Summary

A few weeks after the wedding incident, the Clave has Alec arrested and put on trial to have his runes stripped for what seems like no reason. Faced with exile, Alec must come to terms with himself, his feelings for a certain warlock, and the world that he was raised in.

Notes

This follows the continuity of the TV show up to 1x12, and then diverges (Jace doesn't go with Valentine and the incest angst magically disappears).

See the end of the work for more notes.

Sitting on his bed in his Institute room, Alec looks around in guarded contemplation. This has been his bedroom since he was seven years old, the only place on this cold earth that belongs only to him. The only place where he did not have to turn to stone to survive, the only place that was a shield between him and the cruelty of other people.
That’s not to say that he doesn’t have hateful memories here. Being alone usually relaxes him, lets him put himself at ease, but sometimes it can be different. Sometimes the loneliness became so consuming, so crushing, that it was as though the four walls of the room had collapsed upon his chest – the knowledge that he would be this lonely, forever, agonizing. Although it has been a while since he had felt like that, the very memory of that feeling sends a shudder through him.

After the age of seven, these four walls have been the only ones to see him shed a tear.

Looking at him and Jace, people would expect him to be the orderly one, but it’s in fact the opposite. He’s not Isabelle, but there is a certain carelessness in the way the books are strewn around his room, having somehow travelled with him across the floor without returning to their tidy homes on the several bookcases that he has. There is disorder in the sheaves of messy papers on his desk, the rumpled sheets of his unmade bed. Now that he has time for it, he muses about it. He supposes there is just no need for fronts, for guards and walls, in this space that belongs to him. There must be one place that reflects the chaos of his mind, lest everything he is be swallowed up by the person he pretends to be once he steps out past the threshold of the thick wooden door.

Although some memories are bad, he can’t help but remember the good as he stares at the wall today. Normally, he, Isabelle and Jace would lounge around in Isabelle’s room when they had any free time, but he remembers the first time Isabelle knocked on his door, age eight, and asked him to help her with her nail polish on the left hand. After that, it became almost tradition right through their teenhood. Always Alec’s room, cross-legged on his bed across from each other, always only the left hand, always pretending that the nail polish was the reason behind the late-night chat.

And then there was the night Jace had knocked tentatively on his door – the first time he remembers Jace doing anything tentatively, or being nervous at all. In tripping words and stutters, he asked Alec to be his parabatai, and Alec had never felt more love for Jace than in that moment. (Later, the self-hatred began, the *you’re going to be cursed if you look at his eyes too long again, the he’s going to hate you if he finds out that he bound himself to someone like you.* But that moment was golden.)

Surveying the bedroom, it is as if he can see the ghosts of all of these past moments that it had borne witness to flicker before him into view. Some of it had been happy, certainly. And the room had sometimes been lonely, sometimes even unbearable. But he had never thought it would ever be his prison.

* It had happened earlier that day, after Alec had, surprisingly, run into Magnus at the Institute. The wedding was a few weeks ago, but it has been difficult for them to see each other since. Their attentions had been constantly shifted by those Valentine-related matters that, though life-or-death important, shrink dramatically in significance when Alec lays his eyes on Magnus there in the main room of the Institute.

“Magnus,” Alec says when he approaches him, trying and failing to suppress a half-smile.

“Oh, Alec. Hi.” Magnus seems surprised to see him, but gratified nonetheless. “How are you?”

“I – I didn’t know you were going to be here. What’s – is something – the – is everything fine?” Alec stammers, internally cursing himself for not being able to speak around Magnus, his eyes inadvertently flicking towards the warlock’s soft lips at every other word. Remembering how it felt to kiss them, the rush of adrenaline, his heart beating like a hammer. Wanting to do it again.

“Here on business, I’m afraid,” Magnus says, his lips twitching as if he can read Alec’s mind. Maybe he can, and wouldn’t that be the worst thing to *ever* happen to him – “Nothing to worry about.
Strengthening the wards as per your parents’ request.”

“They’re still asking you to do things for them?” Alec says in disgust. His parents have been less than kind about Magnus, both behind his back and to his face, ever since the wedding.

“Not asking,” Magnus corrects, raising an eyebrow. “Paying. Apparently they can’t trust anyone but the High Warlock to reinforce the Institute’s protections, even if said High Warlock is an abomination who is currently defiling their firstborn.”

Alec sighs. “Sorry about them. Honestly, I – you shouldn’t have to deal with that.”

“Neither should you,” says Magnus quietly, and Alec’s heart does that thing where it feels too big for his ribcage and threatens to burst out of it, that thing it never did before Magnus, not even with Jace.

He doesn’t know how to communicate this, so he just smiles again. One day he’ll get good at this. “Okay, um. Maybe you should – I mean, I wanted to – you should probably go do your thing. Your magic thing.”

“My magic thing. Right.” Magnus nods, businesslike (though Alec swears his lips twitch almost imperceptibly), but neither of them move. After a beat, Magnus clears his throat. “And, afterwards… are you free?”

Alec pauses, taken off-guard a moment. He imagines Magnus in his room – himself and Magnus, alone in his room. He has to physically stop himself from shivering, and words fail him for a moment. But then he sees Magnus’s eyes, open and smiling and loving, begin to turn guarded as he mistakes Alec’s silence for another rejection. It hits something visceral inside of him – he never wants to see that look again, never wants to be the cause of it again. What to make of that? But for now –

“No,” Alec tries to clarify. “No, I mean, yes. I am, I’m free. For you. I mean, for anyone, but mostly for you. If you wanted to – after. Go to my room. Or something.”

Alec sees Magnus’s eyebrows raise and the quirk of his lips, but somehow he figures – rightly – that Alec might just combust if he makes an innuendo about that. So all he says is, “Certainly. I’d love to.”

Gazing down at Magnus just then, Alec feels a rush of something so powerful it threatens to knock him off his feet. Never in his life has he allowed himself to want before, and every time he has forced any feeling of desire towards repulsion and disgust, lest he make the mistake of wanting what he should never want. He has carefully built walls of stone around his heart – so that nothing can come in, and, more importantly, so that he won’t let anything out. It was lonely, but it was safe. But then came the warlock that braved the gauntlet around his heart and read that twisted broken thing inside his chest like it was a lyric.

He looks into Magnus’s eyes looking at him like that, and all those walls come crumbling down, so easily and quietly that he wonders why he had ever put them there at all. What could possibly be more important that this? Magnus’s eyes, that had looked at a room with far brighter people in it and had settled on Alec as the most important thing in it – Magnus’s eyes, that had thought Alec worthy of looking twice at. Magnus’s eyes are smiling, and it makes him almost hurt. Alec is intimately familiar with pain, and so he knows that this isn’t something an iratze can fix, and, even more startlingly, perhaps this is a kind of pain he doesn’t want to fix.

“Or now,” Alec says casually. “Maybe now? Might be good?”
Magnus pauses. Licks his lips. Alec wants to die a little bit. “Now is good,” Magnus says with a smirk.

Really, it’s surprising that they manage to get inside Alec’s room before Alec pushes Magnus against the wall with one hand and closes the door with the other, kissing him in his messy and unpracticed way. Magnus makes a small noise of surprise but returns the kiss with enthusiasm, hands reaching up gently to the nape of his neck. After a few moments of bliss, though, Alec can’t help but feel a little uncertain, and he pulls back to look Magnus in the eyes. The moment he does, to see the desire burning just below the surface of those darkly-lined eyes, he wants to lean back in again.

“Alexander,” Magnus breathes, and they are so close Alec can feel his warm breath on his face. Magnus looks a little dazed before he manages to get enough of a grip on himself to offer Alec a smirk. Alec rather enjoys seeing this powerful, beautiful, endlessly magical person lose control because of him. He doesn’t understand it, but he hopes he can someday. He hopes they will have a someday. “Well, this is much more fun than meeting with your parents.”

Alec snorts. “So is getting poisoned by demons, so that’s not saying much.”

Magnus raises an eyebrow in acknowledgment of this. “I was starting to worry that the novelty had worn off for you after the first time,” he says, as casual and grandly untouchable as ever, but there’s a certain vulnerability underlying the words.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of doing that,” Alec says honestly. It’s still such a luxury to be able to say exactly what he feels whenever he wants; a part of him understands, implicitly, that it’s not what people normally do – but after a lifetime of hiding behind stony silences and words achingly and desperately left unsaid, he doesn’t much care what people normally do.

Magnus brightens – not in the usual sense of the word. Already glittering with makeup and jewelry and sequins and God-knows-what, at Alec’s words he practically glows, his eyes bright, and Alec has to wonder if magic is somehow involved.

“But – you know, sorry I’m not that good at this,” Alec says, and then feels stupid for saying it. Magnus is lithe, catlike, not only with his body but with his words – always knowing exactly what should be done and said with unerring grace. Next to him, with his awkwardness and extra three inches of height, Alec can feel like a bumbling, sputtering idiot. “I mean, I don’t have – I haven’t done this before a lot, so if I do – if I’m not doing it right, tell me or – by the Angel, I’ll just stop talking now. I’m sorry I’m such a – ”


“Really?” Alec says doubtfully.

“Really?” Alec says doubtfully.

“Really.” Magnus smiles at him, and Alec swears he could weather centuries under the shelter of that gaze alone, of the way that Magnus looks at him. Unlike everybody before him, Magnus does not look at Alec as though he is somehow wrong: too indecipherable or too straightforward, too tall or too slouched, too quiet or too abrasive, too overbearing or too cautious.

Even though he wills himself to shut up, Alec has to try and say something, he has to try and figure this out into words to let Magnus know – especially after how unfairly he had treated Magnus before the wedding. “Listen, Magnus. I really – I mean, I just want you to know, and I’m not good with words, but I wanted to tell you that I – that I love this,” he says. “I mean, I love the way this feels – the way I feel around you. I hated it before, and I’m sorry about the things I said then – ”

“Don’t be,” Magnus says, voice like honey, sweet and smooth. “It’s not your fault. It never was. I
Alec smiles. He’d been self-conscious of his smile before, a little crooked and little awkward – but now he can’t stop himself. “I’m glad you did. I’m so glad that – that I met you.”

The way Magnus smiles back, eyes shining with whatever this thing is that Alec can’t name, this thing more important than the two of them yet nothing more than the two of them, makes him lose it again, desire curling in the pit of his stomach like a flame – and the curve of Magnus’s still-there smile against Alec’s lips means more to him than he could ever say out loud. Magnus, who has lived so many years and loved so many people, is smiling for him like he ignites the stars in the sky, as if he is the sun rather than the moon, and all his light is true.

This is their fifth kiss overall, and very soon it becomes their longest. Alec still has Magnus against the wall, one hand cupping his jaw and the other running slow fingers through his softly gelled hair. As if instinctually, he parts his lips, and he hears a small sigh come from Magnus that just makes him want to kiss him even harder, bring him even closer as if there were still any offending space between them. Magnus responds in kind, his hands grabbing at Alec’s collar to pull their bodies flush against each other so forcefully it almost hurts, and when he bites Alec’s lower lip he feels almost dizzy with desire.

Just as Alec thinks maybe he’s not going to die of a hyper-fast heart, as they settle into a rhythm of hands and lips and tongue, Magnus moves his lips away from Alec’s, dropping a kiss teasingly at the corner of his mouth, and then on the line of his jaw. It is Alec’s turn to become pliant in Magnus’s arms as he manoeuvres Alec, now, against the wall, littering kisses along his jaw and just barely, maddeningly on his neck. Alec catches his dark, kohl-lined eye and the barest hint of a smirk, which he returns, and then tilts his head slightly up, exposing the line of his throat and the long “deflect” rune that marks it. It takes everything Alec has to stay quiet as Magnus presses his wet lips along the rune, but once his teeth make contact with Alec’s skin, he no longer has the ability to contain soft, sharp gasps as Magnus sucks bruises on Alec’s neck with experienced deftness, his hands forming fists in Magnus’s hair. Somehow, Alec can feel this in his whole body, the flame in his chest sparking out and spreading to his lips and everything under his skin, flickering up his spine – his heart hammers so hard he is trembling from its force.

Then, just as Alec thinks he is about to lose his mind completely, brain turned to mush in the wake of Magnus’s deft and definitely magical lips – a heavy and insistent knock the bedroom door jolts them out of their sudden fervour.

Before he has a chance to react other than to glance down at himself in momentary horror – the top button of his shirt somehow undone, his hair more a mess than usual, lips and neck showing certain signs of passion – the knock comes again, harder this time. That familiar, instinctive fear suddenly turns his stomach – the fear of being found out, of being found lesser, that he had thought he was starting to outgrow.

“Alexander Lightwood,” says a voice Alec does not recognize. He glances uncertainly at Magnus, who shrugs and takes a step away from the door, as if physical distance can mask their activities. But then, Alec thinks, what’s the point in hiding anymore?

So, running a hand through his hair in an attempt to flatten it, he opens the door. Facing him are several Clave envoys whom he doesn’t know or particularly care for in this moment.

“Alexander Lightwood?” the one in the centre says again. He notices a few of their gazes flicker to Magnus, and he hates that he doesn’t even know the source of the disdain in their eyes (is it because Magnus is a Downworlder, or the way Magnus dresses, or the way that they, two men, have clearly been kissing – it’s a coin-toss of bigotry and ancient ignorance) – he hates that it’s there at all, that...
someone so powerful and elegant and intelligent could ever be looked at like he is somehow inferior.

“Yeah, that’s me,” Alec says, nonplussed. “What’s going on? Is there a problem?”

The Clave envoy betrays no emotion as he says the next words, the words that make Alec’s heart – moments ago so high from Magnus’s kiss – drop like a stone into his stomach, and beside him he hears Magnus inhale sharply when they are spoken.

“Alexander Lightwood, you are under arrest by the order of the Clave for trespass of the laws collectively known as the Accords.”

It’s convenient for them, in the end, to stay in the New York Institute, rather than continuing the proceedings in Idris. After all, half the Clave is already present because of the wedding. They once again summon the Inquisitor, and Alec is locked in his room like an errant child for the time being. He tells the guards not to allow in any visitors until his preliminary hearing, even though he aches to have Isabelle’s arms around him, hear Jace’s voice, see Magnus again. Some part of him knows what’s going to happen – some part of him knows he has to try and make himself get used to being alone again.

“No, no - listen, I don't care what he told you - he's an idiot and so are you, and I swear on the Angel I'll slice you in half if you don't - Alec!”

"Izzy,” Alec says, looking up from his restless meditation. He hasn't spoken to anyone in four days, and his voice comes out hoarse and rough. His mind is in no better shape. Seeing Isabelle - in all her Isabelle-ness, brow drawn in anger but not quite concealing the ache in her eyes when they pass over him in pity, as he sits hunched over on the side of his bed, staring at the ground - it hurts him more than he realised it would.

“Alec.” Alec has always been a man of few words, but he thinks this marks the first time he has seen Isabelle speechless. “I - Alec…”

"I said I didn't want to see anybody." Alec doesn't mean for it to come off so petulant, so ungracious, so stubborn. He softens his voice and tries to elaborate, "I mean... Izzy, you know I...."

“I don't want to hear it,” she says, trying to come off as cold - but that has always been Alec's specialty. Isabelle, for all her vices and virtues, burns hot - passionate, caring, fiery and feisty, she is a girl forged in fire, all heart and with thinner skin than most realise. It doesn’t make her weak, though – if anything, she is the strong one, the one who survived the flame in which they were tempered like weapons, who burned all the brighter for it, instead of being consumed and spat out into cold ash like her brother. "Alec, you can't do this - you can't close yourself off and let them do this to you. You need to act, you need legal representation, you need to tell them they're wrong. I don't get what's going on in that stupid head of yours –"

She breaks off, biting her lip, her eyes wide in worry that appears almost childlike in the sudden innocence that overtakes her demeanour. She comes over to sit next to him on the bed.

“Izzy…” Alec tries to say, but she knows him too well.

“Alec,” she says, her voice small now. “You have to do something. Right? You’re going to do something.”
His little sister. For all her fierceness, Alec has always enjoyed that he’s nearly a whole foot taller than her. It makes him feel like he could protect her. She started wearing her spiky heels when she was fifteen, but, barefoot, in the early mornings, her head hits his chest when they hug, and fits so comfortably there. Today, side by side, she rests it on his shoulder, and he realizes that if anyone could save her, it was never going to be him. Despite their differences, they’re both too broken in all the same ways, though no one could ever guess that.

He sighs. “What am I supposed to do? What can I do? You saw it yourself. Once the Clave has it out for you…I mean, unless you have something they want, you’re a goner. And I’ve got nothing for them.”

Isabelle makes a frustrated noise, one he knows well: the sound she makes in the rare instance when she knows he’s right. “Why, though?” she says. “I know you didn’t break the Accords, you know you didn’t break the Accords. Why you? What’s their problem?”

She knows the answer; she must. It hurts Alec to say it out loud. “I don’t know exactly, but I do know that our people, they don’t—they don’t like people like me.”

“That’s not – ” Isabelle begins hotly, but Alec cuts her off. He stands up abruptly, and she follows suit. Now facing each other, there is a tension that creeps into the air, undercutting their words.

“You know it’s true. Have you ever heard of an openly gay Shadowhunter? There’s a reason why you haven’t. There’s a reason I’ve been hiding my whole life. Either you do that, or they burn you out of their history.”

There is a beat of silence as she hears this, as she understands finally what it all really means. She has always been open and kind about it ever since she found out about him a few years ago, never pressuring him but gently nudging him toward openness, toward happiness. He’s cute, don’t you think, she would say innocently about some passerby a hundred times, allowing Alec to say nothing in response, to pretend it was just an offhand comment. You need to get out more, find a nice boy, go on a date or something. As if it were so easy, as if his stomach didn’t turn with her words. Then, just a few months ago – Isn’t he cute? she said one day, casually as she always does, and Alec did not miss her eyes widen in shock and her lips part in a grin when he reluctantly nodded.

No – there is no-one in this cold universe as caring, as kind and loving and empathetic as his sister; but there are some things that nobody understands unless they are buried beneath your skin, holed up in your bones, haunting all your dreams and waking hours. No matter how much she loves him, she never really knew how it felt or what it all meant. Even he had almost forgotten it, in the past weeks, every moment he was with Magnus.

As Alec reflects on this, Isabelle stamps her foot in a way that is almost childish, trying to take this sudden frustration with the way things are and their unchangeable nature, and trying to channel it into something tangible. A dark that Alec knows well. “Alec, it’s not fair. It’s not fair that it has to be you, it’s –”

“Yeah, I know,” he says, voice low and slow, but still somehow betraying the churning resentment somewhere in the pit of his stomach. “I know we all wish that I were different. I’m sorry.”

Isabelle looks at him at length, face impassive for many moments as Alec stares back with something like defiance, as if he is daring her to disagree. Finally, her expression crumbles and, at last, tears begin to form in her dark eyes, looking like crystal until they spill, hot and liquid, down her cheeks. “You know that’s not what I meant.”
Instinctively, he goes to her. He does not like to be the reason for her crying; it hasn’t happened since they were children, when all fights were in the spirit of games and all conflicts forgotten in hours. Isabelle isn’t wearing her heels, he notices, and her arms have to reach up to go around him. Her head rests against his chest, and Alec closes his eyes, as he tries to commit to memory the one place where he always fit perfectly.

After this outburst of emotion, they resume talking as normal. They speak for hours. Isabelle keeps giving hopeful suggestions, and Alec says in response what they both know and what they both are thinking. She suggests getting a lawyer, Alec points out that their only hope would be somebody in favour with the Clave; and whoever is in favour with the Clave is not a huge fan of any Lightwood at the moment. Lydia, she proposes. After jilting her at the altar? Alec says dryly. She won’t even answer my fire-messages. Privately, though, he wonders why; it’s not like her at all.

Eventually, he and Isabelle run through a long list of options and come up empty – from bribery to illegal escape and all things between and beyond. Ultimately, it’s an exercise in restless helplessness. At least, it is for Alec. As he hugs Isabelle goodbye, his heart beats a wild hope that she will come up with something, that she will save him and things will return to normal once more. If anyone could save him, if anyone ever has, it would be her.

The first time Alec sees anyone except Isabelle for a week and a half is on the day of the trial. As he is escorted in by Clave envoys flanking him with enough distance to be respectful, but not enough to ease their threat, he catches sight of them from afar – Clary’s fiery hair as conspicuous as anything, and of course he could spot Jace in a room full of thousands. His eye is drawn immediately to the boy, golden and tall, from years of instinct. He scans the room, looking for someone else.

Alec frowns. That can’t be right. He looks again.

His parents are not here.

He figured that they would not visit him as Isabelle had, but this he could never have expected. He understands immediately why – there is enough tarnish on the Lightwood name that they would do well to distance themselves from anyone more – but he never thought that they would care so little. It was the same for Isabelle’s trial, when Maryse and Robert had stayed in Idris, but this time, they were here – at least since the last time Alec was out of his room. And – it’s a horrible thought, but he never thought that they would not come to his trial, even if they had skipped Isabelle’s. Alec knows that even Robert, who dotes on her, knows her to be the problem child; and, of course, she and Maryse have more bad blood than most have with their enemies. But this is Alec: their firstborn, their son, their soldier. It comes as a punch to the gut, the knife that is already lodged in his stomach now twisted in further, up to the hilt. And, of course, Max will be with them, wherever they are.

Other than the few familiar faces, the room is full with fifty or so strangers, older and dressed in garb as dark as the runes on their skin. The Clave is in session. They glance at him as he passes by, and he wants to gaze hardly back, but he is not used to defiance. So he looks down, either in shame or deference – really, he has never known the difference. When he passes his siblings and Clary, he does not look up; out of anyone here, he does not want to look them in the eyes. He has always been terrified of being weak around them, and he almost wishes that they were not here. Determinedly avoiding their imploring gazes that he can feel burning into him, he takes one last look around the room and his stomach drops a tiny bit more. Part of him had been hoping Magnus would come. That he would swoop in, adorned in glitter, with his blue fire, and burn this whole nightmare away, leaving only the two of them amid enchanted ash. How Alec longs for that, for those kohl-lined, cat-like eyes to drown in, letting him part ways with this horrid, ugly world that seems to hate him more
than he ever knew.

In the end, he ends up representing himself. He was going to ask Isabelle to do it, or perhaps Magnus, but given recent events, it seemed like foolishness. Luke’s name had come up multiple times as the most viable option – and Alec knows he would do it in a heartbeat if asked – but given his status as a Downworlder, he too was discarded. The Inquisitor for her part, probably again in the aftermath of Isabelle’s trial, elects to do the prosecuting herself, eliminating middlemen entirely from the proceedings.

He finds himself standing in the witness stand up at the very front of the trial room, shuffling self-consciously as the gaze of the entire Clave is burning into him. Next to him, the Inquisitor gets up from what can only be described as her plush, red throne in order to question him. With the room’s high stone ceilings and stained glass windows, Alec can feel goosebumps rising on his skin from the cold. There is no warmth here, no comfort.

“Do you wish to make an opening statement?” the Inquisitor asks him once the trial is in session.

“I barely know what I’m being charged with,” Alec says wearily. He has never been so good with words, and it has always made him feel frustrated, helpless, stupid. And never more so than today, where every word sticks in his throat, his mouth dry and tongue cottony. “I guess what I want to say – or, what I want to urge you and everyone here to understand is that – our job is the protection of this world. And we have our traditions, and our disputes over them, but they don’t – shouldn’t – define our sworn and sacred duty.”

“Right.” The Inquisitor appraises him, and after a long moment, she says softly, “exactly right, Alexander.”

His heart sinks. This can hardly bode well for him.

“For the benefit of the Clave, your charges, Mr. Lightwood, are as follows: three counts of breaching the laws collectively known as the Accords, leading to endangerment of yourself, the Institute that you were heading, and of Nephilim society as a whole and our relations with Downworlders. Do you understand these charges as they have been read to you?”

“I do,” Alec says, his jaw tight. “But I’ll need further clarification.”

“Naturally.” The Inquisitor pauses to look around the room for a moment. “Let me phrase it this way, then. Were you or were you not involved in the following missions of the New York Institute, and did you or did you not approve them, as acting head of said Institute: the invasion of the New York vampire clan’s headquarters with no provocation; undisclosed dealings with Magnus Bane, High Warlock of Brooklyn, using protected Nephilim artefacts, and further using said warlock’s services for demonic purposes; and the deliberate interference in an alpha dispute of the New York werewolf pack?”

Alec’s mouth is dry when he speaks. He spares a glance at Jace, Isabelle, and Clary, who are all looking aghast. Jace, especially, looks as though someone had just punched him in the gut. “Yes. I was involved, and I did approve each of those missions.”

“So – ” she begins, but Alec cuts her off.

“Sorry, with all due respect, may I continue?” He doesn’t bother to wait for her permission. “I approved the vampire mission because Camille Belcourt and Raphael Santiago had kidnapped a mundane, a breach of the Accords – so it was within our right to – ”
“You need a Clave resolution to do that, regardless of the Night Children’s alleged trespass of the Accords. Were you not made aware of the procedures upheld by the Covenant when you were made acting head of the New York Institute?”

We’ll need a Clave resolution.

“I was,” Alec says, the words carried on a sigh.

“So were you aware of the necessity to inform the Clave of this mission?”

They’ll give us a lecture and be glad we did it.

“I was.”

She smiles. “Precisely. You understand, Alexander, that we cannot allow our young Shadowhunters to run amok with blades and exact vigilante justice on Shadowhunters and Downworlders as they please.” Her eyes glitter and immediately Alec knows what comparison she is going to draw. “We have made that mistake once, Mr. Lightwood, and we won’t easily make it again. Do you understand?”

Hard to argue with that.

Tears threaten to sting his eyes suddenly – it’s not fair. He had gone with them because Jace had asked, because for once he didn’t want to be the stick in the mud, wanted Jace to look at him with approval rather than exasperation, because he was so fucking stupidly in love with the blond boy who sought trouble with fire in his eyes. Against all his instincts and all his training, he had followed Jace. It’s not fair, he wants to scream at them. I tried, they wouldn’t listen and I was so fucking weak when it came to him.

But it’s precisely that weakness that they are trying to stamp out.

“I understand,” he says, voice toneless and face impassive, avoiding Jace’s gaze burning into him at all costs. This he is still capable of, if nothing else. Beating himself into stone, not letting anything show behind the mask. The whole room can stare him down all they like; they won’t see what makes him falter.

“Alec,” Clary cries from the crowd, aghast. “Tell them – !”

“Somebody please escort Miss Morgenstern out of the proceedings,” the Inquisitor interrupts sharply, emphasizing the name that she is trying to brand him with.

Alec watches as Jace jumps up before anyone else can lay a hand on Clary, mutters something to her, and then looks up at Alec, eyes imploring. Alec nods once, imperceptible to anyone else. The two leave, Clary looking back in fury at the Inquisitor. He almost smiles, but though he had given Jace his blessing to leave, it gives Alec an ache, somewhere where his heart should be, to know that he is gone. To know that he would even think to leave Alec alone here in this room full of vultures and wolves.

“Alright then,” the Inquisitor continues as his friends are escorted out, her eyes glittering. “To summarize, Mr. Lightwood, you approved and participated in the attack on Raphael Santiago’s vampire clan under the guise of protecting mundanes, but without following the proper procedure as per the Accords, thus placing into danger the relations between Nephilim and the Night Children.”

Alec stays silent, but it is damning. The Inquisitor sweeps around the room, like a bird of prey, graceful and stately in a deadly sort of way. Meanwhile, Alec sits in his corner, stiff, paralyzed. Once
again he wishes he were anybody else. Someone else would be able to fucking do something.

“Now, before the next incident we were to discuss, I would like to extend my apologies, Mr. Lightwood.”

Alec looks up warily. “For what?”

“The timing of this is rather unfortunate for you. So soon after the dissolution of your marriage, or almost-marriage, to Ms. Lydia Branwell. It must be hard.”

Her voice is dripping with mockery, but no one else seems to hear it. Alec is confused, more that anything.

“With all due respect, what does my association with Lydia Branwell have to do with these charges?” Alec says tightly. At his mention of Lydia, Alec sees a stern-looking woman seated behind the Inquisitor shift, looking angry, and lean forward to whisper something in the Inquisitor’s ear.

The Inquisitor continues as if she has not heard anything. “It is not your association with Lydia Branwell that we are concerned about, Mr. Lightwood, but your rather more close association with one Magnus Bane, something that many here were made witness to on the day of your supposed union to Ms. Branwell.”

Alec stills, his blood running cold. The memory of that day, that moment, is one of the best that he has. But ever since it happened, they’ve been trying to wrench it away from him, tarnish it, transform it from a moment of cherished to gold to the shame that they will force down his throat. “And what about – that – concerns the Clave?”

“Magnus Bane is a warlock, Mr. Lightwood. Certainly you are aware of this,” she says, as if speaking to a child. “At that, he is a very prominent and important Downworlder – ”

“Yes, but Nephilim aren’t prohibited from having – relationships with Downworlders,” Alec interrupts, feeling heat rushing to his face when he says it. “If that’s what I’m on trial for, then I can point you to several other people in this room you can prosecute alongside me.”

There is a stir when he says that, as if he admitted something he should not have. For her part, the Inquisitor only smiles. In her eyes, he sees such naked contempt that it takes him aback for a moment.

“Nobody’s saying that engaging with Downworlders is illegal, Mr. Lightwood. Simply that your – dalliances – with such characters don’t exactly reflect well on your upholding Nephilim values, nor do they distance you from involvement in activities that are against the Covenant.”

He realizes that it isn’t because Magnus is a Downworlder, or at least not entirely. If it were, they wouldn’t be looking at him like that. They wouldn’t be looking at him like he, too, is inferior to them. For the first time, he opened himself up to the world; and now he has been judged and found lacking. It makes him sick to his stomach, it makes him want to tear at himself from the inside out until there is nothing left for them to stare at with scorn. Their gazes, their disgust, burns into him. A million flesh wounds couldn’t compare, would not sting so much as this, would not bring tears to his eyes like this threatens to. He directs his gaze away from any eyes staring at him, and consciously avoids eye contact with Isabelle. He knows how she is looking at him now, the sympathy, his pain turned into hers just as it’s always been with the two of them, and he knows that if he sees that look in her dark eyes that he will break. And he cannot break.

“What is this really about?” Alec says, his voice softer and more vulnerable than he had intended it to
“Exactly what it is about,” the Inquisitor says, but her eyes flash in a certain way, she turns imperceptibly towards the stern woman seated behind her, and Alec knows in his sinking heart it isn’t true. “The Accords are what keep our society strong. We do not take breaches of these laws lightly, Mr. Lightwood.”

Alec swallows. “I didn’t break the laws. I know I didn’t, you know I didn’t, they all know I didn’t. So then what? Why are you doing this?”

“Don’t play the victim, Alexander,” the Inquisitor says with unprecedented sharpness, her voice a deliberately sharpened dagger – so deliberate that it almost rings false. She sweeps around to face the congregation. “The Clave knows your people. We tried forgiveness with your family, but it has become clear that it does not work. The Lightwoods were in part responsible for the greatest massacre of our people of our time – the Lightwoods took the Accords and ripped them to shreds on their blades stained with the blood of our people, with good people, your families and mine. Is it so surprising that their children would do the same?”

Murmurs of assent and anger ripple through the collective, growing, cresting, like a wave that slaps the shore where Alec stands, helpless to stop it. He can defend himself, but he cannot defend the actions of the ones that came before him. Even if he wanted to, he couldn’t.

“That was our parents,” Isabelle says loudly through the mutterings. “That doesn’t have anything to do with Alec! If Alec was following in the footsteps of the Circle, would he really be involved in Downworlder affairs? He’d be trying to kill them. This has nothing to do with our parents or the Circle or any of your bull – ”

“Miss Lightwood, if you can’t keep your mouth shut, you’re going to be escorted out of here.”

“If you’re trying to get back at my parents through me,” Alec says in a low voice, “don’t bother. As you can see, they care so much about the result of my trial that they haven’t even bothered to show up, so. You know. There’s that.”

“Mr. Lightwood, this trial is about nothing except you. Your continuing and unfounded accusations are not casting you in a favourable light.”

Alec sighs. It’s no use. His chest tightens and he feels whatever goodwill he had left for the Clave wither and die, along with whatever muscle it was in his sternum that passed for a heart. It’s over.

The trial is more of the same after that, and it doesn’t last much longer, either. The rest doesn’t bear repeating, and Alec is already wishing he knew how to forget things easily, praying that this choking memory will not last long. He hardens his heart and prays for a thousand things – that he were never born, that he were not born this way, that the were not born with this name, this face, this mantle, this world, this cross to bear. His prayers are not fruitful, and his faith is shaken.

The Clave, he had been told, needed time to deliberate. In a few days’ time, he will be sentenced officially.

There is a strange sort of loneliness to his own name as it rings around his mind, just as his footsteps echo loudly in the empty hall of the Institute after the Clave has adjourned. Lightwood. He has never thought about it this much, the two syllables appended to his first name automatically, the fire-bearing word that he always carried with purpose but never difficulty, not until now. Now it feels
like a brand, something starkly visible that he wears, creating hushed silences and pointed stares wherever he goes. *Not one of us.* An old, proud Shadowhunter name, and they still say that he is not one of them. Both pieces of him are strangling him out of the only life he has known. The family he was born into and the love that he has chosen.

“Alec.”

He turns around to see the Inquisitor calling his name. He sighs, wishing for a friendly face; but they’re all waiting for him upstairs in his room. Behind the Inquisitor is the same stern woman from the trial, whose identity remains a mystery to Alec.

“What more do you want?” he says wearily.

She comes up to him. For once, Alec is immensely grateful for his awkward height, pulling his shoulders up to stand straight, so that he is at least a full head above her and her companion.

“I’ve come to offer you something,” she says.

Alec looks from her to the other woman, nonplussed. “What?”

She raises her eyebrows. “A deal, as it were.”

“Deal?” Alec says, trying to appear collected rather than confused, hating the feeling of being naïve to the complex and corrupt Shadowhunter politics that he has become entangled in. “What deal? I thought you were just trying to get back at my parents, or else exile me for being gay, neither of which you can fix with a deal.”

The Inquisitor smiles, the kind of grin you’d see on a skull, skin pulled away from teeth in a way that shows no happiness.

“Wrong on both counts, I’m afraid. For one, I’m not trying to punish Robert and Maryse,” she says, and looks hard at Alec with an expression so scornful that he has to take a step back. “They’ve received punishment enough with a child like you.”

Alec can’t say anything for a moment, the crushing weight he had grown so familiar with over his lifetime returning to press against his chest – threatening to break his ribcage, collapse his lungs, he has forgotten how to breathe with it there, when he thought it was finally gone for good.

She continues. “They fought for you. In the Uprising. No matter how misguided they were, how terrible their ideals were, they were willing to stake their lives on you. And this is the repayment they get. Not to mention that … *promiscuous* daughter – ”

At this, Alec finds his voice again. “Insult me all you like,” he says quietly. “But if you say anything about my sister again, I’ll give the Clave a real reason to prosecute me.”

“We have a real reason, Alexander,” she says, stern and loud. “Just because you do not view the law like the Clave does, doesn’t mean you haven’t broken it.”

“Then what deal did you have in mind? Why would you even mention Magnus Bane?” Alec challenges, his volume increasing with hers. “More to the point, what does Lydia Branwell have to do with any of this?”

“You keep my daughter’s name out of your mouth.”

This is the first time that the silent, sullen shadow of the Inquisitor speaks. Alec looks at her,
bewildered, and now that he finally properly sees her, he can see the blue eyes of Lydia looking back at him; and through the steel-grey tendrils that frame her face, wisps of honey blonde are visible.

“What – I don’t – what is this about?” Alec sputters, feeling his face turn red under the scrutinious gaze of his once-future mother-in-law. He realizes now that he never met Lydia’s parents – at least, not since he was thirteen years old. What she must think of him now. What they all must think of him. He closes his eyes and sees the day of the wedding through the eyes of a stranger, perhaps an afterthought on the guest list – the Lightwood boy and the Downworlder, how strange, how illicit, how unfair to the poor Branwell girl, glowing and dressed to the nines in gold and white – how dirty, the whole affair, how long was he stringing her along? How long has he been in bed with the glittering warlock with the dangerous eyes? Has he been tainted, turned against tradition? How disgraceful, how wrong. The one of ancient magic and demonic fathers, who knows what that dark, wild being has done to the angel blood in the Lightwood boy, who does not know his place in our world, who does not belong in our world, who used to be one of us?

Piercing through his fevered, fragmented thoughts, the words of the Inquisitor bring him back to sickening reality.

“You broke the rules, Alexander,” she says, “and Ms. Branwell’s heart. Now, at least one of those can be rectified.”

Alec looks at her, his confusion and queasiness slowly transforming into outrage as he understands what she is trying to say to him, what deal she is trying to make. He shakes his head slowly, as if that will make this go away. “You can’t be serious. You can’t possibly – ”

“You have a choice to make.”

“I can’t – I can’t believe that you – wow. Wow. Better one less Shadowhunter than a gay one, right?” Alec says, trying to force all his contempt into the words, the words that his own mind has taunted him with since he was barely a teenager.

She doesn’t even deny it. “You have a choice to make, Alexander,” she says softly, venomously. He hates the way the four syllables sound from her voice, dissonant and harsh, like the name doesn’t belong in her mouth. And he had just started to like the sound of it.

Magnus’s words from the wedding day echo in his mind, but these are an ugly twist on that earnest proposal. Choose to live a lie, and you will be loved by your people. Choose to accept yourself, and you will be weighed in the balance, and you will be found wanting, and you will be their pariah.

But it seems to him now that these are not his people. That thought still terrifies him, and he feels its ache fracturing his bones like exhaustion - but it does something else now, too: it gives him the kind of intangible feeling that muddies his head, that he needs a walk through Brooklyn on a clear autumn midnight to properly understand. He feels, for the first time in his life, like he could maybe one day be free from this.

“I think I’ve made my choice pretty clear,” Alec says, lifting his chin and, inexplicably, thinking of Magnus Bane.

“Very well, then.”

And she turns sharply and walks off, the Branwell woman in tow, leaving Alec alone with his heart hammering a pattern on his ribs that he does not quite recognize.

Numbly, Alec starts walking back to his room, but not two moments later, he hears his name being
called again.

“Alec.”

Alec turns around, wanting nothing more than to never speak to anyone again, but his rough response dies in his throat when he sees who it is. “Oh. Hi, Lydia.”

Usually perfectly put together, Lydia has never looked quite so off in the short time that he has known her. Her long blonde hair is hanging down around her face unstyled, her blue eyes open and pleading. “Alec, I’m so sorry.”

“For what?” Alec says. “This isn’t your fault.”

“What?” She looks completely thrown off. “What do you mean?”

Alec sighs, impatient despite himself and her good intentions. “What’s going on?”

“My parents,” she says, nonplussed. “They’re the ones behind all this. They’re in bed with both the Consul and the Inquisitor, and they thought – it’s my fault, I think. They’re under this impression that the Branwell name’s been dishonoured, and that I, you know, had some kind of feelings for you. And I – I can’t do anything about it, Alec. I’ve tried so hard, but they won’t stop. It’s not even about me, it’s about their own egos, at this point. They want to see you punished for ‘dishonouring’ them.”

Suddenly everything clicks into place, and Alec’s stomach drops like a ton of bricks.

“Anyway,” she says, her voice brisk but eyes full of compassion, “I have to go find them. I’ll do what I can, Alec, I – I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah,” he says heavily. “Me too.”

*A*

Alec closes his eyes and begins massaging his temples. He had come up to his room to hopefully relax, but of course Clary and Jace were lying in wait to accost him as soon as he had escaped up here. He leans back into his desk chair, pinching the bridge of his nose. This is the first time he has spoken to either in a week, and he had not remembered how vexing he now finds Jace. Clary, who he had been warming up to, he can barely look at today.

Alec sighs as Jace finishes saying something. “For the last time, Jace, they’re not focusing on the – the – on the Mag – on the wedding thing. That’s obviously and clearly the reason behind it, that and the Branwells’ grudge against me because of it, but you saw what they’re doing. They’re trying to play up the unsanctioned missions I approved last month as acting head of the Institute. Claiming we broke the Accords. That’s enough to do anyone in.”

“Oh,” Jace says, and they witness a rare moment where Jace is wrong-footed. “Right. The ones with the four of us.”

*Four of us.* The very phrase makes his heart clench with anger, and simply looking at Clary with her small, concerned face makes him want to punch something. *Their fault, it’s all their fault.*

“Yes,” Alec says in clipped tones, struggling to keep his voice neutral. “The ones with the *four* of us.”

“So,” says Jace, a strain of desperation that Alec has almost never heard in his normally cocky tones. “Okay, so we tell them it wasn’t your fault. That we went rogue. Against your orders, and you tried
to stop us. That’ll fix it, Alec, you can’t have this happen and just shut me out – ”

“That would work, Jace,” Alec says with exaggerated patience, as if he was speaking to a six year old. Jace has always hated that, even back when they had lessons together and Jace had to ask Alec for help. He can’t betray how angry he is, he doesn’t want to give them the satisfaction, but he needs to channel this somewhere before he implodes. “If I didn’t actively approve them. If you had gone behind my back, or if I had said no, that might be another story. Or it might not. We don’t know.”

“Alec,” Jace says bracingly. “We can’t let you take all the heat, when it wasn’t your fault. Surely there’s – ”

“Oh, Jace, that’s so noble of you,” Alec interrupts through gritted teeth. He closes his eyes, but Jace’s blue-brown eyes burn into his brain, those eyes that he loved for so long, maybe still does, those eyes that he can’t stand the sight of right now, those eyes that he knows he will miss more than anything. It twists something inside of him, like a knife to the heart. “But there’s nothing you can do. There’s a chain of command, and that was my place in it, and I shirked that responsibility in favour of – of whatever we were trying to do. We’re Shadowhunters. We know that, if others don’t.”

“Hey, come on, Alec,” Jace implores, voice low and placating as he follows Alec’s bitter gaze to Clary, whose eyes are averted as if she is seeing something shameful, something she can’t bring herself to look at. “It’s not her – ”

“What?” Alec says with a laugh he doesn’t recognize, angry and twisted and bitter. “Not her fault? You’re sitting here trying to convince me it’s not my fault, but apparently it’s not hers either, so where does that leave us? Is it yours? Jace?”

“Jace – ”

From the corner of his eye, he can see a flicker of fire-red movement, as Clary looks up tentatively at their mention of her. He almost feels sorry for her; this isn’t about her, not really. But the dam is broken; his carefully built walls are crumbling with the weight that has suddenly been thrust on him, after he had thought he was finally free of it.

Alec stands up abruptly from the chair and stalks over to Jace.

“No. Jace, no. Not this time. You can’t just say Alec in that way and expect me to agree, and expect me to follow you wherever you take me. I have, all this time, that’s all I’ve done. Parabatai,” he spits the word out like a poison. “For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Of course, that only ever went one way with us, didn’t it? My fault, I guess.”

It gives him twisted pleasure to see the hurt in Jace’s eyes, even as it hurts him the same way. They are bonded, after all. For now. Knowing that soon he won’t be able to feel Jace’s pain, or his pleasure, his hurts and scrapes and his breathing, beating heart – he wants to cherish even the pain, almost as much as he wants to throw it back in Jace’s face.

“Alec – I did. I do. Alec, my parabatai – please. I love you.” Jace’s eyes implore him, and he remembers how his heart ached the last time he heard those words from Jace. It doesn’t matter now. “Please don’t doubt that. I know this situation is – isn’t anything we thought would happen, but at the time we were trying to do the right – ”

“The right thing,” Alec finishes with a bitter twist to his mouth that might be a smile. “The right thing. Okay.”

“Alec,” Clary speaks up for the first time, her voice small but strong. “What he means is – ”
Something about that breaks something in him. As if she can tell him what Jace means. As if she knows him better than Alec does. He turns on his heel to face her abruptly, and she takes a step back uncertainly when he does.

“I don’t care. Alright? Clary? I don’t give a shit what he means. Because from where the Clave is standing, we went rogue, and I allowed it to happen. They don’t know that I tried to stop you. They don’t know that I tried to tell you guys what was right. So, no, I can’t really bring myself to care about your sanctimonious, holier-than-thou, morally-principled bullshit. Because all I know is that you wouldn’t listen. And I took all the heat for it. I took the fall for you and Jace, because that was my job. My family blamed me. I blamed myself enough to almost marry a woman just to fix what we had broken by doing it. And now the fucking Clave is blaming me, and I could lose everything – I could lose – everything – just when I thought I could finally maybe get a chance to breathe. But, great. You were doing the right thing. I’m glad your conscience is clear.”

He doesn’t quite realize how loud his voice has become until he breaks off, breathing hard and hoarse, and sees the genuine fear on Clary’s face. The next thing he registers is a great deal of pain in his right hand, which he has punched clean through the wall, a few inches away from where her head leans against it.

There is a long, suffocating silence. Jace is looking at him like he has never seen him before. Maybe he hasn’t. Maybe they never knew each other at all.

“Shit,” he mutters, gingerly excising his bloody hand from the wall, avoiding Clary’s eyes. He doesn’t like the look in them, doesn’t like to be the cause of that fright. He should be better than that. This isn’t her fault, Jace is right. “I’m sorry. Clary. That wasn’t – that wasn’t warranted. I’m sorry. I wasn’t going to – I would never actually –”

“It’s okay, Alec,” she says gently, her voice soft around the edges, and he doesn’t deserve that kindness, not from her.

“Sorry,” he mutters again, ducking his head away from her so she can’t see the abject misery that clouds his face. “I’m sorry.”

Shamefaced and looking down, Alec moves to go sit back down in his corner, but Jace stops him in his tracks with a hand clasped to his shoulder. Something compels Alec to look into Jace’s earnest eyes. “Hey, brother,” he says, voice low and bordering on gentle – as gentle as Jace has ever been. “We can fix this. I know we can. We’ll talk to them, we’ll testify.”

You’re not my brother. The ugly thought rears its head before Alec can stop it. Disgusted with himself, he brushes Jace off.

“Don’t bother. You’ll only make it worse. Anyway, the Law is hard, but it’s the Law,” he says tonelessly, his expression carefully blank, so empty that Jace can’t even read it. Anyway, he and Jace have never been the best at knowing the other; Jace isn’t like Isabelle, who knows what Alec is going to say two minutes before he even thinks to say it. He is closer to Jace than anyone in the world, allied by old magic, connected by the clash of blades and intertwined by the sinews of muscle and beating heart – but their minds have always stayed stubbornly in different places. Alec would not have had it any other way, would not have had Jace in any other way but the reckless, headstrong, sarcastic, endlessly brave and broken way that he is. But today he can see the frustration of their perpetual disconnect in Jace’s eyes.

“Alec,” Jace says. He sounds startled, desperate all of a sudden. “You don’t – you know you don’t deserve this? Right?”
“Look, Jace. I did what I thought I should have. I did my best,” Alec says wearily. “You were right. It’s not good enough, it never has been. I should have – I should have married her, I should have gone through with it, I should have – I should have –”

Alec breaks off, wincing as pain throbs through his bleeding hand. His halting, bitter words ring in the choking silence that follows. Clary bites her lip, and Alec knows she wants to say something, something brave and kind and good. But he has scared her silent. He doesn’t know how much more he can hate himself before something has to give.

“Hey,” Jace finally says quietly. “Let me do an iratze on that.”

“I can do it myself, I’m better at –” Alec begins automatically, reaching for the stele in his pocket. Belatedly, he realizes that it has been confiscated. Feeling stupid, he lets his hand fall back down next to him. Jace pulls his own out and reaches toward Alec, but he withdraws sharply, not knowing why, not knowing why it has become like this between them and wishing desperate that things would be like they were before.

Alec sighs. “Look. Both of you. I appreciate it, but it’s – it’s fine. I can’t blame you guys. This isn’t what should be happening – like I said, this is just their front so they can guarantee getting me convicted and exiled. What they really hate is the fact that I’m – well –” He inhales heavily. This will mark the first time he says the two words he has been running from his whole life. So much for that. “That I’m gay. Nothing to do with the two of you. So now that you have that off your chest, you’re free to go.”

He gestures towards the door. In turning towards it, his heart catches in his throat. Magnus Bane, clad all in black, stands in the doorframe, leaning against it gracefully with his arms crossed against his chest.

“Magnus,” he says, unable to form any other words.

“Alec,” Magnus replies in kind, his tone soft and otherwise unreadable. “Hi.”

Alec wonders how much he has heard. I should have married her. By the look on his face, it must have been everything.

Alec wants nothing more than to hold him, to bury his face in the crook between his neck and shoulder and cry until he burns all of this out – this anger, this shame, this bitter despair. But he stays, standing several feet away from him, like they are cordial strangers. He starts to say hello, or something, but the words die in his throat.

Magnus’s gaze is focused on Alec’s injured hand, his eyes flicking towards the ugly hole in the wall that it created. As if unconsciously, he reaches out for it, wordlessly. Alec’s eyes go from Magnus to Jace, then to Magnus again. Jace still stands with a stele outstretched in his hand to apply an iratze to Alec’s injury; Magnus’s hand is proffered for the same reason. Alec holds Jace’s gaze long enough for him to see the imperceptible choice that Alec makes when he steps forward and holds his hand out to Magnus. He looks at Magnus for half a moment and sees compassion brimming in his eyes, but it does not feel soothing, it feels like a quiet kind of poison seeping into him like corrosion, so he looks away quickly, focusing his eyes on the ground, but it still doesn’t stop. Magnus’s long fingers are soft but firm around his wrist. He waves the fingers of his other hand gently, a blue glow softly surrounding their entwined hands.

He barely notices it when the other two silently leave the room.

Upon closer inspection, Magnus’s clothes are not as sombre as Alec had originally thought. Though
black, the leather jacket he wears is fitted, stylish and imbued with gold spikes on the shoulders, and the black shirt has a scandalously plunging neckline, a couple of necklaces adorning the bared skin and at least fifteen rings across his fingers. There is a hint of midnight blue and glitter streaked in his hair, visible only when it catches the light. His face is bare save for the standard smudged kohl around his eyes. Still, for Magnus, it is an unusually grave get-up.

Alec drinks in these details like a man who has been dying of thirst; he loves to see Magnus’s clothes, his makeup, his jewelry. He doesn’t really understand why – that has always been more Isabelle’s thing than Alec’s – but something about it is so fundamentally attractive to him that it almost hurts. Capability has always attracted him, so he figures it must be Magnus’s casual expertise in fashion, or perhaps it’s simply the confidence in self-expression, that thing Alec has never been able to have.

“Hi,” Alec is finally able to say, after his hand has been healed. Magnus lets go of his hand, and Alec feels it tingling even as they are no longer touching, little bolts of lightning shooting up his arm and coursing through his body.

“I’m sorry I didn’t come to the trial,” Magnus says softly. “I thought it would be best for you if I stayed away. But I also didn’t want you to get the wrong idea.”

“Is that why you’re dressed like that, too?” Alec asks bluntly.

Magnus looks down at himself, the closest to self-conscious that Alec has ever seen the warlock. He hates being the reason for that; it makes him feel like poison, like a disease. “Well,” Magnus says, considering. “I did make a conscious effort to be more…appropriate. Than usual. Which isn’t saying much, really, but whatever could help, you know.”

It breaks Alec’s heart. It should never be like this. It isn’t fair that it has to be like this. “Why?” Alec blurts out, tripping over the words that stream out of his mouth like a child. It’s hard saying what he feels when he has trained himself never to do that very thing. Somehow it always comes out with Magnus. “Why does – why are they doing it, Magnus? Why do they hate you, hate me, hate us? So much? What did I do? What did I do so wrong? What – I don’t – ?”

“Oh, Alexander.” Magnus steps close to him, so that they are mere inches apart, his voice heavy with the burden of Alec’s entrusted heart and all its sorrows, and all the sorrows of all the ages that he has faced and felt the same. “You did nothing. You’re perfect. Don’t ever let them tell you that you aren’t.”

“How do you know?” Alec challenges, his voice quiet, shattered.

Magnus sighs. “I’ve lived a long time, Alec. History and time eventually settle every score, and it will settle this one, and it will prove one day that the only ones who are wrong are them. Not us. Not you. You, Alec, are whole, and good, and perfect. Until that day comes, you’ll have to take my word for it.”

As if by impulse, Magnus leans in and bridges the small space between them with a gentle, chaste kiss. His lips, and his words, fill Alec with a warmth he does not recognize, and he wants the feeling back, the Magnus feeling that makes his troubles and fears evaporate. He just wants to feel like he is not broken for once, for just this once.

He grabs Magnus by the lapels and pushes him against the wall, rough and tender in equal measure, as he had done the last time, hoping they can pick up where they left off. He runs a hand in Magnus’s hair, cups his jaw with the other, kissing him fiercely. Magnus responds enthusiastically, and Alec’s kisses become messier, rougher, more desperate as their tongues and teeth bump up
against each other, as lips are bitten and Alec’s hands both move to Magnus’s face, trying to press
him closer than space or physics will allow. He’s trying to get that feeling back, the weightlessness
and artless happiness that came, that swoop in his stomach, but it just feels wrong, he just feels
hollow instead of airy, he feels blackened tar clogging his veins instead of golden beating ichor. It
doesn’t feel right, it’s supposed to feel right –

“Please,” Alec mutters between kisses, desperately, “please…please tell me I did the right thing.
Please tell me you were the right choice, Magnus – please, I need you to tell me – please – ”


At this, Alec pulls back. Magnus’s eyes flutter open, and Alec’s stomach drops inexplicably, his
blood running cold, congealing and solidifying in his arteries. He knew, of course, that Magnus’s
brown eyes were a glamour; he has seen the cat eyes from a distance before. But at this moment they
are separated by a breath, and the vertical slit-like pupils and the green-gold nebulae that surround
them seem strange, uncanny. They are frightening. His breath catches as he thinks about the ancient
darkness that created them, that casts shadows in the warlock’s immortal blood, that has been there
for centuries unseen by Alec, centuries of things that are unnameable to him. He remembers his
mother’s words in this moment and feels sick to his stomach. This is unknown, uncharted territory
for him, and he is losing everything he knows and loves because of it. How could this be the right
choice?

When he blinks, Magnus’s eyes have changed back to normal – to hidden. Where a moment ago,
they were wide open and readily vulnerable, brimming with passion, they are now completely
guarded, and there is a muscle jumping in Magnus’s jaw. It is abundantly clear that Magnus has
ascertained the reason behind Alec’s hesitation. I’m sorry, he wants to say, but doesn’t know how to
say it. I didn’t mean it, I love everything about you, I’m afraid, I’m just so afraid and I need help.
The words will come stuttering out once again, and once again Magnus will smile and understand,
but that’s not fair to him. And just after Magnus had reassured him that there was nothing wrong
with him, Alec does the exact opposite. No matter which way his heart beats, he can’t seem to stop
hurting Magnus. He doesn’t know, it seems, how to love or be loved. He doesn’t know anything
except how to inflict pain and how to hide it. The Lightwoods’ broken boy, the Clave’s toy soldier.
They mangled and twisted him beyond repair, and now they’ve abandoned him because they finally
have realized he is no good to them. That they cannot fix him. And now Magnus is the unjust
casualty.

“I’m sorry,” he ends up mumbling.

“Don’t worry about it,” Magnus says, but Alec can hear the guardedness laced in his voice, the walls
that have been expertly crafted over the years re-erected. Perhaps they are more similar than Alec had
first thought.

“I really am. But I just – I needed to know that – ”

“Alec,” Magnus says patiently. “I need you to understand something. You made a choice, but you
didn’t choose me.”

“What?” Alec feels his heart drop like a stone at Magnus’s words. “What – what do you mean, do
you not know what I – ”

“You chose yourself, sayang, and your own happiness,” Magnus says softly, his mouth turning up in
a smile that is barely there, that doesn’t hit those sad eyes of his. The foreign word is soft and
unutterably old on his lips, and so beautiful that Alec forgets to ask what it means. “And I’ll be a part
of that as long as you want me to be. But your choice was you.”
“That makes me sound selfish.”

“On the contrary.” Magnus strokes his cheek lightly with his thumb, as if wiping away tears that have not been shed. “It’s the most unspeakably brave thing you could have done.”

The corner of Alec’s mouth turns upward into a half-smile. “You’re a lot wiser than you look, you know. You’re pretty sprightly for four hundred.”

Magnus smiles, and the weird undercurrent of tension between them dissolves instantly. “The secret’s in the skincare regimen.”

Smiles still lingering on their lips like sugar, Alec leans in to kiss Magnus again, this time sweet and slow, hands on his waist, with no expectation or need other than to be close to him. Thank you, he breathes when their lips brush against each other, and he hopes that Magnus has heard it.

After a few more moments, they separate again, Magnus pulling away to start pacing around the room. “I did come here for an actual reason,” Magnus says, sounding slightly dazed. “But you, darling, are ever so distracting.”

“Sorry,” Alec says a little sheepishly. “In my defense, so are you.”

Magnus raises an eyebrow and shrugs in acknowledgement. “So I’ve been told. Anyway, I wanted to tell you that I went to see the Consul personally to put an end to all of this. I have enough clout even with the Clave to secure a meeting with her, but – I’m sorry, Alec. It was no use. She said her hands were tied, whatever that means.”

“Oh,” Alec says, deflating. “Okay. I would have figured as much. Thank you for trying, though.”

“I could,” Magnus considers, a spark in his eye that is part flippant, part flame, “turn them all into toads or what-have-you. I mean, I am the High Warlock and all.”

“Yeah, and start a war between the Downworld and the Clave that’d probably destroy the Shadow World,” Alec scoffs. “I’d love to see that, but I don’t think it’s worth it.”

Magnus smirks, but the fire in his eyes becomes more pronounced. “Nephilim will war over anything that questions them. I’ve fought in their wars for them, time and time again, and it means nothing to them. I could kill them all with a snap of my fingers, but they won’t ever acknowledge that as power, only as danger. Sometimes I think the Shadow World could use a change in status quo.”

Alec is quiet for a moment. Everything he thought he knew keeps crumbling around him. The natural-born right for Shadowhunters to rule over their world was not something he had ever thought was questionable. “Maybe one day,” he says eventually, uncertainly. “But not over me.”

Magnus laughs, but there is a bitterness tinged to all of his words. “If you say so, my dear.”

“Come on,” Alec says, reaching over and grabbing his arm to pull him close again, unable to keep his hands off of him for too long. Alec pulls them both over to his bed, where Magnus sits down next to him. “Come here. Let’s just – can we just forget about this shitty world for a few more minutes? Just – come here.”

“You’re being very forward, Alexander,” Magnus says, an eyebrow raised, voice low in his throat.

Alec laughs, but colour creeps into his cheeks at the insinuation and their position on his bed. He is unable to draw his eyes away from the strip of exposed skin of Magnus’ chest, by the virtue of the low-neck shirt. “I guess I don’t have anything left to lose.”
“Fair enough,” Magnus manages to say before Alec pulls him into another kiss. The heady rush of blood that comes with it is more welcome than anything. Alec has never been drunk, but he figures this is what it must feel like, and if it is, it’s little wonder people begin to crave it, how their lives begin to revolve around this one thing, this one, burning need, how he wishes he could be swallowed whole by this...

“Alec. Alec. ALEXANDER GIDEON LIGHTWOOD.”

“For the love of – ” Alec pulls away from Magnus in frustration at these constant interruptions, but the rest of the angry words die in his mouth when he sees his mother in the doorway, having slammed open the door a few moments ago. “Oh. It’s you,” he says, his voice suddenly weak. Maryse is looking at the two of them as if she is trying to choke down vomit.

“Magnus,” Maryse says through gritted teeth, “get out.”

“No, Magnus,” Alec says, holding his mother’s gaze fast and hard. “If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather you didn’t do that.”

“Alec, for once in your life, don’t be so stupid. I need to speak with you.”

“I don’t see why you can’t do that with Magnus here,” Alec challenges. “This is my room, and, anyway, you can’t just dismiss him like that, like he’s your servant or your child.”

Maryse sets her jaw. “I don’t exactly have a good track record with my children listening to me, anyway.”

A disbelieving laughs forces itself out of Alec. “Really? Mother, I did everything – everything – you both asked of me from the day I was born up until about a month ago. I don’t know why nobody can see that. I’ve been loyal. I’ve been more loyal to the covenant than you ever have, and I’ve been the most obedient son you could have asked for. And you don’t even show up to my trial, let alone do anything to help me. You just wrote me off so that my sentencing wouldn’t damage your political clout any further.”

“That’s not true, Alec,” Maryse says, her countenance softening a fraction. “If there was anything that we could do, we would have done it. Since we couldn’t, what’s the use of damaging everything further than you already have?”

“It’s not – ” Alec starts, but to his mortification, his voice threatens to break. The rest of the sentence he says in a voice barely above a whisper, his pitch raising at the end as if it were a question. “It’s not my fault.”

“No,” Maryse agrees, and her eyes are trained on Magnus, standing a few paces behind Alec. “Not entirely.”

“Maryse.” Magnus inclines his head a fraction, his voice cordial and colder than ice.

She doesn’t acknowledge the greeting and turns back to Alec. “But if you could do anything, anything to salvage our family name, you should do it. And I’ve just been told of the very generous deal that Imogen offered, that you just turned down out of hand – ”

“Mom, I can’t do it,” he says pleadingly, and he tries to force the sound of unshed tears out of his voice. He knows Magnus is listening and doesn’t want him to hear him like this. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, nobody is more sorry than me. I’ve done everything I can do for this family, everything you’ve asked of me, but there’s just this one thing that I can’t do. I can’t.”
“Can’t or won’t?” she says sternly. “Alec, this isn’t like you. I know you, better than anyone. You always were the brightest of your siblings, and I know you should be able to come to the right conclusions. To make the right choice – and yet, here you are, refusing your only chance at coming out of this, holed up repulsively in your room with this warlock again. You know this isn’t appropriate, you know that. He’s a Downworlder, he’s a man – you know better. All of this – Alec, sacrificing all of this? For him?”

At the last two words, Maryse jerks her head in Magnus’s direction, as though pointing out a rabid dog, a leper, or something worse. The look she gives Magnus is abhorrent, like he is dirty, somehow, like he is corrupt.

“Okay – ” Magnus begins, starting forward to stand next to Alec where he faces his mother, but Maryse doesn’t let him continue.

“Spare me your excuses, Magnus,” she spits, finally addressing him directly. “He’s a child. He doesn’t know what he’s doing, he doesn’t know what you’re doing. Don’t tell me that you love him, don’t tell me that you’re not going to play your dirty little games with him for a few months, then get tired of him and throw him aside. I know your kind, Magnus Bane, and I know you – ”

“No, you don’t, Lightwood,” Magnus says, lifting a hand to shut her up, his fingers just barely glowing blue. His demeanour is calm, but his tone is frigid. As he speaks, his eyes slowly morph from brown to green-gold again. It makes Alec’s hair stand on end to hear his name spat like an insult from Magnus’s mouth. “I know you, Maryse. A warlock’s memory is long, and it was not so long ago, was it, that you were slaughtering my kind in cold blood. My kind and yours. Do you remember the Whitelaws? I was there, Maryse, and I stood with them when there was no one else. The last stand of the institute that you Lightwoods have now usurped, after murdering them – remember? You murdered them in cold blood, good people, Shadowhunters – not even Downworlders. Them and so many others. And you just want us all to forget, don’t you? For such an ancient people, the memory of Nephilim seems short, but mine is not. Rather than keeping him from me, if you loved your son at all, you would keep him well away from yourself and your own poisonous ideals.”

Maryse’s mouth is open and moving, but it isn’t forming any words.

“And,” Magnus continues, “Gideon? Really?”

Magnus gives Alec a wink with his cat’s eyes – and now that Alec is less unsettled, he finds them terribly attractive – and stalks out of the room, calling over his shoulder, “I’ll catch you later, Alexander.”

The next time Alec sees Magnus is when the Clave convenes again to announce their formal ruling and sentencing on his trial. Once again, like a repeat of the kind of horrible nightmare that keeps your consciousness in its talons long after you wake from it, he finds himself seated by the Inquisitor’s chair in front of the grave, black-clad assembly. Isabelle sits in the first row, front and centre, her face hard and stone-like. In the very back, clothed in the shadows of the stone church hall is Magnus, watching intently, an unwelcome guest into their customs and their cruelty. Jace and Clary are missing. They all know what’s coming, and Alec had taken Clary aside to convince both of them not to attend, and he had told Clary to watch out for Jace while it happened. It’s going to be excruciating for him, he had told her grimly, not mentioning that it would be the same for himself, not looking her in her wide, earnest eyes. It’d be better if we were apart. Thank God she listened, for once.

“Order,” the Inquisitor commands, and the already-quiet room is hushed completely, unnervingly. It
is dark outside, the stained glass windows of the hall bringing nothing but flat shadows into the room, lit by witchlight. It is colder than it was on the last day. “After these few days of deliberation, the Clave has reached its verdict on this case.”

Alec prays, one last time, for a miracle. He has been the dutiful son of these half-angels, and he hopes that his faith might be finally rewarded, that his service to heaven be recognized in some act of holy intervention. But, more and more, Jace’s harsh words over the years and his faithlessness seem to ring true to him. Heaven is empty, their angels fallen into the dust of the earth, and here, they, their children, have become corrupt shadows of divine power.

“The Clave has reached the agreement that Alexander Lightwood is not fit to bear the name of Nephilim nor to wear the marks of the Angel on his body. To that end, today his runes and magical protections will be permanently stripped, and he will be exiled from Nephilim society. Mr. Lightwood, do you understand your sentence as it has been read to you?”

He hears a sharp gasp. It must be Isabelle. Alec, for his part, is numb. He feels nothing, so acutely that it is a tangible emptiness that is threatening to swallow him from the inside out, to leave a void and shadow where once was the son, now cast as wayward, prodigal but never to return.

With great difficulty, Alec swallows and says, “I understand.”

“Very well. The ceremony will commence immediately.”

In something of a daze, Alec dutifully complies as they instruct him to remove his jacket, his shirt. A few moments ago he was feeling cold even with them on, but right now he doesn’t feel anything. He doesn’t see anything but blurs, as if cold rain were flecked on his eyes and distorting everything, he doesn’t hear anything but faint voices and a ringing noise that does not stop. Someone takes his hands and cuffs them behind him; not to prevent him from running, but to prevent him from lashing out in hysteria during the proceedings. Apparently the process has driven weaker minds to temporary madness.

Through the numbness, her voice comes. “Please kneel.”

Alec has had dreams of this. Nightmares, woken from in a cold sweat and a shout of terror. But he always woke up – alone in his bedroom, terrified, no-one or nothing to comfort him, but it had never been real before. In his dreams, his parents were there. Even his worst nightmare had thought that they would not write him off so quickly, that they would not want to distance themselves from him before he was even gone. In his dreams, it was always because of Jace, Jace who would watch with satisfaction and eyes full of hate. There was no way his subconscious could conjure up the idea of Magnus, so unexplainable and unprecedented. The dark-haired warlock bathed half in shadow watches from the back of the room, eyes glowing yellow and lined with dark kohl, and in them there is a storm. Once again, he cannot make himself look at Isabelle, though he can hear her try to contain her tears. That was always in the dreams; that was always the worst part. Today, there is no waking up. He won’t sleep in that bedroom ever again. He no longer has a place in this world, or in any world.

“I would prefer to stand,” Alec says, in a voice like stone.

Nobody forces him down; he almost wishes they would so he could resist and show them what they would be losing, now that he has nothing left to lose – now that compliance has no reward. It burns to know that every rule he has followed and everything he has done for the Clave doesn’t mean a thing to them. Every sacrifice he has made has been cast aside as worthless. Compliance has been everything he has known, and it is at once terrifying and freeing to let it go.
Just then, he hears something he did not think he would ever hear—Isabelle, stifling a tearful laugh. His eyes are closed, but he opens them to see her smile one last time. In doing so, he notices the reason behind it; the rather short Shadowhunter carrying out his sentence is having some difficulty reaching Alec’s first rune, the “deflect” rune that lines his neck, on account of his towering height.

He catches Isabelle’s eye briefly and smirks for her benefit, even though everything inside him feels dead and cold. “Do you need a hand or something?” he deadpans, looking down at the woman.

She glowers at him. “This would have been easier if you’d have just kneeled.”

Alec raises his eyebrows. “Poor you,” he says, injecting every ounce of sarcasm left in his body in those two syllables. There are a few titters among the Clave members, and one he is sure came from Magnus in the far back. He understands better now why Jace says things the way he does—the reaction makes Alec feel just a little bit better in the face of this sick situation. Now that the power dynamics of the gesture have changed, he takes a little pity on his executioner and complies with her request to kneel. It’s better to do it now than fall to his knees in pain later on; the last thing he wants to do is appear weak.

He closes his eyes. The first thing he feels is the tip of the stele hitting skin; it is so commonplace, something he has felt a thousand times before, so much so that it almost comforting for a moment. Then, it starts. He has read about how much it hurts, but he had not truly understood it—he has been wounded, cautious as he is in battle, and he thought he knew what pain was. But this is something else. It feels something like the stele is slicing through his skin and burning it at the same time, except it burns deeper than skin, through muscle and sinew and straight through to inside his bones; and at the same time, it doesn’t hurt only where the rune is being removed, no, the same agony wracks itself through his entire body a thousand times a second. A thousand scorching swords in his skin, pulling from him something that is deeper than bone marrow, something from his soul; and it is with no surgical precision; they don’t care that he gets flayed and scarred in the process. He bites on his tongue so hard that his mouth floods with the iron taste of blood, his jaw clenched so tightly that veins are popping in his neck and forehead, but he will not cry out. He will not give them the satisfaction of his screams, they will not feed on his torment like the vampires they are.

Then there is a brief respite; the first rune is gone. Alec does a mental count. Seventeen permanent runes cover his body. Sixteen, now. He doesn’t know if he’ll be able to stand it, but, in any case, he must. Even after one, his muscles are stiff, and a sheen of sweat covers his body, plastering his hair to his forehead. When the stele touches his skin again, he can feel his vision going black and fuzzy around the edges; he feel as if his jaw will shatter from the force of the pressure he is exerting to not cry out in anguished sobs.

And so it goes: slow, excruciating. Still, he will not let himself go; he maintains composure. The thought of it makes him smile, perhaps in hysteria, a bloody smile from where his tongue and teeth are coated in blood from where had nearly bitten his tongue off. The one thing that they did not teach him, that he painstakingly taught himself: how to keep himself in careful, suffocating control. And so he is, for the last time, for his own benefit rather than theirs for once.

So it goes, Alec soaked in sweat, his mouth more blood than saliva, his muscles stiff and unable to move, his consciousness fading in and out, his body and mind in the throes of abject agony.

Until there is one left.

His hand tries to go to it unconsciously, on his hipbone, as if to protect it from the other Shadowhunter’s stele. But they are tied behind him, and he is helpless.

Parabatai.
“Open your mouth, Mr. Lightwood,” the woman says, proffering a mouth guard. Of course. She knows – they all know – that this one hurts the most. They all know that he, or the other, may not even survive this one. And if he does, will he have wanted to? Amidst all the customs in a culture of warriors, Alec in this moment does not think there is one crueler than this, the tradition of alliance, this bond of soldiers, of friends, of brothers.

Alec tries to speak, then spits out a glob of blood onto the floor.

“You’re punishing me,” he says, voice dry and cracked, sounding like he is on the brink of death, “but, please – this is going to hurt him just as much. It’s not fair to – to – ”

The name sticks in his throat. *Jace. Jonathan Christopher Wayland.*

The other Shadowhunter takes this moment to force the mouth guard into Alec’s mouth.

*Jace.* How he had hated that boy when he first laid eyes on him, at only ten years old, this usurper of his title of best, bravest, strongest Lightwood. How Isabelle liked fighting alongside him better, how Max looked up to him more, how Maryse and Robert would compare the two of them and Alec would always come up short in the balance. Then they became friends, closer than friends, and there was no one that Alec would rather fight beside, study beside, spend all of his spare time with. Awkward and aloof even as a child, he had found what he had never expected to have: a best friend. And then at age fifteen Alec realized that loving him was far worse than hating him could ever have been. Still, he loved Jace, withstanding the demands and torments of such a love, as he had never loved anybody in his life. He loves him still, even after everything that they’ve been through. The *parabatai* ceremony had been a little like this one; in front of a lot of people, their shirts off, Jace laughing nervously whenever they made eye contact and Alec trying to look everywhere but at Jace lest his feelings begin to show on his face. Then they had marked each other with the rune and spoken the vow. It had warmed Alec, even as it twisted and broke his heart beyond imagining, to know that they would be fighting, working, living alongside each other for the rest of their lives.

The thought of him is finally what brings tears to Alec’s eyes. But he does not let them fall.

Not until they start removing the rune, this last, final rune. Then, he feels Jace’s pain for the last time. Then, he’s gone. The tears fall, and he screams, long and loud – Jace’s name escapes his lips, but it quickly turns into a hoarse, nameless cry, petering down to choked sobbing, that echoes far into the hollow halls of this empty church.

* You, and then *us.* So quickly his people have let him go, when they raised and wrought him as a son and sword for all these years.

“You have until dawn to get any personal affairs in order and to gather any personal affects excluding any weapons or Nephilim artefacts, after which you are hereby banned from this or any Institute, nationally and internationally; you are banned from entry into Idris; and you are banned from deliberately initiating contact with Nephilim or Nephilim society from this day forth, nor are you any longer eligible for the protections that Nephilim society offers its own. From this day forth, you, Alexander Lightwood, are banished.”

Alec listens numbly, standing and dressed now, tracks of tears still on his face from the severance of the parabatai bond, his bones still wracking with agony. *You,* and then *us.* It takes him a moment to remember how to speak, and a few pathetic attempts before hoarse words are physically able to come out of his mouth. “I do.”
Now if only he had said those words on the altar all those weeks ago. He takes a moment to imagine it – could it have been so bad? Could it have been worse than this? He imagines the twinge in his chest when he would wake up next to Lydia each morning, that would grow weaker and weaker over the years as he calcified from the inside out – his heart always beating steady, his chest never aching with desire. His heart might never have quickened for anything again, but maybe a day would have come when it would stop breaking each time he looked at her. He imagines kissing her and thinking of bright, kohl-lined eyes to make his lips open and wanting. He imagines picturing the brown curve of Magnus’s neck, the sharp angles of his jaw and the firm muscle of his body when he would be pressed against Lydia’s soft blushed skin. He imagines children with his black hair and her blue eyes, imagines loving them and protecting them from the things that corroded himself, he imagines hating them for all the loss that they would represent. He imagines a lifetime of the crushing ache of loneliness and self-hatred that is all he has ever known, the burden of Atlas on his shoulders for the rest of his miserable years.

Both sentences are certain death – which execution would have hurt a little less?

The Inquisitor is still speaking. “…The law is hard, but it is the law. Does the guilty party wish to address the Clave regarding his sentence?”

Could it have been so bad? Giving up his life and happiness for the people who would always hate him as he truly is – there is nothing more sickening to him than that. He made his choice, he decides now, and he will live with the consequences.

“Sure,” Alec says. “I’ve been loyal. Out of my family, out of any Shadowhunter my age, I’ve been loyal to both Clave and Covenant. A week ago I would have given up my life easily and willingly in service of the Clave, if it meant maintaining peace and order in the Shadow World. Just like any of you would. But, still, you gave – ” He swallows. “You gave me up so easily. But today I’m glad I’m never going to see any of this again or be a part of it, so thanks for that, and good fucking riddance.”

There is no laughter this time, not even from Isabelle. Alec can’t make himself look at her, or at Magnus.

The Inquisitor purses her lips. “Very well, then. This session is adjourned. Ave atque vale, Alexander Lightwood.”

Hail and farewell. As if it is truly a death sentence. He doesn’t know how to respond to that; in his experience, it is only said to corpses whose tongues no longer form words. What does that make him, he wonders. If the greeting is meant to be respectful, meant to show that they are only kicking him to the curb like trash out of necessity rather than hatred, it doesn’t work. Already he is a corpse, already half ghost – at least, that’s what they’ll think of him. The tall, shattered Lightwood boy who used to haunt the halls of the New York Institute, never to be seen again.

As soon as the meeting adjourns and people start stirring and getting up from their seats, Isabelle rushes to Alec’s side at a speed that is near-miraculous even for a Shadowhunter.

“Alec,” she keeps saying as she holds him in her arms. She is almost a foot shorter than him but it still feels right, they still fit perfectly together like they always did. “Alec, Alec, Alec…”

“Izzy,” he mumbles, voice muffled as he buries his face in the crook of her shoulder. “Izzy…it’s okay…”

“No,” she says, and she lifts him gently off of her to contemplate him at arm’s length. She is not crying, but she has been; her eyes and nose red, her wet face devoid of the makeup that she wears like armour – nevertheless, she is, as always, beautiful. “No, Alec, it isn’t. It’s never been less okay.
Are you – do you need – are you feeling okay? That was horrible, I can’t even imagine – Alec,” she interrupts herself suddenly. “Alec, you’re not – you’re not breathing properly. Does it still – is it still hurting, do you need –”

“No,” he lies. “I’m fine. Even if I weren’t, it’s not like you can heal me,” he adds, trying to make light of it, but the words come out weak and sad instead of sarcastic as he had intended. “I need –” he tries to start saying Jace, but his lungs give way and he wheezes for a moment.

Isabelle’s eyes flash in anger at his pathetic countenance, and then they turn to onyx, hard and cold. He thinks that she has learned the art well from him. “You know, Alec, I’m not going to let them get away with doing this to you. I’m going to fight this and fight them until either I’m dead or the Clave is ancient history, and I’m not going to get a second of sleep until my whip is around that horrible woman’s throat.”

“I’m sure you will, Iz. Send me a picture when you do. Come on, let’s just…get out of here…we still have –” he swallows hard, his voice threatening to break. “We still have some time. I need – Izzy, I need him, I need to see Jace, where’s Jace –”

“Upstairs,” she says immediately, “come on, let’s go. You can lean on me, I’m not that fragile, big brother…”

They are joined by Magnus as they exit the room, who is uncharacteristically silent as they walk up to Jace’s room, where the others are waiting. No Alexanders, no asking about his feelings or offering any words of comfort. Alec doesn’t think much of it, his mind completely on someone else, whose loss he can feel as acutely as if someone carved a ragged hole into his chest and pulled out his still-beating heart.

His vision is still a little fuzzy, his limbs uncoordinated; he stumbles along shamefacedly, head down. It does not occur to him until later that this is his last day in this place; come dawn, all the halls and rooms and stain-glass windows and intricate stonework of the old cathedral will be relegated absolutely to memory, stuck in his past forever. In thirty years, it will be distant and fuzzy, and the first twenty years of his life will feel like a dream. Only the smell of old oak, the taste of iron in his mouth, will remind him of a church in the city that he once called home.

This, the only home that he has ever known. Funny, he thinks, that it was not a home at all, but a place of exile for his parents, a distant fiefdom to be snatched away by the Clave as soon as they saw fit, with no care for the children who grew up thinking they had a right to it, that it belonged to them. When they were children, the Clave was nothing but a far off entity, more deity than anything else; they did not know, back then, how it lived in every nook and cranny of their lives, maintaining control over their soldiers from the start. Still, he cannot grudge the Institute for the people who own it, because these halls have born witness to every laugh and every love, feeble and few though they might be, that Alec has ever known.

These melancholy thoughts are shaken from his consciousness as soon as they enter Jace’s room; all Alec has the chance to see is a flurry of fire-red hair before he is accosted by Clary in a silent and surprisingly strong embrace. She is still visibly shaken from bearing witness to the agony of the severance of Alec and Jace’s bond, tears tracking their way down her face, her nose and eyes starkly red against her pale skin. “I’ll fight them,” she says to Alec, suddenly, without greeting or question. “I’ll fight all of them, I’ll go to them and I’ll - I’ll steal the Cup back from Valentine and – bargain with – and – Alec, I’ll kill her, I’ll kill all of them –”

Alec can see where her eyes focus, not on his face, but someplace just below it – on his neck, where his most visible rune is now gone, leaving nary a mark to show that it was ever there at all. He touches his neck self-consciously, and immediately she falls into his arms again, fresh tears in her
eyes. “Sure,” Alec says, and can’t help a small smile. “Between you and Izzy and Magnus, I don’t think there’s even going to be a Clave by tomorrow morning.”

“Damn right,” Isabelle mutters, giving a discreet fist bump to Magnus beside her.

“I’m so sorry,” Clary whispers into his chest, “I’m so…”

“Clary, I don’t blame you for this,” he says heavily. “I’m sorry I made you think I do. It’s them, not you.”

She nods, pensively, but he doesn’t think she is entirely convinced. It surprises him sometimes, how like Jace she is, how she is ready and willing to bear the weight of the world and all of her friends’ hearts on those deceptively slender shoulders. “Okay.”

“Okay, um…” Alec says distractedly, craning his neck over her (not especially difficult given her stature) to look into the room behind her, to find him, is he okay, where is he, Alec needs him, needs to see him, is he alive, is he okay, is he okay…

Though not realizing it, he has said some of this incoherent rambling out loud, and immediately he is brought forward into the room where Jace is sitting on his bed, slumped forward, head cradled in his hands.

“Jace,” Alec manages to say – the rest of his words have been slurred and jumbled, but this comes out like the clear, bright peal of a bell. “Jace.”

Jace looks up abruptly, and he does not look much better than Alec, pale and drawn and indescribably, irreversibly damaged. “Alec,” he says, the word carried on the sound of a sigh. He stands up on shaken legs as Alec strides towards him, this last real and true thing in this world that has been revealed to be more confusing and more horrific than he had ever imagined.

The relief is so staggering when he holds Jace in his arms, when he can feel Jace’s heart beating steady and strong against his own skin, that Alec almost laughs out loud. He closes his eyes and things almost feel right again.

He is aware of both Clary and Magnus looking at them, looking at him, but he doesn’t care. For the first time in his life, he doesn’t care to explain or categorize or justify or hide what he feels for Jace, whatever it is. It’s not the same as with Magnus, who takes Alec’s breath away, exhilarated, and makes his heart pulse erratic to a beat he doesn’t quite recognize; this, Jace, is something different, something just as important, that breathes steady air into his lungs and keeps his heartbeat locked in a stable rhythm with the other boy’s.

“It felt like you died,” Alec mutters, voice muffled in the embrace. “It felt – it felt – ” There are no words to describe your soul being torn in half. “Did you feel it?”

“No,” Jace says, and he draws back so that they are face to face. He grasps Alec’s face in his hand; the action is entirely fraternal, but there is an intimacy there that Alec has never felt with anybody else. “I felt it, but I knew you didn’t die. I would die, Alec. I knew if you died, I would die. For where you go I will go. Still. Always.”

Alec’s breath catches in his throat, and tears sting his eyes again. Leave it to Jace to make him break in a heartbeat, when all the Clave and all the world’s torments could barely manage it. Every unkind word and thought he has had towards Jace in these past few weeks comes rushing over him like a sudden torrent of guilt and sorrow flooding his being.

“I’m sorry,” Alec blurs.
At the exact same time, Jace says, “Alec, I’m so sorry.”

Alec has to smile. The first and only time that his and Jace’s minds are perfectly unified. Better late than never. They have long been such a perfect study in opposites, one dark and one blond, one shadow and one legend, one obedient and one wayward. There is no need to say anything more, there is no need to express forgiveness out loud. They know. They both know.

Eventually, everyone settles down around Jace’s room, stark and clean and monk-like in its organization. Alec sits next to Jace; he doesn’t know how he is going to be apart from Jace anymore, now that the bond has been so grotesquely severed. He needs the blond boy in his sight at every moment, or else he feels his lungs, his heart stop working.

After a few moments, Alec strangely starts to feel the exhaustion and pain seep from his body, the sores inside his mouth aching a little less as the moment passes. The parabatai bond still aches as strongly as ever, but everything else improves drastically from where he could barely breathe. Alec darts his eyes around in confusion, wondering if proximity to Jace has healed him; then, he looks down at himself to see an effusive blue glow surround his sternum, and he looks up at Magnus, who is avoiding his gaze.

“Thanks,” he says quietly, though in the silence the whole room can hear.

“Any time,” Magnus says, still not quite looking at him.

“Your healing still works on – you know, since -- ?” Clary asks, clearly interested but reddening over her choice of words. Alec doesn’t mind too much. It’s nice to see everyone else stuttering around him for once.

“Our magic,” Magnus says gravely, “discriminates far less than that of the angels.”

And there is nothing else said on the matter.

“Alec,” Jace says at length, after another uncomfortable silence settles over them thickly like a layer of dust. “I hate to – say it – but where – where are you going to go?”

Involuntarily, Alec’s eyes flicker to Magnus, who returns his brief gaze. Understanding perfectly without a single word, without more than a moment of eye contact, Magnus speaks for him. “He’s going with me,” Magnus says firmly.

“Really?” Jace says, mildly surprised.

Magnus arches an eyebrow. “Little Nephilim,” he says with exaggerated patience that makes a muscle jump in Jace’s jaw. “I’m the only one who still has the privilege of contact with your brother, as per your own precious covenant. It’s hardly rocket science.”

“All right,” Jace says, mildly surprised.

Magnus rolls his eyes theatrically. Although his words are as glib as ever, there is a distraction underlying them, and a certain moroseness. “Let me spare you the trouble, Wayland. Yes, I’m aware that your parabatai’s magical protections have been stripped, so yes, I understand that that makes Shadowhunters vulnerable to threat, so no, I won’t let anything harm him, wilfully or accidentally, and yes, all of the resources at my disposal will go towards ensuring that, and yes, I know this is a difficult time and he needs support, and yes, you and the others can visit whenever you like and I will accept the sacrifice of my abode becoming a stomping ground for the children of Nephilim, yes, you’re very welcome, but no, I won’t take any kind of advantage of him, although I’m rather
appalled that you would insinuate that. Anything else?"

Alec is mortified to realize that a dark crimson blush is creeping up his neck.

Jace is silent for a few moments, a muscle twitching in his jaw. Out of the corner of his eye, Alec can see Isabelle and Clary try not to laugh. "Alright, fine," Jace relents, and then swears at Magnus under his breath. Alec wouldn’t have it any other way between those two; in fact, he thinks it would make him more uncomfortable if they were as friendly as Magnus and Isabelle are.

Alec is going to smile, too, because it all seems so normal, everyone lounging around in Jace’s room, talking and almost smiling. Even better than normal, because Magnus is here, and Alec feels that pleasant tingle every time he hears the warlock’s voice. But then every few moments the reality of the situation hits and he feels sick to his stomach, he feels a void fill his chest, he feels like Jace is dead or worse although he is sitting right next to Alec, he feels like he wants to lie down to sleep and not wake up for a long time.

"Magnus," Alec says abruptly, cutting into whatever feeble attempt at conversation was occurring with the others. "Um, I need to go to my room and get – get my stuff. Come with me?"

Magnus looks a little surprised, but acquiesces nevertheless. "Certainly."

They exit at once, leaving the others in a despondent sort of silence.

* *

The pair walks the short distance to Alec’s room in silence, their footsteps echoing loudly in the Institute’s halls in the absence of any words exchanged.

This is the part that Alec had been dreading the most: sorting through the remnants of his entire life, deciding which parts to take with him and which he must leave behind. Most people would not expect it of him, but sentimentality and nostalgia are chief among his weaknesses; half the things in his desk drawers are memorabilia, hallmarks of a time long gone that won’t ever come back.

Once he sorts through his clothes – he has six shirts, four sweaters, two jackets, and three pairs of pants, so it doesn’t take very long – and takes one look at all of his books and just decides to take all of them with him, he begins, with trepidation, to look through his most personal affects. Photographs were not a big feature of their childhood, so he has just two framed on his desk. One is of himself and Isabelle, when she was six and he was eight, and the other is of Isabelle and Jace, taken sometime last year. He picks the first up and smiles at Isabelle’s gap-toothed grin, her long black hair in perfect pigtails. The first thing that he finds in his desk drawer, out of a sheaf of near-ancient documents, is just as old: a drawing that Isabelle had made around that age of the Lightwood family. He remembers, when she gave it to him, that he liked the way she had drawn his stick-figure so tall; but now, his favourite part of it is the pencilled-in sketch of Jace, in a refined and pretty style utterly incongruous with the rest of the shaky strokes of the crayon drawing. Isabelle had added that in when she was fifteen and saw the picture on his desk. Oh, Alec, she had said. *Imagine what he feels like when he sees it.* His smile broadens. Just as much as he loves the woman she has become, he misses the girl he remembers from his childhood. Age and war make slow ruins of everyone.

When he looks up at his room again, it is as though they have gone back in time, and he can see two black-haired kids play-fighting demons, using Alec’s bed as their crumbling fort. They are doing it in secret, because they will get a lecture if either of their parents sees them. Alec, age seven, is using his real training bow but invisible arrows; five-year-old Isabelle has a piece of paper that Alec rolled up for her to use as a seraph blade. The demons are imaginary, but their bodies are small and untrained, and they get winded quickly. Breathing heavily, sitting next to each in the fort, they are silent for a
moment, their yells and giggles from minutes ago echoing in their minds.

“Alec,” Isabelle says, sombre all of a sudden. “They’re real.”

“Hmm?”

“Demons. D’you think they’re scary in real life or d’you think it’s still gonna be fun?”

“Probably scary,” Alec says gravely. “That’s why we gotta learn to be brave.”

“But I don’t – ” she hesitates in a small voice. “What if they get us for real?”

“Hey, Iz,” Alec says with a grin. “Lemme tell you a secret.”

Izzy’s interest is drawn by his important tone. At five, Alec’s seven still seems worlds away. “Yeah, what is it?”

“Demons can get scared too.”

“Really?” she says doubtfully.

“Really. And plus, I’m always gonna be there to protect you. And you’re gonna protect me. And they’re gonna be so scared they’ll forget – regret – the day they crossed Alec’n’Izzy Lightwood.”

Izzy smiles, all dimples and rosy cheeks, and the moment of sobriety is forgotten as the game resumes in earnest.

Alec looks back down, and the children disappear, and something catches in his throat at the thought of that promise, so earnestly made and so achingly and unwillingly broken.

“Oh, that’s cute,” Magnus says, coming up to peer over his shoulder.

“Yeah, isn’t it?”

The light, feathery dreams of childhood turn to stone and concrete, crushing their backs and bones under the weight of them. But Magnus’s interjection breaks Alec from his nostalgic reverie and brings the overwhelming burden back to his shoulders. He swallows, wishing this feeling would stop coming back, this deadness inside that is eating him alive, leaving nothing but ruin inside him.

“Right,” he says, turning to Magnus. “I – there was something I wanted to talk to you about. If, I mean – ” Magnus is not meeting his gaze again, his expression pensive behind the thick eyeliner. “Okay. You’re being weird.”

“I never meant for this to happen,” he blurts out, looking at Alec finally with pleading, desperate eyes. Alec has never heard his words come out like this, stuttered and jumpy. It doesn’t suit his honey-smooth voice. “This, your runes, your – I’m – Alec, I’m so – so sorry. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done – I shouldn’t have made you do – ”

“You didn’t know,” Alec says. He tries to make his voice soft, comforting, something – but the words come out flat and dead. It’s fitting for how he feels. “You didn’t know what would happen. Neither did I. It doesn’t matter.”

He wishes it could be different, that he could say at least I can be with you now and jump into Magnus’s arms, and have some semblance of the happy ending he had never in his life dared to dream for. But it can’t. Nothing is fine. Nothing is okay. It wasn’t supposed to go like this.
“We can – we can appeal it. We can go to the Consul – “

“Magnus, it’s over.” He sighs at Magnus’s pleading eyes, the angles and planes of his sharp face softened in concern and something else that Alec can’t place. “Look, you didn’t sign up for this. You don’t have to – this isn’t what you wanted. This, me – like this. It’s not your fault. I just wanted to say – I mean – Magnus, you can – you can leave, is what I’m trying to say. I don’t have to come with you.”

“Leave?” Magnus repeats, uncertain. “What do you mean, leave?”

“You know,” Alec elaborates. “You don’t have to see this through. With me. I don’t want to make you do that.”

They have kissed several times and been on a single date. Even though they both feel this thing deeper than skin, deeper than bone, deeper than soul or history or tradition, it is still too young to call anything definite, and it is still too fragile to bear the weight of this massive burden.

Magnus’s brow furrows in sudden realization after a few moments. “Alexander…” he says, and nothing else for a moment, shocked into silence.

The soft music of his voice around those four sharp syllables breaks Alec’s heart. It hurts – physically, like a fist to the sternum. You’d think he’d be used to it by now.

Alexander! His mother. Alexander… His father. Alexander Gideon Lightwood – Izzy, and later Jace, in playful seriousness, replied to in kind with Isabelle Sophias and Jonathan Christophers. Alexander? Clary, who didn’t know his full name until she heard Jace say it for the first time. Alexander Lightwood, a name he tried so hard to wear with pride, the firstborn son. A name that will now be burnt out in shame from the family tree, a name never spoken but in hushed whispers, a name that will not be passed down to any future Lightwood. A fitting end for a life lived in the choking dark of his own self.

“What?” Alec says. There is nothing left in his life – of his life from before – except Magnus now. And he knows they’re both aware of that, and he doesn’t want anyone’s pity.

“Alexand – Alec,” Magnus says, quickly amending to the nickname when Alec flinches away from the sound of it. “I didn’t just like you for some meaningless angel scribbles on your skin. Nephilim and I have rarely gotten along – ”

“I’m still – still a – ” Alec interrupts vehemently, but his voice breaks when he tries to continue. A fractured, sad silence follows.

“That’s not what I meant,” Magnus says gently. “No-one could mistake you for anything but part angel, darling, trust me.” Alec tries to smile at this. “All I meant was, this doesn’t change anything. Not for me. If it does for you, I – well, it wouldn’t be difficult to understand. Just tell me if you want me to go, and I’ll leave, but if you don’t…then I’m here.”

“Go?” Alec says, nonplussed. “I don’t want you to go – I thought you wouldn’t want to have me – no. No, Magnus. I don’t – ” he swallows. “I don’t have anyone else anymore. Not really. If you really, truly do want me with you, then – that’s good. That’s – fine – you know what I mean.”

Magnus gives him a small smile, so sincere that it feels like something ineffably precious that he has entrusted to Alec. “Okay,” he says. “It’s settled, then.”

“Okay,” Alec says cautiously.
“Oh, and, Alec?” Magnus adds. “Please know – it’s not your fault, either.”

Alec sighs and runs a hand through his hair. “I just – I keep thinking that I should have followed the rules – no, Magnus, I know that they didn’t do this to me because of a couple of minor infractions. But all the same, if they had nothing to pin on me, if I had done everything right like I was supposed to, like I always do, until Jace – ” he winces, even the name hurting. “I don’t know. Maybe I should have done what I was supposed to. I can’t stop thinking that way.”

Magnus swallows. For once, Alec thinks that he doesn’t have anything to say, any soft and kind words imbued with his wisdom and wit, that have always counteracted the toxic barbs that Alec can’t help but hurt himself with. But then he simply says, “I’ve always found the strength of your faith admirable, Alec.”

“Faith?” Alec says after a moment. “I don’t get –”

“Your faith in your angels, in your Clave, in your covenant, in your people, in your family. Some people might call it following rules, but I think it goes deeper with you. When I look at you, I think of the kind of person who would walk barefoot to the ends of the earth to speak with God if given the chance, even if that god had given him nothing but torment. Some might call it weakness, but to me that kind of faith has always seemed strong. Perhaps because it’s something I lack – in any case, Alec, I will not say to lose your faith in the things you believe. But I hope one day you can come to have some in yourself.”

Magnus has said all of this with his eyes averted, examining his hands, but when he meets Alec’s gaze, there is something heavy here between them. An uncertainty that feels more sure, more indisputable than anything else in this universe. Alec has never thought before about how people think of him; he has always just assumed they think him rude or aloof, that they don’t like him, that they won’t understand why he is the way he is. For the first time, Alec feels what it is like to exist as something beautiful, if only in someone else’s mind. Alec wishes he had Magnus’s way with words; he wishes that he were able to take this torrent of things that he feels for Magnus and transform them into words, so that Magnus could know, so that maybe his eyes would not be so sad all the time. For now, Alec is still learning how to love. For now, he tries to channel all of these things into the way he looks at Magnus and hopes that it will be enough.

It’s exactly this kind of thing that makes Alec so helpless. Nobody has ever treated him like this before, like he is something to be cherished, something exquisite and worth every kind of sacrifice to keep. It’s exactly this kind of thing that makes him lose temporarily control of his body to grab Magnus by the collar of his sequined velvet jacket and kiss him full on the mouth, out of the blue, with such hunger that it makes Magnus stagger back a step. He makes a small mmph of surprise but seems quite mollified overall, kissing Alec back with enthusiasm.

“Alright, okay, enough. Packing, my ass.”

Alec and Magnus spring apart to see Jace leaning in the open doorway, his arms crossed and a smirk playing around his lips.

“We – I was – I just was – packing, I was just looking at – you know, the stuff – distracted –” Alec splutters, and Jace’s smirk turns into a full-fledged grin.

“Getting distracted a lot these days, brother,” he says. “I knew it was a bad idea to let you two get anywhere alone –”

Jace is interrupted by a snap of fingers and a blue flash, and suddenly the door is slamming closed on him; but Jace isn’t legendary without reason. He grabs onto the door with one hand before the magic
can close it and pushes it back open with an ease that makes the whole thing look completely effortless. For Jace, it probably was. His grin only broadens as Magnus scowls.

“I hate you,” Magnus mutters under his breath.

“Anyway,” Jace continues, unfazed, “please tell your boyfriend to stop being so rude. It’s rather unbecoming.”

Alec is acutely aware of how he begins to turn an unsightly shade of puce at the word ‘boyfriend.’

“And you’ve got glitter in your hair, wow. Hey, it’s a good look.”

“Please stop,” Alec pleads, his face so hot it’s beginning to feel feverish. Jace’s shit-eating grin remains plastered on his face; regardless, happiness is always a good look on him, however flighty. They have all been made to age before their time, Jace perhaps more so than anyone, so the scraps of youth that shine through despite all that heartache are made more beautiful for it. More beautiful, and equally tragic.

“Fine,” Jace relents. “Call it payback for all the dirty looks you gave me for sleeping around.”

“You were seventeen, Jace, it was unsafe, and someone has to take responsibility around here.”

“Right,” Jace says, sobering. “Guess I’m going to start having to do my own laundry?”

Alec’s face falls. He tries to say something but ends up going with, “don’t ruin Izzy’s clothes. She’ll murder you in cold blood.”

“Hey, Alec,” Jace says, catching him lightly by the shoulder as he begins to turn away. “Me and Izzy were thinking if maybe you wanted to sleep in her room tonight. And me too. For old time’s sake.”

Alec swallows. He thinks it might be unbearable. “Yeah, sure,” he says. “That would be – that would be good.”

“The warlock’s not invited, though,” Jace says, glancing at Magnus.

“More’s the pity,” Magnus says, not offended in the slightest. “You wouldn’t wake up with human limbs if I were.”

* *

Once Alec’s bags are packed, Magnus transports them to the loft with a wave of his hand a flash of blue light. *Are you sure they made it?* Alec had asked, anxiously looking at the spot where all his worldly possessions had disappeared. *Darling, you don’t just get to be the High Warlock for nothing,* Magnus had said affectionately. Magnus himself leaves shortly after that, saying he will be back in the few hours that are left until dawn (and instructed Alec to “give my best to Isabelle, and, if you can stomach it, my worst to that other one”).

Alec finds himself strangely hesitant as he stands outside the door of Isabelle’s closed bedroom door. He shuffles around for a few moments, raising his hand to knock, then lowering it to the doorknob, and then dropping it back by his side. At least he already knows well how to play the outsider.

Just as he decisively reaches for the doorknob – for the third time – the door opens and Alec is subject to an Isabelle hair flip of epic proportions. She is talking to Jace as she opens the door, then stops short and whirls around when she sees Alec. “ – just don’t want him to be alone right now,” she seems to be saying. “Oh, Alec! I was just going to go look for you, where the hell were you?”
“Uh,” Alec says, rubbing his neck awkwardly. “Just making sure all my stuff was packed. Couldn’t find my bow. All for the better, I guess, since I can’t take it.”

“Oh,” Izzy says brightly, ushering him in, “I stole that. I’m keeping it.”

“Oh,” Alec echoes, touched despite himself. “Could’ve told me. Planning on learning archery?”

“Someone has to, or we have to revise all of our battle techniques,” Jace points out from where he’s sitting on one of Isabelle’s squishy beanbag chairs, his long legs spilling out awkwardly across the floor.

Something about this conversation, blasé though it is, makes Alec immediately comfortable again. Something about how his removal from their life is not a clean excision. The edges will be frayed and bleeding, and he will be missed. He does not want them to hurt needlessly over his leaving, but at the same time, some part of him is glad that they are actually going to remember him and feel his absence as strongly as he will feel theirs.

“Somehow,” Alec says, “I don’t think we’re all going to fit on this bed anymore.”

The last time they had had a sleepover like this, it was before the growth spurts, the strength training, the uncomfortable feelings that adolescence brings and never quite takes away.

“Oh, that’s fine,” Isabelle says, waving a hand airily. “Nobody’s tired yet, so we’ll just sit up and talk for a while. And then when it’s time to sleep, Jace can move to the floor. Or Clary’s bedroom,” she adds with a saucy wink at him.

“Shut up,” Jace grumbles. “You guys are just mistreating me because I’m adopted.”

“Right,” Alec says, face blank and deadpan, “that’s exactly it.”

“You know, I think I liked you better before you learned to master sarcasm.”

Isabelle snorts. “Whose fault is that, Jace? You corrupted him.”

“And you?” Alec says to her, amused.

She brushed her hair away from her face in a swift, elegant movement. Even like this, in her pyjamas and without lipstick or mascara creating certain shadows on her face, there is something slightly dangerous about her beauty; there always has been. And she has never been afraid to wield it like a blade. Or, perhaps, she has had no other choice. “I corrupted myself just fine,” she says. “You were always the good one.”

As the conversation is progressing, Alec is readying for bed. At these words from Izzy, he is pulling off his T-shirt. As soon as he does, the amiable mood is suddenly choked by tense silence. He looks down at himself and he, too, nearly chokes on his own breath. His skin is empty of marks, his body and his being robbed of its purpose. Like a hilt with no blade, empty and broken, ugly and useless. He is worse than mundane; he is unholy. He glances self-consciously at the others, whose eyes are averted in what he can only guess is shame. Silently, he shrugs the shirt back on.

“So much for being the good one,” Alec says, and no more is said on the matter. They move towards lighter topics, so that they can all try to forget for the rest of the night.

Predictably, as it has always been, Jace falls asleep first. Alec almost wants to wake him up, knowing that these are the last hours of relative normalcy that they will have, but he can’t bring himself to. Jace never looks peaceful these days unless he is sleeping, and Alec doesn’t want to take that away.
from him. Plus, he can feel the exhaustion settling into his own bones, and he knows that Jace must feel the same. For his part, he knows he will not be able to sleep, and settles for trying to commit this feeling to memory: this feeling, surrounded by people he knows now will love him unconditionally, this feeling of being in a place called home, this feeling of belonging that he does not know if he will ever experience again.

“You okay, big brother?” Isabelle says, her voice soft but alert. Jace has since moved to his makeshift blanket nest on the floor, with Isabelle and Alec lying awake on the large bed, both unable to sleep but neither able to make any further conversation.

“Yeah,” Alec says, staring at the ceiling. “You?”

“Yeah, I’m – I – ” she breaks off, with a sigh. “You know that neither of us ever learned how to answer that question truthfully.”

Alec smiles ruefully. “Yeah, I know. I also know that you’ll be fine without me.”

“I don’t – Alec, I don’t know how to do any of this without you. None of it. I can pretend, but I never thought I’d have to learn how to live without you. I’ve been living prepared for every other kind of heartache in the world, but I couldn’t ever have imagined this.”

His own words from all those years ago echo in his mind. *I’ll always be there to protect you.* How could they, strong-hearted naïve children, have known?

“I’ll still be around,” Alec says. “You can visit me, I just can’t visit you.”

Isabelle sighs again, and there is the faint threat of tears in her breathing that Alec has become masterful at detecting – rare though the phenomena of her crying is, like an aurora in the night, and just as haunting to him. “It should have been me. This, it should have happened to me. I’m the bad one, I’m the problem child, it’s not fair it has to be you.”

“Hey, Iz,” Alec says. He looks down at her with a half-smile, putting his arms around her. He wishes he could protect her from all that, the self-loathing and self-sacrifice that have eaten away at him, that have made him brittle and easy to shatter; but they are more alike than he has ever realized. “Let me tell you a secret.”

“What?”

“This isn’t over,” he whispers. As soon as he says it out loud, he feels it hardening his heart and becoming true. “They might have won this round, but I’m going to fight them, and we’ll always be there to protect each other. And they’re going to be so scared that they’ll regret the day they crossed Alec and Izzy Lightwood.”

The words that had made her smile as a young girl now cause the tears that she had been concealing to start rolling down her face. It is dark, but he can still see them, and he hugs her closer.

“I love you, Alec,” she says.

“I love you, too,” he says. “More than anybody or anything. Please – ” he can hear his voice breaking. “Please don’t forget that. Now get some sleep, okay?”

Eventually, she does fall into a fitful sleep. It brings no peace to the furrows in her brow, but her breathing becomes more even, her body more relaxed. Once Alec tries to extricate himself from her so that she’s more comfortable, but she just grips onto him harder. Relenting, he keeps an arm around her. He stares at the ceiling, counting down the hours until dawn. Somewhere along the way, he
realizes that tears are rolling down his own cheeks, and, try as he might, he is powerless to stop them.

This is how Magnus finds Alec at three-thirty the next morning. He feels a twinge of sadness at the two dark-haired siblings holding onto each other even in sleep. Though the sun has still not risen, the tracks of tears on Alec’s porcelain face are all too visible, clinging to his long, dark eyelashes. He must have only just come to sleeping. Magnus can only imagine how he had spent the night; though it has been centuries, he knows the feeling of not being welcome in your own home, among your own people, anymore. There is nothing comparable to that sense of loss and lostness that aches the soul.

Magnus had walked to the Institute from his apartment; it would have taken him less than two seconds to portal over, but somehow it did not seem to suit the occasion. Brooklyn was as soft and quiet as it ever can be in the mist of almost-dawn, the sky still midnight-ink on the edges, fading into the dull blue that prefaces sunrise. Though at the tail-end of summer, the wind had been blowing in cold earnest, and it had been Magnus’s only companion throughout the journey. The streets, normally busy and bustling to the point of claustrophobia, had been nearly empty, as though all of New York had suddenly become a ghost town. Magnus had pulled his long, black coat closer and quickened his pace, the eeriness affecting him more than it ever has.

Now, in the Lightwoods’ room, waving his hands, he casts a quick spell so that the other two Lightwoods will not wake from the noise. He walks into the room and gently shakes Alec awake. “Alexander,” he says softly, “it’s time.”

Alec jerks awake, his eyes and his movements still soft with sleep, his hair sticking up at several angles.

“Sorry,” Magnus says quickly. “I didn’t know how else to –”

“No, it’s okay,” he mumbles, rubbing his eyes. If Magnus has seen anything more precious in the world, it doesn’t come to mind in this moment. “I’ll be right there. You got my bags last night, right?”

Magnus nods. “If there’s anything else that you forgot, I can get it right now.”

Alec thinks for a moment, countenance still heavy with exhaustion. “No, I guess that’s it. I’ll be right out.”

Magnus leaves the room, waiting tactfully in the empty foyer of the Institute for Alec to be ready. It always strikes him how ill at ease he feels in the Institute, this old cathedral with it’s high, arched ceilings and stained glass, built from flagstone and the blood of angels, that has no place for hell-creatures or half-demons. Yet it carries within it a darkness that is much more ancient, much more insidious, than any that Lilith could imbue in her children. Especially at this witching-hour more cold and unsettling than midnight, it sends a shiver down Magnus’s spine. He can’t imagine what Alec must be feeling, to part with his home as if he were a ghost to it – his cuts have long since scabbed and scarred and only twinge occasionally. The wounds for Alec are fresh and profusely bleeding, and Magnus hopes that he will be enough to heal them.

Eventually, Alec does emerge from his room; he is unmistakable even in the near-darkness of early dawn that does not yet bring gold light into the church – with that loping gait, those slouched shoulders that always make him appear as though he is looking down.

“Ready?” Magnus asks.
Alec hesitates. His eyes and expression are carefully blank. Sadness and anger are things that Magnus knows how to deal with, but Alec’s uncanny ability to erase all feeling from his face and countenance is a rare kind of tragedy, one that even Magnus — guarded as he is — is ill-acquainted with and feels grossly ill-equipped to handle. “Yeah.”

“Alright. We can portal back, but I have to draw up the portal outside. Let’s go.”

“Wait,” comes a small voice from behind them.

Magnus turns around to see Clary Fairchild emerging from the hallway. Clad in a tank top and pajama pants, her fiery hair cascades down around her shoulders, face pale and drawn. She has never looked more like her mother, except she is more whole: the heartbreak has not yet come for her like it did for Jocelyn.

“Can I – Alec, can I talk to you? Before you go? Just for a second?”

Alec draws back a miniscule amount, clearly surprised, although his face shows no indication of it. “Yeah,” he says after a moment, aloof as ever to the casual observer. “Sure.”

They move away from Magnus, but they are still close enough for him to listen to — although he usually tries not to use his particularly adept hearing for eavesdropping, he can’t really help it here. The Institute and the city are both asleep, and silence reigns like disease in every empty corner. And emptiness isn’t hard to come by in a place like this.

“I wanted to say, you know, goodbye,” Clary is saying, her head angled upward to be able to look Alec in the eye. “I know you don’t like me –”

“That’s not true,” Alec interrupts. His tone is earnest but far from gentle. “I do – I mean, you know.”


“Bye,” Alec says stiffly, and then he clears his throat. “Hey, listen, Clary.”

“Yeah?”

“Take care of them. Okay?” Alec says. There is a frustration in his tone that is hard to place, an anger at himself for not being able to articulate himself the way he wants to. “Jace, and Izzy too.”

“Okay,” she says, nodding, her voice getting a little thick. “I will, I promise. I mean, I’ll promise to try. I don’t know if I can do it as good as you. I don’t think anyone could.”

A small sigh escapes Alec. “Sure you will. You keep Jace in line better than I ever could. Hell,” Alec adds with a half-smile, “learn how to use a bow and they won’t even miss me.”

Clary smiles again, this time more sincerely. “Right.”

“You could –” Alec hesitates again, and makes his voice cool and aloof once more. “You could come round Magnus’s sometime and I can help you with that. I mean, only if you wanted to.”

“Yeah,” she says after a moment. “I’d really like that.”

Then, abruptly, she envelops him into a hug so fierce that it knocks the wind out of him. For a few moments, his arms hang awkwardly in the air before he gets with the program and wraps them around her, resting his chin gently on the crown of her head. Ever the firstborn, ever the big brother, ever the protector. It truly comes naturally to him, shining through even when he permits nothing else
to. He whispers something to her that Magnus cannot hear.

It breaks Magnus’s heart, how full of love Alec is beneath his surface, bursting and brimming with it, and not knowing what to do with it, anguished by it. The boy has a broken heart forced in a cage—all that love and it has nowhere to go. How much love he could give and be given if he had not been so denied. If they had not done this to him. Not all kinds of people can survive being tempered like steel; they can become brittle; they can fracture, and shatter, and hide the pieces of themselves behind closed walls and blame themselves for it. Magnus had hoped that Alec was healing, every shy smile a sign of getting better, every blurted and heartfelt confession a promise of restoration—for both of them, of the men that they both used to be, when they were young, before the world made them hard. They are all of them tragedies of their circumstances, and it is not as easy as having any villain to blame for becoming the way that they are.

It takes them but a moment to portal to Magnus’s lair. Though he has lived for hundreds of years, Magnus knows better than anyone that life is defined by certain moments, dotted few and far across the years. It almost seems unfair; all those days and years spent trying to shape your life’s direction in a certain way, and one catastrophic second can make all that work crumble to the ground.

At this moment, dawn has barely caressed the horizon. Today, it seems that the sun is reluctant to rise, that the world wishes to have a few more moments of solitude, of contemplation of its own darkness. No gold touches the sky, still obstinately a dull indigo, soft around the seams with cloud. A breeze too bitter for September gusts over them, through them, as if they are the ghosts of these Brooklyn streets that are narrow and lined with red-brick tenements zig-zagged with fire escapes. Beside him, Magnus sees Alec shiver and burrow his hands deeper into his pockets, deepening his slouch. Magnus moves a little bit closer to him, hoping that it will give him some warmth at least, if not comfort.

As they take the few steps between the portal and the entryway to Magnus’s apartment, Magnus says quietly, “Welcome home.”

In the silence and stillness of New York’s witching hour, his words echo loudly and then fade away like cigarette smoke in the still air. Alec is quiet for a few moments, and when he looks up at Magnus, he appears stricken. “Home,” he repeats with a small laugh.

Each word that they exchange seems tense, and awkward in a way—it had become so easy, before, so natural. Magnus suddenly, achingly wishes they could be like before again. It had been fun—not in the sense that he was not serious, but Magnus does not remember the last time love had been so enjoyable for him. The last time he had had something meaningful with someone, it was Camille, and she had been toying with him, and he had been suffering. Between Camille and Alexander, of course, there had been a fair few. Either they had been vain attempts to heal a heart too fractured to be fixed, or they themselves had added another notch, another hairline crack. Each person, each love, tinged with a certain sadness. And then Alec, with his naïveté and strength, with his impulses of honesty and generosity of soul battling with the forced instinct to hide himself, to hurt himself. Something about that, tragic though it undoubtedly was, has made Magnus’s heart beat in a way that he had thought it had forgotten how to do.

“I’m sorry,” Alec is saying, dispiritedly. “I’m even more of a downer than usual these days.”

Magnus clasps his shoulder reassuringly with a leather-gloved hand, and says nothing else on the matter. For now, it’s better that way; all he says, gently, is “Let’s get out of this cold, okay?”

Alec nods gratefully. As they are hurrying into the building and up the rickety set of stairs, Alec
suddenly stumbles and staggers ungracefully up a couple of steps, roughly grasping the railing to steady himself. He winces slightly in pain.

“Sorry,” he mumbles. One day Magnus will need to tell the boy that his existence is not something that he needs to apologize for.

“You okay?” Magnus asks instead, once again holding his shoulder to steady him.

“Yeah,” Alec says, too automatic to be truthful. After a moment, his face falls just a fraction, just enough for Magnus to see it. “I’m just – I guess – I’m not used to being like this.” At Magnus’s confused look, he elaborates. “Being so…slow. You know?”

Of course. Nephilim marks are not just for aesthetic purposes. Magnus’s heart goes out to Alec, so crestfallen. Not only have his people turned their back on him, but his body is doing the same. “Oh,” Magnus says. “If it won’t hurt your pride too much, I can hold your hand on the way up.”

Alec looks confused for a moment, and then recognizes it as a joke. That adorable lag would be Magnus’s favourite part of teasing Alec, if it were not for the thing that follows: he looks down, ducks his head, and gives that shy half-smile that Magnus would burn down buildings to watch. Sure enough, Alec takes Magnus’s hand, and they climb the rest of the way home with their fingers intertwined.

* *

“Please,” Magnus says once they step into his vast, high-ceilinged loft, “Make yourself at home, Alec.”

Certainly Magnus does so immediately. He waves a hand, and his coat, gloves, and scarf disappear in a wave of blue light, leaving him in the tight leather pants and low-necked, sequined T-shirt that he had been wearing underneath. Of course, the rings, earrings, and myriad necklaces stay, as does the shimmery charcoal around his eyes. On a whim, though, his hair is now streaked with midnight blue. The colour reminds him of Alec.

Alec nods, and sits down stiffly on the plush red sofa, avoiding Magnus’s gaze and instead staring out the wide window to the city still half-bathed in shadow. Home, the four-letter word that Magnus can’t stop himself from using, as commonplace as it is for him, a careless word that has lost its meaning and its appeal over the centuries. Clearly it unsettles Alec, who sees this apartment as an exile more than anything.

“Hey,” Magnus says, “you hungry?”

Alec shakes his head mutely.

“Really? You’re rooming with the High Warlock now. Any cuisine is at your disposal. Or a cocktail, if you prefer? The High Warlock is also day-drinker extraordinaire.”

“No, I’m good,” Alec says. He hesitates and then adds, “but thank you, Magnus.”

Magnus waves his hand. “Not at all, darling.”

He comes over to sit next to Alec, a respectful distance away, cocktail glass having appeared in his hand almost by accident. Oh well, he thinks, it’s been a long day and he deserves it. Almost unconsciously it seems, Alec moves imperceptibly closer to Magnus when he takes a seat. Magnus turns to see Alec looking at him in a way that he almost understands now, a look that is more Alec than any other: that frustration that wages war on his face, of wanting to say something but not quite
knowing how to. Magnus hopes, for Alec’s sake, that he will be able to learn; Magnus hopes that
maybe he will be the one lucky enough to guide Alec. Meanwhile, he will fill the silences before
they become unbridgeable.

“So,” Magnus says conversationally, “what kind of room would you like? Normally, I treat my
guests to the height of luxury, but I get the feeling ostentatiousness is not your style.”

A corner of Alec’s mouth curls up in a half-smile. “Yeah, not really. Just – a regular one, I guess.
Like my old one, maybe?” Seeing Magnus’s expression of distaste, he hastily adds, “but um, you can
add some flair to it, if you’d like. I won’t mind too much.”

“You sure?” Magnus says, lips twitching. “I don’t want to make you needlessly suffer through 1500-
thread count Egyptian linens if it’s going to be too painful.”

“Shut up,” Alec says, “you know I just meant, you know, no shiny things or whatever.”

know I love you Nephilim and your strange and Spartan airs.”

Alec smiles back at this, but after a few seconds, Magnus can see his eyes widen a fraction as he
processes the word that Magnus half-wishes he could take back and is half-glad that he uttered it,
making his heart a small bit lighter for having said it out loud. Love. The context was casual, sarcastic
even, but Alec is young, and he is more scared than ever, and he does not deserve to take on the
weight of Magnus’s heart quite yet. Perhaps one day he will be able to carry that burden, but it is a
heavy price for anybody.

“Anyway,” Magnus says quickly, taking a gulp from his cocktail. Grimacing, he waves a hand over
in the general direction of where he wants to put the spare room, wiggling his fingers elegantly as an
orb of electric-blue emanates from them. The apartment groans quietly, and then it’s done. “There
you are. I think you’ll quite like it.”

“That’s it?” Alec says, looking annoyingly unimpressed. “You usually have a little more – flourish.”

Magnus grins, stretching back lazily and stirring his cocktail. “Yep, that’s it. All of the rest is for
show. Give people their money’s worth of magic. They always expect Latin incantations and god-
knows-what.”

“And you just like showing off,” Alec points out.

“That too,” Magnus concedes, smiling. Minor and obvious though the trait it, it warms his heart a
little to see that he exists in some form in Alec’s mind, that Alec has thought about him, how to
define him and fathom him, that Alec would like to know him, that Alec does know him.

Alec is smiling back, but then suddenly his face closes off again, as if he were forcing himself to do
so. Although Magnus has settled comfortably, cross-legged, in the couch cushions next to him, Alec
is still sitting ramrod straight, each muscle stiff.

“Alec…” Magnus says, but then does not know how to continue. This kind of tension is unfamiliar
territory, very unlike what they had experienced before the wedding. This one is made of something
unnameable and heavy, this one creeps into the air around them like a thick vapour without either of
them being the cause, without either of them wanting it there. “Did you want to go to bed? It’s been
a long day,” he finishes lamely.

Alec looks ready to acquiesce, if only to dispel the awkwardness, but then sighs abruptly. “No, not
really. I want to talk.”
“Oh,” Magnus can’t help the pleasant surprise in his tone. “Certainly. What about?”

Alec makes a frustrated noise. “I don’t know. I – I don’t know how to handle this.”

He’s looking down at his hands, twisting them and wringing them almost unconsciously in the throes of some kind of deep anxiety. Magnus wants to tell Alec to relax, to make himself comfortable here, but looking at the misery etched on his face, Magnus realizes that it is futile. Alec has never even been comfortable in his own body: always slouching, always hunched over, preferring to bend for others rather than making them look up at him, preferring to make himself small so that they do not look at him for too long. It is enough, at least, that he wants to talk about it – that there is some part of him, however small, he is allowing Magnus to see.

“Oh, Alexander,” Magnus says, his heart breaking for the hundredth time for the lost and lonely Lightwood boy. “You don’t have to figure everything out right now. Right now you just need to heal.”

“How can I?” Alec asks, voice wretched and undercut with the sound of unshed tears. He isn’t looking at Magnus. “What they took – imagine not being able to do magic anymore. Could you heal from that?”

Magnus opens his mouth and then closes it again. Magic is as much a part of his being as the blood that beats through his body. It is connected, in some essential way that even he doesn’t understand, to his soul. Wrenching it out of him would destroy everything else, and now he truly realizes what Alec feels. It is not just emptiness, it is irreversible damage. He aches for Alec in that moment.

“No,” he finally says. “I don’t think I could. Not for centuries at least.”

Alec laughs bitterly. “Yeah, well I don’t have that kind of time.”

“I’m sorry,” Magnus says. “For whatever that’s worth. And for whatever this is worth, I’m here. Until you find your way, which I’m one hundred percent sure that you will, sooner than I could, because you’re – ” Magnus hesitates. So much stronger than me, although you don’t realize it because they’ve always told you that you’re weak. He doesn’t say it, doesn’t complete the sentence. “But in the meantime, I’m here. If you need me, if you…want me.”

Alec is silent. Alec’s silences are almost frightening in their quietness, in their contemplation. He finally looks at Magnus, and his face is open, and the ineffable sadness there is one Magnus knows; one that he thought was too old to touch someone so young.

“I do,” Alec says, voice broken and small. “Magnus, it just…it hurts.”

“Let me heal you,” Magnus says immediately.

“No, it’s nothing you can fix. They just – I did everything for them. It’s just hitting me. There’s nothing I didn’t do. I gave them everything except this one thing I thought I could keep, after I did everything else they’d asked. And you know what the worst part is? I thought it worked. I thought I didn’t have to be afraid anymore. Do you know that feeling? When you think someone knows your worst secret and you stop being able to breathe? That’s what it felt like all the time, until you, and then it didn’t. For twenty years I couldn’t breathe because the Clave didn’t want me to. And then I thought I got out of it alive, only to have this happen. And it’s not fair. If I was stronger, it would probably make me feel good that I’m finally rid of that world. But…Magnus, it’s everything I know. My duty, my family, my parabatai, my – ”

Alec breaks off with a flinch, his entire body suddenly going stiff with pain for a few moments.
Magnus freezes, panicking, uncertain. Just as he almost gathers his wits and begins a spell, Alec relaxes and slumps back against the sofa. It seems the moment has taken everything out of him—whatever was left, anyway.

“Are you okay?” Magnus asks.

“I can’t even say that stupid word,” Alec says miserably. “How am I ever going to be able to look at him again?”

Parabatai. The brutality of Nephilim is so profound that even their brotherhoods cannot be severed without destroying something essential in each person. That is the way of Nephilim; it is written in their blood to maim or kill or sacrifice, and nothing more. And the hearts of their children that are trampled on do not matter.

Indeed, Alec can’t seem to even look at Magnus now. These are the most words he thinks he has ever heard Alec say, and Magnus can finally read what horrible things are written on Alec’s broken heart, carved onto it by his own hand and others’, now that Alec has given it to him, placed it in his hands with a whispered plea for trust, for safekeeping. Like a secret has been told, and Magnus’s heart feels heavier for it.


But Alec interrupts him. “Never mind. Forget it. Let’s just forget I said all of that. Okay? Let’s talk about something else, let’s – “

Alec leans forward and grabs the neckline of Magnus’s shirt. Magnus, seeing where this is going, fights his every instinct to push Alec back gently.

“Easy,” Magnus murmurs. “It’s okay. Alec, it’s okay to feel things. It’s okay to be you. I know they told you otherwise, but I’m not going to think less of you for any of it. I just want you to know that.”

“Kiss me,” Alec breathes, his face mere inches away from Magnus, such that Magnus can see the hunger, the broken desire, in his hazel eyes—and he is certain it is reflected in his own. So Magnus does, a soft brush against the other man’s lips. Alec seems inclined to deepen it, but he jumps back roughly and suddenly.

“What the hell -- ?”

“Oh, for the love of God.” Magnus rolls his eyes, the moment ruined, and picks up Chairman Meow from where he had unceremoniously jumped on Alec’s lap. Alec’s alarm, though, is endearing.

“Damn thing is spooked by literally every other human and monster in both worlds, but now he’s feeling sociable.”

“Is that a cat?” Alec looks aghast.

“Why?” Magnus says, holding the furball to his chest almost defensively. “Are you allergic?”

“No,” Alec says, “that’s just the smallest, fattest cat I’ve ever seen. I wasn’t one-hundred percent sure.”

“Alexander, that’s shockingly rude. Please apologize to Chairman Meow.”

“Chairman -- ?” A laugh bubbles out of Alec. “You’re too much.”

“Thank you, but that didn’t sound like an apology.” Magnus pets the Chairman fondly. “He likes...
you, Alec. He doesn’t like anyone. Don’t hurt his feelings like that.”

Alec is shaking his head, but his face turns solemn, a smile still barely playing around his lips. “I’m sorry for my transgressions, Chairman Meow,” he says gravely.

Magnus grins, delighted. He takes Chairman Meow into his lap and strokes him fondly. “Thank you for that. Honestly, the Chairman’s kind of a pain, but he’s scores better than Catsby.”

“Wait,” Alec says, looking a little startled. “Just how many -- ?”

Magnus laughs. “No, no. The Great Catsby passed away a number of years ago. A few of years after you were born, I think? Now that cat was atrocious, even compared to this little shit.”

Magnus is trying to make light conversation, trying to finally set Alec at ease after the hardest day of his life, but something about what he says makes Alec stop in his tracks again.

“So that’s what you do, is it?” Alec says, his voice strangled, with a laugh that doesn’t sound like him, his face twisted into something that barely resembles a smile. “Just…replace them? When they die?”

“Alec,” Magnus says gently. “It’s not like that.”

“What’s it like, then?” Alec challenges, his voice strained. It breaks his heart; funny, how something as small as a little crack in a Nephilim’s voice can make it, and him, fracture – but then, he always gave that old thing away far too easily.

The world of the Clave is a small one, and the New York City streets are vast, cold, and unforgiving. Had we but world enough, and time – a line from one of Magnus’s favourite poems. That’s never been his problem. There’s always been too much world, too much time, and nothing permanent to show for it. Now Alec is seeing it for the first time, the vastness of the world and of time outside the sharp boundaries of clave and covenant, his insignificance in the grand scheme. The fear in his eyes as he faces his place in this big, big world reflects a feeling Magnus could never really shake over all the years, of restlessness and the gutting terror of oblivion. Of being forgotten, passed out of time and memory.

“I cried when Catsby died. I wore only black for six months.” Magnus considers this. “Well, mostly. My friends wanted me to get therapy. And I didn’t get the Chairman until many years after the fact, which was an accident, really. Didn’t even like to look at cats, really.”

“What’s your point?”

Magnus smiles and tentatively takes Alec’s hand in his, entwining their fingers slowly, allowing Alec the time to pull away if he wants to. He doesn’t, his gaze moving away from Magnus’s earnest regard and settling fixedly on their intertwined hands. If there is a ghost of a smile in those hazel eyes, it flickers and fades out of life too quickly to tell.

Magnus says, after a moment or two of this hesitant exchange, “I guess my point is, you don’t have to be a legend to be important, Alexander. To a single person, or to many, or to history.”

Alec shrugs, but the uneasiness that had paralyzed him just now has lifted and eased his brow. “Easy to say when you’re immortal.”

“Depends on how you look at it,” is all Magnus says, gently, not wanting to push the issue. It’s hard for mortals to understand what it truly means to never die – they can try as hard as they like to imagine it or contemplate it, but it’s no use. Their lives are framed by finitude, every step they take
knowingly towards a permanent destination, and so they can’t understand the feeling of being untethered, adrift in a void that has no end. “But don’t you worry about legacy, dear. That will come to pass whenever it will.”

“I don’t think I have one anymore,” Alec says with a sigh. “They’ll burn me out of their history.”

“And then you’ll forge your own, sayang, and they’ll never forget your name. But there’s time to do that later. Right now, you need some rest.”

Magnus punctuates his words by leaning forward and kissing his forehead gently. Alec, unsatisfied, grabs him and pulls him down so that their lips crash against each other in an unrefined, open-mouthed kiss. Magnus pulls back for a moment to gain his bearings, but Alec leans forward with him, chasing his lips. The sight is dizzying, and Magnus kisses him again with such earnest that he hears a soft gasp come out from Alec, and he takes Alec’s face in his hands and pulls his closer, deepening the kiss. One of Alec’s hands is running through Magnus’s hair – mussing it up, but Magnus is painfully far from caring about that – and the other is resting somewhere on his chest, and the feeling of his warm hand on the skin exposed from the deep neckline of his shirt is sending a tingle through his body.

“Alec,” Magnus mumbles between kisses. “You – mmm, you really should … sleep …”

“Yeah,” Alec murmurs, pulling away a fraction so that their noses are touching. “Probably. You’re just – you’re so –”

“Irresistible, I know,” Magnus breathes, and Alec smirks, or Magnus thinks he does, but they are so close that Magnus can only see his lips, soft and pink, and wants profoundly to kiss them. “It’s up to you.”

Alec sighs. “I’m exhausted, to be honest. Can we pick this up tomorrow?”

“I’ll be here,” Magnus smiles. “Your things are all unpacked. The bathroom is ensuite, of course.”

Alec smiles slightly. Their faces are still a breath apart from each other, Magnus’s hand still resting loosely on his shoulder, and the sight from so close is dazzling. “You’re too good to me.”

“You deserve it,” Magnus says, leaning into one last kiss, and savouring the way the curve of Alec’s smile feels against his lips. These are the small things that he wants to commit to memory. Memory is something that he is always, painfully, acutely aware of: all of the beautiful things that come into Magnus’s life, the beautiful, the broken, the blue-eyed things, they all become memory and bones and dust in time. And Magnus lives and lives and never dies, and try as he might, he can never save them all. He cannot even save a single one, and everything he loves become pieces of their former selves, relegated to a box in the back of his mind, where he desperately holds onto each thing that he remembers. He does not want to let go of anything from four hundred years of living. So he kisses this beautiful broken boy on his sofa and memorizes the patterns of his breathing and the texture of his lips, already terrified of forgetting any single moment of Alexander Lightwood.

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“Here it is,” Magnus says with a slightly dramatic flourish, opening the door to Alec’s bedroom.

Magnus is quite proud of his handiwork here, which is as flawless as ever. He turns to Alec and has the privilege of witnessing Alec’s face break into a grin – it’s like watching a sunrise, except a thousand times more special.

“I love it,” he says. “Thank you, Magnus.”
The room is simple enough, only a little larger than his bedroom at the Institute, and far less drab. The walls are wood-panelled with a rich mahogany, rather than wallpapered, seamlessly transforming into the hardwood floor, which has a plush, midnight-blue rug at the centre. There is a flagstone fireplace with a bright fire crackling happily in the far corner near the two large windows curtained in tasteful navy-and-silver drapes. The bed is a mahogany four-poster with complementary midnight blue bedding (he had considered adding a canopy, but thought Alec might think it over-the-top), and there is a solid mahogany bookcase and desk in the other corner. Rather than one single light fixture, there are several bright lamps scattered across the room (connected thoughtfully to one switch). Alec’s books are all set and unpacked, his depressing collection of clothes in the handsome and sizeable wardrobe, all miscellany in the desk or bedside table drawers. The two photographs that had previously been set on his desk in small frames have been blown up (magically, meaning no pixels) to a tasteful size and placed on the walls, along with some other choice pieces of art, a Monet and other landscapes that he thinks Alec will like. True to his word, the only shiny and overtly magical thing is on the ceiling, which displays a glittering, clear night sky.

“There’s no vanity,” Magnus says apologetically. “I didn’t think you’d use one, but if you need it just say the word.”

Alec grins again. “No, I’m good. How did you – this is perfect, how did you – ?”

“I thought ‘Alec’, and I thought ‘home,’ and this is what happened,” Magnus shrugs, and is quite surprised when Alec grabs him and kisses him hard on the mouth.

“I’m sorry,” Alec says, breathing as if he had just run a marathon, when they separate a moment later. “I’m sorry for throwing all of this in your face before. I want you to know that I’m happy that this place, your place, is home now. Or that it will be soon. Or - you know what I mean?”

“Of course I do,” Magnus says, his eyes shining.

If Magnus is anything at all when faced with Alec Lightwood, he is the world’s most hopeless romantic. And the thought of this heartless, sprawling loft – decorated with all manners of artefacts and expensive furniture and priceless items – being someplace that Alec could call a home changes the way that everything here looks to him. There is more light, it seems, streaming in through the windows. Of course, he loves his apartment, and he has hand-picked meticulously everything that is on display here, and generally there’s no place he likes to be more. But, over the years, he had become disillusioned with the idea of home, of truly belonging anywhere, even after he fell in love with New York City. Part of him, it seems, was left in that small wooden house in Indonesia, and he had never been whole in any other place. But suddenly, there seems to be a heart that is on the cusp of beating here, and it really, truly feels like Magnus has come home, for the first time in almost four hundred years.

Magnus is awoken about five minutes after he falls asleep, his hearing picking up something rather unseemly from Alec’s room. He bolts out of bed, magic ready at his fingertips. He swore he just heard yelling, but now there is just a tense silence. Visions of demons and all other evil things that now want their pounds of flesh from Alec are dancing in his head.

“Alec?” Magnus calls, slamming the door to his room open. “Are you – oh.”

There are no demons, or at least none that manifest themselves outside of Alec’s head. He is in the throes of some kind of horrible nightmare, his body stiff and tangled in sheets from tossing and turning, and he is coated in a thin sheen of sweat. He jerks around, occasionally yelling something unintelligible.
“Alec – Alec!” Magnus approaches him and tries to shake him awake, but he lashes out. Thinking quickly, hating to see Alec in such pain, he opts for magic to awaken him instead.

Alec sits bolt upright suddenly, breathing hard, eyes wide with panic. “Magnus – I don’t know what – I can’t – I –”

“It’s okay,” Magnus says soothingly, “it was just a dream, whatever it was. You’re safe, Alec.”

After a long moment, Alec nods and begins to rub his eyes. “Shit. Shit. Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Magnus repeats softly, “it’s okay. It was just a dream.”

Alec swallows. His eyes are still a little glazed, his breathing still difficult, his bare chest heaving erratically. “I don’t – I don’t know what came – what came over me. You can – you can go.”

“You sure?” Magnus checks, not wanting him to feel worse about himself, but not wanting to leave him in distress either. “Are you okay to go back to sleep?”

“Yeah, I – I – I – no.” He mumbles the last word, shamefaced. He looks terrified, and Magnus’s heart goes out to him, having just experienced the acute fear of something getting to Alec. God knows what he must be imagining, or reliving from his hellish day yesterday.

“If you’d be more comfortable, you can come sleep in my room,” Magnus says, and then quickly adds, “I mean, I can conjure a second bed, or you know what I mean. If you don’t want to be alone, is all.”

“Yeah,” Alec swallows and nods. “Yeah. I just don’t want to be alone.”

“Right,” Magnus says, trying to smile but knowing it will not reach his eyes – the part of him where all those years and all that sadness gathers, where it wallows for eternity. “Nobody does. Come on, let’s go.”

Once they’re in Magnus’s room, he’s faced with a small dilemma. He doesn’t want to ask Alec if he wants to sleep on a separate bed, because knowing Alec, he will take it as Magnus not wanting to share his bed and he will feel like an unwanted guest; and he doesn’t want to pressure Alec or make him uncomfortable by asking if he wants to sleep on the same bed (and he is acutely aware of Alec beside him, tall and lean, wearing nothing but sweatpants whose waistband is almost sinfully low). Magnus has never been with anyone quite as inexperienced, and he doesn’t want to ruin it, he doesn’t want love to be anything but healing for Alec.

So, it is much to Magnus’s surprise when Alec says bluntly, voice still a little thick with sleep and hoarse from the nightmares, “actually, can I sleep on your bed? With – you? If you – if you don’t mind?”


Alec blushes a deep crimson. “Yeah, that’d be good,” he stammers, and Magnus throws him the most nondescript T-shirt he has that he uses for working out. It is more than distracting, it is almost disturbing to see him like that, without the characteristic black markings all over his body. He looks so exposed, so vulnerable. Magnus, for his part, is clad as always in royal violet silk pyjama pants and a matching dressing gown. Normally, he would take that off going to bed, but for Alec’s sake, he does not.

Eventually, they both get settled, and Magnus waves a hand to draw the crimson canopy closed.
“This bed is ridiculously soft,” Alec mumbles.

“That’s the point of a bed,” Magnus points out.

“How many pillows is this?”

“Fifteen,” Magnus says, as if this is perfectly normal.

There is silence for a moment.

“I’m –” Alec begins.

“You don’t have to be sorry, Alec. This is nice. You’re not bothering me. Granted, I didn’t expect you to be in my bed on the first night, but you’ve been very forward lately, and I can appreciate that.”

Though it is now dark, Magnus can practically feel Alec’s blush at the saucy comment.

“I’m just joking,” Magnus clarifies when Alec doesn’t reply.

“I know, I wasn’t born yesterday.”

Magnus smiles ruefully. Even he can forget that Alec’s inexperience doesn’t make him a child.

“Okay, so then what?”

“You’re going to make fun of me for this, but can I – can we – I don’t know the technical term for it. Where when you’re sleeping next to someone and you’re not, you know, a foot and a half apart from them?”

Magnus doesn’t say anything for a moment, trying to process this. Eventually, trying to keep himself from laughing, he says, “Alexander, did you just proposition that we cuddle? You do know how to sweet-talk a man.”

There is silence. “I really don’t like that word,” he mutters finally, voice muffled.

“Alec, I –” he wants to say I think I love you, but he stops himself. “I would be honoured,” he finishes.

Nobody moves for a few moments.

“You’re going to have to come closer for this to work,” Magnus says, lips twitching. “Come here.”

Alec turns over onto his side, nestling his head somewhere on Magnus’s chest near his shoulder. Though Alec is taller, and Magnus is more lean than he, somehow it feels like a perfect fit. Magnus puts his arms around Alec gently, and hopes that he is comfortable and that he feels safe.

They say no more for a while, and just as Magnus is starting to nod off, Alec stirs and mumbles something.

“Hmm?”

Alec’s voice is muffled, and all Magnus can see is the dark mop of hair, his face buried in Magnus’s chest. “I said, what if this never goes away? What if I don’t ever feel better? What if I can’t ever sleep without seeing them again? What if I can’t ever do anything else with my life? If any of that’s true, I – I can’t ever go back, Magnus. I can’t.”
Magnus holds Alec closer and begins to run his hands softly, gently through his hair. “I can’t see the future, Alec,” he whispers, “but I’ve lived a while. I know that every hurt heals with time. Will it still twinge or ache twenty, thirty years from now? Yes. But that’s the part of me that has always felt the most human. Though I can’t be grateful for it, I can appreciate it. But my point is, Alec, it will take time. But you have time. Tomorrow, and after. You have time to heal, but you have to allow yourself to feel it first, the ache of it.”

“How?” he whispers. In the early dawn, in the closeness of each other, every word feels like truth, like honesty and something more sacred. “I don’t know how to.”

“There will be time for that, too,” Magnus says softly, achingly. Alec’s quiet voice, thick with sleep and hurt, is seeping into the age-old fractures of his heart. If it is healing them or broadening them, he cannot yet tell. Such is the nature of love. “Tomorrow, after. But, for now, get some sleep, sayang.”

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“What is it that you keep calling me?”

Alec’s blurry voice drags Magnus from where he was relaxing as consciousness was lapping at the shores of sleep, not quite awake and yet not fully asleep either. As he becomes more and more conscious, he realizes that his arm is thrown over Alec loosely, their legs a little intertwined. Alec is laying on his side, facing Magnus and looking at him intently. Sunlight is streaming earnestly in from the window behind him, seeping through the curtains and bathing him with golden glow. A ghost of a smile around his lips, he has never looked more angelic than in this moment.

“Huh?” is all Magnus can say blearily, shifting so that he is face-to-face with Alec.

“That word, that foreign word you keep calling me. Alexander, and then darling, and then there’s that one.”

“What time is it?” Magnus mumbles.

“Eleven,” Alec says apologetically. “It’s late, I know, but we did – ”

“Alec,” Magnus says through gritted teeth. “We went to bed at five in the morning. Eleven is not late. Eleven is like the five-in-the-morning of sleeping at a normal hour.”

“Sorry,” Alec says humbly. “In my defense, you don’t look like you need that much beauty rest.”

Magnus has to smile at this. “You’re good, Alexander. And don’t apologize. It’s a treat waking up to you, even at this unholy time of morning.”

Alec looks down with a smile, blushing. “You look different,” he manages after a few moments of stammering.

“No makeup to bed, I don’t want to ruin my skin,” Magnus says, feeling a touch self-conscious. “Is - ?”

“You look nice,” Alec says, in his blunt and straightforward way, tilting his head as if he is making a scientific observation rather than paying him a compliment. “Your eyes look kinder.”

Magnus is surprised at how touched he is. “Thank you. You’re chipper this morning. Did you figure out your plan to bring down the Clave once and for all?”

Alec turns over onto his back, grinning. His full smile, real and honest and toothy, sends more
shivers down Magnus’s spine than seeing him shirtless has ever done, makes his heart ache more than anything in recent memory. “That depends,” he says, considering. “On you.”

“Me?”

“Can you get me weapons?” Alec says, seriously. “I would need to retrain, first of all. Runeless, you know. It’s different. My vision is kind of blurry, actually, I hope that doesn’t affect my aim…”

“Might need to get you glasses,” Magnus says, amused. “Then you can shoot your arrow into Imogen’s heart, no problem. But, yes, I can get you anything you need.”

“Glasses.” Alec makes a face. Shifting over to Magnus again, he winces slightly with any major movement. Magnus has not personally known a Nephilim with their runes stripped, but he knows the effects can be lasting. He doesn’t want to point it out to Alec, though, who seems to have a light in his eye for the first time in a while.

“They’ll look good on you, say—”

“There it is,” Alec interrupts. “That one. What’s it mean?”

“Oh.” Magnus colours slightly, not knowing why it makes him slightly embarrassed. “Sayang. It just means the same things I call you in English. Something like darling, or sweetheart. It’s just a reflexive thing. It’s Indonesian.”

“Indonesian,” Alec repeats, considering. “Indonesia, is that home? For you?”

Magnus considers this at length. After a few moments, he leans forward and kisses Alec softly, wrapping his arms around him. “No,” he says, “this is.”

He hopes Alec understands that he is not talking about the sprawling penthouse apartment, with its many rooms and many walls, nor about the old, tired city that surrounds it. Over the past few years, the ashen streets of Brooklyn, neon signs and red bricks, the strobe lights and crowded dance floor of a glittering dance club, tenement basements with pentacles and blue flames, a rickety staircase and cool grey skies have all started to feel like his place in the world. But in this moment, when he closes his eyes and thinks of home, he sees a flash of hazel eyes. When he opens them again, he knows that he belongs in that steadfast gaze, and he hopes that Alec will one day be beheld by gold-green eyes and feel as safe and happy as Magnus does in this moment.

End Notes

I'm sorry, I'm just a huge sucker for angst. Hmu on tumblr: http://daddarios.tumblr.com

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