is obliquely silent.

It’s all just him.

Alec shuffles off the subway at his stop, one man in a sea of people traipsing up the stairs, heads bowed and coffee cups clutched dearly to the chest. Sheets of freezing cold rain greet him when he emerges at street level, a thunder on the asphalt and the tarmac, and a deafening hum in his ears. He doesn’t have an umbrella anymore, lost when his apartment was ransacked, so he holds the newspaper over his head and makes a run for it.

Alec is fast. Not quite fast enough. He’s drenched in seconds.

He staggers into the lobby of the _Tribunal_ shaking his hair, splattering rainwater across the floor, and looks again at the newspaper. The ink is smudged and the paper congeals into grey mush in his
hand. He tosses it into the trash and sneers, wiping his palm on his coat, but his coat is soaked too, and he sprays more water onto his shoes. He’s going to be damp all day and he knows it, and with a sigh, he turns towards the elevators.

“Alexander!”

Alec wheels round, almost knocking into a grumpy-looking man in a suit on his way up to the office. Alec side steps out the way, and he’s not surprised to see Magnus striding up to him, his umbrella in hand, leaving a trail of water across the floor. Magnus has another copy of the paper folded beneath his arm and he’s grinning.

And it’s like a light, suddenly piercing, suddenly brilliant, filtering through a very grey world. Magnus smiles at him like he’s the only person worth seeing in the whole damn city. Alec briefly forgets how to breathe.

“Magnus,” he splutters, “hey!”

“I have good news!” Magnus beams, and he presses his copy of the paper into Alec’s chest. Alec fumbles to catch it. “Our tip line got half a dozen calls this morning alone. Apparently someone who worked on the last Herondale campaign saw our headline and got in touch.”

“That’s great news.”

“Indeed, indeed,” Magnus continues, barely pausing for breath. His gaze flits across Alec’s face and the smallest frown appears at the state of Alec’s hair and the rainwater that rolls off it in drips. The corner of Magnus’ mouth twitches and he reaches up, pushing back a curl of Alec’s hair plastered to his forehead. “I’ve set up an interview with them this afternoon, and then I’m off to see Lucian - he tells me he might have some information on Commissioner Dieudonné for me, but I suspect it’s mostly an excuse to break into the scotch I know he’s been saving for when we finally caught a break.”

Magnus’ smile broadens as the light touch of his fingertips against Alec’s temple stray to Alec’s arm, gently rubbing at the crease of Alec’s elbow through his coat. Surely, he can feel Alec’s rabbiting pulse.

Alec blinks owlishly, opening his mouth, closing it again. The back of his neck radiates heat, prickly, uncomfortable, moreish. He looks around, but there’s nobody staring, nobody pointing
fingers, just his colleagues rushing to be out of the rain and somewhere safe and dry.

No-one’s looking. No-one’s looking. It’s just you and him.

Alec ducks his head, shuffling a step closer to Magnus, eager to feel warmth. His words, a rain-wet rasp: “Magnus, I, uh -”

“This is a real step forward for us, Alec,” Magnus murmurs, “Finally, someone to hold responsible. This is thanks to you. If you hadn’t spotted that article -”

“I’m sure you would’ve spotted it too,” Alec says hoarsely. “It was a coincidence.” He glances down at Magnus’ hand, the point at which he grips Alec’s coat. Alec wets his lips.

Magnus’ eyes are bright when Alec finds them again.

“Don’t sell yourself short.” Magnus squeezes Alec’s arm in reassurance, and Alec wishes they were anywhere else but here, in the lobby, because - because he realises he wants to return the touch. He wants to drop the newspaper to the floor and reach out and grab Magnus’ by the lapels of his stupidly expensive suit and draw him closer than a breath. He wants to tell Magnus exactly what he means to every single superhero of this city that has never thanked him for all his good deeds.

“Your help has been invaluable in all this,” Magnus continues. “You know that. We have a name for our pyrokinetic and now, possible motive. We’re getting closer day by day. We’re going to catch up with them soon, I can feel it. I feel it with more certainty than I’ve felt almost anything else.”

Magnus steps closer and tilts his head up, a clear invitation for Alec to lean down and offer Magnus his ear. Magnus’ hand slides up to Alec’s shoulder, holding him at the juncture of his neck, his thumb pressed firmly against Alec’s jugular, as he whispers into Alec’s ear.

“Tonight, after I’m back,” he says, and briefly, Alec thinks of the dozen times before when Magnus had asked of him the exact same thing. They all bleed into one, vague and smeary, but not this. This, a question he hears, he feels spoken against his skin by the tremble in the air, with the utmost clarity. “Dinner, my treat. If only to celebrate a job well done. What do you say?”
Still smiling, Magnus draws back, meeting Alec’s eyes again. Whatever he sees there - shock, or surprise, or a happiness Alec is terrified of naming - Alec is not sure. He can hardly say himself; it all feels so new, save for the soft and ephemeral warmth pearling in his cheeks, unmistakable enough.

Magnus’ thumb brushes up and down the slope of his throat. He will feel Alec swallow.

“I have somewhere I have to be later tonight,” Alec begins, but he doesn’t pause long enough to let Magnus’ face fall. He won’t let it. “So maybe we could do takeout? In your office. It’s probably not what you had in mind, but -”

“No buts,” says Magnus. His hand slides up, palm briefly cupping the side of Alec’s neck, clammy with rainwater, but then lets go again. It doesn’t matter. Alec will feel the phantom of a touch for days to come. “It’s perfect. That sounds perfect. I’ve got to get going, but I’ll see you later, okay?”

Later, yes, Alec thinks, his heart still hammering. Everything he wants to say is caught, accumulated, in his throat. He clutches the newspaper to his chest, but it’s already damp and dissolving in is fingers. Rainwater drips off his coat and pools around his shoes, but he cannot shift his feet.

Magnus throws him a farewell wave, and then he’s off towards the elevators, calling out for someone to hold the door. The elevator music fades out and the hum of other people staggering rain-drenched into the building returns, a play button pressed on a world put on pause.

A droplet of water drips from Alec’s hair to his nose, plitting onto the floor as he stands in the middle of the lobby and smiles. He tries to suffocate it, to bite it back, but its crooked and wily, and this time, he fails. He cups the palm of his hand against his neck in the giddy hope of trapping the warmth there.

The girl at the reception desk stares at him funny. He heads for the stairs.

“I think I’ll die if I move,” groans Alec, leaning back in his chair and pressing his hands to his stomach. “I think I’ll die if I think about moving.”
Empty takeout containers litter Magnus’ desk, the air fragrant with the smell of jasmine rice and lemongrass, unable to escape in a windowless room. Lime and chili tingle on Alec’s tongue, and he feels warm and satiated all over: the length of his back completely unspooled, his feet kicked out before him, and his eyelids drooping.

“And people call me dramatic,” Magnus laughs, waving his chopsticks leisurely at Alec. “I’ve never seen someone forgo breathing in order to eat their dinner. One might think you’ve never eaten a proper meal in your life. That was impressive.”

Alec lets his head flop back over the spine of the chair; he stares at the ceiling, his body pleasantly warm. “My entire family are terrible cooks, me included. I’m pretty sure Iz gave us all food poisoning when she cooked at Thanksgiving.” Alec mock-frowns at the memory. “I think my little brother is still scarred. He won’t touch her macaroni cheese anymore.”

Magnus huffs. “Oh, I know the feeling. Whenever Ragnor would host dinner parties, he used to insist we try all these delicacies he brought back from his travels. Tell me, have you ever tried casu marzu? Because let me tell you, it is disgusting.”

“No, I haven’t,” Alec laughs, “I don’t really get to - go to restaurants and bars and that sorta stuff very often.”

“Oh, well, I suppose I’ll just have to invite you out to eat again, then. There are so many good places to eat in Manhattan that I need to show you. What a pity.”

Alec rolls his eyes, but feels himself smiling. “Nothing too expensive,” he says, “But I’d like that.”

Magnus immediately perks up, his eyes alight. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. I mean, yes, I -”

A loud buzz erupts in Alec’s ear, and it’s only years and years of practice that stop him from startling. His coms, beeping violently. An incoming message. Always.

It might be Jace or it could be Clary, and any other time, Alec would grit his teeth and ignore their
call, but he can’t, not now. They might’ve found something, and not being in the right place at the right time has cost Alec dearly in the past.

He pretends like he’s scratching at his ear as he accepts the call.

“And it’s me,” says Izzy, and Alec busies himself by picking at the scabs on the back of his burned hand. “Just a heads up. Mom is on a warpath. You better get here stat. I’ll explain later. Are you with Jace or do I have to call him?”

Alec’s heart falls. Not far - he’s used to this, he’s used to moments - but it falls enough to be felt. He exhales slowly, quietly, and watches Magnus finish up the last of his food across the desk, entirely oblivious to the voice in Alec’s ear. Magnus swirls his ring finger around the empty takeout carton and licks it clean with a pop of his mouth, humming happily. He looks content, still caught in that coveted moment where the world beyond does not exist and he gets to enjoy himself and be happy. Alec watches Magnus’ eyes crease up around the corners with handsome lines of laughter.

His heart drops another rung inside his chest.

Alec has to look away. He prods at his coms three times, a silent signal that he has received the message but is unable to talk.

“I’ll take that as a no, he’s not with you,” replies Izzy. Alec hears the clicking of a keyboard on her end. “Your suit tracker is still at the office, so I’m guessing you’re still at work. Magnus?”

Three taps again when Magnus is not looking. Izzy laughs, but she sounds despondent.

“Thought so. I don’t think mom will willingly offer you an apology for pulling you away prematurely from your not-date, but you can certainly demand one if you’re feeling brave.” She sighs. “Just get here as soon as you can, okay? You’re … gonna want to be here for this one.”

That doesn’t sound promising, but he doesn’t really feel dread any more, not when it comes to his Idris. Despair, disgust, numbness, sure. He’s used to the way one word, one single command can flick a switch in him and turn him off, as if there’s nothing inside of him. He’s used to it. Used to that binary pulling him away from moments like this.
Magnus slumps back in his chair and pats his stomach, huffing out a satisfied noise. He closes his eyes, relaxes, a smile still lingering. So unbelievably unguarded, candid, happy, far and away from the facade of a person Alec assumed he was, all those months ago when they first met -

Alec gets fragments of a life. A few minutes, a few hours, a whole evening if he’s lucky, but never anything more.

_A Cinderella fantasy_, he once said to Nightlock, on a rooftop far from here. He glances at the clock on the wall, and it’s already nearing nine. He filled Izzy in on the Herondale situation last night over the phone, but he needs to brief Jace and Clary, and he’s supposed to be on patrol until the early hours too. And now, if his mom needs to see him -

He cannot linger. He’s already given himself long enough, but knows that it’s still going to hurt to wrench himself away from this. He’s about to turn into pumpkins and mice, a spell broken. Time to leave a glass slipper on the fire escape stairs.

Magnus cracks open one eye and sees Alec looking at the clock. His expression sober. Not disappointed, but soft, unbearably so. “That time already?”


That night, Maryse calls an emergency briefing at headquarters.

Alec cannot remember the last time they all were summoned to the same boardroom. Izzy wouldn’t say anything else over coms, but Alec could hear the tether close to breaking in her voice - but be it fear, worry, or exhaustion, he couldn’t tell. It must be serious.

_But it’s not something he’s done. Not something he can be chewed out for in the privacy of his parents’ penthouse_, he muses. _Or maybe it is, and his parents just want to make a spectacle of it. Teach him a lesson. Teach them all a lesson._
The white, sterile hallways of Idris are as quiet and intimidating as ever as Alec hurries along. His footsteps echo. The door to the boardroom at the end of the corridor is closed and he can hear no talking from beyond it. He puts his shoulder to the door and pushes, hoping to slip in unnoticed.

He doesn’t. He’s late. He had to run halfway across the city and everybody knows it.

Jace, Isabelle, and Clary are already there, facing forward as if they’ve been instructed not to look at Alec when he arrived. Raj, Lydia, Helen, and Aline are sat around the table, their heads bowed and their thumbs twiddling, all of them wary of the way Maryse bristles and Robert, sat at her side, glares with animal-like scrutiny.

Maryse tosses a copy of the *Tribunal* onto the table the moment Alec ducks through the door. Beneath the sodium lights, the black text is bold and unmistakable.

**SENATOR HERONDALE IN CORRUPTION SCANDAL**

The quiet is stifling. Alec stops in the doorway, greeted by a cold wall of air, so unwelcoming that his body freezes. Behind him, he hears Victor Aldtree clear his throat and slither into the room behind Alec like a leech.

Alec fixes upon the article on the table. Magnus’ article. Magnus’ headline. No-one else moves; everyone is waiting for him.

Very slowly, he raises his head to meet Maryse’s stare.

“Alec.” She says his name as if she wishes she could somehow make it shorter and sharper than it already is.

Alec plants his feet and folds his hands behind his back like a dutiful soldier. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Jace shift uncomfortably, easing closer to Alec out of habit. Izzy, too, is watching him.

“I’m sure you’ve already seen this,” Maryse continues, gesturing at the newspaper. “I’m sure you’ve all already seen this, seeing as it’s been propagated around the city since sunrise.”
Her steely gaze passes over Raj and Lydia, lingering pointedly on Isabelle, a frown appearing when she looks at Clary. She returns to Alec. It’s extraordinary how small he can feel when stood before her: helpless, foolish, a child. Her mouth sets into a sour line, but there’s unease in her eyes that suggests she isn’t mad, just worried. Somehow, that’s worse because Alec sympathises and that blurs all the easily-definable lines composed of you’re wrong, I’m right.

It’s not just worry. She’s disappointed too. Alec’s seen this look of hers far too many times.

Jace is the first to speak up. “Stuff like this gets published all the time,” he quips, nodding at the paper. “Politicians get called out for corruption scandals every Goddamn day. Isn’t it a good thing that the press is trying to hold someone accountable for the Circle that isn’t us?”

Robert grunts and pulls out another three newspapers from under the table, throwing them one on top of the other. And Alec, oh, God, he recognises every single headline.

They’re all by Magnus. About the Circle, about Idris, about Herondale, it doesn’t really matter now.

The way his mother is looking at him makes him wonder if she already knows he’s involved.

“Increased publicity is not good for Idris, you know this,” says Robert. He makes eye contact with Alec. Alec looks away. “These are all front pages from the last week alone. And this is just one reporter. And yes, Jace is right, stuff like this does get published all the time. But it’s not a good thing.”

“I don’t see what the problem is,” Clary interrupts, scowling fiercely. “Don’t we want someone to solve these murders? What does it matter if people are talking about it? About what the Circle are doing to the other supers out there? The police sure aren’t!”

Maryse silences Clary with a glare that could curdle milk. Clary puffs out her cheeks, folding her arms like a scolded child. She might as well be.

“Idris may be in the public eye,” Robert says then, “But it doesn’t mean we don’t value privacy. You, all of you, should be well aware of that. Your identity is all that you have, and with more people looking in the direction of Corporates and supers, the harder it becomes to keep your identities a secret.”
“But all this is about the Circle.” Izzy takes a step forward, grabbing one of the newspapers. She smacks the front page with the back of her hand to prove her point, and then throws the paper back onto the table. It slides half-way across and bumps Maryse’s elbows where she rests them. She scowls, but Izzy continues: “It’s not about us. It has nothing to do with Idris. People aren’t looking to unmask Corporates, they’re looking to unmask the Circle, the person killing all these vigilantes.”

“If the press is looking at Herondale, it will lead back to us. If they’re looking at the Valentine Morgenstern, it will also lead back to us. We don’t want people getting the wrong impression,” says Maryse.

“Wrong impression?”

All eyes in the room snap to Alec, the words barely out his mouth. Their stares burn, some worse than others, and he feels the loathsome crawl of it up his spine. Izzy turns towards him, offering a subtle nod.

Go on, she says without saying anything.

I shouldn’t have said anything, Alec thinks, but neither he nor Izzy have the gift of telepathy.

You have to, she says anyway.

“Alec,” Maryse warns.

Alec squares his shoulders. If he wants his words to be heard, he has to say them aloud, but the lump in his throat is very real, and the looks on both his parents’ faces are not the looks of a mother and a father. Cold and calculative, Maryse is his boss, Robert his general.

And Alec is a soldier with the barest taste of mutiny. It’s not so sweet, and tough to swallow.

“The only impression people have of Idris is the one we deserve,” Alec states, but his voice wavers. He doesn’t want to shout, but he might. He holds his hands tightly behind his back; he can’t afford to let them go. The twitching of his fingers will give him away. “Other supers are being killed. They’re being murdered in the streets and nobody was doing a damn thing about it. Until now, until someone finally started paying attention. So what if uncovering the truth costs us
some privacy? This - this isn’t about Idris, it’s bigger than us, it’s more important - it doesn’t matter what people think about Corporates. How can they think any worse of us?”

_We deserve to be hated for doing nothing._ His gut cramps. He squeezes the pain into his fingers with a vice grip. _And we deserve to be hated more if it turns out we’ve had a hand in this all along._

Maryse narrows her eyes. Robert coughs awkwardly to clear his throat. Alec exhales through his nose, clenching every muscle in his body. His legs are so rigid, he thinks a well-placed kick to his knees would snap him clean in half.

“These articles,” Maryse says slowly, “The press. They’re blaming us for the Circle. Again. Even if it’s not said outright, it’s what people will think. They blamed Idris for Valentine the first time, and they will do it again now.”

“Maybe they should,” Alec retorts. There’s an intake of breath from behind him; he could hear a pin drop. “Maybe people should blame us. Seems to me that everything wrong with this city comes back to us and what we did during the Cold War.”

“Alec ,” warns Robert. “What we do might not be pretty, but it's necessary. You know that better than anyone.”

Alec’s eyes snap from his mother to his father. “Do I?” he snaps. “Do we?”

Robert stands abruptly, laying both hands down on the table. “The safety of the citizens of New York hinge upon Idris working smoothly. Whether they realise, or like it, or not.”

“The citizens, or just those who can pay us? Or those who Senator Herondale has in her back pocket?”

“What are you insinuating, Alec?”

Alec inhales sharply. He casts a sideways look at Jace, who nods, and then at Isabelle, who thrums with untapped energy. She’s practically gnawing at the bit for Alec to keep talking. So he does.
“What are we trying to hide?” he asks the room at large. Still, with his hands behind his back. “What is it about Idris that we don’t want people to know? They already know about what happened in the 70s. It’s all public knowledge.” Alec narrows his eyes. “Idris and Herondale have been working together for years. If she’s been financing the Circle all along, I think people have the right to be suspicious about whether Idris is still involved too.”

“That’s ridiculous,” snaps Maryse. “How can you think we would be okay with that?”

*It’s not. It’s really not*, thinks Alec. Maryse eyes blaze with the same fire that Alec so often recognises in Isabelle and Jace. A part of him believes her. A part of him believes that her outrage is genuine: *how could Alec suggest that? How could Alec call out her integrity in front of everyone, how could he honestly believe that she is so heartless -*

She doesn’t understand. Idris doesn’t have to be signing contracts, and supporting Herondale’s campaign, or even putting money straight into Valentine’s welcome hands to be complicit in these murders.

They only have to know. They’ve known about the Circle for years and done nothing, let them fester. Valentine has come back. Everyone knows what he’s capable of. And Idris has looked the other way.

That’s enough.

By saying nothing, they’re complicit. By doing nothing, the blood is on their hands too.

They’re trying to shove all of it under the rug in the hope that it will go away. It won’t.

“I haven’t seen you stand up to Maryse and Robert like that in a long time,” says Aline afterwards. “It was pretty badass.”

Alec shrugs his shoulders, focused on strapping his bracers onto his forearms. But the buckles are
too fiddly for his fingers tonight and he grunts in frustration as he yanks on the leather.

Aline, already in her suit and armour, levels Alec with a flat look, the sort she always gives him when she knows he’s deflecting, which, in her experience, tends to be a lot.

“C’mon, Alec,” she says, “You’re not the only one with vigilante friends, you know. We can’t just back down now-”

He knows. He finally spoke up and made everyone listen, and yet -

‘You’re delusional,’ his father had said.

‘We’re not having this conversation now, Alec,’ added his mother. ‘If you want to talk about this, we’ll talk about it later. Right now, we’re discussing how best to keep you all safe.’

He doubts there will be a later. And if there is, he’ll be bound to desk duty all over again. They’ll take his mask. They’ll stop him from being Sentinel, and maybe they’ll punish Arkangel and Muse too, and then there will be no-one left to fight. Nightlock will be left alone out there. Aline must understand that.

He is rescued by the clack of heels on the hard floor as Izzy comes striding into the armoury.

“Alec!” she calls. Aline rolls her eyes and mouths ‘good luck’ at him as she quietly slips away, leaving Alec alone with his sister. “There you are, I’ve been looking for you.”

“Jace and I are on first patrol tonight, we have to get going,” Alec says matter-of-factly. He reaches for his spare quiver, hung up on the wall, but Izzy is quicker, swatting his hand away. She moves to step between him and his bow.

“Alec, hold on a minute.” Hands on her hips, she knows how to look intimidating when she wants to: the look in her eyes is vehement and intense. But not angry.

Still, it’s not enough for Alec to let his guard down.
“If you’re going to lecture me -”

“I’m not going to lecture you about mom and dad,” Izzy sighs, “You were right. Everything you said was right. This Herondale stuff is serious.”

“So, what’s the problem?” Alec reaches over her shoulder for his bow and quiver and this time, she doesn’t stop him. “I need to meet with Wolfsbane tonight and give him an update on the search for Johnathan Morgenstern. We need to get going.”

“It’s about those newspapers,” says Izzy, “Mom and dad may have been wrong about the Circle, but they weren’t wrong about the attention all that press is getting. People are talking about it, paying attention .”

“And?”

“I’m not blind, Alec. You forget that I remember everything I read, even once? All those headlines? Magnus wrote them. And I’m sure they’re not the only ones out there. You know and I know that he’s leading this fight from the ground, but -”

Her expression turns sympathetic. She reaches out to hold Alec’s arm.

“- now so does everyone else,” she says. “It’s going to make Magnus a target to anti-super activists, to the police, politicians, people worse than that. Whoever broke into your apartment. The Circle. It’s not safe for him to keep doing this and it’s not safe for you either, at least not as Alec. I know how you’ve been helping him with this investigation-”

“Magnus knows what he’s doing.” Alec hoists his quiver onto his shoulder, squeezing his fingers tight around the strap, knuckles whitening. His mouth is dry. He tries to ignore it, but the clench in his chest demands otherwise.

Izzy gazes up at him imploringly. “Does he? He’s not a super, Alec. Look at what’s already happened to you. Magnus is poking a bear with a stick, and ... if it’s not the Circle he gets on the wrong side of, it’s going to be Idris.”
Alec’s eyes narrow. “You think mom and dad would do something to him?”

“I don’t know,” Izzy says with another weary sigh, letting go her grip on Alec’s forearm. She wraps her arms back around body, holding herself tight. “I wish I knew what they were thinking. I wish there was some pattern in these murders I could dissect, I wish I could think of anything that might help us, but I don’t know anymore. It feels like I don’t know anything anymore. Idris is not above bribing the press to be quiet, we know that. But, the alternative is - God, I don’t know if they’re above that either. There are enough on your side that we could protect Magnus if that order went out, but I wouldn’t put it past mom and dad to try anyway. This corruption scandal has them scared. You can see it in their eyes.”

She turns her head away, looking hard at the floor. Her jaw clenches and she blinks too quick and too hard, and that’s enough for Alec’s shoulders to soften.

He steps into her space, bundling her up in his arms, and she folds easily, tucking herself beneath his chin. Alec presses his nose into the crown of her hair, folding his arms around her shoulders.

“I hate this, Alec.”

“I hate this too,” he mutters, “As if we didn’t already have enough to worry about.”

Izzy huffs weakly against his chest. “You’d almost think Idris wants the Circle to succeed in wiping out vigilantes,” she says, “Maybe they do. Less competition for business. I wouldn’t be surprised.”

*If it comes to that*, Alec finds himself thinking, *then this is not the place I want to be anymore.*

*But if I walk away, who’s to stop Idris from doing something even more terrible?*

“Have you ever received any, uh - threats? For any of your stories?”
Magnus glances up from a file of newspaper clippings on Valentine Morgenstern from the 1970s, fingers relaxing around the coffee he’s been steadily nursing since Alec arrived at his office.

“Threats? Is that what you’ve been thinking about over there?” Magnus asks, tilting his head to the side as he looks at Alec across the desk. Alec nods fiercely, so Magnus relents. “Death threats, you mean? Not in so many words, but unsavory letters in the mail, yes, I’ve had a few. Maybe not my fair share, but as a journalist, it’s to be expected -”

“Have you had any recently?”

Magnus blinks at the interruption and Alec blushes. As always, he didn’t mean for it to come out so bluntly. He hasn’t said a word in almost an hour, mulling over how best to bring this up, but in the end, he just spits it out like hacked up blood. Not easily misconstrued.

Magnus’ frown is earned. He lets the article in his hand float back to the desk. He leans forward, resting his chin on the backs of his knuckles.

“Are you worried?” Magnus asks plainly. Alec’s not sure if he means about me or for you, but Magnus’ gaze as inscrutable and unflinching as always.

Alec rubs his hand across the back of his neck, dispersing the itchy heat that irritates him there.

Worried? Yes, he thinks. He spent the entirety of last night’s patrol thinking about Magnus’ articles in Maryse’s hands. Izzy’s warning. Aline’s pleading. His own destroyed apartment.

Alec picks at the corner of the case file in front of him. He hasn’t been able to focus on a single world.

“A bit,” he lies. “I hadn’t really thought about - about the risks before, but then, yesterday … it’s like I can’t escape the headline. ‘Senator Herondale in corruption scandal’. Everyone on the subway had a copy. Every kiosk was selling it. It made me think.”

“The Editor-in-Chief wasn’t too pleased by me pushing it under his nose, certainly, but as he so wisely told me at this morning’s board meeting, ‘all sales are good sales’,” Magnus notes, “But I
got the distinct impression that a lot of people are not happy with the *Tribunal* publishing such a thing, especially as none of the other big papers would touch a circumstantial story like this with a barge pole, but I’m not surprised. There are enough people out there supporting Herondale to put her in the Senate, after all. I’m sure they didn’t take well to the slander, but when has that ever stopped the press? You don’t stop reporting the truth just because it makes people feel bad.”

“I know that,” says Alec, “I just -”

Alec glances at Magnus and finds him looking. It’s the sort of look worn when one has faced down the end of the barrel of a gun too many times, and now it’s just another day in the office. If Magnus is scared, he doesn’t show it; there are far more pressing things for him to be worried about, and that, Alec supposes, is admirable.

But it doesn’t do anything to lessen the fear in Alec’s chest, nor how it pinches at his heart.

He doesn’t care that people are angry. He doesn’t care that the Herondale campaign is pissed to be confronted with the truth. He doesn’t give a fuck whether the Editor-in-Chief is happy. Not right now.

He cares about whether Magnus is safe.

“Alexander.”

Magnus reaches across the desk, settling his hand across the back of Alec’s like he has so many times before. His rings are a spark of grounding cold, but his palm is warm, softer than Alec’s, not calloused by bow strings and arrow shafts.

“Alexander,” he repeats, “I can look after myself.” His mouth curls up at the corners into a tender, reassuring smile made just for Alec. “I’ve been doing this job for a long time now, I’ve become pretty good at it.”

“This is different,” Alec whispers, “This is the Circle.”

“Yes, this is the Circle,” says Magnus, rubbing his thumb over the back of Alec’s knuckles. “Just like, before, it was the Russians, and before that, the segregationists, and before that, the Nazis. There have been worse, and there will be worse in the future. And I will still have a job to do,
writing about them.”

Alec knows Magnus is stubborn. He’s always been stubborn and it’s one of the things Alec loves and hates the most. His tenacity, his determination, his obstinate belief that he can outlive and outlast every single Hellish thing thrown at him, and it leaves Alec so fucking terrified - but his hand is buzzing where Magnus touches him, and his thoughts won’t align, let alone leave his mouth. Alec tries to scramble for them - the words he wants to say - but they slip between his fingers. And, even then, the few he does catch sound an awful lot like: hey, I know you won’t back down from this fight if I were to ask you, but I have superpowers, so let me protect you.

“Alec.”

“Yeah?”

Magnus’ expression softens. I see you, he seems to say without words. I trust you. But you need to trust me too.

I do, Alec thinks and it reverberates as if he were an echo chamber. I do, I do, of course I do. It’s more than trust, Magnus. It’s so much more than that.

Alec can’t quite tell the feeling in his chest from fear. His pulse stutters over a beat, like five warm fingers are slowly pushing into his skin and squeezing around his heart like a sponge. He holds a breath in his mouth. He dares to turn his hand over so that they are palm-to-palm.

Magnus’ eyes flick to their hands, but his gaze doesn’t linger. He presses three fingers into the pulsepoint on Alec’s wrist, and Alec swears he feels a spark jump from Magnus’ fingers into his blood.

“I know you,” Magnus says freely, “I know the sort of man you are, and the duty you feel to put yourself in harm’s way to protect the people you care about. I want you to know that you don’t need to protect me.”

“What if I want to?” Alec breathes.

Magnus’ fingers press into Alec’s wrist a little firmer. If he’s surprised by Alec’s admission, then Alec cannot fathom what could be so unexpected; Magnus must know. Alec is not subtle. He’s
caught, swept up in the draught that follows Magnus when he walks, when he leaves rooms, when he says Alec’s full name in such a way that Alec wonders how he ever let his mother get away with that clipped Alec she so favours for convenience.

Magnus is brilliant, and maybe Alec doesn’t know how to face that yet, but what he can do, much in the same way Magnus made him promise, is keep Magnus alive.

Magnus’ fingers slide from Alec’s wrist, down into the cradle of his palm. The touch is bare, graceful, feather-light, and Magnus’ fingertips circle the lines on Alec’s hand. It tickles. Alec doesn’t pull back.

Instead, he watches as creases appear in Magnus’ forehead and in the line of his mouth, and if he asks, if Magnus asks ‘why do you want to?’, Alec thinks he will tell the truth. He won’t be able to stop it. His heart is leaking and the compulsion to rush into the bathroom and scrub his skin clear of it is -

It’s gone.

Alec curls his fingers upwards, taking hold of Magnus hand, holding him tight.

“Magnus-”

“You know,” says Magnus, a flash of his teeth as he smiles crookedly at their hands. “I can’t remember the last time someone said that to me.”

“Said what?”

“What if I want to.” Magnus runs his thumb over Alec’s knuckles again, over the years and years of scar tissues knitted together both thin and white. “That sounds … that sounds an awful lot like a declaration.”

“Magnus-”

He’s cut off by the shrill ring of the telephone, stealing the words from his mouth. Magnus narrows his eyes, glaring at the phone and willing it to be quiet, perhaps half tempted to shove it from his desk and onto the floor - but then he sighs.
“That might be Lucian,” he says, “I should get that. I asked him to call back with any updates on Commissioner Dieudonne.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. As much as I appreciate your concern over the Herondale scandal, I’m afraid it’s not our most pressing issue right now. If Dieudonne is reappointed after Herondale wins the Election, we’re going to have more worrisome problems than hate mail. And I hate it when the cops start sniffing around.”

He slips his fingers free of Alec’s grip and smiles apologetically, reaching for the receiver as Alec slumps back in his chair. Magnus flexes and unflexes his fingers, the glint of his ring bouncing across his knuckles. Alec watches it, deaf to whatever it is that Magnus says in greeting to his caller.

Magnus won’t give up. Idris won’t step down. Alec is standing in the crossfire. New York hardly respects the sanctity of no-man’s land.

On the other side of the desk, Magnus stops talking. His mouth presses into a thin line and Alec knows the news can’t be good.

Alec stares down at his hand, abandoned on the table top. He hardly has the will to lift it as it tingles with something charged and hopeless.

There’s another murder in midtown. And it is Luke on the phone, not telling them about Commissioner Dieudonne, but giving Magnus the address of the murder scene and telling him to hurry if he wants to scoop. Alec reads it all in Magnus’ face and shrugs into his overcoat before Magnus has even put the phone down.

“Let’s hail a cab,” he says, “It’ll be quicker than driving.”
The cab leaves them at an intersection in the heart of Manhattan, far and away from the poorly-lit streets of Harlem or the quiet of the quayside. This time, their onlookers are skyscrapers and the neon is bright and the police cordon lights up the surrounding block in blue and red, disintegrating every shadow, but Alec feels like he has stepped into a cloud.

He follows Magnus into an alleyway, jostling with the crowd already gathered, squeezing his way towards the caution tape. The flash of a camera bulb has stars dancing across his eyes and police torchlights dart back and forth across the walls, searching for clues, but to Alec, it’s all darkness.

He sees only the body, laid out on the ground and shrouded in black plastic. Two detectives talk over the body bag as if it isn’t even there. The victim’s arm peeks out from beneath the cover, a cupped palm collecting the drizzle. The skin is blistered but the light rain has washed away the blood and all the trace evidence too. No-one makes any effort to move the body under cover or into the back of the waiting ambulance; it’s just another carcass, better belonging to a butcher.

Alec turns his attention to the two beat cops guarding the perimeter. They talk too loudly, both sipping on Dunkin’ Donuts coffee cups, and Alec hears every word.

There’s nothing different about this murder: another body cut and burned, the name of a superhero carved into the stomach of the corpse by a sharp knife, the culprit long gone and without a trace, but it still makes Alec feel cold, right down to his bones. *Might he get frostbite in his femurs.*

The wind is sharp, shards of yet-fallen frost embedded in the drizzle. It cuts at Alec’s face and makes him wince.

He stands behind the police cordon with his hands shoved in his pockets, sirens ricocheting around his ears and spinning in his head like a hurricane. People push and shove at his shoulders, eager to get a better view of the murder scene: journalists and news anchors and rubberneckers with morbid fascination. Alec takes an elbow in the small of his back and grimaces. The crowd is building, TV vans circling the block like vultures eager for a corpse. The police do nothing to discourage them. No-one really cares for the identity of the person lying under that tarpaulin.

Magnus intercepts one of the beat cops behind the caution tape and engages him in a conversation he’s too proud to escape. Magnus nods and *uhm* s and *ah* s at all the right places to keep the man talking, scribbling all the while in his notepad; he holds his pen too tight. The leather of his gloves stretches across his knuckles.
The officer has a lot to say, and he says it loud, his face exerted in the cold, red and piggish like he’s bellowing steam. ‘All these fucking supers need to be arrested,’ he says to Magnus, ‘Get them the Hell off my streets and behind bars where they belong’, and it doesn’t matter whether they’re Circle, or Idris, or otherwise. He hates them all. They’ve dragged him away from family dinner and out into the rain. He can’t wait to vote for Senator Herondale in the Election.

Alec watches as Magnus’ eyes gloss over. His pen stills for a moment that no-one else would notice. He goes somewhere far away inside.

There’s a weight in Alec’s stomach that won’t be pushed down.

He needs to call this in to Izzy, even though she probably already knows. Arkangel and Muse might be watching from above; if Alec turned to look, he’s sure he would see a glint of silver upon the rooftops, a wink and a nod to him in the dark. He should be looking out for them. The police haven’t left yet. They can’t afford to be seen.

And yet, Alec’s eyes keep flicking back to Magnus, unwilling to let Magnus out of his sight for more than a few seconds. He watches the beat cop puff out his chest as he talks; he watches the man’s hand resting lightly on the butt of his gun; he watches, he watches, it’s all he’s good at.

Watching, waiting, notching moments like arrows until it’s too late, the moment comes, and he can’t fucking move.

Another dead and nameless body - but nameless for how much longer? Black ash crumbles into tar beneath the soles of his shoes. The fire is spreading. Johnathan Morgenstern is not being cautious anymore; he’s killing people out in the open now, where someone standing in their office might overlook the burning from their penthouse and not just draw their curtains. Killing to be seen. Killing to make a point. Alec’s running out of time.

There has to be a common link between this and every other crime scene he has stood behind in the last six months, and yet -

A raindrop splashes against the curve of Alec’s cheek and it almost makes him start because he’s not wearing his mask and he forgets, sometimes, that the leather isn’t always there to cover him. He turns his face to the sky, another fat droplet splattering against his forehead, rolling down into his eyelashes. He blinks it free, but another lands in his hairline and trickles coldly behind his ear where his skin has grown clammy.
He will be back here later. As Sentinel. Maybe with Arkangel, maybe with Wolfsbane and Veil, maybe with Nightlock. Maybe alone.

Alec looks at Magnus again, recalling how Magnus looked in silhouette against the floor-to-ceiling windows in Alec’s new apartment, the glow of the city obscuring his edges in purple and blue, painting him soft, luminous in the way only Alec knows.

He thinks about the terror he felt the night his apartment was broken into, and how his first thought, without regard for himself or the ruin of his home, had been Magnus and making sure he was unharmed.

He thinks about how Wolfsbane gave Idris up for love, and how the woman he married gave up her mask in return for sanctuary.

Magnus rolls his eyes at something the officer says and turns on his heel before the man has finished talking, striding purposefully back to Alec. His determination burns bright; he always looks so steadfast. So sure of himself. So completely and utterly focused on one thing that nothing can knock him off course.

Alec meets his stare, drawn, as ever, into Magnus’ inescapable orbit. Magnus doesn’t look away from him.

Alec tilts his chin back in the direction of the policeman, not willing to drag his hands from the depths of his pockets. He bunches his shoulders against the sharded rain. “That cop looks like you just insulted his mother,” he observes.

Magnus swats Alec on the arm with his notepad, before stepping close to Alec’s side to use him as a windbreak. His shoulder squashes against Alec’s.

“He didn’t say anything of use,” Magnus remarks coolly. Alec feels his words more than he hears them. Magnus shifts against him, eager for body heat. “Your standard anti-super tripe and a spiel of Herondale rhetoric. Nothing about the murder we didn’t already hear from Luke. Victim seems to be older, maybe in her forties or fifties, but there are plenty of older vigilantes in this city, so it’s not out of the ordinary enough to be surprised.”

“We should follow it up anyway.”
“Obviously,” Magnus agrees. “At this point, anything and everything we can get our hands on might be a lead. I’ll have a look through my case files back at the office and see if we can’t make an ID before the police do.” His eyes don’t stay still, scanning the crime scene, the caution tape, the scorched walls of the narrow alleyway, the film of smoke that has settled on higher windows. His trouble is palpable. He’s searching for a clue that cannot be found because it doesn’t exist, it hasn’t been left behind.

Magnus burrows deeper into the turned-up collar of his trenchcoat. The whole length of his body is pressed up against Alec’s side, stealing what little warmth Alec has to give. With a sigh, he tips his head to nudge Alec’s shoulder with his cheek: let’s go, he says through a touch.

Alec will be back here tonight.

He will not want to be.

“We really should stop meeting like this, Sentinel.”

Alec crouches in the middle of the alleyway, scuffing his fingers through the stain of blood and charcoal left behind on the concrete. The body is long gone, but the burning smell lingers, and it’s putrid and bitter and Alec tastes the charcoal on the back of his tongue, a cruel reminder that he will never escape.

He doesn’t look up as Nightlock drops down from out of the sky, flicking out his coat behind him.

“You’re funny,” Alec deadpans. Nightlock scoffs as he stoops next to Alec. He smells clean, like earthy sandalwood, and Alec wonders if it’s just the humidity in the air, or if his hair is curling because he’s just stepped out of the shower to come here.

No. No, he’s not fresh-faced enough for that. Beneath his mask, Nightlock looks drawn. Alec sympathises.
“I spoke to a contact in the police,” says Nightlock, “Victim’s name was Iris Rouse, forty seven, Caucasian, private physician. Certainly used to be a vigilante in the 70s, but not recently active from what I can gather.”

Alec grumbles, rubbing black dust between him thumb and forefinger, frowning as it sticks as a paste to his glove.

“The Circle knew who she was anyway,” he says, “Didn’t matter. She wasn’t safe.”

Nightlock sighs. “The press are going to have a field day with this one. Her alias was Red Witch. Very nasty ability of temporary bodily possession. She didn’t use it for good.”

“Great. They’re already blaming these deaths on those of us that do good.” Alec hauls himself to his feet and walks away - he doesn’t know where he’s going or what he plans to do when he gets there, but he can’t stay here, not longer than he has to. Not when the stench of burning skin is making his stomach twist and churn and every passing headlight across the mouth of the alleyway makes his blood spike.

His pace is brisk, but Nightlock catches up to his side easily.

“Sentinel? Is something the matter?”

Alec grunts. Of course he’s so transparent. He doesn’t know what he was expecting.

“’S nothing, don’t worry about it,” he replies, quickening his pace. “C’mon, we need to rendezvous with Arkangel and Muse and fill them in.”

He doesn’t get far. Nightlock reaches out and grabs him and yanks hard on Alec’s arm, preventing him from running.

“The moment you start lying to me is the moment the Circle wins, because we’re not a team anymore,” says Nightlock. His glare is fierce, and it extinguishes any biting words that Alec wants to say but not to mean. “You don’t have to tell me all the truth, I don’t ask for that, but you don’t get to lie to me when something is clearly wrong.”
“That’s bull-”

“Sentinel.”

Alec clamps his mouth shut and looks away, prising his arm from Nightlock’s grasp. Alec doesn’t try to flee. His stubborn want for someone to tell him he’s not overreacting wins out. He stays rooted to the spot.

Nightlock moves himself into Alec’s line of sight. “Is this about the other night?” he asks carefully, “The night when your apartment was broken into?”

They haven’t spoken about it yet: that night on the rooftop and Alec’s falling-apart panic after seeing Simon with powers and Nightlock’s invisible touch being the thing that soothed him in the end, and Alec is thankful for that. Thankful for Nightlock’s silence. For the most part.

“It’s not about that,” Alec chokes. He closes his eyes to rein himself back in. All he sees behind his eyelids is Maryse throwing that newspaper onto the table again. The front page bears a body with a familiar face. “It’s - I don’t -”

Alec doesn’t know how to explain the swirling feeling in his chest without giving himself away - and not in the sense that Nightlock might clue in on his identity. Alec’s beyond caring about that now; if it would make a blind bit of difference, he’d rip off his mask right here and now and let Nightlock see him.

But instead, he fears Nightlock seeing that the panic has not left him. It’s buried shallow beneath his surface in an unmarked grave.

He fears Nightlock seeing through to the daytime part of him, and he fears giving away the things he feels for Magnus, telling someone else before he’s barely told himself, and, perhaps, putting a name to the weight inside his chest and belly at last.

Perhaps he fears having to ask: can you do it again? The thing you did on the rooftop that night? Can you touch me without touching me at all?

Alec scrubs a hand down his face. That familiar frustration of not being good enough rears its ever-so-ugly head.
“You’re scared.”

Alec’s eyes flash open, his hand paused on his jaw.

“What?”

“You’re scared of something,” Nightlock repeats, “I can see it. You don’t have to hide it. Not from me.”

“I’m not scared,” Alec lies.

“What, then? Because if you’re not scared, then I don’t know how to tell you that I am. There’s nothing about this situation that isn’t terrifying. Whatever it is that you can’t shake, I guarantee, it plagues me too.”

Alec shifts, glancing back down the alleyway. The street is empty, the cordon gone, the vultures dispersed, but even his keen eyesight can’t pick out depth in the darker parts of the night. He looks up towards the rooftops and the enduring blue glow.

“Not here,” he mutters under his breath. When Nightlock tilts his head, Alec says again, a little louder, “Not here. Can we -”

He flicks his eyes to the roof and Nightlock catches on with a quiet “oh”, and then, “of course”. He holds out his gloved hand to Alec, palm up, the lines of his fingers strong and graceful.

*(Can you touch me without touching me at all? An echo.)*

Alec hesitates a moment, but places his hand in Nightlock’s with a deep steadying breath. Glove-to-glove, the leather squeaks.

Gripping Nightlock’s fingers, Alec braces himself for the drop of his stomach, but it doesn’t come. The lift-off is gentle, falling upwards like rising smoke. Weightlessness takes root in his body.
Nightlock waves his free hand in an upwards direction and Alec’s feet float off the ground.

Nightlock guides them upwards: an invisible push beneath Alec’s feet keeps him suspended in the air, and they weave between the telephone and washing lines that criss-cross above the alley, home to a chorus of disgruntled crows that scatter into the dark when their slumber is disturbed.

The phosphorescence of the city appears above the rooftops, distant skyscrapers piercing the fog, their uppermost floors swallowed up by ominous cloud. The eerie light bleeds into the sky, staining the night not black, but an unnatural bloom of moody purple and dirty orange.

Alec exhales heavily as Nightlock lowers them both onto the closest rooftop, concrete beneath the soles of his feet still a welcome thing - but there’s no queasiness, not this time.

The air always tastes cleaner up high: the stench of stale beer and stomped-out cigarettes stagnates down below, clinging to dirty sidewalks and wallowing in the gutters, but up here, it’s all the city’s petrichor, the threat of thunderstorms, the smell of fresh grey rain. It’s never quite pleasant, but it’s comforting in some strange way that Alec will not admit out right.

Nightlock turns to face him, and Alec quickly realises that he doesn’t have the time to soliloquise about the city skyline tonight. Nightlock waits for an answer.

“There’s been a lot of stories in the press lately,” Alec begins, but it comes easier than he was expecting. “Supporting the vigilantes, blaming the Circle. Linking Senator Herondale to everything that’s going on, linking Idris-”

“There has,” Nightlock agrees.

“Has there … has there been much talk about it? Among the other supers that you know?”

“There have been murmurs,” says Nightlock, “No more than usual. I don’t think anyone’s surprised that Herondale has a hand in this. She’s been vehement enough about her hatred for vigilantes in the past. People are still too scared to speak up about it, but at least they’re finally paying attention.” Nightlock’s eyes narrow. “Why do you ask?”

“It’s a lot of attention,” Alec says, echoing his mother’s words in a way that makes him feel wretched. “For supers, for everyone helping the supers. Anyone investigating Herondale is a
target. It’s gonna be harder to keep our identities secret … and we’re the ones with masks.”

Nightlock takes a step closer, lifting his hand as if to brush his fingers against Alec’s arm. He thinks better of it at the last minute.

“Is this why you’re worried?” he asks instead, “Unmasking?”

“Not of me,” Alec replies, “Or of you.”

“Someone you care about, though,” assumes Nightlock, “Not a super?”

Alec shakes his head.

“But they’re in danger by association. I see.” A sharp flash crosses his eyes. His mouth turns downwards in distaste. Cautiously, he asks, “Is something happening at Idris?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. Idris aren’t happy with all the press, they think they’re being blamed for Valentine again and it’s ‘bad for business’, and I -” Alec sucks in a deep breath. He wills the panic to stay hidden. “I don’t know how to trust them anymore.”

“Foolish to trust them in the first place,” Nightlock mutters, but he doesn’t mean it maliciously. He clears his throat. “Arkangel and Muse certainly seem to hang on your every word. Your sister too, I’m sure. There must be enough of you there to make a difference if you’re asked to do something unsavory. You can refuse. Stage a mutiny.”

“There aren’t enough of us. Not to keep everyone safe from both Idris and the Circle if it comes to that.”

“I’ve told you before. There are millions of people in New York. You can’t protect everyone.”

Alec meets Nightlock’s gaze with a resolve that feels so very thin and fragile.

“I have to try.”
Surprise takes root in Nightlock’s eyes. He opens his mouth to speak, to protest, perhaps, but promptly closes it again. He spins on his heels and walks towards the edge of the rooftop without another word.

*What have I said?* pleads the voice in Alec’s head. *What’ve I said, what did I do that was wrong?*

*Don’t go, don’t go. It was the truth. You said you wanted it.*

And Alec’s heart falls out of his chest, because he expects Nightlock to step over the edge and disappear into the night, he expects Nightlock to leave him in a silence he will have no choice but to dig his way out of.

But then Nightlock flares out his coat and sits down upon the parapet that overlooks the avenue below. He swings his legs out over the edge, and, glancing back over his shoulder, tilts his head at Alec. He pats the concrete slab beside him with the flat of his palm.

“Sentinel,” he says and just one word is enough.

Alec moves before he thinks, before he breathes at all, a clumsy shuffle to Nightlock’s side, dropping down next to him with far less grace. He discards his bow and quiver behind him, and he might feel distinctly bare without them but -

Nightlock’s shoulder brushes against his. He’s warm. Human. *Why would he be anything else?*

“Can I ask you something?” Nightlock asks then. “Is it … is it one particular person that you’re worried about? About them being found out?”

“No,” Alec replies too swiftly. He thinks of Simon stumbling around in that God-awful suit of his and falling down fire escapes and getting himself tangled up in schemes and politics. But it’s not Simon who has his name splashed all over the papers. Thinking about Simon might stop him sleeping, but thinking about Magnus getting hurt stops him breathing. “I mean - yes. Yeah. One person.”

Nightlock frowns, restlessly rubbing his thumb and forefinger together where he rests his hands in
his lap. “And you think, what, exactly? That Idris is going to ask you to do something to them? That you’re incapable of keeping this person of yours safe from both your compatriots and the Circle?”

“I don’t know.”

“Now, that is bullshit,” Nightlock scoffs. “Whatever you think you’re capable of, Sentinel, I guarantee that you are capable of ten times more. I’ve seen you in action. I’ve seen you fight. I trust my back to you, and that speaks volumes, believe me.”

“You’re just saying that.”

“I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it. You have superpowers. They’re meant for good. Screw Idris, and I don’t say that lightly. You should use your powers to protect the people you care about. Because, otherwise, what’s the point in having them to begin with?”

But what if I’m not good enough. The thought is there again, vagrant as ever. It’s been dwelling in his shadow as long as he’s lived. What if I’m not good enough to keep him safe? What if they send Jace to do it? What do I do then? I can’t beat him.

You idiot, scolds the voice in his head. They’re never gonna send Jace. He’s on your side. He’ll fight your corner. They’ll send someone else. Someone who doesn’t give a fuck about you or what you want.

Alec exhales slowly. His breath mushrooms in the cold like a detonation cloud.

“Can I ask you something?”

Nightlock doesn’t hesitate, angling his body towards Alec. “Of course.”

“When did you get your powers? When did they manifest, I mean?”

Nightlock’s tongue pokes out of his mouth as he wets his lip. He thinks on the question for a long moment.
"I was young," he says at last, "Young enough not to understand what was going on, but old enough to realise that my differentness was bad and my secret to keep." He curls his fingers into his palm and Alec watches the air ripple around them. "I didn’t start out like this. I was moving cups and saucers around my bedroom with my mind for a long time. Stealing the remote for the television and infuriating my step father. Pulling the glow-in-the-dark stars off my ceiling and making them dance before my eyes. I didn’t know what I could do until I pushed myself."

“When did you decide to use your powers for - for this?” Alec gestures between them. “For more?”

“Oh, that, I remember.” A rueful smile unfolds across Nightlock’s mouth. He seems to blush with the fondness of a memory. “It was 1980 and I was eighteen and shameless, my friend and I had just moved out of our parents’ homes and bought our first apartment. We were celebrating, walking back from a bar or a nightclub, I’m not sure. I was drunk and being obvious with my powers and two police officers stopped us on the streets. They told me they were going to arrest me. I asked them why. They didn’t have an answer, but one pulled his handcuffs and the other grabbed his gun. My friend stepped in front of me to try and reason with them, but all they saw was a black woman resisting arrest. So I used my powers to slam them both against the nearest wall and we made a run for it. I made my first mask later that night.”


*Of course he’s always known what to do with his powers.*

“I can’t remember when they gave me a mask.”

Nightlock shakes his head. “You don’t have to explain. I know about Idris. I know how young they start you.”

“I do, though. I do. It’s just - I don’t know how to -” Alec laughs breathlessly. “I don’t know how to justify the things I’ve done for them, even though I know I - even though I know I didn’t really get a choice. Arkangel, he - I’ve always been trying to keep up with him and I never really thought about why. I thought I was just doing it because how else was I gonna keep him safe? Keep everyone safe? But Idris were always encouraging me, pushing me to train until I bled, and I just wish - I wish I’d seen it sooner.” He looks at Nightlock. “I wish I’d seen you sooner.”
“Well, you would’ve been sorely disappointed, then, because I didn’t used to be this much of a catch.”

Alec huffs, unable to stop himself from smiling. “Shut up.”

Nightlock grins. “Make me.” He leans back, settling his weight onto his palms. His smile doesn’t fade as he gazes up at the clouds, but it changes, evolving like the wind. “We’ve all done things with our powers we’re ashamed of, Sentinel. Even me. All that matters is what we do with them now, the choice we make today. It’s not about whether you’re capable of goodness, because I know you are. You want to keep someone safe. You want to keep everyone safe, but the world is against you, and that’s a terrible thing to realise. But the question isn’t whether you can, but rather, whether you will.”

Alec doesn’t understand. It doesn’t seem like a choice to make; he already knows the answer. There’s no part of him that’s going to rest while Magnus’ life is on the line. “Whether I will?”

“Whether you will,” Nightlock repeats. “Whether you’ll walk away from Idris for good, whether you’ll forgive them for this, for threatening someone you -” A brief hesitation. A word catches in Nightlock’s throat, and Alec shouldn’t notice, but he does. It seems to matter. “-someone you clearly care about. I’m not asking you whether you’ll expend yourself for your friend’s sake. That seems a given.”

Alec nods. “It is.”

“Well, then,” says Nightlock. “Do what must be done, Sentinel. Stop at nothing. Don’t let anyone get in your way.”

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_Do what must be done._

Alec has always been good at following commands, and Sentinel has always been better.
It’s easy to change his patrol route. Izzy doesn’t bat an eyelid; she was in that boardroom with Alec, she saw those newspapers, she knows who Magnus is. She’s ever so good at putting two and two together when it pleases her.

Alec keeps his supersuit in his locker. He changes into in the alleyway behind the building. He climbs the fire escape with his bow slung over his shoulder, praying not be seen. And he stands on the rooftop of the Tribunal and waits until he sees Magnus’ car pull out of the parking lot and then he breathes. Every day. Every night, watching Magnus leave, and then he can leave too. That’s how it goes.

The first night, Alec tails him home. The traffic thins the closer it gets to midnight, but the crawl is still slow enough for Alec to keep up with Magnus’ sleek black car as he navigates his way across the city through a sea of angry taxi cabs. Alec watches Magnus pull into his parking garage from across the street, hesitates until the lights in the penthouse flicker into life, and that, Alec decides, is a step too far.

The next night, it’s enough just to see Magnus get into his car safely. It has to be. If he stays for longer, he starts getting paranoid. If he thinks too much, every car horn and every police siren becomes the cold plunge of a fist to his gut.

What if, asks his conscience. What if something happens to him tonight? What if something happens when he ducks into a coffee shop on his way to work? What happens if he steps out of the office to meet a witness?

What happens when you’re not there?

He’s torn. When is he not? Skulking in the shadows and watching Magnus from afar are what Alec’s good at, but tailing cars risks Sentinel being seen. And if Sentinel’s name and face end up in the papers too -

Well, then they’re both a target.

Jace notices after a week of Alec being late to patrol, although Jace doesn’t understand the why.
He’s just angry again that Alec is shirking missions whilst Jace has frostbite where the sun doesn’t shine. (“That’s everywhere,” Alec points out. Jace gives him the finger before he flies off.)

It’s a Friday. The city is buzzing despite November loitering on the horizon. There are too many people on the streets and Alec can’t watch them all and that’s a problem when he’s supposed to be on the security detail of some smarmy politician at Maryse’s behest.

Sentinel’s on look-out. Beneath his knees, the cornice of the rooftop is cold and unforgiving where he kneels with his eye to the scope of his bow, scanning the floor of the building opposite for movement. Most of the curtains are shut. He can’t see anything save vague shadows moving in and out of dull yellow light.

The truth is, he didn’t read the mission brief, not really. He skimmed it and threw it across the table to Jace and stalked out of that boardroom before Underhill could finish giving them their orders. His mother hadn’t made an appearance, but Alec could hear her in Underhill’s recital of her words.

It’s not Herondale, he knows that. This politician he’s meant to be protecting. Maybe they’re a mayoral candidate or the District Attorney or a visiting dignitary; Alec can’t remember. He doesn’t even know if they’re on Herondale or Penhallow’s campaign, but it doesn’t really matter. He’s distracted. He doesn’t want to be here.

Clary is perched on the fire escape down below, a better view of the parking garage and the three armed bodyguards who stand stiffly in front of the lobby doors. Jace is circling the building, five loops at a time, and then a circuit of the block. Alec has lost count how many times he’s seen Jace fly past.

They haven’t had a mission in a while. Alec was convinced his mother would assign him to desk duty after his outburst in the boardroom, but maybe this is her trying to punish him: you don’t get to walk away from Idris. No-one gets to walk away from Idris.

(But that’s not really true, is it, mom?)

Maybe the mission wasn’t his mother’s idea at all. Maybe it’s Izzy pulling strings, doing just enough to make Jace and Alec still seem subservient to Idris whilst they sneak around on patrol, hunting for pyrokinetics and men with silver tongues.

It doesn’t matter. This still feels too much like a waste of time and Alec is getting antsy. His fingers
twitch upon his scope. His knee is going numb. His mask is beginning to itch and the Kevlar on his chest beginning to chafe, and if he doesn’t get up and run, somewhere, anywhere soon, he’s going to lose his mind.

Wolfsbane has sent word that another vigilante in Brooklyn claims to have seen Azazel, the teleporter Wolfsbane has been looking for, and he wants back-up. Alec tries not to think about the fact Magnus’ loft is near their designated rendezvous point. It doesn’t mean anything. Brooklyn’s a big place.

Alec needs to get there as soon as possible.

He doesn’t have time to make sure that some sleaze-bag politician doesn’t get shot by his opponent in the mayoral elections or whatever the fuck this is.

“How’s everything looking?” comes Izzy’s voice in Alec’s ear. He’s cold and wet and miserable and he’s sure it comes across in his reply.

“Great. Nothing moving, no-one’s dead. Seems like mom and dad will get paid tonight.”

Izzy snorts, but Alec cannot summon a smile. His mouth is pulled into a sour pout and he scans the street below once more through his scope.

“Jace and Clary?”

“They’re fine. Muse is in position. Arkangel is pissed that I was late. But as long as he doesn’t mess up here and we can get to Wolfsbane before the end of the night, I don’t care how far his head is up his own ass.”

A beat of silence. Izzy doesn’t reply immediately, but Alec can hear her thinking. He can hear her side-stepping around the things she clearly wants to say to him; it’s all very loud.

“Iz. Spit it out.”

“You could just tell him, you know. Jace, I mean. He wouldn’t be so mad if you told him what
Alec scowls. “I’m not doing anything, it’s just the investigation -”

“That’s a lie and you know that I know it is. Don’t try to bullshit me, Alec. You don’t have to keep watch on Magnus every night. Give yourself a break. Let someone else help out. ”

“I’m not -”

“I’m not stupid. I know what you’re doing. I have a tracker on your suit, remember? I’ve seen you follow his car as far as the bridge three times this week, same route every time before you double back. Hell, I practically encouraged you to do it, I get it. Keeping an eye on Magnus is important, especially now. ”

“I’m not -” Alec tries again, “Okay, I am , but -”

“But it’s your thing ,” Izzy interrupts, “ I know that’s what you’re gonna say. ”

“It is my thing,” Alec replies. He hears the whir of Jace’s wings as he flies by, but Jace doesn’t come into land. Alec still feels tense. He folds up his bow and turns away from the edge, pressing his fingers to his coms bud. He lowers his voice, as if it will make a damn bit of difference. “It’s practically my fault that Magnus has a target on his back now, I’m the one helping him with his investigation. Idris are watching him because of me .”

“So let us help you! Maybe it’s a surprise, but we’re your family, we care about you. And I know you care about him, about Magnus. For all he’s done for supers, and for all he’s done for you, we owe him a lot. I, personally, owe him a lot. So does Jace.”

“Iz.”

“ Just think about it, okay? If Idris is watching Magnus, we all should be looking out for him. I know you said you didn’t want Meliorn to set up bugs or cameras, but there are other things we can do to keep Magnus safe. We could rotate patrols on his building. Have a different person follow him home every day, just so you can sleep at night. Clary would say yes in a heartbeat, if you asked her. Aline and Helen, Lydia. So would Jace, for the record. He’s not stupid, despite what he may want you to think … he knows something’s bothering you. If you just told him … tell him
someone you care about is in trouble, and Jace would bend over backwards for you, you know that. That’s how he works. He thinks with his heart. You don’t have to keep this from him, even though you clearly want to. ”

“Izzy,” Alec insists, but he doesn’t know what he wants to say. He can’t argue with her when she’s right.

But I should be good enough to do this alone, comes the echo. I’m as good as Jace. I can protect Magnus without him.

(I know you are. I know you can, answers Nightlock in a memory. It’s not about whether you’re capable.)

If it were so easy to step out of the shadow of years and years of bleeding to keep up with Jace, be as good as Jace, be as fast as Jace, Alec would’ve done it along time ago. Pain grounds him, but not this much pain. Not when it’s in his heart and he can’t reposition it into his hand, into a split lip or bruised knuckles.

He just doesn’t want his problems, his inadequacies to be a burden on everyone else.

“You’re not a burden, big brother. Please don’t think that. ”

He didn’t realise he said that out loud.

“I didn’t - I didn’t mean that. Forget it. Sorry.”

“Didn’t mean it, or didn’t mean to say it?” Izzy probes. She sounds too sympathetic. “I know you want to look out for all of us, but we’re allowed to look out for you too. This Circle investigation, all this Herondale stuff, you’ve been shouldering so much of it alone for so long and I’m … I’m worried about you. About what’s going on inside your head.” If Alec could hear he frown, he would. Stubbornness is a family trait. “So don’t keep stuff like this from me, okay? You could’ve said!”

“I’ll talk to Arkangel about it,” Alec grumbles. “Sorry.”
“Promise?”

“Iz—”

“Pinky promise? You know those are sacred.”

“Pinky promise. Just … don’t nag me about it.”

“Alec, it’s my job to nag you,” Izzy laments. "I’m a professional nagger." He hears her typing away at her keyboard. “Alright. That’s enough of the soppy stuff for one night. Try and flag Jace down. I’ve got Aline and Helen on their way to relieve you guys so you can catch up with Wolfsbane. I’m plotting the quickest route to Brooklyn now. I’ll send you the coordinates in a sec …”

Alec cannot remember the last time he had a good night’s sleep. When he was ten or eleven years old, he supposes, a good number of years after Valentine’s coup, but just before Jace joined the family and Alec’s childish dreams were replaced with rerunning training scenarios in his head and counting his flaws before closing his eyes.

Sleeping in his new apartment is not easy. The shadows across his bed are long and emaciated. The floorboards creak in a way he’s not used to. The pipes behind the walls are old and groan at all hours of the night, but mostly when he’s finally home after chasing yet another unsuccessful lead and just wants to sleep.

Alec’s new bed is too soft and his back aches from it in the mornings, and he keeps making eye contact with his downstairs neighbour when he collects his mail, who he is sure can hear him coming and going from his balcony at stupid o’clock in the morning.

All those things are bearable.

It’s just everything else … isn’t.
Wolfsbane’s tip was a bust. The vigilante they were meant to be meet didn’t show.

“So maybe she did, and took one look at our three pet Corporates, and did a runner,” Veil had sneered, looking at Arkangel as she said it. And any other night, Jace would’ve taken the bait and parried her, but not tonight. He’d bared his teeth and muttered a barely audible ‘fuck you’ and disappeared into the dark, leaving both Alec and Clary stranded.

“Sorry about him,” Clary had said, “It’s been a long night. He’s just as frustrated as all of us that this didn’t pan out. I think we were all hoping for that lead on the teleporter.”

Veil had narrowed her eyes, a barbed response on the tip of her tongue, but Wolfsbane had raised his hand. “I think everyone’s running on fumes. Let’s not snap at each other’s throats. I’ll try and make contact with Salem again, see if she won’t talk to me on my own. She’s good friends with Nightlock. She trusts me, but she’s scared of Circle and rightly so.”

Alec had said nothing. He couldn’t. Forming words had suddenly felt like such an effort, his entire body lethargic and slow, that the thought of talking had become insurmountable. Veil had caught his eye and looked at him like she could tell, like she knew exactly how his mouth had glued itself shut with exhaustion, and he had given her a nod, and that was that.

He and Clary had left with nothing.

Now, Alec peels himself out of his supersuit, flinging his mask across his bedroom; he half expects it to stick to the wall with a repulsive splat, but it just knocks his alarm clock off his dresser. He falls face first onto his mattress, his pillow muffling his groan that turns into a yawn and then a sound too close to a sob.

He wants to sleep, but can’t. He screws his eyes tightly shut, suffocating himself in the pillow, but every bruise on his body sings like it’s being pressed upon. His hands still sting with a phantom bow string cutting into the flesh of his fingertips. He wonders how he’s ever supposed to catch a teleporter, let alone a pyrokinetic.

He can’t outrun a teleporter, no matter how fast he is. He can’t stop a teleporter from breaking into his apartment and turning it upside down in a rampage, or wandering into Idris one day and killing everyone he cares about, or catching Simon in his stupid supersuit out on the streets -
“No. No, no, no,” Alec pleads aloud. He grabs the other pillow and covers the back of his head with it, yanking it down over his ears. They don’t even know this teleporter is working for the Circle. Not for sure. It’s only a hunch. Only a red yarn string on Wolfsbane’s cork board. That’s it. It’s not a given.

You’re spiralling, he thinks. He tries to recall the breathing techniques Izzy taught him when they were little; she meant for him to use them when steadying his bow, but Alec’s found alternatives. Breathe in through the mouth. Breathe out through the nose. Stop freaking out.

He doesn’t dare move and, eventually, he falls asleep. But it’s fitful, it’s restless. The barest sound stirs him from a doze. The wind howls outside, but his blankets are too warm, they make him sweat.

If he dreams, he doesn’t remember. He’s sure it’s for the best.

The sunrise wakes him.

Or, more truthfully, the moments before sunrise: the pale purple-greys and watery yellows of dawn, where the sun is still a forethought beneath the horizon.

He can’t remember the last time there was a sunrise. He can’t remember the last time he woke before his alarm, though he certainly doesn’t feel rested.

Bleary-eyed, Alec scrubs at his face with the back of his hand and rolls over towards the strange, empyrean glow dripping through his window where he forgot to draw the blinds. He squints at that first glimpse of sun, the strange sheen to the skyscrapers outside, and he’s so cotton-headed for a moment that he doesn’t know what he’s looking at.

The sky is turning orange. There are so few clouds. It sets the city alight, though the glint of rain in the air shimmers like diamonds upon the window pane.

His alarm clock reads half-past five. He glances at his discarded mask on the floor; he has a few hours left before work. Before being Sentinel becomes a risk again.
Sentinel is on the rooftop of the Tribunal by six, and whatever sun was pushing at the curve of the horizon has fallen back into the water again. A bank of grey cloud rolls in across the bay and swallows up the splashes of dawn that spill across the water like oil; Alec watches it be consumed, New York fading into desaturation.

Maybe Alec would miss the sunrise if he knew it like the rain, but he has grown up in this city where no fine line can be drawn between the day and the night. The phases of twilight seem to linger on and on, a pale haze that dulls the senses and feels like nothing, wiping away all sense of time.

Where the clouds are thin, the sky glows with what could almost be called yellow, pale like chiffon and just as flimsy. Alec has to squint, wondering if his eyes are playing tricks on him.

It’s a figment of a sunrise. Nobody else has stopped to notice; the city already rumbles, awake long before the dawn. New York never really sleeps after all, just bides its time underground, someplace dark and disgusting until the smell of cheap street food and instant coffee rouses it to the surface.

The wind rummages through the fletchling of Alec’s quiver, the sound like bullrush hiss. It doesn’t really harmonise with the dissonance of car horns and the rattle of store shutters hauled open for the day.

Still, this is perhaps the quietest he’s ever heard the city, save for when the snow swallows it up. He’s treading a very precarious line.

_Cinderella fantasy_ , whispers the wind. _Sentinel shouldn’t be here. He’s out way too late and he’s running out of shadows to hide in._

Alec feels restless. Usually, he can control it, but not today; it feels unruly, it feels like a scratch. But his nails are blunt and he wants to do something with his hands because there’s this tremble in
his fingers that might be sleep deprivation, or might be anxiety, or might be something else entirely, and he fears it might result in him picking at his skin until he’s free of it.

He should be getting dressed for work around now. He’ll leave for the subway in fifteen minutes. In forty-five, he’ll be at his stop, and before the hour, he’ll be at his desk. He should go. He needs to get changed, brush his teeth, put on a tie. He needs to play pretend at being human.

Alec doesn’t move. He stands on the lip of the building, his toes a step away from curling around the edge, and lets his bow hang loose in his grip. He closes his eyes, lifts his arms just a little, and imagines the wind picking him up, letting him fly, like Jace, and not come back. He doesn’t know where he’d go; the guilt of leaving would probably bring him home, but the thought of New York tumbling away beneath his feet sounds like a freedom that would settle him.

Just a moment longer. He’ll face reality in just a moment.

The door of the fire escape opens and closes behind him, an intruder taking care to shut it softly. There are footsteps too: the first few are sure and steady, and then they stop abruptly, but after a moment of punctuated silence, they start walking again, the tread more gentle.

Alec breathes in deeply, thinking about making an escape; he can be someone’s early morning phantom. He moves a step towards the edge, but doesn’t take the leap. His fingers twitch on his bow, but he doesn’t draw an arrow to knot to the end of his zipwire.

The footsteps stop not more than five feet behind him.

“Good morning, stranger.”

It’s Magnus.

And Alec finds himself exhaling on an exasperated smile; it’s a little manic, but so is the disbelieving shake of his head. He doesn’t turn around immediately, but he lets his shoulders fall.

“You’re not thinking about jumping, are you?”
Magnus says it teasingly, but Alec can hear the tight note in his voice, the slight unease, the unspoken: *if you are, I’ll go over with you, trying to pull you back*. Alec doesn’t know how he feels about that, so he turns to greet Magnus.

Somehow, the dying light of dawn still finds Magnus’ face. It cradles the curve of his cheek, the shadow beneath his lip, the dark smudges of makeup. His eyes are soft and welcoming, and he wears this peculiar, lop-sided smile both wearily fond and familiar. In his hand, he clutches a polystyrene coffee cup like it’s his last life-line in the world, but his eyebrows raise as Alec meets his gaze in a way that suggests he might just have found another.

Alec’s heart flips over itself. He can’t help it. The mask can’t stop it. Not anymore.

“Hey,” Alec says dopily. He doesn’t reply to Magnus’ question, so Magnus rolls his eyes, stepping closer to Alec as Alec steps away from the edge. “What are you doing up here?”

Too candid. Too honest. The hour is too early for coherent thought. He’s still in his supersuit, and that’s a risk, it always is, but -

This is the ledge. The real ledge, the one he wants to be thrown off of.

“Early morning ritual,” says Magnus, raising his coffee cup. “A bit of peace and quiet before the day begins and my phone starts ringing off the hook.” He looks Alec up and down and a small frown puzzles his brow. “What are *you* doing here?”

Alec does his best to shrug. “Patrol,” he says, and Magnus makes a *tsk* sound that tells Alec he doesn’t believe him.

“Supers may have it rough, but you don’t get lumped with the graveyard shift unless you’ve done something truly terrible.”

Alec shrugs again, ducking his gaze when Magnus’ stare grows too intense.

“So you haven’t done something terrible?” Magnus guesses, taking a thoughtful sip of his coffee. “Quite right. I don’t think you don’t have it in you.”
“Hey.”

“Only calling it as I see it,” Magnus fires back, but his mouth breaks into a smile too early, giving him away.

The familiarity is strange, yet easy. They haven’t seen each other like this, like Magnus and Sentinel, since the night Alec walked him back to his apartment. They’ve only met once before.

Magnus was sharper then. He’s sharper when Alec is not Alec, less soft, more guarded. He plays games -

No. He’s not playing a game now. That was then. Something has changed.

Magnus is smiling at Sentinel with the smile he usually reserves for Alec ... and Alec alone.

Why - why are you looking at me like that? Why are you here?

Magnus takes another sip of his coffee, and says, with the rim pressed to his mouth, “Protection duty?”


“Yes and no,” Magnus shrugs, closing the distance between them. “For me, yes. I’ve never seen you in the daylight before. Whatever brought you here must be serious, but not to Idris, because I seem to remember you’re more inclined to chaperone silly drunk men home from bars late at night, rather than catch the sunrise. So, Idris must not know you’re out here, and therefore, such a mission as you clearly have must be important to you.” Magnus licks his lips of coffee. “Just you.”

“I’m that transparent, am I?”

“Unfailingly so, I’m afraid.”

Magnus grins again, pleased with himself, and Alec can only mirror it, and then they’re standing
on a rooftop at daybreak, looking at each other like a pair of starstruck fools.

Maybe that’s only Alec.

Or maybe not.

Magnus gestures at Alec with his coffee cup. “So. Mister Protection Duty,” he says, and it’s like a purr. “Who is it that has earned dear Sentinel’s favour? They work here, I’m assuming?”


Alec rolls his eyes but plays along. “None of the above,” he says.

Magnus raises his eyebrows again. “Ohhh,” he drawls, “Now that’s interesting. Risking your life for a stranger seems rather out of character.”

“I didn’t say they were a stranger.”

Magnus narrows his eyes at Alec, incensed by Alec’s quick reply. *What was he expecting Alec to say?* Alec’s not sure, but he likes the way it lifts the corner of Magnus’ mouth with a twitch he cannot suppress.

“Sentinel, you’re not here for me, are you?”

The way he says it, it makes Alec wonder if Magnus means for his words to be light, to be jovial. It makes Alec wonder if Magnus thinks they sound careless - because, to Alec, they don’t.

There’s this strain in Magnus’ voice that can’t be masked, where words are thick and careful and those of a man who has had days where he questions whether he’s enough to deserve someone’s protection.
Alec's silence is loud enough to be an answer.

Magnus brings his coffee cup to his lips but doesn’t take a drink; he folds one arm protectively around his middle and gazes out over the city. “You flatter me,” he says. His eyes pass quickly over the dull-coloured skyscrapers; he’s not really looking. “But I’ll be fine.”

Alec’s voice is very small when he replies. Very small, very honest. If he speaks louder, maybe he’ll have to mask that too, and it won’t be so truthful.

“You don’t know that,” he whispers. *Your name is in the papers. Your real name. If people can find me in my mask, they can find you.*

*I don’t know if I could bear that.*

“Yes, I do.”

“Magnus -”

Abruptly, Magnus turns back to face Alec.

“I’ll be fine, Sentinel,” he says, “I know why you’re here, and I appreciate it, I do, but you’re not indebted to me. I’m not blind to the sort of attention people in my line of work earn from politicians and the police and whoever else is signing Idris’ cheques. I’m a target, I know that. But so is anyone who speaks up for the supers. I’m not doing any of it without being well aware of the risks.”

“It’s just a precaution.” *It’s just for my peace of mind -*

“I know it is. And knowing you’re out there, looking out for me is more comforting than I can say. It’s not every day you earn yourself your own guardian angel.” He looks Alec up and down. “Sentinel, indeed. It suits you, you know. But unfortunately someone has already pipped you to your post.”
Alec frowns. “What do you mean?”

Rare colour blooms in Magnus’ cheekbones and he can no longer meet Alec’s eyes. His smile stretches until it becomes a grin he has to hide behind his coffee cup. A private sort of smile, the kind that makes Alec think of ledges and jumping again, of the sensation of falling where there is no ground.

“It seems I already have someone else looking out for me,” Magnus says then. “You can’t underestimate the stubbornness of a man who wears his heart on his sleeve. Might put you supers out of the job yet.”

He’s talking about me.

Well, not Sentinel, but Alec, the very same Alec who sat opposite Magnus in his office, held Magnus’ hand and said: but what if I want to when Magnus told him he didn’t need Alec to protect him.

Alec covers his mouth with his hand, scrubbing at his jaw, but his skin feels hot to the touch. His mask will only hide so much.

“Well, that’s … that’s good,” he says, “I mean, you - uh, you deserve that - someone looking out for you. I’m glad. For them. For you.”

“Are you not going to try and convince me you can do a better job?” Magnus teases.

“I - uh - I mean -”

“Are you flustered?”

“What? No .”

Magnus gestures at Alec with his coffee cup again, his eyes bright.
“Methinks Sentinel doth protest,” he grins, and when Alec shifts uncomfortably on his feet, he adds, “It’s endearing. Don’t hide it. It’s refreshing to see you anything less than gruff and perpetually exasperated with absolutely everyone around you.”

“I’m not gruff,” Alec insists, “Am I?”

“Not denying the perpetually exasperated, I see,” Magnus laughs, and it’s a sprite laugh, sharp and unapologetic, at odds with the vagueness of the sunrise that is neither here nor there.

Magnus steps closer, and his free hand brushes against the side of Alec’s arm, just above his leather bracer. It shouldn’t make Alec’s heart jump as it does, because the person Magnus looks at, the person Magnus touches, is not him, is not Alec, but maybe what Magnus says is true: he does wear his heart on his sleeve, and it’s a curse, because -

Because he’s not so sure it’s been his to control for a while now.

“Thank you,” Magnus says, “For your sense of duty, or for your sense of something else, if this is not duty.”

“It’s not duty. I swear.”

Magnus hums thoughtfully, and this time, the touch is a light squeeze. Too familiar. Maybe he needs to feel flesh and bone and truth beneath his fingertips; maybe he doesn’t know how little of Sentinel is real. Nor does Alec, is he’s honest with himself.

Maybe he sees something else entirely. Alec watches as Magnus’ eyebrows pinch together in the centre of his brow and his head tilts to the side.

“I don’t want you to put yourself out for me,” Magnus murmurs. He curls his fingers around Alec’s elbow and squeezes. His narrowed gaze drops to a point between Alec’s eyes and his chest and he frowns, as if willing Alec’s suit to become see-through. “There are better uses of your time. Don’t drive yourself into the ground for me … I’ve survived this long.”

“You’ve done so much for us,” Alec whispers, “Someone should … someone should show you the same courtesy.”
Magnus snorts, rolling his eyes dramatically. His hand falls from Alec’s arm, and it’s missed, of course it is, but Alec’s entire body still feels like it’s strung out on wire.

“How egalitarian of you,” Magnus says, “Ever the diplomat.”

“Magnus, you know that’s not what I -”

“I know.” And then, softer, “I know.”

Alec shakes his head. “No, you don’t. I mean - Idris they -” They’ve noticed you. “They’ll start pulling strings. Make your life difficult, stop you publishing your stories - they need to be stopped, but I don’t know how to do that, so this is the best I’ve got. It’s the best I can do.”

“And you’d do this for anyone, would you?”

Alec cannot answer that. He refuses to lie, but nor can he compromise himself. Daylight has broken and he’s still in his supersuit. He’s suddenly very aware of his mask.

“Can I ask you something?” Magnus continues, “Before you fade away with the dawn, or however it works.”

“Yeah,” Alec whispers, “Course.”

For a moment, Magnus looks troubled. He hesitates, a decision weighed on the scales inside his head and found to be unbalanced, if Magnus worrying his lip is anything to go by.

‘Isn’t there one person whose head you wish you could see inside of?’

Alec feels flighty again.

“Magnus, I - I should go -”
“You don’t know me,” Magnus interrupts. A pang of dread echoes in Alec’s stomach. *Why does that sound like a test? Why does that sound like a question and not a statement? “And yet -”*

Magnus presses his lips into a firm line. Whatever it is he wants to say, whatever he wants to ask this bleary-eyed version of Sentinel, it’s not going to happen today. Alec watches him decide against it.

“Nothing. It’s nothing, don’t worry about it,” Magnus says, “You just - I’m still trying to figure you out. Everything I thought I knew was -

“Was?”

“Naive, I suppose. I’ve not been paying attention. But now -” He meets Alec’s stare deliberately. “I think I’m finally understanding who you are.”

*And who is that?* Alec can’t help but think. *Could you tell me?*

He can’t stay to find out. He needs to leave before the spell is broken and he turns back into a pumpkin. Or something worse.

“I need to leave,” he murmurs, “Please just -”

“I’ll stay vigilant,” says Magnus with a smirk. It doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “Perhaps I’ll see you around.”

Alec nods tightly. He grabs his zipwire from his belt and an arrow from his quiver, notching it into his bow. The arrow sings across the distance between this rooftop and the next, and Alec ties off the line before tugging on it, making sure it’s secure.

Magnus watches.

Alec hooks his bow over the wire, ready to zipline across. He won’t look back. *He won’t.*
He does.

Three days since he met Magnus on the rooftop. Three more days of ignoring Magnus’ wishes and keeping watch.

_Three more days of his heart on his sleeve._

Alec stares hard at himself in his bathroom mirror.

The shower in his new apartment runs too hot; the glass is wet with steam and his own smeared handprints. His hands clench around the sink basin, his bare shoulders hunched as the curve of his body forms a brief church.

_And that’s appropriate_, he thinks. _Because this is probably the closest he ever comes to prayer._

The water has stained his skin flushed-red and the whiskers of scars stand out like fine white cracks across his body; he knows them all intimately well. The pucker of an old bullet wound, the ripple of faded burns, a clean slice from the sharp edge of Jace’s wings.

He’s full of holes, places where he has lost small parts of himself, handfuls of his body taken and emptied. His fingers prod at the cross-hatched purple bruise painted up his side, turning yellow at the edges.

_‘I’m still trying to figure you out.’_

The bruise stings. Alec winces.

This is all there is when Alec’s mask is peeled back. Bruises and reformed bones and hands that
can barely stomach touching his own skin -

Is this what Magnus expects? If he stripped Sentinel of his supersuit, does he think to find a human being underneath?

Alec twists his body in the mirror, inspecting the way the bruise spreads across his side and curls around into the small of his back. He presses at the skin just above his hip bone, watching as the blood rushes to the touch and then fades again.

Huh.

Alec touches his hip bone again. It feels different; his body tightens. His breath catches in his throat. His eyes flutter closed.

He imagines the spread of a hand in the small of his back, fingers kneading at the knobs in his spine. No-one has ever touched him there.

He imagines fingers trailing down his chest, tracing confident lines through his chest hair, over the warped contours of his body. He imagines it accompanied by a delighted laugh. He imagines softness; warmth; kindness.

No blood. No dirt caked beneath his fingernails. Just the body of a man and not a killing machine.

What does Magnus see when he looks at Sentinel? What does he see when he looks at Alec?

‘I think I’m finally understanding who you are.’

Alec shakes himself out of the thought, his wet hair splattering the mirror with droplets. He wraps himself up in a towel and pads out into his bedroom, where his suit is discarded on the floor and his quiver emptied on the bed.

He grabs his bow and wanders into the living room, leaving wet footprints on the floor. His skin prickles with goosebumps in front of the balcony windows, the cold draught making him shiver, but he doesn’t stop to look for clothes.
The cold is damning. It forms an ache in the bridge of his nose. Something to focus him. He begins tightening the string on his bow. Something to do with his hands.

New York winks at him. The rows of taxicabs and their bright headlights appear as currents far below, arcs of electricity leading towards a beating heart.

*Wouldn’t you want to know?* the city goads him, *What’s going on underneath?*

Unbidden, Alec’s thoughts turn to Nightlock.

This is not the first time Alec has wondered who he is beneath his coat and mask. Where he goes in the daytime. Whether he and Alec have walked passed each other on the street as their other selves and not noticed.

*How could I not notice?* Alec thinks, picking at his bowstring. *Is he that different when he’s not Nightlock?*

The strength in his shoulders. The colour streaked into his hair. The way he moves, lithe, graceful, dangerous … Alec recalls the feel of Nightlock’s shoulder pressed up against his. He remembers Nightlock’s kind words and invisible touch, soothing away Alec’s panic. It can’t all be pretend. It can’t.

Alec doesn’t want it to be.

*And what do you think he looks like beneath his suit? Does he have scars to match yours?*

Probably not. Nightlock’s too careful for that.

*And bruises?*

No, no. He heals quickly. He wouldn’t.
And might he be beautiful?

Alec tightens his bowstring too far; the wire snaps, pinging back against his fingers. Alec hisses, recoiling sharply, but there’s a thin whip of a line across the back of his hand. He watches in morbid fascination as blood begins to bead like raindrops in bright crimson.

His coms beep. “Alec? You there?”

He hardly hears Izzy’s voice in his ear. He sets his bow against the window pane and holds his own hand, thumbing at the cut. The blood smears across his skin, so he licks his thumb, and swipes at it again. The taste of iron sticks to the back of his teeth.

“Alec? Can you talk?” Izzy asks again.

“Yeah,” says Alec, frowning at his hand. “Yeah, sorry, I can talk. I’m at home.”

“I know you’re at home. Suit tracker, remember? I just didn’t know if you were home alone.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know exactly what it means,” Izzy retorts. “How’s Magnus? Have you spoken to Jace about him yet?”

Alec grumbles, wandering into the kitchenette to search for antiseptic and a bandaid. The cut continues to bleed freely, cradled against his chest, and his shower-clean skin is quickly dirtied again.

“Magnus is fine. But he knows. About Sentinel watching him. He caught me.”

“He caught you?” Izzy demands, “When? Where?”

Alec recounts their rooftop meeting quickly. He scrimps a few of the details. Izzy doesn’t need to know.
He can hear Izzy frowning. “And how do you feel about that?” she asks cryptically. “About him seeing you like that?”

“I don’t know. I feel - I don’t know what I feel. It’s fine, it happened. Is what it is.”

“Do you think he realised?”

If he did, he didn’t say anything, comes a voice. But some part of you hopes that he did, doesn’t it? Some part of you hopes that he saw the similarities between Alec and Sentinel, and found them not too different at all.

Alec has no answer to that.

Instead, he says to Izzy, “I’m gonna talk to Jace about changing the patrol route. Tomorrow. Promise.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear it. Now, as much as I want this to be a social call, I do have an update on the case. Wolfsbane’s been in touch again, and he has some new intel on Hodge Starkweather. Apparently he’s been seen coming and going from the Police Commissioner’s private address. You weren’t about to go to bed, were you?”

“No. No, I’m fine.” The clock on the oven door reads 1:30 AM. Alec turns away from it, opening another cabinet in his search for his first aid kit. “Tell me what we’ve got.”

A warehouse on the docks burns down a week later. Magnus gets the call just after sunset and all it takes is a look across his desk at Alec for them both to grab their coats and rush out the door.

Magnus’ car hurtles through the intersections and red lights, but by the time they pull up along the quayside, the flames are long extinguished and the remnants of the building smoke out into the
night. The fire engines flash blue and red, reflecting on the water, and the wind carries the stench of charred metal into Magnus’ car before Alec even opens the door.

It’s not an arson. Magnus talks to the detectives and Alec talks to the fire brigade, and both agree that there are no incendiary marks, no sign of explosives or paths carved out in the rubble, no dead men arranged like a spectacle for all to see. The only body found was the night shift security guard, caught unaware by a flash fire when he opened the door after smelling smoke. He had died quickly.

It matters little. Alec is restless out here in the dark; he hasn’t been apart from his bow in days, and he’s acutely aware of its absence against his thigh or in his hand. Settling back against Magnus’ car with his umbrella resting against his shoulder, he picks at the scab forming on the back of his hand, and watches from the corner of his eye as Magnus intercepts one of the paramedic. Magnus doesn’t say much; he nods and he hums and he scribbles in his notepad, but Alec can see he’s deep in thought.

He’s been distracted a few days now. Alec has noticed that too. He’s been quiet. Contemplative. Staring at Alec for longer when he thinks Alec’s not looking.

This morning, Simon had dropped by with some photographs for an editorial, and Magnus had blanked on why he had asked for them in the first place. Simon had been very troubled about it when he accosted Alec at lunch time.

“Shall we go?”

Alec looks up, and Magnus is standing before him, his hands plunged deep into the pockets of his trench coat.

“Are you - are you done? You get everything you need?”

Magnus brushes past him, fishing the key fob from his coat pocket and unlocking the car. He gestures for Alec to climb in as he rounds the hood to the driver’s door.

“A gas line blew. City Hall’s problem now,” explains Magnus, as they both settle into their seats. His words are clipped. “It’ll be a two paragraph story on tomorrow’s page six, at best. The Belcourt trial will get front billing.”
It’s not their pyrokinetic. Alec has never felt relief like it. He lets his head tip against the car window as Magnus turns the key in the ignition, the engine purring into life with a smooth hum that vibrates in Alec’s temple.

Outside, New York smears into streaks of yellow and deep blue and raindrops on the windshield as they weave through the slow traffic. The bright lights refract in the water, splitting into a prism of spectral colour. Ahead, the red brakes of a taxicab shimmer and the muffled symphony of the city barely registers.

Magnus drums his fingers against the steering wheel. Water beads on his gloves and on his coat sleeves, but he doesn’t wipe it away. Alec huffs, rubbing his own hands together, eager for feeling to return to his palms.

“Here,” says Magnus, not taking his eyes from the road. He reaches for one of Alec’s hands and holds it against the heater. It’s the first word he’s spoken to Alec since they left the docks.

Alec understands why.

A man died and all Alec feels is relief. Magnus does too, and neither of them dares to voice it because they’re both too used to the accompanying guilt.

A man died, but not a super. Not a vigilante. Not a friend, and that makes it -


Alec has to steal mouthfuls of respite when he can find it, else he will go thirsting.

“I don’t know about you, but I need a drink,” Magnus murmurs, slipping out of his coat and flinging it over the back of his chair the moment he steps foot in the office. He heads immediately for his filing cabinet and reaches behind the row of binders for his bottle of whiskey, leaving Alec to close the door behind them.
“You want?” Magnus offers, pointing the bottle at Alec. Alec shakes his head. “Very well. More for me.”

He pulls the stopper out with his teeth and spits it onto the floor. Alec knows something is wrong.

“What’s wrong, Magnus? Is everything okay?”

“Loaded question,” replies Magnus, eyeing the whiskey bottle as if considering taking a swig straight out of it. He decides against it, grabbing himself a glass. “If I say yes, well, that’s clearly a lie. And if I say no –”

Alec doesn’t hesitate. He crosses the room and reaches out to lower Magnus’ hand where he grasps the bottle. Magnus scowls at a point on Alec’s chin, not meeting his eyes.

“That fire?” Alec guesses.

Magnus’ frown deepens, as if confused. He shakes his head.

“No, not the fire,” he says, and then his body deflates like Alec has stuck him with a pin, and he scrubs his palm down his face. He sets the whiskey bottle down on the cabinet, untouched. “No, Christ, but it should be. A man died. That’s newsworthy on any other day. I should be thinking about it, shouldn’t I?”

Alec tilts his head to try and meet Magnus’ eyes. “What are you thinking about?”

He watches as Magnus bites on the inside of his cheek, his gaze still turned to the ground.

_He doesn’t want to say it, whatever it is_, Alec realises. Slowly, he lets go of Magnus’ arm and his hand falls.

“You don’t have to tell me,” he begins, “Not if you don’t want to, I just -”
“Of course I want to tell you,” Magnus interrupts, “I’ve been blind, Alec. Something right in front of my face and yet I still can’t figure it out, and - huh.” His attention falls on something over Alec’s shoulder and he moves past Alec. “That wasn’t here when we left.”

Slowly, Alec turns around.

An unmarked brown-paper package sits in the centre of Magnus’ desk. It’s not large, about the size of a brick, held together with jagged strips of scotch tape. There are two words scrawled in ink on the packaging.

_Magnus Bane._

Alec’s blood runs cold.

“Magnus, wait.”

Magnus pauses, his fingers hovering over the parcel. He doesn’t pull his hand back, but he doesn’t reach out to touch it either.

“You don’t know who sent that,” Alec says quickly, “It could be -”

“A bomb? An explosive? No, I don’t think so.” Magnus flexes his fingers again, almost as if he’s feeling for heat or static that Alec can’t see. “There’s nothing electronic in here. You’d be able to hear it.”

_It doesn’t have to be electronic_, Alec thinks. It’s an unknown package delivered to Magnus’ office after hours. It could be anything. _Anthrax or a box of hypodermics or a razor blade hidden under the wrapping._

Magnus reaches for his letter opener before Alec can react. He slides it beneath the tape at the end of the parcel and carefully eases it open.

Nothing explodes. There’s no huff of escaping fumes, no strange metallic smell in the air, no ticking clock. Alec still holds his breath, excruciatingly aware of his useless switchblade tucked in
the waistband of his pants, and of Magnus’ indomitable expression.

Magnus slices through the rest of the tape, and then stands back. He doesn’t blink. He doesn’t even react, and -

It’s a bundle of newspapers tied together with string, but - the pages .

The pages are splattered with red liquid, still wet in places if the smear on Magnus’ letter opener is anything to go by. The spatter across the inside of the packaging is violent, high velocity, deliberate. The colour looks sickly beneath the sodium lights.

Slowly, Alec brings his eyes up to Magnus.

“Is that blood?” he asks, because he has to ask. He can’t smell anything, can’t smell any iron. Maybe he’s just in shock.

“No. Paint, I think,” replies Magnus. He slides the letter opener beneath the twine and with a flick of his wrist, cuts right through it. The bundle of newspapers falls open upon the desk. Last Sunday’s issue is on the very top of the pile -

Someone has written across the headline, and Alec -

Alec can’t look.

ALL VIGILANTES ARE CRIMINALS, it reads, in bold red ink, MAKE YOUR CHOICE NOW.

Magnus leverages the top sheet away with his letter opener. The next page is similarly decorated: CONTINUE YOUR INVESTIGATION AND THERE WILL BE CONSEQUENCES .

Magnus sets down the letter opener on the desk and inhales deeply, his mouth set in a firm line. He turns his head from the newspapers and briefly closes his eyes.

Alec doesn’t know what to say. He doesn’t know what to do. The paint is such a specific shade of
red, it can’t be a coincidence. Alec knows too well the colour people are when they’re opened from
gut to chin. The words look like they’ve been painted on the page with fingers; the letters are fast,
angry, bloody.

This was delivered while they were out. Maybe whoever sent it was watching them, waiting for
them to leave the office. Maybe it’s just a coincidence.

Doesn’t matter. This was clearly meant for Magnus. The culprit clearly know where he works.

*And if it’s the same people who were in Alec’s apartment -*

*But what if it’s not, what if it’s from Idris.*

Suddenly, Alec feels sick to his stomach.

“Magnus,” he croaks, edging towards the desk, his hand outstretched. “Magnus -”

The sound of his name seems to spur Magnus into life. “Well ... that’s a lovely surprise,” he
grimaces, grabbing the unfolded packaging and tipping the entire thing into the trash can. “But
equally, not the worst present I’ve ever received. Ragnor used to make it his mission to send me
ghastly South American antiques from his travels. It should be said that the shrunken head he sent
me for my thirtieth birthday did not make it up on my mantelpiece.”

Magnus wipes his hands together and looks down at them in disgust, newspaper print and red ink
staining his thumbs, and, searching for something to clean his fingers, moves to step past Alec.

But Alec won’t let him walk away. He won’t let Magnus pretend like this is nothing. Not this
time.

Alec grabs him by the bicep, his grip tight, secure, sure, and pulls Magnus back to face him.
Pressing his thumb into the divot of Magnus’ elbow, he watches as Magnus’ eyebrows shoot up
towards his hairline.

“Magnus,” he says, and his voice comes out too gruff. “Wait a minute. Just *wait*, please.”

He tries to jerk away from Alec, but Alec holds tight, digging his thumb into Magnus’ pressure point. Alec is not oblivious to the fact that Magnus could break free of him if he wanted; he’s strong. Stronger than dress shirts and suit jackets will ever show, but Alec can feel the firm curve of muscle beneath his fingers.

“Are you? Are you fine?” Alec demands. Magnus deliberately looks away. “I know how unflappable you are, Magnus. It’s about as amazing as it is frustrating - but this is - this is a threat. Someone’s threatening your life.”

“And it’s not the first time, and nor will it be the last,” Magnus retorts, “It’s not even that creative. Hardly worth the time of day.”

“Magnus, please!”

Finally, Magnus meets Alec’s eyes, a sudden flash of near blackness. The air pricks with static.

“Would you rather me worry?” he hisses, “Would you rather see me act as scared as I feel?”

Alec doesn’t hesitate. “Yes,” he breathes, “Yes, Magnus, if it means you being yourself with me. If it means you trusting me to help you, to be with you.”

Slowly, Alec slides his hand down the length of Magnus’ forearm. He catches Magnus’ wrist and lifts Magnus’ hand between them, gently guiding it to rest against his own chest. His pulse thunders.

“Magnus,” he whispers, “You’re not fine.”

“I am fine. I promise.”

“But you’re shaking.”
And Magnus’ mouth falls open a fraction, the tip of his tongue pressed to is lower lip, and he looks at Alec with such a mix of confusion and hope and fear and injury that Alec can hardly breathe. Open and unmasked and reverent, and Alec doesn’t know how he could ever have mistaken it for any less than what it is.

Magnus steps closer to him, pressing his hand firmly against Alec’s chest, splaying his fingers right over Alec’s heart. His hand is still chilly. The rain has made Magnus’ hair curl out of its usual perfection.

Alec is overcome with a terrible, inconsiderate longing.

“Yes,” Magnus murmurs then, “Yes, I suppose I am. It’s … it’s because you make me ... vulnerable.”

“I don’t understand -”

“You make me see-through, Alec. Like every single one of the walls I’ve put up around myself is inconsequential when you’re standing in front of me, looking at me the way you do now.” His voice drops a fraction, as do his eyes, coming to rest on the knot of Alec’s tie. He frowns, a minute shake of head. “You make me feel things I’d forgotten how to feel.”

Alec squeezes Magnus’ hand in his own. “At least call Captain Garroway,” he pleads, nodding towards the discarded newspapers. “You have to tell someone.”

Tell Sentinel. Tell Sentinel and he’ll keep you safe.

“And say what? This is hardly the work of the Circle. Even Valentine has more flair than some fake bloody newspaper … it’ll be some Herondale supporter with a chip on their shoulder, nothing more. I can’t be Luke’s top priority. Not right now. Not when we already have so few people fighting our corner.”

“But you’re mine.”

Magnus’ focus flicks to Alec, his eyes a fraction wider than before. “Your -?”
“My top priority.” Alec runs his thumb over the back of Magnus’ knuckles, keeping Magnus’ hand flush against his heart. “I know you said that I shouldn’t, that you don’t need me to look out for you, but - I can’t help it. I can’t. I don’t know when I -”

*I don’t know when I started feeling this way about you, but I do. Heart on my sleeve, remember?*

Quietly, Magnus extracts his hand from the curl of Alec’s fingers. His lays his palm on Alec’s sternum and slides it upwards, finding sanctuary on the side of Alec’s throat. His other hand curves around the collar of Alec’s shirt, tickling the hair on the back of Alec’s neck. He draws himself in impossibly close, chest-to-chest, the temperate warmth and the strange static of him pressed against Alec’s chest, and it’s like, God, it’s like tunnel vision: Magnus’ eyes, his lips, the whisper of Alec’s name.

“Alec …”

Alec doesn’t know what to do with his hands. His arms hang limply at his sides, but then Magnus shifts, and Alec wants for nothing more than to touch him. His want burns. His fingers brush the edge of Magnus’ blazer, hesitant at first, then creeping upwards, rest feather-light against Magnus’ waist.

He feels Magnus’ breath against his chin. His pulse flutters beneath Magnus’ palm against his jugular.

He holds Magnus in his arms, and feels, for a moment, safe.

*Do you feel it? Do you feel how much I want-*

The phone on Magnus’ desk starts to ring. Of course it does. All the air in Magnus’ lungs rushes out at once and he deflates, sagging against Alec, his hand sliding down to the divot of Alec’s throat. He tilts his head forward, and Alec does the same, until their foreheads knock together.

*Again, Alec thinks. It always rings just at the wrong moment. It must be a metaphor. Or a cruel joke.*
Alec’s eyes drift closed. He tries to focus on his breathing, but the telephone rings shrill, unwilling to be ignored. The tip of Magnus’ nose brushes against his.

“Magnus …”

“I think about running, you know,” Magnus whispers, “Every day, I think about not picking up that phone. I think about moving out of New York and away from all the people that want to see me fired, who want to do me harm. There’s a life out there where I wouldn’t have to fear unmarked parcels on my desk. I think about putting myself first, choosing what I want, instead of - instead of all this. Every day.”

“But you can’t,” Alec breathes, “Because that’s not you.” Your capacity for selflessness is too damn big. Your heart -

Magnus’ hand smooths down the front of Alec’s chest, picking at the cheap silk of Alec’s tie. Alec opens his eyes.

“It could be. It could be me,” Magnus says. “Maybe it would be a choice that haunts me. I wouldn’t know until I made it. Until I walked away. Do you understand?” He glances back at the telephone. Resignation seeps into his eyes. He won’t let it go to voicemail. “I should get that.”

And it’s like a fissure, Magnus pulling away. The office is suddenly cold, Alec’s shirt is suddenly thin and gooseflesh spreads up his arms. He feels like he’s been abandoned at sea, a rough sea, and he can only tread water as he watches Magnus swing around the side of his desk and grab his telephone.

He presses the receiver to his ear and meets Alec’s stare with the all the surety of a lightning strike, and whatever is spoken on the other end of the line is of so little consequence that it leaves Alec breathless. Magnus sees him, and only him, alone in this room, in the universe at large. The enormity of the feeling in Alec’s chest is terrifying, and Magnus only mirrors it.

“Sorry, darling,” Magnus says into the receiver, reaching for a Post-It and a pen. “My mind was elsewhere, I didn’t quite catch that - this is the office of Magnus Bane at the Daily Tribunal -”

He breaks off, a small frown knotting in his forehead. He drops the pen and drums his fingers on the desk. (This desk. This damn desk. It’s probably the only thing stopping Alec from doing something truly foolish, like reaching across and forcing the phone back into its cradle.)
“No, it’s quite alright,” Magnus continues, “It’s not the first time. Really, he should get him one of those cell phones that are all the rage right now … mhmm, yes, indeed. But I’m sorry I kept him from you. It sounds quite serious. I’ll pass you over to him now.”

Oh.

Magnus holds out the receiver towards Alec.

“It’s your sister.”

Alec grabs the telephone and shoves it against his ear. Izzy hardly ever calls him at the office, she knows he always wears his coms and there’s a phonebooth on the corner of the block if they really need to talk -

Alec’s fingertips stray to the shell of his ear. A part of him wonders if he switched his coms off without even noticing. Another part of him wonders if it’s been beeping all this time and he just hasn’t heard it.

“Iz?”

“Hey, big brother,” comes her voice down the line, more tinny than over radio. She sounds remarkably calm. “Sorry for calling, but you weren’t picking up your coms. I tried your home number, but - well. I figured you might still be in the office. Call it intuition.”

“Is everything okay? Are you okay?” He glances up; Magnus is watching him with his thumb pressed to his lower lip in thought. Alec lowers his voice. “Is Jace okay?”

“He’s fine, I’m fine, don’t worry, this isn’t an emergency call. But we’ve had another sighting of Azazel and someone who matches the facial composite you did of the pyrokinetic. Brooklyn. Half an hour ago. I thought you’d want to know.”

Alec chooses his words carefully. “And Jace and Clary -?”
“They’re on route, but it’d be good if you could meet them there. Azazel’s probably long gone, but you know Jace. If he and Clary find this guy, Jace will end up getting himself teleported to Mars … which may not be the worst thing, but the paperwork would be a headache, even for you. Do you think you can get across town tonight?”

“Yeah,” Alec says, and then he sighs heavily. He can already feel the rain-damp ache in his joints, another wasted night out in the cold. Their last tip in Brooklyn was a bust. “Yeah, of course. Where in Brooklyn? I’ll meet them there.”

Izzy recites the address of the rendezvous point and then hangs up, muttering about Victor hovering over her shoulder. Alec hardly gets to say goodbye before he’s listening to the dialling tone. He stares dumbly at the receiver in his hand, before laying it softly on the desk.

“I have to go -”

“Did you say Brooklyn?”

Alec opens and closes his mouth. He could say no, no, it’s nothing, don’t worry about it, but he doesn’t want to lie. Not tonight.

Instead, Alec nods.

Magnus scoops his files into his briefcase and grabs his still-wet coat from the back of his chair, swinging it over his shoulders. He doesn’t look back at the crumpled newspapers in the trash can.

“I’ll drive you,” he says, unwilling to let Alec argue. “I’ll be heading home that way as it is, and the subway will be terrible in the rain.”

Alec tries to argue anyway. “Magnus -”

Magnus shakes his head. “Alec. I’ll drive you. Let me.”
The rendezvous point is barely five blocks from Magnus’ apartment. Alec doesn’t want to think about what that means: the Circle sighted so close to where Magnus lives; the possibility that Magnus might see Arkangel flying past his bedroom window; Sentinel’s suit and mask crammed into the holdall by Alec’s feet -

He won’t give those thoughts a podium to speak upon. He can’t. They’re loud enough as it is.

Alec sinks into the warmth of the front seat and the speckling of rain on the windshield of Magnus’ car. The radio is on low, crinkled static mixed with the unintelligible hum of the DJ murmuring into the microphone as Magnus flicks through the stations until he finds something he likes.

The windscreen wipers beat a ceaseless path through the downpour, a metronomic back and forth that lulls Alec into something of a stupor. The water on the glass trembles with blue and yellow light that splits into green the longer Alec stares: not the green of grass or trees, but the dirty feldgrau of a city seeping into the sewers. Figures on the sidewalk hide beneath their umbrellas, nothing more than black quivering shapes darting between the stationary traffic. The puddles in the gutters turn gossamer and iridescent where New York’s bright facade spills into them and trickles into the storm drains.

Alec catches Magnus’ eye in the rearview mirror. The red of brake lights turn his gaze from deep brown to brief burgundy, lit up by the strobing blue of a police car wailing in the opposite direction. It takes Magnus a moment to look away, and Alec watches as he wets his bottom lip with his tongue. He says nothing, and the tension in the front seat of the car doesn’t dissipate.

He feels like he’s waiting on the edge of a steep drop, his toes curled over the edge of a building, like he’s waiting for a plummet he knows will come. His muscles, coiled, and his stomach, ready to meet his throat, adrenaline a familiar thrum igniting his veins.

Alec rubs his hand across the back of his neck, but it’s not an invisible itch he’s chasing. No.

It’s the memory of Magnus’ fingers there, playing with the dark hair at the nape of his neck.

Leaning his head against the window, he steals another look at Magnus, at his profile lit up by the blurry vanishing of Manhattan. Magnus seems to catch the gold; the rest of the colours pass like wind, like searchlights across his skin, whites and blues and neon pinks, but not the gold. It stains
him, clings to him with a dreamcatcher quality, but it’s not quite halcyon, not the same gold as rare
sunsets. No yellows, no oranges, no pale violet skies, just gold: metallic, gilded, magical. Not
really comprehensible.

Alec holds himself rigidly still in the passenger seat. That familiar restless ache wilts his heart.
Perhaps if he doesn’t move, it won’t spread out to the rest of him, but ... he supposes it’s a little too
late for that.

Magnus’ mouth moves along to the words on the radio, barely a murmur. Alec curls his fingers
around the cuffs on his coat and digs his nails into the fabric.

If Isabelle hadn’t called, he thinks, if he wasn’t bound by Sentinel’s duty and this endless cat-and-
mouse chase ...

If Magnus hadn’t had to pull away ...

( He wants you, says the voice in Alec’s head. And you want him. You know it’s true. )

The night is creeping in, the clock on the dashboard nearing twelve, but it’s not quite late enough
for the Brooklyn Bridge to be empty of traffic. Behind them, the World Trade Center dominates
the skyline, and to the south, fog shimmers at the mouth of the East River, creeping in towards the
city.

Brooklyn emerges from the mist, brownstones and bare trees, yellow street lamps casting pools of
light upon the sidewalks and the graffitti sloshed up the side of every other building. Magnus
weaves in and out of parked coupes and abandoned bicycles, until he turns, at last, onto his block.

Alec stares up at Magnus’ building as it approaches; the windows of his penthouse are dark.

Magnus pulls up against the kerb and cuts the engine. The sudden silence is swamping, but the
night drinks up the heat from the car and Alec is quickly cold. He draws his coat tighter around
himself and turns to look at Magnus. He can’t help himself.

Magnus is already looking. He’s half-turned in his seat, his arm resting upon the steering wheel,
his eyes pricked with pretend stars and city yellows. He rubs his thumb and forefinger together,
round and around in little circles, and Alec watches the corner of his mouth uptick, preluding a
Magnus says nothing; he follows Alec’s every move, every rise of Alec’s chest as he breathes, every bob of his throat as he swallows, every nervous flick of his eyes out towards the road. Magnus’ loosened shirt reveals a glimpse of an exposed clavicle. His suspenders cut into the muscle of his shoulders. His hair is still curled from the rain.

And in the strange and liminal light of the city, Magnus is devastatingly beautiful.

Oh, he’s always been beautiful. Always the sort of man to make Alec’s head turn and his eyes linger, but this, this goes beyond a dry mouth and a lick of the lips. This blooms like a stain, blood red and night dark in Alec’s chest, marking him, aching him, suffocating him in the front seat of this car where he cannot escape from it.

Alec longs to be up high. He wants for the wind and the cold and the endless tumble towards the ground; he wishes to be stood on a fire escape with New York visible through the grates beneath his feet, for the mist of rain upon his maskless face, and for Magnus to be stood by his side, their pinkies brushing with a familiarity of more than this, more than friends. He longs for the brisk sting of cold as he inhales, but instead, he only tastes Magnus’ cologne.

“I didn’t say thank you.”

It takes a moment for Alec to realise Magnus has spoken. Magnus’ eyes crinkle up at the corners.

“For what?” Alec croaks.

“Back there in the office. You’re worried for me, and I - sometimes, I … sometimes I forget what it’s like to have someone at my back. I’m not good at remembering how that feels. Trusting people in the past to do the same has never worked out as I willed it to.”

Alec frowns. “It’s not about trust,” he says. “It’s just about doing the right thing.”

“Is it?”
It’s not. It’s not about trust, not really, not here, not now. Alec’s good intentions have been thrown to the wayside, and the reason he shadows Magnus as he does is far more selfish than simply wanting to do what is right.

Magnus shifts towards Alec. “If it were about doing the right thing, you wouldn’t still be here, sitting in this car with me,” he whispers, “I know how far your heart extends, Alexander. I know how much you care about other people. I see it in your eyes, I see it every time you try to stifle a yawn because you’ve been up too late fretting over something you can’t possibly control. But this, this person you are now—”

He reaches out, the backs of his knuckles nudging against Alec’s jaw, a touch so light, so gossamer, that Alec might not feel it if the car and the world outside weren’t so deathly silent.

“-no-one else knows this person, I don’t think. Just me. Only me.”

Alec sucks in a breath. He fights the urge to turn his head into Magnus’ hand.

He exists on the precipice of an almost.

*It would be so damn easy just to lean forward …*

“It continues to astound me,” Magnus says then, “just how much you want to keep everyone safe. Even after everything we’ve seen.”

Alec shrugs sheepishly. “Big brother instincts. Jace and Iz never gave me a choice. I either had to let them get in trouble, or go with them. By the time Max started copying them, I knew all the tricks.” Alec smiles to himself, shaking his head. It’s not just about protecting his family, and he knows it. It’s his switch, as Izzy always calls it. Always on. Always responsible for everyone else’s misdeeds. *Some complex about never being good enough* -

“But you’re the one protecting the whole city from behind your desk,” Alec adds, dropping his voice to a whisper. “If anyone’s selfless, Magnus, it’s you.”

Magnus leans back, letting his head tip against the headrest of his seat.
“Trust me, I’m not,” he says, and then, “You … you should leave. Go find your sister.” He nods up towards his building. “Before I do something utterly foolish like invite you up.”

“Would that be so bad?”

A yielding smile tucks itself into the corner of Magnus’ mouth and he casts his gaze to the side. Roving car headlights refract through the windscreen, yellow light sharp in passing across his cheekbones.

“Oh,” says Magnus. The rumble of the disappearing engine almost drowns him out. “Almost certainly.”

Would they kiss? Alec wonders. Would they fuck? That’s what people do when they say things like this, when they look at people the way Magnus looks at him now. That’s what happens in the real world, when you get invited up to someone’s apartment late at night when you’re feeling just a little not yourself.

Right?

Alec cannot claim to know. He’s never lived a normal life. Magnus can look at him like this, and Alec will freeze because he doesn’t know how to move his arms and legs when they’re free of guy lines and zip wires. He can’t forget that Izzy called him for his help tonight, and he doesn’t know how to open his mouth and say to Magnus, okay, I want that, I want to come upstairs with you, and not just because I want to see you home safely, whilst still battling that God-awful fear of getting Magnus too involved in -

Well, him. In Alec. Maybe that ship has already sailed.

Magnus leans into the space between them again, his thumb twisting the ring on his index fingers around and around. Why is he nervous? Is it nerves?

Maybe it’s something else.

A spattering of rain beats upon the windshield, and the searchlights of passing cars become watery, and the hum of the city becomes dull to Alec’s ears. His eyes dart to the door handle on the passenger side but do not linger. He looks back at Magnus: the harsh shadows across his face and
his eyes bright, despite it; the movement of his jaw, his throat, the way his chest seems to shift as he angles himself towards Alec; his seat belt cutting into the high-thread cotton of his shirt.

_Would Izzy miss him if he didn’t turn up?_ Alec hates that he thinks it, but still, he thinks it, and it’s a bitter, repulsive, and obsessive feeling, one that pins his wrists and ankles and makes his heart hammer in his chest.

He wants to see what will happen. He wants to stay in this car, shrouded by the rain and the spilt light of streetlamps, and not move until Magnus moves, because he thinks Magnus will move, any second now, and seize the moment that was lost to them by the ringing of the phone. He wants to follow Magnus up to his apartment and surrender something he has long held onto, closely guarded against his chest.

_It’s not an emergency, Jace and Clary can handle it_ , Alec thinks. _They don’t need me. They don’t need Sentinel._

Magnus’ eyes darken, irises eclipsed by pupils, the side of his face hidden in shadow as another car glides through the rain, headlights white and overbearing across his temple. He’s focused on Alec’s mouth, and he reaches out, but his fingers still in mid-air, curling into his palm. He doesn’t draw back.

_I don’t want to go,_ Alec realises. The invisible line within him - the one that divides up his body between Alec and Sentinel - it wobbles, it trembles, and Alec can feel the vibrations pulsating in his fingers beyond his control. He thinks of Wolfsbane again, he thinks of giving up the call and the mask and the sense of duty for one special person, and that line of his draws so suddenly taut that he fears it might snap.

“_Alec._” His name, infinitesimally soft and infinitesimally hopeful. There are words held back on Magnus’ tongue that prelude a confession.

Another car passes by. This time, the headlights are orange through the rain, the retreating brake lights crimson red like the heart of a bonfire. The engine sounds too much like the roar of flames, the rumble of tires spinning on the asphalt not unlike the creaking and cracking of a burned timber frame above Alec’s head.

His heart stops beating.
He sucks in a breath.

The taste of Magnus’ cologne is masked by smoke that isn’t even there, but which clings to Alec’s memories nonetheless. He closes his eyes to be rid of it, but that same orange colour flares up behind his eyelids.

*Fire*. The colour of fire.

That line of his, it doesn’t snap. But it springs back with such intensity that Alec is whiplashed as the night in the burning church hurtles back to him, a collision. The smell of ash is still acrid in his nose, the ground still crumbles beneath his feet, but instead of a stranger strung up above the altar, this time it’s Clary, it’s Jace, it’s Isabelle. It’s Nightlock.

It’s Magnus, because Magnus dared to get close to Sentinel without even realising it.

Alec recoils. Magnus’ hand falls back to the gearstick and Alec begs to be rid of the thought -

But he can’t. Because it’s seared into his memories now, and he suspects it will be with him, a ghost on his shoulder, for the rest of his fucking life.

Alec cannot stay.

Not tonight. Maybe not any night, not until the pyrokinetic is caught and the Circle is stopped, and maybe, not after that either. The dream of a kiss, of a nightcap, of a moment longer than the touch of his forehead to Magnus’ - it’s only that. It’s only a dream. He can’t turn his back on Isabelle, on Jace and Clary, on his friends who look to him for guidance. It’s selfish to think he can leave Idris to be with Magnus. He doesn’t get to give Sentinel up when people need saving.

*But so does Alec*. Alec needs saving and no-one ever thinks of him.

“I should get going.” It comes out as a whisper. “Izzy’ll be wondering where I am.”

Alec reaches for the door handle with numb fingers, only managing to open it because he’s looking at it, and he hears Magnus suck in a breath. He turns back, waiting for something to be said, but all
he gets is a smile.

And it’s a terrible smile, because it’s soft and genuine and resigned and always, always patient. Alec doesn’t deserve it. And Magnus doesn’t deserve this inoperable mess of him.

*I want you. I want to be with you, and it’s not enough.*

“Of course,” says Magnus. “Of course. I’ll see you tomorrow, then.” He sinks back into his seat, now a pool of deep shadow.

“Thanks for the lift,” Alec says. The thought of stepping out into the rain makes his chest squeeze. He pushes the car door and the drizzle seeps in: the hiss is instantly deafening, like snare on the sidewalk, and the rain is cold and prickling as it spits across the side of his face.

And then Magnus moves, leaning forward into Alec’s space at the last possible moment -

and Alec freezes -

but Magnus reaches for the glove box, grabbing something from within.

He presses an umbrella into Alec’s palm, curling Alec’s fingers around it. The touch doesn’t linger longer than it needs to, but Alec stares dumbly at his hand. It’s his burned hand. The ugly scarring on the back of his knuckles strains white and rippled.

“Anytime, Alexander,” murmurs Magnus, his voice slipping between the raindrops that sink into Alec’s shirtsleeve. “Anytime.”

“I’m just saying,” Jace grouses, “How is it fair that Sentinel gets to ignore coms and flunk missions to go see his boyfriend, but I can’t?”
“Do you have a secret boyfriend I don’t know about?” Clary fires back with her eyebrows raised. She folds her arms across her chest, but her shock of hair is plastered to her rain-slick suit and she looks more petulant than anything. “Right, yeah, I thought as much. You know it’s not the same. We literally see each other all day, every day.”

“I’m pretty sure you’ve turned up late or hungover to more than your fair share of calls in the past forever, Jace,” Izzy interjects. “You have no leg to stand on, so don’t try it.”

“I definitely have not,” Jace protests, huffing his wet hair out of his face. Clary’s unimpressed stare is audible. “Okay, fine, fine, maybe I was late once or twice, but c’mon. How is it fair that we’ve been playing guard dog for three hours already, and Sentinel only just rocked up?”

“It’s Alec’s choice to work a real job,” Izzy says, “He has just as much responsibility to that as he does to us, and we need to respect that. Until it becomes a problem, it’s not a problem. We clear?”

“Crystal,” Jace grumbles. He rolls his shoulders and it makes his wings flap, spraying them all with rain.

Clary rolls her eyes and sighs, looking at Alec across the roof.

Alec doesn’t have the time for this, which is probably why Jace wants to bring it up: Alec, Magnus, the stupid vulnerability Alec has allowed himself, the hefty hole just to left in Alec’s chest that bears another man’s name. All of it. Jace coaxes Alec like a fire without even meaning to, fanning dying embers and poking at the coals of him, and Alec smokes out, and the city thrives on it: New York, a concrete sadist, grating on Alec’s fresher wounds. The hiss of rain on the rooftop could almost be mistaken for an audience smothering laughter behind their hands, and it’s Alec’s terribly loud sorrow that is the joke tonight.

Jace has always been gifted at seeking out weak points in other people. He’s trained for it.

And it’s already late, late enough for Alec to be worn-thin and unwilling to put up with any more bullshit before sunrise. He’s almost gone twenty-four hours without sleep, and that’s without the memory of Magnus’ fingertips whispering against his jawline. The wind is a poor substitute, already swirling, clouds overhead billowing with the threat of storms that have yet to leave the city alone for the winter. There’s a purple haze in the air, some soupiness that stops light passing all the way through and which makes black shadows look blacker. And all of it skews Alec’s senses; his
body feels swamped, drowned, *drunk*, his hearing muffled, his eyesight dimmed.

He doesn’t feel himself. He’s restless, unable to focus, and that makes him nervous. Patrol has been no different than any other. Their lead on Azazel was a bust, Jace caught a hit-and-run driver, and Clary saved a cat from a tree.

And Alec has waited and watched and let the rain seep into his suit and peel away the top layer of his skin. He’s left a piece of him behind at some point tonight: in the office, in the car, in Magnus’ cautious hands. Somewhere in between. He’s unsettled without it.

Alec closes his eyes. Perhaps he’s dizzy from imaginary blood loss. He wonders if Magnus’ palms might be stained red from the audacity of holding Alec’s face in his bare hands. And then he wonders if he’s left a trail across the streets of Brooklyn and Magnus might be able to follow him all the way here.

When he opens his eyes, there’s something brewing in the night, a charged and difficult-to-decipher storm, and maybe it won’t break tonight, but *soon*. Alec can feel it. Maybe the thing that breaks will be him; maybe it’ll happen before his body hits the metaphorical ground. He won’t be surprised.

It’s just a little difficult to breathe. Each inhalation stings, croaks, snags on nothing in particular.

Jace and Clary are having a silent argument behind him, narrowed glares and childish faces, but he doesn’t want to deal with it. He doesn’t want to deal with any of it; he wants to block them out, all of them, and pretend like the world doesn’t exist and he doesn’t have to think and there’s only silence, only the mission. It’s worked in the past before *too well*, he reasons - but now, whenever he tries to draw up those walls around his bleeding heart, he ends up with messy blood-stained hands too, and how can he hide that?

Alec scans the street below, eyes narrowing in the dark. The traffic is thin, and the passing cars are whizzing by way too fast, making the most of the empty streets to break the speed limit and perhaps the sound barrier too. Alec might do something about that on another night, but he’s scared to move.

The air is charged on the cusp of violence. He doesn’t quite trust his body not to betray him.

“Allright, guys,” says Izzy in his ear, “I don’t think we’re gonna see anything here tonight. Azazel
and Johnathan are long gone, if they were even here at all. Sorry for getting everyone’s hopes up. So, to make up for it, I’ve got a drug bust over the river, or reports of gunfire three blocks south - which do you want? I’ll give the other to Aline and Helen, and then we can turn in for the night.”

“Gunfire, please,” Jace chimes. Alec grunts, and at Clary’s withering stare, Jace huffs, “What? We did a drug bust last week, and the Mayor already has Aldertree on the payroll for his not-so-secret coke smuggling business. So, as much as I wanna accidentally run into Victor on the job and end up having to kick his ass, too many cooks, guys. Too many cooks.”

“Send us the coordinates of the gunfire, Izzy,” says Clary, purposefully ignoring Jace, “Any casualties? Police on scene?”

“Not sure yet, but the report only just got broadcast, so emergency response is probably a few minutes out. SWAT will be ten minutes max. Jace, you want to get a headstart?”

“Sure thing, chief.” Jace flaps his wings, the updraught rifling through Alec’s hair and the fletchling of his arrows, and takes off into the air, a glint of silver soaring off into the city’s skyline, splitting the rain like a sharp blade.

Alec turns away from the roof’s edge, collapsing his bow and sliding it back into his holster as he walks past Clary without a second glance. She’s quick to catch up, trotting to match the beat of his strides.

“Sometimes, I wonder why I’m dating him,” she says conversationally. “He really likes to be insufferable.”

Alec can relate. He doesn’t really know why she and Jace are dating either.

“Let’s get moving,” he says instead, hoisting his quiver higher on his back and snagging it in place.

Clary jogs beside him as he makes for the fire escape. Her shoulder nudges against his. “I really am sorry about him pestering you like that, about Magnus. Are you okay? You haven’t said a word all night.”

Alec’s jaw tightens. “I’m fine, Muse.” He’s not. It’s a lie. Clary knows it, but she has more sense
than to prod him.

“You know, I could probably summon us a car if I really thought about it,” she says, offering him a sunny smile. “A glider? A jetpack? I don’t know. I’ve been thinking there must be a better alternative to us running around after Arkangel all the time. I don’t know about you, but I have blisters on my blisters.”

Alec replies with a grunt. Clary grins at him, scrunching her nose as she tugs her mask up around her face.

They cling to the shadows as they traipse through the backstreets of Brooklyn, taking care to stay out of the light of the flickering street lamps. Clary has long since learned that Alec doesn’t take well to incessant chatter whilst they’re working, and he’s thankful she doesn’t say a word; she follows in his footsteps silently, communicating only with her eyes whenever he ushers her to stay low and stop a moment to let a late-night straggler go past.

Alec tunes in and out of his radio, listening to the police dispatcher call for back-up. The dispatcher says there are three patrols en route, still no casualties, at least four shots fired. No-one who replies sounds particularly incensed, but it doesn’t surprise Alec. The day the police come down hard on gun violence will be the day when he’s out of a job.

“Calling all available units,” the radio crackles, “We’ve got reports of a 10-66 at our scene. Unidentified air-born, likely a superhuman. Code 2, please respond.”

10-66. Suspicious person. That’ll be Jace.

Alec glances back at Clary and she nods. They’re about a block away from the scene, but if Arkangel has been spotted, the police will be hot on their heels. The dispatcher calls for additional units again. She sounds far more concerned about the super than the gunfire.

Alec grits his teeth and picks up the pace. Clary matches him stride for stride as they duck down a narrow passageway; she’s fast when she wants to be, a blur at Alec’s heels, light and nimble -

But then Alec stops.

Clary runs straight into his back with a quiet oomph.
“Alec?” she asks, wrinkling her nose. Alec would scold her for using his real name, if he weren’t so suddenly on high alert. “What is it?”

“Do you smell that?” he asks. He turns sharply, taking a deep breath of city air. Stale cigarette smoke, car exhaust fumes, festering trash left to mould on the streets, but beneath that, something else. Something familiar, sweet and charred and leathery. It makes his stomach churn.

“Smell what?” Clary frowns. She cranes her head, as if it will somehow make a difference, and sniffs. She looks ridiculous. “Sewage and cheap beer? I can always smell that.”


“There are loads of bodegas around here,” Clary says stubbornly, but she follows Alec as he turns back, retracing his steps to the crossroads they just passed. “C’mom, we should catch up with Arkangel. The cops are on their way, he might need our help.”

Pointedly ignoring Clary, Alec presses a finger to his ear. “Isabelle?” he calls, “Iz, can you tell Arkangel to double back to us?”


“Hopefully nothing,” Alec mutters. Untamed flickers of orange and flame-red still lick at the backs of his eyelids.

He looks left, down the street, but the night is deep and the buildings loom overhead. Squinting, he searches for shapes and finds only the faint grey outline of dumpsters and telephone wires. He turns to look the other way, just as a gust of wind comes charging through the narrow alley, bringing with it the unmistakable stench of charred flesh.

“Oh,” says Clary, stepping to his side. A fierce look crosses her face, but Alec knows well enough that it masks the flush of fear. “That smells like burning.”

“Stay alert,” Alec instructs her, flipping open his bow and drawing an arrow from his quiver. He notches it in the bowstring and lines up his sights on something he cannot yet see. Footsteps light
and soundless, he creeps forward, a light following him soon after: Clary has drawn a flashlight in ink on the ground and summoned it from beneath her feet. It makes Alec’s shadow stretch out long and thin before him.

He hears nothing, save his own breath, Clary’s less-quiet footsteps, and the wind. Anticipation wrings him dry, his body poised, coiled, waiting for a bang, a gunshot, the sudden expulsion of smoke from windows overhead. Alec pulls his bowstring back to the anchor of his mouth, the fletchling of his arrow digging into his lip. He tastes a fleck of blood.

The air is ferrous. Iron, flesh, burned skin.

Silence.

But then, the light of Clary’s flashlight scatters across a lump of shadow on the ground, dark, unmoving, solid like nothing else that exists in the city.

“What-” begins Clary, hardly a whisper. “What is that -”

Oh, Alec knows what it is.

“Fuck,” he says.

He knows what a dead man looks like.

He knows how limp, how rigid, how completely wrong it is to see another human lie so still.

And this -

This is the unmistakable shape of a body lying face-down in the dirt ahead of him.

Alec drops his arrow and rushes to the body, charred and warped beyond recognition, searching for a pulse. His fingers pass too easily through blackened skin that crumbles away like tar-covered ash in his hands. He recoils as if burned, a choked noise seizing in his throat.
Clary gasps. “Oh my God. Oh, no.”

Her torch moves across the alleyway and Alec’s blood turns cold. Not ten feet ahead, there’s another black shape in the gutters, face down in the standing water. Clary’s flashlight moves across the walls and finds three more: two propped up against a dumpster, curled in each other’s disintegrated embrace, and the last, on his hands and knees, burned violently up the ridge of his spine as he was crawling away.

Their faces are blackened. Their skin, crisp. Hair, burned away with that vile stench of keratin. Smears of sticky, black liquid on the concrete.

It’s not rainwater. Too dark and viscous for that.

Alec looks down at the body before him, and then at his hand, this paste of black ash and brown blood caked into his palm. He rubs his fingers against the meat of his thumb and it smears the fat against his glove.

The light of Clary’s flashlight passes behind him like a lighthouse, and these bodies before him are the rocks. His shadow stretches out into infinity, gobbled up by the dark, so elongated that it can’t be recognizable as human anymore.

And then, Alec glances up, as if raising his head to grab a lungful of air before he’s drowned beneath a rising tide, and he sees something else. Something worse.

Something carved into the alley wall above their heads, still smoking in the dark.

Clary gasps again, dropping her flashlight. It clatters to the ground, sploshing into a pool of blood. She clamps her hand across her mouth, but Alec hears her sob.

Burned into the brickwork, sticky with blood and eviscerated flesh, are five words. Five names, this time not cut into their chests, but plastered on the side of the building for all to see.

The names of five superheroes. Five aliases. *Five bodies*. 
And Alec doesn’t know any of them, but it doesn’t matter.

It doesn’t matter. It’s a message. A warning.

A threat.

“This is a massacre,” Clary whispers. “Sentinel …”

Alec bends and reaches for her flashlight. He turns it to the wall, sweeping the light upwards, only to find more writing scored into the building. The dripping red letters share the same hatred as those Alec read on the newspaper addressed to Magnus.

\textbf{ALL VIGILANTES MUST BURN}

\textbf{THIS CITY IS NOT YOURS}

This is a massacre, and it shares all the same hallmarks of the church, the two men strapped to that fire hydrant, the very first scene in the parking lot, the Circle, the pyrokinetic, all of it, all of it that leaves Alec sick to his stomach.

Valentine. Johnathan Morgenstern. Senator Herondale. All of them responsible, but -

How can it matter who did this, who really did this, when so many people want to see the vigilantes dead? Alec knows the Circle aren’t alone in wanting supers gone from the streets.

\textit{And Alec had the nerve to want to run away when his people are being chased down like animals.}

The wind whirs overhead: whump-whump-whump, the familiar sound of Arkangel coming in to land. Alec doesn’t look up, can’t look up. His ears are full of static.

He stares at the two bodies lined up against the wall, shoulder to shoulder, arms around one another. They were scared when they died. It wasn’t quick, wasn’t painless.
Smears of blood on the concrete. The bodies were dragged there, positioned upright to make a scene. Alec wonders if he’s the intended audience; it certainly feels like he should be. Look. Look at this. Look what’s happening and you can’t stop it.

Look at what you wanted to run away from.

Look at what you’ve cost them.

He sways on his feet, jamming the tip of his bow into the ground to keep himself upright. His fingers slip over the string notch, still slick with a paste made from another man’s insides. He feels filthy, like someone has jammed a chisel in between Alec’s lower ribs and shaken it around, churned up his guts, ripped a hole in the middle of him, and now he’s drenched in his own blood. He deserves to bleed out. His hands aren’t big enough to stem the gaping wound in his chest and it’s his own damn fault.

He staggers back a pace or two, knocking into Clary’s shoulder

Because it could be, couldn’t it? Five dead supers, the Circle long gone. It could be his fault.

The Circle thinks they can get away with this. Because there’s nobody out there willing to lay their own life on the line to stop them, to save hundreds and thousands of lives.

It could be Alec’s fault.

Can you live with yourself if you leave them all to die on your watch?

There’s a loud thump behind Alec, two feet landing on the ground. A sharp gasp of horror. Arkangel.

“What the Hell is this,” spits Jace. His wings creak as he folds them up upon his back. His voice threatens to break. That never happens. “Fucking bastards, what have they done—”
This will be front page news in the morning. The whole city will see what happened here, and half will commiserate that a better job wasn’t done and only five supers lost their lives in cold blood. Alec clenches his jaw so tight he wonders if he might split bone.

“Iz?” Jace calls where Alec cannot. Alec hasn’t yet remembered how to move, his eyes fixed on the smallest of the five bodies, the one sprawled in the gutters. A woman by the looks of it. Barely a woman. Maybe a girl. And he can’t even tell what colour her hair was; she has none left. The side of her face is blistered away, boiled red and charcoaled black. If she was wearing a mask, it’s long gone now.

“Our pyrokinetic’s back at it again,” Jace continues, finger pressed to his ear. “Quintuple homicide, just off of East 53rd. Some *Silence of the Lambs* shit. It’s a fucking mess.”

“*Christ*,” comes Izzy’s voice. “*Five? You sure?*”

“Pretty damn sure,” says Jace, “It’s laid out like a Goddamn show. Like they were expecting us to drop by and find it first.”

Jace is right. Alec casts the beam of the flashlight around the alley, lingering on the body face-down on the concrete, caught running away from the fire. These people weren’t left like this for the police to find; the writing scorched into the wall tells Alec that much.

“*Some sort of sick satisfaction, I’m sure,*” says Izzy. “*It’s a threat. They know we’re onto them and they’re trying to get into your heads by making it a spectacle. Do you guys want to call it in?*”

Alec frowns, turning the flashlight back to the wall. Unease churns in his gut, trying to tell him something. He looks back over his shoulder and sees Jace standing with his hands on his hips, shaking his head as he takes in the scene. Clary is crouched down on her haunches; her hand is clamped over her mouth, her stare boring into the wet ground, too distraught to even blink. Behind her mask, her face is pale as death.

*It is a show*, Alec realises, *it is a spectacle*, and it’s been left here for another superhero to find. It’s staged, it’s purposeful, it’s -

Oh. It’s bait.
Alec drops the flashlight. His eyes snap to the rooftop, and there, peering over the edge above them, he catches a glint of silver. A beady eye watching them through a scope.

Sniper.

Fuck.

“Get down!” Alec shouts as a gunshot rings out in the alleyway. The metallic whoosh of a bullet ricochets between the walls, ringing in Alec’s ears. He dives for cover behind a dumpster, grabbing his bow and notching an arrow as he tumbles onto his knees. With a snap, he draws the bowstring back to his mouth.

Silence, save for his heavy panting. The glint of the scope has disappeared, but Alec is sure it’s not gone.

A trap. It was a fucking trap.

Jace and Clary -

Alec spies them on the opposite side of the alleyway, submerged in a stack of crushed boxes. Jace’s wings curl protectively around the pair of them, shielding Clary almost completely from view.

“Sentinel!” Jace shouts, “You hit?”

“I’m okay!” Alec calls back, “Sniper, one o’clock, seventy five degrees - on top of the roof! He’s moved positions, be careful!”

A second bullet zings overhead and Alec slams himself down on the ground, cheek into the dirt. Gravel and glass shards cut into his skin.

“Three o’clock!” Jace yells, firing off a round with his glock that goes wide, “You gotta return fire so I can get up there!”
“Easier said than done!” Alec drags himself against the wall for cover, pulling his bow taut again, scanning the rooftop for movement. He sees a glint and lets his arrow fly, but it disappears into the dark without a sound to let Alec know if he’s hit his mark.

He doesn’t have to wait long. Another loud crack and a bullet explodes in the brick above his head. The dust sprays all across his mask, blinked into his eyes. He hisses, scrubbing his face with the back of his hand.

“Muse!” he shouts, eyes watering, “We need something to cover us!”

“I’m on it!” Clary cries. “Hold on!” Alec hears her scrabbling in the dirt, her ink-covered fingers frantically scratching on the ground whilst Jace shields her with his wings. Moments later, she has a stun grenade in the palm of her hand, and she tears out the pin with her teeth.

“Clear!”

Clary launches the grenade skyward and it explodes against the brick with a burst of green smoke and a blinding white flash. Alec covers his eyes with his arm, but the smoke makes tears stream down over his mask.

Another gunshot from above hurtles through the smoke, but it hits the wall miles off the mark, and it seems Alec isn’t the only one who’s blinded. But Alec hears it this time: the hiss of the shot like a Barrett rifle, maybe .50 BMG or .338 Lapua Magnum in the cartridge, but Alec can’t be sure. He hasn’t heard any bolt action, so it must be a semi-automatic. Short recoil. Two-thousand yard range. The magazine probably holds ten rounds, and Alec counts four spent so far, so there’s six left. Two each for him and Jace and Clary.

The smoke burns his eyes - he wishes he had goggles like Jace - but he strains his ears to listen: the huff of smoke, the bang-bang-bang of Jace’s returning fire hitting stone. He hears Clary still scrabbling, a hiss on her lips as she frantically draws something else on the ground and summons it from out of nothing. Another grenade? A gun? A shield? It doesn’t matter.

This sniper has clearly come equipped to kill supers tonight.

“Go, Arkangel!” Alec shouts, coughing violently. “Four o’clock, by the water tower! Go now!”
Alec draws another arrow, letting it loose on instinct alone. He doesn’t wait to see if it hits, grabbing another from his quiver, letting that soar too. High above, there’s a pained grunt, a shout, and then another bullet zings into the dumpster next to Alec, crushing the metal.

Jace’s wings screech and he barks at Clary, “hold on tight!”

Alec scrabbles to his feet, notching another arrow. Cover. He needs to provide cover.

He hears his arrow ricochet off the rooftop and he growls, adjusting his aim higher. His bearings are shot, the bright flash of the grenade has obliterated his depth perception. He risks stepping out from behind the dumpster, letting another arrow fly into the smokescreen. It whooshes through the air, but there’s no answering cry of it finding a home in someone’s chest.

“Arkangel!” Alec shouts, but his mouth is full of smoke. He hacks into his fist and the coms crackle. “Muse! Tell me your positions!”

Alec notches another arrow and grits his teeth as he drops his aim six or seven degrees. But another gunshot booms with a thunder clap before he can loose it, and Alec lurches, a piercing weight slamming into his chest, his armour catching a spray of shrapnel that nearly knocks him off his feet. He crumples to one knee with a wet gasp, winded by the blow, his bowstring lax, and smacks his palm into the dirt to stop himself falling on his face.

A high-pitched shriek rings in his ears as his coms splutter to stay alive. The electrics sewn into his suit spark and spit like a short circuit, and a crack splinters up the Kevlar plating his chest. From above, the screech of metal on brick scrapes down his spine, and then, shouting from a distance. Jace yelling at the top of his lungs. A crash. The engine whir of Jace’s wings. Another round from the glock.

Alec wheezes, his eyes and nose burning as he struggles to push himself up, catch his breath. Still on his knees, he grapples for another arrow, coughing violently as his fingers grope at his quiver.

God, he’s going to be bruised for days, Izzy’s gonna kill him for damaging his suit -

But then Alec feels the wet and sticky warmth seeping out of a very real hole between the two Kevlar plates on his chest, and that’s not right. When he tries to gasp, blood oozes up the inside of his throat, cloying against the backs of his teeth. It splatters out over his chin.
Oh, God. *Oh no*.

*No, no, no.*

Alec curls his hands in the dirt. Broken glass digs into his palms as he fumbles for a grip on his bow. He tries again to push himself upright, a guttural noise ripped from his chest as he staggers to his feet and careens straight into the side of the dumpster. The clang of his body against the metal makes his head spin. A dribble of blood rolls from the corner of his mouth, across his jaw, down into the collar of his suit.

He stumbles, a few steps blindly forward, his hand white around his bow. The smoke in the alley is thick and putrid and Alec can’t see anything, his eyes are burning, glued together with tears.

He sucks in a breath that gargles blood. His insides realign themselves. Searing pain tears through his chest, ripping him open from shoulder to hip, and this time, he can’t hold back a grunt.

*No. No, not now.*

*Oh, please, no.*

Screwing his eyes shut, Alec folds in on himself. It feels like he’s been lit on fire, a match or a red-hot knife jammed between his ribs; like his skin is simmering, bubbling, turning black and ashy beneath his fingers as he tries to cover the place where he’s been shot with the palm of a frantic hand.

Because he *has* been shot.

His armour didn’t stop the bullet.

It must’ve found a chink; Izzy would never equip him with faulty gear. Has it hit his lung? Surely he’d know if it’s hit his lung. He’s been shot before. He survived them all. He’ll crawl home. He’ll pull the bullet out with a pair of tweezers and an old belt between his teeth. He knows how to stand in his boxers in the bathtub and sew himself up with a needle and thread -
His thoughts trip over themselves, slow and soupy and clumsy, his head spinning in dizzying circles. His hand slips across his armour. He daren’t look down. He doesn’t want to see the beam of a streetlight seeping through him where it shouldn’t.

*Oh God, there’s a lot of blood.*

Grunting, Alec drags himself along the alley wall, blood seeping through his armour. Another stab of pain folds him at the middle, clutching at his side. His fingers slide through the wound like butter. He cries out this time, jabbing his bow into the ground to stop himself from collapsing again. Each rasp of pain is worse than the last, and then it’s a violent, spine-shaking cough, his lungs dragging themselves up his throat. He can’t breathe.

“*Izzy,*” he croaks, “*Izzy, can you hear me.*”

Nothing. Not even static. The radio in his suit must’ve malfunctioned with the bullet. Blood oozes between his fingers like treacle, and God above *does it hurt,* but he grits his teeth and tries shouting again, but his words snag in his mouth, drowned, and he coughs against the blood slicking the sides of his throat, his whole body screaming in pain.

The smoke begins to clear and Alec searches the rooftops above desperately, but there’s no sign of commotion, no sign of *anyone.* He can’t hear Jace’s wings overhead. He can’t hear Clary shouting. He *can* hear the rampant and panicked beat of his heart getting progressively louder and more deafening.

Shot. *Shot, you’ve been shot.*

“*Arkangel!*” Alec pulls his hand free of the fucking *hole in his side* to stab blindly at his coms bud. It’s completely dead in the water. He grits his teeth so hard he feels it in the bridge of his nose. “*Muse! Positions,* damn ... *damnit!*”

Distantly, a siren wails with a Doppler echo, splitting his head wide open. The wind howls through the alleyway with a wolf-like snarl, slamming into Alec’s chest like it’s out for vengeance and wants to kick him when he’s down. The smoke thins and disappears. His teeth begin to chatter. He hears nothing else.

They’re both gone. Jace and Clary. They’ve run off into the night after the sniper. They’ve left
Alec behind in the alleyway with five other corpses and blood soaking all the way down the inside of his leg as it leaks from his chest.

And he has no radio.

He’s alone.

“Fuck,” Alec grunts, pitching sideways into the wall, the bricks grating against his shoulder. A violent shiver screeches up the side of his body and he can’t stop it. His shaking fingers slip through his own blood, smearing across his stomach. The blood keeps pouring out. Everything feels hot. Too hot.

“Izzy, please! Please, come in!”

His legs threaten to give out: in the blink of an eye, it’s like someone has taken a pair of scissors to every tendon in his right leg and severed them in two. He lurches forward, stabbing his bow into the ground, and it’s through sheer force of will alone that he remains standing.

If he falls again, he knows it’s over. He won’t get back up, and then time will tell if Jace and Clary return before he’s bled out on the asphalt. He can’t get hold of Isabelle. There’s no-one else who knows he’s out here, not Idris, not his parents, not Nightlock - because he’s not meant to be out here.

God above, he should’ve stayed in that car with Magnus. Oh, but then it might have been Clary with a bullet in her chest, and she’s so much smaller than Alec, it would’ve taken her off her feet - and he wouldn’t be able to forgive himself -

Will the pyrokinetic come back and carve Sentinel’s name into the wall with fire too?

Alec’s vision blurs and tear tracks crust upon his cheeks. He staggers another few steps, his feet moving on their own accord. He has to get away from here, someone will have noticed the smoke, heard the gunfire - but each breath catches in his throat, not unlike the sound of a man drowning, gasping for air.

Don’t go into shock, he wills himself. Don’t go into shock.
His head spins. The world wobbles on its axis. Stay upright. *Stay upright.*

*Did the bullet go all the way through? Is it still in his chest? What sort of gaping hole has a .338 Lapua left in his side? How much of what he can feel between his fingers is his mangled insides?*

Somehow, Alec drags himself to the end of the street, pools of hazy light illuminating the sidewalk in spotlight. The road is quiet, but across the way, there’s a man in a late-night diner laying down his broadsheet on the table, staring out the window at Alec.

Alec’s got to think quick. Can’t stay here. Can’t get to Izzy. His ribs are *burning*, like someone’s taken a drill to his side and poured molten steel directly into the wound, and he’s wheezing on a fading adrenaline high, sweat slick across his forehead. The cold creeps into his fingertips. His rabbiting heart is slowing. Shock.

That’s shock.

He won’t be able to move in a minute.

Alec snaps his head to the side, searching for a phonebooth on the street corner, but the only one he sees is smashed in, the receiver missing from the extension cord that hangs loose from the graffitied remnants of the box.

He doesn’t know his way around Brooklyn like he knows Manhattan. Headquarters is miles away across the river. He won’t even make it to the bridge like this.

*Where can he go?* He can’t call the cops; they’ll leave him to die in some gutter on the roadside. He can’t call an ambulance, because a paramedic with greedy hands is going to peel his mask from his face and call the press to meet them at the hospital, and then it’s all over, somehow more than it is now.

His balance goes; he stumbles to the side, barely catching himself on his bow. The world swims, rippling in the way it does when the neon is too bright or rain too heavy. *Fuck*, he can’t even *feel* the rain.
The man in the diner pushes to his feet, tugging on the sleeve of a waitress to grab her attention. He points through the grubby window at the shape of Alec staggering on the other side of the street, spilling blood onto the sidewalk, a mess of a battlefield casualty too far from the front lines.

Alec has to run. Run, now. *They’re going to catch you.* He can’t move his legs.

He’s on Magnus’ side of the river. He must be - he must be half a dozen blocks west of the loft, and he knows Magnus is there, was there, a few hours ago.

*He could find Magnus - it’s his only choice - no, don’t do it.*

Alec stifles a bloody groan, biting down hard into his lower lip, screwing his eyes shut. The distant police siren changes direction, hurrying back the way it just came.

*Can’t stay here . Move. Move .*

Blood oozes through his armour; it hasn’t yet stopped and he’s running on fumes now. It’s a miracle of adrenaline that he’s still on his feet after limping six blocks, but now he has to climb.

Magnus’ apartment block looms over him like a guillotine. It’s outline shimmers like a blade. The black skeleton of the fire escape splits in two, stairs disappearing beneath his feet. Alec’s sight is almost gone.

He clutches his side with a dying man’s desperate hand, but his fingers just slide through the mess as he leaves a trail of stupid mistakes up the stairs of Magnus’ fire escape. Each heaving step is more excruciating than the last. Coagulated chunks of dark black blood *drip-drip-drip* from the drenched leg of his supersuit, leaving stains upon the stairs.

It isn’t raining. The clouds are billowing and rolling like purple waves overhead, but he doesn’t know when the drizzle stopped, can’t quite remember. His blood won’t get washed away. People will know he was here and where to find his bled-out body and *he’s gone and done the thing he*
He wishes that he wasn’t - wasn’t here. If his coms were still working, he knows Izzy would be shrieking in his ear. She likely doesn’t even know he’s alive. Hell, he’s not entirely sure that he is. His sight turning black and his skin is on fire, excruciating pain tearing through his ribs and up into his chest, aftershocks felt like tremors across his sternum, shanking every breath he tries to take with violent thrusts deep under his diaphragm. Something small and angry and silver is pearling in his chest: a foolish mistake, a grievous oversight, *a bullet*; he knows how bullets feel.

Alec staggers, finding blind purchase in the railing of the fire escape or maybe the edge of a balcony - he doesn’t know and cannot see. He doesn’t know if this is the right floor; he doesn’t have the energy to climb the fire escape any higher. He’ll be found here or he’ll die here. One or the other.

He hooks his arm over the balustrade, concrete digging into his armpit as he holds himself off the ground with all the strength he still has left. His shoulder howls in pain; his boots slip and slide in the splatter of his own blood. There’s a faint gold light fighting hard against the electric glow of the city behind him; it could be warm. There might be curtains flapping through an open window. The smell of sandalwood.

*Help … help me.*

He can’t make noise. No-one can know he’s here.

*I can’t stand.*

He can’t put Magnus in danger like that. He doesn’t get to choose Magnus over everything else. He can’t. It’s selfish.

*Nightlock. Need to find Nightlock. Magnus isn’t safe if I’m here.*

A fresh gush of blood spills through his splintered armour. His legs give way.

*Magnus*, he pleads. *Magnus.*
The darkness swamps him. New York is snuffed into smoke. Alec blacks out before his knees even hit the floor.

_Magnus._

Chapter End Notes

Listen ... it's so hot in the UK right now ... I'm dying ... so you don't need to kill me for that cliffhanger because the sun is doing it already ...

How many times can a telephone interrupt an almost kiss, you ask? Well, don't test me. It's about the _eenes_ longing, okay? The theme of this update was Alec recognising his feelings for what they are, owning up to this desire and desperate wanting that he feels, as well as realising the lengths he would go to in order to keep Magnus safe.

How does Magnus feel about this, I wonder, when he can collapse buildings with the curl of his fingers? Well, Magnus can't quite remember the last time he was someone's priority, someone's choice, so ... it feels pretty damn good, despite the general state of their world.

As a technical aside, this chapter was not beta read so apologies for any typos or excessive wordiness. There are a lot of purple prose pitfalls I fall into and I am well aware of them but without my beta ... I have no control ... I fill my fics with microexpressions ...

Thank you so much for all the feedback from last time! I can't express how much it helps to read people's thought and feelings on this fic, as everyone has a different take on the moral issues and it's so interesting!

Visit me on tumblr and shout in my inbox, especially if you have questions! Please reblog the tumblr post for me too!

I'm also on Twitter if you want to come chat about the fic ... and boy, do I love talking about this fic. Tweet as you read with the hashtag #ficacoldnight! :D

Please leave a kudos if you made it to the end, and drop me a comment with your thoughts, your favourite line, your hopes for what will happen next, your advice for poor old Alec ... I would be forever grateful for it! If you want an alert next time there's an update, please hit that subscribe button!

Until next time, in which Alec battles with a bullet wound, Magnus realises something about Sentinel he should've seen months ago, and Nightlock and Sentinel share a moment of longing and loneliness ... and a little something more.
superman and the divided sky

Chapter Summary

“Do we know each other in real life?”

Chapter Notes

Alec learns what it's like to bleed out on someone else's couch, Magnus has a realisation that's long overdue, and Sentinel and Nightlock share a lonely, intimate moment in the rooftop of the city.

&&&

Tweet along with #ficacoldnight!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

But I am here & not yet dead so

a constellation of the imaginary is no imaginary

constellation There is no sky w/o a dream of sky

— Frank Sherlock, from “The Next Last One”

Blackness.

Then, the soft croon of Freddie Mercury over the radio. The words are all backwards.

A pair of car headlights cut through the dark, twin beams of white and yellow: they light up a steering wheel, a windshield spattered with rain, a revolving city that passes by, again and again, the same few streets over and over. The world spins on a clock face. A destination never reached.
The sun rises, but it’s blue. The light it gives off is dark and navy. Perhaps this is the way the sun looks when one jumps through the puddles to the city that exists upside down after a rainstorm. There is no way back to the surface; it’s a one-way passage to the other side.

Blackness again, save for the bright flare of a cigarette, but there is no cigarette, merely a spot of light cupped between the hands that rest on a steering wheel. (No face, no eyes, just hands.) The shadows are long. The hands try to hide the flare between their fingers, but the light bleeds through the cracks and won’t be stitched up.

‘You should leave. Before I do something utterly foolish like invite you up,’ comes the whisper from all directions.

‘Would that be so bad?’

The car is moving backwards, not the city. The hands on the wheel don’t move, don’t flex. The gearstick isn’t even in reverse.

‘Yes,’ says the voice, ‘Yes, you can’t stay here. You have to go back.’

‘What if I don’t want to?’

‘But you do. You do.’

The sound of rain thunders on the windshield, but there is no downpour to accompany it. The storm rumbles overhead, but there is no lightning.

‘Hear what I say,’ sings Freddie, ‘Don’t lose your way, don’t lose your way, yeah ...’

Street lights flicker and fade, faster and faster until they’re strobing. Yellow, orange, white, black. How can light be black? But it is. Somehow. It doesn’t really make sense.

A sudden jolt. The entire car lurches as if it has collided with something in its journey backwards.
through the city, but there is no sound of screeching brakes or crumpling metal or screams of the dying.

The light in the hands on the steering wheel extinguishes in a huff, a candle blown out. Smoke creeps out between the fingers as darkness engulfs the front two seats of the car again.

‘Sentinel, wake up! Don’t do this to me, come on, open your eyes!’


Alec resurfaces with a gasp, choking on the taste of blood and smoke stuck to his throat like tar. He coughs, splutters, gurgles; eyes streaming, pain flaring. Someone’s rough hands clutch the sides of his face, strong and boiling hot against his cheeks.

“Breathe,” says whoever is holding him still. Their voice is skewed as if Alec is hearing it from underwater or under blood. It sounds like it’s splintering. “You hear me? Don’t you dare fucking go. Not you. Not now.”

His body is leaden. It won’t move. His vision is swimming; he can’t see anything, but he can feel - he can feel the entire world flipping over. There’s a solarflare behind his eyes, and another in his chest, and they’re burning so bright that it feels like he’s ripping apart from the inside out.

It hurts, it hurts … you’ve got to stem the bleeding …

Alec scrabbles desperately at his suit, but it’s not - it’s not there, no armour, no Kevlar, just flesh, and everything is hot and wet and searing beneath his fingers -

He claws at his body, searching for anything to grab hold, but his fingers catch on ripped skin and he gasps again. Someone hisses above him and grabs his wrists and pins them to his sides and Alec cries out. Panic rises like bile in his throat as a tidal wave of pain strikes him in the chest, tearing and hideous, shoving all the air out of him in one fell blow.
Get up, get up, stem the bleeding, you can’t die here -

Alec thrashes against the hands holding him down, but he’s weak, his body won’t move, his arms won’t do as he wants, he can hardly see, and the burning sensation in his side wants to engulf him, swallow him whole, turn him into ash and cinders. The pain forces a whimper from his mouth, but all that spews forth is a spray of blood across his mouth and chin. He swallows most of it. He chokes, his entire body lurching violently.

“Please, Sentinel, you have to stay still, please,” pleads the person by his head. With one hand, they’re still holding his face, frantically stroking his hair, but with the other, they’re wiping the gore from his teeth. Their knuckles are slick and streaked with Alec’s blood already. “Please, we’re trying to help you.”

Alec searches desperately for a face, but he can’t find anyone. And it’s not that his vision is tunneling, but it’s the blood that has dripped down into his eyes from his hairline and blinded him. He blinks frantically against it, but all he can see is a blurry, red-smeared ceiling -

Did the Circle catch him? Just Sentinel or the others too? Jace, Clary - did they get away? Were there other snipers? Was it an ambush?

Am I going to die here?

Alec bites down hard on his lower lip, keeping the noises torn from his throat clenched between his teeth. He tosses his head from side to side, but the hands hold him steady; they won’t let him go, and the fingers dig into his temples. Alec’s eyes begin to water, dark hands plundering his chest, pulling him back under, back to the upside down version of the world where everything moves backwards - until a shadow crosses over him from above.

There’s a woman standing over him, a woman he doesn’t recognise; he’s never seen her before in his life. But then - then, he hears Magnus’ voice:

“Sentinel. Sentinel, stay with me. Stay with me.”

Magnus. Magnus is here.
He sounds fraught, terrified even, and Alec’s heart aches for him; he fights hard to keep his eyes open, desperately seeking Magnus’ face, but it’s a battle not to be won. Alec can’t find him. He’s near, but not near enough. Alec’s drowning breaths come faster, harder.

Hyperventilation.

The room spins, a blurry mess of dark shapes and shadows, pinpricks of soft golden light scattered across the ceiling like fireflies, like fading cigarette flares, like the glow of street lamps refracting through windshield rain. The woman peering over him has a severe face but kind eyes. Not as kind as Magnus’, but caring still, despite the deep frown between her brows. Her hands are on Alec’s skin, cool amidst the blood. She seems to glow with the soothing colour of twilight. Her brown skin looks blue.

A string is cut: perhaps the last tendon holding Alec’s heart inside his chest. His body sags and he drifts, reality peeling away. The fingers gripping his face seem to slacken. Thumbs work into his cheeks in slightly frantic circles. Magnus’ voice is the last thing he hears before he is pulled under by the blunt thrust of pain.

“Please, Cat,” Magnus is saying, “We can’t lose him. I can’t lose him.”

Alec doesn’t dream again of the backwards world. No city rain, no blurry hands on steering wheels, no sudden crashes into things he cannot see. He doesn’t get to relive that moment in the car with Magnus over and over again, pulled taut by a hundred different what ifs and almosts.

His mind is blessedly silent. He feels no pain. He hears no voices.

Alec returns to consciousness slowly. First, he feels cold, a winter chill stagnated deep in his bones, and then, he feels pain, but it’s distant and dazed, obscure in that way one never quite knows what
woke them in the middle of the night.

He knows he’s been asleep for hours, if not days because his neck is stiff and his shoulders are in agony and his mouth tastes like death, stale and drier than a desert. He groans, and then startles, unfamiliar with the sound of his own creaking voice.

There’s light coming from somewhere, flat and grey and daytime. It’s not too bright - can’t be too long past sunrise, however weak and meager - but it takes a moment for his sleep-crusted eyes to adjust.

He can’t hear the rain, but he can hear sirens and congested traffic, so he’s still in New York. He’s sprawled out on something soft but narrow - probably a couch - and it feels expensive, but his entire body lies heavy, like there’s a leaden weight on his chest pinning him down, compressing his ribs. He can move, he’s not tied down, but sitting upright sounds like such a far away question that his body aches and groans in protest of it.

And then a bell chimes nearby, shrill enough for Alec to feel it scuttle down the back of his neck, and it sounds like the collar of a curious cat, investigating whether the gruesome stranger is still occupying his favorite sleeping spot. He tries to turn his head towards the sound, but it scampers away, a jingle disappearing across the room. The tendon in Alec’s neck twinges. He grimaces.

Slowly, feeling creeps back into his legs: he’s familiar with the way sweat dries on the back of his knees when he hasn’t washed in hours, the way his thighs burn when he hasn’t stretched before a mission. The stench of smoke seems to cling to him, and his hairline itches like he’s boasting some impressive scabs. His head feels like its been put through a blender.

Alec breathes in deeply, trying to rally his vagrant thoughts; an ache presses down on his temples, making the room spin, so he closes his eyes and sinks back into the pillows. There’s this stuffy weight in the bridge of his nose, and his throat is scratchy and torn and tastes like iron, but beneath that, he’s sure he smells sandalwood.

Magnus.

Magnus. He made it to Magnus’.

Alec’s hands fly to his face and it rips a red-hot pain up his side, and he gasps, but his mask is still on. His mask is still on. His identity is still his.
Magnus hasn’t looked.

Magnus doesn’t know.

Alec pulls himself upright but fuck, it’s a mistake. His entire body wrenches in pain that spasms from his hip up to his armpit, and he almost falls back into the pillows. He can feel the epicentre of it buried in the side of his chest, a searing, scorching hot spot, excruciating in the way heat lingers in blisters long after a burn. The bandages strapped around his torso squeeze him too tight. Difficult to breathe. Breathe.

He sucks in a few frantic gasps as he sinks his fingers into the couch, knuckles turning white, and the night before collides with him like a semi-truck.

The alleyway. The dead supers. The sniper. He was shot.

And now he’s here.

The couch is drenched in days-old blood, the cushions crusted and brown, and it smells putrid. He smells like a dead man. Across the room, hidden in part by light and breezy curtains, the windows to the balcony are smeared with bloody handprints too, the sort left by a man staggering blind and delirious into the loft. A hurricane has passed through the apartment, a storm with his name: pillows and throw blankets are discarded across the floor and pill bottles and unwrapped bandages litter the top of the coffee table. Alec’s bow and quiver are on the ground too, just out of reach, along with most of his armour; his bracers are split with cracks and splattered with his own insides, tossed aside in someone else’s careless panic. Beneath the sandalwood, the sweet, nauseous smell of rot pervades.

Finally, Alec looks down at himself. He’s still in the bottom half of his supersuit, his right pant leg stiff and crunchy with dried blood, but the top half and his belt are missing; his chest and shoulders are mummified in bandages stained with splotches of red from stitches he will have already torn. Mottled purple bruises are turning yellow up the lengths of both his forearms, and the knuckles on either hands are scraped and shredded, dirt caked beneath his fingernails. His burned palm is hardly recognizable, the scars smeared with mud and gore and Lord only knows what. He’s gloveless and bootless, and there’s a blanket pooled around his feet which he must’ve kicked off in his sleep, and he stares hard at his bare toes.

Someone has taken the time to strip him of most of his clothes.
And yet his mask is still on.

A strange feeling surges up in Alec’s chest then, suffocating and desperate and searching for Magnus. He’s been here, Alec knows he has, because there are five silver rings on the coffee table, stacked in a neat little pile where they’ve been removed so that hands might stem blood flow and fingers might bind wounds.

Alec shouldn’t have come here, but God, he’s alive, and he shouldn’t be alive. Izzy will be worried sick, and Jace will be pacing the streets looking for him, and Clary will be blaming herself, but -

But he hasn’t died in some alleyway gutter, and despite the cramping pain in his chest, that’s a win.

He’s alive. Sentinel’s alive. And Magnus must’ve saved him.

But he’s not here now -

Alec focuses instead on slowing his breathing; he counts each inhale and exhale, just like he would in the training room. His ribs twinge and he leaks air like there’s a hole in him (and there probably still is, he reasons), and he clamps his hand across his side and tries to speak. He sounds like a seventy year old chain smoker; all that leaves his lips is a sad croak of Magnus’ name.

But at least he sounds indistinguishable from Alec.

The bell he heard upon waking jingles again, followed by a curious chirp and claws scritching at the couch cover. Alec looks down and a small silver and white cat stares up at him from the floor with bug eyes and a lashing tail. It meows again, tilting its head and narrowing its eyes in a way that makes Alec think it’s pissed at him.

Chairman, he thinks, recalling Magnus’ many tales from the office about his petulant cat. In lieu of clicking his tongue, Alec reaches down to pet him, grimacing as his body twists, but Chairman scurries away before Alec can reach, darting away through an open door on the other side of the room.

Alec frowns, eyes following the disappearing tail around the doorframe. Likely he looks - and
smells - like a creature newly crawled out of the sewers, so he can’t really blame the cat for startling. Alec’s probably stolen his favourite sleeping spot in favour of bleeding out and almost dying. He can permit the Chairman a little bitterness.

Alec watches the doorway for a moment longer, wondering if the cat will come back, but the jingle of his collar has disappeared. Instead, there’s a hum, but a hum he knows well: voices on the other side of the door, and Alec squeezes his eyes closed to try and focus on the words that bend around the throbbing in his head.

There are two people talking in hushed, clipped tones: one, a woman, and the other, Magnus. His voice, his timbre, his stubborn resolve is unmistakable. It’s definitely him.

“He’s a Corporate, Magnus,” the woman is saying, her voice a hiss. “Do you realise the sort of danger you’re putting yourself in here? He’s been here for days. You might as well have a bullseye on your back, and - for the love of God, this one carries a bow and arrows! It’s a sign! You’re asking for this to end badly.”

“He’s not like the others, Cat,” Magnus says then. He sounds strained. There’s a beat of silence that Alec imagines is punctuated by a withering glare. Alec edges forward on the sofa, levering his feet down onto the floor and wheezing as something inside him moves wrong. He presses his hand to his side, but no fresh blood blooms across the bandages.

“What did you expect me to do?” Magnus continues. “Turn him away when he arrived on my balcony with a bullet in his chest? He’s a good man. I won’t let him die for some stupid war between Idris and the city that he doesn’t want a part in.”

“Does he know?” the woman, Cat, says then, “Is that why he came here? Did you tell him? Please tell me you didn’t. My God, Magnus.”

“Of course not,” Magnus snaps, “We’ve only met like this a couple times -”

“I used my powers on him,” Cat interrupts, “If he remembers that, if he remembers my face ... you’ve dragged me into this too, now. He’ll probably walk himself back to Idris the moment he wakes up and tell them all about us and - I have a job, Magnus. I have a job, and a daughter, and a life, and I don’t want to do this anymore. Too many people want me dead already. I gave this up.”

“I know you did.” Magnus’ voice is softer then. “I know you did, and I’m sorry, I truly am. But
you were the only one, Cat. The only one I trust.”

The vague and bleary memories of a woman’s face resurface: Alec remembers her brown skin, her kind eyes, her hair halved in blue and gold from above as she bent over him. He remembers a cool hand pressing down on his chest and his skin tingles with the thought of being knitted back together.

She saved Alec’s life last night, whoever she is. Cat. And she’s also a super, just like Alec.

‘I used my powers on him. He’ll tell them all about us.’

A lump forms in Alec’s throat and he can’t swallow it. Yet again, Sentinel cannot be trusted for the mask he wears upon his face. Idris speaks for him before he’s even had the chance to open his mouth.

The pile of his armour across the room mocks him. He resents it.

He hears Cat huff loudly from the other room. “If you trust me, Magnus, step away from this,” she insists, “For me. For you. His people hurt our people. He’s not different, he’s just the same as the rest of them or at least he’ll turn out to be once you’ve let your guard down around him. Idris hates other supers just as much as the Circle do, just as much as the people of New York do. You know this.”

“It’s not that simple,” Magnus murmurs. “He’s nothing like the rest of them; he’s trying to do good. He wants to make a difference and I believe he can. No-one wants to see this continue, not us, not Idris, not when we have a common enemy out there. I’ve had enough of people dying because of this ridiculous in-fighting. We should be on the same side.”

More silence. Alec tries to lift himself from the couch, but both his wrists give way and he falls back into the cushions with a flump. Someone moves in the other room, pacing across the floor, but Alec cannot tell who.

“Magnus,” Cat sighs then, and whoever is walking stops suddenly. “Who is he to you, Magnus?”

Magnus seems to suck in a sharp breath, and Alec can envision his reluctance to answer, the way he might be fiddling with the silver cuff on his ear, or his rings, if he still had them on his fingers.
“He reminds me of someone I know,” Magnus replies. “Someone I care about.”

“Who?”

“Alexander.”

Alec stops breathing.

And then he starts coughing violently, a mist of blood spraying from his lips and across the back of his hand where he covers his mouth and tries not to ruin the couch any more than he already has. He gags, his diaphragm heaving like he might throw up, and doubles over on himself, fingers fisted in the couch cushions. He screws his eyes shut as a piercing jolt ricochets the length of his spine and up the side of his neck like a trapped nerve. His back continues to convulse and he sucks in air like he’s drowning, blood and mucus pasted against the backs of his teeth.

The door slams in the other room and the Chairman yowls. Alec coughs again into his fist, tears pricking his eyes, but he hears hurried footsteps crossing the floor. A warm hand arrives on the back of his neck, a thumb rubbing soothing circles into his sweat-cooled skin and fingers combing through his matted hair. A glass of water is pressed into his hands.

Magnus.

“Drink this.”

Alec glances up, his face drawn and pale, and meets Magnus’ eyes. Magnus’ gaze is intense, keen and focused and unreadable, so Alec lifts the glass to his mouth and gulps down as much as he can in one haggard breath. The water is cold and soothing against his throat, slightly bitter with the taste of dissolved codeine. He inhales shakily, but nothing comes back up.

Magnus’ hand doesn’t leave his neck, his fingers digging into the knobs of Alec’s spine. Alec drinks greedily. He’s starving, and shivery too. It really has been days ...

It’s been days and he’s been laid here on this couch the entire time. He wonders if Magnus has watched him. He wonders if Magnus thought he was going to die.
What am I meant to say now? How do I say anything? ‘I was shot and you were the only person I could go to.’

Too honest.

And he’s still Sentinel.

And the last time Magnus saw Sentinel, together on the roof of the Tribunal at dawn, Alec came too close to a truth he could not take back. This time, he’s hopped up on codeine and delirious with pain and only half as inhibited.

Alec offers the empty cup back to Magnus. “Thanks,” he mumbles, his voice like gravel.

Magnus sets the cup on the table and withdraws his hand from the back of Alec’s neck at the same time. He tilts his head, frown lines forming between his brows. “It’s not pretty, but I’m sure you know that,” he says, his eyes flitting across each and every silver scar, scrape, and gravel burn on Alec’s skin. “Do you remember what happened? Do you remember coming here?”

Alec nods pathetically. The blood, the panic, the world tipping over. The fire escape stairs. The bloody trail across Brooklyn. All of it flashes behind his eyelids as he takes a shaky breath to steady himself. “Yeah. Yes. I’m sorry.”

Magnus huffs on a hollow laugh, but doesn’t really smile. “As long as I can bill Idris for new furniture, there’s nothing to be sorry for. But you really did do a number on my couch.”

Sorry, Alec thinks again, but he can’t say it. Sorry, sorry, I’m sorry for dragging you into this, I’m sorry for the mess I’ve made, I’m sorry for ruining your couch. It’s not enough.

“That was a joke, by the way,” Magnus adds, “I worry you might also have a concussion, or maybe I’m just not as funny as I think I am. Sentinel?”

“Yeah?”
Magnus clicks his tongue and moves to perch on the edge of the coffee table, brushing the empty pill packets aside. His knees knock against Alec’s and he picks up his rings, sliding them back onto his fingers.

And at last, Alec gets a good look at him: Magnus’ eyeliner is hasty, smudged and three days old; and dark crescent shadows hang beneath his eyes, staining his skin grey and sickly; his hair flops across his forehead, and he’s dressed down in dark jeans and a henley, no necklaces, no jewelry to be seen. He’s wearing slippers. Goddamn slippers.

“Do you remember being shot?” Magnus asks. Alec nods again. “I had to pull the bullet out myself, you know. It couldn’t stay in there. Lead poisoning. And blood. You ... you lost a lot of blood.”

Magnus’ voice threatens to break on the very last word; it’s the smallest of trembles, but it ripples across Alec’s skin and he feels it intimately.

He has never seen Magnus this weary before. He seems so tired, so bone-deep exhausted, that his body might as well be paper-thin for how it lets through the light. Alec sees right through him, but it’s not -

It’s not as if Magnus is trying to hide it: the way he wrings his hands and fiddles with his rings and clenches his jaw and won’t look Alec in the eye. He wears it as well as anyone would after three days of vigilance over a dying man, wondering what might come first: the person who shot Alec breaking in through the window to finish the job, or Sentinel’s last breath?

“I didn’t mean to come here.” Words escape before Alec can stop them. “It happened too quickly, I couldn’t call any backup. And ... and I knew you were close, so I - I didn’t want to put you at risk-”

“More risk than I’m already at, you mean?” Magnus remarks, raising his eyebrows. “I thought we discussed this the last time.”

“You know what I mean. I’m trying to say thank you. For saving my life.” He gestures at his bandage-swaddled chest. “For not ... for not asking any questions.”

“I haven’t really had the chance to ask any questions. You’ve been unconscious for three days. You
didn’t make for the most riveting conversation, I have to admit.”

Alec’s face warms and he feels guilty, even if he’s the one with a bullet hole in his chest. He rests his palm over his ribs, guiding the rise and fall of his chest, and beneath the gauze he can feel a tough knot of scar tissue that wasn’t there before. He feels out the shape of it, another mark on his body to become intimately familiar with.

Unbidden, an image of Magnus bent over him on this sofa comes to mind: Magnus with his shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows and his hair plastered to his forehead with sweat; rolls of bandages in his hands, Alec’s blood coagulating between his fingers, his friend barking orders at him as she did … whatever she did to plug the wound in Alec’s side. He imagines Magnus changing the bandages around Alec’s bare chest when he bled through; taking a cool cloth to Alec’s forehead and cleaning away the dirt around his mask; sitting across from Alec as he does now, his eyes glazed over and far away but unable to sleep.

*What did I look like when you found me on your balcony? Was it a horror scene? How much blood?*

*Were you scared of me?*


“Cat talks tough, but she means well, even when I phone her up at two in the morning on a work night to tell her about the dying Corporate on my rooftop,” Magnus says, glancing away. He rubs his palms up and down his thighs like he’s worried, but he shouldn’t have to be. Not of Alec. “She also owed me a favour.”

“I won’t tell anyone,” Alec says quickly. “About her powers, I mean.”

Magnus looks up sharply, but Alec continues: “I remember … I remember her being here, she did something, she touched me and it felt like - like something pulling on my skin … and it’s … my head’s a mess. Everything’s all - it’s all jumbled up. But I won’t tell anyone about her, I promise. Please tell her that.”

Magnus nods.
“I won’t tell anyone about you helping me either,” Alec adds. He looks towards the remnants of his supersuit and frowns. “My coms are offline and my tracer got fried by the - by the bullet. No-one knows I’m here-”

“I trust you.”


Magnus shrugs but he’s still picking at his rings. “Is that really a question? You’re a good man, you wait on rooftops to make sure foolish journalists get home safely. I know you’re not the sort of person to go back on your word. And I’ll be the first to admit that I’m an excellent judge of character.”

“You’re not foolish, Magnus.”

“Oh,” Magnus laughs, “That’s all you have to say, is it?”

Alec can’t help his smile and he turns his head away before it can grow any bigger. But Magnus sees anyway and his laugh is light and teasing and so terribly relieved, but easily the best sound Alec has heard in -

Forever, perhaps.

“I’m going to get myself a drink,” Magnus whispers, rising to his feet, and Alec watches him stagger, three-days of sleeplessness catching up with him. “God knows I deserve it.” He glances back at Alec. “I would offer you one but the doctor says that might be a bad idea and she can be terrifying when people disobey her.”

Columns of liminal sunlight slide through the gaps in the curtains and douse Magnus in shades of gold and the ephemeral as he crosses the room to the drinks cart by the window. Alec cannot look away. Magnus glances up at the bloody handprint on the balcony door, brilliant alizarin red in the daylight, and he pauses, he stutters, for the briefest of seconds, before reaching for a bottle. He pours himself a generous whiskey, takes a deep breath, his shoulders settling, and spins on his heels to face Alec. He wraps one arm around himself - self-preservation, Alec thinks - and the glass hangs loose in his fingers.
“So,” he says, and there’s a wry, humourless twitch to his lips, jostling with the concern that his eyes betray every time they flick to Alec’s wounded side. Subconsciously, Alec curls his hand across his ribs, clutching at the gauze. Even the slightest pressure makes him huff.

Magnus’ eyes narrow at the noise. “I’m going to go out on a limb here and assume you can’t tell me what happened,” he says flatly.

Alec doesn’t know why this sudden space between them makes this conversation so much harder to have. But it hurts, hurts differently, this secondary ache in his chest. “Magnus, you know I can’t -”

“-and you can’t tell me why it happened-”

“Magnus-”

“-or even who shot you, although I can take a good guess-”

“Magnus, please-”

“-but, considering I have been such a welcoming and understanding host, I would like an answer to one question. How does that sound?”

Alec sighs, but he’s not good at telling Magnus no. He rubs absently at his bandages and nods.

“Excellent,” Magnus says. He takes a long sip of his whiskey, swilling it around in his mouth. The moment of silence is excruciating. Alec waits on the edge of a precipice.

“So, Sentinel, why did you come here?”

Ah. There it is.

Alec swallows thickly; he looks down at the length of himself, his mummified torso, his half-worn supersuit, his dirty fingernails. He knows that’s not a question he can answer.
And even if he could, what would he say? *You know how you said to Cat that you care about me? Well, I care about you too.*

“I … I can’t answer that, Magnus,” Alec says softly. *I don’t know how, not without giving myself away.* His eyes flit around the room, across the crusting blood on the couch and remnants of the night three nights before, and the ugly contrast of it all against the opulence of Magnus’ home, but he comes back to Magnus, drawn inevitably to the way daylight pools around his feet. “I’m sorry.”

Magnus shrugs and takes another sip of his drink. “Can’t say I didn’t try,” he mutters, but his voice doesn’t match the way he fiddles with the silver cuff on his ear. Alec longs to be able to tell him the truth. “I’ve had three days to think about it, of course. Wondering why you might come *here* of all places. I assume you were nearby, if the rather gruesome trail on my fire escape was anything to go by, but the fact that Idris weren’t able to pick you up-”

“Idris couldn’t know.”

“I suspected as much,” Magnus mutters. He swirls his drink in contemplation and keeps his distance, away from the bloody couch, and it makes Alec itch. “There can’t be many people in the city who would open their door to a super in need in the dead of night.”

Alec speaks before he thinks. “That’s not why I-”

“That’s not why you what?”

*That’s not why I came here,* Alec thinks. *I wasn’t thinking straight. I needed help. I needed saving.*

*There’s no-one else I trust to do that.*

Alec shakes his head, clamping his mouth shut. “Nothing,” he says, “It’s nothing.”

Magnus scowls. “Well, then, permit me a different question, if you won’t answer that one. Given that I’ve been up to my elbows in your insides now, I think we’ve gained a certain level of familiarity between us. Maybe I could settle for your name? If that’s allowed, of course.”
“Magnus, I-”

The sharpness in Magnus’ eyes doesn’t last; if anything, it’s one brief moment before it fades into sympathy. This time, he’s the one shaking his head, his eyes fluttering closed.

“It’s okay,” Magnus whispers. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked that. There are rules, I know.”

He doesn’t sound bitter as he says it. Disappointed, yes. Definitely weary - it’s been a long night, or three - but he doesn’t blame Alec for all the things that can or cannot be said.

And Alec hates that. He tries to push himself up off the sofa again, but his arms still won’t hold his weight.

“Magnus, I - I wish I could. It’s just -”

And oh, how frustrating it is, not being able to get the words out; they’re jumbled and nonsensical before they manage the long slow slide up his throat, and then, he can’t even spit them out - so the words fester fester, so they make him want to gag. There’s a lock on his mouth for which Alec doesn’t have the key, a key he gave away years and years ago, before he knew what it was that he was sacrificing.

Magnus interrupts him with a noise, and crosses the room back to Alec, swallowing up that painful distance. He lowers himself onto the very edge of the sofa, the smallest of spaces between his thigh and Alec’s, and then he rests a hand on Alec’s knee and smiles in a way that has Alec’s heart trip over itself.

“I understand,” Magnus urges, and the way he says it, both unflinching and devastatingly soft, is too big for Alec’s body. Magnus probably thinks nothing of it, but it seizes in Alec’s chest, not as fear, not as dread, but as this overwhelming surge of incomprehensible yearning that he’s not sure his bullet-riddled chest is strong enough to encompass.

Magnus takes another sip of his whiskey, and when he continues, his voice is distant, and Alec’s throat tightens in that way that preludes crying. He doesn’t really understand why he thinks about crying.
“Believe me,” Magnus murmurs, and his fingers arch on Alec’s knee, digging into the fabric of his supersuit. “I understand more than you know.”

Silence, then. And Alec longs to take off his mask. (He’s never wanted for anything more in his life, he’s almost certain. It feels monumental. And he’s terrified. The realisation rings out like a gunshot just above his head and he flinches with the crack of it.)

Alec wants to go back to that moment in the front seat of Magnus’ car: how beautiful Magnus had looked, vague and smeary in the dissonance of car headlights, how the rain had hidden them from prying eyes, how Alec was not sure if the night would end with him going home alone.

He wants to go back to that stolen second where there wasn’t a war to be fought on three sides, and the Circle wasn’t breathing down his neck, and the thought of running away was something he could stomach - because, for Magnus, it would be worth it.

He wants to go back to that moment and linger there, in the addictive will-he-won’t-they of whether his night would accumulate in the sort of kiss he has long been coveting.

But instead, Magnus’ hand feels like fire on his knee, and the patched-up wound in his side feels worse, and his eyes are stinging as he blinks back heat, and Magnus is asking these questions that threaten to flay Alec alive, and … and …

And there’s fizzing in Alec’s ear, and he thinks that means his coms are about to reboot, and he can’t afford to stay here any longer. *He’s alive, he’s awake, it has to be enough. He doesn’t get more than that.*

“I should go,” Alec croaks.

Magnus’ face betrays his hurt; he withdraws his hand suddenly. “Don’t be ridiculous, you can hardly walk. No-one heals from a bullet wound in three days, even with help. You need to rest.”

Alec shakes his head. The wooden floor is cold beneath his bare feet and he can already feel his body begging him not to move. “My coms systems is gonna come back online. I don’t want them to know I’m here,” he says on a breath, “I want - I need to keep you safe. You … you know that.”

“And I told you before, I’m not your responsibility,” Magnus retorts, “I know what I signed up for,
I know what being involved with the supers costs and that’s okay. You don’t have to push yourself through this because of me, Sentinel. Please.”

“I know. I know.”

“Stay.”

I can’t.

Alec pushes himself to his feet and the pain tears right through him and suffers it, grits his teeth, survives despite it. His newly-mended body moves differently, the foreign knot of scar tissue stretching and shifting in ways he is not yet used to: later, he tells himself. There will be time later to learn.

Covering his ribs with his hand, Alec shuffles over to the pile of his gear. It’s in about as good a shape as him, but at least Izzy can provide him with a new suit, a clean bow; replacing his cadaver of a body is a harder feat. He dresses slowly, wincing as he slides his arms into his suit and clips on his greaves to his shins and knees. It’s a struggle to get into his bracers, unable to raise his arms or force his shaking fingers to work on the fiddly buckles, but Magnus says nothing, eyes cast down on the floor as he continues to nurse his drink.

He doesn’t repeat himself.

The knife-edge tension that strings the city out is piercing through the windows, thick and oblique, the very tip of it scraping at Alec’s weeping wound, flaking the fresh scar tissue away.

(Please, he thinks. Ask me again. Ask me to stay again.)

He moves towards the balcony door as he tugs on his gloves. The sun is high and watery in the sky; it must be further past dawn than he realised, for all this is a rare stolen moment of daylight. It’s going to be tough getting back to headquarters unseen, but Alec doesn’t want to linger here, not when he’s so close to admitting something he might regret. Someone will probably send a car, he hopes, before he’s walked two blocks. It’ll be alright. He has to be.

(Ask me to stay. I’ll say yes this time.)
Alec pauses next to the window; he catches sight of his reflection: Sentinel, in full suit and armour, skin white with blood-loss beneath his mask. His gear is rain-heavy and stinks of old blood and sweat, but it’s no longer the disguise that it was before he was stripped of it. He feels naked, standing here in Magnus’ home. *He reminds me of someone*, Magnus had said. *Alexander*.

Alec grabs his bow from the floor and slings it over his shoulder. His hands are shaking. He doesn’t feel safe.

No.

No, that’s not true. Alec feels safe. Alec will always feel safe here.

It’s Sentinel who does not.

(Or maybe it’s the other way around.)

“I’ll send something to cover the damage,” Alec murmurs, and his fingers fold and refold around the strap of his quiver. Magnus hums discordantly, eyes still on the floor. “Sorry again about your couch. And, uhm, everything else.”

Alec pushes open the balcony door, but still, Magnus says nothing, and Alec cannot bear to leave it this way, but -

A memory stirs. ‘*Is there not one person whose head you’re desperate to see inside?*’

“Magnus, listen-”

“I decided on my question.”

Alec blinks in surprise. He takes a step back from the window and his hand falls from the strap of his quiver. “Oh. Okay. What is it?”
Magnus runs his index finger around the rim of his whiskey glass and it sings. He purses his lips, his jaw flexing, and Alec waits to hear something earth-shattering.

“Do we know each other in real life?”

He is not disappointed. It’s like there’s someone stepping on his heart, grinding the heel of their boot down into the point of him where it’s going to hurt the most, and Alec can do nothing. He can do nothing but grit his teeth and bear it.

“Magnus,” he starts, half a sigh, half a plea, but he’s tired. Possibly more tired than he’s been his life, and considering the life he has lived, that’s saying something. He pushes on the balcony door, stepping out onto the fire escape and into the thin and watery sunlight; the brisk wind cuts into his bruises, but he doesn’t let the door close, not yet.

He lets himself be Alec - Alec for just one moment - finding Magnus’ eyes on him when he looks back over his shoulder.

“Yes,” Alec says, giving in. His eyes soften and his shoulders fall, a weight simultaneously lifted and worsened. He might even be smiling, if such a defeated, hopeless thing can be called a smile.

“Yes?” asks Magnus, eyebrows lifting. He edges forward on the couch.

Alec shifts his weight and the sunlight streams over his shoulder and into the loft, painting Magnus’ face in a soft yellow glow; it’s a colour Alec only sees in his dreams; it’s incognizable. Magnus moves to put his glass down on the coffee table, but Alec cannot wait for it. He cannot wait for what will come after: Magnus rising to his feet and rushing after him, snagging him by the crook of his elbow and turning Alec back into the loft, ruining all the carefully-crafted plans Alec thought he had.

Oh, those plans have been in tatters for months now. The moment Magnus stepped into his life saw to that. The moment they pulled that effigy of Arkangel down from the front of the Tribunal and Magnus looked at him like he was someone worth seeing, beneath the suit, without the mask -

And so, Alec says, “Yes. We do know each other,” and then he flees, without looking back. He doesn’t hear Magnus call after him.
Alec makes it as far as the rooftop of the building across the street before he has to stop and lean up against a wall to catch his breath. He screws up his face and tries to focus on not having a full-blown panic attack, but God, it’s difficult. He’s full-body shaking and his skin is clammy and his vision tunnels, blackening at the edges as his head spins with bloodrush. His chest heaves and his lungs ache with every punctuated inhale and exhale and it just hurts so fucking much and it has nothing to do with how bruised and battered he is.

Oh. Oh, that was a lot of truth. Tired and weary and a little lost-for-words but truth nonetheless, and he hadn’t been planning on saying anything like that, anything so fucking dangerous, but when has he ever been able to trust himself around Magnus. He’s far too good at saying things he doesn’t mean to say, and far too good at not saying things he wants to say but is always too scared to admit.

Alec thumps his clenched fist against his leg in frustration, and winces when he finds another untended bruise there. His eyes water, and the monotonous wind sticks like a broken record, each vagrant whine grating on his composure, rattling towards an imminent breaking point.

He thinks of Magnus’ face, right as Alec looked back over his shoulder. That moment of shock, just before Magnus was able to reign it all back in and smother it and turn it into something brittle: Alec had seen it. It had been open and raw and hurt somehow, and yet Alec is surprised -

- because was there really still a part of Magnus who believed that they don’t know each other beyond these masks? What answer had Magnus been expecting to his question?

Alec sags against one of the big ventilation shafts on the roof; the metal is freezing cold and his bruises sing. The barely-closed wound in his chest chafes against itself, his Sentinel armour rubbing him raw, and he wonders what it might take to burst open again. Part of him is almost curious to find out, but it’s not the part of him that Isabelle would be particularly pleased by.

Speaking of Isabelle -

Alec presses a finger to his ear, adjusting his coms bud, but he can’t quite bring himself to speak. He doesn’t want to go back to Idris. Not yet. The longer he stays away, the longer he dodges the responsibility of what he’s done, and that’s not an Alec thing, that’s not an Alec thing to do at all, and yet here he still is, a disappointment to his own expectations once again.
He tells himself that he doesn’t call a car to pick him up because he doesn’t want his parents to know where Magnus lives, or that he went to Magnus’ when he was at death’s door, or that he cares about Magnus in the slightest because it can only ever be used against him.

But it’s not just that.

*He doesn’t want to go back to Idris because he doesn’t want to be at Idris.*

But it’s not like he can just call a cab either. Not in broad daylight. Public payphones in his supersuit do not good decisions make, and he is streets away from anywhere he has stashed a spare change of clothes, and yet, the thought of walking home exhausts him before he has taken even a step off this rooftop. He’s not so sure he’d make it back before keeling over or biting through his tongue in a vain attempt not to cry out in agony.

*Only one thing left to try, then.*

Alec adjusts the frequency on his radio, tapping in to a different channel. He exhales slowly, already fatigued by what he is about to ask, but it really is his last resort.

“Hey,” Alec grunts, hoping the pain he’s in doesn’t bleed across the radio waves. “Lewis. You there?”

Silence trembles for a minute, and Alec’s just about to give up and call Isabelle after all, when the radio spits and fizzles, and then comes the telltale *mmph* of someone tripping over their own feet in their haste to answer.

“*Alec?*” comes Simon’s voice, tinny and static. “*Holy shit, I never thought you’d actually use this thing when you gave it to me! What’s up? How’s it going? Did you take personal days, you weren’t at work on Friday -*”

“Are you somewhere private?” Alec grits out between his teeth, closing his eyes in exasperation. He rubs his fingers along his ribs in an attempt to stem the crackle of pain that flares with every inflation of his diaphragm. Breathing shouldn’t hurt so fucking much, but it does. It really does, and yet the pain with which he so often grounds himself does nothing of the sort. He can’t think; he can’t focus; and it’s going to be a war waged to even get himself home.
“What? Yeah, of course, I’m at home, I haven’t left for work yet,” Simon stage-whispers, muffling his transceiver. “Is something the matter? Oh my God, do you need my help? Give me five minutes to get my suit on and I’ll-”

“I need you to call me a cab,” Alec hisses, “And bring me a change of clothes. I’m in Brooklyn. Can you do that?”

“I’ll be there in twenty minutes,” says Simon earnestly, “Hold tight, Alec, you can count on me.”

“Great,” says Alec in despair.

Despite all his pleading and panicking, Simon cannot stay: “I thought you said you can’t afford to be late to work again,” Alec grunts as he eases himself onto the ugly couch and hauls his legs up off the floor.

Standing in the doorway with one foot inside Alec’s apartment and the other out, Simon looks like he’s about to cry, worrying his lip as if he might chew it off.

“Radio me if you need anything, okay?” he says, before he leaves. “I’ll do an OJ run for you, I’ll bring you dinner, literally anything you think of, alright? Just take it easy.”

The front door clicks shut and Alec’s head thuds back onto the couch cushions. His neck is stiff and his skin is dry and flaky with unwashed sweat and he would die for a hot shower, but he can’t move. Maybe he’ll never be able to move again, maybe he’ll die on this squeaking couch, staring at the ceiling.

That seems like a problem for another day.

Sleep doesn’t come easily: he’s slept for three days straight, and whilst his body might still beg for
it now, his mind races valiantly on. He closes his eyes, and behind his eyelids he sees blue sparks and golden light and the dark wetness of that alleyway, the acidic stench of smoke, the hot ooze of blood down the inside of his suit. He sees Magnus’ face in a blur, he hears Magnus and his friend arguing in the kitchen, he remembers the jingle of that cat’s collar and the clink of ice cubes in the whiskey glass and they’re one and the same.

A mess. It’s all a mess and his head is aching - Magnus was right, he probably does have a concussion - and he cannot hope to sort or suppress any of it.

Blindly, Alec rolls onto his side and winces as the freshly-healed skin stretches. He clamps his hand over his ribs and hisses through his teeth, but no blood blooms against his tshirt.

Whatever Magnus’ friend did for him, it wasn’t stitches and Savlon. Alec is not about to test the limits of how his skin has knit itself back together, fingers tracing cautiously again over the raised ridge of scar tissue that forms a small pucker beneath his tshirt. He’s never met a super with healing powers before, but he knows they’re out there, and Idris’ files are probably full of records that they shouldn’t have, records which Alec could accidentally leave in the paper shredder or ask Raj to send somewhere far away and untraceable. Her name was Cat. That’s all Alec really knows, but sometimes, a name is just enough to cause irreparable damage.

And he almost gave Magnus his .

When the sun begins to set, staining the clouds with a faint orange on the horizon, Alec strips out of his clothes and staggers into the bathroom, lowering himself into a lukewarm bath and twenty minutes of deep sleep. He feels little better when he wakes, but he can at least walk and ease himself into a pair of soft jeans and worn shirt, and he summons the strength to make the trek to headquarters. Burdening storm clouds goad him from the other side of the window. He doesn’t want to add pneumonia to his list of ailments tonight, but nor does he want to subject himself to the pointed elbows of commuters on the subway.

He calls a cab.

By the time he makes it to Idris, the night has crept in but the chants of protesters on the front steps echo like a marching song. Alec watches them for a moment, the turning circle of placards and cardboard signs that never seem to change, and then slips into the alleyway across the street, climbing down through the storm doors and into the basement where the back door waits for him. He scans his biometrics on the keypad, the secret door slides open, and he flips up his coat collar to shield his face from prying eyes and cameras.
Headquarters is quiet for so early in the evening. The white hallways are bright and soulless but empty, not even the sound of steel-capped footsteps to be heard, and reek of fresh bleach, any signs of life scrubbed away by a man with a mop. Alec feels dirty in comparison, and he presses his palm to his ribs, imagining himself leaking blood across the floor as he heads for Izzy’s lab. The blood, he can hold inside his body, but the limp, he cannot hide. Anyone with a keen eye will notice. And there are many people with keen eyes here.

Alec turns the corner towards Izzy’s lab and walks headlong into Jace.

Truthfully, he’s fortunate that the first person he runs into isn’t Maryse, but the relief doesn’t last. Alec grunts, exhaling like a hiss through his teeth, and digs his fingers into his side, feeling the fresh bandages through his shirt. Jace staggers backwards, and the briefest moment of thank God Jace is alive passes Alec by before Jace opens his mouth.

“Buddy!” Jace crows, and Alec sees the relief on his face too, however fleeting, “I shouldn’t be the one telling you to watch where you’re going, you’re the one supposed to hear me coming!”

Alec levels him with a withering glare and shoulders past him, angling his body so that Jace might not see the way he clutches his side with white knuckles.

“Woah, which wrong side of the bed did you fall out of?” Jace asks, backing up with both his palms raised in surrender. He’s not yet in his supersuit or mask, so Alec spies the stitches he has just below his ear and the dried scrapes that lacerate his hands. The bruise blooming on Jace’s temple is about the same colour as every single other one on Alec’s body, but it gives Alec some sick satisfaction to know that Jace didn’t escape entirely unscathed, although his most serious wound is likely his vanity. “Don’t look at me like that! Whatever you think I did, Alec, I didn’t do it.”

“Do I want to know what you think I’m thinking about?” Alec grumbles.

Jace’s smile turns guilty. “What you don’t know can’t hurt you,” he says. Alec rolls his eyes and starts off down the corridor again, but Jace is quick to catch up. “Hey, hey, wait up, Alec, wait - I’m serious. Where have you been? You’ve been completely off grid since the other night in the alleyway, Clary and I went back for you but we couldn’t find you anywhere, you went AWOL. Did something happen?”

“It was nothing,” Alec lies, “And I had - I had a work thing this weekend. I had a lot of hours to make up. Paperwork to finish. I definitely told mom and dad about it.”
“A work thing,” Jace snorts, ribbing Alec in the side as they walk. Alec winces, convinced his body is black and blue all over. “You’re too much, Alec. Couldn’t be out there saving the world because you had an audit to turn in? God, what the Hell do you and Simon talk about over coffee, huh?” Jace puts on a voice and mimes wearing round glasses. “‘What did you do last night, Simon?’ ‘Oh, you know, just played some video games, how about you, Alec?’ ‘Got shot at by a sniper, no big deal. Standard Thursday night, really.’”

“Shut up.”

Jace cackles loudly, pleased by his impersonation of Simon. Alec finds it less amusing, but at least his stony silence sobers Jace abruptly.

“I’m only teasing, Alec,” he says, nodding at the gravel scrapes on Alec’s hands and the thin pink cut through Alec’s eyebrow. “Are you really sure you’re okay? There was so much blood in that alleyway, but I didn’t - there were so many bodies, I didn’t know if any of it was fresh, y’know? I thought you might be hurt, but Iz was convinced you were fine, but - I think sometimes she lies to me.”

“For your own good.”

“Oh, yeah, for sure,” Jace agrees, “But … you’re good, right?”

“Just a bit stiff. I’ll walk it off on patrol. It’s nothing to worry about.”

Alec feels guilty the moment he says it, but the truth is far too clumsy a thing. Jace is going to blame himself when he finds out, and then he’s going to brood and mope and beat the shit out of the punching bags in the training room and do everything in his power to make it up to Alec by stepping on his heels. And Alec -

Well, there’s a lump in Alec’s throat even thinking about it, and he’s not so sure he’d be able to get the words out without breaking down - and the hallways of Idris aren’t the place for that.

“Iz was looking for you, by the way,” Jace says then, clapping Alec on the shoulder and forcing him to stop stalking down the corridor. He grins at Alec. “She said I had to grab you the moment you resurfaced from wherever the Hell you were holed up, so this is me grabbing you. But once you’re done with her, swing by the training hall ‘cus Clary and I are gonna go through some
combo attacks tonight before patrol, just so we don’t have a repeat of that sniper again. You should
join us.”

“Yeah,” Alec says, “I’ll think about it.”

“And that’s definitely Alec speak for no fucking way ;” Jace snorts.

Alec shrugs. “You know me so well.”

Alec knocks softly on the door to Izzy’s laboratory. He’s made the mistake of walking in without
warning one too many times; he has narrowly missed too many bullets to the temple, interrupted
too many deafening explosions, and seen Isabelle halfway through getting too many poor
technicians out of their clothes.

(On one particularly traumatic occasion, Alec was witness to all three of those things at once.)

“Izzy?” comes Izzy’s voice from the other side of the door. She sounds distracted.

Cautiously, Alec peeks his head into the lab, breathing a sigh of relief when he finds Izzy slouched
at her desk, peering at her computer screen.

“Izzy,” he says, “Jace said to come find you-”

“Oh my God! Alec!”

Izzy launches from her chair and rushes to him, slamming the door behind him and gripping him
by the arms to stop his escape. She yanks him into the room and her fingers pinch his biceps as she
looks him up and down and all over, shocked to find him in one piece.
“You’ve been gone for three days!” she exclaims. She’s furious but her eyes are bright and wet. “I covered with mom and dad and said you had work, other work, but - Jesus, Alec, your suit tracker malfunctioned and you just dropped off the radar completely and I thought - I thought you might be - fuck, Alec - you could’ve died and I wouldn’t have even known where to find you.”

Alec wriggles out of her hold and folding his hands behind his back. “I was fine,” he says curtly. “It was nothing. Just a few bruises.”

Izzy plants her hands on her hips and glares up at him. “Just a few bruises, huh?” she says, “Don’t lie to me, hermano.” She turns on her heels and her shoes click-clack on the linoleum floor. Alec follows her to her desk with his shoulders hunched, his head bowed. Izzy throws herself into her computer chair, opening a screen on her monitor that looks like a CCTV feed.

“I thought it might be just a few bruises. Maybe you got scraped up and wanted to lick your wounds in peace, I don’t know. I was even telling myself that you know how to set your own broken bones, you’d be fine,” she says pointedly, clicking play on her screen. It appears to be a loop of CCTV footage from the lobby some flights of stairs above them. The video shows a man in a wide-brimmed hat walk up the front desk, exchange a few playful words with the receptionist, hand over a paper bag, and then leave amidst the flutter of his black coat. The time stamp tells Alec it was recorded a few hours ago, when Alec was staring at his ceiling from the comfort of his couch.

The clip repeats and Alec watches the stranger hand over the paper bag and leave again, but it makes no more sense the second time around.

Izzy tsks in annoyance. “Hell, Alec, after you didn’t check in on Friday morning for debriefing, I even thought that maybe you were pulling a Jace on me and getting laid, but -” She clicks pause on the footage and zooms in on the man who stands at the front desk. She presses play again, and Alec watches the man hand the paper bag over to the receptionist a third time, the set of rings on his fingers catching the light, glinting gun-metal silver.

Alec shrinks back. The man on the screen doesn’t once look up at the camera; his face is obscured by the shadow of his hat, but -

But it’s far too easy to tell who it is. The sway in his shoulders; the loop of necklaces coiled around his throat, falling into the open collar of his shirt; the way the receptionist laughs like she’s been paid the grandest of compliments and doesn’t think to ask for a name or an ID card-

“The cameras don’t catch his face once, even on his way in and out of the building,” Izzy explains,
her eyes trained on Alec’s face. “He clearly knew what he was doing, where the cameras were. Definitely didn’t want us to know who he is. But I have a feeling he knows you. And you definitely know him, Alec.”

Alec folds his arms across his chest. “Don’t know what you’re talking about.” He fixes his eyes on the screen, deliberately ignoring Izzy, watching as the man strides gallantly out of view of the camera. A couple seconds pass, and then the footage starts playing again.

Alec swallows thickly.

Magnus. It’s definitely Magnus and there’s absolutely no doubt about it. No-one else could pull off a hat quite like that.

Izzy sighs heavily, clicking to pause the clip. She reaches into her desk drawer and pulls out a clear plastic evidence bag, labelled with her sprawling handwriting. She holds it up to Alec.

“Lie to me all you want,” she says, shaking the bag. There’s a bullet inside, or the remnants of a bullet, the twisted gold and copper of a .338 Lapua sniper round, and it jingles. It fucking jingles. “But this was in the bag your mysterious acquaintance left us. And a note .”

She hands Alec the bullet, reaching back into her desk. When she sits up, she’s holding a sheet of white paper, swirled with elegant black cursive, which she shows to Alec.

You may wish to run a trace on this. I expect it will be of interest, both to those involved and those who would rather look the other way when the Circle is concerned. I dug it out of the chest of your dear Sentinel myself.

All the best,

— a concerned citizen

The colour drains from Alec’s face. He stares at the bullet and then at the note, and his side begins to itch, as if remembering what it felt like to have that warped shard of metal embedded snugly between his ribs.

“You were shot,” Izzy says, “You were shot! And you didn’t tell me.”
“It was nothing,” Alec mumbles, and then adds, “I didn’t want to worry you.”

“Well, you sure failed at that, big brother.” She snatches the bullet from him and stuffs both it and the note back into her desk drawer. But then she grabs his hands, yanking him closer, rubbing her thumbs across his scabbed knuckles. “Were you gonna tell me or just keep it a secret? Pretend like I don’t see how you’re keeping your weight off one leg and keep pulling a face every time you move? Alec …” She sighs heavily. “I know what you’re like, Alec. I know how you deal with pain. Please.”

Alec stares down at their joined hands. Izzy’s nails are a deep, dark plutonic purple today. Her index fingernail is chipped.

“Alec, look at me.”

He cannot. In fact, he doesn’t say a word until Izzy huffs and reaches forward to lift the hem of his shirt.

“Hey!” he snaps, stepping away and swatting at her fingers. “Boundaries! Jesus Christ!”

Izzy rolls her eyes. “I just want to see, come on,” she says. “Scientific curiosity! You saw the size of that round, the scar’s gotta be gruesome, let me see. I want to know if I could’ve done a better job at patching you up than whoever got there first.”

Alec scowls, but he lifts up his tshirt and the edge of his bandages to show the worst of it. Izzy doesn’t say a word, and Alec watches as her eyes widen and any hint of teasing quickly vanishes. He stared at the puckered scar in the bathroom mirror long enough this afternoon; he knows it’s not a pretty sight.

“Satisfied?” he gripes, dropping his shirt again to hide the bruises that have spread out across his skin like oil on water. “It looks worse than it feels.”

That might be a lie.

Izzy shakes her head. Her eyebrows pinch together and Alec hates the pity in her voice. “Oh, Alec.”
“Don’t tell mom and dad,” he says. “Or Jace, for that matter. He’ll beat himself up over it. But he’ll probably find out anyway. I don’t think - I don’t think I’ll be much use on patrol tonight.”

“I’ll get you off field duty for the week,” Izzy replies. “Clary and Jace can take Raj out with them. Heaven knows he needs the practice and they need to be punished for leaving you in that alleyway alone.”

“Thanks … and I’m sorry, Iz.”

“I should hope so,” Izzy frowns, but then her shoulders droop. “I’m just glad you’re alright, Alec. Don’t do that to me again. We’re just lucky you had somewhere to go.” She glances back at her computer screen, the footage of Magnus paused on his outstretched hand. “You really won’t tell me who that is?”

“No,” says Alec, too quickly.

Izzy laughs dryly. “I’m sure I can take an educated guess.” The heat in Alec’s cheeks feels like razor burn and he deliberately turns his stare to the ceiling. “And you trust him ... with this?”

The question catches Alec off guard and Izzy is astute enough to notice. She tips her head, smiles a bit. Alec opens his mouth, but he doesn’t know what to say or how to lie, so instead he simply says,

“Yes.”

And it’s the truth.

It’s seven days before he goes back to work, other work, but even then he wonders if he’s going to feel the shadow of that bullet in his chest for years to come. An old war-wound, an ache that will rear its head whenever it rains -
(Which is always.)

His skin has healed but his body has not, tricked by Cat’s strange magic into thinking it still has to heal. Every time he moves, his skin stretches taut and he freezes, fooled for a moment that he’s torn himself open again, but the blood never comes. The scar is tough; it will not rip. Alec is not so tough.

He’s exhausted before he’s left his apartment for the subway; his every step is like wading through tar and he imagines his legs are stained gelatinous black to prove it. And the inscrutable feeling of everyone staring at him, as if they know, makes it all the worse. He has a long history of masking his limp - he has Jace and Isabelle as siblings after all, and there have been times when tussles in the training hall have gotten out of hand - and he’s lucky that all the bruising on his body can be hidden by his rumpled suit, but the dark grey circles beneath his eyes are enough to tell a story - or at least spark gossip.

He looks like shit and feels like shit, and maybe if he could read minds, he’d be overwhelmed by a deafening raucous of well that’s what you get for being a super. It’s certainly what his paranoia wants him to believe.

The morning is muted and drizzly, one where the daylight is flat and without character. The subway platform is stuffy and humid, whilst the black glass and oppressing concrete of the city is stagnant; it pulls and tugs at Alec’s skin like roadburn, peeling the remnants of the night off of him, one flake at a time.

The office is hardly any better: the light too yellow, and whir of computers hot and itchy like fingernails scratching into Alec’s skin. He drags his feet through the maze of partitions, but even the relief of dropping down into his desk chair is not enough, his breath punching out of his chest by his ribs.

The migraine blooms in his temple like a bruise, like a bloodspot, like a blister. Sooner or later, it will pop, and the dial-up tone of his computer does him zero favours.

Alec sits with his head in his hands, bowed over his keyboard, until he’s interrupted by a cough. He jolts upright, but it’s only Simon, peering sheepishly over the top of Alec’s cubicle.

He has a coffee in either hand. Alec has never been so glad to see him in his life.
“Five extra sugars,” says Simon, “And a splash of that fancy syrup that the copy guys are trying to keep for themselves.”

Alec grabs the coffee and gulps it down. He burns the roof of his mouth but it’s still a better feeling than slowly-healing gravel burn and the rash he’s gained from his bandages.

Simon watches him with raised eyebrows, before holding out his own coffee to Alec, just in case he wants that too.

Alec waves Simon away. “’M alright,” he says. “And thanks. Needed that.”

“I don’t know how you still look just as terrible as you did when I picked you up the other day, but you do, and you’re not even covered in blood this time. I think you terrified that poor cab driver,” says Simon. “My offer to come ’round and cook for you still stands, by the way. I make a mean pierogi. They’re kosher. Fixes you right up.”

“Maybe next time. And I’m fine. Just tired.”

Yeah, you probably don’t want to be back here,” Simon says, glancing around the office, “It’s been a bit crazy whilst you’ve been gone. That quintuple homicide has been all over the papers this week and not in a good way. Everyone in publishing is working overtime and Magnus has been running around like a mad man, I don’t think he’s actually left the building in days. He really doesn’t know what to do with himself when you’re not here, so he just decides to compensate by throwing deadlines at anyone who doesn’t want one. Trust me, I have at least five, all for Sunday’s issue. It’s actual Hell.”

“Did you say anything to him?”

“What? No, God, Alec, I’m not stupid,” Simon whispers, “Magnus did ask though, if I knew where you were. I just said you were on vacation with your sister, you guys went over to Jersey last minute. That’s what I was meant to say, right?”

“Yeah,” says Alec, “Yeah, I mean - it was.”
“Okay, good. Because honestly, I don’t even know if Magnus bought it, and he’s gonna take one look at you and see you’re definitely not the sort of well-rested you should be after a vacation, but then again - maybe you’re the sort of guy who gets super stressed out by holidays? I dunno. You seem like you’d get stressed out by public transport and people stealing your sun-lounger, just saying.”

“Thanks.”

“It was a compliment?”

“Sure it was.”

“Listen, I’m just giving you a heads up - you should come up with a better cover story for when you find him,” Simon shrugs, “And please go find him for the literal sake of everyone in this office before we all keel over and die. I swear to God, you’re the only person who can keep him tethered to reality. Whatever gravitational pull you have over him, Alec, please, you gotta teach me”.

“I … I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Uh-huh. Sure.”

Alec grumbles below his breath, absently rubbing at where his bandages chafe against the inside of his shirt and uncomfortable, irritable warmth begins to seep through. He turns back to his computer, presenting Simon with his shoulder, the conversation over. Simon rolls his eyes, throwing his hands in the air, and mutters something about Alec being impossible and blind as a fucking bat, as he always does.

Alec doesn’t care to listen.

There is something that Magnus said, when Alec was laid out and half-dying on his couch, that Alec hasn’t been able to shake yet. Except, he’s not sure he wants to shake it, because it’s keeping him awake at night and he doesn’t want to sleep. Closing his eyes means reliving the night in the alleyway, the panic, the fear, the world spiralling away down the drain. Sleep means seeing those five dead supers in his dreams and being too late to save them, over and over again, so -

So, this is better. It has to be.
Magnus said that Sentinel reminded him of Alec. He said that, he said it to his friend Cat when he didn’t realise Alec was awake in the next room over.

Magnus called him a good man. Magnus was unwilling to throw Sentinel out onto the street because Magnus cares for Alec, and apparently that’s changed Magnus in some way Alec cannot believe he deserves, but which saved his life.

Alec doesn’t sit at his desk for long. It’s far too difficult to focus on the words on his computer screen, his leg jittering and his foot tapping on the floor. The pulse behind his temples is insistent, the knock-knock-knock of knuckles on an internal door.

He pushes out from his desk with a squeal of his chair so sudden that both his neighbours peer over their partitions and scowl at him. He glares straight back. He’s good at that.

The door to Magnus’ office is closed, but the yellow light in the hallway flickers in and out of existence and Alec can see shadows passing back and forth across the floor. His knuckles pause just centimeters from knocking; he breathes in a deep breath, and wonders if he looks as flushed and shaken as he feels.

Will Magnus be able to tell? Surely he’ll take one look at the way Alec holds himself, how he winces when he moves and each breath accompanies a kettled hiss, and he’ll know: Alec definitely wasn’t on vacation, unless vacations include getting shot by a sniper in a dirty alleyway and emptying out all the blood in your body onto the asphalt. Simon was right. Not particularly relaxing at all.

On the other side of the door, the phone rings, a shrill sharp trill that makes Alec start and his hand fall. It rings for too long, and Alec’s about to turn and walk away - because the ringing jams itself beneath his fingernails and scrapes down his spine as if a blackboard - but then he hears Magnus grumble, barely metres away, just a thin plasterboard wall between them, and -

“Hello?”
Magnus answers the telephone.

And Alec freezes. He knows he shouldn’t eavesdrop, but he finds he cannot move, he cannot run away, Magnus’ single word razor-sharp. Alec’s scar aches with the phantom memory of both a bullet pearling and frantic fingers trying to push the blood back into his body.

On the other side of the door, he hears Magnus sigh. “Yes, it’s me,” he says, and Alec wonders if the strain in his voice carries across copper wires to whoever is on the other end of that receiver. “No, nothing ... mhm, yes. I spent most of last night looking, and the night before that. Still nothing.”

Alec finds that he’s holding his breath, knuckles resting against the wood of the door. Old burn blisters and fresh gravel scrapes criss-cross the back of his hand, a patchwork story that will take too long to tell.

“Did you ask around? … Yeah - yeah,” Magnus continues on the phone, “It sounds like no-one has seen him - I spoke to Catarina and to Dot, but I - I’m in two minds about just going down to Idris myself and asking them if he’s alive … no, I - well, frankly, I don’t see what other options we have. It sounds like I was the last person to see him alive.”

Oh, he’s talking about Sentinel, Alec realises. He hears Magnus pacing the floor, back and forth, back and forth, as far as the telephone cord will let him move. Alec flattens his hand against the door, his palm flush, and closes his eyes. Tilting forward, he lets his forehead rest against the small gold plaque that reads: Magnus Bane, Senior Editor Crime & Politics.

“No-one cares about a missing super and you know that,” Magnus continues, and Alec can almost feel the words vibrating through him. “Put all the posters up that you like, it won’t make a difference ... Mhm ... Mhm, I - alright ... No, thank you. I mean it, I appreciate your help and you know that, I’m just - things have been hectic here this week and I’m not myself. There are other things on my plate, and I shouldn’t be distracted but ... mhm... yes. Alright. Call me back if you hear anything . Anything at all ... Okay, bye. Stay safe, I’ll see you soon. Bye.”

Magnus hangs up, setting the phone back in its cradle, and then Alec hears this despairing sigh and he imagines Magnus running his hands through his hair, dishevelled and unruly behind the safety of a closed door. Behind his eyelids, Alec can see Magnus’ loft, Magnus sat on that couch with his whiskey in his hands, staring at Alec half-in and half-out of the window - Alec sees it clear as day. The weak sunlight, the smell of blood, Magnus’ mouth falling open, this mix of betrayal and quiet hope on his face -
There’s a loud thud from behind the door and Alec’s eyes fly open and he takes a step back. On the other side, Magnus curses amidst the scuffle of paperwork being hurriedly gathered up after being thrown to the floor in frustration.

Magnus doesn’t sound so good. And it’s Alec’s fault, or Sentinel’s fault, or the both of them, it doesn’t matter which.

*He cares about you, and you left him after telling him that. You left him thinking you were dead. Again.*

*You left after telling him yes.*

Alec knocks. The sound is unexpectedly hollow, reverberating in his knuckles. Alec has the chance to take one breath before Magnus pulls open the door.

*Yes. Yes, we know each other in real life.*

Magnus blinks like he’s staring into the dark and cannot see a thing. His eyes fly to Alec’s face and he doesn’t mask the way that his irritation combusts into shock, eyebrows shooting upwards, and then becomes unbridled relief in the space of a single beat of Alec’s heart. His fingers grip the door with far more force than necessary.

A whisper, not meant to be said aloud: “Alexander.”

And it’s all Alec can do to stand there, frozen and tongue-tied and dumb-struck and gone, so far gone for this beautiful, intimidating man who saved his life a week ago without even knowing it was him. Alec’s not sure what he should say, but his face must be an open book; he drinks in the sight of Magnus staring at him like Alec has just taught him the way thirst longs for water. For a moment, all the tension, all the lines of worry on Magnus’ face just bleed away, his eyes glisten with the look of a man receiving Eucharist, thankful for his knees hitting the floor. 


Magnus begins to reach for him, for any part of Alec his fingers might touch. His mouth twitches with a smile.
But he doesn’t quite make it there, catching himself before Alec sees straight through him. The shutters come down, his lips turn hard and fast, he goes away inside, but Alec has already seen enough.

Magnus forces a playful scowl, narrowing his eyes at Alec. It isn’t genuine. He means to tease and flirt and float around the truth.

“So you’re back from Jersey, I see. If you’ve come to rub your vacation in my face, Alexander, I won’t hear of it,” he says, and it’s meant to be a joke, but it doesn’t quite come out that way. There’s something in his voice that sounds wire-thin, like it hurts him to speak at all. He’s still gripping the door frame with all his might.

Alec pretends he hasn’t noticed. “You’re not even going to ask me how it was?” he laughs, pulling words like pulling teeth. “No? It - it was good, thanks.”

Magnus rolls his eyes, but steps aside, an invitation for Alec to come in. Alec’s feet move before he can really think about it, and Magnus is quick to close the door behind him, ducking his forehead against the wood in a quick prayer to himself that he expects Alec not to see.

Alec sees. “Magnus? Are you alright?”

Magnus straightens instantly, spinning on his heels to face Alec. “I’m fine,” he says too quickly. A lie, and a transparent one at that.

Alec frowns. “You’re not.” He meets Magnus’ eyes and holds his gaze, challenging him not to look away, but Magnus doesn’t want a fight.

With a weary shake of his head, Magnus sighs. He surrenders far too easily. “You’re right. I’m not. It’s been a bit of a Hellish week,” he admits, picking restlessly at the rings on his fingers. “I don’t know if you heard, but there was another homicide, and it was - well, I - I could’ve used you around, however selfish that sounds.”

“I’m sorry for not letting you know I was going away,” says Alec. The ache in his side seems to
mock him: it scolds him for lying. “It was - uh. It was last minute. Izzy just phoned me up, and I barely got the time off-”

Alec breaks off as Magnus smiles, fonder now.

“Yes, Simon did say. It’s alright,” Magnus says. He talks a few slow steps towards Alec, still playing with his rings, twisting one around his thumb. “I’m just being petulant. You deserved a break from all this, so I’m glad you took one. We all need to escape, once in a while, and New York wasn’t the place to be this week. It’s entirely my fault that I didn’t realise how much I depend on you to be the voice of reason in my ear. Next time, I’ll be more prepared, I’m sure.”

He takes another step closer, crossing their invisible line that is already muddied with footprints and handprints alike. It’s not quite close enough for what Alec wants and he is unable to stay still as Magnus looks at him so suddenly gentle.

The tension seeps from Magnus’ shoulders as if he has only now let himself breathe, here, now, with Alec stood before him. Perhaps he has been holding it all in since Sentinel disappeared from his balcony; perhaps he hasn’t stopped for air since then.

The light is soft and fuzzy around the edges of him, but it catches on the thin threads of copper-gold woven into his jacket and looks like finely chewed glass, remnants of the city sprinkled over him and fashioned into armour. Beautiful, still beautiful, but not in the same way as he was, bare-faced and prayerful, bowed over Alec on that sofa -

“I missed you, you know? The office is terribly lonely after hours without you and I really can’t justify buying takeout for dinner when it’s only me,” Magnus says. It sounds like a confession; it trembles as such; and Alec is overwhelmed by the sudden need to grab Magnus by the shoulders and draw him in, all the way in, and hug him and apologise to him and make promises to him that he can’t possibly keep. *It won’t happen again. I swear.*

“Do you have time for a drink?” Magnus continues. He reaches out to flip over Alec’s tie where it has fallen crooked. “I do love living vicariously through other people’s stories about their vacations and making myself irrationally jealous. Even if it is only North Beach.”

“Yeah, uh. Yeah. I have a few minutes.”

Magnus hums in approval and brushes past Alec, his shoulder sweeping against Alec’s arm,
throwing him off-kilter for a moment. Magnus retrieves his whiskey and two glasses from the back of his filing cabinet, and turns back to Alec, holding them aloft with a cloying smile and a wink, both fragile, neither real.

But this flirty, playful side of Magnus is never quite real; it’s how he protects his heart. Alec knows that. Magnus must know that he knows that, and yet -

What are you trying to hide from me?

(Or is it ... is it that you know?)

“I, uh - I was talking to Simon,” Alec says then, as Magnus starts pouring drinks, whiskey splashing into the glasses. “Just now, I mean.”

“Mhm?”

“He, uh - he said something -”

Alec’s mouth is dry and cottony. He doesn’t know what he wants to say or what he wants to ask: things about gravity, perhaps - but what has gravity given Alec save for busted kneecaps from hitting the ground too hard as a bullet passed through his chest in a futile search for sky?

He wants to know: is what Simon said true? Does me being here make that much of a difference to you? How can it be me who makes that much of a difference to you? but one part of him fears the answer he might receive, and another part of him feels like he already knows it.

He wants to know: would you really have invited me up to your apartment that night? And would I have hated myself for it when Clary was the one shot in that alleyway? Would I have hated you?

He wants to know: you saved a man’s life seven nights ago because he reminded you of me, and I think I know what that means, but I don’t know what to do with it, please tell me what to do?

All of it sounds like it’ll only hurt upon impact, and his body is too bruised and battered to suffer another broken bone or punctured lung from the sort of incomparable truth Magnus might tell him.
A truth like that might just send Alec spiralling towards the ground.

Whatever grounding effect Alec might have on Magnus is not the same as the effect Magnus has on him, and it was cruel of Simon to even point it out.

*Do you know?* Alec thinks, *Do you know what it’s like not to be able to think straight whenever I’m around you -*

“Alec? What did Simon say?” Magnus turns back, holding out a glass to Alec, and tilts his head.

Alec rubs his hand over the back of his neck, before taking the whiskey. “Nothing. It was nothing, really.” The first sip burns and he coughs, his throat still croaking from all the smoke he inhaled in that alleyway, but the second sip is oakier, warming him somewhere in his gut, although it doesn’t sit right. “He was just complaining about deadlines, ‘s all.”

“Of course,” Magnus says, looking aside. He swirls his own glass in his hand, but doesn’t drink. “Maybe I should give him some slack. I’ve probably been unfair on him this last week.”

“He said you were … worried.”

Magnus meets Alec’s eyes abruptly, and Alec tries his best not to blink, but his heart hammers. He shifts his weight on his feet, pain tickling up the right side of his body, snagging on his mouth and tugging on a grimace that doesn’t go unnoticed.

Magnus frowns, only slightly. His eyes flick to the twitch in Alec’s jaw, but don’t linger long.

“I *was* worried,” Magnus says, “Five supers lost their lives on Thursday night, and we’re the only paper still publishing articles about it because everyone else has already moved on, pretending like we don’t have a serial killer out there on our streets targeting supers because the police and the Senator don’t care, so why should we. And then - *then*, one of my contacts at Idris has gone missing again, and no-one seems to have seen him since that same night, the honorable *fool*, so I can only imagine what we’re going to find the next time Luke calls in. And you were …”

“And I was?”
“On holiday.”


Realisation dawns on Magnus and he stops, his shoulders stiffening and his fingers tightening around the glass in his hand. His eyes rake over Alec’s body, now seeing the way Alec stands with his weight off his right hip, the way his breathing is thin and rattling in his chest, the way the red rashes on his palms are leftover road-burn. Alec feels hair-line fractures forming throughout his body beneath Magnus’ scrutiny.

Magnus knows that he’s hurt. There’s no way that he doesn’t.

Yes, Yes, we know each other in real life.

“Alec,” Magnus says slowly, frown lines appearing between his eyebrows. He sets his glass quietly on the desk and turns towards Alec.

Tension leaks into Alec’s jaw, and he tries not to clench it, but Magnus’ attention is caught by the way the muscles work. He takes a step towards Alec, looking at Alec like he’s full of holes just because he values his own life less than everyone else - and maybe that’s true, maybe there’s nothing Alec can do about it, no matter how hard he tries to hide it - because Magnus’ face is this combination of pity and awe and sorrow almost unbearable. Alec puts his drink aside and curls his fingers into fists, his scarred skin straining across the backs of his knuckles where he taps them against his thighs.

And then, almost breathlessly, Magnus asks, “Where have you been, Alexander?”

Where has he been? There are two answers to that question, and where the first is: your couch, the second is: I wish I knew.

Every moment since they sat in the front seat of Magnus’ car seems like a blur, like a drunken memory Alec wouldn’t even be convinced happened if it weren’t for the way his body belongs more in a morgue than in his own possession. He hasn’t had the chance to decompress, because when he thinks, when he closes his eyes at night, everything smears together and it feels like all the old scars on his body are wrenching at the edges and splitting him open and he’s hemorrhaging the same neon light as the city.
Because that’s all that remains inside of him anymore. Bright light and -

‘As much as I admire a man’s desire to throw himself into dangerous situations for the sake of others, I would appreciate it if you gave my heart a break.’

‘I made a promise.’

“I -” Alec begins, his voice caught, “I wasn’t - I think I broke a promise I made to you.”

Magnus studies him, eyes dark, and it’s like a slow-motion car crash, the way these things rearrange behind his eyes: the grey shadows on Alec’s face, the dark red scrapes laid over the fading burn scars on the backs of his knuckles, his penchant for putting himself in danger, and the vow he made to Magnus not all that long ago to keep himself alive.

Alec sucks in a deep breath, and it echoes all the way through him because he’s hollow in all the wrong places. He casts his eyes to the floor, staring hard at the shiny leather of Magnus’ shoes.

And then, Magnus reaches out and hooks his index finger under Alec’s chin, tilting Alec’s face upwards; he catches on Alec’s five o’clock shadow.

“You have a scar here,” Magnus says, swiping his thumb across a small dent on the underside of Alec’s jaw, one which Alec has had for as long as he can remember. “How did you get it?”

“My brother, when we were younger,” Alec replies. His eyes are wide, his voice is hoarse; he must look like a deer in headlights. Panic churns in his gut, but it’s not the same sort of panic he feels when standing on a rooftop, facing a burning building and willing himself to jump off the edge and trust the guide rope around his waist. That sort of panic is felt breathless in his chest, but this, this is all over: a weight in his belly, a skittering up his spine, a pressure on his jugular that leaves him dizzy. Alec’s whole body feels like it’s thrumming.

Magnus hums in acknowledgement, but there’s this faraway look in his eyes, a glassiness that takes him into a memory, into a deep part of his heart hidden away from view. He brushes the crook of his finger beneath Alec’s chin, all the way up so that his knuckles catches the underside of Alec’s lip as he pulls away - but he doesn’t retreat far. Again, some need to touch consumes him, and he cups Alec’s cheek with his palm, fingertips ghosting against the shell of Alec’s ear.
Alec’s face burns; he doesn’t dare to move.

“And this one?” Magnus asks, running his thumb through the scar in Alec’s eyebrow, tracing the curve of his eye socket. The touch is willful but soft, quiet and intimate enough for Alec’s breath to hitch in his throat and the repetitive thought of running away to become something that he just can’t get out, however hard he might try.

He’s probably not trying very hard at all.

“It was a super,” he says, and he knows it’s foolish. He’s treading too close to a line, the line, the one that divides him in two. He feels himself lose balance, as one does when they walk too close to an edge, as if the thought of falling is too tempting for the body to ignore.

Magnus’ eyes narrow and he thumbs at the scar that runs through Alec’s eyebrow again. “Why were you with a super?” he asks, low.

Alec’s not sure they’re talking about the scar.

“It was an accident. Stepped in at the wrong time. Got in the way.”

Magnus pulls his hand back. He rubs his index finger and thumb together, and then he looks down at Alec’s hands, the hands clenched into fists, the hand that hasn’t quite healed from the burn Alec parried with all those weeks ago. Now, there are other scars and other marks that criss-cross through the pale vestige of faded blisters, but Alec knows that Magnus is remembering the night he caught Alec on CCTV in that alleyway with the pyrokinetic.

“The wrong time seems to be a habit of yours,” Magnus says distantly.

Alec uncurls his fists, rubbing his hands up and down his thighs, fingers pressing a bite too sharply into his pants. He can feel his blunt nails leaving red welts on his skin, but he can’t focus on it, not like he needs to.

“If anything were to happen to you -” Magnus continues, but he doesn’t finish the sentence. It snaps in the middle, and Magnus flattens his mouth into a taut line around it. It’s already been said too many times before, and each successive repetition only grows more brittle. It’s become a reoccurring theme between them.
“Magnus, I’m good. I’m fine. I swear.”

“How can I believe that?” Magnus whispers.

_How can you trust Sentinel?_, Alec thinks, but it’s not what he says.

“You can trust me.”

Magnus shakes his head, catching his lower lip with his teeth in a moment that makes him look vulnerable. He looks away, eyes sticking to the ceiling in the corner of the room, even when Alec steps sideways, trying to move back into his view.

“Magnus,” he repeats. “You can trust me. I promise.”

“I don’t know if I can. Because you keep doing this. You keep risking your life for other people, and you keep paying the price for it.”

Something has changed. Magnus’ words press down like fingertips on each of Alec’s every bruise and it hurts. Magnus looks at him like he hates him and he loves him and he doesn’t really know the difference between the two - but Alec does. Alec knows hate.

He hates the fact that he made Magnus worry and will keep making him worry for as long as he lives a double life.

He hates the fact that he has to lie and say he’s fine when he’s not fine, he’s so far from it. He hates that he _wants_ and doesn’t know how to ask for it, ask to go back to that moment in the front seat of Magnus’ car and say _yes_.

_Yes, let’s go upstairs._

_Yes, I want to see what happens._
Yes, we know each other in real life.

“One day,” Magnus says, hugging himself tight, arms around his chest, “the price is going to be too high.”

Perhaps, it already is.

“Magnus …”

Magnus steps away, forcing a distance between them. He disappears around the back of his desk, a no-man’s land Alec can never cross, and begins sorting through his files.

“The tip line has been ringing off the hook since Thursday night,” he says, without looking up.
“Valentine Morgenstern has been sighted in all five buroughs and even as far as Union City. Often in more than one place at the same time.”

“Magnus.”

“I’ve even had vigilantes ringing in, worrying that they’re being followed, but I have no idea how much of it is paranoia, no idea what’s real and what’s not -”

“Magnus, please,” Alec insists, moving to the other side of the desk. He presses his knuckles down onto the tabletop and ducks his head in an attempt to catch Magnus’ eyes, but Magnus won’t look at him. Magnus pulls another folder from the pile, but Alec reaches out and grabs it before Magnus can open it, sliding it across the desk.

Magnus doesn’t protest. He doesn’t try to take it back, his head hung between his shoulders and his frown fierce as he stares at his hands, his fingers arching and unarching on the desk.

“This can wait,” Alec whispers, “Please. I’m real. This is real. Magnus, I -”

I can’t change. This is who I am, it has to be, because it’s all I have, all I know how to do.
“Alexander, you can barely walk, look at you.”

“You don’t understand -”

Magnus slams his hand down on the desk. “I understand fine!” He squeezes his eyes closed, his jaw working. Alec doesn’t move. “I understand fine. More than you know. I just - I can’t lose you. Not as well as -”

“You’re not gonna lose me.”

Magnus opens his mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. He shakes his head, reaching for the next folder on his pile. He drags his telephone over and stabs in the number scrawled across the top of the file: Dorothea something, reads the label. Before he lifts the receiver, he looks up at Alec.

“I have to call a witness and I’ll be out late tonight,” he says, “You … you should get back to work before someone notices you’re missing.”

“Magnus, I meant what I said.”

“I know,” Magnus whispers, pressing the dial button. “I know. That’s the problem.”

Sometimes, Alec wonders if he’s a masochist: there are few other explanations for why he chases the thrill of pain as he does, and for why he puts on his supersuit again that very same night.

His armour keeps all his insides in place. Kevlar and leather are a reassuring second skin and his suit stops him flexing his ribs when he breathes out too heavily. If he falls apart inside, his body turned to slush, at least his suit will keep him standing.

But his legs tremble as he scales the side of a half-built greystone, his guideline holding too much of his weight, and he thinks that if he had to abseil down the building in a hurry, he might meet the
ground far too fast. He feels unbalanced, like the howl of the wind might carry him away, but at least the ache in his muscles is grounding. It reminds him of how much space he takes up in the universe, even if that’s not that much at all.

“**How’s it going?**” Jace asks over the coms. “**You don’t sound so good.**” He and Clary are on patrol over the river, but Alec told them he would be fine alone - which may or may not have been a lie. He needs the silence, he needs the space. Jace and Clary’s guilt over the shooting has been nothing less than suffocating.

“**Sore but fine,**” Alec replies, heaving himself up onto the rooftop with a grunt. The building is covered in netting and scaffolding, a crane looming high above, and Alec rolls over onto his back to catch his breath. The scaffolding glows in the pale blue light of the city, forming a maze above his head through which he can only see patches of sky. Far above, the clouds ripple and contort, barrelling towards the horizon, and the wind carries the smell of fresh steel and cement.

“**If you need me, you just shout, yeah?**” says Jace, “**Anything at all, if you want a coffee or one of those bacon burgers from East village, you just let me know, and I’ll do a fly-by for you, okay? And if the pain gets bad again-**”

“Okay,” Alec grumbles, letting his eyes fall closed. His bow digs into his thigh but he feels too tired to stand, so he just unclips it and tosses it aside for now. “Don’t you have a job to do? That lead isn’t going to follow up on itself.”

“I just want to make sure you’re doing alright, bud. It’s too soon for you to be back on patrol, you heard Izzy. She’s pissed, by the way. If you don’t kill yourself first, I’m sure she’ll finish the job. Y’know, normal people don’t go back out on patrol only a week after they were shot with a military-grade sniper rifle. They’re meant to stay in bed and eat chicken noodle soup and watch Golden Girls reruns.”

“I’m taking it easy,” Alec lies, “I’ll call you if anything comes up, I promise.”

“I’m holding you to that.”

Alec sighs again, folding his arm across his face. The darkness is quiet but not silent, the city an ever-present hum, pushing and prodding at his temples until he grits his teeth and rolls up off his back.
Everything is such a mess. He could almost laugh.

Five more supers are dead. The Circle is trying to kill him. His parents are going to kill him when they find out he was shot going against direct orders. And if they don’t kill him, they’re going to take Sentinel away, assign him back to desk duty and supervising Victor, and maybe that will kill him anyway -

And Magnus -

Magnus resents him for being Sentinel. Magnus saved Sentinel’s life. Magnus doesn’t know who he is, but he knows enough, and it should be a paradox, and yet somehow it’s not, and Alec is in no way caffeinated enough for this.

He reaches for his bow, unfolding it to its full length on his lap as he runs his fingers down the string, pulling it taut and letting it snap back against his hand. Nothing makes sense but this: the whip-sharp sting across his knuckles, the twang of his bow, the feel of the grip in his hand. He can count on his arrows to fly true.

He does laugh at that. His ability to string a bow or catch an arrow mid-flight aren’t going to change. He still has that. God, that’s ironic.

*Does it really matter?* some part of him jibes. *You’re still out here. You’re still trying to use a bow and arrow against someone who can shoot fire from their hands and another who can make people do whatever he says. You’re still letting Magnus down every time you use your powers.*

Alec pings his bowstring too hard and it snaps against his thighs. He rubs his hand over his leg, smoothing the sting away, and then he stops. He pulls back the bowstring and its snaps against his legs again, and this time, he flinches.

It’s not enough. It doesn’t numb anything.

The wind changes direction, whistling through the scaffolding with a different tune. A drop of rain splats against Alec’s cheek, followed by another, and then another, and then the Heavens open. The rain comes down heavy and fast, freezing where it slices down Alec’s neck and into his suit. On the concrete, it’s a percussion, but on the steel, the water sings, it chimes, it sounds like magic.
It *feels* like magic. Like a prickle, like an invisible touch slipping beneath his bracers and stroking the bare skin of his wrists, the flutter of his pulse. Like a wound reopening, and a handful of kinetic energy plunged into his chest, kick-starting his heart again, moving him as he longs to be moved.

Alec blinks away the rain from his eyes, shielding his face as he looks up and searches the rumbling sky. The overlooking highrises cut imposing figures, and in the distance, an aeroplane takes off from JFK and disappears into the dark, swallowed up by the clouds, but it’s not the shadow Alec wants to find.

Nightlock. *Nightlock’s nearby*. Alec can feel him, he would know him anywhere, the way the air shifts to accommodate him.

He can feel him. And this longing, this quiet desperation in his chest, *what is that?*

Alec hauls himself to his feet, looping his bow over his shoulder and scanning the rain for a familiar coat. Anticipation beats a steady pulse in his blood, but beneath that, he finds yearning.

Maybe it’s unfair: Nightlock will be furious at him for disappearing again, and he won’t want to listen to the long list of Alec’s woes when far worse things are happening to the people Nightlock cares about, but -

Alec sucks in a deep breath, curling his fingers tight around the strap of his quiver, making a fist.

He’s so damn tired of being alone.

“So, you’re still alive.”

Nightlock’s voice comes from over his shoulder because *of course it does*. Alec turns slowly, and Nightlock’s there, arms folded across his chest, feet firmly planted, and the wind whipping through his coat. His face looks stern beneath his mask and his voice is flat, but Alec thinks he knows him enough to recognise worry when he sees it.

He wears it in the same way Magnus does. It stings.
Alec straightens his back and lifts his chin as best he can, but it doesn’t provoke Nightlock in the slightest. Instead, Nightlock scrubs his hand across his face, pinching the bridge of his nose over his rain-wet mask, and walks up to Alec with quick strides that are too sharp and sudden.

He reaches out for Alec before Alec has a chance to react, gripping Alec by his bicep. He squeezes hard, his thumb pressing into a bruise he doesn’t know is cradled in the hollow of Alec’s elbow.

“I know you were hurt,” he says, shaking Alec’s arm. “I know you were hurt and I know it was bad and you didn’t fucking tell me where you were. Again. I was - I was terrified, Sentinel, do you know that?”

“I’m … I’m fine,” Alec says, looking down at where Nightlock grips him, and then up, at Nightlock’s face. His jaw is tense and his eyes are dark and Alec is so tired of having to hurt people with what he does: Izzy, Jace and Clary, Magnus, and now Nightlock. They all wear the same expression, like they’re disappointed, or worse - they pity him.

“You were shot!” Nightlock snaps, “Don’t ask me how I know that, it doesn’t matter. Do you know how much blood they found at that homicide that didn’t belong to any of the victims? God only knows if the police have your DNA on file now, if you’re their prime suspect, if they even care.”

“Nightlock -”

“I debated walking into Idris myself just to demand to see you, to see that you were still in one piece. They would’ve locked me up, sure, but you know what? It didn’t matter, because if you weren’t already dead, I was about to kill you myself.”

He pinches Alec’s elbow again, but then the touch softens and his fingers fall, catching on the edge of Alec’s bracer, trailing all the way down to Alec’s fingertips - and then gone.

His voice is quieter when he speaks again. “I’m glad you’re still alive. I thought - I thought you might have cut it too close this time. I really did.”

Alec closes his eyes, exhaling slowly. The rain is cold but he care barely feel it. Even behind his eyelids, he is acutely aware of how close Nightlock stands, the warmth of him, how the same energy in his palms crackles and drips from his words down his chin, how the desperation burns wild in his eyes, untamed and uncloaked, because he’s clearly come to care about Sentinel without
that ever having been the plan.

Nightlock shifts, the air moves; Alec feels it threading between his fingers like a phantom handhold.

“What happens if you die?” Nightlock whispers. Alec has never heard him so split-open, so forthright with his emotions, and that’s terrifying too, because Alec doesn’t know what to do with it. It stirs something bitter and dark in his chest, twisted around his heart, words sharp with spite, because of course he can’t just fuck up his life as Alec. He has to hurt the only good thing about Sentinel too. “Sentinel, look at me. What do we do then?”

Alec opens his eyes. Nightlock’s stare is unwavering, but stubborn like a child. There’s this sneer buried beneath the surface of his expression, and Alec is half-tempted to poke it, to break it completely, but then Nightlock adds,

“What do I do then?”

The will to fight just seeps away, trickling from the barely-healed hollow in Alec’s side.

“You won’t have to wait long to find out,” Alec mutters. Nightlock’s entire body stiffens, and his eyes go wide, and he takes a step back, but he doesn’t understand. He doesn’t understand what Alec means.

Alec sighs. He imagines sinking his fingers into his chest and prying open his ribcage. He’s about to admit to a very personal weakness, and he knows he can’t step back from that. Once he’s bleeding, he’s bleeding; he can’t stuff the blood back inside his body, it’ll just drip between his fingers.

“Sentinel -”

Alec summons a weak and weary smile. “I don’t mean it like that,” he says, “I just - I don’t think Sentinel will survive if I keep going like this.”

It feels less like ripping off a bandaid and more like letting an old wound air after too long spent festering beneath layers of sweat and kevlar. Nightlock takes another step back as if he can see it, and it’s strange, because he’s never baulked at the sight of blood before. But here, now, he doesn’t
know what to do with his hands, with his feet, or his body; he’s speechless and he’s cornered, and it throws his off-balance in a way Alec knows he fears.

*Please*, Alec thinks. He has never wished to be telepathic until now. *Please. You’re the only one who might understand.*

The wind whistles through the scaffolding again and it skates across the hard lines of Alec’s cheeks, his body made hard to ward off loneliness -

But hopefully, not for much longer.

“The person I am and the person Sentinel is … I’m not sure that’s the same person anymore. Or if they ever were the same person,” Alec admits. He fights the need to tuck his hands behind his back and squeeze his fingers until numb, and instead turns away from Nightlock, looking out across New York and its downpour with a lump in his throat. Fat raindrops roll down his mask, clinging to his eyelashes and the line of his nose and collecting above his upper lip; he flicks the water away with his fingers, but more gathers there. “Does that make sense?”

“Perfectly,” Nightlock says slowly, his words curling around Alec’s shoulders and neck. They make Alec shiver. “But that’s not to say the person Sentinel is now is the person he always has to be. You can change. You know that.”

“It’s not just about me,” Alec sighs, “It’s … it’s more than that. Bigger than that. If Sentinel changes, Idris has to change. Everything we know about Corporates has to change. It’s … difficult.”

“I don’t doubt that.”

Nightlock steps up to Alec’s back, his boots sploshing in the rooftop puddles, and Alec shudders as Nightlock smooths his hands across the breadth of Alec’s shoulders. His fingers are solid, caring, *real*. His chest brushes up against Alec’s arm, sharing warmth amidst the rain pouring down between the scaffolding. The last dredges of the city’s phosphorescence fade with the banks of thick cloud that roll in across the bay, and the light beyond Jersey City in the distance, along the horizon, is moody and purple. And yet, the twinkling lights of skyscrapers pierce through the gloom like starlight, dancing amidst the sheets of rain.

Nightlock has never touched him like this. Not for this long, not with his hands in place of his
He must be able to feel Alec’s weak pulse because Alec can feel his, rumbling in his fingertips like the subway on Manhattan Bridge.

“I’m tired of pretending,” Alec whispers. It’s easier to be honest once he’s started talking; it’s easier to be honest when he’s talking to Nightlock, and not Isabelle or Jace or even Magnus, and maybe it’s because Nightlock is no-one, a half-person just like Sentinel, a figment that only appears at night, but -

But it doesn’t feel like that. Not to him, to Sentinel, to Alec.

I’m real. This is real.

And you’re real. Faceless, nameless, it doesn’t matter. You’re real.

Nightlock says nothing, but he turns Alec to face him, holding him by the arms. Beneath his mask, his eyes are bright in the dark. The checkerboard of skyscrapers lit up with yellow and white have nothing on him.

“My family doesn’t know who I am,” Alec continues, his gaze drifting across Nightlock’s mask, the cut of his jaw, his mouth, his suit beneath his coat. “They know me when I’m Sentinel, he’s who they want me to be. They don’t know me as - when I take my mask off, nothing changes for them.”

“And a lot changes for you?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it does.”

“Who are you, then? When you’re not Sentinel?”

Alec’s eyes snap to Nightlock’s, but Nightlock doesn’t blink. The wind whips through his long coat and cards through his hair, and still, he doesn’t let Alec go, his fingers twisting into the sleeves of Alec’s supersuit.
“I don’t mean your name,” Nightlock clarifies. “You know I won’t ask for that. I mean, who is the person that you need to be, rather than this person you are now?”

Alec presses his lips into a fierce line. “I - I’m just - I don’t think I know,” he says quietly, “But I want to know. I hate not knowing, I hate … I hate not knowing who I am, I hate Idris getting to decide that for me. I want - maybe there’s a way that I can help people without it having to be like this. I just - I just want … something normal, I guess.”

“Something normal?”

Alec shrugs, but his throat feels tight and his eyes are hot. He scans the outline of rooftops across the street for movement, a nervous habit more than anything, but New York is still and God, he doesn’t understand why he’s nervous of all things, but he is, and his fingers are clenching and unclenching into fists at his side. All this mess, it’s been building up inside his chest for so long now, ruminating and festering and frothing up inside his throat, waiting to bubble free.

Telling people these sorts of things is never easy. He struggles enough with Jace, with Isabelle, with his twisted loyalty to Idris. With his own damn self, most of the time.

Unbidden, he thinks of Magnus.

“I don’t know,” he finds himself saying, “A normal job, a good night’s sleep, I’d like to go somewhere far away, out of New York. I want - I want to see the sun. You know. Lots of stuff.”

I want the chance to fall in love and not have it end in catastrophe.

Suddenly, he feels dizzy, as if buoyed by waves he should’ve seen coming, lifting him off his feet. The thought of having a normal life - of having a normal life with someone like Magnus - and not standing here in the rain, having this conversation every night, is -

Well, it twists his insides up in knots.

Alec folds his arms across his chest. He squeezes himself tight. He tries not to let these loose parts of himself spew out on the ground at his feet.
“Sentinel can’t have those things.” Nightlock doesn’t phrase it as a question.

Alec expected it to be more difficult than this. Maybe he was waiting to lay out a case on a table top and plead his cause, string together points on a map, fill out paperwork to prove that the life he lives is not meant for just one man.

No need.

“No,” Alec whispers, “He can’t. Because I don’t know if he’s me.”

“I get it. I understand. It’s a difficult thing,” Nightlock says. He appraises Alec with roaming eyes, mapping every scuff in the leather and the kevlar of Alec’s gear, every twitch of his nervous fingers, every breath that rises and falls in Alec’s chest. He seems to look straight through Alec, right into his heart, at things Alec never lets anyone else see. It itches and it chafes, but he doesn’t want to turn away and tell Nightlock to stop looking at him, to stop unravelling him like the loose thread of a favourite sweater that begs to be tugged.

“It’s a difficult thing,” Nightlock repeats, his voice tender in a way that Alec knows in some faraway dream. “When you can do what we can do. Do we have a responsibility to save people just because we can? I think so. It was not asked for, no, but neither is it abandoned with much ease.”

He takes a step closer to Alec, one that is slow and careful and pushes away the space carved out by rain between them. Alec holds a breath, but is not quite sure for what end.

“The gift you have is yours to bear. Just as my gift is mine,” Nightlock continues, “It’s not something we can give up, not if we want to live with ourselves, and because of that, our personal happiness is placed in jeopardy. I don’t know if we get normal. I think that’s the cost of doing the right thing, or maybe it’s just the cost of being different. But being a super is not something we can easily walk away from.”

His eyes drop from Alec’s, moving lower. Either he’s looking at Alec’s throat, watching the way Alec swallows, or maybe he’s looking at Alec’s lips, caught on the way Alec wets them.

“But all of that, this paradigm, it’s not set in stone.” Nightlock’s voice, now, is almost a whisper, scarily gentle and intimate and kind. So kind. He rubs his palms up and down Alec’s arms to keep Alec warm. “You know that too. You said as much, just now. The way the world is now is not the
way it always has to be. Corporates can change and Idris can change. The world will change. There’s balance to be found in all of this, or perhaps - perhaps there isn’t even balance to begin with, and it’s up to you to realise that you are not as divided down the middle as you believe you are. I know who you are. He exists, he’s real. He’s a good man.”

Nightlock curls his fingers around Alec’s arms, either thumb pressed against the pressure point in each of Alec’s elbows, just above his bracers.

Alec looks at him. Nightlock smiles. “He is a good man,” he stresses. “He’s you.”

And then Nightlock leans into the space between them and presses his lips to Alec’s. His mouth is soft and warm, but the stubble on his jaw scratches at Alec’s chin and his face is wet with rain. Alec’s hand immediately finds purchase in the curve of Nightlock’s cheek, his fingers brushing against the underside of Nightlock’s mask and sweeping downwards, pushing away the collar of Nightlock’s coat to find the very human warmth of his jugular.

The kiss is chaste, barely a press of lips before Nightlock pulls away. There’s this fond and lonely look in Nightlock’s eyes that seems familiar, even if Alec cannot place it. There aren’t that many people who have looked at Alec like that before.

“What was that for?” Alec whispers. Something shifts inside his chest.

It’s probably his heart.

Nightlock’s hands slide down to Alec’s wrists. “Curiosity, I suppose,” he says. His gaze flits back to Alec’s mouth and he leans in for another kiss. It pains Alec to be the one who leans away.

Alec presses his palm gently against Nightlock’s chest. “I’m sorry. I can’t.”

“There’s no need to apologise,” says Nightlock as he pulls back. His answering smile is wry and rueful. Sad, but not hurt. “The moment got the better of me. That was forward.”

“No, I’m - I don’t mind. Really. But there’s - there’s someone. We’re not together, but, I - he means - he is - so I can’t -”
Nightlock huffs on a laugh. He lets his hands fall from Alec and the contact is missed in an instant.

“God, what I wouldn’t give to go back in time to that night we first met and tell that version of me just how much we have in common. He would laugh in my face and then perhaps fling me off a rooftop for fraternizing with a Corporate.” Nightlock smiles tightly, shaking his head. It seems to pain him, but then he adds, “I have a someone too.”

“Oh,” says Alec. “Are you -”

“No. More than a friend, less than a - whatever I want for it to be, and God only knows what that is. He doesn’t know. I haven’t told him. Not yet. But I’m hoping, I’m trying. He doesn’t make it easy.”

Nightlock turns away and strides towards the edge of the roof. He waves his hand and the rain diverts around him, parting to let him through and bouncing off this invisible cape he shrouds himself in. Abruptly, he flicks out of his coat and sits down upon the rooftop edge, swinging his legs out over the parapet. The night descends below him, a void without end, swallowing up the rain, but he does not look down. He stares out into the sheets of downpour, his entire body held stiffly. With a flick of his wrist, a pulse of energy ripples through the rain, distorting it like an echo.

Alec shifts his weight from foot to foot, acutely aware of the sound of rain seeping through the ply boards and scaffolding above, plit-plit-plit on the concrete, sluicing down inside his suit. Nightlock’s back casts as broad and imposing shadow, but his shoulders hunch as if he wills himself to be smaller, to be lesser.

Alec doesn’t like that, but nor is he good at talking: he has enough trouble putting a name to the feelings inside his own chest when it comes to -

When it comes to Magnus.

He doesn’t have the language for wants and needs, only necessity, only servitude and survival. These are words he was never taught or never had the time to learn, and now, he’s barely better than illiterate, but he’s trying. He really is.

His mouth still tingles from the press of Nightlock’s lips to his. Silently, he walks to the edge of the roof and lowers himself down beside Nightlock, folding his hands in his lap where he can fiddle
with his fingers, pinching at the leather of his gloves. Nightlock glances at him, at his hands, and Alec doesn’t imagine the way he shuffles a little closer.

Just so the rain won’t slip into the space between their shoulders. Just so they can share a bit of warmth.

Then, Alec whispers, “Can you tell me about him? Your someone?”

Nightlock twists to look at him, surprised for a moment, but then he shakes his head. His smile becomes crooked, but Alec likes it better. It’s natural, not a charade or a mask, and Alec’s glad to see it.

( Real, comes the whisper. It’s real. )

“Now isn’t that a question,” Nightlock muses, rubbing at his lip with his thumb. For a passing moment, he looks faraway, going elsewhere, somewhere that Alec is not. “He’s someone who I respect a great deal, and I suppose that might be a strange thing to come to mind first, but it’s true. It feels … it feels as if he might be duty-bound to make things right when they go wrong, whatever it takes. I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone with a bigger or more stubborn heart. I think he loves people intensely. Fiercely.” Nightlock laughs to himself again. “I wouldn’t mind being on the receiving end of that, I suppose.”

Alec’s heart has the audacity to trip. Rain drips from the scaffolding above, seeping down the back of his neck, but he doesn’t notice it, his skin already warm. He knows why.

“Does he know?” Alec asks quietly, “About Nightlock?”

“No. Or at least, I hope not,” says Nightlock quickly, but then he sighs. “He’s smart, though. Very smart, very logical. Observant. He sees me with unnerving clarity, and I just - he’s come close, a few times. To me, to Nightlock.”

It’s all too easy for Alec to think of Magnus; to recall the longing that sits and stagnates in Alec’s chest at all times, a want to tell Magnus the truth about who he is and what he does, despite the contradiction in his head that screams selfish and makes him hate himself for even considering the possibility. Magnus already thinks Alec is reckless. Sentinel is worse. Magnus does not deserve that burden on his shoulders too.
It’s the convergence of those two lives again. Magnus is his lynchpin, the point at which Alec and Sentinel meet, not at a crossroads, but as a collision, with no other way around. Nightlock must know that. Nightlock must know that, despite how much Alec can long for things to be different and strive to make waves in the life he has become so regimented in, some things cannot be changed by strength of will and wish alone.

And yet, Alec finds himself asking, as if there’s still a seed of hope inside his barren chest, “Could you not … tell him? Who you are?”

Nightlock flicks his wrist again, another pulse of kinetic energy distorting the rain, this time like a boomerang. It bounces back and rain water splatters up against Alec’s boots.

“I could. I definitely could. Perhaps it would be less hypocritical of me to do so, if I am to sit on rooftops with you and tell you that all is not lost.” A heavy sigh. “But it’s a hard thing, don’t you think, pulling down those walls in front of another person.” He taps the leather of his mask. “Literal walls, in some cases. The person that I am may make sense in my head, but it doesn’t mean it will make sense to him. There are things I’ve done I’m not proud of, and things I still have yet to do, and he may not like them. I think that’s the part that I fear.”

Alec doesn’t know what to say, so he nods.

Nightlock laughs. “I feel like this conversation has become a bit of a downer,” he remarks. “But what about you? What sort of man catches Sentinel’s eye? I must say that I’m intrigued.”

Alec knows he’s blushing, but hopes his mask might conceal some of it. “C’mon,” he pleads, trying to worm his way out of this conversation, even if the weight inside his chest has dispersed without him really noticing. “Like you actually care.”

“I do. Care, that is. For a Corporate, I am surprisingly invested in what you have to say. How else am I to subtly piece together your secret identity, hmm?”

“Nightlock -”

“Fair is fair,” Nightlock says, the corners of his mouth curling upwards. Behind his mask, his eyes are bright, present once more. “I gave you information, so it’s only right that you return the favour. Don’t tell me you’ve given up on justice now?”
“Shut up,” Alec scoffs, nudging Nightlock in the shoulder with his own. Nightlock allows himself to be buffeted, but still he grins. “What do you want to know?”

“How about his name?”

“No.”

“Spoil sport. Fine. Fine. How about what he looks like? How do you know him? God help me, but I’m curious now, I need as many details as you’re willing to give me.”

Alec shrugs, his face unabashedly warm. He leans back on his flat palms, staring up at the sky, blinking fat raindrops out of his eyes. A faint orange pollution carves out the rolls and ripples in the clouds, and an eerie blue sheen disperses through the rain, streaking his face in colour.

“He makes me feel real,” Alec says simply. “When I’m with him, what I want is … what I have.”

“That must be nice. And he doesn’t know about Sentinel either?”

“No,” says Alec, “I can’t tell him.”

Alec doesn’t need to say *that’s the thing that hurts the most* for Nightlock to know. If there’s one person in the city who knows what Alec is going through, at least Alec can say that he’s found him.

Nightlock makes a low humming noise, deep in his chest. “Has he seen you before? As Sentinel?”

The question is not out of the blue, and nor does it take Alec off-guard, but there’s an edge in Nightlock’s voice that sounds different. Alec is hard-pressed to say what it is, but it’s stilted as if Nightlock’s trying to fight off a tell that will give away some deep dark secret that he is keeping, which is, of course, his to keep. Alec won’t demand it. He knows far better.

“Yeah. He has.”
Nightlock smiles ruefully. “I’ve done the same.”

Alec shakes his head, a dry laugh lost to the sound of the wind clinking against the scaffolding overhead.

“Of course you have,” he teases in return, but his smile suddenly feels too thinly stretched.

It’s a difficult thing to explain: the balance between the need to keep his identity pressed close to his heart, and the desire to stand before Magnus as Sentinel and say, in honesty and penance, *this is me*. Both feelings are at war within his chest, but the tide of the battle never seems to swing one way or another.

The first time he met Magnus as Sentinel, it had been an accident, but all those times after? Standing on the rooftop of the Tribunal, scrambling up Magnus’ fire escape when he was bleeding out … Alec is not blind, nor stupid either. He knows why he did it. He knows why he dragged himself to Magnus’ loft with a bullet pearling in his chest and blood coagulating in his footprints, and he knows why he thought about staying, after.

He wants Magnus to be able to look at him and know. Know why he keeps breaking promises and risking his life. Know how much he wants to be free of the shackle of Idris without having to say it out loud. Know who is beneath the mask without being asked to come out for the second time in his life. (It took him almost twenty years the first time, after all.)

*If the tables were turned and Magnus was the one beneath the mask, Alec would know it was him, wouldn’t he?*

“The temptation is hard to ignore, isn’t it?” Nightlock says softly, breaking Alec out of his reverie. He speaks words into the night, eyes scanning the darkness for flickers of light and movement amidst the rain, but somehow Alec doesn’t think it’s what he’s really looking at. “Blurring that line, showing this side of yourself to that important person? Because you want them to know you, to know all of you? Somehow, you know it’s only going to make the relationship you have all the more painful, and yet you do it anyway, and wonder how you were such a fool after.”

“Is it foolish?”

Nightlock turns back to Alec, his mouth slightly parted. Alec imagines his eyebrows are raised behind his mask.
“What?”

“I mean - is it … I don’t know if it’s foolish,” Alec says, shrugging sheepishly. “I don’t see how wanting the person that you lo- … how wanting the people you really care about to know, to see you … I guess it’s reckless, selfish, but I don’t know if I’d say foolish.”

“What else would you say it is then?”

Alec pauses for a moment, thinking carefully, before deciding on his answer as thunder rolls concussive overhead, a warning of incoming violence. Alec tastes it in the air, the static, the charge, the threat of lightning bent upon splitting open the sky like a pomegranate.

“Honest.” He nods to himself, satisfied with that answer, but then adds as an afterthought, “And brave.”

That’s what Izzy said, years and years ago, when the mask Alec wore was slightly different and not made of stiff black leather, but instead clenched fists and tight jaws and a dark, brewing self-hatred in his heart. It was before Alec had come out - before Jace knew, before his parents knew, before Max knew - but Izzy had seen it, of course.

She notices something once, and she remembers it. That’s her gift.

‘It’s not something you can change about yourself, Alec’, she had said, when the burden to bear had finally been too much and he had crumpled, eighteen years old and lost and frustrated and gay. ‘That’s why telling people about it is bravery.’

She was right. Always is. Nightlock is brave; and Alec is still figuring out exactly how to be. It’s been an uphill struggle for a long while now.

“You’re something else, aren’t you?” Nightlock huffs, his lips quirked in amusement. “Honest and brave, indeed, aren’t you, Sentinel?”

In the distance, lightning strikes the radio tower of a faraway highrise in a blinding flash of white that seems to shatter on the sharp lines of Nightlock’s face. White light and electric blue
hemorrhage in the night.

A second flash, closer now, refracts as sparks in Nightlock’s eyes. If Alec can feel the charged and thunderous energy in the air, then Nightlock must be drowning in it, or reveling in it, or somewhere in between.

With the storm at his beck and call, Nightlock could look powerful - dangerous, perhaps, if the light would hit him right - but the reverence in his voice says otherwise. The juxtaposition is almost jarring. Another roll of thunder booms overhead, and this time, the building beneath them trembles. It ripples through Alec, shifting his centre of gravity.

“I’m not brave,” Alec whispers, “I’m just … I’m not.”

Nightlock frowns. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Put yourself down, demean yourself, pretend that you’re less than you are. It’s unbecoming. You don’t deserve that. I know you’re struggling, but you don’t deserve to be treated like that.”

Alec doesn’t know how to reply, so he bites his tongue. Nightlock looks at him, eyes roaming his face, and apparently it doesn’t take words for him to understand the parts of Alec that Alec doesn’t even understand himself. He looks at Alec as if his mask really is only skin deep.

“You don’t think you have the capability for bravery, do you?” Nightlock asks, his voice barely audible. He sounds surprised.

Alec feels his body shrinking in on itself, shoulders hunching, head ducking, a casual shrug as if to say: so what? That doesn’t hurt me to be told, even though it does. It stings. It has for a while. He’s studious, he’s capable, he’s loyal to a fault … but brave? That’s always been a word that people associate first with Jace, and not with him.

“Sentinel. Tell me if I’m understanding wrong.”
Alec shrugs again, eyes anywhere but Nightlock’s face. He presses his fingertips into the concrete, hard enough that his knuckles flex with dull pain. He makes an I-don’t-know sound without words, and Nightlock clicks his tongue, dissatisfied.

“You think you’re not brave enough to be the person you want to be. That you’re not brave enough to break away from the world you know,” Nightlock states, “Not brave enough to tell this man who - what was it? Makes you feel like you’re real, that he makes you feel real? Because you think you don’t deserve it? Because you think you aren’t good enough? Even if you’re craving to let him know?”

“I … ”

“Do you not think that you’re being brave every time you put on that mask?”

“But you just said we have no choice.”

The moment the words leave his lips, Alec makes the connection. He hears Isabelle again inside his head: he’s almost ten years older than he was then, but still learning the same damn lesson.

‘It’s not something you can change about yourself, Alec. That’s why it’s bravery.’

“Exactly,” whispers Nightlock. He raises his hand, fingers outstretched in the space between them, the thought of touching Alec’s face suspended there like a pendulum weight. He considers it; he decides against it; and Alec is both disappointed and relieved not to feel a feather-like touch against his jaw, the feeling in his chest stuck somewhere in the middle like a caught metronome.

“I admire you,” Nightlock adds, and then he smiles wryly, “You can’t tell anyone, of course. You’re still a Corporate and I wouldn’t hear the end of it. But I do. You’re honorable and steadfast, and there’s … there’s this part of you that just seems so clear - which I am immensely envious of, by the way, despite how much I might pretend otherwise, and despite how much you don’t see it in yourself.”

He ends in a whisper, and Alec’s heart falters inside his chest, the same way one’s foot comes down too fast on a stair in the dark that isn’t there. Alec fumbles with the compliment, unsure of how to receive it, how to swallow it, where to put it once it has been given.
Nightlock says nothing further, a soft huff of breath escaping his lips, mushrooming into a cloud. He leans into the rainlashing at the side of the building: elbows on his knees, chin pillowed on the backs of his clasped hands, the line of his back a curve. He could shield himself with a flick of his wrist, but the downpour soaks through his hair and through his coat unrepentantly, as if he doesn’t really care.

Or as if he cannot even feel the brewing storm at all. Perhaps it leeches into his blood, turbulent kinetic and electrical energy, and Alec can only wonder how it’s possible to keep all that trapped inside without bursting. How easy it must be to feel the lightning like a rage, like an outburst, and how terrible it must be to have rain hovering over his every thought-

The strange sense of sorrow that stalks Nightlock like a shadow seems darker against another bolt of lightning, exploding behind them now. Shadows evaporate in an instant and Alec counts to five before the thunder rolls.

“Hey,” says Alec, but Nightlock doesn’t reply. “Nightlock.”

The lightning fragments on the rooftop across the street, a light so bright that Alec sees stars, spots obscuring his vision as the thunder bellows directly overhead. Alec wets his lips. His mouth still tingles. The energy in the air scampers down his spine.

This time, he’s the one reaching for Nightlock’s fingers. Nightlock frowns, confusion pinched behind his mask, but Alec doesn’t let go, gently folding one of Nightlock’s hands between both of his own.

_If not brave, I am at least stubborn to a fault._

“Hey,” Alec says again. He guides Nightlock’s hand to press against his chest, over the place where his armour is the thickest, and lets it rest. Alec knows his body is trembling with the residual growl of the thunderstorm and Nightlock must feel that too; Alec’s not this forward, not this generous with his touches, but maybe Sentinel is - or could be.

Maybe Sentinel has learned something here tonight, on this rooftop, in this rain. Alec might call it belief: in his hands, in his mouth, in his resolve to ask for the things that he wants, even if it terrifies him in places he cannot reach, even if the moment in which he wants them passes just as quickly as a lick of lightning.
“Hey.”

Alec leans in, pressing his lips to Nightlock’s mouth. He tastes of rain.

And it doesn’t take a breath for the kiss to be returned, Nightlock’s mouth moving against his, his other hand holding Alec by the side of his neck. Again, it’s gentle. Chaste. A little bit lonely, but Nightlock pours some part of himself into this kiss that mirrors all too well the things Alec has confessed tonight, and Alec wonders if Nightlock needs this as much as Alec does.

It’s not a kiss, not really.

Instead, a beautiful, one-time indulgence, spoken in the language of solidarity - and that’s a language Alec does know how to speak. Nightlock’s mouth is soft and comforting, the hint of faint whiskey on his tongue; his fingers twist into the hair on the nape of Alec’s neck, and his other hand remains flush over Alec’s heart. This fluttering feeling - it’s both new and familiar in a way Alec cannot name, but Alec wouldn’t mind staying in this moment for a fraction of forever, if he had forevers to spare.

He pulls back and rests his forehead against Nightlock’s, exhaling slowly, his breath misting across Nightlock’s jaw.

And it’s strange, perhaps, to see so little of someone’s face after kissing them, but the way Nightlock’s mask reveals only his eyes is like tunnel vision for Alec. He sees so many things therein - so many things that Nightlock longs to give to someone that he loves - which seem to ascend towards the most finite of points. Alec feels a little jealous. He wants to be looked at in the way Nightlock looks at him now as he thinks about his *someone*.

Alec offers him a small bashful smile, and is glad to find it returned.

“You always have something up your sleeve, don’t you?” Nightlock whispers, mostly to himself. His face is still close enough that Alec *feels* the words more than he hears them, counting instead the shadows cast by Nightlock’s lashes on the bare slip of skin that his mask reveals around his eyes.

“I don’t,” Alec replies, just as quietly. Another flash of lighting, and all shadows disintegrate for a Molotov second. Nightlock’s answering smile needs to be held down, and Alec likes that. It’s untapped. Unbridled. Unapologetic. There’s a soft spot inside Alec’s chest for it.
“You do, even if you don’t think you do,” Nightlock replies, fingering Alec’s hair behind his ear, dangerously close to the tie of his mask. “Which is what makes it so often a surprise.”

The tingle in Alec’s lips dissipates, and Alec can feel it seeping into his blood, finding refuge in the deeper parts of his chest. His thoughts shift, unrepentantly, to Magnus, and it’s curious how Alec can think of him now and not feel guilty for having another man’s hand held against his chest. It’s almost like the moment begs for Magnus Bane to be thought about; there’s something here that trips a wire of familiarity.

You continue to surprise me.

Nightlock hums again as he finally leans back from Alec, tilting his head to the sky. He waves his hand once, a delicate and graceful flick of his fingers, and the rain is pushed away from them, shoved back by an invisible force. Alec is not sure if it will ever stop being a marvel.

At Alec’s hip, his police pager starts beeping. He flicks over to the active channel, and finds the dispatcher calling for all available units to attend an apartment fire in midtown. Alec scans the horizon for smoke. He doesn’t suppose he will find any amidst the rain.

“That sounds like our cue to leave,” says Nightlock, climbing to his feet. He turns, extending a hand out to Alec, a beckoning curl to his gloved fingers, and Alec takes it without question.

“Sentinel,” comes Izzy’s voice in his ear, “We’ve got a fire at an apartment block in Hell’s Kitchen. Doesn’t look like it’s an arson, and emergency services are already on scene, but you best get over there, Arkangel and Muse are too far away. The dispatch is saying there are still residents inside the building.”

Alec can’t help but scowl. He exchanges a look with Nightlock that they both know: where there’s fire, there’s smoke, and hopefully a smoke trail that will lead them one step closer to the man who can summon flames to the palms of his hands.

Nightlock steps up to the edge of the roof, pausing just before he plummets into the night. “Are you coming?” he asks.

“Yeah,” nods Alec, “You go ahead, you’ll be quicker alone. I’ll catch up. Maybe I can call Arkangel in for a lift.”
“Very well.” Nightlock tilts his head to the side, appraising Alec for one last moment. The police radio chirps on Alec’s hip, but the look in Nightlock’s eyes has yet to shift: it still retains some of that strange fortitude, that longing, that tenderness. Like he doesn’t want to leave at all.

And yes, yes, the city burns somewhere distant, blindsided by whatever God lives up in the clouds heavy with human detriment, yet all that Alec wants is to be looked at like this for the rest of his days. It doesn’t have to be Nightlock. His own importance furls out before him in a way he has never seen before. He feels necessary, but far more than that - he feels wanted.

“Nightlock,” he says before it’s too late and guile leaves him stranded. “I, uhm - thank you.”

Thank you is not enough. He’s been running in circles for weeks now, grinding himself into the gutter and it was bound to end in ruin. He was bracing himself for a costly mistake, for a fall, for another bullet just a little bit more to the left, but here he is, and Nightlock is still looking at him like that, with fondness and with care, despite all the parts of Alec that have been exposed tonight, ones which Alec thought for sure were the worst. He’s not alone, not tonight. He feels validated. He feels like he can breathe again, and God, he’s missed it.

Thank you will never be enough.

Sentinel and Nightlock save four families from the burning building in midtown, and Alec sleeps well that night, despite tearing open some of his scars on his side. There’s something in his chest that wasn’t there the day before: a weight, a comforting heaviness, a resolution. Wholeness. He’s not quite sure what to do with it, how to act upon it, but it feels important. Like something fundamental, and Nightlock’s words ring in his ears alongside the lingering echo of flames consuming brick.

You’re not as divided down the middle as you think you are.

The next morning, the front page of the Tribunal reads: MASKED VIGILANTES PREVENT TRAGEDY IN MIDTOWN FIRE. Alec tries to read over the shoulder of a woman on the subway, craning his head to get a better look. The central photograph is blurry at best, the building on fire from a distance, but Magnus’ name is bold beneath the title. Written and edited by Magnus Bane,
Senior Crime & Politics Editor.

Magnus must’ve been working late last night too, bent over his computer and racing a deadline into the early hours of the morning, all whilst Alec scrubbed off the soot from his face in the bathroom mirror.

Alec can’t help but smile to himself. A stranger knocks against his shoulder as the subway carriage jolts from track to track, but they are plugged into their Walkman and don’t notice the dumb look on Alec’s face. Such is the beauty of unsociable public transport.

Alec buys a copy of the paper from the platform kiosk at his stop, before trudging up the stairs from the subway to the street. For once, the sound of rain doesn’t wait for him: instead, he feels a crisp, bitter cold, and finds himself squinting against bright sunlight. The sky is cloudless and cerulean blue, and the city against it is a sharp slate grey., for once more stone than glass and neon. Even the shadow beneath Alec’s feet is solid and black, rather than the liquid water he so often sees in dull light and beneath heavy storm clouds.

Alec raises the newspaper to shield his eyes from the sun. Around him, people emerging from the subway do the same, all of them bewildered and confused by the great big ball of pale yellow in the sky. A young woman stops beside Alec just to gaze upwards, pulling down her scarf, allowing the sun to warm her face. Winter redness blooms in her brown cheeks and makes her wild curly hair shine, and then Alec catches her eye. She smiles crookedly at him and steps out into the street to chase a cab.

Alec watches her go. The taxis are more yellow than usual. The standing water in the gutters reflects spills of bright blue. His office building towers above him and the enormous letters that stand over the revolving door, spelling out The Daily Tribunal , gleam bronze and gold.

Alec feels solid. He exists. He casts the shadow of a full person. It’s a curious feeling.

Simon intercepts him as he sits down at his desk, the day’s front page clutched in his hands.

“Good morning,” Alec says dryly, raising his eyebrows as Simon slaps the paper down on Alec’s
desk, practically vibrating. “Can I help you?”

“Were you there?” Simon stage-whispers, stabbing the headline with his finger. It’s still early and the office still empty, their colleagues too distracted by the passing presence of the sun. “Was this you? God, Alec, that’s so cool.”

Alec shrugs. He doesn’t want to say *it was nothing*, because it wasn’t, and his body berates him for it. He’s yet to regain his strength since the shooting and his bullet wound needs rebandaging where it has begun to purple with a bruise. His skin feels raw from the heat of being inside a burning building, and he finds himself sitting hunched, as if half expecting a roof to fall down on him at any moment.

No roofs had fallen down on him last night, of course. It’s one of the many perks of having a partner adept in telekinesis. Alec had carried his fair share of people out of that apartment block and onto the street as the firefighters tackled the blaze, but it was Nightlock who held the crumbling building together with gritted teeth.

So it wasn’t nothing. But last night was -

Last night was something private and Alec doesn’t want to share. It’s *his*. Him and Nightlock on a rooftop in the rain, the two of them shouting at each other across the roar of a fire, Nightlock’s wink at him after they managed to outrun the police. It was a kiss.

Alec also doesn’t want Simon getting any heroic ideas. Not when the Circle are hunting down anyone stupid enough to wear a supersuit. Alec doesn’t want to think about how Simon would fare with a bullet in his stomach, because it wouldn’t be *well*.

It’s a futile effort. Simon *does* have those other ideas and Alec shouldn’t put it past him.

“Hey. Hey, Alec,” Simon says, swinging on the side of Alec’s cubicle. He leans in conspiratorially, grinning widely. “You think you can you take me with you next time? I swear I can pull my own weight. I’d be a big help.”

“No.”

“You didn’t even think about it! That’s not fair!”
“I didn’t need to think about it. It’s still a no. You’re not trained.”

“Well, that’s - that’s just - not all the supers out there are trained, Alec. That - that - that other guy that you were with last night, what’s his name -” Simon grabs the paper, quickly scanning over Magnus’ article. He stabs the page again when he finds what he’s looking for. “Aha! ‘Although no official confirmation has been made by Idris as to the identities of either super involved at the scene, tenant Gretal Monroe, 24, recognised one of the masked individuals as Nightlock, a superhuman known to the Brooklyn and Lower Manhattan areas’ … and then it goes on to say that a source who didn’t want to reveal their identity said that Sentinel was the other super, so don’t worry, you got your name drop, but - yeah. Nightlock. He’s not Corporate, is he? Which means he’s not trained either.”

Alec rolls his eyes, snatching the paper back from Simon. His eyes skim the words, honing in on the single mention of Sentinel’s name, half way through the article. Nightlock is mentioned a few more times, and Alec cannot help but wonder if it’s on purpose: Magnus wrote this sometime early this morning, just before their 4AM print-run, and the focus of the story is so deliberately on their good deed and the lives they saved, and not on the obsession with unmasking them. Magnus knows that Sentinel doesn’t get in the papers much and he’s kept it that way.

“Yeah, well … Nightlock knows what he’s doing,” Alec mutters, rubbing at his bandages through his shirt. “I trust him. I don’t trust you.”

“You don’t trust me? I’m sorry, but who was it that came to pick you up from that dodgy bodega in Brooklyn when you were literally shot last week? Not any of your other super buddies, that’s for sure.”

“Watch it.”

“Spoil sport,” Simon pouts, “C’mon, Alec, wouldn’t you feel better if you could keep an eye on me, rather than me doing stuff on my own? You could train me!”

“I’d feel better if you stayed at home and didn’t get yourself into trouble,” Alec grumbles, “Look, it’s … it’s not safe at the moment if you’re … if you haven’t done this before.”

“I’m pretty sure not safe is the constant state of affairs out there,” Simon snorts, earning a scowl from Alec. Simon holds up his hands in surrender. “Okay, okay, lay off the death stare, I was just pointing out -”
“It’s not safe,” Alec repeats, “I mean it, Simon. Supers are getting killed. This is serious.”

“But you’re trying to catch them, right? The Circle, the people doing the killing? And I don’t mean Sentinel - I mean, obviously Sentinel’s trying to catch them, but I mean, you - and Magnus. That’s what you’re doing, isn’t it? Don’t say I haven’t noticed all your secret rendezvous and all the weird and mysterious files you keep trying to hide from me - unless! Oh God, it’s not cover for you guys hooking up, is it?”

“Simon -”

“-because, like, I’m totally cool with that, if you guys are. Hell, I’m actually super onboard with it, I have been from the start - you know that - and maybe this is why Magnus hasn’t been on my case so much since you got back? Because he’s finally getting some? Definitely makes sense, I mean -”

“Simon, stop .”

Alec knows his face is red; he can feel the tips of his ears burning. He’s usually so good at keeping his expression neutral whenever Simon goes off on one of these tangents and brings up Magnus, but this time -

He can’t help but think of last night on the rooftop, and how he’d imagined kissing Magnus when he’d been kissing Nightlock instead.


“Dare I ask what you two are whispering about?”

Simon and Alec both look up, finding Magnus leant over the top of Alec’s partition, an easy smile gracing his features. Simon immediately breaks out into a grin, wiggling his eyebrows at Alec. Alec, on the other hand, snaps his focus back to his computer, willing himself to bore a hole clean through the screen.

Magnus looks good today.
Not that he doesn’t look good every day - Alec quickly steals a glance up at Magnus, but Magnus is still smiling at him like the Goddamn sun, fuck - but today he seems effortless. Is effortless the right word? Perhaps weightless is better, or buoyant, or cheerful - fuck, Alec is staring again. And the silence has definitely gone on too long not to be awkward, but all Alec can see is how the skin at the corners of Magnus’ eyes is creased by crow’s feet, and it’s far and away from the hurt Alec had caused on his face yesterday morning.

“Magnus -” he stutters, but he doesn’t know what he wants to say. He thinks of rooftop confessions and kisses again.

Absurdly, Simon is there to dig him out of ... whatever the Hell this is. He steals the newspaper back from Alec’s tightly clenched fist and holds it out to Magnus.

“I was just showing Alec your story,” he beams. “It’s so cool, seeing all this stuff about vigilantes in a positive light for once, y’know? Or at least, that’s what I got from it, but I’m sure lots of other people will get that too! There’s only so many ways you can spin a story about two supers saving twenty-something people from a burning building and they all seem pretty positive to me -”

“Thank you, Simon. I appreciate it,” Magnus says kindly, but his eyes don’t stray from Alec. He studies the shadows beneath Alec’s eyes and lingers on the healing scars on the back of Alec’s knuckles. Alec offers him a tight smile, and Magnus takes it in stride, his own smile broadening. “And what about you, Alexander?” he asks, “Any thoughts?”

“Oh, Alec and I were just having a fight about Nightlock,” Simon interrupts. “He’s not Corporate, but Alec’s trying to plead his case or something because Nightlock’s his fave or whatever, whereas I’m like - what if Sentinel has this really cool and enthusiastic apprentice who, like, really wants to go out on missions with him but who Sentinel’s basically sidelining for this flashy dude who can move objects with his mind -”

Oh, Alec decides in that moment. Simon won’t even need to go out on patrol with Alec to get himself killed at this rate. Alec’s going to kill Simon with his own bare hands.

“Nightlock is Alec’s favourite, you say?” Magnus asks, ignoring Simon’s blathering. “I do recall a conversation we had on that God awful couch of yours, Alexander, where you told me in strict confidence that you did not pick favourites.”

Simon’s eyes bug out and he springs away from Alec’s desk, seizing his copy of the paper.
“And I think that’s my cue to leave,” he says, “Lotsa work to do, papers to drink, coffees to write, places to be that aren’t here - I’ll see you later Alec! Think about what I said, okay!”

Alec exhales wearily as Simon scurries away. “Sometimes I wish he would just … not,” he mutters.

“I think Simon means well,” Magnus muses, “It’s just that he has almost zero understanding of any social nuances. Or grievances, for that matter.”

“I know he means well. That’s what makes it worse. ‘Cus I can’t tell him to shut up, because then I’m the terrible person -”

Alec trails off. Magnus is watching him, eyes alight and amused. Again, it summons last night right to the forefront of his mind -

“How are you feeling today?” Magnus asks.

Alec blinks. And then blinks again.

“I, uh - what?”

Magnus slips into the cubicle, propping himself against the corner of the desk. “I want to know if you’re still in pain, Alec,” he says simply. “That’s all.”

“I … I’m good,” Alec starts, “I mean … it’s not as bad as it was.”

Magnus smiles in relief. The truth will do that, Alec supposes, but Magnus still seems lighter than he was yesterday, and Alec wonders if he’s not the only one to have had revelations last night.

He can hear Nightlock in his memories. ‘The person that I am may make sense in my head, but it doesn’t mean it will make sense to him. There are things I’ve done I’m not proud of, and things I still have yet to do, and he may not like them.’
And then he hears himself: ‘he makes me feel real. When I’m with him, what I want is what I have.’

Alec is tired of pretending. And he might not be able to tell Magnus the truth, but it doesn’t mean he has to lie anymore.

He swivels in his chair to face Magnus. “I’m sorry,” he says, “For what I said yesterday, I was - I don’t know what I was, but I’m sorry. For not telling you the truth. For making you worry.” For every single thing I’ve done as Sentinel that you don’t even know about, but has hurt you regardless.

Magnus shakes his head. “You shouldn’t have to apologise, Alexander. I’m sorry too. I asked you to change something about yourself that I don’t think can be changed, however much it might alleviate my own fears, and that was out of order. Protecting people is in your blood. I know that.”

‘Being a superhero is not something we can easily walk away from.’

Nightlock was right. And Alec has been warring with it for so long now, this stupid notion that he can either have it one way or another: saving people or not saving people. He knows the responsibility he carries on his shoulders is not something easily shrugged; risking his life for the sake of others is in his DNA, just like Magnus says. It’s what his mutation demands.

But this life, it’s not without sacrifice, and perhaps more importantly, it can’t be without compromise either.

Alec knows his reckless, stubborn, protective streak scares Magnus. It scares Alec too, the ends to which he might go to save a stranger’s life or take a bullet. But Magnus is brave, and Goddamnit, so is Alec. Nightlock told him so.

He can tell the truth to the person who matters the most.

“I can’t keep that promise I made,” Alec says, “It’s not who I am.”

“I know,” replies Magnus.
“But, I’ll try,” Alec continues, “I’ll try … to be better. I know … I know that there are people who care whether I come back in one piece.”

A smile tucks itself into the corner of Magnus’ mouth, a thin dimple curved around his lips. “Maybe you can stick to saving cats from trees and helping old ladies across the street,” he murmurs, “Leave the burning buildings and fist-fights to the people with superpowers.”

“Maybe,” Alec agrees, but he’s smiling too. Different to other smiles, different to ducked gazes and stolen glances; it doesn’t feel so much like a lie. It doesn’t feel like he’s cheating Magnus out of something he doesn’t know he deserves.

And yes, it feels selfish too, because this is him putting his own wants and needs above those of the city, just for a moment, just for once. One rooftop confession won’t allay a guilty complex. But there’s a space in Alec’s chest now, maybe carved out by that bullet, maybe unloaded upon to Nightlock last night, where Alec can let the man he is beyond the mask be at peace.

“Are you busy?” Magnus asks then, nodding at Alec’s computer, “I was hoping to borrow you for an hour or two, if you don’t have too much to do. I have a new editorial I want your opinion on, and - perhaps a stop by the coffee machine wouldn’t go amiss either. I have a week’s worth of office gossip to fill you in on, if Simon hasn’t beaten me to it.”

Alec grins. “Yeah,” he says, “Yeah, I’m not busy. Sounds perfect.”

The sun doesn’t stay out long, swallowed up by the clouds well before midday. Alec doesn’t notice, not until long after the shadows beneath the windows and across the cutting room floor have softened into greyness. He stands with his hands clasped behind his back, peering over Magnus’ shoulder as Magnus spreads articles and photographs out across the table. Magnus talks animatedly about standfirsts and bylines and pull quotes, gesturing widely and laughing at his own dry quips, and it washes over Alec like the wind, like the balmy winter sun and he soaks it up.

Alec’s eyes roam across the table, the collection of articles and blurry photographs and bold headlines; Magnus’ voice is a gentle hum in his ears, but his words pass Alec by. Coffee cup held to his lips, Alec murmurs in approval when Magnus pauses for his input, before Magnus hurtles into a monologue about whether he wants to include a new story on Senator Herondale’s proposed
anti-vigilante legislation on the front page or not.

Alec feels so remarkably normal that he is duty-bound to notice it. Peace is so rarely stolen between arsons and murders, and between thoughts of mutiny and crises of identity, but here he stands with some temporary semblance of it in his palms now, warming him in the same way his coffee does, leaching into his skin.

_Funny old thing_ , he thinks. _How terrible and apocalyptic the world can seem at night, only for him to wake up the next morning and wonder how it was he came upon that ledge._

Alec sips at his coffee, following Magnus’ dexterous hands as they skim across the pages on the table, rearranging articles and shuffling headlines. He doesn’t know why Magnus needs his opinion on these things: Alec’s no journalist and most of the stories in this issue have nothing to do with the investigation, but -

But Magnus enjoys his company. Alec knows it to be true. A bashful flush creeps up the back of his neck. _It’s more than that and you know it._

Alec knows that Magnus cares for him. He’s said as much.

Maybe. _Maybe_ , Alec thinks. _Maybe I’m brave enough to ask about it now. Ask him: is this what I think it is? You and me?_

He takes another sip of his coffee, swilling it around in his mouth. Lukewarm and sugary, but he hardly tastes it. The only thing he’s remotely aware of is the space that exists between his shoulder and Magnus’.

And he’s so oblivious to anything else, that when Magnus asks, “Have you ever met Sentinel?” , it’s so out of the blue that Alec chokes on his coffee.

“What?” Alec coughs, setting his cup down on the table before he splatters coffee all over shirt. “Shit, sorry -”

Magnus won’t look at him, focused on the editorial spread on the cutting table. His thumb presses against his lower lip in thought, but he holds his body unnaturally still.
“I - I don’t know who that is,” Alec croaks. “Is that - is that the super from the paper this morning?”

“Sentinel, yes. He’s a Corporate,” Magnus replies candidly. “He doesn’t get in the papers very much, which is unfortunate, because he’s not the most terrible to look at-”

Alec raises his eyebrows. Magnus mistakes his panic for something else entirely and rolls his eyes.

“-what? I can appreciate a beautiful jawline and nice arms, Alexander. Live a little.” Magnus sighs dramatically, if only to distract from the way he wraps a protective arm around his middle. “But he keeps a low profile, stays out of the public eye - which is rather impressive, considering he’s the one who cleans up Arkangel’s messes and Arkangel is certainly no stranger to the limelight. Here, what do you think of this layout for the editorial?”

Magnus nods towards the article clippings on the cutting table. His thumb runs back and forth across his mouth, pushing and pulling redness through his lips in a way that catches Alec’s eye.

Alec clears his throat pointedly and takes a step closer to the table, tilting his head as he studies the layout for the front page. The headline is about the election, but the inset article at the bottom of the page is about Jace, about Arkangel, and is accompanied by a small photograph taken from a distance of Jace speeding through downtown. Simon probably took it.

Alec doesn’t process it. His mouth is dry. He twists his fingers where he hides his hands behind his back, tugging at his knuckles until they ache.

“I haven’t met Sentinel, no,” Alec lies. “Why … why do you ask?”

Magnus hums noncommittally. “I met him recently. He reminds me a lot of you, if I’m being honest, which I am … he’s very serious and terribly frank.”

“I’m … not sure if I should be offended by that.”

“I mean it as a compliment,” Magnus forces himself to laugh. He turns to face Alec, his hip resting against the edge of the cutting table, and takes his time to appraise Alec from head to toe and back
again. Alec’s bandages are well hidden, but it still feels like Magnus can see straight through his shirt, right to the bruises and the puckered scar over his ribs. The smallest of frowns appears as a twitch between Magnus’ eyebrows. “I think you’d like him. You have similar sensibilities.”

Alec leans forward, reaching into Magnus’ space to move the article about Jace to the left hand side of the front page. Magnus’ eyes follow his hand, and then Magnus clicks his tongue and nudges Alec with his hip in appreciation. From the corner of his eye, however, Alec notices Magnus rubbing his thumb and forefinger together, playing with the simple silver ring that rests just below his knuckle.

There’s a question poised on the tip of Magnus’ tongue, and Alec can take a good guess at what it might be. He’s been waiting for this, somewhere in the back of his mind, ever since the shooting. He fucking told Magnus they know each other in real life, he and Sentinel. It was only going to be a matter of time before Magnus brought it up with Alec.

And yet, Magnus doesn’t know how to ask. Alec can read the hesitation in his eyes, and perhaps, Alec could benefit from some of that same refrain, because his brain-to-mouth filter is sometimes too forward for his own liking.

“You’re nervous,” is what Alec says aloud, before it can be bitten back. Magnus tenses in an instant, so Alec backpedals. “I didn’t mean-”

“It’s alright,” Magnus says. He keeps his eyes on the table but his jaw works as he chews the inside of his cheek. “I suppose it’s true.”

“Did something happen? Magnus?”

Magnus looks at him abruptly, and Alec feels it, a sharp stabbing pain in his chest between two ribs, exactly where Magnus pulled a bullet from his body barely seven days ago. The phantom bullet aches within him; his bandages are quietly itchy and coarse against his skin, and the spill of bruises that ripple up beneath his arm and around towards his spine begin to pulse. But the look in Magnus’ eyes seizes Alec’s attention with more than deja vu alone: the feeling of invisible fingers prodding and poking and pushing into his scar tissue is not all to do with the memory of being shot.

“He said something curious,” Magnus begins, not breaking eye contact. He doesn’t even blink. “Sentinel, that is. There was an incident, he was hurt, and I helped him. I’ll spare you the grisly details, but - he said that ... he and I, we know each other in real life.”
Alec’s racing thoughts screech to a violent halt. He could hear a pin drop.

“Oh.”

“Oh, indeed.” Magnus laughs gently, the tension in his shoulders dissipating a little. “Truth be told, I haven’t stopped thinking about it since it happened. And then, last night, I - well, it doesn’t matter.”

“I - you - how do you know he was telling the truth?” Alec asks, and the words sound ridiculous the moment they leave his mouth. “About - about knowing you?”

Magnus shakes his head. “He wasn’t lying. He doesn’t tell me everything, but what he does tell me, I believe, is invariably the truth. I know who he is, but I don’t know who he is.”

“And you’re … not sure if you want to figure it out?”

“Exactly,” Magnus says, “I’m fond of him, it goes without saying. He’s a good man at odds with himself - one of those rare moral Corporates you’re so eager to defend -” He meets Alec’s eyes deliberately and the back of Alec’s neck flares with heat. “- and so my curiosity has the better of me. How could it not? There are these things he’s told me about himself, so of course I want to know more, but at the same time, I -”

He sighs heavily, making a throwaway gesture with his hand, waving his fingers dismissively.

“I feel like so much of what we’ve been doing here - you and me and this investigation - is so staunchly against this culture of unmasking our supers that I shouldn’t possibly want to know who he is beneath the mask, and it must be hypocritical of me to even entertain the thought. Let alone … ask him.”

Magnus breathes deeply. Alec expects him to retreat away inside as he often does, to slowly slip away, back behind those carefully composited walls of his - but he doesn’t. He stands there, in front of Alec, so extraordinarily open that the look in his eyes could almost be described as daring.

Go on , he seems to say. Go on. Tell me.
“He didn’t have to tell you,” Alec says slowly. He takes a step closer to Magnus, and spreads his palm flat on the tabletop, an anchor, just to stop himself from getting closer still. Magnus’ entire body is on high alert; Alec sees it in the way he sucks in a sharp breath and stands taller, and his eyes flit from Alec’s face to the centre of Alec’s chest, sliding up the side of his neck, his jaw, his mouth, to return to his eyes again. Alec wills the rampant beat of his own heart into submission, and pushes on.

“He didn’t have to tell you that he knows you or you know him. Maybe - maybe that means he … wants you to know.”

“Do you think so?” Magnus asks breathlessly. It’s hard to tell if the question he asks is the question he means.

Alec shrugs. “Yeah, I … I guess,” he says. “I mean, if it were me -”

The stillness shifts in Magnus’ eyes; his gaze darkens. He reaches out for the end of Alec’s tie, pinching the silk between his thumb and forefinger, rubbing it between his fingertips.

“Are you saying that if you were actually a superhero, and not a fool with a heroic death wish, you would want me to know it was you?” he asks.

Alec gulps. This is getting into dangerous territory. Pointedly, he doesn’t look down at where Magnus is bridging the gap between them, pulling gently at his tie - but that’s not the problem here.

“Yes,” Alec all but whispers. “Yes. Yeah. I’d want to.”

That’s the problem, and it’s the unshakable, invariable truth. Insistently, his thoughts turn to Nightlock again, and his soft words from last night.

‘Not brave enough to tell this man who - what was it? Makes you feel like you’re real, that he makes you feel real? Even if you’re craving to let him know?’
Alec wishes he knew bravery enough to know for sure if the feeling in his heart is the mettle he needs to take that step into the unknown.

It’s me. I’m him, I’m Sentinel. Maybe you already know.

Magnus hums, ducking his gaze to look at Alec’s tie. He curls his fingers slowly around it and gives it a gentle tug; the knot presses lightly into the base of Alec’s throat, although it certainly feels far tighter than that.

Magnus wets his lips, but is unable to refrain from smiling - and it’s one of those rare smiles that show his teeth, the sort that he doesn’t give freely or easily and that he tries his hardest to fight back. He reaches up, straightening out Alec’s shirt collar, and then the lapels of his suit jacket, before patting Alec’s tie flat against his chest. Magnus’ palm is a heavy weight upon Alec’s sternum.

Alec is not sure he’s ever been touched like this before - and maybe that’s a small part of a tragedy - but, at the same time, every single one of his nerves is alight. He can barely find breath when Magnus finally takes a step back, taking his warmth and the smell of his aftershave with him, and turns back to the cutting table.

“So what do you think?” he asks, and Alec’s thoughts stumble like a drunk man.

“What do I - about what? The - uh, the paper?”

“Yes, the paper,” Magnus says, rolling his eyes fondly. “And about Sentinel. Any of it, all of it, Alexander. I’d appreciate your counsel.”

“The paper looks fine -”

“I’m not in the business of fine, Alexander.”

“It looks great. And Sentinel - maybe, maybe you should just ... wait. Maybe you’ll figure out who he is without having to think about it.” He looks Magnus in the eye. His words come out lower than anticipated. “Maybe he’ll … muster up the courage to tell you himself.”
Alec shrugs again, but knows he’s mere words away from stumbling. “Yeah. I mean - yeah.”

It’s enough to have Magnus smile again, sweet and serene and satisfied with that answer, which is all Alec can really want. Magnus turns his attention back to the cutting table, making a rectangle with his thumbs and forefingers in the shape of a photograph and admiring the layout of all his headlines; he nods his head and then starts tidying everything back into a pile.

“Is that - everything?” Alec deigns to ask, his heart still thudding.

“For now,” Magnus says, “I’d keep you all day if I could, but I’m sure you have work to do. But stop by my office on your lunch break? I have a few more case files for us to look at, and Captain Garroway is supposed to get back to me about-”

“So you can?”

Magnus opens his mouth to speak, but decides against it. With his stack of papers in his arms, he tilts his head to the side, admiring Alec openly.

Alec knows that he must be smiling because he can see himself reflected in Magnus’ eyes: this gentle, happy amusement, all talk of senators and supers, of secret identities, of hero complexes, and of the city beyond this room, so easily forgotten. There’s only them. *I know you and you know me and we don’t really need to say it, do we?*

Magnus shakes his head, but no movement is too small for Alec not to notice; he’s spent too many years honing his senses to let anything Magnus does slip by unappreciated.

“You are -” Magnus starts, and then huffs on a soft laugh. “I’m glad you’re here with me, Alexander. You *are* brilliant, you know that?”

Alec blushes. “Magnus -”

“Don’t argue with me, I won’t hear it,” Magnus interjects, side-stepping around Alec. He reaches
up and pats Alec at the juncture of his shoulder, fingers digging into Alec’s suit jacket. There’s a bruise there, hidden away beneath Alec’s clothes, and it sings as Magnus touches him. “You deserve to know how good you are. This is a thankless job, and a thankless city, and these last few months have been little short of madness. Every day we see the worst New York has to offer, and yet - here I am, with you. I don’t think I could see this through with anyone else.”

“You’re just saying that.”

“I’m not. I’m really not. Do you not feel the same?”

Alec does. There’s no question about it.

Magnus’ hand drifts down Alec’s chest before he peels his fingers away. “I’ll see you later,” he whispers, and then makes for the door, looking back over his shoulder just before he leaves. “And don’t forget your coffee. It’ll have gone cold.”

Alec misses patrol that night. He steals away to the public phone booth on the corner of the street to place a call to Isabelle, and she just laughs when he says Sentinel’s not going to be there tonight.

“Mom is going to be so mad,” Izzy says, but she’s still laughing as she says it, and Alec imagines the way her smile lights up her face, bold with red lipstick. “Jace too.”

“Tell Jace that my bullet wound still hurts,” Alec retorts. It only makes Izzy bark with laughter again.


Alec smiles as he tucks the receiver into the crook of his neck, curling himself over the phone box, ducking his head from passersby hurrying home for the night, who throw him the curious disappearing glances that one always gives a stranger caught in a private moment, from the other side of the glass.
“I’ll have my coms on,” Alec murmurs, “So if you need me -”

“*If I need you, I’ll let you know,*” Izzy replies, “*It’s not as if we’ve caught any leads and we haven’t had any sightings of the Circle since the shooting. I suspect the pyrokinetic realised we were closing in on him and has gone underground, which is why they sent the sniper after you guys.*” She sighs, and the remnants of her laughter slip just out of reach. “*Until we figure out how the Circle are choosing victims, and what their pattern is, I don’t think we’re ever going to catch them.*”

“If one person can figure it out, it’s you.”

“*Well, obviously,*” Izzy replies. “*You go enjoy your date night -*”

“We’re working, it’s not a date.”

“*-whilst I continue to slave over fifty blocks worth of CCTV footage from the Brooklyn scene we still have to watch. Not that I’m trying to make you feel terrible for abandoning your poor overworked sister to do all the grunt work whilst you spend the evening flirting with your journalist, and Jace and Clary swan around the city, getting their beauty shots in tomorrow’s papers.*”

“The closest thing Jace has to a beauty shot is his mugshot,” Alec says, and then adds, “Do you still have a copy of that on file, by the way?”

“*Of course. I’m going to use it for his every birthday card from now until the end of time.*”

Alec can’t help but grin, the stretch of it hurting muscles in his face he hasn’t used in a long time. There’s some part of him that feels a little fake, a little forced, but he does his best to push it back.

Not tonight. *Not tonight.* The Circle can set the city on fire tomorrow, and the world will crash and burn, but not tonight.

Tonight, Alec just wants to *try.* He just wants to be.
“Where are Jace and Clary working tonight?” he can’t help but ask, because even when he’s Alec, and not Sentinel, it’s only self-control that stops his fingers from tapping a nervous beat against his pant leg. “Just so I know.”

“I shouldn’t tell you, you know,” Izzy replies, “You’re the one who just phoned me up saying you’re playing hooky tonight, and now it sounds like you’re going back on your word. As much as I don’t want to encourage Reckless Alec, a little wouldn’t hurt.”

“Easier said than done when we have serial murderers roaming the streets, but okay.”

“Don’t get sarcastic with me. I’m just trying to help you be less uptight,” she replies, before sighing again. “Alec, I’ve got this. When have I ever not got this? Jace and Clary are working south of the bridge tonight, Wolfsbane and Veil are supposed to rendezvous with them later, I’ve got your alibi for mom and dad covered, and you are not going to worry about any of it. Take a night, and if not a whole night, a couple hours. Just for you. Okay?”

Alec hesitates a moment before replying.

“Okay.”

“Enjoy your night with Magnus. Be yourself, forget about your mask, have a drink with him, I don’t know. But I want to hear all the juicy gossip tomorrow, and there better be some gossip.”

“Sometimes you and Jace make it very difficult for me to distinguish who my least favourite sibling is.”

“That’s harsh. Take it back!”

Alec can’t help the laugh that escapes him, lighter and more bubbling than he was expecting. And more than Izzy was expecting too, because whatever she was planning to say next isn’t said, and a stolen moment of happiness exudes across the line. It feels strange, but strange things do happen, even against the worst of odds.

Alec sees that more clearly now.
“Alright,” he says, laughing softly, “I take it back. You’re not nearly as bad as him. Stay safe tonight, Iz. I’ll check in for debriefing when I get home.”

“It’s going to be a peaceful evening,” Izzy declares. “And if it’s not, the Circle are going to have me to answer to.”

“I almost feel sorry for them.”

“Almost being the operative word, of course.”

Alec shakes his head on a breathless laugh. “I love you, Iz.”

“I love you too, you big idiot,” she says, “Oh, and Alec?”

“Yeah?”

“You sound better today. Happier. I’m glad.”

Magnus’ office door is slightly ajar, so Alec doesn’t bother knocking as he slips into the room, quietly shrugging out of his suit jacket and setting his satchel down on the floor. It’s always hard to tell the time of day (or night) in Magnus’ windowless office, time having a habit of standing still and ceasing to exist whenever Alec sits down at this desk, but tonight, there’s a sense of calm pervading, even here, that Alec hasn’t felt in a long time.

“Good news?” Magnus says, glancing up from the stack of case files in front of him, his eyebrows raised. He’s lost his jacket from when Alec saw him earlier, and now he’s in his shirt sleeves and suspenders, his hair a bit askew from a busy day, and he has this diamond-like determination in his eyes that makes Alec want to do good, real good. Real, selfless, heroic, superpowerless good. It’s his favourite look on Magnus. Always is.
Magnus quirks an eyebrow a little higher, expecting an answer to his question. His eyes flick from Alec’s eyes down to his mouth, and then back up again. It takes Alec a moment to realise that he’s just walked into the office smiling.

Apparently that’s significant.

“Oh,” says Alec, rubbing the nape of his neck. He looks down, but can’t keep his eyes away from Magnus for long. He pulls out the desk chair opposite Magnus and, as he sits, Magnus slides him half the files without saying a word, creases at the apexes of his eyes.

“Yeah, no, not really,” Alec continues, “Nothing special. Just saying goodnight to Iz.”

“I didn’t steal you from her, did I?”

“No, not tonight. She’s got a night shift with Jace and just wanted to remind me that he’s a pain and -”

“And?”

“And apparently I work too much.” Alec shrugs. “Which is rich, coming from her.”

“Well, not to disappoint her, but Luke has sent over a box of records from the precinct and I think we can get through them all before the end of the night between the two of us. With just enough time for a drink afterwards, of course.”

Alec rolls his eyes, sinking deeper into his chair and extending his legs beneath the desk. His feet kick against Magnus’, but it only makes Magnus smile as he returns his focus to the open folder in front of him. The scritch of his pen is audible as he circles a few words on the page and Alec allows himself to just watch: he is caught, ineffably, by the way small dimples form parentheses around Magnus’ lips in much the same way as he writes on the page.

“Alexander.”
“Yeah?”

“As much as I am flattered by this scrutiny, you can stare and make notes at the same time.”

Alec grins as he reaches for a pen and flips open the first folder on the top of the pile. The document is stamped with the name of Captain Garroway’s precinct and seems to be a collection of old arrest records, dating back a few years. Alec will spend a few hours reading through it, highlighting words here and there, nudging his knee against Magnus’ beneath the table - and he’ll probably find nothing.

It’s true that the investigation into the Circle has gone cold, Valentine Morgenstern forever outrunning their reach, the pyrokinetic forever rubbing it in their faces. It’s true that Izzy stays late every night at headquarters puzzling over maps of the city and listening to the endless rote of police broadcasts, trying to predict where the next fire will catch. And it’s true that Jace and Clary are chasing bloody phantoms in the streets, and traipsing home at the end of the night with empty hands and rain-wet hair, and -

And it’s like Magnus said: thankless.

Thankless work, no end in sight. One day, it might cost Sentinel his life, but before that, it might cost Alec’s. His happiness, his good night’s sleep, his chance to fan the flames that flicker inside his chest every time Magnus hums or taps his foot against Alec’ calf beneath the desk or merely looks at Alec like he wants him.

The thought a hefty and damning weight at the back of Alec’s mind. A nightmare without end. A sacrifice without choice. And yet -

And yet, it’s so easy, being with Magnus here in this office, late into the night, the two of them working in companionable silence as they pour over old case files, and deconstruct police reports, and work their way down witness lists until Alec is sure he can hear the phone dial tone in his ear long after he’s put the receiver down. And then it devolves, as it always does, into a glass of whiskey and soft laughter once the focus has slipped away from them and into the early hours of the morning. The whiskey is oaky and warming in Alec’s belly, and Magnus flirts with his eyes behind the rim of his glass, perched on the edge of his desk, playful and generous with his touches to Alec’s arm. They laugh, they talk, Alec forgets. He gives himself an hour, and then another, and then a night - and so does Magnus.

‘You are not as divided down the middle as you think you are.’
Alec cannot bring himself to hate it. The man he once was - the man Sentinel once was - was a stickler for the rules; had no time for personal indulgences; drowned in the tides of duty. That man would not be sitting here. Alec sees that now. He has been pushed towards a person he has never quite managed to be. He has changed. It’s just like Nightlock said.

And the new Alec … the new Alec thinks about what Nightlock said on that roof last night, in and around the serenity of their shared kiss, and finds himself wondering who it was that decided duty couldn’t be to the heart.

New York has given Alec so little back for his troubles, dragging him beneath the surface and into its dark and murky depths at every turn and corner. He deserves to take a moment for himself, and yes, perhaps that’s too sentimental a thought, too dangerous a thought. It’s certainly a foreign one and doesn’t quite sound like himself, because the self he knows is still tattered, holding on to the last threads of a life he thought he knew but clearly didn’t.

But then, Magnus will laugh about something, and maybe brush his fingers across the small of Alec’s back as he moves across the office to pour them both another whiskey, and Alec will realise that he wants to make it sound like himself.

This the person he wants to be. The life he wants, the peace he needs.

The man he wants to spend it with.

It always comes back to that: the thing he’s always wanted for such a long, long time.

Chapter End Notes

And that concludes Act III of the fic! We're over halfway through now, but Act IV and Act V are gonna be very intense! Does Magnus know who Sentinel is? When is the pyrokinetic gonna strike next and what is Valentine's plan? What is the Senator up to and what will happen on Election Night? When are we getting more Luke backstory? Well, we will find out soon enough ...

Anyway, I can't believe it took 300,000 words to get to the first kiss, but hey, that's very on brand for me, so you shouldn't really be surprised. But were you surprised that it was Sentinel and Nightlock who got the first kiss? I know there were lots of different guesses given the love square, and in all honestly, when I originally wrote this fic in 2018, there was no kiss here, but then Nightlock just went for it and it felt so
natural that I had to let him have it ... it's a moment so steeped in this beautiful curiosity and camaraderie and trust, a product of years of loneliness on both their parts ... it's more than romantic interest between them, it feels sweeping and yet so private and intimate. I hope that comes across well enough!

This chapter was not beta read (as my beta is still on a well deserved break) so please forgive any typos and waffle-y purple prose ... it is my weakness and I know it ...

Thank you so much for all the feedback from last time! I can't express how much it helps to read people's thought and feelings on this fic, as everyone has a different take on the moral issues and it's so interesting!

Visit me on Tumblr and shout in my inbox, especially if you have questions! Please reblog the tumblr post for me too!

I'm also on Twitter if you want to come chat about the fic ... and boy, do I love talking about this fic. Tweet as you read with the hashtag #ficacoldnight! :D

Please leave a kudos if you made it to the end, and drop me a comment with your thoughts, your favourite line, your hopes for what will happen next, your advice for poor old Alec ... I would be forever grateful for it! If you want an alert next time there's an update, please hit that subscribe button!

Until next time, in which Sentinel and Nightlock tackle a collapsing building, Senator Herondale shows her hand, and someone's mask is peeled away.
“You can ask,” Alec says without thinking. He turns to Nightlock and Nightlock’s eyes glint in the dull streetlight from above. The laughter lines around his eyes crinkle in delicate shadows that Alec only wishes he could see more of. “Anything you want to know, you can ask.”

“Oh,” says Nightlock, “Don’t tell me that. You don’t mean it.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because,” he whispers, “Because then I would have to ask you your name, and I fear you might tell me.” He rests his hand on Alec’s arm. The touch doesn’t linger: a short, fleeting squeeze, but it’s enough for Alec to wet his lips and take a half-step closer. “And, however much I might want to know, at some point down the line, you’ll regret it, and we can’t have that.”

Chapter Notes

Sentinel and Nightlock tackle a burning building, Izzy and Alec make a crucial discovery, and Herondale shows her hand ... and somebody gets unmasked.

&&

Tweet along with #ficacoldnight!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This city is afraid of me. I have seen its true face.

— Alan Moore, Watchmen
Dispatcher: “911, do you need police, fire, or medic?”

Caller: “Fire, we need fire! We’re on - we’re on East 109th, the fifteenth floor, the building is shaking -”

Dispatcher: “Okay, you need to evacuate the building right away.”

Caller: “Right now?”

Dispatcher: “Right away. Can you make it to the stairs?”

Caller: “There’s a lot of smoke, we can’t see anything, all the lights are down -”

Dispatcher: “Okay, you need to get out right now.”

[TRANSCRIPT: sounds of people shouting, indiscriminate]

Caller: “People are shouting, they … they can’t find the stairs. I think - oh God, I think the ceiling’s collapsed, there’s so much smoke -”

Dispatcher: “Can you open the windows, get some air? Otherwise, get down on the floor and find something to shelter under, a desk, a table. The fire department are on their way, you need to stay calm. Is there another way out of the building?”

Caller: “People are saying the other stairs are blocked too, what are we - [TRANSCRIPT: sound of shattering glass] Oh my God, I think someone just broke the window out, is that the fire brigade?”

Dispatcher: “It’s not the fire brigade, please stay away from the windows, they might be breaking under the strain of the building -”

Caller: “Oh thank God, it’s a super -!”
Thick, acrid smoke fills Alec’s lungs like tar the moment he crashes through the window in a spray of glass. The fire alarm shrieks overhead, red flashing light cutting through the smoke, and the very air shakes, the boom of collapsing rubble and the shrieks of hysteria sinking their claws into the building and into Alec too. Swinging his bow over his shoulder and staggering forward, his feet crunch on broken glass and his eyes burn, and God -

This really isn’t how he expected his Friday night to turn out.

Six hours ago, he was sharing a drink with Magnus in the office. An hour ago, he was sat on the roof of the Penhallow building, picking at the fletching of his arrows with a grin on his face like a teenager picking flower petals ("he does, he does not, he does"). And twenty minutes ago, he was arguing with Jace about after-patrol takeout.

("We had Chinese last week,” Jace had moaned, lounging back on his elbows, his wings discarded to the side. “I want Italian. I could murder a chicken parmesan right about now.”

“IT’s not Chinese, it’s fusion ,” Clary had said, “The flyers are always pinned up on the noticeboard in my dorm, I wanna try it. And it looks really fancy .”

Jace had held up his hand to stop her. “Exactly. Fancy is just a word made up by people who want our money for their immoral crimes against food. I don’t want to eat ‘aerated kung pao chicken’ or ‘essence of wonton’. I just wanna eat normal food like a normal person because I’m hungry and I’m cranky and I don’t want to eat any more of Izzy’s cooking.”

“We’ve done literally nothing tonight and you ate before we came out.”

“That was my first dinner. This is my second dinner, which is obviously way more important. And I also really want to eat my bodyweight in cheese.”

Clary had rolled her eyes and turned to Alec, her hands on her hips. “Okay, Alec, you get deciding vote. Chinese or Italian? That’s fair.”
Alec had wanted bacon burgers. From the East Village. Extra pickle, extra relish, greasy and full of cholesterol. His stomach had grumbled at the thought.

“If I pick one, will it make you two shut up?” he had asked instead, before pressing his fingertip to his ear and turning away. “Iz, we’re done here. Tell Herondale that Penhallow had no visitors that weren’t already on her schedule, as we already knew she wouldn’t. You want us to pick up any food for you on the way back to HQ?”

“The answer is always yes, but it’s gonna have to wait,” Izzy had replied. “We have bigger problems. Turn onto the police frequency on your radios.”

Alec had flicked over onto the dispatch frequency as Clary and Jace gathered closer. The radio had crickled and crackled, spitting out white noise, until -

“All units, all units, we have a building fire and a potential explosion on East 9th, massive infrastructure damage, multiple fatalities expected. Proceed with caution. Air search and rescue en route.”

“Well, there go our dinner plans,” Jace had said. “And our paychecks from the Senator.”

Alec has done his fair share of emergency evacuations, but collapsing buildings are never fun. Smoke inhalation, crush injuries, shrapnel in the eyes, the walls bending and bowing beneath the weight of the ceiling - he has to ignore it. There are people trapped inside the building. He needs to get them out.

*And he doesn’t know if the explosion on the top floor was a gas main blowing or a fire set deliberately.*

There’s no time to stop and find out.

“Can anybody hear me?!” Alec shouts, but the smoke floods his mouth and he coughs violently into the crook of his arm. His eyes sting, streaming with tears as he scrabbles for anything he can use to cover his mouth. “Is anyone there?!”
He thinks he’s in a living room, but he can’t be sure. Smoke pours in through the doorway, spilling out of the broken window; the floor above groans deep and guttural and the walls creak ominously. Distantly, he hears hissing too, but beyond the huff of smoke, he has no clue if it’s escaping gas or something else, and he can’t smell anything but burning either.

Alec yanks the glove off his hand and bites it between his teeth, but it helps little: the smoke cuts up the inside of his throat as he staggers through the debris. A rattling boom from down below shakes the entire floor, the rumble vibrating up Alec’s legs; he sucks in a sharp breath, leaping in the direction of what he hopes is a doorway before any of the floorboards beneath his feet give out.

Windows shatter behind him, glass bursting under steel pressure. Alec covers his head with his arm as a shard nicks him on the back of the leg; the pain shoots up the inside of his thigh, and then, moments later, the warm sluice of blood trickles down his calf and into his boot.

“Anybody?!” he shouts again, muffled by his glove. He coughs, the smoke scraping at his lungs, and stumbles into a door frame. He grips tight to the wood. “If you can hear me, you gotta make a noise!”

“¡Aquí!” comes a voice. “Help us, please!”

The smoke scrambles his sense of direction, and Alec staggers blindly forward, feeling his way along the wall. The red lights still flicker overhead, but the sprinkler system is down and out - the air is hot and dry and full of dust and it cuts at Alec’s jaw and the side of neck where his suit doesn’t cover him. It stings like road rash.

Oh, he’s going to demand those bacon burgers from the East Village if he makes it out of here alive. Doesn’t matter how much fucking cheese Jace wants to eat -

The whole building shakes, a gurgle rippling through the foundations. Alec stills, a breath held.

And then, the entire room above crashes through the ceiling in a hail of rubble and concrete and dust. The floorboards beneath Alec’s feet shunt and splinter and the whole building lurches sideways - Alec is flung against the wall as his bow slices into his back.

“Fuck,” he grits out between his teeth, swiping at the grey ash that covers his mask and face. The hallway is dark and billowing with pitch black smoke, and he can’t see his own hands. The walls groan again. Another collapse imminent.
Then, a scream, silenced abruptly by the cascade of rubble. Alec leans into the wall, bracing his shoulders against cracked wallpaper, and eases himself along the hallway. Each step has his heart pulsing in his throat, expecting his foot to go straight through the floorboards.

“Where are you!?” Alec shouts, scrambling at his utility belt for his torch. He smacks it into submission, but the yellow light bounces back off the impenetrable wall of smoke, dust particulates mushrooming before his eyes and sticking to his eyelashes. There’s no echo at all. “If you can still hear me, shout again!”

“¡Aquí!”

Alec’s heartbeat hammers in his ears. He feels his way along the wall until his fingers curl around an open door and he pulls himself inside, his toes clipping errant floorboards that have fallen from above. Blind. He’s completely blind, stumbling forward like a drunk man, like a man with no powers at all. What good is training when he can see nothing, feel nothing -

He flings his glove aside and covers his mouth with the back of his arm, coughing into his gauntlet. The beam of his torch is swallowed up by rippling shapes in the smoke. And the air - the air is hot, scalding hot, hot enough to make his skin feel like its peeling off his bones.

Across the room, a woman sobs, smothering the wail of a child.

A deluge of brick dust drops from the ceiling, filling Alec’s ears as he careens into the room, crashing through the rubble and fallen furniture. His coms spit and crackle - across the wire, he can hear Izzy shouting instructions at Clary, many floors below - but his head rings with a shrill, high-pitched whistle. He swings his torch wildly around the room: the smoke rolls and undulates against the ceiling, but a thin layer of clearer air sticks to the floor. Alec’s mouth is dry, but there’s still oxygen to breathe. No fire here. Only splintered bed frames and an upturned wardrobe, and -

The beam of his torch catches on the outline of a person hunched in the far corner: their face to the wall, their back to the smoke, so cloaked in ash and soot that Alec might mistake them for a shadow.

Not a shadow. A woman. An old woman. She’s shaking, trembling with silent sobs, holding something desperately to her chest.
Alec vaults over the fallen bookcase with ease.

“Hey!” he shouts, grabbing the woman by the shoulder. She startles, turning sharply, and the whites of her eyes are unnatural against the grey of her skin. Her face: stricken with anguish, and in her arms is a young boy, no older than five, cheeks and neck streaked with black tears.

“Come on!” Alec yells. A violent crash rips through the floorboards behind him, but he can’t look. The boy wails, burrowing his face into the woman’s shoulder, and the woman convulses so suddenly that Alec fears the building is about to drop out from beneath their feet.

“Get up!” he shouts again, hauling the woman to her feet. “We gotta go! Come on!”

He doesn’t wait for an answer.

Alec wrenches the boy from the woman’s arms, pulling him to his chest, and then hoists the woman up with his other arm. He wades back towards the door, but then his knee smacks into something sharp and his foot clips a nail, jabbing up into the sole of his boot. Alec grunts in pain, but refuses to keel forward, gritting his teeth as he pushes on.

The smoke floods through the hallway, gushing towards the broken window. It drags Alec like a riptide, shoving against his back. He trips and stumbles but won’t fall, clattering into the room where the floor has all but vanished, a deep crater full of smoke and sparks opened up beneath his feet.

Fuck, he thinks, but the adrenaline is coursing through his veins and all he can see is the small opening of the window on the other side of the room, the briefest of beacons. He can hear sirens. He’s sure of it.

The old woman grips tighter to Alec’s quiver. He can hear her whispering: no, no, no.

But I must, he thinks.

One step back. And another. And then Alec runs and leaps across the gaping hole in the floor. He lands with a thud, and his foot jolts in pain, skidding in the blood leaking from the sole of his boot. He refuses to fall.
But his arrow is gone, his zipline is gone. He only knows he’s close to the window by the crackle of broken glass beneath his feet.

*How do we get out? How do I get them out alive?* It’s not a question, but a necessity. He takes stock quickly: his bow is on his shoulder, he has a quiver full of arrows. A couple more grappling lines on his belt. *Will the line support three people?* Maybe. But Alec doesn’t have enough hands to take them both at once.

Not suspended a hundred foot above the ground.

There’s no chance of getting to the stairs. Even less of a chance of navigating ten stories to the ground. Alec looks back over his shoulder into the crackling smoke; flashes of orange and yellow slice through the black, licking at the cavern in the floor.

*Fire.*

The boy’s fingers turn to fists in the neck of Alec’s suit. They have to go out the window.

Somewhere far below, a thunderous *crack* shudders through the building, and as with lightning, Alec counts - one, two, three of silence - before the whole floor pitches sideways. Floorboards, furniture, *everything* hurtles towards the far wall, almost taking Alec’s feet with it. Alec shoves forwards, pinning the woman and the boy between himself and the wall, his fingers carving holes in the plasterboard.

“Arkangel!” he shouts into his coms. “Arkangel, I have two civilians for air lift, twelfth floor apartment on the west side! Now!”

“*On my way, buddy, hang tight!*” comes Jace’s voice and Alec grits his teeth, bracing himself as the floor sags once more, splintering sounds tearing through the smoke. The old woman scrabbles at the front of Alec’s suit, spluttering prayers in a language Alec doesn’t know, pleading with a God that has spared them no favours so far, but Alec is not going to let her die today.

He’s not going to let anyone die today, and then he’s going to get his bacon burger, and Jace and Clary are going to have to fucking deal with it.
“Alright, I’m outside, which window are you at? I can’t see you!” Jace yells in Alec’s ear. Alec hoists the boy up into his arms, and then pulls the old woman towards the window. He gasps for breath but only swallows ash. He chokes. His eyes are red-raw. Streaming.

Jace is not gonna see us. Not with the smoke.

The woman digs her fingers into Alec’s forearm, her blunt nails pressing into the leather of his bracers. Alec looks down at the flashlight in his hand.

And then he draws his arm back and lobs the flashlight through the window.

“You nearly got me in the face with that!” shouts Jace, “I’m coming in close. Get whoever’s first up on the ledge and tell them they’re gonna have to jump. I’ll catch them.”

Alec curls himself around the old woman, shielding her from the smoke as best he can. His other hand lies flat against the boy’s head, making sure his eyes and mouth are pressed to the juncture of Alec’s shoulder.

“You have to get up on the ledge, my partner will catch you,” Alec yells to the woman. He knocks away the jagged glass fragments protruding from the window frame and yanks on the woman’s arm until she moves. Her whole body trembles as she struggles up onto the windowsill in her slippers and nightgown, clutching tight to Alec’s hand.

“Por favor, por favor, please,” she cries, scrabbling at his arm. “¡Por favor, no!”

“You have to jump!” Alec shouts, “Jump! ¡Salte!”

Alec wrenches his arm out of her grip and shoves her as hard as he can between the shoulder blades. She screams, but her voice is swallowed up by the smoke in a second, and - she’s gone.

Alec’s heart drops out from his chest. The boy shrieks into Alec’s neck, and Alec tightens his arms around him, but the world is suddenly silent. He hears nothing, not the roar of fire or the huff of smoke or the screaming - so much screaming.
He doesn’t breathe. He can’t. There’s only the high-pitched screech in his ears -

And the crackle of the coms. Jace.

“Got her! That’s one! You got the other one or are you staying put?”

“I haven’t cleared the floor, there’s still more people trapped in here!” Alec calls back, coughing violently as more dust fills his mouth. “Here comes the kid! You ready!?”

“Circling back and coming in close again. Ten metres and closing.”

Alec pries the boy from his chest, but the boy’s small hands make fists in Alec’s quiver strap, holding and pulling and yanking with all his might - but Alec is stronger. He plants the boy on the windowsill and grips him securely by the shoulders, and hopes, dear God, that the boy is too young to remember being thrown out of a window to save his life.

“Arkangel, now!”

Alec pushes the boy out the window and he vanishes into the smoke too. A second of excruciating white noise, and then - Alec hears the telltale whir of Jace’s wings working overtime with extra weight.

“Package received,” Jace says, “I’ve gotta get Muse, don’t get yourself killed!”

Alec grits his teeth, plastering his arm across his face as he turns back into the room. The smell of the smoke has changed: the stale, musty stench of rubble now sharper, crackling, more alive, and that means burning. He feels the heat rolling against his face, the sweat dripping down the inside of his mask.

Fire. Nearby. Getting closer. The ceiling will cave soon, if the flames don’t burn through the floor first. His suit is slick against his skin, but his blood runs cold. That’s ironic.

That’s trauma, more like, his brain corrects him, sounding an awful lot like Izzy, but he can’t afford to listen to her. For a moment, he’s back in that immolated church, in that alleyway with the
pyrokinetic, with his hand on fire. He can still feel his skin blistering.

Distantly, someone else screams for help. *No time for being afraid.*

Alec leaps back across the hole in the floor, but this time, his foot does slip. The underside of his boot is slick with blood and he falls hard on his knee, the impact rattling through his kneecap, all the way up his thigh and into the side of his chest like an arrow aimed straight for his still-healing bullet wound. A cry of pain is wrenched from his insides, agony tearing at the scar tissue, but he clamps his hand over his ribs at the sound of more screams spat out from the shrapnel and smoke.

He pushes himself to his feet, but it’s like a string cut above his head - or all the tendons snapped in his body - and his knee bows beneath his weight, his leg crumpling. He stumbles forward, fingers digging into his armour, willing to part it like pliant skin, and presses hard against the bandages beneath his suit where the pain carves out an epicentre.

What he wouldn’t give for a useful superpower. *Healing, pain suppression, invulnerability, they all sound pretty fucking good,* he thinks, gritting his teeth. That’s probably an inappropriate thought when the building is about to disintegrate beneath him, but Izzy’s always told him he has a morose sense of humour, so why not prove her right. She always appreciates that.

*Crack.*

Alec freezes, still on his knees.

A thunderous boom shudders through the floorboards, a violent quake that ripples into Alec’s body. He doesn’t dare move, but the walls crumble all around him, brick and mortar tumbling into the crater in the floor; he smells hot metal, exposed steel beams that reek like blood, and the stench of burning wood and rubble. Behind him, below him, beneath the floor, he can hear flames spitting and hissing, heat radiating against his knees, smoke acrid-hot in his throat.

He pushes up onto one knee, shifting his weight ever so slowly, but then -

The floorboards beneath him fold like they’re nothing, like they’re paper, and he drops, suddenly, into blackness.

He lurches forward, his hand flying out to grab something, *anything*, a broken floorboard, a steel
beam - but he’s not wearing his glove, and the splinters carve into his bare palm. He yells out, and his grip slips, and he’s going to fall.

*Until he doesn’t.*

Soft warm leather wraps around Alec’s wrist and yanks him upwards, just as the entire floor below vanishes into dust, fire three floors below swallowing it up and roaring like an engine jet. The heat of the flames flares hotter only seconds later, fed by tumbling debris, scorching Alec’s dangling feet.

Alec hisses through his teeth, his bare palm wet with blood, but the grip on his wrist holds him tight.

“I’ve got you!” a man shouts above his head, drowned out by smoke and falling brick.

Alec can’t see him, can’t even see his hand, but he feels the worn leather of a glove against his skin. He grabs at the man’s wrist in return, swinging one leg up onto what remains of the floor, and then the other. Alec rolls himself onto his stomach, not quite willing to kiss ground that will probably break beneath him - but it’s close; he drops his forehead against the ground and wheezes. His body heaves with haggard breaths as he gasps for air.

An invisible force parts the smoke, pushing it back against the walls as it squirms and ripples behind an enormous wall of energy. But at last, Alec can see himself again, and it’s like repossessing his body; he wills his fingers to twitch, and twitch they do. He exhales on a shaky, relieved laugh, and someone behind him huffs loudly.

“You’re an heroic idiot with a deathwish, you know that?” Barely a whisper, or maybe it’s a shout. Alec doesn’t know. His ears are still ringing. His temples are pulsing, his eyes feel like they’re peeling. He has to close his eyes, digging his fingernails into the floor as his chest convulses, trying to spew out the smoke from inside. He feels like he’s going to retch.

Then, there are hands are on his back. On his shoulders, on his spine, stroking across his ribs, smoothing across his hips, his thighs, feeling him for injuries. A sharp inhale, a click of the tongue, and then Alec allows himself to be rolled over, and he’s face-to-face with Nightlock.

Neither of them say anything, but Nightlock grips Alec by the shoulders, his fingers bruising Alec’s collarbone. He stares at Alec’s soot-streaked face with eyes so intense that Alec’s not sure if
it’s really the building burning or if it’s something else entirely.

He’s not sure he’s breathing either. Maybe he isn’t. His body moves on autopilot; he sits up, but Nightlock doesn’t lean back, crowding Alec with his body. He burns hot, but it’s a different sort of heart to the fire ripping through the floors below them; Alec feels the warmth of him and breathes him in. For just a moment.

And then, the moment passes, and he shrugs out of Nightlock’s hands, and they exchange a look, and all Alec can think is we have to hurry.

Nightlock reaches out and hauls Alec to his feet.

And Alec doesn’t have to tell Nightlock twice.

“Did you really just walk into that bodega and buy a bag of ice in full gear? And no-one cared?” Jace asks, an hour and a half later, squinting at Clary as she holds a bag of ice cubes to her scorched cheek with an angry pout. “Can I borrow it?”

“Go buy your own,” Clary says, but when Jace scowls, hamming up the scrunch between his eyebrows, she sighs and throws the bag at his chest.

Jace wastes no time in pressing his entire face into the ice with a relieved sigh. “Oh my God, that’s good,” he exhales. “Iz, can the next upgrade to my wings include an ice cube dispenser? It’d be multifunctional. Both burn treatments and after-patrol drinks. Two birds with one stone.”

Alec would roll his eyes if he could.

But he can’t.

He can’t, because he’s completely and utterly exhausted. Just standing upright has him swaying
back and forth and back and forth like the wick of a lit candle. His vision is blurry at the edges and his head is foggy, his eyes dry and stinging. His body aches, and there’s a throb in his palm and in his foot and in the small of his back. His skin is caked and cracked and stings every time he stretches, splitting into fault lines like dry deserted ground. Black soot coats him from head to toe, and Alec fears for the first drop of rain because it’s going to turn the ash to tar upon his skin and take a lifetime to wash out of his hair.

The three of them look a mess, sprawled out on a rooftop a block over from the remains of the apartment building; it still smokes in the distance, a humongous pillar of grey leaking into the sky. The wind, too, reeks of ash and charcoal.

Jace flops onto his back, laying out like a starfish with the ice pack covering his face. His wings are abandoned, the hydraulics jammed with rubble and the titanium tarnished by fire, their glint no longer bright and brazen. A thin trickle of blood has dripped and dried upon Jace’s eyebrow, leaking from a thin cut along his hairline inflicted by flying shrapnel; the crusting blood has glued his eyelashes into a clump ad carved out a path of red across his mask.

Clary slumps over next to him, the curve of her spine a near parabola, her head hung between her shoulders. Her red hair is grey with ash and matted at the ends. Her face and arms are reddened with first-degree burns, but it’s superficial enough that it won’t scar.

Alec will not be so lucky.

His suit is torn along the back of his knee and his blood has coagulated into a thick black paste; he can feel it flaking up the inside of his thigh and down the side of his calf. He’ll be fortunate if it doesn’t get an infection, or worse, tetanus, if the puncture wound in the sole of his foot is anything to go by. It’s ironic, really, that the wheezing pain in his chest is the least of his worries.

He tries to steady his breathing: slow, careful breaths, in and out, the night air cold and wet but not refreshing. He draws it deep down inside his chest and tastes the threat of rain.

He still feels nauseous.

But it was worth it, he thinks, tightening his arms around his stomach to keep himself upright and all-together. The swaying worsens, but he forces his eyes to stay open as he scans the streets below.

Clary saved eight people from the first floor of the apartment block before the fire took over. Jace
caught four jumpers from the roof and air-lifted as many as he could to safety. And Alec and Nightlock had ploughed through the carnage, shoulder to shoulder and back to back, and rescued twenty-two more people who couldn’t make it to the stairs because the roof had collapsed over the fire escape, trapping them inside.

Alec had got them out as Nightlock had kept the ceiling above him at bay with both his palms spread wide.

Twenty-two other people who the fire brigade would not have reached in time.

Alec’s shoulders still ache beneath the weight.

He didn’t get everyone.

The fire took the floors and the foundations from below, and an explosion on the roof brought the building down on top of them, even with Nightlock straining at the seams as he held up the weight of all that steel and rubble with sheer force alone.

Alec can still feel Nightlock’s power snapping in the air: the energy strung tight, unable to dissipate, pushing and pulling at Alec’s skin, kneading him like he’s malleable. He can still see the wired clench in Nightlock’s jaw. The fury and determination in his eyes. The blood on his hands.

His voice, shouting -

“You can’t save everyone.’ Alec can’t remember who told him that. Maybe it was Nightlock. It doesn’t really matter.

Sometimes, you can’t save everyone. You can tell yourself that you could’ve been faster, or could’ve been stronger, or if you’d just done one thing different, maybe one more person could have gone home to their family, perhaps not in one piece, but alive at least -

Alec repeats it like a mantra, but words have never really made it easier to swallow: instead, the wind whispers (“you didn’t get everyone”) and the lump in his throat feels like a chunk of brick cutting into his windpipe. He knows Jace and Clary feel it too, sobriety whitening both their faces as they fight half-heartedly over their bag of ice and pretend to laugh.
You don’t get everyone.

Tossing aside his bow and quiver, Alec surrenders to the wind desperate to bowl him over. He lowers himself to the ground with a stiff groan and shuffles back onto his palms, staring up at the sky. He’s not entirely sure where smoke ends and cloud begins, the grey and purple colour much the same. Sirens blare down below, red and blue lights flashing up against the side of the building, reflecting in the windows, but they glance off Alec like raindrops into oil. But the commotion stirs the convoluted feeling inside his chest that cannot quite decide if it’s relief or regret or a sickening amalgamation of both.

“Where’d Nightlock go?” Jace asks, his voice muffled by the bag of ice. He’s still sprawled out on his back and he looks mostly ridiculous.

“He said he wanted to make sure the police are doing their job,” says Clary, jutting her chin towards the edge of the roof and the noise in the street below. She frowns a little as she speaks. “People in this neighbourhood aren’t usually the cops’ first concern.”

I should go check on him, Alec thinks, but he has to count to five before he can bring himself to move. He eases himself up onto his knees, carefully testing his weight on his bum foot and tries standing, but regrets it instantly. He lets out a long hiss of pain between his teeth.

Clary eyes him skeptically, and under the bag of ice, Jace helpfully adds, “I’m just gonna lay here a while longer, you go ahead.”

Alec moves for his bow, wondering if it will be easier to abseil the side of the building, or if he should hobble his way down the fire escape (hobbling on fire escapes being something he’s become remarkable adept at lately), when the pressure in the air shifts. That prodding sensation becomes a beckoning, an invisible hand linking its fingers with Alec’s own, pulling him forwards towards the roof edge. Jace and Clary don’t notice - they never do - but for Alec, he’s as in tune with it as his own breathing.

He searches the sky for Nightlock, squinting against the starless dark, but no-one steps out of the clouds. Uneasiness chips away at the solidified smoke in his gut, tussling with the dull ache in his side and the sharper spike that spears through his foot with every step he takes towards the fire escape.
The police have established a two-block perimeter around the apartment building; half a dozen ambulances litter the sidewalk and flimsy white gazebos have been set up for paramedics to treat the walking wounded, whilst those worse off are shuttled over to Bellevue.

The road is oil-slick with water from the fire truck hoses, black, iridescent, and shiny. A number of firefighters, stripped out of their overalls, hunch over on the kerbside, staring at their boots. Sweat has carved paths through the dirt on their skin. They look just as terrible as Alec feels.

It’s easy to tell who was in the building as it came down: they’re bloody and shivering and covered in dust, and in a way, Alec is lucky, because he blends right in. His mask is hardly a mask when his entire face is sooten.

Still, he clings to the shadows and weaves in and out of the crowds, avoiding the eyes of police officers asking dangerous questions. He hears a young woman wailing on a stretcher, her eyes swollen shut with burns. He watches the paramedics shroud an old man in a shock blanket as they try to time his pulse whilst he spouts gibberish like a burst artery. There’s a pool of blood on the sidewalk, seeping into the cracks, that has been smeared by hundreds of feet passing through.

Alec tries not to linger; he swallows down that lump in his throat, but it hurts, it scratches. He shoulders his way through the chaos towards the front line, where the fire engines stand in a regimented row, spurting water onto the smoking ruins.

Then, he hears a child crying. A shrill, hysterical wail of a boy terrified, and it cuts through Alec’s haze of pain like a blade, dividing the dark in two. Alec stops in the middle of the street and turns towards the sound - a few people look at him, and distantly, he hears the whispers circulate (“look, it's a super”) - and there, under the puddle of a streetlamp, is the old woman in her nightgown and the little boy in his pajamas, who Alec threw out a window to safety.

They’re both alive. She has a bandage around her head and red burns on her hands, and the boy is clutching her dress, sobbing, as a paramedic tries and fails to drape a blanket over his shoulders.

Alec takes a step towards them, but gets no further. He wants to go to them, to say something, but he doesn’t know what. He doesn’t know how.

He never sticks around for the how. He’s always long gone by this point, some debriefing to be at,
some mission to attend to. He’s usually so eager for Sentinel to be away, and yet, now ...

“Sentinel!” calls Nightlock, and Alec tears his eyes away from the old woman as Nightlock strides up behind him. Nightlock is caked in rubble. His coat is flaked with shreds of paint and brick dust, there’s dark brown blood splattered on his singed sleeves, and even behind his mask, Alec recognises the face of a man who’s tired, but who still moves like he can bend the world in his hands if he’s determined enough.

He makes people look at him, not the sort of man who will unwillingly shrink into the shadows. His determination, his dedication, his *fearlessness* attracts attention, but none more so than Alec’s.

Alec can feel people staring. He watches a paramedic nudge his colleague in the shoulder to make her look. He bristles as the whispers of the crowd skitter up the back of his neck (“who’s that, do you recognise him?”). From the corner of his eye, Alec sees a policeman narrow his eyes at Nightlock and rest his hand on the butt of his gun.

Alec bristles.

A building has collapsed and there are all these bruised and bloodied people out on the street with nowhere to go, and yet this policeman is willing to turn his pistol on a super if one of them takes even a step out of line. Alec presses his mouth into a hard line, curling his hand around the strap of his quiver, fingers itching for his bow - but then Nightlock’s mouth lifts at the corner as if to say: *easy now* .

Nightlock reaches out, his hand settling on Alec’s arm. (Alec feels that warmth again. He leans into it. He can’t help himself.) Nightlock tugs gently on his suit, no longer an invisible touch, and Alec allows himself to be moved.

“Her name’s Rosa Santiago,” Nightlock says, nodding towards the old woman as he guides Alec towards the sidewalk. “And her grandson, Max. I told them I would deliver you to them when I found you. They wanted to say thank you to the man in the black mask who saved their lives.”

The Earth drops out from Alec’s stomach without warning, the same way it always does when he flies with Jace and they hurtle too fast and too sudden towards the ground. In its wake, it leaves behind a hollow space with which Alec’s body doesn’t know what to do: *should it be filled with the rest of his innards? Should it be left empty? How about a snugly placed bullet from one of those trigger-happy cops?*
The boy, Max, sniffs loudly and peeks at Alec. He tugs at Rosa’s nightgown and she pets his hair, and then she looks up, catching Alec’s eye for the first time. And Alec watches the change in her expression: the momentary fear, then the surprise, and lastly the crinkle around her eyes as she beckons him to come closer.

Nightlock gives Alec’s arm a reassuring squeeze.

Max, on the other hand, glances warily at Nightlock, streaked with ash and dust and blood as Nightlock is, and disappears in on himself, curling into Rosa’s hands. Alec sees the tears pricking in Max’s eyes, the hiccup lodged in his throat, the way his tiny hands tremble - but that’s when Alec feels something trickling into the space where his stomach used to be.

_Humility_, he thinks. _Modesty_. That same reckless protective streak he’s had since the day Isabelle was born and she was placed in his arms and he became a superhero in all the ways that really matter.

“Your name’s Max?” Alec asks. Max’s eyes snap to him, wide and watery. He watches Alec like a spooked animal, and Alec does his best to decompress, to shrink down into someone less like a shadow emerged from a fire, and more like a friend. He lets his shoulders droop and his fingers hang loose at his sides and his regard for the wary cops slip away from his tilted smile. “My little brother, his name is Max too. He’s not quite as tough as you though. You were very brave in there.”

Max stares at him in that discerning way kids do, unsure of a stranger but intrigued by a mysterious man in a mask smiling at him; he chews on his thumb nail until it rips and then he peers around Rosa’s leg to look again at Nightlock.

Nightlock only beams.

With one last stroke of his knuckles against Alec’s arm, Nightlock crouches down to eye-level with Max. Alec can feel the eyes of the policeman watching them and he wants to put himself between the gun and Nightlock, even though it’s foolish and he’s already bleeding, but his body won’t move.

“Would you like to see something cool?” Nightlock asks Max, snapping his fingers. A pulse of energy warps the air with a strange goniochromic shimmer, rippling and convulsing like a serpent. Max’s eyes fly as wide as dinner plates and he recoils back against Rosa’s leg. It makes Nightlock laugh beneath his breath.
Nearby, a man in an orange vest booms into a megaphone. The firefighters’ boots squeak on the wet asphalt. The crowd clamours against the line of yellow police tape, camera flashes blinding where stringers have already begun to arrive in droves, eager to make the morning edition of the *New York Times*.

There’s a family sitting on the sidewalk with shock blankets around their shoulders; the shrill sirens and the strobing blue lights wash over them, their eyes like misted glass. An old man is scrubbing away the crusted blood on the face of young woman with a sheet of newspaper, leant against the phonebooth across the street. A dog stands in the middle of the street with its hackles raised and its teeth bared, barking at the firefighters emerged from the smoke still in their masks and oxygen tanks, moving like weighed-down astronauts on the surface of the moon.

And yet, the policeman doesn’t move, loitering against the hood of his car with his hand on his hip, trying not to look like he’s watching Nightlock and Sentinel as fiercely as he is. From the corner of his eye, Alec sees the officer whisper into his shoulder radio and unclip the holster of his gun.

> And at what point does he call for backup and arrest two tired supers, not for saving two dozen people from burning alive, but for setting the fire to begin with? Alec wonders. Sentinel can survive a night in the cells, but Nightlock might not. *Not that he’d let them catch him, but that will only make it worse.*

An invisible touch buffets Alec’s arm, his shoulder, the nape of his neck, drawing his attention back to Nightlock as he flicks his wrist in a flourish. Alec blinks owlishly as an arrow is stolen from his quiver and Nightlock guides it through the air to float above their heads. Max is enraptured, his mouth falling open and his hand dropping from Rosa’s nightgown as Nightlock flexes his fingers and makes Alec’s arrow somersault through the air, weaving between street lamps in looping figures of eight.

Behind them, the policeman shifts. He lifts his gun out of his holster and lets it rest casually against his thigh, and so Alec steps forward, quietly placing himself in the line of sight between the barrel of the gun and Nightlock, crouched on his haunches.

Nightlock waves his hand again, and Alec’s arrow somersaults and cartwheels through the telephone wires, and Max gawps, but Rosa, her eyes puffy and lined with age, looks from Max to Alec as soon as he moves closer. Alec hesitates, meeting her gaze, but she doesn’t recoil from him. *She’s too old for that*, he thinks. There comes an age where you’ve seen all you’re going to see, and the things you’re scared of now are different to those which kept you up at night when you were young.
Instead, the look in her eyes is wise. Alec doesn’t know what else to call it, but she looks at him like she knows him, like she sees right through his mask and the film of dust and debris upon his skin, and knows he’s just a twenty-something office worker from midtown who wears a suit and tie in the day time, and who doesn’t know how to pick out furniture that matches, and is somehow at odds with saving the world and saving himself at the same damn time.

Alec feels small. The unrelenting stare of New York already has him shrinking down inside himself, but her scrutiny makes him feel young, like he’s a boy again, and he can’t help but duck his head and hunch his shoulders, folding his hands behind his back.

“Your name is Sentinel?” Rosa asks, not letting him look away. Alec can hear her accent now, the lilting, rounding vowels, soft and weather-worn, and it sounds so different out in the open.

Alec nods. “Yes, ma’am,” he says, as Nightlock slowly rises back to his feet, swiping dust from his knees and thighs.

Rosa’s eyes soften and she holds out both her hands, palms up. It takes Alec a moment to realise she wants his hands in return, his gloved and bloody hands, and he makes an awkward noise. He doesn’t know soft gestures. He doesn’t know how to look at another person when he’s dressed like this and not have them want to spit on him.

“Sentinel.”

Alec looks to Nightlock, and Nightlock’s lip upturn at the corners and he nods. Alec glances over his shoulder and locks eyes with the policeman. Three other officers have arrived, all of them perched in a row on the hood of the car, all watching Alec and Nightlock like a pack of vultures. If they’re waiting for someone else to die to pick apart the carion, they’re out of luck. Alec’s pride is not so wounded.

Gingerly, Alec unclasps his hands from behind his back and places his palms, one gloved, the other bare, gently in Rosa’s.

Her grip surprises him. Her knobbly fingers have bite in the way grandmothers always squeeze too hard when hugging, unaware that they’re all bones and sharp elbows. It takes Alec back only further, years and years and years, before things like superpowers and Idris were tangible concepts, and before he was looking over his shoulder at the police, and all he knew was the wide-eyed drive to keep his baby sister safe, to make his mother smile and his dad proud. (The more things change, the more they stay the same.)
“This young man said you’re the one who saved our lives,” says Rosa, glancing sideways at Nightlock, her smile wrinkling. Nightlock shoots a grin back at her, dashing and cavalier, and she gives Alec’s hands a reassuring squeeze. “He kindly offered us the chance to say thank you.”

“The least I could do,” adds Nightlock, still smiling. “Sentinel rarely takes credit for his good deeds. Someone has to step in, now and again, to make sure he is properly appreciated.”

“Hey,” Alec warns.

Rosa laughs tiredly. “It sounds like your friend is right,” she says. Alec tracks the lines in her face, the years of creases, the wrinkles around her eyes, and the give in her jaw. Her slippers are pitch black and she has curlers tangled in her hair and the veins stand out on the backs of her hands in dehydration, but none of it has any bearing on the fondness and the gratitude of her smile.

Alec doesn’t know how to react; he wants to fidget, to duck away from the attention and let someone else steal it, as they always do, but Rosa is holding him tight, and Nightlock is watching him, and the feeling slowly filling the empty plunge in his stomach is heavy - maybe not leaden, but solid, immovable, very real.

“It was nothing,” Alec says. “Just doing our duty. I’m glad we arrived when we did.”

“Saving lives is never nothing.” Rosa’s eyes move to Max as he shrinks away from the glare of the policeman, curling further behind Rosa’s leg. “Max is my only grandchild. His parents have been dead for five years. He doesn’t remember them.” When Alec’s mouth flattens into a tight line, she gives his hands another squeeze. “It was a hit-and-run. Max was in the car with them, the police didn’t get there in time, but a super heard his cries and pulled him out of the wreckage. That man saved his life too. And now you’ve done the same. It’s not nothing to me.”

“Few people have as good an opinion on supers as you do, Rosa,” Nightlock says gently. “It’s both an honour and a pleasure to be of service.”

“That policeman is certainly not one of them,” Rosa scowls, glaring over Alec’s shoulder. “But I shouldn’t think he’d try anything now. Everyone here knows what you did here tonight. They’ll try to tell us such horrible things about you, make us believe what they want us to believe, but just look at you all.” Rosa lets go of Alec’s gloved hand so that she can press her palm across the top of Alec’s bare knuckles, compressing his hand between the both of hers. “You’re so young and brave. So much of your lives ahead of you, and this is how you choose to spend it, risking your lives to
rescue strangers. I don’t know if we deserve it, but I do know that I am grateful. I don’t know what this city would do without you supers and your good hearts.”

“You don’t have to-” Alec starts, but Nightlock quickly interjects.

“There are very few supers in New York with hearts as good as Sentinel,” he says. Alec glares at him. “And all it takes it just one person to change the mind of a city. I can already see it happening.”

Nightlock nods his head and Alec looks up. The family in the tinfoil blankets on the sidewalk are watching them too, but the look in their eyes isn’t the same one that Alec feels on his back. The father leans over to his children and he whispers something to them that makes their eyes widen, and maybe, Alec would call it awe.

Then, Alec looks to the old man dabbing at the face of the young woman by the phone booth, and his eyes lock with those of the girl, and she smiles at him, despite the blood that drips from her hairline and into her eyebrows. Her teeth are white, and the smile is blinding in its relief and gratitude.

On the other side of the street, two exhausted paramedics are lingering beside their ambulance, their arms fill with water bottles and fresh bandaging, waiting for their opportunity to intercept Sentinel and Nightlock before they leave.

A passing firefighter tips his helmet in Alec’s direction, a great loop of hose coiled around his shoulder, and congratulates Alec on a job well done.

There are strangers in the crowd who have stopped their shouting to simply turn and watch.

And the spotlight of all their stares feels so different to that which Alec has always known. The uncomfortable prickle that skitters up and down his spine slowly morphs into the realisation that people aren’t whispering about him and Nightlock out of hatred.

It’s curiosity. It’s indebtedness. It’s -

*God, is it pride?*
Rosa’s smile is knowing when Alec circles back to her, his hands still clenched between her bony fingers.

“Thank you,” she says again, gently shaking Alec’s hand between hers. “For saving our lives when no-one else could.”

Across the city, on the roof of another skyscraper, someone is lighting fireworks. The smoke-drenched clouds light up with bursts of cobalt blue and brilliant red, the same colour as police sirens, and then the same colour as fire.

_Ironic_, Alec thinks, because the air still tastes of stale smoke - but news of tonight’s arson won’t hit the press until the morning, and New York continues on, blind and oblivious. He clenches his teeth and tastes iron.

Each firework rattles like a shotgun shot, and Alec jolts with every bright explosion. It’s a conditioned response. His nerves are fried.

As Alec climbs the fire escape back to his rooftop perch, Jace and Clary are a symphony of _oohs_ and _ahs_, the pair of them spread out on their backs where Alec left them. Jace’s bag of ice is now a bag of water resting in the centre of his chest and his arms are folded behind his head and he looks almost at peace.

A catherine wheel of bright orange light whizzes up into the sky, propelling itself Heavenward with trails of spiralling yellow smoke, and Clary’s face softens, the gaunt look in her eyes buffed out by the soft glow of colour that fills the hollows of her cheeks. Jace tips his head to look at her, his crooked smile fond but too intimate for Alec to want to watch for long.

Alec shrugs out of his bow and quiver and props himself against a ventilation shaft, rubbing his hands up and down his thighs, kneading his tired muscles. He tries not to breathe too deeply because his ribs are twinging, and his eyelids are heavy now, but he refuses to look away from the roof edge.
( “I’ll catch up,” Nightlock had said, down below. “I’m going to see that Rosa and Max are suitably housed the night and not just left in the back of an ambulance with nowhere to go. It’s going to get cold tonight and the streets are no place to be.”

A flash of a smile, sweeping Alec’s heart off its feet.

“Wait for me, won’t you, Sentinel?” )

The fireworks spit and spurt, loud echoing snaps bouncing back and forth between the clouds and the rooftop pipes and guttering, but Alec’s hands still tingle as if he’s the one holding Roman candles between his palms whilst they’re burning and alight.

Alec can’t remember the last time someone thanked him - properly thanked him, and it wasn’t just thrown over the shoulder as a grunt, despite him retrieving a handbag or wrestling a gun out of a mugger’s hand.

He can’t remember the last time someone took both his hands, looked into his eyes, and told him they were grateful for his existence - because it’s never happened before .

Hell, he can’t remember the last time someone glared at him like those cops did but didn’t try to kill him , because there were too many witnesses around who would’ve had something to say.

Not like the cops would’ve gotten anywhere close with Nightlock eyeing them as he had been, but the less they know about what Nightlock can do with the snap of his fingers, the better -

“Is someone going to go over there and tell them that playing with fireworks on the roof is not only illegal, but going to end badly, or should we just see how it plays out?” comes Nightlock’s soft voice, closer to Alec’s ear than he was expecting. He doesn’t startle; instead, a breath deflates him, whistling out across his lips, dragging tension out from the centre of him like it’s on a fisherman’s twine, the hook even lodged somewhere in Alec’s gut.

Alec turns to Nightlock and lets himself just look, because he hasn’t had the chance, really, since they tumbled out of the rubble, so caked in smoke that Alec wasn’t quite sure he’d recognise himself in a mirror. Nightlock does the same, his eyes gentle as he catalogues the way Alec has his hand pressed to his wounded side and stands with his weight off one leg.
Beneath his mask, Alec wonders if Nightlock’s eyebrows pinch upwards, creasing in the middle, to match the way his eyes seem to sadden.

“You’re hurt,” Nightlock says, and it’s not a question. But it’s not an accusation either, and he doesn’t sound mad; there’s resignation in his voice that Alec knows well.

“I’m fine,” Alec lies poorly, “Would’ve been worse if you didn’t show up when you did.”

“Oh, you know me,” says Nightlock. He wraps his arms around himself, palms cupping his elbows, and edges a step closer to Alec. He doesn’t look away from where Alec splays his fingers against the wheeze in his ribcage. “Running into collapsing buildings and saving dashing young men is my ideal Friday night.”

Alec can’t help a small smile. Jace and Clary remain enraptured by the fireworks, and if they have seen Nightlock return, they’re pretending not to notice, for which Alec is grateful. Still, he keeps his voice low and private when he speaks again.

“You saved my life tonight,” he says quietly, and Nightlock’s eyes flick to his face, surprised. “So I need to thank you for that. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” says Nightlock. He opens his mouth to say something else, but he bites it back, pursing his lips, a moment of pause. Then, he adds, “I don’t want to wake up one day to find you gone, and not even realise until it’s too late to do something about it.”

“Good thing you have my back, then,” Alec whispers, and it makes Nightlock’s wounded expression thaw.

He shakes his head in despair, but at least he smiles. “Don’t joke about it,” he admonishes Alec. “Trust is a strange thing. And not just for me, it seems.”

“Not just for you?”

Nightlock’s smile stretches easily. He turns his face to the sky as another firework explodes in the shallows of the clouds and it looks, for a moment, like it’s raining pure gold. The shimmer catches in the dark of Nightlock’s eyes and leaves Alec a little dazed.
“You saw how important Sentinel was to those people you saved tonight,” Nightlock says, “That’s trust too. Belief in you. They trust you to save them, time and time again. And you will, of course, because that’s who I know you are.”

Alec takes a step closer, ducking his head a fraction to try and catch Nightlock’s eyes. “Yeah?” he prompts, “Where’s this going?”

“I’ve been thinking about what you said the other night,” Nightlock admits, “And I think - I think you might not hate Sentinel as much as you thought. You might not hate being Sentinel, I mean. Because people still look at you like that.”

“You said it’s not something I can give up,” Alec says softly, “You were right about that.” You’ve been right about a lot of things.

“I know I was,” says Nightlock, “But this is more than that. I don’t mean to tell you how you should think about yourself, and I can’t, but I wonder: the person you are beneath the mask, the person you say you need to be, would he have done exactly the same as you did tonight?”

“Would he have gone into that building to pull people out?”

“Yes. Precisely.”

“… Yeah. Yeah, he would’ve. I would’ve.”

Nightlock smiles softly and it melts into his eyes. He doesn’t look dissimilar to the moment after Alec kissed him on that rooftop those few days ago. Alec’s breath catches in his throat and he wets his lips.

You’re not as divided down the middle as you think you are.

Nightlock reaches out to dust the debris away from Alec’s shoulder and his knuckles ghost down the ridge of Alec’s arm. “You know, I am curious,” he says absently. “About who you are beneath that mask. I think I want to know. But then, I think: surely I already know everything that matters?”
He looks up then, meeting Alec’s eyes suddenly, the quirk of his mouth playful. Alec blushes beneath his mask.

Above them, a firework veers off course, spinning away into the sky with a squeal. It bursts in a fountain of brilliant gold and Alec watches it fade in the reflection in Nightlock’s eyes.

And he wonders, too, who Nightlock might be beneath his mask and how much of him is real, how much of him is different. What indelible bruise does New York leave on his skin, and when he strips out of his suit, does he cover it or does he lean into it, does he float through the city with this evidence of his self peeking out the collar of his shirt and coiling up the column of his throat -

Alec’s fingers tingle. He is overcome by the sudden, strange need to swipe his thumb through the soot streaked up the side of Nightlock’s neck and carve a path of skin through the remnants of the fire. He’s drawn to it, the thought of touch, like a moth to a gaslight.

Nightlock tilts his head, exposing the long line of his neck as if he can read Alec’s thoughts. “Sentinel?” he asks. “Are you alright?”

His leg is bleeding and there’s a hole in his foot and his ribs are aching where it feels like his scar is slowly being ripped away from his skin, but -

Yes, he thinks. Yeah, I’m alright.

Behind them, Clary sits up, stretching her arms high above her head with a massive yawn. Nightlock’s attention flicks to her, but Alec’s doesn’t dare stray: he lingers on the illuminated curves and lines of Nightlock’s face in profile.

Why does it feel like I know you more than I should?

“Oh, Nightlock! You’re here!” Clary pipes up, “We’re gonna go get some food, do you want to come eat with us?”

Nightlock frowns, but his smile doesn’t fade. “I’m not sure I’m appropriately dressed for a dinner reservation, my dear.”
“Oh, no, we’re just gonna get some takeout. Nothing fancy,” she says, “Besides, I don’t think you should be alone after everything that just happened.”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“I mean -” says Clary, hopping to her feet and trotting to Alec’s side. She smiles a melancholy smile, close-lipped and war-weary. Alec shares the feeling. “A lot of people were hurt tonight, and ... we didn’t save everyone. And it’s just a tradition we have, not to let anyone go home alone after something like that. Or on an empty stomach.”

Nightlock looks at her quizzically for a moment, before his eyes flit to Alec, asking a question he doesn’t need to ask.

*Of course you’re welcome*. Alec wouldn’t have it any other way.

“I’m starving,” Jace announces then, sauntering up to Alec and swinging his arm around Alec’s shoulders. Alec grunts, bowing under Jace’s weight, his injured foot pulsing in pain. “Is that place that does your bacon burgers still open, Sentinel?”

“Not at this time of night,” Alec grumbles. He doesn’t really know what *this time* is, but it must be late; his eyes are heavy and his body leaden and he’s already thinking of his bed, despite the throbbing in his temples.

He glances over his shoulder, towards the pillar of black smoke that continues to rise into the air. Red and blue lights bounce back and forth off its dense underbelly. Alec can still hear the man in the best shouting directions into the megaphone; the feedback is shrill and static, white-noise in the gloom.

“I know a place,” says Nightlock then, reeling Alec back in. He meets Alec’s eyes and doesn’t blink. “How do you all feel about Mexican?”
Alec’s not quite sure what to think as Nightlock brings them into land in an alleyway in Spanish Harlem, Jace and Clary following close behind. The night smells like barbecue smoke and cooked meat and spilled wine, humming with voices and engines and the fervor of a Friday night. The street is dark and narrow, sandwiched between a graffitied bodega and a bar pulsing with deep bass; the music threads itself through the concrete beneath their feet and Alec can feel the asphalt vibrating with the giddy drunkenness that flows through the open windows above his head.

Jace folds his wings upon his back and sticks to Clary’s side like glue. His eyes jump from window to window, from the fire escape to the passing beams of headlights that light up the alleyway in brief flashes of white, before vanishing. He meets Alec’s gaze and raises his eyebrows, an unspoken *where exactly is he leading us?* passing between them, but all Alec can think back is: *just trust him*.

Jace mutters under his breath and Clary throws Alec a wary look, but neither of them say a word.

Ahead of them, Nightlock meanders down the alley with a hum on his lips, counting each door he passes and stepping lithely around each pothole in the road. He comes to a stop outside an unremarkable steel door cut into the brick of the building behind it, and he rattles the padlock and chain in place of knocking. Clary keeps peeking back over her shoulder to watch the entrance to the alleyway where cigarettes flare as orange specks and people congregate outside the bar, and Jace rolls his shoulders beneath the weight of his wings, unable to relax, but Alec -

There’s something beneath the stench of wet concrete and clogged gutters and dried sweat on the inside of his suit that Alec thinks smells of chilli peppers and sweet potato and the comforting charcoal of a grill. His stomach rumbles and he pats his hand against the curve of his belly; he hasn’t eaten in hours.

Nightlock throws him a knowing look. His mouth twitches up into a smirk as someone on the other side of the steel door unbolts the deadlock with a grunt.

The door opens to a young man in a dark shirt, a dishcloth thrown over his shoulder and a face like thunder. And his expression only becomes more surly as he narrows his eyes at Nightlock.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” the man says. His voice doesn’t rise above a monotone and he drags his eyes from Nightlock to Alec, and then to Jace and Clary, the line of his mouth hardening.
He fixes Nightlock with a withering stare. “Do you know what time it is?”

“Past closing time, I should hope,” replies Nightlock, flashing a devilish smile. The man doesn’t budge from the doorway. “Raphael, you can surely make an exception for your best customer.”

Raphael works his jaw, his mouth pursing like he’s sucking on a lemon. Abruptly, he yanks the dish towel from his shoulder and stalks back into the building, leaving the door wide open.

“You’re lucky the kitchen is still open,” he calls back, “You fucking owe me.”

Nightlock grins, and he makes a show of bowing and waving Clary, Jace, and Alec through the door.

Nightlock leads them through a kitchen and out into the deserted seating of a small cafe: the tables and chairs are all stainless steel, the tablecloths plastic and cheap, and the floor is terracotta tiled and well-worn, but Nightlock weaves through the room like he’s been here a hundred times before.

Corrugated shutters shield the front windows from the street outside and the only light in the room comes from the paper lanterns strung overhead, rustling with a yellowing glow. The walls are painted in alternating sunny yellow and cerulean blue: on one side, a faded Mexican flag sags over a blackboard smeared with chalk, today’s specials scrubbed clean; while the opposite wall is covered by framed photographs, dating back years and years until they’re sepia-stained and monochrome. Trinkets and curiosities line the windowsill and the bar: beautiful Talavera pottery and Taxco silver and round bottles of honey-coloured tequila.

Nightlock chooses a table in the middle of the room, sinking down into one of the hard chairs covered by a brightly-coloured woven blanket. He stretches out his legs and deflates with a sigh, relieved to finally be off his feet. Soft music seeps out of the walls, a smooth Spanish tenor swirled through the twang of a guitarron, rolling through Alec’s body with feelings both old-worldly and nostalgic, but summer-sun warm.

Clary pinches a menu from another table as she slides into the seat next to Nightlock, and Jace
abandons his wings in the middle of the floor. He unzips the front of his suit down to his sternum and unloads his handgun and magazines from his holsters, piling them onto the table. Next to go are his gloves, and then his belt, and he flops back into the metal chair with a groan, eyes fluttering shut.

Alec doesn’t move. He is caught in a surreal second, music wafting through his ears and through his fingers like a whisper, like a touch. The world grows infestimally quiet. The street beyond the shutters might well not exist.

Nightlock nods to the chair next to him and raises his eyebrows, beckoning Alec with a smile. “I promise I don’t bite, Sentinel,” he grins wickedly. “Unless you want me to.”

“You’re insufferable,” says Raphael, emerging from the kitchen with an apron tied around his waist. “You have thirty minutes, and then I’m calling the cops on the lot of you.”

The back of Alec’s neck prickles. He drops into the chair next to Nightlock and grabs the menu that Nightlock presses into his hands without looking.

Raphael rolls his eyes, exchanging a look with Nightlock that could curdle milk. Then, he sighs, shaking his head. “Alright. What do you want to eat?”

Raphael disappears back into the kitchen, the clattering of pots and pans and mild curse words fading into the comforting sizzle of oil in a hot pan and soft, unintelligible humming. Jace slurps his horchata with disgusting efficiency and Nightlock laughs at him, pulling apart a crust of bread in his now-gloveless fingers, dipping it in a shallow dish of olive oil. Clary leans back in her chair, her cheek pressed to her shoulder and her eyes closed behind her mask as she soaks in the old music, and allows a soft, peaceful smile to grace her lips.

And Alec … Alec steeps in the smell of cinnamon and milk and spices: warm cumin and paprika, fragrant chilli, rich aromatic flavours Alec can already taste on his tongue as his stomach rumbles. Drowsiness pokes and prods at him, smoothing its hands across the breadth of his shoulders, easing him away from consciousness - and its only by gripping his twinging knee with his hand that he stays awake.
The warmth, the quiet, the vibrant colours of a well-loved home tucked away in a side street ... it feels like a place taken out of time, leaving Alec longing for sun-dappled streets and cicadas and all these things he’s never seen or heard or felt, his whole life lived within New York’s dense clouds.

What is this place? Alec wonders, his eyes straying to Nightlock as he teases Jace for the froth of milk upon his upper lip. What sort of maitre d’ doesn’t even blink when four washed-up supers arrive on his doorstep just before the sunrise?

Nightlock must come here often. He seems familiar with Raphael, the sort of begrudging camaraderie only found in old friends. Perhaps Raphael is the one to make him a hot drink and ask no questions on those difficult nights, those terrible, rainy nights where Alec goes home to Isabelle and Jace and wonders if Nightlock is across the city and all alone. Alec hopes that’s the case. Nightlock once said that he had no-one in his ear, but - at least he has someone.

They must know each other beyond the mask. The thought comes to Alec unbidden, a slow and unfurling realisation. Raphael hasn’t once called Nightlock by name. Maybe that’s on purpose. Maybe he knows Nightloc’s real name.

( God, Alec … are you jealous? )

Raphael stalks out of the kitchen, his arms piled high with plates, and arranges them all on the table with the concentration of a man very proud of the food he cooks. Jace’s eyes widen to the size of dinner plates, and Clary stirs from her doze with a twitch of her nose. Alec licks his lips, unable to help himself.

“Thank you, Raphael,” Nightlock says, catching him by the arm before he turns away. “Add it to my tab?”

“One of these days, you better start carrying a damn wallet in your suit,” Raphael retorts, before slinking back to the kitchen. The kitchen doors swing shut and Jace waits for one whole second before pouncing on the closest plate, shovelling as much food as he can into his mouth without choking.

“We can’t take you anywhere,” Clary sighs, reaching for a tamale.

For a while, no-one says anything: the sort of molasses silence inhabited by the too tired and too weary. Cutlery clinks against plates and paper napkins rustle and Alec deflates, all the smoke
clogged up in his lungs slowly seeping from his mouth.

*And the food is good*. Warmth pools someplace deep in Alec’s belly, a comfortable fullness snug around his heart. He looks across the table at Jace, still in his mask, and Clary, still in hers. Her eyelashes are still dusty and her mask has left a black smear on her nose where it has shifted with sweat, but her cheeks are round and rosy and she grins as she steals from Jace’s plate.

*How did I get here?* Alec thinks, because here is so far and away from his lonely perch on a rooftop that he might just pinch himself to wake up. Six months ago, a night like this would’ve been sat in the downpour, shivering, waiting for Jace’s call, but now - *now*, the haunted look in Jace’s eyes is gone, and Clary is glowing, and Alec’s knee knocks against Nightlock’s under the table and Nightlock nudges Alec with his foot and a knowing grin. Here is a soft yellow warmth and muffled laughter and a sense of hope inextinguishable in the rain. This moment, these people, this *team*, tucked away in this obscure pocket of the universe where all those who see him as he deserves to be seen are sat around this table.

Alec’s gaze moves to Nightlock’s mask; he can’t look away. *I don’t know what you look like. And you don’t know what we look like. And yet -*

*I know who you are. In all the ways that actually matter.*

Alec’s gaze drifts down from the leather of Nightlock’s mask to his lips. Flakey ash marks Nightlock’s face all the way down to his chin, a lick of someone else’s blood a stripe on the underside of his jaw. (Briefly, Alec wonders if it’s his own; the thought curls curiously in his belly.) Black fingerprints adorn his throat where he’s tried to wipe away the soot, and his shoulders sag beneath the thick film of ash matted into his coat. One of his epaulettes is frayed, and as Alec’s eyes move down to his hands, bare and graceful and gloveless, strange blue-green marks ring his fingers too. There’s a gentle intimacy to be found in the way he stares, unblinking, into the middledistance as he eats: his bruises, his bare bones, the blood on his temple, all exposed for Alec to see.

Under the hazy lantern light, he seems so disarmingly human.

*Why are you so surprised? You kissed him. He was human then too.*

Jace spoils the moment with a loud yawn, unhinging his jaw so wide that they all might see his tonsils. Alec snaps his eyes away from Nightlock’s face before he can be caught staring.
“Charming,” says Clary.

Jace grins, slumping back in his chair and petting his belly. “God, this sure beats the food at Headquarters,” he says, “Man, Sentinel, if I knew the night was gonna end up with free dinner, maybe I wouldn’t have been so surprised when you gave us the go ahead to ditch the mission and chase that 911 call. Hey, do you think we could take a doggy bag back for Maryse so that when she chews us out, we can just bribe her? Who can say no to tamales?”

“You were on a mission?” Nightlock asks, looking to Alec.

Jace waves his hand dismissively in the air. “Oh, y’know,” he says, “Running point for the Herondale campaign. Usually it’s just security detail but we’re so close to the Election now, they’ve got us watching the Penhallow building too. Orders from the Police Commissioner, what’s-his-name.”

“Dieudonné?” Clary supplies with her mouth full.

“That’s the prick. Anyway, we were just hanging around, there wasn’t much going on, and then Sentinel’s police scanner picked up the building collapse, and well - he comes up with all these noble reasons why we should leave our posts and go check it out, and it was - ”

Alec frowns at him across the table.

“What?” Jace asks, “Why are you looking at me, Muse and I wanted to go! We were just surprised that you wanted to go. Maryse is gonna be pissed, you know how much she nags us about the Herondale contract.”

“Of course I wanted to go,” Alec remarks, “If it was an arson, it might’ve been -”

“Yeah, but usually you feel all guilty about it,” Jace says, “You get that miserable look on your face and don’t say a word in debriefing and think that Maryse secretly hates you. That’s why I’m surprised. You usually sit on the fence.”

“Maybe,” says Nightlock then, “You don’t know Sentinel as well as you think.”
Jace’s eyes snap to him, and then narrow, but Nightlock doesn’t flinch. “That’s not what I’m saying,” Jace says curtly, “Sentinel’s always done what’s right, no matter the personal cost. But he didn’t used to be the first one to run off into danger without feeling bad about it. That’s my job.”

“What Arkangel means-” Clary interjects, “-is that’s he’s meant to be the loose-canon of the team, and now Sentinel is stealing his limelight and Arkangel feels emasculated.”

Nightlock’s surprised laugh bounces off the walls, unapologetic and loud and so sudden that Alec sits bolt upright. Nightlock leans back in his chair, pressing his hand across his mask as his laughter trembles in his shoulders, while Jace glares at Clary, Clary sticks her tongue out, and Alec-

Alec is enraptured. Nightlock’s whole body shakes as he laughs, his chest heaving and his mouth split open by a grin so broad he shows his teeth. He wipes at his eyes through the holes in his mask, and when he sits back up, he’s breathless and his cheeks are straining, tinged pink. When he meets Alec’s eyes, he looks alive.

“It’s not that funny,” Jace grumbles, but Clary placates him with a pat on the arm and her last tamale plopped onto his plate.

All of that, it’s background noise. Alec smiles. He smiles at Nightlock, and Nightlock smiles back at him like there’s no-one else in the room, or in the city, or in the world.

“Sentinel has changed a lot since he met you, actually,” Clary says then, “Arkangel isn’t totally wrong about that.”

Nightlock leans forward, resting his chin in his palm. “Oh? How so?”

“Well, it’s like Arkangel said,” Clary says, glancing at Jace and counting on her fingers, “He’s not so hard on himself anymore.”

She grins at Alec, and Alec scowls at her, muttering a quiet, “watch it” that she may or may not hear.

“Yeah, the old you woulda beat yourself up about disobeying direct orders,” Jace adds, and Clary folds down another finger, nodding vehemently. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I haven’t seen
you this relaxed in years, buddy. You’re literally smiling right this second. I’m actually kinda scared.”

“I smile,” frowns Alec. “Sometimes.”

“Oh, I thought of another thing,” says Clary, ignoring him, “You don’t try and do everything by yourself anymore.”

“Yeah, that’s definitely true,” Jace agrees, “You’re not exactly much of a people person. But, hey, what do I know -” He gestures at Nightlock. “You made a friend and he’s from the wrong side of the tracks. No offense.”

“None taken,” says Nightlock.

Clary curls a third finger into her palm. “You’ve don’t roll your eyes so much when I’m on a mission with you either. That means you must be starting to like me.”

“Or at least tolerate you,” Jace remarks. He sits up in his chair then, leaning forward across the table towards Nightlock. “Before, if we got a 911 call like we did tonight, I woulda tried to sneak away, Sentinel woulda stopped me, we woulda had a fight, and then when my back was turned, he would’ve snuck off by himself to go see to it anyway. But this time, he was the one telling me to get my suit back on and hurry up.” Jace grins. “I think you’ve turned him into a bit of a vigilante.”

“Well,” says Nightlock, “You won’t find me complaining about that. I think you Corporates could learn a thing or two from the wrong side of the tracks, or however you say it.” Jace snorts, sitting back and holding his palms up in surrender. “But I still disagree. I have a sneaking suspicion that under his suit, Sentinel wears his heart on his sleeve.”

*Heart on your sleeve ... you've been called that before. And not by him.*

Alec clears his throat. “I am here, by the way,” he says, “And I can hear everything that you’re all saying. Just so you know.”

Nightlock reaches out and covers Alec’s hand with his, briefly squeezing Alec’s fingers before pulling away. Alec stares at his hand as if burned, and then looks up, finding Clary across the table with her eyebrows raised and a knowing smile pulling at her lips. Alec scowls at her.
“I don’t know about warm and fuzzy,” Jace says then, “But you should meet this guy in real life. He tries to pretend that he’s tough and serious, but lemme tell you this story ...”

By the time Raphael kicks them out, it’s late.

Late, where each hour of night bleeds into the next, where the world shimmers and drunken laughter from a distance preludes the sunrise. Shadows are long but the sky is purpling and the streetlamps paint the sidewalk in shades of peach and orange. Above the clouds, there will be a moon, distant and far away and only real in theory.

Tiredness clings to Alec like a second skin, making his eyes droop and his legs feel sluggish, the pain in his knee now a dull ache - but his belly is pleasantly full and his chest is warm, unaffected by the wind chill that sweeps through the downtown alleyways. Jace’s glee in retelling as many damming stories from Alec’s childhood as he physically could has left Alec’s cheeks flushed, but it’s the thought of Nightlock’s bright and eager grin that lingers in Alec’s semi smile.

Alec feels a little dopey. Like he’s blind with it, or numb with it, like he’s five drinks deep and willfully oblivious to anything but the gentle buzzing in his head - save, he hasn’t touched a drop. The thunderous rumble of a collapsing building and the searing lick of fire up his back and the inescapable suffocation of smoke all feel so displaced from now, another world, another Alec.

He can’t bring himself to feel it. The guilt, that’s what Jace called it. He wasn’t wrong. But now, Jace throw his head back and howls with laughter at something Clary says, their joined hands clasped swinging back and forth between them like two teenagers in love as they meander down the alleyway ahead of Alec.

They look so happy, so peaceful, endlessly at ease in their own skin, be it made of leather gloves and titanium wings or not. On any other night, Alec might be envious.

“Hey, Sentinel, we’re going back to Headquarters for the night,” Jace calls, pressing a kiss to the crown of Clary’s hair after. “You need a lift?”
Alec shakes his head. “I’m good. I’ll walk home. I could use the fresh air after tonight.”

“Suit yourself,” Jace grins, golden as it comes. Clary wraps her arms around his neck and his wings unfurl, turbines thrumming - and then they’re off, shooting into the sky like a comet, silver across the facade of twilit cloud.

Alec watches them go, his face turned up the sky and chapped by the wind, until the spark of silver is long gone and Alec can only imagine a jet trail in Jace’s wake. All that is left behind is an unsilent quiet.

Nightlock knocks his shoulder against Alec’s, coaxing Alec back down to Earth.

“I like them,” he says, and when Alec looks at him, Nightlock’s lingering smile stretches into something sweet. “They’re both entirely exhausting, but I already knew that. They are Corporates, after all.”

“So am I,” Alec teases,

“Yes, well, I am humble enough to admit I judged a book by its cover when we first met. You weren’t who I expected you to be at all, and you know that. And besides, as Arkangel so gleefully told us, you’ve changed for the better.”

“Wish I could say the same for Arkangel, but he’s still the same pain in my ass he’s been for years.”

“Oh, I don’t know, I think he just about makes up for it with his stories of all your childhood escapades. It’s very charming.”

“Not all of them were true,” Alec grumbles, palming at the back of his neck. “He exaggerates a lot. Most of the time, we just got in trouble because I was trying to pull him and my sister out of trouble.”

Nightlock chuckles to himself.
“What?” Alec asks, “What’s funny?”

Nightlock shakes his head on a smile. “Nothing. Nothing’s funny, it’s just - I like this. I like you, hearing about you, seeing how you are when you’re with them, after you take Idris out of the equation and you’re allowed to exist on your own terms. I like seeing you like yourself.”

Alec’s heart has the audacity to flutter. *Sentinel without Idris is still Sentinel,* it seems to say. *And Alec without Idris is still Alec. He still has Jace and Clary and Isabelle and Nightlock.*

“You’ve never said it outright, but Arkangel is your brother, isn’t he?” Nightlock continues, “You don’t look alike, but you’re not just partners. You get under each other’s skin and then forgive yourselves afterwards, like family.” He smiles softly. “I always assumed, but I never wanted to ask. Boundaries, and what have you.”

“You can ask,” Alec says without thinking. He turns to Nightlock and Nightlock’s eyes glint in the dull streetlight from above. The laughter lines around his eyes crinkle in delicate shadows that Alec only wishes he could see more of. “Anything you want to know, you can ask.”

“Oh,” says Nightlock, “Don’t tell me that. You don’t mean it.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because,” he whispers, “Because then I would have to ask you your name, and I fear you might tell me.” He rests his hand on Alec’s arm. The touch doesn’t linger: a short, fleeting squeeze, but it’s enough for Alec to wet his lips and take a half-step closer. “And, however much I might want to know, at some point down the line, you’ll regret it, and we can’t have that.”

*But I - I don’t. I don’t think I will. Not if it’s you.*

Nightlock’s smile becomes a little more teasing.

“But if I figure it out, I’ll let you know. Now that I know Arkangel will gladly give me clues, I suppose I should be more willing to spend time with him, hmm?”
Alec smiles bashfully. “If there’s one thing I’m going to regret, it’s you and Arkangel being in collusion with each other.” Then, quieter, he adds, “But I trust you. You know that. Before, I didn’t know why, but now I do.”

“I do too,” replies Nightlock, “When you wear a mask like this, it becomes too easy to hide who you are. You can trick yourself into being someone you’re not and lying to the people you care about becomes second nature. Showing them your true self can be like showing someone your weak spot and marking it with a bright red X and saying, here, stick the knife in here.” Nightlock presses his palm flat against his ribs, fingers pressing into his coat to make his point. “I know I’m like that, or I was, before we met. But-”

“But then you wonder how that person can be the same guy who just spent an evening with three annoying Corporates and didn’t bite their heads off,” Alec grins.

“Jury’s still out on that,” Nightlock scoffs, “But truly - I don’t think I thought about the fire once while I was sat next to you. I didn’t think about how many people we didn’t save, and I didn’t think about how many people get to go home to their loved ones tonight because of us, and I didn’t think about our pyrokinetic, Jonathan Morgenstern, the Senator, any of it. It’s not that I didn’t want to think of it - it just didn’t cross my mind, and perhaps that makes me a terrible person -”

“You’re not. You could never be.”

“Hmm. Well, whatever I might be, whatever I was - I was me. I am me, here, now, in front of you. I’ve been closed off to this, to other people, for a long time, so us … it goes beyond mere trust. Perhaps your brother was onto something - you’re more foolhardy when you’re with me, and I’m -” Nightlock’s teeth sink into his lower lip and he shakes his head again, probably beyond his realising. He sighs. “I’m more honest when I’m with you.”

Overhead, the deep purple of the sky is changing into lilac. Sunrise is still a while away, and probably won’t ever break the horizon, but the city begins to stir. Alec can hear its circadian rhythm all around him, from the rumble of the subway, to the laughter of those stumbling home after a very long night, to the cries of gulls circling high above where the wind is at its strongest.

It’s late, so very late, he has to be at work in a few hours, and yet, he doesn’t want to leave this moment. If he could stay, trapped, paused, whatever it takes to be here forever, in the tender, vulnerable look in Nightlock’s eyes, he would. Perhaps in a heartbeat.

“It’s an honour, Sentinel, doing all this alongside you,” Nightlock whispers, “I hope you know that.”
“We make a good team,” Alec replies. The veneer of soot and rubble that clings to his suit is all but forgotten for a simple, yet halcyon moment. He doesn’t get many of those.

Alec makes sure to wrap up his injured foot and his busted knee in reels and reels of gauze before he even thinks about stepping foot in the office, unwilling to let Magnus notice and worry about yet another lie Alec would have to tell. He scrubs himself clean in the shower, necks half a packet of aspirin, and downs a double espresso latte on the subway; and by the time he steps into the elevator, he could probably pass for a human being.

He hasn’t slept in thirty hours, but he can’t feel it, not like he usually can, like a leaden weight lining the soles of his shoes.

_{Maybe you’re just delirious,} says the voice inside his head as he makes his way through the maze of cubicles, poorly hiding his limp. _Maybe you really did get tetanus from standing on a fucking nail last night. That would be a way to go._

He doesn’t really listen to it.

Simon intercepts him the moment he sits down at his desk, springing out from behind Alec’s partition as if he’s been waiting for Alec to arrive.

But Alec’s usual terse greeting doesn’t come; it doesn’t even form in his chest, let alone make it up his throat and out. Instead, he takes the offering of coffee from Simon and settles into his chair as Simon starts wildly talking with his hands.

Simon saw the fire and the building collapse on the late night news whilst stuffing his face with takeout, and, dropping his voice to a dramatic whisper, he tells Alec that he would’ve been there at Sentinel’s side if his supersuit hadn’t been at the dry cleaners.

(Alec doesn’t want to ask why it’s at the dry cleaners, because that means acknowledging that Simon’s been wearing it, and probably not just around his living room.)
“The papers are saying that you guys saved, like, ten people,” Simon says, “Dude, that’s crazy. You’re literally a hero.”

“It was more than ten,” Alec mutters, sipping at the coffee, sickly sweet and too hot to drink, but he finds himself wanting to talk to Simon about last night, to tell him about the smoke and the heat and the claustrophobia. And the way Rosa held his hands and thanked him for saving her life ... Alec wants to tell someone else what he did. Someone who wasn’t there but knows his secret. He wants to blurt that they saved at least forty people, not ten, like the papers claim. He wants to explain about how powerful Nightlock looked holding up that building with his bare hands, the pure strength white in his knuckles and knotted in the tension in his jaw. He wants to tell someone about how it felt to sit around that tiny metal table with Nightlock and Jace and Clary, this burdening idea in his head that sounds so awfully like a team.

Sentinel without Idris. New York without Corporates. A team of supers no longer at the whims and wants of politicians.

Sentinel and Nightlock, side by side, together ... “There’s no way the press can twist this,” Simon says then, shaking his head vehemently, “They had this old guy on the radio this morning who said Arkangel saved his life after he jumped from his window to escape the fire - and Arkangel caught him before he hit the ground. I didn’t think we were allowed to broadcast nice things like that anymore, but I guess that proved me wrong.” Simon huffs on a smile, and when he speaks again, his voice is softer, “The DJ asked him what he’s gonna do now, if his opinion on supers changed. He said he’s turning eighty-five this year, but he’s gonna be out of the steps of City Hall protesting Herondale’s superhuman registration bill until his heart gives out. I just … that got me, y’know?”

Alec tastes words forming on his tongue that are dire and scathing and cynical, but he finds that they don’t need to be said. Simon’s smile, Simon’s relief - it’s so damn genuine. And Alec’s sure there are other newspapers, and greasy politicians, and angry people on the street who will twist the violence and the tragedy of last night and wait on the steps outside Idris with placards that read: who do you think set the fire?

But all Alec can remember is the look in Rosa’s eyes: that perpetual, enduring, long-awaited gratitude.
He feels needed. He feels necessary. He feels like there’s someone out there counting on his good deeds, and it doesn’t matter if he’s Alec or Sentinel or somewhere in between.

Alec and Sentinel want the same things.

“- have you seen our headline today, though?” Simon continues. He whistles appreciatively and mimes the spread of a tabloid headline. “‘SUPERHEROES UNITE TO STOP ARSON AND SAVE LIVES: Corporates and vigilantes set aside differences to rescue over a dozen people from apartment block before emergency services arrive.’ I know Magnus is good at his job, but like - have you read the article? It’s amazing - like he was actually there, and not just on the street watching, but literally inside as the building as it was coming down. I don’t know how he finds his sources, or if he just makes half of it up, but there’s this bit halfway down the second column that’s like - man, it lodged my heart in my throat, y’know - can you imagine the floor falling apart beneath your feet like that-”

“Simon . ”

“Yeah? Oh . Oh, well - of course you can imagine it, but -”

Alec sighs heavily, but he hides his tiny, betraying smile behind the lip of his coffee cup. “Don’t you have work to do?”

“Okay, so technically, yes, I do, but -”

“I’ll tell Magnus you’re skiving.”

“You wouldn’t.”

Alec raises his eyebrows as if to say, try me .

Simon scowls, wrinkling his nose. “You always spoil my fun.”

“No-one is a vigilante for fun, Simon.”
Simon puffs out his cheeks as if he’s desperate to dig himself into a hole, but, thankfully, decides against it. Instead, he grumbles under his breath and kicks Alec in the shin, before dragging himself back to his desk.

Alec watches him go and waits until he’s sat in his own cubicle before he grimaces, Simon’s foot having found a hefty bruise.

The office is hectic, but Alec’s not surprised: the Election looms on the horizon and the city is restless with its fervour. He can’t catch the subway without Penhallow watching his every step from the billboards, while Herondale parades in red, white, and blue across the screens in Times Square: *Prosperity and Peace* in bold white font beneath her.

Alec’s boss has taken to wearing a pin badge on his tie that says: *Re-elect Herondale 1992*, and the accountant in the cubicle next to Alec has *Vote Penhallow* fliers taped behind his desk.

The copyeditors spend the morning running back and forth across the floor with mockups in their arms, their fingers black with newspaper print, and the elevator doesn’t stop dinging, a constant flurry of journalists in and out, bags full, cameras on their shoulders, notebooks tucked beneath their arms, talking hurriedly about this exit poll and that.

Simon drops a copy of the day’s paper on Alec’s desk as he rushes out the door to chase a lead, and it’s only when Alec flicks to page six that he sees anything about Bush vs. Clinton.

*Stand by the President*, says Bush’s slogan, accompanied by a photo of him, liver-spotted and frail, standing over a podium at some conference on the other side of the country. Over the page, there’s a story titled: *Clinton Consolidates Theme of Inclusion and Consensus*, but it’s overshadowed by another article about Commissioner Dieudonné putting his support behind Herondale with an eleventh hour donation.

Anyone would be forgiven for forgetting there’s a race on for the White House.
Alec stares for a long time at the photograph of President Bush, and yet, he feels nothing. Not simmering hatred, nor quiet anger or repulsion or disgust; not even apathy - just nothing.

Bush may want to stop him marrying or look the other way when he’s walking down the street holding another man’s hand, but Herondale -

Herondale hates the supers with prejudice bordering upon the violent. *God only knows what will happen if she gets reelected and passes her legislation to get all the vigilantes registered.*

What happens to the Circle when she wins?

Bush and Clinton might as well be in another country, another planet. It’s all about the race to the Senate. And there are only days to go.

Alec turns back to his emails, but it’s a futile task. He can’t help but think about Rosa again; about the man Simon heard on the radio, desperate to pay Arkangel back for saving his life.

He can’t help but think about the policeman last night, who couldn’t draw his gun on Sentinel and Nightlock because so many people were watching him.

What would’ve happened if he had? Alec wonders. *If that officer had taken a shot at them and Nightlock had deflected the bullet up into the sky, but everyone had seen.*

In the canteen at lunch, Alec corners one of the copyeditors and asks her about the exit polls. She looks startled for a moment - Alec is sure he’s never said a word to her in his life before - but then she hands him one of the misprints and tells him she has to run, but they should catch up over coffee sometime.

Alec nods politely, not really listening (and definitely not intended to follow up on her offer), his eyes focused on the page in his hands. He skims the text quickly, and its reads: *’the Senate race has tightened over disputes over ethics, with Gov. Penhallow’s poll lead narrowing over Sen. Herondale in the last few crucial days of campaigning. With these polls averaged, Gov. Penhallow leads with 42 percent over Sen. Herondale’s 39 percent, in light of Herondale’s resurging public favour in light of recent hardline comments regarding her stance on the city’s superhumans. This follows the news that Police Commissioner, Malachi Dieudonné has backed the Herondale campaign, speaking openly about his former Harvard Law classmate …’*
Alec frowns and continues reading.

‘... at a recent press conference at One Police Plaza, Commissioner Dieudonné spoke of his hope to stay on as Commissioner of the NYPD if Herondale seizes another term in office. He spoke at length about the need for the police to crack down on anti-social behaviour, citing the recent string of arsons across Manhattan that have been linked to vigilante crime …’

That doesn’t make sense.

Izzy and Meliorn have seen the surveillance tapes of Hodge Starkweather leaving the Commissioner’s house. Captain Garroway has been running his own investigation at the precinct and is gunning to push Dieudonné out of office for his role in the corruption scandal. They all know Dieudonné’s involved with Herondale, with the Circle too.

*But why would he be criticising the attacks by the Circle at a public press conference? Valentine is on Herondale’s payroll, he’s the one doing her dirty work -*

*Ah, Alec thinks. It’s fear mongering. The people of New York don’t care which super is setting fire to apartment buildings or leaving vigilantes dead in the streets. They don’t care if he’s Circle or Corporate or something else - all supers are the same.*

All supers are dangerous.

Alec chews on his lip and he retreats back to his cubicle. He picks up his desk phone and thinks about calling Izzy, but he shouldn’t. Not here.

He lays out the copy and stares at it, until the wobbly black text blurs together into illegible streaks across the page.

Alec is missing the middle piece of the puzzle. He knows he is, he can picture the space where it needs to go, and that’s what makes it worse.

Herondale is fanning the anti-super rhetoric to drum up support for her bill. Fact.
Valentine and the Circle are working for her. So are the police. Another fact.

This pyrokinetic is out there, killing vigilantes, burning buildings, bearing the name Jonathan Morgenstern - okay, that’s not necessarily a fact, but Alec cannot see how it isn’t true. He’s seen the man’s face. Nightlock recognized Valentine’s hallmark on those first few murders. He fits their profile.

*And if last night was an arson and not a gas main blowing, that means he’s moved onto civilian target’s, Alec thinks. That must mean something.*

*But why would Herondale sign off on that? She wants the supers to look bad, sure, but why would Valentine let her drag his son through the mud -*

Alec’s head hurts. There are so many variables. Ragnor Fell’s files. Herondale’s ties to the defense contractors. The vigilante with the teleportation powers. The 1975 coup. Valentine’s disappearance. The threat against Magnus’ life.

Whether anyone in Idris can even be trusted -

Alec’s good mood from last night has soured. No, not soured, but withered, and when he swallows, he finds he can still taste the remnants of all the smoke that he inhaled.

There’s something missing. Something tying it all together, something, *something* -

He needs to tell the others: Isabelle, Jace and Clary, Wolfsbane and Veil. Nightlock. His team. He needs to tell his team, because one of them must know, one of them must be able to figure it out -

Magnus will know.

The sun has set by the time Alec slips away to Magnus’ office; he’s been awake for nearly forty
hours. His shoulders ache and his knee twinges with every other step, but it’s his head that’s thrumming, this jackhammer noise that won’t leave him be.

Alec clutches the strap of his satchel as he picks up the pace, flying down the stairs, his work shoes clicking on the linoleum floor. He turns sharply down the corridor where the argon lights still flicker and hum, the green glow of the exit sign ever eerie, but ahead of him, a sharp shard of yellow cuts through the dark.

Magnus’ door is open. Alec stops in his tracks.

Magnus never leaves the door open, their entire investigation is in that office, all those files in his cabinets -

A figure disturbs the sliver of light, slipping out of the office - and it’s not Magnus, too short for Magnus. A woman. A stranger. Dark cropped hair, pretty eyes, leather jacket over boots and a dress; she seems familiar, but Alec is sure he’s never met her before.

Immediately, Alec thinks of the brown paper parcel that was left on Magnus’ desk.

The woman doesn’t see him, not right away. It’s too dark, and her hair covers her face and the desperate exhaustion in her eyes.

Alec shifts his weight, tucking his thumb into the waistband of his pants where he can feel the outline of his switchblade. He sucks in a breath that is a fraction too loud, and the woman looks up.

Alec thinks of bloody newspapers and death threats.

Her eyes meet his. She looks terrified, but not of him.

*That’s not right.*

She passes him by, and Alec leaps into a run, not rushing after her but, instead, for Magnus’ open door.
“Magnus-!”

His hand doesn’t even touch the door.

Magnus flings the door open and Alec is blinded by the flood of bright yellow light that swarms him. He stumbles back a step, shielding his eyes, but Magnus is there, alive, unhurt, but -

Manic. The look in his eyes is manic. His shirt sleeves are hastily shoved up to his elbows and his hair is in uncharacteristic disarray.

Alec’s relief is extinguished in a puff of smoke.

“Magnus, are you okay - I just saw someone -”

“Alexander,” Magnus breathes, “We have a lead on the pyrokinetic.”

Oh .

Magnus steps out of his office, thrusting his umbrella into Alec’s bewildered hands, throwing his coat over his shoulders as strides towards the elevators.

“Wait -” Alec demands, rushing after Magnus. “Wait, wait, Magnus, you have a lead? What?”

“Yes, I think so,” says Magnus, stabbing the button on the elevator panel. His foot taps against the floor. His face is unreadable but his eyes are alight - but he doesn’t look at Alec. No, he stares straight ahead. “Our dear pyrokinetic has an alias and I’ve finally been able to track it down.”

“An alias? What do you mean an alias?”

Magnus grabs his umbrella back from Alec and, ducking into the elevator, hits the button for the parking garage. Alec leaps through the closing doors and the elevator plummets. Alec braces his
feet squarely on the floor; but Magnus thrums with untapped energy, his eyes fixated on the elevator doors. His rings clink against the handrail as he drums his fingers.

The doors open and Magnus floods out into the car park, but Alec lunges for his arm, seizing hold of his hand to stop him from walking away. Magnus wheels around, words poised on the tip of his tongue, but Alec gets there first.

“Magnus, hold up a second, please. The pyrokinetic has another name? What is it, how did you find it? Where are we going? That woman who was just in your office -”

The determined look in Magnus’ eyes abates, and he hits his umbrellas against the elevator doors to stop them closing prematurely.

“You saw this morning’s paper?” he asks.

“Yeah, I - Magnus, of course I did, the fire -”

Magnus’ eyes darken. For a moment, he slips out of reality and Alec doesn’t know where he goes.

“I spoke to Captain Garroway this morning. It wasn’t a gas main,” he says, “The ignition patterns match every other scene, and CCTV and witness reports put him there - Jonathan Morgenstern, I mean. I didn’t want to think about it last night, but -”

He trails off, the line of his mouth pinching like he’s in pain. Alec clutches at his hand, and Magnus continues:

“I’ve been asking around, and finally - finally, Alexander - someone came through with information that checked out. Sebastian Verlac - I think the name’s come up before, but he’s known in vigilante circles as Hellfire. They’re all the same person, Sebastian, Johnathan, Hellfire - it’s our guy.” Magnus looks up at Alec suddenly. “This is our big break. It has to be. The end of all this.”

Magnus pulls him forward and Alec almost stumbles, his bad foot cramping with a misstep. The elevator doors ding behind them, and then Magnus lets his hand go, turning towards his car. His unbuttoned coat billows behind him.
Alec stops walking.

“Magnus,” he calls out. “Stop.”

Magnus stops, looking back at Alec, his car keys resting in his open palm. Alec scrubs his hand down his face and moves to close the gap between them, but he can feel a tremor beginning in his hand, winding its way up his arm.


*Last night in that cafe. The smoke, the dust, the quiet, Nightlock, the kiss on that rooftop -*


‘It’s an honour, Sentinel, doing all of this with you.’


He has to phone Izzy, he needs to call Jace and Clary, he’s got to pass the message on to Wolfsbane and Veil -

And yet, he can’t think about *any* of that, because he steps in front of Magnus and Magnus’ fingers curl up around his car keys, squeezing tight.

“Magnus, where are we going?” Alec asks, his voice a whisper. “We can’t just - we can’t just run out there, we need a plan, we need to - we should call people, you should call your friend at Idris and tell him, I don’t know -”

“Alexander,” Magnus replies, “Alexander, we’re going to Idris. If Jonathan Morgenstern is truly calling himself Hellfire, then the only place in New York that’s bound to have records of anyone by that name … is Idris.”
Alec knows he baulks. Words evaporate on his tongue and he doesn’t know what to say.

“Magnus, I -”

“I’ve had enough, Alec. I’ve had enough and they must know. Herondale has them deep in her pockets. There must be something.”

“I thought - your friend Sentinel -”

“My friend Sentinel ... My friend Sentinel has been hurt more than anyone by Idris keeping things to themselves. He’s run himself into the ground chasing this pyrokinetic, and yet Idris has him working for Herondale anyway and it’s like a punishment. It has to be. Without Idris, he’d be - he’d be so much more free, and I’ve seen it, and I just - they’ll know. Someone there must know about Jonathan Morgenstern and how to find him. I refuse to believe otherwise.”

The frantic edge to Magnus’ words jams itself beneath Alec’s fingernails. Alec curls his hands into fists at his side.

“Come with me,” says Magnus, “Please. I’m going to Idris, but I don’t want to do it alone.”

Oh, this is going to end badly.

The drive across Manhattan to Idris’ headquarters does nothing to quell the nausea in Alec’s stomach: every bump in the road, every pothole Magnus doesn’t avoid threatens to make Alec vomit up his own nerve endings, and he grips the door handle for dear life, his knuckles turning white.

Magnus says nothing, focused on the road ahead, both hands clenched on the steering wheel. He swerves through breaks in the traffic, cutting in front of angry cab drivers who blast their horns and
yell obscenities. New York feels electric tonight: billboards and bright lights; Election posters on every mailbox, lamppost, storefront window; campaigners on every street corner tossing fliers into the sea of pedestrians. Headlights strobe across Magnus’ face, a rush of white and yellow light flashing across his cheeks, but his eyes are submerged in shadow.

Alec braces his feet in the footwell, his whole body pulled taut like a bowstring.

All his gear is back at the office. He has his coms bud pressed into the shell of his ear, but he can’t exactly place a radio call here and now: *oh hey, Underhill, just to let you know I’m gonna be walking through the front door any minute, just pretend you don’t recognise me and please keep mom and dad away -*

Maryse is going to be furious. Magnus is already on her watchlist, and now he’s accusing them of holding back information from a murder investigation -

Because of course Idris know something. Magnus is right about that. And maybe it’s not his mother deliberately turning a blind eye to Herondale, and maybe it’s not his father hiding files in his desk drawer, but somewhere in the archives, in the record’s room, in the back of someone’s mind, there will be -


Alec thinks again of that unmarked parcel delivered to Magnus’ office. He remembers the newspaper print and the red paint on Magnus’ fingertips, the colour of blood.

Alec looks down at his own hands, one gripping the door, the other clenched around his aching knee: he imagines blood there too. Blood caked into the cracks and lines of his skin, splattered across his knuckles, brown beneath his fingernails -

He assumed the threat was from the Circle, from someone working for the Senator, but they don’t know that. It could so easily have been a warning from Idris.

*He can’t let Magnus do this .*

Ahead of them, the World Trade Center dominates the skyline, rows upon rows of pinprick lights disappearing into the clouds. Sixth Avenue passes them by, traffic crawling uptown, an endless
snake of red brake lights swallowed up by the horizon. Magnus veers through an intersection, racing through an orange light, and Alec’s shoulder knocks against the window, and then: an all too familiar sight. Alec’s breath catches in his throat.

Idris: looming up and out of the ground like a behemoth, like the minotaur at the centre of the city’s labyrinth, enormous and brooding, its grey stone walls drenched in the twilight. Protestors swarm across the front steps, marching around and around in circles, placards in the air, and on any other day, Alec would pay them no heed, sneaking in the back door, but today - tonight - they’re going in through the front, and neither he nor Magnus are wearing masks.

Cutting through the oncoming traffic, Magnus skids into an empty parking space, slamming the breaks a second before rear-ending the car in front. He grabs a parking permit from the sun visor above his head, throwing it onto the dashboard, and before Alec can say a word, grab his sleeve, anything - he leaps out the driver’s door and into the road.

Alec tumbles out the passenger side before he loses sight of Magnus altogether. The chants of the protestors drown out the rumble of the traffic in an instant: Alec’s heard them all before, all the terrible things screamed by people who would gladly see him dead in the street, but tonight they blare like sirens and the wind carries them straight through Alec, cutting him into ribbons beneath his overcoat.

Magnus swoops up the front stairs, a black crow-like shadow in his trenchcoat, and Alec runs after him. He ducks beneath placards and shoulders his way through the protestors and doesn’t look any of them in the eye - he can’t he doesn’t have time, his heart beating rampant against the inside of his chest.

You’re not going to find anything. They’re not going to let you find anything, Magnus, please.

He catches up to Magnus beneath the deep shadow of the front doors, reaching around Magnus’ shoulder to grab the door handle and stop him from going any further, and Magnus finally looks back at him. And the look that Alec finds in Magnus’ eyes is strange, unwieldy: devastating focus, his stubbornness that Alec knows so well, and then, beneath that, a tremor akin to desperation - but all of it pales when he sees the worry carved into Alec’s face.

He pauses, one foot over the threshold: his sense of justice pulling him one way, and Alec pulling him back.

“Alec,” he asks warily. “Alexander, are you okay?”
Behind him, Alec hears a protestor shouting at them, screeching about Idris’ crimes, about murderous superheroes, about corrupt governments and police scandals, the same contempt they always spew at anyone who walks through the front door of headquarters. Most people coming and going into headquarters have security escorts, but it’s not the reason Alec feels vulnerable.

“We don’t have to do this,” he says, but it’s not a shadow of the things he wants to say.

*It’s not safe.*

*For you.*

*For me.*

Magnus turns to face Alec, and, bracketed by Alec’s hand holding closed the door, he’s breathing the same air as Alec, almost chest to chest. Alec can smell his cologne, can feel the warmth of his body; even the pressure in the air pulses against Alec’s temples. His head spins. He lets go of the door.

“We do,” Magnus whispers. “Alec, if this is the break in the case we’ve been waiting for - we need to do what we can. I have to try.”

“They won’t tell you anything, Magnus, why would they, they’re Corporates -”

Magnus shakes his head. “Not all of them are the same, you know that. There will be someone -”

“It doesn’t have to be you!” Alec pleads. “You don’t have to go in there - I’ll do it, someone else can do it. Get your friend Sentinel to do it -”

“Alexander. This might put an end to the war.” Magnus reaches up and brushes his thumb across the curve of Alec’s cheek, searching Alec’s eyes. “If we know his name, we can leak it to the press, flush him out of hiding ... we can catch him. We can stop him and then no-one else has to die. That’s freedom. We deserve *freedom* , Alec. All of us.”
The way he says it - *freedom* - Alec knows there’s something else, there’s something more that he’s not saying, and Alec can’t see it. Magnus says the word like he has something to lose by not walking through this door ... and something to gain from pulling on this thread, wherever it might lead, even if that’s into the centre of the Circle.

He says *freedom* like Sentinel would, like Alec would if he were to think about telling Magnus who he is and how he feels, like it isn’t an ever-present hunger eating Alec from the inside out.

He says freedom like it hasn’t been Alec’s only daydream for as long as he can remember.

‘*Without Idris, Sentinel would be so much more free. I’ve seen it.*’

Alec sags, taking a step back from Magnus; the cold air spills between them, carrying with it the voice of the city laughing, goading, screaming.

*You go in there, and you risk your life,* Alec thinks. *I go in there, and I risk mine. But if we don’t go in at all, we’re risking everybody else’s.*

The choice between the one and the many used to be so easy. It’s not anymore. Alec has become selfish.

Magnus smiles weakly. “I don’t expect Idris to just hand over the information we need, Alec, I’m not that naive. But there are people here I trust. And people here to whom I owe a debt, and if I can save him by doing this -”

The sentence is left unfinished, but its meaning is clear. Magnus refuses to let Alec look away.

“Besides,” Magnus says slowly, and it’s like he can see right through to the centre of Alec, where his heart has stopped beating, “Are you not a friend of the Corporates, Alexander?”

Alec doesn’t blink. *Sentinel without Idris,* he thinks. *Freedom.*

“No,” he says. “Not anymore.”
Magnus blinks, physically taking a step back.

“Alec …”

Alec shakes his head. He can’t have this conversation here, not on Idris’ front steps, not with a
CCTV camera above their heads, and not when his mother might be standing at an upstairs window
watching him.

Stop. Stop, take me back, he thinks. Take me back to last night. Take me back to not thinking about
any of it. What was it Nightlock said -

He refuses to let himself remember. If he remembers, he might walk away.

“Okay,” he surrenders, pushing open the door. His voice threatens to break. “Okay. Come on.”

The front lobby of Headquarters is sterile like a hospital, plate glass and shades of inanimate blue-
grey drawing the eye upwards to a high ceiling. On the tiled floor, Alec’s footsteps echo in a
silence suddenly damning: the door swings shut behind Magnus and they are alone, the city lost to
them, the sounds of the street and the shouts of the protesters extinguished like a flame.

In the centre of the lobby, there is a desk. Tonight, it’s manned by Underhill, and Alec doesn’t
know whether to breathe a sigh of relief. He swallows thickly and squares his shoulders, but his
step falters.

He feels Magnus’ eyes on his face, but refuses to look back.

Underhill looks up, his brief frown the only crease in his otherwise immaculate appearance. Still,
he straightens his tie and smooths out his suit as he begins the shpiel:
“Good evening, sirs - I’m afraid we don’t have any availability for consultancy tonight. If you would like to book an appointment, you can ring out client line and rearrange for another day -”

He stops when he locks eyes with Alec. Alec clenches his teeth so hard they might shatter, and with the barest shake of his head, he prays to any God who will listen for Underhill not to say a word.

“Uh,” says Underhill, his eyes quickly moving to Magnus, and then back to Alec. He stands up from his seat behind the desk. “Is there - is there anything I can do to help?”

That’s not scripted. Alec knows it. And Underhill *knows* that Alec knows it, because Alec sees his hand move to his phone, pick up the receiver, and then put it down again as Magnus steps up to the desk.

“I’m here to talk to Sentinel,” Magnus says clearly, “Tell him his friend Magnus is here to see him. We’ll wait here.”

Underhill doesn’t look back at Alec. (And Alec thanks whoever is up in the clouds listening to him.)

“I’m sorry, that won’t be possible,” says Underhill, “I’m not at liberty to discuss our employees with non-clients. If you would like to leave your name and a contact number -”

“Fine then - what about Arkangel or Muse? Can I speak to either of them?”

“I’m sorry, sir, but I can’t -”

“I have urgent information regarding an ongoing case and it’s imperative that they hear it,” Magnus says, “If none of them are here, then I’ll talk to someone higher up. It’s about Valentine Morgenstern and the Circle. Your boss will want to know.”

Underhill doesn’t budge. “I’m very sorry, sir, but without an appointment, we won’t be able to arrange a consultancy for you. If you information related to a police matter, I suggest you contact your local precinct. We are a private security firm, not officers of the law.”
Magnus slams his hand down on the desk. “Your records, then! Under law, you are required to produce any information you have regarding an ongoing criminal investigation, and I’m gonna go out on a limb here and say that the man I’m after is not one of your clients, and isn’t protected by any client privilege bylaws.” Magnus reaches into his coat and pulls out a pen and a scrap of paper. Hastily, he scribbles out a few words and thrusts it at Underhill. “Jonathan Morgenstern. He’s also known as Hellfire. Look him up in your system, go ask someone - I don’t really care. I can wait right here.”

“Sir, all information regarding Idris’s public record can be accessed in the archives at City Hall,” says Underhill, “If what you’re after is not on file there, then either it doesn’t exist, or it relates to private client data, which I am not able to give out to members of the public. Or the press.”

That’s a warning. Alec hears it loud and clear: I know who he is and he shouldn’t be here. Maryse will have your head. And mine.

“Then don’t tell me,” says Magnus, holding the scrap of paper out to Underhill. “But give this to Sentinel or Arkangel when they return, and let them decide what to do with it.”

Underhill’s eyes dart to Alec’s.

Alec nods.

The ride back to the office is silent.

Magnus no longer drums his fingers on the steering wheel; instead, he clenches it tight, his knuckles white and the tendons on the backs of his hands straining like wire. He shifts the clutch forcefully and revs the engine at the car in front -

And Alec doesn’t know what to say. He’s never seen Magnus like this: the desperation.

He’s seen Magnus’ pain and his anger and his suicidal need to drive himself into the dirt for the
good of everyone else, but -

This is somehow different. It feels personal.

Alec’s coms begin to crackle. He turns towards the window, resting his temple against the glass as fat drops of rain begin to bead and form winding rivers of split light. He presses his fingertip against his ear to accept the call.

“Alec,” comes Izzy’s voice, determined and sure, “I just walked into Security and found Underhill deleting CCTV footage. He said you asked him to. Wanna tell me what’s going on?”

That was quick. It’s only been a few minutes. Alec will have to buy Underhill a fruit basket in thanks.

Alec taps his ear three times to signal that he can’t reply.

Izzy huffs. “He also gave me a note. Hellfire? I’m gonna assume that’s our pyrokinetic’s alias. I’ve not heard it before, but I’ll do some digging in the archives. Make sure you get yourself back here as soon as possible. I’ll need you help.”

Alec taps his ear again. Izzy doesn’t say anything for a moment, but the line doesn’t fall quiet. Her slow intake of breath mixes with the static.

“You know this is dangerous, Alec,” she whispers, “He came looking for Sentinel. He’s too involved … it’s not safe for him. Or you. You know mom and dad are watching him.”

Alec squeezes his eyes shut. He presses against his coms, ending the call. The line goes dead.

“Magnus,” he says.

Magnus murmurs a noise of acknowledgement, but his eyes remain trained on the road.

Alec sits up in his seat and turns to face Magnus. “Magnus, we should talk about this.”
“I don’t see what there is to talk about.”

“There’s … there’s everything to talk about. You didn’t have to go to Idris. There are other ways to track down the supers, you could’ve talked to Sentinel on his own - you didn’t have to put yourself out there like that. You know Idris is watching you.”

“I already told you, Alec. Some risks are worth it.”

“You’re safety isn’t,” Alec scowls, “You know Sentinel will come through for you, so why - you’re overcompensating for something. What is it?”

Magnus’ jaw tightens and Alec watches the slow movement of his throat as he swallows. His teeth sink into his lower lip, and then his shoulders droop. He flicks the turn signal lever and weaves his way through the traffic, pulling the car up against the kerb and killing the engine.

Alec doesn’t move. Nor does Magnus, his hands still on the wheel and his eyes fluttered closed. The traffic crawls on by Magnus’ window, an endless stream of yellow beams turning into red tail lights.

“Magnus? What is it?”

“I’m sorry,” Magnus says then, “For making you worry.”

“It’s - it’s not about me. It’s about you.” You’ve always been selfless, but this is different. “This isn’t gonna help the investigation, so why -”

“Something happened. Last night,” Magnus interrupts, finally opening his eyes. “I realised something about myself and I don’t know how I feel about it. So, I panicked.”

“What … what did you realise?”

Magnus exhales heavily. “The investigation, Herondale, the Election … even Idris looking over
my shoulder … it doesn’t go away. And I know that, I’ve always known that, but -”

Magnus turns to look at him, his eyes searching Alec’s. Alec doesn’t dare blink.

“I’ve never been good at being honest with myself. And it scares me to know that what I want, who I am when all of - all of this is stripped away, I don’t know who that is as well as I once did. My priorities have changed.”

“You … you told me once that not everyone in the city is my responsibility,” Alec urges, “You know it’s the same for you. Not everything you do has to be for everyone else, Magnus. You can’t just - you can’t just keep using yourself up like this. Especially to punish yourself.”

A wry smile quirks Magnus’ lips. He shakes his head despairingly. “It’s not a punishment. It’s just instinct. I saw a part of myself I wasn’t familiar with and I resorted back to what I know. This investigation has been my life for as long as I can remember, even before Ragnor - sometimes I fear it’s all I know, and then -” Magnus huffs on another dry laugh. “I don’t like showing weakness around other people, Alexander. You understand.”

‘Showing them your true self can be like showing someone your weak spot and marking it with a bright red X and saying, here, stick the knife in here,’ Nightlock had said. And then, ‘I’m more honest when I’m with you.’

“You can show weakness around me,” Alec says. “I’m not going to judge you. Never.”

Magnus smiles tightly. “I want it to be over. All of it: the investigation, the murders, Idris, the constant barrage from the city beating its supers into submission. Because I’m tired. I’ve had enough, and I want - I should feel guilty, sitting here with you and not rushing back to the office to follow up on this lead. And a part of me does - feel guilty, I mean - but it’s not, that part of me is no longer loud enough. Does that make me a bad person? I don’t know. Does that make me immoral? Maybe.”

“No,” says Alec. He reaches out and takes one of Magnus’ hands from the steering wheel, slipping his fingers in between Magnus’. “I’ve had this conversation before. “No, it doesn’t. It just means you’re human.”

Under his breath, Magnus laughs again; he sounds more watery now, like the rain dripping down the windshield has crept into the car and into him too. “I don’t like you seeing this part of me,” he
whispers, squeezing Alec’s hand in return. “It’s ugly. It’s not admirable.”

“I don’t care. It’s honest, like you said. I like that.”

Magnus huffs. “Is everything always so black and white for you?”

Alec shakes his head. “Not everything. Not always. But you are.” How I feel about you is.

Magnus’ smile solidifies before Alec’s eyes. Not quite shy, but - softer, somehow. His gaze flickers to the sliver of space between them, and then back to Alec’s face. Warmth rises in Alec’s cheeks.

“It always comes back to that, doesn’t it?” Magnus says cryptically, “You seeing all the parts of myself I thought I’d lost.” Gently, he untangles his hand from Alec’s and turns the key in the ignition. The engine begins purring again.

“We need to get back to the office. I have to update Luke about this - he might have information for us,” Magnus says, “And even if he doesn’t, we need to keep him ahead of Dieudonné and Herondale if he stands a chance at becoming Commissioner after the Election.” Magnus sighs heavily. “How late can you stay tonight?”

Alec has to get back to Headquarters. Izzy is waiting for him.

“As long as you need me,” he replies.

“What part of as soon as possible was lost in translation?” Izzy calls out when Alec slips into the record’s room. “It’s almost 3AM.”

“Magnus needed me,” Alec says quietly. He picks his way across the scattered files and overturned filing cabinets on the floor, finding Isabelle hidden away between two tall bookcases. She’s on her knees and surrounded on all sides by stacks of manila folders, her long hair scraped up into a
ponytail. “You find anything?”

“Nothing digital, as expected,” she replies. “But there must be something in here. I’ve found the section on vigilante records, so we just have to find the right folder.” She glances over her shoulder at him. “Alec? Are you okay?”

Alec scrubs at his face with his palm: his jaw is scruffy and he sniffs loudly. There’s not much point hiding what Izzy can already see.

“Is Magnus okay?” she asks again. “Underhill didn’t tell me much, but I made him show me the footage from the lobby before he deleted it. What happened?”

Alec recounts the story quickly. He skips the moment in the car. Izzy’s eyes soften anyway.

“I’m already watching mom and dad’s emails,” she says, after. “I’ll talk to Meliorn about getting some bugs for the penthouse and the boardroom. If they so much as say Magnus’ name, we’ll know.” She pauses, narrowing her eyes. “I hope you’re not blaming yourself for this. What Idris does is not your fault.”

Alec doesn’t have the energy to argue with her about that. Instead, he kneels down next to her and splits her pile of folders in half. From the corner of his eyes, he sees Izzy open her mouth to say something else, but - it’s Izzy. She knows him too well. She knows when words are obsolete.

Her shoulder nudges Alec’s, and Alec turns his head to press his nose into the crown of her hair.

“Thanks, Iz,” he whispers, “Thank you.”

It doesn’t take long for Alec’s injured knee to begin to hurt. He grits his teeth through the dull throb of pain, but he can’t focus on reading: only the ever lagging tick of the second hand of the clock on the wall as the hours begin to slow.
The pulse in his temples is definitely sleep deprivation, but with no windows to the outside world, he has no idea if the sun has begun to rise. Jace and Clary must be back from patrol. His parents will wake soon.

Alec doesn’t want them finding him face down in the archives when they come demanding why Sentinel wasn’t out on the streets last night.

He tilts forward, closing his eyes and letting his forehead rest against the cool metal of a filing cabinet. The sharp edge of the drawer digs into his skin.

*There must be something. Everyone leaves a paper trail.*

“Alec!”

Alec screws his eyes tighter shut. He searches for a blackness deeper than the one behind his eyelids. He longs for a soft silence, for gentleness, for Nightlock looking at him with the same tenderness as last night in Raphael’s cafe.

“Alec! I think I’ve found something! Come over here!”

Alec’s eyes snap open and he looks over to where Izzy is sat back on her heels, staring at a file in her hands. She scans the page quickly, her face pales, and Alec scrambles to his feet.

“Is it Hellfire?” he demands, “Jonathan Morgenstern?”

Izzy nods, thrusting the file at him. “Yes,” she says, standing to peer over his shoulder. “It is. Look. Hellfire. Name: unknown; classification: vigilante. Known powers: pyrokinesis, fire augmentation, and thermal resistance.” She flips over the page and taps it with the back of her hand. “The age and the physical type all match. And then there’s this.” She taps on a red stamp at the bottom of the page: it looks like a serial number, but the ink has blurred over time and Alec can no longer read it. Izzy, however, clearly recognises it. “Come on, we need to get to my lab. Bring the file.”

She grabs Alec’s wrist and drags him to the door, Alec slipping the folder into his jacket. The
hallway is empty, but the bright white lights make them obvious, and Izzy’s heels click fast and loud on the ground. Her ponytail swings back and forth as she marches ahead of him, not looking back. Alec’s heart beats unrhythmically.

“Pull up the database,” Izzy commands as they duck into her lab. She shuts the door behind them and turns the lock, before flipping on every light in the room. Then, she works her way around the lab, turning on her stereo, her microscope, every single piece of apparatus on her bench, the prototype wings strung up on the wall - everything. The discordant hum of electricity fills the room as she pulls out the chair next to Alec.

“Electrical interference,” she says, kicking off her heels and seizing the keyboard from him. “Recording devices only work if there’s an open channel for them to broadcast on. If the room’s bugged, no-one will be able to hear us.”

She starts typing, her fingers moving quicker than anyone other than Alec would be able to see.

“That stamp in the file is a serial number for a digital file,” she explains, “Read it out to me.”

“I can’t tell what it says - maybe, maybe the last four digits are 6A6D.”

“Yep, that’s enough,” Izzy says, stabbing enter on the keyboard. The computer whines, screeching with a dial-up tone, and then a file folder opens on the desktop. “Alec, these are contract files.”

“Herondale’s contract?”

Izzy double clicks on one of them, and a new window opens: she scrolls quickly through the reams of text and comes to a stop at the bottom of the page.

“Mom and dad’s signatures,” she says, and then frowns, “And Hodge Starkweather’s. This is at least twenty years old … look, it’s from the spring before Valentine’s coup. Why is this in here? Jonathan Morgenstern was only a child during the coup. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Open them all,” Alec says, “See if any of them have Herondale’s signature on them.”
Izzy opens the rest: all contracts of employment, some dating back to the mid-seventies, others from the last few months. None of them mention Jonathan Morgenstern. None of them are signed by Herondale.

Alec’s head buzzes. *The missing piece of the puzzle ...*

Beside him, Izzy gasps. “Alec, this one - look. I’ve seen it before. Do you remember that sales contract mom had you and Jace retrieve from that defense contractor a few months ago?”

Alec nods. Of course he remembers. He remembers the scratchy black ink:

‘[REDACTED], on behalf of the office of Sen. Imogen Herondale.’

Except, the signature is not redacted on the copy of the contract on Izzy’s screen:

*Pol. Com. Malachi Dieudonné, on behalf of the office of Sen. Imogen Herondale.*

“The Police Commissioner has been buying military weaponry for the Senator?” Alec demands, his mind reeling. “That doesn’t make any sense-”

“No, it doesn’t,” says Izzy, “But it explains why she’s so eager to keep Dieudonné in office if he is orchestrating arms deals for her. But why is this linked to Jonathan Morgenstern’s file - there’s gotta be a reason …”

Alec swallows thickly. “Why do you think the Senator needs military weaponry?”

“Arming the Circle? It’s the most logical explanation, but for what end -” Izzy freezes, her sentence fragmenting. She spins to look at Alec. “You were shot with a Barrett rifle. Those are military grade.”

“Herondale ordered the hit on us? We’re the ones working for her, she has a contract with Idris -”

“Her proposed legislation applies to all of us, not just vigilantes, Alec. She uses Idris because we’re
convenient, but you know how she feels about supers. Especially supers sticking their noses where she doesn’t want them.” Izzy turns back to the computer and begins typing again. “This is a good lead, though. I’m going to see what I can find on Dieudonné, see if we’ve had any other dealings with him. What I want to know is, if the Circle has access to all this equipment that Herondale’s office has supplied, why have they not used any of it yet? They could do some serious damage, but they’re still letting Jonathan Morgenstern run around doing whatever he likes - ah. Hm. They must be waiting for something.”

“Waiting for something? Oh. Like the Election.”

“Maybe,” Izzy agrees, “Although Penhallow’s still in the running, so I don’t know what would happen if Herondale doesn’t retain office …”

Alec nods. “Okay,” he says, “Okay. We need a plan.” He closes his eyes, and in his head, he imagines a bundle of threads, each frayed end begging to be pulled, to be assembled into something that makes even an iota of sense. Each thread spreads out like a spiderweb before him, except this time, Alec finds himself standing in the middle, and the strands around him are shivering. Someone else on the web is moving.

He exhales slowly and opens his eyes; Izzy is looking up at him expectantly. “We need to get this information to Jace and Clary,” he says. “Have then start tailing the Commissioner, maybe he’ll lead us to Starkweather, or Jonathan Morgenstern if we’re lucky. Then we need to tell Wolfsbane and Veil, they’ll want to know. Captain Garroway too - if the Circle is planning some sort of - some sort of large scale attack against the supers, emergency services need to be prepared. And I’ll tell Nightlock -”

But first - I have to tell Magnus.

“I’m on it,” says Izzy, and she’s smiling, as if the thought of imminent danger is a thrill. “You know, this is good news.”

“How is this good news?”

“Mom and dad don’t know about your shooting. And even if they did, there’s no way they’d put your life on the line like that. Especially not mom. So, either they’re being willfully ignorant about what Herondale’s doing, or they’re being used. I think that’s more likely.”
“They still know Herondale’s funding the Circle. They’re complicit.”

“Yeah. Yeah, they are, but - I reckon they’re as much in the dark as we are about what Valentine’s planning. And you know mom ... keeping Idris afloat is the only thing that matters to her. She’s hedged her bets on the winning side and is hoping Idris will be spared when Valentine reveals his hand. That must be it.”

“We have to beat Valentine to it,” Alec says. “And if the Election is the trigger, we only have a few days -”

Izzy’s smile turns crooked. “Well then - why are you still sitting around here?”

Alec knocks on Magnus’ office door at 8AM sharp the next morning. His eyes are heavy and his neck is stiff from a night spent on Izzy’s couch, but he left Headquarters as soon as the sun rose; he doesn’t think Magnus went home last night either.

Jonathan Morgenstern’s folder is tucked into his suit jacket, along with copies of all the contracts Izzy found in their database. His foot taps against the floor.

Magnus opens the door just as he’s about to knock again.

“Alexander,” he says, caught between a frown and a smile. His eyes are sleep red and ringed with grey, and he has his tie loose around his shirt collar, as if Alec has caught him in the middle of dressing for the day. And where before he might have greeted Alec with a quip: you’re early today, or what a pleasant surprise, he knows Alec too well now. “What’s happened?”

Alec pulls out the file from his jacket and hands it to Magnus. “Jonathan Morgenstern’s file from Idris. I thought you’d want to see.”

Magnus’ eyes widen and he snatches the file, immediately flicking through it. “How … how on Earth did you get this?”
Alec shrugs. “I caught that man from Idris in the lobby just now,” he lies. “He came to deliver this to you, so I intercepted it.”

Magnus pulls Alec into the office and shuts the door behind them. “Did he say anything?”

“He said … he said it’s a gift from Sentinel. I guess Sentinel must’ve felt like he owes you.”

Magnus smiles down at the file. “Sentinel doesn’t owe me anything.”

“Well then, maybe he just thought that you deserved it. I get that.” Maybe he would do anything for you. “He must trust you.”

Magnus’ eyes are glued to the file as he circles back to his desk. He throws himself into his chair and grabs his legal pad and a pen - and then stops. He looks up at Alec, and then down at the folder again.

“What is it?” Alec asks, moving to peer over Magnus’ shoulder. There’s a slip of paper in between the pages of the file, and Alec knows there is. He put it there.

“Looks like a note,” Magnus huffs, and then he laughs to himself. “And it’s from Sentinel. ‘Stop risking your life - S.’ Very succinct. I wouldn’t expect anything more.”

He looks up at Alec. He grins. He’s beautiful.

Alec feels himself blush. “Well, he has a point,” he says.

Alec is the last person in the office that night. It’s difficult to focus on emails and audits when he knows Magnus is one floor below, sifting through the file and likely making plans without Alec.
Alec tries not to worry about it. Izzy covered their traces at Headquarters. No-one is ever going to know the information came from Idris, and Magnus is smart enough not to reveal it to the public just yet. He will have called Luke. Perhaps visited City Hall to request all the public records on Dieudonné. And then returned to the office to pull Ragnor’s files out of storage and spent the day pouring over them for any mention of either Hellfire or the Commissioner.

One misstep is going to light a fuse. Herondale has already shown what she’s willing to do; and next time, whoever gets shot and left to bleed out in an alleyway might not be so lucky. Maybe it will be Clary. Maybe it’ll be Jace, shot down out of the sky. Maybe it’ll be Nightlock.

As soon as Herondale finds out we’re sniffing around the Commissioner -

(“So, we won’t let her find out,” Izzy had said last night, “We can do this quietly. You and Jace are trained for espionage, aren’t you? Let’s use those skills for good for once.”)

Alec sends his last email for the day and leaps up from his chair, grabbing his coat, not waiting for his computer to shut down. He avoids the elevators and takes the stairs two at a time, slipping out through the fire escape and into the light drizzle of evening.

He pops the collar of his coat and pulls it tight around his body, jogging for the phonebooth on the corner of the block. One of the glass panels has been smashed and the tiny squares of glass crunch beneath Alec’s work shoes as the wind whips around his pant legs.

Thumbing a few quarters into the slot, Alec lifts the receiver to his ear and dials Izzy’s number.

She answers after only one rings.

“ Alec?” Her voice is obscured by the grainy interference of a public telephone. “ That you? I was just about to call over coms- ”

“Yeah, it’s me. Sorry for leaving before you got up - I had to get the file to Magnus. Did you manage to brief Jace and Clary?”

“ Yes, I did - Jace is going to watch the Commissioner’s private address, and I’ll send Clary to his
office, but -

“And Wolfsbane and Veil? Did you send the message?”

“I did - Wolfsbane says he’s on it. He’s been watching Dieudonné for a while, but that’s not what I need to talk to you about.”

Alec stiffens. His fingers curl tighter around the receiver.

“What?” he dares to ask. “What did you find?”

“It wasn’t what I found,” Izzy says, and Alec pauses, because her tone has shifted, her unease palpable. “Rather, something I overheard. You know I said Meliorn was setting up bugs for me in mom and dad’s office?”

“Did they say something about Magnus?”

“No. No, no, don’t worry, it’s not about Magnus, but - I overheard mom on the phone with Senator Herondale this morning.”

“Should I be surprised? Herondale wants to up her security detail for the Election. Mom said she was going to add both Clary and Raj to the team with me and Jace,” Alec frowns. He glances over his shoulder, peering through the grubby glass, but the street is almost empty and the rain keeps everyone’s heads bowed. “Why? What did you hear?”

“Herondale wanted to discuss extending the Idris security contract post-Election. Mom said that she’d been happy to renegotiate the deal and continue as Herondale’s partner, but then Herondale said she wanted to bring in Dieudonné as her liaison between Idris and her office.”

“Mom would never agree to that.”

“No. And she didn’t. She said that Idris doesn’t employ civil servants as we’re a private company - and then she asked Herondale about the Commissioner’s selection. Herondale sounded pretty sure that Dieudonné is going to keep his position.”
“We already know that Herondale’s been pulling strings for Dieudonné,” Alec notes. “Of course she wants to keep him on if he’s already her middle man between her and Valentine.”

“Alec,” Izzy stresses, “Mom asked Herondale about the other candidates. She asked how Herondale’s going to make sure the right man gets the job.”

Oh. Oh no.

“Captain Garroway,” Alec breathes, “Magnus said that Luke is going after the Commissioner’s job.”

“Yeah, I know. And so does the Senator. Alec, listen, I think - are you alone?”


“Yes and no,” Izzy says, “Luke’s on the task force investigating these arsons and vigilante murders. Everyone knows he’s sympathetic towards supers and he’s publically put his support behind both Penhallow and Clinton. He worked his way up from a beat cop to captain, so he’s popular amongst the NYPD, probably more so than Dieudonné. He has a very good chance of being selected for Commissioner.”

“Herondale’s not gonna let that happen.”

“No. No, I don’t think so. I wouldn’t be surprised if Herondale asks mom to arrange something. It would be easy to stage it as an accident. Or not an accident - they could have the Circle do it and blame it on the supers that Luke is so eager to protect. It would be good publicity for Herondale’s cause.”

Alec scrubs his hand across his eyes. “What … what did mom say? What does it have to do with Idris?”

“Herondale didn’t say much. She said that she would like to discuss assurances in person with mom and dad, so that she can guarantee Idris’ support once she’s back in the Senate. Then she
spoke a bit about the legislation, asked mom whether Idris could be tasked with rounding up unregistered superhumans once the bill gets passed. Mom was … even mom was taken aback. She tried to get more details, but Herondale suggested that a good premium would be on the table if they could come to an arrangement … she said she’d send a car for mom to pick her up. Mom hasn’t been at Headquarters since.”

“Fuck,” Alec hisses, “She’s gonna take a hit out on Luke. How have we not heard about this? Someone must - if Herondale is watching Luke, she must already have a tail on him, how has he not noticed?”

“I haven’t told Clary yet,” says Izzy. “I don’t know how to - how do you tell someone that their father’s life might be at risk and with all our resources, we can’t even catch the person doing it? Jace is here, maybe I can ask him to break the news, but I’m sure you can imagine how that’s going to go. Clary will want to be out there protecting Luke herself.”

“Can we arrange a protection detail? Coordinated patrols, we can get someone watching his building - you could talk to Meliorn,” Alec says. “God, this is our fault - Magnus and I shouldn’t have involved Luke in our investigation - fuck.”

“Jace was with me when I was listening to the phone call,” Izzy says, “He volunteered straight away. I assume you’ll also -”

“Yes,” Alec says without thinking. “I’ll do it. My stuff’s in my locker, I’ll go suit up now-”

“I figured as much. But mom and dad won’t be happy if they find out you and Jace are both doing your own thing again, especially so close to the Election. They’ll flip. And that’s if Herondale doesn’t figure it out first. I don’t know what happens to the contract or to mom and dad if Herondale finds out we’re protecting Luke.”

Alec sinks his teeth into his lip, folding himself over the telephone. He stares hard at the floor, kicking at broken glass with his toe.

*Sentinel without Idris. You know it’s possible.*

Yes, but this is different. This is different to Izzy covering for you when you’re with Veil and Wolfsbane. It’s different to slipping away after patrol ends to meet up with Nightlock and track the pyrokinetic.
This is mutiny. And he has no other choice.

“Can you cover for me and Jace?” he asks. “Just for tonight. An alibi.”

Izzy snorts on the other end of the line. “C’mon, Alec,” she says, “It sounds like you think I don’t already have a plan.”

“I would never think that,” Alec says softly, “I just - this is serious.”

“I know it is. Which is why I know you have to do it. It’s who you are, Alec. Who you’ve always been, really, and it’s a damn pain that mom and dad can’t get with the times and see that Idris is on the wrong side of this fight.”

The words ring in Alec’s head.

“Who I am,” Alec echoes.

“Yes, who you are. Ridiculous and stubborn and stupidly Hell-bent on saving the people that matter to you, which doesn’t have to be the whole city, by the way, but - I know you, big brother. I know what makes you tick. And I know what you’re capable of, too. And if Idris want to survive whatever is about to happen, they’re gonna need that person. But enough of that - let’s talk details ...”

Izzy’s already spoken to Jace, Aline, and Helen. Of course she has. Sentinel and Arkangel will be one team, and Aline and Helen will be the other, “and maybe we can get Raj and Lydia on board too,” Izzy says. “We can rotate as teams of two between Luke’s home address and the precinct, and then the remaining people can tail him in between. I’ll talk to Meliorn about getting cameras set up in his home and in his squad car - shouldn’t be too difficult -”

Alec nods, but his minds whirs.

They have to see this as a lead. Alec has no idea how the Circle has been choosing victims, and because of that, Valentine has been one step ahead of them since the beginning. He’s always gone by the time Sentinel arrives and finds the carnage, but now -
But it’s Clary’s father. Could you see it as a lead if it were Isabelle being threatened? If it were Jace?

If it were Magnus?

“Check in again when you’re suited up,” Izzy says then, “Jace will meet you on the roof of your office in half an hour, and then you guys can head over to Luke’s precinct. If you run into Nightlock tonight, it wouldn’t be a bad idea to get him on side too. We need all the help we can get.”

“Alright,” Alec replies, “Talk to you later, Iz. I love you.”

“I love you too, big brother. Stay safe.”

She hangs up and the dial tone bleats in Alec’s ear: one, two, three; for a moment, the only sound in the world. He slots the phone back into the cradle and slips from the phone booth, tugging his coat tighter and jamming his hands beneath his arms.

The rain is cold upon the back of his neck. The autumn air makes his scar ache, a dull stiffness that pulses through his side and down his leg.

He doesn’t really feel it.

Alec ducks down the alleyway that runs along the side of the office, his feet splashing in the puddles. The thin black windows of the Tribunal watch him like a hundred eyes peering from out of the stone as he jumps from the glow of one street light to the next.

He’s not going to have time to talk to Magnus tonight. But if Magnus has already phoned Luke today about Dieudonné, and Herondale is tapping Luke’s phone -

A short, low whistle rings out from above. Alec’s eyes fly up to the silhouette perched on the fire escape ladder above his head.
“Hello, stranger,” Nightlock says, already smiling. He vaults over the railings, landing with easy grace in front of Alec, his coat billowing in the updraught. “Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes. Late night at the office?”

Nightlock hasn’t seen Alec since that one, ephemeral night on the skyscraper -

- and God, that feels so long ago now.

But the way his face lights up, that hasn’t changed. He grins at Alec in a way he never looks at Sentinel: a brightness, an edge, a delight in the crooked line of his mouth and the dance of his eyes.

And it’s not lesser or more to the way he looks at Sentinel - it’s only different. Only jarring. It makes Alec wonder which is real. Who is it that you show to the people you care about?

(Somehow, the Nightlock who Sentinel knows feels like the one that matters a little more.)

The man who stands before Alec now isn’t the same super whose skin is peppered with Alec’s fingerprints, just as Sentinel’s is covered in his. This Nightlock won’t let Alec see when he’s vulnerable, and he isn’t the Nightlock who once told Alec fondly of his someone he’s in love with, and he’s not the same person who kissed Sentinel on a quiet rooftop.

This Nightlock doesn’t know he kissed me at all.

Alec’s coms bud crackles in his ear. Isabelle must be talking to Jace. The static is a sharp jolt to the gut and Alec’s entire body stills.

Nightlock sees it in his face. His smile fades and he steps forward, reaching out his hand to Alec. His fingers don’t quite reach - and Alec is glad of it, because he fears he might have flinched.

“Alec? Are you okay?” he asks, “Is something the matter? Are you hurt?”

“‘M fine,” Alec says tightly. He looks to the rooftop where he knows Jace will appear any moment now, and the movement of his eyes cannot go unmissed. “I’m not hurt,” he clarifies, “But we just
got a tip - and I need to - I gotta go-

Nightlock doesn’t give him time to come up with a good lie. His eyes narrow behind his mask. “What do you mean a tip? About the Circle?”

Alec shakes his head. “Herondale. Listen, I - I don’t have time to explain - a friend of mine is in trouble -” He moves past Nightlock but Nightlock grabs his arm and turns him back.

“Which friend?”

“Luke Garroway. He’s a Police Captain at the 99th precinct - he’s a friend of a friend, and I really have to go -”

“Captain Garroway? Has something happened to him?”

Nightlock’s eyes burn into his, and then they smoke out; Alec watches his eyes glaze over. He squeezes Alec’s arm.

“Dieudonné,” Nightlock mutters, more to himself than to Alec. Then, he looks sharply up again, “Did he do something to Luke?”

*He calls him Luke like he knows him*, Alec thinks, but then shakes his head. *There’s no time.*

“There may be a threat made against his life” Alec says. He glances up at the roof again. “I need to - I’m sorry, but I have to go. Maybe you could -”

Alec gently pulls his arms from Nightlock’s grip - but it doesn’t take a second for Nightlock to glide into step beside him, matching Alec’s brisk pace as he rushes for the fire escape door - and his suit.

“Herondale ordered the hit?” Nightlock asks. His feet barely touch the ground. “Or Valentine?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know, I just - I can’t - I can’t say anymore, not here -”
“Okay,” Nightlock nods. “I understand. Let me go instead. If the Circle are going to target him, it’s not safe -”

“I’ll be fine. I have to go, you don’t understand-”

“Alec.”

Nightlock pushes between Alec and the door back into the office, and Alec stops abruptly. With a flick of his fingers, Nightlock could push Alec back before Alec’s even had the chance to reach for the door handle. He could pin Alec against a wall and pull all the breath from Alec’s lungs, but -

“I’m not going to try and stop you,” Nightlock says, “I know the sort of man you are. I know you’re stubborn, but - please. I’m asking. Phone Captain Garroway, warn him, but don’t -”

Don’t go out there alone.

But I won’t be alone, Alec thinks. I’ll be with you.

“I read … I read in the paper - about that arson in Harlem, the building - you saved all those people alongside the Corporates-”

“I’ll find them,” Nightlock urges, “Call Captain Garroway and go home. Let me do this. I promise no harm will come to Luke whilst I’m there.”

Alec bites the inside of his cheek. He hates the fact he’s got to lie.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yeah, okay, I -” Alec holds up his scarred hand between them, and Nightlock’s eyes fall to the
fading burn ripples that whirl across his knuckles. The memory of that night in the alleyway lick like flames across Nightlock’s eyes and his face pales. Dirty trick, says the voice inside Alec’s head. You’re lying, you’re lying, you’re lying to him. “Thank you.”

In the back of his mind, Alec can hear his watch ticking; it won’t be long until the metallic swoop of Arkangel overhead gives him away. Nightlock needs to leave before Jace arrives.

“You have to go,” says Alec, “Now.”

Nightlock nods as he adjusts his gloves and then, with a wave of his hand, he summons energy from the air and the flickering lights above to raise himself slowly off the ground. And Alec feels it, the way the world contort and adjusts around him, how the very fabric of reality is pushed and pulled into Nightlock’s hands, and Alec can’t resist the very same draw. He feels his heart shake loose inside his chest.

And Nightlock must hear it, that caged worry rattling around inside with a distinct tremor, because he pauses, not two feet off the ground, and his own expression softens. He floats down into Alec’s space and, with a tilt of his head, magics up a smile.

“Don’t worry,” he says, and with his index finger, he catches the underside of Alec’s jaw, a gentle touch flicking across Alec’s skin, forcing him to look up. “I can think of a few ways you can pay me back. Dinner and a movie, perhaps? Or I could whisk you away for a beautiful view of the city and a bottle of wine, it’s up to you -”

“You’re incorrigible,” Alec says breathlessly.

“All the best supers are,” Nightlock smiles. He spreads his arms wide, arcing his palms upwards through the air, and before Alec can blink, he soars up into the sky, and Alec is buffeted by the winds of takeoff.

For a stolen moment, Alec shields his eyes to the dark and the blinding city glow, and he watches, enraptured, until Nightlock is just another speck amongst a ceiling of artificial stars. And then, he’s gone, disappearing into the night and labyrinth of skyscrapers, and reality descends upon Alec with a winding punch.

He almost tears the fire door off its hinges as he runs for the locker room.
For once in his life, Jace arrives on time, landing on the rooftop in a gust of wind and the creaking hiss of his wings fanned out wide. Alec’s wet footprints betray his pacing, his quiver already slung over his shoulder, his bow clipped to his belt, and his mask in place, and he and Jace don’t have to say anything beyond a nod and a look that reminds Alec that there is a reason, after all is said and done, that they’re partners in this.

*Let’s go.*

They make good time across the city; the wind carries Jace like a feather. He swoops and dives and rides the currents that wind through the skyscrapers, and drops Alec onto the building across from Luke’s precinct, before flying higher, a brewing storm drawing him up towards the clouds where the view is better.

Alec’s feet hit the roof and his stomach bubbles up into his throat; flying with Jace is never like flying with Nightlock. The turbulence has him staggering, and his body is already running on fumes as it is, but he swallows it all back, gritting his teeth.

Unclipping his bow from its holster, he flicks it out to its full length and fixes his scope to the guard as if he were notching an arrow. With one eye closed, Alec squints through the lens, scanning the precinct across the street until he finds exactly who he’s looking for.

Bright office light filters out through the barred windows on the fifth floor. Beat cops and plain-clothed officers make the switch from the day to the night shift, and the bullpen is already busy with collared drunks who have got ahead of themselves and found an early bed for the night in a police holding cell. And then Alec finds Luke, Captain Garroway, dressed in his blue uniform and perched on the edge of a desk, laughing with another officer like he has no idea in the world what waits outside for him in the dark.

*And why should he know?* Alec didn’t know. Alec didn’t see this coming when he should’ve.

Luke looks none the wiser. A shudder in Alec’s hand ruins his steady grip of his bow, and he thinks he’d call it anger. Because he *is* angry, there’s no question about it, it’s untapped and raw and his body reacts to it seismically: anger at himself, at Idris, at Herondale, at the whole damn city for getting to decide when one good man’s life becomes expendable for another’s cause.
“Iz,” Alec hisses into his coms, “We’re here. Arkangel’s scouting, and I have eyes on Luke.”

“Good to hear,” Izzy replies in his ear. “If anyone asks, you and Jace are following up on a robbery, two blocks south of your current position. I had Meliorn make a fake police broadcast, just in case. You’re covered - with mom, at least. She won’t question it.”

“Alright.” Alec follows Luke with the line of his scope as he weaves between desks, clapping one young officer on the back, and peering over paperwork with another. “Has mom come back to Headquarters yet?”

“Not yet. I checked CCTV and Herondale sent a car for her just after three. She’s been gone for hours.”

Alec doesn’t want to think about his mother, not now, not with everything he knows about what she’s done, what she’s allowed Idris to be, but if Herondale is willing to remove Luke from the equation because he’s getting in the way, what might happen if Maryse decides to pull Idris’ support and back out of the contract -

Don’t think about it.

“Okay. Keep me posted. Everything looks normal here,” he says, and as he says it, he knows it doesn’t matter. Herondale doesn’t have to make her move tonight. It could be any night. The Election is still a few days away, and the Commissioner’s selection will be weeks after that.

It might not be tonight. It could be any night.

A young woman in civilian clothes appear in Alec’s sights. She doesn’t look like a cop, dressed down in jeans and a leather jacket, a choker around her neck instead of a detective’s shield, and she doesn’t greet any of the other policemen, making her way straight across the room to Luke like she’s on a mission.

Alec watches as she taps Luke on the arm, and Luke turns away from the window. Alec can no longer read his lips, but the shift in Luke’s shoulders, he does see.
“Hang on, Iz. We might have something.”

“What do you see?”

“Female, maybe twenty, twenty-five; dark skin, dark hair.” Alec blinks, and the frown on his face cements. The woman looks oddly familiar, but he can’t place her, and he doesn’t know why. Something about her wild curly hair and the jut of her hip is giving him deja-vu. “She’s talking to Luke right now.”

“Does it look like they know each other?”

“They’ve moved away from the window, I can’t see them anymore,” Alec says. “Should I get closer?”

“No, stay put,” Izzy says, “Keep your eyes on the door. Jace, can you do a fly-by? Fifth floor, west-facing side.”

“Sure thing, boss,” Jace replies, his voice obscured by the sound of wind rushing past his ears.

Silence descends, and Alec keeps his eyes trained on the windows of the precinct, barely blinking as Jace bullets past, wheeling off on a silver angle around the block.

Alec measures his breathing, slowing each rise and fall of his chest until he’s completely invisible, unnoticeable: he’s done this many times before, other nights and other rooftops, waiting for other people until he’s lost the feeling in his fingers to the rain. He’s used to pin-prick quiet.

Tonight, though, the silence is suffocating. Izzy murmurs in his ear and Jace soars and tumbles through the low lying clouds above and Alec watches the window for Luke to return - but he doesn’t come back. Nor does the woman.

“I’m monitoring the precinct CCTV,” Izzy says, “Luke’s squad car is still in the lot. He hasn’t left the building.”

Alec’s fingers twitch on his bow. His stomach begins to cramp, a dreadful unease tying up his
insides in knots, and the only answer is to clench his jaw to stem the pain.

He’s in the dark. *How can they know what Herondale is planning and yet still be one step behind?*

*What if that costs Luke his life?*

*What if he has to tell Clary that he didn’t figure it out in time?*

Alec exhales sharply through his nose, his brush mushrooming in the cold. It feels like someone is standing on his stomach, grinding the heel of their boot into his gut. *Don’t think about it*, he tells himself. *Don’t think.*

“*Shit,*” Izzy hisses, “*I think mom’s back.*”

“*With or without Herondale?*” Jace asks.

“*I don’t know. I just got the summon upstairs. It’s probably a briefing -*”

“Iz -” Alec whispers.

“*I’ll be careful, big brother, don’t worry. I’m not going to ask her about Herondale until I know what’s going on. I’ll be back as soon as I can.*”

Izzy’s line crackles with white noise, and then snuffs out into silence.

Alec’s ears ring. Nausea sweeps through him like a riptide, like there’s a claw in his stomach trying desperately to yank his insides up and out through his throat.

*Wait a minute.*
He clenches his fingers around his bow so hard that his knuckles seize.

He knows this feeling - the feeling like his diaphragm is pushing up against his lungs and his mouth is full of bile and his head is swimming.

Where -

Alec keels sideways as a wave of nausea, stronger than any he’s felt before, takes him off his feet and he nearly drops his bow. He staggers, dry heaving with his arm pressed against his gut, and in his ear, he hears Jace’s faint voice say: “Buddy? Sentinel? Are you okay, what was that noise - ”

Then, Alec looks up - and sure enough, Veil is stalking across the rooftop towards him, Wolfsbane following some distance behind.

The look in Veil’s eyes is thunderous. Alec can feel it radiating off her skin, rolling waves and rippling power. He has never seen the distortion caused by her illusions so plainly before.

“What the fuck are you doing here, Sentinel?”

Alec winces; the bark of her words bludgeons him with another churn of his stomach. He scrabbles for the holes in her illusion, searching for the shimmer, the sound of rain, whatever is here that shouldn’t be here - but he can’t find it.

Light bends around her unnaturally; her leather jacket reflects a holographic glow. Her fists are clenched at her side, gripping tight to whatever it is she’s stopping Alec from seeing.

Alec grimaces, palming at his thighs as slowly straightens up. Another lump pulses in his throat. He wills himself to stay standing, but she’s not holding back, and if she wants to drown him with her illusion, then so be it. Alec won’t be able to stop her.

Still, he croaks, “I’m - I’m - can you cut that out? It’s just me, I promise. I’m alone.”

“No,” Veil says, but she twists her fist and the pressure does at least abate from Alec’s insides. Behind her, Wolfsbane folds his arms across his broad chest. His cowl conceals his face, but it
looks like he’s frowning. But he says nothing. Veils continues, “Why are you doing here? Do you know? How did you find out?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about -” Alec hisses, “I’m here for Captain Garroway, he’s a friend -”

Veil narrows her eyes. “What about Captain Garroway?” she demands. She jerks her fist to the side, and another flood of nausea pummels Alec’s stomach. He curls forward on himself, sucking in a sharp breath to keep the bile down.

It’s enough for Wolfsbane to step in.

“Veil, that’s enough,” he says in his deep timbre. “Leave him be, I don’t think he knows.”

Veil clicks her tongue, but unclenches her fist, and the weight in Alec’s gut lessens. He scrabbles for a breath whilst he can.

“Captain Garroway - we think the Senator has a hit out on his life.”

Veil freezes. Alec is surprised to see fear flash across her face, the steel in her eyes disintegrating in the drizzle, and it makes her look infinitesimally young.

“What?” she asks. “What are you - what are you talking about?” Alec hears it in her voice too, the uncertainty slipping through the cracks in her facade; the iridescent shimmer in the corner of his eye begins to tremble.

“We received a tip. Senator Herondale and Idris -”

“Idris is in on this?!”

Veil lurches towards Alec - and Alec knows she’s not afraid to throw a punch - but Wolfsbane’s hand on her shoulder stops her from doing something rash.
“Wolfsbane -!”

“Veil. Enough,” he says, and then looks at Alec. “Is this true, Sentinel?”

“Yes, we think so,” Alec says, “Herondale’s ordered an attempt on his life, and Idris might be complicit, but we don’t know how far up it goes. But it’s not me. I’m not involved. And not Arkangel or Muse. We … we can’t be part of this. Not anymore.”

*Sentinel without Idris.*

Veil closes her eyes and Alec can see her jaw work, tense and fuming. Quietly, Alec adjusts his grip on his bow, and then wonders if an arrow could hold up against someone who could blind him with a flick of her wrist.

He doesn’t get to find out, for which he’s glad.

“Veil,” says Wolfsbane then, and both Veil and Alec look to him in the same moment. “I think you should let him see.”

“Aren’t you serious? No, that’s not -”


Alec steps closer, but no amount of caution can prepare him for Veil’s harsh sigh and the way she grabs his wrist, pressing his fingertips to the thin strip of skin between his gloves and bracers, freeing him from illusion.

And it’s like coming up for air: the sky, the cold, the rain, and the blue. Alec gasps.

It’s all too easy to figure out what she was hiding.

Wolfsbane is not wearing his super suit. Instead, he’s in a police officer’s uniform, a gun strapped
to his hip and a brass badge pinned to his breast, and Alec doesn’t even need to count the stripes on his shoulders -

Because Veil’s illusion was hiding the fact Wolfsbane is not wearing a mask.

“What -” Alec starts to say, before he stops himself abruptly. It’s pretty obvious what this is, and he doesn’t need to ask, not with the way Veil is glaring at him.

Wolfsbane is Luke Garroway.

Wolfsbane is the man Alec is here to protect; Wolfsbane is Clary’s father and Magnus’ police contact, and -

Wolfsbane is the next vigilante the Circle are going to try and kill.

Wolfsbane knows who Alec is in real life.

(God - does he know? Does he know who I am?)

“I saw Arkangel nosing about,” Veil says then, still glaring at Alec. “And then I spotted you, because you’re never far behind. You two are far too fucking obvious and that’s without Arkangel’s giant metal ego. I came to tell Luke you were up to no good.”

“It’s a protection detail,” says Alec, looking up at Luke - at Wolfsbane - he’s not really sure what to call him. *How did I not see it? How did Jace not see it? How did Clary? It was only a mask, it should’ve been obvious.* “We need - we need to have eyes on you - home, work, anywhere you go. Herondale might already have a tail on you.”

Luke frowns. “So, it’s pretty serious, huh?” he says, “Damn. Well, I guess we were right, then. About Herondale and Dieudonné. That’s gotta count for something.”

“This is ridiculous!” Veil snaps, turning to Luke, “You know what this is - she’s threatened, the Senator, because you wanna be Commissioner and stand against Dieudonné. Because you actually care about the supers in this city, and not lining your own pockets - fuck. This is messed up. She
can’t get to Penhallow, so she’s coming after you, because you’re the next best thing.”

Her tone is clipped. Nervous. It sets Alec on edge and finally, he’s able to tear his eyes away from Luke.

Veil clenches and unclenches her fists at her sides, itching for a fight. Alec can see the tension in her body, the fury in the set of her jaw. For a moment, he wonders who Luke must be to her for it to matter this much - and then he realises, Luke doesn’t have to be anyone. Not a friend, not family, not a teacher or a mentor, not even another vigilante. Nobody.

He’s just a man fighting for her right to exist, to take up space in the world. That’s more than enough reason for Veil to want to protect him with her life.

Veil’s eyes flick to Alec as if she can read his thoughts.

“Nobody cares about vigilantes. Not Herondale, not Penhallow, not the police. There’s nobody out there to give us a voice when we need one,” she says, her voice low and dangerous, “Read what you want in the press, it doesn’t matter - Luke’s the only one with any actual standing, the only one who can make a difference, that’s why he’s running for Commissioner - not that a Corporate would understand -”

Oh .

This is the problem with spending so much of his life in the dark. He’s grown used to it. He lives in it.

It’s not the dark that eats him up.

It takes a lightning strike of a moment to illuminate all the cracks in him and the city alike, and the light streams through the holes in him and hemorrhages out the other side. It takes a blinding flash to see the bigger picture.

This is not just a threat on a man’s life because he’s political competition. It’s not about nosy journalists getting too close to the truth about the Circle, and it’s not about Penhallow and the Election. It’s so much bigger than that, and finally, Alec has caught up with the speed at which everyone else is running.
Veil is right. It’s no secret that Luke is open about his support of the city’s supers. And now Alec knows that’s because he is one himself, but nobody else knows that: all they see is a police captain in open opposition to the Senator, to the White House, to the fucking President himself - and that’s powerful.

Alec looks at Veil. She’s fighting off a tremble, but her eyes are wide like she’s one wrong word away from flight or fight - and she doesn’t know which.

And Alec doesn’t know her story - perhaps he never will - but he can take a guess.

*How many other kids with powers has Luke Garroway brought under his protection?*

*How many other vigilantes has he steered onto the right path? How many has he taught to handle their powers -*

*How many vigilantes depend on heroes like Wolfsbane for their safety?*

A threat on Luke’s life - on Wolfsbane’s life - is a threat to the city at large, and on every single vigilante that lives within its shadow.

And it would be all too easy to pick them off, one by one, until all who are left are those who work for Idris, under the thumb of politicians and senators and greedy fucking governments.

“Fuck,” Alec mutters under his breath, “Fuck.”

Veil’s expression seems to soften. Her hands loosen at her sides. She looks defeated.

Alec hates that.

Luke reaches out and claps Alec on the shoulder, the warmth of his palm seeping through Alec’s black armour. “It’s alright, Sentinel,” he says, “This is nothing any of us haven’t dealt with before. Every time we put on a mask, we’re painting a target on our backs. It’s part of the job description.”
“Except you don’t have a mask,” Alec says, “Not this time.”

“I know. But if a Police Captain is murdered in his bed, there are going to be at least some people asking questions. I sure would.”


Luke shrugs his shoulders, somehow managing a smile. “Honestly, I’m kinda surprised,” he says, “I was waiting for Dieudonné to make his move but I figured he’d pay me to quietly pull me name outta the race for Commissioner. Resorting to violence makes it seem like they’re desperate. Means we’re doing something right.”

“It might draw the Circle out into the open too,” Alec mutters, “For once we know where they might be.”

Veil’s face sours, her mouth twisting in distaste, but Luke nods thoughtfully. He’s far too calm for Alec’s liking.

“A smart move would be to use me as bait,” he says, “We can force their hand. Valentine wouldn’t expect it, not us all working together. Who else did you say is on side?”

“Arkangel, Muse, a few others from Idris. And Nightlock.”

“I think we should consider leaking this to the press,” Luke says. “Or leaking something to the press - this close to the Election, people will pay attention, and we can coax the Circle into showing themselves when we want them to. I know a man who works for the Daily Tribunal who might be able to help.”

“Magnus Bane,” Alec says on a breath.

Luke raises an eyebrow at him. “You know Magnus?”
“We’ve met a few times,” Alec lies, betrayed by the throb of the scar on his ribs. “He’s sympathetic.”

“Sympathetic, right,” Luke snorts, “I guess you could say that about him.” He wanders towards the rooftop edge and stands, hands on his hips, staring across the road at his precinct. “I’ll arrange a press conference. If I publically challenge Dieudonné’s candidacy, it’ll keep the Circle’s eye fixed upon me. They’ll be blind to whoever else is moving around in the shadows.”

“And if they don’t send their pet pyrokinetic?” Veil scowls, “And they just gun you down on a street corner? Or a call goes south, or your squad car just happens to hit a fire hydrant, or -”

Luke looks back at her. “It’s a risk I’m willing to take. At this point, we’re running out of time and we have to make a move.”

“And your family?”

Alec doesn’t mean to say it, but he does. He thinks of Clary, and then he thinks of the woman Wolfsbane once told him about, the one whom he left Idris for.

If it were Magnus -

“I’ll send my wife away, out of the city,” says Luke, “And my daughter will be fine. If the Senator wanted to use them against me, she would’ve already made her move.”

Alec swallows thickly. “Okay. Okay, I’ll get all the information we have sent to Magnus Bane’s office. But Veil has a point, we should talk about how we’re going to keep you safe-”

The pressure in the air shifts - and this time, not an invisible hand sweeping up the back of Alec’s neck or cupping Alec’s cheek, but a violent jolt in the air that buffets them all on their feet.

Veil stiffens, raising her hand to recast her illusion over Luke, but Luke waves her down. The wind rips through his windbreaker and it rustles like thunder, and he turns away from the edge in the same moment Alec looks up.
Why, now, does his heart start racing -

Nightlock drops from out of the sky, landing heavily enough to kick up rainwater beneath his boots. His suit is rain-splattered and his hair is windswept and he looks at Alec for split second before turning to Luke.

“You know, if you actually kept normal work hours and didn’t prostrate yourself to the service of the people, perhaps you might more often be at home when I come looking for you,” Nightlock says. “I knew I should’ve checked the precinct first.”

Luke laughs, a deep rumble in his chest. He reaches out for Nightlock’s hand and grasps it warmly. They know each other. *They know each other as Nightlock and Luke.* “I don’t think you have any leverage to talk to me about normal work hours. But it’s good to see you. You already know what’s going on?”

Alec sucks in a breath. And he sees, too, the moment when Nightlock’s shoulders stiffen and he lets Luke’s hand fall.

“Yes,” Nightlock says slowly. “I’m up to speed.” He looks back over his shoulder at Alec and meets Alec’s gaze and it’s like another lightning strike, the way Alec feels his shadow disintegrate in a single blink.

*Alec was the one who told Nightlock.*

“Nightlock, I -”

Alec’s coms crackle loudly in his ear and he flinches. He cups his ear and twists away from the sudden intensity of Nightlock’s stare. “*Wait, who knows that who knows what?*” comes Jace’s voice, “I’m lost. What’s going on over there? Am I meant to know something? This is too much knowing. Should I come over?”

Alec taps his coms bud three times: *yes, but I can’t talk right now*, and, perhaps bravely, looks back at Nightlock.

Nightlock is looking at him in a way that Alec cannot read. And Alec opens his mouth to speak, but he finds he has no clue what to say.
He can still feel the flick of Nightlock’s finger against the underside of his jaw. He can still hear Nightlock’s words echoing between alleyway walls: ‘Call Captain Garroway and go home. Let me do this. Don’t go out there alone.’

 Barely an hour has passed since Alec saw him, and he saw Alec.

_I didn’t make the connection between Luke and Wolfsbane, but surely_, Alec thinks, _Surely you must know it's me._

“Does it matter?” Veil interrupts then, “We don’t have time for this - if you’re all just gonna stand here and talk in circles, then I’m outta here -”

The wind howls and she stops, turning her face to the sky: this time, the drizzle trembles with the unmistakable _whump-whump-whump_ of engines whirring and the clink of steel moving over steel. She lets out a mildly disgusted groan.

Jace comes into land, unfurling his wings and dramatically flicking his hair out of his face. A broad devil-may-care grin stretches across his mouth.

“Hey - wow, the whole gang's here,” Jace says, “What’d I miss?”

The subway carriage jolts Alec into wakefulness. His head knocks into a grab handle and his shoulder bumps the man in front, who returns it with a glare over the top of his newspaper.

Alec’s eyes drift down to the headline: _BELCOURT HOLDINGS LINKED TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING RING AS FRAUD TRIAL CONTINUES_. The words coalesce and jumble and smear into a black streak; he blinks, and blinks again, but it’s too great a task to clear his eyes of sleep.

He didn’t sleep last night. He didn’t even see his bed, stumbling through his balcony doors just
after sunrise, only for his alarm clock to ring the moment he slumped down onto the couch, still in his supersuit.

And he’s gone longer without his bed, he knows he has and he knows what he’s been trained to endure - but his head is too fuzzy to recall, and he lets the subway rocks him back and forth into a stupor.

His hair is still damp from the rain last night, his skin still cold. He can hear the rumble of the city and the whistle of the wind and the quiet pulse of blood in his ears, all of it an echo.

He doesn’t know how long he was on that rooftop last night, but he does remember the hour Jace and Veil had spent trading petty insults, and the sound of Izzy’s voice crackling over the radio, and the way Nightlock had been quiet, his eyes never leaving Alec, looking for something that Alec had no clue how to give or how to hide.

Nightlock hadn’t been himself, and even in the midst of every other chaos, Alec had noticed. He always notices his eyes drawn to Nightlock like he’s magnetic, like Alec is trapped in an orbit around him, one which Nightlock doesn’t even have to lift a finger to create.

Nightlock has always had this way of cutting through every storm, whether he wills it or not.

The subway brakes too fast and Alec earns an elbow in his back for his troubles. He shoulders his way out the door, nudged and knocked by other passengers pushing their way on before he’s even stepped foot on the platform. He pushes his way up the stairs slick with trampled rain and the smell of creosote, and the anharmonic whine of passing trains is replaced by the sound of rain on concrete and umbrellas opening to an overcast sky.

Alec holds his stachel up above his head as he steps out into the rain. The sound of it hitting his bag is much the same as the sound of it hitting his armour last night: dull, muffled, and cold down the back of his neck.

(“Are you really just gonna stand there and stare after him like some mooning teenager?” Jace had asked, just before the sunrise. “Come on, we gotta go. I wanna do one more fly around the block to check for any tails before I go back to HQ.”)

Alec had dragged his eyes away from the rooftop edge where Nightlock had stepped off into the dawn twilight, accompanying Luke and Veil back across the city to their hideout. Jace had stood
with his wings unfolded and his hands on his hips; the titanium had glinted in the drizzle like liquid silver.

“I’m not mooning,” Alec had muttered. “I’m just ... worried.”

“Okay, not mooning, but you’re definitely moping. And Luke’s in good hands, c’mon. Nothing’s gonna happen to them tonight, and no-one’s gonna take on Nightlock in the daylight. You said yourself how quick he scared off the pyro last time they met.”

Alec’s mouth had flattened into a hard line. *I’m not worried about that*, he had wanted to say. *Well, I am, but -*

“He didn’t ask me to go with him.” *And he didn’t say goodbye.*

“Who? Nightlock?”

“Yeah.”

Jace had frowned. “Why would he ask you to go with him? Me and you are still on duty. He knows that. Besides, he’ll be perfectly fine by himself. You’ve seen him in action.” His eyes had narrowed. “What’s this about? You okay?”

Alec had waved him off. Jace hadn’t pushed it. The afterimage of Nightlock on the rooftop had lingered like a spectre.

*Maybe I slipped up*, Alec thinks as he ducks into the lobby of the Tribunal. *Maybe I finally, finally slipped up and he knows who I am.*

*But don’t you want him to know who you are? You want to know who he is, after all.*

It still doesn’t explain his silence. Or the look in his eyes.
Alec knows he must bear the sins of the night, because Simon raises his eyebrows at him as Alec stalks past his desk. Simon tells him he looks a fright and Alec replies with a glare that he hopes would terrify anyone away from asking exactly why.

He busies himself with mundane tasks - answering emails, writing memos, organising his meetings for the month - stuff he can’t mess up in sleep deprivation, and it’s halfway to eleven before Magnus finds him.

And it’s a little strange, because Alec has grown used to Magnus stopping by his desk first thing in the morning, or whenever Magnus is on his way to get coffee at the coffee machine that is definitely not the closest to his office but is certainly closest to Alec, or just any time Magnus wants to talk or flirt or simply look -

So, when Magnus emerges from the elevator on the other side of the office, a coffee already in his hand, Alec knows something is wrong. His clothes, his makeup, the ever-present pile of folders tucked under his arm, those things are all the same - but it’s the way he holds himself that tells Alec he hasn’t slept either.

Magnus’ lips press together in a thin line and he dismisses one of the junior editors who tries to intercept him. He weaves through the maze of cubicles and not a single other person looks up, not sparing him a second thought. And Magnus - Magnus is the sort of person who commands rooms.

Seeing him so distracted is not right; Alec’s heart pinches inside his chest. The hair on the back of his neck bristles as if someone were blowing on his skin.


Maybe Izzy or Luke already beat Alec to it.

“Magnus, hey,” says Alec, halfway out of his chair before Magnus has even reached his partition. “Are you okay, you look -?”

“We need to talk,” Magnus says. His eyes roam from Alec’s face to his feet and back again,
searching for new bandages, new scars. But he finds none and his expression softens and he adds, “There’s been a development on the Morgenstern case. Do you have a moment?”

Alec grabs his jacket from the back of his chair. “Of course,” he says without hesitation. “Lead the way.”

Magnus is silent the entire way to his office, but it’s clear that he wants to say something: he rubs his thumb against his rings and keeps his lips pressed against the rim of his coffee cup and doesn’t look at Alec. He can feel Magnus’ skin itching and yet knows Magnus will not bow to scratch it.

He knows what it is that Magnus has to tell him. They decided last night that Isabelle would send a transcript of the telephone call she overheard to Luke, and Luke would pass the details on to Magnus at the Tribunal to lay a snare for the Circle. Nightlock had said nothing, but he had nodded, and whilst Jace and Veil had debated back and forth about what exactly the public needs to know, Alec had just … watched.

Watched and wondered: why do you have nothing to say about this?

Magnus wears the same look as Nightlock did; his face is drawn, his eyes are unreadable; he’s troubled.

And as he should be - Magnus knows Luke, they go back years. Luke is more than just a source; he’s a friend, and Alec remembers the last time one of Magnus’ friends got too close to the Circle.

That was Ragnor Fell.

From the corner of his eye, Alec watches as Magnus worries his lips, his fingers tapping restlessly against his coffee cup. He holds his head high and his shoulders squarely, but somehow, there’s hesitation in every step, as if the closer the get to his office, the more he doesn’t want to step inside.
Alec wants to reach out, take Magnus by the elbow, stop them walking in the middle of the corridor and ask him again, *are you okay?*

(And Magnus would lie: *I’m fine, Alec*, and Alec’s heart would ache more than it already does.)

Magnus holds open the door to his office and locks it quietly behind them. There are files scattered all over the desk and across the floor, pouring out of filing cabinets, and crumpled drafts overflowing from the trash can. A stack of newspapers occupies Magnus’ chair, and on top of Magnus’ computer keyboard is a tape recorder.

Alec doesn’t move. He clasps his hands behind his back and waits as Magnus dumps his coffee and his folders on the desk, shrugs out of his suit jacket, and pushes all the newspapers off his chair and onto the floor. He wheels himself over to the filing cabinet and grabs his whiskey and two glasses, before spinning back to face Alec.

He says nothing, pouring himself a whiskey neat and downing it one stiff gulp. Alec hates the silence.

“Magnus .-”

Magnus leans forward and presses play on the tape recorder. The reels spin and Luke’s deep voice fills the quiet, and Magnus’ eyes are on Alec in a flash.

“*Magnus, it’s me. Sorry I couldn’t leave this over voicemail, but my phone’s being tapped so this will have to do. Lucky for me, I’ve had a helping hand from a fellow with metal wings and another who’s a crack shot, so don’t worry about me-”*

Alec blinks, focusing his gaze on the tape recorder as the dials spin around and around, and Luke explains quickly about Herondale, Dieudonné, and the Commissioner’s selection. He doesn’t mention Sentinel or Arkangel or Nightlock or anything that happened last night, but Alec can hear the gaps left between his words, the spaces into which Alec can slide himself.

He tries not to react. But there must be something on his face, some twitch to his mouth, some remnant guilt, some tell he cannot hide, because Magnus’ gaze narrows like he already knows Alec is lying to him.
Like he already knows Alec has heard this all before. And he has.

“-about what we spoke about last night ... check out Side B of the tape, and - only show it to people you have to show it to, okay? Write me a good story. Alright. I’ll talk to you later. ”

When the tape finishes and the play button pops up with a click, they’re left in silence. Alec forces himself to be the one to break it.

“I already know,” he says quickly. Magnus raises his eyebrows. “Someone left a tip last night, but you were already gone when I came back to the office.”

“Left a tip?”

“Yes,” says Alec, “Someone from Idris. They didn’t give a name, but -”

“Must’ve been Sentinel,” Magnus murmurs. He looks away from Alec, reshuffling the files on his desk. Alec breathes a sigh of relief. “That would make the most sense, of course.”

Alec bites the inside of his cheek. Lying again. “He was probably calling for you but got me instead. You know each other, and you said you trust him. Sentinel. He probably trusts you too.”

“Mhm,” Magnus murmurs, eyes fixed on the tape recorder. “This is not good news.”

“About Captain Garroway?”

Magnus hesitates. He swirls his empty glass and a single droplet of whiskey rolls around the bottom in a slow circle. “Yes,” he says, “Luke’s a good man. Both the NYPD and the city need him. But -”

“But?”

Magnus gestures at the tape recorder. “Luke wants me to run a story about Herondale rigging the Commissioner’s selection. And this close to the Election, it’s going to have traction, people are
Magnus stops himself, raising his eyebrows as he twists away to pour another drink. There’s something he’s not saying, but he drowns it in a second swig of whiskey and the twist of his mouth.

“You’re not gonna run the story?” Alec asks.

Magnus shakes his head. He reaches out to hook his index finger around Alec’s where his hand trails across the desk, and then he frowns, rubbing his thumb against Alec’s knuckle.

“No,” Magnus says, toy ing with Alec’s fingers. “No, I’ll run it. At this point, I don’t really have a choice. We need to catch the Circle before they kill again. We need Penhallow in office. I know the dangers. And if I didn’t, I wouldn’t be a journalist.”

Magnus’ eyes drift slowly up to Alec’s, lingering on the thin creases in his shirt sleeves, on the too-tight knot of his tie, on the stubble coming through on his jaw. And in his gaze, Alec finds a fire extinguished, but still smoldering, embers still glowing, still dangerous enough not to touch with bare fingers.

And Alec knows far too many dangerous people, people who can level buildings and cast fire and control minds, but in this moment, he thinks New York would be stupid to stand in Magnus’ way.

The things Alec can do with a bow and arrows, and the things Nightlock can do with a flick of his wrist - Magnus can do those things with a pen and a typewriter. Clever words and a sharp tongue. Change the world, save the world -

And yet, no-one can keep going forever and not feel the burden.

That must be it.

Alec squeezes Magnus’ fingers in his, offering him a half smile.
Magnus smiles back. “I’ll run it,” he continues, “And it’s going to be sensational.”

Chapter End Notes

I am 110% convinced that Alec goes at least 4 days in this chapter without sleeping AT ALL ... bro ... please ... catch some zzzs, you're killing me here ...

This is the start of Act 4 which is where everything goes tits up for everyone! Exciting times ahead! Terrible times ahead! Really depends on how much you like angst (I like angst a lot, although mainly writing it, not reading it, so please accept my apologies). Don't forget to keep your eye out for the little details ... I do like to foreshadow, as you may (or may not?) have noticed already hehehe

Not beta read because we die like men! Please forgive all my typos, for there are many ... I'm going on holiday on Wednesday and I needed to get this chapter posted before that. I'm also going to NYC so I can't wait to take innumerate reference photos for this fic lmfao

Thank you so much for all the feedback from last time! I can't express how much it helps to read people's thought and feelings on this fic, as everyone has a different take on the moral issues and it's so interesting!

Visit me on tumblr and shout in my inbox, especially if you have questions! Please reblog the tumblr post for me too!

I'm also on Twitter if you want to come chat about the fic ... and boy, do I love talking about this fic. Tweet as you read with the hashtag ficacoldnight! :D

Please leave a kudos if you made it to the end, and drop me a comment with your thoughts, your favourite line, your hopes for what will happen next, your advice for poor old Alec ... I would be forever grateful for it! If you want an alert next time there's an update, please hit that subscribe button!

Until next time, in which we finally reach Election Night, Alec puts a name to this desperate feeling inside his chest, and Magnus learns the price he must pay for falling in love.
Chapter Summary

“I think, maybe, I’m bad at loving people.”

“But?”

“What makes you think there’s a but?”

“Is there?”

Magnus huffs and shakes his head. “But. But. There’s no but, Alec. I’m bad at loving people. That’s a full sentence in itself.”

“I don’t think you get to judge yourself for that,” Alec whispers. “You can’t. You don’t know what being loved by you feels like.”

Chapter Notes

And Alec has a secret to tell.

&&&

Tweet along with #ficacoldnight!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Hello darling, sorry about that. [...] 

Sorry about the scene at the bottom of the stairwell
and how I ruined everything by saying it out loud.

Especially that, but I should have known.

[...]

Here is the repeated image of the lover destroyed."

-- Richard Siken, Litany in Which Certain Things Are Crossed Out
“Last copy, that,” says the man at the newspaper kiosk. He nods over the desk at the copy of the Daily Tribunal in Alec’s hand. “Not even eight-thirty and I already sold out. Not surprised, with a headline like that.”

Alec murmurs in response, handing the man two crumpled dollar bills and turning away before he can be engaged in more conversation. He tucks the newspaper under his arm and stuffs his hands into his pockets, and joins the endless shuffle of people down into the subway.

It’s been a week.

A week since he discovered Wolfsbane is Luke. A long week of nights sat watching Luke’s building, getting frostbite in his fingers, and Jace going stir fucking crazy. The first of the snow has finally arrived in the city: grey slush instead of white flurries, but it never settles. It only makes Jace miserable, and Alec even more miserable, because Jace hates flying around in the snow. Steel gets cold against skin so easily.

The wind gets cold too. And the rather fetching wind burn in the shape of Sentinel’s mask across the bridge of Alec’s nose is not ideal either.

Alec burrows down inside his coat as he wedges himself onto an overcrowded subway carriage that smells of sweat and damp. He winces against the squeal of the tracks and braces himself against the window as the train pulls away from the platform, and then he unfolds his newspaper.

SENATOR HERONDALE ACCUSED OF NEPOTISM IN POLICE COMMISSIONER SELECTION

November 1st 1992 | by Magnus Bane

Alec skims over the text, but doesn’t really read it. He doesn’t know how Magnus persuaded the Editor-in-Chief to let him publish the story, but -
Well. Maybe Magnus didn’t persuade because he didn’t ask. And now the Editor-in-Chief is going to find out like everybody else when his secretary presents him with the morning edition alongside his coffee and breakfast pastry.

The subway rocks Alec back and forth, a slow and sluggish sway weighed down by so many people crammed in one carriage, hiding away from the cold and the wet. Alec looks up: at least half a dozen other passengers are staring down at the same headline as him.

Alec begins reading again from the top.

**WITH JUST TWO DAYS TO GO** before the race to the Senate crosses its finish line, another dark cloud has emerged over Senator Herondale’s campaign: accusations of nepotism and cronyism regarding the approaching selection of the next NYPD Police Commissioner.

**Following Tuesday’s Presidential Election,** the Mayor of New York City is expected to name the new Commissioner of the NYPD, who will formally assume office from January 1st 1993. Traditionally, the NYPD Police Commissioner is appointed by the Mayor and serves in terms of 5 years, renewable at the Mayor's pleasure. The Commissioner is responsible for the day-to-day operation of the department, as well as the appointment of deputies and subordinate officers.

**Incumbent Commissioner, Malachi Dieudonné,** has served in office for a record 4 terms, having held the position through innumerate high profile incidents, including the 1980 assassination of Congressman Lownstein at the Rockefeller Center, the Lufthansa Heist of 1978, and the 1975 coup and subsequent riots led by Valentine Morgnstern.

**In recent months,** both Sen. Herondale and Pol. Com. Malachi Dieudonné have been linked to organised crime and a string of city-wide vigilante murders. Dieudonné, a close personal friend of the Senator, has faced significant public backlash for his position and lack of action on the increasing violence against superhumans, from both the Herondale and Penhallow camps, and calls have been made to remove him from office.

**However, sources from within the NYPD have relayed increasing pressure on the Mayor from the office of Sen. Herondale to renew Dieudonné for a fifth term, despite tumbling public opinion and the popularity of opposition candidates.**

**Captain Luke Garroway,** a decorated officer with a twenty year career in the force and currently the Commanding Officer of Manhattan’s 99th Precinct, is the frontrunner in the court of public opinion. Garroway’s dedication to tackling violent crimes and prioritising civilian safety has earned him popularity amongst the liberal electorate, and he has recently spoken out in support of
Gov. Penhallow’s election campaign. However, Garroway’s long-term support of superhuman rights places him in direct opposite to Sen. Herondale’s proposed bill to enforce mandatory and city-wide registration of vigilantes. At a recent press conference, the Captain said, “Too many of us are turning a blind eye to unprecedented levels of violence against our friends, our neighbours, our family members, even at the highest levels of government. If we do not take action now, to secure the safety of our superpowered brothers and sisters, who will be there to defend us when persecution comes in another form? It is high time we had representatives in both local and national government willing to support the rights and safety of every citizen in New York, and not just those who fit a predetermined paradigm, which is why I will be pursuing the office of Police Commissioner of the NYPD.”

When approached for comment, both the offices of the Mayor and Pol. Com. Dieudonné failed to provide a response. The press office of the NYPD said: “all allegations of nepotism and electoral fraud are taken very seriously…”

The article doesn’t mention of the threat on Luke’s life, but it’s there, as Alec reads between the lines; he can feel Magnus’ frustration and anger and fear after every full stop and before every comma, that restlessness of a city on the brink of both an election and a catastrophe living and breathing upon the page.

Alec hopes that Herondale and the Circle will take the bait.

If Herondale wants to keep Dieudonné in both her pocket and in office, she has to get rid of Luke, but this article will force her to show her hand ahead of time.

And Arkangel and Sentinel will be there when she orders the Circle to make their move.

Or so they hope. But hope is a fragile thing, and Alec can feel the shudder of it within his chest even now, matching the vibrations of the subway window against his back.

Sentinel and Arkangel will tail Luke when he’s at work. When they told Clary, she had decided to move back home and protect Luke there. Izzy has had cameras set up on every block between the precinct and his apartment, while Veil refused to leave his side, snapping at Luke when he reminded her she shouldn’t be risking her life for his.

(“I don’t care, Luke!” she had yelled, that night on the rooftop, “Your life’s in danger! How can you be so relaxed about this!”)
Alec had shared in the sentiment. )

If the Circle is tailing Luke, Jace will catch them. If the pyrokinetic makes a move, Izzy will see him. If Valentine emerges from the shadows at last, Alec will stop him.

That’s the plan.

Alec is fine with it. And Sentinel too.

He hasn’t seen Nightlock since that very same night.

But he’s not worried. *He’s not*. It’s a mantra he repeats to himself as he shuffles off the subway at his stop and climbs the stairs out of the underground and into the cold. The sky is grey and overcast, hanging heavy with unshed rain, and Alec’s breath mushrooms white in front of his nose. He tucks the newspaper inside his coat, an extra layer between him and the cold, and hurries across the road towards the office, the large brass letters above the door tarnished by the oncoming winter.

Alec has gone far longer without seeing Nightlock; he has always come and gone as the wind, arriving in places Alec was never looking, but this time -

This time, it feels like there’s a gap, like he’s missing a shadow - but Alec doesn’t know why.

He knows Nightlock is still around. He knows Nightlock has been patrolling near Luke and Veil’s hideout while Jace and Alec stay at the precinct. He has passed messages to Sentinel through Luke, and yet -

Alec is haunted by his silence. By the look in Nightlock’s eyes the last time they saw each other: confusion, reservation, something Alec couldn’t put a name to.

*He wasn’t angry, just* -

*Seeing something he hadn’t seen before.* That’s the only way to describe it.
Alec slips into the crowded elevator in the lobby just before the doors close, squishing himself against the wall. The air, here, is devoid of the city’s fervour, replaced instead by the tired sighs of journalists desperate for the Election to be over.

Alec wants for the same thing, but for different reasons.

In two days time, Bill Clinton will probably be in office, if what the polls say is true. In two days time, either Herondale will be back in the Senate and ready to pass her legislation, or she won’t.

In two days time, Alec will know if he can stop holding his breath, waiting for the Circle’s next strike.

The elevator empties on the second floor, but Alec continues up, stepping out into his maze of grey cubicles. He dodges out of the way of run-ragged interns rushing between the cutting rooms and the printers, their arms overflowing with drafts. He sees Simon at his desk, bowed over a stack of Polaroids and furiously scribbling notes, but doesn’t stop to say hello.

Nightlock must be worried about the Election too. It’s the only thing that makes sense; for him, the stakes are higher. Luke’s life, his own life, the lives of every single vigilante he knows in the city. His freedom, it must hang on a thread, and that’s something Alec, *Sentinel*, cannot ever know or claim to understand. That has to be it.

*So, why do I not believe it?*

Nightlock is not the only one who’s scared.

Alec slips into his cubicle, tossing his bag under his desk, and notices a Post-It note stuck to his keyboard. The looping purple handwriting is endlessly familiar.

*Interview with Luke today for next article. Back later.*

-- M

Alec frowns, turning the note around and around between his fingers as he settles into his chair.
Upside down, back-to-front, it doesn’t matter: Magnus’ quick cursive doesn’t give anything away, but it doesn’t need to.

Magnus has been distant this week too.

Distant, but not cold - his smiles are still there, his lingering looks, his trailing hand in the small of Alec’s back when he needs to pass him by in the confines of the office, but -

It’s in his eyes. He’s been glazed and far away, stewing in thought and long silences, despondent and distracted, even when Alec cracks a rare joke or makes a gently teasing comment or swings by Magnus’ office late into the night with two coffees and a new lead that might be of interest.

Nightlock, that’s something Alec knows. A dull ache, but an ache nonetheless, and Alec has had so much practice in ignoring clemens in his gut or twinges in his heart or raw and bleeding wounds leaking out across his skin. Pain grounds him. Pain is real. He understands it.

But Magnus is different. Magnus *hurts* someplace different, someplace not tangible; he exists in a different space within Alec. Alec doesn’t understand it. No epicentre, no place to slap a bandage, no amount of scrubbing his hands raw beneath the faucet will do: he cannot find where it hurts, but he can feel it.

And Alec feels helpless. There’s nothing he can do but wait.

He scrunches up Magnus’ Post-It and tosses it onto his desk, before switching on his computer. The dial-up tone shrieks but Alec is deaf to it: he hasn’t been sleeping well, tossing and turning on those rare nights where he does get to his bed before sunrise, if only to wake feeling more comatose than alive. He feels spread thin, so exhausted that each of his arms and legs are hanging on by a single wire thread that might snap if he’s shoved too suddenly off balance.

Usually, he can hide it. Simon is used to his tired glares, and Izzy used to his grumbling, and even his mother and father are used to his stoney soldiered silence, but -

Jace noticed. And when Jace notices, that means it’s bad, because Jace is oblivious as a rock and avoids talking about feelings like the plague. But last night on patrol, he had joked about the bags beneath Alec’s eyes being the same colour as his mask, and Alec had snapped at him.
“Woah, woah, okay, I’m sorry,” Jace had said, holding up both his hands in surrender. “It was just a joke. I get it, this protection detail is rough, we’re all dead on our feet here, but you don’t need to bite my head off.”

Alec had glared at him, but not said a word, turning his attention back to the precinct. He had felt Jace’s eyes boring into the side of his face, as if pure will alone might force Alec to confront him, but when that failed, Jace had stalked in front of Alec and physically pushed his bow to the side.

“I know we’re here for Luke, but you’re still my partner, Alec. I’m allowed to be worried for you,” he had insisted, cutting off whatever biting remark Alec was about to say. “You’ve been in a shitty mood all week. You look terrible and I haven’t seen you stop to eat or sleep or literally do anything but work since we found out about Luke being Wolfsbane.”

“I’m fine,” Alec had said, “We don’t have time for all that. We’ve got a job to do.”

Jace had sighed heavily. “You can’t protect Luke if you’re asleep on your feet, buddy. And I can’t protect Luke if I’m having to watch over my shoulder to make sure you don’t keel over dead.” He had reached out and clapped Alec on the shoulder, squeezing him through his armour. His face had twisted into a wince, the way one does when trying to awkwardly broach the topic of emotions when you’ve spent a good portion of your life avoiding them. “Is this about Nightlock? You’ve been kinda weird since the last time we saw him -”

Alec had looked up sharply. “It’s not about Nightlock.”

“Yeah, you say that, but here’s the thing: I don’t believe you. Look at you, you’re miserable. Well, more miserable than normal.”

“The only one of us who’s gonna be miserable around here is you when I kick you off this rooftop.”

Jace had folded his arms across his chest. “Alec.”

Alec had huffed again.

It’s not Nightlock, he had wanted to say. Or: it’s not just Nightlock. It’s Magnus, and he’s hurting, but I don’t know where or why or how to stop it. But how do I tell you that when I don’t even
understand it myself?

He hadn’t said anything, but Jace had stared at him imploringly, a soft, sympathetic smile offered as a truce. )

Alec’s computer screen lights up, drawing him out of the memory. He sighs heavily and opens up his emails in the naive hope that there will be something, anything, to distract him.

There’s not. A couple of audits to finish, some budgeting to approve, an invitation to someone’s post-Election party to turn down. He clicks around, opens up a Spreadsheet, and then just … grinds to a halt.

And it’s like he’s here, but not really here: his body folded into this chair, but his mind reliving all the nights spent on the roof of Luke’s building, scrutinising every passing car; all the rain weathered alone and wondering if Nightlock was somewhere soaked to the bone too; all the fleeting glances he’s stolen at Magnus in his office, cataloguing the twist in Magnus’ lips, the gaunt look in his eyes -

Maybe Alec just needs to sleep.

Sleep and never wake up; sleep until all of this is a distant memory and either the world has imploded or it hasn’t; sleep until he can open his eyes to a city that doesn’t want him dead.

Alec stays late that night, and perhaps it’s on purpose: he knows Magnus will be back from his interview with Luke and staying late too, bowed religiously over his keyboard and he rushes his next article for the morning press. The rest of the office is quiet in the eye of the Election hurricane, the last few people trickling out by ten o’clock: the silence lends itself better to honesty and true feelings. Alec finishes up his audit, sends it off in an email to his team, and then loosens his tie around his neck. His neck cricks loudly. His side still aches as he hauls himself to his feet: a dull echo of a bullet felt whenever it rains - which is always.

Magnus will have already started nursing his whiskey. He drinks in much in the same way Alec uses the dull pulsation of pain to bury his thoughts: the burn of scotch numbs the senses and blitzes
words into a thick slush, and sometimes, that’s exactly what is needed. But tonight, on his way down to Magnus’ office, Alec stops by the coffee machine: one black, one laden with milk and sugar. The black one is for Magnus.

Magnus isn’t in his office. But the light is still on and his jacket is thrown over the back of his chair and there are files strewn across the desk, so he must still be in the building. Alec stands in the doorway for a moment, neither here nor there; the quiet of the night descends like snow, muffling every other sound. A part of him exists beyond his body, and maybe that’s the part that hurts, a part that his fingers fall through like air.

He retraces his steps to the break room, but it’s empty save for the whir of the coffee maker. Then, he goes to the cutting rooms, but all the lights are off, and then the dark room, but the door is locked and bolted. In the boardroom, the blue and yellow wave of the city’s skyline floats beyond the floor-to-ceiling window, incorporeal and bodiless lights bobbing up and down in silence, but Magnus is nowhere to be found and the coffee is rapidly cooling in Alec’s hands.

It’s the fire escape, nudged open by paper file to keep the door from locking, that catches his attention just when he considers going home. Alec leans out into the stairwell and he feels the cold draught of wind from high above; it ruffles through his hair and slips beneath his thin shirt sleeves, coaxing the hairs on his arms to attention. The night beckons him upwards, and so he climbs, taking the stairs two at a time: he tries every door he comes to, but knows well enough that Magnus is on the roof.

He’s not wrong, but is a little out of breath by the time he gets there. He clatters through the door and out into the dark, his breath instantly mushrooming into a white cloud as his eyes fall upon the thin figure stood by the edge of the roof.

And it’s Magnus, of course it is, Alec knew it would be, but he’s shrouded by the night and overlooking the sprawling glow of New York, his face lit from below. It hasn’t rained yet tonight, and perhaps it never will; Alec licks his lips and cannot taste moisture. The air is dry, but cold. Horribly cold, the sort that makes bones and war-wounds ache and groan. The city winks in frosty blues and whites and man-made yellows, a concrete metropolis, and whistles with the wind gutting it from the sewers upwards, carrying with it the smell of wet asphalt and rusting iron and spilt beer, all rot and smoke.

Magnus has his back to Alec, his arms folded across himself, and a near-empty whiskey tumbler hanging listlessly from his fingers. The wind whips through his hair, billowing his shirt and making the cuffs of his pants dance around his ankles. He left his jacket inside. He must be cold.

Alec doesn’t say anything, stepping carefully over pipes and wires, to Magnus’ side. He presses the black coffee against Magnus’ arm in greeting, hoping he could use some warmth.
“Hey,” Alec says gently. “You okay?”

“Yes,” Magnus says, taking the coffee cup from Alec’s hand, their fingers brushing. His skin is not nearly as icy as Alec expected. “I am. Thank you.”

Magnus turns back to face the horizon - blurred by smoke and smog, it might be - but he doesn’t tell Alec to leave, so Alec sips at his coffee, hunching his shoulders as the wind cuts through him far faster than he can warm himself.

Alec’s not sure how long they stand in silence: the cold and the ache behind his temples, longing to lead him towards sleep, make seconds stretch to minutes, if not hours. He refuses to speak before Magnus - he would wait years for Magnus to be ready to talk, so an hour is nothing in the grand scheme of things - but his patience wears thin; he tries not to entertain thoughts of his bed, all too far away, but his pillow calls to him from across Manhattan. But then Magnus shifts his weight, half-turning towards Alec; he inhales, a word pressed against the back of his teeth, and meets Alec’s eyes - but whatever it is he wants to say, it goes unspoken.

Alec can help with that.

“Hey,” he says again, barely a whisper. Carefully, he takes the whiskey glass from Magnus’ other hand, tipping the last few mouthfuls out on the rooftop. It beckons a small smile to Magnus’ lips and he glances down, eyes drifting to Alec’s loose tie.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Alec asks, tipping his head, trying to find Magnus’ eye line. “I’m here for you. You know that.”

“I know.” Magnus raises the coffee to his lips, takes a sip, and hums, closing his eyes as he welcomes the sharp contrast of coffee against the sweet, oakey flavour the whiskey.


“No,” says Magnus, “The story is fine. It sold well, I’ll write another, get chewed out, and everything will continue on as normal.”
“But?”

“But. But, indeed,” he says, and Alec watches his shoulders fall as he takes a step closer, his arm nudging Alec’s in a search for warmth different to that found at the bottom of a glass. Magnus tips his head to the side, letting his temple rest on Alec’s shoulder, and it can’t be comfy, but Alec doesn’t dare move. “I don’t like it. I don’t like the plan.”

“It was his idea to use himself as bait,” Alec murmurs. Magnus’ hair tickles his jaw. Alec wants to turn his head and press his nose to Magnus’ roots. “He would have suggested it if he was unsure. Or if he thought it wouldn’t work … are you worried about him?”

“Yes,” Magnus says, “and no. Luke is capable, you’re right. He knows the risk and he knows what the Circle is capable of. He was in the city in 1975, the first time it happened. I know he remembers the riots. The violence.” Magnus inhales sharply through his nose, and Alec does turn then, the strands of Magnus’ hair tickling his upper lip.

“Magnus?”

“It’s not just Luke I’m worried for.”

“Oh.” I see.

Magnus nods and Alec feels it. “You heard Luke on that tape. Idris is involved in whatever he’s planning … when I spoke to him today, he told me Arkangel and Sentinel are the ones watching his building, and I - Arkangel is a fool, always has been, but he saves people. And then …”

“Sentinel?” Alec whispers, not daring to ask any louder.

A moment of hesitation or, perhaps, something else altogether. Magnus’ reply is just as quiet. It trembles like a confession. “I think I’ve grown rather fond of him. I don’t want him to die.”

Alec gulps. “He knows what he’s doing too. I’m sure of it.”

“You’d be surprised. He’d give you a run for your money.”
leans his weight upon Alec, letting his eyes fall closed. Then, he turns his face into Alec’s shoulder, and his next words are muffled where they’re spoken against Alec’s shirt sleeve.

“I was thinking, again, about him and I knowing each other in real life. Or not knowing, as it were. But I realised, there is one way that I’ll know. One way to find out what his name is. And that’s - that’s when the worst happens, and some person I never even thought about losing disappears from my life, and I don’t realise until it’s too late and there’s just a hole left behind where they once stood.”

“That won’t happen.”

Magnus pulls back from Alec’s shoulder, looking up at him with something devastating in his eyes.

“You can’t know that, Alexander,” he says. “It’s not fate, not destiny that butchers supers in the streets down there. It’s us, every single person in this wretched city who gets to remain complacent, and it’s them. The Circle, the government, even Idris itself - we can’t predict everything that they might do. Not all of it. This plan of Luke’s isn’t bulletproof, whatever he might tell the two of us, and Sentinel is risking his life for something that might not even work.”

And Alec doesn’t have an answer to that, not really. He’s not a man of God and has no good faith; he can’t argue that Luke’s plan will work, because he knows it might not. He knows that what Magnus says is the unremarkable and insidious truth.

But he is stubborn, God help him. Isabelle and Jace and his mother and father and everyone that he knows have been telling him how unmovable he is for far longer than he has held a bow or worn a mask.

“They’re going to be fine,” he says resolutely. He reaches out and finds Magnus’ free hand, tangling their fingers together with such a tight squeeze that it surely must hurt. If you say something enough times, it must be true. “They’re going to be fine. Believe me, Magnus.”

Magnus looks up from where he’s been staring at their joined hands, and searches Alec’s eyes, and Alec feels it like Magnus is digging around in the slush of him, pulling parts aside and reaching down deep into his chest where truth is buried: once again, Alec feels see-through. The city can probably be seen through his skin; he is glass. It’s as close to a confession as he thinks he’s ever been.
And then, quietly, Magnus says, “I believe you.”

“Do you mean that?”

“I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it, Alexander.” He squeezes Alec’s hand and presses his cheek back against Alec’s shoulder. “And I do mean it. You have this remarkable gift - people listen to you, they depend on you. They believe in you.”

“It’s just the truth,” Alec grumbles, but heat blooms up the back of his neck, at odds with the howling wind. Magnus’ thumb begins working circles into the back of Alec’s knuckles, exploring, tracing all over the ridges of Alec’s bow-calloused fingers and old blister-burns.

“A gift for making people feel better, then,” Magnus continues on. “Which, I think, might just be that much more important.”

“Remains to be seen,” Alec murmurs, and then winces as a shrill gust of wind glances off his cheek. “Can we go inside?”

Magnus looks up, but doesn’t pull away; the night is reflected in his eyes, tiny pin-pricks of coloured light. Alec’s gaze drops to Magnus’ lips. He squeezes Magnus’ fingers in his and swallows back the stupid things he wants to say and do.

*Would it be so stupid?* says the voice inside his head. *The world might change tomorrow. You might die tomorrow. You could kiss him.*

The longer Alec stares spellbound, the more Magnus’ smile grows, fond and eviscerating, the one he reserves for Alec only. He nods towards the fire escape door and tugs gently on Alec’s hand, and Alec is blind to follow.

The moment they step inside the stairwell, the Heavens open, as if something was holding the rain at bay for them. *Strange*, Alec thinks. *I couldn’t feel it coming.*
Magnus leads Alec back to this office, weaving through all the narrow, windowless corridors of the building still stuck in the fifties. The overhead lights flicker in and out of existence, the night thick and treacherous around them, but Magnus’ footsteps are loud on the linoleum floor. Magnus says nothing, but he holds himself infinitely lighter, and Alec admires the sway to his shoulders as he is towed by the hand through the labyrinth of hallways and neon exit signs.

Magnus lets Alec’s hand fall when they step into his office, and Alec finds himself pausing again at the doorway, unsure of what should happen next. He knows he doesn’t want to leave Magnus alone - Jace will be fine on patrol by himself, and Alec’s bed can wait a little longer for a warm body - and a part of him stirs with the thought of asking Magnus if he’d like to come back home with him, for drinks, for late night conversations, for anything Magnus would willingly want to give, in all honesty.

They’ve stood upon this precipice before.

Alec fidgets with the half-drunk coffee cup in his hands, picking at the styrofoam.

“Do you want to be alone?” It’s not quite the question he wants to ask, but he’s building himself up to it, one day at a time.

“Not particularly,” Magnus shrugs with practiced ease. He sounds flippant, dismissive and deflective, but Alec knows that’s not the case: Alec’s fingers are sunk beneath Magnus’ skin now, just as Magnus’ are beneath his, and Alec sees him. They bear the same bruises. “We go to press at four. Would you wait up with me?”

Magnus settles behind his desk and gestures with a flick of his wrist towards the empty chair on the other side. Alec smiles and shuts the door behind him, and knows the late night will be worth it, if only for the way Magnus’ eyes soften in the same instance.

They talk for a long while, low and a little bit bleary-eyed, but not about work, nor Luke, nor the Circle - not any of it. The rule goes unspoken, and instead, Magnus regales Alec with stories of the first few articles he ever published, when he was wide-eyed and ingenued and fresh out of journalism school and, then, when he pulls a scrapbook of his first publication from deep within his filing cabinet and pushes to the side all his case files, Alec can’t help but laugh. The stories are terrible - even Magnus admits as much - and he grins as Alec teases him about an Agony Aunt column he once wrote for a gossip tabloid called The Daily Sunbeam.
The column reminds Alec of a story about Jace and Isabelle, and as Alec talks, Magnus leans forward with his chin resting in his palm, his eyes following Alec’s hands as he reenacts the first occasion he was called to bail Jace out of prison.

Magnus counters with his own experience of a jail cell after a particularly remarkable bender of a night at a gay bar in the Village with Catarina and Ragnor, and Alec ducks his head, and tells Magnus in return of the one and only time Izzy dragged him to a club where all the men were in very skimpy leather shorts and Alec didn’t know where to look.

Magnus snorts with laughter, and Alec grins, his face beet red as he insists that his mother nearly disowned him for turning up to breakfast the next day hungover. He was twenty-one years old.

He’s never told anyone before.

And when he tells Magnus this, his smile changes and he looks at Alec like he’s the most important person in the whole wide world. He doesn’t say much after that, but it’s okay.

It’s okay, because it’s the sort of conversation that only feels appropriate in the darkest part of the night, when it feels like morning might not come. 3AM lends itself to unfurling honesty and coy smiles and stillness and silence that begs not to be broken by words louder than a whisper.

Alec falls asleep before four; he feels it coming a mile off, his eyelids drooping and a yawn stretching his jaw. He folds his arms on Magnus’ desk and rests his head for a moment, letting his eyes flutter shut. The last thing he hears before he slips under is Magnus’ gentle laughter from the other side of the desk, and he imagines the look that might be on his face as he watches Alec drift off, and it’s one of the nicer dreams Alec has ever had.

Alec wakes to a shiver scampering down his back. Magnus’ office has no windows, and Alec scrunches up his eyes against the harsh and yellow overhead lights, but it can’t be long after sunrise because Alec is still exhausted, but now he’s got cramp in his neck from at least a few hours bowed over the table. He shifts slowly, his neck cracking painfully and his back completely stiff, and finds something draped across his shoulders. He turns his head, still pillowed on his arms, and something heavy falls across his nose, and it smells of sandalwood. It smells good.
One eye, blinked open. The light makes him squint, but he feels expensive linen against his cheek.

Oh. Magnus’ suit jacket.

Alec rumbles with a low, throaty hum, embarrassingly content, and behind him, he hears the door creak and someone try their hardest to slip through without making a sound. From the footfalls and the smell of coffee, Alec knows it’s Magnus, but he feigns sleep a moment longer, gently tugging the jacket tighter around his shoulders.

Magnus sets two coffee cups down on the desk and then there’s silence, and Alec breathes deeply, because the thought of Magnus standing there and watching him twists his chest up in peculiar thready knots. He’s about to pretend to wake, roused by the smell of coffee, when Magnus’ fingers flutter against his temple and then comb gently into his hair. Alec’s heart trips over a beat.

“Alexander,” Magnus whispers, his fingers curling, drawing slow and lazy circles around the back of Alec’s ear. “Alec. Hey.”

Alec murmurs something low and drowsy, turning his head and scowling against the fluorescent light. Magnus is a silhouette for a moment, and Alec can’t quite make out his face, but his fingers are still there, and it feels so nice that he wants to sigh.

“Mm, hey,” he rasps. Magnus shifts closer, stirring that sweet smell of sandalwood, and with the light no longer hitting him from behind, Alec makes out the small and private smile gracing his lips. “G’morning. What time’s it?”

“Just before eight,” Magnus says, slowly untangling his hand from Alec’s hair, until it’s just one finger left, trailing down Alec’s temple and then across the shell of his ear - and then gone. Alec longs for more: for a hand on his cheek, smoothing away the creases left in his skin from a night pillowed on his own arms. “I thought you might want to freshen up before you clock in and have to deal with Mr. Lewis. Coffee?”

Alec pushes himself upright, his back clicking, and he grimaces. Magnus’ suit jacket drops from his shoulders, pooling in the chair.

Magnus grabs one of the two coffees he had placed on the desk, pushing it over to Alec. Alec inhales the rising steam like oxygen, drawing it down into his lungs. Magnus chuckles again.
“Did you sleep at all?” Alec asks, after his first sip. The coffee is hot and burns the inside of his mouth, but the sensation is enough to rouse him. It has at least six spoonfuls of sugar in it, and Alec can immediately feel it crystallising in his blood. God bless. “You shoulda woken me.”

Magnus shakes his head, reaching for his own coffee and a copy of the morning paper, which he lays out before Alec too.

“No,” he says. “But it’s alright. Here, what do you think?”

Alec blinks back the sleep from his eyes, and turns his gaze down to the paper. Magnus’ headline stands out in stark black font, twin photographs of Senator Heronale and Chief Garroway accompanied by a wall of text: DECORATED POLICE CAPTAIN BLOWS THE WHISTLE ON SENATOR AMIDST ALLEGATIONS OF CRONYISM. It’s the only article on the front page and continues for another three, and beside him, Alec can feel Magnus’ hawk-like stare, waiting for Alec’s judgement.


Magnus scoffs derisively. He fiddles with his rings, twisting them around and around on his knuckles.

“I’ve been called to a board meeting at twelve,” he says, “It turns out the CEO is an avid donator to the Herondale campaign. They’re all quite furious.”

“Serves them right for not caring about what we publish,” Alec says, wrinkling his nose, before adding, “You gonna be okay?”

Magnus shrugs, but he’s still smiling. “I’ve fought worse battles in my time. What’s the worst they can do? Fire me? Not as world-ending as they might think. And besides, the story is already out there. They can’t exactly recant it now. They have to stick by it.”

They don’t have long to talk. The phone in Magnus’ office starts ringing and doesn’t stop, people furious and fuming for all sorts of reasons, both good and bad. For every three people that lay into Magnus about the article, about how ridiculous and untrue it must be, one person dials their hotline to leave a tip, or show their support of Captain Garroway, or simply express their hope for Penhallow to win the Election, and in that, Alec finds a semblance of hope.
Alec has to return to his desk to do his own work, but he sends Simon back to Magnus with instructions to help him with the influx of callers, and then when twelve o’clock comes round, Alec sits and stares at the clock on the wall, imagining Magnus sat on one side of a boardroom table, staring down the Editor-in-Chief and his stern and wrinkled face, Magnus’ own anger both defiant and magnificent.

Isabelle calls not long after twelve, asking all the questions Alec would expect: she wants to know how they managed to get the article to press; about the public reaction; why Alec didn’t go home last night; and whether Magnus is going to cope with all the attention.

_He will_, Alec tells her, without question. _And if he slips, he’s got me_.

Nightlock finds Sentinel that night, as he always does, stepping down from out of the sky without warning. Alec is perched on the parapet opposite Luke’s apartment, adjusting the tension in his bow and counting his arrows, even though he knows exactly how many he left headquarters with this evening.

The air shifts, tentative and probative, and Alec releases a breath he knows he’s been holding. He hasn’t seen Nightlock in a week, not since that strange night by the precinct, and the feeling that floods through him now is relief.

_Maybe Nightlock was scared too_, he thinks, listening to the sound of Nightlock picking his way across the roof. Alec tucks his quiver and bow away, resting both palms on his knees as he scans the dark for movement. _Maybe he was worried, just like Magnus_.

Alec wouldn’t blame him.

The invisible touch prods at the back of Alec’s neck and he looks up as Nightlock settles beside him, flicking out the tails of his coat as he sits.

He says nothing, but does offer Alec a small, tight smile, and Alec knows he’s right.
I’m scared too.

“You’re early,” Alec says instead, “Your rotation here isn’t until twelve, I thought?”

“No, it’s not,” Nightlock replies, “But I was getting restless. I wanted to see you. I figured I - might owe you an explanation, or at least an apology for avoiding you.”

“You don’t need to apologise,” says Alec. “I get it.”

Nightlock hums and shakes his head, laughing lightly to himself. “I appreciate the sentiment. But I missed you. Night’s watch is so terribly lonely by oneself, which I clearly had forgotten. No-one around to tell me that all my ideas are bad, stupidly dangerous, *what-are-you-thinking-Nightlock* ideas.”

Alec scoffs and turns his attention back to the arrows in his quiver, inspecting the fletchling, running his fingers through the feathers. Nightlock watches his hands intently, but says nothing, so Alec asks,

“Did you see the article in the *Tribunal*? It looked pretty good. I think it’ll work, get the Circle’s attention at least. That’s something.”

“Mm,” Nightlock nods, “It was a good piece. Magnus Bane and his team did well.”

“Are you scared?”

“Scared?”

Alec shrugs. “Yeah,” he says, “This is dangerous, what we’re doing. People might get hurt, and the Circle aren’t exactly gonna hesitate, given the chance. Jonathan Morgenstern is going to come after Luke and we’ve put ourselves in his path. All of us. Veil and Muse are just kids -”

“They’re not that much younger than you,” Nightlock teases.
“You know what I mean,” Alec grumbles, “They haven’t been doing this as long as us. I remember the coup - I was a kid, but I remember. Idris was in chaos, mom and dad almost left the city - probably would’ve, if my sister hadn’t just been born.”

“Yes,” says Nightlock distantly. “It was around the time I first started feeling my powers. I remember too. And you’re right, though I’m loathe to admit it. I think I am scared, but - but not just for those reasons. It’s - well, it’s complicated.”

Alec frowns. “What other reasons are there?”

Nightlock turns to look at him, his stare flat and pointed. When Alec doesn’t get it, Nightlock gestures at Alec with a flat palm.

“I’m no different to any of the others,” Alec says, but Nightlock rolls his eyes. “Why are you worried about me?”

“Of course you’re different,” Nightlock says. “And you know why. Don’t make me spell it out, Sentinel. Lest I kiss you again, or something else equally gossip-worthy and revealing of my feelings.”

Alec bites down on the inside of his cheek in a vain attempt to stop himself from blushing beneath his mask. Nightlock turns away, gazing out across the street, but in profile, there’s colour in his cheeks too, a delicate pink at odds with the severity of his leather mask.

Alec pinches the fletching of one of his arrows.

“And that’s why you disappeared for a week?” he asks.

Nightlock hums. “Something like that. Let’s call it a realisation. I needed to do some thinking.”

“Sounds serious.”
“Perhaps,” Nightlock nods, “I never - when we first met, I - I never thought I’d care as much as I do. But I do, and here we are, and it’s different, because whilst I don’t want to see anyone hurt - not Luke, not Veil, not any of your inconspicuously loud rabble - it’s you who I can’t see die. You understand that, right?”

“I’m doing my best to keep myself alive,” Alec says. *I’ve learned recently that it matters*. “Doing my best to keep everyone alive.”

“I don’t know if I care about everyone.”

“You do. That’s ridiculous. Of course you do.”

“Of course I do. But you matter more.”

Alec shuts his mouth and swallows thickly. He holds himself stone still, fingers curled tightly into his palms, and stares at the side of Nightlock’s face as Nightlock continues to search for stars that might never appear.

*That doesn’t make sense*, Alec thinks, *What have I done to deserve that?*

*I’m sure Magnus would ask you the exact same thing*, replies the voice in his head. *And yet you’d put Magnus ahead of everyone else in a heartbeat, wouldn’t you? Maybe Nightlock feels the same way.*

Alec shakes his head, but the thought doesn’t go away.

Instead, he says, “You’re allowed to be scared, you know? And you’re allowed to tell me when you are, rather than just ... disappearing for a week. I want to know. You don’t have to pretend that you’re not.”

“Duly noted, Sentinel,” says Nightlock, but finally, he peeks at Alec from the corner of his eye, and his mouth upturns into a smile. He nudges Alec’s shoulder with his. His body is warm; Alec leans into him. “But eyes back on the target. We’re still on the clock, remember.”
There’s some part of Alec that expects the world to have changed overnight when he wakes on Election Day. He’s not sure what: perhaps the sky should be darker or the clouds greier, or there should be shouting in the streets or fanfares or the city lit up in red, white, and blue, but when he opens his curtains, he’s only greeted by the drizzle.

November 3rd 1992. Just like every other November 3rd in the years before this one: autumn-cold and slightly wet, Election fliers peeling from the lampposts and the newscaster on the television announcing that Clinton is predicted to have the White House by midnight tonight.

“For the first time in electoral history, Bill Clinton is expected to sweep the entire northeastern contingency for the Democrats …”

Alec flicks through the channels as he eats stale cereal and gulps down his terrible filter coffee on the ugly couch, the leather squeaking every time he shifts. On NBC, a panel is discussing whether Bush stands a chance in any of the swing states, and on FOX, an overpaid and under-qualified expert is giving his opinion on Clinton’s domestic policy. Alec keeps scrolling until he finds a local channel, where the discussion turns to Herondale vs. Penhallow, and the fight for the Senate.

He slumps back into the couch cushions and spoons cereal into his mouth robotically as the newscaster relays the results of the final day of polling. Herondale is still trailing, but the whispers about her nepotism came too late and Magnus’ story has not made as big a difference in her popularity as they might have hoped. The gap between Herondale and Penhallow is narrow; Alec wouldn’t want to call it.

“The results of the New York state vote will be revealed in the early hours of the morning,” says the newscaster. “The voter turnout for the city will be revealed shortly after, although the race for the Senate is expected to be down to the wire. We will be covering the developing story, so make sure to stay with us until -”

Alec turns the TV off, abandoning his breakfast and reaching for his coat. In truth, he doesn’t want to think about it, he wants to go to sleep and wake up tomorrow when it is all said and done, but -

He’s never been one to bury his head in the sand. He cares too much.
“You been to vote already?” Simon asks, sliding up to Alec’s partition the moment Alec sits down. “The line at my place was so fucking long, it was crazy. And there were Herondale campaigners standing out the front, trying to pressure people to vote red, even at the last minute, like - is that even legal? I dunno, but I really wanted to give them a piece of my mind -”

Alec unwinds his scarf from his neck, still damp with rainwater. He huffs a limp strand of hair away from his forehead. “Herondale’s still trailing in the polls,” he says, “They’ll try anything.”

Simon’s eyes dart around the office and then he leans in close, covering his mouth with his hand. He drops his voice dramatically. “You know something? Has she got you working for her?”

Alec shakes his head. He’s not going to tell Simon about Captain Garroway because Simon will probably want to get involved and that’s just one extra variable Alec cannot account for. There are already too many lives on the line. So instead, he says, “I don’t know anything. If Herondale has any plans to influence the outcome of the Election, it - it doesn’t have anything to do with Idris. She has other people in her pocket if she needs them.”

“You mean the Circle?”

Simon’s eyes are wide and earnest, and Alec tries not to sigh. He really does.

“Maybe,” he mutters. “There’s not much we can do except watch and wait.”

Simon huffs, folding his arms across his chest. “Wait and watch. That’s ridiculous - everyone knows you can’t trust a politician, Alec, especially Herondale - I mean, come on, Magnus just published that article about the Police Commissioner thing, and if Herondale’s willing to do all that literally days before the election, why would she stop? She’ll definitely try something, I know it, and with so many people out on the streets today - we could be out there doing something, y’know? Put on our suits, head on down to -”
“No.”

Simon blinks. Then, blinks again. He starts at least five different sentences before his brain catches up with what he wants to say.

“No? Alec, what - come on, man -”

“I mean it,” Alec hisses. “We’re monitoring it. Trust me.” We have to wait for them to show their hand first. We can’t make the first move, however much it might cost. It’s the only way we’re gonna catch them.

Simon narrows his eyes. “Monitoring it, right, okay. So you guys do think something’s gonna happen, then?”

“Simon.”

“Who’s out there? Arkangel? Like, I know he says he’s good and all, but if you had more people on side, wouldn’t it be better -”

“Simon, enough!”

A few people turn to look at Alec’s raised voice, but he refuses to budge, half out of his chair and glaring at Simon. Simon holds his stare for as long as he can, but he cannot win. He ducks his eyes, his face reddening as he scratches the back of his neck.

“Geez, Alec, it was only a suggestion,” he mumbles, and now Alec feels bad, on top of everything else. “You know I just wanna help.” He waves his hand demonstratively. “You and Magnus are always doing your thing, your investigation, actually making a difference in people’s lives, and then you - you know. Sentinel’s out there trying to find the Circle too, trying to stop Herondale, trying to make a better future for everyone like me. It just feels like - like I’m not doing enough, or you’re doing too much and I’m not pulling my weight. I feel pretty useless.”

Alec’s expression softens. “You know there are risks. Consequences.”
“I know! Of course I know, I just - that article Magnus published? The one about Captain Garroway? You know the editorial board docked a third of his salary for next year because of it? They might even move him out of Crime & Politics and put him in Celebrity News instead, but - when I spoke to him, he said, ‘at least I get to keep my job’ and that’s - that’s just it, you know? The consequences are worth it if you’re doing the right thing.”

Alec didn’t know that. Magnus hasn’t told him. He tries not to let his face give him away.

“That’s different -”

“Is it?” Simon asks. “He’s still risking everything for everyone else, but the thing is, he doesn’t get to wear a mask, but I do, and I just - I just want to help, okay? Because - because if Herondale wins today and that legislation passes - I don’t know what’s going to happen to me, I don’t know if I’ll still have my job, or if I’ll still be allowed to live at home, or if I’ll be shipped off to wherever it is the government decide to send the supers they don’t want. So, if I can make a difference -”

“I’m not going to let that happen.”

“Wh- what?”

Alec flattens his mouth into a tight line and presses his knuckles into his desk. “That legislation won’t get passed. I won’t let it. Nothing is going to happen to you, I promise.”

“How can you promise that? You’re the one who just said we can’t do anything but wait for Herondale to do something bad enough to impeach her, but what if it’s never bad enough, and people keep letting her slide -”

“Simon,” Alec implores, grabbing Simon by the sleeve and squeezing his arm tight. Simon’s eyes fly wide and he looks from Alec’s hand to Alec’s face and back again. “Listen to me. We have a plan. Herondale is not going to get away with this. You have to trust me.”

“But you won’t trust me,” Simon says, “And the worst part is that I trust you anyway, and what does that say about me, huh?” He jerks his arm away from Alec’s grip and looks away; Alec can see the glassiness in his eyes. Simon blinks back his frustration far too unconvincingly. “I’m scared, man. Aren’t you?”
“I’m terrified.” Absently, Alec rubs at the puckered scar of his bullet wound beneath his shirt, and Simon’s eyes follow, and his shoulders droop as he understands. He smiles softly at Alec, and Alec sighs. “Look. If you really want to help, just - keep your eyes open. Tell me if you see anything, hear anything. Just … stay off the streets. Don’t do anything stupid. And if - if Herondale wins, I think you should leave New York. For a little while at least.”

Simon’s smile broadens with a flash of teeth. He buffs Alec on the shoulder with a closed fist.

“You care about me,” he grins.

“I don’t. It’s professional courtesy. That’s all.”

Simon’s voice becomes a sing-song. “Oh, man, you totally do. You care about my safety, you get all protective, you wanna be my friend -”

“Don’t you have work to do? I can still tell Magnus to fire you.”

Simon winks at Alec, miming two finger guns. “Only a true friend would threaten my job security like that. I know the truth now.”

“Please go away.”

Fear is a strange thing. Alec likens it to the cold: creeping and insidious, a constant presence buried beneath every thought that only makes itself known in quiet moments when the rest of the world falls still. With goosebumps on his skin or a prickle up the back of his neck or a hitched breath that catches in his throat, it’s a coldness ingrained in Alec’s bones.
The city, too, is steeped in it. And not just because of the rain or the howling wind or the sky’s pathetic excuse for snow: beneath the fervour and the bright Election lights, there’s a second of pause. Alec can see it in the eyes of his colleagues - the hesitance in their laughter when someone makes a joke about the Senator and, for a moment, they wonder if it’s funny at all - and he can see it in the shuttered expressions of people on the street, who keep their gazes locked on the sidewalk, deliberately avoiding the enormous billboards overhead that point and jeer at them and say: 

America needs you. Cast your vote now.

The fear exists as a pendulum, and as it swings, it strikes anger on one side, and anguish on the other, and it’s the sort of tick-tock clock that Alec has known inside himself for many, many years.

The buzz in the office begins as whispers, but by lunchtime, it’s a hum, an insectral thrum that Alec wishes to scratch from his skin. Nervousness crackles in the air, ignited upon excitement and worry and anticipation: Alec overhears two copyeditors discussing the different front pages they’ve already made up for tomorrow, one for Herondale, one for Penhallow, as if Bush and Clinton are page two news. The man in the cubicle next to him as his radio turned on low, but Alec knows he’s listening to the exit polls, because he keeps sucking in sharp breaths and grumbling in a way he thinks Alec can’t hear.

And just before clock-out, Alec’s boss stalks into the office, wheeling behind him an old television, and sets it up in the corner of the room, and any pretence of work is quickly disregarded as Alec’s colleagues gather around the screen, clutching their cups of coffee and harried whispers.

Alec can’t look. He can hear the TV murmur, but he knows if he looks up, that thread of tension that hangs over his head will snap, and release something down upon his neck that will only hurt and make him bleed.

“Here is your CNN Team with chief anchor Bernard Shaw here for Decision Night ’92. It looks like President Bush is in serious trouble tonight ...

Alec turns his attention to his screen: there are new budgets to prepare before the end of the year, but the numbers swim before his eyes. He flexes his fingers on the keyboard pinches his eyes closed to clear his head, but it doesn’t work.

“Exit polls are already showing us that Governor Clinton will win the state of New York and a big prize of 33 electoral votes, but the real competition lies in the race to the Senate for sitting Senator Imogen Herondale and her opponent Governor Jia Penhallow of New York City, which is far closer as we approach tonight’s finishing line ...”
Behind his eyelids, Alec sees Simon’s face. He sees Luke and Veil too, his stalwartness and her simmering anger, and then he sees Nightlock gazing out into the dark with an unreadable face, but his fingers curled over Alec’s on some distant rooftop, body heat stolen.

“Despite recent media campaigns, Senator Herondale has gained support in New York following her conservative politics and hard-line approach to the city’s superhero crisis …”

Alec’s phone begins to ring, and he almost swipes his keyboard off his desk in his haste to answer it.

“Hello?”

“Hey, it’s me,” comes Izzy’s voice, and he hates it, the way he’s never been more glad to hear from her in his life, and yet his stomach still falls out from within him. “I already tried Magnus’ office but no-one picked up.”

“No, I’m still working, I - I haven’t seen him all day, actually.” Alec spins on his chair and covers the receiver with his hand. “Is there an update on Luke?”

“No. Nothing. Jace is on duty with the Senator tonight, and Aline and Helen are with the Governor, but Clary’s sitting on Luke and Veil, so they’re good for now. I haven’t heard anything else, but maybe it’s going to be a quiet night. Or maybe we just don’t know what everyone else knows.” She sighs heavily, submerged in the sort of weariness that suggests she hasn’t slept in days either. “Polls close in an hour. How is it over there?”


“Clinton has it in the bag. It’s what every station is saying. That’s good.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know. I know.” Izzy sighs again. Alec can imagine her scraping her hand through her hair or scrubbing her eyes with her fingers and staining the back of her knuckles with black mascara residue. “You’re off the Herondale security detail, by the way. Mom said so, I think she’s replacing
you with Lydia and Raj. I didn’t ask her why, but I think she knows. About you getting shot. I looked into her contracts and she’s the one who requested your transfer, not Herondale, so - I don’t know. I don’t know what it means, but I guess she wants you safe, so that’s something.”

“Do you think it means something’s about to happen?” Alec asks.

“It could do, but - if mom knows, Jace is still out there on the front line and - she’s not gonna risk him. I know how much she says Idris matters, how it’s our first responsibility, but she’s not gonna risk his life. He’s her son too.”

“Has she said anything about the Election? Anything about who might win?”

“Nothing. And I don’t think she’d tell me anyway. Dad might, but I haven’t seen him today, and I don’t want him asking questions either. CNN says we’ll know by 3AM about New York - you watching?”

Alec shakes his head. “I can’t,” he says. It makes me feel sick, but in a way I don’t know how to control.

“I get it. I feel it too,” she whispers. “Listen, I’ll call you if anything happens, but - go home. Sleep through it. You don’t have to be on duty tonight.”

“I’ll sleep for a bit,” he concedes, glancing back towards the TV and the growing crowd of his colleagues. He can’t stay here. He’ll either lose his mind or run to the bathrooms to scrub his hands raw. “I can take over from Clary later. Can you let them know?”

“On it,” Izzy replies, her nails clacking against her keyboard on her end of the line. “It’s kind of weird, right? The world will be different tomorrow. Whatever happens, something’s about to change.”

“Yeah,” says Alec. I hope it’s for the good.
Alec staggers into his apartment just before midnight, toeing out of his shoes and tossing his briefcase against the door. His living room is dark, but the city bleeds in through the windows, spewing blue and neon guts across the floor and leaving smears of colour across the leather of the ugly couch.

His supersuit is hung up in his closet, his bow and quiver stashed beneath his bed, but he doesn’t get that far, tumbling over the armrest of the couch and flopping into the cushions. Distantly, he hears the rumble of city: helicopters overhead and taxis blasting their horns, commotion in the streets as people pour out of their houses to head downtown and watch the results on the big screens in Times Square.

He should get into his suit. He should do as Simon says and be out there, on the streets and amongst the people. Tensions are high and emotions will be fraught: New York may well be in need of someone to save it from itself tonight, and yet, Alec cannot bring himself to move.

*Get up*, he thinks. *Go be Sentinel. Don’t act like you have a choice.*

He rolls over on the couch and the cushions squeak. He cheek sticks to the leather. Blindly, he fumbles for the remote and switches on the television.

“... ended twelve years of Republican control of the White House and will mark just the fourth time this century that a sitting President has been denied re-election...”

Alec pauses, his finger stilled on the volume button. Across the bottom of the screen, a red banner rolls from left to right, and reads: *Clinton first to 271. Governor headed for a landslide victory over Bush. More to come.*

And Alec feels nothing. Nothing at all, no hollow victory, no sense of satisfaction, no withering hope - none of it. His mind, an echochamber waiting for an echo, and when it comes, it’s a singular, intrusive thought:

*Will the world tomorrow need Sentinel more or less than before?*

The TV switches to shaky footage of Clinton behind a podium, his wife and daughter at his side as he addresses a cheering crowd of different shades of blue and white. He waves; the crowd cheers; there are still votes coming in, but his victory is sure enough. The news broadcaster announces that
he’s on track to flip 22 Republic states. It should be enough.

It should be enough for Alec to release the pent up breath he’s held for so many years - so many years of Reagan’s spew of hatred, and Bush’s helping hand in killing a generation of gay men, and Alec’s fear of so much as looking at another man on the street in case someone ever noticed, but -

Alec lies completely still. The TV fades into a drone, but he counts each pulse of blood in his ears to match his heartbeat. Hardly sounds like a heartbeat. It’s white-noise. Static.

“... some more Republican upsets to bring you, as Democrats have gained the Senate in both California and Wisconsin, but all eyes are still on New York as we await an official count ...”

He switches the television off, and the room is plunged into sudden silence as the screen glows faintly green, and then cold, cold like rain. There are patterns to be found in the ceiling, he finds: swirls and cracks and water stains the shapes of masks and bloody puddles. His bullet wound aches, the thin layer of bandages itching between his skin and shirt, marking him with the cross-cross patterns of gauze.

Alec sits up abruptly. He can’t lie here in the dark. He’s going to go insane with the wait.

If Herondale wins, are you going to be able to keep your promise to Simon? goads the voice inside his head. How much longer are you gonna be able to keep Luke alive? Are you ready for Nightlock to be the next body strung up inside a church?

Because she might win.

Alec leaps off the sofa and begins the frantic mission of turning on every light in his apartment: the living room, the kitchen, each and every mismatched lamp Clary left with him, all the candles he can find until his fingertips are matchstick-stained, and the room is flooded with warm yellow, and - and it’s still not enough. The dark encroaches through the windows. He closes the curtains, draws the blinds. The cold still creeps through. He feels it in the cracks between the floorboards.

His eyes dart to his landline, the receiver abandoned on the kitchen counter, the long wire unspooled to the floor. His fingers twitch; he longs for Izzy’s voice, but knows she’ll only want to talk about the Election; and then he wants for Jace, but he won’t want to talk about it at all; and then there’s -
Alec rushes into his bedroom and yanks the drawer out of his bedside cabinet, emptying its contents out across the floor until he finds what he’s looking for.

A crumpled Post-It note. Looped cursive handwriting. The splotches of purple ink.

Magnus’ phone number.

It’s been months since he gave it to Alec, and yet Alec remembers it both like a day and a lifetime ago, how he stared at it on the subway all the way home, how the ink was still wet against the pad of his thumb.

Now, he swipes his finger over the dry and faded ink, and his breath comes out stuttered, but slow. Slow, much slower, and he wanders back into the living room without looking up, as if the numbers might disappear the moment he looks away.

**What if Herondale wins? What do we do then?** he thinks. *I don’t know how long I can keep doing this.*

**And what if she doesn’t?** says a voice that sounds like Magnus’. *What if the city does the right thing? What if there’s hope?*

Alec doesn’t reach the phone. There’s a knock on his door, swift and sharp and to the point, and he stops in the middle of the floor, still in his socks, and scrunches the Post-It note into his fist on instinct.

He says nothing. The knock comes again, not urgent, but deliberate.

Alec scowls at the front door, willing whoever it is to go away and leave him be. It can’t be important - maybe the pizza guy with the wrong apartment or the landlord wanting his rent early. Everyone else who knows he lives here have far easier ways to get in contact with him in an emergency, and tend to prefer coming in by the window and the rain - but then the knock sounds a third time, and Alec grumbles as he tucks the Post-It into his pocket and shuffles towards the door.

He doesn’t bother looking through the peephole, halfway through an eye roll as he opens the door, ready to tell whoever it is on the other side that they have the wrong apartment, but -
“Magnus?”

“Alexander,” Magnus says, smiling as he pushes down the antenna on his cellphone and slides it into his briefcase, which is unlocked and overflowing with papers. He has a stack of manila folders tucked under his arm, and his fingers are blackened with newspaper print. The edge of his smile is sharpened. “Sorry, I know it’s late and I don’t have a standing invitation, but I figured it was important and you wouldn’t mind - I didn’t disturb you, did I?”

Alec opens his mouth, but no words come out. *I was just thinking of you …*

Alec lets his gaze roam: over Magnus’ loosened tie and rolled-up shirt sleeves and suspenders digging into his shoulders. He’s lost his suit jacket. He’s coatless, scarfless, gloveless, but his face is neither wind-chilled or wind-burned.

*I needed to hear your voice, and now you’re here.*

*How do you do that?*

*How do you always know how to do that?*

“I, uh - no, come in,” Alec says, stepping aside. “I was just - uh. Shouldn’t you be - y’know?” He gestures vaguely towards the windows. “Out there?”

Magnus quickly steps out of his dress shoes and unknots his tie, letting the loose ends lie flat beneath his collar. He flicks open the top button and scrubs his palm across the divot of his throat.

“Yes, probably,” he says, “But there are a hundred other journalists who will be able to write tonight’s story, and I doubt the board will be wanting to give me first billing on page one tomorrow in light of my dwindling favour with them. And I -” He pushes the door closed behind him and looks up at Alec. He seems tired. “I realised it wasn’t where I wanted to be anyway.”

Alec swallows thickly. “Yeah?”
“Yes,” Magnus says, and he smiles, and drops his briefcase to the floor. He presses the stack of files in his hand to Alec’s chest, and Alec is a moment too slow to stop Magnus’ hand there before it falls. Instead, he catches all the loose sheets of paper before they float to the floor, and Magnus breezes past him into the living room.

That quiet, he feels it again - but no longer is it empty, no longer does he echo on the insides with a tin-can ring. He feels momentarily full, stopped, slipped between two frantic moments and into a warm second of peace.

He turns to watch Magnus, to watch the way Magnus fills his space like he’s breathing life into an artificial room. The candlelight flickers as he nears; the light grows bolder, then softer, more golden than yellow. Magnus stretches out his arms and rolls his shoulders, easing out a crick in his neck, and then he tilts his head as he looks upon the black screen of the television balanced precariously on top of the VCR, and Alec thinks: *oh, indelible bruise. You’ve turned me purple all over.*

Magnus looks back at him then. “You haven’t been watching?”

Alec shakes his head, setting the files aside as he joins Magnus in front of the TV. “I turned it off. I couldn’t - I couldn’t do it.”

“Can I?” Magnus asks, already reaching for the remote, but he pauses. He glances up at Alec. His eyes are bright but unreadable, night-dark, starry in a way Alec is unfamiliar with. “Senator Herondale’s out. She lost.”

Alec blinks. Stops breathing. Feels the phantom touch of a hand against the back of his neck, invisible fingers playing softly with his hair. “Wh - what? Are you - are you serious?”

Magnus nods, pressing the power button on the remote as the TV spits and sputters into static, the flickering grey-green slowly forming the fuzzy outlines of faces. He immediately turns the volume down low, but Alec’s eyes are glued to the words that scroll across the bottom of the newscast.

‘*Clinton seizes the White House from Republican control. California clinches victory in the Senate for the Democrats. Prosecutor Braun of Illinois becomes first African-American woman elected to the Senate. Governor Penhallow steals Senate seat with surprise margin in New York.*’

“Herondale’s out,” Magnus continues softly. “Sixty-forty split, it was pretty decisive in the end.”
Governor Penhallow gained a lot of ground with neoliberals who decided they didn’t like Herondale impinging upon their civil liberties after all. Or I should say: Senator Penhallow—"

“You did that.”

Magnus scoffs, dramatically twirling the remote in his hand and pointing it at Alec. “I really don’t think so—”

“You did,” Alec insists. He steps forward, taking the remote from Magnus’ hand and tossing it onto the couch. He watches Magnus suck in a tight, whistling breath, his eyes glazing over as they drift from Alec’s chest, to his neck, to his jaw, and upwards. “People are only ever gonna listen if there’s someone out there telling them the truth, Magnus—”

“It wasn’t just me. Don’t write yourself out of the narrative, Alexander.”

Alec rolls his eyes, flopping down onto the couch. It squeaks violently, and Magnus answers with a laugh.

“Part of me thinks this has gotta be a dream,” Alec admits then, “Or maybe it’s a nightmare, I don’t know. I’ll wake up and it’ll all have been a lie.” He looks back to the TV: live footage from Senator Jia Penhallow’s campaign centre, Manhattan, New York City, says the rolling text. On screen, the Senator is being embraced by her staff as someone pops open a bottle of champagne and drenches them all. Foam splatters across the camera lens.

“If it’s a dream, may we stay in it a while longer,” Magnus says, “Whether Penhallow is good for this city remains to be seen. There’s still a long way for us to go, and I am loathe to trust a politician, but—”

“She’s better than Herondale.”

Magnus nods, smiling tightly. “We can only hope.”

_Hope_. As a word, it has always lain heavy on Alec’s tongue. Immoveable, unshiftable, unpalatable; Sentinel has never had space for it, and Alec has never known how to wield it. It burns with a simmering flame and he is afraid of the heat, he knows how skin blisters and bubbles when engulfed in fire, but—
But now, he can’t feel it: that white-hot scorch, he waits for it to come, to lick up the insides of his fingers, but his body passes right on through.

He looks, again, up at Magnus, and Magnus watches the TV intently, his arms folded across his chest and his weight rested on one hip. He taps one ringed finger against his elbow. The gun-metal silver around his knuckle glints with candlelight.

“What do you think this means for Luke?” Alec asks then. “If Herondale’s gone …”

“I don’t know,” replies Magnus, “Herondale is still a powerful public figure, but she no longer has the NYPD in her back pocket. Dieudonné won’t stay long as Commissioner, not now. Not with the entire city looking at him, and not if Penhallow plays the game right - she’s well aware that Luke publicly backed her during the campaign, and if she’s smart, she’ll have a word with the Mayor herself …”

“Do you think he’s still in danger?”

Magnus thinks carefully. “Hard to say. I can’t imagine the Circle will have the incentive to go after someone so high-profile without political backing and financial incentive - but that’s not to say Herondale doesn’t still have both of those things. I’ll talk to Luke, see what he thinks.” He looks back at Alec then, his gaze briefly lingering. “And Sentinel and the others from Idris. They have access to Herondale’s contracts now, so maybe they’ll know more. They might even have a plan, but -”

“Do you want to stay?”

Magnus’ eyes snap up in surprise. “I’m sorry -?”

Alec shrugs, picking at the skin of his thumb where his hands lie in his lap. “Do you want to stay here for a bit?” he asks again. “You can watch the rest of the coverage, if you want - local news will probably run a segment on Herondale and Penhallow, we’ll probably wanna see it. Plus the streets will be busy, it’ll take ages to drive back to Brooklyn. And I …” Alec chews the inside of his cheek as his nail catches on an old scab on his knuckle. “I don’t think I could sleep now, even if I wanted to.”

Magnus narrows his eyes, looking from Alec, to the television, and then back again; he looks at
Alec’s flighty hands and planted feet, at the dent he carves out in the couch cushions, at his lack of shoes and his rumpled shirt. He looks at Alec as if, for once, he casts a shadow. Alec’s whole body hums. He’s aware of every fibre of himself.

“I -” Magnus starts slowly. He stops himself, a frown forming in his brow, dangling Alec over a dangerous precipice. He makes a gesture with his hand, pointing at Alec and then curling his fingers suddenly into his palm. “I still take offense with that couch, you know.”

The taut line of Alec’s mouth splits into a smile and he rolls his eyes with a huff of laughter as he sinks back into the couch cushions, his hand coming to rest gently on his side where he can feel bandages through his shirt. Magnus grins and flops down onto the couch with a flourish, that self-confident shimmy back in his shoulders as he makes himself comfortable. He reaches for the remote and taps Alec on the chest with it.

Their legs are touching. Magnus’ thigh to Alec’s. Alec could plant his hand on Magnus’ knee without needing to move; a single breath would do it. Close the distance.

*You’re the only person who makes me feel real.*

Alec has to drag his eyes upwards, but Magnus guides him, tapping the remote on Alec’s chest. He hums happily when their eyes meet.

“I’d love to stay,” Magnus says softly, marvelling at Alec’s growing smile. “I don’t suppose you’ve eaten yet?”

New York doesn’t sleep that night. Midnight knocks at the windowpane, a familiar and beckoning friend on the other side of the glass, cloaked in bright lights and accompanied by the wail of far-away sirens, but Alec doesn’t once peek beyond the curtains.

Cross-legged on the couch with takeout in his lap, Alec funnels rice to his mouth as he watches the television intently, barely pausing to chew. Magnus waves his chopsticks at the screen, arguing with newscasters who cannot hear him, and scoffing about the underhand dealings and damaged reputations of Senator-someone and Governor someone-else.
Clinton’s victory speech is played on repeat and Alec can probably recite the words from memory. The panel on FOX News commiserates over Bush. The lead anchor on NBC seems to have had a few drinks during the commercial break to celebrate, her smile suddenly broader.

Magnus flicks through channels faster than Alec can keep up, searching for a local station that might be discussing Penhallow vs Herondale - but then he stops, goes back one channel to a beautiful woman on stage with a microphone bathed by pink neon, and his face lights up. The noise he makes is muffled by the dumpling he’s halfway through eating.

“Oh, Alexander, I love this film,” he proclaims. Alec can’t help but laugh as Magnus pats his arm excitedly. “I know you’ll hate it, but Isabella Rossellini is so good in it.”

“After all that build up, you’re bored of the Election already?” Alec grins, but he shoves all the takeout boxes onto the floor and settles back into the squeaky green leather, laying his arm along the spine of the couch. “You realise it’ll be all over the papers for weeks, right?”

Magnus waves his hand dramatically. “We have four years of Clinton and Penhallow ahead of us now, and I’m sure they’ll both show us their true character in time. No need to find out tonight. Tonight, I just want to-”

“Forget?”

Magnus smiles fondly at Alec, but his eyes yield. It makes Alec’s chest hurt deeply. “Tonight, I just want to watch this movie with you. If that sounds like something you might enjoy, of course.”

Alec nods. “Yeah,” he breathes, “Yeah, I’d really like that.”

Magnus hums and then he swings his feet up onto Alec’s lap, lounging back against the armrest and the deluge of horribly patterned cushions. He crosses his ankles of Alec’s knee, and Alec is only still, onto struck dumb for a moment, before he rests his hand lightly on Magnus’ calf, unable to stop himself from thumbing at the thin sliver of skin he finds below the hem of Magnus’ dress pants.

Magnus looks at him, but says nothing. He doesn’t have to. There’s a knowing look in his eyes, the smallest twitch of a smile pulling at his lips as he turns back to the TV and the soft reticent glow that seeps from the screen and mingles with the candlelight.
Alec runs his thumb in a circle over the curve of Magnus’ ankle. He tries to watch the movie, but he’s not familiar with it: the picture is soft, fuzzy, drenched in synth and mumbled words, and the story doesn’t quite make sense, as if each frame is a half second off-kilter and sways across the screen, as if Alec watches through drunken eyes. Here is another moment between moments. Alec finds himself stepped out of time, a beat and a half behind the rest of the world and suspended in stasis: New York held at a distance, Sentinel shoved beneath his bed.

*Perhaps this is normal*, he thinks. *Perhaps this is how normal people spend their normal nights. Lazy and content and warm and forgetful and far, far away.*

His attention drifts; he finds Magnus in the corner of his eye out of instinct, out of habit, out of ineffable pulls he will never truly understand - but he’s not about to challenge things like gravity.

Magnus is beautiful in the flickering light. Blush-coloured pinks melt into his skin, and blues pool beneath his eyes where he still carries weariness, never truly shrugged from the shoulders with the same ease as suit jackets. Alec can see the tension in him, the thin wire line pulled taut through the length of his body even now: how his eyes follow the characters on the screen, but every so often, his thoughts drift and Alec watches as they disappear elsewhere: to Luke, to Sentinel, to the investigation, no doubt. Perhaps, even, to the conversation he and Alec shared on the office rooftop not two days ago about fear.

Magnus is human that way. Extraordinarily human, but not like Alec. Not in the same way as Alec. The power Magnus has is a different sort; it draws people close. It fascinates.

Alec studies him in profile, the striking line of his jaw, the shadows of eyelashes, the flick of his hair where is has begun to droop. Candlelight moves like gentle fire through his hair and along the chain of his necklace. Alec thinks of him behind his desk at the office, pushing papers, writing furiously, twirling the phone cord between his thumb and forefinger. He thinks of Magnus in the rain, his collar turned up against the wind, and his shoulder pressed warm against Alec’s beneath a shared umbrella.

And Alec thinks of him, or how he must be, stirring with a rare sunrise. How dawn might stripe his bare skin with yellow and New York blue; his hair flat, his face fresh and make-up free, a yawn floating from the tips of his fingers, all the way up his arms and into his open mouth.

And it’s in that softness that Alec lingers now; this lingering, half-desperate thought of a life that could be perfect, one which he tries so hard not to indulge in -
But you want it. You’ve wanted it ever since you were old enough to want at all. You want it so badly that it might just kill you sooner than everything else.

Do you think you love him?

Do you know how to answer that?

Alec curves his palm around Magnus’ ankle, holding tight. He sinks back into the couch cushions and turns his attention to the ceiling, to all those abstract swirls that look like masks in one light, and faces in another. He inhales deeply.

No-one calls for him; his coms don’t ring and no-one comes knocking, and maybe, for once, no-one dies in the city that night. It’s almost as if there’s presence in the air: a disquietude, a tentative calm, a pause where the city exists upon the brink of a breath, not quite sure of what might happen next or how, even, to react to it, and time drags on so very slowly.

Alec knows the feeling well.

He can’t say he likes the film: it’s too crude, too violent, makes no sense to him the longer he spends not looking, but Magnus is enraptured, and that’s enough. Magnus clicks his tongue when someone gets shot, sucking in a sharp breath when the music builds, and then he hums, low in his throat, when the credits roll.

“Well, that was exactly as good as I remember it,” says Magnus then, the first words spoken in a while; his voice is deeper with disuse. He doesn’t try to move, however, perfectly content with the slow circles Alec is drawing on his ankle with his fingers. “Underrated and definitely misunderstood. Made half a decade too early, I suppose. A little unnervingly relevant to the state of the world, but most things are these days."

“I didn’t really get it,” Alec admits, “But, uh - I guess if that’s the point -”

“Remind me to lend you my copy of Twin Peaks some time. It’s just as weird, but essential viewing.” Magnus cranes his head backwards over the arm of the couch, the column of his neck a long impressive line as he stretches his arms above his head. “I have the first two seasons on VHS, and it makes for excellent binge-watching if you’d rather not leave your apartment for a whole weekend.”
Alec smiles at that. He can’t remember the last time he had a day to himself, can’t remember the last time the city didn’t need of him, but it sounds -

“Only if you’ll join me,” he says without thinking, but when he does think, he finds he means it.

Magnus swings his legs from Alec’s lap and sits up. He faces Alec, rests a hand on Alec’s forearm to quiet him.

“You’re being very bold tonight,” he whispers.

“Bold?”

“Saying what you want. Asking … for what you want.”

Alec swallows heavily. “Guess I am.”

Magnus searches his eyes and time slows, seconds stretching until they’re inconsequential and matter little.

Are you still scared? Alec thinks, Or are you hopeful? Maybe you’re both. I’m both.

Alec’s attention drifts to the clock on the wall: it’s nearing three in the morning, and Magnus’ loft is a good drive across town. The streets will still be busy with celebrations. Magnus might not make it back to Brooklyn before the sunrise.

Alec exhales carefully. “You … you could stay here tonight if you want,” he says, although it comes out more like a croak. “It’s late.”

Magnus doesn’t look away. “I don’t want to impose. I interrupted your evening as it is.”

“You wouldn’t be - you’re not. You know I’d feel bad making you go back across the city by yourself. You can take the bed, and I’ll - I’ll take the couch.”
“Well, as long as I don’t have to sleep on this abomination of interior design.”

Alec sighs, knocking his shoulder against Magnus, but Magnus only laughs as he effortlessly rises to his feet.

“Bedroom’s through there, on the right,” Alec says, nodding the small hallway that leads off the living room. “Bathroom is across. There’s clean towels, probably a toothbrush in the cupboard. Iz gave me a lot of new stuff when I moved in.”

Magnus hums, taking a few steps forward but then spinning back on his heel to face Alec. He presses his hands together; the glint in his eyes matches the one that plays on his rings.

“The bed. You could always join me,” he says, emboldened. “Save you a terrible back ache from sleeping out here.”

Alec’s heart murmurs, but it’s not a sound he knows how to quell anymore. Instead, he scrubs at the warmth at the back of his neck and sighs.

( It’s like Magnus is trying to be that version of himself that Alec once knew, all those months ago: flirty and provocative and ridiculously coy, but - well. Something has changed. A lot has changed. Magnus doesn’t sound playful any more.

He sounds like he might mean it. )

“Good night, Magnus,” he says. “Sleep well.”

Magnus grins, a hum on his lips that sounds too much like a Freddie Mercury song, as he disappears into the bathroom, and Alec falls back against the squeaky cushions of the couch with his eyes pinched shut.
Alec can’t sleep. He lies on his back and draws pathways across the ceiling as car headlights come and go, and shadows turn into tendrils that coil and curl like wandering fingers. There’s a thin blanket draped across his chest and with his hands folded on his stomach, he can feel each inflation of his lungs and the sofa squeaks every time he shifts.

The world will be different come the sunrise. Clinton in the White House, Penhallow in the Senate, Herondale gone, and Idris -

He doesn’t know. He doesn’t know what will happen next and that feeling of a breath held still exists in his throat and he daren’t breathe deep enough to dispel it. The Election, the Senator, the future of Idris and his family - it’s vague, smeary, blurred in shadow and made fuzzy by the lateness of the night: a parallel world, the one always glimpsed upside down in puddles in the gutters. None of it feels real, though Alec can hear the call of it, half-imagines the whir of Jace’s wings or the screech of a siren or Nightlock’s soft laughter muffled by the curtains.

Sentinel was meant to relieve Clary from duty an hour ago. He was meant to join patrol and watch Luke for the night, but his coms have been silent. The radio in his ear hasn’t crackled once. Izzy hasn’t even asked him where he is, but perhaps she already knows.

Don’t you want her to call you? whispers the voice inside his head. Don’t you want to know that they’re alright? What if someone gets hurt when you’re not on watch?

Alec knots his fingers together to stop himself from picking at his skin.

They’ll be fine. Clary will be fine, Jace will be fine. Luke will be fine. Don’t think about it. You can’t leave. Why are you thinking about leaving? How would you explain that to Magnus when he wakes up in the morning and finds you gone?

Alec pinches his eyes closed, but behind his eyelids is a different sort of darkness: quietly intimate, quietly suffocating. Warm, fragile, fluttering.

Magnus is asleep twenty feet and a wall away.

Alec rolls onto his side, pressing his cheek into the sofa cushions: they smell of leather and old mothballs. His eyes drift to the closed door to his bedroom. Of course they do. Of course he does. He wants and wants and wants.
How would I explain it, if I had to leave? Maybe I’d just say: Magnus, it’s me. I’m Sentinel. It was my blood on your couch. Maybe that would be enough.

Here’s the indulgent future again, a whisper in his ears, tickling the side of his neck. Here’s the intrusive thought he can’t ignore: what if I tell him? What if I cross the line? Idris might not exist tomorrow morning with Herondale gone and Sentinel will be all alone, and maybe I’ll need him.

The world is changing. Alec could change with it.

Alec sits up, swinging his legs off the sofa, and the floor is ice-cold. I’m scared, he thinks, and it’s for all the right reasons: Magnus won’t be safe if he knows, Magnus will treat him differently when he knows the truth; what if, what if, what if. I’m scared of changing us. But I want to anyway.

Alec wants a future for himself too.

The floorboards creak as he pads over to his bedroom door and grips the handle - it’s cold too - but then he shakes his head and raises his hand to knock.

(Just knock. Just do it.)

The door opens before his knuckles touch wood. Magnus is suddenly standing there, barefoot in his dress pants and undershirt, staring at Alec with wide eyes, dishevelled hair. His mouth forms a perfect round oh.

“Hey,” says Alec, rubbing his clammy palms against his thighs.

“Hi.”

“I couldn’t … I couldn’t sleep.”

“Me neither,” whispers Magnus.
Wordlessly, he searches Alec’s face and then steps back into the bedroom, opening the door for Alec to slip inside too. Inside, it’s dark, the only light from the single window that overlooks Alec’s bed where the sheets are rumpled and striped by the shadow of the blinds. Magnus’ shirt and suspenders are folded neatly over the comforter. His rings are in a pile on the bedside table next to Alec’s alarm clock.

Magnus stands in the centre of the room, his arms folded across his chest; if there were moonlight, it would paint up the side of him in a spill of aldurescent white. Instead, the glow from the city is faintly orange, faintly blue.

Alec’s mouth is dry. His stomach wrings itself in knots.

“Are you … ?” he begins, but falters. Magnus raises an eyebrow.

“Am I?”

Alec gestures vaguely with his hands. “Still thinking about - about Herondale? About Luke, the Election, all of it. The Corporates, the vigilantes, the murders - I just -” He rubs his fingers against his temple. His voice drops to a whisper. “Can you ever just turn it off? Just make it go away? Or does it just -”

“Get quieter?”


Magnus presses his thumb against his lower lip and turns away, lowering himself down onto the edge of Alec’s bed.

“I don’t really sleep anymore,” Magnus murmurs, “And that feels like a terribly intimate thing to confess, somehow. I don’t know why. But I close my eyes and-” He motions with his hand, backwards. “I remember. Everything I’ve seen, whether it was years ago or just last week, and it’s like reliving the past all over again in gruesome and excruciating detail. So I try my best to avoid it. At least when I’m awake, I can force it to the back of my mind, but-”
“But?”

“It’s not the past I’m thinking of now.”

Alec crosses the room and sits down next to Magnus on the mattress; the springs squeak and groan, and he tangles his fingers in the sheets, but then forces himself to relax. From the corner of his eye, he watches Magnus’ hands in his lap and thinks about taking one.

Instead, he whispers, “What are you thinking about now?”

Magnus huffs, his lips curling up into a smile. “Not what I ought to be thinking about, that’s for sure. Not about Luke, or the supers, or the Circle, and how I probably should be out there and not here, with you, when there are stories to write, but - but all I can think about is, well. My future. What I want, who I want to spend it with, and God, what position am I in to make demands for my happiness when there are so many others out there who need my help ...”

Alec shifts closer. “You’re allowed to want,” he says. You’re the one who taught me that. “It’s not selfish. You can’t just keep letting everyone take parts of you because you’re nice enough to give them away, Magnus. What happens when there’s none of you left?”

Magnus’ mouth flattens into a tight line and he thinks for a while. Maybe he’ll call Alec a hypocrite. Maybe he’ll say: that’s rich, coming from you. You would run yourself into the ground to protect everyone else and you know it.

And maybe Alec would reply: yeah. Yeah, that’s why we work so well together. We’re the same.

It’s not what he says. Nor what Magnus says either. He turns to look at Alec.

“Do you know what I want?”

Alec nods. He can recall every brush of Magnus’ hand across his back, every stolen look there’s ever been, all at once. They’re talking between the lines now. “Yeah. Yes. I think so.”

“And should I go for it? This thing that I want? Despite every good reason not to do it, despite all
the parts of myself that I don’t want someone else to see -”

“Maybe it’ll work out.”

“Do you know that?”

Alec’s fingers brush against Magnus’ arm; his skin raises with goosebumps.

“You said yourself that things are changing,” Alec murmurs, “You said the world will change, it has to change. It’ll make room for ... for wanting. For things like that. People like -”

Us . Whatever that really means.

“And besides,” Alec mumbles. His fingers follow the length of Magnus’ arm and dance across the backs of Magnus’ knuckles, but Magnus stays unnervingly still. “Maybe you’re - maybe you’re not the only one who ... wants ... that .”

Magnus leans back, away from Alec, and the sheets rustle too loudly. The look in his eyes in unreadable.

“Alexander,” he says. Alec’s name sounds like both a prayer and warning on his lips. He knows what Alec means. “Alec -”

Alec shrugs, but he feels tightness all through his body, like he’s one misplaced word away from being plucked like a string and trembling.

“It’s the truth,” he says simply.

“It’s a complicated truth,” Magnus stresses.

“I don’t understand what’s complicated about it.” Idris and Sentinel and New York, that’s complicated. But the way I feel about you - and the way I think you feel about me - that’s not complicated. That’s the only thing that makes the tiniest bit of sense anymore.
“Me,” says Magnus then. “I’m what’s complicated about it.” He sighs heavily, and falls backwards into the pillows against Alec’s headboard. He rubs his forehead with his finger and thumb, and Alec’s attention is drawn to the blue-green marks on his skin where his rings have been. “There are parts of myself that I don’t know how to give up to anyone but me. I think, maybe, I’m bad at loving people.”

Alec frowns. “That’s a lie and you know it.”

“It’s not. There’s a difference between loving someone and being willing to die for them. I would throw myself in front of a bullet for a thousand people without even asking for their names, and for the longest time, that’s - that’s what I’ve known. Martyrdom is selfish in that respect. Part of you wants to die, especially when you confuse it with things like love. Hero complexes and suicidal streaks are the same damn thing.”

“But?”

“What makes you think there's a but?”

“Is there?”

Magnus huffs and shakes his head. “But. But. There's no but, Alec. I'm bad at loving people. That's a full sentence in itself.”

“I don't think you get to judge yourself for that,” Alec whispers. Slowly, he shuffles across the mattress until he is propped up against the headboard too. Shoulder to shoulder, he hears Magnus’ tiny expulsion of breath. “You can't. You don't know what being loved by you feels like.”

He turns to look at Magnus, but finds him already staring. In Magnus’ eyes, there is a question that goes unasked: ‘and you do? You know what being loved by me feels like?’

‘Yes,’ Alec would say, ‘I think I do.’

For a moment, there is no noise in the world: the city has fallen silent and New York holds its breath. Then, Magnus hums softly.
“Will you stay?” he asks.

Alec smiles at him. “I wasn’t exactly planning on leaving. This is my apartment.”

Magnus rolls his eyes and nudge Alec in the arm before dropping his head onto Alec’s shoulder. He closes his eyes and presses his nose into the sleeve of Alec’s t-shirt.

“That’s not what I meant,” he murmurs. “Just … don’t go back to that God awful couch tonight. I’ll have nightmares about it.”

“Very funny,” Alec grumbles. Careful not to dislodge Magnus from his shoulder, he sinks down against the pillows until he’s on his back. He folds both hands on his stomach again, interlacing his fingers; his eyes find a different ceiling.

Magnus rolls onto his side, his chest against Alec’s arm. His breathing begins to slow, the heavy lines disappearing from his face as he closes his eyes.

Shadows shift on the ceiling with the same languid rhythm as a beating heart. When Alec inhales, he smells laundry detergent in his pillows, the faint musk of leather from Sentinel’s gear stuffed beneath his bed, and the powdery smell of sandalwood. He turns his head; Magnus’ hair tickles his nose.

“You’re being very bold tonight. Saying what you want. Asking for what you want.’

Alec’s heart beats loudly, painfully, inside his chest.

“Magnus,” he whispers into the dark. “Is this the thing that you want?”

“Yes.” Magnus’ mouth moves against Alec’s shoulder as he speaks; the brush of his lips is like static skittering across Alec’s skin. A feeling he’s felt before. “Yes, very much so. Thank you.”

He says nothing else as his breathing evens out. The rise and fall of Alec’s chest slows too, but he
can’t bring himself to close his eyes and wander into sleep. He waits for a dip in the mattress and a slither of space as Magnus rolls away, but Magnus doesn’t move.

His body is warm against Alec’s, an open parenthesis along Alec’s side. The backs of his knuckles brush against Alec’s arm. A touch, an almost: it feels so warm, so real, so human.

Alec wakes to the crowing of his alarm clock some time before sunrise. He groans, pushing his nose into his pillow and scrunching up his mouth, and then, distantly, he hears a breathy laugh. Footsteps pad across the floorboards, and Alec considers opening his eyes - but oh, that’s such an effort - stretching out beneath the duvet: every bruise and poorly-healed cut on his skin twinges, but the old aches and pains in his knees are gone, his body warm and better rested than he’s been in months, if not years. He feels liquid and golden all through his fingertips and up his arms and swirling slowly in his chest; any sense of urgency is smothered by the dopey smile he hides in the pillow as he rolls towards the other side of the bed. The alarm continues to beep and Alec reaches out to slap it off the table, but instead his hand finds warm sheets.

He wrinkles his nose and blinks open one eye as someone else beats him to the clock.

“How, I thought you’d be more of a morning person,” comes Magnus’ disembodied laugh from far too close. “But that death glare you’re giving me says otherwise.”

Alec is suddenly very, very awake.

Oh. So that wasn’t a dream.

Fuck .

Alec sits up abruptly, knocking his pillow onto the floor, the covers pooling around his waist. Beside him, the sheets are crumpled and the duvet kicked away into a heap. Magnus’ suit jacket is still folded over the foot of the bed.
And Magnus -

Magnus stands in front of the window, illuminated by the chalk-soft outline of dawn, buttoning up his collar and fixing the knot of his tie. The neat iron-presses have fallen out of his trousers, his face is bare, and stubble darkens his jaw in a way Alec has never seen before, but which feels so -

So terribly intimate.

Alec looks down at his rumpled t-shirt and then up at Magnus again. His hair must look like a bird’s nest. His beard has probably come through all patchy. His ears begin to burn.

“I, uh - how long have - how long have you been awake?”

Magnus shrugs, sliding his suspenders up over his shoulders. “An hour, maybe two,” he says, “I woke up and couldn’t get back to sleep.” His eyes narrow playfully. “Potentially something to do with your snoring.”

“I don’t snore.”

Magnus taps his fingers against his chin and pulls a face. “Oh, no, I really think you do. Very cute little snores. Quite endearing, really.”

“Hey,” Alec grumbles. His smile grows. So does the constricting feeling in his chest. “That’s lies and slander. What happened to journalistic integrity?”

“Hmm, never heard of it,” Magnus says, grabbing his rings from the bedside table. Alec watches as he slides each one onto his fingers, but then, reaching his thumb ring, he stops. He seems like he wants to say something - and it’s a silence filled with a lot of things that deserve be said - but Magnus chews on his lower lip, and maybe he’s fighting off a bashful smile, but the light is too low to really tell.

“So,” he says.

“So,” Alec repeats. He picks at the threads of his well-worn bedsheets and Magnus watches him,
but neither of them move. There are really no guidelines for what to do when you wake up beside
the man you slept with in every sense but the Biblical term and can’t decide whether it would be
weird or not to offer him breakfast. Not that Alec has any food in the apartment besides a stale box
of Cap’n Crunch and some out-of-date milk. He could probably scrounge some coffee. At least
Magnus’ takes it black. Alec is definitely out of sugar -

“I just wanted to say thank you,” Magnus interrupts, fiddling with his thumb ring, “For last night.
My original plan for the night involved my cat and a bottle of good scotch and was significantly
more tragic.”

“I’m glad I’m a step up from your cat.”

“Oh, now, I didn’t say that. The Chairman wouldn’t take kindly to it. But your company is
certainly a step up from a bottle of scotch.”

“Good to know,” Alec laughs softly, “Thanks for keeping my ego in check.”

Magnus chuckles too, but then the awkward silence slips between the lapse in conversation like an
unwanted friend, and Alec’s skin begins to itch. He fights off the need to pick at his hand by
massaging the backs of his knuckles with his thumb. The push and pull distorts the mottling of his
old burn scar.

What exactly is he supposed to say? A haze exists over last night: some part of it is a dream, a
surreal ethos painted by flickering candles and the soft warmth of a body nearby and whispered
truths made possible only by the lateness of the hour. Hell, they fell asleep together.

And yet, this yearning in his chest that he confuses with pain - he wants more of it. More of the
ache that comes from the peculiar vulnerability of lying next to Magnus in his own bed and
listening to him say: I think I’m bad at loving people.

He steals a glance at Magnus: his eyes are cast low, his focus on his fingers, this unsureness in the
curve of his spine and set of his shoulders that leaves him soft and pliant. The smallest hint of a
smile still exists on his lips.

He’s nervous. So’s Alec. This is new for them both.
“Is it - is it usually so - y’know?” Alec asks, gesturing pathetically at the disturbed sheets as his face heats up. “When you -”

“Sleep with someone?”

Alec almost chokes. “That’s not what happened.”

Magnus’ smile sharpens. “Seeing as I decidedly did not partake in the aforementioned bottle of scotch and am pretty confident in my ability to trust my memory, I’m quite sure that’s exactly what happened, Alexander.” He meets Alec’s eyes and his expression is teasing, probative, but there’s an edge there, one that Alec could cut himself upon. “Did you or did you not fall asleep in the same bed as me?”

Alec rolls his eyes. “Magnus,” he presses.

“I’m not hearing a no.”

“Because you’re not gonna get a no,” Alec says, “Are we … are we not going to talk about it?”

“It?”

Alec bites the inside of his cheek. “You know what I mean, Magnus.”

“Hm. Yes. I do,” he says, barely a whisper. That coyness shifts. His half-smile grows wistful. A small, quiet sadness that Alec doesn’t really understand. “But we’ve gotten so good at not saying anything, haven’t we?”

_I want to say it_, Alec thinks. He wants to grip the bed sheets but it’ll give him away. The soft grey light of dawn slips through the blinds with phantom-like poise and ghosts across Magnus’ shoulders like a sweeping touch. _I want to say it so much._

_I’m Sentinel. I told you we know each other in real life_
I’ve never felt about anyone the way I feel about you now, and I think there’s a word for that.

He wants to say something. He can’t say both.

Magnus clears his throat, and it’s painful to watch him physically stand taller and take a step back from the precipice of this constant conversation they both have had their toes over the edge of for so many months now.

“So I should … get going,” he says, gesturing towards the door. “I should really head to the office. My spare suit is there and it’s not really a habit of mine to turn up to work two days in a row in the same outfit. People will speculate and I doubt the gossip will be as pleasant as the truth.”

Alec blinks. “Right, yeah, ’course. I guess I’ll just - you go ahead and I guess I’ll just see you later?”

“Yes. Though I suspect it’s going to be a busy day today and probably a late night,” Magnus replies. He glances at the door and raises an eyebrow expectantly. “Am I going to have to see myself out?”

It takes a moment for Alec’s sleep-addled brain to catch up, and then he throws off the covers and scrambles out of bed.

The floorboards are freezing cold against the soles of his feet. Alec hisses, pushing up onto his toes as he winces and holds the bedroom door open for Magnus.

Magnus laughs softly, patting Alec on the plane of his chest as he passes by.

Alec stands quietly in his open front door as he watches Magnus gather his briefcase and double
knot his dress shoes. He folds his hands behind his back and tries to swallow back the lump in his
throat that just won’t budge; the longer the silence lasts, the more unbearable it gets, and the more
Alec worries he’s going to spit out the wrong words before he’s even had a chance to decide which
might actually be right.

Magnus hesitates on the doormat, as if he too knows that stepping out into the stairwell, across the
threshold they’ve so carefully built between themselves and the rest of the world, will put an end to
this moment of possibility.

Because that’s what it is. Possibility. Promise and longing. A sense of anticipation that if Magnus
just lingers long enough, unspoken things will finally be voiced.

Alec sees in him his reluctance to go. His smile is no longer elusive; it’s a whisper, an unwinding,
an unspectacular realisation of: *I don’t really want to go, and whatever was holding me back
before, it doesn’t seem to matter anymore*.

Alec offers him a small reassuring smile in return, and Magnus decompresses, his shoulders falling
and he shakes his head ever so slightly, this careless breath of a laugh escaping him.

“Lunch in my office, then?” he says, but means more.

“I kinda fancy Mexican. I went to a really nice place the other day,” Alec grins crookedly. “So if
you provide the takeout menus, I’ll bring the shitty office coffee.”

“My hero,” Magnus murmurs, some hidden joke bitten down into his lower lip. There’s a glint in
his eyes that is impossible to describe.

He moves, stops, and moves again, taking Alec’s wrist in his hand, his fingers brushing across
Alec’s pulse point. He murmurs something indistinguishable, a single world, and Alec barely has
the chance to look down as Magnus leans in and presses his lips to Alec’s cheek. And it’s -

It’s just close enough to the corner of Alec’s mouth for it to mean something. For it to be a breath
that sounds so much like: *say it. Say what you mean. Say what you want.*

*This is what I want, Alec.*
The rough scratch of stubble on Magnus’ chin rubs against Alec’s cheek, but Magnus’ relieved exhale is soft like gossamer; he doesn’t immediately pull away, one moment of pause stretched centuries long in the moment. Alec’s heart skips a beat, expelled for a from his body, and he reaches up to keep Magnus there, his nose against Alec’s cheek, his mouth a whisper away from Alec’s ear, close - but he’s too slow. Or maybe Magnus is too quick, because he leans back and pats Alec on the shoulder and deliberately avoids his eyes as he whispers: “see you later, Alexander”, and Alec only feels it as a shiver. And then, Magnus throws a hasty goodbye over his shoulder as he steps over Alec’s doormat and disappears down the stairs, and Alec is left winded in his pyjamas.

He’s not sure how long he stands there, alone on his doorstep, but it’s between one blink and the next that he re-inhabits himself and the breath he sucks in is sharp. His neighbour emerges from her apartment two doors down and shoots him a suspicious look for standing in the hallway in bare feet and sweatpants, so Alec ducks back inside, shutting the front door with more force than necessary.

The silence in his living room is suddenly different. Before, it was shifting and sinuous, a quiet poised on baited breath as Alec watched Magnus move through his space, but now it’s so devoid of noise at all that Alec is deafened by it.

Outside, the sun is struggling to rise. The New York behind his curtains is drowned in watery yellow and sombre grey. The newspaper kiosks will have lines around the block and Times Square will be lit up in blue and white, enormous LED screens of Clinton’s speech replayed over and over again for the taxis stuck in crawling traffic. The office will be bustling, and anyone wondering about Alec’s absence will surely just think he’s sleeping off a late-night celebration.

The truth is a little different.

Alec leans back against the door. He flattens his palm over his sternum and feels his heart rattle like it’s fighting tooth and nail to tear its way out of his chest.

(*It was your cheek, he thinks. It doesn’t count.*)

(*No, it counts. It counts.*)

Alec doesn’t know what to do. He doesn’t know what to do with the feeling too big for his body, this oxymoronic lightness that holds him as fast to the ground as a downpour; he doesn’t know how
He raises his finger to his ear and presses on his coms. Static crackles for a moment, followed by a buzz and the sound of someone knocking a lot of things off their desk in a hurry to answer the incoming call.

“Yep, hi, hello, Alec?” comes Izzy’s voice. His tether to the ground; she splits the imaginary curtain of rain with just his name. “Alec? You there? Are you OK? What’s the matter, what’s happened?”

All the air rushes from Alec’s body. Nervously, he laughs, “Just because I’m calling, you think there’s a crisis?”

Izzy huffs loudly. “Listen, in my experience, if I get a message over coms before ten in the morning, it means someone’s been thrown in jail. And because it’s you calling and not Jace, I’m gonna assume that’s not the case, so therefore we’ve either got a new lead or something terrible’s happened, so lay it on me. ”

“No, I’m - nothing’s happened, I’m about to leave for the office and I’m just - I just wanted to check in.”

“Oh Jesus, Alec!” Izzy exclaims, “You couldn’t have waited to call until I’d had a shower and a coffee? It’s like seven in the morning, no sane human being should be awake yet - especially someone who worked a night shift by herself, in case you forgot already! Speaking of which, Clary said you didn’t show last night, what the Hell happened? ”

Alec bites down hard on the inside of his cheek.

“I was watching the Election coverage.”

“Well, I figured, but it’s not like you to flunk without a good reason - oh. Ooohh. Magnus?”

“Yeah. Uh. Yeah, he came over.”
Came over? Was that with an invitation or did he just show up on your doorstep? Alec, I need details, it’s not fair to spring this on me before I’m caffeinated.” She gasps then. “Did he stay the night?”

Alec swallows thickly. He nods. Izzy can’t see that.

“So, I, uh. Slept? With him.”

“You did what?!” Izzy screeches, “Alec, what, are you serious? You slept with him? I didn’t even realise you guys were seeing each other - wait, are you even seeing each other? Do you know what ‘seeing each other’ means? ‘Cus it’s not your weird dating-not-dating working-together-not-really-working-together flirting thing, okay - oh my God, tell me everything!”

Alec digs his fingernails into the soft skin between his thumb and forefinger as he makes a fist. “I didn’t actually sleep with him. Not like that. He just - he came round last night, we were watching Penhallow speak and it got late, and so I offered him my bed, and. Well. Yeah.”

“Wait, okay, rewind a minute. So you slept with him but you didn’t actually sleep with him, so that means, what? You guys really just … went to sleep together?”

“Yeah.”

“And did you at least kiss him?”

“No.”

“Did he kiss you?”

Alec hesitates. His cheek still feels warm. The juncture of his wrist where Magnus’ fingers brushed his skin, even more so. “… No.”

Izzy makes a frustrated noise and Alec imagines her throwing her hands in the air. “Well, why was it necessary to phone me at buttcrack o’clock in the morning to tell me that nothing happened?”
Alec pinches the bridge of his nose and lets his eyes fall shut. His head falls back against the door with a heavy thunk.

“I just,” he begins quietly, “I needed to tell someone.”

Izzy says nothing; in the silence, a far-away siren yowls like a feral cat. The jittering of a jackhammer on the street below accompanies it, drowning out the shouts of construction workers annoyed not to have the day off to celebrate. Alec tries to tune it out; he searches for the blip in the static, the smallest of noises from Izzy’s end of the line, but the thrumming in his head is too loud. He can hear his own pulse, and it’s not that his heart is beating fast, no - it’s just all out of rhythm.

And then, exhaling softly, Izzy sighs, “Oh, Alec.”

“Don’t feel sorry for me,” Alec replies quickly, “It was good. It was enough.”

“I’m not feeling sorry for you,” Izzy says gently, “I’m just - I just want you to be happy, but I know what you’re like. You finally have the chance to grab something that really means a lot to you and then you get in your own head and start thinking about it too much and second guessing it and wondering if you deserve it, and -”

“I didn’t second guess it.”

“And yet you guys somehow fell asleep in the same bed and nothing happened? I need you to explain this to me ‘cus there’s clearly something I’m not getting here, Alec.”

“I really like him, Iz.”

Alec can hear her exasperated smile. “I know you do. I know you do.”

“And I almost told him the truth.”

Izzy doesn’t need him to clarify. He doesn’t mean: I think I’m in love with him. He means: and
maybe I would’ve told him everything, if we’d had a moment longer or I was a moment braver.

He means *Sentinel*, but of course, Izzy already knows that.

“Why didn’t you?” she asks.

*I don’t know*, Alec thinks. *I don’t know, maybe I’m still scared. Maybe I’m still not there yet, maybe I’m still loyal to Idris when it matters. Maybe I don’t know how to do things differently and I’ve left it too late and now I’ll never know-*

He doesn’t say any of it.

Izzy hums into the coms. “You know, we don’t really get to fall in love. Not in our job. It’s too much of a risk, and then, even when it’s not, it’s like - it’s like what you said to me that one time: how can someone ever know the real you when you have to wear a mask and hide parts of yourself ‘cus someone might want to kill you for it? I dunno. But I do know that *Sentinel* is the real you, and - Magnus knows that. He must do - even if he cares about you only half as much as you care about him.” She sighs then, wearily, heavily; Alec hears her loneliness too. “I envy you, Alec. You’ve found someone good. Someone who’ll fight your corner with you.”

“I don’t know how to tell him. How to say it,” Alec mutters, “They didn’t exactly cover ‘revealing your secret identity’ in basic training.”

Izzy scoffs. “*Dad would’ve had an aneurysm if you’d ever asked about that*. You know what he’s like … he’d probably prefer it if we didn’t even know each other’s identities. If you told him you were thinking about telling Magnus, he’d freak the fuck out.”

Alec shakes his head. “Well,” he says very quietly, “At least it’d probably distract him from the fact I’m - the fact Magnus is a guy. That would be the least of his problems.”

There’s a moment or two of silence and then, Izzy barks out a laugh. And there’s a defeated, hysterical edge to it, but Alec can’t help but laugh under his breath too. It’s not funny; the truth hurts a bit; he’s not sure what else to do.

When her laughter subsides, gradually fading into the static, Izzy asks, “Do you have time to stop by *HQ* today? After work?”
Alec nods. He feels the door handle sticking into the small of his back. He still doesn’t think he can move, but - he must. He must. “Yeah,” he exhales, “Yeah, I can do that.”

There’s a coffee cup on Alec’s desk by the time he makes it to the office. It’s accompanied by a Post-It note covered in looping purple scrawl.

Simon peeks his nose over Alec’s partition and asks what it says, but the ringing of his desk phone pulls him away before he can get an answer out of Alec. Probably for the best.

Alec’s chest remains full of knots. He folds the note up and tucks it in his shirt pocket, and then sips the coffee as he checks his email - and God, the coffee’s fresh, still warm and spilling steam, sweet and sugary and distinctly not from the pot in the break room. The pattern on the polystyrene cup looks like the logo from the café three blocks away, and fuck, he feels like he’s going to vibrate straight out of his seat.

He shows Izzy the note at headquarters later that night.

Alexander -

Got called out to cover the Penhallow press conference over lunch, won’t be back until later.
Raincheck on our date?

Indefinitely yours,

Magnus

Izzy looks at him pointedly. She doesn’t need to say anything.
Instead, she makes him dinner in the shitty kitchen in the basement and they eat it by themselves in her laboratory over a split bottle of wine, and yes, it is inedible, and yes, it’s what he imagines wallpaper paste to taste like, but he says nothing. He smiles when she speaks, and he sips at the wine, and Izzy finishes three glasses the same colour as her lipstick as she rants about her lack of love life and how she’ll never meet someone good and sweet and kind when she’s stuck behind a desk in a windowless room for the rest of her life.

“Since when did you want good and sweet and kind ?” Alec teases her.

Izzy pouts. “Since now . Hey, maybe I’m jealous, you don’t know! You’re not the only one who can change his mind on what he wants.” Her shoulders slump as she sighs, resting her chin in her palm. Her cheeks are flushed with alcohol. “You’re not the only one who wants freedom, you know?”

Her words linger in his mind long after he’s stepped into his supersuit and disappeared into the dark. He slips through the shadows, but each rain-wet footprint sounds less like a splash into a puddle, and more like Izzy’s voice: I know you do, and then, like Magnus’: but we’ve gotten so good at not saying it, haven’t we?

Alec finds himself on the roof of Luke’s apartment building when the Heavens open and the rain falls like a cut curtain, soaking Alec to the bone in an instant. He checks in with Clary and Jace, but they’re watching the precinct tonight, and even across the coms, Alec can hear the tinny sound of the downpour beating against Jace’s wings.

The cold is biting. Unrelenting. Alec seeks shelter from the wind behind the water tower, but the rain carves into his face, and when he closes his eyes, he can’t summon the taste of that coffee, nor the way it had warmed him into the pit of his stomach. The shivering gets the better of him. He tries to focus on the streets below, but the traffic is backed up four blocks and crawling at a snail’s pace and nothing is out of the ordinary, and he’s just so cold .

He tucks his face into his shoulder and screws his eyes up tighter. This time, he seizes the memory that wants to pass him by: his warm bed this morning, the smell of sandalwood clinging to his pillows, the unconscious comfort of another person tangled in his sheets and breathing softly and radiating heat enough to thaw him.

Real. It feels real. It could be real still.

Distantly, Alec hears the sound of someone clanking up the fire escape; the footsteps are heavy and deliberate, and Alec cracks open one eye to see Luke emerge over the edge of the roof. The
rain has slicked Luke’s supersuit like black oil, but the water rolls off his mask and cowl with ease. His expression shifts into a frown as he lays eyes on Alec and crosses the roof to join him.

“You’re going to get hypothermia if you stay up here much longer, son,” he says in greeting. “You don’t have to be out here tonight. It’s Goddamn miserable.”

“I don’t know if miserable is enough to stop the Circle,” Alec mutters, looking back out to the street. “You heard any news?”

Luke shakes his head. “Not much. Herondale’s office still hasn’t released a press statement about the result but I heard Dieudonné’s already been asked to write his resignation letter. Penhallow isn’t waiting around.”

“That’s good.”

“Yeah, I guess it is,” Luke agrees. “I also got a call from the Mayor this afternoon. My name’s been put back in the ring for Police Commissioner. Said I’ll know for sure by the end of the year, once any rioting has died down, but the streets have been pretty quiet tonight - looks like most of the country was ready for change. Clinton sure won it by a landslide, huh?”

Alec nods distractedly, narrowing his eyes as he continues to squint out into the rain, despite it gathering on his eyelashes. He doesn’t want to talk about Herondale. Maybe that makes him a bad person.

Luke’s frown deepens. He reaches out and claps Alec on the shoulder, and Alec’s not sure what surprises him more: the sudden touch of another person, or the sureness of his hand.

“Sentinel, come on, I’m not an idiot. I see what’s going on here,” Luke says, and Alec wonders if he really does. “This Election stuff it intense, I get it, but you don’t need to worry about me. I can take care of myself.” He grins then, his teeth brilliant white and dangerously sharp. “Valentine Morgenstern isn’t stupid enough to try and kill me when Herondale’s just been kicked from office and the entire city is watching. Not if he doesn’t want every cop in New York and all the supers at Idris breathing down his neck.”

“So, we’re back at square one,” Alec remarks, “We still don’t know where Valentine is, and now we’ve lost our only chance to draw him out into the open and catch him.”
“This could be the end of it,” says Luke, “The Election, I mean. Perhaps no-one else has to die.”

Alec shakes his head. He thinks of that very first man with his throat slit in a parking lot. He thinks of the two supers tied to the fire hydrant, and the five slaughtered in that alleyway where he was shot. He thinks of the body strung up in the church, scorched into the most gruesome sort of blasphemy. “That wouldn’t be justice for everyone already dead.”

Luke squeezes his shoulder; his smile has changed, no longer a grin and softer now. It could be pride in a better light.

“No, you’re right,” he says, “It’s not. And I’m not about to abandon them either.”

The wind berates Alec’s cheeks, slicing against his skin, but for once, it doesn’t smell of smoke. Not tonight. Rainy New York burns with something other than fire; Alec sees it in Luke’s eyes and only hopes it will catch and incinerate the concrete veneer of the city until all that is left is the chance for something to grow from the once-bloodied ground beneath their feet.

And perhaps, in its wake, Alec will find space to grow too.

Luke’s hand drops from Alec’s shoulder. “I appreciate it, you know,” he says. “Everything you’ve done for me. For Veil, for all the supers of the city, ‘cus I know it ain’t easy, not with Idris the way it is now.” He smiles tightly. “You know, when I joined Idris, this is what it was meant to be about. An organised group of supers with government funding actively dedicated to helping people. I don’t know what happened to that vision, but - y’know, I can still picture it. Maryse Lightwood standing at her father’s side and telling all us new recruits that we’d sworn an oath to New York and that took precedence above everything else.”

That’s enough to draw Alec’s attention to Luke’s face. “You knew Maryse? Back then?”

“Course I did,” Luke chuckles, “Idris was her life. No-one believed in it more than her. Guess that’s still true, in a way.”

Alec shakes his head again. “I don’t think so,” he murmurs, “Sounds like most of that’s been forgotten. Idris isn’t what it used to be.”

“I’m not so sure about that. Yeah, it lost its way for a while there, but if the future of Idris is in
your hands, then - Hell, you’re doing a damn good job.”

Alec shrugs, but his face feels warm despite the rain and he doesn’t really know what to say. It’s going to take more than one man to correct all of Idris’ sins - to wipe clean the blood from their hands - and Alec doesn’t know if that can be him. He feels too inconsequential for something like that, for a calling that should be made for Jace’s heroism or Clary’s fearlessness or Izzy’s longed-for freedom. Not for Alec and his mess of a heart -

“When people ask me about Sentinel, they’re not asking about a Corporate anymore. They’re asking about a superhero, because the things that he stands for, that’s the future of Idris, and other vigilantes, they get that. They see your good deeds,” Luke continues, “And you’ve got a team behind you already: Arkangel and Muse are good people, I know that. And you’ve got Nightlock too, which ain’t an easy feat, trust me, because he’s stubborn as all Hell. But it matters. You guys look out for each other. You know what’s right, even when what you’ve been told is wrong, and as long as someone’s leading the way in the right direction, others will follow.”

“You ever thought about coming back to Idris?” Alec remarks dryly. “We could use a leader with that sort of vision.”

Luke grins again. “I think you already have one.”

The hiss of rain on the concrete fades away. In its place comes disbelief, and then a quiet pride that returns feeling to the tips of Alec’s fingers; he hears it like a simmer, like the imaginary crackle of static across his skin.

And God, he chases it, he always has: the satisfaction of beating Jace in the training room; the whisper of Nightlock’s power across his jaw; Magnus’ electric smile every time they stumbled across a new lead -

It’s a rare feeling, not one easily stoked in the shadows of people like Jace and Isabelle with their bright and luminous personalities and the way they draw the people around them into unwitting orbit, but Alec cannot find it in himself to tell Luke he’s mistaken. It would be a lie.

He knows what Luke means; Alec is not so oblivious to his own strength of character anymore.

But then, Luke adds, “You remind me of her, you know. Maryse. Both of you try to do too much alone. Makes sense when you think about it, but I’m glad you’ve learned from her mistakes.”
Alec frowns. “What does that mean?”

“Damn,” Luke grins, and his laughter rumbles deep in his chest, but Alec doesn’t understand the joke. “You even glare the same as her.”

The rain relents. Alec’s eyes narrow. He pushes back the nervous tremble that begins in his fingertips and could be mistaken for shivering. “You know, don’t you?”

You know who I am.

“I’ve known for a while,” Luke admits, “I used to be a detective, come on, give me some credit! I’ve been trying to figure out which one of Maryse’s sons you are for a while, but - hey, Arkangel is clearly Jace and you’re too old to be Max.”

Alec waits for the world to be swept out from beneath his feet, but it doesn’t so much as budge. The drizzle continues to collect in shallow pools on the rooftop, ripples dissipating into a still reflection. A single drop of water rolls down the side of Alec’s nose, and then the rain stops with a gentle exhale.

Luke knows his real name.

And it’s not a death sentence.

“You know, we met once, way back when I first started at Idris,” Luke chuckles, tilting his head back to gaze up at the sky. “You were a kid. It took me far too long to realise where I’d seen you before, and it wasn’t ‘til I met you that first time in Magnus’ office that it clicked. You remember? We talked about the photo Jace keeps in his wallet.”

Alec remembers. It was months ago. And Luke’s known who Sentinel is all that time -

He closes his eyes, breathing deeply: the air is wet and petrichoric and tastes of ozone, rather than car exhausts, just this once.
He should deny it.

If it were anybody else, he would. He’d tell them that they’re wrong; he’s not who they think he is; you’re wrong, I’m not Alec Lightwood.

But he is. I am. And Alec already knows who Luke is beneath his mask, so it’s only fair.

An eye for an eye, after all.

“You can’t tell anyone,” Alec says. You can’t tell Magnus. Not before I get there first.

“You don’t have to ask. I’m not exactly in the business of outing other supers without their consent. There is a vigilante code,” Luke says, and then he pauses, a small frown appearing and disappearing behind his mask. “What about Nightlock?”

“What about him?”

“He hasn’t figured it out?”

Alec shakes his head. “No. No, I mean, he - you can’t tell him either, I don’t think he wants to know. It’s just … something he said to me …”

Nightlock’s voice echoes in Alec’s memories: ‘Because then I would have to ask you your name, and I fear you might tell me. And, however much I might want to know, at some point down the line, you’ll regret it, and we can’t have that.’

Luke hums thoughtfully, but it’s too difficult to get a read on his expression behind his cowl. He rests both his hands on his hips. Then, he says, “You know, Nightlock asked me the same thing.”

Alec blinks. “He asked you not to tell me who he is? You … you know who Nightlock is?”

Luke chuckles again. “Yeah,” he says. “I do. We’re old friends and we go way back. He was just starting out when I left Idris and we worked together for a while. We thought it would be smart to
show each other our faces, sorta like insurance. ‘Course, back then I was a patrol cop and an ex-Corporate, and he was just a kid on the wrong side of the tracks, so that was way more interesting for him than me. He moved outta New York after that, but when he came back to the city last year - well, now he’s made a name for himself too.”

“But he doesn’t want me to know.”

“I guess so,” says Luke. “Look, I can’t speak for his reasons, just like I can’t speak for yours, and I can’t say I understand completely … but then again, if I know anything about Nightlock, he’s always been a little -”

“Cryptic.”

“Precisely,” says Luke. “Listen - I know as well as anyone how powerful a name can be. You don’t just give it out to anyone who asks ‘cus people can and will use it against you if they can, but …”

“But?” Alec dares to ask. He wonders if he sounds desperate.


Alec doesn’t hear what is said; Luke murmurs into his radio, but Alec’s eyes drift to the sky. The clouds are thinning, no longer heavy and purple, but pitted by the faint glow of a moon still hidden away but desperate to break through. Somewhere up there, in the stratosphere, everything will be bathed in a pale white light, and silence.


“The rain’s stopped. I’ll be fine,” Alec remarks quietly, before asking, “Hey, Wolfsbane?”
Luke grins at that. “What’s up?”

“How - how do you do it? How do you tell someone who you really are and not have it … change everything?”

“How, well, there’s your problem, right there. It will change everything; it’s a big deal,” Luke replies, “But change ain’t always a bad thing. You can’t stay stuck in one place forever. And besides -” He looks at Alec pointedly. “I know how much he wants to know who you are. He’s not gonna hate you if you decide to tell him. He cares about you deeply, Sentinel.”

“He?”


(Who else? Alec thinks of a kiss in the drizzle, high above the city, the night cold around them both. He thinks of Nightlock’s cool, constant presence, a balm to his heart.

He thinks of Magnus, flaring bright and hot.

Who else .)

Alec cannot answer that. But he wants to.

“I have to run,” Luke continues. He pats Alec familiarly on the shoulder again, and some of that warmth from his palm seeps into Alec’s rain-soaked suit. “Take care of yourself, Sentinel. You’re a good kid, and I know you know that. You know what needs to be done, so it’s your call now. Oh, and don’t forget to say hi to your mother for me.”

Alec watches as Luke lopes off into the dark and disappears over the side of the building, the scrape of sharp claws down brick the only sound to be heard, until that fades too. In its place, the percussion of the city swells.
He doesn’t remain on the rooftop for much longer.

Herondale’s office releases a statement congratulating Senator Penhallow on her win three days later. The letter is short and perfunctory and polite, and when Alec reads the extract on the front page of the *Tribunal*, he wonders if Herondale wrote any of it at all, or just signed off on it when it crossed her desk.

It feels performative. It feels like a tentative peace, and New York has released its held breath a moment too early and let down its guard with its flank still vulnerable.

*And with no fires, no murders, and a Democrat in office again, why shouldn’t the city breathe?* Alec gets it. He really does.

Even now, Luke’s words echo: *This could be the end of it. Perhaps no-one else has to die.*

Alec wishes that were true. He wishes he could just go back to the way it was before - before that night in the parking lot with Luke and Veil, before Nightlock stepped down from out of the sky, before Magnus opened his eyes to everything wrong with the city’s treatment of its supers - but Alec’s not sure he knows how to be that person anymore. He’s not sure he wants to be that person anymore.

That version of himself feels more like a stranger than Sentinel has ever felt to Alec. Now, there’s only *before*, and *after*. And the person *before* hated Idris, but hated himself more, but the person *after* -

This person, this new version of both Sentinel and Alec, has a future. A future still vague and murky, possibilities waiting to be seized, but a future nonetheless.

And because of that, it’s difficult to fall back into routine.

Izzy scales back Luke’s security detail: Clary and Veil rotate between the precinct and his
apartment, but Alec and Jace are placed back on patrol, much to Alec’s restlessness and Jace’s chagrin.

Alec never thought he’d hear Jace complain about being bored of catching robbers and intercepting car chases, but he moans over the coms every night: “the Circle are still out there, Alec, we can’t just sit on our asses again. We have to go after them, no-one has to know.”

“Patrol is important,” Alec replies, though his heart is not in it. He knows Jace is right.

“Patrol is boring. Patrol doesn’t catch the real bad guys. And no, before you say it, some kid out in his mom’s car going for a joy ride doesn’t count as a bad guy. I miss the thrill of it, Alec. Don’t you? I can’t keep pretending like I’m OK with all these dumbass missions Maryse and Robert keep assigning us just to keep us out of trouble.”

Jace has always been reckless like that, but maybe Alec is too.

‘You know what’s right, even when what you’ve been told is wrong, and as long as someone’s leading the way in the right direction, others will follow.’

If Luke’s words from before are an echo, these are a shout. Alec hears them in every white, soulless corridor of Idris, in every empty boardroom, in every silent debriefing in his parent’s penthouse office.

His mother slides him another brown envelope across her desk, while his father looks on expectantly, his arms folded across his chest. Alec doesn’t read the briefing; he doesn’t count the cash tucked away inside. He doesn’t ask any questions. He says that Raj and Lydia need the field experience, and he’d be happy to delegate to them.

His mother scrutinises him with a steely glare, but she doesn’t argue with him. He’s not wrong.

Luke was right.

Luke is right. Alec knows that much. Idris has to change and there’s a part of Alec that is new and bold and different, composed of a hundred blurred lines, who wants to be the one to do it. He doesn’t want to leave Idris. He wants to save Idris. He wants an Idris that serves the people and saves the supers and doesn’t serve corrupt Senators and relinquish all responsibility of Valentine
Morgenstern. He wants an Idris that will allow him to be a different person in the day time, or maybe just the same person in the night, and he wants an Idris where it will be okay to show his face to Luke, to Nightlock, to Magnus, and nobody wants him dead.

You could leave, says the voice in his head. You could leave Idris. Jace and Isabelle and Clary would follow you.

You could stand up the next time Maryse commands you to break into a government building and steal files that don’t belong to you, and put your foot down. Say no. Maybe someone else would too.

You could start a new Idris. One where it’s OK to just be a normal person with an extraordinary gift.

He thinks about it in the elevator ride down from the penthouse. He thinks about it as he paces through the corridors of headquarters, and he thinks about it in the training room as he’s wrapping up his knuckles and bouncing on the balls of his feet.

The envelope from Maryse is abandoned on the bench behind him. His supersuit is shut away in his locker, his bow hung up in its stand.

Each swing of his fist into the punching bag is painless; he loses himself to the rhythm of it, the way his body is trained to move and react without conscious thought. He’s built for it; made for it.

He’s been trained to lead and make a difference.

Alec strikes the punching bag to the floor and it topples with a heavy thud. As he leans to pick it up, he finds himself thinking of Simon, of all people.

If you start a new Idris, Simon will have somewhere to go. Somewhere to keep him safe, somewhere to train him how to use his powers.

All the vigilantes will. Now, and in the future.
They’ll have someone to protect them.

It would certainly be a weight off Alec’s mind: the ever-present worry that Simon is running around out there in his stupid green latex suit, with his stupid superhero name, and his stupid heroic ideas in his stupid head that are undoubtedly going to get him killed, probably by something as mundane as being hit by a car when crossing the street.

If Alec were to breakaway from Idris and start his own team, there would be a place for Simon. He could ask Luke to join him. Veil too. There must be others. Maybe Nightlock could help train Simon, because their powers aren’t even that dissimilar -

Alec stops. He lets the punching bag fall back to the floor, and finds himself exhaling sharply, winded by the sudden blow of a realisation that has been a long time coming.

He’s just been too terrified to see it.

He still wants to be Sentinel. He’s never wanted to stop being Sentinel.

And for so long, he’s been questioning whether this life is the life he wants to live: the dichotomy between Sentinel and Alec has always been something wretched, weighed down by the grey morality of Idris and the knowledge that his superhero identity stands in the way of things that he wants. Life that he wants. Person that he wants.

Sentinel and Alec can’t exist at the same time, you know that, some part of him still goads, cruel laughter always steeped in sour, bitter thoughts, stewing in the gloom. How can someone else love you when you can’t tell them the truth about yourself? How can they ever be safe when there are people out there who want to kill you? And if you did choose them, how can you live knowing you’ve picked yourself over the lives of everybody else? That’s the choice, isn’t it? You and Magnus, or everybody else. Sentinel or Alec. Can you live with that?

Alec shakes his head; he refuses to listen. Not this time. Not this time. The future is no longer black and white - it’s grey. It’s inconcrete.

He leaves the training room quickly, his knuckles still bound and sweat cooling on the back of his neck, and makes his way to Izzy’s laboratory. The door is unlocked but the lab is empty, although Izzy’s stereo hums with a familiar song about love and forevers.
Alec pulls out the chair at her computer with a screech and sits down, covering his eyes with his palms as he hangs his head. His feet tap restlessly on the floor.

He thinks about Magnus. He thinks about his smile early in the morning, and warmed sheets, and the brush of his hand, and his feet in Alec’s lap, and Queen songs on the radio, and Alec’s bleeding out in his arms, and the look on his face when Alec said: *yes, we know each other in real life*. Some part of that look had been hope, but -

Sentinel is not Alec’s to give up. He knows that, and has known that, long before anyone ever reminded him that he has a responsibility to this city and its people and their safety, and it goes above and beyond his own happiness. Simon depends on him. Luke trusts him. Nightlock needs him, and here, now, grinding the heels of his palms into his eyes, Alec can picture him so clearly: the shimmer of the rain like a cloak all around him, refracting neon colours and trembling in the air; his eyes flaring and burning in his desperation to protect New York from those that would do the city harm; the way his lips felt against Alec’s when he realised: *it’s you. There’s only you. We’re the same, can’t you see?*

But, then, Nightlock has said -

‘*There’s balance to be found in all of this, or perhaps there isn’t even balance to begin with, and it’s up to you to realise that you are not as divided down the middle as you believe you are.*’

His own words from the night of the Election seep into the forefront of his mind: *you’re allowed to want.*

*(You’re allowed to want for both.)*

*(You’re allowed to be both.)*

Alec rests his elbows on his knees, holding his head in his palms, staring at the floor. He doesn’t move, not until Izzy and Clary comes bustling through the door sometime later, halfway through a conversation about Clary ditching patrol again to cover Luke - and that’s when Alec knows.

“Alec?” Clary asks, stopping in the doorway and tilting her head as she looks at him, bowed over on a chair. “Are you okay? Has something happened? You look kinda pale ...”
Izzy’s heels click on the floor as she walks past him, her hand patting his shoulder as she wanders over to her computer.

“He looks like he’s just made a decision,” she announces proudly. Alec can hear her smile stretching. She squeezes his shoulder in reassurance. “About time, big brother.”

There’s only one thing he can do to save himself the heartache of tearing himself in two. There’s only one way to make Sentinel and Alec the same, and only one way to get everything that he wants: Idris dissolved and Simon saved from himself and the Circle stopped for good and Nightlock forever at his side and -

And freedom. Freedom to love and choose and want.

He needs to tell Magnus the truth.

So, listen, I don’t know how to tell you this, but remember when Sentinel bled out on your couch and you pulled the bullet out of his chest and nursed him back to health? Yeah, that was me. I have superpowers. Surprise!

Alec groans, scrubbing his hand down his face and palming at his jaw. The sound of the faucet is not loud enough to drown out his thoughts, but as he stares at himself in the bathroom mirror, he thinks the bags beneath his eyes tell enough of a story.

Behind him, someone emerges from one of the stalls and shoots him a wary look - which is fair enough, seeing as Alec has been standing in front of the sink and gripping the basin for the best part of half an hour.

Alec returns his attention back to the mirror, holding his own stare until the door swings shut and he’s left alone again.

How one goes about telling someone that they’re a superhero, Alec cannot say. Anything he comes
up with is laughable at best, excruciating at worst. He’s no good at words; he’s so much better when he doesn’t have to think, when he can just let his heart drive his body forward and muster up the courage to do something truly foolish.

*Magnus, remember when you said you were complicated? Well, I think I have you beat.*

God, it’s been so easy in the past: stumbling across Simon in his stupid suit, Luke revealing himself as Wolfsbane - Alec didn’t have to work for that. He just had to deal with it. He didn’t have to decide if it’s morally responsible to tell someone who you are, *who you really are*, and give them the power to hold that over your head like a knife on a string.

*Magnus won’t hold it over you. You know how much he cares about Sentinel. Hell, it’s probably about as much as he cares about you.*

*And you know he cares about you. You know him. Sometimes more than you know yourself.*

But all of that, it doesn’t stop Alec’s hands from clenching on the sink to fight a tremble, and it doesn’t stop the need to scratch himself raw until no sign of Sentinel might be found on his skin. Alec has spent so much of his life practicing not being seen, and now - it’s fear. That’s the only way to describe it. The fear of being known. Of being seen and then rejected.

*Magnus used to hate the Corporates*, whispers the insidious voice. *Some part of him probably still does. You really think all that has changed?*

The bathroom door swings open and Alec grits his teeth. In the mirror, he catches sight of Simon.

“Oh, hey, here you are!” Simon says, full of cheer. He’s still riding the high of the Clinton’s victory and Herondale’s loss. “I just ran into Charlie from marketing and he said you were in the bathrooms being weird, so I thought I better come along and make sure you’re doing okay - so, you doing okay?”

“I’m fine,” Alec grunts.

“You don’t look fine,” says Simon, side-stepping up to Alec’s shoulder and squeezing into Alec’s space. He starts fluffing his hair in the same mirror as Alec. “You look constipated. Are you constipated? ‘Cus my bubbie Helen has this really good home remedy for that, and I could get you
“Simon, I’m fine.”

Simon pouts. “You’ve been distracted this entire week - and don’t look at me like that, I have eyeballs Alec, I can see you moping. I thought you’d be happier since Herondale’s gone? Idris won’t be in her back pocket anymore, there’s nobody left to whisper in the Police Commissioner’s ear and tell him what to do, and people are finally paying attention to how fucked up the situation with the supers is. Those are good things, right?”

Alec sighs heavily. “Those are good things.”

“But?”

“But what?”

Simon gestures up and down at Alec. “But you’re clearly going through some shit here, and maybe I wanna know about it ‘cus you managed to keep the whole Sentinel thing secret from me for literal years, so who knows what else you’re not telling me.”

Alec lets his shoulders fall and the breath rush out of him, and he turns to face Simon. Simon puffs out his chest and pushes up on his toes, but doesn’t come close to Alec’s height.

“How many people know?” Alec asks. He knows they’re alone in here, but he glances around the bathroom anyway and drops his voice. “How many people know about 8-Bit? About your powers?”

Simon screws up his face, wrinkling his nose. “I haven’t told anyone, if that’s what you’re asking. You’re the only person who knows, not even Becky or my mom. Alec, come on, I’m not an idiot. Well, okay, maybe the guy at my local pizza place knows too because one time I did order a pizza in my supersuit and apparently no-one else orders extra anchovies, pineapple, and olives, but it tastes good, okay?”

Alec closes his eyes. “So you’ve never had to tell anyone?”

Alec’s eyes snap open. Simon’s mouth forms a round oh of surprise.

“He’s, uh - he’s still in his office, you know?” Simon says, thumbing over his shoulder. Of course he sounds meek now. Alec wants to roll his eyes, but he’s too focused on not walking out of the building and not coming back. “I mean, I guess you probably know that - ah, shit, this was you giving yourself a pep talk, huh? Did I fuck it up? Did I make you feel worse? I didn’t mean to make you feel worse.”

“You’re definitely digging yourself a hole.”

“Oh, fuck, okay, let me try again.” Simon squares up to Alec and sets both his hands deliberately on Alec’s shoulders. He furrows his brow very seriously. “Alright, Alec, you got this. This is nothing. I believe in you.”

That’s nice, Alec thinks, but he doesn’t say it. He doesn’t want to overshadow Simon’s earnestness with sarcasm.

Simon takes his silence as an excuse to continue. “Remember that time you got shot? Major yikes. Burning buildings? You’ve done that. Bailing Jace out of prison? Basically a normal Friday night for you at this point. Talking to Magnus is easy in comparison. You have nothing to worry about. How’s that?”

Alec forces a smile. “It’s good,” he lies.

The what ifs have always been Alec’s downfall: Izzy always talks about his on switch, and she’s not wrong. Alec thrives on calculation and control; he’s always the one who needs to know the plan, the outcome to every possible scenario while Jace and Clary run head first into danger.
Sometimes, he feels like a set of scales. In one hand lies rationale and in the other lies risk, and he’s afraid of tipping too far one way over the other.

Consequence weighs heavy on him, and the *what ifs* he carries now might just be the most important he has ever had to balance.

*What if Magnus decides he hates you? What is Magnus realises he can’t trust you anymore? What if Magnus cannot be with someone who’s also a superhero?*

*What if, what if, what if -*

Alec pauses in front of Magnus’ office, his hand half-raised and ready to knock, only to find that he can’t. He imagines invisible fingers wrapping around his hand, holding him back. The touch crackles, sparks like familiar static, hisses like the sound of rain in his ears, pulling him back towards what he knows.

He closes his eyes. Imagines a rooftop, shifting air pressure, Nightlock at his side, whispering in his ear: *you don’t think you have the capability for bravery, do you?* In the dark, Nightlock’s face blurs into someone more familiar.

*Hey, Magnus, I need to tell you something.*

Alec sucks in a deep breath and raps his knuckles on the door.

He hears Magnus clattering around on the other side, tossing whatever it is he’s working on to the side with brazen disregard, and then the door opens, and Alec watches Magnus’ expression change from petulance and into delight as his entire face lights up.

“Alexander,” he grins, and Alec is absolutely charmed and absolutely *screwed* because all his nerve drops out from within him and he’s not sure he remembers how to speak. “I was hoping you’d still be here, and here you are. Perfect timing, as always.”

Magnus grabs his coat and steps out into the hallway, humming as Alec is forced to shuffle backwards, lest they touch and Alec implode here, right now, and say the very things on the tip of his tongue.
“I, uh - we - don’t we have work to do?” Alec asks.

“Nothing that can’t wait for tomorrow,” Magnus says, and he’s close, close enough to reach up and pat Alec affectionately on the chest, and for Alec to feel it ripple all the way through him like a jackhammer. The touch hardly lingers, and then Magnus is off, sweeping down the corridor, expecting Alec to keep up.

And oh, this is terrible. Alec glances back at the office: their small windowless sanctity where the city can’t get in. Familiar fluorescent light that flickers periodically, and the squeak of a leather chair that has grown too comfortable. There would be a whiskey glass to clutch, and files to distract his fidgeting hands, and Magnus leaning over his shoulder to see what he’s doing, to ask him what’s got him so distracted tonight, while his breath teases the slope of Alec’s neck as his hand trails up Alec’s back, palm splaying flat between Alec’s shoulder blades with just enough pressure for Alec to know that it’s intentional -

It’s as if Alec’s nerves are alight, glowing orange at his frayed edges. He’s going to go up in smoke before he’s even decided on what he wants to say, or how he’s going to say it, and it’s going to be a disaster. He knows it.

He strides after Magnus, but Magnus has a whistle on his lips, a song Alec knows too well, too intimately, and it seems to soar through the low-ceilinged corridors. Magnus’ steps are light and buoyant, as if there’s suddenly all this space inside his chest and he feels weightless. Alec sees it in the sway in his shoulders, the straightness of his back; he’s not sure he’s seen Magnus this carefree in - well, probably ever.

Magnus leads the way up to the office floor, winding through the empty partitions with Alec bewildered at his heels, until he comes to a stop at Alec’s desk. He unfolds Alec’s coat from the back of Alec’s chair, and holds it out expectantly.

He tilts his head and anticipation lights up his eyes. His jaw clenches in a way that suggests he’s trying to fight back the extent of his smile, but it only makes his cheek colour.

Alec squints one eye as he cautiously sliding his hands into the sleeves. “Are we going somewhere?”

“I was hoping dinner,” Magnus says, smoothing his hands across the breadth of Alec’s shoulders as he flattens out the creases in Alec’s coat, “Or at least, perhaps a coffee? My treat.”
“Did you find another lead on the Circle?” Alec frowns. “Are we meeting a source?”

Magnus wets his lips and shakes his head. He adjusts Alec’s collar for him. “No,” he says, and his voice is unfairly soft. *This is not how it was meant to go*. “No, Alec. I’d just like the pleasure of your company. You do owe me a date, if I recall correctly.”

“Oh.”

“And who knows,” Magnus continues, his deft hands moving to straighten Alec’s tie. “Perhaps you’ll offer to walk me home at the end of the night. I’m quite looking forward to it, I must admit.”

“Oh.”

This is *definitely* not how this was meant to go.

“Oh?” Magnus laughs, “Is that a yes?” He glances up at Alec’s blank face, and his cheer slips a moment, “But I understand if you’re busy, of course. You might have other plans -”

“No,” Alec interrupts, “No, that - that sounds good. Great. That sounds great.” Sure enough, he can feel control slipping through his fingers like sand, but whatever invisible touch lingers, weaving in and out of the space between him and Magnus, it’s there to catch the loose parts of him.

He meets Magnus’ eye. Suddenly, he feels slowed right down. Inhale. Exhale. Quietly, the air pressure shifts.

Alec has never been in love before - he’s sure he’d know if had - but he did grow up with Izzy as a sister, and with that came her collection of gaudy teen rom-coms and her thirteen-years-old-and-forlorn sighs and the first boyfriend she had at fifteen and the first heartbreak she had at sixteen. Alec remembers it all: sitting on her bed and watching her get ready for a date; rolling his eyes at
the way she and Jace would tease each other over terrible first kisses; and the first time she fell in real catastrophic love and ended up sobbing into Alec’s chest from dusk until dawn. Alec didn’t really understand it then. He knows how the stories are supposed to go. Fairytales and highschool coming of age movies. Romance novels. Epic love stories stretching across decades. The hero falls in love with the damsel in distress, but never the other hero. A feeling like that, a feeling so spectacularly wounding - well, he really thought Izzy was just being melodramatic.

He knows that those three words are supposed to be the hardest words you can ever say to another person, but whoever decided that was wrong. They have to be.

Alec’s felt enough of love to know it’s as easy as breathing.

And it would be easy, in any other life, to tell a beautiful man that Alec might be falling in love with him over a fine dinner and a glass of wine and soft, muted candlelight, rain beating down on city streets beyond cast iron framed windows.

Perhaps Alec would do it. Perhaps, in that other life, he would say these things that are meant to be hard to say. He likes proving people wrong; it’s than stubborn streak of his, and if it comes to love, then so be it, he could take it in his stride. Words like that can be said short and perfunctory and to the point, and if not that, they can be shown, and Alec has always been better at letting his actions speak louder and wearing his heart on his sleeve.

The point is: there are other things that are far harder to say.

There’s something you don’t know about me, but if I tell you, you’re going to be in danger. But if I don’t tell you, I’m afraid it might kill me, because the things I feel for you are too deep for me to know what to do with and I’m drowning.

Magnus takes him to a restaurant in Midtown, bathed in the twinkling lights of the Empire State Building itself and where the staff take their coats at the door, and Alec stumbles his way through choosing what to eat when there are no prices to be seen. His throat feels tight and he picks at the crease in his trousers beneath table for something to do with his hands; even small talk - which is usually so effortless when it comes to Magnus - feels like pulled teeth and the sharp jab of a needle beneath his fingernails, excruciating, and Alec can’t get his words out right.

He remarks on the wine, and it feels false. He asks Magnus about his favourite dish on the menu, and his ears ring. You’re stalling for time.
Alec takes a long sip of his wine and glances across at Magnus. The light of the candle lit in the centre of the table dances across his face, weaving fluid shadows so different to the harsh and abyssal darkness found beneath buildings and hidden away on rooftops. Magnus rests his chin in one palm, and with the other hand he gently runs his finger around the rim of his wine glass, endlessly patient with whatever Alec struggles to say, completely in his element in a place like this.

A place like this.

The maitre’d and waitstaff are dressed as if they’ve stepped out of old New York, all Ritz glamour and ties and tails, new money decadence weaving between the tables balancing golden martini glasses on a tray in one hand without spilling a drop. White table cloths are draped in flickering candlelight, and a piano hums in the centre of the room, drowned out by the soft and quiet murmur of the sorts of people who come to places like this to pretend like they’re above the city, trying to forget the bones buried beneath its sidewalks. Alec is dressed for the office. His shirt is rumpled. His stubble is coming through.

This is not the right place to tell Magnus the truth. And Alec knows it’s an excuse he makes for himself, still wrestling with that truant bravery of his, but he feels it, right down in his bones. Not here, not now, but God, he’s uncapped the lid of it, and it wants to be free.

“Do you come here often?” Alec asks, once Magnus has finished talking to the waiter in fluent French, reeling off a list of things he wants Alec to try.

“Not often,” Magnus says. He tilts his head towards a table in the corner of the room. “I once had dinner with Al Gore over there, although he was much more interested in the steak than my attempt at an interview. This place is also a frequent haunt of our new senator - she favours a table by the window.” Magnus pauses, taking a moment to look around the dining room. “It’s better with company, otherwise it feels a little bit like a lie, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Alec agrees. The stench of money heavy in the air; it’s not like that informants’ bar Magnus took him to before, or Raphael’s cafe both worn-in and well-loved. Here, it feels as if people are watching them - not in the sense that there are a hundred pairs of eyes looking in his direction, but in that strange, paranoid sensation that skitters up the spine when it feels like someone is stealing glances from the corner of their eye or in the reflection of their spoon. There are more than a few faces in here that he’s seen in the tabloids, and perhaps some of them recognise Magnus too. Alec catches a well-dressed man across the room staring at Magnus; he looks away with a huff when Alec glares at him.

Alec tilts his chin in the direction of the other table. “That guy over there knows who you are. But he’s pretending like he doesn’t.”
Magnus hums against the lip of his wine glass. He doesn’t turn to look. “Oh, I’m sure. I’ll either have written a story about his off-shore finances, or maybe ruined his run at Governor. Or maybe he just knows I’m a journalist and is keeping his distance because he has secrets to hide that he doesn’t want publicised. Or questions he doesn’t want to answer.”

“Huh.” Alec looks over at the other man again. His shoulders are stiff and he has angled his chair so that Alec can only see the back of his head. He fiddles restlessly with the stem of his wine glass as he engages in conversation with someone far too young to be his wife. “It’s like … if no-one acknowledges what’s going on in the news, then it doesn’t exist.”

“It’s more than that,” Magnus says thoughtfully, “If they tell themselves it doesn’t exist, then it doesn’t. People can be willfully blind like that. It doesn’t matter if they can see it or not, it doesn’t matter if there are riots in the street, or posters in every subway station, or a murderer on the loose - enough money, enough power, and it’s not your problem anymore.”

“But not everyone thinks that way.”

“No,” says Magnus, smiling into his glass, “No, it seems things are changing for the better. Though, by saying that I’m sure I must be jinxing it.” He knocks his knuckles on the wood of the table, and his eyes crease up as he smiles at Alec; for a moment, he looks remarkably young. “But at least the food is good. And their sommelier here is excellent. So, there’s still reason enough to come here.” He meets Alec’s eyes deliberately. “Amongst others.”

Alec smiles crookedly. “Maybe we can get a takeout,” he suggests, “Next time.”

Magnus straightens up. “Oh? There’s going to be a next time?” he says, “Hmm. Yes. I’d like that. I’d like that a lot.”

“I’d like that too,” Alec says softly. *I don’t know if you’ll still want that after I tell you the truth.* His stomach churns.

Alec asks about Magnus’ upcoming articles, and Magnus recounts Penhallow’s press conference earlier in the week, and then their food arrives. It even smells expensive. Magnus remarks that Alec’s eyes are the size of dinner plates as he holds out a mouthful of lobster on a spear to him, and then he laughs as Alec narrows his eyes suspiciously.
He can feel the soft, warm unreality seeping into his skin, and it makes him feel light, buoyant, but off-kilter. It’s a little like being drunk, but rather than the giddiness, there’s only the notion that the room is blurry on the edges and he might not be able to walk in a straight line if he stood up.

“Mm, I’ve been meaning to ask,” Magnus says then, gesturing at Alec with his fork. “Your brother and sister, they both work for your parents, right? What was it you said they did - private security?”

Alec nods. He’s very well-versed in two truths and a lie when it comes to talking about his family. “Yeah. Iz does tech, Jace is … Jace does whatever our parents need him to do.”

“Well, that doesn’t sound overbearing in the slightest,” Magnus remarks, “And your brother’s frequent run-ins with the law - how do your parents feel about that, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“I’m not sure if they know. And if they do - I guess they don’t care. Jace can’t really do anything wrong.” Alec considers for a moment, before adding, “He doesn’t get in trouble for the thrill of it. He’s just hot-headed. He knows what’s right and wrong and doesn’t really care what happens to him.”

“That sounds like you. Stubborn, rather than hot-headed, sure, but a dangerous sense of justice.”

Alec nods at the tables around them. “It’s better than being obvious,” he says quietly. ”No matter the cost.”

Magnus’ eyes soften. In the candlelight, Alec might mistake it for wistfulness. Sadness, even. He sets his cutlery down on the table deliberately.

\textit{Don’t be sad about that}, Alec thinks. \textit{It’s who I am. I’ve made peace with it. It’s Sentinel.}

“Magnus …”

“It’s okay,” Magnus interrupts gently. He reaches across the table and touches Alec’s wrist, forcing him to lower his knife too. His fingers dance across Alec’s pulse point. “It’s okay, I understand. I do. What was it you said to me? How much of yourself can you be willing to give up to do the right thing? How much of yourself can you use up?”
“Yeah.”

“Well, the answer is a lot, I’m sure. But sometimes I wonder, giving up your happiness …”

“I’m not giving up my happiness,” Alec whispers. He lowers his palm to the table, and waits for Magnus to rest his fingertips on Alec’s. The touch is feather light. “I’m happy, Magnus. I’m happy, here. With you.”

Magnus holds his gaze. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I am,” Alec says. This is what I want. This is what I’m choosing now. I’m not going to hide away any more.

“Well then, let’s toast,” Magnus says, raising his glass. He doesn’t remove his other hand from Alec’s. “To happiness. To us. To a second date of what I sincerely hope will be many.”

Alec chuckles, but he hasn’t drunk enough wine for it to excuse the flush in his face. “To a second date,” he agrees.

Magnus turns the conversation to Isabelle next. And it doesn’t sting, per say, but it tastes funny in Alec’s mouth. He wants to gush about her, her work, her dedication to the city that would rival both Alec and Jace’s, he wants to make Magnus smile the way he smiles, but he has to pick his way through careful truths, and now, he’s restless. His heart beats loudly. He wonders if Magnus can hear it across the table as his fingers trace a slow circle across Alec’s palm.

The need to confess sits just below his tongue - a heavy, inarticulate thought - but Alec feels it in his fingers too, itching for the twang of a bow string; and in his chest, the phantom exertion of vaulting over rooftops burning his lungs; and across the bridge of his nose where Sentinel’s mask should sit, and is sitting, in every other way but the one Magnus can see.

Across his palm, Magnus drags a line of static. Alec feels it there as well.

No, that’s different. The electricity trickles up Alec’s forearm, dissipating into his blood. It makes him tingle all over. No, that’s not confession, it’s just want. You want him.
And at what point does that burn a hole in you and everything else just spills out?

Alec’s eyes drift from their joined fingers, up Magnus’ embroidered sleeve, across the breadth of his shoulder sculpted by his suit, and pause upon the knot of his tie and where it presses lightly into his throat. The dark silk matches his suit. Magnus’ skin glows golden in the candlelight and there’s a twinkle in his eyes.

Magnus’ mouth, quirked; Alec lingers on his lips and he wets his own. He thinks about kisses, thinks about pushing the candle off the table if he were to lean over. He thinks about asking for the cheque.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Magnus asks, his voice a murmur. Their plates have been cleared, and Magnus nurses a black coffee now, while Alec sips at his over-sweetened cappuccino. Magnus taps a spot on his forehead, between his eyebrows. “You’ve had a frown line here all night. What are you thinking about?”

You. The way it would feel to tell you. The way it would feel to be with you.

Alec feels as if he might quake free of his skin, a tremble so violent that he would be excoriated.

Tell him. Tell him, tell him.

His voice comes out choked. “I like … I like that suit. On you. You look good.”

Magnus’ mouth rounds in surprise and he blinks, inspecting the cuffs of his jacket as if he’s never seen it before. “This old thing? It’s nothing, I’ve had it for years. But thank you.” He pauses, as if weighing his words. Then, carefully, he adds, “I also look good out of it. For the record.”

A laugh is punched out of Alec’s chest, surprised, embarrassed, delighted. “For the record?”

Magnus grins. He draws a question mark into Alec’s open palm with the tip of his finger. “For the record. One never knows how a night might end.”
“How … do you want this night to end?”

Magnus laughs then, like a diamond, all sharp edges and beautiful, and Alec cannot hide his own flushed grin. When their eyes meet across the table, Magnus’ gaze flicks down to Alec’s lips, but Alec doesn’t look away, not this time.

“Who’s to say I want it to end?”

Alec’s heart thumps. His gaze darts to the table, and then back to Magnus, but he can’t look away for long. His smile curves at the corners. He feels like he’s standing on a precipice, and the night plummets away below him, but that adrenaline thrill of knowing he’s about to jump runs rampant through his veins.

“My coffee’s gone cold,” Magnus whispers. “What do you say we get out of here?”


Magnus stands, straightening out the fit of his jacket, and Alec’s eyes remain glued to the fluid roll of his shoulders. Magnus tucks a hundred dollar bill underneath his coffee cup and then a server appears with their coats and umbrellas. Magnus thanks them softly, and then he tips his head and purses his lips as he looks across to Alec, as if to say he hasn’t planned that far ahead, but he doesn’t want to. Not tonight. He’s giving Alec control, as if he already knows that Alec is going to tell him something before the night is through that might change everything.

“I would love to just walk,” Magnus says. There’s this vibrancy in his eyes that makes Alec want to squirm. “This city isn’t all doom and gloom, despite what the papers would have you believe.”

Outside, and it’s raining, as it always is. The spire of the Empire State disappears in the cloud, staining the sky a fluorescent purple. The cold mists on Alec’s face, dewey upon his cheeks and eyelashes.
Sometimes, it feels like New York obeys a universal law where it must always be raining, lest the city itself stop existing, the bright lights and fast cars a mirage spilling out from the fog. Alec would not be surprised if he could pass through the concrete and the glass like smoke.

Alec holds his umbrella up high, gesturing for Magnus to join him beneath it. It’s a large umbrella, big enough for them both to be under it without having to touch, but Magnus doesn’t care for that. The night is cold, their breath is frosting, and Magnus slips his hand into the curve of Alec’s arm without a second thought, tugging him close.

The rain sounds like synth and snare where it hits the umbrella, rolling off the canvas in plump drops onto the toes of their shoes. But Magnus - Magnus is warm, pressed up against Alec’s side, and he smells of sandalwood, soft and earthy and faintly sweet. Alec cannot smell the city steeped in rainwater, but it’s more than that: he’s blind to it too, for the way the rain creates this curtain of haze all around them. The yellow of streetlamps and roaming headlights is soft, and the blue glow from the skyscrapers above is liminal; the roar of car engines speeding through puddles and squeaking their wipers is little more than a hum; and the rain has everyone passing by on the sidewalk hidden away under coats and umbrellas, ducking their heads to keep the water out of their eyes.

There’s privacy to be found in not being able to see other people’s faces. Anonymity. Intimacy in the way only a city of millions can afford. No-one else is looking at him, so Alec has the chance to be himself, nakedly. He can press closer. He can surrender to the steady, thumping rhythm of his heart.

He steals a look at Magnus from the corner of his eye, and finds Magnus smiling to himself - and it’s not a flood of fondness that Alec feels then, but more the slow and gradual unfurling of something already taken root in his chest. Unquestionably, it’s beautiful. Warmth spreads through him, like the neon itself is seeping into his body and he’s brimming with this ethereal white light. He feels present in a moment that slips its way between all other moments, an electromagnetic reality, where New York around him is rain-bleary, but he and Magnus are sharply in focus.

Magnus catches him looking. He squeezes Alec’s arm: *don’t look away*, he seems to say with his eyes. Alec doesn’t. There’s no universe, real or not real, in which he could.

There’s no violence here. No bows and arrows; no magic; no murder staining the sidewalks red with blood. It’s all washed away, all the grime, all the dirt, the smell of slick concrete and crushed cigarettes and split beer. All the costumed heroes and all the bad consciences.

Here, now, it’s only Alec, only them, hidden away by the rain. The memory of his mask, the phantom feeling of his bracers, his bow looped over his shoulder, all of it is stripped away, sliding from his wet skin, and it leaves behind only Alec, as he should be, honest and trembling and red
raw and far disposed from reality. He moves through a dream. Maybe he’s just like all those people in that restaurant, pretending the bad isn’t there when it can’t be seen.

But it doesn’t feel that way. It doesn’t feel that way at all.

“Alexander?” Magnus asks, “Are you alright?”

“Yeah,” Alec exhales. He looks at Magnus more boldly now, not a glance stolen. Here, he thinks. Here is the place where I get to tell him. Tell him. Kiss him. God, do I even know the difference anymore?

Their pace slows, already a meander, but now lingering in a moment that Alec wants to extend for ever and ever and not let end. Magnus raises his eyebrows: go on.

Alec shakes his head on a crooked smile. “I feel … I feel like myself. It’s hard to explain.”

“You feel real?”

Alec hears a murmur from the past: ‘Not brave enough to tell this man who - what was it? Makes you feel like you’re real, that he makes you feel real?’

He nods. Then whispers, “Yes. Yeah, I do.”

“I’m glad,” Magnus says. “You should try it more often. It’s a good look on you.”

Alec rolls his eyes, gently nudging Magnus with his shoulder. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

The imaginary line that keeps apart his insides and his outsides - the line that blurs, sometimes, when Sentinel bleeds over into Alec - it fades away completely. Sentinel fades away, but it doesn’t feel like he’s lost a part of himself in the process; there is no empty space left behind to be filled by light and noise and rain. There is only self, the body, the conscious feeling of his arm pressed against Magnus’, of his breath misting in the night.
He feels human, devoid of the prefixed _super_. Just human.

“Oh,” says Magnus then. He tilts his chin upwards. “Would you look at that.”

Alec looks up, following Magnus’ eyes. They stand at an intersection of five streets, where skyscrapers loom and white light strobes in plate glass, polychromatic beneath the pink of low-hanging clouds. Billboards flash with bright light and brighter words: beautiful people modelling beautiful clothes, advertisements for soda pop and Samsung, layer upon layer of electricity humming, disorienting and kaleidoscopic, a church of the American electric. Rows of yellow cabs revs their engines and sound their horns in symphony, traffic lights changing from red to green to red again, all blurred into one iridescent smear by the rain.

The colour refracts off the wet asphalt like a mirage, and the reflection of the city looks like another world just beneath their feet. Perhaps, if Alec were to step off the sidewalk and into the nearest puddle, he would fall through into the dark and brooding sky of an upside down world.

“Oh,” Alec says, “Never thought the city could look like this.”

“Fitting, isn’t it?” Magnus remarks. Slowly, his hand slides down Alec’s sleeve. “Even New York wears a mask to stop us from seeing her real face, and yet, here she is, giving us a glimpse. It makes me feel hopeful.”

_Hope_. The word reverberates, a tuning fork of a thought, silenced only by the moment Magnus’ fingers finally find Alec’s, tangling together inside Alec’s coat pocket. He presses static energy into Alec’s palm.

Alec’s breath hitches, but Magnus’ eyes are focused straight ahead, his mouth curled into a wry smile.

“Come on,” he says, “Let’s keep walking. As nice as this is, I want to get out of this rain.”

The few blocks back to the office pass too quickly between dodged puddles and steam billowing up from subway grates, and Alec cannot stop the plummet of his heart when they turn a corner and the brassy _Tribunal_ is there before them, drab and dingy in the downpour. Magnus slips his hand from Alec’s to swipe his pass in the door and let them into the building. He nods to the security guard, but Alec trails behind, dazed, walking in Magnus’ footsteps, counting each wet mark on the linoleum floor.
Magnus leads the way to his office, plucking the umbrella out of Alec’s hands and tossing it into the pot behind the door. He shrugs out of his coat, throwing that, too, onto one of his filing cabinets, and breezes past Alec to fetch the whiskey, leaving Alec standing in the middle of the room.

“Drink?” Magnus asks, spinning on his heels with flourish, holding a glass in either hand. His smile is broad and confident; Alec’s skin flushes hot and he abandons his coat, loosens his tie, two fingers tucked against his throat. The pressure in the room shifts.

(An invisible touch, to the back of Alec’s neck.)

Magnus clicks his tongue, pouring them both a drink. He hands Alec the glass, his eyes following it all the way to Alec’s lips, waiting until Alec has taken a sip before he takes one himself.

The liquor burns a little. Alec grimaces as it simmers in his mouth, pools in his chest, makes the heat in his stomach flare hotter. Magnus laughs, once, pushes his stack of files to the side and sits upon the edge of his desk, only the toes of his shoes against the floor. He appraises Alec shamelessly, taking another grateful sip as Alec edges closer, one bold step away from being framed by Magnus’ legs.

“Alec,” Magnus says simply, but the sound of Alec’s name is like a beckoning, like a call to arms. He reaches out and traces his fingertips across Alec’s sternum, and then he drags his hand down, feeling the planes of Alec’s chest move with a sudden inhale. His fingers brush the buttons of Alec’s shirt. The touch is white-hot.

Alec swallows thickly. “Yeah?”

Magnus pinches the end of Alec’s tie and tugs, encouraging Alec forward. He leans backwards on the desk and spreads his knees as Alec steps between them. Alec has to put his glass down.

“Magnus …”

Magnus hums, taking another sip of his drink as he twirls Alec’s tie between his fingers. His knuckles brush against Alec’s bandages beneath his shirt, and Alec tips forward, bracing himself with one palm on Magnus’ thigh.
Slowly, Alec looks up. Magnus’ glass is pressed against his lower lip, but he’s not drinking; behind it, his mouth, reddened, curves into a coy smile.

“Oh, so now you’re being forward,” he murmurs. Breathless, he sounds. “Well then.” He drops Alec’s tie and his hand moves to Alec’s hip, guiding Alec closer.

Alec’s fingers dig into the meat of Magnus’ thigh. His heart is thrumming. He knows where this is going. He has to get the words out first. “Magnus - I have to tell you something -”

“You can tell me anything,” Magnus breathes, but he’s looking at Alec’s mouth and his fingertips are stroking back and forth across Alec’s hip, and it’s very hard to focus.

“What you said - earlier,” Alec continues, “About the city. About its mask -”

Magnus sits up, setting his whiskey down on the desk; liquor splatters across the back of his hand, but he’s unwilling to take his eyes off Alec, and Alec feels his breath against his jaw. “Yes?” Magnus whispers. “What about it?”

The glass clips the side of Magnus’ desk phone, knocking it out of its cradle. Magnus doesn’t care, but Alec notices, even as Magnus’ palm lays flat against the slope of his neck. The tiny red light on the telephone blinks at him.

Alec frowns. “What’s that?” he asks.

“Voicemail,” Magnus murmurs. He reaches blindly for the telephone, stabbing the play button next to the red light. The answering beep is shrill, but Magnus’ eyes return to Alec as both his hands find Alec’s neck and sweep upwards, cupping Alec’s jaw: he holds Alec present, solar, as if Magnus is the one in his orbit and his orbit alone, and all the world is secondary.

And oh - as Magnus guides Alec’s mouth closer to his - Alec only wishes that it was.

“Magnus, it’s me ,” comes Luke’s voice from the answering machine, and Alec suffers the moment of impact, the crash land back to reality. He watches Magnus’ dazed expression clear, sharpen, still - a fraction of a moment from Alec’s lips.
“I tried to call, but I couldn’t get you at the office, and when I stopped by, I guess you’d stepped out. Listen, I - there’s no easy way to tell you this -”

Magnus’ fingers sink into Alec’s skin. He’s not breathing. They’re close enough that Alec would feel it if he was.

Alec wets his lips. “Magnus,” he whispers. “Magnus?”

“There’s been another murder. Another arson, over in Brooklyn, near the loft. It’s a super, female, early twenties - we found her wallet not far from the body, still had her ID and credit cards in it ... her name’s Dorothea Rollins. I think you knew her - she called herself Salem.”

The light drains from Magnus’ eyes.

“Just - call me when you can. I’m gonna be tied up with this all night, so I won’t be at home. Swing by the precinct if you need me. Let me know you’re alright.”

The voicemail cuts out with another shrill beep. And, for a moment, there’s only deafening silence.

Alec’s heart beats in his ears.

“Magnus.”

Magnus’ hands jerk away from Alec’s jaw like he’s been struck. He rips himself out of the space between Alec and the desk and lunges for the phone. The answering machine tells him that he has three missed calls, but no more messages. Magnus curls his fingers into his palm so tight that his knuckles whiten, flexing beneath his skin, and then, slowly, dials a number he knows by heart. He sets the phone to speaker. The dial tone rings shrill in the office, the four walls a sudden echochamber: one ring, two rings, ten loud rings, and then -

A woman’s voice. “Hi, you’ve reached Dot Rollins. I can’t come to the phone right now, but feel free to leave a message ...”
A pained, broken noise is punched out of Magnus’ chest so abruptly that it makes Alec jump. Magnus circles his desk, seizing the pile of manila folders he pushed aside, all of them overflowing with printouts and newspaper clippings, and rips open the first one.

The beep of the answering machine is violent.

Alec is frozen. His hands, still warm; his mouth, still tingling in expectation. His heart, stopped mid-beat. There are so many things that he knows he should be thinking: another murder. Another super. The Circle are still out there. The Election didn’t stop anything. Was it Luke who found the body? Has Luke been trying to get in contact with Sentinel whilst Alec has been -

He cannot stomach the thought. Inside his head: white noise only, a thunderous downpour without the breath of relief that accompanies the rain.

What -

What just happened?

Magnus throws sheets of paper over his shoulder, abandoning files on the floor with the manic desperation of a man searching for something vital, but Alec cannot move. The cold space where Magnus had been, the warmth left behind by his hands on Alec’s waist - it feels like whiplash, compressing him down into a pulp. The moment, shattered, crunches beneath his shoes. Something within him cracks audibly.

Salem. Dot Rollins. He’s heard that name before. He’s seen that name before, written somewhere -

“Magnus -”

“Fuck,” Magnus exhales, a hiss forced through gritted teeth. He holds a folder open in his arms, flipping over a sheet of paper stapled to the top. There’s a black-and-white photo of a woman clipped beneath it, alongside a number of newspaper articles and a phone number scrawled in Magnus’ own handwriting.

Alec recognises the woman in the photo. He has seen her before.
Fuck, he’s seen her more than once.

She was in Magnus’ office the night Magnus dragged him to Idris - Alec remembers the fear in her eyes as she passed Alec by in the corridor - and -

The night Magnus first met Sentinel. She was there too. In the doorway, with the cigarette. Alec remembers it now as if it were clear as day. *The same woman* ...

Magnus’ jaw tenses. The tendons in his neck are stark in shadow and the dull yellow light. His ringed fingers curl around the edge of the folder, creasing the paper.

In his eyes, Alec sees a slow and horrible realisation.

And it’s not something Alec has ever witnessed on Magnus’ face before, and God, it’s excruciating, because it’s old and forgotten and dredged up from a place Alec just knows Magnus has kept under lock and key for a long time now.

Alec forces his legs to move. He moves around the side of the desk and peers over Magnus’ shoulder. The label at the top of the folder reads: *Dorothea Rollins*, and Alec’s blood runs cold. *Oh no.*

“Magnus,” he says again. His fingertips ghosts against Magnus’ shoulder blades, but Magnus’ whole body tenses beneath the touch. “Magnus, I’m so sorry -”

“I knew her,” Magnus whispers. “And I knew what she was. Dot is my friend. I’ve known her since we were in our twenties, we used to - we would go out drinking together. I’ve followed Salem in the papers too, saved all the clippings. I even knew she was in trouble - she came to see me, a week ago, right here in the office, that night - that night we went to Idris, do you remember? - and she told me as much. Thought someone was following her. I put her folder in the pile. I told her-”

“And I just put her folder on the pile.”
Magnus turns and looks up at Alec then. His eyes are ablaze; a wild, devastated fire; and Alec sees straight into the heart of him, open and eviscerated, bleeding freely against Alec’s shaking palm. A burn, a wound, a terror, a fury.

“She’s dead.” Magnus drops the folder with a thump and wraps his fingers around the edge of his desk until his knuckles protrude from beneath his skin. His whole body shudders with a sucked-in breath; the shock washes over him. “I - I don’t - she’s dead. And that’s on me.”

Alec reaches out, but he doesn’t know where to touch, how to touch, to make it better. “What -” he stammers, “Magnus, no, it’s not - it’s not on you, this isn’t your fault -”

Magnus laughs sharply, hysterically; it could be a sob.

“You heard Luke. She was killed whilst we were out, Alexander,” he says. “Whilst we were out pretending this horrible reality doesn’t exist, just like everybody else, and I was - and I was not at my desk, doing the job I promised Dot that I would do. If I had been here, maybe, maybe I would’ve been able to - I saw her last week, for God’s sake, and I was supposed to look at her case and I didn’t, and I could’ve done something.” Magnus scoffs, his expression twisted in pain. “That is, indeed, on me.”

“Magnus, I’m so sorry -” Alec presses his palm flat against Magnus’ back in an attempt to soothe him, to chase the closeness of a moment ago. But he’s never been good at knowing how to comfort someone, his calloused hands made for notching arrows and pulling bowstrings and not for soft and gentle condolences, and it shows: Magnus’ entire body stiffens as if Alec has scorched him.

Alec pulls his hand away.

He doesn’t know what to do. He has seen pain before, he’s seen guilt before, but never wracked up together inside someone for whom he cares so much - and he doesn’t know how to make it go away. He doesn’t know how to fix it - because, fuck, what can he even say or do to make this better? - and that hurts more than anything has hurt before.

He doesn’t have the power to undo the past. He can’t manipulate time and turn back the clock five minutes.

Can’t save someone’s life with a flick of his fingers.
(God, but he wishes that he could.)

“Magnus,” he tries, once more. The need to touch, to have his hands on Magnus again, overwhelms, but he bites it back, gulps it down, channels the uncontrollable tremor in his hands into digging his fingernails into the meat of his palm until it hurts. Instead, he whispers, “Tell me what you need me to do.”

Magnus fingers tense, and then relax, over the edge of his desk. The line of his shoulders softens and, slowly, he draws himself back up to full height with a calculated exhale. His gaze flicks to Alec, and in his eyes, Alec finds resignation eclipsing longing like the slow drag of a stormcloud across the moon, smothering it, suffocating it, locking it back up in the box where it belongs.

_In another world, _he seems to say. _In another lifetime, maybe we could have what you want._

_In another universe, maybe we get to be that._

Magnus reaches for his phone again, dialing Luke’s number. His hand pauses, just before he picks up the receiver, and he closes his eyes, searching for a moment of penance he surely thinks is undeserved.

A second of panic pinches in Alec’s throat. Heat gathers behind his eyes.

“Magnus,” he begs again, “Please.”

“I need to call Luke,” Magnus says without opening his eyes. “I need … I’ll need to go down to the precinct, stop those bloodhounds at the _Times_ from making this into a shitshow, someone will have to call Dot’s family - I have to go. I need … I need to work.”

And he doesn’t sound cold, but he does sound different, because gone is the lingering warmth and the coy smile and the feeling of being alone together in the vastness of the universe. Now, Alec feels cut adrift. He can see it in Magnus’ eyes: his walls, hastily thrown back up; the invisible distance between them, growing further than a hand can stretch; Alec is no longer allowed to see inside.

_No, he thinks. No, don’t do this. Not now._
“Well, I can help you,” Alec says quickly. He reaches for Dot’s abandoned folder, but Magnus is quicker, sliding it out of reach. Alec freezes, his hand half-outstretched; when he looks to Magnus, what he finds is just not something he can understand.

(This is what you get for wanting something you can’t have. )

“Alec, no, it’s okay,” Magnus says. His voice cracks. “Not tonight. I need … you need to go. Please.”

Alec frowns. “Go? Go where?”

“Home.”

“Home?” he asks, and then he steps forward again, pushing into Magnus’ space, ducking his head to try and meet Magnus’ eyes. “Magnus, I don’t understand - tonight, I thought we - I can help you. Let me be here for you.”

Magnus turns to face him sharply. His eyes are bright. Wet.

“Tonight - tonight was everything,” he presses, “It was wonderful, and I thought - I really did think, for a moment, that we might get -” He cuts himself off, as if unable to find words, with a shake of his head. There’s something he’s not saying. Something he can’t say. He ends up just repeating himself. “I have to go.”

Alec feels like he’s been doused in ice cold water. He steps back, soldier straight with his hands hanging limp at his sides, and looks at Magnus for a long moment. Magnus doesn’t look away, but nor does it feel like he’s meeting Alec’s eyes, not really. He’s somewhere else, far, far away from here -

And far away from Alec.

Alec knows when to choose his battles. He wishes that he didn’t, he wishes he were like Jace, foolish enough to run into things he cannot win; he wishes he knew how to plant his feet and not be buffeted by New York’s endless storms. He knows he’s managed both before.
But not in front of Magnus. Magnus is a thready hole in his bravery; Magnus is where his control spirals out of his grip and he’s left scrabbling for it in the dirt. Moments ago, he was a breath away from spilling his heart, and now -

*It’s me*, whispers the voice in Alec’s head. Only now, that’s distant too, and slowly, the words he was so sure of saying begin to fade. *It’s me, I’m Sentinel. You weren’t the one who was supposed to be out there tonight keeping people safe. This is not your fault -

*Because it’s mine.*

He should’ve known better.

Alec swallows thickly, staring hard at the lines on the desk. From the corner of his eye, he watches Magnus rub his thumb and index finger together, and the edge of the folder on the desk catches in a breath of imaginary wind.

“Okay,” Alec says. He compresses down the disappointment in his gut, squashing it up as small as he can manage, and if it tastes bitter, he won’t let it show on his face. He’s good at that. “Okay. I’ll just - I’ll just go.”

He grabs his umbrella from the pot by the door, but Magnus doesn’t move from behind his desk. His eyes have fallen back on his phone and he’s staring at it like he expects it to come alive in his hand.


“I’ll see you tomorrow, then,” Alec offers instead, pausing in the open doorway. Outside, the hallway is pitch-black; not even Alec can see the way out. An invisible hand seems to push him forward, insistent in the darkness. “Magnus, if you need *any* help -”

“I’ll let you know,” Magnus interrupts. He glances up, finally, but his tight smile doesn’t reach his eyes. “See you tomorrow, Alexander. Have a good night.”
You too, is out of place, so Alec doesn’t say it. He leaves without saying anything at all.

Chapter End Notes

So ... I told you Alec would get his good night's sleep in this chapter! It's such a shame about ... everything else ...

I had a great time in New York, by the way! Times Square at night in the rain was every aesthetic of this fic come to life and I think my sister got fed up of my talking about superheroes. But we also decided that swinging around from NYC buildings is basically impossible and this whole fic has therefore been rendered moot. Oh well.

Anyway, listen. I do love writing romance, I promise. I love that precipice moment, that will-they-won't-they, that pause just before a kiss ... but you know what I love more? Angst, man. I love me some angst. The next few chapters are gonna be terrible (for you) (not me, I love it), but they're some of my fave parts of this fic as we really get to see Alec spiral, Nightlock and Sentinel properly fall in love, and just how much Magnus is torn apart by this distance he forces between himself and Nightlock, and this duty he has to the people of New York and all the other supers, at the expense of his own happiness. The end of this chapter and the next chapter are really my ode to episode 2x18, if you can't already tell ...

This chapter is not beta read so I know there are typos everywhere! I'll get them later! I couldn't look at this in my Google Docs any more, I HAD TO RELEASE IT INTO THE VOID

Thank you so much for all the feedback from last time! I can't express how much it helps to read people's thought and feelings on this fic, as everyone has a different take on the moral issues and it's so interesting!

Visit me on tumblr and shout in my inbox, especially if you have questions! Please reblog the tumblr post for me too!

I'm also on Twitter if you want to come chat about the fic ... and boy, do I love talking about this fic. Tweet as you read with the hashtag #ficacoldnight! :D

Please leave a kudos if you made it to the end, and drop me a comment with your thoughts, your favourite line, your hopes for what will happen next, your advice for poor old Alec ... I would be forever grateful for it! If you want an alert next time there's an update, please hit that subscribe button!

Until next time, in which Magnus makes a choice between himself or the city, Alec suffers the fallout, and Sentinel and Nightlock realise just how much they need each other.
“I get that you’re angry!” Alec snaps, “I’m angry too, but this - it isn’t your fault that she died, so stop being like this -”

“Like what?” Nightlock demands, stalking towards Alec. Alec tries to take a step back, but he’s already pressed flat against the wall, and the rough brick grates at his armour. He squares his shoulders and clenches his teeth, meeting Nightlock’s burning stare with as much stubbornness as he can manage.

“Like what, Sentinel?” Nightlock asks again, taking another step closer. Eddy currents skitter along the edge of Alec’s mask where it cuts into his skin. He can feel the white-hot heat radiating off Nightlock’s body. “Like I’m being difficult? Worse? Like I’m terrible? Because please, I already know.”

Chapter Notes

Magnus has a choice to make: Alec ... or everyone else.

&&&

This chapter contains scenes of a sexual nature. It is not healthy. Additional information can be found in the end notes (not spoiler free) if you are concerned about triggers.

As always, tweet along with #ficacoldnight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

And the part where I push you

flush against the wall and every part of your body rubs against the bricks,

shut up, I’m getting to it.

-- Richard Siken, Litany in Which Certain Things Are Crossed Out

&

But don’t you think I wanted him
to push me against the abandoned cars, rust and friction
bruising my backbone as he tugged at my zipper

with his teeth?

-- Traci Brimhall, *Dueling Sonnets on the Railroad Tracks*

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*Go home, Alec.*

*Go home.*

Alec does not go home.

Sentinel stops by headquarters that night, not Alec.

*Alec* got lost somewhere along the way, left behind in an alleyway or in the beams of car headlights or in the doorway to Magnus’ office. The lights of Idris’ white corridors are bright and unforgiving; his shadow disintegrates. Each footprint is an echo he has grown unused to hearing.

*Stupid. Stupid for forgetting. Stupid for pretending.*

Raj accosts him in the mess hall, asking why he’s not out on patrol, but Alec ignores him. Lydia intercepts him in the locker room as he grabs his spare quiver off the wall, and tells him Maryse and Robert want to see him. He nods; she frowns; she doesn’t ask him if he’s okay.
He’s not sure if he is okay. He’s not sure if he gets to ask that question when he’s just left Magnus alone in his office with the death of his friend at his feet.

Dot Rollins isn’t okay. Dot Rollins is dead.

Alec cannot bring himself to step foot into the elevator to the penthouse; if his parents want to find him, they can send Underhill. They can send Jace. Hell, they can walk down the stairs themselves and come knock on the door to the training room - but he probably won’t hear them.

The training room is empty: cold steel floors and artificial lights. Alec hooks up a row of paper targets along the back wall and selects an arrow from his quiver. He notches it into his bow; the fletchling tickles his fingers, but he doesn’t feel it. He doesn’t feel its weight, its sharpness, its sense of purpose.

With a hiss, he draws the bowstring back to the corner of his mouth and his eyes follow the long line of the arrow towards the target. The distance shrinks. He’ll make the bullseye without blinking, but he doesn’t let the arrow fly. He holds it until his hand trembles, until the bowstring slices into the pads of his fingers like wire.

Maybe if he makes himself bleed, he’ll feel something. Blood tacky on his fingertips, the sting of the bowstring against his lip - he feels dizzy. There’s a space inside of him that wasn’t there before. Hollowness. He needs it filled.

He feels the bowstring break his skin: the smallest of slices and the welling of a single drop of blood. It’s not enough to pull his eyes from the target, but the sound of the door closing behind him is.

“Alec?” calls Izzy, and just that, just his name alone, is enough to make him lower the arrow and lax the string. He turns to face her and her expression is grave.

Izzy’s eyes rake across his bare hands, his knuckles, the single smear of blood on the tip of his index finger. She searches his skin for the criss-cross of familiar white scars, but the ones Alec bears tonight aren’t visible.

It doesn’t really matter. She doesn’t need infrared vision to see into the heart of him.
“Alec, are you alright?”

Alec’s fingers curl around his bow. “I’m fine,” he says. He’s not. He doesn’t know what he is.

Izzy frowns, but says nothing. She takes the bow from Alec’s hand and then guides him into the weapons room by his elbow. The space smells of steel and worn leather, and the lights flicker overhead, and as Izzy locks the door behind them, Alec finds the time to take a breath.

He expects her to turn on him and hound him for the truth, but she doesn’t. Her eyes are bright, knowing, and Alec is, of course, the furthest thing from alright.

“Mom called from upstairs,” Izzy whispers. Alec feels his fingers digging into the hollow of his elbow. That’s something. “She said you’d skipped out on briefing and wanted me to find you.”

“Well, you’ve found me.”

Izzy purses her lips. “What happened?” she asks gently, “Did mom say something?”

“No. No, she didn’t. It’s fine.”

“Jace? Nightlock?”

“No, it’s-”

“Magnus?”

Alec stills, but then nods, small and hardly noticeable. Izzy’s face softens.

“Okay,” she says, relaxing her grip. She runs her hands up and down his arms, as if trying to warm him from the outside in. “What happened with Magnus?”
“There was another arson.”

“Yeah, I know, I just heard the police report. I already sent Jace and Clary to check on it. I thought … I thought you’d already be there.”

“The super - it was someone Magnus knows.”

“Oh,” Izzy says, ”Salem?”

Alec swallows around the lump in his throat. “Her name was Dot,” he says, “She was Magnus’ friend. He said … he said that he knew she was in trouble, but he didn’t - he just - we were out when it happened. I wasn’t even thinking about - and Magnus thinks it’s his fault, and I-”

“It’s not his fault,” Izzy interrupts, “And it’s not yours either, before you go down that road, because I know you will. You can’t be expected to be there for every single person in New York, Alec -”

“It was the Circle, Iz. Again. Herondale losing the Election meant nothing, and they’re still out there killing people, and I wasn’t there.” I was with Magnus. I was pretending .

“You can’t be with everyone at every second of the day. You can’t always be Sentinel. You’re just one person, powers or not.”

“They’re my responsibility.”

Izzy shakes her head. “No,” she says. Her fingernails will leave crescent-shaped grooves on Alec’s arm; she grips him tight, makes him listen. “They’re not. They’re ours , maybe, but not yours alone. Don’t do this to yourself, Alec.”

She stares up at him imploringly, but it’s like - it’s like he can’t see her, like he’s looking straight through her, and the rest of the world is silent. He sees himself back in that restaurant: him and Magnus tucked away in the corner beneath the low and intimate light, sharing shy smiles and soft laughter whilst a woman was dying on the other side of the city. Alec can still hear the rain on his umbrella. He can still feel Magnus’ shoulder knocking against his. He was feeling butterflies in his
stomach, and Dot was feeling the cold plunge of a knife, or maybe the searing burn of fire turning flesh to liquid -

That’s not why he hates himself. That’s the worst part.

He hates himself because he came so damn close to telling Magnus the truth, the truth about Sentinel, he summoned the courage and threw caution to the wind and allowed his heart to beat traitorously loudly - and then he lost it. And that’s what he’s grieving more than anything, the death of another damned what if, and doesn’t that make him selfish.

The thought is acid; it corrodes him. A woman is dead, and this is the thing that hurts him the most.

He thinks of the look of pure grief on Magnus’ face again.

*This is why you don’t deserve happiness. You don’t know how to wield it without hurting someone else.*

*Magnus must be in so much pain and you’re only thinking about yourself -*

Izzy takes both of his hands in hers, and Alec blinks; the world reforms around him, fading back into colour. Her palms are so much smaller than his, but her grip is so much stronger; she rubs her thumbs across the backs of his knuckles, passing over old scar tissue and the pale ripples of blister burns, like she knows that he won’t be able to break the skin without thinking of her touching him. The blood from the cut on Alec’s index finger smears across her skin, no longer a violent red.

“Alec.” So much is said without being said; it fills every vowel in his name. “Listen to me. This is not your fault, okay? It’s not. Go home and get some rest. Clear your head for tomorrow and then we can tackle this together. Jace and Clary are on it, and Luke will already be on scene, so there’s nothing else you can do. I’ll tell mom you’re off-duty tonight, so you don’t have to worry.” She offers him a thin smile. He hears the waiver in her voice, the way her laugh is watery. “Just get out of here before I decide I’m mad about you wasting all those arrows I made.”

The noise he makes in response could be a yes. More likely, however, it’s a surrender.
Alec doesn’t remember leaving headquarters. The subway ride is a blur of boots and shoulders and static noise and rain damp smells. In his apartment block, he takes the stairs to avoid the chime of elevator music, but half the lights are out, and he dips in and out of heavy concrete shadows.

The empty takeout boxes from Election night are still on his kitchen counter. He hasn’t had the time to take out the trash yet. The glass that Magnus used is still sticky with the last dredges of wine where it stands alone in the sink.

Alec can’t stand the sight of it. He can’t stand the sight of any of it, and he rattles through his kitchen with a trash bag, sweeping everything off the countertops; and then he scrubs each and every glass in his cabinet until his hands go red beneath the soap suds; and then he mops the floor with bleach that makes his eyes burn and his throat scratch - and still, it’s not enough.

The electric red light on the stove reads 2:08 AM. The thought of sleep doesn’t just scare him; it eludes him. His body is too tightly wound. He cannot stay still; if he stops, everything else will catch up. He has to stay ahead.

So, he paces. He paces back and forth in front of the window with the city as his voyeur. He paces until he wears a path on the floor in black boot scuffs, until the rhythm of his own feet replaces the tick of the clock and he loses all sense of time, the dark outside never shifting.

He paces until there comes a knock on his window, some time before the dawn, and he looks up, eyes bleary and red-shot, and it’s Jace.

Jace’s suit is rain-wet, his hair damp and straw-like where it falls stiffly over his mask. His wings are propped up on Alec’s fire escape, and he offers Alec a tired wave and a tired smile, gesturing to the window latch.

Alec says nothing, but pushes the sash up and Jace clambers over the windowsill with all the grace of a wet dog. When he shakes his head, he splatters rainwater over Alec’s shoes.

“Thanks for that,” says Alec, retreating into the kitchenette for a dishcloth, which he tosses at Jace.
“Don’t mention it,” Jace replies, scrubbing the towel through his hair and sniffing loudly. He smells of the city and of the downpour, and there’s mud slicked up the side of his boots, but it’s his hesitation that Alec notices first.

“Where’s Clary?” he asks, because he doesn’t know how to pose the question he really wants to ask. “Did she go back to HQ already?”

“Yeah,” says Jace, flopping onto the couch. He drops his head back against the cushions and expels a heavy breath. “She was tired, I don’t blame her. We sat on that rooftop for like, six hours, it was fucking freezing. I woulda gone with her, but ...”

“But Iz called you.”

“Yeah. She said you’d want an update. I figured you wouldn’t be sleeping yet. Guess I was right.”

Alec bites the inside of his cheek and turns towards the window. The sky is still a deep, deep blue. “Did you see what happened?”

Jace shakes his head. “Nah, we watched from a distance. Couldn’t really get close, and the cops already had the tape up by the time we got there. It was intense. Really big crowd, real angry - apparently the word got out that a vigilante killed a civilian - can’t wait to see how that’s gonna change once the press reveals the poor dead girl was a super.”

“Cause of death?”

“Place was burned to all Hell, but Luke seems to think our pyro wasn’t alone,” Jace says, slumping forward with the dish cloth draped around his shoulders. He frown fiercely at the floor, remembering something horrible. “Her throat was slit, like those first few bodies - you remember? The Circle burned the body after, tried to hide it with the fire, but - yeah. Self-inflicted. She bled out. Fucking messed up.”

Alec’s stomach churns violently. The wind howls at his window; it could almost be a whisper, the very same whisper that Valentine Morgenstern must’ve spoken into Dot Rollins’ ear to persuade her to take her own life.

*And then he her burned anyway.*
Bile burns the inside of Alec’s throat, but he swallows it down. His mouth tastes like ash. In the reflection in the window, he could be in that church again. He could be in the pouring rain of that car park with Luke and Veil, staring down at that first dead man, feeling guilty, and knowing he’s ten steps behind.

He’s still ten steps behind. After everything that’s happened, he’s still in the dark.

“There was something else, actually,” Jace continues. The sofa squeaks as he shifts uncomfortably. The noise is too loud, but Jace’s voice is too low. “Your friend Magnus was there.”

A beat of silence; through the window, the city shimmers like candle flame, but Alec sees only his reflection. His face, dipped in ink and shadow, but a shard of yellow light cuts across his throat, and he recalls, with a shiver, the feel of Magnus’ curved palms flush against his skin. The same light catches and pools in the creases of his shirt, shifting as Alec moves, and he remembers the whisper of fabric as Magnus caught his tie between his thumb and forefinger.

Flecks of yellow are suspended in his eyes, appearing, disappearing, not unlike the roaming of car headlights. He sees again the moment of realisation dawn in Magnus’ eyes, a pale and watery imitation. He feels again the cold space of Magnus’ pulling away from him.

(‘You need to go,’ comes the whisper, haunting. ‘Please.’)

Alec turns sharply from the window, stepping back into the light. He clears his throat. “Magnus was there?”

“Yeah,” says Jace slowly. “Iz said -”

“He knew the victim, yeah,” Alec says quickly, “A friend of his. What happened? Was he okay?”

“Clary spotted him. He rocked up just after midnight and went straight for Luke. We were up too high to hear anything, but he and Luke sat in Luke’s patrol car for ages. I guess whatever they were talking about was pretty serious though, ’cus Magnus looked kinda spooked when he got out the car, and then - weirdest part - he looked right up at me and Clary, like he knew we were there on that rooftop. I mean, he can’t have known, but - Hell, it sure felt like he was staring straight at me. Then he left. Dunno where he went.”
Alec scrubs his palm across his jaw, letting his eyes fall shut. Maybe Magnus went back to the office. Maybe he went home.

*Maybe he went looking for the people who did this -*

Alec exhales sharply.

*He could be out there by himself, and where is Sentinel?*

*Stuffed in a duffel bag under your bed, that’s where.*

“You okay, buddy?”

“Yeah,” Alec lies. “Yeah, I’m fine. I’m just - it doesn’t—”

“Make sense?”

“Yeah,” says Alec. He’s not just talking about the Circle. He thinks Jace knows that. He thinks Jace can hear the wretchedness in his voice too. “Yeah, none of it. None of it makes sense.”

Jace slumps back on the sofa, spreading both his arms along the spine and craning his neck back. He speaks to the ceiling. “What I don’t get is why Herondale would want her dead ... Salem’s not exactly a big fish. She kept to herself in Brooklyn, never gave us a hard time - a lot of cat-saving and walking old ladies across the street, y’know?”

“You know why,” Alec mutters, “She hates supers. And she can make the rest of New York hate them too if they’re going around killing other people.”

Jace’s mouth flattens into a thin line. He looks unconvinced. “I get that. It makes sense, in a fucked up way, but. Herondale’s out. She’s not gonna get her bill passed in the Senate now, and all she’s really doing now is proving that the press was right about her, so why is she still calling the shots? Is she even calling the shots? Hell, we don’t know.”
That’s not a question Alec can answer. Not tonight.

“Everything points to Herondale,” he says wearily, kicking at Jace’s shin. Jace scowls, but wiggles along the couch to make room as Alec drops down next to him. Alec huffs, shielding his eyes from the light with the palm of his hand.

“I know it does. Maybe it’s that simple. Maybe it’s not. Maybe it’s just meant to look that way,” Jace says. Alec squints at him through parted fingers, so Jace adds, “I’m just spitballing here. Maybe Herondale’s not the top of the food chain. C’mon, you can’t say it ever made sense that she was paying people to bump off low-level superheroes when she could easily do so much worse.”

“What’s the alternative then?”

Jace shrugs, but he worries his lip at the same time. “I dunno. Someone higher in government? Or - or it could be Idris. What? Someone has to say it.”

“Mom and dad wouldn’t do that.”

“You think?”

“Not after the coup. They - they saw what Valentine did first hand, they wouldn’t support it again - not after what it did to Idris. Mom wouldn’t.”

Jace sighs heavily; he doesn’t need to say anything. The seed of a thought is already planted, and as it grows, it wraps around Alec’s legs and arms and chest so tight that he can barely breathe.

*If Idris was involved in Dot’s death … if his parents did this to Magnus’ friend …*

Alec rubs at his temples. “I can’t do this tonight.”

“I’ll go see Luke tomorrow. You can see if Magnus found anything. We can split up for patrol and you can try and find Nightlock, see if he has any leads.”

Jace stops, turning to look at Alec. “You got a better plan, huh?” he asks. “‘Cus I’m all ears.”

A better plan. *A better plan than what? Running around in circles and watching your friends get killed, one by one, while you stand by doing nothing -*

Alec squeezes his eyes shut, but he feels the lump in his throat being choked out of him. He clenches his teeth until his jaw aches.

He hears Jace inhale softly. “Alec?”

“Yeah?”

“You sure you’re okay?”

*No*, Alec thinks. *No, I’m not.*

He sleeps terribly that night, tossing and turning and flicking on his police radio when it gets too much, the silence too loud. But the chatter across the radio is white noise, the sort of static that riles up the hairs on the back of Alec’s neck and jitters beneath his skin like an itch he needs to scratch raw: he hears an officer call for backup because the crowds are getting violent; he hears another ask, “can you also pick up coffee on your way over ‘cus it’s going to be a long night.”

“Roger that,” comes the reply, “You boys be wanting donuts with that?”

“Nah, Sarge already brought out the pastries to make up for Captain Garroway dragging us out on yet another dead supe’. Better hurry, they’ll all be gone soon!”
Alec wants to bite through his tongue.

He falls into a fitful sleep just before sunrise - a dream of blood and smog and a dead woman crumpled against a burned-down wall - and yet still manages to snore through his alarm. It’s the banging on the ceiling from his upstairs neighbour, shouting at him to “turn that incessant noise off!” , that has him tumbling out of bed with a lurch that spins his stomach upside down.

He slams his hand down on the alarm clock - it’s already almost nine, and he is so late - and staggers over to his wardrobe, grabbing the first thing that looks remotely like a shirt and slacks that he can find. There’s greasiness inside his head like a hangover; his mouth is dry and his stomach churns on empty, but it’s the pulse in his temples that has him clattering towards the coffee pot. As he waits for the kettle to boil, he leans over the kitchen sink and splashes cold water on his face, palming at the rough scrape of his jaw where he hasn’t shaved in days. His reflection in the faucet is distorted, warped, his face stretched out of proportion. It feels about right.

He looks like a man who has spent the night in the gutter.

The subway is packed, because of course it is , hot and sweaty with the ripe smell of damp clothes and fast food and creosote. Alec presses up against the window, his palm against the glass, a hundred elbows digging into his back and commuters push and shove their way onto the carriage.

A man with a Bible wails about the word of God, his voice carrying through the train, but not a single person looks up at him, chins tucked into scarves, eyes closed, noses buried in books and newspapers. The rustle of broadsheets is loud; the word of God matters little compared to headlines in stark bold print.

VIGILANTE-ON-VIGILANTE CRIME HOLDS NEW YORK HOSTAGE , reads the front page of the New York Times.

PENHALLOW PRESSURED TO TAKE HERONDALE’S SUPERHUMAN REGISTRATION BILL TO THE SENATE , says the Wall Street Journal.

CITY UNDER SIEGE: HUNDREDS KILLED BY SUPERS AS GOVERNMENT DOES NOTHING , exclaims the New York Post.

Alec rests his temple against the subway window, the vibrations of the train rattling through his
skull. The lights of the tunnel bleed into flashes of yellow beyond the glass: dirty, electric, and painful to look at, and the swaying of the carriage stirs up his insides, full of too much space.

Something has seeped out of him and left behind a sticky, tacky residue: black like oil, black like subterranea where sound and sight are muffled, like he’s viewing the rest of the world through a haze of grime.

A sliver of himself is missing. He doesn’t know where he left it, and the memory - his hand on Magnus’ thigh and Magnus’ palms cupping his face - of a heart beating wildly in his chest is strange and obsolete now. He feels muddied, like last night’s hands have left marks across his skin in places where he has lost small parts of self, handfuls of his body taken away and emptied. Stolen, lost, given away freely. He’s not entirely sure.

The office is no better than the train: in place of the sweat and electric smoke of the subway, the smell of cheap aftershave and coffee and printer ink persists, hitting Alec like a wave the moment he steps through the revolving door. He avoids the elevators, but in the stairwell, a group of copyeditors laugh and cackle where they share a cigarette, the smoke mushrooming across the ceiling. On the reporter’s floor, phones ring from desk to desk, jumping from one person to the next like passing gossip. The man in the neighbouring cubicle to Alec’s unwraps something hot and greasy and it permeates through the air, making Alec’s head throb. He’s not sure he takes a breath until he throws himself down in his chair and plants both his hands palm-down on his desk.

The world keeps turning. There’s another article to be written, another story to chase, another coffee to drink. Another day just like the rest, like the hundreds of days before this one. His colleagues continue on, oblivious to the blood spilled the night before.

But they’re not oblivious, not really, because the copyeditors in the stairwell will have heard the radio this morning, and the guy in the next-door cubicle will have read the paper on his commute to the office, and all of them, every single person in the building, will have skimmed over the headlines and shrugged them off. It’s just another dead super, after all.

No-one is oblivious. You cannot exist in this city and be oblivious.

They just don’t care.
Alec could have walked in drenched in the blood he feels slathered across his skin, and nobody would’ve asked him *how* or *why*, only picking up the phone to call the police on him.

*And if they did care? If they did care about Dot Rollins, would it make a difference? It still happened. It’s still gonna happen again and there’s nothing you can do about it.*

*Would it absolve you?*

*Is that would you need?*

Alec peers over the top of his partition, landing on Simon hunched over his desk, typing studiously away at his computer, plugged into his Walkman. Alec scowls and pulls up his emails, sending Simon a curt *hello*. He sees the email arrive on Simon’s screen, but Simon doesn’t react, quickly tapping the close button and diving back into his work.

*Simon*, Alec tries again. Still no response.

Alec frowns and hauls himself to his feet, winding through the other cubicles to Simon’s desk. He clears his throat, but Simon doesn’t hear him, so he hooks his finger around Simon’s headphones and yanks them from his ears.

“Simon.”

Simon jumps a mile in his chair. “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, Alec!” he exclaims, smacking his hand to his chest. “Don’t do that, you almost gave me a heart attack!”

“Your music’s too loud,” Alec frowns. “You need to be more aware of your surroundings.”

Simon narrows his eyes as he looks Alec up and down. “Says *you*, who looks like he hasn’t seen a bed in weeks. Have you seen yourself today? You look terrible.” He glances around the office, and then leans into Alec, dropping his voice. “Don’t tell me you bailed on the big confession last night?”
Alec hesitates. A pinch, somewhere near his heart.. “Something like that. Listen, have you seen -”

“The news? Yeah, shit, I have.” Simon looks around again, his eyes skittishly wide. “It got a column on page five, but no-one’s talking about it, not with the verdict on the Belcourt trial this morning. It’s just another dead super, right? I tried asking Magnus about it earlier but man, he was having none of it, told me to get back to work - but how am I supposed to do that when I don’t know if I’m sitting next to someone who secretly wants to kill me too -”

“You spoke to Magnus?”

Simon nods vehemently, but barrels on. “I thought - I really thought it’d be over, y’know? With the Election. That’s what you guys thought, right? That Herondale was the one paying for these supers to be killed, but now she’s out of office, so why would she still … I don’t get it. How can someone hate supers that much that they just want us dead for no reason?”

“What exactly did Magnus say to you?”

Simon opens his mouth, but snaps it shut again. His eyes follow a group of people into the elevators, and then he glances over his shoulder to check that his neighbour isn’t eavesdropping. The manic look in his eyes sets Alec on edge, as if Alec hasn’t spent the entire night just one sharp shove away from tripping.

“Listen, Alec,” Simon whispers, scooting his chair closer, “You think we can talk about this on break? Don’t get me wrong, I’m super proud of you initiating conversation for once, this is a great step in the right direction, but - I don’t think we should talk about this here. Ixnay on the uperssay, if you catch my drift.”

Alec glares at him. “Simon -”

“And besides!” Simon announces, “Magnus is in an absolutely terrible mood today and he’s already snapped at me three times, and one of those times I wasn’t even doing anything wrong, unless breathing is a crime now? But maybe it is, I don’t know - all I know is that I have to finish this editorial before lunch and get it to Magnus’ desk before he skins me alive, which is somehow the least scary part of my life right now.”

“Did Magnus mention anything about-”
“Of course you ask about Magnus, and not oh, I’m so sorry to hear that Simon, is there anything I can do to help?” Simon parrots, swivelling on his chair to face his computer. “And look, I don’t know what’s wrong with him today, he hasn’t cracked a single smile, but he’s my boss and I’m not exactly about to—” He stops, fingers pausing over his keyboard. “Wait. Rewind. You said you bailed on your big confession, so … this wouldn’t have anything to do with you, would it?”

Alec folds his arms across his chest. “Simon.”


“No,” Alec says stiffly, and Simon raises his eyebrows, expecting more, but Alec fears the vomit of words that might tumble out if he said anything else. If he knew how to say anything else. “Look, have you seen him? I need to talk to him.”

Simon flops back in his chair. “He’s been in and out of his office,” he sighs, “I dunno, Alec, Magnus is on a warpath today, I wouldn’t want to step on his toes, y’know? But - I mean, if there’s anyone who might cheer him up, it’s probably you, so by all means …” He nods his head deliberately in the direction of Magnus’ office. “Go put yourself in the line of fire, do us all a favour. Me, on the other hand - I’m gonna get this piece done for tomorrow’s press and then go the Hell home because there’s no way I’m staying out after dark anymore when who knows what is running around out there. Suddenly, the life of a hermit is super appealing to me.”

Simon squishes his headphones into his ears and turns back to his computer. Alec stares at him, unmoving, until Simon extends his leg and kicks Alec in the shin and mouths, “go”.

Magnus is not in his office. And Alec knows this because he stands outside the door for half an hour with his knuckles resting against the wood before he even notices that all the lights are off.

The hallway is empty too. Alec lets his forehead fall forward and rest on the door, an inch below the brass letters that spell out Magnus’ name.

Alec knows this feeling well: the malignant greyness that swells up and over his skin, soaking his
nerve endings until he’s no longer sure he can feel his own body. It has always left him weightless, floating in a void that he fears more than most: no floor, no ceiling, no walls to grab, no sharp edges to cut himself upon and relearn feeling.

He knows it like he knows breathing, a body honed to move through space without stopping and thinking and being, built for service and built for running; and yet, this time, he feels the greyness rolling down the inside of his throat and it clogs his mouth and it tastes a fraction like he imagines suffocation might do and he thinks: perhaps this is a punishment. For trying to say the things that shouldn’t ever be said.

For trying to be a person you are not allowed to be.

The world moves on and Alec is stuck. He hasn’t really noticed until now, pulled in two directions as he is - Alec, forward and Sentinel, back - but every time he takes a step towards one end, there’s always, always something in his way, casting a shadow, planting its hands firmly on his chest and shoving him back into his own footprints.

This time, it has cost him. Sentinel could not reach another super in time and now there’s blood beneath his fingernails yet again. And Alec -

Alec doesn’t know what he’s supposed to say to Magnus now. I want to make the pain go away, is not enough.

Your friend died because I wasn’t there to save her and I hate myself for it. That’s heartless.

I think I love you but it won’t change anything, is a truth he doesn’t think he deserves to say. I’m sorry for trying to say it outloud.

Alec stands there for a moment, eyes closed, forehead against the door. A taut thread stretches through him, waiting to be snapped, but the effort of holding it tight strains every muscle in his back and it hurts. It aches. In a way that is too dull to sink his fingers into.

And it doesn’t go away, not with another coffee, not with the slow rotation of the minute hand around the clock face. The throb in his temples doesn’t relent as he returns to his desk. He can’t focus on his emails; letters blur and numbers rearrange across the screen. In the corner of the office, the big TV on the wall has been switched to CNN and red and white text rotates in front of the newsreader, announcing that Senator Penhallow will be in the studio for an interview at ten.
‘Super-crisis’ in New York, reads the standfirst, Penhallow discusses crime rates, police spending, and legislative action.

Alec forces himself to look away: whatever mandates Penhallow wants to pass under the banner of being more progressive and less illiberal than her predecessor, he doesn’t want to hear it. Not today. He’s not the only one stuck in the cycle of one step forward, one step back.

He focuses, instead, on the elevators. He focuses, instead, on the way he holds his breath everytime he hears the doors open and someone in a suit steps out.

It’s never Magnus.

The office is busy, frantic with the energy that comes after the first cigarette break of the morning but before the second. Outside, the day is at its brightest: a soft, grey film of light that almost permits some sunlight, but doesn’t quite get there. The reporting floor is a well-oiled machine: stringers trying to sell their leftover stories to desperate journalists, and journalists chasing after overworked editors, and editors shuffling around piles and piles of copy in their arms as they disappear off to the cutting rooms - people moving past each other on high speed tracks that swerve so close to crashing, but never hit.

Alec is lulled by the buzz of it, by the background noise and clamour, by the systematic ding of the elevators, and that’s when the double doors of the stairwell burst open, and Magnus strides into the room.

He moves with purpose, crossing the tracks of other people like he expects everyone else to divert around him - and so they should. He wears steely-eyed focus better than anyone, his hair is styled tall, his suit clean and crisp and gun-metal grey, and today, his eyes, too, are dark and determined.

And Alec is half out of his own seat before he realises.

Magnus doesn’t look over at him. Magnus doesn’t even stop, weaving through the cubicles in pursuit of someone who is clearly not Alec. He walks fast. Too fast. As fast as he always has walked, side-stepping between people with the grace of a dancer and throwing passing smiles over his shoulder, but only now, does Alec see it for what it is:

He moves too fast for anyone to stop him. For anyone to step in front of him and sequester him into
Alec sees it in the dark circles beneath his eyes that have always been there. The hasty makeup. The tension like a steel rod through his shoulders. The way his smile has to be fake to hide it all.

Magnus moves so that he is out of reach of everyone else.

Ugliness in Alec’s chest twists itself into sinuous knots: it’s grief, but not his own. It’s borrowed, superimposed, gathered and collected as if it has nowhere else to go as it rolls so freely from Magnus back and pools upon the floor.

Words stick in Alec’s throat that he doesn’t know how to say: a hundred different questions, a thousand different honest truths all tied up in Magnus’ name. He wants to call out, but he finds himself rendered mute.

Carefully, Alec lowers himself back into his seat. He watches Simon shrink down behind his monitor, but Magnus stops right in front of him, tapping two fingers on the top of Simon’s screen to get his attention. Simon cowers, Magnus rolls his eyes, and whatever is said is too low for Alec to hear.

He doesn’t need to hear it: he can see it in Magnus’ folded arms, in the way he taps his fingertips against his elbow like an impatient metronome. He sees it in the way Simon scrambles through the precarious pile of paperwork on his desk and knocks half of it on the floor in his haste to hand Magnus a stack of negatives.

Magnus tucks the photographs beneath his arm and says something else to Simon, quick and terse and enough to make Simon pause. Alec cannot see Simon’s expression, but he can see the way Magnus’ eyebrows knit together and the way his mouth turns down at the corners, and the way -

The way he hesitates. The briefest of doors opens; the smallest of chinks in his armour presents itself to Alec. A fissure, a crack, a hemorrhage of black light that escapes before Magnus can press his fingers over the metaphorical wound, and Alec thinks: you’ve never been okay. Not for months. You’ve just been so good at hiding it all this time.

Alec sees it all.
The man from the neighbouring cubicle leans around the partition and tosses the day’s paper onto Alec’s desk with a grunt. The corners are splodged with greasy fingerprints and the smell of fast food.

The newspaper is folded over onto page six. Alec’s eyes flick to the first article (“BELCOURT GUILTY AS JURY RETURNS VERDICT AT FRAUD TRIAL AS HUMAN TRAFFICKING ALLEGATIONS CONTINUE”), and then the second (“GUNMAN IN HARLEM KILLS AT LEAST 2 AND INJURES 34”), and then the third, which wraps around a photograph of a blackened Brooklyn townhouse surrounded by fire engines. The colour is faded on the paper; the lights of the firetruck are not blue.

Further down, there’s a photograph of Dot Rollins. It’s different to the one Alec saw last night: in this, she has a cigarette in one hand, a glass of wine in the other, leering at the camera the way only happily drunken people do. The photo is a deliberate choice, Alec knows it is; somewhere, there is an editor who told his staff, make her look careless, a drunk, better off dead. We don’t want pity.

But she has bright eyes and a wry smile, the sort that curls with the knowledge of a secret that you’re not allowed to know, and she looks far too much like the sort of person Magnus would find it necessary to know, and know well.

The article headline is this: MIDTOWN SUPER KILLED IN FIRE AS VIGILANTE CRIME WAVE CONTINUES. Vague and impersonal and saying nothing, not really; Dot is not mentioned by name until the third paragraph down. The nature of her super power is in the first fucking line.

Dangerous, the reporter calls her. Evidently, Magnus didn’t write this one.

Alec looks up. Magnus has already left.

“My contact at the city morgue sent me an update,” Izzy says, over the phone. “Fire was definitely not an accident, but not cause of death either. She bled out, but there was no carving on her skin like with the others. I think she was burned in a hurry, apparently there was no deep tissue damage.”
Alec curves his body around the telephone, cradling the receiving between his shoulder and ear; the smog-coated glass of the phonebooth on the corner of the block shields him from prying eyes - but he could always do to make himself smaller, more inconspicuous. He ducks down into the upturned collar of his coat.

“Interrupted before he finished?” Alec suggests. “Sounds like they had to leave the scene in a hurry.”

“Maybe. Probably. Meliorn’s got satellites tracing heat surges across the city, so we caught this one pretty quickly. Cops were there in eight minutes. Jace and Clary were there in ten. Luke sent over the crime scene photos this morning, and the place is a mess. Dot fought back. She probably made a lot of noise.”

Alec swirls those words around in his mouth; the taste is bitter. He presses his fingertips into the cold black plastic of the phone box until he can feel pressure in each of his knuckles.

Dot fought back. She might have won if someone else was there to help her -

“Stop it,” says Izzy, “I can hear you hating yourself.”

“I’m not,” Alec mutters, before adding, “If she fought back, maybe there will be evidence at the scene. DNA or blood or - something.”

“If you want the address, you could just ask, you know. I’m well aware you’re gonna go straight there after work tonight.” Izzy recites the address of Dot’s brownstone to him. It’s in Brooklyn. Not far from Magnus’ loft. “CSU will have finished by tonight, so all you’ll have to deal with is a couple patrol cops guarding the door. Don’t get caught, alright? I’m gonna tell mom and dad that you’re on patrol with Jace. As normal.”

Alec nods - and he knows Izzy can’t see that - but he can’t really hear her; her voice is white noise. His eyes follow the passers by on the other side of the glass, and he wonders which of them might be a super who he doesn’t know. Some of them might be unread folders on Magnus’ desk. Others of them might be Circle, might be the man called Hellfire, called Johnathan Morgenstern, hunting the rest of them down whilst Alec wastes time in a phonebooth.

“Alec? You still there?”
“Huh?”

“I said, have you spoken to Magnus this morning? How is he?”

“I haven’t - I haven’t really seen him,” Alec lies. “He’s been busy.”

“So why are you wasting your lunch break talking to me? He just lost his friend, Alec. Go be with him. For both your sakes.”

“I don’t know what to say to him.”

Izzy sighs forlornly. “Are you kidding me? It’s not about what you say, Alec, because God knows you’ll just spit out whatever words come into your head. It’s about how you say it.”

“That’s not very good advice.”

“You’re welcome to ask Jace, but you won’t get anything better and you know it.”

And it’s hard, it’s hard to explain to her how he feels; there isn’t a word for it, the way he exists separate from his own body, incorporeal and drifting through the day.

It’s never been like this before. He’s seen a hundred people die; arrived too late a thousand times; death doesn’t shock him like it should. And he’s always had to force himself not to feel, but this time, it’s like -

There’s a voice in his head that sounds like his mother: it’s just another dead vigilante. You didn’t know her. It wasn’t your job to save her.

His father would chime in: stop feeling this way. It’s unnecessary. What have you lost? Nothing important.

That unfeeling in his chest has rotted into a hollow. Guilt has pooled there. Guilt, regret, sorrow, and loss, thick and black like tar. He was never taught how to funnel it out, how to siphon it from
himself, and now he’s having to swallow it back to stop it from spilling out of his throat.

You’re gonna have to light it, says the dangerous voice in his head again. Set a match to it. Burn it out. Burn out the feeling, fill the hole in you with smoke. Be rid of it.

Alec doesn’t know how to go back to his desk, but he does. He answers his emails and writes his audits and drinks his coffee because it’s all routine and his body moves through the motions on autopilot. Well-trained. That’s the word for it.

He tries to formulate words. Condolences for Magnus. Repetitions of the things he said the night before that bordered upon the desperate. Don’t push me away. Let me help. I don’t know how to help. Tell me what to do. Tell me how to make the guilt go away. I know you’re feeling it too -

Ah. There it is. The guilt again, and how it tastes, petrolic in his mouth, sticking against the back of his teeth. A trickle of it, down his chin; quietly beading from every pore.

How dare you feel guilty now. How dare it render you comatose now. Why only when Magnus is involved does it incapacitate you like this?

You’ve always been able to move through it before.

Alec’s hands fall away from his keyboard; his screen turns black with his screensaver, a ball bouncing back and forth and never hitting the corner. The office around him has fallen in empty silence - beyond the window, it has grown dark - and his thoughts drift away to the duffel bag in his locker downstairs, fingers twitching for a bow and arrow, skin seeking the stiff contact of Kevlar armour and black leather. His supersuit has always been so good at keeping his insides in and the outside out.

He’s the last one left in the office. The clock on the wall reads 8 PM. He doesn’t know where the day went, but he it’s dark and quiet now, enough for him to slip out of Alec’s skin and zip himself into Sentinel. The need possess him.

Alec leaps out of his chair, grabbing his coat as he heads for the stairwell with single-minded focus. His footsteps echo, and in the space between, the argon lights hum like insects overhead, and Alec, too, is drawn moth-like towards the neon-green sign above the door that reads exit.
It’s not his mother’s voice he hears then. Not his father, not Isabelle, not Magnus. In the back of his mind, he hears Nightlock.

*Are you going to hide behind Sentinel every time you’re too afraid to be Alec? I told you. You and him are the same damn person.*

Not a shout, but a murmur. Nightlock’s words are like a whisper against his ear, quietly intimate and quietly compelling, the flush of breath against the side of his neck not unlike the prelusion to a storm.

The lights flicker overhead, as if to make a point.

*You’re not as divided down the middle as you think you are.*

*(And sometimes, that’s going to hurt you more, but the point is this: what are you willing to endure?)*

Alec takes the stairs and weaves his way through the blacked-out corridors and empty hallways; the building is like a maze, not because he doesn’t know his way, but because he heads towards the centre when he already has a piece of string tied to Sentinel that would otherwise lead him out. He has to look.

At the end of the line of closed office doors, there’s one with the lights still on. Alec stops mid-step.

The sound of jingling keys reaches him first. A muttered curse. A flicker of movement in the low light, a shadow wafting like a candle.

Magnus fumbles with his keyring outside his office door, his back curved and his head bowed, and he is a reflection of Alec not a few hours ago, standing in the exact same spot. He seems defeated, so tired that the grace has bled out of him, and he, too, is dragging around a body that feels empty and purposeless.

Magnus curses under his breath when he finds the right key, jamming it into the lock and pushing his shoulder against the door, and Alec cannot just stand by and watch them miss each other again.
They’ve been missing each other a while now.

“Magnus,” Alec calls out, and he watches the sound of Magnus’ name from his lips ripple up Magnus’ back. “Magnus, wait, please -”

Magnus stops in the doorway but he doesn’t turn to look as Alec approaches. He seems to steel himself, his hand curling around the door handle, his eyes falling briefly closed. He gathers himself; Alec’s step falters. Magnus’ shoulders shift beneath his suit jacket with a steadying breath, but it shakes, it trembles in the quiet, and it stops Alec short of reaching out and touching him.

“Magnus,” Alec says again. Maybe it’s the only word he knows he can say without putting his foot in it. Maybe it’s the only word he knows with any certainty anymore. It’s better than saying: you didn’t say hello today, and that’s never happened before, and it’s done something terrible to me.

Magnus turns to look at him. There’s a dichotomy in his eyes: a warm relief and cold severity, the pieces of himself glad to see Alec warring to be seen amidst those he has closed off and shut away and turned to armour, to steel. The door behind him slowly swings shut against his back.

Alec’s name escapes him as a breath: “Alexander.” A pause. “I thought you might’ve gone home for the night.”

Alec offers an unsure smile as he steals another step closer, but Magnus tenses. “Sun’s only just set. Why would I - why would I have gone home?” He swallows thickly and then adds, “You’re still here.”

Again, another flinch - not bodily, but it’s in his eyes, in Magnus’ eyes. He can’t hold Alec’s stare and that’s never happened before.

He’s going to send me away again.

The words tumble from Alec’s lips before he can stop them.

“Magnus … about last night -”
“It’s been a busy day,” Magnus interrupts, leaning back against his door, forcing as much space between them as he can. He folds his arms across his chest and his fingers dig his suit jacket; he holds himself tight, as if desperate to stop the rise and fall of his body. It doesn’t go amiss. “Some underqualified intern mixed up the copy for our next editorial and delayed it until Sunday’s issue, so I’ve been chasing that all afternoon. Add onto that Simon’s missing photographs, and the fact the board is breathing down my neck again - somewhat of a nightmare, you could say.”

His words are quick and sharp, but hollow. And Alec doesn’t want to be having this sort of conversation. Not now. It’s too awkward, too stilted to bear. It feels false.

“And Dot?” he dares to ask.

Magnus’ jaw clenches. “And Dot. I’m sure you saw her page five obituary,” he says bitterly. “More than a vigilante deserves, I’m sure. The editor was very generous with his word count. Two hundred fucking words.”

The lights overhead flicker again like a heartbeat; Alec half expects the hallway to be plunged into darkness, but the grainy yellow glow persists. It paints a sickly colour across Magnus’ cheeks, desaturating the bags beneath his eyes.

He’s not okay. But he doesn’t want Alec to see that he’s not. Perhaps that hurts more, letting the anger seep out, but keeping everything else tangled up inside.

(Alec would know.)

Alec reaches out, brushing his knuckles against Magnus’ arm. He pinches a crease in Magnus’ suit jacket and tugs on it gently, like he’s some tall child trying blindly to stop someone else from crying when he doesn’t really understand why.

He wishes he understood why. He wishes he could share that grief with Magnus, feel it too, unburden him and split the load. Alec would gladly accept all of it into the space inside his chest if it meant Magnus didn’t have to carry it at all.

“Magnus,” he whispers. “Let me help. Please.”
Magnus scoffs. “Help. I think we’re past the point for help. Unless, of course, you can turn back time so that I can actually do something to save her and not -” He snaps his own sentence in half, unwilling to finish it, and bites down hard on his lip. “Sorry. That’s - that was unnecessary. I’m just tired. I’m sorry, Alexander.”

“You don’t have to be sorry. Just - just tell me what I can do to make it easier. You don’t have to deal with this alone.”

“Alec -”

“Please. Please. I can’t - I saw you earlier in the office, and you weren’t - you weren’t you. You were the person everyone thinks you are when they look at you, when they look past you, but you weren’t … the Magnus I know. So … just tell me what I can do to fix it.”

Magnus’ expression softens for a moment. His eyebrows pinch together, his mouth flattens to suppress a quiver. He looks heartsore. “Alec, you can’t fix this.”

“But we can get justice. For her. That’s - that’s what you’ve always said, isn’t it?”

Magnus shakes his head. “It isn’t about justice, not this time. It’s about making sure it doesn’t happen again, and because of that, I need you to understand, we can’t keep -”

“We can talk to the police, to Luke,” Alec interrupts, his hand falling from Magnus’ arm. “There’ll be evidence, there has to be something - something that will lead us to the Circle. They have to have left something behind this time and we’ll find it. We just gotta keep looking.”

“Alec, stop. You need to listen to me -”

“You said Dot has a case file. You said - you said you left it on the top of your pile, but we can look at it now. Or I can look at it. I want to look at it. Maybe there’s something we didn’t see before. What about all the other files we have -”

Alec reaches for the door handle to Magnus’ office, but Magnus inhales sharply, knocking Alec’s hand aside.
Alec’s eyes fly to his. He freezes.

“Magnus?”

“There’s -” Magnus begins, but the words stick in his throat. “I don’t think - I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“It’ll be quicker with two of us,” says Alec. “We can figure it out together.” He takes one last possible step closer, and now, they’re breathing the same lukewarm air. But Magnus stiffens, and instead of tilting his chin up to look Alec in the eye, he turns his head to the side and presents Alec with his cheek.

“You have your own work to do,” Magnus whispers, “I can’t keep asking this of you. It’s not your fight.”

Alec frowns. “Of course you can, you can’t say that. I’m here, I want to do this, if it’s your fight, it’s my fight too.” It’s my fight more than you’ll ever know. “What do you - has something happened?”

Magnus doesn’t answer that, but his jaw works, and in profile, Alec can see every muscle moving. The sharpness of him is an edge upon which Alec could cut himself, and perhaps, Alec craves exactly that.

“Magnus, you can’t blame yourself for last night.”

“This isn’t just about last night,” Magnus retorts, “But last night was the accumulation of something I should’ve seen a long time ago, something I should’ve been able to stop if I weren’t so -” He cuts himself off with another pained noise. “First Ragnor, and now Dot, and who knows when it might be - I’m sick of watching the people I care about die.”

“I can help,” Alec urges, “I can help you.”

“I know you can.” It’s almost a whisper. Maybe it has to be a whisper so that Alec won’t hear his voice shake. “But I never … I never said this was going to be forever.”
Alec blinks. Finds himself rendered mute. Blinks again. Magnus refuses to look at him, his face turned to the side, but Alec has him all but pinned to the door with nowhere else to go.

“Magnus - I - I don’t understand. Are you saying you don’t want me to help with the investigation anymore?”

Magnus nods, and then whispers, “Yes. Yes, that’s what I’m saying.”

“Why?”

“I can’t have both, Alec,” Magnus says, too quickly. His eyes are bright, even as the lights flicker in and out of existence. The honesty that comes forth is ripped from within him like a bandaid, Alec knows.

“What do you mean both ?”

Magnus takes a deep breath. “Both you and my duty to this city and its people. You saw what happened last night. I’ve lost sight of ... of what I told myself I should never lose sight of, and someone I care about lost her life because of that. So, I have to choose. And I’m choosing not to forsake this city for my sake. I’m choosing to stop this from happening again.”

“I don’t understand.”

Finally, Magnus looks back at him. “Last night, I chose you over everyone else,” he says carefully, and Alec’s traitorous heart has the nerve to stutter. “I choose being with you instead of being here, at my desk, where I needed to be. Because being around you, Alec, it makes it easier to breathe. It makes me forget about everything else in the whole damn world, and I want so badly to forget.” He exhales shakily, and then adds, “But choosing that, that moment of escape for myself, however much I want it, that was selfish of me, and I paid a price. Dot paid a price. She won’t have been the only one.”

“We couldn’t have known what was -”

“Yes, we could’ve. We could’ve.”
“So then it’s not a mistake we’ll make again!” Alec snaps, “Magnus -”

Magnus shakes his head again, but the look in his eyes is messy now and a wet glint catches the light. He palms his hand across his jaw, but even that is shaky as if there’s static energy tingling in his fingertips.

Alec has never seen him like this before. He’s seen his anger and his fear and the deep-rooted sadness that often lingers when they’re alone together in the hours after midnight, but this is different: so often does Magnus stop himself upon a precipice and refuse to let himself slide down into feeling, especially a feeling everyone else can see and jam their fingers into the cracks thereof.

He’s like Alec in that sense. He panics when the feeling gets too much. He pushes others away. He wants to hide it before anyone else can find weakness in it.

“Magnus, please,” Alec repeats, and he wants so desperately to reach out and touch him, to touch him in the way he touched Alec last night - hand to chest, hand to cheek, hand to heart - and fold the universe down to one singular moment where everything else beyond is void, but he doesn’t know how, nor what would be right in a moment such as this.

“I will,” says Magnus then, “It will be a mistake I make again if this continues. If there’s a choice to be made between you, Alexander, and everyone else, then I can’t help but want to be selfish, to push everything else to the side, and that’s -”

“A Magnus, you - you can have both,” Alec interrupts, but panic rises in his chest. God, how long has he wanted to hear Magnus say things like this - I care about you, I want to be near you, I choose you - and yet it bleeds him and it bruises him because what has he done to deserve a happy ending? Violence permeates its way into every nook and cranny of this city, and Alec knows that. His feelings for Magnus have always been coloured purple by such a cruelty.

Alec’s voice cracks now. “Magnus, we can figure this out.”

He wants to say more. He wants, hopelessly, to say all the things that went unsaid last night, to say: you’ve got to let me do this, it’s the only way Sentinel can do good, it’s the only way he can be a hero.

He wants to say: do you even know how much you make me feel like me? Like Alec? Like a living
breathing person, like a human being - and not a soldier?

He wants to say: the thought of losing us, this thing we’re so good at not saying, is -

Terrifying.

He doesn’t know how. He’s not brave enough to open his mouth and say any of it, to push them over that edge, one way or another.

For a moment, Alec is acutely aware of the silence. The breathlessness, the dark of the hallway, the cold that doesn’t come from a draught, but from the absence of static that he hadn’t noticed until now. There is no breeze, no shift in the air; he thinks, again, of a maze buried somewhere deep beneath the city. He’s lost hold of his piece of string that leads him to the exit.

And it always comes back to this: a circular and inescapable labyrinth where the monster in the middle is sometimes Sentinel, and other times Alec, but more often than not, it’s the plummeting knowledge that he’s falling in love in a moment when he cannot fall in love.

There is no space for it here. (You were an idiot for hoping that there was.)

Magnus reaches for his hand then, taking Alec’s palm between both of his. Alec huffs out a breath that borders upon the brink of too much truth.

“I can’t have both. It’s not that simple,” Magnus says softly. “And there are things I can’t tell you, other responsibilities I have that I can’t abandon, even for this. I would explain it all if I could, but -” He sighs heavily, looking away, but he doesn’t drop Alec’s hand, stroking at the faded burn across his skin. Alec focuses on the touch like it’s a lifeline. “But I can’t. And I need you to accept that.”

“I don’t know if I can,” says Alec.

Magnus’ eyes flash to Alec’s. “I can’t dedicate myself to saving this city if we continue to do this, whatever this might be,” he says. “I know you know that, Alec. There are difficult decisions I have to make to ensure the survival of - of the people who need my help most. And the only thing holding me back from doing this is -”
You. Unspoken, but there, as clear in Alec’s mind as the memory of Magnus drawing him in by the tie last night, crowding him between his thighs, touching him like the rest of the world had fallen away.

Alec stares down at their joined hands, blinking heavily. Magnus’ thumb continues to sweep over his scar, but Alec can’t feel it.

“I asked you once, what your superpower would be, if you had one,” Magnus continues, “But I was wrong, and you already have one, or so it seems. Your steadiness, your stubbornness, your willingness to put everyone else before yourself … your capability to always know what is right from wrong, when I can hardly fathom it -”

“I’m not a hero complex that you have, I know that now. I was wrong about that too. It’s a dying need to protect people and you get no rush from it. It’s not about you, you’re not in this for yourself, so you must know why I have to do this -”

Magnus exhales unevenly, squeezing at Alec’s hand.

“- and I know,” he whispers, “I know you know how I feel. How I feel about you. And because of that, I’m compromised.”

His thumb circles over the back of Alec’s knuckles, but Alec just stares at him, with the same sort of terror that a man might stare at a raging fire or the rarely-seen stars or the smoking end of a gun. Alec doesn’t dare blink, but he feels water beginning to collect in his eyes and it burns like smoke would anyway.

“That’s why this isn’t easy,” Magnus continues, his voice gossamer soft, “You mustn’t think that it is. But I have to - it must be done. Please understand.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Alec says, “We’re - look at how much good we’ve done, Magnus, we’ve helped so many people, we can protect the supers together. I need to do this with you, and you - you shouldn’t have to do it alone just because -”
"I’m the one with superpowers here. I’m the one whose job it is to risk his life. I’m the one whose duty to New York comes first, and I’m the one who doesn’t get a happy ending because of it, but it’s okay, it’s all I’ve ever known, I’m used to it."

“Last night,” Alec says suddenly, “Last night, I was going to tell you something, and it’s important -”

Magnus drops Alec’s hand, and Alec’s words wither and die on his tongue. It doesn’t matter what he says. Magnus is making this choice without him, and Alec damns the bitterness in his heart that congeals black and disgusting because of it.

“Please don’t make this more difficult than it already is,” Magnus mutters. “The Circle is a threat to every single person in New York. I have to think of them.”

“Magnus, they’ve done nothing for you!” Alec retorts. “You don’t owe them these - these pieces of yourself.”

“I know,” says Magnus, “But if no-one speaks out for them in their hour of need, who will be left to speak for me in mine?”

Me. I will speak for you. Sentinel will speak for you, that’s what he was always meant to do.

Don’t you see?

Alec’s fingers twitch; his nails dig into the palms of his hands and he locks his body down. For a singular, self-destructive moment, he thinks about grabbing Magnus by his lapels and dragging him in for a messy, violent kiss, because maybe - maybe that’s the closest he’ll ever get to truth he wants to tell.

One desperate, pleading kiss to stop Magnus from making this choice, to steal the words from his mouth, to pin him flush against the door to his office until all he can think about is the hot press of hands against his chest and the slide of Alec’s lips against his mouth and how Magnus is more noble than him, because Alec is done silencing this part of himself that the city wants to consume.

He leans forward - not far, but far enough for his shadow to pass across Magnus’ face. Magnus wets his lower lip. His eyes fall to Alec’s mouth.
The static prickles. *Bad idea*, it seems to say. *But do it anyway.*

Alec doesn’t kiss him. He wants to, but he can’t. Kisses that sharp, that biting, aren’t meant to be first kisses.

He doesn’t want to kiss Magnus and prove Magnus right and force Magnus to choose him over and over again at the behest of the people who need them both.

He doesn’t want to kiss Magnus and have him still pull away afterwards.

Alec takes a step back, squeezing his fingers into his palms. There’s a dangerous drop of water clinging to his eyelashes and he tries to blink it back, refusing to let it fall, but the rest of the world begins to blur.

“This is never going to be over,” he says, a little bit brokenly, “They’re always going to need your help.”

“I know,” says Magnus, “I know.”

“So then, we can’t ever -”

It’s not a thought worth finishing because it brings Alec too close to the ledge he just pulled back from. He’s already talking in *we* and *us*, despite knowing there can be neither.

Magnus nods stiffly. *No*, his eyes seem to say. *No, we can’t. Because I would never forgive myself if someone else died on my watch when I could’ve done something differently.*

A long time ago, it was that easy for Alec too. Before Magnus, before Nightlock, before Alec knew himself as he does now, it was easy to make hard choices and prostrate himself to the service of an unforgiving city.

Now, it’s just another loss to grieve, and perhaps this is his worst one yet: the loss of a possibility,
a could-have-been, an almost.

*Serves you right,* says the voice in his head. *That’s not a future you get to have. You’re Corporate. You sold that away the day you were born.*

Alec scrubs his fingers beneath his eyes, wiping away the few rogue tears that have accumulated there. He sniffs loudly, but he will not cry.

He doesn’t want to give the city, and Idris, and *fucking Sentinel* the satisfaction of knowing they were all right: Alec and Sentinel cannot exist at the same time. The worlds they live in are too far apart for one body to stretch between.

“I have to go,” Magnus whispers, drawing Alec’s focus back to him. A thin sliver of light streams out from within his office, yellow as it strikes Alec diagonally across his face and he winces. “I have somewhere I need to be tonight, and - I’m sorry. I am, truly.”

“You don’t - you don’t have to be sorry.” The words come out like a croak. He sounds wretched. “There’s nothing to be sorry for.”

Magnus smiles thinly at him, but Alec can’t look.

There’s nothing he knows how to say anymore. He wants to run away, to disappear and compress this too-big feeling down into the smallest possible moment and hide it in the dark. He wants to go away inside himself where the mask and the armour will keep him safe, and yet -

And yet, he still wants to reach out his hand and stop Magnus from closing his office door in his face. He wants to say the damning and irreparable things that cling to the tip of his tongue and clog up his throat and make it so damn difficult to breathe.

No. *No, don’t make it more difficult for him than it already is. Don’t make him resent you on top of everything else.*

Alec turns and walks away, and it’s both the easiest and most difficult thing he’s ever done, made all the worse by this flash of an expression that he sees on Magnus’ face at the very last second: hurt and disappointment and shattered hope and steeled acceptance, all of it at once. As if he were hoping all along for Alec to be able to change his mind; for Alec to say something that would give
Magnus no choice but to choose him; for Alec to kiss him up against the door until the world stopped spinning after all.

Alec’s footsteps echo down the hallway, his shadow sprawled out long and thin before him, distorted until he’s barely person-shaped. He wipes the back of his hand across his eyes until he sees shapes in the dark and his knuckles comes away wet. He can’t look back, he won’t look back, but the shard of light streaming out from Magnus’ office strikes up the back of Alec’s legs, and he cannot overlook the fact that he is walking away from a door left ajar.

*Don’t think about it. Don’t miss what you can’t have. Don’t dwell on it.* Because if he dwells on it, he’ll break, and he’s not sure he knows how to put himself back together after that.

The lump stays lodged in his throat until he’s on a rooftop halfway between somewhere and nowhere, armoured up and mask donned and *Sentinel.*

He doesn’t know where he’s going, but he knows where the night will take him: to a burned down house and a crime scene and yellow tape fluttering in the wind, but he doesn’t want to get there yet. He wants to wander in circles, around and around until he can’t tell one shiny building from the next and the city blurs into an irrelevant infinity.

This rooftop could be any rooftop. His suit is rain-wet and his hands and feet are cold. Static hums across the coms and in the distance, a lonely siren wails above the residual hum of the city at night. A cymbal crashes as someone slams the lid of a metal dumpster. Tires squeal on wet asphalt like brass. The hiss of the rain could be a snare.

New York exists discordantly around him, sounds that aren’t really sounds. Fragments and riffs of different worlds colliding and moving through each other, a smear of noise that would make so little sense if one were to pause and take a minute and listen.

Maybe that’s why he stops. Maybe that’s why it’s this rooftop where his legs give out and he staggers against a wall, and the frustrated sob he hides in the crook of his elbow dissolves into slow, heavy breathing and a *moment.* He counts his breaths, he listens to the city, he tries to will all the parts of himself back inside the suit - but Alec feels dashed tonight.
Sentinel’s suit is marked in his own handprints. Inside, his body feels torn, though the leather is not.

A droplet of rain rolls down his nose, but something holds the downpour back. It hangs heavy overhead though the underbelly of the cloud has yet to be pierced, and so Alec lets himself fall back against the wall and sink to the ground, lifting his chin to the sky.

The night is bitingly cold against his cheeks, rubbing them red-raw. The tightness in his chest is frozen solid. It won’t melt away.

His throat constricts, his jaw aches, and his knuckles turn white as he presses his fists into his thighs to stop himself from scrubbing at his eyes - but his body refuses to submit to it, and God, Magnus was right, he is stubborn. He won’t even let himself cry, even when he’s completely alone, because of, what - shame? Hell, he’s not sure if he knows how to cry anymore; it was cut out of him a long time ago on the training room floor beneath his parents’ withering stares, and whatever wound was left in him has festered, buried so deep down within him that he doesn’t know how to reach it to apply a bandage and help himself heal. He wants to heal. He wants to be that whole person that Magnus truly thinks he is.

He feels trapped upon a ledge: someone with their hand against his back, not letting him turn back the way he came - to Idris, to the person Idris made him - but he’s unable to jump into the abyss beneath his feet because he knows freefall will hurt even more. Who knows what happens after that.

Not him. That’s why it’s terrifying. He’s always been a stickler for control.

The rain fades but the sky rumbles. His body feels too heavy to stand; the cold is wintery, ingrained deep in his bones. Even in his leathers, he knows he risks hypothermia if he doesn’t start moving again soon.

As if on cue, his coms start to buzz. Alec raises his finger to his ear.

“Alec?” comes Izzy’s voice and he can hear her frown. “Are you alright? Your suit tracker hasn’t moved in a while ... is something going on?”

“M fine, Iz,” he says, but he sounds pathetic as he sniffs loudly and wipes the back of his hand across his nose. “Just stopped to do a kit check. Don’t worry.”
“Kit check? I refilled your quiver last night when you were at HQ. Is something wrong with your bow? I swear I only checked the tension the other day, it shouldn’t have slackened that much so soon.”

“The bow’s fine.”

“Oh, your suit then? I’m still working on those upgrades for you, I swear, but figuring out how to make everything fire-resistant is surprisingly difficult, especially with Jace wearing an engine on his back...”

“There’s nothing wrong with my suit, Iz. It’s fine. I just stopped to catch my breath.”

Izzy pauses. It’s like she’s listening to all the things he’s not saying. He hates her intuition sometimes. “Everything okay?”

Alec laughs wetly. “Great. Just great,” he says, “I’m - I’m gonna get going. I still have to get across the river.”

“Okay.” A pause. “Okay, let me know if you need those directions again. We’ve got two patrol cars parked at each end of the block and no-one’s watching the door but make sure you get in and outta there before shift change. Call in if you need me - unless it’s from a jail cell, then call Jace. Love you, Alec.”

“Love you too.”

The line goes dead and Alec sucks in a deep breath of city air, drawing it as far down into his chest as he can. He closes his eyes and shuts out the world and wills himself to be calm. If he knows anything about himself - and as Izzy has always cared to remind him - it’s that he can will himself to be a great many things when he needs to be.

But tonight, his will feels a little watery. It will have to do.

Alec hauls himself to his feet, his fingertips already numb from the cold, and makes his way across the city: from roof to roof where he can, the leaps he takes between buildings a meter too risky,
landing on his knees on rough tarmac and gravel. He grits his teeth and swallows it, even when he feels the familiar wet warmth of blood seeping into the lining of his suit. It’s something to focus on.

And when the distance is too far to jump, Alec slides down the rain-wet fire escape, avoiding the yellow puddles of street lamps in the same way a magnet repels another magnet. The neon glare of the city is too bright, too electric, and it makes him squint when he stares for too long, floating shapes passing across his eyes like sunspots. At the edge of the East River, he ducks down into the subway tunnels where the smell of oil and creosote sticks to his skin like sweat, and the dark absorbs all sounds, and when he surfaces again, he’s in amongst the softer, warmer lights of Brooklyn.

Brooklyn’s sidewalks are well-trodden and ill-tended, its brownstone gait loping alongside the hundred-mile-an-hour rush of Manhattan. The low-rise townhouses are are lit with an intimate yellow glow in the upstairs windows, but their walls are splashed with graffiti and paint and the music creeping from the bars tucked away in basements is off-tempo. A group of men smoking on the front stoop of a barbershop spot Alec emerging from below ground and they holler and jeer, their laughter carrying as Alec dips back into the dark.

It makes him feel vulnerable. He needs to be up higher, someplace far off the ground where no-one can see or hear or touch him, because he feels one single touch might skim him of his own skin, he’s so tightly wound. His eyes fall upon the first fire escape he sees, and he makes quick work of grabbing the ladder and scrambling up.

The Manhattan skyline illuminates the horizon. From the rooftops, Alec can see far and wide: the streets below, the bridge to the North, the distant trees of Prospect Park to the South, and across the river, the dual towers of the World Trade Center disappearing into the cloud cover, the top few floors submerged in a deep purple sky.

There used to be peace found in being able to see everything at once. This time, however, the city seems to stretch out infinity, reaching all four points of the compass and disappearing further, into places Alec cannot be, not all at the same time.

Alec smells the burned rubble and blackened mortar long before he sees the old brownstone that once belonged to Dot Rollins. The stench of burned brick has a more acrid smell than that of melted steel and glass; it reeks of charcoal and decades worth of history reduced to cinders,
stagnant despite the winding of the wind through the rows of neatly-planted trees on the sidewalk.

Glass litters the front yard and black soot spreads outwards from the blown-out windows like plague, but all the plant pots on the front steps sit in undisturbed single file, leaves tinged with a thin layer of soot. The front door has been scorched off its hinges and a great big X of yellow tape crosses the gaping space, flapping belligerently in the night, but there are till cars parked against the kerb outside and the house three doors down has all its lights on.

On the corner of the block, a patrol car lurks. Alec can see one officer asleep in the front seat, his cheek lolled against his shoulder, and another lighting up the end of a cigarette, as if the smell of burning isn’t undercut by the familiar taste of copper and flesh.

Neither officer is watching the house, but Alec doesn’t want to risk being seen. He notches an arrow in his bow and lets it fly down the street, shattering a distant streetlamp into a shower of sparks. The smoking officer jumps in his seat, drops his cigarette on his lap, and swears violently as he slaps the embers away from his thighs and leaps out of the car, his hand on his gun as he tears off towards the noise.

The other officer doesn’t stir.

Alec watches the first offer disappear, and then swings down the guttering from his rooftop vantage, landing silently on the sidewalk. Quietly, he locks another arrow in his bowstring, the arrowhead trained on the ground, and he slinks up the front porch steps, ducking beneath the caution tape like he’s little more than a hitch in the wind.

The smell of smoke is stronger inside, mingled with the chemical taste of melted rubber and plastic, but the foyer is not burned beyond recognition. Ignition patterns carve up the wallpaper with unruly black scars, but he can still tell the colour of the carpet. The walls do not creak and the ceiling does not threaten to fall down upon his head. A pair of leather boots at the foot of the stairs are completely untouched.

Alec ducks into the hallway, stepping over a shattered photograph on the floor. It is labelled with a small yellow evidence marker. A thick film of ash coats the glass; the photograph itself has been torn. One of the women in the picture looks like the clipping of Dot from Magnus’ folder.

Alec’s fingers twitch against the fletching of his notched arrow. He peers into the first room he comes to: the kitchen, once quaint, is now strewn with shattered china and upturned spices. Fire has turned the cabinets black and brittle. The refrigerator has been torn from the wall, now lying face down on the tiled floor. The air ripples with silent aftershocks, an energy signature different to
the rhythm of Nightlock’s, but still beating with a pulse: it pulls and prods at Alec’s skin.

Psionic energy, he thinks, Salem was a psychic. Or a telekinetic. And there was a fight here.

He surveys the chaos again, and this time, he sees the paths through the debris, the burn marks on the wall, the space on the floor where someone clearly lay before staggering to their feet. He sees a fight played out in his mind’s eye.

Dot didn’t die because she did nothing. She probably did everything she could to survive, and it didn’t even fucking matter.

If you had been here, could you have stopped it? If Sentinel had been in this kitchen instead of her, would he have won?

If Magnus had been here, instead of with Alec, would Dot still be alive?

In another room, a floorboard creaks, and Alec’s spine straightens. He sucks in a sharp breath, holding it in his mouth, his whole body tensing. Slowly, he raises his bow and draws the string back. He listens.

Another creak. The screech of furniture moved across the next room. Footsteps. The residual psionic energy twitches like a spasming nerve.

Alec lets the breath he’s holding seep from between his lips, steadying the grip he has on his bow. He takes a step back, and then another, back out into the hallway. More angry black brands are hewn into the staircase in front of him, but the noises aren’t coming from upstairs.

Alec pushes up onto the balls of his feet, raising his bow so that the point of his arrow is in line with his eye. His pulls the bowstring back to the corner of his mouth. His breath tickles the fletchling. The hallway is cramped and his range of movement is limited, but as long as he’s the quickest, it doesn’t matter if he has to fight in close quarters.

Around the corner, there’s another creak, someone in the room next door. Alec is definitely not alone in the house.
Not a cop. It would be against protocol. Probably looters. Could be something worse.

Izzy said Johnathan Morgenstern was interrupted before he could burn the body.

There could be some unfinished business.

_God, of all the nights -_

Alec rounds the corner in one quick step, kicking the door open. The figure in the centre of the room spins to look at him, raising both hands suddenly, and it’s only at the last second that Alec pulls his bow sideways and the arrow embeds itself in the wall opposite.

Standing in front of him is Nightlock: his boots blackened with soot, his hands cloaked in swirling energy, and his hair mused by the whistle of the arrow flying too close to his temple.

Of course it’s Nightlock. _Why wouldn’t he be here too?_

Alec freezes in the open doorway, his bow lowered to the ground. Nightlock stares at him, unmoving, and then twists his head to look at the arrow stuck in the wall. An inch to the left and it might have hit him. He glares at Alec.

“Well,” he says caustically. “Thank you for missing, I suppose.”

Alec’s temper bristles. He stalks into the room to retrieve his arrow, yanking it from the wall, but it brings with it a whole chunk of plasterboard. He shakes the debris free but the dust clouds against his suit, leaving a chalky residue across the leather.

“If I’d’ve known it was you, I wouldn’t have fired,” Alec retorts, “Couldn’t you have let me know you were in here? Left a sign outside or something?”

Nightlock rolls his eyes.

“You’re funny. Next time I’ll be sure to leave the porch light on for you, just so you know I’m
home,” he replies, his tone clipped and curt. He crouches down on his haunches to pick at the ash and rubble at his feet, presenting Alec with his back.

Alec frowns, but says nothing. He glances around the room, tracking the scorch marks that spread like veins across the ceiling. Dark ash smothers the carpet, the couch, and the squat coffee table in the centre of the room, while yellow evidence markers stand guard around a number of footprints on the ground, undisturbed by CSU. Most of the furniture is scorched beyond repair, the fire so hot that the aftermath is white and grey against the black. And buried beneath the smell of burned wood and cushion foam, that coppery smell lingers, not quite the smell of seared skin that Alec has come to know, but it’s blood. That much is unmistakable.

The worst of whatever happened, happened here.

“Do you know what happened?” Alec finds himself asking.

“I think it’s pretty obvious what happened,” says Nightlock coldly. He waves his hand and the rubble shifts, revealing a dark stain on the floor that seeps into the ground. Blood left to fester. “A super brutally murdered an innocent woman. Doesn’t matter if she was a super too. All New York is going to see is that vigilantes are dangerous and can’t be trusted. Which is, of course, the whole point, I’m sure.”

“Did you speak to Luke yet? He thinks Valentine might’ve -”

“Yes, I spoke to Luke,” Nightlock interrupts, “I spoke to Luke, I spoke to every single person I could find. It doesn’t really matter, does it? Not when no-one was here to stop it when it happened.”

Alec feels it like a blow to his gut. His whole body tenses. “You don’t have to tell me that. I know I messed up, I - “ That lump in his throat pushes up into his mouth. His words come out choked. “I don’t need the reminder.”

Nightlock scoffs. He pushes to his feet and brushes past Alec. “I wasn’t talking about you, Sentinel. You’re not the only one who has a guilty conscience this time.”

Nightlock stalks into the next room, opening the door with a flick of his fingers. Alec can only trail after him.
“You knew Salem,” he says, and it’s not a question, but he watches it ripple up Nightlock’s back like a violent shudder. “Nightlock, I’m sorry.”

“Yes, I’m sure you are. As are a great many others. And I have received enough condolences to last me a lifetime today, so I really don’t need another.”

Alec bites his tongue. Nightlock still won’t look at him, stepping over the crevasses in the floor and curling his fingers in the air to push all the furniture in the room to the side. Alec doesn’t know what he’s looking for, but maybe he’s not looking at all.

Maybe he just needs to be doing something, because the alternative is standing still and letting the rest of the world catch up with him. If you can run from pain, why would you ever wait around for it to catch you -

Alec swallows thickly, but it gets stuck in his throat. He still feels so watery, and the quiet is unnerving, unnaturally still as the carpet of ash swallows up all noise. Alec can hear himself breathe. He can hear the way it wobbles, the way he has to sniff it back.

Ahead, Nightlock stops. He glances back at Alec over his shoulder and his expression is unreadable, but it shifts from uncertainty into sharp steel again too quickly. Whatever it is he sees in Alec, whatever it is he feels, he lets it wash from his shoulders.

They’re in a study now: there’s a computer against the wall, and a basket of unfolded laundry on the floor, and a large low-fi stereo on the desk, only just taken out of the box by the way it hasn’t attracted finger smudges and dust like everything else. A collection of vinyl records sit on the shelf next to it, alongside a packet of unopened cigarettes and a set of car keys.

Nothing has been moved. It’s a home well-lived in. Dot Rollins could walk through the door at any moment and Alec would feel like an intruder in her space, and not a man seeing a ghost.

He drifts towards a framed photograph on the desk and picks it up. The photo is of Dot and another woman at a bar - and the other woman looks so terribly familiar that Alec almost drops the frame when he realises who it is: the dark skin, the kind eyes, the look of amused exasperation tied up in a crooked smile. It’s Magnus’ friend Cat. The woman who saved Sentinel’s life that night of the shooting.

In the background of the photograph, there’s someone leaning over the bar and talking to the
bartender. And he’s out of focus, but Alec recognises him too, and he lets his thumb sweep across the glass.

_Magnus._

Alec exhales shakily and sets the frame back down. When he turns away, he finds Nightlock watching him from across the room.

“You’re quiet tonight,” he says.

“And you’re angry,” replies Alec.

Nightlock smiles bitterly, but it’s cold. His whole presence is cold, unapproachable, untouchable, and Alec feels held at a distance. “Amongst other things, yes.” He nods towards the photograph. “What was that?”

“Nothing,” Alec says, “Just a reminder. We - we shouldn’t stay here for long.”

“You can go, if you want. I’ll stay.”

“There are cops outside,” Alec scowls, “They’re only gonna be distracted for so long. They’ll find you.”

“And what can they do if they find me? Shoot me? Well, good luck to them. I hope they try. I know how to disarm a trigger-happy officer of the law.”

Alec narrows his eyes. “You’re not joking.”

“No. I’m not.” Nightlock straightens out his gloves, his eyes downcast. “I’m not going to let this city rest until I’ve found the people who did this, and if it means tearing this place apart, so be it. I’m not making the same mistake twice.”

“And if it costs you your life?”
“A small price to pay.”

“And if it costs you your happiness?”

Nightlock looks up at him suddenly. His eyes narrow. “Why do you ask that?”

Alec shakes his head. “No reason,” he mumbles. “But I’m not - I’m not gonna leave you here by yourself.” *I’m not gonna lose you too. Not if I can help it.*

“You think I can’t take care of myself?”

“You know that’s not what I’m saying.” Alec meets Nightlock’s eyes: his stare is provocative, like he’s trying to goad Alec into snapping, or shouting, or maybe just leaving him alone. He’s trying to get under Alec’s skin, but Alec doesn’t know if that’s self-sabotage or not.

He refuses to rise to the bait, but it’s difficult.

He adds, “I’m not the person you need to fight. You know that.”

Nightlock works his jaw, swirling words around in his mouth. But then - the sound of someone stepping on broken glass crunches through the silence.

*Crunch.*

Alec freezes, but Nightlock slowly turns towards the door. Neither of them breathe, but the crunching continues: the sound of someone walking through the house and not even trying to disguise their footsteps.

“You didn’t invite anyone else tonight, did you?” Alec whispers, but Nightlock’s eyes are burning, trained on the door. His fingers twitch and Alec sees the air shimmer with kinetic energy as it pools in Nightlock’s palms and the floor beneath their feet begins to tremble.
“Nightlock?”

“Stay here,” says Nightlock, taking a step towards the door. “If it’s Johnathan Morgenstern come to finish what he started, then he’s going to have to answer to me.”

“Wait!” Alec hisses, snatching an arrow from his quiver. He steps forward, but Nightlock thrusts out his palm and a pulse of crackling energy strikes Alec in the chest, shoving him backwards and into the wall. Alec gasps, the breath punched out of him, but Nightlock surges forward, and with a flick of his fingers, he slams the door behind him, so Alec cannot follow.

“Nightlock, wait -!”

What follows next is a crash, so loud and deafening that it shakes the floor and the door on its hinges and Alec stumbles forwards. He hears a man shout - not Nightlock, not a voice Alec has ever heard before - and then a blast collides with the wall and plasterboard dust mushrooms into the air.

Alec scrambles to the door, but when he ploughs into it with his shoulder, it opens only a fraction before hitting dislodged rubble. The gap is not even wide enough for a hand, let alone his whole body, but Alec charges it again, and then again, and another resounding boom shakes the entire house on its foundations.

“Nightlock!” Alec shouts, and in the next door room, glass shatters, a window blown-out, a body sent flying through it and into the backyard.

Alec rushes to the only window in the room and flings back the curtains. Gripping his bow with both hands, he slams the point into the glass and it fractures, splintering like a spider-web. He grunts, jabbing the window with his elbow, and this time, the glass caves. He scrapes the fragments away with his bow and vaults over the windowsill, leaping out into the backyard, his ears ringing.

“Nightlock!” he calls blindly, stringing his bow as fast as he can and wheeling around with his arrow. “Nightlock -”

On the ground, there’s a man, coughing and spluttering and writhing as he rolls himself onto his front and tries to push himself to his feet. His breathing is garbled, wet with blood that streams from his broken nose, and he wheezes between hysterical sobs as he struggles onto all fours. His
spine convulses as he spews blood onto the decking.

Alec has never seen him before. It’s not Johnathan Morgenstern. Not any of the Circle members they’re tracking. Not a cop, not Valentine Morgenstern, just a kid in a hood and sweatpants, the strap of a battered satchel clutched in one hand.

“Fuck,” Alec breathes, and then he hears the splintering of brick and the cracking of stone, and to his horror, the outside wall of the house begins to split, ripped apart like threads as the brickwork peels back with the gruesomeness of flayed skin. Nightlock steps out of the rising dust, both hands clenched into fists as he guides the reorganisation of the world around him.

His eyes are focused solely on the man on the floor.

They’re out in the open. Alec is aware of lights flickering on in the other houses that overlook the yard; he can hear panicked shouting and someone yelling to call the cops and curtains rustling as people peek out into the dark.

He can hear his heartbeat in his ears. But he can’t look away, his body unresponsive as Nightlock stalks over the man and grabs him by the scruff of his jacket and hauls him to his feet.

The man’s sobbing grows wild. He clutches at Nightlock’s hands. “Please, please, please let me go, I don’t - I didn’t mean to-”

Nightlock slams the man up against the house. With a snap of his fingers, the man’s arms are spread wide, his wrists pinned to the brick. The man chokes as blood streams down the back of his throat and sprays out of his mouth, splattering across his lips in a fine red mist. His eyes are watering, carving streaks in the dirt on his face, but Nightlock’s gloved hand grips the fabric of his jacket tighter.

The press of Nightlock’s knuckles against his windpipe makes the man gag, and his hands go limp, dropping the strap of his bag. It hits the ground with a thunk and a camera clatters free, its lens shattering on the ground.

A camera.

He has a camera.
“Nightlock!” Alec shouts, lowering his bow. “Nightlock, stop! He’s just a kid!”

Nightlock flinches but he doesn’t look back. He flicks his wrist and Alec grunts as another wave of energy thuds against his chest, pushing him back against the wall - but this time, he braces his feet wide and refuses to be moved.

“Nightlock, stop! Don’t make me shoot you!”

His fingers pinch the end of his arrow and he can feel the fletchling cutting through his glove, but finally, Nightlock looks back over his shoulder, and oh -

Behind his mask, his eyes are wide. Wild. Angry, furious, smoldering at the seams, but he stares at Alec like a cornered animal, desperate for help.

His hand is pressed flat against the base of the man’s throat, but Alec can see it in his eyes that he’s running on fumes, that his heart was broken last night in some terrible way and it hasn’t been fixed.

“Nightlock,” Alec tries again, pushing forward. The night is like tar but he wades through it. “Stop. He’s a kid, he has a camera. He’s a stringer.”

“A stringer?” Nightlock croaks. He turns back to the man, and pushes down his hood. There’s dark hair and dark eyes beneath, a boy barely over the cusp of eighteen, and it’s not their pyrokinetic, not at all, but Alec knew that, and so did Nightlock. His breath hitches audibly.

Alec slides his arrow back into his quiver and passes his bow into his other hand. He holds up his palm in surrender. He takes a careful step forward. Then another.

“Nightlock, please - that’s enough.”

“Are you here to take photos of dead supers?” asks Nightlock, his eyes locked with the man. “Are you a reporter?”

“Please - please, I didn’t - it was only - only for the scoop,” the man sobs. Tears stream down his face. Snot and bloody mucus drip from his nose onto the ground.
“Only for the scoop?” Nightlock’s shoulders jerk violently with every stolen breath. His hand pressed against the man’s throat is curled so tight in the collar of his jacket that his entire arm is trembling.

The air crackles around him, and Alec feels it, taking another step closer.

“Nightlock,” he says softly. He presses his palm flat against Nightlock’s shoulder blades and feels each and every one of Nightlock’s muscles shift. “Stop. C’mon.”

“You heard him, Sentinel,” Nightlock hisses, “He wants to see a dead woman so badly -”

“Stop, please. This isn’t you.”

“This isn’t me?” Nightlock repeats, and he’s shaking now, beneath Alec’s grip. “Or maybe it is and has been all along and now we all know the truth.”

“You’re hurting.”

Nightlock laughs callously. “And what does that matter?”

It’s the only thing that matters, Alec thinks.

Alec grips Nightlock’s shoulder and pulls him back. There’s a moment of resistance, Nightlock’s arm solid muscle beneath Alec’s hand - but then he relents, and his hold on the man’s jacket slackens. The man coughs, and blood spurts across Nightlock’s boots, and as Nightlock waves away the bonds around his wrists, he falls to his knees.

“Get out of here!” Alec barks, stomping his foot on the ground. Beneath his hand, Nightlock is shaking, his eyes fixated on the wall ahead of him, his fingers flexing and unflexing as energy ripples in his palms, but Alec doesn’t let go. “I said, get the Hell out of here! Go! Go on!”

The man scrambles to his feet and doesn’t look back, running as fast as his legs will carry him,
vaulting over the fence and disappearing into the alleyway behind the house. Alec hears the clang of metal, puddles splashing with panic, and then - silence, save for Alec’s own violent expulsion of breath.

“Fuck,” he whispers. “Oh, fuck .”

His fingers clench around Nightlock’s bicep, hard enough to leave bruises, but Nightlock doesn’t flinch. He doesn’t even blink as he stares at the wall, his jaw working with seismic tremors. Beneath his mask, his eyes are wide and wet. He breathes heavily through his nose.

*What was that?* Alec panics. *What the fuck was that?*

Alec doesn’t know what to do, but his heart is racing a mile a minute. He looks up and catches a woman next door disappearing behind her curtain. He looks to the ground, and sees the camera, and brings his boot down on the lens, turning it to dust.

A siren wails nearby, too close for comfort, the shrill sound ricocheting down the back of Alec’s neck like a chill. Those cops will be here at any moment. They’re not safe here. Nightlock is not safe here.

And Nightlock must realise it too, because his eyes snap to Alec’s, too fast and too jarring.

Alec finds terror. Terror, and anger, and guilt, and regret, and this wretched, wretched sadness that is somehow so much more than simple grief, furious and far too much to keep in; and now, Nightlock bleeds freely with it. It permeates the air, stinking of iron, and the dark pulses like a rampant heartbeat, its tempo rising.

“We need to get out of here,” Alec whispers frantically. “The roof. Hurry.”

Nightlock says nothing. He nods.
Blue lights splinter across the old brownstone, bouncing off the brickwork and illuminating the blackened rafters with strobe sirens. The wind carries the shouts and commands of police officers, as well as the murmur of a growing crowd, neighbours out on the street in their dressing gowns and slippers.

Alec pulls Nightlock up onto the roof of an apartment building at the end of the block and all but doubles over, hands on his thighs, breathing deeply, leant up against the wall of the rooftop door. Nightlock takes a few steps further, his back to Alec and his face turned to the sky as he runs his hands through his hair, knotting his fingers in his roots.

The wail of the sirens is grating; Alec feels it like nails down a blackboard, but the blackboard is his spine and his very skin is screaming out. He screws his eyes tightly shut and wills it all to go away, but the world doesn’t listen to him. It rarely does.

“You could’ve killed him,” Alec exhales, scrubbing at his eyes as he stands up straight again, “If the cops had caught us - if that guy files a police report - what the fuck were you thinking?”

“You think if I could answer that, I would’ve done any of what I just did?” Nightlock snaps, “Christ above, Sentinel, please, just don’t. Just don’t. I don’t want to hear it.”

“Just don’t? What would’ve happened if I wasn’t there, huh? What would you have done? Would you have killed him for just being in the wrong place at the wrong time?”

“I said, don’t!” Nightlock exclaims, wheeling around to face Alec. His eyes are bloodshot. Ash marks his face where he’s dragged his fingers across his mask. “Don’t lecture me, Sentinel, I don’t need to hear it.”

Alec puffs out his chest. He feels his lip curling in anger. “That was a civilian! A kid! I get that Salem was your friend, but you can’t just -”

“But what?” Nightlock’s jaw clenches, and so do his fists, but it’s not because he wants a fight. He wants to run. “But what, Sentinel? Tell me! She was my friend, you’re right, and I could’ve been there for her, I could’ve been there for all of them, but I did nothing to save her, and that - even if that wasn’t the person who did this to her, he wanted to take pictures of the place where she died for his fucking newspaper, another dead super for the front page!”
“I get that you’re angry! I’m angry too, but this - it isn’t your fault she died, so stop being like this.”

“Like what?” Nightlock demands, stalking towards Alec. Alec tries to take a step back, but he’s already pressed flat against the wall, and the rough brick grates at his armour. He squares his shoulders and clenches his teeth, meeting Nightlock’s burning stare with as much stubbornness as he can manage.

“Like what, Sentinel?” Nightlock asks again, taking another step closer. Eddy currents skitter along the edge of Alec’s mask where it cuts into his skin. He can feel the white-hot heat radiating off Nightlock’s body. “Like I’m being difficult? Worse? Like I’m terrible? Because please, I already know.”

When Alec sucks in a sharp breath, it’s not the night air he’s tasting. Static dances on his tongue. His eyes flit to Nightlock’s mouth, then the tight line of his jaw, and then to how each breath fills his chest like he might burst with the next frantic rise and fall of his shoulders.

Alec’s eyes flick back to Nightlock’s. “You’re not terrible.”

“Why do you care? Why do you care if it is or isn’t my fault? You don’t - you don’t know me, Sentinel. Not really, not truthfully. Not - not in the ways that matter.”

“Of course I do! I know you, I know you in the only way that matters. And you know me, more than anyone else, and that’s why we - that’s why we work so well together!”

“Do we?”

“For God’s sake, yes!” Alec snaps, “So you don’t just get to shut me out! Not this time! Not you as well!”

Nightlock’s expression falters. Something akin to horror flashes across his face like a lightning strike, electric one second and extinguished the next. All that follows is smoke, and Alec cannot read it at all.

He doesn’t understand the look in Nightlock’s eyes as he searches Alec’s face. He doesn’t understand the way Nightlock closes the final stretch of space between them.
And he doesn’t understand the reason why Nightlock winds his fist into the strap of his quiver and tugs on it sharply, dislodging all the arrows from Alec’s shoulder, tossing them to the ground. They scatter on the concrete with the sound of firecrackers, and Alec tenses, his eyes open wide, his heart surging into his throat as he stammers to speak.

Nightlock presses the flat of his palm to the slope of Alec’s neck, his thumb pushing against the neckline of Alec’s suit. The static follows. It threads its way into the spaces between leather and skin where no-one else has touched him before.

Alec’s head swims. He doesn’t know where frustration ends and changes into the hammering of his heart, desperate to be free.

“You think - you think you’re terrible, but you’re not.” The words escape him, whisper soft yet hoarse. “This is just - this is what you do. You think you can take on the world alone, but you can’t. It’s not your burden to bear. It’s not your fault because it can’t be. You’re grieving.”

“That’s not an excuse,” Nightlock murmurs. “No amount of grief should justify violence.” His thumb pinches Alec’s jugular, but his other hand finds purchase on the Kevlar mounted upon Alec’s chest, his fingers curling over the edge of Alec’s armour. He holds tight.

“I don’t know,” replies Alec. His throat seizes, like there’s a hand upon his windpipe. His entire body is pulled taut, not unlike a bowstring. The next move will make him snap. “Maybe it’s not an excuse, but I - I would’ve done the same back there. If it were me, and I were - I would’ve done the same.”

Nightlock stares at him, his eyes drilling into Alec’s, splitting him open. It feels gruesome, but worse than that - it feels vulnerable, because Alec is crowded up against the wall and Nightlock’s hands are on him and Alec imagines Nightlock’s fingers slipping and sliding through the thick ooze of his own blood, red and ugly and telling beneath the glow of the city at night.

“Does that …” Alec whispers into the dark, “Does that make me terrible too?”

Nightlock’s expression softens for a moment in the face of tragedy. He shakes his head, a tiny, barely noticeable thing, but his next words dispute it.

“Yes,” he says brokenly, “Absolutely.”
Nightlock surges up on his toes and crushes his mouth against Alec’s with all the desperation of a man at war with a world on fire that he can never save.

His gloved fingers sink into the slope of Alec’s neck, holding him tight, and his tongue presses against the seam of Alec’s lips. A gasp is wrenched out of Alec from deep within his chest and he braces himself on Nightlock’s shoulders, but Nightlock pushes him flat against the wall, every part of Alec’s body rubbing against the brick with a flint sort of friction as Nightlock kisses him hard.

Alec’s head spins - this is not like before, this is so not like before, like the melancholy kiss they shared with their feet dangling one hundred meters above the city streets. This kiss is sudden and furious - and God, Alec wants to suffer it. He’s never been kissed like this before, like he’s going to look in the mirror when this is over and see Nightlock smeared across his mouth. He’s never been kissed like the other person is on the brink of falling apart. He wants bruises to bloom on his skin with it, because it will make him feel something other than -

*Other than everything else.*

Nightlock pushes his tongue into Alec’s mouth and Alec feels suffocated, the bloodrush into his temples threatening to knock him off his feet. A low rasp lodges in his throat, but Nightlock steals it from his mouth, a thief in the dark. He steps between Alec’s legs, a thigh dividing Alec’s knees. Heat swirls low in Alec’s stomach, rippling out across his belly, his hips, his chest, the sudden burning in his thighs - but Nightlock’s mouth is fierce and ever so distracting.

“God forgive me,” Nightlock breathes against Alec’s jaw. His eyes darken, eclipsed by the shadows of his pupils blown wide. He knocks his forehead against Alec’s, and then they’re mask to mask, leather against leather, and it fits. They fit. Nightlock presses his thumb against Alec’s mouth, dragging it across Alec’s lower lip to see the colour of his skin change, and Alec feels the smear of magic follow, kneading at his skin with no care or consideration for the breathlessness it leaves behind.

Alec feels undone. Nightlock kisses him fiercely and it’s all teeth and hot air and impatient hands and sweat simmering on the back of his neck; it’s the same sort of sensation he chases when he chases pain. It blinds him to everything else, sometimes like a solar flare, sometimes like a numb tingling beneath the surface of his bruised and battered skin - it doesn’t really matter, just as long as it’s enough to stop him thinking and stop it hurting in a place he can’t control. He needs to feel teeth, fast and furious. He needs breath, slow and vicious. He needs to feel like his armour is only skin and bones, like he can be peeled apart until he is no longer a person at all.

And Nightlock is seeking the same escape, he must be. It shines in the blackness of his eyes, and
his desperation chafes Alec’s skin where his roaming hands divulge Alec of any hesitations he’s not even sure he has. It’s a cry for solace, and Heaven knows they both need that now.

Nightlock is grieving in a place Alec cannot fathom, and Alec -

Alec had his heart broken tonight, and now a beautiful man in a mask wants to kiss him. Needs to kiss him. He can do that. He can do this one thing, for one person, and he can do it right, and he will not be pushed away.

Nightlock tugs at his hair, the heel of his palm grazing the tie of Alec’s mask, and Alec cranes his head back, exposing his neck to Nightlock’s clever mouth. His kisses are wet, the scrape of barely-there stubble rough against Alec’s rampant pulse, but Nightlock pulls away when he reaches the base of Alec’s throat with a sharp nip. His hands trail down Alec’s chest, sweeping across Alec’s armour, and come to a stop on Alec’s hips.

His eyes flash to Alec’s. Alec nods, canting his hips forward.

Nightlock’s hands make quick work of Alec’s belt, and then he’s tugging at Alec’s suit, pulling at the fastenings that run down his middle. The cold is gasping against Alec’s bare skin, goosebumps spreading across his stomach as Nightlock pushes the leather apart and shoves Alec’s undershirt upwards, but it snags on his armour.

Annoyed, Nightlock huffs into his mouth. His fingers curl into the hollows of Alec’s hips, and Alec’s skin thurs with the scamper of kinetic energy across his lower body, buckles and clasps falling undone. Alec’s bow falls from its holster, clattering onto the ground.

Nightlock hums, and he pushes his gloved hand underneath Alec’s suit, fingers fanned and scraping through his chest hair, palming hard circles into Alec’s skin. Alec feels his heartbeat drawn towards the surface. He surges forward for another blind kiss and he swallows greedily Nightlock’s low murmur. Nightlock’s fingers swoop lower, sliding down across Alec’s ribs, across that damned bullet wound scar, and down, dipping between his legs. His knuckles brush over Alec, and Alec hisses, biting down on his lip as he knocks his forehead against Nightlock’s shoulder..

With his other hand, Nightlock twists his fingers into Alec’s hair and with a sharp tug, he urges Alec upright again, Alec’s head thunking back against the wall. Their eyes meet again; Alec’s mouth is pink and swollen, and Nightlock’s expression is so dark that Alec is sure he has Alec’s heartbeat right between his teeth.
And, for a moment -

For a moment, he looks like Magnus.

He looks like Magnus that night in his office, the same expectation in his eyes, the same fervour, the same willingness to shut out the rest of the fucking world.

He looks like Magnus, or maybe Magnus looks like him, but Alec can’t be sure.

He just wants to be kissed. He just wants to be taken apart and put back together, and he doesn’t care who does it.

*I want to know what it feels like. For it to be him. For it to be you.*

“Nightlock … please.”

Nightlock runs his hand through Alec’s hair, his thumb stroking the curve of Alec’s ear, and the line of his jaw, far too tender for a moment such as this. Alec stares at him openly.

He wants to feel it all.


And then Nightlock sinks to his knees, hands moving to grip Alec tight by the hips, and it’s all Alec can do not to fall forward, unsure of where to put his hands. His grips tight to Nightlock’s shoulders, as Nightlock noses at his fly. His breath is soft and warm, but then comes the scrape of teeth against the zipper, and Alec’s throat clenches.

The wind is ice cold and the clouds threaten rain as Nightlock tugs Alec’s zipper, shoving the lower half of Alec’s suit down around his thighs, but Alec hardly notices. If it must rain, let it rain. At this point, the raindrops will evaporate upon his skin on impact, and even if they won’t, some part of him wants to be drenched, wants to drown.
Alec almost bites through his lip as Nightlock pulls him free of his supersuit.

Nightlock’s gloved fingers wrap around Alec’s cock and he mouths at the head, precome smearing against his lips, and it’s enough to make tears prick at the corners of Alec’s eyes, for his body to curve over Nightlock like a man in prayer. Nightlock takes Alec upon his tongue, the wet heat of his mouth all-encompassing, and the hollow of his cheeks makes Alec’s vision blur, the colours of New York vague and smeary in their blues and purples in his periphery.

Alec gasps - the sound won’t stay down in his throat, plucked out of him beyond volition - and his fingers sink into Nightlock’s shoulders as Nightlock licks a thick stripe up the underside of his cock with the flat of his tongue. Nightlock pulls back with a soft huff, his breath misting in the cold night air, and Alec trembles at the sight of it: the focus in his dark eyes, the red shine of his mouth, the slip of his tongue against his lower lip as he tastes Alec against his teeth.

The word please longs to carve the unforgiving night wind into fragments; it’s already tearing Alec up on the inside. He feels distraught. His whole body is shaking. He can’t control it.

He can’t control any of it.

Nightlock swallows him deeper this time, his hand covering that which he cannot reach with his mouth; he swirls his tongue over Alec’s cock until he cannot go any further and spit glistens across his chin.

The groan builds in Alec’s chest like a knife, cutting him open from the inside out. “Fuck - fuck, Nightlock -”

Nightlock’s gloved hands grope blindly at Alec’s thighs, his breath hard through his nose. Alec can feel him slipping, clinging to Alec like he’s terrified of falling apart at the seams, his mouth more clumsy, the noises that are muffled by Alec’s cock on his tongue more charged. Nightlock’s thumb digs into the juncture of Alec’s thigh, rubbing small circles into Alec’s skin and pushing against his femoral artery until it hurts. The air seems to bite, nipping at Alec’s skin. His toes curl in his boots.

He struggles to breathe. It’s like there’s rainwater filling up his throat. The recesses of his body threaten to overflow and he’s not strong enough, not whole enough to hold it all inside.
His heart hurts. A lone tear escapes his eye and races hotly down his cheek.

It’s too much. Alec’s gloved fingers slide up to the corner of Nightlock’s mouth, and his thumbs press against the seam of his lips, stretched around the head of Alec’s cock. Nightlock’s eyelids flutter, reveling in the touch, in the friction of Alec’s leather gloves against his skin. He swallows around Alec’s cock, and Alec is the one who chokes, curling forward once again.

Nightlock pulls back to laugh, the sound breathy and hoarse and more undone than Alec has ever heard him, hanging over the edge of fierce exhilaration and the unbridled desperation to feel and be felt by another person. Alec’s chest fucking aches - it aches, and when Alec’s eyes fall closed, he smells smoke and feels the roaring blaze of fire licking at his skin and sees Nightlock with his hand about that stranger’s throat, power crackling in his fingertips. He feels every snappish word exchanged tonight upon the flat of Nightlock’s tongue as he licks Alec again; in the light scrape of teeth against the underside of his cock and the messy, unpracticed want of Nightlock’s mouth; it winds Alec up so tight that every muscle in his body strains with it, balanced unbearably upon a knife edge.

White-hot pressure builds low in his gut, splintering in his legs, his thighs trembling and taut with exertion. A suffocated moan scorches his tongue, the burning, disintegrating sensation almost too much. Nightlock’s mouth on him is a finger on a revolver’s trigger.

Alec opens his eyes and his gaze locks with Nightlock’s and then, it’s like they can’t unlock, and Alec can hear the blood singing in his ears with every curl of Nightlock’s tongue, with every bob of Nightlock’s head, with every squeeze of Nightlock’s fingers against the meat of his thighs as he palms his hands up and down in religious fervour. Alec can’t look away, even when his vision begins to blur, his eyes burning in the same way they burn with the rush of wind or adrenaline or a torrent of flame searing at his skin.

“Please -”

It escapes without meaning, a reckless, pleading word shoving its way into their frantic agreement. It makes Alec sound like he needs it - and he does, God, he does, because the thought of dying friends and brutal murders and Magnus, damn Magnus, his Achilles heel, the chink in his armour, his unravelling - in that hallway tonight, telling him he’s in love with him but can’t be in love with him anymore - fuck, it hurts.

It hurts too much. Alec can’t hold it in anymore.

He can’t help it: his hips buck forward into Nightlock’s open mouth, and then they both freeze,
Alec’s shoulders heaving, the look in his eyes shattered in a way he knows Nightlock can read all too easily. But Nightlock stares up at him, his expression fraught behind his mask, and he sucks again at the head of Alec’s cock, curling his tongue over Alec’s slit. His hand moves to the back of Alec’s thigh, encouraging him forward.

_Do it again._

Blinking back the water in his eyes, Alec doesn’t realise he’s shaking his head, but his fingers knot in the heavy fabric of Nightlock’s coat, his knuckles straining. Nightlock swirls his tongue again, and Alec bites hard on the inside of his cheek, suppressing the broken noise branded to the tip of his tongue.

Slowly - exaggeratingly slowly - Nightlock hollows his cheeks and swallows Alec down, his eyes fluttering closed, the shadows of his eyelashes too fine a thing upon his mask for Alec to be noticing right now. Alec’s hips jolt, thrusting into Nightlock’s mouth again, and Nightlock hums around his cock when Alec hits the back of his throat. Alec does it again, another faltering thrust, and Nightlock’s eyes prick with water; he adjusts his hands on Alec’s thighs, thumbs pressed into the softer skin at the vee of his hips, and then he swallows Alec as deep as he will go, and Alec sees fucking stars.

_Make me feel it._

_Make me feel it tonight, tomorrow, for the rest of my fucking life if that’s what it takes._

Nightlock’s hands pull on his hips, commanding Alec to move, to give him what he needs. He guides the first few thrusts, setting the pace, and he takes Alec gratefully, chasing some sort of muddied exoneration for the sins he thinks he carries for the sake of the mask he wears. Alec will offer it to him if he can; forgiveness may be outside the realm of things he’s qualified to give, but vindication, reprieve, a base moment of nothing more than this - yes.

Yes, that he knows.

_I can help you. Let me help you._

“Hey - hey -” Alec starts, his voice hoarse. His heart stutters. He feels his insides tightening, his cock throbbing. He kneads at Nightlock’s shoulder, his other hand cupping Nightlock’s cheek again. “I’m close - I’m close -”
Nightlock leans back on his knees, replacing his mouth with his gloved hand as he twi...s A...
pull in enough air to lessen the pressure in his chest. He’s never been so close to someone else, so near enough to step inside someone else’s body and inhabit their skin and steal away all their body heat. He can feel Nightlock hard against the juncture of his hip, the shift of his body as he seek instinctual friction. He smells sweat and leather and damp rain and the musky scent of sandalwood beneath all that, and everything inside his head is a mess except for this: the laser-focus he has, now, on Nightlock’s mouth.

And then he kisses Nightlock, and the bruising force of it is possessive and instinctual and cavernous, room enough for Alec to fall and keep falling, forever and ever. He bites at Nightlock’s lip, he tastes himself on Nightlock’s tongue, strange and dizzying, and that free-falling rush is exposed to the elements.


His hands are clumsy where they slide up Nightlock’s arms, his neck, the side of his face as he cups Nightlock’s jaw, the press of his thumbs against Nightlock’s cheeks too hard. Yellow light from the city pools and traps itself in the waxy leather of Nightlock’s mask. In the beads of sweat along his hairline. In his eyes.

In his eyes. So endlessly familiar.

“Anything,” Nightlock murmurs against Alec’s mouth, “Your hand.”

Somewhere between a nod and a silent yes, Alec brings his hand to his mouth and tugs his glove off with his teeth, tossing it aside. Nightlock’s eyes blaze, hurrying to unclasp his belt, but Alec’s hands take over, tugging down Nightlock’s fly and dipping beneath the soft leather, seeking the trail of coarse, dark hair below.

Nightlock grits his teeth around a moan far too soft, the pressure of Alec’s fingers not enough for what he wants, but just enough to have his back arching, pulling himself flush against Alec’s chest, the barest slither of space left between them. He pushes aside the collar of Alec’s suit and bites down at the juncture of Alec’s neck, sucking a dark mark into Alec’s skin - and it makes Alec’s entire body hum electrically.

Nightlock’s cock is flushed and hard and leaking, and Alec feels the heat of him against his palm, a short-circuit waiting to trip that makes Alec wonder if he’s one brush of Alec’s fingers away from coming, the weight of Alec’s cock still heavy on his tongue.
Alec wraps his hand around Nightlock’s cock: against his bare skin, Nightlock feels hot and strange and good and fervent, and Alec exhales shakily. Nightlock leans into him, his cheek against Alec’s, the line of his mask cutting into Alec’s skin, a cool, rain-damp contrast to the warmth of his body. He pants, breathing heavily right beneath Alec’s ear, nipping at Alec’s earlobe when Alec adjusts the angle of his wrist and runs his thumbs through the bead of precome pearling at the tip of his cock.

Nightlock hisses, turning his head towards Alec’s mouth, his teeth grazing Alec’s lips. The sting makes him dizzy, teetering on the edge between pleasure and pain, and he surges forward to capture Nightlock’s mouth, twisting his hand around Nightlock’s cock in such a way that he can swallow Nightlock’s desperate rasp for breath, down, down, down, right down, until it’s simmering, alight, in his belly.

It’s quick and clumsy, fast and desperate. Nightlock’s hips jerk forwards with the light graze of Alec’s nails against the underside of his cock. His fists grapple Alec’s supersuit, holding himself firm against the lean line of Alec’s body, trapping his cock and Alec’s hand between them. He licks into Alec’s mouth, urging Alec’s strokes to become faster, surer, harder, and Alec’s gut tightens at the thought.

_Faster, please_. He’s not sure if Nightlock’s the one who whispers it, or if it’s the wind, or if it’s the bloodrush in his ears.

But Nightlock kisses him hungrily, clinging to Alec in the same way a dying man holds on for dear life - and hasn’t Alec held his fair share of those in his arms - but this time, _this time_ , the last breath Nightlock steals is as beautiful as it is frantic beneath the barbed-wire light of the city at climax. Both are the most intimate forms of surrender. Both hurt in a way Alec wishes that they didn’t.

Alec squeezes the base of his cock, dragging his sticky palm up his length, and Nightlock presses his forehead against Alec’s - mask to mask once more - and he comes, hard, his eyes screwed up as he spills across Alec’s shaking hand. And Alec -

Alec is oblivious to everything else except the look in Nightlock’s eyes when he opens them again.

Raw.

It’s _raw_ , it’s bleeding at the very edges; the red dark shifts in his pupils, alive, settling into something no longer needing to be hidden by cruel and callous words. He is now seen. He has allowed Alec to _see him_ , and perhaps it wasn’t intentional, but he breathes the same air as Alec
now as their chests rise and fall in sync.

_Was that what you needed?_ Alec can’t help but wonder. The crackle of kinetic energy seems to have left the air, swept up into the sky, transformed into energy of another form: the heat in Alec’s chest, the ache in his hand, or maybe the soft glow that passes across Nightlock’s weary face like strobing car lights across the ceiling of a dark room.

Boldly, Alec smooths back the hair from Nightlock’s forehead, sweaty and damp, as Nightlock tucks them both back into their suits, refastening the buckles and banishing away most of the mess with a weak flick of his wrist.

The brick behind Alec is cold, but Nightlock - he is so warm, and as Alec reaches for him again, Nightlock’s hands fall back to Alec’s chest, holding himself steady. He doesn’t step away.

They stay that way for a while, sharing air and holding on to one another as the city murmurs, sirens growing louder as it reveals itself a voyeur. Alec trembles, an aftershock that won’t dissipate, but he focuses on slowing his breathing. Nightlock’s eyes are cast downwards too, his gaze fixed on Alec’s chest. Carefully, he picks at one the buckles fastened over Alec’s heart, rubbing at it with the tip of his finger.

There’s no post-coital kiss, not here, not tonight, and it’s Nightlock who finally breaks the silence.

“Well,” is all he says. He lets his hands drag down Alec’s chest until they fall away, but he’s too hungry for Alec’s body heat to step back.

Hesitantly, he looks up. He meets Alec’s eyes. His expression is conflicted.

Alec’s heart lurches.

“That was … yeah ,” he says. He swallows thickly. “Do you -”

“We shouldn’t do that again,” Nightlock murmurs, but he tilts his head, as if inviting Alec to challenge him. His mouth parts. His eyes flick back to Alec’s wind-chapped lips. “When you get masks and secret identities involved, things like this, they get - complicated.”
Alec’s voice comes out hoarse. He daren’t speak louder than a whisper. “I think this is already complicated.”

Nightlock shakes his head. Resignation hardens the line of his mouth, but he reaches up, and with his fingertips, he brushes the thin slip of skin beneath Alec’s eye. He flicks away the last of the rogue tears gathered there.

“You may not have wanted to do that if you knew who I was beneath the mask.”

“That doesn’t matter to me,” Alec says quickly. “It wouldn’t change anything.”

“It should.”

“It doesn’t.”

Nightlock’s jaw clenches. He slinks away from Alec, but he doesn’t go far, moving to Alec’s side, their shoulders brushing, before he sinks down onto the concrete. He tips his head back against the brick, relishing the same cool against the back of his skull that makes Alec shiver.

“I shouldn’t have done that,” he says, not looking up at Alec. “Not with you. I - I think I’ve betrayed your trust.”

Alec shakes his head adamantly, joining Nightlock on the ground, kneeling in and amongst his strewn arrows.

“Don’t say that,” he says, “Don’t say you regret it. I kissed you back.”

Nightlock’s mouth lifts at the corner. He rolls his head onto his shoulder to look at Alec. “Yes, you did, didn’t you?”

Alec huffs, and pushes himself off his knees, straightening out his legs in front of him as his back meets the wall. He watches Nightlock fiddles with his hands, twisting an invisible ring around his knuckles, and he thinks about reaching out, grabbing his fingers, holding them in the space that has narrowed between them without either of them really noticing.
“Once was good though,” Alec offers, and his question hangs suspended in the dark. He watches Nightlock’s face carefully: how it shifts into a wry smile, how his eyes crinkle at the corners behind his mask.

“Once was good,” Nightlock agrees. He tips his head onto Alec’s shoulder. It feels oddly familiar. “Very good, even. One to remember, that’s for sure.”

Alec scoffs, and Nightlock laughs, but it peters out into another delicate sigh.

“Sentinel, listen,” he says, “I’m sorry about earlier. I shouldn’t have -” He breaks off, closing his eyes as he presses his nose against Alec’s shoulder. Alec leans into it, turning his mouth into the crown of Nightlock’s hair; he inhales deeply, but he just smells of rain. Nightlock murmurs inaudibly, and then, when he continues, his voice is broken. “I’ve lost sight of myself. I’m a mess.”

“I don’t blame you.” Alec mumbles. “That reporter … he probably got a fright, but he - he gets to live. And you’re allowed to be angry. I understand. I get it. We’re all on edge right now.” He pauses, and then adds, quietly, “And I’m sorry too. I know what it’s like to feel - to feel like everything’s gone wrong all at once.”

Nightlock hums, but says nothing.

Lazily, he raises his hand and, with a curl of his fingers, has Alec’s bow rising from the ground. He rotates his wrist, and all the discarded arrows rise too, slotting back into Alec’s quiver. He guides them both over to Alec’s waiting hands and Alec makes a soft noise of thanks, folding up his bow and clipping it back to thigh, before running his fingers through the feathered tufts of his arrows.

The telltale sound of a helicopter nearby cuts through the low-lying clouds, the whump-whump-whump of its rotating blades growing louder and then softer again as it bypasses their hideaway. Alec’s searches for it amidst the outline of downtown Brooklyn and its field of flickering yellow lights, but finds nothing. Another siren wails, a police car speeding past down below, but Izzy is silent in his ear, and he hasn’t heard from Jace, so he settles back against the wall, and he strays in the warmth of another body pressed up against him for one moment longer.

He closes his eyes. Sweat has cooled on the back of his neck and the inside of his suit is damp from the cold. The wind is bracing and, as the hour creeps towards midnight, it howls, carrying with it sharp shards of sleet. Numbness tingles in his fingertips, and he wishes for it to go away, he wishes for time to stop, he wishes for one more thing not to be ruined, but -
Alec’s thoughts drift to Magnus. He cannot stop himself, and the ache in his chest is arresting, painful like the first deep breath after a long run. The cold stings his nose; his ribs feel tender. His bullet scar twinges with a stab of phantom pain.

*His heart* ...

“Sentinel?”

“Yeah?” Alec croaks, eyes still closed.

“You’re in pain.”

*Always*, Alec thinks. *Always. But I could cope with it until now.*

He was never expecting to be free of it - he doesn’t want that. Pain is what he knows, pain is his quantifier, a reminder that he exists and that he survived - but oh, he wishes he could smother it. He wishes he could slap a bandage over his chest and sew up this wound with a needle and thread, his belt bitten between his teeth to stop himself crying out.

He wishes, he wishes, he wishes.

He wishes he never got so attached. He wishes it didn’t matter more to him than it does to Magnus.

Alec curls his fingers around his quiver, digging his nails into the hard plastic. He feels Nightlock shift off his shoulder and turn to face him expectantly.

Space is left in the silence for Alec to speak. Nightlock has always been good at that. Good at waiting for Alec to reveal himself to him.

Alec opens his eyes.
“I thought I knew what I was doing,” he says, his voice a low, rumbling murmur. He looks to Nightlock for reassurance. “I thought I knew how to do this. Something actually good. Something that made me feel like I was really helping people, but I’ve just fucked it up just like everything else.”

“I think you know how to do this better than you think.”

Alec shakes his head. “That’s not what I mean,” he replies, staring up at the sky. “Being a Corporate. Following orders, doing what they tell me to do, feeling like what I’m doing is … not what I should be doing. Not helping regular people. Doing the right things for the wrong reasons and sometimes the wrong things for the wrong reasons too. I know how to do all that. It’s all - it’s all I think I know how to do.” Alec sighs heavily, but the words keep coming. “But there was … there was something else. Something just for me, to make me feel like - I dunno. Like I could actually change if I wanted to. Like I could be Sentinel outside of Idris, like I could save people without even putting on a mask at all.”

“What was it that you were doing?”

Alec worries his lower lip. What was he doing? All those nights spent in Magnus’ office, what was he really doing? Helping those vigilantes or helping himself, desperate to redeem his own conscience, or - Just trying to be near Magnus. In his vicinity. His orbit.

It’s not something Alec wants to unpack now. He already hates himself enough.

“Telling the truth,” he settles on. “Trying to change people’s minds, trying to make them see that - trying to make them see that someone has noticed what’s going on. That we can’t keep letting everything be swept under the rug by the police. I dunno. Something good. Something that might actually make a difference.”

“And that has to stop?”

“Yes,” he whispers. “It can’t be like it was.” Even though I want it to be. Even though that makes me selfish.
He doesn’t know how to put New York first. Not really. Not when it comes down to the things that matter, not when it comes down to longing and sorrow. He’s never really been a good person, not like Magnus. He only wishes that he’d seen it sooner, and not spent so long pretending like it was something he could become.

Some people just can’t. You’re one of them.

Alec feels his eyes grow hot again. He scrubs his hand down over his mask, palming at his jaw, but there’s a tear clinging to his eyelashes and he can’t blink it back. Not when he can sense Nightlock’s stare boring into the side of his face, and not when he feels so set adrift inside.

“‘M sorry,” he mutters, “That probably doesn’t make any sense. It doesn’t make any sense to me. It’s just – been a confusing few days.”

“Hm,” Nightlock hums. He shifts closer and returns his cheek to Alec’s shoulder, before his eyes drift to the quiver in Alec’s hands. With one finger, he selects a single arrow and guides it up into the air. He turns it over with a circular motion of his finger, inspecting it from its sharpened point, all the way to the vibrant red of its fletching as it catches the light.

Then, he flicks his wrist and the arrow shoots across across the rooftop, embedding itself in the skin of the water tank in the far corner. Alec waits for water to start trickling out of the puncture, but it never comes.

“I think my night may have been worse,” Nightlock says.

“Worse?”

“Not that I am competitive about my woes, of course. But worse, yes, I think it might be. Or it certainly feels that it is.”

Alec huffs. “You’re always so overdramatic that I really don’t know when you’re exaggerating or not.”

Alec smiles to himself, but Nightlock fiddles with his gloves, feeling out the knuckles of his fingers again. There’s a quiet frown sewn into his brow and his mouth turns down at the corners. It sober Alec quickly.

“You can tell me,” Alec prompts, “If, uh - if you want. You don’t have to. But if you want.”

“Would you want to hear it if it were terrible?”

“I told you -”

“Because it has nothing to do with tonight,” Nightlock continues on. “With Salem, I mean. And I almost wish it did, I almost wish that’s what hurt the most, because maybe I would feel better about it all, but -”

He closes his eyes, his mouth turned down at the corners, and he rubs at the skin of his forehead, as if trying to lessen a migraine. Alec understands: it’s a vicious circle. He wants the reason he’s feeling bad to be because his friend was killed, but to call that a better situation than whatever it is that he faces now is just - it’s cruel. It’s fucked-up. Alec won’t argue otherwise.

“Do you remember,” Nightlock says then, “when I told you that there was … someone.”

“Yes,” Alec says slowly. The last remnants of warmth and limblessness in his belly wither away quietly. He doesn’t like where this is going. “Why?”

Nightlock sits up suddenly, sensing Alec’s shift in mood. “Don’t panic,” he says. “We’re not an item, him and I. You haven’t done anything immoral tonight. If anyone’s made questionable decisions lately, it’s certainly me, not you.”

“Did it not work out?”

Nightlocks laughs crassly. “I don’t know,” he admits, “If the answer were so clean-cut, things would be easier. Perhaps if I could say yes, yes and it hurt, that would justify what happened in that house in some sick way.” Nightlock looks away from Alec, his gaze wandering across the roof, to the city at a distance. He thinks of someone far away. “But I don’t know. In truth, he’s all
that I can think about, whenever we’re in a room together and, more often than not, even when we aren’t. It’s a problem.”

“Why would that be a problem?”

“Salem? I knew her, she was my friend. You were right. She was good and kind and didn’t deserve what happened to her and yes, I’m angry. I don’t intend for the people who did this to get away with it. Not this time.”

Alec frowns. “What does that have to do with -”

“A lot of people depend on me, Sentinel,” says Nightlock, looking back at Alec. He smiles thinly. His eyes appear overcast. “And I’m letting them down if I turn a blind eye to their suffering just so that I can - well. So that I can indulge myself, I suppose.”

Alec holds his breath. This sounds -

This sounds painfully familiar.

“I wasn’t lying when I said I’m going after the Circle,” Nightlock continues. “But I can’t have him involved in whatever might happen next and I can’t have him knowing about Nightlock, because it’s going to get dangerous, and … well. Nightlock is who I am, who I have to be. That doesn’t get to go away. I’ve made my peace with it. But he doesn’t deserve any of that, and I’m not going to risk him, or risk other people because of him.”

The deja vu is jarring. “I don’t …” Alec begins, “I don’t know much about it, but it sounds like -”

“Like I’m foolish, I know,” Nightlock scoffs, and then he hesitates. He looks at Alec for a long moment and then says, “I’m so in love with him that it must be foolish. Because I let him go - I broke his heart - for all the right reasons, and yet it still feels like I’ve just made the worst decision of my life.”

The statement echoes in the dark: I’m so in love with him, and it stirs a pain and a longing in Alec’s chest for which he doesn’t have a name, but which feels overwhelming. And it’s not even his love, just one that he’s proxy to, but still it makes him feel - sad. Just achingly sad, because he can hear it in Nightlock’s voice, all this regret tinged with the conflicting need to do what is right,
even if that might hurt more than it’s worth, and it’s bleeding into every part of him and turning sceptic.

*It’s a cruel thing*, Alec thinks, *this word called love*. Perhaps people like them, people with superpowers who skulk around in the dark, shouldn’t want for it because it can only end in heartache. Perhaps they don’t deserve it, what with blood sticky on their hands and ash congealed in their footsteps and a man’s panicked gasps still ringing in Alec’s ears.

“How -” Alec whispers, “What does it feel like?”

“Being in love?”

“Yeah. Yes.”

“How you not know?”

Alec ducks his head and huffs. “I do. I think I do. I just - want to make sure.” He sets his quiver on the ground and stares at his hands: one gloved and the other bare. The lines in the leather match the lines on his skin. “Sometimes, I... I don’t know if I’m feeling it right. Maybe what I’m feeling isn’t that. Maybe it’s just me wanting to feel like I - like I’m needed. Like I can feel it just like everybody else, like I can do it just as good as them. I dunno.”

Nightlock thinks deeply. “It’s like a bullet,” he says slowly, “I’m sure you know how that feels. But before the pain, before you’ve realised what’s happened to you. It’s that very first breath you take afterwards, and all the air rushes into that new hole in you, and a gasp has never felt so sweet. Or so needed.”

Alec tilts his head back against the wall and looks up at the clouds as they race across the city.

“How it over?” he mumbles, “Between you and him?”

“It never really had the chance to begin,” Nightlock says, “If I think about it for too long, I get terribly wistful. But - what other choice is there?”
“You can just stop feeling that way? You can turn it off like that?”

Nightlock shakes his head. “No. No, not at all.”

There’s nothing Alec can say to that. It’s such an unspectacular truth and Nightlock says it with the finality of a man who has resigned himself to loneliness, to heartache. He’s already made space for it. He already knows how to make space for it.

The quiet slinks its way between them, tangible only once it’s noticed and settled into the space between their shoulders with shadow-like deference. Alec listens to the rush of wind and the way it sings across steel and metal and brick, and he listens to Nightlock’s shallow breathing as it starts to slow.

And Alec is not sure how long they linger there, on this rooftop in the heart of Brooklyn where no-one knows their real names; he doesn’t want to count the seconds because he’ll find them wasted.

He lets himself become that nameless person inside of him: neither Alec with his heartbreak nor Sentinel will his crushing responsibility, just - a person. A blank slate. A man with no country and no city and just this.

Silence. The ringing in his ears has almost subsided.

Beside him, Nightlock shifts, his body opening up as he moves to face Alec. Alec feels his gaze drag up Alec’s legs, across Alec’s hands lying limp in his lap, and all the way up his chest. His eyes linger at Alec’s jaw, and as Alec turns to look at him, a soft and gentle, “what?” on his lips, Nightlock’s palm comes to rest on Alec’s cheek and he leans all the way in, pressing his mouth against Alec’s.

This kiss is not like before. Nightlock’s mouth barely moves against his, the urgency and the outrage now extinguished and all that’s left behind is smoke. His lips are chapped. Alec’s too.

But his fingers fluttering against the edge of Alec’s mask is tender.

“You’re a good man, Sentinel,” he whispers, resting his forehead against Alec’s as Alec’s eyes drift closed and he leans into the cradle of Nightlock’s palm. “There are many people like us in this city, but not all of them have good hearts. Not like you. I’m glad to know you.”
“I’m nothing special.”

“Oh, you are. You are. I don’t want to think where I would be if we hadn’t met.”

“You’d be fine.”

Nightlock’s thumb strokes across Alec’s mask, caressing the skin beneath his eye. The drag of his magic doesn’t prickle; it’s not like static this time. It’s a simple and consoling warmth.

“Fine is a luxury we cannot afford in this business,” says Nightlock, “Or in life. But I would be worse off without you, and that is the truth. You and I - we are the same.”

He pulls away, but as Alec opens his mouth, Nightlock holds up two fingers.

“Yes. No. Don’t argue with me,” he says, “I’m right. Let me thank you. Let me thank you for being here with me.”

_You don’t need to thank me_, Alec thinks. _I’m the one who would’ve been alone tonight if not for you._

_I would’ve always been alone if not for you._

Nightlock sits back on his haunches and pats his thighs decisively. “Now,” he says, and his vigour is forced, Alec knows it is, “Will you join me?”

“Are we going somewhere?” Alec frowns, but he grabs his quiver and slings it over his shoulder, and then takes the hand that’s offered to pull him to his feet. His knees creak; his body feels spent; he throws out a hand against the wall to keep himself balanced.

“Anywhere away from here,” Nightlock says, and then, as if echoing Alec’s very thoughts, “I don’t want to go home just yet. I’d rather not be alone.”
“I don’t want you to be alone either,” Alec confesses.

“Well, that settles it then,” Nightlock replies. He presents Alec with his palm, his feet already lifting off the ground. “That makes two of us.”

By the time Alec stumbles through the unlatched window of his apartment, it’s late - later than usual because he’s delayed this homecoming for as long as possible tonight, and the clock that balances precariously on a stack of books in his living room reads a quarter to four. Blindly, he wanders into his bathroom, shedding his gear as he goes, a trail of black leather and armour winding its way through his home. Peeling off his suit like a second layer of skin, he tosses it carelessly into the bathtub, and then removes his coms bud from his ear, placing it next to the faucet.

He stares at his reflection in the mirror above the sink.

He’s not sure who the person staring back at him is: his eyes are distant and his hair is rumpled and the cold has turned his skin pale, pale white, almost blue. His chest hair looks stark against him; the stubble on his jaw is nearly black. And there are grey marks beneath his eyes as he strips away his mask, tide-lines of dried sweat, lines of wear and tear scraped into his skin.

Alec knows all of these things intimately, but it’s still a stranger who meets his gaze in the mirror and he’s not entirely sure why.

He turns to the side, inspecting the pale pink scar that the sniper’s bullet left on him all those weeks ago. He prods and pokes at the ridges of raised skin, finally free of bandages, and the tough sinew feels strange, disbodied, like it belongs to someone not him and he can’t feel the trace of his own fingers.

He feels his way across his ribs, along the white outlines of other faded scars gained over the years: close-calls and bad mistakes and going one step too far in the training room. There’s one - a faint silver line across his collar bone - where he stood an inch too close to Jace’s wings as they unfurled and the steel had cut into his skin. It’s almost beautiful, a fine delicate line, compared to the faded ripple of blister burns across the backs of his knuckles. Alec still remembers the coppering of blood beading along his clavicle.
But there’s a bruise on the side of his neck, about the size of a nickel, and that’s new. It’s purple and blue, faded around the edges but red in the middle where it’s been worried by teeth. Alec’s fingers dance across it, pressing down on the skin with the morbid sort of curiosity that bruises always seem to evoke: touch, feel the sting, remember that it happened.

An ache. Small, dull, indelible ache.

You let him kiss you there. You shouldn’t have done that. Think of Magnus. This time yesterday you were ready to put yourself on the line for him. What does that make you now? The same few thoughts revolve around and around, but he refuses to listen to them.

You kissed him back. You wanted it.

He recalls the feel of Nightlock’s mouth there - there on his neck - but it doesn’t fill him with any sort of rush. It doesn’t fill him with anything at all: his hips ache, his mouth tingles, but beyond that, there’s only haze.

He’s not confused why he did it. (I needed him, he needed me, I was hurt and I wanted that to stop, just for a bit. Just for a second.) He knows Nightlock is his one constant that won’t ever change. (‘You and me - we’re the same.’)

But his eyes refuse to focus. His home feels too large, too empty for just him, and it amplifies every slight sound, every groan in the water pipes and even drip of the faucet. Every breath.

He’s looking, but he’s not really seeing.

Ah.

Maybe he does know why he can’t recognise the person in the mirror.

It’s Sentinel.
Even without the mask, it’s Sentinel. Fully Sentinel. He’s not Alec tonight; there’s not even a shred left.

Sentinel was the one who went to that house tonight; Sentinel kissed Nightlock on that rooftop and came apart in his hands; and Sentinel wants to run off into the dark on the cold trail of a killer who doesn’t want to be found.

Alec squishes his fingers against the bruise on his neck again - harder this time, so that the pain feels real. If he makes it hurt, it’s not a hickey. It can’t be that. It won’t ever be that.

*If Magnus had kissed you there, would it be different?*

He hates the fact that he thinks it. He hates the fact that while Nightlock’s mouth was crushed against his, Alec has still had the sense of mind to think -

To think their eyes looked the same.

*Did you think about kissing Magnus because you wanted it to be him instead? Or because you wanted to hurt yourself too? Just like Nightlock.*

Alec bows over the faucet and splashes cold water across his face, scrubbing away the stale sweat and the redness left on his mouth.

He shouldn’t be thinking about kissing Magnus. About Magnus kissing him.

It hardly matters. He won’t ever know what it feels like and that’s -

That’s for the best.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter has been stressing me out to no end. As you may know, I don’t write explicit smut as a general rule of thumb (I usually find it unnecessary to the stories I
want to tell), but in this case, it felt both necessary and true to the direction of the fic to include the scene on the rooftop here. This being said, their interaction here is not intended to be romantic - it’s intense, painful, messy, and definitely not healthy. I would even go so far as saying there is a dubiousness to the consent here: while they do both want it and want each other, it’s as Nightlock says, *would you have changed your mind if you knew who I really was?* Is it misleading to engage with someone like this when they don't know who you are and can't make an informed choice? Maybe. When secret identities and masks are involved, there is an inherent consent issue, and a certain power imbalance as well, particularly if you’re of the opinion that Magnus already knows who Sentinel is, which would make things even more complex, as one might call that duplicitous. I actually debated a long time about leaving the smut scene in the chapter (and just having a very intense kiss instead) because I know how some people dislike reading about their favourite characters making mistakes and doing things that are ethically questionable and even harming each other, but ultimately, that’s what makes for an interesting character and a unique story. Neither Alec or Magnus are perfect, especially in this verse, and they do do things that hurt each other. Should they have done what they did on that rooftop? I don’t know. But they did it anyway, because Magnus was hurting, and Alec was lonely, and people make bad choices when they’re grieving and I felt that not presenting that would’ve been a disservice to the real experience of such emotions. If anyone wants to chat more about this scene, I’m happy to field any questions about my narrative decisions!

One other thing I would like to mention is that one of the key themes of this story is exploring the way romantic feelings can develop differently but with equal intensity for more than one person at the same time. Alec loves Magnus. Alec loves Nightlock too. But Magnus and Nightlock have different emotional relationships with Alec, and vice versa, and Alec acting on his feelings for Nightlock is not a betrayal of his feelings for Magnus. He loves them differently, and that’s valid, because love is not a finite concept and cannot be “shared”. Alec has plenty love to give, and each type of love is not diminished by the other. There’s an element of polyamory to this story and that’s deliberate.

ANYWAY. So sorry about the angst (not really). I could lie and say there’s no angst next time, but that’s very much not true (although we do get some good Simon content, so all is not miserable). We are now finished with Act IV, so we’re moving onto Act V which is very intense! Act V is actually set over the course of two or three days, but it’s 4 chapters, so you can imagine the sort of thing that’s about to happen. It’s finale time, chaps! The next chapter actually contains my fave scene of the entire fic, which is where Alec’s feelings finally catch up with him and he just has a fucking breakdown lmfao

As before, this chapter is not beta read so please forgive typos/microexpressions/purple prose/delete as appropriate. I could keep polishing these updates forever but sometimes I just need to get them “good enough” so they can leave the nest.

Thank you so much for all the feedback from last time! I can't express how much it helps to read people's thoughts and feelings on this fic, as everyone has a different take on the moral issues and it's so interesting!

Visit me on tumblr and shout in my inbox, especially if you have questions! Please reblog the tumblr post for me too!
I'm also on Twitter if you want to come chat about the fic ... and boy, do I love talking about this fic. Tweet as you read with the hashtag #ficacoldnight! :D

Please leave a kudos if you made it to the end, and drop me a comment with your thoughts, your favourite line, your hopes for what will happen next, your advice for poor old Alec ... I would be forever grateful for it! If you want an alert next time there's an update, please hit that subscribe button!

Until next time, in which the pyrokinetic's next target is a little closer to home, all the bottled emotions catch up with Alec, and Izzy makes a proposal that has been a very long time coming. Oh, and maybe there's a reveal. Of sorts.
blue flame in the sunken place

Chapter Summary

Alec leans into the touch. Magnus’ hand is warm; he cannot help himself. And so he whispers, “Would you still say that if you knew who I was?”

“Yes,” Magnus says, “There is no-one you could possibly be that would change anything I’ve said.”

“I bet there’s someone,” Alec mumbles. With his eyes still closed, he turns his head to press his nose against the swell of Magnus’ thumb. A stray tear escapes him, at last. It rolls down his cheek and catches on the edge of his mask. “Someone who wouldn’t be worth it. Trying to take care of everyone without exception only gets you hurt.”

Chapter Notes

Trauma catches up with Alec, the Circle set a fire a little closer to home, and Alec finally comes to a realisation - about Valentine, about Idris, about everything.

&&&

Tweet along with #ficacoldnight!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

obey—or get pushed to the edges

it’s more vulnerable there but

at least you can see the outside

of that moment they failed you.

— Andrea Abi-Karam, Extratransmission
Alec writes his resignation letter the very next day.

Well, in truth, he pens it on the subway, his hand shaking and his ball-point pen weeping ink splotches across the page that stains through into his slacks where he rests the letter on his lap.

He folds the letter up and slides it into an unnamed envelope and then -

Then, he just stares at it. If he slips it into his jacket pocket, it becomes real. If he crunches it up in his hand, he can pretend it never happened.

He wonders what his boss will say, whether he’ll ask Alec why, with so little notice, he wants to quit.

_I can’t cope anymore. Sorry._

He wonders if Simon will grill him about it.

_It’s Sentinel. It’s only Sentinel. That’s who I am, who I have to be._

He wonders if anyone will notice him gone at all.

_It doesn’t matter. You don’t get to be Alec anymore. There’s no space for him._

The train jolts into the station and Alec squeezes his way through the doors, mumbling apologies as commuters push and shove at his shoulders. Alec is swept forwards by the current of people filing through the ticket barriers, the click of a the turn-style a rhythmic and metronomic beat. He holds the envelope close against his chest, afraid of dropping it beneath the flurry of feet slapping on the wet floor.

_It’s for the best_, he thinks, fingers crinkling the corner of the envelope. _You need to quit, you can’t keep doing this job. Jace was right, mom was right. It’s time to stop pretending before someone else dies._
Winter is upon the city and the tiled floors on the subway station are streaked with meltwater and muddy sleet; New Yorkers are bundled up to their chins in scarves and coats and disgruntled expressions. Alec feels the cold ache in his bones too, but the bruise he has up the length of his spine is not November-caused. No, that’s a remnant of Nightlock shoving him against the wall last night, first with his powers, and then with his fists.

The dull pain in his temples, that’s from too little sleep. The lethargy in his chest that makes each beat of his heart tremendously difficult, that’s from -

He knows what that’s from. The lump still exists in his throat and it won’t be swallowed down. He feels wafer thin. Fragile. He’s easily buffeted by the crowds.

The receptionist in the lobby at the Tribunal beams at Alec as he trudges in from out of the almost-snow; Alec gives her a nod and ducks his head. One of the guys from marketing accosts him in the elevator and asks if he wants to come to some very-premature Thanksgiving drinks he’s organising; Alec smiles thinly and makes a poor excuse that won’t really be heard.

The office itself is quiet, a residual hum of post-Election news keeping people tied to their desks. Alec grabs a copy of today’s issue from someone else’s intake tray and glances at the headline: THOUSANDS RALLY IN ANTI-VIGILANTE PROTESTS; PRESSURE PLACED ON GOVERNMENT TO BRING ANTI-VIGILANTE LEGISLATION FORWARD.

He cannot read it. Not today. He throws the paper into the first trash can he sees.

His resignation letter feels heavy in his hand, like it’s more than just a piece of paper inside the envelope, and it’s rocks and stones and water instead. Perhaps it is a weight he has been carrying around far longer than he realised: this job, this pretence, this second life that has never been more than a shadow, a grey space in which to desperately hide himself away and avoid confronting the truth.

The truth is obvious. You’re Sentinel. You’re only Sentinel. No-one needs you to be anything but.

You’ve always been so good at being what other people need.
Alec grips the letter in his fist, crinkling the envelope. *Enough pretending.* He turns away from his trajectory towards his desk, weaving his way through the sea of partitions towards his boss’ cubicle. It seems simple: lay the letter down. A quick curt nod. No questions asked, gone in two weeks. His mother will be so pleased to have him back at headquarters.

*You’ve wasted so much time.*

“Hey, Alec, wait up!” Simon’s bright and enthusiastic voice cuts through the residual hum of the office floor. It’s far too much to handle.

Alec flinches, his fingers tightening around the letter, but he doesn’t stop walking. If he stops now, he won’t go through with it.

“Alec, wait, hey! Stop walking so fast, I gotta talk to you!”

Simon appears at Alec’s side, wide-eyed and hair-ruffled, the label of his shirt sticking out of his collar, and his tie already loosened around his neck. He’s clutched a large box of negatives, but he beams at Alec like he’s never been more glad to see anyone else in his life.

“Jeez, who lit a fire under your ass?” he complains loudly, and each one of Alec’s steps becomes a trot for Simon as he tries to keep up. “Listen, I’ve got this idea that I wanna run past you, and before you shoot me down, just hear me out -”

Alec grunts in response.

He doesn’t want to think about Simon. He doesn’t want to listen to Simon and his cheer and his sincerity and his complete obliviousness to the mess inside Alec’s head. Alec’s hurt, heartsore and wrung-dry, and his three hours sleep the night before have made him drag his feet. He runs his tongue over his lower lip, half-expecting to still feel the indentations of teeth marks. To still taste the flick of his own bitten blood. The bruise on his neck throbs, but not more so than the ache in his chest as his gaze slides towards the stairwell.
I wonder if Magnus is in his office.

No. You don’t get to think about Magnus now. He made that perfectly clear.

Alec stops abruptly, and Simon almost walks straight into him. The aftershocks of the night before ripple through him, seismic tremors that he doesn’t know how to soften or how to quell.

Magnus’ desperation. Nightlock’s anger. The sound of tearing, crumbling brick.


“Alec?” asks Simon, a tilt to his head.

“Huh?”

“Are you even listening to me?”

Alec’s face sours. “No,” he grumbles, but he looks again towards the stairwell. A habit. “Don’t you have work to do?”

Simon puffs out his cheeks out and folds his arms across his chest, stepping deliberately into Alec’s line of sight, forcing Alec to look at him.

“Alec, c’mon, man. I’m being serious here, my life might be on the line,” he implores. “You could at least just pay attention to me for once, instead of just - I dunno - brooding? Moping about Magnus? Pretending you’re Bruce Wayne? Whatever it is you do to make sure you look as unapproachable as possible.”

Alec stares at him, but Simon stares back, stubborn and red in the face and absolutely refusing to back down. He wears petulance well. Alec sighs, and nods his head towards the coffee machine where they might have a more private conversation not overheard by nosey journalists.

Simon huffs and leads the way. Alec tucks his letter into his jacket and follows.
“Alright,” he says, as Simon manoeuvres them both into a corner and glances furtively around the office. “I’m sorry, I’m listening. What is it? Spit it out.”

Simon scowls suspiciously at him. “You’re in a way worse mood than normal. Has something happened?” He gasps. “Did you catch the bad guys? Wait, no, why would that put you in a bad mood -”

“Simon,” Alec presses. “Get on with it. I have things to do.”

“Right, yeah, okay!” Simon claps his hands together and sucks in a deep breath. Alec braces himself for a speech. “So, I know you said no to the whole me-helping-you-out-on-patrol thing, and I get that, I totally respect your decision - but given the fact these murders are still, like, not letting me sleep at night, I figured maybe you could reconsider? I don’t need to be out in the field with you, but I thought we could do some training on the down-low. Your terms, of course. You can pick the time and place, and I’ll be there. I just wanna make sure I can protect myself in case these psychopaths come after me next.”

Alec glares at him, but Simon’s eyes are as wide as dinner plates and he sticks his lower lip out pathetically.

“Simon…”

“Please? I’m just scared, man.”

“You don’t have to be scared if you just stay home,” Alec says, lowering his voice. “Nothing is safer than that. Using your powers, out there - that makes you a target. You know that.”

Simon’s not listening. He shakes his head furiously. “That whole Salem murder thing’s got me really freaked out, okay? I dunno what’s gonna happen next. I just - I think 8-Bit stands his best chance when he’s with Sentinel, y’know?”

Alec almost says no.

He almost says no, like every other endless time before. It would be so easy to say, no, Simon, I
told you. Enough is enough. I’m not in the mood.

But as he closes his eyes and scrubs his palm across his unshaven jaw - he sees Dot Rollins. Her picture clipped to the top of her file. The bloody stain amidst the ash in her living room. The photo in her study of her and Catarina and Magnus out at a bar.

He sees every dead super left immolated and exsanguinated or abandoned in an alleyway. Some who were killed at home. Some not even wearing their masks.

The next one could be Simon. It could be 8-Bit in his stupid spandex suit and his secondhand equipment and if the guilt is already eating away inside of Alec, what happens when the next murdered superhero is someone that he knows?

What happens when it’s someone who asked him to protect them, and he still said no?

He proves Magnus right. I can’t let someone else I care about die. That’s what. It’s as simple and as terrible as that.

You can protect him. You can still do this, even without Magnus. One last little piece of Sentinel’s humanity. You need to do this otherwise you’re going to go away inside yourself and never find the way back out.

‘I’m just sacred, man,’ Simon had said.

Me too, Alec thinks. Me too.

Alec exhales deeply. The earnestness, the hope in Simon’s eyes is intolerable. It makes Alec want to disappear, unpeel and step outside his skin, be free of the wretched, disgusting, crawling feeling that skitters up his arms and across his chest and reaches every last corner of him.

“Okay,” Alec says.

Simon’s eyebrows shoot up into his hairline. “Okay?”
Alec nods stiffly. “Yeah, okay. You’re right. I’d - I’d feel better if you had training. You’re right.”

Simon blinks owlishly. Then, he scowls, his eyes narrowing. “Are you messing with me? I can’t
tell.”

“Simon.”

“What? You kept your alter ego secret from me for literal years, forgive me for being a little
sceptical about whether you’re being real with me!” He pauses. “Are you being real with me?”

“I’ll train you, Simon.”

Simon’s mouth drops open into a round oh , but then he bursts into a grin. “Huh. Wow. I didn’t
think you’d actually say yes, but - I guess me being so insistent finally wore you down. This is
great! Okay!” He slaps Alec heartily on the shoulder. “I owe you one, Alec. I promise I’m not
gonna let you down. Let’s talk later about the details! I gotta get these prints to Magnus before he
bites my head off.”

He beams at Alec again and then bounds away, the box of negatives in his arms bouncing with
every step. Alec watches him go, and when he disappears into the elevators, Alec reaches inside
his suit jacket and pulls out his resignation letter.

It’s creased and crumpled, dog-eared at the corners now, but it doesn’t matter. Alec retreats back to
his desk and hides the envelope at the back of his bottom-most drawer, kicking it shut with his
foot. He sits down on his chair and places both his hands flat on his desk and he breathes. Deeply,
steadying, necessarily. His chest won’t inflate all the way, but it’s like a gasp, a sudden stolen
mouthful of air. Just enough to keep him going.

Tomorrow, maybe. He’ll quit tomorrow. Or the day after. Or the day after that.

Soon, I swear.
The day drifts. He exists at the bottom of a strange void and the walls are tall and unscalable: he can’t focus on his computer screen, but the tick of the clock on the wall is too loud. Conversation becomes a droning hum, but it echoes, back and forth and back and forth.

His body feels numb. Disbodied. Not quite his own, or not quite the one he has learned to inhabit. Gone is the familiar rhythm of loneliness, and now, a space inside rattles and he’s not sure he knows how to counterbalance against it.

He left a part of himself on that rooftop with Nightlock. It’s like Nightlock took it between his teeth and ripped it away and didn’t give it back, and now Alec realises what piece of him that was.

And he asked for it. He asked to be rid of it, perhaps not with words, but with his anger and his frustration and his mouth fervent against Nightlock’s.

His boss comes by his desk with a stack of financial transcripts that need signing off. Alec takes them and nods, and then, as he flips through each consecutive page, it’s like he doesn’t know what he’s reading anymore. Words and numbers that he used to know, that he used to skim through with ease, but now it’s like wading through tar. His head hurts.

He gave to Nightlock the person that used to be able to do this job. He said, take him, chew him up, spit him out. I’ll take back what’s left, if anything.

That person is a mess. Bloody and pulpy and incomparable to anything Alec knew before. Wearing Sentinel’s skin, but not Sentinel’s eyes and duty and cold dead heart.

Sentinel with a weakness. A chink in his armour. A defect. His mother would not be happy to see her best asset broken.

Who are you? asks the voice in his head. You look in the mirror and see Sentinel, but who is it really? Have you ever even known?

Who is left now?
Alec picks at the stack of reports on his desk, rubbing his thumb against the corners and watching the paper flutter. The edge catches against his thumbpad and Alec hisses at the thin red slice that cuts into his skin.

He blows cold air onto the cut and wets his thumb with his tongue, and when he looks up -

He sees Magnus.

Magnus doesn’t see him. Magnus doesn’t even look at him, emerging from the elevators with a stack of files under his arm and expression like a storm as he marches over to Simon’s desk.

He doesn’t look angry. Not like yesterday, sharp like lightning and electric like a lit match might ignite him if he were struck with it. The look in his eyes now isn’t thunderous - just turbulent. Clouded and grey and ill-focused, and he talks to Simon in a voice too low and rumbling for Alec to overhear.

His hair is ruffled. The dark colour around his eyes is smudged. The prickle of stubble shadows his jaw where he’s normally close-shaven. The walls he puts up against the rest of the world are gone - dismantled or imploded, Alec doesn’t know - and in their place is exhaustion, the bearing of a man up all night and out too late to clean himself up in the morning.

I wonder where he was, Alec thinks. And then he realises, Probably chasing leads. Talking to witnesses. Looking for the Circle when you were at that house -

Simon sits up in his chair as Magnus passes him a number of open files and then leans over the desk, tapping his finger on the page. Alec’s eyes linger on the curve of his spine, the width of his shoulders, the glint of his rings on his fingers. He moves slowly, even the shift of his weight unusual, ungainly. Muscle-sore.

What have you been doing without me?

Simon turns around then, pointing over his shoulder in Alec’s direction. He says something to Magnus and he beams, but Alec watches his smile fall away as Magnus stills and shakes his head. Simon’s brow furrows, but whatever question he asks of Magnus doesn’t get a response as Magnus closes the folder on the desk and presses it into Simon’s chest. Simon gapes, looking wildly between Alec and Magnus’ retreating back, but Alec doesn’t care to meet his eye.
No, he looks at Magnus. He looks at Magnus until Magnus stops in the middle of the room as if he can feel Alec’s stare boring into him, and he turns, and he meets Alec’s gaze.

Alec doesn’t look away. Magnus’ eyes drop, he considers the files in his hands, but then he looks up again, and his mouth opens like he plans to say something that Alec won’t even hear.

Alec rises out of his chair.

“Hey,” he mouths across the office. He doesn’t know what he wants to say. He feels the bruise along the length of his spine. The mark on his neck. Last night, last night, last night -

Nightlock’s eyes looked like Magnus’. Like Magnus’ do now. Conflicted and unsure, unreadable, caught between wanting to walk over and leaving like they never locked eyes.

And Alec -

Alec doesn’t know the person he’s looking at either. He doesn’t recognise the look in Magnus’ eyes, and he doesn’t chase after Magnus as he spins sharply on his heels and walks away.

Why not? Would the person you used to be have followed him? Would the person you thought you knew let him keep walking away?

Magnus disappears back into the elevators on the other side of the room, and it’s not until the doors close with a chime that Alec blinks, and realises he’s standing aimlessly in front of his desk.

Alec’s eyes flick back to Simon. Simon raises both his eyebrows and tilts his head towards the elevators.

“What was that?” he mouths at Alec.

Alec doesn’t know. He doesn’t really know anything anymore.
The day drifts and Alec drifts with it. He reads his emails, he files his reports, he moves through the space he used to occupy with despondent steps, following a path worn down in the carpet.

Simon tries to distract him with coffee, and then with cake from the cafeteria when that doesn’t work. He offers to buy Alec lunch at the deli around the corner, but Alec shakes his head and disappears back to his desk.

When the clock strikes six, he packs up his bag and he goes home and he sleeps. He ignores Izzy’s phone calls and rolls his eyes when Jace turns up on his balcony and asks why Sentinel skipped patrol. Alec makes him a cup of coffee and lends him a towel to dry his hair, but when Jace emerges from Alec’s room with Sentinel’s bow clutched in his hand, Alec tells him to leave.

Jace props the bow against the couch and puts his hands on his hips. “You wanna tell me what’s going on?”

“Jace -”

“No,” says Jace, “No. Nuh-uh. Last night you went AWOL and the night before that you were sat here in exactly the same place freaking out over something you wouldn’t tell me.”

“Did Izzy call you to check up on me again?”

“Christ, Alec! I don’t need Iz to tell me when something’s clearly wrong with you. What’s going on? What is it, what’s the matter?”

It’s everything, how can you not see? Alec thinks. These murders, they make no sense. The Circle can’t be caught. People are dying all around them and they can’t stop it, no matter what they do. Nightlock almost killed a man, and Sentinel is drowning in a guilt he can’t outswim.

And Magnus.
Magnus, Magnus, Magnus -

He misses Magnus so damn much, and it’s only been a day, and Alec has no idea how that fits into anything, how there’s space enough in the person he thought he was for that to exist. He’s never felt it before. He doesn’t know how to hold it. He doesn’t know how to bottle it down like everything else, because it’s not like everything else.

I don’t know who I am anymore.

“Is this about the murder?” Jace asks with a frown. “We’ve seen everything in this job. You’ve never been this messed up over it before.”

Alec looks down at himself: he’s dressed in his slacks and undershirt, barefoot and jacket-less, having fallen into bed without undressing. Jace, perched against the arm of the couch, is in his supersuit: black leather and gold accents, Kevlar and hard plastic, combat boots and a handgun strapped to his thigh. His goggles hang loose around his neck, but his mask is slick against his skin. On the balcony, his wings glint in the dark.

“It’s not about Salem,” Alec says, but then he corrects himself, “It’s not just about Salem. It’s about - we couldn’t save her.”

Jace steps deliberately in front of him. “We didn’t know she was in trouble.”

“We’re supers. We’re meant to. We’re meant to save all of them,” Alec murmurs. “If we can’t even do that, then - what the Hell are we?”

“You know me, buddy. If I could be everywhere at once, I would be. But we can’t.”

“It’s not about that! It’s not about whether we could get there in time, it’s about -”

It’s about whether we’re good enough to save them. Whether I’m good enough.

Someone good enough wouldn’t put themselves first. Someone good enough would know what they have to do next. They wouldn’t question it. They’d just know. And not be - stuck.
“Alec, you’re freaking me out,” Jace whispers, reaching out to touch Alec’s arm. Alec takes a step back. “You keep going like this and you’re gonna snap.”

You think I don’t know that?

“Well,” says Alec, as he turns to the window and throws it open onto the fire escape. He gestures at Jace’s wings. “I’ve still got time before that happens, so. If you don’t mind, I want to sleep.”

Jace pales. His eyes flick between Alec and his bow and the city beyond the window. He seems hesitant to leave Alec alone, but even more reluctant to stick his fingers in a wound that Alec tries desperately to cover. The bleeding is clearly visible.

“Call me,” says Jace. “Or just come over to HQ tomorrow. I don’t care which.”

“Oh okay,” lies Alec.

He sees Jace out the window and watches him disappear into the dark like a silver flash. He stays, standing in front of the glass with his arms folded across his chest, until the sunrise peeks over the horizon and his eyelids begin to droop. He manages one more hour of sleep before his alarm blares and he drags himself out of bed and repeats the day anew.

Instant coffee. Subway. Rain. Simon intercepts him in the office, but this time with a pastry instead of a cake. He follows Alec to his desk and perches on the corner and talks animatedly about something Alec doesn’t care about. Izzy calls his desk phone but he doesn’t pick up.

He doesn’t see Magnus once.

“Jesus Christ, you look exhausted,” exclaims Simon, three nights later. Or, not Simon, as Simon likes to insist: when he’s in his ridiculous green-and-white spandex supersuit, he’s 8-Bit, and Alec
needs to remember that. “Have you been on patrol already?” He gasps. “Have you caught any bad
guys?!”

Alec pushes away from the lampost he’s leaning against, hitching his quiver higher on his shoulder
and tightening his grip on his bow. Simon’s suit is unchanged since that night, so long ago, on the
fire escape in the pouring rain. His hair sticks out through his cowl at wild angles. The stitches in
the spandex are loopy and uneven. The shinpads strapped to Simon’s calves are dented and well-
worn, but the reels of copper wire coiled around his forearms wink metallically and shine in the
dark. Alec’s eyes flick down to Simon’s work boots, and then up again to the glasses perched on
the end of his nose - and the uneasy feeling in Alec’s stomach twists and turns itself into a tight
knot.

“Let’s get this over with,” he grumbles. Simon grins, swinging his backpack onto the ground and
starts rooting around for God knows what. His house keys fall out of the front pocket with a jingle.
Alec clenches his jaw. “You really couldn’t have worn anything less conspicuous?.”

They’re in an abandoned parking lot, not too far from the office, and it’s late enough that the only
people wandering through the dark are drunk or high and won’t make credible witnesses if they
decide to report two strange supers loitering on the corner of the block. The fog has rolled in thick
and soupy across the East River, diffusing the light like rain on a window: swarms and speckles of
colour, no discernable sense of what might lie beyond the cloud; and each slow swirl of mist has
the same trance-like spell as a single raindrop rolling down the glass.

Car headlights sift through the gloom, two beams of long, thin piercing light, and Alec twitches. He
would prefer to be in the training hall at headquarters, but that would involve answering too many
questions he doesn’t want his parents or Jace and Isabelle to ask, so - here they are. Alec in his
leathers and Simon in his handicraft suit, beaming at Alec like this is the best night of his life. Alec
hopes they can’t be seen from the road.

He feels far too open and exposed; the night smells of wet asphalt and overflowing sewers, and
Alec longs for the freshness of rain found only above the tops of the tallest skyscrapers. He wants
for a vantage point too, some way to see the city in all its directions, to spot rising smoke from a
distance. But instead, the mist clings to the tarmac, pale grey clouds shimmering on the sidewalks
and twisting in the air, and streetlights refract off the fog in a disorienting yellow daze. Sound is
muffled. Alec can’t even hear his own footsteps.

“You don’t have to look so concerned, y’know,” Simon says, smiling crookedly. “I told you
before, if anyone tries to sneak up on us, I’ll feel them coming.”

Alec hums uneasily. Simon has told him about the threads of electricity that wind through the
Earth beneath their feet, trembling and thrumming with even the lightest of footsteps. Simon can
sense them all, like an afterimage of every single person he passes by. He said it’s how he always knows when Alec is in an especially bad mood: he stomps around the office and the world quivers beneath him.

Alec glances back towards the road, but the fog is thick and he can’t see more than twenty feet in any direction. He would rather be doing this on a rooftop or in the deep shadows of an alleyway where no-one ever ventures, but Simon needs space.

Or, rather, Alec needs space so that he’s not accidentally zapped by Simon. He’s not entirely sure what Simon can do.

Simon probably doesn’t know either.

“Aha!” Simon exclaims then, extracting a pair of cycling gloves from his backpack. The fingers are bright antibiotic green. Alec clenches his teeth. “Alright, I’m ready! Let’s do this. How shall we start? Can you teach me to fight? I wanna learn how to punch someone in the neck and make them blackout.”

“You can’t do that,” Alec deadpans, before sighing heavily. “Just - why don’t you show me what you can do and we can go from there.”

He waves his bow vaguely in Simon’s direction, and Simon’s grin broadens as he tugs on his gloves - but then he pauses.

“Hey, uh - Alec?”

“It’s Sentinel.”

“Sentinel,” Simon corrects, and then he frowns, his mouth screwed up into a pucker as he thinks hard. “This Magnus thing is really grinding your gears, huh?”

“And what Magnus thing is that?”

Simon rolls his eyes. “C’mon, man, don’t play dumb with me. You know what I mean. I’ve seen
Magnus like, once this week, and he keeps sending me memos via the courier like he’s avoiding our floor for some reason.”

“I can’t say I’ve noticed,” Alec mutters. He nods his head at Simon. “Come on. Focus. I don’t want to be out here all night.”

Simon’s eyes narrow. “He’s been out of the office every day since that Salem murder, you know. And you’ve gone home before me every night this week. And then a couple days ago, I asked him if you guys needed my help on the investigation, and without even looking over at you, he said that he was working on it alone. Don’t think I haven’t noticed. You’re avoiding each other.”

“I’m not avoiding him,” Alec grumbles. He’s avoiding me. He has every reason to avoid me. “He’s just busy. So am I.”

“Uh-huh. ‘Cus that’s believable. Maybe you love doing audits that much, but Magnus isn’t about to go back to writing for the Sports section when this is still going on,” Simon remarks. “I’m pretty sure the whole office has noticed, by the way. You guys weren’t exactly subtle.”

Alec’s stomach churns. He doesn’t want to think about what that means. Not on top of everything else. “Great,” he mutters. “Fucking great.”

He starts walking - he doesn’t know where - but Simon scurries after him.

“Wait, wait,” Simon pleads. He tries to pet Alec’s arm, but Alec wrenches himself out of reach. “It’s not just you, okay? I’m on your side here. Magnus told me he doesn’t want me working on these murders either. Says I’m not supposed to go looking for new leads, no new photos, nothing. I tried to ask him why, but, well, we never got that far. He had places to be. Busy guy.”

Alec stops abruptly and jerks his chin up towards the streetlight above their heads.

“Can you control the electricity in that streetlamp?” he asks sharply. The light is dull and grainy, the glow filtered through the mist against the black leather of Alec’s supersuit and the side of Simon’s face.

Simon ignores him.
“-but like, that’s me, I get that he doesn’t want me around his work, but you’re you, you know?” he continues on, talking animatedly with his hands. “That’s the part I don’t get. You and Magnus, you guys have always been a team - you have that mildly freaky thing where you can communicate with each other just by staring intensely across the office - and now he won’t even look at you when you’re in the same room?” Simon’s eyes flash up from his hands to Alec’s face. He looks horrified. “Oh God, it wasn’t actually a break-up, was it? You woulda told me if you guys had actually started-”

“Simon.”

“I’m serious!” Simon exclaims. He throws his hands up in the air and a loud bang explodes the streetlamp, a shower of sparks and shattered glass erupting above them. Simon yelps, jumping out of the way. Alec pinches the bridge of his nose between his gloved fingers.

“Oops?” says Simon.

“I’m not paying the city for any damages you cause,” replies Alec.

“What makes you think I can? On my salary? Which is also your salary, in case you forgot - but I guess you have all your Idris pocket money to tide you over -”

Alec thumbs over his shoulder. “I’m very close to leaving right now.”

“No! No, no, please, don’t go, I’m focusing, this is me focused.” Simon screws his eyes shut and presses both fingers to his temples in fierce concentration. Alec sighs, rolling his shoulder where his quiver has begun to weigh down; he knows for a fact that the theatrics are for show. Simon doesn’t need to do any of that to access his powers.

“Okay, the other one then,” Alec instructs, nodding at the haloed glow of a second streetlamp over his shoulder. “No more distractions. I mean it.”

Simon squeezes his eyes closed, wrinkling his nose and flexing his fingers, and the overhead light flickers in the semidark in a series of stop-start patterns.
Alec watches for a while, and then groans.

“Please tell me you didn’t just spell out ‘fuck you, Magnus’ in Morse code.”

Simon opens his eyes and grins mischievously. “That’s ludicrous, he’s my boss. I would never.”

Simon mimes shooting the lamppost with finger guns, making pew pew sounds at the light as it blinks. Alec rolls his eyes and selects an arrow from his quiver, running his fingers through the fletchling. He notches it in his bow, waiting for Simon to make the streetlamp flash once more, and draws the string back to his mouth. It doesn’t take a second to find the shot; he could make it with his eyes closed. The tension snaps and the arrow shatters through the bulb.

Glass fragments scatter across the asphalt, glittering like rain. Alec steps forward to crunch some beneath his boot.

“Yeah, I’m definitely not paying for that.” Simon remarks, but then he squints into the fog and claps his hands together and Alec hears another streetlamp explode nearby.

The sound of shattered glass is strangely satisfying. Loud, imperfect -

He wants to do it again; draw another arrow, break another lamp, pierce a billboard, shoot out a window. Destroy something.

Have it be a substitute for all the other things he wants to break that might hurt more.

Alec notches another arrow.

His arm becomes an extension of the taut line of his bowstring, his elbow raised perpendicular to the ground. He lines up his sights, raising his bow to the sky, but the fog swallows up the light in eerie white-yellow halos and his target drifts in and out of focus. Moisture in the air becomes dew upon his mask and condenses on his lips and all he tastes is the threat of rain. There’s nothing here to tie him to one place: he could be anywhere, anyone, poked out of reality for a moment and caught in a pocket of unmoving time.
What are you doing?

He lets his arrow sag. He’s not about to start up a spree of public vandalism.

“Don’t - don’t hate him. He said he had to make a choice,” Alec murmurs, not looking at Simon. Unshed rain beads upon his eyelashes. “Between the investigation and … something else. He chose the right thing.”

“Even if that’s true, I know you don’t believe it,” says Simon, folding his arms and fixing Alec with a withering look. “Something else just means you. He chose his job over you. I’m not stupid. That sucks. It’s gotta hurt.”

“There’s nothing I can do about it.”

“Well, not with that attitude, there’s not! You really think you finally said yes to training me tonight, after I have been literally begging you for months, because you felt like it and aren’t frantically trying to avoid your problems? Yeah, man, not so subtle.”

“Did I not say I could leave?”

Simon throws his hands up again, but nothing else explodes. “How you ever ended up as a superhero is beyond me! Beyond me! You don’t have a cooperative bone in your body.”

Not with you, Alec thinks childishly, and then: but with Magnus -

Alec scowls, shaking his head to rid himself of the thought and then he berates himself for proving Simon right. He hasn’t seen Magnus in three days and it’s left him feeling sick and restless, unable to focus at work, distracted when he’s on patrol. Jace and Izzy have noticed too.

He doesn’t want their sympathy - the sad look in Jace’s eyes, or Izzy’s hand on his arm in an attempt to comfort him for something she won’t ever understand.

He doesn’t want to hear them say it’ll get better, Alec, because he already knows that. He knows that. The pain will fade with time and he’ll move on, but dammit, it hurts now.
Missing Magnus is a dull ache. And Alec can’t shake it, can’t sleep it off, can’t pretend he doesn’t see it in the mirror. It doesn’t matter if he’s Alec or Sentinel or some car crash of the two because Magnus has impacted all parts of him and there are dents in his bones that cannot be buffed out. It’s fucked to say he can’t function without Magnus - because he can, and he was doing it all alone long before he met Magnus - but it’s more like -

It’s more like he doesn’t want to function. He’s seen what he can have, with Magnus, and now his muscles are screaming and his body is protesting and everything feels like a grey and ominous cloud of lethargy making it so difficult to even haul himself out of bed in the morning. And he knows, he knows, and Simon, and Isabelle, and probably Nightlock know too, that one person shouldn’t be so dependent on another for their happiness but -

But when you live a life like Alec’s, how can you not be fatally addicted to any shred of happiness and completeness shown to you by another human being?

Alec has been starving twenty years for it. He wants to be seen. He wants someone to look at him and see his worth and see his value and say, *you know what? You exist. You exist and what you do matters*. Who you are matters.

(And I love you all the more for it.)

“What do you suppose I do then?” Alec finds himself asking, because this is where is now: too tired to give up, but too lost to know where to go next.

“Talk to him?” Simon offers, looking at Alec like he thinks Alec is an idiot. He’s probably right about that. “Look, Alec, man, you’re clearly not okay. And Magnus doesn’t seem much better, I mean, he didn’t choose his work over you because he wanted to. He’s been miserable all week. He misses you.”

“And how exactly am I meant to change his mind? He was pretty set on his decision. He’s stubborn.”

“You could just tell him?” Simon suggests, “Tell him about Sentinel. You’re what he’s fighting to protect.”

*But that’s what I was going to do*, Alec thinks, recalling the walk back from that restaurant through
the rain-soaked city beneath the same umbrella, and then the warmth of Magnus’ office and his hands on Alec’s face. The way the secret had poised on the tip of Alec’s tongue, ready to be told. That had been the plan: finally telling Magnus the truth.

It hadn’t gone so well.

“As long as he knows me, he’s in danger,” Alec insists, but it comes out like a whisper, and he watches the pity cross Simon’s face and he hates it. “As long as he knows Sentinel, and the Circle are out there killing supers and the people who protect supers, Magnus is not -”

Crzzzt.

Alec flinches, the noise from his coms shrill and sharp and deafening, slicing through the stillness of the fog. The beep of an incoming message has him scowling, and he taps his finger against his ear, answering the call.

Simon’s eyebrows jump up in surprise. “Izzy?” he asks.

Alec nods, still frowning. His coms continue to ring. “Yeah, but she’s not -” he starts, “Iz, you there?”


“Isabelle? Hello? Can you hear me?”

The coms sputter suddenly. “Alec!” comes Izzy’s voice, “Alec, are you there?”

“I’m here, what’s going on?”

“Oh, thank God, I was about to call Jace, but - I need you to listen to me, okay?”

He can hear the edge in her voice; her words are clipped, like she’s holding back the truth between clenched teeth. “Iz? What’s wrong?”
“We’ve got another fire.”

Alec’s stomach drops. Of course. Of course. It’s never going to stop.

“Where?”

“Before I tell you, I need you to promise -”

“Isabelle,” Alec presses. “Where is the fire?”


It’s like a punch to his gut, leaving him winded. His ears ring and his blood runs cold.

“Wh - Izzy, what do you mean the office?”

“The details are hard to pin down right now, but the emergency call just came through. Fire department got the fire under control, but I don’t know how much damage it’s done. It sounds like it was a deliberate attack, I don’t know if it was the Circle, but we gotta assume -”

“Izzy -”

“Jace and Clary are across town, but you’re closer -”

Alec’s finger trembles against his ear. The shudder ricochets down his arm. “Iz -”

His eyes flick to Simon, who stares back at Alec, wide-eyed and worried. He looks so much like himself, it’s terrifying; Alec could blink and Simon could be dressed for work and clutching his camera, his satchel slung over his shoulder, those same stupid glasses resting on the bridge of his nose -
“Alec?” mouths Simon.

“Alec -” says Izzy.

“Are there any casualties?” Alec whispers. “How many dead?”

Izzy hesitates. Why does she hesitate -

“Izzy, please -”

“No, no reported casualties yet, but the police are scrambled and I don’t - I don’t know - apparently there are protestors on scene, I don’t know how serious this is. Just - get there quick, Alec. Jace and Clary will meet you there.”

The coms fall silent, but Alec cannot move, his finger against his ear still. He looks to the sky, but the fog has descended thick and fast; the rooftops of the closest buildings are submerged in the cloud, and the smell of rain masks any trace of smoke.

Slowly, Alec’s hand falls.

Oh, God.

“What was that about?” Simon laughs nervously. “You don’t look so good-”

Oh, no. No .

This is not happening.

He’s flung back to the moment he found his apartment in pieces, ransacked from floor to ceiling. The sofa upturned, his books ripped and scattered. The door hanging off its hinges.
The same fear, the horrifying dread, the moment his blood ran cold as it dawned that someone was looking for him -

And nearly found him.

If they want him, if the Circle want Sentinel, why target the Tribunal, why not go to his home again, why not go to Idris directly -

Alec’s stomach churns violently. A spasm clenches in his gut and his whole body jolts forward.

And if they weren’t looking for Sentinel this time? whispers the voice in his head, a horrible, goading laugh. If they were looking for someone else -

It’s like a switch is flipped inside of him: one moment he’s here, immovable, the world both silent and deafening - and the next, he’s shoving his arrow back into his quiver and slinging his bow over his shoulder. He tightens the buckles on his bracers and presses his finger to the bridge of his nose, pushing on his mask. The leather squeaks. It doesn’t budge, but the shake in his hand takes all his willpower to suppress.

Think about it. Why would the Circle target the Tribunal? Why would Herondale target the Tribunal?

You know who they’re after.

“I need to go,” Alec whispers. His voice is hoarse. Wretched. The fog feels tar-thick all around him, impenetrable and numbing, stripping him from all of his senses. Now. I need to go now.

“Go?” Simon squawks, “Go where? What’s happened? The Circle?” His face pales behind his mask, his eyes following Alec. “Alec, you’re freaking me out, man.”

“It’s nothing,” Alec lies. He searches the clouds again; inhales deeply; still tastes only rain. His heart wrings out inside his chest. He faces south. What he hopes is south. “Go home, get out of here. Get off the street.”
“You know, that does absolutely nothing to reassure me! What’s happened, really? What -” Alec turns away, heading for the road, but Simon leaps in front of him, holding out his arms to stop Alec from running. He lunges for Alec’s arm, but Alec wrenches himself away. “Alec, no, wait, please don’t go - if something’s happened, I can help! I want to help, I can be useful. People might be hurt. You might need backup!”

Go.

Go now.

“Nothing’s happened,” Alec says again, his voice dangerously low. His heart beating dangerously loud. “Go home, Simon.”

“Nothing’s happened, you say, but look at you,” Simon insists, gesturing at Alec, “Fuck, man, you’re terrified. I can see it in your eyes.”

Alec grits his teeth. The voice in his head whispers and whispers. “Simon -”

“You’re shaking. Your hand is literally fucking shaking. Why are you lying to me?”

You don’t have time for this.

You know he was still at the office. You know he was probably sat behind his desk, working on tomorrow’s issue.

(Magnus. Magnus is in danger.)

“Why won’t you let me help you, Alec?”

“Because I’m not having you put a target on your back too!” Alec snaps, and then he recoils, as if slapped by his own words. He inhales sharply, and then, too his horror, he feels sharp heat stinging in his eyes and his throat constricts.
Alec shakes his head and he shoves Simon away. Simon staggers backwards, his mouth agape, but Alec refuses to look at him. *Just go home*, he thinks, he pleads. *Please just go home. Just do this one thing.*

“Sentinel!” Simon shouts, and Alec feels the electricity surge beneath his feet, but he won’t stop walking. He won’t look back. *Go home, Simon.*

But Simon’s voice carries, undispelled by the fog. “It puts a target on your back too! I hope you know that! You don’t just get to run off into the dark and risk your fucking life and have it not mean anything! Sentinel!”

Alec ducks his head and breaks out into a run. *That’s okay*, he thinks. *It’s my job. It’s Sentinel.*

It might just be all he has.

The fear carries him. He pushes until his thighs burn and his muscles scream and every beat of his feet on the sidewalk is a gunshot. *Faster. You need to be faster.* He gasps for air, sucking in sharp breaths that lodge in his throat. He can’t breath, but he can’t stop either.

Beneath the rain, beyond the cold, he smells acrid smoke. Brick fire. Burned rubble. Flames extinguished on the asphalt.

He doesn’t think; he just runs. New York, a blur.

Three blocks south of the office, his coms blare again, and Izzy cuts through the thrum of blood in his temples. “Alec? It’s me. Are you there yet?”
“Almost,” Alec hisses. He pushes himself to run faster, his feet barely touching the ground. “Hold on.”

“Emergency services are already on the scene, be careful. I got a message from Luke - he says definitely an arson, it matches what we’ve seen before - but firefighters managed to contain the fire to the ground floor only. Still no casualties, but six people have been hospitalised.”

“Names?”

“No-one from your department,” she replies, “Mainly cleaning and security staff, which is a whole ‘nother issue I don’t want to get into tonight, but - if Herondale and the Circle were targeting the newspaper because of what it’s been publishing, why wait ‘til the only people left in the building are staff working zero hour contracts for below minimum wage, it makes no sense, Herondale’s throwing herself under the bus -”

“Izzy -”

“Sorry - it’s already turning nasty, the media are circling, I’ve already got CNN and ABC Eyewitness up on the TV and it looks like there’s a lot of protestors too. Anti-vigilante stuff, they’re picketing the building. Police dispatch are saying no arrests yet but the mayor has the riot squad on standby. No word from the Police Commissioner yet.”

Alec slows as the office comes into view. Fog and smoke bleed into one another, white rain and grey ash catching in Alec’s throat all the same. Police sirens wail, drowning out the shouts and jeers of an amassing crowd, while officers stand on the hoods of their patrol cars, screaming at people to get back, but no-one will listen. Red and blue light flashes upon the wet asphalt and in the windows of the three fire engines jack-knifed across the street and across the plate glass of all the skyscrapers that overlook them, and all the people inside who watch the streams of black smoke pour from the smashed lobby doors of the Tribunal.

The enormous gold letters above the door are muted in the gloom. The front of the building is smeared with the remnants of a vicious fire, now black and turned sticky in the rain.

The same faint drizzle wets the air, sticking to Alec’s eyelashes; the fog, still impenetrable, swallows up the noise, the shouts, the blare of a man with a megaphone, and yet, the hiss of escaping smoke roars loud.
He scans the rooftops, he searches for a fire escape that will take him up high and away from the crowds, but he cannot move.

He has to ask the question not yet asked.

“Magnus.”

“His name hasn’t come up,” Izzy says instantly, “Does he usually work this late?”

Yes, Alec thinks. An ambulance hurtles past him, its sirens screeching. He watches it go, and his stomach drops. Yes, he’ll be writing a story or scouring through all the files in his office for a lead we shouldn’t’ve missed or nursing a whiskey as he waits for 4AM press -

“Alec? Alec, what is it? Are you alright?”

“I - I have to go. I have to go.”

“Alec -” Izzy begins, before sighing, “Stay out of sight. Don’t do anything reckless. Tensions will be high as it is and no-one is gonna want to see a super skulking around when they’ve just seen someone else burn the place to the ground. Anyone in a mask is gonna be fair game tonight. We’re all guilty by association.”

“It’s what they want.”

“I know. I know it is. Stay safe, okay? I love you.”

Alec swallows his response, a thick lump in his throat, and the coms fall silent.

The street is swarming with people - cops, firefighters, civilians in dark coats shrugged over their pyjamas, men in suits pulled out of their offices by the commotion, people swinging placards - and their voices ring in Alec’s ears. He should climb higher, do as Izzy says and stay out of sight, but his feet pull him forward with single-minded focus. He slinks across the street, sliding into the shadows, and weaves his way between the patrol cars and ambulances; his head, bowed, and his back, snug against walls and wheel arches. And his heart, rampant loud -
Great plates of glass lie shattered on the sidewalk, and a group of firefighters trudge through the shell of the revolving brass door, yellow boots blackened with ash, face drawn and eyes vacant behind their masks. Smoke plumes from within, stalking their footsteps; the cloying, itchy taste of burnt rubble scrapes at the back of Alec’s throat. A perimeter of caution tape keeps the crowds of onlookers and pushy TV crews hemmed in behind the sidewalk, but not their hurling insults and loud curses and flashes of big cameras, unblinking and all-seeing.

The crowd pushes against the tape barrier like a wave close to breaking. Alec watches one police officer exchange his megaphone for his weapon, his hand palming at the butt of his gun.

The line will snap before the night is through.

Alec ducks away from the shelter of a police car to crouch beside the poor armour of a mailbox and a newspaper dispenser covered in graffiti and stickers, his shoulder against the cool metal. His rests his knuckles against the ground; his other hand passes across the holster on his thigh, whilst the string of his bow cuts into his neck like a garrote.

He doesn’t know what to do, but there has to be - there has to be something. He can’t rush into the crowd shouting Magnus’ name, and he won’t make it into the building without being seen, but -

*There has to be something you can do. Look harder. Look harder.*

( *You’re going to be seen whether you like it or not,* whispers the voice in his head. *Are you ready for that?*)

A man runs past him in the opposite direction and Alec holds his breath; the man glances at him, his eyes wide and soot caked along his hairline, but he doesn’t stop. The smell of ash follows him like a smoker’s cloud, chased by the only thing possibly worse:

“The supers did this!” someone shouts, “We know they did! Why aren’t you rounding them up, why aren’t you killing them like they keep trying to kill us?!”

The crowd roars in agreement and Alec feels it, like a fist thrust into his chest and gripping his heart, squeezing it so tight that it squelches out between the fingers.
The officer with the megaphone bellows for people to stay back, threatening the use of force, but the clamour rises. The night fills with shouts and screams and angry cries for a justice that has long been polluted by the stench of smoke.

Alec hears his heartbeat in his ears. His fingers clench into his palm.

What can he do? He’s just one man. One man against a city driven to hate him, and he can’t move things with his mind or spread his wings and fly away when he needs a quick escape. He has a bow and arrow and he just -

He just wants to find Magnus. He wants to find a man who can’t even look him in the eye anymore because the hurt is too raw, too personal, too much of a love Alec will never know how to handle. And New York wants him dead for that.

A quiet and unfeeling dread seeps into his stomach: a cold, a tightness, a numbness like anaesthesia that makes it hard to swallow all of a sudden.

He peers over the top of the mailbox and meets the eyes of a firefighter slumped against the wall, dragging on a cigarette, his helmet abandoned on the sidewalk. Alec stills, his muscles coiled and ready to run, but the firefighter raises his eyebrows and taps his finger against his brow, in the same place where Alec wears his mask. Alec stares back at him and the firefighter offers him a tight and weary smile, before tilting his chin towards a news van parked against the kerb, and a TV crew pointing their cameras at the two of them.

Get out of here, the firefighter seems to say, without opening his mouth. They’re going to kill you if they find you. He clambers to his feet with a groan, extinguishing his cigarette under his boot, and walks towards the cameras, intercepting the reporter in her prim-and-proper heels and smartly-pressed suited.

Alec seizes the chance and darts away from the mailbox, away from the eye of the camera roaming like a spotlight eager to find him.

They’re going to kill you if they find you.

But I have to find Magnus first.
He hides against the side of an ambulance, crouching behind the driver’s open door, and listens to two paramedics wrapping a woman in a shock blanket. He listens to their radios crackle, another unit requesting a second stretcher for a casualty with head trauma.

He listens, but doesn’t hear any of it.

Placards litter the ground, torn and trampled-on and soaking in the light rain, cardboard and paint turning to mush underfoot. Alec’s seen them all before: *superpowers are dangerous* in angry red paint; *no more vigilantes, protect our city* carved into cardboard with a thick black marker pen; *police not masked freaks* is one that always stings.

An old bed sheet-turned-flag lies drowned in a dirty puddle, leaking paint like an oil spill, like blood. The canvas reads: *dirty press, vigilantism is crime, not news*. Alec swallows hard, and beneath his boots, the glass of shattered bottles and windows alike crunches on the ground.

This is not good.

His eyes fly up to the crowd, and he sees, then, the jostle of placards and cardboard signs and the people in dark hoods and dark coats, collars drawn up and scarves tied across their mouths, obscuring their faces. He sees their heavy duty boots and paint-stained fingers and the unmistakable shapes of firearms tucked into belts and beneath jackets, and he watches the line of crime scene tape bow and flex and buckle, and he knows -

He knows that the fire may not have claimed any lives yet, but the Circle, Johnathan Morgenstern, *whoever the fuck* is pulling the strings is still banking on blood being spilled here tonight.

The city tears audibly, a great rip down its centre. It’s frayed edges will not be drawn back together.

*Magnus, where are you?*

Alec’s fingers twitch. A man at the back of the crowd turns to look at him, and then a woman points, and then the whispers catch like wildfire.

*“Is that man in a mask?”* he hears. *“Shit, don’t look at him, don’t look.”*
“Oh my God, is that a super?” says another, “Do you think he’s the one who did this?”

“Where’s the police? Quick, someone go get that officer!”

Alec pushes away from the side of the ambulance, skirting around the edge of the crowd. He keeps his head down, but the eyes follow him, staring him down.

“It’s a newspaper now, but when does it become our kid’s schools or our hospitals or our governments?”

“They all need to be locked up before they kill anyone else!”

“See, this is what you get for defending supers in the press. Serves the Tribunal right, publishing all that shit. The supers don’t give a fuck. They’ll hurt whoever they want to hurt, doesn’t matter if you try to be their friends. They just want us normal people gone.”

Alec grits his teeth, darting behind the two paramedics running from their ambulance with a stretcher between them. Someone shouts after him, but he won’t turn back - he can’t - not when the wail of police sirens jimmies under his fingernails like a thin blade, or the rumble of the crowd snaps the police cordon and the officer with the megaphone hisses into his radio for the riot squad to get here now!

“Damnit, Magnus”, Alec thinks, Where are you?

Someone grabs Alec’s arm, wrenching him backwards. Alec’s hand flies to his belt, seizing his knife, but as he wheels around with the blade in his fist, he comes face to face with a young man, eyes wide and police uniform covered in ash.

The officer’s eyes snap to Alec’s mask, and then to the quiver on his back and the knife in his hand, and he pales, panic flashes white in his expression, but then he says, “Are you Idris? Are you backup?”

The question shoves Alec off-guard; he staggers backwards, yanking his arm from the officer’s hand as he gapes at him with no words on his tongue.
Idris -

Why would that -

The officer’s hand moves to the gun on his hip. His voice shakes when he demands, again, “I said, are you from Idris or are you -”

Alec lowers his knife and holds up his palm in surrender. “I’m Idris, stand down,” he says quickly, “Backup is on its way. What happened here?”

The officer refuses to lower his gun. “I thought Idris were meant to catch the vigilantes,” he says, and it sounds like an accusation: why weren’t you here to stop this? “Not let them - not let them do this -” His voice trembles; the sentence snaps. Alec watches the tremors rattle down his arm and into his gun, his finger dangerously on the trigger. “You’re not backup. You said Idris is on its way, so you’re - why - why are you here? What are you doing here?”

“Why’s there a super here?” comes a hiss from Alec’s right. “Do you think he’s the one who set the fire?”

“I don’t recognise him, do you?” whispers a mother to her son. “Don’t look, don’t look, he might be dangerous.”

“Fucking cops called in backup, look,” says a man in a leather jacket, brandishing a placard. “They got the paid ones doing their dirty work when it’s their kind out here killing us!”

The air is dangerously close to ignition.

“I’m not here to cause trouble,” says Alec through pressed teeth. Carefully, he returns his knife to his belt and holds up both hands to the officer, taking a slow step backwards. “I just need to find someone, someone who might have been in the building.”

Somewhere in the crowd, glass shatters as a bottle is thrown to the ground and a man lunges for the megaphone in the policeman’s hands. The firefighters shout and wave their hands, urging people to stay back from the still-billowing smoke, but the crowd moves like one creature, pushing and
surges forward, sloshing over the sidewalk like rain overflowing a storm drain.

The officer in front of Alec startles, almost dropping his gun, and he scrabbles for his radio - and Alec is gone. He runs, vaulting over the hood of a patrol car, squeezing between two closely-parked ambulances, his shoulder knocking the wing mirror so hard that he bites his lip and tastes blood.

More glass shatters, bottles thrown and broken. Angry, vicious words are hurled up at the golden letters of the Tribunal that Alec longs to block from his ears; screaming, shouting, the bang of an exploding canister of tear gas.

He waits for the inevitable - the sound of a gunshot. It’s not what he hears.

“Over here, please! Hurry, quickly!”

Alec looks up, immediately drawn to the open doors at the back of the ambulance in front of him. An old woman huddles beneath a tinfoil blanket and an expensive suit jacket, thrown hastily over her shoulders. Her face is gaunt and her body trembles, a deep red gash staining her forehead and matting her hair - and Alec knows shock when he sees it - but his eyes don’t linger, moving instead to the man crouched at her feet, holding her hand between his own, petting it softly and whispering gentle words of encouragement.

Alec opens his mouth: there should be a held breath he can release now, but no.

No, it doesn’t work like that - his entire body seizes, and any hope he has of breathing is trampled into the dirt.

It’s Magnus.

Magnus, there, alive and in one piece and unhurt.

Oh, thank God.

“Hey! I’m talking to you!” Magnus shouts again, waving at the two paramedics with the stretcher.
His tone is clipped and stressed, drawn tight and spread thin, and Alec only needs those two words to know he’s at the end of his tether - but Magnus doesn’t let go of the old woman’s hands. “This woman has a head injury, why hasn’t she been taken to A&E already!”

Of course. Of course he’s here, and not out there in the crowds.

Of course he’s the one tending to the wounded, making sure everyone inside the building got to safety, making sure everyone gets help -

Alec’s eyes rake over Magnus’ profile. He doesn’t look injured: no scratches, no bruises, not even a smear of soot across his forehead. The drizzle has flattened his hair, and his soaked shirt is translucent and plastered to him like a second skin, but he reaches up and draws his suit jacket tighter around the woman’s shoulders. Briefly, he cups her cheek and she smiles weakly at him, and even at a distance, Alec can see her mouth thank you.

The paramedics rush over and Magnus helps her onto the stretcher, draping his jacket across her chest and tucking its sleeves beneath her. As one paramedic straps her to the board, and the other steadies her head, Magnus squeezes her hand tightly, patting her knuckles, and then he steps back, watching as she is loaded into the back of the ambulance.

He rolls his shoulders - and Alec watches the muscle move beneath his see-through shirt - and then he runs a hand through his dishevelled hair, the breath escaping him as his whole body sags.

And then, finally, he turns around, and he looks up, and he meets Alec’s eyes across space between them.

It only takes a second. For Magnus’ frown to bloom into a smile, tired but relieved at the sight of Sentinel alone -

And for Alec to want to run.

Even in the drizzle, even in the creeping fog and the dull and hazy light, Magnus is beautiful, the chaos deflecting off him like rain on a windshield, like oil in the puddles beneath Alec’s feet, and Alec doesn’t know how to stand in front of Magnus anymore and not be hurt by it. He doesn’t know how not to be lanced through his chest, right through that old bullet wound between his ribs, bringing him to his knees in the gutters.
Magnus holds up a hand, rings glinting, and almost waves. Alec doesn’t move.

It’s as Simon said - he misses Magnus. He misses Magnus, because New York might be on fire and its people burning and yet there is only one person in the world Alec wants to save, and he feels it like a wound ripped open, having barely scarred, and no amount of pressure will stem the blood flow.

He hears Magnus’ voice in his head: ‘I never said this was going to be forever.’

‘I can’t dedicate myself to saving this city if we continue to do this.’

‘I know you know how I feel. And because of that, I’m compromised.’

And Alec wants to run to him - but what would he do with his hands? He doesn’t know what he would say; he doesn’t know how he would say it. How would he excuse the bleeding that no-one else but him can see? His chest aches at the thought, steeped in and weeping messy feelings that desperately need to be shoved back into his heart.

Magnus’ smile falters just a bit.

But you’re wearing the mask, whispers the voice inside his head, Sentinel’s voice, it’s always been Sentinel’s voice. You could go to him. You’re not all Alec right now. You could pretend. You could pretend you’re not the person he sent away and he would keep smiling at you like that, and he would never have to know that you’re lying to him, forcing him to go back on his promise to the city -

Alec runs.

He knows why he runs: it’s the fullness in his chest and the bitter, caustic grief in his throat and this sharp edge of self-hatred that he knows all too well for the marks it has left on and beneath his skin. He doesn’t look back; his legs carry him into an alleyway between buildings and the shouts of the protesters and the screech of police sirens die so suddenly, muffled beneath his frantic pants for breath, that he might have stumbled out of reality and into another fracture of time.

The taste of smoke vanishes, replaced by dampness, replaced by petrichor, and Alec keeps running. He keeps running and doesn’t stop, not until he’s lost within the labyrinth of sinuous shadows and
capillary streets, the sort that carry the blackened blood of the city to and from its heart. Between
the narrow walls of skyscrapers, the fog doesn’t descend, a lingering cloud high above Alec’s
head; when he inhales, he breathes in a lungful of stale wet air, cold but humid, and he feels that
cold in the bridge of his nose, making his eyes water. It stings; his vision blurs; his foot catches on
the ground and he staggers shoulder-first into the wall, and this is as far as he goes.

He doesn’t feel the chafe of the brick through his armour, but he wishes that he could, grating at
his skin, rough and abrasive, reminding him of the space that he takes up in the world when he
veers too close to losing it all. He squeezes his eyes shut, turning so that his back rests against the
wall and he tilts his head up, the base of his skull against the brick too. The rain mists upon his
face, seeping into his skin but collecting upon his mask; he listens to his own heavy breathing, how
it hitches, how it preludes a sob.

He hasn’t had a moment like this in a long time. Stubborn pride usually protects him, but when
he’s alone, God, he’s vulnerable. There are things inside his head that whisper wicked things, that
war and worry and remind him that he’s worthless; that tell him to press his cheek to the pavement
and stay there, for all the things that will pile up upon his back and keep him from ever standing. If
he falls down, he won’t get back up again. He knows this; he’s fought it for a long, long time.

Alec’s knees give out, and he slides down the wall slowly, his jaw sore and his teeth clenched so
tight that he wonders if it might shatter bone. The ground is cold and wet, but he is numb to it, a
shrinking shadow in neon light, and he presses his head into his hands, gloved fingers tangling in
his hair and pulling hard.

No, he urges himself, No, no, not here, not now.

He grips his hair harder and squeezes his jaw tighter.

Pull it together. Pull it together. There’s no time for this -

It’s dark here: darker than most other places in the city, windowless and peopleless, some cruel
cajole in the blackness that goads and baits him towards the precipice that the whole damn city
exists on. Alec is a shape in the darkness, a stain on the ground, smeared into the infinite stretch of
midnight as everything he has been frantically outrunning catches up with him at once.

Behind his eyelids, he sees Magnus again: Magnus in his thick black trenchcoat, buffeted by the
wind at a crime scene; Magnus with a whiskey in his hands, catching the light with a heady glint;
Magnus in the hallway outside his office, telling Alec again and again that he loves him, but can’t
love him, because it’s too selfish a thing-
Alec thinks of that church again, smells the acrid smoke and feels the floor crumbling away into ash beneath his clumsy feet; and he feels the raze of inferno fire against his skin; and cradles a man dying bloody and gurgling in his arms. He thinks of Dot Rollins, alone and tortured as Alec was across the city and laughing; he thinks of the boy Nightlock shoved up against the wall the other night, blinded to the destruction and the grief and the untapped hatred that scorched in his fingertips. He thinks of politicians sliding envelopes of dirty cash across tables in exchange for horrible things; he thinks of the pyrokinetic they just can’t catch, holding the lives of innocent people for ransom by the throats with a murderous intent. He thinks of Idris’ uncaring eye.

He thinks of Sentinel, useless. Always useless. Trying his best but always failing, never good enough to save everyone, but especially you. Especially Alec. Sentinel will never be able to save Alec, and he knows that, he’s always known that deep down inside, but why does it hurt so much now -

He thinks of fucking Nightlock on that rooftop.

Make me forget. I want to forget. I want all this feeling to stop, because I can’t go on any longer. Those were the words they had traded between hard kisses and bruised mouths and hot and frantic breaths. Alec needs that again, and he needs it to last longer than a moment; he needs to feel like he’s only skin and bones, and not everything else in between.

He longs to be a body without a name, and yet, all this time, he’s been so scared of becoming a cadaver.

The paradox is winding. A stranger inhabits his body, a stranger wearing his face, and he feels it like the cold pang of terror, like a bullet reentering the point from which it was once pulled out - who is he? He is not Alec. Alec never really existed; he was a figment, a fragment. Slowly fading and falling away, piece by piece, and only now is there so little of him left that he notices.

And Sentinel - Sentinel is a pretence. Sentinel is a lie, a pawn, someone else’s weapon in a war Alec doesn’t want to fight. He has no claim over him, over his armour and his quiver, over the mask on his face.

Who are you? Do you know at all? What do you have, when you don’t have that? What can you ever hope to be?

Nothing. That’s what. Alec pinches at his hand, digging his nails into the leather of his glove until
he can feel it cutting into his skin. *The blackest, most violent nothing, unpeeling him from his body and all the muscles he thought he knew, suspending him a void with no end, no ground to crash land upon, no sky to escape through.*

Footsteps approach, echoing between wall and narrow wall, and Alec opens his eyes; the world is wet and bleary, and it won’t return to normal, no matter how fast he blinks.

But the rain - the rain lessens. It quietens, silenced on the ground as the pressure in the air shifts and no longer bears down upon Alec’s shoulders with such unforgivingness.

Alec looks up. Unspent water gathers along his eyelashes.

Magnus emerges from the gloom, still without his jacket. His hair is limp and wavy where it falls across his forehead. His suspenders cut through the drenched fabric of his shirt and dig into his skin.

And his eyes fall on Alec, and whatever wildness slowly transforms into relief, and then anguish, and then fear again.

“Sentinel,” he says, quiet and unsure, afraid of cornering a wounded animal ready to bolt again. He stops, out of reach, and Alec wants to shove him away - *go away, get out of here, don’t look at me like this, don’t look at me whilst I’m weak* - but at the same time, he needs Magnus closer.

He wants to feel Magnus’ warmth so desperately - but he can’t, not with the cold threat of rain between them.

“Hey -” Alec says, but his throat feels mangled and his voice is hoarse, like a foot is pressing down on his windpipe. He scrubs at his face, flattening his hair back against his head, but rainwater drips from the tip of a limp strand that hangs over his forehead. Every muscle in his body has seized and he can’t unfurl them; his legs won’t work as he commands them; his fingertips feel ice-cold within his gloves. He gives up on getting to his feet. “Sorry, I - I just - I can’t - just gimme a sec -”

“It’s okay,” says Magnus. He takes another cautious step towards Alec, his feet silent on the ground. Crouching down on his haunches, he brings himself eye level with Alec, arms folded around his middle to ward off the cold. His arms strain at his wet shirt. His mouth is pressed into a thin line. “Take your time.”
“It’s like - it’s like I can’t breathe,” Alec chokes, “I can’t - I don’t know -”

I don’t know what to do anymore. I don’t know who I am.

Concern pinches Magnus’ eyebrows, and Alec watches sorrow and sympathy spread across his face like blood in water. He’s too much, too caring. Too good for the deeds Alec has done to stay alive, for the morality Alec has shed in the name of Idris, for the blood that has been spilt only for Alec to end up crumpled in some dank alleyway in a forgotten corner of New York’s purgatory.

Why did you ever think you could have this? Why did you ever want for something you always knew you’d have to sacrifice -

“Sentinel.” Magnus reaches out, resting his hand on Alec’s knee. The back-and-forth swipe of his thumb has Alec’s skin thrumming until painful. “Look at me. You’re okay. Take a few deep breaths, nice and slow. Stay with me.”

Alec sucks in a breath, too sharp and too harsh, and it peters out inside his throat. He tries again, and this time, it’s a little easier. Magnus guides him, the rise and fall of his own chest deliberately slow. He doesn’t look away; his stare, locked with Alec’s.

“Okay, there we are,” he murmurs, “I was worried, for a moment. It seemed like you took one look at me and panicked, back there. Is the sight of my face really so terrible?” He offers Alec a small, teasing smile, but it doesn’t reach his eyes, still sharp, still holding Alec completely still.

“I’m sorry, I just -” Alec starts, but the words keep clogging. He growls in frustration and grinds the heel of his palm into his eye socket, brushing away stray water. The wet leather squeaks. “It’s nothing, fuck, it’s nothing, I got the call about the fire, and I - I thought - when I saw you were okay, I just -”

“I’m fine, Sentinel,” Magnus whispers. His thumb doesn’t stop moving across Alec’s knee, drawing with it a strange flicker of energy that Alec feels from within. “I’m fine, I’m okay. Blessedly, still in one piece.”

Magnus leans forward, dropping onto his knees. His expensive suit darkens in the muddy rainwater that pools the concrete, but he doesn’t look down.
“Although,” he continues, and he’s touchable now, if only Alec could remember how to lift his hands. “Dare I say it, the thought of you seeing that I’m fine and then rushing out of there like you’d seen a ghost doesn’t fill me with much confidence.”

“It wasn’t because of you.” Hauling the words he wants to say to the surface takes all the strength in his body, and yet when they leave his lips, they sound like barely anything, a pathetic little whisper. “I didn’t - it wasn’t you , I just -”

_I didn’t run because of you. I ran because of me. And how can I ever tell you that, how can I -_

“Sentinel,” Magnus interrupts. It needs to be _Alec_. He needs to say _Alec_, and he won’t. He can’t.

“I don’t -” Alec breathes, scrubbing at his face again. “Magnus, I don’t … I don’t know how to be - I don’t know _who I am_ anymore.”

Magnus frowns. “Of course you do,” he says. “You’re brave, you’re good, you’re kind. I’ve seen it. You would upend the whole world if it meant doing what was right, if it meant saving even one person, even if that meant leaving behind the only paradigm you’ve ever known.” He squeezes Alec’s knee. “Whatever has happened to you to make you doubt that is temporary. It means nothing. In no way does it make you lesser than what you are.”

Alec’s heart lurches, but Magnus pauses. His eyes flick away, down to his hand on Alec’s leg, across the leather and armour that plates Alec’s chest, boring into the brick wall over Alec’s shoulder. His jaw works; he swallows thickly; the words that hang from the tip of his tongue are hardest to say.

_“Who ever has happened to you is not worth this pain,”_ he says slowly, _“Nor do they define the person who you are.”_

_But it’s you , Alec thinks. Would you say that if you knew it was you?_

Instead, Alec says, with his head bowed low, “There’s just - there’s _so much_ , and it’s like - it’s like there’s not enough room, inside of me, and dealing with it all by myself feels like - I just want it all to _stop_.”

“Ask for help,” Magnus urges, “Please. You must have people around you, I know you do. Don’t
push them away when you’re struggling. You don’t have to do this alone.”

He sits up on his knees and leans into Alec’s space, and there’s nowhere for Alec to go this time, nowhere for him to run. Magnus’ cups the side of Alec’s face with his palm, running his thumb across Alec’s cheek, skimming the edge of his mask, then, the soft and wet skin beneath Alec’s eye.

A crease settles between his brows. His mouth, gently parted, and the look on his face one that belongs to a man who has been through this all before: the terror, the fear, the lostness and the loneliness, and now wears an old and unyielding pain, and a guilt Alec just doesn’t understand.

*Why do you look so guilty?* Alec thinks, and his eyes flutter closed as Magnus’ thumb brushing beneath his eye again, across the barest slip of skin not hidden by Alec’s mask. *What have you possibly done to feel guilty about?*

*Don’t look at me like this is your fault. It's not. It's mine.*

“You said once before,” Magnus continues, his palm sliding across Alec’s jaw, his fingers tracing across the lobe of Alec’s ear. “That time you turned up half dead and bleeding on my balcony, that I know you in real life. That you know me. Ask me for help.”

Alec leans into the touch. Magnus’ hand is warm; he cannot help himself. And so he whispers, “Would you still say that if you knew who I was?”

“Yes,” Magnus says, “There is no-one you could possibly be that would change anything I’ve said.”

“I bet there’s someone,” Alec mumbles. With his eyes still closed, he turns his head to press his nose against the swell of Magnus’ thumb. A stray tear escapes him, at last. It rolls down his cheek and catches on the edge of his mask. “Someone who wouldn’t be worth it. Trying to take care of everyone without exception only gets you hurt.”

“You speak from experience.”

“Bad experience. I didn’t do so well.”
“I’m sure you did your best. That’s all anyone can ever ask.”

*I didn’t. I didn’t do my best, because if I did, no-one would’ve died*, Alec wants to say, but it sticks in his throat, along with every other little thing. He wants to close off and shutdown, like he always does.

Alec opens his eyes. Magnus’ expression is glazed, distant, and he touches Alec’s face as if he imagines someone else entirely. Alec wonders if he thinks of Salem again, of his friend Ragnor Fell, of every other super who has come across his desk with the worst sort of obituary.

It’s because of that, Alec asks, “Have you guessed yet?”

Magnus’ hand falls from Alec’s face, and Alec mourns the touch, the softness. “What?”

“Who I am,” says Alec, and he knows he sounds wretched, because he brushes away another rogue tear and he continues on, “Have you guessed? Do you - do you know?”

“No.”

“Yes.”

Magnus blinks, startled, eyes snapping upwards to meet Alec’s. Confusion flashes across his face, then surprise, as he searches Alec’s baffling honesty for a trick, yet finds none.

The question means something to him, but Alec’s answer means more. In rare moments is Magnus as transparent as this.

The rain hushes, but the air is thick, heavy with promise, with revelation, and the silence drags out long enough for Alec to remember where he is and how the cold seeps into him through the ground and for the trembles to begin again in his fingers, the longer Magnus goes without saying
anything.

“Magnus-”

Magnus shakes his head. “There is someone,” he whispers, and each word has the pressure of a held breath, bending the very air beneath a force immensely powerful, “whom I hope that you are.”

*Oh*. Alec’s heart thumps and his breath catches.

Oh, there it is at last, and yet -

And yet, it’s like Alec is standing at the bottom of a well and staring upwards, and these words, *these words*, they bounce down the walls and splash into the stale water that swills around Alec’s ankles and they echo, distorting into no-longer-words, merely sounds that seem like something he should know but cannot place.

Their magnitude is lost on him. He just can’t *feel* them, he can’t feel their weight, their impact. His chest is full of nothingness and there’s no way to grab hold of that and reassemble it into anything familiar because it passes through his fingers like smoke. He’s numb, exhausted, running on fumes.

‘*There is someone whom I hope that you are.*’

He’s talking about Alec. He must be. There’s no way that he isn’t.

*So why can’t I feel it?*

*I want to feel it.*

*I want to know how it will mess everything up because, fuck, at least that’s something. At least the pain is something other than this.*

He can’t help himself. He has to know. “Is it gonna screw everything up if I am?” he whispers.
Magnus’ eyes burn now, like he’s trying to peel away all that he knows about Sentinel and look at him again for the very first time. He’s trying to place where he’s seen these eyes before, the colour of his hair, the shape of his hands.

His focus drifts to the thin scar on Alec’s chin. He touched Alec there once. He brushed the crook of his finger beneath Alec’s chin, all the way up so that his knuckles caught the underside of Alec’s lip, once.

(‘You have a scar here. How did you get it?’

‘My brother.’)

A small frown appears between Magnus’ brows, balanced precariously upon the edge of realisation that Alec is not even sure he wants to make.

Magnus’ voice is very low when he asks a simple, “Are you?”

Are you Alec?

Alec could push it. He could push it, he could give Magnus an answer, the answer, and finally relinquish the very last thing over which he has control: Alec and Sentinel share the same body. My body.

Every fibre of his being longs for it. He longs for the mess, for the panic of stumbling into something he can’t take back or ignore or run away from. He longs for the feeling that leaves him sick to his stomach.

For freedom. If I tell him the truth now, maybe I’ll be free.

He wants it all, and it’s not unusual that he hungers for the things that will cause him harm.

“Sentinel?” Magnus asks, both hesitant and hopeful. He raises his hand again, his fingertips
straying against the edge of Alec’s mask, as if he wants to pick it free of Alec’s skin. As if he wants confirmation for something he already knows, and has known, deep within, for a long time now. “You have to be the one to say it.”

Alec says nothing, but he wants his silence to be enough. He wants the hiss of the rain on the asphalt and the reason why he ran - and the reason why he came looking for Magnus in the first place - to say enough. He wants to see realisation assemble on Magnus’ face like the alignment of stars and planets and stellar bodies; for Magnus to suddenly tip his head back and laugh, bodily, at the thought of not being able to recognise Alec beneath such a flimsy piece of leather covering his eyes.

If only Alec’s strength of will was enough to make that happen, but no. No, he’s rendered mute, and static seems to jump from Magnus’ fingertips and onto his cheek, and it makes him flinch.

And then the rain descends, whatever keeping it at bay above their heads snapped in half like a long-awaited breath. A moment, broken.

Magnus sighs heavily, slumping back on his knees. Alec watches his hand fall for a second time.

“We can’t stay out here all night,” Magnus murmurs. “Even if you want to, I’ve already ruined this suit and I would rather not catch hypothermia too. I have more than enough on my plate at the moment and I don’t want to deal with that as well.”

Magnus moves to stand, pushing up on his knees. Alec can’t help the noise he makes - a gasp, a protest, some mangled plea of Magnus’ name - as Magnus wrenches the space between them from out of Alec’s chest, not unlike a bullet.

“Wait -”

Alec lunges for Magnus’ hand before he can blink. His fingers curl around Magnus’ wrist, the leather of his gloves squeaking against Magnus’ rain-wet skin, and he tugs Magnus back, and Magnus staggers, grabbing Alec’s shoulder to and steady himself.

“Sentinel -”

The truth waits on the tip of Alec’s tongue. *It's me. Beneath all this, it's me, but I don’t know for*
Magnus stares at him, his fingers digging into Alec’s shoulder. Nervous anticipation and bewilderment at war in his eyes; his face so close, their noses could touch; a breathlessness about him, as if he might already know what Alec is about to tell him. As if he has wanted nothing else with all his heart than to hear Alec say -

*It’s me. I think you already know, but I need to say it. I need to pretend like it might fix everything, like it might stop people dying. Like you and me, when we’re together, nothing can stop us -*

Alec cannot manage it. It sticks in his throat, a heavy afterthought of rain, and no sound reaches his lips.

“Sentinel?”

*If you tell him now, it won’t change anything. He still won’t want to be with you.*

Quietly, Alec lets Magnus’ hand fall. He blinks back the tears that still cling to his eyelashes and exhales one shaky, damning breath.

“I’m sorry,” he murmurs, gently pushing Magnus away. “I’m sorry, I can’t.”

Disappointment flits across Magnus’ eyes but it doesn’t stay long. He is quick to be rid of it, pulling up the walls that Alec knows so well, his expression settling into something unremarkable, something protected from the elements.

“What for?” he asks simply, pretending like it doesn’t hurt.

Alec struggles to his feet, leaning heavily against the wall. His supersuit is soaked and he can feel water in his boots. He scrubs futilely at his face as rain water drips from his nose. “For - for not - for not being the person you deserve. For the fact you were dragged into all of this.”

“It’s nothing I didn’t choose for myself.”
Alec knows that’s not entirely true, even if Magnus believes it. No-one enters into this world of their own volition. No-one wants to be a superhero. Not really. Not at such a cost.

“Can you get yourself home?” Alec murmurs, unlooping his bow from his shoulder. The string is distorted and stretched. *Useless*. He’ll need Izzy to tighten it when he gets back to headquarters, if it doesn’t find itself in a dumpster first. Still, he clips it back into its holster and looks to the sky, searching for a fire escape to take him away from here, but the icy fog makes his vision blur.

“I’m more concerned about you,” Magnus says, stepping in front of him. “You’re not okay. I know how stubborn you are, but you can’t just walk this off. My car is parked not far from here, let me drive you somewhere. Back to Idris, back home. I’ll take you anywhere.”

Alec shakes his head. His chin quivers. He refuses to look at Magnus; maybe he’ll find absolution in the thick cloud of fog above them instead.

“You shouldn’t - you shouldn’t say things like that,” he says.

“Like what?”

“Like you care about me like I’m - like I’m your -” he struggles, “I’m not worth it - it’s only gonna - it’s only gonna cause you more problems. Put you in danger. And I can’t -”

“It is worth it.”

“Magnus, it’s not.”

Magnus steps towards him, reaching for his arm again, but Alec pulls away. “You’re worth it. Everything that I know you are and and everything I know that you are capable of, that makes it worth it.”

Alec’s breath catches, a half-swallowed sob only barely contained. He squeezes his eyes shut, but another tear betrays him, sliding down his mask, across his cheek. It drips from his chin, and instantly, is lost to the rain.
He turns and walks away, and for a moment, it feels final. Magnus doesn’t follow him. The rain drowns out all other noise; he can’t hear himself sniff or grasp for breath or any of it.

And then, he hears his name. His thinks he hears his name. Not a shout, but a whisper, and it could be the wind, an ill-forgotten wish, but it sounds so much like Alec that has to stop and look back.

Magnus hasn’t moved, but he stands in the middle of the empty street with his arms wrapped around himself and his hair plastered to his forehead and his jewelry glinting in the rain. His expression is fierce; the set of his mouth bears a determination that Alec has always craved but never known.

“You don’t have to be anyone,” Magnus calls out, loud enough to be heard over the downpour, “You can call yourself whatever you like, Sentinel or otherwise, you can listen to stories they spin about you in the press, or the pretend that you’re the horrors Idris demands of you to be, but none of that dictates who you are.”

Above, a clash of thunder rolls.

“All that matters is what you do and how you do it. And I’ve seen it,” Magnus says. “I know you.”

There’s catharsis to be found in the effort of breaking down and dragging oneself back up out the dirt for lack of anywhere else to go. It sets all other things in perspective.

It’s late by the time Alec returns to Idris, staggering into headquarters through the back door. There’s a murmur, still, on the streets: police cars hurtling uptown, protestors loitering on the front steps, waiting to accost anyone who dares go in and out and make their business with the Corporates known.

But headquarters is quiet. The hallways are white and glossy, the once-flickering lights finally fixed and now unrelenting in their artificial glow, and Alec’s rain-wet footsteps are the only sound
to be heard. He’s not surprised: New York is restless tonight, its hackles raised, and everyone here will have been called out on patrol. Jace and Clary will be at the Tribunal by now. Probably wondering where he is. Probably worrying.

He traipses through the corridors to Izzy’s laboratory, rapping his knuckles on the door three times as he enters. The lab is a mess, the smell of electrical smoke and motor oil pungent in the air, whilst wrenches and spanners litter the bench. Jace’s new wings are strung up on the wall, and in the polished titanium, Alec catches a distorted glimpse of his own reflection: blanched, rain-wet, and red and crusty eyed.

He sighs heavily and turns to Izzy, who is hunched over her computer with her headset on, murmuring into the microphone. He watches her for a moment, the way she types without looking down at her keyboard, a number of open files at her elbow and a data search ongoing on her screen; he looks at her polished shoes and her shiny, well-styled hair and at the way she taps her fingers on the desk to the rhythm of a song she might only have heard once, but remembers still. He’s glad to see her. Always is. He allows himself to breathe for the first time in hours.

But Izzy must see movement from the corner of her eye, because she glances up, takes one look at Alec and then says into her microphone: “I’ll call you back, Alec just got in and something’s come up. Let me know if you run into anything.”

She loops her headset over the top of her monitor and spins around in her chair to face him.

“You look terrible,” she says, glancing down at the brown rainwater that soaks Alec’s suit.


Her eyebrows jump up, and she’s on her feet in a moment. Her hands grip both his arms, her thumbs digging into the pit of his elbow as she maneuvers him in front of her. Alec finds himself in her spotlight, unable to step back.

“What happened at the Tribunal?” she asks. Her focus is steely, the look in her eyes severe. “I’ve been listening to dispatch all night and no-one’s said anything about any more casualties, but - did the cops give you any trouble?”

“Nothing I couldn’t handle.”
“Protestors?”

"Yeah. Some."

“Any sign of Jonathan Morgenstern?”

“Long gone.”

Izzy frowns. Her voice softens. “And Magnus?”

Alec sucks in a breath, but it doesn’t make it all the way, lodging half-way down his throat. “He was there. He was fine. We spoke -”

Izzy tilts her head as she looks at him, her eyebrows pinching in the middle. Concern. Pity. Don’t let it be pity. “And that’s a bad thing?”

Alec closes his eyes and nods. He hears Izzy inhale deeply, steadying herself, and then she steps away. Alec opens his eyes as she pulls out a second chair and gestures for him to sit as she falls gracefully back into her own, crossing one leg over the other.

He does as he’s commanded.

“Talk to me, Alec,” she implores. “Something’s happened. Something big. You don’t have to deal with alone, not ever.”

There are no other sounds to be heard save for the whir of her computer and Alec’s shallow breathing, but in the silence, Alec doesn’t spiral. The walls, the floor, the chair beneath him, and Izzy’s serious, unrelenting stare are grounding. Real. He knows it and he knows her and that’s something to which he can grip tight and not let go. This part of him, this part he knows. This part he hasn’t lost yet.

He feels more in control than he has the entire night, and, at last, the world stops spinning.
“I think I … I think I screwed up,” he says.

Izzy hesitates. Alec can hear all the things she would normally say, an echo of Jace, of their parents: you, screwing up? As if. I’m sure it’s not that bad. Don’t overexaggerate, you don’t make mistakes.

“Oh, okay,” she says slowly. “That’s okay. You’re allowed to screw up.” She purses her lips in thought. “Tell me what happened and we can try and fix it. Together.”

‘You must have people around you. I know you do.’

‘Don’t push them away when you’re struggling.’

Deep breath, Alec.

Once he starts talking, it’s difficult to stop. He falters and trips over his own words, words he can’t spit out fast enough, others that are too big and lodge in his throat. Frustration gnaws at him, sharp teeth and irritation whittling him down, but he tells her, he tells Izzy, about the last few days.

About the night Dot Rollins was murdered and Alec and Magnus were halfway across the city and oblivious, about Magnus shutting down because of it; of their fight that wasn’t even a fight; of how Alec’s heart is weeping like an open wound and a part of him is in desperate need of being sewn up, while the other parts want to let it bleed as a cruel reminder that he does exist. He does. He takes up space and suffers for it.

He tells Izzy of the night at Dot’s house, how Nightlock almost killed a man in his grief, and then he explains about the resignation letter that sits in his desk drawer, and he can’t help but wonder if it was untouched by the fire because he doesn’t want to write another one, but he doesn’t want to have to check either, because the cavernous space that exists in the office is just too damn much when Magnus is there.

And, lastly, he tells her about tonight: Simon and the fire and the rain, and Magnus following him into the alleyway, and the feeling of everything passing through his fingers like sand in an hourglass, leaving him hopeless and wanting and helpless.

How close he had come to telling Magnus the truth before he walked away. How wretched he feels
for not even knowing if he’s done the right thing.

Izzy doesn’t say a word, her lips pressed together in a thin line as it all comes tumbling out of Alec like a cut torn open, stitches ripped, garbled and gruesome. He doesn’t cry - out of the rain, the sadness has settled, dried and crusted in the pit of his stomach - but his voice croaks, rubbed raw and hoarse. It’s like there’s a hand plunging down inside his throat and pulling out his insides, metre by slow metre, word by excruciating word.

But when he’s done, ending on a sharp, far-too-harsh breath, Izzy reaches across and takes his hand in hers, and rests them both upon her knee. She tilts her head and smiles at him, and, finally, Alec feels himself decompress.

“I wish you’d told me sooner,” she says, like it’s the easiest thing in the world. Maybe it is. Her love has always been unconditional and Alec has always held it in his head that, one day, he’ll push it too far, but -

Today is not that day.

Yeah, well, I didn’t realise it was this bad until -” he mutters, scrubbing his hand across his jaw. “I’m sorry, Iz. I’m sorry you have to deal with - with all this.”

“At least you’ve seen it now. At least you know,” she says, petting his fingers, “What do you think you want to do now?”

“I dunno. Haven’t really got that far.”


“This isn’t heartbreak.”

“Oh, it is,” Izzy insists, “Maybe it’s not heartbreak in the most normal sense, but that’s what it is. It’s just - it’s when something you thought you knew and trusted is suddenly ripped away from you, and then you feel so - so lost, you don’t know what to do and you have to figure out how to recalibrate again. It’s like taking baby steps. I think that’s how I’d describe it.”
“Does it ever go away?”

Izzy smiles softly. “Yeah. Yeah, Alec, it does.” She squeezes his hand again, and oh, how is it that she feels like the older sibling now, the one protecting him, shielding him from the rest of the world that wants to do him harm. In a moment, Alec is transported back to every moment of their childhood where she would run to him with a scraped knee and ask for a band aid when their parents wouldn’t give her one. “The way you feel inside, the helplessness, the loneliness ... you know that doesn’t define you, right? I’m sure it feels like it does, but trust me, it doesn’t. I know.”

The corner of Alec’s mouth tilts upwards. He shakes his head sadly.

“I thought I understood,” he says, “Understood us, me and Magnus. I thought if there was one thing, one thing I had control of, it was how I felt about him. How he felt about me. I guess that was stupid.”


“I don’t know, maybe I was expecting something a little more insightful?” Alec squints, “Should I have gone to talk to Jace instead?”

Izzy pulls a face and yanks at his hand; Alec lets out a quiet oomph, if only to appease her.

“Don’t joke. Jace doesn’t know what talking about your feelings means. He’s the sibling you go to when you want to watch Golden Girls reruns and not discuss your problems,” she says, scowling. “But I’m serious, Alec. You weren’t stupid then. You’re not stupid now. You’re the smartest person I’ve ever known.”

Alec pulls a face, but Izzy continues.

“I know it feels like you’ve lost Idris, or what we all thought Idris was, and I know it feels like you’ve lost Magnus too, and maybe you don’t know where you stand anymore, but the person you thought you were when you were with him, with Magnus? The person who did all those good things, who must’ve saved so many lives, and who finally took a step back and saw this -” She gestures to the room around them, to the building that towers for floors above their heads. “That this is all a smokeshow? That’s still a person you can be. Dios, it’s the person you’ve always been, even if it took meeting Magnus for you to see it in yourself.”
“C’mon, that’s enough,” Alec grumbles. “I’m not that important.” He tries to pull his hand away, but Izzy grips tight.

“Don’t try and deflect, I know what you’re like,” she says fiercely. “You’ve always wanted to help people. Always wanted to protect people, save people. When have you and Idris ever been on the same side? When have you ever been what anyone wanted you to be? You do things your way, the right way, the Alec way. Always have. You’re the sort of hero this city needs. You, *Alec*, not Sentinel.”

Alec swallows down the lump in his throat. Izzy’s words echo Magnus’, but they hurt differently, like Izzy’s pushing on a bruise, and not trying to extract a bullet from between two of Alec’s ribs.

“Just because Magnus has walked away,” Izzy adds, “which I don’t agree with, just so you know, but that’s a story for another day - just because he did that, it doesn’t mean you’ve changed. It doesn’t mean your job, your sense of right and wrong, your capability for kindness has changed. You know that, right?”

She scoots forward on her chair until her knees knock against his.

“The person I see is still my brother, maybe now more than ever,” she continues, “I need you, Jace and Clary need you, Idris needs you. Everyone in New York needs you, only you, because that pyrokinetic and Valentine and the Circle are still out there, and it’s not going to be how well you can string an arrow, or how good you are at keeping up with Jace that’s going to stop them in the end. And … and even though he might not realise it - or maybe he does, and that’s why he’s done what he’s done - I’m sure Magnus needs you too.”

Alec’s heart aches; the clench of his chest is earnest. “What do I need to do?”

*What do I need to do to make this feeling go away?*

“Give it time. And while you’re waiting, you can save New York. I’ll help you. So will Jace and Clary and Luke, and Aline and Helen, and Lydia and Raj, and Goddamn Victor Aldertree, even if I have to drag him kicking and screaming, because give me *any* opportunity to ruin his day and I’ll be -”

“I wouldn’t be opposed to that,” Alec mumbles, and it makes Izzy grin, lighting up her face. She
“Just start allowing yourself to be you. No more Sentinel, no more Corporates, no more Idris. I told you before, if you want to leave, we’ll leave. If you want to start over, I’ll follow you. Always. I trust you.”

“Maybe … it’s time for a change.”

Izzy’s smile doesn’t dim in the slightest. “Yeah,” she says, “I’ve been hoping you’d say that.”

He stays the night at headquarters, unwilling to step out into the rain again and traipse across the city. Izzy hands him the key to his old room - he wonders if anyone’s touched it since the day he left, or if the walls are still grey and the bedspread still cold, as if awaiting his return - but he shakes his head and slips into the breakroom, collapsing into one of the uncomfortable chairs that is too small for his body.

The television turned on low bathes the carpet in pale green light, shadows flickering across Alec’s suit. He tracks the characters on the screen - it’s a sitcom, though the laugh track is little more than a hum beneath his skin - but allows his focus to drift.

And God, he’s tired. His body aches, his legs stiff and his joints seized, and the chill of the rain hasn’t yet left him. The damp leather of his suit sticks to him like a second skin, but peeling it off requires energy and he has none to spare: he feels rung dry, like someone has gripped him tight around the middle and squeezed every last drip of feeling from his chest and all that’s left is quiet.

Quiet, save for the crackle of static on the television and the way the soft liminal glow stops the dark from being truly black. He feels dispossessed, slipped out of time and reality again, the television screen becomes a tunnel, a portal to another world; in its spotlight, Alec sits, bound by the magnetic force of the screen, his eyes glazed over.

He reaches for the remote and switches the TV to the late night news. The picture changes: where static bled and the green-grey colour was fuzzy, now, the news anchor appears sharper, staring back at Alec through the screen. They seem too permanent, not human in the strangest of ways.
“New York will now turn its attention to Senator Penhallow and its police force as it waits for a verdict on the latest in this string of arsons,” says the anchor. “The future of the city and its troubled vigilante population remains, as before, concealed by smoke.”

Alec frowns. *Not smoke, no*. The future he imagines is drenched in rain, covered by cloud that he cannot see the end of. The thought of having to take a step forward without knowing where his foot might land is terrifying, but-

It must be done. He knows that now.

The Circle must be stopped. Sentinel cannot relinquish his mask. And Alec cannot give up just because he doesn’t get what he wants. He doesn’t have that luxury, and there are other supers out there, vigilantes, who have even fewer.

Idris can’t be trusted and the government is holding its breath, waiting for the worst to happen, so that they can swoop in with new laws and legislation and claim they’re acting in the interest of the people. Valentine is targeting civilians now.

*But Herondale ... that’s the thing that doesn’t make sense. That’s the piece that doesn’t fit.*

Alec’s missing something.

These things, he knows. These things, he recalibrates with, reunderstands his place in the world.

A deep breath: he holds it in his chest for five, six, seven seconds, and then releases it. He repeats it again, and again, and again, until the pressure pushing down on his ribs abates at last, and the tremble he’s been fighting off the whole night doesn’t threaten to break him, and only makes his fingers twitch on the armrest of his chair.

*You may not know who you are, but you know what you have to do now.*

*Stopping the Circle from hurting anyone else is the only thing that matters.*
Alec slumps lower in the chair and the old leather squeaks. On the television, a rain-swept reporter battles with an umbrella; below her, a scrolling banner reads: SUPERS ATTACK NEWSPAPER; PENHALLOW TO RESPOND WITH REVISED ANTI-VIGILANTE LEGISLATION AT THE SENATE; behind her, the gold letters of the Tribunal have lost their shine, tarnished by smoke. The fire engines are gone and the swarm of protestors has dispersed, dirty placards now littering the ground in and amongst a few shattered riot shields.

Magnus might still be there. Or he might have jumped in the back of the last ambulance and made his way to the hospital to make sure everyone is okay. Or maybe he’ll have found a way to sneak back into the building to save all those months of work stashed away in folders and filing cabinets.

It doesn’t bear thinking about.

Or maybe - maybe he’s still standing in that alleyway where you left him. Where he told you -

Alec hisses as if burned, his head jerking away from the television screen. He scrubs his palms up his face, rubbing his fingers into his eyes and gritting his teeth. He dislodges his mask and it falls into his lap.

‘There is someone whom I hope that you are.’

Alec wants to pretend he didn’t hear it. He wants to pretend like he’s not significant enough to be someone worth hoping for, like Magnus knows so many people and he could’ve been talking about anyone, but -

*Does Magnus know?* He must do. He said it in as many words as he could without using Alec’s name and crossing over that invisible line that is scrawled across so many parts of them.

*And even if he doesn’t know*, whispers Alec’s quietest of thoughts, *he still wants the person beneath Sentinel’s mask to be*

*You*. Alec.
He exhales shakily, leaning his head back against the spine of the chair. The ceiling is bathed in the pale green glow of the TV and shadows dance across the white tiles. Alec closes his eyes, praying for sleep, praying for blissful silence.

*How does that make you feel?* he imagines Izzy asking.

*I don’t know*, Alec would say. *I don’t know and I don’t want to think about it.*

He dreams restlessly. He dreams he’s in a car, breath fogging up the windshield. The city passes him by in blurs of rain-wet colour, familiar skyscrapers and unfamiliar empty roads, bright billboards and flashing neon signage - and yet, instead of the soft blue glow of downtown, oranges and yellow burst and die like fireworks beyond the window, each one accompanied by a bang.

The engine roars and the car accelerates, the sudden lurch pushing Alec back in his seat. New York hurtles past the passenger window, again and again, the same few streets over and over like a cassette stuck on repeat. Freddie Mercury sings on the radio again. Alec’s been in this dream before.

He looks to the driver, but the rest of the car is shrouded in deep black shadow and Alec sits in the only circle of spotlight. But then, another explosion of bright fire lights up the windshield, the steering wheel, the driver’s hands, his eyes, his face -

*Magnus*.

No, not Magnus. Not quite. He’s Magnus but a step to the left, a half second out of time, a distortion in a mirror. His clothes are strange, his coat heavy and deep burgundy red. His gloved hands grip the steering wheel, but the air distorts around his fingers like a shimmer. Stubble darkens his jaw before he’s plunged back into the intransient night.

Alec opens his mouth but words don’t come out. *Ah*. There’s no talking in a dream. He knows that.
'Magnus’, he thinks loudly. ‘Where are we going?’

Rain beats upon the windshield but the wet pressure seeps into the car; it stops Alec from twisting in his seat to face Magnus fully. His seat belt digs into his neck; he cannot lift his hands or feel his feet; it’s like his body exists separately from him, and he is but a consciousness trapped behind another man’s eyes.

The car accelerates without Magnus pressing his foot down upon the pedal, the city leaping forward to meet them, moving faster and faster on its spinning axis.

Another yellow burst ignites beyond the windshield and it blinds Alec for a moment; he sees stars and moons and pale blue sunspots, dancing across his vision, and he winces, casting his eyes away.

On the radio, Freddie laughs at him. Then, Freddie sings: ‘Listen to the warning, the prophet he said: for soon the cold of night will fall summoned by your own hand.’

‘Magnus, where are we going?’ Alec thinks.

‘I told you where we’re going,’ says Magnus. ‘Weren’t you listening?’

Alec frowns. A puff of breath tickles the underside of his jaw, not intimate, and too much like an animal breathing heavily against his throat, murmuring like it’s made hungry by the rhythm of his pulse beneath his skin.

A low whisper echoes in Alec’s ear - but it’s not Magnus, not his voice. Alec can’t make out the words; they sound like a muttered spell, like they’re spoken backwards and upside down and in another reality away from here, far beyond the haze of a dream.

‘Wait,’ Alec thinks, trying to turn his head and find the source of the voice. ‘Wait, slow down. I don’t understand what you’re saying.’

‘I’m not the one saying it,’ says Magnus beside him, his hands still on the wheel, his eyes still on the road.
‘Listen to the man, listen to the man, listen to the man, listen to the mad man,’ croons Freddie.

Alec closes his eyes, scrunching his face into a frown. The whisper moves up the shell of his ear, each soft sss caught between the teeth, a rushing hiss like the wind, like the wind has a secret and Alec strains to hear it.

‘Who’s that?’ he thinks. ‘Am I meant to know?’

‘You know who it is,’ replies Magnus. Another explosion illuminates his face for a Molotov second. The colour of a building on fire, a city ignited.

‘I don’t. I’ve never heard this voice before. I don’t know who it is.’

The shadows twist on Magnus’ face, passing across his eyes in the shape of a mask. His hands begin to glow with a colour Alec cannot describe - white, silvery, distorting the fabric of the universe, a colour he’s never seen before. Moonlight, starlight. Magic.

‘Yes, you have,’ says Magnus. ‘Listen harder. Imagine this voice in someone else’s mouth.’

Alec pinches his eyes shut again and strains to hear the strange and elusive whisper as it begins to rearrange, slowing down and forming words he recognizes from the pieces of deconstructed otherness.

‘The vision fades, a voice I hear,’ sings Freddie, ‘Listen to the madman!’

‘Are you listening, Sentinel?’ asks Magnus.

‘What do you think I can convince you to do?’ says the whisper. ‘What sorts of terrible, horrible things? What sorts of noble things? Can you tell the difference?’

The light beyond the windows smears into yellow, orange, white oblivion, faster and faster, until it’s strobing and dizzying and incomprehensible. Another thunderous crack from just beyond the
windshield has Alec jolt in his seat, but he can’t see anything beyond the stretch of road ahead of them, swallowed up by a darkness that exists on far-too-near horizon.

‘I’m in your head now,’ comes the whisper. ‘You’re going to do as I say.’

‘I don’t understand,’ thinks Alec.

‘Listen,’ says Magnus.

Alec cracks open one eye, and then the other, wincing against the harsh white light of the windowless room; he has no idea of the time of day, or if it’s been mere minutes instead of hours since he fell into an uneasy sleep. His head hurts, his eyes aching like he’s been staring at a bright light for far too long; he feels disoriented, groggy, and desperately hungry. The television on the wall is black and there’s a painful twinge in his neck from sleeping upright, and -

There’s a plate of pancakes on the coffee table before him, still warm enough that the square of butter on top has half melted and begun to grip, glossy and golden. And, slouched in the chair opposite, his folded hands resting on his stomach, and staring at Alec intently, is Jace.

“You know, it’s creepy to watch someone sleep,” Alec grumbles, rubbing the sleep from his eyes as he shuffles upright.

Jace grins. “Morning, sleeping beauty. I was wondering if you were ever gonna wake up.” He nods down at the pancakes. “Izzy made you breakfast. I think.”

“Did you already eat?”

“Oh yeah. I’m not making that mistake again. I don’t think my stomach is ever gonna recover from those waffles she made for my birthday,” says Jace. “We picked up breakfast burritos on our way in. Clary and I just got back.”
Jace gestures at his supersuit, specked with rain and splattered with mud, although he’s abandoned his mask and wings.

Alec frowns. “You guys were at the fire all night?”

“Not all night. Most of it. Then we went and paid a visit to Herondale’s building to see what was going on, but, well - not much, was the answer. I dunno what I was expecting, to be honest. It’s not like you’d blast music from the rooftop or throw a party if you’d just ordered a moderately successful hit on a newspaper, right?”

Alec hums in response, rolling his shoulders and stretching out his stiff legs. His suit smells ripe, cold sweat and dirty gutter water left to dry and crust within the cracks in the leather. He unclips his bow from its holster and drops it onto the coffee table, cautiously reaching for the fork Izzy has left him.

Jace watches him with equal scepticism.

“Iz said you had a rough night of it,” he says, as Alec stabs a pancake. “You think the paper was targeted ‘cus of you? Like with your apartment?”

Alec shakes his head, taking a bite. He chews carefully, but Isabelle’s attempt at breakfast doesn’t immediately kill him, so he swallows it down.

“Probably not. If they wanted to catch Sentinel, there are better ways of doing it.”

“So, you think it’s revenge, then? For all that stuff you guys published about the police commissioner election being rigged and Herondale’s corruption and all that?” Jace’s eyes narrow. “You think it was a hit on Magnus?”

“Not a hit. A threat, maybe.”

“Huh,” Jace muses, and he leans forward to tear off some pancake with his fingers. “Makes no sense, though. If Herondale wanted to deny everything that Magnus said about her, why would she go and do this and prove him right? The Circle attacking the paper that slandered her basically
confirms that they’re working together.”

Jace is right. It makes no sense, but it’s just one more thing in a long, long line of impossibilities, and Alec has grown tired of listening to them revolve around and around inside his head, unanswered.

“It’s like the Salem murder,” Jace adds, speaking with his mouthful, “And that apartment fire from the other week.”

“Attacking civilians, you mean.”

“Yeah, but why go after civilians, y’know? I mean, sure, it’s like you said, Herondale wants people to hate the supers for doing all this, but if everyone knows she’s involved in like, actually killing people, they’re not gonna like her either. It’s just gonna make people like Penhallow more and listen to whatever she has to say.”

No. No, not Penhallow.

“Did you see that she’s gonna take the anti-vigilante bill to the Senate anyway?” Jace continues, snagging another piece of pancake. “I mean, what sort of fucked up is that - changing her policies just ’cus of pressure from the protestors or whoever -”

No, it’s not pressure.

Alec stops chewing. He swallows the last mouthful, but a lump forms in his throat.

No, he thinks. No, it’s not Penhallow that everyone will be listening to.

(‘Are you listening, Sentinel?’)

No, it’s somebody else’s words in her mouth.

Alec drops his fork. “Shit.”
Jace’s eyes fly up. “What? What is it? Is it the pancakes? Oh God, Alec, I already ate so much, don’t do this to me -”

He jumps out of his chair and grabs for the plate, but Alec lunges for his wrist. Jace’s mismatched eyes meet his, his frown fierce and confused.

“No,” Alec says, “No, it’s nothing to do with - it’s Herondale, she’s not the one who’s -”

The door bursts open with a deafening slam and Alec’s heart rockets into his throat. Jace leaps away, his hand immediately on his holster - but it’s Izzy who skids into the room. Her dark hair tumbles out of her ponytail and there’s a crease on her cheek from where she must’ve fallen asleep on her desk again, but her eyes lock on Alec.

Jace reaches out to steady her, but she bats him away, sucking in a sharp breath.

Her excitement meets Alec’s dread like the clash of a riptide and Alec’s feet are swept out from beneath him.

He knows they’ve both just had exactly the same realisation.

“Woah, Izzy, where’s the fire?” Jace laughs, sliding his handgun back into its holster, but Izzy pushes past him.

“Alec,” she gasps, out of breath. She must’ve run all the way here. “I figured it out. We got it all backwards.”

Alec’s stare doesn’t leave hers. “Herondale’s not calling the shots,” he whispers. “The attacks have nothing to do with her. They never did.”

“What the fuck d’you mean it’s got nothing to do with her?” Jace demands. He steps between the two of them and holds out a hand in each direction, like he needs them to slow down, or Hell, stop moving altogether. “What’s going on? Did you guys suddenly develop telepathy without telling me? This is my worst nightmare.”
Izzy spins around and locks the door behind her. Jace assuredness waivers as she then rushes over to the television and turns it on, stabbing the volume button with her finger until it’s as loud as it will go. The walls vibrate and Alec grimaces, while Jace covers his hands with his ears.

“Iz, what the fuck!”

Izzy shakes her head, pressing her finger to her lips.

“Quiet,” she mouths, pulling out a small rectangular device from her pocket and extending its silver antenna. Alec knows old Soviet tech when he sees it. It must be from Meliorn.

He also knows its used to scan a room for bugs and other listening devices.

Izzy sweeps the detector across the room, passing it across the frame of the door and around each light, behind the television, beneath every chair. Alec sits completely still, and it’s only when the detector buzzes and Izzy reaches beneath the coffee table and pulls away a tiny black chip, that Jace hisses.

“Fuck,” he says, as Izzy drops the bug on the floor and stamps on it with her heel. “Fuck. What the fuck is that? What the fuck is going on, guys?”

Izzy sweeps the room once more, but the detector doesn’t buzz again. Satisfied, she turns down the volume on the TV and looks back at Jace.

“Alec’s right,” she says, “Herondale’s not the one directing the Circle in these attacks. Well, she is, but - she’s not. God, why didn’t I see it sooner, it's so obvious -”

“Not to me, it’s not! You just said you got everything backwards, and now you just found a bug, Iz, Jesus fucking Christ,” Jace snaps, looking to Alec for help. “Alec?”

Alec looks him in the eye. “Jace, you were right,” he says, “About it not making sense. Why would Herondale damage her own reputation just to prove a point about supers being dangerous -”
“She wouldn’t,” Jace says, “So, if she’s not behind the fires, who is - fuck.” He clamps his hand across his mouth and looks down at the crushed bug on the floor. “It’s not Maryse and Robert, is it?”

Izzy shakes her head. “No, I don’t think so. I think they’re being used too, just like Herondale, just like Penhallow. They’re all being used to push this anti-vigilante bill through the Senate.”

“So they don’t know?” Jace demands.

“I don’t know,” says Izzy, “But they’re compromised. They must be.”

Jace’s face pales. He looks slowly between Alec and Izzy and their hardened stares. “So … who is pulling the strings?”

“Think about it,” Izzy says. “There’s one superhuman we know who can make anyone do what he wants. One person with the literal power of persuasion, who can control someone’s free will. Who can set fires, and cut throats, and persuade mom that it’s not worth Idris looking into these murders, and who can control Herondale’s entire election campaign - all with a whisper. That’s all it takes to get inside someone’s head.”

_He could suggest a building to be a good place to jump from, and a part of you wouldn’t think twice about doing it._

(‘Are you listening, Sentinel?’)

“Silver Tongue. Valentine,” mutters Alec, “Valentine’s been whispering in Herondale’s ear. Manipulating her. Using her connections to arm the Circle, to push that legislation towards the Senate - it’s his words in Herondale’s mouth. In Jia Penhallow’s mouth. Commissioner Dieudonné. Mom and dad. Who knows how high it goes.”

Izzy nods determinedly. “He must’ve been guiding Herondale’s hand all this time,” she adds. “Whispering in her ear since the very start, telling her what to do and when to do it. Valentine doesn’t care what the attacks do to her reputation, all he wants is to get rid of the vigilantes. He just wants to turn New York against the supers, make people fear us by causing as much chaos as possible and blaming it all on the supers. Doesn’t matter that the vigilante setting the fires is his own son.” Izzy rests her palm flat on her sternum and exhales deeply. “It fits. It fucking fits.”
“Fuck,” Jace says. He palms his hand through his damp hair. “How long do you think -”

“Months, years,” says Izzy, “If not longer. I wouldn’t be surprised if this dates right back to the coup in the 70s. For all we know Valentine planted the whole thing in her head twenty years ago.”

Alec slumps back in his chair, suddenly winded. He covers his mouth with his hand, scrubbing at his jaw.

Of course. Of course. That’s how it all fits together.

That’s why Idris was so adamant about not getting involved in these murders, in tracking down Valentine. That’s why he and Izzy found all those contracts of sale in the Idris databases.

That’s why nothing happened when Herondale lost the election.

It didn’t matter. It made no difference to Valentine’s plan.

The Circle didn’t need Herondale. They just needed someone, anyone, with the leverage to get them into the Senate, to put them beyond the reach of the police, to pay Idris to look the other way.

Valentine Morgenstern has been orchestrating this for decades. Making sure there’s not a single person left who can stand in his way as he eradicates every single vigilante from all five boroughs and beyond. Planting whisper after whisper and watching them grow and twist and mutate until all the prejudice and all the hatred became its own terrible creature and all Valentine has to do is sit back and watch the carnage rip the city apart, limb from limb-

The murder of Ragnor Fell. Magnus said Ragnor was investigating the Senator as well as the epidemic of hate crimes. He must’ve gotten too close to the truth. All those files of his that Magnus had, linking the Herondale campaign and the Circle - Ragnor must’ve found the connection and they killed him before he could tell a soul.

God. God, it makes so much sense now.

And is Magnus -
“What happens when Magnus gets too close too?”

“We have to get word to Luke,” Izzy says, “We can’t trust anyone else. If Valentine has been whispering in mom’s ear, even just once, even if it was decades ago - we can’t trust her. We can’t trust anyone in Idris, because they might be complicit without even knowing.”

“Fuck,” Jace repeats. He falls down into the chair next to Alec. “Jesus, fuck, the entire system, everything, it’s all corrupt. Police, government, Corporates. All the way to the top. What the Hell do we do now?”

“If we’re right about this, the fires are gonna keep happening,” says Izzy, “They’re gonna get worse and worse, more violent. The Circle will start targeting more civilians. Schools, hospitals, anywhere with a lot of people where they can do maximum damage.”

“We have to stop them,” Jace says, “If Valentine gets anywhere near the White House, this spreads across the whole country and we’re fucked, from here to the fucking Pacific -”

“I’m not gonna let that happen,” says Alec. He reaches for his mask and fixes it back on his face; the leather is still damp, but it’s no longer cold. Slowly, he rises to his feet. “We’re going to stop them. No-one else is going to die.”

He looks at Izzy and she nods, lifting her chin defiantly. Words aren’t needed.

Alec stands taller. Straighter.

“I have to find Wolfsbane and Veil,” he announces. From the corner of his eye, he sees Jace sit to attention, his focus rapt on Alec, like Alec’s the only one in the room. “Nightlock too. We need to get word to them, but we can’t trust any of our communication channels right now, not if the entire building is under surveillance.” He turns to Jace. “Jace, go get Clary, and then both of you head back to the Herondale building. Don’t take your eyes off her. I want to know everywhere she goes, everyone she meets. Herondale’s our best lead to Valentine. And Iz -”

“I’m on it,” Izzy says, “I’ll sweep my lab for bugs and then I’m gonna rendezvous with Melion, get everything backed up away from Idris’ servers. We can set up a private frequency, one that can’t be overheard. Then, I’ll -”
You can do this, Alec thinks. I need you to do this.

Izzy purses her lips and nods to herself. “Then, I’ll go and talk to mom and dad,” she continues. “I don’t know what’s gonna happen, but someone has to-”

“You got this, Iz,” says Jace, “If anyone can stare down Maryse, it’s you. You’re always good at getting secrets out of people.”

Izzy rolls her eyes, but can’t hide her crooked smile. “Okay,” she says, “Stay safe, both of you. Keep your radios on and stay in touch. If I find out that either of you have done something stupid and reckless again, I’ll -”

“Yeah, yeah, you’ll kill us yourself,” says Jace. “We know.”

Alec slips into the subway tunnels through a maintenance hatch a block from headquarters. The dark is safe, hidden away from both daylight and prying eyes. Distant trains rumble along the tracks, a thunderous echo that makes the sewer rats skitter into the gloom, their shadows long and distorted by the beam of Alec’s flashlight.

The adrenaline has dissipated. In its place, the stiffness of his suit, the ache in his feet, and an aftershock in his fingertips that he can’t shake free, tripping like an electric shock through the palm of his hand.

He tightens his grip on his flashlight, clenching his teeth. The beam of his flashlight curves across the tunnel walls and pulls shapes out of nothing, shapes that reassemble into people and memories and moments in the past where Alec should never have missed what was staring him in the face all along.

Just one man did all this. The thought won’t leave him be, replaying on an endless loop. Just one man. One man killed so many people. One man has done such irreparable damage to every single super in New York.
He has so many questions, now, that he doesn’t dare ask. It’s almost laughable. He’s spent the last few months dogged and desperate for answers, after all.

Deep in downtown Manhattan, he finds a service shaft and creeps up the ladder, pushing aside an old manhole cover to reveal the city on the cusp of twilight: skyscrapers coloured purple and car headlights blinking into existence where they pass by at the end of the street. New York revels in its own impressive, surface-level beauty. It was long ago that Alec stopped marvelling at the city’s ability to turn a blind eye and carry on, regardless of what might have befallen it the night before. The subway’s still running and the streets are still gridlocked from Brooklyn Bridge up to Central Park, and Wall Street will be flooded by men in suits trying to capitalize on last night’s tragedy at the Tribunal as if it’s just another day in the office.

New Yorkers are tenacious. Resilient. Stubborn. All things that Alec is too.

And selfish. Don’t forget selfish.

Yes, New York is selfish too. Unfeeling and unempathetic, a city of a million cold shoulders presented all at once. A fire is just another fire if no-one you knew got hurt. Something to skim read on the front page of the paper before leaving it half-crumpled on the subway seat or for the next person to take.

Above him, the highest windows reflect the same deep blue of the sky: calm and starless and entirely unperturbed. Below, the world is pinker, oraner, more artificial.

Alec passes beneath a neon sign shaped like a naked woman sipping a cocktail; next door, a flashing red billboard advertises tobacco for sale; and beyond that, the bulb in a barber’s pole has blown out and the blue and red striped glass is shattered on the ground. Alec keeps his back pressed to the wall as he ducks through the alleyways and narrow streets, the brightly coloured neon roaming across his face in kaleidoscopic stripes. Tonight is not a night to be seen at ground level; tensions will be high, and a lone superhero out before dark becomes a target for anyone in reach of a phone to call the police.

It doesn’t take long to find what he’s looking for: an unremarkable street deep in unremarkable shadow. Dumpsters are shoved against the walls, and at the end of the road, an old lorry is parked against the back door of a bodega, a tarp draped over its roof. It doesn’t look like it’s been used in a
while.

But it’s the set of steel doors leading down into a basement that Alec approaches; they’re bolted shut, but the usual padlock and chain that binds the handles is missing.

Good. It means someone’s home.

And Alec doesn’t have the time to go scouring the city tonight. He knocks loudly on the doors; the sound reverberates.

Then, footsteps, followed by the sliding of a deadbolt, and one of the doors is shoved open, forcing Alec to step back.

“Oh,” says Veil, scowling up at him. She’s wearing her mask, but her leather jacket is tied around her waist. Instead of shivering at the sudden winter cold, she sneers at it. “I thought you were the pizza guy. That’s disappointing.”

Alec blinks owlishly at her. Her frown deepens and she moves the shut the door again, but Alec throws out his hand to stop her.

“Wait,” he says quickly, “I need to talk to you. Both of you.”

“You couldn’t’ve just called ahead?” Veil asks, her eyebrow raised. “I thought you and Wolfsbane had a deal where you guys trade secret messages and I don’t have to see any of it, especially Arkangel.” She peers out of the storm doors, glancing down the street, and then steps aside, ushering Alec in.

Inside, the hallway is dark and musty where the walls are damp from rain unable to soak into the already sodden ground - but at least it’s warm. Alec watches as Veil slides the deadbolt back into place and then turns to him, folding her arms across her chest.

Alec doesn’t wait for her next scathing remark.

“It’s Valentine,” he says simply. “He’s behind everything.”
Veil narrows her eyes and looks at him like he’s stupid. “Yeah,” she says, “Obviously. We know. Jesus, Sentinel, what do you think we’re doing down here in this dungeon-”

“No, I mean - Valentine’s not working for Herondale. She’s working for him. They’re all working for him, he’s manipulating them. He’s been whispering in their ears for decades-”

“What do you mean *all*?”

“Herondale. Dieudonné. Penhallow.” He takes a breath and watches Veil’s shoulders tense. “And Idris as well. We can’t trust anyone.”

“You mean, we can’t trust you ,” she says sharply. Alec winces. She might be fully armoured, her skin iron-tough, but he’s not. Not in the way that it matters. “How did you find out?”

“The fire last night. At the Tribunal .”

The sound of low conversation cuts him off; indiscernible words echo through the hallway: Luke’s low rumble and the soft, familiar murmur of someone else. Alec turns, staring into the dark.

Behind him, Veil huffs, and then pushes past, her shoulder knocking into his.

“Turns out you’re not the only one freaked out about that,” she mutters, “Come on. You need to talk to Luke. I assume you Corporates have already come up with some shitty plan that you want our opinion on.”

Alec follows her through the dark hallway, holding his hand to his eyes as they step out into the bright light of the main room. The hideout is as he remembers it: the beat-up old couch in the corner, laden with textbooks. The round table in the centre of the room. The enormous corkboard on the wall, covered in a tangle of strings that looks too much like the inside of Alec’s head.

On the back wall, a dozen or more handguns, boxes of ammo, heavy artillery stolen from a police evidence locker. Wolfsbane’s spare suit in a glass case.
Wolfsbane, himself, leant over the table, leaning hard on his knuckles.

And beside him - Nightlock.

Alec releases a breath. He feels his whole body tense and then deflate, as if he’s been running and running and running, and finally here is someone who will know what to do. Someone who will tell Alec how to fix it all. Someone who understands -

He hasn’t seen Nightlock since that night on the rooftop. Since the kiss, since Nightlock’s hands were on his hips, digging into the meat of his thighs. Since they -

Since they.

“Luke!” Veil snaps, leaving Alec standing in the doorway as she crosses the room. “Sentinel’s here. He has something to tell you. Something about the fire last night.”

“I can see that,” says Luke. He’s wearing his supersuit, but not his mask. His face looks drawn, but he smiles at the sight of Alec. “It’s good to see you, Sentinel. What can I do for you?”

Alec looks to Nightlock, but Nightlock says nothing, his eyes darting away as if ashamed to be caught staring; a frown forms behind his mask. Both his hands are flat on the tabletop, but his fingers are arched. Tense.

Alec drags his attention back to Luke. “Idris is - we’re compromised,” he says simply. There’s no point dragging it out. “Valentine’s been using Herondale to stir up anti-vigilante hatred, and Commissioner Dieudonné to stop the police investigating the fires and the murders.”

Luke’s jaw tenses and his knuckles turn pale as his fists clench on the table.

“Senator Penhallow too, apparently,” Veil remarks, glaring at Alec from across the room. “Valentine’s been whispering in everyone’s ears. Telling them what to do, who to kill. Which vigilantes to trick into trusting you, only for you to round them up and -”

back at Alec. “Why would Valentine do that?”

“The legislation. If all of New York demands it, there’ll be no choice. The Senate will have to pass it.”

“Shit. Right. Right, that makes a lot of sense,” says Luke. “Nightlock figured the fire last night wasn’t something ordered by Imogen Herondale. We were wondering if it was a hit by the Circle, but this fits better. Valentine doesn’t care about journalists, he just wants terror. Herondale’s the scapegoat.”

“Arkangel and Muse are following Herondale for now,” Alec explains. “We have to find Valentine and she’s the only person we know who is in contact with him and not someone acting on his behalf.”

“What about Robert and Maryse?”


But Nightlock does. He shifts, the pressure in the room following his silent cue. His dark eyes return to Alec. Probing. Intense.

Confused. Why does he look confused -

“I don’t know,” Alec mumbles, “If Valentine’s been influencing them, I don’t know how long. I don’t know how long he’s been planning this .-”

“All it takes is one whisper,” Nightlock interrupts sharply. “That’s enough to put the suggestion in someone’s head and it’s time, and only time, that allows it to grow and perpetuate and become something so large and insidious that we can no longer tell who is in their right mind and who really wants to see us all dead.” He sneers. “Silver Tongue, indeed.”

Mom and dad wouldn’t, says the voice in Alec’s head that sounds like Sentinel from long ago. He wants to believe it, but after last night - Alec knows he is alone.
Idris has long been in the business of catching vigilantes and turning them over to the authorities. Twenty-something years. Since Alec was young and it was drilled into him that all vigilantes did was give Corporates a bad name.

God. How long has this been going on? How long has Idris gone without questioning what a man with the literal power of persuasion can do behind their backs?

How long have his words been ringing in Maryse’s ears, over and over again until she took them as her own and knew no better?

Valentine never had to lift a finger.

“This isn't good,” says Luke, scrubbing his hand across his jaw and his few-days-old beard, “Shit. This is worse than I thought.”

“We should just get out of New York,” Veil says, “If everyone’s been turned against us, what chance do we have? Let this place tear itself apart. It doesn’t care about us.”

Alec wants to tell her that she should leave, she should go. If there’s somewhere else she could be that’s safe, where she doesn’t have to constantly look over her shoulder to make sure there’s no-one hiding in her footsteps - he wouldn’t wish this on anyone.

But Alec - Sentinel - he can’t leave. It’s as Izzy said: he has to save the city. That’s his duty - not Idris, not Magnus, not the long suffering of his heart - but the population of Manhattan island who won’t know the Hell they’re hurtling towards until it’s too late.

That’s who Alec is.

Alec’s gaze flicks over to the corkboard on the wall. In the centre, there’s an enormous map of the city: the location of each fire is marked with a pin, and each of the dead vigilantes is connected by a piece of string, spreading outwards like a spiderweb.

“We can’t just give up,” says Luke to Veil, but Alec blocks them out. He crosses over to the corkboard and runs his finger along a thin string of red yarn. It leads him to a photograph of Ragnor Fell.
He feels Nightlock’s eyes on his back. The sharpness of his stare slips beneath Alec’s supersuit in a way no-one else does, intimate against the skin on the nape of his neck.

A shiver. He keeps his eyes trained on the map of the city and doesn’t look back. He searches for the church, for Dot’s apartment in Brooklyn, for that parking lot in Harlem from all those months ago, each stuck with a pin.

*Focus*, he tells himself. *Focus, now.*

He follows the line of Broadway as it cuts across the map, slicing Manhattan in half. Time Square. Grand Central. Down to Madison and across onto Park Avenue. Right down to Brooklyn Bridge and City Hall and Idris -

*‘The fires are gonna keep happening. They’ll start targeting more civilians. Schools, hospitals, anywhere with a lot of people,’* Izzy had said this morning.

(‘*Are you listening, Sentinel? ’* Magnus had said in the dream.)

Alec frowns at the map. Every thread, every clue, it all leads to the centre of a web. And he knows who they’ll find at the centre of it, but until now, he hasn’t given thought to what will happen when he gets there.

Now, *now*, he sees it.

Valentine wants that legislation to pass through the Senate. And in order to do that, he needs to make people afraid. He needs to make people think that the only choice they have is to round the vigilantes up and put them behind bars.

*How do you cause mass panic? How do you cause mass hatred? How do you turn a whole city against one group of people -*

Alec’s fingers brush across Penn Station, then Grand Central, then down to Manhattan Bridge. How many people must enter the city there every day -
“Fuck,” whispers Alec.

“Sentinel?” Luke says, “What is it? Do you have a plan?”

Alec shakes his head, curling his fingers into a fist as he rests his knuckles against the corkboard. From the corner of his eye, he sees Nightlock shift, taking a step towards him.

“The Circle used Herondale to acquire military equipment,” Alec says. “Arkangel and I found the contracts months ago. They have access to firearms, anti-aircraft weaponry, surface-to-air missiles, probably more. They wouldn’t need that if they were only going after a handful of vigilantes.”

“Shit,” says Luke. “Shit! This is way, way beyond my paygrade.”

“It’s way beyond all of our freaking paygrades!” snaps Veil. “Shouldn’t the FBI or the CIA or literally anyone other than four costumed idiots in a basement be dealing with this? Luke?”

“If what Sentinel says is true, then we don’t know how far Valentine’s influence extends. If he’s been manipulating politicians, he might have infiltrated the FBI too. Lord knows he’s had the time to do it.” Luke rubs at his temples. “Sentinel, we can’t do this alone. We’re gonna need Idris’ resources.”

“I know,” says Alec. He glances at Nightlock, but Nightlock says nothing, his eyes trained on Alec. His expression is unreadable. It does nothing to settle the rampant beat of Alec’s heart, loud enough, he’s sure, to be heard even at a distance.

“We need more people,” Luke continues, “Between the four of us, we can’t cover enough ground. I can spread the word amongst other supers, but we can’t have eyes everywhere-”

“We don’t need to be everywhere. Just in the right place,” Alec realises. “We know the Circle is working with a teleporter, so we can’t outrun them and we can’t predict where they’ll be - but they can’t move that big a quantity of weaponry in the same way. So, either, they’ll move it by road or it’s already in position. We just have to find that.”

Veil scoffs. “I mean, how hard can it be to find a couple big guns in a city of millions?”
“No, Sentinel has a point,” says Luke, “You ain’t gonna be able to hide heavy duty equipment under a tarp in someone’s basement. It’ll be an abandoned building, a construction site, a rooftop somewhere, and it’s gonna have to be near a target with high population density, within a few blocks at least. That narrows our search radius down a lot. We just gotta figure out what might be a target, and we can do that, ‘cus who else knows this city inside and out like we do?”

Veil opens her mouth to protest, but then she sighs, pressing her lips together as she pointedly looks away.

“Fine,” she admits. “Fine. It’s the best we’ve got. But if we’re gonna be stuck here all night, I want my pizza.”

Veil accompanies Luke to the pizza place on the corner of the block, complaining about how, last time, they forgot her extra anchovies and she’s still pissed. She stalks ahead of Luke as they disappear down the hallway, and the slamming of the steel doors makes the whole room shake.

Alec listens to the fading echo, and then the silence. The empty space suddenly feels very large, but the weight on his shoulders has lessened.

They have a plan. It’s enough. He can focus on that, if nothing else.

And yet, he can’t bring himself to move, rooted to the spot in front of the corkboard; if he moves, he might dislodge the quiet, and so he holds himself still, squeezing his hands behind his back, his spine ram-rod straight. The map of the city begins to blur, roads and lines coagulating into one, but maybe - maybe if he stares long enough, it will reform into another epiphany. Maybe if he keeps his eyes on it, it won’t implode in on itself.

“Sentinel.”

The air shifts with a fluttering pulse as Nightlock steps up to Alec’s shoulder. Alec flinches, but refuses to look away from Luke and Veil’s complex tangle of yarn strings.
It matters little. He feels Nightlock’s eyes on his cheek, tracing his scowl, the line of his nose, the bite of Alec’s teeth as he chews his lower lip.

“Are you okay?” Nightlock asks.

“Yeah,” Alec lies, “Yeah. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Nightlock purses his lips, deep in thought. He says nothing for a long moment, staring up at the board, but he’s close enough for Alec to feel the warmth of him, to remember what it was like to have his chest pressed against Alec’s, his hands reaching places inside Alec’s chest that he thought would never be touched -

Nightlock’s hand finds Alec’s elbow with a gentle, barely-there touch, but the static still leaps. “Sentinel,” he murmurs, as if he knows precisely where Alec was last night, crouched in that gutter with his head in his hands and trying desperately not to fall apart. “Please.”

Finally, Alec looks at him. “I’m fine. I have to - we have to do this. This is what matters now. Nothing else.”

“Is this what you have to tell yourself?”

Alec sighs and turns towards Nightlock, folding his arms across his chest. Of course Nightlock knows; of course he sees straight through Alec.

“And what about you?” Alec asks, but it comes out too harsh. The back of his neck grows warm. His gaze flick away, but returns quickly to Nightlock’s face, and his next words are softer. “Sorry, I - you’ve hardly said a word to me tonight ‘til now and I thought after - what we - after what happened between us, we’d be - I thought we talked about this. The other night.”

(‘You’re hurting.’)

‘And what does that matter?’
Nightlock works his jaw. “I’m worried,” he settles on, “About you.”

He turns back to the board and flicks the grainy photos of Johnathan and Valentine Morgenstern with his fingers, before pinging the yarn thread that connects them.

“I can see what you’re doing. Burying yourself in this to avoid everything else. Sticking your head in the sand doesn’t always work. I speak from experience.”

“I have to focus on something,” Alec whispers. “If I don’t, then -”

“You don’t have to prove yourself,” replies Nightlock, “Not to me. I know who you are and what you’re capable of.”

(‘You’re worth it. Everything that I know you are and are capable of, that makes it worth it. I know you.’)

Alec hesitates. Nightlock’s words echo Magnus’ from last night, and Alec wonders if he might hear the sound of rain on concrete if he were to close his eyes.

“It’s not about proving myself,” Alec mumbles, “It’s about - we’ve been chasing the Circle for so long and I just want it to be over. Everything else is just - it’s a mess and I don’t know what I’m doing, but I - I can still see this through.”

“I don’t -” Nightlock starts, but then he frowns, and Alec catches him rubbing his thumb and index finger together, his nervous tick. “I don’t want you to lose yourself to this. Too much has already been sacrificed for this cause. Too much that I fear we won’t be able to get back once it’s over.”

“Isn’t it worth it? Me for everyone in New York? That seems like an okay price.”

“No. No, Sentinel, it isn’t.”
Alec blinks, watching as Nightlock runs his finger and thumb down a length of red yarn that connects an old mugshot of Valentine to the birth records of his son, pinned to the board.

“No?” Alec frowns. “But that night on the roof, you said-”

“I know what I said. It is worth saving people,” says Nightlock, “It is worth catching Valentine and his son and making them pay for what they’ve done. But it’s not worth losing you, Sentinel. It’s not worth losing yourself. I refuse to wish that misery on you.”


He thinks of Magnus. He thinks of Magnus giving up his choice for the sake of the careless city, while pleading with Alec not to do the same, scolding him for a hero complex he doesn’t know the half of.

_Why does Magnus get to sacrifice his happiness? Why do you, but not me?_ Alec wants to know. _What makes Sentinel so special? So irreplaceable?_ Alec’s not remarkable. Not where it matters. It doesn’t make sense.

Nightlock turns back to him, and the corner of his mouth lifts, half of a sad, defeated smile. In his eyes, tenderness. More than tenderness. An echo, again, of someone he is not, someone he cannot be, and yet -

“You know why,” Nightlock says. The look in his eyes is bruisingly honest. “I care about you. I’ve never felt for anyone like I do you. And this -” He gestures to himself, from his mask to the soles of his boots. “This has cost me more than I can bear, but I refuse to let it take you too. So, if this is turning into some crusade to make you feel like a hero, or some way to hurt yourself and make yourself feel pain that you know you don’t deserve -”

Alec reaches out, his hands grabbing fistfuls of Nightlocks coat - and he doesn’t pull him nearer, but it’s enough just to hold him, to have him in his grasp so that he cannot walk away.

“It’s not,” Alec insists. Nightlock looks down at Alec’s hands, and then up again, meeting Alec’s eyes. His lips part gently, a breath held. “I promise you, it’s not that. I’m in this ‘cus it’s the right thing to do and I need to do it because that’s - that’s who I want to be. Because once it’s done, maybe things will be better again. And if they’re not, at least enough time will have passed that it doesn’t hurt so much anymore.”
Nightlock’s eyes soften behind his mask. He steps closer, into Alec’s hold on him, and cups Alec’s cheek with the palm of his hand.

“Is it easy?” he asks, smiling fondly as Alec leans into the touch. He soothes his thumb against Alec’s mask. “To be that honest all the time? I fear I would come across much too disingenuous if I tried the same.”

“I thought you’d appreciate the truth,” Alec shrugs. “Or as much of it as I can give.”

His words summon a brighter smile from Nightlock, delicate and graceful, fascinating in a way Alec cannot put his finger on. Nightlock’s hand drops, but he ducks his head as his smile grows. He laughs to himself, bashful and breathless. It looks good on him.

“God, I missed you,” he exhales, “You and your ridiculous sense of right and wrong.”

Nightlock steps forward, his hands returning to Alec’s sides, slipping across his ribs, drawing fine ley lines of static across his chest like he’s the map. He studies Alec’s face, intensely, curiously, his eyes molasses-brown and achingly familiar, golden as they come, as they search Alec for something Alec wants to give freely.

Nightlock’s fingers press into his ribs, his touch drawn unconsciously to the puckering of a scar hidden away beneath Alec’s leathers. “I will do this with you,” he says, “I would do this with you even if we were the only two people left in the world. That would be enough.”

Somewhere, entangled in these red strings and knotted into the labyrinth of city streets, is an answer, a way out, and Alec will find it. He will find it, so that Nightlock doesn’t have to worry about him; so that Alec doesn’t have to break down in alleyways in front of the man he loves; so that they might all get another chance at normalcy, if they want it, and heroism, if they don’t.

He will find it, so that he can finally put Idris behind him. He will find it, so that Magnus will no longer have to make choices between himself and everybody else. He will find it, so that even if Magnus decides to choose everybody else again, it won’t strip Alec of everything he thought he had and was.

He’s not there yet, but he wants to be. He has to be. He has Nightlock by his side, and that -
That means something that it didn’t before. What they are, when they’re together, it’s like -

It’s like -

Maybe I love you too.

Nightlock reaches up and cups Alec’s jaw with both his hands, his fingers splayed against the slope of Alec’s throat and the soft skin beneath his ears. Alec’s eyes flutter closed, and it takes a moment, soft and soundless, for Nightlock to press his lips against Alec’s.

Alec kisses him back gently, the exchange of a promise, of assurance; less like a kiss and more like a whisper that says, you are not alone in this.

Alec finds that he knows this. It does something to calm his ruffled soul, and for that, he’s indebted to Nightlock, probably beyond what he can ever repay.

Nightlock pulls back, his palms sliding the breadth of Alec’s collarbone, holding him in place by the shoulders. Alec’s hands have found his waist, palms flush against Nightlock’s suit, beneath his coat. Their eyes meet, but nothing needs saying aloud.

Behind them, the storm doors clatter open and are slammed shut again, and Alec hears Luke talking rapidly into his radio and Veil’s boots clunking on the floor.

Nightlock takes a step back, but the faint and wistful smile on his lips lingers, just for Alec. The look in his eyes is infinite.

Alec returns to headquarters when the first shards of dawn pierce the city, the night fading into flat, grey twilight and a watery yellow that spills out across both the Hudson and the East River.
His eyelids droop and his body aches, begging for his bed, but he knows he will be awake again in a few hours.

Idris looms above him as he emerges from the subway tunnels, and he presses his finger to his ear, listening to the coms huff and spit with static. The line rings but Izzy doesn’t pick up, so he changes the frequency and tries Jace instead, but there’s no answer from him either.

His stomach twists uneasily, but he forces himself to swallow it down. They must be asleep. That’s it. They must be.

The coms hum with white noise. The call goes answered.

Headquarters is deserted.

Not just quiet, but eerie, grave-like in its stillness, and even Alec’s footsteps are muffled, an echo swallowed up by the long white hallways. It’s the hiss of the electric door sliding shut behind him that disturbs the quiet, barely louder than a whisper.

Alec glances up at the CCTV camera in the corner, but its eye is glassy and unseeing; in his ear, the coms crackle was electrical interference as he approaches Izzy’s lab until, suddenly, they cut out into silence.

The twist in his gut becomes a knot. He doesn’t bother knocking on the door to Izzy’s lab, but inside, all the lights are off and she is nowhere to be found.

He tries the training room next - empty - and then the breakroom, but there’s no-one slumped in one of the uncomfortable armchairs watching reruns or pretending to doze, and the only sign of life is the half-eaten stack of pancakes on the coffee table from the morning before.

The bug that Izzy crushed beneath her shoe is gone, however.
He shuts the door behind him quietly and heads for the dormitories, but then he hears the sound of footsteps approaching - fast. He stops and turns as Underhill rushes around the corner.

“Alec!” Underhill calls out, and he seems genuinely relieved to see him, “Hey! I saw on the cameras you’d just arrived - ”

“Where is everyone?” Alec interrupts, “Where’s Izzy? I need to talk to her.”

“They’re all upstairs for briefing,” says Underhill, “Maryse told me to find you when you got here.”

Shit.

Alec rides the elevator in silence up to the penthouse, his foot tapping restlessly on the floor. He watches the rising numbers disappear above the door, and then catches his reflection in the mirror: his mask is stark against his pale skin, so he peels it off, a red mark left along his hairline and across his cheeks. He drags his hand through his hair, damp from the outdoors, and sweeps it back against his head, but it all stands on end. His suit is rain-wet too, and the black leather looks like oil in the artificial light.

He holds his breath as the elevator shudders to a halt and the doors open with a chime. Waiting on the other side, with her finger pressed to the button, is Clary.

“Fray,” Alec says in surprise.

Clary looks up, but her eyes are red and she looks frazzled, her red hair tangled and wind-matted. Her mask hangs around her neck and her gloves are nowhere to be seen.

“Alec,” she says, as Alec steps out of the elevator. She wipes her nose on the back of her hand.
“Hey, I was just - uhm.”

Alec’s frown deepens. He reaches out to pat her arm, but his hand falls. “What’s happened?” he asks.

Clary shakes her head. “It’s nothing, it’s stupid - I just - do you ever feel that you’re fighting for the wrong side? And everything you thought you knew was right is just -”

“Yes,” says Alec. “Yes, always.”

Clary sniffs loudly and looks up at him. “Really?”

Alec nods. “Yes, really.” He glances towards the door to the penthouse and tilts his head. “Are Jace and Izzy still in there?”

“Yeah. Yeah, your mom was chewing them out for going off-mission again. I think she knows about us protecting Luke. She said she was going to bench Jace.”

“Hm,” Alec murmurs. “Okay.”

“Okay? What do you mean, okay? Alec -”

“Okay,” Alec repeats. “Go clean yourself up and gather your things. Meet me at my apartment after.” He turns away from her and begins walking towards the door.

“At your apartment - Alec, hey, wait! Does this mean -”

Alec looks back over his shoulder at her, his hand on the door. On the other side, he can hear his father’s raised voice. “I’m putting an end to this,” he says.

He pushes into his parents’ office without knocking. Maryse sits behind the grand oak desk, and Robert stands at her side, both his hands arched on the tabletop as he leans forward, his eyes intent on Jace - but his attention quickly moves to Alec.
Alec raises his chin defiantly, tucking his hands behind his back as he strides to Jace’s side and falls into parade rest beside him. He knocks his shoulder against Jace’s deliberately. From the corner of his eye, he sees Izzy, her hands on her hips.

In her eyes, fury.

“Alec,” says his mother, the curve of her mouth displeased. She looks him up and down. “Kind of you to join us. I wasn’t aware you were scheduled on the field tonight.”

“I wasn’t,” Alec says. “I was following up a lead on the fire at the Tribunal last night.”

Maryse’s brow twitches, just above her eyebrow. It’s the only tell in her otherwise impenetrable demeanor.

“That was unfortunate,” she says measuredly. “But I’m glad you’re safe. I trust that no-one you knew was hurt?”

“No. There were no casualties.”

“Good,” she says, and then her attention returns to Jace and Isabelle. “The situation with these fires and continued attacks is serious. We were just discussing the importance of letting the police handle such matters and keeping Idris’ interests separate.”

Jace bristles. “Pretty convenient, that,” he hisses. “Looking the other way when it’s not your supers being mowed down in the streets. I get it. Keep the family safe.”

“Jace,” Robert snaps, “I think we’ve heard enough from you tonight. We understand well enough what your position is on this, but this is ours. Political neutrality is important, and you know that.”

“Political neutrality,” Izzy scoffs, “How many Senators buying our services constitutes us still being neutral? You wanna tell that to Herondale?”
Maryse’s jaw clenches. Alec knows that look. It’s severe and stern and expectant; it asks him, *please make your brother and sister see sense. I trust you to do that. You’re the oldest, so it’s your example they need to follow.*

It’s the same look she’s levelled at him since he was six years old.

“Imogen Herondale is a client and it’s not in our best interests to terminate her contract,” Robert remarks, “Nor is it your business. Your responsibility is following orders.”

“Speaking of which,” continues Maryse, reaching into her desk draw to retrieve three manilla envelopes. She lines them up in a neat row in front of her. The middle envelope is labelled: *Sentinel.* “I have a mission for the three of you. Consider it an opportunity to prove that you can still do your jobs.”

“Or what?” Jace quips, as Alec approaches the desk and takes the envelope with his name on. “You’re gonna put me on the bench again? You’re gonna take my wings?”

Alec steps back and runs his fingers along the seam of the envelope. Inside, a stack of paperwork, a contract of employment, and five stacks of hundred dollars bills held together with an elastic band. He pulls out the top sheet of paper and reads the mission brief quickly.

“You will be happy to hear that I’ve taken you both off the Herondale contract,” Maryse continues, ignoring Jace. She’s still watching Alec. “I understand neither of you were pleased to be working for her, and I appreciate that, so please consider this a compromise on my part. We’ve recently entered into an agreement with Senator Penhallow, and she has requested the retrieval of some items of importance to her. I trust this will be well within both your capabilities.”

Alec’s eyes flick over the words on the page. He schools his expression and carefully slides the document back inside the folder.

“Items?” he says. “This is a contract for the abduction of a person.”

Maryse holds his stare. “Not a person. A prisoner. The individual in question is being transported to Riker’s tomorrow afternoon, and the Senator believes it would be in everyone’s best interest for them to be relocated elsewhere.”
“Let me guess,” Jace says, grabbing the file from Alec’s hands. He reads the mission brief quickly. “Camille Belcourt, huh? As in Belcourt Holdings? What the Hell does Penhallow want with her?”

“All the relevant information is contained in your mission brief,” says Robert. “Anything beyond that is not necessary to know.”

“The down payment will be doubled upon successful delivery of the individual to the agreed location,” adds Maryse, nodding her head at the folder. “Idris will add an additional ten percent as a token of goodwill.”

“Idris will add - Jesus Christ,” Jace says, tossing the paperwork back onto the desk. “We’re Idris. Sentinel and Arkangel, all of us. We’re Idris.”

He turns and stalks out of the room, but when Robert opens his mouth to order Jace to stay, Maryse reaches out and touches his arm, shaking her head.

She looks to Izzy. “There are to be no detours on this one, Isabelle. Do you understand?”

Izzy narrows her eyes and her jaw works, but she strides over to the desk and grabs her copy of the mission brief. Her eyes meet Alec’s as she passes him - frustration and anger and resignation at war across her face, but with nowhere to go - but Alec grabs her wrist to stop her leaving too.

“Alec -” she mouths.

Alec squeezes her wrist and looks back to their parents. “Does this prisoner have links with the Circle?”

The vein twitches in Maryse’s forehead again. “What are you insinuating, Alec?”

“I’m not insinuating anything. I’m asking. Is Camille Belcourt a member of the Circle? Is that why Penhallow wants her?”

Izzy’s eyebrows shoot up and she turns back to their parents. “I thought you said Idris were staying clear of the Circle -”
“That’s enough,” says Robert, slamming his palm on the desk. His glare burns, but Alec’s burns too; he’s seen enough fire to last a lifetime. He’s seen worse fires. He won’t back down to this. “The Senator has determined this is a dangerous individual, and she needs Idris’ help to extract them. That’s all that we need to know.”

“All that you want to know,” Alec corrects.

“What?”

“It’s all that you want to know, because knowing more makes us complicit,” Alec explains. He refuses to blink until his father does. “Because if you have proof the Circle has infiltrated the government, you have to decide what’s more important to you - protecting the people of New York, or making money.”

Robert gapes at him, but Alec marches forward and snatches both his and Jace’s mission briefs from the table. He turns back to Izzy, nodding towards the door.

“You haven’t been dismissed,” snaps Robert, but Maryse raises a hand again, silencing him.

She looks at Alec, but her eyes are unreadable, her face a careful blank slate.

*Maybe she understands*, Alec thinks. *Maybe there’s still a part of her who sees it like us. Maybe Valentine never got to her.*

*I’m your son*, he wants to tell her, he wants to plead. *Why do you keep choosing Idris over me?*

“Is that how you feel, Alec?” she asks.

Izzy hesitates in the door, unwilling to leave without Alec, but Alec stops and looks back. He nods.

*It’s the way I’ve felt for the longest time. You just never noticed.*
“What would you do if the answer to your question was yes?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” says Alec.

“Do you understand the position you’re putting me in? The position you’ve put both of us?”

Alec exhales heavily, briefly closing his eyes as he summons the strength he needs to ask the questions that must be asked -

And wrench himself away from the world he’s always known.

“I have three questions,” he says.

Maryse rises from her chair, folding her arms across her chest. She exchanges a look with Robert. “Alright, three questions. But that better be it.”

Alec raises his chin and squares his shoulders, tucking his hands behind his back.

“When was the last time you saw Valentine Morgenstern?”


“Who told you not to let Idris investigate these murders?”

“No-one,” says Maryse, “No-one told me to do anything. I made the decision. Vigilante murders are not our jurisdiction and you know it.”

She stares at Alec, holding his gaze, daring him to say another word.

And Alec wonders, he wonders how long she hasn’t been his mother, and at what point he lost her without even noticing.
He wonders if it happened before Valentine ever whispered in her ear.

“Are you lying to me?” he asks.

The silence beats loud, but Alec could hear a pin drop. Behind him, Izzy inhales sharply.

But before him, Maryse grits her teeth and looks away, unable to hold Alec’s determined stare. She looks, instead, to the window, and the dawn encroaching upon the city, swallowing up shadows.

“Get out,” she says.

It’s an order Alec doesn’t disobey.

Alec flings his quiver to the floor the moment his balcony door shuts behind him: the thud is heavy, but his eyes are on the ugly couch and his whole body trembles like it might turn to dust if he forces himself to take another step.

The couch squeals in protest as he flops down across the cushions, face-first with a withering grunt. Cheek squished against the seams, he rolls onto his side and stares at the manila folder in his hand, wishing, for once, he could summon fire with his fingers and turn it to ashes in a flash.

His fingers shake. He abandons the file to the floor and stares at his palm instead, at the delayed sense of panic that wriggles beneath his skin and which he can’t clamp down.

You did it. You said all those things, you walked away, says the voice inside his head. So why doesn’t it feel good? Why doesn’t it feel like a relief?

Alec’s curls his fingers into his palm and squeezes tight. The Kevlar on his chest digs into his ribs,
but he can’t bring himself to move.

He knows what this is. It’s always been so much easier to slip into the shadows than to raise his voice in vain, but this - this is not in vain. It can’t be. It doesn’t matter how much the disappointment in his mother’s eyes had wounded him - the effort of wrenching himself free of Idris is worse, and he’ll survive it yet.

_We can’t trust Idris. You did the right thing. You did the right thing._

_Don’t go back on your word now._

He sits up abruptly, swinging his feet onto the floor and the whole room spins. He folds forward and hangs his head between his knees, grinding the heels of his palms into his eyes until the black behind his eyelids alights with dizzying stars.

It always starts as this tight, putrid feeling in his gut: nauseous worry, the onset of a panic attack, the need to do harm to himself. Then, it becomes a whisper that sounds like his mother, like his father, like every single person who has made him feel like he’s not enough, like he’s not good enough to wear his mask and the responsibility it carries. Alec presses his hands harder against his eyes - and he makes it hurt, but not enough to distract him, not enough to scratch that itch that wriggles and writhes all over his skin.

_You did the right thing_ , he repeats to himself. _You know you did._

The silence in his apartment is deafening. He scrubs his hands down his face, peeking between his fingers at the floor: the mission briefing is stomped with mud from his boots, the front of the file torn.

He drags his fingers across his jaw; then, across his mouth. He closes his eyes and inhales deeply, a shudder passing through him, and he summons the memory of Nightlock’s hands cupping his face last night. The press of his lips.

His voice, his voice.

_You are not alone_. 
Another deep breath. And then another. Each shakes less than the one before. He palms his hands across his thighs, focusing on the push and pull rhythm of his leathers moving against his skin.

Alright, that’s enough, he tells himself. You’ve had your moment. Time to pick yourself back up and move on. There’s no time for this.

He digs his fingers into his thighs and closes his eyes. He feels his body sagging towards sleep, but his mind races.

Stand up, he thinks. Just stand up. You have so much to do.

He tries to imagine Nightlock standing before him, his hand outstretched, willing to pull Alec to his feet, but even that is vague and smeary, incorporeal in a way that Alec cannot grab.

Nightlock could be anywhere, Nightlock could be across the city, searching high and low for what Alec is meant to be looking for - he’s not here. Alec can’t reach him.

He opens one eye and glances at the telephone on the coffee table, its coiled wire trailing across the floor.

You know who you want to call. You know who would tell you what to do, tell you that you can do it.

Alec closes his eyes again and shakes his head; the thought clings to him like glue.

Then, there’s a knock on his front door. Alec slumps back against the sofa, listening for the sound of shoes retreating, but there’s a second, more impatient knock, and then the jingle of keys in the lock.

Alec glances at his quiver, dumped by the balcony doors. Too far to reach, but his switchblade -

“It’s me!” Izzy calls out, and Alec lets his hand fall waywardly to the side, thumping against the
cushions. “Alec? Are you here?”

He doesn’t want to ask when and why she acquired a spare key. *So that she can make sure you’re still alive*, he thinks darkly. *You’ve given her cause enough to worry in the past -*

Alec cranes his head back against the spine of the sofa as Izzy rounds the corner, carrying a large box in her arms, and a holdall slung across her shoulder.

“Oh, there you are,” she says, dumping the box on the coffee table and her bag on the floor, grimacing as she works a kink out of her neck. “Jace and Clary are on their way, but they told me to go ahead. They’re still gathering their stuff, but they’ll catch up.”

Alec grunts in acknowledgement, shifting across the sofa when Izzy kicks his shins with her foot. She flops down next to him, sighing heavily as she sinks into the cushions, and then twists her head to look at him.

“How long have you been lying here?” she asks.


“Okay. When was the last time you slept?”

Alec squints at her, but she raises her eyebrows, expecting an answer. He huffs.

“Couple days. I was with Nightlock last night. Didn’t sleep.”

Izzy hums and reaches for his hand, drawing it out of his lap and into the space between them. She toys with his fingers and Alec watches her, born back to a time when she was so much smaller and she would marvel at how much bigger his hands were than hers. They still are.

“So,” she says, letting the single word hang silently for a moment. “That was something. Back there. You okay?”
Alec nods, but words stick in his throat. Izzy takes it in her stride, as she always does, noticing Alec in ways no-one else ever pauses to see.

“It’s tough,” she continues, “When you’ve known only one thing for so long … I don’t think it’s possible to make a clean break. I wish it were.”

“I don’t know how to explain it,” Alec mumbles, looking down at their joined hands. He turns them over, inspecting the fading burn scars on the backs of his knuckles. The faintest tremor still persists. “I know we did the right thing. I know we can’t trust Idris anymore.”

“But you want to? Because there’s still a part of you that hopes you were wrong? Yeah, I know. I have it too.”

She smiles encouragingly at him. He squeezes her hand in response. For a moment, he’s beyond his suit, beyond the mask that sits across his eyes; he’s just Alec and she’s just Izzy, his little sister Izzy, and they’re tucked away in their own corner of the universe where they sit with their heads together and make plans for how to take on the rest of the world when everything else seems to be against them.

“Do you think,” Alec begins, his voice barely a whisper. Izzy draws her legs up onto the sofa, kicking off her shoes and tucking her feet beneath her. She rests their hands on her knee. “Do you think we could do it? Break away from Idris for good? You think that could work?”

“Yes,” she says earnestly. “Yes, I think it could, and I think you took that first step a long time ago.”

Alec smiles tightly. “What about Jace and Clary?”

“What about them? You heard Jace back there, he’s just as ready as you are to make a run for it. He’ll be the first out the door if you’re the one holding it open.”

“And you?”

Izzy twists their hands together and presses her thumb down on top of his. Alec pulls his thumb free and huffs on a laugh, but she wrestles his thumb back down again and beams at him triumphantly.
“Is that even a question?” she asks. “Sentinel’s my responsibility. I go where he goes. And he’s you. He’s Alec.”

She engages him in another thumb war, but Alec pins her thumb under his.

Then, he says, “It’s like - it’s like I’m waiting for something but I don’t know when it’s gonna happen. It feels like I can’t sit still. I don’t know how to … exist, when it’s like I’m stuck on a ledge.”

“So, we don’t wait,” she replies. “Valentine will make his move soon, so we just have to move first.”

Alec scoffs, shaking his head. “When did you get so wise, huh?”

Izzy rolls her eyes and smacks him on the arm. “How about when I realised both my brothers are dumbasses?”

“You always were the smart one. And the brave one.”

“I’m not brave, not like you,” she confesses, “Valentine’s still out there, he’s probably got his hooks into Penhallow, and I bet mom and dad will have cleared out my entire lab by the time I get back to headquarters. It sucks. I’m scared, but - yeah. We don’t get the time to be scared, do we? Mom and dad never allowed it.”

“It’s not just that. It’s -”

“Scared of being alone?”

“Yeah. Yeah. How’d you know?”

She shrugs. “I know you. It’s not complicated.”
Alec pauses. It’s not what she says, but how she says it - like it’s the most fundamental and irrevocable truth, some law of the universe. Like how it always must be raining in the streets of New York, Izzy must always know him. She will always know who he is.

“Iz …”

“You know you’ll never be alone, right?” she interrupts. “Not ever again. I won’t let it happen, so you don’t have to worry about that, Alec. There are so many people out there who love you, you don’t even know. So many people who would follow you anywhere you wanted to lead.”

She loosens her hold on his hand, shuffling across the sofa to tuck herself into his side. Alec rests his arm behind her head and she lets her ear rest against his shoulder, and as Alec turns his head, her hair tickles his nose.

“I’ve got patrol tonight,” he murmurs, “With Nightlock, Luke, and Veil. We’re going to find Valentine before he can do any more damage.”

“Okay,” Izzy replies, and then she yawns loudly. “Sounds like a plan. But first we gotta talk to Jace and Clary.”

“About?”

“About leaving Idris. Starting afresh, just us, no more Corporates. I meant it, you know. It’s time.”

She swings her arm around his middle, hugging him tightly, and settles against his side. Alec watches her eyelashes flutter and then her breathing slow, and then he drops his arm to her shoulders and squeezes, and hopes, painfully, that he might find a few moments of sleep before Jace comes knocking and Sentinel demands he pick up his quiver again and New York sets about its own stubborn burning.

Chapter End Notes
I just got real busy over Christmas with the Malec Secret Santa challenge, so I didn't have time to finish this update for December. But here it is, and I have been anguishing over this for two months and I still am not satisfied but YA KNOW WHAT it's time for it to leave the nest. Onwards and upwards. The next chapter is high octane and I'm excited to move onto it.

Not much to say here ... but finally, here are your answers. I'm sure they're highly unsatisfying as Alec still doesn't have the tools at his disposal to address them all. Magnus clearly knows (although how much is pure hope, how much does he refuse to let himself realise?), but Alec still isn't in a mental place to know what to do with that information. Something is still stopping Alec from telling the truth, and it's very annoying, but I really wanted to try and emphasise this sense of tragedy in this story - they love each other, they know each other, but still it's not enough. Circumstance divides them.

Thank you so much for all the feedback from last time! I can't express how much it helps to read people's thoughts and feelings on this fic, as everyone has a different take on the moral issues and it's so interesting!

Visit me on tumblr and shout in my inbox, especially if you have questions! Please reblog the tumblr post for me too!

I'm also on Twitter if you want to come chat about the fic ... and boy, do I love talking about this fic. Tweet as you read with the hashtag #ficacoldnight! :D

Please leave a kudos if you made it to the end, and drop me a comment with your thoughts, your favourite line, your hopes for what will happen next, your advice for poor old Alec ... I would be forever grateful for it! If you want an alert next time there's an update, please hit that subscribe button!

Until next time, in which the city burns.
one mile past the pendulum

Chapter Summary

“Close your eyes,” Nightlock says then. “Please.”

Alec closes his eyes, and immediately, there is the flutter of kinetic energy he knows so intimately, dancing across his eyelids, sweeping across the translucent slip of skin that his mask reveals.

“Keep them closed,” Nightlock insists. “Don’t open them, whatever you do.”

“Nightlock, what -” Alec begins, but he startles as Nightlock reaches for both his hands and guides Alec’s touch to the familiar slope of his jaw. “What are you -”

“This is who I am,” Nightlock says. “Don’t open your eyes.”

Chapter Notes

Valentine Morgenstern makes his move and the city burns for it. And the people that Alec loves get caught in the crossfire.

&&&

Tweet along with #ficacoldnight!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“At the trial of God, we will ask: why did you allow all this? / And the answer will be an echo: why did you allow all this?”

— Ilya Kaminsky, from “A City Like a Guillotine Shivers on Its Way to the Neck,” Deaf Republic

“So, that’s it, huh?” says Jace. “We’re really gonna leave Idris?”

Alec’s jaw clenches and he focuses on the squeal of the kettle, watching steam rise and gather against the ceiling. Izzy nudges him in the side with her elbow, and slides four empty mugs along
the countertop. The smell of instant coffee persists.

“Alec?” she probes, tipping her chin towards Jace, who stands in the middle of Alec’s apartment with his arms folded across his chest as he stares Alec down.

Alec exhales deeply.

“Yeah,” he says. “That’s the plan.”

“No more Corporates?” Clary pipes up from her perch on the back of the couch. Her bags are piled in the corner, whilst Jace’s wings are abandoned on the balcony. Her eyes are still red from earlier, but now, her scowl is fierce and determined. “This gonna mean we can finally go after Valentine and the Circle?”

“Yeah,” says Alec again, filling up the four mugs with hot water. The backsplash scalds his hand and he hisses through his teeth. “You don’t have to come with us. It’s asking a lot, and if you do this, you’ll be -”

“Okay.”

Alec looks up at Jace. Jace nods sagely.

“Okay,” he repeats. “Yeah. Yeah, let’s do it.”

“Okay? You sure?”

“What else did you expect me to say, Alec?” Jace laughs, “No? Like this hasn’t been a long time coming? Like I don’t want to get my hands on the Circle as much as you? New York’s my home too, I wanna defend it.”

“Idris shouldn’t be sitting out of this,” Clary remarks. She hops off the back of the sofa and grabs Jace’s hand, towing him over to the kitchenette. “And I can’t just stand by and wait for the next person the Circle kills to be someone I know - someone any of us know.”
She meets Alec’s eyes deliberately, holding his stare until he grumbles, sliding her coffee across the counter.

“You’re not meant to just say yes,” he says, “You should think about this. I’m serious.”

Jace rolls his eyes. “Yeah, when are you not?”

“Jace,” Izzy scolds. He sticks his tongue out at her.

Alec sighs. He reaches for the sugar and loads his coffee, adding an extra teaspoon for good luck.

He doesn’t know what he expected: maybe he wanted them to argue, maybe he wanted them to protest, for Jace to tell him he was thinking with his heart and not his head, for Clary to cruelly remind him that leaving Idris was what the Circle did, all those years ago, and look what happened -

He glances sideways at Izzy as she blows at the steam rising from her own cup.

She was right, and it shouldn’t surprise Alec as it does. Jace and Clary are ready to leave. They were just waiting for him to say when.

*It shouldn’t be that easy,* whispers the ever-present insidious voice in his ear. *You shouldn’t get to walk away from everything you’ve done without atoning for it.*

“Alec,” says Clary, reaching across the countertop to touch the back of his hand. He blinks, drawn out of his thoughts, and finds sympathy in her green eyes. “We know what this means and we’re with you anyway. Always.”

Alec shakes his head in surrender. “Okay,” he exhales. “Okay, fine. *Fine.* But I won’t be able to clean up your messes anymore. That’s on you.”

“Dunno what you’re talking about,” Jace grins, “I’ve never made a single mess in my entire life.”
“Uh-huh,” says Izzy, “What about that one time you flew headfirst into a billboard during a car chase and had to explain to the mayor why there was a massive person-shaped hole where his nose should’ve been -”

“Okay, okay, one mess, Jesus! Don’t hold it against me,” Jace says, “I’m just saying - I’m ready. I trust you, man. You wouldn’t be doing this if you didn’t already have a plan, and you know I’d follow you into Hell if you asked - so, I’m in. No question.”

“Me too,” Clary says haughtily, her nose in the air. “We’re with you, Alec, wherever this takes us. Wherever we end up.”

Izzy nudges Alec in the ribs again. “See?” she says with a smile, “I told you.”

Alec takes a pointed sip of his coffee. “Yeah,” he deadpans, “But Jace is great at making bad decisions -”

“Woah, hey, no,” says Jace, slamming his coffee down and dramatically rolling up his sleeves, “What is this, Let’s All Attack Jace? Go on, have at it, you’ll regret it-”

Izzy snickers as Jace narrows his eyes at Alec, his grin crooked and goading. Alec’s expression doesn’t shift, but he quirks his eyebrow as if to say come on, then, and it makes Jace snort. He lifts both his hands in surrender.

“Are you two are done with the posturing?” Izzy remarks. “We have work to do.”

Clary laughs brightly. “So who else is on-board? Or is it just us?”

“Just us for now,” Izzy replies. She glances up at Alec. “But I think we should ask Aline and Helen too. And Lydia would say yes, for Alec, and she’ll drag Raj because God knows he’s incapable of thinking for himself. Even Victor might agree if he sees something in it for himself, but the more people we can pull away from Idris, the better.”

“Hell, if we get enough people to jump ship, there won’t even be an Idris anymore,” says Jace. “It’d collapse in on itself without any supers. Then we’d be left to rebuild it as whatever we want.”
“I don’t want to rebuild anything,” says Alec, “I don’t want another Idris.”

Jace lets out a low whistle. “So you really do wanna go completely rogue,” he says, “Gotta admit, Alec, I didn’t think that was your style.”

“I think there’s a lot that you might not have realised was Alec’s style,” Izzy grins. “Besides, it’s not rogue, it’s just –” She looks at Alec over the brim of her mug. “It’s what Idris should’ve been doing all along. Protecting the people of New York. No exceptions.”

“What about other supers?” Clary asks then, “Like, the other vigilantes? Wolfsbane, Veil, Nightlock … you think they’d join, if we’re talking about forming some sort of new group? Superteam? Justice League? I’m not really sure what to call it.”

“I’m on patrol with Nightlock tonight,” says Alec. He sets his mug down and on the countertop, he draws out the shape of the city with his fingertip. “We’ll start in Midtown and head over towards the Penhallow building. Wolfsbane and Veil will take Penn Station. We know the Circle has access to military weaponry and heavy artillery and it’s somewhere on the island. We just have to find it.”

Jace scrubs his hand over his jaw and nods. “Gotcha. Where do you want me and Clary?”

“Fulton Street and work your way East towards 1PP and Brooklyn Bridge,” Alec says. He takes Izzy’s mug from her hands and positions it on the countertop as a marker. He places Jace’s due south, somewhere in Lower Manhattan, and then takes a step back, trying to picture the city at large. He knows each and every street and dark corner like the back of his hand, but it’s still not enough. “The Circle is going to target somewhere heavily populated, so they will be holed-up nearby. I know it.”

“And when we find them?” Clary asks, “How do we stop them? I don’t know about you, but I dunno how to disarm a missile or stop someone detonating a bomb …”

Alec hesitates. “I know a guy. A technopath.”
He should feel restless. He’s exhausted and running on zero sleep and he can’t remember the last time he saw his bed - but each blink feels like effort, and any more than that is beyond him tonight. The wind rattles through him and the cold settles in the soles of his boots, and even the weight of his bow is inordinate. Above him, the clouds sag, fat and grey with unshed rain, their roll slow across the roof of the city. Wet pressure fills the air, but smothers the sounds of screeching brakes and angry cab drivers leaning out their windows, and Alec listens to his own breathing: each hitched inhale, each careful exhale as he scans distant rooftops for movement.

But New York exists in a vacuum of quiet, the sort of silence that only ever preludes snow, and he doesn’t dare move.

Behind him, the Empire State is alight in shards of yellow, its radio tower submerged in the sky. In the distance: a hundred different plate glass skyscrapers, each one home to a politician who might very well be deep in Valentine’s pockets. Everything else is white noise.

It has to be.

“Arkangel and Muse just got to Wall Street,” says Izzy in his ear. “They’re gonna start on the docks. There’s lots of abandoned property down there. Maybe they’ll get lucky.”

“Mm,” Alec murmurs, “What about you? How’s HQ?”

“No words from upstairs. I might be able to get in and out without mom and dad knowing I came back.” She sighs heavily. “I’ve backed up my records and wiped my computer, but I’m gonna have to leave most of my hardware. God, can you imagine Victor getting his slimy little hands on all my equipment -”

“Iz.”

“Sorry. Sorry. I’m just -”

“Worried?”

“Mhm. Yeah. What about you? How are you feeling?”
Quiet, he thinks. *I feel quiet. Like I’m waiting for something that hasn’t yet happened, but I know that it will. Like I’m adrift until then.*

The night shifts, an invisible palm pressed up against Alec’s spine. He leans back into it and looks to the sky, seeking out a familiar shadow.

“Nightlock’s here,” he murmurs into the coms. “I’ll check in with you if we find anything. Keep me updated on Arkangel.”

“Okay. Stay safe. I mean it.”

The coms fade into static and then there’s silence again. The pressure in the air weighs him down, submerges him in the strange stillness of the night; far above, he can feel the gentle lapping of a current, as if there are waves breaking on a surface he cannot reach and cannot see, and he is left to be buffeted by the ripples of it.

Alec presses on his mask; it doesn’t shift, adhered to his skin, but he can feel it. He doesn’t usually feel it.

He holds himself perfectly still. Inside his gut, a knot of unshifted tension, too dense to untangle, too solid to be moved by the ebbing and flowing of the dark.

He hears the soft pad of a man coming into land on the rooftop behind him; his gentle puff of breath; the accompanying sigh. The receding of that invisible hand against the small of Alec’s back, and then its hesitant return.

“You ready?” comes Nightlock’s voice, a semi-dark whisper.

Alec settles his shoulders and raises his chin. For a moment, he lets his eyes fall closed, but he can still see the city behind his eyelids.

He nods. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m ready. Let’s go.”
He feels Nightlock step up to his side, and with him, that tickle in the air that feels like a touch, as if Nightlock thinking about reaching out for Alec’s hand is enough to be tangible alone. Alec flexes his fingers at his sides and opens his eyes. He finds Nightlock already looking at him, New York forgotten.

“What?” Alec asks.

Nightlock frowns behind his mask. He raises his hand as if he means to brush his knuckles against Alec’s cheek, but then he reconsiders it. “Have you slept at all?” he asks. “You look terrible.”

Alec shakes his head and scrubs his hand across his face. “Something came up at Idris. It’s - it’s nothing more than we expected.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Do you need to talk about it?”

“No. No, I -” If I think about it too much, I’m going to lose control again. “Doesn’t matter. We have to focus on Valentine. That’s what matters.”

Nightlock takes a step closer. “Sentinel-”

“I know,” Alec interrupts, “I know. I just feel -”

Unmasked. He feels unmasked. He thinks of all those endless headlines splashed across front pages: of vigilantes wrenched from their identities by a dogged press, of masks ripped from the faces of dead supers who no longer have a voice to raise. Such a thin sheath of leather across his eyes shouldn’t be the only thing that stops Alec from feeling the cold, but -

Here he is, freezing. Idris lies exposed, all its secrets and all its supers vulnerable. The city unpeeled from its muscle, and what Alec has found inside is rotten, black and gangrenous, and worse than that - tender .

Alec folds his arms across his chest, shoving his hands beneath his arms. The leather of his suit squeaks. He holds himself tight; he holds himself together.
He breathes out through his nose. His next words, a whisper. “Have you ever known anyone who got unmasked?”

“Why?” asks Nightlock.

“Have you?”

Nightlock presses his mouth into a thin line. “Yes, I have. Too many to count. Why?”

“Has anyone ever unmasked you? Without your permission, I mean.”

“No,” says Nightlock. “No, never. That’s - hm .”

Alec turns to look at him. “What? What is it?”

Nightlock’s eyes flash to his, dark and vehement. “I fear it,” he admits. “The thought of someone taking my mask from me and then knowing who I am and all the unforgivable things that I’ve done - that’s not something I can fathom. But -”

“But?”

“But I think the day is fast approaching when we will no longer have the luxury of masks and secret identities, and we’ll be forced to make a choice between that and our own survival in order to make our voices heard.”

“New York won’t ever trust supers if they don’t know who they’re trusting.”

“Precisely. The only way for people to treat us as human is if they see us as human. And that - that is an intense vulnerability I don’t have a name for, and nor am I sure if I am equipped to handle.”

“You would never tell someone who you are?”
Nightlock’s jaw works, but Alec is drawn to the cut of his throat as he swallows back the words that are too honest, even now, to admit.

“I would. And I have, I think, in all the ways possible that do not involve pulling this mask from my face,” he begins, “But the truth in all its magnitude? It’s not a case of would I say it, but rather, how. And I don’t know how. I’ve been Nightlock for a very long time and he’s become a habit that I don’t know how to break.”

He laughs to himself, breathless and defeated, and it tugs on the tangled threads of Alec’s heart.

“Can I ask you something, Sentinel?”

“Always,” Alec replies earnestly.

“Do you ever wonder who I am? Beneath all this?”

“Why?” Alec frowns. “Are you planning on telling me who you are?”

Nightlock hesitates. It’s only for a second, but Alec hears it loudly. “No. No, I can’t. I can’t do that.”

“Then it doesn’t matter,” Alec implores. “Like you said, I know enough. Doesn’t matter about the mask. It’s never mattered, not to me.”

The look in Nightlock’s eyes changes as he moves, the glow of the city roaming across his face and refracting across his mask; for a moment, as he steps directly in front of Alec, he is plunged into shadow.

“Why did you ask?” Nightlock whispers, “About if I’d ever been unmasked?”

Alec shrugs, but he can’t bring himself to look away. He feels the back of his neck grow warm, that same heat creeping into his cheeks.
“It’s nothing,” he says, “It’s just - without Idris, I feel like I’m … someone else. Some thing else. I dunno.”

“Oh.”

“Why did you think I asked?”

Nightlock searches Alec’s face, letting the quiet seep in and expand in the space between them - too much space. Alec longs to reach out, to let his knuckles graze across the lapels of Nightlock’s coat, to find purchase and ground himself against the push and pull of forces he cannot see, far beyond his control.

He’s not sure what Nightlock looks for. But he does look sad, quietly sad, resigned to knowing he’ll never find what he wants inside of Alec, and it makes Alec ache in a place he cannot reach.

*What did you want me to say?* Alec wonders. *Tell me and I’ll say it.*

“Close your eyes,” Nightlock says then. “Please.”

“Why?”

“Please. Humour me.”

Alec closes his eyes, and immediately, there is the flutter of kinetic energy he knows so intimately, dancing across his eyelids, sweeping across the translucent slip of skin that his mask reveals.

“Keep them closed,” Nightlock insists. Alec hears the squeak of leather on leather. A soft, steadying exhale, as if a weight is lifted. “Don’t open them, whatever you do.”

“Nightlock, what -” Alec begins, but then Nightlock reaches for both his hands and guides Alec’s touch to the familiar slope of his jaw. Alec’s fingers jump against his skin. “What are you -”

“I’m going to show you who I am,” Nightlock says. “Don’t open your eyes.”
Alec frowns, but he feels his way across Nightlock’s jaw, cupping his face, smoothing his thumbs across Nightlock’s cheeks.

But, instead of leather, instead of a mask, he only feels -

Skin. Just skin. Warm, human, pliant skin.

Nightlock’s mask is gone. He’s taken it off.

Alec balks, but Nightlock’s hands cover his, keeping Alec’s palms pressed against his neck. The leather of his gloves is a thin barrier to warmth.

“Your mask -”


Alec exhales shakily and he knows Nightlock must feel it, that tremble down Alec’s arms and into his hands where he cradles Nightlock’s face so carefully, as if he’s just as fragile as Alec feels.

Slowly, Alec drags his thumbs across Nightlock’s face again, brushing against the side of his nose, across the creases that feather the corners of his eyes, feeling the give in his skin where his mask should be.

Alec tries to imagine the face he feels beneath his hands: how the sharp line of Nightlock’s cheekbones might look, whether his eyebrows are as dark as his hair, whether he has freckles, scars, any sort of blemish at all.

He grazes his thumb over Nightlock’s top lip and feels the tiny expulsion of a held breath, even through his gloves.

Alec has never needed to know before. He has wondered, but it has never mattered - who is
Nightlock beneath his mask - and yet now …

Now, he wants nothing more than to open his eyes and it suffocates him, the knowledge that such a small, breakable quiet is the only thing that stands between him and knowing. It would be so easy to shatter. So easy to break a trust and see that moment of wide and breathless surprise in Nightlock’s dark eyes, his face unobscured and honest and open.

Open his eyes and see the face of the man whose name he doesn’t know, but who he …

Nightlock leans into the curve of Alec’s palm. Alec squeezes his eyes as tight as he can manage, until an ache blooms in the bridge of his nose and behind his temples.

The face of a man he loves.

“There are things I have done as Nightlock that this person can’t be forgiven for,” Nightlock murmurs then, and each word is movement against Alec’s fingertips. “My past is not clean, and my present, even less so. I’ve hurt people I care about. I’m still hurting them, but I can avoid the repercussions because, as long as I wear this mask, they’ll never know.”

“You want to protect them from it,” Alec whispers back. “You don’t have to explain yourself. I get it.”

“That’s what I have to tell myself. The alternative is facing a reality far less pleasant and more self-serving,” Nightlock says, “Fear is an insidious thing. Especially when the thing you’re most scared of is yourself and what you know you’re capable of.”

“I’m not scared of you. I could never be.”

“No,” Nightlock mumbles. His hands fall away from Alec’s, and Alec exists, suspended, in a blind and untethered moment, until the touch returns. Nightlock’s palms smooth upwards against his chest, his fingers then clasping around the back of Alec’s neck. He draws Alec close. “There are far worse things you could think of me.”

He kisses Alec soundlessly, the press of his lips against Alec’s unhurried, yet aching, a sense of finality held between his teeth. Alec moves against him, deepening the kiss, cradling Nightlock’s face between his palms, but Nightlock pulls away, the barest huff of breath ghosting across Alec’s
His hands linger, and then fall, and he steps away from Alec; the cold rushes in. Alec feels disappointment keenly in his chest.

“You can open your eyes,” Nightlock says, and Alec does, and the bright glare of the city at a distance makes him wince. Diffuse spots of white light bleed into the yellow, and the horizon becomes a smear, not unlike the glow of car headlights caught in wet asphalt.

But Nightlock stares back at him, unchanged and unmoved. The wind ruffles his hair, and he smiles at Alec, a quirk to his lips that seems apologetic. The edge of his mask cuts into his skin in a way that Alec fixates upon.

“We should get going,” says Nightlock, turning away. “We have a lot of ground to cover tonight.”

“Wait -” Alec snags Nightlock’s coat sleeve to stop him walking away. “Wait, there’s something - something I need to ask you.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah,” says Alec. “You were right, something did come up at Idris, but I -” He grits his teeth and powers on. “I made a choice. For the city, yeah, but also - also for me. And I thought - well, I wondered if maybe you’d like to -”

I’ve left Idris behind. And I don’t know where I’m going now or what’s going to happen, but I know I can’t stop moving, and I want to know; I need to know -

Nightlock steps back towards him, his hand sliding up Alec’s arm. He tilts his head as if to say: you can tell me. Always.

And all Alec wants to ask is:

Come with me?
A blade of night slips between their bodies clad in leather and in Kevlar; between their shadows, devoid of starlight and neon, pitch-dark in its blackness. Alec breathes out deeply, and Nightlock mirrors him, sternum rising. The air crackles with familiar static, arcing from Nightlock’s fingertips and into Alec’s skin, an ignited touch that always pushes Alec towards the things he wants to say but is sometimes too afraid to voice in case he’s asking for too much.

But this is not too much.

That same electric power as in the air coils in the corner of Nightlock’s mouth, so often obscured in the smoke of intricate feelings that are now, suddenly, laid out so straight. The look in Nightlock’s eyes has always kept Alec from loneliness, armour and masks, skin and bones all tossed aside for the feeling of being not alone against the world, or against Idris, or against any of the people who want them dead.

Alec knows Nightlock will say yes to whatever he asks.

Nightlock frowns. “Sentinel?” he asks, squeezing Alec’s arm. “Don’t leave me guessing now.”

A police siren wails in the distance but Alec barely flinches. He’s unable to draw his eyes away, his heartbeat quickening.

Another siren, this time much closer, its clamour louder. The screech scampers up the back of Alec’s neck, begging him to look. His skin prickles, but he fights it. In the distance, a rumble, not quite thunder. Something else. A faint tremor echoes through the ground like the aftershocks of an earthquake. He fights it still.

An ambulance flings itself around the corner of the block, blue lights streaking up the side of the building and flashing across Nightlock’s face.

“I want-” Alec begins, but the wind carries with it the whump-whump-whump of helicopter blades overhead. A scowl knits Alec’s brow, but he powers on. “I want to start something new. An alliance between all the supers, Corporate or vigilante, it doesn’t matter. But I need you at my side-”

The question is not finished.
A bright, blinding spotlight strikes Alec in the face and he recoils away, covering his eyes with his arm. A helicopter swoops across the rooftop, an enormous creature of steel and armour, its searchlight surging across the guttering and up the side of the next skyscraper. The updraught shoves Alec sideways and he staggers forward, out of the light. The whirl of the blades and the shriek of the engine deafens him and sunspots scatter across his eyes.

He feels Nightlock’s fingers close around his bicep, yanking him back from the edge of the roof.

“Sentinel, get down-!”

Alec drops to the ground as the helicopter dives down into the street, the roar of its blades bouncing off plate glass and brick as it disappears between the buildings, its searchlight following.

Alec’s head spins, his eyes streaming, and he scrabbles to the edge of the roof, leaning over. Below, the traffic is gridlocked, car doors flung open and drivers standing in the street, hands shielding their eyes as they watch the helicopter fly. Cabs blare their horns, and the wind whips ravenously though Alec’s hair and Nightlock’s coat alike, carrying with it the sound of shouting.

But the ground rumbles beneath him again, and this time - this time he feels it shudder through his hands as he pushes himself back to his feet. Not thunder at all.

*What is that -*

He glances to Nightlock, but Nightlock’s eyes are wide, fixed on the horizon. Both his hands uncurl at his sides, his palms held open. He reaches for strands of discordant energy that Alec cannot see.

“Hey,” Alec starts, “What is it, can you sense something -”

He’s cut off by the shriek of his coms, the crackle of ugly static.

“Alec!” Izzy gasps in his ear, “Alec, are you there, do you read me?”
Alec presses his finger to his ear, but her voice crackles, lost to the noise that surrounds him.

“I’ve got you,” he says urgently. Below, another police siren wail, its high-pitched screech splitting the night apart at the seams. The building rumbles again, now louder. Beside him, Nightlock sucks in a sharp breath. “Are you okay? What’s wrong? We just saw a helicopter fly overhead, it looked military -?”

“Alec, there’s been an attack.”

Alec’s blood runs cold, dread sliding into his gut like a well-placed knife. He changes the frequency on the comms to the police dispatch channel, and immediately, he’s overwhelmed by a dozen voices barking commands, the sound of sirens swarming in the distance.

He flicks the radio back to Izzy.

“The emergency frequency is saying there’s been explosions at both Grand Central and 1 Police Plaza,” she says, “They’re treating it as a terrorist attack, but the police are scrambled and the Commissioner is missing. I don’t know what’s happening, if it’s a bomb or a fire or what, but it’s gotta be -”

A loud and shattering boom tears through the night. The shockwave slams into Alec’s chest, and then, a supernova: a bright plume of molten fire and erupting smoke, ripping apart a skyscraper on the horizon, gutting it of its insides.

The Penhallow building. It’s the Penhallow building.

The blaze of heat is razor-hot, the sudden light blinding. Deafening white noise fills the air, Alec’s ears ringing, a foghorn noise inside his head. Monstrous waves of black smoke pour upwards into the dark, swallowing the tower and spewing out fragments of glass and brick and steel beams sent hurtling towards the ground.

Everything rears to a brutal stop. For a moment, pitch-black silence.

And then, he hears the screaming. Screaming, shrieking, hysterical panic, drowning out the low and hideous rumble below their feet.
“Oh my God,” Alec whispers. He watches as the helicopter veers sharply off its course, circling back towards the explosion. The smoke engulfs its searchlight.

He looks for Nightlock then, but Nightlock is staring at it too, his mouth open and horror strewn across his face.

Alec reaches for him, but the air pulsates and he staggers forward. He’s not sure he’s breathing. He’s not sure his heart is beating, choked of words, a peal of Nightlock’s name lodged in his throat. He grabs for Nightlock’s coat, for his sleeve, his arm - anything - but it’s like his fingers sift through sand and he doesn’t reach far enough.

The helicopter careens towards the skyscraper, struggling through the thick smoke that spurts like blood from a wound and then -

And then there’s a second blast - not an explosion, but swift and sharp and shrill like a gunshot, like a whistle - and the helicopter is shot out of the sky.

For a moment, Alec thinks it’s a lightning strike: a bolt of white electricity that lances through the helicopter and tears its rotor blades free of its body. But then another shot rips the tail propeller apart, fuel lines igniting in a ball of fire, and the helicopter spins, down and down and down, and Alec cannot look away as it drops, like a stone, between the skyscrapers.

Silence, devastating and disbelieved, and then - chaos. The helicopter hits the ground with a crash so violent that Alec feels something within him fracture. His blood pounds frantically in his ears but he can’t -

He can’t believe his eyes.

Someone shot that helicopter out of the sky.

Oh, God, he realises. Oh, God, it’s happening.

We were supposed to have more time.
“Alec!” Izzy shouts in his ear. “Alec, can you hear me?! Alec, come in!”

Nightlock grabs Alec’s sleeve, his fingers tight around Alec’s wrist; the leather of Alec’s suit twists so taut that Alec can feel it cutting off the blood supply to his fingers. He looks up at Nightlock, sunspots still spinning in his eyes, and finds fury and frenzy and, most of all, panic, carved into Nightlock’s face.

Alec opens his mouth, but no words come out. He flails, mute. His whole body is seized from whiplash.

“Alec! Alec, Alec - come in, damnit!”

There’s terror in Nightlock’s eyes and he doesn’t try to hide it. He stares at Alec, searching for something, anything -

“Alec!”

Reality snaps back into place. The deafened sirens and muffled shouting from below become a roar. He wrenches his stare from Nightlock and presses a shaking finger into his ear.

“I’m here,” Alec rasps, “A helicopter just - and there’s a - the Penhallow building just - I -”

“Are you alright? How close are you? Alec? Alec, are you hurt?”

His knees are covered in dust; his legs feel like stone. He cannot move. He watches the black smoke spew into the sky, thick dark clouds rolling over one another, consuming one another like ravenous, bottomless voids -

“Sentinel,” urges Nightlock, and he crushes Alec’s wrist so tight that there will be fingerprint bruises in the morning, should there be a morning at all.

Izzy shouts in his ear - his desperate name over and over again - but if she’s telling him where to
go or what to do, he doesn’t hear it.

He only sees Nightlock and the backdrop of electric light and billowing smoke. He sucks in a deep breath, both sudden and sharp, and the taste of smoke and burning rubble already on his tongue winds him like a punch right to the chest.


Alec can only nod. There is no time for thinking.

And then Nightlock seizes his hand, drawing Alec close to him, and the ground plunges away from beneath Alec’s feet. Nightlock raises his arm and they surge upwards into the air, the very dark frenetic with energy that threatens to split open a chasm in the Earth far below. Alec can feel it: violent tremors along Nightlock’s arm, raw energy outpouring from the city and magnetised towards Nightlock’s open palm and crooked fingers.

Nightlock tips his hand downwards, and they go plummeting over the rooftop edge. The street is alight with car headlights but deserted, all those fled from their cars either long gone or crowded in storefronts, pointing fingers at the cloud of ash and debris that rolls towards them. Nightlock squeezes Alec’s hand and lets him drop - and Alec hits the sidewalk running, the impact shooting into his thighs but his bow already in his hand, head bent down and heart burning.

Nightlock swoops down next to him and the people on the sidewalk part for them like the sea, leaping back against windows and doorways, cowering away from the crackle of kinetic energy that thunders in Nightlock’s wake.

And Alec runs.

He runs, and he runs, and he runs, faster than he’s ever run before. His pulse beats frantically in his temples and his coms spurt static in his ear, a storm of whitenoise that grows louder and louder as the smoke swells between the surrounding skyscrapers.

“This way!” Nightlock shouts, veering into a narrow street, and Alec follows, his boots skidding on the asphalt as he pushes himself to keep up.

The ground rumbles beneath his feet, a jolt so sudden that Alec stumbles, crashing into a dumpster,
the sharp metal corner catching him in the gut - but he doesn’t stop, *can’t stop*.

The Penhallow building looms above them, spewing smoke; the explosion has ripped an enormous, angry gash out of the highest floors, a wound of ragged mortar alight with flames and spitting sparks. A thick coat of black dust smothers the ground, littered with a thousand sheets of paper, circling in the wind and trampled by feet.

And the smell - the smell of burning rubble and concrete and metal, red-hot and acrid, painful to swallow and painful to taste -

Smoke floods from the lobby doors, shattered glass thrown far across the street. Cars are piled up on the sidewalk, and a truck has jack-knifed across the road, the hood crumpled around a fire hydrant. And debris rains from above: brick and glass and plaster and great shards of steel launched like javelins from above.

Alec throws his arm across his mouth, coughing into the crook of his elbow. The smoke bites at his eyes, but he can hear people shouting, and he can see others staggering out of the wreckage, pencil skirts and suit jackets ripped and bloodied, faces painted grey and streaked with darker tears.

Nightlock steps down from out of the sky, and with one single thrust of his hands, he casts the smoke into the sky. With one hand, he holds the cloud at bay, and with another, he clenches his fingers into his palm and the air clears, ash and dust sucked upwards, uncloaking the few scattered people collapsed on their hands and knees and spluttering blood across the pavement.

The force of it ripples through him: the leather of his gloves taut across his knuckles, every muscle in his back shifting like tectonic plates. He steps back, bracing himself, and raises his hands higher.

The building groans, an eerie, guttural shriek of bending steel and breaking glass. Nightlock clenches his jaw and pushes, and around them, all the lights flicker, energy transformed into the kinetic force that he launches against the side of the tower as it begins to tip.

“Sentinel!” he barks, not looking back, “Hurry! I’ll be right behind you!”

Alec doesn’t stop - he runs past Nightlock, vaulting over the hood of an abandoned SUV, landing hard on his feet, glass crunching beneath his boots. A man stumbling from the rubble grabs his sleeve as he passes, and Alec wheels around, raising his bow, but finds only terror on an ash-white
“There’s people still trapped!” the man sobs, holding tight to Alec’s suit, “You have to help them, you have to get them!”

Alec wrenches himself free, ploughing headfirst into the bank of smoke - but it parts for him, split by invisible hands at his back, watching over him, pushing him forwards, always forwards, into the dark and acrid underbelly of the creaking building.

He crashes into a man and a woman limping through the doors, but they’re both still walking so he pushes them towards the light of the city. The ceiling creaks and groans and bows, huge chunks of plasterboard falling down all around him, the air thick with dust, unbreathable. He’s been here a hundred times before, and yet the smoke always burns and his eyes stream with tears and he can’t stop the hacking cough, and yet he can’t stop to think: will this be the one that don’t come back from, because he can hear the shouts for help from deep within the tomb of rubble and concrete.

Blindly, Alec reaches out with his bow, feeling the great crevasses in the ground, the clang of steel beams fallen from above. Not even his keen eyesight will help him here, the smoke licking along the floor and striking him in the chest with wave after wave, trying to push him backwards.

But he can feel heat. Fire. Licking flames, close enough to hear the crackle, the sparking of wires ripped loose in the ceiling, the sobs of someone muffled beneath the blowout -

He powers on, shielding his face with his arm, pulling the leather of his sleeve between his teeth to stop himself gulping lungfuls of ash. He swings wildly with his bow and finds a clear path across the floor.

The air feels hotter.

That way.

He’s seen the blueprints of this building before: he knows there are desks to his right and the stairwell to his left, but the cries for help are straight ahead and he can’t place them -

A fist pounds frantically against a metal door and Alec leaps forward as the ceiling comes down behind him, a roar of crumbling plaster and an explosion of brick and steel. The cloud of dust is
fire-hot, scalding him up the length of his spine, but then his shoulder slams into something solid - not a wall. Metal. Cool to the touch.

A small red light flickers in the darkness: an arrow pointing upwards.

*An elevator.*

Alec slams his hand against the door. The sounds rings out, and then -

“Help! Help, is someone there! We’re in here!”

*Fuck.*

Alec stabs the button on the wall, but the doors don’t open. Then, he slings his bow over his shoulder and pries at the doors with his fingers, but he can’t get a grip and his gloves squeak on the metal like nails on a chalkboard.

He smacks his palm against the door again. “Fuck!”

What can he do? He can’t bend metal with his mind. He can’t levitate slabs of rubble and concrete with the flick of his fingers, he can’t walk through walls, he has a fucking bow and arrows -

He has his knife. Maybe he could force the doors open. What about incendiary arrows? Shit, no, he can’t risk another explosion that brings the whole fucking building down on top of them, but -

He braces himself and digs his fingers into the thin gap between the doors, pulling until his arms burn and his shoulder wrenches. The whole world shakes around him, walls crumbling, ceilings falling, his heart pounding in his ears - *but he can’t do anything.*

The doors won’t budge. He can hear the crying on the other side, the weeping, the panic of a dozen people trapped inside a steel tomb and he clenches his teeth and the sob bubbles up, catching ugly in his throat. His forehead thunks against the doors. He pounds the metal with his fist.
If he leaves, these people will die.

But if he stays -

If he stays, they’ll still die, but he’ll be trapped in here too.

_You have to go. You can’t save them. There will be others. You have to go!_

“Fuck!” Alec yells, “Fuck. Fuck!”

And then, something heavy barrels into his shoulder, shoving him into the doors with an _oomph_. He throws out his hands to steady him, but as the smoke billows, it’s not the ceiling that has come down in front of him or a wall blown out -

It’s a person. And Alec could recognise that God awful supersuit anywhere.

“God damnit, Simon!”

“I can help! I can help!” Simon shouts, but he’s stumbling through the rubble and careens sideways into the wall when the ground pitches away beneath his feet.

Alec throws out his hands and grabs Simon by the shoulder, throwing him against the elevator doors as ceiling tiles thunder from above.

Simon’s hair is white with ash. He has goggles pulled down over his mask, but his eyes are wide, panicked, disoriented. He cannot focus on Alec’s face, his breathing rabbiting and his heartbeat racing with adrenaline; electric currents must be pouring into his skin and running rampant through his head, a thousand different high-pitched screeches at once.

Alec shakes him violently, slamming him back against the elevator doors. “Simon! Look at me, snap out of it!” He squeezes Simon at the juncture of his neck and shoulder, forcing Simon to look at him. “Focus!”
“Sentinel!” Simon gasps, and Alec looks down and sees Simon has his palm flat against the doors, “Alec, there’s people trapped, I can hear them!”

“I know!” Alec yells above the chaos. “The doors are stuck!”

Simon’s eyes widen. “I can open them,” he says, and then he twists out of Alec’s hands and presses both his palms to the wall, feeling along the plasterboard until he finds the control panel. “I can open them, I can open them! Quick, we gotta hurry!”

A chunk of brick clips Simon on the temple and he winces, letting out a gasp of pain. Red blood blooms through his suit, staining the cheap spandex and dripping into his eye.

Alec’s heart lurches, but Simon grits his teeth and screws his eyes shut, concentrating on his hand against the door.

Get out of here! Alec wants to scream with all his might. What are you doing? Get out of here now, go!

Alec throws himself back against the elevator doors, digging his fingers into the gap between them and heaves.

The smoke is thicker, darker, blacker now, gushing from the stairwell and from gaping holes in the ceiling, and Alec can hear the foundations of the building rumbling beneath his feet. Beside him, Simon trembles, his whole body jittering as if run-through with electricity - but then, a spark, a jolt, a whir and a groan.

“Simon!” Alec shouts, and Simon’s whole face contorts in pain, “Come on!”

The doors creak, screeching metal on metal, but Alec finally gets a grip on the doors and he pulls them apart with a grunt. Smoke floods the space before he can blink, and there’s crying and cheering and frantic hands and elbows pushing and shoving to escape through the smallest gap. Someone headbutts him in the jaw, and another steps on his toe with a pointed heel, but he grits his teeth and bares it, squeezing himself between the doors and holding them open with his back against one and his knee against the other.

“Everybody out!” Simon yells, grabbing people by their sleeves, by their collars, by whatever he
can reach. He sounds too much like himself, **too much**, too kind, too desperate to help. “Quick, hurry! Get out to the street, hurry!”

Alec hisses through his teeth, his arms straining as the last few people tumble out. Ten, fifteen, maybe more, he’s lost count, and half of them are swallowed up in the smoke already. Sweat beads along his forehead, pain shoots up his wrist and seizes in his knee. He squeezes his eyes closed and swallows a sharp bark of pain as the door forces against his spine.

“Go, go! Simon shouts, “Okay, Sentinel, that’s everyone! Come on, come on!”

Alec leaps away from the doors and they slam shut, only just missing his fingers.

Hell surrounds him. Smoke swarms up from beneath his feet and strangles him, wrapping around his neck and shoving into his mouth, and the heat, the blazing heat of a fire, he can feel it too, scorching against his cheek and peeling his skin - but it’s too dark to see any flames. Screaming, everywhere, ahead of him, behind him, deeper into the rubble. He looks down at his hands, caked in white ash, streaked with something darker - is that blood? **Oh, God, whose blood** -

Each breath, faster, faster.

He looks to Simon. Simon stares back at him, his face drawn and pale, his eyes frantic. His suit is torn; a stream of blood from his head wound crusts across his eye.

And then, the darkness groans, in the ceiling, in the smoke, in the crumbling walls - a sound so shrill and loud and fucking piercing that it lances down Alec’s back and has Simon covering his ears, crumpling forwards. And God, it’s a sound Alec knows all too well: the metallic shriek of collapsing concrete and shaking steel - a weight hanging above their heads like a guillotine blade.

Alec is damned if he’s going to die like this.

Smoke fills his lungs and he chokes, hacking and hacking but it won’t stop, his throat on fire. He lunges for Simon, grabbing him by the shoulders.

“Out, now!” he barks, shoving Simon forwards. “The building’s coming down! Move!”
“There’s still people trapped!” Simon cries, “I think there’s more upstairs, we have to help them!”

A thunderous boom rains ash and rubble rain down upon them, clipping Alec’s shoulder. He grabs Simon in a headlock and pulls him to the ground, throwing himself as a shield across Simon’s back as a whole section of the ceiling swings loose in a fit of sparks and a cascade of concrete. Brick scrapes Alec’s cheek and sharp pain slices down the back of his head, but he presses Simon closer to the ground, teeth bitten so hard into his lower lip that he tastes blood.

Not today. Not today, not today, not today -

Simon yelps and Alec grunts, thick grey smoke swelling and swallowing them like a thunder cloud, rippling and rolling - and then, a flash of fierce, bubbling orange light. Fire .

The heat blasts Alec’s face. He grips Simon beneath both arms and hauls him to his feet, clamping his hand around Simon’s wrist and yanking him -

Simon trips and stumbles, boot catching on upturned rubble. He slams into Alec and pushes them sideways; Alec digs his heels in, wrenching Simon away from the downpour of rubble as the floor above them gives way, imploding, showering them with shrapnel. Alec sucks in a harsh breath, but it’s all dust and ash and fucking glass , shredding the inside of his mouth, and he hacks into his gloved fist, the taste of blood spread across his lips now, wet and dripping down his chin.

“Alec!” Simon gasps, clutching at Alec’s suit, but Alec shakes his head, pushing Simon forwards. They have to get out.

They have to get out now .

The bright beam of a searchlight bursts through the smoke, appearing and disappearing like the flashing of a lighthouse. Alec flails forward, driving Simon towards the muffled wail of sirens, praying that they’ll stumble out into night air.

His fucking skull vibrates as another deafening crash collapses the floor behind them, brick shattering and floorboards cracking - and then it’s overhead, a hundred tonnes of mortar and steel burying them in a concrete tomb, the air so hot its burning now, Alec’s eyes streaming - and it’s all Alec can do to press his hands between Simon’s shoulders and launch him forward with all his might.
Simon pitches forward, his shout consumed by the smoke, and Alec throws himself to the ground as the rest of the ceiling cracks and brick pelts down on him from above like a volley of arrows.

He lands with a brutal thump, chest-down in shattered glass cutting into his chin, his hands clasped across the back of his head where his hair is matted with blood - but the weight of the building doesn’t come. There’s something else pressing down on his back, kneading at his suit, and he knows it, he knows it well.

“Sentinel!” shouts Nightlock, and even if Alec can’t see him, he knows him, he feels him, the press of his magic grasping for Alec. Alec begins to crawl, dragging himself forward on his forearms in the direction of Nightlock’s voice.

“Sentinel! Sentinel, can you hear me!?"

The smoke thins, rushing past Alec’s ears faster and faster. His next gasp tastes like rainwater and the ground beneath his scrabbling fingers is a sidewalk, and not the thick shroud of ash.

“There!” he hears Simon shriek. “He’s there, he’s there! I see him!”

Eyes screwed shut, Alec heaves himself up onto his hands and knees, crawling towards the sound of shouting and police sirens and gushing water - until hands find his shoulders, digging into the side of his neck.

“Alec!” Simon gasps, but fuck, they’re still too close to the building and the roar drowns everything out. Alec shoves at Simon’s chest, urging him to move back. “Sentinel, oh my God! Are you okay?!”

Alec opens his eyes: the night is smeared with smoke-drawn tears, but God, he’s outside, he can feel the drizzle cutting through the smoke, he can feel the cold at his front and the blaze of fire behind him, and he’s face-to-face with that terrible white-and-green lightning bolt plastered across Simon’s chest. He grabs a fistful of Simon’s suit and pulls himself upright, onto his knees, Simon’s frantic hands pawing Alec’s elbows as he tries to hold Alec upright.

But it’s not Simon that he wants to see, not really, not desperately - and he twists back over his shoulder and finds Nightlock: alone on the frontline, flanked by firefighters in full masks and oxygen tanks. His back to them, his heels digging into the ground. His coat, rippling. The muscles in his back drawn taut, but a violent tremor seizes in his arms and legs, his whole body shaking
Both hands held aloft, palms defiant against the smoke and the toppling skyscraper, holding it at bay with sheer force of will -

“Nightlock!” Alec shouts, pushing away from Simon, “Nightlock!”

Nightlock flinches, driven backwards by the energy propelled from his hands, but it’s not enough. The skyscraper bows, glass blown outwards, and then walls and steel framework dragged inwards like the suction of a black hole, and the building just crumbles, like it’s nothing, like the boom that echoes through the ground beneath Alec’s feet is enough to pulverise it.

Nightlock hisses through his teeth, pushing back with both his hands, but the foundations break apart between his invisible fingers, smoke gushing free from a gaping wound. Ash and dust surge up into the sky and debris thunders down upon the sidewalk like hail, a wall of smoke so thick and dark that it’s almost black, rising like a monster wrenched out of the Earth.

Nightlock staggers backwards, his knees buckling. Alec lurches to his feet, catching Nightlock against his chest before he falls; his weight is real, but the tight clench of his hand in Alec’s suit stings as he meets Alec’s eyes and gasps for air.

“All around them, New York screams like an abattoir: firefighters yelling, retreating behind their fire engines as the red-hot smoke swells towards them; civilians collapsed in the middle of the street, spluttering and coughing and drenched in greyed-out blood; sirens blaring black and blue in Alec’s periphery.”


A shard of shrapnel slices across Nightlock’s cheek then, drawing a thin line of blood. Nightlock winces; the blood beads; but his eyes remain rooted in Alec’s, unblinking, unaltering.

“Nightlock -”
Nightlock reaches up and presses his palm against the side of Alec’s face - it’s only for a second, a fragment of a second - but his hand comes away smeared in ash and brown blood.

Stay alive, his eyes seem to plead. Stay alive.

Alec nods at him, and then they leap apart: Nightlock ascends into the sky, raising his palms to drive the wall of smoke back, funneling it up into the clouds where it spreads across the roof of the city like a film of heavy black tar. He shouts to the firefighters, barking commands as hoses are unravelled and turned back to the crackling fire, water spewing across the rubble and carnage.

Alec turns back to Simon, but finds Simon staring up at the pillar of smoke, his face white with fear.

“8-Bit!” Alec yells, “Get everyone off the street!”

Simon’s eyes snap to Alec. Tears streak through the ash on his face. “The building - there were still people -”

“8-Bit!”

Simon sucks in a sharp breath and it wobbles all the way through him, but he nods, and he moves for a young woman slumped in the middle of the road, bleeding profusely from a cut on her leg.

Alec squares his shoulders, the same deep breath centering him. Pain radiates through the base of his skull, and his palms are worn through with gravel burns, but he fixates on a man clinging tightly to lamppost, his suit darkened by blood, and knows what he has to do.

Not today.

Not today.
He doesn’t know how long it lasts. He doesn’t know how many people he carries away from the wreckage, how many are going to die before any ambulances arrive, how many are already dead. There’s no time to stop and check a pulse. No time to pause to catch his breath.

He piles up the bodies, he shouts at those who are still cognizant to apply pressure, hopes and prays that -

God, he doesn’t know what he prays for. His head is whitenoise. His hands are shaking.

Izzy’s voice still rings in his ears. There’s been explosions at Grand Central and 1 Police Plaza -

He sets down the woman in his arms on the sidewalk; she’s dazed but she’ll live. Her head wound is already clotting, and the cut on her arm is superficial, but her skin feels cold as shock sets in. Alec peels her fingers off his shoulder and squats down in front of her, rubbing his palms rapidly up and down her arms, trying desperately to warm her, but she says nothing. Her eyes are vacant.

The screaming has quietened. The silence is deafening, his ears already numb to the sound of sirens and the lop of helicopters circling overhead like vultures with their searchlights and TV cameras.

Alec wishes he had a coat to drape over the woman’s shoulders, but he has nothing. As he stands, he searches the swirl of paper and dust for a paramedic or an ambulance, but -

He hears the quiet sobbing before he sees Simon, slumped over on the edge of the sidewalk, his head buried in his hands and his back trembling. His sleeves are splattered red. His mouth, too, smeared with blood.

You think he’s ever had to do CPR before? You think he’s ever seen someone die in front of him before?

He shouldn’t be here.

“8-Bit,” Alec calls out, softer than he means to. Simon’s head snaps up. He swallows a sob, wiping the back of his hand across his nose as he hacks back snot and mucous.
“I’m sorry, I - I’m still going. I can do it -” Simon begins, but Alec shakes his head. He extends his hand to Simon.

Simon stares at it, then up at Alec’s face. “Alec -”

Alec reaches for Simon’s arm instead, pulling him to his feet. Simon babbles nonsense, but Alec steers them away, gripping Simon’s arm tight.

He drags Simon towards the shadow of a narrow alleyway; the darkness calls to him, quiet, still, the roaming blue lights against their backs and casting long, wavering shadows.

Alec kicks over a garbage can - the clang rings out - but he maneuvers Simon to sit on it and then crouches down in front of him.

“What the Hell are you doing here, Simon?” he presses out between his teeth. “You shoulda stayed home -”

“You know I live just ‘round the corner,” Simon insists, wiping his nose again. His eyes are red but vehement as he glares down at Alec. “You know that, and how can you still think I can just - do nothing ?”

“You’re done,” Alec says, “Either go home or stay here, but you’re done. You’re not going back out there.”

Simon shakes his head, but he doesn’t try to get up. Alec suspects his legs have given out.

“I can still help -”

“Simon!”

Alec’s jaw spasms and his nostrils flare, and Simon flinches, but he doesn’t back down. His fists are curled so tightly in his lap that his arms are shaking. Alec notices it.
Simon’s terrified.

“You,” Alec says, gesturing with his pointer finger back the way they came, “You could’ve died in there.”

“But I didn’t!” Simon exclaims, his voice rising, “And those people we saved from the elevator didn’t either, don’t you get it? I can do this, I can help you, you need me-”

“That’s enough!” Alec snaps, warning in his eyes. Simon’s mouth clamps shut, but his eyes bulge, and Alec knows he’s furious, just like Alec is furious, and the city around them is burning panic like a fuel and they’re all dizzy in the fumes of it.

“Sentinel,” Simon pleads then, “Please. Please.”

Alec slumps back on his haunches, scrubbing his hand across his face; dried blood and plaster flakes away.

“Simon, I -”

Simon’s eyes dart over Alec’s shoulder, but then return to Alec’s face. His lower lip juts out, and his fists clench, and for a moment, Alec wonders what electric currents he can feel beneath their feet that Alec isn’t even remotely aware of -

A dark shadow passes across Simon’s face, and then, the brush of fingers - real and not real - against the back of Alec’s neck.

“Sentinel,” says Nightlock, behind him, “There’s been another explosion near Brooklyn Bridge. Infrastructure damage. We need to go.”

Alec exhales shakily. His nerves spit and spark. Simon can probably feel that too.

“I can do this,” Simon insists. “Please.”
“We’re going to need all the help we can get,” Nightlock murmurs. His hand drifts to Alec’s shoulder and squeezes gently, and Alec looks back at him.

Ash has turned his black hair grey. A thumb-smear of blood stripes his cheek, but the thin cut has dried and crusted. In his eyes, Alec finds a swirl of cloud: deep purple night, plutonic, wild and yet determined - but fear too, a plea held suspended by the thinnest of threads, one sharp tug away from snapping.

A tremor shivers up Alec’s spine, reverberating out across his every rib. His entire body seems to tense, blunt fingernails felt in the palm of his hand with how hard he squeezes; he feels his cuticles begin to bleed.

“Ash?” Simon yelps, leaping to his feet as Alec sags forward.

“Ash, what’s wrong, what’s happening? Oh God, are you hurt? Are you hurt?”

Gasping, Alec clutches at his stomach, his fingers sinking into his leathers. *Not hurt*, he wants to spit out, but instead, he claws at a feeling he knows too brutally well, sickness stirring up his insides and straining to burst out through his diaphragm.

“Veil.”

Water pricks at the corners of his eyes as he looks for Nightlock, only to find him leaning heavily against the wall, his face contorted.

“Sentinel?!” Simon squawks, “What’s going on - both of you -”
Alec’s head swims, the world spinning on an axis. The Doppler screech of police sirens ricochets off the front of his skull where he can hear his own blood beating. Sweat slathers his forehead and under his lip, and then another punch of nausea slams into his gut and it takes every muscle clenched to keep himself from vomiting.

“It’s Veil,” Nightlock hisses, but Alec already knows that. “She’s close by.”

“She’s in trouble,” Alec grunts, a hot flush of heat sweeping over him, “If she’s using her powers, she’s in trouble - we have to find her -”

A loud crash rings out through the alleyway. Simon startles, and Alec’s eyes snap to the rooftops. Nothing moves, but as he glances back at Nightlock, he watches Nightlock’s eyes narrow.

“What was that?” Simon whispers. Nightlock holds up his hand to hush him. He tilts his chin down the alleyway and Alec nods, slowly drawing an arrow from his quiver.

Then, a shout. The clang of feet racing down a fire escape, and the sickening thud of a body hitting the ground.

And Nightlock says nothing, but then he’s running, and running fast, a deep red shadow tearing off into the dark.

“Alec?” Simon asks.

It takes Alec a breath to catch up. It always does.

Breathe in. Breathe out. He looks back at Simon.

He starts running.

Alec sprints after Nightlock, as fast as his weak legs and bruised knees will carry him. He doesn’t look back: he hopes Simon is behind him, but as smoke rises into the sky, the shouting ahead gets louder, and the harder he runs, the worse the sickness in his stomach, violently ringing his insides dry.
The nausea swells and he careens into a dumpster, dry heaving onto the ground. His throat is on fire, carved up by rubble, and the back of his head throbs; when he touches it, his hand comes away black and gooey, and another punch to the gut churns his stomach.

Alec gasps, gripping the wall to keep himself upright. He can’t find the illusion - no edges to pick at, no strange shimmering mirages, no lack of rain where there once was a downpour. The pain is the worst he’s ever felt - crippling agony and it screams and it screams - help .

She needs help.

Alec grits his teeth around a cry and pushes away from the wall.

He keeps running, his hand a fist around his bow, knuckles white beneath his gloves. Far ahead, Nightlock veers around the corner, disappearing as the dark swallows him whole.

The air swells, a blast of pressure pulsating, shuddering, striking Alec in the chest. He notches his arrow in his bowstring, fingers shaking. The clang of metal on metal echoes outwards, and he dives for shelter against the wall, peering around the corner -

And leaps back as the whistle of a bullet notches the wall a foot above his head.

Alec flattens himself against the wall with a hiss. A second gunshot ricochets off the ground, and then, a snarl, the scrape of talons on the ground and a curdled cry.

Silence. Haggard breathing.

Alec draws his arrow back to his mouth and leans around the corner - but it’s Luke.

It’s Luke, it’s Wolfsbane , standing over the crumpled body of a man still clutching a gun. Luke’s shoulders heave and his claws glint in the low light, his supersuit slick and dripping black. There’s blood on his teeth, smeared down his jaw, and Alec doesn’t know if it’s his.
“There’s more! On the roof!” Luke barks, and then Alec sees Nightlock, hands still extended and breathing hard, raise his arms and surge upwards into the sky.

Alec ducks away from the wall, arrow locked in his bow, and Luke’s dark eyes flash to him, incomparable fear and fury extinguished by relief. His claws recede into his fingertips, but his suit is torn across the chest and his legs are shaking, as if he’s the one who clattered down the fire escape, all the way to the ground.

“Sentinel!” Luke exclaims. He kicks the gun away from the dead man and limps towards Alec. “There’s more on the roof, we gotta go-”

Luke rushes for the fire escape and Alec follows, crouching down to give Luke a boost towards the ladder. He grabs it easily, yanking it down, and scrambles up onto the metal grating, and Alec is forced to swing his bow over his shoulder to pull himself up after.

“What happened?” Alec demands, as Luke hauls him up onto the platform, “What’s going on? Who was that?”

“Circle.” Luke wheezes, “We chased them here from Grand Central - Hodge Starkweather and the teleporter - but Veil’s still up there -”

He’s cut off by a shriek, and both he and Alec look up. A shockwave of energy bursts across the rooftop, sending guttering and pipes flying, and launches a man over the edge who plummets to the ground, his back cracking off the railing of the fire escape. His body smacks into the lid of a dumpster, and the sound that escapes him is like a click, and then a gurgling, as blood froths over his lips and the light fades from his eyes.

The red and ugly mark of the Circle is like a brand upon his neck.

“Nightlock,” Alec breathes, looking up, but Luke doesn’t wait for him, charging ahead, galloping up the fire escape on all fours.

Alec scrambles after him. The stairs are splattered with blood and drizzle, but Alec pushes himself faster, keep running . Keep climbing . His feet beat a metal rhythm, the same bang-bang-bang with each increasing flight of stairs. He races past the second floor, then the third. Higher, still higher, above the telephone lines and satellite dishes protruding from the wall. Above the dried-up neon advertising tobacco and Marlboro’s. High enough to see the plume of smoke rising into the air from
the crumbling skyscraper behind them, and then others, enormous columns of grey rising and rolling like storm clouds, in the distance.

A wave of sickness slams into Alec’s gut the moment he reaches the rooftop, but it comes with the grunt of another man flung violently against the ground, his body tossed aside by the invisible wrath of a man on a mission.

Alec finds Nightlock instantly: he stands in the centre of the roof, feet braced in a wide stance and his palm thrust out in front of him, his whole body gasping for breath. The air crackles with spent kinetic energy, fizzling, thundering, alive.

“Nightlock!” shouts Luke, but the wind is loud and roaring and steals his voice. “Where’s Veil? There was another one up here!”

Nightlock twists to face them, and Alec sees the cinders of Hellfire in his eyes, smoking out into spots of orange and ember. His hair is ruffled, wind-swept to the side, and his coat billows in the night, and something about him terrifies Alec for a moment, in the way that all men without choice are terrifying.

“He ran East, across the rooftops,” Nightlock says, and as he lowers his hand, a spasm rips down his forearm, and he has to clutch his wrist to keep himself still. “Veil followed.”

Luke nods and starts running, vaulting over the low wall that divides the building from the next.

Alec hesitates, staring at Nightlock.

“Go, Sentinel!” Nightlock shouts, but the power is crackling in his fingertips and the air is alight with it. “I’m fine! Go after them!”

Pain pulses in Alec’s temple - not the good pain, not the sort of pain that hunkers down and grounds him to reality. This is keen and piercing and makes his eyes water and the world blur at the edges. In his chest, his heart beats too fast and too loud, hammering like it wants to rip itself free, and as Alec presses his hand to his sternum to catch his breath, a gunshot rings out, splitting the night in two.

Nightlock’s head whips around in Luke’s direction. A second gunshot splinters against concrete,
and then, suddenly, a man comes flying over the rooftops, frantically trying to reload his gun.

The side of his face is carved up by claw marks, staining his blond hair red, but his Circle tattoo is plain to see.

It’s Hodge Starkweather. Alec recognises his face: he’s seen it in a dozen newspaper clippings, in Ragnor Fell’s files, on Luke’s corkboard at the hideout. In every redacted file Izzy has dug out of Idris’ archives. In every blurry CCTV image that has passed across Magnus’ desk -

Starkweather slams his fresh clip into his gun as Luke comes racing after him, but his shot flies wide as Nightlock throws out a hand and blasts the bullet out of mid-air.

Starkweather rears around, his eyes wild and panicked, but he’s surrounded - Alec and Nightlock ahead of him, Luke behind him, Veil appearing at his shoulder. Her hair is wild and unruly, her lip split and a bruise blooming on her forehead, but the look in her eyes is ignited. She presses her fingers to her temple and Starkweather collapses down onto one knee, a visceral scream of pain ripped out of his chest, but he swings out with his gun - bang, bang, bang -

And Nightlock deflects them all, stalking forwards, catching each rogue bullet in an invisible fist, tossing the casings aside with the clink of metal against concrete.

Veil’s squeezes her eyes closed and Starkweather crumples forward, his hand clenching around his stomach and his forehead pressed to the ground. He screeches like his insides are being twisted up into nothing, like they’re being pulled out of his chest, and maybe - God, maybe, that’s what Veil is making him see, because she wants him dead, she so clearly want him dead -

“Veil!” Alec shouts, “Stop! Stop, we need him alive! We need him to find Valentine, stop!”

Veil falters for a moment, her concentration slipping as her hand falls.

But it’s enough, and Starkweather grits his teeth, his finger already on the trigger before Nightlock can move or Luke can tackle him.

Bang.
The bullet whistles past Alec’s ear and Alec returns it with an arrow, piercing Starkweather’s chest, and he gasps, lurching forward. Alec grabs another arrow from his quiver and lets it fly, knocking the gun from Starkweather’s hand, but as Starkweather tips forward, blood splatters from his mouth, a gurgling, drowning sound of his lungs filling with fluid. His hand reaches for the arrow protruding from his chest, but his eyes roll back in his head and his body goes limp, collapsing to the ground with a final anticlimactic thud.

Alec exhales harshly, his bowstring pinched between his fingers. The string cuts into the pads of his fingertips.

His eyes flick to Nightlock, to Luke, to Veil, but they’re all staring back at him. Horrified.

“What?” he asks, and he looks down at himself, but there’s nothing but thick grime and ash clinging to his suit. “What are you-”

“Oh my God,” says Veil, and then she’s clambering over the rooftop and rushing forward, jumping over Starkweather’s body to get to Alec -

To get past Alec.

Oh no, Alec thinks. Oh God, no.

Alec turns slowly, but he already knows what he’s going to see, already knows where that stray bullet landed. And yet, it’s so much worse than a knife to the gut, than a hundred of Veil’s worst illusions mangling his insides; it’s like that sniper’s bullet again, lodged between his ribs, the cold punching the breath from his lungs, the shock taking root in his chest.

Oh God.

Simon.

It’s Simon, and he’s standing there, at the top of the fire escape, just behind Alec and Nightlock, and he’s got his hands pressed to his stomach and thick black blood is oozing out between his fingers.
“Sentinel -” he starts, but then his knees give out, and Veil is only just quick enough to catch him in her arms before he hits the ground.


Alec’s body moves before his head can catch up. He sprints to Veil’s side, dropping to his knees so hard that he hears something crack, and he cradles Simon’s weight, lowering him onto his back. Simon’s eyes flicker across Alec’s face without latching on, and behind his mask, his face is already stark-white and terrified.

“Sentinel, I -”

“Simon,” Alec says, shoving Simon’s hands away from his gut. His suit is already soaked in blood, staining the green and white with deep, viscous crimson that leeches outwards. Alec rips both his gloves off and presses them down onto the wound, putting all his weight behind it to staunch the blood flow. “Simon, listen to me -”

Veil takes Simon’s head in her lap, holding his temples between both her hands, and Alec is only vaguely aware of Luke crouching opposite him, seizing Simon’s wrist to feel his pulse.

Luke’s eyes widen as he feels the rhythm of Simon’s pulse stutter. Alec wishes he hadn’t looked up.

“Sentinel -” Simon wheezes, but his voice hitches. “Sentinel -”

“Simon, you’re okay,” Alec insists, pressing down harder on Simon’s stomach, but blood bulges from beneath his gloves. “It’s me, I’m here, you’re gonna be okay.”

“You can’t -” Simon says weakly, “You can’t use my name - we’re supposed - we’re supposed to be secret, you can’t -”

Simon grimaces in pain, screwing up his eyes behind those damn goggles of his - and Alec would tear them free of his face is he had a hand to spare - but Nightlock is there first, sliding onto his knees beside Alec, his coat flared out behind him and his shoulder a sudden heat against Alec’s. He reaches for Simon’s goggles and tosses them aside.
“Veil,” he says clearly, “Is there anything you can do? Distract him, take the pain away?”

“I can try,” Veil says. The wave of nausea consumes them all, and Alec lurches forward, fighting against the bulbous pressure that forces its way up his throat. Wolfsbane’s jaw works, a rivet of blood dried against his lower lip, and even Nightlock pales, his face grey behind his mask - but Simon lets out a shuddering breath, and Alec can only pray the hole in his stomach is numbed by whatever spell Veil casts over him like a shock blanket.

“That’s better,” says Nightlock, reaching up to sweep Simon’s sweaty hair from his forehead. “Simon. Simon, listen to me. Focus on my voice. Just my voice. Do you understand?”

Simon’s head tilts towards Nightlock, but his eyes are glassy and unfocused. A tear rolls down the side of his nose, clinging to the edge of his mask. It draws a stark line through the soot.

No.

No, this was not meant to happen.

Alec’s heart seizes inside his chest.

I wasn’t supposed to let this happen.

“Hold on, kiddo,” Luke says then, unpacking a supply of gauze bandages from his utility belt. “Keep your eyes open, stay with us. That’s it.”

Blood seeps hot and sticky through Alec’s fingers as Luke pulls out Alec’s gloves and replaces them with wadding, hastily strapping it down with strips of bandages that he tears free with his teeth. But blood soaks into the gauze, red spilling across the white faster than Luke can work, and the rush of panic leaves Alec lightheaded.

His vision swims. He presses down harder on Simon’s stomach.
Simon paws at Alec’s hands, his fingers closing around Alec’s wrists. Alec’s eyes snap back to Simon’s face and he knows he must look wretched.

“Sentinel ...”

Dry heat burns behind Alec’s eyes because, somehow, Simon still manages not to call him Alec.

(And at this point, Alec wouldn’t even blame him if he did.)

“I’m here,” says Alec, “You’re okay, it’s not as bad as it looks.”

*Lie.*

“I’m sorry,” Simon croaks, his voice hitching on the end of the word as Alec lessens the pressure as Luke lashes the last of the gauze across Simon’s stomach. Alec returns his hands as quickly as he can.

“There’s nothing to be sorry for,” says Luke, rummaging through his supplies for a large hypodermic needle. He unclips the cap with his teeth, shares a look with Veil, and then jams the point into Simon’s thigh.

Simon doesn’t even flinch. Either Veil’s spell is strong enough to blind him, or the pain is, and Alec doesn’t want to know which.

“No, I -” Simon chokes out. His grip is weak around Alec’s wrist, his strength fading. “Sentinel, I - I promised -”

“Don’t,” Alec warns, “Don’t you dare.”

“But I promised -” He splutters and a fine red mist coats his teeth. Alec cannot ignore the way Nightlock’s frown tightens. “I promised I wouldn’t get in your way -”
“And I’ll grill you about it on Monday when we’re back in the office and arguing over the coffee machine again,” Alec grits out, “You’re not getting out of this lightly. Just -”

*Just not now.*

Alec can’t do this. His grip on reality is slipping, and the city is already on fire around them, and the pain in his chest is driving him delirious -

“He’s going to bleed out if we don’t get him real help,” Nightlock murmurs, close to Alec’s ear. “Every emergency room in the city is going to be full tonight, but I know someone who can help. She’s a healer.”

“I’ll do anything,” Alec pleads, “Just tell me where to go -”

In the distance, the city rumbles, some beast alive and rampaging through its veins-turned-streets. Alec’s eyes fly to the horizon, searching for another eruption of smoke, another fireball exploding in the dark, but there’s nothing. The strobe of searchlights and sirens illuminate the underbelly of the sky in flashes of bright, blinding blue.

It’s chaos. It’s worse than chaos. And Alec has no idea what’s happening, he has no idea where Jace and Clary are, no clue if Magnus is safe, wherever he is. And he doesn’t want to think about how far away Nightlock’s friend might be, or how they’re going to get Simon there when the streets are full of violence and men who can blast fire from their hands -

He begins to shake - panic roots through him - but Nightlock’s hands join his where they press down on Simon’s stomach, his palms covering the backs of Alec’s knuckles, and he squeezes.

“Sentinel, stay with me,” Nightlock urges. “He needs you.”

Alec opens his mouth to say something, anything, but then his coms start buzzing, a blurt of white noise so loud it makes him flinch. Simon hears it too, because his face twists up into a worse grimace and he turns his head to the side, pressing his nose into Veil’s knee.

“- *Alec?!* ” Jace crackles across the frequency, “*Alec, for God’s sake, pick up! Alec!*”
Alec rips one hand away from Simon, holding his finger against his ear. Nightlock sits up on his knees to lean over Simon, squashing his hands down on the bandages, Alec’s other hand pinned beneath his fingers. Simon groans in pain, his head lashing from side to side, and Alec’s coms roar with static again.

“Arkangel?” says Alec, “Hey, Arkangel, come in, are you alright? Is everyone okay?”

“Alec!” Jace shouts again, but he’s breathing hard and it distorts his voice. “Alec, we’re at 1PP and it’s a shit show, you gotta get here as fast as you can! We need backup!”

“What’s going on?! Are you hurt, is Muse with you?”

“Alec, fuck! There’s - there’s Circle here, too many - the pyrokinetic! Crzzzzzt - ”

“Arkangel!”

Jace grunts, and then the feed explodes with static, a deafening crash and the scrape of gravel.


“Fuck,” Alec whispers, but his eyes fall back on Simon’s contorted face, and he feels it like a knife, carving his chest in two. He can’t leave Simon. He can’t be in two places at once. “They’re at 1PP, Arkangel said they need backup -”

He presses his finger hard against his ear. “Damnit Arkangel, come in!”

“There was an explosion at 1PP as well,” says Veil. Her fear betrays her, a tremor in her voice as she clutches Simon’s head between the flats of her palms, “I heard it on the police scanner.”
“That’s half an hour across the city, we’ll never get there in time,” Luke grunts, “Sentinel, is there anyone else you can call?”

“I’ll try -”

“I’ll go,” says Nightlock, “I wouldn’t have to run. I can get there quicker.”

Alec’s heart stops. “Nightlock, no -”

“My friend works at Bellevue, it’s not far,” Nightlock says severely, “She goes by Witchlight, but her name is Catarina. Ask for her and give her my name. She’ll help Simon, I promise.”

“No, I mean -” Alec tries, “You can’t -”

Nightlock gloves are wet with Simon’s blood as he pulls away and ushers Luke to take his place. He twists to face Alec on his knees, and considers his hand for a moment before reaching up to cup Alec’s cheek. The touch is fleeting, but it leaves a smear of red beneath Alec’s mask.

“Get him to safety,” Nightlock instructs, “And then find me afterwards. But I have to get to Valentine.”

“You better come back alive,” Alec says through gritted teeth. “Promise me.”

Nightlock summons a wilted smile.

“No-one has managed to kill me yet,” he says, and then he’s on his feet, and Alec is winded by the cold plunge of night that swoops into the space beside him. Nightlock stands tall, his body long and his coat billowing in the wind, a blood-red cape behind him. He flexes his fingers, invisible power crackling into the palms of his hands.

“Stay safe,” Nightlock says, “All of you.”

And then he’s gone, soaring up into the sky between one blink and the next, and Alec is left upon a
precipice, with the roar of the city streets far below him, an impassable cliff-face above him, and his friend bleeding out on the ground in front of him.

“Fuck,” Alec curses, “Fuck!”

New York has been torn open, disembowelled and ripped apart from gut to throat.

A thick carpet of ash covers the ground. Scraps of paper circle in the wind, and each gust brings with it a shower of shrapnel and the stench of burning. Car alarms blare in the dark; yellow cabs left abandoned with their headlights on line the sidewalk.

There are people squatting on the roadside covered in dust and dried blood, their eyes vacant, their bodies cut adrift. Glass litters the street from smashed windows and the frantic search for water or medicine or untended cash registers.

Ahead, crouched by a fire hydrant spewing water, two girls desperately try to revive their friend, shaking her shoulders and pushing on her chest. Her hairline is caked in blood; Alec doesn’t think she’s breathing. He has to look away. He can’t stop to help.

Alec has Simon’s arms and Luke has Simon’s legs and Veil is running alongside, talking to Simon a mile a minute, trying in vain to keep him from slipping under. Simon isn’t heavy, but he’s dead weight, pain bubbling away beneath his skin where even Veil can’t reach.

Distant police sirens grate beneath Alec’s skin. Adrenaline tramples him into the gutter and his arms burn, his thighs aching, but -

But he can’t drop Simon. Doesn’t matter that he can’t feel his hands anymore. Doesn’t matter.

Alec hoists Simon up beneath his arms but Simon cries out, his body folding in on itself, a fresh red stain darkening the brown gauze lashed around his stomach.
How much blood has he lost? Too much. Too much and it still hasn’t stopped.

He’s not gonna last much longer.

Alec doesn’t want to know if the bullet is embedded in stomach is slipping through his insides like butter; he doesn’t want to think about how much more blood he can afford to lose before it can’t be reversed -

“Hey, Simon,” Veil says then, shaking Simon’s arm. “Simon, Simon, are you still with us? We’re almost there, hold on -”

“Keep him talking,” Luke urges, “Don’t let him black out. We’re almost there!”

Alec looks up: the lights from Bellevue gleam in the distance, a tower of yellow windows lighting up the dark. Great long shadows weave across the street, catching on remnants of a helicopter shot down from the sky. Alec doesn’t know if it’s the same one as before, but its pieces are scattered and its body lies smoking in a crater carved out of the asphalt.

There are bodies strewn across the sidewalk: the pilot thrown clear, soldiers in their uniforms lying face down in the dirt, blown wide by the impact, limbs twisted and bent beyond recognition. Fire burns amongst the wreckage, lingering flames lickering at steel and aluminium but finding nothing to burn. They simmer and crackle and die, and then nothing.

Just silence.

The street is empty. There is no-one nearby, no-one crying in the shadow of looming skyscrapers, no-one frantically giving CPR on the sidewalk. No survivors.

“Fuck,” says Luke and Alec watches his claws shrink back into his fingers where he clutches Simon’s calves ever tighter. “What has that bastard done -”

There’s no time for that and they both know it. Luke looks back, makes eye contact with Alec, and Alec nods. They pick up the pace, and it jostles Simon, and his cry is sharp, but the doors of the hospital are within throwing distance.
Alec will drag them all there on his hands and knees if he has to. He is not letting anyone else die tonight that he can save.

The ER is like a war-zone: blood streaks the floor, orange beneath the fluorescent lights and reeking of iron. Mangled clothes and ruined scrubs have been trampled under thousands of pairs of feet, and every available surface - bed, chair, upturned filing cabinet - is crowded with someone writhing in pain or staring blankly at the ceiling with a look in their eyes that is unseeing. Paramedics burst through the doors shouting for a doctor, while the nurses battle through the onslaught of people vying for their attention, holding their blood-soaked hands aloft as dying men grab at their scrubs as they pass by.

The noise is like nothing else Alec has ever heard: all the screaming, all the crying condensed into one place, the screech of gurney wheels on a linoleum floor, the clatter of trollies being pulled to the floor and raided for bandages and morphine, the bang of doors opening and closing and opening and closing.

Veil pushes her way through the crowds, but she’s smaller and slimmer than Alec and Luke, and they lose her too easily to the assault of agony and dying breaths and the pungent stench of burned skin and bubbling blood.

There’s an old man laid out on a gurney against the wall, missing the lower half of his left leg. The skin is mutilated, the bone shattered, blown violently apart, and the mattress is drenched in blood. His face is sickly pale, breaths barely inflating his chest; his eyes, already closed. No-one is looking at him. Maybe a doctor has already decided he’s a lost cause. Maybe the nurses haven’t even got to him yet.

Dread fills Alec’s stomach like tar, pressing up against his diaphragm from the inside. A woman with a stethoscope around her neck pushes past Luke, and he drops one of Simon’s legs. Simon’s foot hits the floor and a broken shriek of pain is ripped from his mouth, his eyes screwed tight.

“We have to find Catarina,” Alec says, but God, he doesn’t even know what she looks like, how is he meant to spot her -
No, you do know what she looks like. You do.

She must be the same Cat that Alec met all those months ago, the one who saved Alec’s life on the couch in Magnus’ apartment, pulling a bullet from his chest as he slipped in and out of fever. The one with the healing magic, the blue glow, the kind face.

He remembers how she looked leaning over him, how her hands were cool.

Luke grunts, scooping Simon out of Alec’s arms and hoisting him up against his chest. There are people looking at them now, people staring at the pair of masked supers clutching their fallen friend between them, and maybe they’re thinking oh, this must be bad, it killed one of them too, or maybe they’re thinking, good, it’s what they deserve, but Alec refuses to meet any of their eyes.

He scans the crowd. He has to find Cat.


Alec nods and then he ducks into the crowd, slipping between bodies and dodging paramedics sprinting between the operating theatre and ambulance bay, their radios babbling with static and dispatch. He skids through a smear of blood on the floor and crashes into the reception desk, only to be shouldered out the way by someone else vying for attention. The sharp point of an elbow digs into his back, impaling a bruise. Another hand grabs him by the collar of his suit and jerks him backwards, shoving him into another man’s chest. A woman screeches in his ear, slapping at his arm, over and over and over again, hysterical -

Too many people. Too many people, and he doesn’t have time, because Simon’s not like him, Simon’s not been fucking shot before, Simon’s not got twenty years of practice in grin-and-bearing pain. He doesn’t have time, because Nightlock has run off after Jace and Clary, and they could be dying too for all Alec knows, and the city is falling apart at the seams before Alec can try to catch the pieces and -

And he hasn’t even spared a thought to Magnus, but it strikes him like a blow to the chest, lancing straight through his heart because, fuck - he doesn’t know where Magnus is, or if he’s okay, or -
Alec grits his teeth and hauls himself up onto the reception desk, and a hush falls across the crowd. And God, it’s so much worse, because suddenly he can see every white face streaked with blood and staring up at him, eyes wide and desperate and hoping, praying, that this stranger in a mask might be able to save them.

He should rip his mask off right here and now. Rid himself of the false promises. Show them all that he’s fucking terrified too.

He searches the mass of people for anyone he recognises. He sees a father cradling his son in his arms. A woman sobbing on the floor. A group of police officers carrying their sergent between them, but his uniform is torn and his skin burned and blackened. The first doctor Alec spots is a man in an overcoat, and the next is a nurse with bloody handprints splattered down her chest, but then -

He makes eye contact with a woman at the back of the crowd: blue scrubs, stethoscope tangled around her neck, dark braids piled up atop her head. She has a child in her arms, a boy with gauze strapped across his eyes, wailing into her neck, but for a split second, she stops and she stares back at Alec. Her nose flares, as if she’s sucked in a breath. Her eyes widen.

It’s Cat. She’s not as Alec remembers - he doesn’t remember anything beyond the feel of Magnus’ hands on his cheeks, and the blue glow of Cat’s magic knitting him back together, and her voice - but it’s her. He knows it is.

He sees it in her eyes.

Alec moves to leap down from the desk, but Cat holds up her hand - wait, she mouths. I’ll be right there.

“Wait!” Alec calls out, but it’s too late - a man grabs his leg, tugging frantically at his suit (“Help! Help me, please!”) and he looks down for only a second, but -

Then, she’s gone. Cat’s gone, swallowed up by the crowd again. Alec’s breath catches, the panic of drowning flooding his chest. His eyes dart from face to face, but he can’t see her anymore.

Where’d she go, where’d she go -
His heart pushes up into his throat, crushing his windpipe. His breathing quickens. He can feel himself losing it. He can -

Someone grabs his calf from the otherside of the desk and he twists sharply, ripping himself away from the touch - but Cat is behind him, stepping back and holding up her hands defensively.

“Woah, Sentinel, it’s me,” she says, and Alec almost fucking *cries*. He jumps down from the desk, both his knees buckling, and Cat grabs him by the arm before he can crumple to the ground.

“What are you doing here, are you hurt?” she demands. Her eyes rake over him, her hands pulling at his suit; he’s covered in blood that isn’t his. He looks like he’s just climbed out of a grave.

“Who sent you here? Is Magnus alright?”

*Magnus -*

“Nightlock sent us,” Alec says. “My friend got shot, he needs help, he’s - he’s lost so much blood - Nightlock said you’d help us -” *Like you helped me.*

“Where’s Nightlock?”

“He went after Arkangel and Muse -”

“He wasn’t hurt? He was okay?”

“*Yes ,”* Alec breathes. “Yes, he’s okay, but I need to go after him -”

“Take me to your friend,” says Cat. Her tone cuts through all the words still stuck to Alec’s tongue and he can only nod. She grips his arm, the circle of her fingers like a vice, and Alec pushes his way through the crowd.

His stomach churns and his vision begins to tunnel, blackening around the edges. He searches for Luke, for Veil, for Simon’s pained cries, and the panic rises. He tastes bile in his mouth and he looks back at Cat and she’s wearing a grimace too, but then -
“Sentinel! Sentinel, over here!”

He hears Veil before he sees her, squashed in a corner between two vending machines: Luke is on the ground behind her, Simon cradled in his arms but deathly still, oh God.

I’m too late.

“What happened?” Cat demands, pushing past Alec. Luke lays Simon on the floor and Cat drops to his side, her hands everywhere, splayed out across Simon’s chest, his torn-up supersuit, the bandages lashed around his stomach. Her fingers flutter across the gauze.

“He was shot?” she asks, “What kind of bullet, do you know?”

“It was the Circle,” Luke says. Simon groans weakly, but his eyes are still closed, his face deathly-white. “We were at Grand Central when it blew, but Valentine’s men were still in the area. We chased them all the way to the Penhallow building, but -”

“Standard forty-five calibre, I think,” Veil interrupts, squatting on her haunches next to Cat. Her voice waivers. “It happened so quick, he wasn’t even there, and then he was-”

“He’s lucky,” Cat says, but the crease between her brow deepens. She presses both her palms against the wound. “His spleen is ruptured but he hasn’t lost as much blood as he should’ve. I can feel Nightlock’s energy signature on him, he must’ve done something to slow the bleeding. He gave him just enough time.”

Cat looks over her shoulder at Alec. “Sentinel,” she says. Her hands begin to glow blue. “He’s going to be alright. I can save him.”

Alec feels like crying.

“Thank you,” he exhales. Thank you.
Alec escapes outside when the smell of blood becomes too much and his head begins to spin. His mouth tastes like death and he’s desperate for water, but on the one night he longs for the rain, it’s nowhere to be found.

The night is warm and dry and it doesn’t feel right. Smoke shrouds the city and fire has stolen all the moisture from the air and it cracks upon his lips. His hands, too, are crusted with Simon’s blood, dried and turned brown against his bare skin, caked beneath his bitten nails. He doesn’t know what happened to his gloves. Maybe he left them on that rooftop.

Alec stops, his gears grinding to a halt. His body sags beneath exhaustion. Blue ambulance light hemorrhages across his back and a paramedic charges past him, but he doesn’t feel it. He stares down at his hands, rubbing his thumb across the backs of his knuckles; the blood flakes away, revealing his old burn scars beneath, but his skin is still stained a faded red and it won’t shift, no matter how hard he digs in with his nail.

He exhales shakily and curls his fingers into his palms, clenching them at his sides. Above, a helicopter searchlight scours the side of the hospital. It’s too far away to hear.

It’s like being underwater - or maybe, maybe under blood, because whatever it is that pushes down on his shoulders is thicker, heavier, denser than water, too hot. Too cloying, stinking of iron, pulsing like a heartbeat.

He feels dangerously flammable. Dangerously burnable.

New York tilts on an axis before his very eyes, like the whole city has pitched sideways and he’s scrabbling for control but has no grip. He presses his nails into his palms, squeezing until he feels the dull cut of pain, but it’s nothing compared to the throb in the back of his head or the way the wind stings the cut on his cheek.

*The Circle are still out there. Jace and Clary need your help.*

A moment. Just a moment. He needs a moment to regain his sense of balance. For his eyes to refocus, for his hearing to come back to him. A moment to inhale and not cough up a cloud of
You think there’s time to catch your breath?

“Simon’s going to be fine,” comes Luke’s voice from behind him. Alec tenses, and then slowly uncoils, forcing himself to turn around. His fists remain clenched at his sides.

Luke looks just as weary as him. He’s splashed his face with water to wash away most of the blood and grime, but it only makes his bruises look worse.

“Catarina says he’s stable. She got the bullet out and stopped the bleeding and she’s put him up on a couch in the nurses’ room with an IV,” Luke continues. “She says she’ll check in on him when she can, but she’s got worse things to deal with. Her words.”

“Good,” says Alec, “That’s good.”

Luke smiles at him sympathetically. He reaches out and squeezes Alec’s shoulder where Alec’s quiver bites into his suit.

“But you don’t look so good,” he says.

“I’m fine,” Alec lies. “I need to go after Nightlock and the others.”

“Do you know where they are?”

“Arkangel and Muse were at 1PP when Nightlock left,” Alec sighs, running his hand through his hair. His palm comes back sticky with congealed blood. “I haven’t heard anything since then, and I don’t know if -”

“You don’t know if we should go after them?”

“I don’t know what’s going on,” Alec says, “I want to go after them, but if the Circle aren’t finished, then we need to find them first.”
“I spoke to Catarina and she says every hospital on the island is full to capacity but there’s more coming in. Fire and Rescue are still pulling people from the rubble. Sounds like there’s been four explosions so far, that we know of-”

“IPP, Grand Central, the Penhallow building, and Brooklyn bridge,” Alec surmises, “Plus at least two helicopters shot down.”


“It sounds like it’s going exactly as planned, that’s what,” says Veil, appearing at Luke’s side. In her arms, she has a small pile of candy bars raided from a vending machine. She offers one to Luke and then to Alec, but Alec shakes his head. He’s not sure he would be able to keep it down.

Veil shrugs, but Alec can see the thinly-masked fear behind her mask, the hollow look in her eyes.

He doesn’t say anything. She doesn’t need to be called out. It would only make him a hypocrite.

“Explosions at highly populated places,” Veil continues. She tears open a chocolate bar with her teeth and eats it in three bites, before tossing the wrapper over her shoulder. She chooses another one and eats that too, and then adds, “Everyone’s gonna be trying to get off the island. If Valentine’s still out there, I bet that’s where he’ll attack next.”

“He’s definitely still out there,” Luke mutters, “And you’re right. Lincoln Tunnel will be backed up by now. Might be a good place to go. Or the ferry, if it’s still taking people over to Staten Island. This isn’t just about damage, it’s about fear. Valentine wants to hurt people, and if we wanna find him, that’s where we need to be.”

Veil frowns. “There’s a but,” she says.

Luke folds his arms across his chest. “Sentinel wants to go after Nightlock,” he says, “I think we should go with him.”

Alec opens his mouth to protest. He’ll say that he’s not that selfish; he’ll argue that Nightlock and Jace and Clary can take care of themselves; he’ll insist that Sentinel and Wolfsbane and Veil are
needed elsewhere far more urgently because God only knows how many people might be trapped under rubble or bleeding out alone in a gutter or -

Or foolishly putting themselves in harm's way to save someone else. Like Simon did.

Like Magnus would.

*Don’t think about Magnus. Don’t think about Magnus.*

“Okay,” Veil interrupts, stuffing her other candy bars into her jacket pockets. She licks the chocolate from her fingers and then straightens her mask upon her face, her jaw set, her eyes determined. “So let’s get going. If Arkangel is going to get himself killed doing something stupid, I wanna at least be there to see it happen.”


Smoke rises from Brooklyn Bridge, rolling, billowing in the distance. Alec thinks there should be noise - some great roar that rumbles beneath his feet - but there’s only silence, and the beat of Alec’s feet is muffled by the flurry of ash that falls thicker as One Police Plaza draws closer. The World Trade Centre looms over the horizon - it’s a straight line down 1st Avenue from the hospital to here, but the eerie silence of Alec’s coms makes every stride feel twice as long.

His adrenaline has long since ebbed. And what replaces it is a cold that isn’t cold. It’s a shiver, an exhaustion clinging to his bones, and frostbite in his fingers that turns his hands numb, even if there’s sweat dripping down his back and the muscles in his legs burn.

Beside him, Luke huffs and puffs with every block they sprint past. Whatever fall he took wrestling that Circle member has fractured a rib, because his breaths are heavy and he holds his hand against his side and tries not to let his grimace show.

Veil is ahead of them, faster, lighter on her feet, but Alec can tell she’s running on fumes.
Her face is drawn but he can see in her eyes that she’s not looking at the road ahead. No, she’s thinking about the people she loves too, wondering if they’re okay, fighting that need to turn around and choose her friends and family instead, rather than Alec’s idiot partner who has never shown her the same consideration.

And yet she’s still here, running ahead of Alec towards the same danger, the same fire that has taken the lives of so many of her friends.

*Does that make us brave? Or just foolish?*

Alec knows what Nightlock would say. He knows what Magnus would say. He finds it’s the same thing: *you can be both.*

But what Alec wants isn’t to be brave or foolish - he wants to be able to split himself into parts. He’s never met a super who could clone themselves, but it sounds like a gift he could use: one self to search for the Circle before tip New York apart in a way that can’t be fixed; one self to run to Magnus’ loft and rap his dirty knuckles against the window; and one self to power on towards Nightlock. His heart is torn. It’s been torn for a very long time, and he’s not sure he remembers when it happened.

Before, it was so easy. There was Sentinel, and there was Alec, and that divide between the two parts of himself was so stark, but now -

Now, he’s not sure if it’s Sentinel or Alec who wants to run to Magnus’ loft and rip off his mask and lay the truth out on the floor; and he’s not sure if it’s Sentinel or Alec who is trying to swallow back the thick lump of panic in his throat at the thought of Nightlock being in trouble wherever he might be.

Alec’s only one man. He’s spread so thin. He’s meant to be saving other people too.

Alec’s coms splutter as Veil turns sharply onto Park Row, City Hall and 1PP rising up from out of the dark. White noise scatters like a lightning strike through Alec’s skull, and he winces, reaching to pull the bud from his ear, when the static becomes a voice he knows well.

“*Alec?”* says Izzy. The sound of her voice is enough, at last, to release the tightly-held breath that Alec bites between his teeth, one knot coming loose within Alec’s thready chest. He slows to a
stop; Veil glances back over her shoulder at him and wheels around as Luke steps up to Alec’s shoulder.

“Sentinel?” he asks, concern in his voice.

Alec nods his head and turns back to the coms.

“Alec?” Izzy asks again. “You there?”

“I’m here,” he exhales. He scrubs his hand across his mouth and jaw, only to find his fingers shaking. “I’m with Veil and Wolfsbane, we’ve just left Bellevue, on our way to 1PP. Simon’s been shot.”

“Oh, God, is he alright? Are you alright? I heard the explosion and then you disappeared and I thought -”

“Simon’s gonna be okay,” Alec interrupts, “Nightlock knew a healer and we got him to the ER in time.” He trails off, inhaling slowly. “Iz, this is - this is chaos. Does anyone know what’s going on?”

“I don’t know, Alec, I don’t know,” she says, “Idris is in an uproar, I’ve already sent Lydia and Raj to Grand Central - apparently there’s still hundreds of people trapped below ground. Aline and Helen are with Victor at the Brooklyn Bridge, and I think even mom and dad are suitting up. I’ll probably have to join them -”

“Have you heard from Arkangel and Muse? We’re trying to find them.”

“You … haven’t heard from them?”

Alec’s heart drops out of his chest, splashing into his gut.

“No, I - Arkangel radioed me earlier, it sounded like they were in trouble but I couldn’t leave Simon, so Nightlock went after them -”
“I haven’t been able to get a hold of them either.”

Alec glances up, but Luke and Veil are already staring at him, the dread on their faces mirroring that which they see on Alec’s.

“Coms are all over the place,” Izzy adds, “I think someone’s knocked out the radio tower just to make it even harder for people to know what’s going on. I’ve been trying to get in contact with you all night, and I just thought - fuck, Alec, I - oh. Jace’s suit tracker is still working -”

“Where are they?”

“They’re on the other side of the island, heading North through Greenwich Village … why would they-” Izzy begins, but then she hesitates. “Alec, something’s not right.”

“What? What is it?”

“Clary’s tracker just dropped out of range. It - it just vanished. And Jace’s … he’s not flying, Alec. But he’s moving too fast to be running -”

“What? That doesn’t - fuck. They must be in a vehicle,” Alec says, “Fuck, they’re in a vehicle, Iz -”

“Why would they be in a vehicle, there’s no traffic moving in or out of Manhattan, and they’re not even heading towards - oh God.”

“Put an SOS out on Arkangel’s frequency. If he silences it without answering -”

Luke clamps his hand on Alec’s shoulder then, his face determined. Alec tenses, the breath that escapes him withering and forced, and he won’t look Luke in the eye, he can’t -

He’s going to tell Alec exactly what he doesn’t want to hear.
“The Circle will have them,” Luke says, “They’ve probably been taken.”

“Alec -” says Izzy.

“God fucking damnit,” Alec hisses. He wants to argue that Jace wouldn’t be so fucking stupid as to get caught -

But Alec knows that’s not true. He knows Jace. He knows Jace will have done something reckless to keep Clary safe and it will have cost him because he doesn’t have Alec watching his six tonight and there’s no-one to protect his back.

_Their trackers are still moving_, he tells himself. _They’re still alive, the Circle haven’t killed any Corporates before -_

“Fuck,” Alec breathes, “Fuck, Nightlock is with them, Iz.”

“Jace is not answering ,” says Izzy, “Clary’s not either. They’ve stopped moving - you know those warehouses over on West 29th by the Hudson-”

“Nightlock doesn’t wear coms,” Alec says, “I have to go after them.”

“Alec, no, wait, you can’t go alone! Let me put the word out, I’ll tell Lydia to come find you - or maybe I can suit up, I can be there in half an hour -”

“There’s no time-”

“You can’t chase after them guns blazing, Alec, that’s suicide -”

“What fucking choice do I have?!”

He doesn’t mean to shout, but the silence afterwards is damning.
Alec sucks in a sharp breath. The pressure in his chest doesn’t abate. He presses his finger back to his ear and turns away from Luke and Veil, ducking his head.

“Iz, listen to me,” he urges, “I can get to them in fifteen minutes if I run. I’m the closest. I can’t wait around for Lydia or Raj or you to get here, this is - this is our brother, this is -”

This is Nightlock.

“You’re …” Izzy starts, but her voice hitches. “You’re too self-sacrificing for your own good, do you know that?”

“Nightlock’s in danger. I have to help him.”

“I know you do. I know. I just wish that you wouldn’t -”

“Tell me where I need to go.”

“Jace’s tracker is stopped just outside that old meat packing warehouse up by the docks - you know it?”

“Yeah, I do. I’m on my way.”

“Stay safe,” says Izzy, “Check back in when you’re close and I’ll find you a way in if you need it. I love you, Alec.”

“I love you too, Iz.”

Alec leans down and grabs his bowie knife from the back of his boot. The blade is dark, muted steel uncatching the glint of the city, and it looks duller than Alec knows it is. He slides it snugly into the back of his belt.
His bow fits less easily into his palm; it doesn’t sit right without his gloves, his hand clammy where he closes it around the grip. He pings the string for good measure. It doesn’t make a sound, but snaps back against his bare knuckles.


Alec turns back to them, steeling his expression.

“I’m going after Nightlock and the others,” he says, “You two should get out of here. People are still trapped at Grand Central, you should head there.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Veil snaps. She takes a step towards Alec, her chin held high and a sneer on her face. “What makes you think you can just ditch us here and run off to face the Circle by yourself, huh?”

“Veil, enough,” Luke says gruffly, before looking to Alec. “Son, this is serious. I’m not letting you do this alone. We’re coming with you.”

“Arkangel and Muse are Corporates,” says Alec, “You don’t owe them anything. You don’t owe me anything. You don’t need to risk your safety for them, especially when the Circle wants you all dead. I can’t ask you to do that.”

“Yeah, and you’re forgetting something,” Luke replies, “We’re your friends and you need our help. That’s reason enough to risk our lives.”

“And even if it weren’t,” add Veil, “Nightlock is one of us and I sure as Hell aren’t gonna let him die for his stupid-ass obligation to Arkangel just because he’s sweet on you.”

“That’s not -”

Alec stares at him, cataloging the bruise that blooms purple and red on his swollen jaw, the blood that has dried on his split lip, the tears in his suit from the fight on the rooftop; he looks tired. So very tired.

“We’re your friends,” Luke continues, “And we’re Nightlock’s friends. That’s true too. But all of us - whether we’re Corporate, or ex-Corporate, or vigilante, or whatever - all of us together are responsible for this city. For the Circle. For each other, even if it means putting our lives on the line. That’s what having these damn powers means. That’s our responsibility. And if we want to live in a city where none of this shit happens, then we gotta be the ones who stop it from happening. It’s not someone else’s grunt work.”

Alec swallows thickly. Veil stares at him, waiting for an answer, but Luke digs through his utility belt and pulls out a spare pair of gloves. He holds them out to Alec.

“We don’t have time to discuss the details,” Luke says. He pushes the gloves into Alec’s waiting hands. “You either accept that we’re coming with you or you don’t, but if it comes down to a fight against the Circle, I have been waiting twenty years to get my hands on Valentine Morgenstern and I am not about to give that up. We’re coming with you. Now, let’s gear up and get going.”

“Okay,” says Alec. He stares hard at the gloves, rubbing his thumb over the leather - not as soft as those he sacrificed to stop Simon from bleeding to death - and it’s a fight to drag his eyes up to Luke’s.

But what he finds there is the look of a man who doesn’t blame Alec for anything. The look of a man who wants to fight with Alec, not against him. A man capable of putting aside the people that he loves because he still loves the city just the same, despite everything it’s put him through.

*New York is his home. It’s the home of the people that he loves. Have you ever thought of that?*

Luke doesn’t see the same divide as Alec; his heart is not torn. Luke and Wolfsbane are one and the same person, and that person is determined to see this through to the end.


Chapter End Notes
Listen. Listen. I don't know how long it takes to run across Manhattan and I don't want to know. Let's just pretend it's totally feasible to run the length of the island in like 20 minutes and that they're all super fit and can run these great distances while having broken ribs and head wounds and potential concussions and all that. They're superheroes!

Anyway, look at me writing a chapter that's like 90% action when I hate writing action? You can do anything you put your mind to, kids, but it may be riddled with spelling mistakes and typos. But that aside, I've been looking forward to getting to this point! This chapter, and then chapters 16 and 17 make up a trilogy that all cover this one night. This is it! Finally made it to the big finale! I can't believe I have basically finished a fic, that never happens!

One of my fave things about this chapter is the culmination of the Alec and Simon story line and seeing how Simon has become someone Alec cares about, just as much as his family and Magnus. I really enjoy writing them as they're excellent foils for each other, but I was especially looking forward to having them work together as their alter egos and seeing a more serious side of Simon, because damn, you don't get into this superhero business without suffering some trauma. Sorry, Simon.

Thank you so much for all the feedback from last time! I can't express how much it helps to read people's thoughts and feelings on this fic, as everyone has a different take on the moral issues and it's so interesting!

Visit me on tumblr and shout in my inbox, especially if you have questions! Please reblog the tumblr post for me too!

I'm also on Twitter if you want to come chat about the fic ... and boy, do I love talking about this fic. Tweet as you read with the hashtag #ficacoldnight! :D

Please leave a kudos if you made it to the end, and drop me a comment with your thoughts, your favourite line, your hopes for what will happen next, your advice for poor old Alec ... I would be forever grateful for it! If you want an alert next time there's an update, please hit that subscribe button!

Until next time, in which Alec, Luke, and Veil mount a rescue mission, and the masks finally come off. It's about time, don't you think?
superman crosses the rubicon

Chapter Summary

“So,” says Valentine, “Shall we see who’s under the mask?”

Chapter Notes

With Jace, Clary, and Nightlock kidnapped by the Circle, Alec, Veil, and Luke mount a rescue mission.

&&&

Tweet along with #ficacoldnight!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying,

Whom shall I send,

and who will go for us?

Then said I,

Here am I; send me.

Book of Isaiah, 6:8

Warm.

It's almost Winter and the night is warm, uncomfortably warm, smoke and charred ash drawn across the city towards the river. It rolls across the waves like oil, spreading out across the water in silence as the city behind it broils, and the smell of saltwater is suffocated beneath that of hot metal. The air is still, soot caught between streets where the wind doesn't reach its plundering hands.
It makes Alec’s skin feel dirty. A thin layer of grime clings to his suit, to his mask, to the slips of his skin that are exposed to the elements, and it’s like an itch. He can feel it flaking, dislodged by each hot puff of wind that New York exhales against the back of his neck. Each breath smells of rubble, burning.

The street is deserted, a thick snake of black asphalt cutting through the dark. Waves beat up against the quayside with a quiet hiss; as Alec shifts, the leather of his suit squeaks far louder, whining in the dark.

Veil, crouched in front of him, looks back over her shoulder with a glare.

Ahead of them is a warehouse. Alec has passed it by so many times: nondescript, steel-framed with small, dark windows, no lights inside. A large To Let sign lies upended on the sidewalk, and the metal shutter is rolled all the way down to the ground. A black SUV is parked in front, windows tinted and engine cold.

But there are two men standing either side of the only door into the building, and that’s enough for Alec to know they’re in the right place.

The tracker in Jace’s suit hasn’t moved in the last twenty minutes. He’s in there. He’s in there, and Alec doesn’t know if he’s alive or dead, or if Clary’s with him, or if Nightlock -

*Or if the Circle didn’t just leave Nightlock to bleed out in a gutter somewhere.*

Alec doesn’t want to think about it. He can’t. Nightlock could be halfway across the city and alone and Alec would have no idea -

His coms remain deathly silent but his pulse beats frantically in his ears. He squeezes the grip of his bow in his hand until his knuckles twinge in pain.

The need to scratch his skin off persists.

“Both armed,” whispers Luke. Sunk into the shadow of the building that towers above them, he’s almost invisible, no more than a shift caught from the corner of the eye. He tips his chin at Alec,
and then points at the two guards. “Both packing. One in the waistband, one under the arm. Second guy’s got a spare clip in his jacket.”

Alec squints into the dark. Streetlamps bath the sidewalk in pools of eerie, soupy haze, too pale to be yellow. In the distance, Jersey glimmers, spilling yellow across the river in a way that looks like fire licking the water. Alec narrows his eyes, following one of the guards as he pushes away from the door and taps a loose stone with his foot, knocking it into the gutter. He moves awkwardly. Even at a distance, Alec knows the way a man’s stance changes when he’s hiding a weapon.

“They’re Circle,” Alec murmurs, tapping his fingers against the slope of his neck, “They might have powers. We need to be careful.”

“I can blind them,” Veil says, but Luke shakes his head.

“No, we can’t give them the chance to alert anyone else. We have one shot. It has to be quick and silent.”

He turns to Alec and nods at Alec’s bow.

“How fast can you take two out?”

“Fast enough,” says Alec. He pulls an arrow from his quiver and notches it in his bow, drawing the string back to his mouth. He lines his sights down the length of the arrow, following one the guards as he offers the other a cigarette. The glow of orange embers is like a homing beacon; Alec could shoot the cigarette out of his hand if he wanted to.

But he doesn’t want to. Alec is not shooting to maim tonight.

He lets the string go and the arrow whistles through the air, piercing the guard with the cigarette as he steps in front of the other man. The arrow disappears through his back and, like foil, he crumples to his knees without so much as a gasp, his body pitching sideways. The glow of his cigarette is extinguished beneath him.

Alec reaches back for a second arrow, but he pauses with the fletchling pinched between his finger and thumb.
The other man stands frozen, both hands raised in front of him. He looks up, and Alec notches his second arrow, but he doesn’t loose it.

Alec’s first arrow protrudes from the man’s chest, feathers slick and weighed down with viscera. Thick, black blood drips onto the ground.

The man opens his mouth but no words come out; a thin trickle of blood bubbles over his lips, rolling down his chin. His eyes glaze over and he drops like a leaden weight, the thud of his body dull against concrete.

“Nice shot,” Veil remarks, nodding her head at Alec, but Luke dives past both of them, sprinting across the street.

Alec holds his breath, his bowstring held taut between his fingers as he watches the front of the warehouse for any sign of movement, his eyes fixed on Luke’s back - but silence pervades. The wind howls high above their heads; the distant city crackles; sirens wail far, far away from here.

He looks to Veil, but she’s already gone, jogging across the street. Alec inhales deeply, slinging his bow across his shoulder, and with one last look at the hundreds of windows that overlook them like beady black eyes in the dark, he runs after her, the beat of his feet silent on the ground.

Luke grabs the second guard by the shoulders and flips him over, yanking Alec’s arrow out of his chest and snapping it in half.

“He’s dead. Get rid of this,” he says, handing Alec the arrow as Alec arrives at his side. The shaft is greasy with blood and the feathers tarred and Alec grimaces. “We can’t have anything that leads back to us.”

Luke reaches into the dead man’s jacket and grabs his handgun, detaching the magazine and counting the cartridges inside the clip. His jaw tightens, and then he reaches into his utility belt and pulls out a silencer, screwing it onto the end of the barrel.

He presses the nose of the gun to the arrow wound in the dead man’s chest and pulls the trigger. The body jolts, but no more blood spurts forth. Luke turns to the other guard and does the same: the point-blank shot is muffled, the bullet absorbed by the concrete beneath their feet. The smell of cordite pricks Alec’s nose.
Luke tucks the gun into the back of his belt and begins rummaging through the man’s pockets. He pulls out a thin white keycard and holds it up to the glow of the streetlamp.

“Gotcha,” he whispers. “Veil, listen at the door, see if you can hear anyone.” He flicks the card towards her. She snatches it out of midair with ease. “Sentinel, help me hide the bodies.”

If Nightlock were here, he’d make a quip about helping a police captain disturb a crime scene. If Nightlock were here, he would’ve blasted those two men into the river with just a flick of his hand, and then ripped the warehouse apart with his fingertips.

*If Nightlock were here -*

Alec grunts as he grabs one of the bodies beneath the arms and begins dragging it towards the shadows, a dark trail of blood leaving a streak along the sidewalk. The hiss of the river lapping against the quayside is like a whisper, the same goading words repeated over and over again, but he ignores it, gritting his teeth as he pushes the body over the edge and into the water with a heavy splash.

Blood slathers his gloves. It’s a heavy-handed metaphor that he doesn’t need tonight.

Beside him, a second splash as Luke shoves the other body into the river. Alec glances at him: Luke’s mouth is turned down into a thin line and he frowns, staring down at the churning water, before he wipes his hands across his suit and shrugs the thought from his shoulders as if little more than a shirt.

Alec’s gut clenches on nothing. *If only it were so easy.*

He turns away from Luke and presses his finger to his coms.

“We’re here,” he murmurs. “Abandoned meat-packing warehouse across from West 29th?”

“*You found a way in?*” Izzy crackles.
“Does the front door count?”

“Unbelievable,” she says, “I pulled the building blueprints from the records room. It hasn’t been abandoned for long. Two doors in the lobby - one will lead you into the back, other goes into the main warehouse.”

“What about cover?”

“Not sure. Hopefully the place hasn’t been completely gutted so you’ll be able to stay out of sight. There’s no CCTV system as far as I can tell.”

“I’ll manage,” Alec replies. “And Arkangel?”

“Hasn’t moved. He’s about three hundred feet from where you are now. Clary’s still - Clary’s still offline. Alec ...”

“I know.”

Luke nods at Alec and they follow the blood trail back to the front of the building. Their footprints mar the ground, deep red and tacky, and the sidewalk glistens blackly where blood has already seeped into the cracks in the paving stone.

Alec swallows every ugly thought back, squashing them down into his stomach. He inhales through his nose, but the night is drenched in iron now, iron and smoke, and there’s no way to be rid of the taste on the back of his tongue.

Simon’s blood is still caked beneath his fingernails. The back of his head still throbs, blood matted in his hair. His suit remains streaked with grey ash. The way his heart is rabbiting, panic simmering just below the top layer of his skin, desperate to boil over -

A part of him fears the man he’s going to see in the mirror at the end of all this. If there’s an end to all this.

If he makes it there at all.
Veil crouches in front of the door to the warehouse, pressing the keycard against the reader. Luke signals with his hand, and Alec notches an arrow in his bow, and Veil holds a single finger against her lips, gently pulling the door handle downwards.

The card reader flashes green and the door swings open.

Alec holds his breath. His trigger finger trembles on his bowstring, but there’s only darkness, the quiet creak of hinges, and Luke’s relieved expulsion of breath at his side. No shouting, no gunfire.

Silence, only. It makes every hair on the back of his neck stand up on end.

Luke pulls a flashlight from his belt; the cold shaft of light cuts into the dark, but the room has been stripped bare: there are holes in the walls where electrical wires have been torn out of the plasterboard, dents in the floor where furniture has been dragged out into the street. The ground is scattered with loose leaves of paper that crinkle beneath their boots. The ceiling hangs low and Alec hunches his shoulders; the trapped smell of packing peanuts, dust, and rotten meat makes him wrinkle his nose.

Luke clenches his jaw around the urge to gag. He turns his nose and mouth against his shoulder, and passes the beam of his flashlight across the empty room, stopping on the door that leads into the storage hall.

An old desk chair is jammed beneath the handle. Tracks cut through the dust and strewn paper on the floor. It’s been put there recently.

Luke turns off his flashlight and motions to the door, and Alec nods, drawing his bowstring back to his mouth; his breath tickles the fletchling; the feathers brush against his upper lip. Veil slowly eases the chair out from beneath the door handle and Luke presses his ear against the gap between the hinges, frowning as he listens.

“Voices,” he mouths, “Not close. Open it.”

Veil pulls on the door handle. The hinges creak. Luke reaches back for the handgun tucked into his belt, and Alec’s heart beats loudly, a steady, echoing drumbeat. He doesn’t dare breathe, but -
But there’s nothing. Still nothing. The sound of the wind rumbling against the shutters, the distant
cry of sirens, and gloom, nothing but gloom, opening up into the storeroom. There are no footsteps.
No-one hears the creak of the door and comes running.

Alec holds his bowstring taut against his mouth and creeps forward. He feels Luke follow close
behind, footsteps silent on the hard ground.

*Where is everyone -*

The first thing Alec notices is the cold. His breath escapes him as a hiss, clouding into white, and
he can hear the hum of a compressor, draining the heat from the room.

But the city’s faint orange glow slips in through high windows, and there: *the colour of fire .*
Alec’s fingers are numb and yet the flicker of hot shadows dance across the endless rows of steel
shelves lined up before him, and he should be able to feel the blaze, smell the smoke, but it’s like
the cold has extracted him from his own body, and his feet move on instinct, forward.

The metal shelves reach up to the ceiling and tower over their heads, stacked with cardboard boxes
and wooden crates marred with frost where they have thawed and refrozen again. The smell of
meat clogs Alec’s nose, but it’s the dark and the cold that sticks to the soles of his boots, sinking
into the rubber treads.

(A memory resurfaces: a night on the quay like this one, a night stepping through the remains of a
burned-down warehouse. The space of two strangers between him and Nightlock -

‘So you can control kinetic energy?’ Alec had asked.

‘Control, shape, manipulate, as long as I can physically move to transform it,’ Nightlock had
replied. ‘It’s easier to generate my own kinetic energy and use that, but I can transform heat and
light too. Not so useful when you live in a city where it’s always raining, but beggars cannot be
choosers.’

Alec feels the cold deep in his bones. The tip of his arrow glints in the low light. His stomach
clenches and the taste in his mouth now -

Dread. He knows it well.
Alec flattens his back against shelves and peers into the aisle that cuts down the centre of the storeroom: it’s empty, its silence eerily hollow. At the other end of the warehouse, a pale yellow light flickers unnervingly.

Luke presses against Alec’s shoulder and leans in close. “People at the far end. Half a dozen, maybe more. I can smell them,” he murmurs, but the look in his eyes is already feral, his pupils two long beast-like slits. Power ripples in the clench of his jaw. “You go first, I’ll take the rear. Put Veil in the middle and stay low.”

Alec nods and Luke gestures for Veil to get between them, but Veil hesitates. Alec catches her eye, the brief moment between one steeled expression and the next where her mask slips and Alec sees her for what she is: young, as young as Izzy, and way out of her depth as her fingers tap incessantly against her thigh.

She’s not armoured in leather and Kevlar like Alec and Luke, not trained by Idris to push herself to bleeding, and then further. She doesn’t have claws that extend from her hands or an arrow pinched between her fingertips - she’s in jeans and a jacket. Sneakers. Earrings.

Alec reaches into his belt for his bowie knife and hands it to her without a word.

It’s not enough. The set of her mouth is determined, but her eyes are wide, even as she closes her fist around the knife. It’s not enough, and they both know it, but he’d rather she have something to protect herself than nothing, in case her illusions fail.

Luke tips his head in the direction of the voices and Alec ducks into the next aisle, his breath mushrooming in the cold air.

Ahead, the faint yellow-white glow flickers like fluorescent lights often do. It’s not fire - there’s no crackle, no smoke, no orange aftertaste - but the air feels thicker now, a weighted pressure pushing down on Alec’s shoulders.

He creeps from each stack of shelves to the next, his bowstring taut in his fingers. The sound of voices reaches him at last - a hum, wordless, but then louder. A shout. Barked commands. The scrape of feet dragging across the floor and the loud clang of a chair knocked over.

Muffled yelling. More clatter. Another vicious snarl, ricocheting from floor to ceiling, and the
tension in the air snaps.

Alec flinches like he’s been smacked across the back of the neck, sucking back a gasp. He looks back at Veil, but she’s staring at the knife in her hands, and Luke is crouched on his haunches, his ear pricked as he listens intently, and Alec doesn’t think either of them felt it.

He doesn’t want to think about what that means.

Alec presses his finger to his ear. “Iz,” he whispers, “We’re in. Where are my exits?”

“Beside the door you came in through, there’s a fire exit at each corner of the storeroom onto the street,” Izzy replies. Her voice catches, out-of-breath, and Alec can hear the tell-tale sound of boots pounding on the floor. She’s running. “Loading docks at either end of the building. Windows too.”

“Windows are thirty feet off the ground,” Alec replies. “Too high to reach in a hurry.”

“Jace has incendiaries in his belt,” she says. “If you find him, use them. If they haven’t been taken-”

“Okay,” Alec says, stopping Luke and Veil with his palm. Up ahead, the light grows brighter and it makes their shadows stretch across the floor. “We’re moving in, I’ll let you know when I have eyes on-”

He’s cut off by a shout, and then the sickening screech of a chair dragged across the floor. It scrapes down Alec’s spine like nails on a chalkboard.

“I said, shut up!”

Alec flattens himself against the shelf, his blood surging into his ears - he holds his arrow taut as Veil presses her fingertips to her temple - but they haven’t been seen.

“Don’t you ever stop!” the man shouts again, and it’s followed by a grunt of pain and another sharp scrape of a chair. “Shut up or I’ll make you!”
A dull *smack*. The unmissable sound of a palm slapping someone across the face, and then a gasp, a muffled cry, as if someone is trying to kick and scream and yell with gag stuffed in their mouth to keep them silent, but -

Behind him, Luke hisses, a growl escaping through his teeth.

It sounds like Clary. It sounds like the way she always bites back pain when she’s hurt, the way she wipes her bloodied lip on the back of her hand and pretends she’s not out of breath when she’s running after Alec, but Alec can always tell -

He isn’t hearing things. It sounds like her.

She’s still alive.

*She’s still alive but the Circle have her.*

Alec pulls back his bowstring as far as it will go - and then further, until it shivers with elastic potential. Slowly, he centres himself, silencing the howl of the wind outside and Veil’s shallow breathing and the click of Luke’s claws on the floor. He focuses on the push and pull of the familiar power that drenches the air, the grasp of a hundred pairs of invisible hands reaching for him and squashing him and dragging him in all directions - and then he peers around the corner.

The breath held in his mouth withers -

And then dies.

Beneath the flood of fluorescent light, in between forklifts and wooden pallets and men dressed in black with circular tattoos splattered like bruises against their necks, there are three chairs in the middle of the floor.

Jace is strapped to the chair on the far left, flayed of his wings, his head lolled onto his shoulder. Ropes bind his ankles to the chair legs and pull his arms behind him; his wrists, lashed together, and his shoulders, wrenched back and twisted out of shape. His face, too, is smeared with blood, coating his blonde hair red. There’s a rag clenched between his teeth.
His breathing is shallow; Alec counts each rise of his chest, but it’s too slow, it takes too much effort.

Jace is hurt. He’s really hurt.

But tied to the chair next to Jace is Clary, and Alec doesn’t know how his stomach can drop any further, but it does, it does, because she’s awake, and her eyes are wide and brimming with angry tears as she struggles in vain against the bonds that wrench her hands behind her back. Her red hair is tangled, wild about her face, and the ropes lashed across her chest cut into her neck, her skin burned with red hangman’s marks.

She heaves against the ropes, pulling and pulling, thrashing her head from side to side, but there’s no give. The rag in her mouth is soaked with spit. Still, she tries to scream.

“I said quiet!” screeches the man who stands behind her, kicking at the back of her chair, but it just makes Clary scream louder against the gag. He doesn’t have the Circle brand like the rest of them, but oh - his blonde hair, his thin jaw, the anger simmering like Hellfire in his eyes - Alec knows that. Alec knows that too fucking well.

Johnathan Morgenstern.

The man from the alleyway all those weeks ago. The bastard with fire ablaze in the palm of his hand and unrepentant bloodlust between his teeth.

Their fucking spectre of a pyrokinetic - he’s here. He’s right fucking here, right in front of Alec, but with Clary’s hair clenched in his fist -

“I’ll burn your tongue out of your mouth if you don’t shut up!” Johnathan yells, stamping his boot so loud on the ground that Clary flinches away. Tears stream from her eyes, but it’s the brutal gash along her hairline that Alec stares at in horror: the cut is deep, down to the bone, and the blood bubbles thick and black across her pale skin, seeping into her hair and sliding down her forehead, collecting on the ridge of her mask.

Because she is still in her mask, and so is Jace, but it’s not a relief, because as Alec drags his eyes from Jace to Clary, and then to the third chair -
Alec’s heart stops beating. His arrow falters, his bowstring slackens.

It’s Nightlock.

It’s Nightlock, right where Alec expected him to be, but hoped, _prayed with all his might_ , that he wouldn’t be.

Nightlock’s mask spans the bridge of his nose, shiny with blood. A dark red welt blooms on the underside of his jaw and a trail of blood trickles down his chin from his split lip. There’s rubble in his hair and grey ash smeared across his coat, but his sleeve is torn, ripped from cuff to elbow, and beneath, his suit is soaked in blood too. His legs are strapped to the chair, but his chest is bound by heavy steel chains, squeezing his arms to his side, cutting into his neck, yanking his head back. His eyes, fixed on the ceiling and - and he can’t move.

He can’t move. They’ve tied him so tightly that he can’t move, he can’t lift his arm, he can’t even twitch one finger. They know exactly what Nightlock can do with the twitch of one finger.

(‘ _So you can control kinetic energy?’_

‘_Control, shape, manipulate, as long as I can physically move to transform it._’ )

“Fuck,” Alec hisses between his teeth. He watches as Nightlock’s nose flares as he tries, and fails, to shift against his bonds. The chains cut deep into his shoulders and squeeze against his windpipe, pulling tighter around his throat.

And it’s Alec left feeling like he can’t fucking breathe. “Fuck. Fuck, Iz, they have all three of them.”


Alec moves before he can think, before he can breathe at all, diving for the stack of crates and wooden pallets closest to the three chairs. He freezes, chest flush against the floor, his bow white-knuckled in his hand, but Johnathan keeps talking, his glare fixed on Clary.
“Enough! You can cry all you want, but no-one’s gonna hear you!” Johnathan snaps, thumping the back of Clary’s chair, kicking the small of her back. She lets out a gasp that’s swallowed by her gag, and then she starts coughing, choking on her own spit and Alec thinks she’s going to suffocate.

*The bastard. I’m gonna kill him -*

Alec sweeps up onto his knees and readies his arrow again, finding a shot between the crates. But suddenly, Luke’s hand is on his wrist, wrapped around his bow grip, pushing his bow down.

“Wait,” Luke warns, knelt at Alec’s side. His expression is stormy, but the thunder in his eyes, the snarl growing on his lips is not for Alec.

Veil slides up to Alec’s other side, bracing herself with a palm flat on the floor.

“There’s three guards here, and one more by the fire escape past Nightlock,” she whispers, nodding her head. Her eyes move to Johnathan. “Tell me that’s not the *fucker* who’s been setting people alight -”

“That’s him,” Alec hisses, but Luke still pushes his bow down, and Alec wants to fight against it with all his might. “Behind Muse. That’s *him* .”

“I’ll blind him,” Veil threatens, “And then you put an arrow right between his eyes, it’s what he deserves -”

She’s cut off by the rumble of a car slowing to a halt outside. Veil shrinks down next to Alec, but Luke sits up, straining his ear as the engine is cut and car doors are slammed. He lets go of Alec’s bow and reaches back for the gun in his belt, but his hand pauses at the sound of another car pulling up behind the first, and then a second, and a third, and the bright beams of headlights roam across the ceiling through the high windows.

Footsteps echo on the ground outside. Alec looks to Luke and Luke holds up both his hands: *at least ten people*, he indicates, and then mouths, “maybe more”.

Alec peers through a gap in the crates: Johnathan has moved away from Clary, speaking now in hushed tones to one of the guards. Clary tugs at the ties around her wrists, straining against the rope across her throat; her eyes dart to Nightlock, and Alec watches the frantic look they exchange, the quiver in Clary’s jaw as she pleads for Nightlock to do something, please, and the tiny shake of Nightlock’s head that his own bonds allow.

The air pulsates, and Alec knows what it is now: Nightlock calling to the energy that swirls around him, summoning it to his hands but with nowhere to throw it. The fluorescent lights overhead flicker with the same tremble that presses against Alec’s skin. The cold grows ever colder.

None of it matters. Not if Nightlock can’t move.

Outside, the hum of conversation is carried like a current, a mechanical thrum in the already charged air. A single set of footsteps ring out on the hard ground. Then, the door in the corner of the building swings open.

A man strides through the doorway. He unclips an empty holster from his belt and tosses it to the floor, and rolls his shoulder free of an ache, flexing his fingers and cricking his neck.

Alec knows him. Alec has spent too many nights staring at his picture on Luke’s corkboard in the hideout; too many nights crowded around Izzy’s desk, squinting at out-of-date records; too many nights sat with Magnus in the office pawing over what little information they could find at City Hall.


Valentine is shorter than Alec expected. Older, greying around the temples, weather-worn - he’s just a man. Power doesn’t crackle from his fingertips. Reality doesn’t distort behind him, bending to his will.

He’s not even wearing a supersuit. No mask, no cape, no gloves. Nothing to hide the burn-blister, red and angry and disfigured, that forms a circle across his throat. He’s wearing a black jacket and dark jeans, smeared with ash, yes, the soles of his boots caked in dirt, yes, but he’s just a man.

*How many times might Alec have passed him on the street and not given him a second look -*
Valentine walks into the room with purpose, pausing momentarily in front of Nightlock. Nightlock’s eyes harden, a sneer curling his lips as he glares up at Valentine with enough fury to level buildings and melt cities. The energy in the air answers him, twisting itself into knots, crushing Alec in a vice, rumbling like thunder.

Valentine scoffs, his mouth twisting up into a smirk, and he nudges the foot of Nightlock’s chair with his boot. Nightlock strains against his bonds, the chain across his chest digging into his suit, but Valentine’s smile only widens.

He says nothing and continues on, stopping in front of Clary, his back to Alec. Clary snaps forward in her seat, angrily biting at the rag in her mouth, but Valentine looks over her head and towards Johnathan.

“Jonathan,” says Valentine, and his tone is so self-satisfied that Alec has to close his eyes to stop himself from loosing his arrow. “I heard you encountered a problem.”

“Nothing I couldn’t handle,” says Jonathan. He doesn’t smile at his father. “Picked them up at 1PP. They killed three of ours and took out Blackwell and Pangborn. Azazel fled like a coward.”

“But City Hall was dealt with?” Valentine asks.

“Of course,” says Jonathan, “I wouldn’t leave the job unfinished.”

“Good,” says Valentine. He reaches into the back of his belt and pulls out a large knife - the blade is long and the handle bound in leather, and for a moment, Alec can only wonder if this is the knife he told Dot Rollins to cut her own throat with.

“Azazel is not a concern,” Valentine continues, “He’ll crawl back to his master like the dog he is and will be rounded up tomorrow with the rest of them, if he’s not already been caught. It looks like Idris has been mobilised after all. I thought Maryse would keep them all locked up in her ivory tower, but it appears not. No matter. The deed is done now.”

Valentine laughs, a dry and despicable laugh, as he angles the blade in his hand to catch the light. Clary’s eyes, panicked and wet with tears, flick from Valentine’s face to Jace, still unconscious, and then to Nightlock, but Nightlock -
Nightlock watches the knife. And the look on his face - that grim and familiar determination - tells Alec that he will do *anything* before that knife gets near Clary.

“The city is in chaos,” Valentine says then, tapping the knife against the flat of his palm. “And tomorrow, the ever-so-righteous Senator Penhallow will call a press conference on the steps of the Supreme Court and denounce the unchecked vigilantes that have razed New York to the ground. I’ve written her quite the speech.”

Valentine takes a step towards Clary. He presses his knife against Clary’s cheek, drawing the blade down across the edge of her mask, slipping the tip beneath the leather.

Luke sucks in a sharp breath beside Alec, his claws sinking into the ground, carving scars into slab concrete. His lips pull back over his teeth in a snarl, now sharp and canine.

Valentine pulls the knife away, twirling the tip against his finger. Clary clenches her jaw, holding her chin as high as she can. She doesn’t blink, but Alec can see her eyes brimming with tears.

“What,” Valentine says, watching her face, “do you think of that?’”

Clary would spit in his face if she could. Her orange hair blazes around her shoulders and the tendons on her neck stand out in stark shadow where she strains forward.

“What was that?” Valentine asks, raising his eyebrows. “I couldn’t quite understand. Let me help you.”

He tugs the gag from Clary’s mouth, snatching his fingers back as she lurches to bite him. Jonathan kicks the back of her chair again and she cries out - and this time, her pain is ear-splitting and Alec hates it.

“Let’s not have any more of that,” says Valentine, taking a step back for good measure. He returns to toying with his knife, tapping the blade against the curve of his other palm. “You wouldn’t even be here if you’d stayed out of the way, as Idris was instructed to do. You brought this on yourself, I’m afraid.”

“You’re a psychopath!” Clary spits, “Why are you doing this?! Those are innocent people out there! Innocent people you’ve killed -!”
“Their deaths were necessary sacrifices,” says Valentine. “This time tomorrow, this city will finally come to see its vigilantes for what they really are. A disease. And I assure you, New York will thank me for it.”

“The only disease here is you,” Clary snarls. “You don’t get to do this! You’re a - you’re a super too! You don’t get to decide who lives and dies!”

“I do. I do. I have given everything for this cause. I have given everything I have for this—everything,” Valentine says. “Vigilantes are a scourge on this city. They’re hated, they’re despised, and for good reason. If you allow a man to play with fire, once he gets a taste for justice in his own hands, he will never play fair again. Unchecked superpowers are dangerous.”

“You’re the ones who’ve been killing people!” Clary cries. “You’re the ones! You’re the ones who’ve been burning people, not them!”

Valentine shakes his head. “You don’t understand. Russia? Vietnam? Traitors to our own country? Our enemies are using superpowered humans against us. Humans can be bought. Humans with powers can be bought and they’re bought by the people with the biggest pockets. Vigilantes have no loyalty to the government, no loyalty to corporations like Idris. They’re baseless, driven only by their own wants. Don’t you see? A city without vigilantes is a city at peace.”

“Peace based on a lie!”

“But peace nonetheless!” snaps Valentine. “Once we get rid of this - this vigilantism, we give the rule of law back to the people, back to our government. Take it out of the hands of those beyond the law, who bend and corrupt it as they see fit. I will be a hero-”

“You’ll be a hypocrite.”

Alec’s eyes snap to Nightlock, who sits with his gag around his neck, having spat it free. His mouth is pulled up in a sneer, blood smeared bright red across the split in his lip that has torn open once again.

Valentine twists to face him, the jerk of his head too abrupt. Behind him, Jonathan stands tall, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides. Alec can smell skin slowly and furiously burning.
“I am, am I?” Valentine says, prowling towards Nightlock. “And why is that, my masked friend?”

Cold floods through Alec as Nightlock stares down the knife in Valentine’s hands. The rest of the world falls silent.

In his head, all Alec can see is the last kiss he shared with Nightlock. All he can feel is Nightlock cupping his jaw before he left them with Simon on that rooftop.

Alec remembers the hot press of Nightlock’s hands beneath his suit, against his chest. The cool whisper of rain slipping into the narrow space between them. The curve of Nightlock’s maskless cheek beneath Alec’s palms.

All of it. Over and over and over again. And all Alec wants is to do is let the arrow pinched between his fingers fly - fuck the consequences, fuck the bullet that would answer in his chest, fuck the -

“Why is that?” Valentine continues, looming over Nightlock. He angles the knife to catch the light again. The blade winks sharply. “Enlighten me, please. Why am I a hypocrite? Go on.”

Nightlock’s jaw clenches. “What peace comes at the expense of turning one group of people against another?” his hisses, dangerously low. “Using politicians to do your dirty work? Hating your own kind so much that it isn’t enough to kill them yourself, is it? You have to get them to slit their own throats and then you burn their bodies-”

“Yes,” says Valentine, crouching down in front of Nightlock. He spins his knife in his hands, the point digging into his fingertip. It draws a drop of blood. “Yes, those are things I have done. I am not ashamed to have purpose. I am not ashamed of that which people have been too afraid to voice out loud. Someone has to get their hands dirty to do good in this world. That is my sacrifice.”

“You’re fucking crazy,” Clary spits. She yanks at the ropes around her wrists, her knuckles white, and wrenches her shoulders forward. She’s going to dislocate them - or worse. Blood drips down her face from her hairline, and a thick, viscous string hangs from her lip. “We won’t let you do this.”

Valentine laughs, pushing himself to his feet once more. He continues to spin the knife in his hand, the very tip of the blade smudged with a bloody fingerprint as he points it at the unconscious Jace,
and then at Clary.

“Idris won’t move against me. Not now. All it takes is a whisper,” he says, “Another whisper in Maryse’s ear to have her look the other way, to make her realise that all her precious contracts will dry up if she takes a step out of line. She keeps you all on such tight leashes.”

He turns on his heel to point his knife at Nightlock again. “No-one else has to die. Don’t misunderstand me. Once the Herondale legislation is passed, superpowers can be documented. Dangerous individuals can be isolated. New York will be made safe. And all those who oppose it will be put behind bars, where they belong. Where they can do no harm.”

Nightlock glares at Valentine. He says nothing, but static energy arcs across Alec’s skin, electric, burning, sparking like a livewire, and he knows Nightlock must be on the brink of combustion. Nightlock’s entire body is pulled taut like a bowstring, his feet planted flat on the floor, his arms rigid where they’re strapped against his sides. On the arms of his chair, his hands have been taped down, but Alec can see his fingers trembling.

Power ripples through him, but it has nowhere to go.

“You’re never going to win, Valentine,” Clary spits, “Not ever. Not while we’re still breathing. You can’t control all of us. We’ll fight you at every turn, Idris, vigilantes, everyone, together.”

Valentine clenches his jaw, stopping the knife in his hand. He curls his palm around the blade and narrows his eyes. His silence hangs above their heads like a guillotine.

Slowly, Alec places the arrow in his bowstring to the floor and reaches back for another in his quiver: this one, striped green around the fletchling. A gift from Izzy. Fast-release neurotoxin. ‘Not enough to kill someone, but definitely enough to maim them and stop them coming after you,’ she had said.

It doesn’t seem enough, not to Alec. A hundred arrows wouldn’t be enough.

“Sentinel,” whispers Luke, and Alec hardly hears him, blood rushing in his ears - but he does see the look in Luke’s eyes, the war between the anger and the warning: we only have one chance here. Don’t be rash. We’re outnumbered.
Beneath the flickering fluorescent light, Valentine starts walking, pacing back and forth in front of the three chairs. His knife hangs loose in his hand and his footsteps echo on the hard floor; he crosses back and forth and back and forth, and the silence stretches until snappable, until it might pierce the skin, but no-one says a word.

He stops in front of Jace. He watches the erratic rise and fall of Jace’s chest, listens to the wet sound of his breathing. His face darkens.

“Johnathan,” he says, with a jerky nod of his chin.

Jonathan’s mouth twists up at the corner and he moves to shove the gag back up into Clary’s mouth, as another guard does the same to Nightlock.

“Mmmrgh!” Clary tries to yell, but she soaks her gag with spit, “Mmrgh, mmrph!”

“You’re right,” says Valentine with an easy shrug of his shoulders. He spins the blade of his knife around his fingers. “Of course you are. Idris has long since been able to control its own supers. Something should be done about that.”

He taps his knife against Jace’s shoulder, but Jace doesn’t stir. With the tip of the blade, Valentine tilts Jace’s cheek; blood beads along the knife where it pierces Jace’s skin, and Clary thrashes from side to side, lashing her head and screeching against her gag, but it’s of no use. The gash along her hairline drips down into her eye.

Valentine smiles.

“Not him?” Valentine asks, pressing on his knife as the point sinks into Jace’s cheek, “Not your dear Arkangel? I could tell you slit his throat. I could put this knife in your hand and tell you to cut his fingers off one by one and you would be powerless to stop it. The true path to victory is control. The true path to peace.”

Valentine draws the knife away suddenly, and a thin splatter of blood flicks across the floor. He inspects the blade, rubbing his thumb through the blood and rubbing it between his fingertips, and then looks back at Clary.

“But he’s Corporate, I understand. He’s your friend, your partner. That would be cruel, asking you
to do that to him. I know who he is to you.” A pause. His eyes flick away from Clary. “But who is Arkangel to him?”

Valentine points his knife towards Nightlock.

“*He* came after the both of you, knew where you were and rushed to help. He came to *save* you. Why is that? He’s no Corporate. By all means, he should hate you.”

“Mmmprh!” Clary cries again. Nightlock still doesn’t move. The look in his eyes is black.

Tremors start in Alec’s arms. That dread, that terrible violent fear - his fingers shake with it. His arrow twitches. He won’t get a clean shot -

“So, here we have Arkangel, and you must be Muse, and ... I’m not sure I actually know who he is,” continues Valentine. He turns away from Jace and strides back to Nightlock, and Alec clenches his jaw until it seize. Valentine drops again onto his haunches in front of Nightlock, scrutinising him with a slowly-dawning smile.

Nightlock wrinkles his nose, but the tie in his mouth stops him from saying anything. He struggles against the back of the chair, as much as his bound hands and legs allow, trying to put as much distance between himself and Valentine.

Alec can hardly watch. He pulls the arrow back to his mouth and lines up the shot between the pallets.

“*Luke*,” he begs.


Alec’s blood is close to boiling.

“You’re not a Corporate,” continues Valentine. He taps his knife against the flat Nightlock’s knee. “Not Idris, not one of Maryse’s brood, are you? It begs the question: what *are* you doing here? What did they promise you? Protection? Are they going to look the other way for you? *Hm* . You
Nightlock heaves his shoulders. His dark eyes burn and his nostrils flare and in his mind, he’s incinerating Valentine where he stands. The lights overhead spit and spark, yellow flashes leaping to the ground, but Valentine doesn’t look up. His grin grows.


“A pity,” says Valentine, drawing himself to his feet once more. “Pure energy manipulation isn’t something I’ve seen manifested in a long time. Quite the party trick.” He hesitate then, his eyes narrowing as the lights pulse and Nightlock’s fingers twitch. “Ah. Kinetikinesis. I think I know who you are after all. Nightlock, isn’t it? That’s what they call you now?”

He laughs dryly.

“Oh, yes, I know who you are. I know the stock you come from, I know what you are capable of. The bounty that’s on your head … But I can’t have someone like you interfering with what needs to be done.”

A pause. Alec could hear a pin drop.

“So,” says Valentine, “Shall we see who’s under the mask?”

Beside Alec, Veil gasps. She reaches for Alec’s arm and sinks her fingers into his bicep, but Alec can’t look away. He’s fixed on Nightlock, on how his stare widens in a moment of horror, and then narrows, a glare so sharp it would cut through Alec like a knife.

Alec can’t look away. He can’t even blink.

“Mmmrph!” Clary chokes on her gag, “Mmph, stmmph!”

“Bring her over here,” Valentine commands, pointing with his knife. “She wants to see what I can
do. I’ll show her.”

Jonathan grabs the back of Clary’s chair and shoves it forward, the legs screeching on the ground. Clary lurches, bloody spit slathered down her chin, but Valentine grips her by the shoulder and drags her in front of Nightlock.

“All it takes is a whisper,” he says, “I tell you to take his mask off, and then he gets to watch someone he thought he trusted betray him like that. It’s that simple. There’s no point fighting it.”

Clary twists her head to the side and the rope around her neck burns into her throat, but Alec cannot see her face anymore, only the way her arms are wrenched behind her back and her nails are red with blood. But he can imagine her eyes - red and teary and desperate, how she must be pleading with Nightlock, begging him to forgive her -

Nightlock shakes his head, the smallest of movements.

“Stop?” asks Valentine, the corner of his lips curling upwards. He reaches out and pulls the gag from Nightlock’s mouth again. “You want me to stop?”

“You want my mask, then take it,” Nightlock sneers. Blood coats his teeth. “Do it yourself, you coward.”

Valentine pauses, holding Nightlock’s stare. And then he huffs, another laugh, and shrugs his shoulders, kicking Clary’s chair back.

“Well.”

And then, Valentine extends his hand. He reaches for Nightlock’s mask, and Alec’s breath catches in his throat.

*Oh no.*

*Oh, God, no.*
‘I fear it,’ whispers Nightlock in his memory. ‘The thought of someone taking my mask from me and then knowing who I am and all the unforgivable things that I’ve done - that’s not something I can fathom.’

Clary fights powerlessly against her bonds, tears streaming down her face, desperately trying to drag herself back to Nightlock’s side, but Jonathan grabs the back of her chair and holds her still.

Nightlock turns his head, but the chains, the rope - he can’t move. He can’t hide his face, he can’t turn away from Valentine’s hands.

“Fuck,” whispers Luke. Alec can feel him bristling, his claws contorting, sinking into the concrete as if it were flesh. The hackles rise on the back of his neck. His fangs dig into his lower lip. His voice is a growl when it comes out again. “Veil, it’s now or never.”

Alec looks to Veil, but her eyes are pinched closed, a fierce crease carved out between her brows in concentration.

Jonathan gives another sharp kick to Clary’s chair, and this time, he knocks her over onto her side; her gasp in pain as her shoulder hits the ground is like shattering glass.

Valentine doesn’t react. Nightlock jerks his head away, but there’s nowhere for him to go, nowhere for him to run, and Valentine curls his fingers around Nightlock’s mask and pulls. The black leather peels from Nightlock’s face like a second skin.

Alec’s vision blurs.

It shouldn’t be like this. It’s wrong. It’s not allowed, it’s - their identities are all they have. It’s all Nightlock has, it’s all Alec has and the thought - the thought of someone else taking that from him is so invasive it makes his skin crawl and -

It’s what Nightlock fears the most.

Alec reaches for Veil’s wrist, squeezing it tight in an iron grip. Her pulse leaps beneath his fingers. Her eyes flash open and find his panicked stare in an instant.
“Veil,” he pleads, “Please. Please don’t let them see who he is.”

A wave of nausea pierces Alec through the stomach like an arrowhead. It makes his whole body want to wretch, agony rummaging through every last part of him, seeping into his blood, rippling up his spine. Luke doubles over, his knuckles pounding into the ground as the illusion sweeps over him and spreads out through the air like a film of oil and smog.

Alec’s eyes flash to Nightlock. He’s aware of Clary screwing her eyes up in pain, and Jonathan raising his head, of Veil’s heartbeat where Alec grips her hand, but none of it matters. None of it matters, because, suddenly, Valentine has Nightlock’s loose mask clenched in his fist and victory taking root on his face, and then -

Then, Valentine freezes.

He’s not the only one. Alec’s entire world stops spinning.

A sneer settles on Nightlock’s bare face, *his bare face*, wrinkling his nose and darkening the shadows around his eyes as he glares up at Valentine with pure and abject *hatred* pouring down his chin, slick with blood.

And Alec -

Alec would know that face anywhere, no matter his split lip and bruised jaw and bloody teeth. He would know that mouth, those eyes, the way his heart stops beating in his chest any time, any place, even with his eyes closed.

He’s not Nightlock anymore.

*He’s Magnus.*

Nightlock *is* Magnus.
Alec drops Veil’s wrist, falling back onto the cold concrete. The illusion seizes him by the gut and Magnus’ face, and Jace and Clary’s faces too, is masked by a blur of grey static.

“What -” starts Jonathan, his head snapping towards Valentine as he searches the room. “What is -”

Valentine holds out his hand and reaches for the static across Magnus’ face, but his fingers pass right through it. He stares down at his palm, and then his lips draw back across his teeth.

“There’s another super here!” he barks, throwing Magnus’ mask to the ground and clenching his knife in his fist. “All of you! Jonathan-!”

Luke leaps from the shadows in a fit of snarling teeth and claws, and tears into Valentine’s body, tackling him to the ground. Luke’s talons sink into Valentine’s chest and there’s only a second - a second between Valentine’s head cracking against the ground, and the enormous torrent of fire that erupts from Johnathan’s hands - for Alec to throw himself over Veil, shielding her with his body.

The fire tears through the wall of wooden crates and pallets. The flames roar, leaping towards the ceiling, swallowing up the air and the cold, and the ground shakes as if it’s being carved in two. The red-hot heat sears Alec’s back and he cries out, biting down on his tongue until he tastes blood, but he pulls Veil into his chest, pushing her head into his shoulder.

“Sentinel!” she gasps, her fingers sinking into his suit, clawing at his shoulders. She tries to wriggle away from the flames, but Alec is too heavy for her to drag. “Fuck! Sentinel!”

“Blind him!” Alec hisses, scrambling for his bow. Another blast of fire rips through the metal shelves behind them and Alec gasps, hot smoke flooding into his chest.

Veil squeezes her eyes shut, pressing his fingers to her temples as she sucks the light from Johnathan’s eyes, and the flames pouring out of his hands swerve out of control. The fire screeches, the crash of a jet engine, deafening - the blaze slams into the ceiling as Johnathan staggers forwards, hands clawing at his eyes.

“Sentinel!” Veil shouts, and Alec rolls up onto his knees, notching an arrow. He shoves her back and raises his bow and the arrow is a silver whistle through the smoke as it pierces into Jonathan’s shoulder, propelling him backwards.
Alec doesn’t stop. He draws another arrow and lets it loose, and it sinks into Jonathan’s leg, skewering his thigh and dragging him down onto all fours. Alec grabs another arrow, but a bullet whistles overhead, and he dives out the way as Valentine’s men surge through the door.

“Get them!” Valentine roars. “Kill them! Kill them all!”

Alec scrambles behind the metal shelves, pinning his back against the crates as gunfire rains down upon him. He looks for Veil, but the smoke is thick - he can’t see her. He can’t see Luke, he can’t see Clary lying on the floor, he can’t see Magnus -

Another gunshot rings out, ricocheting off the metal above his head, and then another grazes his cheek, splattering blood up into his eyes as he leaps back.

The pain is like a spark, shooting into his temples, vibrating in the back of his skull where his hair is matted with blood. The room spins, turning over on its head before his eyes, as a bullet tears through the cardboard beside him, exploding into styrofoam. His ears ring.

“Alec? Muse! Muse, get up!”

Magnus.

God, it’s Magnus. It’s Magnus’ voice, a half-octave lower than the one he knows, but it’s still him, and Alec never recognised it ‘til now.

He can’t think. He can’t breathe.

A gunshot cracks above his head and Alec twists back, seizing the chance to let his arrow fly. He hears a man grunt, a body collapse to the floor. He draws another arrow. The smoke parts.

“Alec? Muse, quickly!”

Alec’s eyes fall on Magnus, his face blurred by Veil’s spell but his arms and legs still bound to his chair. He pushes and pulls at the chains, desperately rocking his chair towards Clary as she lies on her side in the middle of the floor. Her shoulder is squished against the ground and a pool of blood
spreads out from her head wound, hidden away behind Veil’s static - but she’s kicked her way free of the ropes around her ankles and is fighting with the ones on her wrists, gnawing at them with her teeth.

Alec makes a run for it before he can think about what he’s doing, leaping through the fire and the smoke and sliding through a smear of blood on the ground. He needs to get to Magnus, but Clary is closer, and he has an arrow in his hand in a second, skidding up to Clary on his knees.

“Alec!” she gasps, thrusting her hands out to him as Alec starts sawing at the ropes with the arrowhead. “I can’t see his face! I can’t see Jace’s face! What’s going on?!”

“It’s an illusion, don’t worry,” he breathes, snatching the ropes off her wrists. “Get to Jace, get him out of here - I’ll get Nightlock-”

Bullets shatter overhead, raining casings down upon them, gunshots splitting Alec’s eardrums as Valentine’s men stagger blindly through the smoke, swinging their guns around where Veil has stripped them of their senses. Alec looks back, searching for Veil amidst the roaring fire, but then -

A loud cry of pain rips through the chaos, and both Alec and Clary’s eyes snap up as Luke lurches to the side, Valentine reeling away from him, blood spurting across his face as he tears his knife out of Luke’s ribs. Luke’s knees give out beneath him and he drops to the floor, clutching at his side as dark red blood spews between his fingers.

“Luke!” Clary gasps, and Alec barely has the sense to grab her around the waist before she can run for him. Valentine staggers to his feet like a drunk man, bloody knife in his palm, his eyes glazed over but his shoulders heaving. Vicious claw marks carve up his chest, his skin in tatters. He makes a wild swing with the knife, but it only finds air.

“Jonathan!” Valentine screeches at the top of his voice. “Jonathan, kill them! Burn them!”

A groan comes from Jonathan as he heaves himself to his knees again, pulling Alec’s arrow free of his thigh. Blood soaks his clothes and he smears his hand across his mouth in a streak of red. There’s danger in his eyes, murderous, ravenous, and Alec scrambles for his bow.

“Sentinel!” Magnus cries out, and it drives straight through Alec like a knife again. “Look out!”
Alec throws his bow to the side and grabs Clary around her middle, diving out of the way as a pillar of fire explodes from Jonathan’s open palm. Alec’s grazed cheek splits open on the concrete and a shooting pain erupts through his jaw as he feels bone fracture.

Clary groans against his chest. There’s blood in his mouth. His head spins; his vision blurs. Through the smoke, he sees Veil, sprawled out on the floor, thrown clear by the blast. Hands flat against the floor, she tries to push herself up, but her arms give out and she lets out a sharp cry as she collapses face down.

Jonathan shakes his head as Veil’s spell fades from his eyes. He reaches for the arrow in his shoulder and tears it out, and then his eyes find Alec, strewn across the floor, Clary held against his chest, his bow twenty feet out of reach, and -

Oh, God.

Alec looks for his bow, for Jace, for Luke, for anyone, but it feels as if the fire in Johnathan’s eyes is surging up inside his throat. His eyes snap to Magnus, bound to his chair and helpless, but his face is still blurred, one of Veil’s illusions hanging on by a thread, and Alec cannot find any eyes to meet.

“Sentinel!” Magnus shouts, “Sentinel, get up! Sentinel!”

Alec’s huffs on blood as he pushes himself up, letting Clary free of his arms. The world screeches into slow-motion: the boom of bullets overhead, the spray of shrapnel; Luke, splayed out on the floor, lunging for Valentine’s legs, swiping his claws across Valentine’s tendons and dragging him down, down, down; Veil throwing out her hands to cast another spell across Valentine’s men, her whole body heaving, the illusion wringing her dry; and Magnus -

Magnus is shouting, screaming Alec’s name that isn’t his name, wrestling with the chains that bind his hands behind his back, and Alec cannot even see his face.

It wasn’t supposed to end like this. It wasn’t supposed to begin like this.

Jonathan staggers forward and holds up his hand, his whole body convulsing like a parasite as he
summons another wave of all-consuming fire that leaps from his palm, razing the world to the ground. Alec lunges for Clary, but her hands smear through the blood on the floor, her blood, 
Alec’s blood, her fingers drawing lines, and then -

“Muse!”

Another voice Alec knows too well.

“Get him down!”

It’s Isabelle.

Clary slams her hand down on the ground and a wall of stone surges up from the Earth, summoned from the patterns she has drawn in their blood. She drags Alec behind it as the fire collides with concrete, the flames divided, veering off in all directions, billowing against the roof and sucking all the oxygen upwards.

She presses Alec against the wall, her meagre weight plastered across his back, one hand between his shoulder blades, the other frantically sweeping through the blood that soaks their knees. Her forearms is red with it, his hands are red with it -

A bullet whistles supersonic overhead, sharper, faster than all the others, hitting flesh with the unmistakable thud of Jonathan dropping to his knees. The inferno dies suddenly, snuffed out like a candle, and with it, Alec hears three more well-placed shots, and then the clatter of an empty clip flung to the floor.

“Alec, get up!” Clary says, tugging on his arm, and she has a blade in her hand now that wasn’t there before. Alec looks past her, and there, in the doorway - Izzy.

A pistol in either hand, black mask across her eyes, her foot smashing into one man’s nose as he tries to grab her, but she’s too quick, pointing her gun at his kneecap and pulling the trigger -

Izzy.
“I have to get Jace!” says Clary, and she pushes away from Alec, but Alec’s head spins.

“Izzy,” he breathes. And then, “Magnus.”

He tries to stand, but his legs collapse beneath him. He looks down, and something is bleeding - him - a jagged piece of shrapnel sticking out from his thigh at a twisted angle. He hisses, clasping his hand over the wound as blood drips between his fingers, and he drags himself on his hands and knees towards Magnus, still tied to his chair.

His face, still a blur.

“Sentinel,” Magnus breathes as Alec crawls up to his side, and God, his voice is unmistakably him. “Get my hands free, hurry!”

Alec nods, grabbing an arrow and hacking at the ropes around Magnus’ wrists. The second Magnus feels weakness in his bonds, he tears his hands free, not waiting to be on his feet before a strike of his hand sends Jonathan’s body hurtling into the shelves behind them. The fluorescent lights explode in a shower of sparks, yellow lightning pouring down around them, and Magnus thrusts out his palm, and Valentine is swept off his feet and launched up into the air, crashing into the ceiling. Smoke pours through the roof into the sky, as shards to steel and glass shatter on the ground.

Fire from the deepest circle must reign in Magnus’ eyes. Alec can see it in the ripple beneath Magnus’ coat, can feel it in the tremors of impact that shoot up his arms where the air convulses with infernal kinetic energy.

Again, Magnus strikes out with his hand, and Valentine’s body smacks against the ground with a sickening crack. Alec rips the ropes away from Magnus legs, and then, then, Magnus is away, banishing the chains that bind him as the world folds in around him, collapsing into one singularity: his warpath, the very fires of Hell. Power crackles across his skin, rolling in his shoulders. With another arc of his arm, he sends three men flying into the far wall, concrete splintering, their bones shattering into dust.

And then, with a lightning snap of his fingers, he tears down the roof above them, crumbling the building in the very palm of his hand like it’s built on piles of ash and smoke, slabs of corrugated iron and steel falling to the ground, flattening the remaining guards beneath collapse.
Great clouds of black smoke swell into the air, rising, rippling, and then clearing, revealing Izzy alone in the centre of the carnage, her shoulders heaving, her suit splattered with blood. She slides one pistol back into its holster and clutches the other between her palms as the dust settles like a shroud around her - and then fires one last ringing shot at the ground as someone groans beneath the rubble.

A bullet between the eyes, and suddenly - *there’s silence*.

Silence, for all the night sky has been torn open above their heads and the very ground beneath their feet lies smouldering, slick with burning blood and bodies turned to cinders -

Alec is the first to move, collapsing against Magnus’ empty chair, his lungs burning, his fingernails making bloody crescents in his palms. He can feel his blood pulsing in his fucking *eyeballs*; his temples pound and the room spins far beyond his control; and a fiery pain sears in his leg.

He looks to Jace, but Clary is at his side, cradling Jace’s head in her lap. She pets his hair and her fingers flutter against his blurred face, but his breathing is shallow and his skin, pale, pale white with blood loss.

Veil, amidst the simmering cardboard and rolling smoke, staggers to her feet. Blood drips from her nose and she clutches her shoulder, spitting out a black glob from the back of her throat. She sneers, wiping her hand across her mouth, smearing her chin with blood, and staggers towards Luke, who is curled on the ground with his hand clamped across his side. His claws are gone, his teeth receded, and he bites his lip to muffled the groan as he pushes up onto all fours.

Magnus doesn’t move. He stands with his back to Alec, staring at Isabelle, his coat rippling, his shadow flickering in the dying fire, both his hands still curved at his sides, his fingers seized and trembling. Kinetic energy vibrates in his hands, pulled from the flames and the heat and the violent orange light, and it streams into his skin, pulsing up his arms, and Alec can feel him - his gravity, the blackhole-pull of him at the centre of the universe as he bends all matter to his will.

He’s hardly breathing. His body convulses, seismic tremors running through him.

Alec opens to call his name, to call Magnus’ name, but -

Nothing. Only smoke, only the taste of ash and blood on his tongue, clogging his throat. Darkness
threatens to pull him under, adrenaline gushing through his veins. Dots of light swirl across his eyes.

He tries to move, but the shrapnel in his thigh tears at his skin. Black blood stains his suit, leaking from him like oil; he hisses with the pain, too loud.

“Sentinel!” Izzy gasps, rushing to his side and dropping to her knees. Her hands cup his jaw, turning his face to the side, feeling the blood in his hair. The scrape on his cheek stings.

“Are you okay? Are you hurt?” she demands. Dried blood marks her face, splattered across her chin and smudged with gunshot residue. The blood isn’t hers, but the black powder is. Her hair escapes her ponytail in wild fly-aways. She doesn’t look like herself.

“Oh God,” she hisses below her breath, “Alec, your leg -”

“’M fine,” Alec wheezes, trying to sit up. He bypasses the blood on her face and reaches up to tap his fingers against the side of her mask: it’s simple black leather, much like his own. Hell, it might even be one of his own that she stole from the lab. He tries for a weary smile, but it turns into a grimace. He grips his leg tighter. “Glad you’re here. Suits you.”

“Shut up,” Izzy says. She reaches in her utility belt and pulls out a reel of bandages, ripping a strip with her teeth to make a tourniquet for Alec’s thigh. She lashes it around his leg, tying it off with a tight knot. Alec winces, but the blood stops seeping out between his fingers, congealing against his palm.

“It hasn’t ruptured your femoral,” Izzy murmurs, kneading Alec’s muscle with her fingertips. “I’m gonna pull this out. It’s gonna hurt. Keep pressure above the wound, okay?”

Alec clamps his teeth together as Izzy yanks out the shard of metal. Alec grunts, turning his head into his shoulder, but Izzy doesn’t blink, unlooping the roll of bandages and strapping a wad of dressing to his leg. The gauze soaks up the blood like a sponge and Izzy frowns, tightening the tourniquet.

“You need to get that cleaned and sewn up before it gets infected -”

“I’m fine. Get to Luke,” Alec urges, gritting his teeth, “He needs help. And Jace ... Jace hasn’t
woken up -”

“I’m on it.” She cups his cheek again and presses the roll of bandages into his hand, before jumping to her feet.

Alec closes his eyes, sucking in a deep breath. His heart still hammers and he tries to calm it, but it feels too much like he’s fighting for breath against a rising tide, and something in him is still terrified of drowning, or of smoke, or of both.

The pain, an anchor. He tries to focus on it, but it drags him down and his breath quickens. His fingers dig into his leg, sinking into his thigh.

Don’t think, don’t think, don’t think -

He feels himself slipping.

Into what, he doesn’t know. Shock swarms him; his thoughts turn translucent, disappearing beyond reach, falling over the edge of distant rooftops and into nothing.

That feeling of falling, of spiralling, endlessly, towards the ground.

A warm hand finds his shoulder, pressing into his pulse point, and his next breath is half a sob. He opens his eyes, and he doesn’t know what to say, but -

It’s not Magnus.

It’s Veil, kneeling in front of him, her eyes searching his, behind his mask. She looks drawn, thin and tired, and blood has dried on her forehead, but Alec relishes in the unapologetic prod of her fingers against his heartbeat as she releases him from her spell.

The tension coiled in Alec’s gut unravels, the weight pushing against his diaphragm dropping down into his stomach. He glances at Jace and Clary, and at last, their faces are unobscured by the grey static: tears cut through the dirt on Clary’s face, but Jace’s bleary eyes crack open, and he thumbs at the tangle of her red hair that cascades down her shoulders.
Alec breathes a sigh of relief, returning his focus to Veil. He wants to know if she’s okay, but the words won’t come out, if they even exist in his chest at all. So he nods, once, thankful, and she smiles wearily at him, before heaving herself to her feet. Her knees shake; Alec doesn’t miss it. He watches her limp over to Jace and Clary and free them from the illusion too.

As she goes, a shadow crosses over Alec, paused at a distance.

Alec looks up.

And this time, it is Magnus.

Really, truly, definitely Magnus, in Nightlock’s suit and Nightlock’s torn coat, with Nightlock’s power tingling in his fingertips. A red welt on his sharp cheek, blood crusting on his lip, his hair blown out of place like a storm has swept through the rafters of him. The fires of Hell simmer in his eyes, but the heat is dying a slow death, smoking out into embers the longer he stares at Alec in confusing silence.

It’s him. It’s really him and yet Alec can’t -

It’s like he can’t process it. Magnus’ face, his hands, his dark eyes alight with destruction. It’s been him all this time -

Magnus stares down at Alec with a look in his eyes that Alec cannot place. It’s wild, almost, like the panicked fight-or-flight of a cornered animal: horror, fear, a raw and bleeding pain he doesn’t know how to stem, so it spills out of him.

“Your mask -” Alec starts, his voice rasping. “I think Valentine threw it over -”

Magnus waves his hand, snuffing out the fire that burns all around them, silencing the crackle of concrete and the plumes of dark grey smoke. He says nothing, but in his stare, Alec suffers the heat of the fire, unrelenting, burning straight through him.

It’s nothing like anger. Nor is it dread, but it’s the most intense thing Alec has ever seen on Magnus’ face, and it extinguishes all the words he wants to say into smoke inside his mouth.
It’s you.

It’s Magnus. It’s his Magnus but he shouldn’t be here because it’s all wrong, it’s not how it was meant to be, Alec should say something, but what on Earth should he say - and yet Alec’s heart betrays him, remembering how to beat like it’s been shocked back into rhythm.

Magnus is Nightlock. Nightlock is Magnus. Has been, all this time. This entire time. Through nights on rooftops and immolated churches and knee-deep in bloody gutters, and through kisses and wandering hands and truths, so many truths that were unshareable until him. Until Nightlock.

Alec can’t believe it.

He can’t stomach it. He feels sick.

“I need to leave,” says Magnus, and his voice is strained, rubbed so completely raw, “Wolfsbane and Veil too. They both need to leave. The rest of Idris will not be far behind and someone needs to get ahead - ahead of Penhallow...”

And yet, he doesn’t move, rooted to the spot and trembling with residual energy. He stares down at Alec like he doesn’t know what he’s looking at, like he’s looking through Alec, past his mask, past his skin, and he’s found -

What has he found? Gravel burn and bullet scars, an empty aching space in the cavern of his chest, half a man crumpled on the ground, what -

‘Is there not one person that you’re desperate to see inside the head of?’

Alec clenches his jaw and raises his chin. He holds fast to Magnus’ stare.

Magnus’ mouth flattens into a tight line. He extends his hand and summons his discarded mask from the rubble, guiding it back to his face. It slips over his eyes, formed to the bridge of his nose, but it no longer looks right.
It doesn’t conceal who he is at all. He’s just Magnus in a mask.

The wail of a distant siren, the groaning of steel and iron above their heads, Luke’s bitten-back hisses of pain - it all descends on Alec at once. The rush of blood in his ears, the wheeze of his own tattered throat, suddenly a downpour.

He grips his own thigh until the pain shoots through him. Magnus’ eyes move over him - and what is that, if not one last fucking look - and then, God, he turns on his heels.

But Alec will be damned if this is how they’re going to part.

“Magnus, wait -”

Magnus flinches at the sound of his own name, recoiling as if struck, as if he were still expecting to hear -

Nightlock.

Wait, Alec wants to say. Don’t go. It’s me.

Nightlock, it’s me.

Magnus turns slowly and his expression falters: he smiles at Alec, a tiny, sorrowful twist of his lips. The war in his eyes has quietened, dampened by rain and a glassiness that shrouds him now, and here, here is a surrender: a white flag held out to whichever God laughs and rumbles in the storm clouds that always hang above their heads and revel in their suffering.

And he looks so tired. So tired of fighting, so war-weary, like his chest has been cracked open and the light which ruptures from within now lies abandoned.

“Sentinel,” he whispers, and he glances down at his open palms, “I can’t -”

Alec’s throat constricts. His eyes begin to burn and he can’t stop it.
“Magnus,” he croaks. Wretched, he sounds. Wretched, like a man bleeding out on the floor who still stops to cup his hands and catch the blood of someone else. He watches Magnus grimace again. “Magnus -”

Magnus hesitates, glancing back at the door, and then at Isabelle and Veil tending to Luke, and then at Alec.

He wants to run. Of course he wants to run. Valentine ripped off his fucking mask.

And yet -

Don’t go.

And maybe that makes Alec selfish, maybe it makes him worse than selfish, but it doesn’t matter, because he can’t open his mouth. If he opens his mouth, he fears the cold thrust of shock will catch up with him at last. He grips the tatters of his supersuit ever tighter. Violent shivers rattle in his knuckles, pressed into his thigh. Don’t go, don’t go, not now -

An invisible touch. Alec feels it then, fingers of smoke tracing his ruined cheek, drifting across the bullet graze. The energy in Magnus’ fingertips uncoils - the same energy, the same power that held collapsing towers at bay and brought buildings down on top of them - and it diffuses through the air and curls through the blood and embedded shrapnel on Alec’s face, delicate and unsure at first, and then, it curves, forming the shape of a palm as it cups Alec’s jaw.

Alec exhales shakily, his eyes fluttering closed. It’s not enough.

It’s not real. It could be, it could be, and Alec’s heart aches for it, but Magnus doesn’t move, doesn’t step closer to him, doesn’t lift his hand, and somehow, that hurts all the more - him holding Alec at a distance.

Valentine took his mask, what do you expect, that’s his identity, that’s all he is, that’s -

That’s all you are.
Isn’t it?

And it’s like a gunshot wound not noticed until too late, riding the high of adrenaline that numbs the body to everything else: suddenly, Alec’s looking down, and he’s imagining a hole in him, an incision cut from one side of him to the other.

That line. That stupid, breakable, fucking line between the two parts of himself, and it’s gone. Ripped out of him, deboned, and now he’s smeared with the inseparable mess of both Alec and Sentinel all at once - because how can he be anything else?

The line doesn’t exist anymore. It’s never existed. Magnus, Nightlock, Alec, Sentinel, all of Alec’s longing for something more, something whole, all of it -

(‘Have you ever been unmasked?’)

Magnus’ magic strokes across the curve of Alec’s cheek. It catches on the edge of Alec’s mask, and Alec feels it, the barest pull, the shift of the leather.

Alec’s eyes meet Magnus’.

He’s going to run.

“Nightlock,” Alec breathes. He hears Magnus’ wet hitch of breath. “Magnus …”

He tries to stand, but his leg collapses beneath him. Blood oozes black through his fingers, the tourniquet sliding lose, and it rips from him a whine of pain, of frustration, because Magnus’ face contorts and the invisible touch disintegrates, and then he turns away, and Alec -

Alec’s not going to be able to follow him this time. The damned cold floods between them. All that’s missing is a little rain.

“Magnus, please - Magnus, wait -”
Alec pushes to his feet once more, but he veers sideways and catches himself on the empty chair with a grunt.

Magnus doesn’t look back. He sucks in a breath and straightens his back and reassembles all the parts of the armour that have been stripped of him. He rubs his fingertips together at his side, but his hands are shaking.

And then he’s gone. Between one blink and the next, vanished into the smoke, and Alec’s head spins, his vision tunnelling, and maybe he blacks out for a moment, but -

Magnus is gone. The pressure in the room abates, as if all the rain in the air falls at once, and then nothing. And in the distance, another siren cries out for help.

Alec doesn’t know how long he remains slumped on the floor, propped up against the empty chair. He stares at the ground, at the frayed rope and abandoned chains, the splatters of blood, and doesn’t really see any of it.

It’s not that he’s numb. No, his leg throbs and his chest aches, his ribs bruised for so many reasons, but he’s just -

He’s ground to a stop. His eyes won’t focus and there’s a ringing inside his head. He’s vaguely aware that he can’t remember the last time he slept.

In his ear, the coms crackle but there’s no-one waiting to talk to him over the radio; instead, the hum of static absorbs him as his eyes drift to Izzy’s back as she finishes wrapping bandages around Luke’s middle.

Shock. Is this shock? Is he in shock?
No. It’s something else altogether.

He imagines himself reaching for the thought, bundling it up into a ball in his hand and squashing it down inside his chest, but it resists him, pushing back against his palms.

It’s over, says the voice inside his head. It’s over, it’s over, repeated like a mantra. His boot slips in the blood on the floor; he glances at the bodies buried beneath the rubble. It’s over, but it’s not.

He needs to get Luke and Veil out of here. He needs to get stitches on his leg, get the gravel pulled out of his cheek, he needs -

New York still burns beyond. How many people are still trapped in the collapse of falling buildings, how many people still need his help -

You’re still Sentinel. You don’t just get to sit here.

You’re still Sentinel, even if Nightlock is no longer … no longer -

Carefully, Alec shifts up onto his knees and braces himself on the back of the chair, stifling a groan. His leg is weak, trembling like a leaf, but it takes his weight as he staggers to his feet. He hobbles over to Izzy as she sits back on her heels and admires her handiwork.

Luke looks up at Alec. “Hey, Sentinel,” he winces, face contorted behind his mask, “Glad to see you made it out of that intact. Well, mostly.”

“Only thanks to you,” Alec murmurs, “You’re the one who got Valentine.”

“Gonna be a one-time deal though, yeah? Don’t count on me asking to be put back on team Idris,” Luke cough-laugh. “I think a week or two of sitting on my couch and watching mail-order movies is more up my street right now.”

Luke presses his palm to his bandaged side and slowly sits up. He waves Veil’s hovering hands away. “Also never been stabbed before, but there’s no time like the present,” he grimaces. “Let a man live.”

He looks around, finding Clary and Jace, and then Veil, and then Valentine’s unmoving body on the floor, but he doesn’t linger. He searches the room for Nightlock, but Nightlock - Magnus - is already gone.

Lastly, Luke looks at the door, and then, back to Alec. His stare is quiet, but it’s knowing, and Alec can’t bring himself to meet it.

“You guys need to leave,” Alec mutters, looking away. “Our backup will be here soon and they can’t … they can’t find you here.”

“A bit late, huh?” Veil remarks. “We could’ve used some help back there. Just saying.”

Izzy scoffs. “All Idris cares about doing is spinning this in the best possible light for themselves. They’ll make up some story about how they’ve been pursuing The Circle for a while, but the details will be miraculously hazy. They’ll be praised for it anyway.” She raises her eyebrows at Alec. “Anything for the public image.”

“Well, better not shit on their public image, then,” Luke grunts, gesturing for Veil to ease him to his feet. “You gonna be alright?”

_Ah. Now that’s a loaded question._

“We’ll be fine,” says Izzy, dusting rubble from her suit as she stands too. “I don’t envy Arkangel for the amount of paperwork I’m gonna make him do, though.”

Luke smiles tightly at her, but it’s not the question he’s asking. Not really. The look in his eyes is probative. _Are you gonna be okay?_ he says without saying anything at all. _Sentinel?_”

Alec doesn’t know how to answer that.
“I guess we’re not gonna be able to flag down a cab to take us home,” Veil says, hoisting Luke’s arm over her shoulder. There’s a hard edge to her voice that she doesn’t try to hide. Blood is already spotting on Luke’s bandages. “No-one’s gonna believe I’m dragging my, uh … my incredibly drunk dad home from a bar on a night like this, huh?”

“Watch it, kiddo,” Luke says. “We’ll be fine. Get me to a payphone and I’ll ring the missus to pick us up.” He pauses then, his attention drifting to Clary and Jace. His face softens behind his mask. “Tell them I’ll be alright. I don’t want them to worry.”

Ah. He knows. Alec can see it in Luke's eyes: he knows who Muse is, of course he does.

*These masks don’t do much to hide their identities, after all ...*

Alec doesn’t find himself surprised; he feels too drained for that, too tired to feign shock.

“Yeah, of course. Let me help you outside,” he mumbles, reaching for Luke’s other arm and slinging it around his neck. His leg sags beneath him and he catches Veil’s knowing look as she quietly shifts Luke’s weight onto her shoulder. She says nothing.

They limp their way through the smoke towards the fire escape. The rising dust scratches at Alec’s throat; each breath in is a wheeze, and each one out is a cough. He kicks a discarded handgun across the floor and the clang reverberates through his skull like a gunshot, and he looks down, but he wishes that he hadn’t, because a man half-buried beneath the rubble stares up at him with vacant eyes. His face is grey with ash. Black marks mask his circular tattoo from view.

Veil shoves her shoulder against the fire escape and the door swings open with a creak. Beyond, the night is varnished dark and muffled quiet, and the Hudson winks beneath the lights of Jersey City across the water. Alec relishes the taste of rain-damp concrete on his tongue and wonders if he’s taken it for granted for too long.

The moon stares down at them through a fissure in the clouds. It stains the ground and Alec’s sweat-soaked suit with a white and unfeeling glow, prolonging the unusual quiet.

Moonlight doesn’t care for who lives or dies or spills blood on the concrete. Nor does it care for the pillars of smoke that rise above Manhattan and the rumble of the city that sounds a lot like thunder, or Luke’s grunt, a hiss sucked between his teeth as he screws up his face in pain.
It must be late. Years have passed overnight, and yet, the thought of sunrise still seems inexplicable. The bank of heavy clouds extends to the horizon and beyond.

Alec hopes there’s a payphone nearby. He hopes Luke can reach his wife, he hopes Veil has spare change in her pockets because it wasn’t on Alec’s list of necessities for the night.

He hopes Nightlock -

*Magnus.*

He hopes Magnus is -

It’s not a thought he can chase. He can’t. His body is too tired and his head -

He doesn’t want to think about his head. There’s an ache in his temples, a migraine pulsing like dull heat in his forehead. His eyes sting, crusty with dried blood and sweat dripped down from his mask, and he feels dizzy, dehydrated, his vision swimming as he pushes himself to take another step, and then another, *don’t let go of Luke, don’t fall over, not yet.*

If he stops to catch his breath, everything will pile up on top of him at once, and he can’t let that happen, not yet, not until he has somewhere soft to land when his knees inevitably give out and meet the ground.

Luke turns his head to the sky, gazing up at the moon. His face is drawn, his skin paling, but his eyes fall closed and he breathes deeply. A moment of calm passes across his expression.

Nightlock said something, once, about him howling at the moon.

Nightlock said -

*Magnus.*
Alec exhales shudderingly and unhooks Luke’s arm from around his neck. Veil dips beneath the extra weight, but the strength seems to be returning to Luke’s legs, and Alec thinks that they might be okay.

“I have something,” he says, reaching into his utility belt. He pulls out a spare coms bud, relieved to find it uncrushed. He’s been holding onto it a while.

“It’s two-way radio,” he continues, holding it out to Veil in the flat of his palm. “Like mine. In case you want to get in contact.”

Veil eyes him skeptically. “Get in contact with you or with all of your lot?”

“With me,” he replies. “My, uh - my woman in the chair designed it. She thought it might be useful. In case of emergency.”

“Woman in the chair,” Luke grins, reaching out to take the coms bud from Alec’s hand. “I like that.” He presses the small bud into his ear and grins. “We’ll be in touch. I hope Maryse isn’t too hard on you all. Don’t let her blindside you. You know what needs to be done now.”

“I’m glad one of us thinks so,” Alec remarks. Veil tsks and Luke laughs, the sound hearty and full and familial, resonating in Alec’s chest like a warmth he longs to thaw his hands in. It doesn’t quite reach as deep as Alec needs it to, but he knows why, and it’s not Luke’s fault.

“You’ll be alright, Sentinel,” Luke says, offering Alec a fading smile, “You’ll be alright. He’ll be alright. Just give him time to process.”

Alec nods stiffly. He doesn’t know what to say, but Luke doesn’t expect it of him either.


Alec turns to leave, but he pauses, glancing back over his shoulder, when Veil doesn’t make any effort to move.
“Is everything -”

“My name’s Maia,” Veil says. Alec’s eyes widen in surprise, but Veil shrugs her shoulders. “Not Veil. Not whatever the Hell is written in my file at Idris. I want you to know that.”

Alec frowns. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because,” she says, and then she sighs heavily, as if it’s a tedious thing to admit, “Because for a Corporate, you’re not all that bad. And I trust you. Maybe that’s a mistake. I dunno yet.”

“It’s not,” Alec replies, firm, “I won’t let it be.” Then, he adds, “I’m Alec.”

“Good to meet you, Alec,” she says, a wry smile forming on her lips. “I’ll see you around. Look after Arkangel and Muse, they sure need it!”

Alec lingers on the quayside for a while, back against the wall and head tipped back against the sheet iron, relishing in the cold prickling at his skin and the rush of the water lapping against the rocks. He tries closing his eyes, but the blackness is just a bit too much, conjuring up things he doesn’t want to think about, so he settles on staring at the sky.

There are stars. He so rarely sees stars, and of course they would come out tonight when everyone else is so busy staring at the ground, running until their lungs burn out, huddling under door frames with their loved ones, or face down on the sidewalk -

Izzy would scold him for standing out in the cold, but he can’t bring himself to move, not until he loses all feeling in his fingertips and all the noise inside his head flatlines.

Valentine is dead. The pyrokinetic too. He hasn’t processed that yet.

He should feel relief, and he will, probably, in the days to come, but now -
He relives the moment of Valentine pulling off Nightlock’s mask over and over again, and it’s still Magnus every time.

A car approaches, gravel crunching beneath tires, an engine silenced. Doors open and slam, and then hushed voices trickle along the side of the building, pooling around Alec’s feet: quiet commands and stern words whispered beneath someone’s breath. He hears footsteps clicking on the sidewalk, pointed heels like Isabelle’s, but it’s the pad of heavy-duty combat boots that approach Alec.

Alec looks up.

It’s Underhill, lowering the gun in his hand when he sees the masked man loitering in the shadows isn’t a stranger. He has a look on his face like he was gearing up for a fight but is glad to not have to get his hands dirty.

“Jace and Clary are inside,” Alec says, nodding over his shoulder. “Izzy’s with them, but they’re not in good shape.”

“The Circle?” Underhill asks.

“Dead,” says Alec, on a breath. Underhill’s shoulders deflate and the sharpness leaves his eyes; instead, his focus flicks to Alec’s weeping thigh and bruised face.

“Maryse sent a clean-up crew,” he says, “And a car for you. You should head back, get fixed up. Things are pretty crazy back at headquarters.”

Alec doesn’t budge, but nor does Underhill, staring at Alec like he’s not sure how Alec is physically standing. Alec isn’t sure either. He can still hear the whistle of bullets overhead, the roar of fire, the blaze …

It’s all a blur, with the singular point of clarity being -

Abruptly, Alec pushes himself away from the wall before he can think of it again. He steps around Underhill, but Underhill grips him quickly by the shoulder as he passes.
“I’m glad you’re alive,” he says, “Let me know if anything comes up, but be careful. It's not safe out there tonight.”

Alec nods. He appreciates it, but he’s not so sure the warning will make a difference.

There are no protesters on the front steps of Idris’ headquarters.

Smoke rises from Brooklyn Bridge in the distance, the wind carrying the whirl of helicopters and the shouts of emergency services digging through the carnage for survivors. Idris is a dark shadow against the clouds: deeper black-grey, austere and unmoving. A single window on the top floor is aglow, the only light amongst the overhang of blacked-out skyscrapers.

There are cars abandoned across the street and a thin film of ash coating traffic lights and stop signs and billboards alike, heavy in the air like the threat of rain. Placards lie face-down on the sidewalk, and broken glass and blackened Molotov marks litter the steps up to the front door, but the square in front of the building is deserted.

It feels like stepping out of time, a moment trailing the present where only silence lingers, if only briefly.

“I need the medical team, now!" Izzy demands, flinging open the front doors. “We’ve got two serious head traumas! Hurry!”

The night spills across the tiled floor, sloshing up against the glass and blue-grey walls like a wave of oil. The receptionist at the desk leaps out of her chair as Izzy holds open the door, and Clary and Underhill stagger into the lobby, carrying Jace between them. Jace’s feet drag on the ground and his head lolls on his shoulders, eyes blinking heavily as he tries to keep himself awake. Blood has dried on his temples, but now Alec can see the bruises, the dark purple stains on his skin that are already turning brown and yellow around the edges.

Alec hobbles after them, but every fucking step is agony. Blunt pain lances through his leg, now
stiff and immovable, and someone smashes into his shoulder as they run past, geared up and racing back out into the cold. There are already dozens of people descending on Jace, men in their suits and women in their smart heels, poking and prodding and peeling Jace of the rest of his suit. Someone demands where his wings are. Another person barks orders into the intercom to get Maryse on the line. Someone else yanks Jace out of Clary’s arms and Clary cries out, scrabbling against the tight vice of their arms as they hold her back.

Alec grits his teeth, knotting his fingers into the torn fabric of his suit, and he squeezes so hard his knuckles turn white.

“Get Jace to medical!” Izzy shouts. Her voice is clear and precise and cuts through everything else. “He needs blood, I want all the O-positive we’ve got! Don’t fucking start with me, Blackthorn, do it now!”

She grabs a man by his collar and shoves him in the direction of the elevators. Then, she wheels around on the receptionist and snaps at her, gesturing wildly. Izzy’s suit and mask are covered in brick dust, ash turning her hair grey, but her dark eyes are fierce, determined, and terrifying, and it’s like a call to drill.

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“Underhill, I need you to radio Aline and Helen, see if they need back-up,” Izzy orders, “Take Rosales and Bridgestock if you need them. Monteclaire, you’re handling Raj and Lydia tonight, right? I need you to call them in - and someone needs to find Victor! We’ve still got Circle members out there, the threat is not over! Clary, you’re with me, come on, you need stitches -”

It’s a blur. Alec sees faces, but he doesn’t see faces. There are more people shouting. Izzy angrily grabs someone on the medical team by his scrubs. Jace slumps forward and a number of people dive to catch him before he hits the ground hard.

Alec’s back meets a wall, and then his stomach lurches and he doubles forward, crumpling at the middle. Time grinds to a sluggish halt.

He stares down at his hands, clamped over his knees, until his fingers begin to tremble. It starts in his fingertips, a tingle, and then it’s resonating up his arms, vibrating in his shoulders like a struck note that will not dissipate.

And then, it solidifies: a heavy metallic weight sags in his chest, hooks sinking into his skin like a grapple, a piercing pressure compacting on his lungs. His throat twinges, bruised and scraped by frantic breaths, but when he tries to speak, to call out, his voice catches on a gasp. Pain radiates down his sternum, digging into his ribcage. He wonders how many of his ribs are cracked, not
from battle, but from fear.

What is he doing? He should be doing something. He can’t just shut down, he can’t stop functioning just because he feels like it - people pour in through the doors, marching in blood on the soles of their boots, and others are running the other way. Somewhere, out there, hundreds of civilians are trapped under the wreckage of Grand Central Station, or crawling on their hands and knees away from the Penhallow building. Lydra, Aline, all the others - doing the job that Alec should be doing - and Simon, oh, Simon, Alec just left him in the aftermath -

Where is your sense of duty? comes the insidious whisper than Alec knows well, but the words are drawn out, distorted by the slow passage of time.

The front doors bang open again and he steals a glance outside: the night, still dark, still wailing with far-away sirens, reeks of burning concrete. Alec’s whole body flinches like it wants to move, like it wants to pitch forward and run after those police sirens and fire engines, like he wants to keep on helping, even now, even if it means he ends up collapsed on the ground and clutching his leg with blood slick on his hands.

He doesn’t move, but he careens sideways, smacking his hand against the wall to keep himself from falling.

“Alec!”

Clary.

Clary rushing to his rescue, Clary hoisting him up, sliding beneath his arm. Alec turns to a face full of wild red hair. She stinks of smoke. There are dark black stitches along her hairline, stark against her pale skin. She’s been scrubbed of the blood on her face, but there are still flakes along her jaw, in the shell of her ear.

When did -

How did -

“Alec, why are you still here,” Clary says, tugging Alec’s arm around her thin shoulders.
She won’t be able to manage his weight. She’s too slight; he’s too heavy. She lost so much blood, she shouldn’t still be walking -

He leans on her anyway, and the cramp in his leg unwinds, if only for a moment.

“Your head -” he starts, but he thinks the words come out jumbled, because she looks up at him, confused, and then pulls gently on his fingers, draped across her shoulders. She guides him forward - one step, and then a second - and his thigh feels like it’s convulsing, his knee quaking like he can’t control it.

“Is Jace -”

“He’s okay, he’s in medical. They don’t think he’s too badly hurt, maybe a concussion and some fractures, but he didn’t lose as much blood as we thought,” says Clary. Alec exhales sharply, his whole body sagging in relief, and Clary stumbles. “Alec! Alec, hey, hold on, come on. Have you been standing out here the entire time?”

“What -”

“Alec, it’s been over an hour since we got back-”

Alec blinks. The world slowly fades back into colour: pale blue glass and artificial lights and Jace’s blood, now dried, on the floor. Izzy is gone. Underhill too.

He and Clary are the only ones in the lobby now, but he didn’t even notice.

“I don’t know,” he says truthfully. “I don’t know, I thought - I was just -”

“Jesus,” Clary hisses, “You must’ve blacked out. Izzy sent me to look for you, she didn’t know where you were.”

“We need - we need to get back out there,” Alec says, pressed between his teeth. “What about
back-up for the others, what about -”

“There haven’t been any more explosions. Izzy thinks there’s still Circle members out there, but the White House is calling the shots now, they’ve already mobilised the military. They’ve taken it out of Idris’ hands.”

“Penhallow -” Alec grunts, “We need to stop her - we need to stop her before that press conference -”

“I tried to leave but your mom stopped me,” says Clary. She steers them towards the stairwell that leads down into the basement levels. “She’s called an emergency briefing. Raj and Lydia just got back, and Helen and Aline are on their way -”

*Of course. Of course his mother has,* Alec thinks. He glances back over his shoulder at the open door, before it disappears from view. *How far would he make it, if he turned around and left? The front steps? The sidewalk? How far would he get with Clary beneath his arm before they both collapsed from exhaustion?*

*But Penhallow -*

“Alec, you can’t walk,” Clary says, as if reading his thoughts.

*Is that supposed to stop me -*

His foot catches on the ground and he staggers forward, pulling Clary with him. She braces her feet against the ground, but she gasps, screwing up her face and pressing her nose into her shoulder to conceal her wet whimper of pain.

Alec’s eyes snap to her, suddenly panicked. Clary holds tight to his arm, but her other hand flutters across her side, delicate over hidden bruises.

“Clary -”

“I’m fine,” she says, but there are silent tears rolling over her eyelashes and down her cheeks, and
she can’t stop them, “I’m fine, I’m fine, they needed to help Jace - I just -”

Alec clenches his jaw and slowly leans his weight back on his leg. Pain explodes up through his knee like a firecracker, eye-watering and white-hot, but he suffers it, he must, and he grips Clary by the shoulder and leads them down the stairs. She curls into his chest, her forehead against his neck, and she sobs.

Alec doesn’t tell her to stop.

“Holy shit! Alec, man, what the Hell happened to you?”

Alec squints against the white light of the corridors, raising his hand to shield his eyes. He shrugs free of Clary’s arm as best he can, but she won’t let him go, no completely, her hand tugging at the back of his suit.

Ahead of them is Raj, a hand held up in greeting, and behind him, Lydia, staring at the ground.

They don’t look much better than Alec: Raj’s mask hangs loose around his neck, his suit black with rubble and debris; and Lydia’s arms are caked in blood from wrist to elbow, the same red smudge thumbed across her mouth too. Her blue eyes are glassy.


She blinks and looks up, momentarily confused. Her eyes pass from Raj, to Clary, and land on Alec, and some of the harsh lines in her face soften at the state of him. “Still alive, so that’s something,” she says, “But Victor’s arm is bust and we heard about Jace. You?”

“I’m okay,” Alec lies. “Who called you back?”

“Your mom, obviously,” Raj cuts in, folding his arms across his chest. “We were at Grand Central
pulling people out the rubble. Police tried to stop us, but when they saw how much Lydia can lift, they shut up pretty quick.”

“How many people did you get out?” Clary asks from Alec’s side.

Raj exchanges a sober look with Lydia. “Not enough,” he says. “There were probably thousands of people down there when the explosion went off. But then the recall came in, so…”

Raj trails off, kicking his foot against the ground in frustration. “We shouldn’t be back here,” he says. “It’s wrong.”

“Well, if you want to tell Maryse that, be my guest,” says Lydia, and she turns away, flicking her ponytail over her shoulder. “Come on. Let’s get this over with.”

Lydia leads the way into the boardroom. Alec never feels so deep underground as he does here, in this windowless room: it makes him think of collapsing walls and descending ceilings, how it feels to gasp for air under a hundred tons of rubble. Here, there is no smoke, but the smell of fresh paint stings the inside of his nose.

There are twelve equidistant chairs around the table, plush, unused leather with plastic armrests. White fluorescence bounces off the shine of the table and the tiled floors, and overhead, the lights hum. There’s no other furniture in the room. It feels sterile, regimented, and Alec is overcomes by the need to -

Ruin it. Mess it up, break it. Bleed across it. He’s not sure what, but his head swims with the smell of bleach.

Raj sinks into one of the chairs, Lydia settling into parade rest behind him. Clary backs up against the wall, crossing her arms, and Victor Aldertree slips through the door behind Alec, his arm in a sling and the stoniest expression Alec has seen on anyone bar himself carved out on his face.

He looks Alec up and down, but doesn’t hold Alec’s stare, clutching his cast against his chest.

No-one says anything. But Alec knows they’re all watching each other, Raj watching Victor, and Clary watching Alec, and Victor cataloguing who has come out of this the worst, calculating whose paypacket will be thickest -
Alec shouldn’t be here.

The city is on fire, and Valentine is dead, and it’s all come at such a personal cost. He wants to peel his mask from his face and lay it down on the table in front of all of them. He wants to take his paycheck and shove it into Victor’s hands. He wants to walk back the way he came, even if it means brushing shoulders with his mother on the way out, because -

He shouldn’t be here.

(And it’s not just because there are still people out there who need his help. Not really.)

(He knows where he should be. Where he wants to be. It calls to Alec beneath the mask, appealing to all the selfish parts of him that he shoved deep down within his chest and locked away and told himself he couldn’t answer - but God, they deserve an answer.)

Alec almost takes a step towards the door, but then he hears voices, and Aline and Helen round the corner. Helen’s cheek is scraped, a large gash slicing her face from ear to nose, and Aline wears an expression like thunder. She looks furious and it stops Alec in his tracks.

“Oh, good, we’re all here!” Aline snaps, throwing up her hands and electricity crackles in her fingertips. Her eyes flit across the room, and land last on Alec.

“Calm down, Aline, it’s only a briefing,” Victor says over his shoulder. Helen glares at him, but Aline ignores him.

“You know Robert called us all out of the field?” she says, looking at Alec. “We’re not allowed to go back out there, because - because they forbid us?”

“Forbid us?” Clary gasps. “What do you mean? But there are -”

“The fire department was still digging people out of the rubble at Grand Central when we were called back,” says Lydia, glancing at Raj. “There were hundreds of people trapped down there.”
“One of the towers collapsed on Brooklyn Bridge too,” adds Helen, “We lost at least twenty cars into the river.”

“The police can handle it,” says Victor, holding up his broken arm, “We’ve done our part. Some of us more than others, it would seem. Let the cops pull their weight for once.”

“Can I remind you that I could punch you through that wall over there, Aldertree,” says Lydia, “So I would shut up, if I were you.”

Victor grimaces but says nothing further, and even Raj raises his eyebrows and snickers. Aline, however, is still staring at Alec.

“Alec,” she pleads, “This is not fair, they can’t bench us. Not tonight. We have to do something.”

What does she expect him to say? Alec wonders. Does she expect him to shoot her down, reason with her, make her see it from Idris’ side, from Maryse and Robert’s side, from Victor’s side? Does she expect him to stand by and say nothing as he always does, and let Maryse tell them what they can and can’t do, how they should and shouldn’t be using their powers, because -

Because at the end of the day, do they really own them?

The politicians and the senators and the men whispering in Maryse’s ear, they would probably tell Alec no. No, you haven’t for a long time. You’re an asset. You’re a weapon. You don’t get to be anything else.

That doesn’t seem fair. Aline is right.

“Alec -”

“I get it,” he says.

“You - wait, what?”
Heels click in the corridor and tension thread its way through Aline’s shoulders: her jaw clenches and her eyes darken, but she steps away from Alec and settles into parade rest between Lydia and Clary. Raj twists back in his chair, folding his arms on the table top, while Victor stands to attention, fixing his eyes on the opposite wall.

Alec looks to Clary. She nods at him, giving him permission for something he knows not how to do, only that he must do it.

It’s Izzy who appears in the doorway, but she’s not smiling, Maryse and Robert both close on her heels. Izzy steps aside, bumping her shoulder against Clary’s as they knot their hands together, but Alec watches his mother: the lofty tilt of her chin, the stern look in her eyes, her slicked-back ponytail, the stack of paperwork tucked under her arm. Her dress is crisp and clean; her jacket is pressed at the seams.

Everyone else in the room is in tatters.

Alec wonders if she can see that, or if it’s only him aware of the blood drying on the floor.

Maryse says nothing, not until she’s rounded the table and taken her seat at the far side, with Robert to her right. There’s an unspoken stalemate where no-one wants to move, but Alec can feel Aline crackling, and he sees Clary shifting on her feet, and Izzy’s stare, not on their parents, bores into him.

“Thank you all for being here, I’ll make this quick,” says Maryse. “As I’m sure you’re all aware, we have a domestic terrorism situation on our hands. The Circle have claimed responsibility for all the attacks tonight, but I’m pleased to say that the threat has been subdued and we have Valentine’s body in our custody. Senator Penhallow is in talks with the White House and the military has taken control of the situation at all four incident sites, but Idris still has a job to do.”

“The sun’s already up, so the focus for the rest of the day is going to be evacuation and security,” says Robert, as Maryse lays out paper packets in regimented order on the table top. Alec spots his name scribbled in hasty ink on the envelope directly in front of her, and it’s on that envelope that she rests her hands.

“Senator Penhallow has requested additional security at her home address ahead of her emergency press conference in three hours, so Lydia and Raj will rendezvous with her security team,” continues Maryse, “Victor, I want you with the mayor. I understand you’re injured, but he’s willing to pay triple for your time and you’re already familiar with his detail.”
Victor nods. Alec stiffens. He curls his fists at his side and draws a steadying breath in through his nose.

“Aline and Helen,” Maryse says, “We have clients on Wall Street who are looking for evacuation alternatives now that all the bridges off the island are impassable. They’ve paid up front, so we need to supervise some air transit and be mindful of non-essential personnel who shouldn’t be on site.”

Maryse’s eyes flick to Alec. She looks him up and down and it’s not subtle: she can see the shape he’s in, his scraped-up cheek, the way he stands with his hand clenched around his thigh, all his weight off one leg. She sees it, she hesitates, because she’s still his mother after all, and she keeps talking anyway.

“It doesn’t sound like Jace is in a position to assist, so Alec, you’re with Clary for now. Imogen Herondale has requested a private escort out of the city, so that’s where I want you. We have clean-up teams seeing to the incident at the waterfront, and we’re currently preparing a public statement on that, so Isabelle will be on standby for all of you.”

“Incident?” says Clary, unable to help herself. “Jace almost died! If it weren’t for Alec and Wolfsbane and Veil -”

“If the three of you had followed protocol, you wouldn’t have been in that situation to begin with,” says Robert. “It was dangerous, and yes, you did almost cost Jace his life -”

“This is bullshit,” says Aline, “They got Valentine, didn’t they? They stopped the Circle - that was Alec. Alec did that. What did you want him to do, stand by whilst the Circle blew up even more of the city? Killed more people? Screw protocol!”

Maryse raises one eyebrow. “Alec?” she asks expectantly. She wants him to make everyone else see sense. She wants him on side as she goes to the press and claims that Idris was behind Valentine’s capture, that Idris saved the city; she wants him to fall in line.

Alec takes a deep breath.

“Lydia and Raj said there are still people buried at the building collapse at Grand Central,” he says, and the steadiness of his voice surprises him. He pushes it as far as it will take him. “We should be
sending people *there*, not to Imogen Herondale’s beck and call. We know she was in Valentine’s pocket. She doesn’t need us. The civilians need us.”

There’s a sharp intake of breath, and Alec’s not sure if it’s Maryse or everyone else. Still, the corners of Maryse’s mouth turn downwards and stony disappointment calcifies on Robert’s face.

“Alec, we’re not having this discussion again,” Maryse says slowly. “What you and Jace and Clary did tonight was bad enough. It almost cost you your lives.”

“But it didn’t,” says Alec. “And we won. Valentine is dead. He was killing vigilantes and you know that -”

“Idris’ role isn’t to stop the Circle or save illegal vigilantes or dig civilians out of rubble,” Maryse interjects. “We’re better suited elsewhere. *You* are better suited elsewhere, somewhere your powers can be of real use.”

“And that’s not saving lives?” Alec counters. He fights back the need to laugh. He can almost hear Valentine whispering in his mother’s ear: *Idris doesn’t need to be involved in this. Idris can look the other way.* He gestures wildly at the others. “You’re telling me that Lydia’s super strength and Raj’s teleportation are more useful standing guard at Senator Penhallow’s front door over rescuing people who the Circle tried to kill? *And blame on us?*”

“You know that’s not what your mother is saying, Alec,” says Robert. “But being a superhero is about being responsible with your powers. Responsible with your *lives*. If you go back out there, there’s no telling what could happen, and you’re all far too valuable an asset for us to risk that -”

Oh. There it is. Alec sees it in the way Aline widens her stance and braces herself for a hit; in the way Clary huffs out a sharp breath, her jaw working; in the way Izzy’s still staring at him, and not at their parents, like Alec’s the only person in the God-damn room.

There it is. That word.

*Asset.*

Not a human being. Never a human being.
What human being can cope with this amount of blood on their hands?

“As I see it,” Alec says slowly, dragging out every word between his teeth. “Part being a superhero is knowing when you don’t have to be one anymore. And when you need to start being one again.”

“Alec,” Maryse warns, “This is already a PR nightmare and we’re doing our best to spin it in Idris’ interests. Of course I don’t want to see anyone else hurt, not civilians, not your vigilante acquaintances. No-one. But there’s no room for negotiation.”

“I’m not trying to negotiate,” says Alec. He gestures to Lydia, to Aline, to Clary. “Nor are they. They’ve told you what they’re going to do. So have I.”

For the briefest of moments, he sees his mother slip: the mask peeling away at the corners, her eyes widening as she hears him for the very first time. He knows she wants to keep him safe - and he doesn’t blame her for that and never will - but it’s not enough, not when it’s so out-weighed by everything else.

“Alec, this is your job,” Robert says, when Maryse is silent. “This is Idris, we’re not just talking about some off-the-books and behind-the-scenes sort of mission here. You have a responsibility to a lot of people. This is your family.”

No, Alec thinks. No, it really isn’t. And it hasn’t been for a long time.

He looks back at Izzy and she nods. She’ll follow him anywhere. He knows that. It’s all he really needs.

“We know it’s difficult and we know you all want to be out there, but that’s not what we do. We have to play this one by the books, make sure we get ahead of the press on Valentine,” Robert continues, leaning forward on the table. “Handle this the way Idris has always done: quietly, professionally, and responsibly. This is what you’ve trained all your life for. This is who you are.”

“No,” Alec says aloud. “No, it’s not who I am. Not anymore.”

“Alec -”
“I quit.”

And oh, doesn’t that feel free.

He’s had enough; this is his breaking point. It hasn’t come without blood and sacrifice and the loss of almost everything he’s come to love, but here and now, it’s as simple as turning his back and walking away.

And it’s exactly what he does.

“Alec!” his mother barks, this edge of fear in her shout of his name, and he hears her rush around the side of the table, but someone steps in her way - maybe Isabelle, or even Clary. He doesn’t look back, even as he catches Aline’s eye on the way out of the door.

This is not his world anymore and he owes Idris nothing: he’s given them years of his service, turned so many blind eyes, lost too many irreplaceable things that he’s held dear to his heart. Valentine is dead and the Circle is over and no more of his friends will be burned alive in the underbelly of this city whilst Idris takes no responsibility for the hatred they stoked to begin with; his job here is done.

“Alec!” his father shouts. At last, someone is raising his voice. “Alec, don’t walk away!”

Alec turns, at the door, and his eyes are flat and fierce and final.

“Enough,” he says, before he leaves, “That’s enough.”

Chapter End Notes

Don’t ever take medical advice from fanfiction, kids! Leave that shrapnel in your leg until you can get medical attention and have a surgeon pull it out! Unless of course the plot demands that your sister just yank it the fuck out your leg, then you do you ...

What to say about this chapter ... what to say ... my fave part is when Lydia threatens to punch Victor through a wall! Or when Veil finally reveals her name to Alec! Or when Alec's entire worldview goes tits up and shatters right before his eyes! Love that
for him! Will the suffering ever end!

There was actually meant to be a much more romantic and bittersweet scene between Sentinel and Magnus after the reveal - including a forehead touch - but then I realised ... bitch ... Magnus is traumatised, he's gonna run. He's thinking about protecting his heart; this is what he does, what he's always been good at. So I scrapped it all and made him leg it. It made more sense in terms of his character hahahahaha

FORGIVE MY TYPOS, FOR THERE ARE MANY ... GOD I STRUGGLE WRITING ACTION SCENES LOL

Thank you so much for all the feedback from last time! I can't express how much it helps to read people's thoughts and feelings on this fic, as everyone has a different take on the moral issues and it's so interesting!

Visit me on tumblr and shout in my inbox, especially if you have questions! Please reblog the tumblr post for me too!

I'm also on Twitter if you want to come chat about the fic ... and boy, do I love talking about this fic. Tweet as you read with the hashtag ficacoldnight! :D

Please leave a kudos if you made it to the end, and drop me a comment with your thoughts, your favourite line, your hopes for what will happen next, your advice for poor old Alec ... I would be forever grateful for it! If you want an alert next time there's an update, please hit that subscribe button!

Until next time, in which Alec finally makes his choice. AND ALSO GETS TO SLEEP!
excoriation of a man in shifting light

Chapter Summary

“Why?” Magnus demands, “Why do you say it like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like I’m exactly the person you wanted Nightlock to be?”

Chapter Notes

At last, this is Alec. This is the whole of him. For the first time in a long time, he is unhindered. He is unmasked.

&&&

Tweet as you read with #ficacoldnight!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Layer by layer I removed all that I thought I was, all that I thought I had to be and in the moment I was left standing naked and vulnerable without identities and labels, I remembered, I am that I am.

- Lenita Vangellis

Alec staggers into the breakroom, his knees giving out on him as he careens shoulder-first into a wall.

He’s shaking. His head spins and it’s like his ribs are realigning inside his chest, shifting to fill a vacuous space that wasn’t there before.

It feels like -

God, it feels like something has been wrenched from his chest. Like a weight that has been bearing
down on his shoulders for so fucking long has suddenly been snatched free, and now -

Now, he feels the violence of it. Now, his legs tremble and he can’t inhale deeply enough to catch his breath and his thigh throbs and he clenches his teeth against the pain.

The only light in the room is the glow of the television, its picture green and flickering, its murmur on low - did he leave it on the last time he was here? How many hours ago was that? How many days?

On the screen, the camera follows Senator Penhallow addressing a crowd from the steps of the Supreme Court: her hair is scraped back, her grey suit is austere. An aide holds a large black umbrella above her head; Penhallow’s microphone hums with the sound of the rain as camera flashes dazzle in the downpour.

A Breaking News banner scrolls beneath Penhallow’s podium.

‘New York Senator Jia Penhallow thanks the NYPD and military for efforts following last night’s string of terror attacks in first public statement,’ reads the text. ‘State of emergency officially declared in New York City as terror threat remains high.’

The broadcast cuts to footage from last night: the Penhallow building erupting in a ball of fire; the Brooklyn Bridge seen from above as cars pour off the road and into the river as smoke engulfs both towers. Orange flames burn bright against the night sky, striping Manhattan’s skyline in the colours of fire and smog.

Then, the broadcast cuts to live footage of One Police Plaza, its charred black silhouette stark against the grey bank of early morning clouds. Helicopters circle overhead and smoke slips from the highest windows, but the fire has long been extinguished. The camera focuses on the enormous cavern carved out of the side of the building, and then on the rubble strewn across the street. The next shot is a row of firemen collapsed on the ground, helmets abandoned and discarded, holding their heads in their hands.

The scrolling text changes: ‘Early reports unclear on superhuman involvement. Private security firm Idris expected to give press conference tomorrow.’

Breath escapes Alec as a hiss through his teeth. He closes his eyes and counts to ten, over and over and over again, but the rough scrape of his supersuit against his thigh is like road burn. Blood
oozes into the bandages, a slow black sludge oil-hot between his leathers and his skin.

He needs stitches. He needs stitches before he starts bleeding out across the floor, but he won’t go back, he can’t go back and ask his parents for that now.

Alec tugs on the tourniquet lashed around his leg, pulling it tighter. Dirt and rubble flake from his suit, and as he shakes his head, dust scatters from his hair. The scrape across his cheek stings, the gash of the bullet already scabbed over, his skin knitting back together in a tight knot. There’s blood crusted in his hairline. On his fingertips too.

God, he must look fucking delirious. He half-expects someone to burst through the door and strap down his arms and wheel him off to be sedated because he must look out of his fucking mind. That’s what his parents must see. Not someone trying to lead a coup, but a tall child with scraped knees and a concussion just trying to be petulant -

No, something inside him says. No, not this time. Don’t go there.

Alec fights back the groan building in his throat, pushing himself upright against the wall. He lets his head tilt back against the cool plasterboard and his eyes drift back to the television screen.

“Senator! Senator, over here, Velasquez for MSNBC.” A journalist thrusts out his dictaphone towards Penhallow’s podium. “Senator, do we know who’s responsible for the attacks? Do we have anyone in custody?”

The camera zooms in on Penhallow’s face. Her expression remains unreadable, but she twitches as if hearing a whisper in her ear.

“We are acting under the assumption that these attacks were perpetrated by the same pyrokinetic individual who has been terrorising Manhattan these last few months,” she says. “Unfortunately, we do not know the individual’s identity, but it’s difficult to believe that they were working alone and we suspect other vigilante involvement. If anything, this tragic attack has further highlighted the urgent need to document all those with superhuman abilities who currently reside within the city limits.”

Alec thunks his head back against the wall; dull pain flares in the base of his skull where his hair is dry and straw-like with blood. He fights the urge to sink to the ground. He won’t be able to get back up again. He knows that.
How many people died tonight? He doesn’t know. He doesn’t want to know because it’ll be a number too big to fathom and it’ll be a number he might’ve prevented if only he’d been -

What? If you’d been what? Faster? Better? Stronger?

Wouldn’t have made a difference.

He lets his eyes fall closed. The darkness is a reprieve only for a moment: he recalls the stench of acrid smoke, the crash of the Penhallow tower collapsing above his head, Simon’s warm blood on his hands …

… the cold bite of the air in that warehouse, the flash of fire as it poured from Jonathan Morgenstern’s hands …

… the iron-hard look in Maryse’s eyes.

I quit.

What happens now? He doesn’t know. He never expected to make it this far and still be standing.

No-one gets to walk away. You have to run. You have to run.

Oh, but he’s too tired to run. He’s not sure he can will his legs to move; perhaps he can hobble, perhaps he can crawl his way to the front door before someone catches up with him.

He wonders if he’ll get to say goodbye to the others. He wonders who will get his bows, his spare quiver, his mask if he’s not there to claim them.

He wonders if this is how he leaves his parents and the place he once thought of home for good, and he wonders if Izzy and Clary and Jace will follow him out, and he wonders what happens to Idris then, if Alec were to light the fuse on its own implosion -
Am I doing the right thing? That’s the fundamental question. It always has been, always the one that Alec hears the loudest and always the one that doesn’t have an answer.

What is the right thing? Did they get all the Circle tonight or are there more? How far did Valentine’s whispers reach? What happens to the vigilantes now, how does Alec keeps them safe, where do they go from here -

And then, oh, Nightlock is Magnus.

Alec’s eyes snap open.

Oh God. Nightlock is Magnus.

He’s been repeating it over and over for hours now, but it’s like delayed impact: here, suddenly, is the whiplash. Here is the plummeting of his stomach, the violence of the impact.

Nightlock is Magnus. All these months of rooftops in the rain and scrubbing soot from their suits; all the unfettered truths and quiet promises; all the parts of Alec shared with a stranger, offered up so freely and so desperately, clutching as he did for any shred of solidarity, of sameness -

Would you have offered them at all if you didn’t know? If you didn’t know, somewhere, deep down inside, to whom you were giving up a part of yourself?

Of course Nightlock is Magnus. Alec should’ve seen it sooner. He should’ve stopped in his tracks that very first night, sat on that rooftop waiting for Jace, and said, ‘oh, I know who you are, as if I could ever miss it?’

‘As if that mask could hide any part of you from me?’

A soft knock taps on the door and Alec looks up too quickly. The quiet, “yeah?” that escapes him is weak and feeble and, somehow, devastated.

The door opens slowly and Izzy slips into the room, flicking on the light. The top half of her supersuit is knotted around her waist, leaving her in a tank top and goosebumps that pepper her
skin. Her frown is fierce, but the fire cools in her eyes as she finds Alec. She looks relieved.

“I was wondering where you went,” she exhales, “You doing okay?” She steps into his side and swings her arm around his waist, tucking herself beneath his shoulder. She hugs him tight, pulling his weight off his leg, but she smells like dust and rubble and gunpowder and it does nothing to quiet the pounding in Alec’s ears. “Alec?”

“I don’t know,” Alec tells her honestly. His voice wobbles. “Iz, I - I don’t know. What - what have mom and dad said?”

“What you’d expect,” Izzy sighs. She glances at the TV and her expression hardens. “Dad wanted to know who else was planning on following you out and everyone put their hands up. Well, except Victor. Mom’s face was a picture, but I think there's a part of her beginning to get it.”

Alec scrubs his face with his hand, dislodging flakes of dried blood from his mouth.

“We’re doing the right thing,” he says, “We have to be, but I-”

“We are,” Izzy nods, “And it is. It is the right thing, because you’re the one leading it. Idris has to change if we want to make a difference for the other supers in the city, if we want to survive, everyone knows that.”

Alec tips his chin towards the TV. “Valentine still won. He’s dead but he still won. His message got out there. Penhallow’s already calling for superhuman registration and 1PP is still smoking behind her.”

“So, we fight it. Idris can’t stand in our way anymore. There are people out there who care about the supers. I know you’ve seen it, Alec. Attitudes are changing, I know it.”

Alec looks down at her. The determination in her eyes, the stubbornness, the steadfast belief she has in him - it never changes. They could be children again, and she would be gazing up at him in exactly the same way, her chin jutted out and her arms clamped around his leg, unwilling to let go.

Now, though. Now, it all reminds him so much of Magnus. That confidence, that trust that Alec is a good person. A just person. It’s unshakeable. It forms as a lump in Alec’s throat.
“It’s always been an uphill battle,” Izzy whispers. “And I know you’ve always borne the brunt of it - you didn’t deserve that - but that’s never stopped you before. People aren’t gonna forget what you’ve done for them when they look back on this in the history books.”


Izzy smiles up at him, the corners of her mouth lifting. “Oh, you bet,” she says, “I was just trying to be modest.”

She squeezes him gently and then peels away, crossing the room to silence the television. The hum of voices is cut short, but Alec can still hear the static crackling in his ears.

Izzy turns back to him, her smile contorting into a frown.

“You need to go to medical,” she says severely, “Your leg needs stitches and your face is a mess.”

Alec smiles tightly. “I quit, remember? I think that means I have to leave.” He palms his hand against his thigh but it does nothing to lessen the raw pulse of pain. “Jace was worse off than me. And Clary. She’s hiding it but she’s hurt. Make sure someone checks her out.”

Izzy purses her lips into a thin line. “Fine. But at least let me change your bandages because they’re actually disgusting.”

She shoves him into one of the chairs and crouches down in front of him, slowly peeling the browned bandages from his thigh. The wet gauze sticks to his suit and his skin just the same.

Izzy pulls a knife from her boot and saws into Alec’s suit, ripping the leather until she can reach behind his knee and restrap his leg with fresh dressing.

The white bandages stay white; no blood seeps through. Alec is relieved.

“Hey ... Alec?” Izzy asks as she tucks the end of the bandage in on itself and knots it tight. “Can I
ask you something?"

Alec grunts in acknowledgement but says nothing. He focuses on his breathing, but he hears her moment of hesitation.

“At the end, back in that warehouse … I looked Nightlock in the eye. He stared right back at me.”

Oh.

“He … he wasn’t wearing his mask.”

Alec swallows thickly. He refuses to look at her. “Veil’s illusion wasn’t cast on you.”

“No,” she replies, “No, it wasn’t. I saw him, I saw his face. He’s … he’s Magnus. Your Magnus.”

Alec takes a deep breath. His Magnus. His Nightlock.

Two parts of the same whole, and Alec -

Well, Alec’s been half in love with the both of them for a while now, and that’s the real truth, isn’t it? That’s the real truth and he feels it pooling in his hands, dripping through his fingers, and how, how is he meant to grab hold of that and know the right thing to do with it?

Somehow, walking away from Idris is far easier.

“Yeah,” Alec mumbles. It’s all he can think to say. “Yeah. It’s him.”

“What are you going to do?”

Alec feels nauseous again. “I don’t know. I - we - I don’t know how to … fix everything. If there’s even anything to fix.” He presses his knuckles into the meat of his thigh, just above the tourniquet.
“They took his mask, Iz. He told me that he - I don’t know how we can - I don’t know if he’d want to see me now. Now that I know.”

“Why would he want that?”

“It’s complicated,” Alec sighs, gesturing vaguely with his hand. “When I’m Sentinel and he’s Nightlock, it’s - it’s different. To how it is when we’re not. But now … now it’s all messed up.”

“But do you still feel the same? About him, now that you know?”

Alec doesn’t hesitate. “Yes.” The certainty of his own answer surprises him. “Yes, I do, but -”

“Does he know? About you? Who you are?”

( ‘There is someone whom I hope that you are.’

‘Is it gonna screw everything up if I am?’

‘Are you?’ )

Alec exhales through his nose, clenching his teeth, and says nothing.

Izzy pushes to her feet. “I think you’re overthinking things,” she says, “He’s a super. You’re a super. No-one’s gonna understand what he’s going through better than you. I reckon he knows that.”

“I don’t overthink things.”

Izzy rolls her eyes. “Uh-huh. Sure you don’t.”

She offers her hand and pulls him back to his feet. Then, she presses her pointer finger to the centre
of his chest, smudging the dust that clings to his armour.

“You deserve to be happy, big brother,” she says. “Sometimes that requires a risk, and if last night was anything to go by, you know how to take way worse ones.”

“It’s not about me being happy, it’s about -”

“No,” Izzy interrupts, shaking her head. “No, it is. This time, it is. You can’t go back out on the field. And you can’t stay here. I know for a fact you’ll refuse to go home and sleep because you’re impossible, so - let me handle mom and dad. Let me look after Clary. Let me check on Jace. I’ll get them out, I promise. And you … you deserve to be happy, Alec. And if not happy, at least at peace.”

Peace. Oh, it’s been so long since Alec knew the meaning of the word, but now that Izzy says it, he craves it. Not just his bed, not just the quieting of the blood that pulses in his ears, but -

More than that. He wants the chance to breathe. He wants to pull on the thready mess inside his chest and feel the knots unravel, fall loose; he wants to pull on that one red string that he has always felt tied between him and Magnus, between Sentinel and Nightlock, and he wants to reel it in.

Izzy knocks her knuckles against his arm. “Go to Brooklyn. Keep to the subway tunnels ‘til you get to the other side of the river,” she says, her voice low, “The police will be looking for anyone in a mask and everyone will be on high alert. Do what you gotta do and then we can reconvene after. Just keep your radio on so I know where you are.”

Alec reaches for her then and bundles her into his chest, pressing his nose into her hair. Izzy huffs but Alec can feel the balling of her fists in the back of his suit.

“You’re so stupid sometimes,” she murmurs into his shoulder. “Putting everyone else first, not thinking about yourself. You coulda died last night.”

“And leave you alone?” Alec replies. “You’d never forgive me.”
The daylight surprises Alec: here is New York, shadowless and swept with grey light, standing silently beneath heavy clouds and the threat of rain, yet completely unmoved. The air carries the weight of water and the stench of iron-filled smoke. Hot metal lingers on the back of Alec’s tongue as he turns his face to the sky and lets his eyes fall closed, if only for a moment: the wind beats against his battered cheek, picking up loose paper and scattered leaves from the sidewalk and shaping them into blustery forms, accompanying an eerie howl. The cold slips beneath his tattered suit and finds, easily, all the holes in him.

The streets are empty. The distant cry of sirens sounds like wailing, but without the hum of car engines to muffle it, the sound echoes between the skyscrapers.

There is no shadow beneath Alec’s feet, no neon light reflecting in the plate glass windows that disappear into the cloud. The usual rumble of traffic is nowhere to be found; that heat that rises up from subway grates has been replaced, only, by the thin sheen of a cold morning fog not yet dispelled nor trampled into the gutters. And if Alec listens hard enough, he can imagine the rush of the East River whispering through the streets: a hiss, a breathing, a silence.

He longs to be up high, away from the sound of flowing water: a rooftop, perhaps. A rooftop with a view over the city at large where he might be able to see each pillar of smoke at once but not taste any of them. A part of him longs for the freedom of flight, wings strapped to his back and spread wide, carrying him up and up and up, pushing through the blanket sky and into the endless blue of the stratosphere.

Perhaps it’s the weightlessness he wants, or the cold. Perhaps it’s something more: the bravery that comes with letting his feet leave the ground and the relinquishing of control, if only for a moment.

Yes, bravery. That’s what he wants. He wants to stop shaking.

A part of him thinks of running, even now. He doesn’t know where he would go, but it doesn’t seem to matter: away from here, away from Idris, from Brooklyn, from everyone that knows his name and his face. He doesn’t know why the urge still possesses him - after all that has happened, shouldn’t he have grown? Shouldn’t he be able to push past that crippling fear of being not enough and carry on?

Shouldn’t you have outgrown those bad parts of yourself by now? Shouldn’t you have forgiven them?
Alec takes a step and his leg seizes, and then another, and the pain is worse, but he pushes through it until the throb becomes a rhythm he can count upon, a beat that matches the pace of his heart.

He slips into the subway tunnels where the air is stagnant and stale and reeks of motor oil, but even here, the cold stalks him. The train tracks are quiet, no thrum of electricity in the steel. Alec’s footsteps ring out but go nowhere, swallowed up by the dark. With each limped step, his bitten-back grunts fill the silence.

He doesn’t know how far he walks. Time trickles away from him, drip by increasing drip, and disappears into the blackness that follows behind him at a distance that neither shrinks nor grows. His flashlight was crushed at the warehouse, so he finds his way by signal light: tiny pin-pricks of yellow that glow like eyes along the ceiling of the tunnel and watch him stumble and hiss and stagger and then judge him for it.

He thinks of Magnus. How can he not? He thinks of Magnus’ face in the moment Valentine peeled away his mask - the hatred, the snarl, the fear violent in his eyes - and then after, Magnus gazing down at Alec crumpled on the floor, his whole body vibrating with untapped energy.

The pain hidden between each of Magnus’ ragged breaths. The way he had been caught between running and not running, stuck in a moment where he never hoped to be, unable to move his legs - because where could he go?

Where can you hide when someone knows your face? Your name? Everything about you that you weren’t prepared to give -

*What would you have done? If it were you in that chair and he was the one watching it happen?*

*Do you even know?*

When Alec emerges from below ground, dusk has crept into the city and the air is wet. Behind him, Manhattan shrinks beneath a storm cloud, its silhouette painted in low lilacs and fuzzy greys, and
Alec feels like a smudge against a neon and deeply shadowed canvas.

But downtown Brooklyn hums: offices lit with artificial yellow light, brightly-lit billboards flickering overhead, reflecting in the rainwater pooled on the sidewalk. A taxi hurtles past, its headlights like white strobe, bouncing out of puddles on the ground. Alec lifts his arm to shield his face, but the driver doesn’t stop and the engine whistles into the distance.

He feels a half-step out of sync with reality and he’s not sure why. The ache in his leg no longer grounds him; he limps his way down the street on autopilot, but there’s only white noise inside his head: the static crackles, growing louder and louder; soon it will be a roar, as if Manhattan burning behind him is creeping in his footsteps, willing to catch him up.

He’s walked this way before. With Magnus, without Magnus, limping with a bullet lodged in his side and dragging a trail of his own blood to the foot of Magnus’ fire escape.

And yet, it doesn’t feel familiar. His body could be in another city entirely. He exists in a daze, and then Magnus’ building is looming up in front of him, strong red brick and dark windows, save for the glow of gold emanating from the very top floor.

And Alec has to stop. He stops beneath the ladder of the fire escape and gazes up at the black iron, wet with rain, and watches how the city light scatters like shrapnel, like shards of glinting metal through the water droplets. The clouds above are grey, threatening another downpour. The stars, as always, remain veiled.

Wind ruffles through Alec’s hair, making the arrows in his quiver shiver with anticipation. The armour on his forearms rubs and chafes; the kevlar upon his chest squeezes him too tight. His heart is beating so hard he fears it might wear a hole in his chest from the inside out, erosion upon his ribcage, rubbing holes in his bones. In his ears, that same thunderous drum beat builds like a crescendo. He feels his pulse spreading across his skin like a fine sheen of sweat, and there’s a weight to it, a palpable echo, marching towards one singular point.

This is that point. It has to be. There’s nowhere else to go.

(You don’t get to run from this. You have to be brave. You deserve peace.)

He scales the fire escape far quicker than the last time he was here, but the similarities to then are not lost on him: he’s still limping, still bleeding, still knows that whatever happens at the top of
these stairs will change everything in a way that can’t be undone.

He’s breathing heavily by the time he reaches the balcony. The lights from the loft filter warm yellow through the soft chiffon blinds that have been drawn across the windows, and it’s a light surprisingly gentle upon Alec’s face. Behind him, the city glows blue, far colder. Alec feels it lave upon his back, a beckoning hand to return to what he knows: self-sabotage, self-detriment, self-harm.

He grits his teeth and wills himself not to turn away. His stomach twists into knots.

Too long. It’s been too long: too long lying in the daytime only for truths to be said quietly within the silence of city rooftops, far and away from prying ears. Too many ducked gazes and wondered what ifs. Too long wanting to be whole and fearing what might happen if he was.

Alec steadies himself. He grips his bow tight in a fist and then lets it clatter loudly to the ground. He discards his quiver too, and the arrows scatter across the balcony, and he doesn’t care.

Too much pretending. Too little Alec. He is Alec. He’s always been Alec, mask or no mask, and Alec deserves to be seen.

The thin curtains on the other side of the window part, and then, then, there’s Magnus, stirred by the noise.

He’s still in his supersuit, but he’s lost his coat, his gloves, his mask. His skin is raw, scrubbed of blood and dust by the splash of water whilst bowed over a sink, and his hair flops limply over his forehead. Exhaustion shadows the curves of his cheeks and the hollows beneath his eyes, purple bruises bold against his jaw and throat, but he looks so soft, softer than Alec has ever seen him. The glow of the city becomes him, dappling him in the colours of a quieter midnight than they should be afforded.

And it’s unfair, it always is, how he has such tenancy of Alec’s bruised and battered heart.

“Magnus.”

His name, a whisper. The wind swallows it. On the other side of the glass, Magnus’ attention hones in on Alec’s masked face.
The look in his eyes is one that should be reserved for the very particular moment when a knife penetrates the cracks in one’s armour - but maybe this is exactly that. Alec sucks in a breath like there’s a blade slipping between his ribs.

Magnus stares at him and Alec stares back, and Magnus gives nothing away, nothing save for the way his eyes widen and his fingers quake around the half-finished glass of whiskey in his hand.

His eyes dart the length of Alec’s body, looking for blood, for bullets, for some trail of Alec smeared up the side of the building. He finds none, but his eyes flick back to Alec’s with an urgency that’s winding.

Alec attempts a smile. It seems to shudder, more like a grimace; he cannot hold it for long.

“Hey,” he says. A breath. He wonders if he looks desperate. He must do.

*Be brave, Alec. Be brave.*

Magnus stoops to put the glass on the floor before it can be dropped, and when he stands again, with that inhuman grace of his, something is different, something which Alec cannot read, not in its entirety.

The balcony windows are pushed open and the smell of sandalwood is woven into the wind; it seeps into Alec’s lungs, mixing into the nauseous taste at the back of his throat. He takes a deep breath and tries to quell the jittering of his heart.

Calm.

Calm now.

It’s been too long.

“Magnus.”
Magnus looks at him warily, the long line of him a shadow against the soft light sweeping from out of the loft like honey gold, unwelcome in this alien world of rain and neon and blood-in-the-gutters. Alec shifts his weight and his thigh aches, his armour plates digging into the bruises on his ribs and sternum; his cheek stings as the wind buffets his face without remorse and threatens his eyes to water.

He’s still Sentinel on the outside. Black gloves, black mask, but he’s stripping it, can’t Magnus see? His bow, his quiver, both abandoned, the pieces of his disguise pulled apart and scattered, just for him, just for Magnus -

Alec steps towards Magnus and Magnus stills in the doorway, his eyes narrowing, dark and dangerous. His fingers twitch at his sides, and Alec can see him shrinking into himself, unwilling to have this conversation, unwilling to put his heart on the line. He looks terrified.

Alec swallows thickly. “I’ll leave if you want me to leave,” he says. “But I don’t want to leave.”

He follows the bop of Magnus’ throat, the way he turns his head to the side so he won’t have to look at Alec full on.

Alec takes another step forward.

Magnus folds his arms around himself, the leather of his suit stretching across his biceps. A droplet of rain falls from the sky and lands with a *plit* on his boot. The neon city glints in a reflection from the ring returned on his index finger. Plutonic clouds roll purple overhead and the colour of the night is slightly off, slightly eerie, slightly soft, and yet Magnus is frighteningly beautiful.

Alec notices all of it. *What was that thing about bravery again?*

“Magnus? Talk to me. Please.”

Magnus exhales sharply through his nose. Then, measuring his words, he says, “I was wondering if you would turn up.”

Alec blinks owlishly. It sounds forced. No, *not forced*, not quite. It sounds fake. And Alec thinks
that Magnus knows. Knows that Alec knows. This is a mess.

Magnus’ mouth forms a wry half-smile. “I’d hate for the few memories I have of you to be limited to the blood stain you left on my couch.”

There’s a bruise on Alec’s chest that he’s acutely aware of then: a purple mark right above his heart and he feels invisible fingers digging into his tender skin. He wonders if Magnus feels it too, or if he still clutches tight to an armour, not of Kevlar, but of words, to keep plundering hands out of his chest.

How do you open yourself up to the one thing that you know has the potential to hurt you more than you’ve ever hurt before? There’s no flimsy bit of leather pasted across the eyes that can mask you from that. It requires a brutal trust that says: here, stick your arm out, and tell me which vein to slice into.

How do you say to someone: I’ve fought a lot of things, but I’m not quite sure I’ve ever fought something as strong as the way I feel about you, and not have it hurt more than it should?

“Sentinel-”

“Magnus,” Alec pleads, because it’s all he can really say. He doesn’t want to pretend like last night never happened. He can’t. He can’t pretend like his heart wasn’t wrenched up through his throat when Valentine pulled Nightlock’s mask from Magnus’ face. He can’t stand here in silence.

Magnus’ expression quietens. His gaze ducks to the ground and his jaw works in deep thought.

“How’s Arkangel?” he asks, “He’s okay, I hope?”

“Okay as he can be,” Alec replies stiffly. “Muse too, and I got Luke and Veil out in time. Idris is - there’s - there’s something I need to talk to you about.”

“About Idris?”

“Not … not exactly.”
Magnus sighs. He closes his eyes and his jaw flexes, as if he’s clamping down on a tremor he refuses to let Alec see, like he’s only barely holding it together, and it makes Alec’s heart ache for how much he needs to cross the space between them and touch Magnus in any damn way he might permit.

When Magnus opens his eyes again, the slow blue light of the city catches in wetness that wasn’t there before.

“This is difficult for me,” he says. The words catch, hoarse, in the back of his throat. “You know it is. I never planned to - this changes things.”

“Yeah,” Alec whispers. His mouth is dry; he forces himself to take a breath, but it makes him sound too fragile and too hopeful, both at the same time. “Yeah, it does.”

Magnus looks up and the untapped power that rests in his eyes flares dangerously. The hold he has on himself softens for a moment, but then he squeezes himself again, fingertips digging into his flesh through the leather of his suit. His knuckles are tensed and white, and Alec can see it: his bewilderment.

“Why?” Magnus demands, “Why do you say it like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like I’m exactly the person you wanted Nightlock to be?”

There’s nothing Alec can say. He moves forward, crossing those last few precious steps between them. Magnus doesn’t retreat; he raises his chin defiantly, as he always does when he’s facing down a challenge.

Magnus doesn’t blink, holding firm to Alec’s stare. His eyes must sting, a possession of blue light obscured by the scant few drops of rain that fall from above and land on his face. The gold light from the loft crests upon his shoulders, but Alec’s shadow shrouds him. The rain pitter-patters against the ground and the gutters and the leather of Alec’s gauntlets and the armour upon his chest and soon enough the Heavens will open.
Alec cannot wait for that.

He cups Magnus’ face with both his gloved hands and presses his mouth to Magnus’ sharp intake of breath, swallowing it in a clumsy, messy kiss. It’s the sort of kiss that bruises, staining the skin with marks that say: nothing has mattered more to me than this very moment. Than him being you.

They stagger backwards and Magnus’ fingers fist in the collar of Alec’s supersuit, gripping him tightly, unsure whether to draw him close or shove him away. But then Magnus kisses him back, fervour in his mouth, the first breath of rain a drizzle upon his cheeks. Alec’s every sense is eclipsed, the throb in his wounded leg forgotten, replaced only by the hard and urgent bite of Magnus’ mouth against his and the way the air thrums around them with aftershocks of static electricity.

Something rattles around inside of Alec and maybe it’s his heart come loose at last. He kisses Magnus ever deeper for it, eyes screwed shut and fingers digging into skin with the desperation of a man who has run too many years upon a knife’s edge and who has been cut to shreds because of it.

Alec remembers a first kiss - soft, pliant, tentative upon a rooftop over a glass city; and then a second kiss, hungrier, more violent, the scrape of brick and fervour up his back as lips bruised upon his neck; and a third, no more than a promise of solidarity.

Magnus has kissed him every time, and every time, Sentinel has kissed him back, but here, now, the black leather of Sentinel’s mask exists between them like never before.

“Sentinel … Sentinel, wait.”

Alec’s eyes snap open and he finds the same thunderstorm brewing overhead reflected in Magnus’ expression: dark, volatile, electric, and full of rain. Alec smears his thumb along the underside of Magnus’ jaw and Magnus leans into the touch. His hands lie flat against Alec’s chest, the silver of his rings caught with neon.

“I’m sorry,” Alec says, too quickly. Apologies come second nature to him now. He wants to press his remorse to Magnus’ mouth, over and over and over again, because maybe if he does it enough and his lips rub raw, the parts of himself that he never can vocalise will bleed through.

“Stop,” says Magnus. Alec feels it against the corner of his mouth like a plea.
Alec huffs, dropping his forehead against Magnus’ and his breath mushrooms in the cold.

Magnus’ hands slide across Alec’s shoulders and circle around Alec’s upper arms. “Why are you here?” he asks softly.

Alec shakes his head. He screws his eyes shut. “I had to see you were okay.”

“Don’t lie to me. Please. Not now.”

“I’m not. Idris are - I wanted to see if-”

“You didn’t come here to talk about Idris,” Magnus whispers. Each word ghosts across Alec’s ruined cheek. “Why are you here, Sentinel?”

“You know why.”

“Do I?”


Alec reaches up and presses his thumb and index finger over the bridge of his nose. He pinches at the leather; his mask shifts beneath his touch.

“I -” he struggles, “You said, once. You said, there was a person who you hoped, who you hoped I’d be, and maybe - maybe I’m not that any more, maybe it’s ruined now, but I -”

Alec pinches harder at his nose until it hurts.

“Sentinel …”
“No, I’m -”

Magnus grabs his elbow, pulling his arm down.

“Don’t. You don’t have to do this,” Magnus says firmly. “I don’t want you to do this just because you feel guilt for what happened. I don’t want you to unmask yourself because you think you owe me that or that it’ll somehow - that it’ll somehow fix - I don’t want that.”

“I’m not - it’s not. I’m not doing it for you, I-.”

Magnus raises his eyebrows. His grip tightens on Alec’s arm. His words come out sharp. “Who, then? If there’s someone else here, they’ve certainly escaped my notice -”

“For me. For me, Magnus.”

Magnus’ mouth drops open but he doesn’t know what to say, nor how to say it. His frown falls away as something slips in his expression: grief. Alec calls it grief, the grief of having something stolen from him that he was not yet ready to give up, and yet it trickles away with the rain that rolls down Magnus’ cheek and drips onto the ground.

In its place, Alec finds awe.

“Sentinel -”

Slowly, Magnus’ hand slides up Alec’s arm and pulls Alec’s hand away from his mask. And then Magnus leans in, the worn leather of his suit brushing against Alec’s armoured chest where Alec only wishes he could feel it. And then, hesitantly, like he’s afraid of Alec slipping through his fingers like rain, he smooths both his hands upwards, across the width of Alec’s shoulders to the curve of his neck, the underside of his jaw, the back of Alec’s head where his fingers tangle in Alec’s hair, still straw-like with dried blood.

His touch slips beneath the edge of Alec’s mask, plucking at the thin leather.

“Are you sure?” Magnus asks, “You have to be sure. I won’t do it if you’re not.”
Alec nods. “Yes,” he says, even if everything inside him shakes like thunder. “I’m sure.”

Magnus eases his fingers beneath Alec’s mask and peels it away from his eyes, before tossing it to the ground. Alec doesn’t hear it land because he’s caught, inexorably, by the sensation of cold rain upon his eyelids, like he’s never felt it before.

“And what, Alexander?”

Alec meets his eyes.

He seems -

He looks -

God, he smiles.

And then Magnus laughs a soft, wet laugh and his smile broadens, before falling and then catching again. There’s pain in his eyes. There’s hurt. There’s something so much more.

“Oh, I had a feeling it was you,” he says.

It’s more than Alec can bear.

He pulls Magnus into his chest, wrapping his arms around Magnus’ back, clenching his fists in Magnus’ suit. For a moment, Magnus cannot move: he lets out the tiniest ooft of surprise, breath caught in his throat, hands trapped between them, but then his palms sweep round to Alec’s shoulders, pressing his thumbs into tired muscle, and God -

God, it’s warm, he’s warm, warm like a long awaited sunrise over a perpetually midnight city. He smells of sandalwood and well-worn leather, of smoke and soot and residual gunpowder, and Alec has missed him, he’s missed this closeness, how easy it’s always been to sink into the space Magnus occupies, drawn towards him on a trajectory he can’t escape. Alec buries his nose in the
crook of Magnus’ neck and closes his eyes. He inhales deeply.

And at last, this is him. Not Sentinel, not Alec, but whatever is left when the lines that separate his insides are no longer needed.

This is the whole of him. For the first time in a long time, he is unhindered.

“Alexander,” Magnus mumbles, his cheek pressed against Alec’s. His knuckles press against Alec’s spine. “A hero complex indeed.”

“I don’t have a hero complex.”

Magnus huffs, pushing Alec back to see his face. His smile is gone, his face, plunged into shadow.

Alec frowns. “What is it? What’s the matter?” Doubt pools in his chest, enough for the rain to make a sound in it: plit, plit, pause. Plit. “Did you - are you … are you disappointed?”

“Am I disappointed?”

“That it’s me?”

“No,” Magnus says. He brushes the crook of his finger against the underside of Alec’s jaw, catching on a bruise, scrutinising it. “God no, not in the slightest. I just-”

He looks away, scouring the city at a distance. Drizzle blurs the horizon, a film of rain spread across Brooklyn’s brownstones and Manhattan’s far-away fragments of light. Yellow turns to blue and then to deep indigo that diffuses into the clouds, only to be lost to the dark.

“Magnus?” Alec whispers.

He steps in front of Magnus, but a jolt of pain slams into his thigh, reverberating up into his hip. He winces, biting back a hiss.
Magnus looks down at the dark mark staining the bandages on Alec’s leg.

“You’re hurt.”

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not. You’re bleeding.”

“There were-” Alec begins, but he can feel the ooze of blood smearing against his skin as the wound reopens, “-more important things.”

“More important things,” Magnus mutters, stepping back. There’s blood on his suit too and it clings to the creases in the leather. “The day when you stop putting other people before yourself will be the day I sleep soundly again at night.”

“I -”

“Don’t. I’m not having a repeat of the last time you almost bled out on my couch.” His mouth flattens into a tight line, fixating on the way the rain darkens the blood stain. “You’ll be lucky if it’s not infected. How long have you been out in the rain?”

*I don’t care about that, Alec wants to say. It doesn’t matter, I’ve had worse. It’s you - it’s you I’m worried about. Why won’t you -*

“Magnus -”

“Yes?”

He says it too quickly, too sharply, the jerk of his head upwards too sudden. The edge of fear is -

Ah. Yes. Alec sees it now. Magnus is terrified. *That’s what this is, isn’t it?*
He’s terrified and he doesn’t want Alec to see. Of course. Nightlock was never scared. Nightlock was bold and brass and brave, Nightlock kept his heart safe and locked away from clumsy plundering hands.

Perhaps Magnus longs for his mask, even now. Perhaps there’s a part of him that resents Alec for seeing him stripped bare and wishes they could go back to before, to claw back an inch of control, but -

‘There are parts of myself that I don’t know how to give up to anyone but me,’ Magnus had said once, in the dark of the night in Alec’s bedroom, hidden away from the voyeur of New York. ‘I think, maybe, I’m bad at loving people.’ It had sounded ridiculous, even then.

I see you, Alec wants to say now. I see all of you. There’s -

There’s no part of you that I don’t want. You know that, right?

“I’m sorry,” Alec says instead. The rain is coming down harder now. It slicks Alec’s hair and water rolls down his nose. He swipes it away and then adds, “I missed you.”

It’s enough for Magnus’ composure to fracture, but only because Alec knows where to look. His eyes flit across Alec’s face.

“There will be time to talk,” he says carefully, “I promise. First, please let me make sure that you don’t go and die before we have that chance.”

The loft wraps Alec in its comforting smells: brick dust and old incense, the ink and crisping paper of broadsheets stashed away in heavy mahogany drawers, the vestige of sandalwood and Magnus’ cologne clinging to the curtains like tea does to carpets. It’s familiar in a way Alec knows it shouldn’t be, far and away from the rain-damp concrete and humming neon of the world outside, but it’s sanctitude, intermittent and there to be stolen.
Alec sucks in a deep breath and looks again at Magnus. There’s tension stretched taut across his back, his shoulders levelled where he should be at ease in his own home. Alec’s eyes are drawn to the gravel scrapes and lingering dust that still cling to Magnus’ suit, to the cuts and bruises on Magnus’ skin that weren’t there before.

Maybe he went back, Alec realises latently, shuffling across the carpets, dragging his feet. He went back to dig more people out of the rubble while I was stuck at headquarters and doing nothing.

Alec doesn’t know how that makes him feel.

“Make yourself comfortable,” Magnus says, hesitating in front of the couch. His words are pinched and he frowns at the cushions, waving his hands to rearrange them unnecessarily.

Alec doesn’t question him. He flops back onto the couch, sinking into the pillows, unable to hold back his groan. His eyes slip closed and he kneads the heel of his palm into his thigh.

Magnus perches on the coffee table, his knees nudging Alec’s. Alec opens one eye to look at him: his expression is hard, distant and troubled. He rests both palms upon his lap, but his arched fingers dig into the leather stretched across his knees.

“Hey-” Alec starts. “Hey, listen, if you’re not -”

“Everything’s fine,” Magnus interrupts, but then he sighs. He curves his fingers - a quick come-hither gesture - and moments later, a small silver tin comes floating through the air, settling on Magnus’ lap.

Magnus flips open the lid, selecting a roll of bandages and a small suture kit and placing them to the side. Then, his hands still and he grits his teeth.

“I’m sorry, Alexander,” he says. “This is … I don’t - I’m sure you wanted something more than-” He gestures at himself. “Than this.”

Alec shakes his head, scooting forward on the couch. “I get it,” he says gently, “You were right. Things have changed and if you need … if you need time, I get it. I do. But I’m - I’m not
disappointed either. “

Magnus smiles tightly. “Thank you,” he says, low. And then, reaching for Alec’s leg, “May I?”

Alec nods, fisting his hands in the sofa cushions. Magnus’ fingers weave through the air, the soft pulse of his powers pushing and prodding at Alec’s skin, slowly unwinding the bandages from his thigh.

The cold of the night huffs like a breath against his skin. He longs for the warmth of a real touch and not the skittering of static he cannot see, and yet -

And yet, Magnus levers this space between them, even now. Space enough to draw back, to flinch, to pull himself out of Alec’s reach should he need it.

Alec leans back against the spine of the couch, face to the ceiling, and his eyes drift shut. He tries to slow his breathing, but all he smells is sandalwood and musky cologne and he’s unable to settle.

“You’re going to need stitches,” Magnus says gently, his invisible touch retreating.

“Mm,” Alec murmurs. He hears Magnus move again, slipping from the coffee table and onto his knees, splashing water onto the wound. It’s ice cold and rolls down the inside of Alec’s leg and into his boot. Magnus separates the ripped flaps of his suit and Alec squeezes his eyes shut, readying himself for the sharp jab of a needle.

But it doesn’t come.

A warm palm bridges Alec’s thigh, fingers fanned outwards, smoothing gently across Alec’s suit and holding him steady. Alec’s eyes flick open, his heart stuttering. He meets Magnus’ exposed stare.

Between his fingers, Magnus pinches a threaded suture needle. Heat encroaches up the back of Alec’s neck.

“Hold still,” Magnus whispers. The needle dips into Alec’s skin.
He barely feels it. His thigh smart and the back of his head stings, and his body is poppy-coloured with bruises all over - and he’s suffered all those things a million times - but there’s something so intimate about Magnus’ soft hum of concentration that Alec has to grit his teeth to stop himself from making a noise.

By the time Magnus knots the last loop of neat stitching, Alec has to say something. Anything will do.

“I don’t blame you.”

Magnus looks up sharply. “Blame me?”

“For not saying anything. For not - for not telling me about Nightlock, or -”

“Alexander -”

“I mean it. I know why you didn’t, I know you - I know you think that I wouldn’t - that it would change the way I feel about you, but it won’t.” Alec clenches his jaw. “Nothing could change that.”

Magnus cuts the tail end of the thread with a flick of his hand. His mouth works in the way it does when he struggles to find not the right words, but the correct words.

_Screw correctnes s, _Alec thinks. _Just tell me how you feel._

“I lied to you, Alexander,” Magnus murmurs, “All this time, I lied. I never tried to tell you about Nightlock because I never - I never wanted to.”

“That’s okay, Magnus, I -”

“I don’t see how it can be. I saw how desperately you wanted to tell me the truth about Sentinel, how you would always cut yourself off when you came too close and then - then the light in your eyes would die just a little bit more. I saw your struggle and I still -” He exhales heavily and rubs
his thumb over his lower lip, troubled. “I was cowardly. That’s the truth of the matter. I couldn’t stand the thought of you knowing what I’m capable of when I’m - when I’m him.”

“When you’re you.”

Magnus tenses. “I’ve done terrible things, Alec. Nightlock has done terrible things. Things he doesn’t deserve to be forgiven for.”

“So have I. So has Sentinel.”

“That doesn’t exactly make it any better.”

“No,” Alec says. He brushes his thumb over the raised stitches on his thigh. “But it means I get it.”

He shuffles, gingerly, to the edge of the couch and lowers himself onto his knees in front of Magnus.

“Magnus, I’m not lying to you.”

Magnus’ turns his face to the side. “There are - there are parts of myself that I showed to you before I suspected it was you,” he says. “There must’ve been times where you did the same, told Nightlock things that you didn’t want to tell … me.”

“Do you regret that?”

Magnus scoffs. “It’s not an easy thing to come to terms with,” he says bitterly. “Perhaps there were secrets I confessed to Sentinel that I would not have told you as Alexander, but, God, maybe it was for the best. I don’t regret it.” He stares hard at the ground, rubbing his fingertips together anxiously. “I know you now. And you know me, and I have never found that to be the easiest of things to relinquish to someone else, but here we are. You get under my skin.”

Alec wets his lip with his tongue and then, hesitantly, presses his fingertips to Magnus’ jaw, slowly turning Magnus’ face back to him.
“The night we heard about Dot,” he begins, and oh, his voice wobbles now. He can’t stop it. “The night in your office, the night you told me that we couldn’t- that we couldn’t keep doing - this.”

“How could I forget?”

“You said there was a choice you had to make,” Alec continues. “Me, or everyone else. Me, or - or Nightlock.”

“Yes.”

“That’s not - it doesn’t have to be - it doesn’t have to be that way.”

“... No?”

“No,” Alec says, and he takes hold of Magnus’ supersuit once more, his knuckles brushing against the hard planes of Magnus’ chest. Please hear me, he thinks. Please hear what I’m saying and let me say it. Don’t push me away again. “I don’t want half of you. If that’s all you want to give me, if I have to choose between Nightlock and you, Magnus, I’ll take it, but - it’s not enough.”

A sudden pulse of pressure thumps Alec in the ribs then, knocking his heart out of rhythm. He gasps, pitching forward, but Magnus grips his wrists and pins Alec’s hands against his chest.

“I always wondered-” Magnus says, and the pressure washes across him, almost a distortion in the air, “-how both choices could feel so much like losses, no matter which one I picked. It was never fair. I was blind. Foolish. Terrified, I dare say, because it was you, and there’s -” He shakes his head. Wetness gathers along his lash line. “There’s never been anyone like you before, Alexander. I pushed you away to protect myself as much as everyone else, and I suppose I failed in both regards. I should’ve known you would-”

He huffs, and then, quietly, summons a smile. “The space you make inside yourself for other people is unfathomable. Of course I know that. You wear your heart on your sleeve.”

“I should’ve told you about Sentinel sooner,” Alec says quickly, “I could’ve. I was going to, that night we - that night we - it woulda helped.”
“No. No, this was - this *is* mine to bear,” Magnus says. “And mine to deal with.” His thumbs roam across the backs of Alec’s knuckles. “My choice to make.”

Alec blinks. He tries to pull his hands away but Magnus holds him tight.

“What … what choice is that?”


His hands cup Alec’s jaw, a touch soft and warm and humming with gentle electricity that Alec knows intimately; a quiet, “oh” tumbles from Alec’s lips.

“If it’s - “ he begins, faltering, “If it’s a duty, Magnus, I don’t -”

Magnus’ hands skim across Alec’s cheeks, his jaw, down the length of his neck where bruises lie, worshipful and reverent. He splays his palms flat across Alec’s sternum, caught by the rise and fall of each breath. He considers Alec for a long moment and then shakes his head.

“The duty of the heart is a difficult thing to comprehend, Alexander.”

There’s little to separate them now: no bloody gutters, no slaughterhouse, no killing floor. No cold backhand of shock. No capes, no masks, no ties that bind hands behind backs and keep Alec from wanting what he wants, and being the person he wants to be.

And he has believed, for a long time now, that he might not know how to be that person when the time came. He finds, in retrospect, that he was quite wrong.

He hauls Magnus towards him, pressing his mouth to Magnus’. Magnus is pliant where Alec stumbles blindly, but the soft press of tongue against the seam of Alec’s lips is so good, so lovely, that somehow, all remnants of the longing he has cradled within his chest these past few months just slip away, a sigh in the wind that ruffles through the curtains behind them.
There’s a hum in Magnus’ throat, a thank god sort of noise, and he knots his hands around the back of Alec’s neck and kisses Alec deeper, more desperately, like he’s been holding back all the times before and needs, now, to push himself beneath Alec’s skin and inhabit each and every scar and scrape and ugly bruise. His chest, flush against Alec’s. His heartbeat, loud, matching the thump of Alec’s. Gold light tangles in his hair just as blue night laps at Alec’s back and recedes with a sigh.

Magnus smiles into the kiss. And then he laughs, he laughs like he’s exhausted, and he tucks his nose into the curve of Alec’s neck, inhaling leather and sweat as wetness dampens the collar of Alec’s suit.

It feels like a dream. A dream no longer doused in smog and synth and neon colour, nor a shimmering world suspended in puddles of reality. It feels like a dream, and yet Alec feels so present and he knows it must be real. How can he doubt it?

As Magnus leans back, his eyes, wet, scatter the light. Alec is left breathless.

“I don’t want half of you either,” Magnus says honestly. “Alec. Sentinel.”

Magnus curls his fingers in the free air and Alec’s mask floats through the open windows, dropped into Alec’s waiting hands. The mask is cold and damp with rain, but the leather feels soft and well lived-in beneath his careful touch.

“You told me once that you didn’t consider yourself a superhero,” Magnus murmurs. “That you were doing the right things for the wrong reasons, that you weren’t really helping people. That you didn’t know who you were. I need you to know that you’re wrong. You’ve been wrong for a while, in fact -”

“Magnus -”

“You are a hero. Mask, no mask, as Sentinel, as someone else entirely. In all the ways that matter, when it matters. That’s who you are. You save people when they need you the most, even if … even if they might not realise they need saving. You see people as they are.”

He covers Alec’s hands with his and curls Alec’s fingers over his mask.
“Sentinel is you. He’s all of you. I would not give him up for the world now.”

Alec clutches his mask. He feels it like a bright spot, like a city illuminated at the centre of him, banishing blades of dark shadow that have lingered for so long in places he could never reach. Undo his stitches, and perhaps that same light would stream out, astronomical like stars, and how would he catch it -

You make me feel real, he thinks. It’s the sort of painfully honest confession that would make Magnus’ eyes flash and then his smile broaden, but -

Alec’s already told him as much. You make me feel real.

He drops his mask to the floor and doesn’t look to see where it lands.

Alec’s reflection in the bathroom mirror surprises him: a man stares back at him who he doesn’t quite recognise, and yet, not a stranger. His skin is grey, dried blood flaking along his hairline, his cheek scraped pink by concrete. A deep purple bruise mottles his jaw, the same colour as the dead of night, and Alec turns this way and that, inspecting the way the light catches the sickly yellow colour beneath.

The skin around his eyes is clean, tidelines of sweat and ash shaped by his now-abandoned mask. He wonders if he looks changed. He wonders if Izzy would notice something different, as observant as she is. There’s a glint in his eyes that wasn’t there before.

He rubs at the condensation forming on the glass, leaving streaks across the mirror in the drag of his fingers. The rush of water from the bathtub faucet is a rumble; the wet warmth of steam is a huff upon his muddy skin, sticky where it seeps beneath his leathers, but smelling sweet of soft lavender and sandalwood soap.

Faintly, he can hear Magnus pacing beyond the door, his voice lowered in a murmur as he talks on the phone - “Catarina,” he says, “How is he? Oh, that’s good. That’s very good. Call me first if anything changes.”
Alec leans back against the sink and begins unlacing his boots. Every muscle pulls like an unoiled machine, but the cool bathroom tiles against the soles of his feet makes him sigh. Next, he peels off his gloves and finds his fingers streaked with browning blood; there are deep cuts across his knuckles that he cannot feel and he works his thumb into the rippled scarring on the back of his burned hand, kneading at his circulation.

A soft knock on the door, then. Alec looks up as Magnus pokes his head around the door, offering up a soft smile. He has his cellphone in his hand and pushes the antenna down with a click.

“Catarina,” he says simply, “She’s found a bed for Simon. He’ll pull through, she’s not worried.”

“Oh. Good. That’s good,” says Alec.

Magnus’ eyes flick down to Alec’s knuckles, and Alec moves to hide them behind his back - but then he stops. Gingerly, he holds his hand up to the light.

“Maybe I should’ve dealt with this before I came over,” he says sheepishly. “Sorry.”

Magnus slips through the door and drops his phone on the countertop, gently gathering Alec’s hand in the both of his.

“For an institution so well staffed as yours, one would hope that you’d have a healer or two on hand,” he says, frowning at Alec’s old burns. “Idris is behind the times.”

“Well,” says Alec shyly, “If you know anybody -”

Magnus scoffs. “That’s a big ask.” He glances at the tub, now full to the brim and overflowing with fluffy white bubbles, and waves his hand, turning off the faucet.

Then, he looks back at Alec, his eyebrow raised: a question, steam-addled, goes unasked.

Alec looks down at the leather on his arm, the armour on his chest, still caked in blood and God
knows what. There’s an itch, now, against his skin, that’s not unpleasant, but it makes the hairs on his arm stand on end. He swallows thickly and offers Magnus a lop-sided smile.

Magnus’ eyes darken and he steps closer, hands drifting to Alec’s gauntlets. Alec remembers the last time Magnus had his fingers beneath Alec’s suit - the rush, the dizziness, the frantic need to feel skin and a heartbeat, teeth scraping at Alec’s throat - but this time, it’s gentle. Worshipful and almost skittish. Careful in a way Alec has never before been handled.

Magnus unbolts the leather gauntlets from Alec’s forearms, sliding them over Alec’s hands, and then unclips his chest guard and tugs it over Alec’s head as Alec dutifully lifts his arms. Magnus’ breath hums against the base of his throat, and Alec’s breath hitches.

Magnus gathers all the pieces of Alec’s armour and piles them next to the sink, his back turned, and Alec stutters to unzip his suit. Dried blood and sweat makes the leather stiff as he pushes it down over his hips and steps free, every bruise and old scar reopened smarting in the humidity as steam encircles his bare chest.

His leg looks like an oil spill: Magnus’ neat stitches are dark against a splattering of purple and deep blue that smears from Alec’s knee to his hip, the surrounding skin grey with bloodless.

The morbid curiosity to prod and poke at himself stirs, as it always does. There’s always been something about mapping each and every mark on his body that puts him in control, but tonight, he grits his teeth and hauls himself into the bath, sitting down with too loud a splash that water splatters over the edge and onto the tiled floor.

But God, the hot water is like a balm to his tired muscles, and he feels himself unwinding, drawn out and stretched long. He rubs at the sutures again and imagines all the dirty blood and swallowed smoke seeping out through the pores in his skin, only to be sucked away down the plughole.

He tilts his head back against the rim of the tub, turning so his cheek rests against the porcelain.

“Magnus,” he says gently, and Magnus turns almost too quickly, compressing a tight smile.

“Good?” he asks, setting the few bottles he’s collected on the edge of the tub and kneeling next to Alec’s head.
“Perfect,” says Alec. Magnus leans his arm upon the rim of the tub, dipping his fingers into the water; a pulse of energy ripples through the water, kneading into Alec’s aching legs.

The air is thick with steam and something else; soupy and warm and enough to make Alec’s eyelids heavy. He brings his hand up through the water and bubbles to catch Magnus’ fingers.

Magnus hums, reaching for a bottle with his free hand. He magics it into the air, inverting it so that the salve slides out onto his fingers.

“Let me see your face,” he says, “You look terrible.”

Alec sits up, the water lapping against his chest as he turns his scarred cheek to Magnus.

The salve is cold and Alec can’t help but flinch, screwing up one eye. Magnus tsks him, stealing his other hand back to hold Alec’s chin in place as he rubs circles into the graze. It stings, but quickly turns to numbness, and Alec thinks back to the last time he was here, and to Catarina, who had somehow pulled that bullet from his chest without him bleeding to death.

“I was serious,” Alec says then, “About if you know any healers.”

Magnus doesn’t look away from where he’s focused on Alec’s cheek.

“As was I,” he remarks, and his fingers stray to Alec’s jaw, mapping the prickle of four-day old stubble as if he can’t help himself. “But I sense there’s a story here that I’m about to be told.”

“I -” Alec starts, before closing his mouth. He ruminates for a moment, letting the only sound be the soft slosh of water and the fizz of collapsing bubbles.

Once he has collected the words he wants to say, he tries again.

“I was telling the truth. Earlier. I do need to talk to you about Idris.”

“Oh? So this wasn’t a person call after all? Should I be insulted or flattered-”
Alec rolls his eyes and splashes Magnus evasively. “Shut up. I, uh - I was just gonna say that I - I quit. If quitting’s something you can do, I don’t really know yet. But I -”

“You walked away?”

Alec shrugs a half-shrug. “Yeah. Yeah, I did. A lot of people did.”

“Idris won’t be able to come back from that,” Magnus murmurs, sitting back on his haunches, rubbing his hands into his thighs. A sharp expression crosses his face, one of deep thought, and Alec is entranced watching it evolve.

“Corporates -” Magnus says, “- are over.”

Alec smiles tightly. “Maybe,” he says, “I don’t know what will happen now, but I do know that I’m not going back. Not ever.” He pauses, remembering a conversation left unfinished on a rooftop that feels years ago now. “I thought, maybe, we could do something new.”

“We?”

“Sentinel and Nightlock.” A smile tugs on the corner of his mouth and he permits it. “Someone told me you know Nightlock. Maybe you could ask him?”

“Oh, well, I’ll see what I can do,” Magnus hums, “Although, no promises. Nightlock can be surprisingly difficult to work with, as I’m sure you know.”

“I think he’s too hard on himself,” Alec says, settling back into the water, “It won’t be just us. Isabelle will coordinate. Arkangel and Muse, they’ll join. I want to ask Wolfsbane and Veil. Simon too.”

“Oh, Simon too?” says Magnus, pillowing his arms on the edge of the tub and resting his chin there. “Well then, best I had join. Someone needs to keep an eye on him before he ends up getting himself killed.”
Alec can’t help but roll his eyes. “Trust me, he’s already tried.”

Magnus laughs softly, and for a while, the ghost of that is all that lingers amidst the rising steam. Alec lets his eyes fall shut, basking in the sound of water and Magnus’ quiet breathing that slips, slowly, towards a doze.

*Peace*, he thinks. Izzy was right. Of course she was.

Eventually though, Magnus punctuates the silence.

“I’m proud of you, Alexander.”

Alec cracks open one eye. “For doing what I should’ve done ages ago?”

“Whether you should have done it ages ago has no bearing on whether you *could* have,” Magnus remarks, “The time is right. What matters is the change you are going to make now.”

“You too,” says Alec, “I mean - it’s not just me. This was your idea from the start. Your headlines, your work with the press. Hell, Magnus - you’re the one who suggested it to me. Put the idea in my head.”

“Well,” Magnus muses, “Perhaps I can take some credit. I don’t suppose the fight with Idris is over yet anyway.”

Alec flattens his mouth into a thin line and shifts in the water, easing himself towards Magnus. Magnus sits up, murmuring a low note of appreciation when Alec ducks his head and presses his mouth to Magnus’.

He pulls back to watch the cycle of emotions on Magnus’ face: his surprise, and then his eyes fluttering open, the smile that unfurls when he meets Alec’s gaze. He looks -

Fond? Vulnerable? As if the press of Alec’s lips to his is enough to leave an indelible mark on his skin? Alec’s not sure he has the words to explain it, but he’s sure it terrifies Magnus witless too.
“No,” Alec murmurs, his voice low, “And it’s not your fight either, so … thank you. For doing what you do. For everything you’ve done for me, for all of us, even though you didn’t have to. I don’t know if I’ve said it before.”

Magnus smiles again, reaching out for Alec’s cheek and guiding him back into another kiss, more lingering than the last. It’s soft and sweet and dawdling, as if Magnus plans to carve out his own pocket of time amidst the steam before the rest of the world finds them.

Alec will gladly follow him. Wherever he wishes to go. This is the sort of kiss in which he melts.

When Alec emerges from the bathroom, his hair damp and soft where it flops over his forehead, and his skin faintly pink, he finds Magnus standing in front of the window, a drink in his hand as he gazes out across the city.

Magnus has changed his supersuit for a robe, black and jade-coloured silk slippery against his skin. Rings glint on his fingers and a fine chain of silver sits against the red indents that mark his neck, dripping down his sternum.

Alec’s jaw clenches and he shakes his head, ridding himself of the thought of chains and rope binding Magnus to a chair. He crosses the room silently, bare feet padding on the floor, and nudges his shoulder against Magnus’, earning a quiet hum.

Rain pours beyond the window, sheets of static grey plummeting from the Heavens. A fork of lightning splits the sky over the river, and thunder rumbles at a distance, a bellow so deep that Alec feels vibrations in his chest. Briefly, he recalls his bow and arrows out on the balcony, but he cannot bring himself to care, a distant thought that can be dealt with another time. His mask is still on the floor next to the sofa; it will stay there, until the early hours of the morning.

They talk about Idris. Alec recalls the colour of Jace’s blood on the floor, Clary sobbing into his shoulder, his mother’s sharp words and stern glare. Magnus says nothing, soft murmurs punctuated by sips of his drink; the oaky smell of whiskey licks at Alec’s throat and muffles his own words, already drowned out by the storm.
He wishes they didn’t have to talk about it. He wishes, just for one night, they could outrun it.

“There’s only so much we can do now,” Magnus murmurs, “We have no way of knowing just how far Valentine’s whispers reached nor who might still be under his influence. The next few days will be telling. Penhallow will push the superhuman registration bill to the Senate, but - hm.”

“You think there’s any way of stopping her?”

“I don’t know. We can use the press to our benefit, but violence on this scale - it stays with people a long time. It blinds them to fact and reason. I fear for the supers of New York more than I did before.”

“At least you won’t have Corporates to worry about.”

Magnus hums around a sip of his drink. “Hm. Well, I’ve developed a bit of a soft spot for a few of them.” He sober. “Idris’ resources would’ve been useful though.”

“I can talk to Iz. She still has connections, and if anyone has an idea what to do, it'll be her.” He sighs, scrubbing at his jaw. The thought of his bed drops further out of his reach. “I should … I should probably get going. She’ll want me to check in …”

Magnus turns to him, lowering his glass from his lips. “And if I asked you to stay?”

“You want me to stay?”

“It’s not safe out there. The police will be hunting supers. Anyone in a mask is a suspect.” Magnus’ gaze flits back to the window. He hesitates. “You’re no use to anyone in the state you’re in.”

Alec snorts. “Thanks.”

“When was the last time you slept?” Magnus asks archly. At Alec’s silence, he takes another sip of his drink. “I thought as much. I would like you to stay.” He pauses again. “Please.”
There’s a flicker of doubt in his eyes. Alec is weak to it. He steps between Magnus and the window, curving his body inwards. Magnus watches his every move and then, with a quiet sigh, brushes his knuckles against Alec’s cheek. Alec leans into the touch.


Magnus’ bed is soft. The pillows smell faintly of detergent and the sheets are silky and Alec sinks into the mattress as if it were water, unable to stop himself from sighing and slipping under. The quiet colour of night spills in through the window: shards of pale blue and diffuse white stripe the floor in shades of the illusionary.

The clink of metal on metal punctures the silence as Magnus, sat at his vanity, removes each ring one by one.

Alec watches him in the mirror, listening to the raindrop rhythm of silver against the desk. He can see himself in the reflection, his skin near-white against the deep satin blue of the sheets, and then he catches Magnus’ eye, and feels himself blush.

He flops back into the pillows and stares at the ceiling, following the movement of sentient shadows lit up by passing headlights, far below.

He thinks about Jace, blood streaming from his temple, his head lolled onto his shoulder. He wonders if someone has seen to Clary’s broken ribs. He tries to recall the tight grip of Izzy’s hands in his suit, the warm line of her pressed against his side.

He thinks about his suit, still crumpled on the bathroom floor, and how he’ll never be able to get the smell of blood and smoke out of the leather. He wonders how it will feel to put it back on. He wonders if he’ll know what to do next when he does.

What happens now? he thinks. He follows the shifting lines of Magnus’ back beneath his robe. What happens to us now?
He could ask, but he doesn’t think Magnus will have an answer.

‘We go to sleep,’ he’d probably say, looking at Alec with that inscrutable stare of his, as if he can see right through Alec’s chest.

‘That’s not what I mean,’ Alec would say. ‘I mean, what happens to Sentinel and Nightlock now? How do we … how do we go on like before?’

He watches headlights swarm across the ceiling, some yellow, some blue. Distantly, there are sirens, and distantly, there is rain, and he remembers the beat of both of them upon his skin the night the Tribunal burned and Magnus followed him into that alleyway, soaked to his skin.

‘There’s someone whom I hope that you are.’

Something in Alec’s stomach clenches, an uncomfortable knot. He shuffles up against the headboard.

“Magnus?”

“How long have you known?”

Magnus stills, slowly setting his last rings down on the vanity. Then, he swivels to face Alec.

“You said, earlier, before I - before I took my mask off. You said that you had an idea Sentinel was me,” Alec continues. He pinches at the skin between his thumb and forefinger, the only part of him not bearing a bruise. “How long have you known?”

That night of the fire? That night Nightlock pinned him against the wall and kissed him hard enough to bleed? That night Alec collapsed on the balcony with a bullet lodged in his chest?
Magnus smiles tightly, casting his eyes away. He pushes wearily to his feet and crosses to the other side of the bed where he sits on the edge of the mattress, cast in the square of striped light from the window, and stares down at his hands. Faint colour marks his knuckles.

Alec rolls over on the mattress, pushing himself up on one elbow. He reaches out for Magnus’ hand, brushing the soft skin on the inside of Magnus’ wrist.

“When did you know? That it could be me?”

“In truth,” Magnus says quietly, barely a murmur, “Not for certain until last night when your dear sister stormed into that warehouse, guns blazing. Even with a mask, it wasn’t hard to mistake her, and then, well, I couldn’t pretend like I didn’t know anymore. I couldn’t ignore it.”

Alec slides his fingers across the back of Magnus’ hand.

“But before then, you said … you hoped.”

“There were so many moments,” Magnus confesses, “So many moments when you did something, and I thought - I thought, maybe. But, the night you were shot, Alec ... I sat at your bedside for three days straight. By the end of it, I could map every inch of your face with my eyes closed. That’s … that’s when I knew.”

Alec lays his palm against Magnus’ neck and Magnus brings his hand up, holding Alec there. There are pin-pricks of gold in his eyes, a swirl of colour like the lights on Broadway, and yet, Alec has never seen it before. Always bright epileptic neon or the harsh light of office fluorescence, but never this.

Alec wets his lips with his tongue. “That’s a long time ago,” he murmurs.

“Yes, it is. And yet it shouldn’t have taken me so long to realise,” Magnus continues, “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you that I knew. But, I … I couldn’t do that to you, to Sentinel. I couldn’t claim your secret for my own, I couldn’t take away your choice like that. Not more than I already had.”
“That night at Dot’s house,” Alec says, and Magnus’ expression hardens. “And the night the office burned down -”

Magnus nods stiffly, but he doesn’t let go of Alec’s wrist. “I saw you in that crowd and then you bolted, and I thought - well, you know what I thought.”

“I was looking for you,” Alec says, “I was with Simon. Training. Then the call came in and I - I couldn’t stay away. Even after you told me to. It didn’t seem to matter.”

Magnus looks up at him, eyes bright in the dark, searching Alec’s expression as he always does when Alec says something too honest. And Alec will never be sure what it is that Magnus looks for: reason, logic, some ulterior motive that Magnus doesn’t understand, but Alec has none to give.

There is no reason here; the things he feels are too inherent for that.

He reaches up and curls his fingers around the back of Magnus’ neck, drawing him close. Alec’s eyes flutter closed at the soft exhale of pious breath against his cheek.

“Magnus,” he whispers.

Gently, Magnus rests his forehead against Alec’s, holding the back of Alec’s neck as he cards through Alec’s hair. He murmurs a soft surrender.

“Yes?”

There’s this rasp in his voice that brings Alec short of an answer.

A moment of abdicated silence lingers in the few short spaces between them. Alec doesn’t dare to open his eyes, but Magnus’ fingers curl tighter into the short strands of his hair.

Things that Alec does not know how to define begin to form as thoughts: unbearable fullness in his chest, fatigue that weighs him down, relief too big for him to comprehend, not tonight.
Tonight, it is enough just to be reminded that they’re both still breathing.

Alec leans the rest of the way forward, sealing the last open wound on himself with a kiss. It stills him in the same way it did the first time, all those months ago on a rooftop overlooking a rain-drenched city; it quells the rampant beat of his heart.

This, he thinks, *this is penance*.

Alec sighs and Magnus drifts into it. His touch, on the underside of Alec’s scruffy jaw, tilts Alec’s head back, deepening the languid kiss. He rises up and pushes Alec down into the pillows, his shadow falling across Alec’s face like a curtain of heavy rain. The press of his tongue against Alec’s lower lip strips away the piety, and Alec opens his mouth, eager and pliant beneath Magnus’ wandering hands.

It’s so easy to fall, and Alec is not someone gifted with the power of flight. There’s vulnerability here, the sort he so rarely permits himself. Alec can feel the shape of it between Magnus’ insistent kisses; in his hands that won’t stop shaking, even now; in the way he doesn’t stop to allow words to betray his bruises. It’s the sort of vulnerability that’s been fractured, but is no longer fragile.

The city exists on a periphery, dark and brooding and beyond, and Alec allows himself to sink into the mattress, for his shoulders to be pressed against the sheets and for Magnus’ weight to push down on his chest, because for one necessitous moment, he feels safer than he ever has before.

When Magnus pulls back, pale blue light illuminating him from above, that delicacy still lingers in his eyes. He asks Alec softly, “Did you know?”

“Before last night?”

“Before Valentine pulled my mask off,” Magnus clarifies.

“I don’t know,” Alec says honestly. He tries to find better words: there were moments when Nightlock reminded him of Magnus, he’s sure, but -

It seems so obvious now. It seems like a mask lifted, and maybe that’s what it was, stopping him from seeing the truth. It makes sense.
“I … don’t know,” he repeats, more sullenly. “Is that weird?”

“Not weird,” says Magnus. He brushes away Alec’s hair from his forehead and leans over him again. Where his robe hangs open, Alec sees the marbling of bruises that spread out across his chest, marks of knuckles, marks of boots, angry red and deep turbulent purple.

*We match*, Alec thinks deliriously, arching up into Magnus’ next kiss. He slides his hands beneath the silk of the robe and covers Magnus’ ribs, and wonders if it’s possible to know which spots are tender without looking.

Magnus’ nose brushes against his. Alec can feel the flutter of his eyelashes against his cheek, against the thin strip of skin that his mask used to cover. The hum of static energy exists beneath it all, and it draws him, sluggishly, towards sleep.

He feels Magnus shift beside him, the tickle of his hair against Alec’s jaw. He feels the rise and fall of Magnus’ chest, pressed up against his side.

He feels Magnus’ hands, gossamer-light, passing back and forth up the length of his arm, and it’s the last thing he remembers before he closes his eyes and, oh, *it’s good*.

His sleep is deep. He’s earned it.

Chapter End Notes

So, you might remember I wrote this entire fic in 2018 and basically I'm just pulling one chapter a month out of my Google Docs to edit, but like ... damn, the first draft of this story was so much happier than where it ended up, and this chapter needed so much changing. Magnus is so deeply, deeply traumatised (Hell, they both are), that it was a struggle to try and balance this relief they both now feel with the deep-rooted fears they've been entrenched in for so many years and cannot easily shrug. I tried my hardest to stay true to Alec's character (in his honesty and desperate need to fix things) and Magnus' character (his unwillingness to risk his heart and let people get too close, although, ultimately, he is unable to do just that, because Alec is Too Much), while also trying to show that they're not miraculously fixed by this. But they're on the path, at last, to getting better.
Also, this is only a 14,000 words chapter in a 500k word fic, but damn ... that's enough fluff for me ... where's my angst gone ...

I'm sure the most interesting (or maybe shocking) part of this chapter is the discovery of when Magnus found out about Alec being Sentinel ... and maybe it's not what you were expecting! It's a tricky one, because while Magnus knew, there was still a part of him that questioned it, that couldn't really believe it until Alec's mask came off. But regardless, hopefully if you decide to re-read this story, the hindsight will change its meaning entirely and it will be enjoyable in a completely different way.

Thank you so much for all the feedback from last time! I can't express how much it helps to read people's thoughts and feelings on this fic, as everyone has a different take on the moral issues and it's so interesting!

Visit me on tumblr and shout in my inbox, especially if you have questions! Please reblog the tumblr post for me too!

I'm also on Twitter if you want to come chat about the fic ... and boy, do I love talking about this fic. Tweet as you read with the hashtag #ficacoldnight! :D

Please leave a kudos if you made it to the end, and drop me a comment with your thoughts, your favourite line, your hopes for what will happen in the final chapter ... I would be forever grateful for it! If you want an alert next time there's an update, please hit that subscribe button!

Until next time ... there are still a few loose ends to tie up. A few truths Alec has yet to tell. And a future, deep and blue, and endless ...

P.S. In light of the current pandemic and resulting increased AO3 traffic, AO3 no longer counts hits from unregistered users on fics. Obviously, this is going to have a large (and depressing lol) impact on content creators, so please remember to log in and leave kudos and comments for as much fan content as you can during this time and show your love for your favourite creators. In addition to this, if you don't have an AO3 account and would like one, I have 9 invitations available and am happy to give them out first come, first serve. Please ask!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!