A Glimpse of Happiness

by LadyOxymoron

Summary

On his wedding day, a glimpse into an alternate dimension makes Alec question his choices. It may very well be the catalyst he needs to pursue his happiness.

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Or, an alternate spin on the ending of Season 1, written for the SHBingo square "Portals".

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.

Alec looks at his reflection and fixes his bow tie with unsteady hands.

*Oh God,* he thinks. *I'm getting married.*

Alec has never fooled himself by entertaining thoughts of marrying for love. He’s always known he’d get into a political marriage but he wasn’t expecting it to happen so soon, so suddenly.

Not right when he’s met someone who takes his breath away, who makes his heart beat faster.

But there’s no sense in lingering over these thoughts, is it? Not now that he’s about to marry Lydia...
Branwell to restore what’s left of his family name.

Not now and not ever.

Alec sighs and decides that he looks as good as possible, that he is as ready as he can ever be. With a last glance at the mirror, he turns on his heels and heads for the door, wishing his stomach would stop leaping and rolling.

"Just get on with it," he mutters to himself as he opens the door, only to freeze in his tracks.

Alec closes his eyes, blinks, opens them again but the sight doesn’t change.

Magnus Bane is leaning against the wall, right in front of the door of his room. His pose screams of casual nonchalance but Alec can see the way his thumb is twisting the ring on his middle finger, turning it around over and over.

Magnus notices him and kicks himself off the wall in a fluid movement. “Alexander.”

“What are you doing here? You’re not-” Alec falters mid-sentence, heart kicked into a rapid rhythm. "You’re not supposed to be here.”

“I wanted to talk to you,” Magnus says and the softness in his voice pulls at something inside of Alec’s chest. “Maybe it’s foolish of me but I was hoping I could talk you out of this horrible mistake you’re making.”

“I told you,” Alec says, hoping his voice comes out steadier than he feels. “Even if I felt something for you, I just can’t throw away my career because of it.”

“But you can throw away your life like this?”

Magnus’ voice is not harsh or unkind in any way but his words slap Alec in the face nonetheless.

“We can’t always have what we want, Magnus,” Alec says but he’s not sure who’s trying to convince of it. “My family-” Alec exhales and falters, unsure how to go on.

“Will eventually forgive you,” Magnus murmurs. “One could dare say your siblings would fully support you.”

Izzy and Jace would support him, Alec knows that. “I-” he swallows, itching to cross the floor and pull Magnus close. To feel him close. Anything to numb the tight ball of tangled emotions that’s taken residence in his chest. He fists his hands instead, fingernails digging painfully in his palms. “I can’t.”

“Very well.” Magnus nods and disappointment flashes briefly on his face along with something else Alec can’t name. Then he shakes his head and plasters a smile on his face. It’s sharp enough to hurt Alec’s heart. “I will see myself out, then.”

“Magnus,” Alec starts, swallowing as the new coldness in Magnus’ usually warm eyes threatens to take him apart. “I’m sorry.”

“I would offer my felicitations but we both know it wouldn’t be appropriate now, don’t we?” Magnus says instead of acknowledging Alec’s apology. “Goodbye, Alexander.”

With a flick of his hand, Magnus opens a portal right in the middle of the hallway. He disappears into the swirling lights without looking back.
Something inside Alec curls up into a tight ball and screams in pain.

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Alec doesn’t know how he manages to find the strength to put one foot in front of the other and walk to the altar but here he is, waiting for his bride to be.

His stomach has mostly stopped rolling. The nausea is beginning to fade, leaving only a dull weight in the pit of his stomach.

Lydia steps inside the room and even Alec can admit she looks beautiful. He manages a weak smile and offers his hand to her, helping her up the last steps of the altar.

Then the ceremony begins and Alec just stands there, trying to force down the cold, sharp avalanche of dread that’s threatening to swallow him whole.

*You can do this,* he tells himself, even though something discordant jars in his chest at the thought of marrying Lydia.

But he’s here now, isn’t he? He’s here and he committed to this and there’s nothing he can do but go through with it.

And if it means stuffing all of his feelings in a box and locking it up, then so be it.

*You’ll regret it,* Izzy’s voice says in his head.

Alec has to force down another wave of nausea as he thinks about his sister and the hurt disappointment in her eyes.

He jerks slightly as he feels Lydia’s warm hands on his wrist, turning it around for the rune that’s gonna change his life forever.

He watches the stele get close and closer still, feels the air drain from his lung proportionally.

Action and reaction.

*This can’t be happening,* he thinks, forcing himself to relax just a little. The tiniest amount necessary to keep breathing.

Alec closes his eyes, sending a silent prayer to the Angels. For what, he doesn’t know. For courage maybe. For fortitude.

Suddenly, his fingers start to tingle as a wave of warmth sweeps through his body, like a tiny pulse.

Alec jerks as he feels the cold kiss of the stele against his overheated skin. At the touch, his heart stutters and the floor seems to tip beneath his feet.

It literally does. It swirls and shimmers, tiny tendrils of energy licking Alec’s ankles and going up to his calves.

*A portal,* Alec thinks but he has no time to move that there’s a sharp jolt, something pulling at him from within so hard that he has to squeeze his eyes shut against the feeling. Only to gasps and open
them wide when his world gets back on its axis.

Instead of Lydia, there’s a wall in front of him, pale yellow and decorated with abstract and colorful paintings.

Alec blinks. The crowd is gone, Lydia is gone. He’s not inside of the Institute anymore.

He realizes he’s lying on something soft and he looks down. A bed. He slowly, warily turns around and almost jumps out of his skin when he sees a mound under the sheets, bare shoulder poking from beneath them, dark hair stark against the pale pillowcase.

“What the hell?” Alec almost shouts, belatedly realizing he’s naked and pulling the sheets tight against his body.

The shape under the sheets twitches and emits a startled sound before straightening up on a sitting position. ”Whs’up?”

And it's Alec's turn to let out a startled sound because he is in bed with Magnus Bane. Magnus Fucking Bane. A very naked Magnus Bane.

There’s something off about him but Alec can't put his finger on it. Not when confusion and panic are trying to squeeze his lungs in a vice-like grip. Not when Magnus’ body is so distracting.

"What the hell?" He repeats, clutching the sheets tighter.

"What is wrong, Alexander?" Magnus asks and Alec wants to laugh or possibly cry at the absurdity of the question.

"What is this?" Alec asks, wincing at the shrillness of his own voice. "What did you do?"

"I am afraid I'm not following you, my dear," Magnus says, brow knitted in confusion.

If Alec didn't know better, he'd read Magnus’ expression as genuine surprise. "Is this one of your magic tricks?"

Magnus' eyes widen, something like panic flashing briefly on his face. "How did- how did you," he says and Alec has never seen him so flustered before. So terrified.

"What have you done, Magnus?" Alec pushes, doing his best to keep his eyes away from exposed flesh.

Magnus opens his mouth but no sound comes out. Then he looks at Alec and tilts his head to the side, face scrunched up in concentration. "You're not my Alexander."

"I thought we'd already established that," Alec says and the words, as necessary as they are, hurt him nonetheless. "I thought you'd understood why I've got to go through with the marriage." Even though, now that he's away from the altar and thinking clearly for the first time in hours, it's hard to remember why for himself. "And now this."

"You don't understand," Magnus says, voice urgent. "You don't belong here."

"You were the one to bring me here," Alec says indignantly, just a little stung even though he has no right to be. "So portal me back." Magnus just shakes his head, looking bewildered and flustered like Alec has never seen him. "And why the fuck am I naked in your bed?"

"Because my Alexander was," Magnus murmurs.
Alec is starting to think Magnus must have hit his head on the way home. "You're not making any sense."

"I'm afraid what I'm going to tell you next will make even less sense." Magnus sits straighter and Alec is grateful when he pulls the sheets up with him. His arms are already too much of a distraction as it is.

Alec decides to go along with it. "Try me."

"There is no way to sugarcoat the truth so I'm going to be direct. You currently are in an alternate dimension."

Alec barks out a laugh despite his increasing panic. "You expect me to fall for that one? Listen, you made clear what you think about my marriage but I've got to get on with it. Portal me back, Magnus."

"You're not listening to me. I can't open a rift between our dimensions," Magnus says and the alarm in his voice is enough to instill the first tendrils of doubt in Alec's mind. "And even if I could, I wouldn't. Last time someone messed with interdimensional portals, a demon almost got loose in my dimension. We'll have to find another way."

"Magnus, please, I need to get back to the Institute. The Angel knows I'm gonna be in trouble as it is." Alec takes a deep breath and tries to smother the increasing anxiety. "So stop this and bring me back. I'm serious."

"So am I," Magnus says, face deadly serious. "I haven't the faintest idea about what is happening."

"You don't understand. I got to get--"

"No, you don't understand," Magnus says, interrupting him. "He's not raising his voice but his tone is so forceful to shut Alec up. It's clear you and your Magnus have matters to settle but I am not my counterpart and I definitely am not responsible for whatever this is. I would appreciate if you'd desist with the accusations so we can focus on finding a way to send you where you came from." He pauses and when Alec just stares at him, his face soften marginally. "And get my boyfriend back."

_Boyfriend._

The word makes Alec's heart skip a beat. It makes his chest ache with longing. It makes him jealous of this version of Alec that gets to have a boyfriend, that gets to have _Magnus_.

If what this Magnus is saying is true, of course.

Magnus seems sincere, though. So sincere that Alec's doubts start to grow. "How do I know you're not messing with me?"

Magnus studies Alec for a few moments as if staring at him is going to give him some insight. Then he brightens up. "Of course! You mentioned the Angel so I think it's safe to assume you are a Shadowhunter." He waits for Alec's nod and points toward a door to their left. "In that case, a simple look in the mirror should be enough."

Alec frowns and runs a hand through his hair, trying to fight the confusion and anxiety that have his stomach in a knot. "What?"

"Just go look at yourself, Alec."
Alec bites back his retort, too overwhelmed to argue. He rolls off the edge of the bed and onto his feet, realizes he is still very naked when the cool air hits his skin.

He tugs at the sheet but Magnus is still holding onto it firmly.

"I know that gorgeous body of yours inside and out, my dear," Magnus says, his words warming Alec’s cheeks. Then Alec feels him shift. "But I won't look if that makes you uncomfortable. You'll find bathrobes in the bathroom."

"Thanks," Alec manages to say before standing and hurriedly making his way toward what he guesses is the bathroom's door.

Once there, Alec closes the door behind his back and lies against it, trying to get back in control of his nerves.

He allows himself a few moments and then makes his way toward the sink, stomach tied in knots with the uncertainty of what he's going to find out in the mirror.

Alec stares at his own confused face and it takes him a few seconds to realize what's wrong.

His deflect rune is gone.

A quick glance confirms that all of his runes are gone.

Alec bites his lip almost hard enough to draw blood and refuses to allow panic to set in, even though he knows one thing for certain.

He's screwed.

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Alec has no idea about how much time he spends in front of the mirror, trying to figure things out.

The more he looks, the more details he notices. Like how this Alec's has deeper lines around the corners of his mouth and how his hair is shorter. When Alec runs his fingers through it, it feels sticky, like there's some kind of product on it.

Done with his examination, Alec opens the faucet and splashes his face with cold water, trying to force the fear down and think of a way back home.

When he realizes that the only person who can help him is actually naked in the other room, panic starts to well up again.

Alec does his best to push it down, wears one of the bathrobes and- oh God, is it purple?- and gets back to the bedroom.

Magnus, well not quite Magnus, is still in bed. His head snaps up as he hears Alec come in. "Is there any hope I've got my Alexander back?"

"No." Alec shakes his head. "But I believe you now."

"Took you long enough," Not-quite-Magnus says and now that Alec knows he's telling the truth, he
can easily notice some of the differences with the Magnus from his dimension.

His handsome face is devoid of any makeup. His hair is shorter and not styled. It falls on this Magnus’ forehead in a natural way. There are no rings on his fingers and no nail polish on his clean cut nails.

"Yeah, well, forgive me for not taking tales of dimensional jumps lightly," Alec says, sitting down on the edge of the bed. "How do I get back?"

"How should I know?"

You always know everything, Alec wants to say but realizes that's not quite right. Not here. "You're the warlock."

"It's not that easy," Magnus says, sounding weary. "My magic has been dormant for centuries."

"You can't do magic?" Alec says, alarm rising up once more.

"I did not say that." Magnus demonstrates it with blue sparks on his fingers and the familiar sight in such a foreign reality give Alec some comfort. "I've been trying to practice again ever since- wait a second, do you happen to know a redheaded Shadowhunter? She goes by Clary. Tiny, feisty, carries along a blonde jock?"

Clary and Jace. This must be the place they ended up in when they ran with the cup, Alec realizes. "Yeah, I do."

"You people must stop barging into my life like this," Magnus says with a heavy sigh.

"Yeah, well, it's not like I asked to be here, you know," Alec retorts.

Magnus rolls his eyes. "You're a ray of sunshine, aren't you?" He mutters, almost to himself. Then he straightens up again. "We need to find a way to send you back where you belong and get my Alexander back. And soon."

There's something about this Magnus that softens every time he talks about his Alec. It's a dangerous thing to witness because it pulls at something inside of Alec's chest. It makes Alec wistful for something that's not his. For something he can never have.

"Tell me about that," Alec mutters, doing his best to ignore those thoughts.

Magnus sighs and runs his hand through his hair. "Okay, I am going to need you to walk me through what happened."

"There is not much to say. I was about to get married," Alec says. "Then a portal sucked me in and I found myself in here."

"Slow down. You clearly recognized me so you must have known my counterpart," Magnus says, his brow furrowed into a small frown. He waits for Alec's nod. "Forgive me for being so straightforward but I was under the impression you two have history."

"Yeah, it's-" Alec pauses, clears his throat, swallows. "It's complicated."

Magnus must read something in Alec's face, in his voice because his eyes softens. It's brief and Alec almost misses it but it makes him look so much like his Magnus to punch Alec's breath out of his lungs.
"He's not your Magnus, though, Alec thinks. Neither of them is.

Alec doesn't think he's ready to acknowledge the way the thought settles over his chest and
squeezes.

"I honestly can't imagine any version of myself would let any Alexander go without a fight,"
Magnus says, bringing Alec out of his head. "Not even a grumpy asshole like you."

Alec snorts out a laugh despite himself. "Yeah, you've made abundantly clear what you think about
me. What's your point?"

Magnus rolls his eyes at his bluntness but lets it go. "My point is that he might be involved in
whatever is happening."

"I don't think so. He'd already left the Institute when it happened."

"Do I need to remind you of the fact that the first thing you did was accusing me?" Magnus pauses
and looks pointedly at Alec. "Him, of foul play?"

While Magnus is right and it's been Alec first thought, it could have been possible only within their
dimension. Alec is sure of it. The Magnus Bane he knows would never send Alec in an unknown
dimension out of pettiness, no matter the circumstances.

"Yeah," Alec says. "But that was before finding out where I was."

Magnus looks pensive for a few seconds then he slowly nods. "I suppose it makes sense."

"What now?" Alec asks, trying to not sound too harsh.

"Now you tell me exactly what happened. Do not leave a single detail out."

Alec has always been a private person. Reserve to the extreme if you asked his sister. But he
realizes that if he wishes to leave this place and return to his world, the man in front of him is his
best bet.

So he swallows and nods, before launching in his tale.

Magnus listens, rarely interrupting to place a pertinent question but otherwise quiet. And Alec is
grateful for it because talking about his feelings and his marriage to a stranger doesn’t come easily
to him.

Magnus' eyes warm as Alec goes on, sadness and compassion softening his features. He snaps
upright when Alec admits his desperate final plea to Raziel, his eyes widening slightly as Alec
describes the tingling warmth and the portal.

When Alec finishes talking, silence falls in the room. It stretches out for so long and Magnus' face
is so still and unreadable that Alec doesn't know what to make of it.

Fear starts to push at the edges of his mind. "What is it, Magnus?"

"I am afraid that your guess was correct." Magnus pauses and looks at Alec. "And my counterpart
has nothing to do with this."

"What does that mean? You know who did this?"

"I will need to check some of my books," Magnus answers. "But I think you did this. Indirectly, but
"What's that supposed to mean?" Alec asks, even though his mind is starting to connect the dots.

"I believe," Magnus says, slowly. "That you've been granted an answer to your prayers."

Alec feels weak at the thought. The Angels must have a twisted sense of humor if they figured sending Alec to an alternate dimension would be an appropriate response to his prayer.

"What does that mean?" Alec repeats, forcing back the hysterical laugh that he feels bubbling up. "How do I get back? Oh God, what if I can't get back?"

"That is not an option," Magnus says, voice clipped, his face set in harsh lines. "Your Angels may have granted you a wish but in doing so, they have taken something from me. Someone very precious to me."

Alec swallows, a part of him humbled by the intensity in Magnus' eyes, another part of him jealous of what this alternate Alec has. "Believe me, I never wished for any of this."

"I know." Magnus takes a deep breath and visibly struggles to get the emotion on his face under control. "What I was trying to say is, I won't stop at anything to get my Alexander back."

And Alec has the sudden certainty that Magnus is telling the truth, that he would go head to head with Raziel himself if he has to.

The knowledge both warms his heart and makes it ache for something he can't have.

But can't you, really? A traitor voice whispers in the back of his mind. They're making it work.

Alec bites the inside of his cheek to stop the dangerous direction of his thoughts and just focus. "Yeah. We need to find a way. What do you have in mind?"

"I will need to dust off some ancient books," Magnys says, resolve in his voice and in his eyes. "The days of the Angels are long gone in this dimension but maybe some research can help us find a precedent."

Alec nods. He can do research. In fact, having a task will keep him sane, he thinks. "Just tell me what to do."

"Not so fast." Magnus holds up a hand. "My books are at my place."

"Wait," Alec says, looking around himself. "Is this my place?"

Magnus arches an eyebrow up, looking at Alec with a look that indicates he's starting to think Alec is a bit dense, after all. "What do you think?"

Really? Alec thinks, looking around himself with new eyes, taking in everything.

The apartment is artfully furnished by someone who clearly knows what they're doing. It's bright, all sleek furniture and glass but colorful enough to not look too sterile.

Maybe it's not something Alec would choose for himself but he must admit it's nice. It's just another thing that reminds him how different he is from this world's Alec. It serves as a bitter reminder that maybe they're too different, that maybe the blossoming hope that Alec can have what this version of him has is a utopia.
“Right,” he says, pulling the lapels of the hideous bathrobe tighter around himself, suddenly cold. “We should go to your place and figure this thing out.”

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Alec steps out of the bathroom, clad in the simplest clothes he could find in his alternate self’s wardrobe. And that includes a ridiculously hard to fasten pair of dark pants and a dark green button down.

Magnus is perfectly dressed in a classic looking outfit, still no trace of makeup on his face and Alec guesses it must be his Magnus’ thing. It makes it easier to keep them apart in his head, at least.

They spend the ride to Magnus’ flat talking about their worlds, about the people they have in common and how different things are.

Alec is amused to learn Jace here has his own coffee stand. He learns about Valentine and his visionaire company. About his mother’s little bookshop, one that she apparently runs with Luke.

He’s not really surprised to learn that his father is out of the picture but he gapes at Magnus as he hears this world’s Alec is a party planner because that’s the furthest thing Alec would think to do for a living.

When they arrive at Magnus’ flat, Alec is still trying to wrap his mind around the fact that this world is devoid of demons. That in this world there’s no need for Shadowhunters and the angel-blooded version of himself is free to live as he wants. Without expectations or a family name to uphold.

The place is not what Alec was expecting either. He’s so used to the warmth and eccentricity of his Magnus’ loft that the neat rows of books and all the divination items throw him a little.

This place is different. This Magnus is different but Alec can see some of his Magnus underneath the surface. He can see just enough of him to wonder if he’s really that different from this world’s Alec. Where it matters, at least.

“Tarot reading,” he says, pointing at the deck over the large desk. “Really?”

“Oh, do shut up,” Magnus answers, heading for the bookcase and perusing some of the most ancient looking books. “I have to do something for a living, don’t I?”

“From where I come from, Warlocks sell their services,” Alec points out, grabbing a crystal ball off the desk and frowning at it.

“Yes, well. You must have realized things are a bit different here.” Magnus turns around to place a few books on the desk and glares at Alec. “Put that down. I’ve had it custom made and that crystal doesn’t come cheap.”

Alec shrugs and puts the offending ball down. “Does he know?”

Magnus tenses visibly. “Knows what?”
Alec can sense that Magnus knows exactly what Alec is talking about but he’s stalling. “About your magic.”

“It’s complicated,” Magnus says airily but Alec can read the tension underneath the facade.

“It really isn’t,” Alec says, knowing it’s really none of his business but unable to help himself. “Either he knows or he doesn’t.”

“He’s not ready.”

“What are you afraid of?” Alec blurts out, cursing himself as soon as the words leave his mouth.

Magnus tenses again. “I could ask you the same.”

Alec guesses he deserves it. “Right.” He nods, conceding Magnus’ point. “Let’s get to work.”

They start to go through Magnus’ books in silence, the awkward conversation still hanging between them, loading the air all around them.

Alec doesn’t know how much time has passed when he closes his book with a sigh. “Nothing here.”

Magnus wordlessly hands him another book, without even looking in Alec's direction.

Alec takes it, bites his bottom lip, sighs. "Look, I'm sorry," he says, watching Magnus' fingers tighten around the edges of the book. "I should have minded my own business."

Silence stretches for a few moments and Alec is about to get back to work when Magnus speaks.

"Apology accepted," he just says but he's looking at Alec again and that's some progress, isn't it?

Alec is about to reply when something lands in the middle of the desk and jumps down, a white and gray blur that disappears under the desk in a blink.

Alec gets quickly on his feet, his hand going on instinct where his thigh holster should be, tensing when he meets only fabric.

"At ease, soldier," Magnus says, a hint of amusement back in his voice. He disappears behind the desk and reemerges with a small cat in his arms. "It's just Chairman Meow."

"Chairman Meow?" Alec asks, relaxing as the tension leaves his body. He ignores Magnus' eyeroll and steps closer. "Hey, little guy."

The cat stares at him and sniffs his outstretched hand, hissing quietly before leaping off Magnus' arms and skittering away, until he's perched on top of the library, looking down at them.

Magnus chuckles at Alec's outraged face. "I believe he can sense there's something wrong with you." At Alec’s scowl, his face softens a little. "He used to get along with my Alexander."

Alec just nods and opens his book, feeling keenly out of place, more now than ever.

It's just a cat, he tells himself, taking a deep breath.

But it’s not just a cat, is it? Alec is stranded in a strange dimension, with familiar names, familiar faces but foreign people. He’s inhabiting the body of a version of himself that has his life figured out and is not afraid to go get what he wants.
Magnus, this Magnus is being much nicer than Alec would have been if the circumstances were reversed, especially considering this disaster is Alec’s fault to begin with.

This Magnus has lost his boyfriend because of Alec and his inability to stray from the path that’s been set for him. Because of Alec and his inability to go through with his marriage either.

Alec can understand why Magnus is helping him. The kindness as he does so is unexpected but maybe that’s just something that’s inherent to Magnus’ character, no matter of the dimension he’s in.

A soft thud takes Alec out of his reverie and he turns around to see the culprit walking slowly toward him. It’s another cat, bigger, and Alec recognizes it as one of those breeds that look like they’re constantly scowling.

It walks closer and Alec prepares himself for another hissy fit but it never comes. The cat just curls around himself and sits there, completely indifferent.

Alec feels the corners of his lips twitch, despite himself. “I like that one.”

“Go figures,” Magnus grumbles under his breath. “His name is Church.”

After that, there are no more interruptions for a long time and they both focus on the books, the sound of the pages being turned the only thing breaking the quiet.

Magnus gets up and heads to the library, putting back the books they’ve already checked and getting a few more. “These are the last ones,” he says, sitting back down in front of Alec.

Alec can’t help but notice the way Magnus does things the mundane way, without the aid of his magic. His Magnus uses his magic like breathing, without a second thought, and Alec wonders just how much of himself this Magnus is forced to hide and lock away on a daily basis.

In a way, they’re not so different, Alec thinks.

Alec turns another page and nods. “If we can’t find anything here,” he says, forcing back the dread he feels at the thought. “Is there anywhere else we can try?”

“I can make some calls,” Magnus says, voice a little shaky as if the thought is unbearable to him. “But Angelic knowledge has faded away, just like the demons. It’s rare to find it referenced anywhere and if my friends can’t help, there’s nothing more we can do, short of summoning one of the Angels themselves and ask them for an explanation.”

Alec’s head snaps up. “Wait, can we do that?”

Magnus laughs quietly. “I don’t particularly fancy being smited by one of your Angels, no.” He shakes his head. “And as far as I know, there’s not any known way to summon one so let’s hope it won’t come to that.”

Alec nods, hearing in the tone of his voice what Magnus is not saying. Hearing that Magnus will do anything in his power to get his Alec back. “Yeah, let’s.”

Hours later, they’ve gone through every book Magnus owns to no avail.

Alec closes the last book and stretches with a sigh. “What now?”

Magnus shrugs, helplessness written in the lines of his face. “Now we hope my friends have a more
furnished bookcase.” He whips out his phone and starts to compose a number.

Alec stands and walks to the window, in part to give Magnus some privacy and in part to clear his head.

On his left, there is a big golden cage, housing about half a dozen birds. Alec watches as some of them jump from perch to perch, clearly agitated by his presence. Some of them just ignore him and keep grooming themselves, drinking, eating from the big seed feeders.

They have space to move, they have everything they need to survive but they’re not really free, are they? They’re not really living their life to the fullest. They can’t choose what to eat, where to go, they can’t even choose who to live with.

They’re trapped between the golden bars of what, in the end, is still a cage.

The comparison with Alec’s life, back in his own home, is so glaringly obvious that suddenly he forgets how to breathe.

“Breathe,” Magnus says, placing a hand in the middle of Alec’s back.

Alec has been so focused on the increasing anxiety to not hear Magnus approach. The touch takes him by surprise, making him jump, but it has the desired effect of making Alec draw in a gulp of breath.

“Are you okay?” Magnus asks and Alec tells himself that the concern in his voice comes from the need to preserve his own Alec’s body.

“Yeah,” Alec rasps out. “I’m good.” He freezes as he remembers the phone call. “News?”

Magnus hesitates and Alec is assaulted by the sudden fear that he’s going to get stuck in this place forever.

Would it be so bad? A small, traitor voice in his mind asks.

After he pushes past the initial reaction, Alec realizes that yes, it would. This isn’t his home. He’s dimensions away from his family, from the people he loves. He’s living inside of a body that doesn’t belong to him, living a life that isn’t his to live, no matter how appealing the thought may be.

Besides, as much as wishes he could have more, as much as he likes this Magnus, there is something missing. That spark that makes his Magnus stand out in the middle of a crowd, the butterflies Alec feels in his stomach every time his Magnus looks at him.

No, Alec thinks. He needs to get back. Everything else can be dealt with once he’s back home.

Magnus clears his throat and Alec realizes he’s been lost in his own mind again. “Sorry, you were saying?” He asks.

“My friend may be able to find some old Seraphic books,” Magnus says and even if it’s not a definitive answer, relief flows through Alec. “But we will have to wait at least until tomorrow.”

Alec bites back the scathing remark that’s sitting on the tip of his tongue and tries not to show his disappointment. This man has only been nice to him and if Alec has to be honest with himself, he’s been a bit of a jerk. “Okay.”
“Okay?” Magnus asks, eyeing Alec warily.

Alec rolls his eyes because, come on, he hasn’t been that much of a jerk, has he? “Don’t look so surprised. I know how research works. I can be patient.”

Magnus looks at him and tilts his head in acknowledgement, skepticism and some amusement on his face. “Very well. Now that the matter is settled, what do you say to Dinner? There’s a little Ethiopian.” Magnus stops mid-sentence and suddenly freezes. "Oh, snap."

_Snap?_ Alec would be amused if he wasn't so out of his depths.

"I'm afraid tonight we’re otherwise busy," Magnus says, slow and pained.

“Busy?” Alec asks, unease slithering down his spine as he takes in the seriousness of Magnus’ expression. “Whatever it is, can’t we just-” he sweeps his hands in a wide gesture as he searches for words. “Ignore it?”

“I do not think we can ignore your family.”

"My family?” Alec splutters, eyes widening in alarm.

"I'm afraid so." Magnus looks as worried as Alec feels and that doesn't help things at all. "I had forgotten we were having them over for dinner."

“For dinner?” Alec asks, feeling like a deranged parrot.

“Yes, for dinner,” Magnus says. “At your place.”

Dread flares through Alec, sharp and sudden. “Magnus we can’t. We have to cancel. I just-I can’t-”

“Easy,” Magnus says, interrupting Alec’s ramblings. “Calm down, Alec. We can’t cancel. You know how your mother gets.”

Alec doesn’t know it but if this world’s Maryse is anything like his mom, cancelling on her would bring hell fire upon them. He winces. “Yeah but I don’t know a thing about them and what if I screw things up and-”

“Stop.” Magnus raises up his hand. “You’re doing that again. You will be fine, Alec, I’ll tell you everything you need to know.”

“Easy for you to say,” Alec says. “We can’t possibly cover everything in a few hours.”

“We’ll be okay.” Magnus sounds so confident that Alec starts to calm down, marginally. “Now, we need to shop and head back to your place. I will start educating you on the way there.”

***

A few hours later see Alec pacing in the kitchen of his apartment. Magnus has told him as much as he could on the way there and while they were getting dinner ready.

The important things are covered. Like how he met Magnus, what everyone does for a living, who is dating who.
Alec has agreed to pretend to be a little hungover if anyone asks, because the previous night they were attending one of Alec's events and apparently, this Alec doesn't mind indulging.

It will give Alec a good excuse to refuse to drink too much and it will, hopefully, justify small mishaps.

It doesn't mean Alec is any less nervous. "Okay, let's go over it one last time. Mom-" the ring of the bell interrupts him mid-sentence. "Fuck. Oh fuck, Magnus."

"You'll be okay, Alec," Magnus says and it doesn't matter how many times he has already said it, it's still hard to believe. "Trust me?"

And Alec does. It's irrational and crazy but he really knows he can trust him, just like he knew he could trust his Magnus when he agreed to let him take his strength. He lets out a slow exhale of breath and nods. "Yeah."

Surprise flickers over Magnus' face. He's about to say something when the doorbell rings again and he gestures Alec toward the door instead.

"Why me?" Alec asks, the last word coming out shriller.

"It's your house, Alec."

Alec nods sharply and bites his lip hard, refusing to allow panic to set in. "Keep close." His voice comes out too harsh and Alec tries to soften his features. "Please."

Magnus nods and reaches out to push him toward the door, starting to walk right behind him.

Alec's hand closes around the door handle. He takes a deep breath and yanks the door open, finding himself face to face with his sister. Well, a version of his sister Alec didn't think he'd ever get to see.

"Alec!" Isabelle smiles and suddenly she reminds him of his Izzy, when she was still a kid, before all of their mother's criticism and the harsh Shadowhunter training shaped her into the fierce warrior she is today.

Alec wouldn't trade his little sister for the world but a part of him grieves for that lost innocence. "Hey, Iz," he says softly.

"Iz?" She asks, face puzzled. Alec is about to curse himself for being such an idiot when she smiles and launches forward to hug him. "I like it."

*Crisis averted,* Alec thinks, hugging her back on instinct.

The first one at least.

Her boyfriend is right behind her and Alec has to actively try to smooth his frown as the vamp-Simon pats his back with a cheery, "Hey, man."

Jace and Clary are next and at first glance, they don't look all that different from his world's counterparts, if one doesn't count the lack of runes.

To be fair, he doesn't know the Clary from his world enough to spot any difference and he doesn't have the desire to do so.

Clary walks past him to greet Magnus and Jace stops to squeeze his shoulder. Up close, Alec can
see that his eyes are not as daunted as his parabatai’s. He looks unburdened by all the pain and
grief and loss the Jace from his world has suffered.

“Hey, bro! What’s with your,” Jaces waves toward the general direction of Alec’s head. “Hair?”

Alec frowns. “What’s wrong with it?”

“You know, you never keep it loose like that.”

Before Alec can dig a grave for himself, Magnus steps in. “Alec has run out of styling gel, I’m
afraid.”

Alec adds this tidbit of information to the pile of things he should know about himself and makes a
mental note to go and hide all of the hair product in the bathroom before everyone can figure out
that’s a lie.

“It suits you,” Maryse says, pushing past Jace to ruffle Alec’s hair and Alec has to exert every
ounce of self-control to keep himself from gaping at her.

“Thanks,” he murmurs, sneaking a glance at her face.

She is smiling at him, warm and happy, like she approves of Alec. And she looks so different from
his own mother that it makes Alec’s heart ache.

How many times has he longed to see that look on his mother’s face? How many times has he met
steel and disapproval instead?

Is this what his mom would look like without the pressure of the Clave on her back? Is this how
she would be without the weight of a tattered family name to uphold?

Alec blinks back what definitely are not tears and wonders whether there’s still hope for his own
mother. He has to push the thought to the back of his mind when she reaches out and cups his face.

“Everything okay, sweetheart?” She asks, the concern on her face almost enough to bring forth a
new wave of emotion.

Sweetheart. Such a simple nickname. Alec doesn’t remember the last time his mother has used
such a term of endearment to refer to him, to any of them really.

And yet, this Maryse throws it around so carelessly, like she has been calling him sweetheart for all
of his life.

Alec allows himself to lean into the touch just the tiniest bit, to soak the foreign and stolen
affection, however briefly. Then he pulls back and nods sharply. “I’m good,” he says, happy to
notice his voice doesn’t break.

Years of experience help him school his features into a neutral expression as Maryse stares and
him, eyes searching. In the end, she smiles back but the worry doesn’t quite leave her face.

Alec wonders if his mom has ever been able to read him like this. He wonders if maybe she’s
known things all along.

The possibility hurts him more than he likes to admit.

Maryse hugs him briefly and moves past him. Alec sees her kiss Magnus’ cheek but he doesn’t
have the time to unpack the gesture and what it represents- acceptance, a traitor little voice
whispers in the back of his mind—when Luke steps forward and takes his hand in a firm grip.


“Hey.” Alec shakes it back, thoughts still spinning wildly in his head.

There’s nobody else after Luke and Alec breathes a sigh of relief. It’s just the eight of them and Alec can handle it. He has to.

Soon, the food is ready and everyone has taken their seat around the table. They start eating and make some small talk. Alec knows enough to be able to follow most of it and he’s grateful when Magnus takes care of the rest.

They fall into an easy rhythm and Alec can breathe again. As long as he doesn’t look too closely at Maryse, because her easy smile and the memory of the coldness in her eyes make his heart ache.

***

Alec is leaning against the kitchen counter, enjoying the small moment of quiet. He has escaped with the excuse of checking the casserole in the oven and he’s grateful for the respite.

The sound of chatter and laughter wafts in from the living room and Alec dreads the moment he’ll have to go back and face those people again.

His fingers tighten around the edge of the kitchen counter. “Fuck me,” he whispers.

“I think Magnus has that covered, bro.” Jace’s voice comes out of nowhere, making Alec jump.

It takes him a few seconds to realize what Jace has just said and when he does, Alec almost chokes on his own saliva. He can feel warmth across his face and down his neck as the heat of embarrassment prickles his skin.

“What the fuck, Jace?” Alec splutters.

Jace laughs so hard he has to lean on the kitchen counter next to him. “Are you blushing? I didn’t think I’d see the day I’d see you blush.”

Alec doesn’t blush, thank you very much. Alec has never joked about sex or men fucking him either, though.

“How crass, Jace,” Magnus says, walking in the kitchen. He doesn’t give Jace the time to reply before going on. “How’s the food coming along?”

And just like that, the attention is diverted from Alec as they get busy taking the casserole out of the oven and bringing it to the table.

Alec is so relieved he could kiss Magnus.

He doesn’t even have the time to analyze the stray thought that a plate is being put in front of him.

The rest of the evening runs as smoothly as possible.
Alec is on the receiving end of some more of Jace’s jokes but then Luke starts teasing Jace just as much and soon everyone is so busy bantering to pay Alec attention.

And Alec knows the casual way Magnus touches him, the way he calls him *darling*, the way he holds his hand are all part of their little charade but for a moment, he wishes it was his life.

***

“I should go,” Magnus says, wiping his hands on a dry towel.


“You should get some sleep,” Magnus answers as he grabs the last of the clean plates and puts it in the cupboard above the sink. “Tomorrow is going to be a long day.”

Alec has been craving some time quiet for hours. Hell, he’s been craving it ever since this ordeal started but suddenly, panic surges through him at the thought of being alone in this foreign place.

This Magnus may be a stranger but he’s still the only one who is aware of what’s happening. He is the only one who can help Alec get back home.

If Alec has to be honest with himself, he doesn’t want to be alone. Not now.

Back home, he probably would have brushed his needs off and soldiered on. This dimension makes him bolder. “Stay,” he says, keeping eye contact against every instinct that’s telling him to look away. “Please.”

“Alec,” Magnus murmurs, and it’s always *Alec*, ever since Magnus has found out he’s not *Alexander*. “I-”

Magnus looks like he’s going to gently decline his offer to stay and it takes Alec a few seconds to brush past the initial sting and understand the reason behind his demeanor.

“No, no, no,” Alec says hastily. “I’m not trying to- I meant, just as friends. I can use the company.”

Something in Magnus’ posture loosens up. “In that case,” he says, smiling at Alec. “I will stay.”

“Thanks,” Alec says, smiling back.

Magnus’s face softens. He looks pensive, like he’s going to say something important but he shakes his head minutely instead. “Look,” he says, voice playful now. “He *can* smile.”

Alec barks out a short laugh, despite himself. “Don’t push it.”

They don’t discuss sleeping arrangements. They never talk about who’s going to take the couch or who’s going to take the bed. It’s like after the reassurance that nothing is going to happen, they mutually decided they’re adult enough to share the bed.

The room is in the dark. Magnus in on his side, facing away from Alec and he’s been so quiet for so long that he’s probably sleeping.
Sharing a bed with someone else is not a novelty to Alec. He’s had a lifetime of big brother experience to get used to it.

A whirlwind of thoughts fight for attention within Alec’s mind but Alec knows he can’t afford to pay attention to any of them or he’ll never sleep. He tries to clear his mind like he’s been taught since he was a child, focusing on his own breathing. He finds himself focusing on the sound of Magnus’ breathing instead.

Alec is about to fall asleep when he hears it. It’s barely a murmur and if not for the quiet of the room, Alec would have missed it.

“I haven’t told him because I am afraid to lose him.”

***

They spend the most part of the next morning at Magnus’ place, trying to track down Magnus friend’s location through his belongings. He’s another warlock and has agreed to let Magnus borrow his books, with the caveat that Magnus must find him first.

“I don’t get it,” Alec says, frowning.

“How astonishing.”

Alec snorts and bites back the retort that’s threatening to slip past his lips. He cocks up his left eyebrow and stares at Magnus instead. Really? It says.

Magnus grins at him unapologetically “I suppose Ragnor is bored,” He says, shaking his head in a mixture of fondness and annoyance. “He wouldn’t admit it out loud but he misses the old days.”

“So he’s gonna play games with us?”

“With me,” Magnus says, grabbing an ornate brooch and inspecting it. “Whatever excuse to use some magic, you know?”

Alec doesn’t know but he thinks he understands, on a lesser scale. He’s familiar with that constant hiding, that constant negating a fundamental part of yourself.

Alec pushes back the thought and thinks about the previous night. Magnus hasn’t said anything about the admission he’s made in the dark and Alec hasn’t pushed.

Alec wants to tell him to come clean. He wants to tell him that everything is gonna be okay because if this world’s Alec is anything like himself, he won’t abandon the people he loves. Except, Alec can’t really make that promise, can he? He knows next to nothing about the Alec whose body he’s inhabiting and as much as he wants to help Magnus, he can’t promise everything will go smoothly.

Magnus’ little cheering sound brings Alec out of his reverie. He pins the thought for later and turns to Magnus, who’s smiling wide at him.

“I’ve got a location,” Magnus says, still clutching what looks like an old bookmark.

Alec stands. “What are we waiting for?”
“Perhaps it would be best if I went on my own.”

Alec frowns. “Why?”

“Ragnor doesn’t trust people. He is a bit of a recluse, I’m afraid,” Magnus says, already headed to the coat hanger and retrieving his jacket. “It would make things easier.”

Alec opens his mouth to protest but in the end, if staying behind will lead to a swift resolution, he’s willing to do that. “Alright,” he says, sitting back on the couch and reaching out to scratch Church’s head. “I’ll be here.”

Magnus nods, giving Alec a grateful smile. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.” He heads to the door and stops with his hand on the handle. “Feel free to keep yourself entertained but stay away from locked cabinets.” With that, he’s gone before Alec can blink.

Alec shakes his head and keeps scratching the cat’s head. He has learned that Church doesn’t purr, 

Alec is surprised when Chairman Meow joins them. The small cat sniffs at his free hand and hisses slightly, letting Alec know his displeasure. In the end, he settles down, deciding that Alec may be an impostor but he is capable to provide head scratches and belly rubs nonetheless.

Alec sighs and shifts into a position that allows him to pet both cats comfortably. The apartment is quiet, the sound of Chairman Meow’s purring soothing.

Alec is fast asleep before he knows it.

***

“....like I imagined!”

Magnus’ voice makes Alec jump, which in turn makes the cats scatter away as he sits straight. “What?”

Magnus stops right in front of him and shakes his head. “Coffee first. I need you properly awake for this.” He walks right past him and heads toward what Alec supposes is the kitchen.

Alec stands and follows him, rubbing the sleep off his eyes. “Can’t you just conjure it?” He asks before his brain can really connect with his tongue.

“I could.” Magnus’ voice is casual but his body tenses slightly. “But I cannot risk to create a habit and perform magic at inappropriate times.” He takes a deep breath and turns around to face Alec. “And before you ask me, it’s not only because of him.”

Alec wants to push but Magnus’ body language says he’s not ready for it. He nods. “I understand.”

Do you? Magnus doesn’t say it but it’s written all over his face, his posture. He slowly nods back and keeps himself busy with the coffee maker.

Coffee in hand, they get back to the living room and sit down and Alec’s glad to notice some of the tension has left Magnus’ body.
Alec takes a sip of his coffee. “What did you find out?”

“I believe I was correct in assuming the Angel granted you some sort of wish.” As he speaks, he reaches out and retrieves a book from the coffee table, one Alec hadn’t noticed was there.

“And what now? How do we reverse it?” Alec asks.

“We don’t,” he says, making Alec’s heart sink.

“What?” Alec asks, uncaring of how shrill his voice sounds. “What do you mean we don’t? Are you kidding me?”

“Relax.” Magnus turns the pages until he finds the one he was looking for. He points at it and Alec finds the lack of nail polish jarring, especially now for some reason. “It is not reversible but it’s finite.”

“It’s finite,” Alec repeats, trying to make sense of it.

“Exactly. I will get my Alexander back.” Magnus smiles and it’s bright and genuine like it’s never been.

Magnus looks so happy at the prospect to get his boyfriend back and his joy is so unbridled to make Alec’s heart ache with longing.

The other Alec will get back home to his perfect life, greeted by a loving partner, a loving family. Alec will get back to a place where he’s expected to marry a woman, where he’s expected to fulfill his duty to salvage a name his parents have dragged through the mud.

He swallows. “And I will go back home.”

“Oh? Yes, yes,” Magnus says, distracted by the contents of the page. “You will get back home.”

“How?” Alec asks, trying to push back the longing for something he’s not allowed to have.

Magnus taps his fingers over the page. “It’s all here. It dates back to when Nephilims still operated in this world.”

Alec shifts closer and peers over Magnus’ shoulder. He can’t read the text but there’s a print of a man, a Nephilim if the runes on his skin are any indication. He’s looking up at the silhouette of a winged figure. The Angel is looking down on him and both of them are surrounded by a bright light.

“What does it say?” Alec asks, pointing at the page.

“According to this text, in the old times the Angels used to be more in touch with their hunters. It was not unusual for them to manifest and help their Nephilims in a moment of distress.” He pauses and looks pointedly at Alec.

“But why send me here?” Alec says, ignoring the knowing look.

“Let me finish,” Magnus says, putting his hand up. "Usually, the Angels would grant a wish but in some cases, in rare cases, they would offer a glimpse into the past or into the future to help them choose a path."

“But why here?”
"It's not that much of a stretch to think a glimpse into another dimension would be right up the Angels’ alley.” Magnus says, closing the book.

"Wait," Alec says, reaching out for the book and opening it again. "You said it was finite?"

"I did. Here." Magnus points at the bottom of the page. "It says that the glimpse usually ends when the person has enough information to solve whatever issues they had in the first place. It may have been as simple as choosing the right trademark weapon or as complex as choosing a different path but all of the Nephilims were returned safely home."

"So you're saying I'm gonna have to wait until I'll have some big epiphany?"

"Not at all, Alec." Magnus takes the book back and closes it again. "It doesn't say anywhere that you need to make your choice." He emphasizes the last word, letting Alec know he's perfectly aware of the nature of it. "It just says you need to have all the information that might help you make an informed one."

"I'm not sure I understand," Alec admits, wiping his sweaty palms over his denims.

"You don't need to change your mind or have some big revelation. If you wish to do so, you can go back and go ahead with that ridiculous marriage of yours." Magnus' voice is softer now, his face kind. "But I don't see why you should."

"I told you, Magnus," Alec says, taking a deep breath to calm himself when his voice comes out harsher than he intends. "I can't- I just- I have a duty to my family."

"Is this duty worth your happiness?"

"Yes," Alec says, the word burning up his throat on its way out. "No, I, I don't know okay? The only thing I know is that's always been expected of me."

"You are very young," Magnus says, reaching out as if he's going to cover Alec's hand with his own but stopping before he can do it. "Do not ruin the rest of your life because of some misplaced sense of duty. Don't let those expectations crush your soul, Alec."

"What am I supposed to do, Magnus?" Alec asks, hating how small his voice sounds. "They don't-they can't know."

"Would it be so bad if they did?" Magnus asks and the kindness in his voice is almost too much to bear.

"I could lose my family." Alec swallows and lowers his eyes to his lap. "I could throw away my career."

"Don't be overdramatic, dear. I don't have fond memories of your kind but I recall banishment was something reserved for grave offences." Magnus pauses and winks at Alec. "Now, your career might suffer a setback but you seem like a hard working kind of guy."

Alec huffs out a laugh. "Yeah?"

"Yes," Magnus says in mock solemnity. "All work and no fun."

Alec would like to retort, to say that he does have fun. But besides going for a few drinks with his siblings when he’s tired of their nagging, he doesn’t do much. He can hardly remember the last time he’s done something just for the fun of it.
“You point?” He asks.

“My point,” Magnus says, looking pointedly at Alec. “Is that your career may suffer a little, considering it’s supposed to be a political marriage. But what if you can’t reach your goals right now? One would think waiting a few years would be a small price to pay for happiness.”

_Happiness._ It’s such a foreign concept to Alec. He’s always known he can’t have what he wants so he’s stopped wanting. He’s stopped allowing himself to even _think_ about it.

Until Magnus, his world’s Magnus, came along and disrupted the carefully crafted bridles Alec has built for himself.

_Happiness_, Alec thinks. Can he really have it? “And what about honor?” He asks instead, realizing he’s threading dangerous territory.

“What about it, Alec?”

“I’ve made a commitment.” Alec says. “I proposed to Lydia. I’ve got to honor my word.”

“Oh, please,” Magnus says. “There is no honor in living a farce of a marriage.”

Where’s the honor in living a lie? His Magnus’ words resonate through Alec’s head.

“Maybe you’re not so different from him, after all,” Alec murmurs before he can think better of it.

“I take that my counterpart has tried this particular argument with you.” Magnus shakes his head minutely. “You should have listened. It would have spared both of us some grief.”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s all my fault,” Alec huffs, aware all of this happened because of him and his stupid prayer. Magnus’ words sting a little nonetheless. "I get that."

Magnus' face softens. "Well, shifting blame does us no good, does it? Maybe you weren't in the right place to listen. I can only hope you are more receptive now."

"Why do you care?" Alec asks, knowing he's only been a nuisance for this man.

Magnus seems startled by the question. "I don't know. Maybe I feel for my counterpart. If he is anything like me, I imagine he doesn't take rejection very easily," he says and his words remind Alec of the brief flash of hurt on his Magnus' face. "Or maybe, a part of me would never want to know any version of you is unhappy."

"You really love him, don't you?" Alec asks but he doesn't really need the answer, not when it's so clearly written over Magnus' features.

"Yes, I do." There's no hesitation in Magnus' reply. "Very much so."

Alec can just nod in acknowledgement as another pang of jealousy twists in his chest. He's jealous of what this Alec has, of what he's not afraid to want and take for himself. He's jealous of a life that isn't his own and can't ever be.

_It could_, a traitor voice in his head whispers.

And this voice is getting dangerously louder with every _what if_. It speaks of possibilities and of a better future. It promises happiness, if only Alec would allow it. It says that Alec is the owner of his own life and he's the only one who can dictate his own future, if only he'd let himself be selfish enough to do so.
It’s a dangerous thought and Alec is not sure he can deal with it. It’s easy to entertain this kind of thoughts when he’s in the anonymity of another dimension. It’s easy to do so when he is so far from his own family and friends, far from criticism and judgement. When he’s walking around in the body of a man who’s out and proud of it.

"Wait a second," Alec says, a tremendous doubt clawing its way into his mind. "What about your Alec?"

"What about him?"

"If I’m here," Alec says slowly. "Then he could be... oh God."

Magnus’ eyes widen in understanding. "He could very well be in your dimension, yes."

“You may not have a choice about telling him about your magic,” Alec says dryly, trying to not think about his own predicament.

"Do not joke about that," Magnus says, almost all the color drained from his face."I was under the assumption that you’d be brought back in the same moment you were whisked away. But if I’m wrong, if what you’re saying it’s true..."

"It’d be a disaster," Alec finishes the sentence for him. "By Raziel, do you think I don’t know that? He could ruin my life."

"Excuse me?" Magnus says, low and indignant. "What about mine?"

"You’ll be fine." Alec lifts his forgotten coffee cup and takes a sip, grimacing at the taste of the coffee gone cold. "You’re not gonna lose him."

"You can’t know that, Alec."

"I know myself," Alec says quietly, placing the cup back on the coffee table. "We may be different from our counterparts but there’s something in you that reminds me of the other Magnus." He pauses and stares at Magnus, willing him to understand. "Our upbringings and our lives may be different but if I’m right and we share some of the basic personality traits, your Alec won’t abandon the people he loves. I know I wouldn’t."

Magnus doesn’t look entirely convinced but he gives Alec a shaky nod. "And yet, here you are."

“It’s” Alec has to swallow and blink as Magnus’ words make his eyes sting. “It’s complicated. It’s different from what you have with your Alec. I barely know the other Magnus and it’s too soon to talk about love.”

“Maybe not love. Not yet,” Magnus agrees, voice steadier now. “But you’re denying yourself the possibility of it. You’re giving all of it up without even allowing yourself to try it.”

“Then show me,” Alec says, his voice coming out sharper than he intended. “Show me what I’m missing. I’m supposed to learn about this Alec’s life to find my way back home, right?”

Magnus looks surprised for a moment but nods slowly. “I believe so, yes.”

“Then I’m listening.”

They spend the rest of the day talking. Magnus tells him how they met, and isn’t it ironic that Clary Fray was the one responsible for it?
He tells him how his Alec courted him. He tells Alec how they danced around each other, Alec taking a step forward and Magnus taking two steps back. He tells him how his Alec managed to win him over in the end. He tells Alec of the love, of the laughter, of the feeling of belonging after being alone and unseen for so long.

Magnus shows him photos and Alec’s breath catches in his throat at the way they look next to each other, at the way they look at each other.

By the end of the day, Alec has a clear understanding of what he could be missing. He’s not naive enough to think it’d be as simple as that but he knows it’s something that maybe it’s worth fighting for.

Alec doesn’t know what tomorrow will bring. He has no idea if this brief foray into someone else’s life is really going to change his own and he’s not fool enough to really believe it will.

And maybe it’s just the darkness of Magnus’ bedroom. Maybe it’s just safer to let himself dream when he’s tucked in someone else’s bed, so far away from judgemental eyes and rigid rules.

But for the first time in what feels like a long time, Alec allows himself to hope.

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Alec jolts awake and tries to scan his surroundings to figure out what startled him.

The room is still in the dark. If the soft snores coming from his right are any indication, Magnus is still sleeping soundly next to him.

Alec settles back against the mattress, sure he must have been a false alarm. He’s about to fall back to sleep when he feels it. The tips of his fingers are tingling, a pleasant warmth spreading up his wrists and his forearms.

He looks down at his hands and sees tiny wisps of golden energy dancing around his fingertips. They’re faint enough he’s not sure he would have seen them under the light.

“Magnus,” he calls, the awareness that he has little time left spurring the urgency in his voice. “Magnus, wake up.”

“What is ‘t?” Magnus says, turning around, his voice slurred with sleep.

“I think my ride home is here.”

“Your Angels have impeccable timing,” Magnus mutters, ripping a laugh out of Alec.

“Yeah,” Alec says, laughter dying down to a chuckle. “Sorry to wake you up but I thought you wanted to welcome your boyfriend back. And, y’know, I wanted to say goodbye.”

Magnus sits up and glances at Alec’s hands, where the wisps of gold are growing brighter. “Are you going to be okay?”

Alec exhales slowly. He remembers Magnus’ concerns about his happiness. He remembers how Magnus said he couldn’t bear to think any version of Alec could be unhappy. He can’t promise he will be happy so he settles for the truth. “I don’t know,” he says. “But I’m gonna try.”
Magnus nods and reaches out. His hand hovers over Alec’s but stops before he can touch his sparkling fingers. It settles on his forearm instead, squeezing it lightly. “You take care of yourself, Alec.”

Alec nods, touched by the concern he can hear in Magnus’ voice. “You too,” he says, swallowing around the lump in his throat.

He turns his hand around to squeeze Magnus’ hand back but as he does so, strings of light leave his fingers and whirl in the air in front of them, slowly forming a portal.

“I think that’s your cue,” Magnus murmurs. He lets go of Alec’s forearm and settles back against the headboard, scurrying to the side as the portal slowly starts to close in on Alec.

“I’ve got to go,” Alec says, stating the obvious. “Thank you for everything. I don’t know what I’d have done without you. I owe you.”

“You owe yourself,” Magnus says, glancing at the approaching portal. “Be true to yourself, Alec.”

The portal is so close Alec can feel its energy caress his face like a gust of wind. He glances at it and looks back at Magnus, nodding slowly. “I will. But you’ve got to do the same, Magnus.”

Alec has only the time to see Magnus swallow and nod before the portal sucks him in. He closes his eyes, Magnus’ face glowing ethereally with the light coming from the portal still impressed against his eyelids.

Next thing he knows, something cold is pressed against his forearm, its tip heating up where it presses over Alec’s exposed skin.

He snaps his eyes open and reaches out to grab Lydia’s wrist. “Wait.”

“Alec?” She asks, confused.

Frozen in place and trying to recover from the whiplash, Alec listens to the harsh sound of his own breathing and the low murmuring of the people behind him. He knows what he wants, what he needs to do but knowing it doesn’t make it easier.

Alec thinks about the rules. Rules that were always so easy before Magnus. Train, fight, obey.

He thinks about honor, about loyalty to his family because that’s all Alec knows. Loyalty is just what he does, what he’s always done.

What about loyalty to yourself? A voice says and it sounds so much like the Magnus he’s learned to know during the last few days that Alec almost smiles.

He raises his eyes and looks past Lydia, at his brother.

Jace meets his eyes squarely and even though Alec can see some confusion on his face, he can also see understanding.

He’s not gonna judge me, Alec thinks as Jace slowly nods at him in encouragement.

And Alec knows that if he were to turn around, he’d see the same encouragement on his sister’s face.

They’re family too, Alec realizes. And maybe, just maybe, they’re the family he wants to be loyal to. The family deserving of his loyalty.
The thought warms his chest and pokes at the wriggling tangle of nerves inside of his belly, loosening it a little.

Decision taken, he squares his shoulders and invokes his known *get on with it* attitude. “I can’t do this, Lydia. I’m sorry.”

All of the noise dies down until Alec is sure they could hear a pin drop on the floor.

To her credit, Lydia doesn’t look surprised or upset. She doesn’t make a scene either. She just nods and puts away the stele. “I understand.”

“I’m sorry,” he repeats because he truly is sorry and Lydia deserves to hear it.

“Don’t be,” she says, the corners of her lips lifting up into an understanding smile. “You deserve to be happy.”

Alec nods in gratitude and acknowledgement. He turns around and takes the first step, both down the staircase and toward happiness.

Another step follows and then another, until Alec’s feet are on the ground at the end of the stairs and he’s walking up the aisle, this time away from the altar.

Someone, his mother, calls his name but Alec keeps going, loosening his bowtie as he walks out of the double doors. He can hear the faint sound of heels following behind his back but he doesn’t slow down.

Once he’s out of the room, he takes his bowtie all the way off and leans against the wall, waiting.

Alec knows he can’t put off this conversation, not indefinitely, and while he may want to avoid a public confrontation, he’s not coward to the point of leaving without a word.

“Alec.” His mother gives him a tight-lipped smile as she steps out of the chapel and closes the doors behind her back. “What is the meaning of this?”

Alec fights against every instinct that’s telling him to apologize and get his ass back in that room. He swallows and takes a deep breath. “I can’t do this.”

Before his mother can reply, there’s a brief commotion right out of the room. Suddenly, the doors burst open and Jace and Izzy walk in, worry on both of their faces.

“Mom,” Izzy says, taking a step forward.

“Stay out of this,” his mother says, pinning her in place with one of her infamous glares. Then she turns her stare on jace. “Both of you.”

Izzy, to her credit, doesn’t stop walking. She stares defiantly at their mother and walks closer to Alec, standing at his side and placing a hand in the middle of his back.

*I’ve got you, big brother,* the warmth of her small hand says.

Jace is still standing near the door as if he’s guarding the entrance. He catches Alec’s eye and nods.

Alec is overwhelmed by his siblings’ unconditional support. A sudden surge of gratitude and affection is almost enough to bring tears to his eyes. It is enough to straighten his spine as he looks at his mother.
“I can’t do this,” he repeats, voice made steadier by his sister’s unwavering touch.

“Why not?” His mother asks, voice as sharp as a whip.

_Because I’m not what you want me to be,_ Alec wants to scream at her. "I'm making some changes in my life," he says instead.

"Pray tell then, Alec, what is so important that you're willing to sabotage your career for it?" She asks, demands, her lips still pursed in disapproval.

It’s the same disapproval he’s met his whole life. The same disapproval he’s met when he was second in the rune reading competition, the same disapproval he has seen in her eyes whenever someone would best him in hand to hand combat. The same disapproval that’s driven him to train the hardest, to be the best of his classes, the best archer, the perfect little Shadowhunter.

That disapproval that slaps him in the face all the harder now that he’s seen the kindness and the pride in the other Maryse’s face.

“Screw my career,” Alec says, surprising himself with the vehemence of his own outburst.

If the way his mom’s eyes widen, she is just as surprised. “You don’t mean that,” she says, looking at him like he’s lost his mind. “This is your future, Alec. Your legacy. You were raised to lead this Institute.”

Alec thinks about all of the years of training, about all the long hours of etiquette and diplomacy lessons. Then he thinks about Magnus, both of them. He thinks about an alternate version of himself who had everything Alec has never even dared to dream of.

And maybe his mother is right and he’s lost his goddamn mind because next thing he knows he’s laughing. “Maybe I don’t want that,” he says when he manages to catch his breath. “If it means I have to give up who I am.”

His mother’s eyes widen in understanding and Alec’s chest hurts with the certainty that she’s always known. That she’s known and she’s been willing to ignore it as long as Alec walked on the line she’d drawn for him.

Another hysterical laugh threatens to find its way past his lips but Izzy’s hand moves from his back to his forearm and squeezes, grounding him.

“Now,” he says when it’s clear his mother is not going to say anything for the foreseeable future. “If we’re done, I’m gonna go. I have some matters to settle.”

Alec pointedly avoids his mother’s gaze and glances at Jace, nodding in gratitude when his parabatai gives him a small smile and gestures at him to go.

When he turns to look at Izzy, the pride in her bright eyes is almost enough to steal his breath away. “Thank you,” he says, voice barely above a whisper. “If you need me I’ll be at Magnus’s.”

Izzy smiles at him, wide and happy and _proud_. She nods and squeezes his arm, before releasing him. “Go,” she whispers back. “I’ll take care of everything.”

Alec smiles at her, wide and grateful. “Thank you,” he repeats before pulling back and turning around.

“Alec, wait,” his mother calls after him but he keeps going, ignoring her now that he’s said what he
needed to say.

The last thing he hears as he steps out of the door of the Institute is her, “Has he gone mad?”

Alec smiles because yes, he thinks he definitely must have. And it's not necessarily a bad thing.

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Alec walks. He takes the long way to Magnus’ place because now that he’s taken the most important step, there’s no rush and if he’s honest with himself, he can use a clear head.

Alec walks. He walks and thinks about the other Magnus and his Alec. He thinks that because of fortuitous timing, maybe Magnus hasn’t had to explain anything to his Alexander but Alec finds himself hoping that he will nonetheless.

He thinks about his Magnus and about the possibility that he’ll turn Alec down just like Alec has done with him.

Strangely, the thought isn’t as unbearable as he might have imagined.

Rejection would sting but it would leave a window for a second chance at proving himself. Rejection doesn’t have to be permanent, not in the way a Wedded Union Rune would have been.

This is not just about Magnus. This is Alec, taking his life back and hoping Magnus will agree to be a part of it.

So Alec walks and thinks and lets his feet carry him to Brooklyn Heights, ignoring the pain inflicted by the uncomfortable shoes, ignoring the glances people send his way because of his attire.

Alec walks to the elevator, then out of it, stopping only when he reaches the empty hallway leading to Magnus’ loft.

He takes a deep breath and keeps going, throwing himself at the mercy of his stubborn determination to see this through. He’s glad he hasn’t tried to come up with a speech because the closer he gets to Magnus’ door, the blurrier his thoughts get.

Alec stops in front of the dark door and makes himself knock, heart racing in his chest. As he waits, a part of him wonders if maybe Magnus isn’t home. He’s both disappointed and relieved at the thought.

He lifts his hand to knock again when the sound of boots on the other side of the door stops him in his tracks, anxiety-induced cartwheels twisting his stomach.

And then the door slides open and Magnus is on the threshold, surprise and curiosity and maybe a hint of bitterness on his face as he stares at Alec.

Alec takes in the makeup, the sharp cut of his pants, the shimmer in his shirt. He takes in the jewelry and the nail polish and the perfectly mussed hair with the stylish streaks of red.

This is Alec’s Magnus, blindingly, achingly so. And the realization hits Alec so hard to take his breath away. It hits Alec so hard he has to close briefly his eyes.
When he opens them again, Magnus is still staring at him. Alec stares back, hoping the flush he can feel warming his cheeks isn’t as vivid as it feels. He hangs onto his courage and onto the eye contact anyway because this is not the time to be defeated by embarrassment.

Magnus is speechless for a few moments but he’s the first to break eye contact. “What can I do for you, Alexander?” he asks, looking down at his manicured fingers.

Alec’s mouth feels so dry that he’s sure he will never be able to work his tongue loose enough to reply. He swallows and clears his throat. “Can I-” he gestures toward Magnus’ loft. “Can I come in?”

There’s a brief flash of surprise, maybe a hint of hope on Magnus’ face before he manages to get his features under control and some bitterness creeps back in. “One would think,” he says, slow and careful and Alec hates how perfectly polite he sounds. “You might want to exercise some caution, under the circumstances.”

_He believes I married Lydia_ , Alec thinks. It’s not too much of a leap, considering how much time has passed since their talk. Alec has no idea how much he’s walked but he knows a few hours must have passed.

Enough for an arranged wedding and some obligated platitudes.

“No, it’s not like that,” he says, walking closer, suddenly and painfully aware of his own heartbeat. “I’m not-” and really, Alec is not sure he can articulate enough words to explain, not when Magnus is standing so close.

Alec lets out a frustrated little noise and reaches out, grabbing the lapels of Magnus’ shirt and drawing him in. He kisses Magnus, instinct driving his actions more than reason, unable to swallow back the low moan at the feeling of Magnus’ lips against his own.

Magnus’ body tenses briefly and Alec is about to reluctantly pull away when Magnus relaxes against him and kisses him back, bringing his hand on the back of Alec’s head to keep him close.

Alec is kissing Magnus and Magnus is kissing him back and, really, none of Alec’s fantasies can live up to the real thing. He can feel the heat of Magnus’ body and Magnus’ tongue sweeping over this bottom lip and Alec thinks he may forget how to breathe. No, he thinks he might never breathe again but that’s okay and it doesn’t stop him from parting his lips, allowing Magnus’ tongue in.

They both let out muffled moans in each other's lips and Alec's world explodes and reshapes itself with Magnus as its whole point of focus.

"I called the wedding off," Alec says between harsh breaths when they break the kiss. "I didn't marry Lydia." The words come out of him in a rush because now that he has found his voice again, he can't let Magnus believe the contrary for a minute longer.

Magnus' lips twist into a cautious half smile. "You called the wedding off."

"Yeah," Alec says, reluctantly pulling back. "You were right, Magnus."

Magnus steps back into the loft and gestures Alec to come in. "About which of the points I made?" He asks as soon as Alec follows him inside, arching an eyebrow up.

Alec snorts but can't help the wide smile he gives Magnus. "Oh, come on, smugness is unbecoming."
Magnus' laugh is genuine and it's the best sound Alec's heard in a long time. "I do believe I am entitled to some vainglory, my dear."

Alec lets out an amused chuckle but sobers up quickly. "What now?" He asks quietly.

Magnus' smile is achingly soft. "Forgive me, Alexander, but I feel pressed to turn the question back to you."

Alec swallows and hesitates just for a second because this is it. "I was hoping we could go for a drink sometime, " he says. "You know, on a date."

"I would love that," Magnus says, eyes brightening as the caution on his face morphs into hope.

Alec doesn't think he's ever smiled so wide. He reaches out and cups Magnus' face, brushing his thumb over the sharp line of Magnus' cheekbone and marvelling at the thrill of being allowed to do it. "It's not gonna be easy," he warns, intent on full disclosure.

Magnus nods, reading everything Alec is not saying out loud. "I'll take my chances."

You're worth the effort, Alec hears and the thought makes his heart swoop and his chest tighten and by the Angel, Magnus is worth the effort too.

Alec closes the distance and kisses Magnus again because now that he's had a taste, he can’t seem to stop.

When they pull back, Magnus laughs quietly, hot breath against Alec's lips. "What made you change your mind?" He asks, genuine curiosity in his voice.

Alec thinks about the other Magnus. He thinks about the time they spent together, bickering but also somehow helping each other. He thinks about the photos, about the tales. He thinks about that Magnus' steadfast determination to convince Alec to pursue his happiness.

"You did," he says.

End Notes

This was supposed to be a short one shot, a loose interpretation of my bingo square "Portals". It obviously got out of hand.

Thank you to everyone who's made it to the end. Thank you to the organizers. And a huge thank you to Toby (and the other lovely people in the sprints room) for the support and for letting me flail and scream about it.

(If you want to say hi, I'm on tumblr and twitter with the same handle.)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!