“Woody, if you're conscious and incapable of answering, well, I hope you didn't get your jaw broken again... you're really too pretty for that kind of job. God. What kind of hope I have to cling to... you better be gagged...”

It was lucky Alec was the one hearing this and not, say, one of his kidnappers. He wouldn't have survived the blushing.

Alec's sense of duty will get him killed one day. It has always been a given. That, or his PTSD.
will finally crush him to the ground. Magnus is not amused.

Notes

This started last summer as a funny little jab at the devil-worshi... err, Clalec shippers. It was called Super Agent Man and was silly from start to finish. It turned into something else, far more darker (still funny at moment I hope) and jeez, I fought it as much as I could but I'm really weak for drama (probably as weak as a bond girl in front of a MI6 agent).

This is the story of a spy that doesn't believe he's a person anymore and of a genius that just want him to listen

I hope you enjoy this <3

See the end of the work for more notes.
“And he wouldn’t even agree on a Lord of the Ring wedding! What kind of fiancé is that?!” Alec’s mark screams in his ear, well above the music in the bar they’re in. She’s been doing it all night and Alec is beginning to think that the deal breaker for Linda’s fiancé had been her pathological loudness. Smart guy.

“That’s a damn shame,” Alec says with the perfect dose of interest and compassion, but internally he’s rolling his eyes. God, he hates small talk and flirting -especially flirting with girls.

Since he’s gay and all.

But then again if Jace could have kept it in his trousers for once, if Jace had not eloped with one of his goddamn mark (supposedly) and left the country for god fucking knows where, the MI6 wouldn’t be short a spy. And in such a dire need of a replacement that sending one of their only rainbow-waving superspy to seduce a goddam woman had seemed a good idea -although, Alec doesn’t hold it against Linda… poor thing has no idea her boss is working with terrorists. Really the only thing he can hold against her is the aforementioned loudness.

Damn Alec hates his best friend and brother.

Jace’s supposed to handle those kind of jobs, he’s the people person, the infiltrator. Alec thrives on adrenaline fueled chases and defusing bombs while his handler screams instructions in his ears. People aren’t Alec’s area of expertise. Damn it twice to hell, he isn’t good at all at this. Now, that’s a bit harsh. He’s almost adequate. Good-ish? Okay, that’s a big fat lie.

He just loathes honeypot missions.

It’s not even the ‘let’s flirt with people that you don’t have any interest into’ part that bothers him - though it does bother him, just not as much. No, the real problem is that Alec is excellent at it. Must have something to do with all the lying he did from age 12 to 23. When it comes to saying the right thing in the right voice, with all those small micro expressions that make people trust him, he nails it.

No. Not people, marks. Because that’s his job and Alec isn’t one of the best spies in the bloody world for nothing.

But when it comes to actual people? Well, it turns ugly. He spends so much times using corny lines and putting his training in body language and psychological manipulation to good use that he has the hardest time distinguishing the bullshit from the real stuff.

Where does the faking stop? Where does Alec begin? After half a decade of using aliases and laughing at jokes that aren’t funny he feels flayed alive when it comes to say something true about himself. It’s a miracle he still answers to his name when people call after him.

Jace might have had the right idea to retire so suddenly after all. But that will never be in the cards for Alec.

“Worst thing is, I had already ordered a replica of Galadriel’s crown…” his mark goes on complaining, voice doing that annoying ear-piercing high note at the end of her sentence just like a sulky child. Jesus, he should be paying more attention to whatever she’s saying but he’s just so bored
Alec bites his tongue before mustering his best husky voice and gently pushes a strand of blond hair away from her eyes.

“Obviously, he wasn’t ready to treat you like a queen Linda,” he murmurs, leaving the ‘but I am’ unsaid.

It’s better when the marks get ideas on their own. Cue a rueful smile, something honest with just the right touch of self-consciousness and now she’s melting in front of him, sighting like a bleeding heart over a Shakespeare sonnet. He takes a sip of his wine, breaking eye contact shyly, like he didn’t mean to say that much. To show that much. Some women like their beefcake tender and Linda’s Tinder profile was pretty clear about that.

All in all, their third date is going well. He just really, really hope it won’t need an encore.

“He wasn’t ready to treat you like a queen,” Magnus parrots on the comms, nearly making Alec chokes on his drink. “Oh. My. God. This has to be the most ridiculous thing that ever came out of your mouth and your fake American accent make it worst, Woody.”

Alec clears his throat to mask his reaction. He doubts that Alex Montgomery, M.D. would giggle in the middle of nothing like a witless idiot. No, Alec’s fake persona is a smart, cultured cardio-thoracic surgeon in training. A fitness enthusiast and protector of lost puppies (stealing small animals to ‘rescue’ them and seduce their owner, truly a fine job for Queen and country).

Yet the dick joke that is his codename never gets old, damn Magnus.

“Excuse me, I’ll be back quickly,” Alec says to the woman before standing up. He lingers a second or two, like he can’t quite leave her, even for a handful of minutes.

She nods amiably, chin cradled by her hands and elbows on the table, a dreamy look in her eyes. Midway to the bathroom, Alec turns and spots her fanning herself. He kicks the sneaking feeling of guilt away from his head—it’s mildly effective.

* Once he’s in the bathroom, he checks that all the stalls are empty and wipes out his phone, putting it to his ear to fake a call if anyone was to enter.

“You mind toning it down over the comms?” he tries to snarl at Magnus, looking straight at the mirror so his handler can see his face and how serious Alec is through the cameras in his eye contacts. Banter during cooldown is ok, but messing up Alec’s flow of bullshit could be risky. Somehow, his demand comes out sounding a lot like a plea. One day Alec hopes he’ll be able to scare his handler off. One day he might even actually mean it.

“No can do. I’m as struck as you are on this shitty mission, no way I’m getting more bored than I already am.” Magnus yawns and Alec checks his watch, frowning. It’s… 4 am in London, he quickly calculates. He spent so much time in San Francisco for this bloody mission that he adapted to the time zone. It’s going to be fun back home...

“This isn’t suppose to be fun!” Alec halfheartedly counters. Magnus obviously fails to grasp that he didn’t get the worst part of the assignment. Hell, if one of them was to actually enjoy the company of a woman, it would be Magnus. “How is the hacking going, anyway?”
“Well. Well-ish.”

“What’s that suppose to mean?” Alec’s free hand spasms.

Now Magnus is a computer wizard, the best asset they have in the MI6 -hell, in any agency on the bloody continent- by far. God only knows why he’s stuck handling Alec’s sorry arse instead of running the entire Handler departement yet. So if he has trouble hacking into something, Alec knows deep in his bones that he better starts worrying.

“The bug you put on her phone is doing ok but there’s nothing work related on it. She might have another one and you missed it. And the security protocols at Verlac Inc America are pretty tight - never mind that she’s a secretary - but they have something on her phone to prevent network connection while she’s at work and disabling it will fry the phone and sound a alert.”

Shit. That only means one thing.

“I’ll have to go home with her…” he voices, dread making his free hand shakes a little bit. It’s the only solution, a fourth date would take too long to arrange and, well, terrorism is more or less a time sensitive matter.

Plus the building she lives in is all payed for by her company: top security and bodyguards in the lobby. Which only adds up to the list of bad news, since their little mission is of the book. Off the book that is off the book. The higher ups had been clear -no acrobatics, no police, no suspicion. No help if he gets caught. The Americans aren’t fond of spies, and even less of the ones sent by their allies. The only way in is, well, in.

Go directly to bed. Do not pass Go. Do not collect £200... but still feel like a cheap whore.

“Don’t worry, that Galadriel wannabe will probably go to the bathroom once back at her place to prep, you only have to give me direct access to her internet modem in the meantime. I’ll hack it and call you on your cell faking an emergency at the ER that requires all hands on deck. I mean you’re a surgeon! She will swoon, I’ll bet,” Magnus says, obviously trying to be reassuring but Alec can barely hear him over the sound of his labored breathing.

“Yeah, she ought to,” Alec repeats, trying to convince himself. This can’t turn into the Rome incident. It won’t. Magnus is good, he can code on the fly with his eyes banded and only one hand. It will be fine, he asserts to himself.

“Damn, don’t I wish to be on that extracting mission in St Petersbourg… backdoor diplomats are such a pain but there would be guns! Violence! Possibly a mad dash across rooftops. Quite romantic if you ask me and far more suitable for the both of us,” Magnus says mournfully, as if he spends those kind of mission actually facing the guns and doing the running around. Somehow Alec is positive that his handler wouldn’t be so fond of gratuitous violence, clad in his soft leather shoes and trademark silk shirts, if he was directly confronted by it. “I mean I’m a senior handler! Honeypotting birds and blokes are for interns!” he continues his rant, “interns!”

St Petersbourg and extract mission echoes in Alec’s head, once, twice and his free hand spasms again.

“Wait. What diplomat?” he croaks.

“Don’t know the details, just that Carmichael was sent to Russia in a hurry last week and that Ragnor is handling him ever since. Needless to say, Rag isn’t the happiest camper right now.”
Alec concentrates his mind on the mad typing Magnus is doing, so loud he can hear it over the comms; he calms himself trying to picture Magnus multitasking several monitors at once to avoid him the unpleasant task of sleeping with a woman. His respiration eases out, his hand unclench and his need to punch something diminishes.

“Carmichael,” he dumbly repeats. Carmichael -002- is straight and pretty loud about it, Alec’s memory supplies him. Carmichael was obviously free and could have been sent here, instead of Alec.

“Yes, that arse is a fucking disaster, always cocking up his ass-on a bitch!” Magnus swears loudly and the typing stops brusquely.

“What?” Alec asks, looking at his watch nervously. He doesn’t have that much time left before he needs to head back in the bar, but he doesn’t want to leave Magnus. Nevermind that Magnus will still be in his ear, it’s just not the same.

“She’s at it again.” Magnus sounds awfully calm over the comms; a sign that whatever situation they’re in is about to turns to shit. Alec nearly ask for clarification when it hits him too.

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“Mother,” he mutters simply. His throat hurt around the word, like it’s coated with shredded glass. Alec wishes, not for the first time, that his goddamn mother wasn’t the head of the double-o program. You think there would be some kind of regulation forbidding field agents’ relatives to have a say on mission schedules, and yet...

“I can’t believe that after all those years she’s still trying to convert you,” Magnus comments with sympathy. “If you feel like reaffirming your gayness to her, I’ll be a enthusiastic part-”

“I’ll pass Babe,” Alec cuts him off, Magnus’ codename quickly rolling off his tongue -far too sweetly for his liking. Though Alec doesn’t want to examine that too closely.

There are boundaries, regulations, a terrible track record on past relationships and so forth, anything Alec can find to hide himself behind when it comes to his stupid, stupid little crush on his bloody handler and his mindless flirting.

Crush…. As if. It stopped been a crush a long time ago.

Magnus makes a sounds like a groan, immediately followed by the unmistakable sound a cup being put down violently.

“Don’t say I never do anything for you,” the handler snaps, his usual warmth replaced by a wall of ice between them. “Let’s get you back to that charming mark of yours, shall we? Your queen must be getting impatient, Aragorn.”

Alec sighs and pockets his phone. He sighs again for good measure and takes a good look at himself in the mirror. Halfheartedly, he straightens his back and gives a charming smile at his reflection before wincing at the thought of Magnus watching him put on his fakest face on.

This is going to be a long night.

* * *

Mostly by accident, Alec finds himself staring at a snow globes display.
He should stop. Nothing comes out of it anyway, since Magnus never mentioned the neatly wrapped little gifts.

Two years of this and Magnus never peeped a word, never left the small offerings on his desk more than an hour after Alec put them there. Never displayed any or even trashed them. Alec doesn’t know what that means.

He swore after Húsavík that he would stop -the little whale trapped in plastic he had brought back from his mission had disappeared like all the gifts without a trace. All of this was pointless.

And yet.

Standing in one of the many gift shop in San Francisco International Airport and a little lost about how he got there, he’s staring at bloody snow globes again. The selection here is pretty big and he’s wondering if he should pick a Golden Bridge one or go crazy with a gay flag one.

Perhaps heading back to the waiting area empty handed -bar his small carry on bag- would be for the best. He’s tired, he runned around all night after Linda turned out to be a ruthless assassin posturing as a heedless secretary. Worst thing is that after all the effort they put into this mission, they have nothing to show for it as Verlac Inc servers are clean of any illegal activities at first glance. But that’s for the Archives department to pour over their records now.

Alec’s part of the mission is over.

He’s feeling vulnerable and not only because Linda stabbed him; Magnus had walk him through stitching the wound himself in his hotel bathroom -voice tightly containing panic as always in those situations. His words had certainly been more soothing that the content of the mini bar.

Shit. Alec’s dissociating again. Or associating. He’s doing something unhealthy that’s for sure -God he’s tired and the alcohol in his system probably doesn’t help. Yet it doesn’t change the fact that his only solace is Magnus’ voice. Always.

He knows that it’s his PTSD talking, he knows this. Doesn’t change a thing. Magnus’ smile is still incandescent, the way he slurs Alec’s codename still wanton. And he’s just is out of reach. Either over the comms, miles and miles away from Alec or simply not responding to the only way Alec dares to communicate with him in real life.

 Fucking snow globes.

* *

**THEN**

It all started in the Eternal City, two years ago.

Italy in the high of summer had been a bad idea and Alec, between his fair skin and well documented love for all black outfits had been dying in the sun. He was burned and groggy and sweaty and the opposite of, what was Izzy’s choice of word again? Ah. Sprezzatura .

The effortless display of grace, she had explained. Something that he would need to seduce a well bred, sickeningly rich heiress that was spending her summer in Rome. Something that Alec, as it was known, direly lacked of.
Yet Lydia Branwell, duchess of something, had zeroed on him quickly, seemingly taking a fast liking to the poor britty boy that was so warm he fainted in front of the Trevi Fountain. Talk about composure. He had been sent to protect her from shady family members -who were right there- and she ended up fanning him with her newspaper and giving him an ice cold glass of water.

And so the Rome incident happened.

Alec was charmed, really, and charmed the girl pretty easily too, keeping close to her. Despite her upbringing she was cut from the same cloth he was and they got along like a couple of silly old people in a retirement home. They ended up going to the Colosseum together, even sharing one or two embarrassing instagram pictures at the Leaning Tower of Pisa (Alec giving it a side hug and Lydia punching it).

Alec’s brand new handler was quiet and addressed to him as 009 and only when the situation called for it. Handlers had never like him very much or stayed longer than a few missions with him; either because he was unbearable or his mother’s son.

It had been a fun week -even if the threat on Lydia’s life had been an obvious downer in Alec’s mind.

Until she made a move on him. Which had been bloody awkward since he was \textit{required} to do everything in his power to keep close. He, hum... vainly tried to perform. Alec still has no idea how men explain their lack of erection to their lovely dates. No idea had all.

All of this, of course, was recorded for posterity.

Lydia had frowned and asked him if he actually wanted this (they had been down to their \textit{underwears} at that point) and it had been damn hard (\textit{uh}) to say something that could save the day with his handler cackling over the comms, strangling himself around the fact that Alec couldn't get it up.

In his defence, no one knew he was gay then. No one but his siblings and obviously the guys that Alec had discreetly hooked up with along the years.

And his handler was whispering “Woody Lackwood” over and over again and making Alec laughs nervously like an idiot. If he hadn’t been the one in this situation, Alec would have been cackling too. Not very nice, but again, he never claimed to be.

“Are you... gay?” Lydia had asked, all gentle voice and gentler smile. “Because I’ve seen how you’ve been ogling my cousin André but I thought that you might have been bi. Wishful thinking I guess.”

Alec couldn’t tell her that André was planning her murder. It was against the sacrosanct regulations so he just nodded pitifully, finally coming out to her.

“Oh, I’m gay,” he said, strangled voice barely audible over the pounding of his heart. It was weird to say the words at loud for the first time in his entire life. Izzy, Jace and Max had all say it for him and one-night-stands had never required a verbal confirmation.

Lydia smiled again, a bit sadly (probably because of the despaired look on his face) and nodded, putting her clothes back on quickly.

Alec’s handler, who he had never met or heard of before a week ago (a man that he called \textit{HI1} for God’s sake!) stopped laughing and gasped.
“009, I-I no idea,” he mumbled. Guilt had been evident in his voice.

Alec was going to do something, go hide in the bathroom and tell his handler that he wasn’t gay, that Lydia just wasn’t his type and that he didn’t want to offend her. He probably would have done it regardless of the truth - *his truth*. A handful of minutes would have sufficed and he would have avoided everyone knowing (not that it was H11’s fault, mission feeds were recorded, as per regulation). But then the wall to Lydia’s hotel suite exploded and Alec had other concern than his sexuality being exposed.

Namely, save his boxer-clad arse and Lydia’s.

After three days of intense car chases and all out violence, André was dead and the day was saved. Lydia was shipped back to England by her grateful parents the moment the threat was eliminated but not before she could slip a kiss to Alec’s cheek and tell him that all of this had been *very educational* - all this with a glint in her eyes that called for trouble.

But Alec could barely think about anything beside the voice in his ear and the assistance it provided. When H11 wasn’t poking fun at Alec for the dreadful lies he had to say to flirt his way through people, he was actually the best possible handler a field agent could wish for.

The fact that Alec had a very explicit dream about H11’s voice the last night he spent in Rome wasn’t important. It was solid partnership, that’s all.

When Alec got to the airport to fly home, he had not expected to get drawn by a little gift shop and its snow globes. But it was funny wasn’t it? Rome monuments under a plastic snow. So ridiculous when the cloak of heat outside was barely kept at bay in the waiting area of the airport.

But Alec had scaled Saint Peter’s Basilica two nights ago, with only H11’s voice to guide him to follow the quickest path and find Lydia before the bomb exploded. H11 had been babbling about a game, Assassin’s Greed or something, and talking about the sights. Alec had been grinding his teeth together not to laugh at the ridicule of his situation; of H11’s easy tone in such a dire night; of the fact that he could be late and Lydia could die. Or that he could do all the right choices and still come up short.

And through it all, *H11* had been there.

So, Alec had bought a little replica of the monument, trapped in cheap plastic and glitter. It was an awful present for someone who saved your life but H11 seemed like the kind of guy that would dig it.

Anyway H11 was probably butt ugly and forty and *straight* and even if he wasn’t he was still Alec’s handler, his partner. Regulation would not permit it.

When Alec got back home, he debriefed with his mother. She knew.

Everyone knew and it came rushing back to him that he had say *the words* and hadn’t take them back. Maryse was waiting for easy denial, her gaunt face and cool eyes on him like a judge’s. Alec was tempted but, behind his mother, Izzy and Jace were waiting with the kind of faith that should have been aimed at someone else. So he decided to be brave (he couldn’t even feel his hands from the way they were clenching with nerve) and shrugged.

“I’m gay,” he repeated again. This time his truth had come through.

No one really had a problem with it except, of course, his parents. But at work, no one cared. The country would still be saved by Alec, gay or not, if the need arise. At the end of the day, that’s what
counted.

Still, it was a bit of a shock to be free of all this pain and all those lies. So he forgot about the little package in his carry one bag and it was only after a week back home that he remembered. He left it at a cluttered desk that an intern pointed at the next morning. And three hours later, Alec met H11 by accident.

As first meeting goes, it wasn’t the best. Alec heard him before he saw him, screeching at someone over some codes that were beyond someone’s level with a lethal dose of contempt in his voice. That was H11’s sneering tone alright.

So he turned toward the beautiful voice and was struck on his feet, mouth gaping and all. Because the man was impossibly beautiful and soft looking from head to toes. Blond highlight, shimmering red and gold shirt and tight jeans. He looked ready for a runway show, not the windowless workstations of the SIS building.

Alec’s brain went blank and not a single smart thing to say popped into his mind. The genuine lust in his belly took him aback, wrestled him to the ground and beat him senseless. This was… unusual.

At that point in his life and in his career, Alec had done loads of things that he wasn’t 100% behind. Hooking up was to relieve tension and even a passing attraction could do. Being a spy hadn’t made him very trusting or capable of seeing people and not potential enemies. But this man was different. There was no overlooking him, no way of belittling his beauty or the respect that Alec felt for him after that one mission together.

The older gentleman with H11 poked him in the ribs and his eyebrows went up, up, up, looking at him. Alec, still, couldn’t say a thing.

He knew how to flirt, somewhere at the back of his mind. He knew that he knew. Hell, he could probably have this impossible man in his bed under five minutes if he brought his A game. But with whom H11 would be sleeping? Laughing with? Alec? Or some fabricated version of himself that he used on marks? Someone that he used for so long with the majority of his family members?

He didn’t know. Couldn’t think apart from the giant red flag in front of him and the ABORT! ABORT! ABORT! ringing in his ears. And just like that Alec fled. Just turned his back and walked to the elevator, punched the floor number of Izzy’s lab and prayed that no one would talk about this again.

That didn’t stop him from requesting H11’s file. And suddenly he had a name to that oh so marvellous voice and perfect face.

Magnus Bane.

Next mission, Magnus -who somehow decided to stick around as Alec’s handler- began to call him Woody.

After that one, Alec had to pretend to be on the phone while casing a lingerie shop (who was runned by some kind of underground brothel matron and her human traffickers without borders™ minions) and had talked nonsense for over an hour with Magnus (“Babe, I can’t find your size”, or “Babe, you know what babyblue does to your skin”) while his handler had been busy decoding a security algorhyme. It had been fun. By then Alec had nearly forgotten that Magnus was even hotter than his impressive hacking skills and about the little snow globe.

Then someone shot him in the stomach.
Magnus’ voice was the only thing that kept him alive for half an hour, before he lost consciousness. When he woke up, he was in pain (but alive, ALIVE) and in a cell, Magnusless. That probably had been the hardest part, being alone and lost. He concentrated his mind on the last words he had heard from his handler “we’re coming for you, stay awake, focus on me”.

It was no surprise that the first thing he did when he escaped was to slip the earpiece back in place (before even reaching for his beloved gun!). It was like clean water rushing on him. The eye contacts, unfortunately, had been damaged and rendered useless.

“Babe?” he had say, not really expecting an answer.

But Magnus had been there, ready, obviously waiting for Alec to make contact.

“You wanker!” was the only thing he cursed for a while. “Why don’t I have a video feed? I’m hearing voices, oh my God! HOW ARE YOU EVEN ALIVE?” Magnus shouted.

Alec hadn’t been able to utter a word to explain how a some surgeon working for the matron had stitched him up, because Magnus wasn’t listening, his relief too loud to hear Alec above it.

Then he collected himself and walked Alec through escaping the rest of the building and to a safe house on the other side of Washington. Alec had collapsed on a bed, exhausted but alive. Over the comms, Magnus wasn’t any better but Alec still asked him to walk him through the last development of the mission.

Magnus cursed him again, this time clearly annoyed, but proceeded. The mission was more important than being a bit winded.

When Alec finally got home two weeks later, he left a little Pentagon snow globe on his handler’s desk. He didn’t really know why.

It happened again after Cairo (the Sphinx) and after Paris (the Louvre pyramid) and on and on and on... Until Alec had to face that he had a problem; that coping with multiple death experiences and codependency with fucking snow globes while avoiding the object of his affection in real life wasn’t so good.

But what could he do about it?

*

NOW

The elevator ride to the handlers’ floor is a long one. Thirteen levels underground doesn’t seem that much after scaling the Empire State Building (twice) but there’s something about being willingly buried under so much concret that freaks Alec out.

But it has to be suffered. For a while now, he doesn’t feel home after a mission -doesn’t feel safe- before delivering a little snow globe to Magnus’ desk. And that unfortunately means that he has to go all the way down to the basement, where it’s so cold that the overworked servers are easily kept from overheating.

Magnus’ not here, Alec checked before entering the elevator as he always do. It’s sad that he hasn’t seen much of the guy he’s so codependent of for two years. But he’s sent overseas a lot and for long period of times and, more than once, gets back to back assignments or needs to deal with an
emergency taking precedence on his need for a cooldown -and damn his mental health or social equilibrium.

Apart from a few chance encounters in Maryse’s office upstairs and sometimes in Izzy’s lab, Alec doesn’t actually see Magnus. There was, of course, that one godawful time he spotted his handler in a gay club in Soho (Alec had run for dear life, abandoning Izzy and Raphael from Q dept and went straight home, shivering all over).

He’s a coward, he knows. It’s not like Alec actually talks to the guy when they’re in the same room. He just can’t.

The elevator rings open and Alec exits it, relieved to see that the handlers’ floor is nearly empty. Since that first time down there, he memorized the way to Magnus’ workstation. Second alley, seventh row, he smiles to himself, making his way through the empty desks and black monitors. He ignores the people -internes, mostly- that openly gawk at him from their desks. Everyone knows that double-o agents don’t bother coming down here and prefer the gun ranges on the -7 floor or Q’s lab. So he’s kind of a curiosity.

Alec swallows, uncomfortable about been a piece of gossip and putting Magnus in this situation. The handler didn’t ask to be part of Alec’s welcome home ritual. Alec can only hope that no one gives him shit (or that he doesn’t think of Alec as his stalker).

If only the interns could stop ogling Alec like he’s wearing a bomb vest that would be nice. He walks faster, giddy about escaping their scrutiny.

He gets the little package out of his overcoat pocket (Golden Bridge wrapped in pride flag paper this time to celebrate his return from San Francisco) and nearly jumps in surprise when he realises that Magnus’ desk is empty.

Empty.

Not just the chair. The screens are turns off as usual but the pictures that Alec knows so well after two years are gone. The trashy For Queen and Cookies mug isn’t filled with cold coffee (it’s not even there), the post-its with lines of nonsensical codes on it covering the partitions have been taken down and everything smell strongly of chemical cleaner.

There’s nothing. It’s blank. Deserted.

Alec’s hand grips the wrapped snow globe so hard that it breaks, glass cutting at his fingers and glittery water staining his coat and the ugly government issued carpeting under his feet.

Magnus’ not here, he thinks. Alec keeps staring at the desk for a while. The building seems to crumbles on him, taking his lungs apart, ripping his throat. He can barely breath.

When he regains some of his sense he puts the broken (and bloody) snow globe in the pristine dustbin under the desk and forces himself not to run back to the elevator.

Up, up, up the floors fly by, and suddenly he is in the atrium, quickly passing security (the guards there look with concern at his bloody hand but something on his face must dissuade them from prying). He’s finally outside, in the brisk London air but it doesn't elevate the pressure he’s feeling around his heart.

Magnus is gone.

He makes it to his barren flat and his shower before he’s drowning in a full blown panic attack.
Chapter End Notes

Title from *Skyfall* by Adele

Thank you for reading!
Two days later, he’s in Cabo to meet weapon smugglers selling military grade tech and gear right from England.

Why did MI6 even bothered bringing him back to London from San Francisco to send him to Mexico next was beyond his comprehension. The only sleep he got was medicated and at this point, it’s clear that no one actually cared -not even him, he’s too numb for that.

Izzy tried to talk to him before he boarded but he shut her out, unwilling to hear out loud what he’s so adamant to keep inside.

“009, your contact will be wearing a pink pajeo and a matching hat,” his new handler drones in his ear. It’s like having a mosquito buzzing around your head -one that you’re not allowed to kill.

Alec doesn’t answer. That would be acknowledging that Magnus, *Babe* as he only called him, is gone.

*Fucking promotion*, he swears in the privacy of his mind.

Alec spots his contact on the beach and makes his way towards her, too tired to take the long way round and try to look natural.

“You come here often?” he asks listlessly.

The woman looks at him up and down, frowning. She’s CIA and joining him on this assignment, more a hindrance than a help in his opinion. They’re supposed to blend in with the crowd of tourists and locals, making it through the day as a couple of young tourists that had some kind of instalove whatever before heading to buy assault rifles and such tonight. But he’s not in the mood.

It’s obvious that she didn’t expected him to be so… bored? Unprofessional? Completely out of his depth? He’s all that and more.

He should listen to the spiel she serves him but he can’t. It’s all decorum and if they could cut to the part where they *do something* and he stops ruminating over Magnus, he would be grateful. People shooting at him he understands… handlers that bail on their charges of two years without a word is another matter.

Alec’s proud that he didn’t ask where Magnus went. He was tempted, nearly did it but before the words could leave his mouth he remembered Magnus’ cool tone when Alec shut down his last attempt at flirting in San Francisco.

Last drop and all that. It’s a clean break at least, Alec should be happy about it.

The next days pass in a blur of bullets and adrenaline.

The weapon dealers come to the agreed place but before Alec could even open his mouth, the place is swarming with armed men in shiny gears; the weapons they’re packing aren’t to laugh at and Alec and the CIA agent are lucky to escape the place, more relying on instinct than the incoherent babbling of Alec’s handler.
Both their hotel rooms and covers are blown up and too many people are on their trail, with too many guns. They flee in a run-down little tourist plane and even that is not enough to shake their pursuers. Alec loses his eyes contacts during a fight and the CIA agent is nearly fried in an explosion.

This is the biggest disaster Alec had the displeasure to be assigned to since Seoul.

After they fly halfway across Central America, their trail finally goes cold (not without a last asshole using Alec as target practice) and they can take a breath to make sense of what the bloody hell happened.

*Never trust high stake missions with interns*, Magnus would say. *Never trust interns at all*.

It’s only when some shouting occurs over the comms that Alec truly wakes up from the haze he’s been into.

“Give me that you useless wanker!” Magnus demands. “009?”

That hurts more that finding the empty desk somehow. Alec bits the interior of his cheek until he forces down the need to cry “*You abandoned me*”. Magnus never owed him anything after all. It was his job and he moved on.

“H,” he mumbles instead. He hasn’t been this petty in years but he ought to express some small amount of bitterness, it’s only healthier. “Can you tell me what the fuck happened in Cabo, please?” he pants, “because from where I’m sitting it seems that my handler cocked up his research and nearly got me killed.” Even with the shortness of his breath he’s snarling the words. So it might be a little more spiteful than what he planned. The pain he’s in forges it… right?

“I’m taking over until we can extract you,” Magnus says lamely and, is it Alec or can he hear some guilt in his voice? “The people you were supposed to meet got tipped off that you weren’t buyers.” Some mad typing fills the silence and Alec refuses to be soothed by the noise. But fuck, it’s like coming home. “I’m accessing the Pokemon Go accounts of family members of the cartel’s lieutenants, I think I can use that to pin some of them somewhere on the map with a predictive geolocation algorithm -something that *you* should have done six days ago!” he shouts, probably at the intern. “This way the mission won’t be a total loss… we’ll extract the ones we can find right along with you. Stand by, I’ll get back to you when I’m done.”

Alec could get drunk on Magnus’ voice and his absolute control over the situation. Might be the rum he’s been gulping talking, though.

“Good news?” the CIA agent asks him. He’s not sure of her name. Might be the one she gave him or an other. It’s easier to not talk to her at all.

“Someone competent is worth kaaaaaaah! You mind being a little more careful?” he shouts, wincing at the way she’s pressing on his abdomen.

“Drink more rum and let me work, froggy,” she orders, eyes not leaving the wound on his lower stomach. Her hands are covered in his blood and she’s been looking for the bullet for a while now. To say that the emergency first care training at the CIA is lacking would be too kind.

He grinds his teeth together to keep in an actual scream of pain and swallows some rum. He doesn’t know what burns more.

“What the hell was that 009?” Magnus asks and Alec recognizes his stormy tone immediately.

Shit. Comms were still opened.
“Bullet,” Alec says, as if it explains everything.

“WHY DIDN’T YOU TELL ME HE WAS INJURED?” Magnus bellows, probably at the cowering intern. That will teach him (though Alec’s not exactly sure who needs to be taught to be honest).

“It’s tea pot,” he giggles suddenly at the CIA agent. “I’m a tea pot. Now the froggies are the French,” he continues. In that moment it’s important for Alec that she knows the difference. He’s not dying under the wrong stereotype, thank you very much.

It’s possible that he’s getting drunk, with all the blood he lost and rum he’s been drinking to compensate.

“I’m a tea pot, Babe.”

He passes out before he can hear if Magnus chastise him for using his old codename.

*\

THEN

“Hey!”

Alec can still remembers his stomach dropping from several stories when he heard Babe - Magnus - call after him. He didn’t know how he knew it was aimed at him but he did. So he stopped right in his track and stayed perfectly immobile in the middle of busy the atrium of the SIS building.

Magnus suddenly filled his field of vision, as graceful as a panther rounding his prey. His hair was tipped in flamingo pink and falling a bit in front of his eyes. Alec had wanted nothing more than to push it back so he could lose himself in his handler’s black-rimmed eyes more completely.

Alec felt ridiculous and sick at the same time at the thought. Not a week before he had used that very same move to bed a embassy attaché in Mumbai so he could steal some stupid files from him. How other agents still find a way to have real relationships on a government whore salary if was a bloody mystery to Alec, one that he wasn’t sure he wanted the answer.

“Hey, Lightwood. Remember me? Right, course you do. Little voice in your ear screaming “TURN LEFT! LEFT!” like a very angry wife riding shotgun. Hard to forget,” his handler joked, big smile on his face.

Alec nodded, afraid to look anywhere else than at Magnus’ brown eyes, lest he got fixed on his lips or down the unprofessional neckline of his oxford shirt.

“So I wanted to know, about that new earpiece that the Quartermaster's crazy little helpers are developing. I’ve been thinking we should definitively put our names down for field testing. ‘Might need a little tweaking on the fly but I’ll feel better with that baby stuck in your ear. I’m going grey a little bit more every time you get punched and lose your earpiece… How am I supposed to mock you if you can’t hear me?’” he ranted, face going through a myriad of expressions. He was so adamant, even as he tried to hide his concern with humor.

How did people go by being so… uncensored? So bloody honest?

Alec stood there, wondering why Magnus couldn’t be like all the other handlers he ever had. Why
did he have to care? Because Magnus’ anguish was painfully obvious every time Alec put the earpiece back in place after losing it: frantic calls and relieved insults, tart comments on his ability to attract danger like a magnet, all of it wasted on his sorry arse.

Alec had nodded silently like a puppet. This time though, Magnus’ smile dimmed.

“So… Congratulation on not dying in Mumbaï…” he said lamely, trying to keep the conversation going for some crazy reason.

Alec resented him a bit for it (mainly because his tongue was glued to his palate), but his mind was on the little Gateway of India replica in a glass bubble that he left on Magnus’ desk the day prior.

Shit, he had thought. Was Magnus going to ask about the snow globe? Snow globes?

But he didn’t. Instead, Magnus nodded to himself, lips a tight line of disappointment and walked away in response to Alec’s unbreakable silence.

“Goodbye, Woody.”

Alec had to remind himself that it was for the best. What could someone like him offer to someone as luminous as Magnus?

*

NOW

Izzy’s not happy with him.

Nobody is but his little sister’s disappointment is worst that anyone else. She paced his hospital room for two whole hours, high heels clacking on the floor loudly, counting on her fingers how many times he nearly died since he joined the double-o program right out the Academy.

Like he needs her keeping tabs on that for him (forty six and a half, some kind of grime record, especially since he’s only have four years on the job).

She’s insistent that it’s maddening, that even Jace never even approached that number (twenty four if that time he was fed bad fish isn’t take in account). Had she not been so worried about his health she would have punched him until he caved and promised to be more careful (she told him so five different times since she got in his room—not a record, she must be worried).

But Alec is stubborn and not even Izzy can convince him to stay in the hospital one more day. Ruptured intestines, damaged liver (bullet, not alcohol which is very surprising) and a severe case of blood poisoning left him weak for too long after Cabo. He needs to get out and they can’t force him to stay here anyway.

When he signs the discharge papers he can hears Izzy fuming behind him. Still, she takes his sparse belongings and helps him get in her car.

The drive to his flat is tense and he swears he can smell ozone. But if his sister wants to explode she keeps it inside, giving him a very mature silent treatment instead.

It’s ok. He’s feeling dizzy from watching the buildings flash in and out of his field of vision. Perhaps telling her to slow down would help but she would certainly u-turn him back to the hospital the
second he admits weakness. He can’t fault her for her care.

* For the first time in months, Alec actually has free time (albeit due to the severity of his injuries and his superiors realization that pushing him so much wasn’t ethical or efficient on the long term). He can’t shake the feeling that he’s being benched for screwing up in Cabo.

So he stays in bed until 9 am and takes his medication, reads reports, goes out for painful walks in the cold winter air and forces some food down once in awhile. Even the nurse coming everyday to change his bandages and to check on his general health doesn’t try small talk with him.

For an entire week his life is quiet, hushed under feet and feet of snow and burning whiskey. Operatives all around the world would kill for that kind of time alone and for once he's grateful too. He could do without the nightmares though, but he manages. Online shopping has its use.

On a Monday, Maryse leaves a stern message on his phone telling him that she’s still waiting on his report of the Cabo disaster. He’s tempted to send an email with only the name of the intern who screwed up inside (not that he knows said name).

Two weeks in his vacation, Izzy is still pretending that she isn’t using her Q department privileges to spy on him with billions-worth security equipments. He lets her. Deep inside of him, he knows that she just scared to death for him so he empties his alcohol stockpile over the balcony, switching over to overly sugared tea. He’s scared for himself too.

Everyday, Alec hopes that Jace (who’s still hasn’t surfaced) is perfecting his tan somewhere safe with his wife. He deserves it.

After a while of this, Alec seats himself by the balcony and racks his brain for reasons not to quit. Just quit, not stay has an instructor, not to take a position as a supervisor. Just quit and figure out what he can learn to do aside from looking at the wrong side of a gun.

The answer is not so much.

His parents were spies. He and his siblings were raised to be spies as well, their entire education leading to it. Isabelle could have got in the field agent training but she was simply too smart for it, too valuable. At 24, she’s running in all but name the Q department waiting for the old Quartermaster to retire or blow himself up. Then there is poor Jace, who never really got over the fact that he was adopted and didn’t want to disappoint Maryse so he gave up his dream of ever flying as a combat pilot and followed Alec head first on the espionnage dirty world. Hell, Max (who’s 17!) has been pushed to work harder in school so he can uphold the family tradition and no one seems to be able to dissuade him from walking into their bloody steps.

And Alec? Alec never really had any other options. At least he doesn’t think so. Brainwashing started as soon as he could walk.

The reality of his situation is gripping his lungs tighter and tighter and shit, he was right to do this on the balcony; fresh air does help keeping him from choking on his hopelessness.

Heavens he need a cigarette and to hell with Izzy’s disapproval. But before he can reach for the packet, the front door of his flat opens and closes rapidly and he hears someone making their way inside.
It’s not Izzy or his mother since there’s no high heels clattering around and they’re the only two (beside Jace and Max) to have access to his flat. And since his brothers are certainly not in London at the moment, it means that someone just broke in his flat without triggering any alarms.

Alec is baffled. What kind of assassin is not only loud but comes by the (steel reinforced) front door when their target is so clearly on the balcony, where a sniper could do the job in an instant?

A bad feeling creeps up his spine when humming starts in his kitchen.

“Oy! You might want to give me a hand for- you don’t have a microwave. Or a stove. Why does that not surprise me?” Magnus calls out.

From Alec’s kitchen.

In his flat.

In the same space that he is occupying.

“No, really, how do you eat? Do you even eat?” Magnus continues, his baffling brand of concern all over his tone.

Alec is left dumbfounded for a minute or two. After that, he gives serious consideration to jumping; his flat is only four stories high and he likes his odds.

But Alec is physically incapable of not going back inside and following the voice that guided him home so often. As he passes through the living room, he eyes with dread the little package he received this morning. Thank God it’s not opened, Magnus doesn’t need to see that.

Magnus looks stupidly good from behind and Alec takes a big calming breath when he finally see him. New undercut, he remarks. Suits him.

Suddenly he swirls on his heels gracefully and they’re facing each other. His former handler is wearing a soft charcoal cardigan and black slacks with the smallest amount of jewelry on him. Perhaps he’s sick? The few times Alec saw him he looked like he just robbed a Tiffany’s. Worst, his face looks pinched, like he’s not happy to be here at all.

A tinfoiled dish is sitting on the counter, impossibly huge and smelling a lot like raclette cheese. Magnus... cooked for him?

“How did you get in?” he manages to ask, his voice sounding a bit funny from disused (or it could
be talking to Magnus when he is standing right there that shakes him).

Magnus casts on him a judgemental look. Obviously the fact that those are the first words he exchanged with Magnus directly in two years (the mission related stuff in Maryse’s office notwithstanding) doesn’t go over his head and Magnus crosses his arms protectively in front of him.

“You’re talking to the person that helped create the security system of your home -of every MI6 agents’ home- and you dare ask?”

“Izzy did that,” Alec says, closing his eyes against Magnus’ vibrant presence. He never saw enough of Magnus to get use to him. He doubts that it would have worked.

“Your sister built the hardware. I wrote the software and its backdoors,” Magnus’ shrugs but Alec picks on the petulance under it. Magnus, if nothing else, as always been proud of his achievement. If Alec was to press on that hard enough, perhaps Magnus would leave him alone.

“Then I suppose you can lock the door behind you just fine,” he growls. He’s not sure from where all this aggressivity comes from and doesn’t like it one bit. But Magnus is the last person Alec wants to see right now, if ever.

More lies.

“How nice,” Magnus sneers. He doesn’t get out though. If anything, he roots himself more in Alec’s sorry excuse of a kitchen. He even widen his stance like someone expecting a punch would do.

Alec deflates in an instant, not meeting Magnus’ proud glare anymore.

“Why-why are you here?” he finally asks.

“That’s what friends do,” Magnus says quietly. It costs him to say so and it shows. Alec can see how he is working his jaw against unsaid truths.

Alec wants to say something. Defends himself from the sneaking guilt in his guts, denies Magnus’ claim. Say thank you.

“I have a kettle,” he says instead.

Magnus frowns.

“You and 99% of the count- oh. Earl grey, two sugar.”

Alec is grateful for the distraction and goes get the kettle from his bedroom, bringing it back to the kitchen slowly.

It’s not that he need tea in the middle of the night (though he might) but his left thigh was butchered a while ago in Seoul. Surgeons saved the leg -barely- and after that, stem cells therapies did a wonder to repair muscle damages and regrow nerves.

Still.

If only all those little miracles could stop the crippling pain Alec sometimes wakes up with… so it’s boiling water and wash clothes traitemt -Alec doesn’t want anyone to know about it, that’s why he doesn’t have meds. That, and the pain could be psychosomatic, he thinks bitterly. A bad leg might throw him out of the double-o program… something that had put him in panic a few month back but now, he just feels empty.
“Luring me with tea won’t save you from having to talk you know,” Magnus says as he sits down on the couch. “I let you do your… whatever that was for two years. Surely you have something to tell me after all this time.”

Alec turns around and freezes when he sees that Magnus picked up the package and is now shaking it lightly like a kid would with a christmas present.

“Put that back,” Alec tries to order but it comes out like a plea. A common affliction when Magnus is doing… anything, really.

Amazingly, Magnus stops. He puts the package on his lap.

“What did you need from the Puerto Paraiso Mall in Cabo?” Magnus asks, looking down at the parcel’s label curiously.

Alec doesn’t answer and concentrates on filling the kettle with water as his hands are shaking slightly. It won’t take Magnus too long to guess.

“You were at the hospital,” he prompts, dizzy with the idea of Magnus visiting him while he was unconscious.

“ You were at the hospital,” Magnus retorts, saying nothing at all.

“That’s…” Alec gives up on his sentence. “You could have asked Isabelle.”

“Do you know how irritating it is when you do that? You just start saying something and then stop and lie or deflect,” Magnus says, refusing to let Alec’s poor defence mechanism slide. “I needed to see how much you wrecked yourself this time.”

Alec is happy not be be looking at Magnus’ face right now. He sounds… bad. Disappointed.

“Why?” Alec croaks as the water begins the boil louder and louder in the kettle.

“Because I’m tired of relying on what I read in reports or the little you let on when you actually talk to me!” Magnus nearly shouts.

Alec tenses up but doesn’t comment on the accusation. Silence from him is answer enough.

He does not expect the cushion that hits him on the back of the head. He nearly elbows the whistling kettle over the counter in surprise.

“I’m sorry, did I walk into a stranger’s home by mistake?” Magnus snaps. When Alec turns to look at him, he looks particularly proud of himself. Angry too.

“You walked here without invitation, I can remove you from my flat at any moment.”

“Try that and I’m not coming back,” Magnus threatens.

“I DON’T WANT YOU TO COME BACK!” Alec shouts.

Magnus doesn’t flinch but his entire face shuts off.

“The little snow globe in that package would say otherwise,” he says, throwing the package on the couch, the disgusted expression on his face quickly spreading to the way he holds himself. Tense and defensive. But above all, done.
Alec recoils like Magnus slapped him.

“Oh right, we don’t talk about that.” Magnus says. Then, to himself, “we don’t talk at all.”

The kettle loudly stops in the silence. Alec turns back to it and fills mugs. Bringing them to the living room, he’s faced with a challenge: Magnus is sitting on the only couch and hell if Alec dares sit next to him. So he puts the earl grey on the coffee table and walks to the balcony, settling against the massive window with his own mug.

“We do talk,” he tries.

Magnus arches one of his manicured eyebrows at him. “No, I talk. You answer. And you need an earpiece or you just stare blankly at me,” Magnus rectifies ruthlessly.

“I-I… I’m talking to you, now.” Alec breathes. That ought to count for something, Alec hopes. Not that he knows what he wants.

“Then you bring little trinkets from your missions,” Magnus continues, eyes on his untouched cup, as if he didn’t heard Alec. Perhaps he didn’t talk out loud. “What were you going to do with that anyway?” he asks, vaguely pointing at the package.

Alec doesn’t know. A week ago he got nervous, restless and tired of the nightmares. So he ordered something online. He regretted it immediately but didn’t cancel. Then waited with dread and pure need for the snow globe to be delivered.

“I needed it.”

“Why?”

*Because I only come home because of you. Because I’m alive, despite everything, due to your dedication. Because I don’t know if I can do anything without you at my side. Because you’re everything I could want if I was someone real and not a blank piece of clay.* Alec doesn’t utter a word of that. It would be wrong to put that kind of weight on anyone’s shoulders, and on Magnus’ in particular.


Magnus snorts.

“All that… You know I have a box full of these?” a silence “I’m sick everytime I look at them so I stashed them away from my sight. I fucking hated going to work after one of your return. Because I knew that one of those little fuckers were waiting for me,” Magnus confesses.

Alec would have prefered being accused of stalking and nearly drops his tea in shock.

“I-I didn’t mean to-”

“No, of course you didn’t mean to rub it in my face that I nearly got you killed -again!” Magnus cuts him.

What.

“I never! I just needed you to understand that…” He can’t say the words. “You saved me, every single time you saved me. I… didn’t think you would take it that way. The wrong way.”
“What other way would I take it? You ignore me when we’re in a room together, you never mentioned the ever growing snow globe collection and you flirt back for a second then stop and ignore me some more. You were nice enough when you needed me, on the comms. But outside of that? I’m not worth a word or two.” Magnus deflates when he finishes and Alec gets the impression that he just wrestled himself to say that out loud. To accept it.

“I’m not good at this,” Alec confesses, trying to own up his mistakes and behavior.

“You seemed pretty good at it with the rest of the world.” Magnus’ tone isn’t biting, just tired.

“Forgive me for not wanting to serve you the bullshit I give to my marks.”

“So don’t. Be yourself,” Magnus pleads. It sounds wrong to Alec’s ears.

“Did it occur to you that I have not a bloody clue who that is?” Alec says, tired of having no real answers to offer.

Magnus looks up at Alec, brown eyes feverish. He just gapes at him for a while. Suddenly he’s standing up and Alec knows that he won’t like what he’s about to hear, his stomach dropping, down, down, right through the floor and crashing far below.

“You could have asked, I would have helped. Or you could have trusted me. I mean, I spent the last two years hearing you seduce people left and right. I know all your tricks, Pinocchio. And it would have been nice to have a choice.”

He leaves the flat stiffly, forgotten cup of tea still on the table where Alec put it.

An hour later, when he has finished shaking, Alec realizes that Magnus left with his snow globe.

* *

THEN

Magnus dated. Obviously.

Not that Alec stalked him but he knew. One could think that people dealing in state secrets could hold their tongues but… Gossip is gossip and even Izzy wasn’t impervious to it. Magnus was after all extremely datable -the obnoxious hellion that Alec had for a sister had said fuckable but, yeah, Alec wouldn’t have touched that one with a drone from the other side of the world.

Every time Alec went to see her in the Q department, she would give him an update about who’s fucking who that week while working on a new fire throwing hair spray or poisonous lipstick. Somehow it always had a calming effect on Alec, to hear all about the mundaneness of his colleagues. Regulations were about making them into faceless gears of a big, all-powerful and all-knowing machine. But still they remained humans.

And so was Magnus.

He was always in the fringes of Alec’s life then; working, helping and sounding criminally alluring doing all that. The occasional tentatives to talk happened from his part, followed by morose (yet professional) conversations over the comms. Alec told himself time and time again that it was enough.
It was obvious that Isabelle purposefully gossiped about Magnus just to get a rise out of Alec and annoy him (or embarrass him) into confessing... feelings. Feelings that he had no right to have.

“And Rafa told me that 003 is seeing your handler after work a lot. He saw them at a bar two nights ago,” Izzy said, hands deep in the carburetor of a burned out Aston Martin. The front of her lab coat was black with burn residue and mucky grease.

“So?” Alec tried hard to sound and look unaffected by the news. He disliked 003, as she reminded him too much of a deadly snake for his taste. And Magnus? Who was flashy and unapologetic and kind to be with that manipulative woman? Just no, it turned something in deep in his stomach.

“Well that’s something, no? I mean I know you won’t ever acknowledge it but he’s the best handler with Fell and Catarina -I certainly did right by putting his name for you, didn’t I?” Meddling evil sister. “You don’t think that agent Belcourt is trying to steal him from you? Her missions are always so high profile... His career would be set and I suppose some would think it’s nice working with their girlfriend, even it’s against regulations.”

“He can switch if that’s what he wants,” Alec shrugged, eyeing a new gun prototype with envy. “Interns can’t be that bad.”

Izzy turned her head towards him, clearly thinking that whatever came out of his mouth was utter rubbish. I knew the feeling.

“What do you think destroyed this car?”

“Jace’s driving skills?”

“Good guess any other day, but no,” she laughed. “One of our intern engineers decided to try a new carburant formula.” Her laugh let place to a deadly expression. “I should have drowned him in the stuff.”

Alec snorted at the state the poor car had been reduced to; interns were the worst and he bloody knew it.

“So I’ll request Fell when he’s free. He hates Carmichael.”

“That doesn’t bother you at all? To lose Magnus?” She looked unconvinced.

“He’s not mine, Izzy.”

But Magnus didn’t leave. Didn’t utter a word of his relationship with Camille Belcourt. Alec was, against his better judgement, pleased. Magnus continued to flirt with him like nothing was different so his relationship with Belcourt couldn’t be that profound.

Right?

After a year of partnership, he had come to fall for a lot of things that made Magnus, well, Magnus: the shameless way he bragged about his worth and the pride in his voice when he got shit done. His laugh when he was lightly making fun of Alec. The way he moved like he owned the space he was in. That little tremor in his voice when Alec was out of danger, at last. His kind heart and sharp wit.

Alec would have ruined him, though. He was made of ill fitting jagged pieces and a touch of his hand would cut Magnus right open and bleed him dry. Killing machines don’t get to wreck real people.
That certainly didn’t stop the soaring feeling he got when Izzy told him that 003 and Magnus had had a shouting match in the atrium that had to be broken off by security a few weeks later. It had been vicious, selfish even, to be happy about such a thing but Alec couldn’t help it. He was an asshole and he knew it.

A few weeks later, Magnus was spotted with another handler, holding hands and smiling... and on and on and on.

Alec was jealous of course. But what could he do about it? He wasn't whole. He was a spy that knew how to play people, clay that could pretend to be human. Magnus deserved more than that.

*  

**NOW**  

“What I want you to realize is that, for all her influence, your mother doesn’t have a say in what happens in this room,” agent 007 says, pushing a button on the side of the entrance.

The safe room answers, closing down around them. If Izzy and the rest of the Q department did their job right, the room was now entirely cut off from the rest of the building. No one can know what happens inside once it’s closed.

“I-I’m not sure this is necessary Luke,” Alec says, pushing his bag around with his foot.

“You’d be surprised,” the older agent answers. When he turns back to Alec, his face lights up like the sky at dawn. Luke is just so… balanced. It’s weird to see such a genuine smile on a double-o agent when there is no mark around.

It’s infectious and Alec smiles too, even if he has no idea why they are here. Being back in the SIS building after so long makes him nervous and Alec’s not sure he actually wanted to.

They’re both wearing their training gear and Alec isn’t sure why because the room is empty, just blank white walls. It’s big and could accommodate a hundred people without too much trouble but there is no echo. Weirder, now that Luke closed it, the temperature is… strange. Perfectly even. It’s hard to say where his skin finishes and the air starts.

Luke came pick him up a few hours ago from his flat, saying he needed him for something (Alec didn’t have the heart to refuse 007 and followed him). But when Luke had lead him to the Quiet Room of all places, Alec had frowned. He didn’t have the clearance level to even look at the door, let alone go inside and activate it.

“What is this about?” he asks.

Luke taps something on his phone. The light dims and a large section of the floor rises like some kind of stage.

“This is the Quiet Room, but you heard the name in rumors I gather. Now what you can’t know is what the hell we do in here. And stop standing like that, there are no snobby officials here,” Luke demands playfully.

Alec looks quizzically at him before he realizes that his standing to attention, hands clasped behind his rigid back. He didn’t even know when that happened.
“Luke…” Alec stops, massaging the back on his head. He feels like a kid that’s about to be told off his bad behavior but Alec is still on leave. He shouldn’t be here. Being rude to Luke isn’t an option (he probably wouldn’t survive it to be honest, 007 is the best of them) so he says “I’m actually too tired to play guess.”

“You’re too smart to have to guess,” Luke says as he throws his phone on the top of his bag without really looking.

Alec groans but walks to the platform (which reaches his hips) and pokes the floor there. It’s strangely soft, like padding. On a whim he jumps on it. His abdomen burns a little, but Alec had know worse and so he breathes it out. Now that he's on it, he sees that the platform is a square.

“This is some kind of, what, exclusive dojo?” he asks, frowning.

“Something like that.” In a heartbeat, Luke somersaults and lands on the platform, as lightly as acrobat.

“Hum. If you mean to spar, I really think you should find yourself another partner be-” Alec jokes. But doesn’t have time to finish before Luke is upon him and trying to wipes his legs from under him. Alec jumps out of his reach, barely, and loses his footing over the edge of the platform, falling hard on his arse back on the floor.

“Fuck you!” he wheezes, rolling on his side and clutching his old wound.

“Is that all you can do 009? Or are you so far up your own arse that you can’t even see a old man like me coming for you?” Luke calls.

Alec opens his eyes and looks up at him.

“This is so fucked up, Garroway,” Alec snarls. “Sod off, I’m done here.”

“You’ve been moping in that flat of yours for over a month. What am I supposed to do? Let you get mad in there or at least try to wake you up?” Luke has the decency to look concerned.

“So you’re going to hit me?”

“Well I was told that your wound was healed so yeah but, uh. Obviously your sister was wrong.” He almost sounded apologetic. Luke sits on the edge of the platform, frowning. “I thought that a bit of exercise might be good for your blood. We’re worried about you, kid”

Alec doesn’t answer. What’s the point? They’re all worried and he can’t do a thing about that.

“You should get out of the country for a while. Visit the world or something.” It sounds rehearsed and Luke’s heart isn’t in whatever he’s proposing.

“Yeah sure. Missing some snow globes from... Oh wait! I’ve already been everywhere!” Alec shouts this time. He winces as he sits upright, hands clenching on his knees.

Traveling for pleasure seems laughable to him. He saw it all, climbed it all, was shot at in a lot of countries. He hates planes with passion; hates tourists and their air of amazement; hates unfamiliar beds; hates taking pictures; hates changing time zone.

He hates everything.

Luke is quiet for a moment, looking at the blank walls and his hands in turns.
“You should at least shave the beard.”

“I did.”

“When?”

Alec passes a hand over his cheek and shit. It’s covered in thick curls again. He didn’t notice that so much time had passed since Magnus left his flat in silence. Alec had went a little crazy with his electric razor, shaving the beard and most his hair off, in a hopeless effort to tame it.

“So I’ve been a little out of it. Can’t be the first double-o to need a little space from the job,” he defends himself.

“Course you’re not. But usually they let people in,” Luke says like he’s talking from experience.

“You did?”

“Hell no. Nearly cost me my girlfriend at the time. I went a little wild, cabin in the woods style. Quiet and solitary. No one for miles and miles; just me and my dog. Spent an entire year there,” Luke says sadly, looking down at Alec with pity born out absolute understanding.

“What happened?” Alec asks after a moment, letting his curiosity get the better of him.

“006 went rogue. You heard of it, no?”

Alec nods, it’s a well know cautionary tale among double-o agents, even if it happened twenty-three years ago and that there is little actual facts and a lot of speculation about it. Alec just know that agent 006 tried to destroy the MI6 and disappeared before he could be executed.

“It wasn’t in the reports that he was my best friend,” Luke continues, “close as you are with Jace, raised and trained together. I took it hard.” It sound like the understatement of the decade. “Never met someone so addicted to power like he was…”


“You went through something rough too,” Luke says.

“What? Nobody betrayed me. I just got shot, it’s not that big of a deal.”

“Not in the classic sense. But you suffered. Quietly, but you did. Izzy, Jace and Bane saw it. Anyone reading your reports knows that you take impossible risks. You accept for the hardest, dirtiest assignments like you’re punishing yourself for something. Your mother should have stopped you a long time ago. The others didn’t have the influence on M or the council to make you slow down but she did. Yet she encouraged you, in her own way, to do worse. To take worse. That’s bad Alec. That’s betrayal.”

“That’s the job,” Alec weakly counters.

“Please. I’ve have two decades of the job on you and not half the number of scars.”

“You’re the best.”

“This has nothing to do with being the best. She did this to you to gain power over the council, to sap M’s influence. She raised you to be her perfect soldier with that in mind.”

Alec wants to defend his mother but Luke’s right. It never stops, the flow of missions, the pressure or
the harsh words his mother wields. Suddenly he’s crying. He doesn’t try to stop, just curls on himself with his head hidden between his knees and sobs.

“You need help kid,” Luke says kindly. “It’s not a bad thing. Take a leave and go somewhere you don’t need a gun. You have…”

A massive tremor shakes the room suddenly, throwing both of them down.

“You okay?” Luke asks, first to get back on his feet. He looks worried.

“I take this isn’t you trying to get through to me?” Alec asks with little hope, using his sleeve to dry his tears. Shit, how badly timed can a breakdown be?

Luke shakes his head, retrieving his phone from his bag and a gun.

“Come, we need to get out and look what is bloody going on.”

* *

They fight their way through a dozen of heavily armed soldiers before reaching the atrium.

The elevators have been disabled or destroyed, security doors have been blasted to nothing and getting around in this smoky maze safely is near impossible. And everywhere, corpses: burned, shot; left in clusters or alone. It’s always bloody and Luke punches a wall when he sees one of the youngest trainees in the double-o program laying around like a discarded puppet. Both Alec and Luke are wounded, their gears torn and cuts in places. Luke keeps passing his hand over his forehead to keep blood away from his eyes. Alec has been choked (twice) and his left knee is a throbbing mess.

This is, to date, the worst day of his life -worst than Seoul, which is no small feat. He doesn’t know where Izzy or his parents are. Half of his coworkers might be dead and Magnus… Alec closes his eyes for a second. This isn’t the time to let fear for his loved ones paralyse him.

It’s strange to be fighting without Magnus’ assistance. Strange and inefficient, like fighting in the dark with his senses blurred. Alec’s grateful that Luke is here with him.

In the east corridor, they find someone that got blasted. Poor bastard is still alive despite his body being mostly charred and Luke says something under his breath before ending the person’s suffering.

*Crack*. Alec flinches at the sound.

He turns towards Alec, as if to say something but he just shouts his name in warning.

Alec doesn’t have time to think he just spins around and shoot at center mass twice without really taking in whoever’s coming at him. His attacker goes down and before he can get up Alec jumps on him and breaks his neck.

*Crack*, again, reverberating in his wrist and forearms. This time Alec doesn’t react, just pants through his adrenaline high.

Thank God for his training kicking in. The dead man is wearing the same sleek bullet proof vest and gear than the others. Everything looks brand new and Alec finally recognizes it. Those are the same weapons and gears that he investigated in Cabo, the ones that were stolen from the british military.
“What the hell.”

“What the hell. How did all of those guys get in?” he asks again, a burning question since they got out of the Quiet Room and found the SIS building under attack.

“To do this so rapidly they had to have had intel from the inside,” Luke answers. “How’s your side?”

“Sore,” Alec lies. It hurts as if he’s been shot again. He shouldn’t have bailed on those physical therapy sessions.

Luke isn’t fooled but they don’t have any other choice. They move forward, guns ready.

“Alec!” Isabelle’s voice rings in the silence of the corridor and he feels his entire body relax at once, so much he feels dizzy. He stumbles towards her, left knee protesting, and catches her in his arms.

Both of them are in tears in seconds.

“What the hell are you doing here?” she asks him after a long minute.

“Luke decided to give me a pep talk,” he jokes.

She looks at Luke, at the bodies lying in the corridor and then back to Alec.

“You could have him shave the beard, at least?” she says, a bit of hysteria in her voice.

“The beard stays,” he nearly giggles. This is bad, he needs to stay sharp. “How did you escaped the Q departement? We had to climb through the elevator shaft.”

“I was in Mum’s office when the first explosion happened. We got separated… I don’t know if she…” she stops herself. “They know the place, the security.”

“That was my feeling too,” Luke says grimly.

“Special forces are late, and I don’t know how many of those arseholes were in,” Izzy continues.

Now that Alec can breathe he see the blood on Izzy’s clothes; the way she’s favoring her right leg (she’s barefoot) and the multiples cuts on her face. She looks like something out of one of his nightmares.

“We’ve got around twelve of them. But we saw more.”

“Way more,” Alec confirms. What the hell is happening?

There’s a metallic noise, like a can rolling on the floor and Alec turns around, spotting the smoke grenade too late. In seconds they can’t see a thing and his eyes are burning, tearing up profusely in the smoke.

He can hear people running toward them and suddenly he’s tackled and thrown on the floor violently.

Someone shouts in his ear and panic rises when Izzy’s hand is torn from his and he’s cuffed tightly, hands behind his back like a common criminal and dragged out of the foggy corridor to be dumped into the atrium.

“Are you that incompetent that you can distinguish your arse from our people?” a woman growls.
Alec is not sure until he opens his burning eyes but yes, his mother is screaming at a soldier and the
guy is slowly backing away from her while a second one is freeing Izzy and helping her from the
floor.

“For Pete’s sake!” his sister roars, “that’s backup? Late and stupid?”

“We couldn’t take any chances,” the soldier who untied her says curtly.

“I’ll give you a hint, the bad guys aren’t wearing training gear and everyday clothes!”

Someone uncuffs Alec and he nearly falls on his face, only saved from the indignity by Luke’s
careful hands.

“What the hell is happening?” he croaks, coughing smoke.

Maryse turns surprised eyes on him but rolls with his presence.

“Valentine Morgenstern came home,” she announces pointedly, like it’s supposed to mean
something.

Luke immediately tenses up against Alec’s side.


“Yet it’s true. Saw him myself before one of his goons shot at me. 003 has gone rogue too. She was
spotted escaping with him ten minutes ago.”

“Belcourt’s a turncoat?” Izzy’s eyes are almost comical. “She’s one of our best!”

“It seems that her best had a price,” Maryse commented sourly.


“What? But… it was years ago! Why come back now?” Alec frowns. One does not take the risk of
attacking the heart of British intelligence for kicks or mere revenge.

Not twenty odd years after the facts.

“He destroyed some of our servers with E-bombs. But I think he was mainly after them.” Maryse
looks down at her tablet with something cold in her eyes, calculating and vicious. Alec can’t see
what she looking at but it must be bad.

“Who?”

“The handlers!” Izzy exclaims, peaking at their mother’s tablet. “He took them!”

She barely finishes the words that Alec’s already running, pushing a soldier around and using his
emergency rope to get down to the Handlers’ floor. Down thirteen floors in the dark, hands burning
and side aching, heart racing like mad.

It’s chaos there.

Medics are busy attending to the wounded and the vents mustn't be working anymore, because the
air is stale and the scent of blood is so strong, Alec gags on it. There are bodies everywhere but no
one has the time to cover them, foes or allies, and they lay where they fell -broken puppets, disarticulated and pitiful.

He doesn't know what he’s doing here. Magnus isn’t an handler anymore, thank God for that, but Alec just need to make sure. It had been like a reflex, stupid and illogical, to come check. Now he’s wondering how the hell he will get back in the atrium because there is no way he can climb that rope on his own.

Shit, he will have to wait that the elevators are cleared for use.

A hand drops on Alec’s shoulder and his body tries to react but he’s too tired to do anything else than jump in surprise. When he turns his head, pain radiates in his neck and Ragnor Fell is looking at him with pity.

“He’s not there,” he says.

Alec frowns. Of course Magnus is not there, he got promo- no.

No.

“I-I don’t understand, he wasn’t working here anymore,” Alec pleads once he understand Fell’s words and expression.

Ragnor looks at him strangely and says:

“Mags came back after your little trip in Central America. Said that, I quote, he hated his new office upstairs. Load of rubbish if you ask me, boy has been pining after your useless arse for years now.”

Alec’s legs fail him and he hits the floor without feeling pain. He’s too numb for that. He wants to shout at Magnus for his stubbornness, for his attachment to Alec -who is a useless arse. His breathing goes erratic and he has to close his eyes against the remaining of the violent assault. But blood is still on his tongue, in his nose. A vicious reminder. All the noise around him, though, are distorted like he’s underwater. The wails of pain and calls for help are hushed and weird.

He’s close to a faint.

Sickenly, Alec’s mind replays him Magnus’ face when he left his flat, all those weeks ago. He wonders (not for the first time) how Magnus fared after that. If Alec had come back here sooner and took back his place; had went and talked to Magnus, begs for another chance. Alec would have at least know that Magnus was downstairs and would have his earpiece to help him, to go to him.

Did Magnus fight, manicured fingers trembling on a gun handle? Alec can’t remember if handlers are put through basic training these days… Did Magnus call for help and had no one answer? He always managed to get Alec’s out of tight spots and Alec wasn’t up to the task when it was his turn.

Everything’s blurry after that. Alec is positive that he tried to climb back up on his own but… did someone stop him and put him under? Did he fall, exhausted from his wounds?

All he knows is that, when he wakes up, he’s cuffed to a bed and floating, floating through too many pain drugs. He pulls and pulls at his cuffs but he only cuts his wrists and even that he doesn’t feel.

“For your own safety,” his mum says from somewhere. And his head feels heavy and he’s unconscious again.
Chapter End Notes

Title from *Writing's on the wall* by Sam Smith

Thank you for reading!
Okay, here's a little cheat sheet for this chapter as I used codenames quite liberally:
003 is Camille
006 was Morgenstern
007 is Luke
008 is Jace
009 is Alec
Q6 is Izzy and H7 is Ragnor

Good reading!

Waking up a second time isn’t quite the same. His wrists are bandaged but not bounded to the bed and he’s in pain.

Good.

He focuses on that, on the deep ache everywhere in his body and forces himself to sit up on his hospital bed. First try he nearly throws up. Second time he can’t go all the way. Third time, he uses the railings to do it, abdomen burning still.

“You shouldn’t be doing that.”

Max.

“Wha-” shit his voice is hoarse. “What are you… doing here?” he manages to say, looking straight at his little brother. He should be in the Academy, up north. Safe.

“Iz is needed to assess damage, Dad’s been posted at Downing Street to keep the Prime Minister safe and Mum is busy accusing M of incompetence.” Max snorts. Then, more serious, he announces “Jace resurfaced by the way. Saw the SIS building getting blown up on the telly and felt guilty being safe. Didn’t have more than a foot on british soil that Mum had him rounded up and guilt tripped back into active duty... but I wasn’t told more.”

Max looks tired. Seventeen-year-olds shouldn’t be that hollow, shouldn’t be standing vigil in their older siblings’ hospital room. Alec hopes that Max didn’t have to sleep in the cheap looking chair he’s currently sitting on.

“Shit.” Alec stands up and has to sit right back, head spinning and stomach ready to empty. “I need to go.”

“You can’t. Mum is coming soon to see you. I think she wants you to go back and you can’t do that. I heard the doctors, your body isn’t a machine Alec. Stay in your bed and fake if you have to,” Max orders him from his chair.

Alec looks around. The room is tiny but, with the numbers of wounded there was, it’s a miracle he has one for himself. Lightwoods’ privilege, he guesses. The cuffs he was restrained with are waiting
on the nightstand and Alec realizes that Max is his guard as much as his brother right now.

“The handlers,” Alec begins, snatching the cuffs away discreetly.

“They’re as good as dead and Mum said that the MI6 is going to concentrate on taking our operatives out of the field. Morgenstern won’t wait long before selling whatever intel he stole or can extract from the handlers,” Max says with something final in his tone.

Alec as a weird impression of *déjà vue*, looking at his little brother. He sees himself, regurgitating his mother’s words. Her cold logic now poisoning Max as it poisoned him.

“They took my handler,” he says under his breath.

“What did you say?” Max’s hand is on his arm. Alec didn’t even hear him move. The gesture is a command and a warning at the same time. Max is still a child in so many ways but he could take Alec right now and flatten him.

“I’m going to take him back,” Alec vows, his voice is loud the tiny room.

He grabs Max’s hand quickly and cuff it on the bedside railing. Cuffing the other is more difficult but Alec has the advantage of height and surprise. When he takes a step back, Max’s phone in his hand and his brother’s eyes are doing something that would be rather comical in other circumstances.

“Sorry little brother,” he wheezes.

He doesn’t let Max frantically calling his name slow him down when he exits the room.

*Magnus needs me.*

The corridor is empty, but the ruckus Max is making will attract people soon enough so Alec wobbles as quick as he dares towards an elevator. In the ER, he steals a long coat left unattended and before he can really prepare himself, he’s out in the cold February air, in his hospital slippers.

He quickly calls Izzy on Max’s phone to tell her not to worry and throws it away, cutting off her shouting.

The walk to Alec’s safe house is trying and long but it’s worth it in the end. The place is completely clean of his identity, so off the book that his mother and the MI6 would probably kill him for having it. Alec knows that several other double-o agents have such a place as Luke helped him put it together about a year ago. It’s the only *fuck you regulation* that Alec ever permitted himself to do.

Alec wants nothing more than to fall on a stuffed chair but he can’t, if he stops right now he won’t wake up easily. The cold water of the shower hits him and he nearly shouts, biting his lower lip to stop himself. More unpleasantness follows.

First, medical. He’s got cuts and bruises all over him, courtesy of Morgenstern’s men and his trip down the Handlers’ floor. At least his side isn’t looking too bad. The scar is a little sore but whatever rest his mother forced on him did the trick. He tends to his wounds, changes his bandages and pops some vitamins mechanically, like someone making tea without thinking about it.

Second, objectives: 1) Save Magnus and the other handlers. 2) *Destroy* Morgenstern’s operation. 3) Follow Luke’s advice and take an early retirement.

Alec will need to locate where the prisoners are being held, if they’re still alive (*don’t think about that, don’t think about that*). Going there will require a discreet transport, one that can wait and not
be seen. One that can transport six (or less) and survive the possibility of a chase. Disable the security of the base without getting caught, look around for the handlers and then extract them. Five (or less) frightened handlers, not trained for combat and in bad shape after a few days of torture (don’t think about that either). All that in a probably heavily secured and secluded base.

By himself. Sure.

Kill/capture Morgenstern and Belcourt if possible.

Go home, face disciplinary action, resign if still alive.

Regardless of the state of his head (which has been banged a lot) it’s the craziest plan Alec ever thought off. He can hears Magnus poking holes right into it from wherever he is.

Alone, this plan is unfeasible.

*

THEN

“Woody? WOODY?! Why are you not answering?” Magnus shouted in his hear.

Alec wanted nothing more than to answer but the gag in mouth stopped him for doing that. It was lucky the guards had found the decoy earpiece but not the real one. That way Alec got to be on the first row of Magnus’ freak out. He was locked in the trunk of a car, hands and feet bound, hood on his head and there was nothing he could do to ease Magnus’ worries.

No video or audio feed, just the sinking feeling that he had assisted -powerless- to the death of his field agent. Alec could hardly comprehend how Magnus was still doing this fucking job and not losing it.

“You better be unconscious you arse,” Magnus continued. “And if you're listening and you're not my stupid danger magnet, you better be prepare for something bad. I'll find you and destroy every. Single. Aspect. Of. Your. Sorry. Life. If you harmed him in any way.”

Shit. That was so against regulation Alec felt ill thinking about Magnus getting sacked because of his stupid loyalty. The driver of the car took a sharp left and Alec’s head banged on the inside of the trunk.

“Woody, if you're conscious and incapable of answering, well, I hope you didn't get your jaw broken again… you're really too pretty for that kind of job. God. What kind of hope I have to cling to... you better be gagged…”

It was lucky Alec was the one hearing this and not, say, one of his kidnappers. He wouldn't have survived the blushing.

“This is the point where I drop you and leave you to your own devices,” Magnus said emotionlessly and Alec closed his eyes, knowing full well what was going to happen -bracing himself for it the best way he could. But instead of deafening silence, Magnus muttered “Fuck regulations,” a long pause then, “I’m going to turn on the experimental body monitor function of your earpiece and it better match your heartbeat pretty boy”.

Alec had been raised to be a spy and in all his education, the word experimental had always been
bad news.

A sharp pain in his left ear torn a scream from Alec but it was thankfully muffled by his gag. It went on one, two, three long seconds before receding, slowly. Something was hissing in his ear and Alec forced himself to breath in and out, as evenly as he could.

Magnus was, for once, impossibly silent. It occurred to Alec that his handler was probably listening to his heart right now, holding his breath until whatever program would identify it (if it actually could). His heartbeat went a little crazy at the thought

“Oh my god, you fucking sadist, of course you had to get your cute arse captured again,” Magnus accused in a rush. “I don’t care about that fancy combat training of yours I’m killing you the second you get home.”

Alec hoped that there would be enough of him left by the henchmen who were holding him at the moment for Magnus to kill.

“Okay,” Magnus said, “better I get you out of whatever you’re in this time before your mother comes down here and shut down my access. But you owe me.”

Alec nodded to himself. He had spotted a nice gift shop in McCarran International Airport after he landed. Surely they would have some ridiculous snow globes in there.

*

NOW


“Third floor is clean, moving on to fourth floor. Over,” Alec murmurs from his hidden corner as he sees a scientist pass by, shouting at a stoic soldier who is power-walking as if to escape him.

“Basement is clean but for the extensive armory. Placed C4 charges and moving toward our exit point to secure the area. Over,” Jace says, voice cracking in Alec’s earpiece.

“Copy that boys, I’m on the sixth floor, infirmary unit. No sign of them. Next check in 5, over.”

Once the scientist and the soldier are out of sight, Alec breaks into a run and cross the long corridor in seconds.

“Shit I never realized how stressing this is,” Izzy grumbles in his ear. “I’m never calling Ma-Warlock One, I mean, a prima donna ever again. 008 the cameras in that room are not disabled. You need to wait a secon- done.”

Jace swears at their sister and if Alec wasn’t as focused as he is, he would be laughing.

Finding Morgenstern’s base of operation had been a team effort. Luke had brought Izzy and Jace to his hideout -against Alec’s will- to help rescue Magnus and the others. The older double-o wanted a piece of 006 (for obvious reasons) and refused to let Alec go in alone, simply sitting himself in the small living room, looking as impossible to move as a mountain. Both Jace and Izzy were furious that Alec hadn’t counted them in from the start and shouted at him for a while before laughing at the stupidity of his plan. They still added their names at the bottom of it without too many modifications, because they’ve always been crazier than he was.
First, Alec investigated the weapons and gear that were sold in Cabo a month ago; the very same that Morgenstern had outfitted his soldiers with to attack MI6. It couldn’t be a coincidence.

Find the seller.

Find his ledger.

Find Morgenstern using the intel.

Easy.

Well, not that easy, as there was no trace of a seller and no indication of known organisation behind this. Alec and the CIA agent had never got to investigate the weapons anyway, not between all the bullets fired their way. The MI6 had send someone else after, but the trail had gone cold and the buyers that could be tracked down weren’t knowledgeable. Whoever had run the sale had gone underground and kept quiet, which was no small feat.

But Salmon -Samsom? Rafa's boyfriend- had poured over Verlac Inc's records for weeks after Alec’s mission in San Francisco and the nerdy Archivist had found something strange, something that clicked.

Sebastian Verlac or one of his subordinates had visited each and every military site in England that the guns had been stolen from in the first place. Some visits were old -a few years back, when Verlac had still been in his early twenties- and seemed random, perfectly justified by Verlac Inc's weapon manufacturing subsidiary, Morningstar Mechanics and by publicly known government contracts they owned. Other visits were odd, to some other manufacturers that didn’t work with Verlac. No contracts or associations followed, just vague inquiries or promises.

It all sounded a lot like recon. Shifty.

Then, Izzy broke into their mother's office. It was inevitable, Maryse was privy to secrets that Luke couldn’t even dream of, stuff that only M, their mum and the board knew about. Izzy went in there just like that, full on rogue and out, without so much as that bloody assistant from hell noticing that she stole key intel on Morgenstern -files that were far too high for all their security clearance level combined.

Those were mind opening, even if some of it had been heavily redacted (old-school style with entire paragraphs carefully erased, left blurry and unreadable). They reminded Alec of his own, sans high-treason or megalomania. Still, the similarities made him uneasy. Had he been a little less tethered by his siblings and his friends, he could have turned like Morgenstern.

Luke remembered some of it, filling out blanks when it was needed, even if Alec could tell he was still hiding some stuff. As long as it didn't endanger Magnus' and the other handlers' lives, Luke could keep his secrets -some old wounds were better left alone.

The files proves that Verlac’s father -a scientist and the founder of Verlac Inc- and Morgenstern had known each other and worked together during one of the former 006's missions in France. And like that Alec had a connection between the two, something solid that connected the dots in the events of the past months.

After that, it was just a matter of finding where the two could be holding the handlers. A Verlac Inc holding would be best, somewhere out of the way and probably not too obvious, where Morgenstern’s men could pose as Verlac security.

Could have been the Deep Space Observatory in Bolivia as Jace suggested but the satellite
photographs he procured showed no extraordinary activity in the past two weeks. The research facility in Scotland was another matter. The campus fences had been upgraded, entire squadrons of guards had been moved there, to the point that the inhabitants of local towns and villages were getting feisty about it on social media.

The site raised all kind of red flags but the kicker had been Verlac currently being there, seemingly to assess the facility himself. His public personal schedule was cleared of anything else for a few weeks.

Scotland it was.

Ragnar, who had joined them after a few days at Alec’s secret flat by his own means and with a great deal of scorn for their so-called sleuthing, had snapped one of his laptops in anger, remarking that the MI6 could have easily picked up the clues and organized a raid themselves.

Silence had met his words; it was true enough, yet they all were reluctant to voice Maryse’s choice to avert her eyes as Morgenstern was torturing intel out of her own men and women so she could focus elsewhere (namely instrumentalise the attack to steal M’s office and title).

It's undeniable that having their entire group is the only reason Alec has not been killed so far (or had accessed the equipment required for this). Even if Verlac Inc research center in Scotland is rather straightforward as a building, it's buzzing with electronics and backup systems to keep people like Alec and the others out.

They should have tried harder.

The building is east of Cairngorms National Park, not so far away from Aberdeen and, despite the impressive security their aircraft got them past the fences and radars in no time, undetected and safe.


“Still undetected, 007. May I ask again where you found that? Because I sure as hell have never seen its like before.”


Ragnar doesn’t comment but he huffs his disapproval loud enough at Luke’s rebuttal. Alec would like to know too. The helicopter they use to get here looks like a French Caracal but just… better? Reflective plates all over, freakishly silent blades, massive rocket launchers and machine guns -all sleek and deadly. And Luke had access to it, somehow -hell, for all they know, he stole it during a mission and never told anyone about it, the regulation breaking bastard. Bless him.

Alec passes a corner but stops dead in his tracks.

“Q6, the floor plan you dug up might be wrong. That’s not a staircase but a lab in front of me,” he announces to his sister.

They only have Ragnar and Izzy to backup three field agents, multiple different monitors and feeds, meaning that when he needs something, he has to ask instead of just leaving it to them to give tailored instructions. Worse still, Izzy isn’t a handler; she doesn’t have the training required to manage all those live feeds, satellite tracking and hack on the side like Ragnar does as naturally as he was born with keyboards under his fingers.

If only they could have reached Rafa in time before he got shipped to the Academy to upgrade their security systems, at least they would have a handler for each field agent.
“Get closer, what kind of lab is it? The other way up is bursting with security,” she says apologetically.

“Bioinspired Materials and Systems,” Alec reads off the little plate.

“Digitally locks, I see. Ok, place a bug I’ll open it and you go through.”

“Copy that Q6.”

“Shit,” Luke says. “Q6, there’s a gigantic lock on my way, I need your expertise. Sending you a proper scan now.”

“Taking over the door override for 009,” Ragnor announces before Izzy can ask. “Now that’s some ridiculous layers of coding. Uh, no cameras there,” Ragnor remarks. “No audio feed either; the room is clean.”

“That’s good, right?” Alec asks.

“Depends on what they’re doing in there they don’t want to be recorded,” Ragnor says hauntingly.

The door silently unlocks in the next ten seconds and Alec dives into a dimly lit lab, keeping to the floor to avoid detection if anyone is inside. He only sees a wide space and multiples machines, their purpose lost in the dark. He slides under the first work station he reaches to place a new bug on a computer and give Ragnor direct access to the mainframe and possibly an updated layout.

“Getting you a point of entry, H7.” Alec doesn’t say “work your magic” as he would have done with Magnus. He doesn’t want to jinx his chances to say it again to his handler.

“007, use your freezing gel over that long vertical line of metal on your left, should do the trick and let you access the mecanisme,” Izzy instructs to Luke on the comms. She never had to work this quickly before but she’s keeping her cool and Alec is insanely proud of her.

Still, Alec frowns. The plans of this research center were hard enough to come by (an entire week) and they’re obviously out of date on the security and layout. Their break in was carefully prepared and their routes follow the best they could work out based on those plans. The tiniest change could be their undoing. The bug better find something.

Someone swears and, to Alec’s surprise, the sound doesn’t come from his earpiece.

“Someone’s here with me, over,” he murmurs. Shit, he doesn’t want that to be his last words.


Alec crawls back to the door before turning his head, curious. He didn’t saw anyone coming in and...

On the other side of the lab, someone that looks a lot like Magnus Bane from behind is trying to pick a lock. Alec could be wrong, it’s dark in there but… He’s on his knees, looking at a disassembled door lock, electric cables dangling from an opening in the door mechanism. The man reaches blindly for something at his side and… bloody hell, that’s Magnus’ hand alright.

It’s almost anticlimactic. Forget that, it’s so unexpected that Alec is getting whiplash and feels his stomach convulse. He thought he would have to turn every stone of this building to find Magnus.

But there he is.

“You’re not in your cell,” Alec says loudly, baffled.
Magnus’ shoulders tense and he turns in a flash, menacingly pointing a screwdriver at Alec with conviction. Like it’s going to scare anyone from the other side of the room.

Then Magnus registers who talked and whose idiotic arse is crawling on the floor, not twenty feet away from him. The screwdriver clatters on the floor and Alec winces.

“You’re not in your cell,” he repeats and shit, his eyes gets misty.

“I escaped,” Magnus says mechanically. It’s adorable. He’s looking at Alec like he never saw him before, like he can’t believe that he’s real. “What are you doing here?”

“I-I .” Alec looks around, still lying on the floor. Isn’t it obvious with all the stealth gear he’s wearing and the fact he just broke in the facility Magnus is being held against his will? “Saving you, I reckon.”

“That’s… fortunate,” Magnus murmurs, nodding along.

It’s weird to see him like this, all… asepticized. He’s got the right skin, the right features (heavily tired) but his hair is flat and he’s not wearing the indecent eye make up that Alec always wanted to smears around. The baggy white scrubs he’s wearing are a crime and so are…

“Are those crocs?” Alec asks before he can think better of it. God it’s not the time for his nerves to abandon him but he feels jittery with adrenaline crash and relief. He might hyperventilate if he’s not careful.

“They didn’t think I was helpful enough for Berluti leather,” Magnus says, an approximation of a smile on his lips.

“009, have you lost it or did you find Warlock One?” Luke demands in his ear. Shit, he and Jace can’t see Magnus in front of him through his contact lenses.

“Warlock One escaped his cell and he’s… here,” Alec manages to explain.

“Warlo- you know that it means oath-breaker in saxon?” Magnus sneers. From where he found the strength to do it, Alec has no idea.

“Please tell him that I did not approve of-” “this is great we” “-op staring at him like a lovestruck puppy,” Ragnor, Izzy and Jace talk over each others and Alec is tempted to disconnect his earpiece to stop the cacophony they’re making.

Alec must have winced because Magnus looks at him weirdly, so he points his ear and says “lots of stupid people driving shotgun tonight.”

“Unbelievable,” Magnus says fondly. He swallows and asks tentatively, “You wouldn’t have something to eat, would you?”

Alec is on his feet immediately, crossing the room quickly and he hands a power bar to Magnus. Close like this, Alec is overwhelmed by Magnus’ gaunt face, the black and blue marks on his neck and wrists, the febrile way he opens the package. The bar disappears in seconds and Alec gives Magnus his bendable water container to wash it down.

He doesn’t dare say a thing. The others have gone silent -expecting. Alec can picture them: Izzy and Ragnor bent over their computers, monitoring the guards while Jace and Luke are hiding away in a dark room or an air duct. Magnus downs the water and gives Alec a look that wrecks the seasoned spy.
It’s shame.

Alec doesn’t censure his instinct and he takes Magnus trembling form in his arms as gently as he can. Magnus, to his relief, doesn’t reject the touch. Then Alec does something very stupid and shuts his earpiece and eye contact cameras off via his wrist command.

“Hey this won’t last okay?” he murmurs to Magnus. “You’ll get better but they won’t, I promise you that. Remember Seoul? You know how bad it got… How desperate I was. Right now you can’t see past the next hour, everything is tainted with pain and ignominy. Your body feels weak from lack of sleep and food. It’s stiff with nerves and the moment you will feel safe you will crumble of exhaustion and relief. And that’s perfectly okay, Magnus. You won’t have to be strong or put a brave face on.”

Magnus sobs, unrestrained, in the circle of his arms.

“You’ve been missing for nine days. It probably felt longer to you, hell knows it was for us,” Alec says. Sense of time is one of the first thing to go in captivity. “Luke and Jace are looking for the others. We’re getting you out.” Alec adds, hand hovering above Magnus’ head, conflicted with the raw need to touch his hair and Magnus’ boundaries being so violated already. The hand ends up on Magnus’ shoulder, a safe choice.

“The-they’re…” Magnus takes a deep breath and opens his deep brown eyes and focuses them on Alec. “They’re dead. The other handlers, I mean. 003,” Magnus chocks on the venom he uses to say Belcourt’s designation, “she told Verlac that I was the highest ranking handler and that they didn’t need-” he stops as if he can’t bring himself to say the rest.

Alec stares at him in shock for a handful of seconds and he turns his earpiece and cameras back on.

“-him with my bare hands, what the fuck is he thinking!? Magnus should have ended him years ago!”

“007, fall back to exit point, Warlock Two, Three, Four and Five are dead, over,” Alec announces grimly.

“009, what the hell were you thinking?” Luke snaps. Then, after a second, “copy that. You have ten minutes to join us before I come and kick your arse, over.”

“Never thought I would see the day he goes awol for a boy…” Jace mutters.

“It will need to be shorter than that,” Izzy cuts him. “008, take the armory down and detonate every charge you placed, demo is on. They realized that Warlock One is missing and are sounding the alarm. 009 you will have to fight your way back to the exit point, they’re closing on your position.”

“007, I’ll guide you to Warlock One and 009, they’ll need reinforcement soon enough,” Ragnor says calmly.

Something must have shown on Alec’s face because Magnus extracts himself from his arms.

“They’re looking for me, aren’t they?” Magnus eyes are full of resignation.

Alec nods and takes his spare earpiece from his belt, giving it to Magnus as well as his second gun just before a series of explosions shake the floor. A section of the farthest wall and ceiling crumbles in the lab, blocking the way Alec got in.
“Keep behind me and-” Alec doesn’t finishes his sentence. Magnus is holding his gun not only with determination but also *expertise*. “Yeah, shoot. This door isn’t digitally locked?” he asks, pointing at the one Magnus had been busy with when Alec came in.

“Got past that already. But I can’t get the mechanical part to open, too complex for the tools I have.”

Shit -Alec already used all his freeze spray earlier in the night.

“Ok.” Alec pushes Magnus aside and shoots at the exposed mechanism twice before trying to open the door. It doesn’t give and Alec winces. “We’ll need to go up then. 007 we’ll meet you on the fifth floor.”

Alec hears some swearing but doesn’t pay attention to it, too busy pushing a giant desk against the door, blocking it. With the cave-in, the ceiling above them might be too fragile from another explosion and would probably kill them both if they tried to blow open the door. That leaves only one solution: he places a C4 charge with a motion sensor rigged on the door. Anyone trying to open it will get blasted to pieces.

“Did they tag you?” he asks.

Magnus shows him his bloody wrist and Alec swears.

“Got it out in my room, don’t think there is a second one,” Magnus explains. “You opening the door of this lab out of turn might have triggered some red flag in the security system.”

“How did you got here?” Alec can’t help but ask as he sets a careful foot on the piece of the crumbled wall and ceiling. The wreckage forms an easy slope towards to the fifth floor. Now they just have to pray it doesn’t cave in while they’re on it.

“I wrote a subroutine in their security protocols. Surveillance cameras recognize me and I taught the main security program to open all doors that it could for me after 5pm today. That one's got a manual lock that I didn’t plan on,” Magnus says with a shrug. “Time was short,” he adds at Alec’s bemused expression, like he thinks Alec isn’t properly impressed and he needs to defend his plan.

Alec pauses. Like this, Magnus almost sounds like himself. Vibrant and proud.

“Bloody hell, Mags,” Ragnor says, forgetting to use the right code name. “You would have walked out of there with your hands in your pockets! Why on earth were you going the wrong way?”

“003’s quarters are somewhere on the fourth floor,” Magnus hisses back. Alec can see how he’s clutching his gun and the intent is clear.

“Warlock One we’re packing very serious,” staccato of gunshots, followed by distant yells “fire power tonight. I can assure you that Morgenstern and Belcourt will get a taste of it,” Luke swears, just a little winded.

“Good.”

Since the alarm has been raised, they don’t have to be sneaky and it’s liberating.

Alec just shoots anyone in their path until Luke nearly kills him at an intersection of corridors when
they meet.

“008, I got 009 and Warlock One. On our way to you, over,” he says casually as he lower his weapons.

“Copy that, over.”

There are five floors between them and escape and Alec feels more stressed now than ever. If something goes wrong, it’s now.

“Where is the exit point?” Magnus asks.

The past ten minutes have been hard on him. Running and being shoot at at the same time as you’re shooting back isn’t pleasant even when one’s in top form. Alec, unfortunately, can empathize with Magnus’ situation.

Suddenly a new explosion below them shakes the floor and Alec can’t help but smirks -guards must have tried to open the lab door, triggering his bomb.

“Ground floor,” Luke cringes. “I wish we could use the win-”

“Is that you 007?” asks a disembodied voice from the loudspeakers mounted on the wall.

Magnus flinches and grips Alec’s forearm in a tight hold. Luke swears and raises one of his guns to a camera and shoots it.

“Now that was just petty, my friend. I’m just happy to see you.”

“006, I presume,” Alec says to no one in particular.

“Luke, you shouldn’t have come here. It’s a pity I didn’t found you anywhere during my little visit to the headquarters but I was relieved in a way. You might be a hypocrite and traitor, but I loved you as a brother once. But once again, you try to take my property.”

006 sounds like he’s the wronged party here and Alec wants to barf. The guy’s mental.

Magnus shoots the nearest speaker, cooly lowering his gun once it’s done but looking like it did little to his moral.

“We need to move, he’s just trying to slow us down,” Alec stresses as he tries to push both Magnus and Luke. They need to move.

“And this must be Maryse and Robert’s son… Did they tell you that they followed me once? That they got cold feet and decided to run back to the MI6 and LIED to be forgiven? Or did they forget to mention that?!” 006 -no, Morgenstern, the man lost the right to be called that- shouts the end of his sentence. Obviously, he’s still feeling sore about whatever happened (or whatever he likes to say happened).

Alec bites the inside of his cheeks and forces himself to roll with the words. Morgenstern just wants to root them in one spot and can obviously hear them. Must have bugs somewhere.

“I’m afraid that we can’t let you go and that your accomplice on the ground floor is dead,” Morgenstern says like it’s paining him.

Panic swells in Alec’s heart immediately.
“JACE? JACE?!” he screams but his brother doesn’t answer. “Q6 what the hell happened?”

But the comms are silent and before Alec can truly lose it, Luke pushes him on the floor and quickly fires an entire clip of bullets at three guards that entered the corridor without Alec noticing.

“He jammed our comms and took over I think, we’re switching to plan B!” Luke shouts as he takes his earpiece and contacts out and throws them away.

Alec shoots a guard in a neat head shot from the ground and gets up, reaching for Magnus’ hand.

“Get that earpiece out!” he orders, doing the same with his and taking his contacts out as well - no need to let Morgenstern and his minions use their own cameras.

No other guards come in but more will soon follow.

“We can make it to the roof. H7 and Q6 will have activated plan B and teleguided our bird in position the moment they stopped hearing us, we can still make it in time,” Luke explains in a ushered tone.

“What about Jace?” Alec demands. He can’t… he can’t...

“We need to trust him to apply plan B, he’ll make it in time,” Luke tries to reassure.

Alec swallows, unsure. Then he looks at Magnus’ haggard face and… no. He can’t do it. He looks back to Luke quickly.

“You take Magnus up. I’ll go down and get Jace,” he says, trying to muster as much confidence as he can. He knows it’s suicide but Jace would do the same.

“Alec you can’t-”

“Leave it, I gave up a long time ago on making him embrace logic,” Magnus says, cutting Luke tiredly. “Just… don’t die. I though about new stuff to shout at you since the last time and I can’t do that with an empty casket. Stupid spy.”

“I deserve it,” Alec says, not dwelling on Magnus’ fond yet defeated face. “Now go.”

He doesn’t wait for them to move as he runs back the way he and Magnus came. There are only corpses waiting for him on the way and soon, he reaches the lab he found Magnus in. Half of it is burned but everything is wet and slippery - the fire sprinklers went on.

The door is blasted alright and half a dozen bodies (in various state of integrity) lies beyond the wall. He’s careful not to trip on them and he’s back at full speed.

If Jace’s alive, he knows that he has to come up but alone he can’t be making good time. So he’s probably on the third floor fighting his way to the stair case or any-

Alec falls down, screaming in pain.

A bullet grazed his left shoulder but they don’t need to know it’s just minor. Screaming and rolling, he points his gun at chest level and - gun is kicked out of his right hand, but he’s rolling again, tripping his assailant and throwing her on the floor, punching her half burned face once before she kicks him in the ribs (which crack ). She screams as he pulls her hair violently (some come off with bits of skin) and hits her head on the ground before he’s nearly shot again (the bullet hits the wall). The second time she shoots he deviates the gun at the last moment and the shot leaves his ears
ringing from the close range... he’s disoriented and she hits him with the gun on the temple weakly, as child would, and they roll around again.

She comes on top ready to shoot him in the head but the gun is bloody jammed and Alec shouts in rage more than pain and reaches down to his thigh holster, her hands around his neck now, tight, tight, tighter and... He rams his combat knife on her left side once, twice, puncturing her kidney and then ramming it higher, to the back of her lung.

Blood sprays on his face and her hands falters as she collapses on him. He pushes her away before getting on his knees to get his breath back.

It takes him three uneven breaths to realize it’s Camille Belcourt agonizing in front of him. Half of her face is burned and the rest doesn’t look at all like the very well put together woman Alec used to avoid in the MI6 headquarters. Just a shadow, broken and dying. He looks back at the way he came from, at the burn walls and bodies.

“Didn’t think there was a bomb, huh?” he snarls at her trembling form. “Thought that Magnus was alone and no trouble?” he pushes her on her belly and takes his knife out, shredding her wound even more. “Drowning in your... blood will be fun,” he wheezes.

He doesn’t know if she’s still alive when he stands up, shaking. His ribs are in bad shape and he’s in no condition to fight or, to his shame, rescue anyone. He waits a minute, hoping, praying (a thing he hasn’t done in a long time). But Jace doesn’t show up. Not after a minute and not after two.

Slowly, he turns away and gets back to the fifth floor. Every time he sees a body he shudders but it’s none of his friends and soon, he finds the stairs that lead to the sixth floor, hauling himself up by the banister. One of his eyes is so swollen he can barely use it, his balance is thrown off by his many, many injuries. If someone tries to take him, he won’t survive.

More bodies. Still no Luke or Magnus. Still no plan B on the roof. He would have heard (and die). Midway through what he hopes is the roof access (thank you outdated plan) he finds a cluster of bodies and a few feet away some blood. It turns into a larger pool (some smeared), half a bloody footprint and a constant trail of fat drops.

Alec swallows and forces himself to walk faster until he gets to a service staircase labelled as the roof access. What will he found upstairs? He blinks back tears and reaches for the handle.

The door nearly breaks his nose when it’s opened violently and he crumbles on the floor. A second later he’s pointing a gun at Jace.

Who’s pointing a gun at him.

They look at each other in total surprise for another second before Jace helps him to his feet and up the staircase with great effort.

“How-how are you here?” Alec mumbles.

“Went down to get you, stupid.” Jace seems pissed. “You shouldn’t have come back to save me.”

Bloody hypocrite.

“No. How are you on this floor? There was only one way up!” Alec insists.

“I blasted a window and climbed the side of the building. Gave Bane a fright when he opened the door and I was already here. Your boyfriend nearly blew my foot off!”
They get to the roof and cold air hits their faces like a million icy needles. Alec’s grateful for the wake up call and stumbles into the wall near the door as Jace’s lock it the best he can -with C4. Alec approves.

“Where are… Mag’… Luke?” he wheezes. His ribs are making it painful to talk now as their pressuring his diaphragm.

“In the bird, come on now,” Jace urges.

Alec turns his head but the helicopter is not on- right. Between the reflective plate on the bird, the near darkness and his injuries, he can’t see a thing. Jace helps him again toward the middle of the roof as door opens out of thin air (or it seems).

“Get him inside quick! Izzy said that we will have company soon,” Magnus announces while grabbing Alec and hauling him inside. Jace closes the door behind them and goes to the pilot seats.

Magnus forces Alec down in one of the stretchers that they prepared for the handlers. Luke is on one of them, applying pressure to a bloody compress on his tight. The bay is so damn empty Alec wants to throw up and kill Belcourt all over again.

“One on five. He refuses to feel sick at the relief that the one they saved is the one he loves, but the guilt is still there.

“How did you manage to break three ribs in the little time you were on you own?” Magnus mutters. “Stupid face… I hope it stays like that for a while, would teach you a lesson Woody.”

If Magnus’ words are harsh, his hands are gentle. Alec barely feels the take off as concentrated as he is on Magnus lightly inventorying his injuries and insulting him.

“Bane! Come over here. You should be the one to do it,” Jace calls from the front. “Izzy! we’re airborne, firework is a go. See you soon, over”

Magnus reluctantly leaves Alec’s side (it’s written all over his face and Alec wants to grab him and ask him to stay but he’s too tired).

“What are you talking about?” he hears Magnus asks.

“What do you think about leveling this building to the ground?” There is a deadly smirk on Jace’s face, Alec is sure of it.

“I would like that very much,” Magnus answers quietly. “What do I have to do?”

“Take that in your hands and adjust till you have the ground floor neat and center on the screen. Then fire at will.”

Magnus doesn’t takes long and suddenly a loud explosion rattles the air. Then a second and a third. They must be out of the blast zone because they’re not hit by any projectile but Alec can hear the building crumbling, tonnes and tonnes of stone and glass crashing together, burying anyone still inside under feet of rubble.

Nobody asks if Magnus feels better. This is only a small consolation.

“Mor… genstern?” Alec asks to Luke.

“Didn’t see him… might not have been in the building at all. No Verlac either as far as I can tell,” he answers.
Shit. It isn’t over then. They won’t know for sure, not until the MI6 grows a pair and comes here to investigate.

“Belcourt…” Alec coughs and can’t finish his sentence.

“Didn’t show up.”

“No. She-she… dead,” Alec manages when he gets his breathing under control again. “Got her.”

Luke nods. “It’s not going to be pretty when we get home,” he says, eyes on his injured thigh.

“What do you mean?” Magnus asks, back from the front and sitting down between Luke and Alec.

Luke and Alec look at each other. There isn’t a good way to say to someone that their country declared them dead weight and didn’t bother rescuing them.

“This isn’t an sanctioned mission,” Jace says from his seat, breaking the awkward silence.

Magnus passes a hand over his eyes, as if shielding himself from the consequences of their actions.

“You’re all mental,” he giggles.

Oh.

The giggles turn into uncontrollable sobs after a while and Luke has to dose Magnus with something to make him calm down and finally sleep. Breakdown and exhaustion. Soon the nightmares will come and the off putting guilt of being taken, of not having been enough to protect himself. The guilt of surviving when others didn’t, of putting others in danger to get rescued.

Alec knows that all too well.

“He’ll be okay,” Luke promises to Alec as he installs (with some difficulty) an infusion pump on Magnus forearm. “Poor lad had it rough but he’s strong.”

Alec just lies there a while as Jace fly them to safety, eyes riveted on Magnus’ sleeping form.

Chapter End Notes

Title from Golden Eye by Tina Turner

Thank you for reading!
“009, you can go in now.”

Alec frowned at his mother’s snobbish assistant, sitting all smug and proud behind what was really a toilet attendant desk. Though, the man had perhaps some valid reason to show his lack of consideration for Alec. After all, nobody had even bothered to tell him what the meeting was about, the assistant had just called him an hour ago (at the ungodly hour of two in the morning, during Alec’s three day leave, the first he had in months) and demanded his presence on his mother’s behalf. Typical.

He still got up, reluctantly, form the leather bench outside Maryse’s office and stepped inside, suppressing Mummy’s little errand boy from his head as best as he could.

He was not sure of what he saw at first.

Since it was her office, his mother was there, no surprise at that. She looked sourer than usual but there was something more, something that Alec couldn’t quite pin down.

Magnus -shit, shit, Magnus!- was there too, bleary eyed and clutching a huge, fuming mug in front of his mouth. For once the man barely acknowledged Alec beside a sleepy “’lo.”

But what got Alec to pause was Lydia Branwell’s presence. Countess Branwell.

The last time Alec had saw her, she had kissed his cheek as a thank you for saving her life from her own cousin. It had been a year or so ago on the tarmac of a private airport outside of Rome, just before she had been safely flown back to England.

The three of them were sitting around Maryse’s conference table in a tense silence.

“Alec, glad to see you’re fine,” Lydia said with so much sincerity it took Alec aback.

It was not common for agents to be reunited with their previous targets, except when the later were in handcuffs or wrapped in a body bag, down at the morgue. Alec had never attended a three am tea party with anyone he spied on before.

New experiences and all that.

“What is this about?” he muttered, taking a seat opposite to his mother and as far away he could from Magnus’ sleepy presence. The handler was sipping on whatever coffee or tea was in his mug with an air of calculated disinterest, but Alec could read the way he was holding himself. Just a little tense,
just a little axed toward the rest of them - far more attentive that he pretended to be. Alec felt Magnus’ eyes on him like a brand for a second and then gone.

“Countess Branwell has intel on a mission you might be assigned to,” Maryse announced, voice strained and working through ill-disguised anger. “Though I didn’t recommended it, she insisted to come here herself to deliver the news to you specifically.”

“I wouldn’t trust anyone else to deal with this,” Lydia nodded.

Maryse looked particularly offended at that. How Lydia had obtained a private audience with them without actually saying anything, Alec didn’t know. But it was worth his mother’s pinched expression.

“Weeell,” Magnus dragged the word through a yawn, “I will need the Cliff’s Notes in the morning but right now, some of us have to deal with that cyber attack from Beijing.” Magnus stood up and yawned again, obnoxiously. His shirt rode up and Alec’s eyes found the sliver of skin that was revealed above his trousers without him meaning to, heart missing a beat at the shadow of Magnus’ happy trail disappearing down, down, do...

“Sit down, Bane.”

Alec flinched at his mother’s tone, stung by the bite in her voice, as did Lydia. Magnus, either because he had nerves of steel or was too tired to care, didn’t. He shrugged and sat right back before stretching to reach for a bottle of whiskey that sat on the middle of the conference table. Alec, again, got caught up in the lines of his body, his long arm and elegantly bejeweled hand. Magnus poured some whiskey in his mug. *Some* being most of the bottle.

The mug had been huge and so were Maryse’s eyes as she watched Magnus proceed. She didn’t stop him though, or bark at him again.

“Hum,” Lydia coughed diplomatically. “My parents received an invitation for some kind of party that left them extremely shaken. They threw it away but I salvaged it. It’s some kind of auction,” Lydia took a thick envelope from her handbag and slid it over to Alec, “the actual invitation is hidden, it took me a while to figure out how to read it.”

Alec took the invite in his hands and opened it. Inside, there was only a thick, white piece of paper with a matte finish. The only thing on it was two glossy, concentric red circles. Alec turned the invitation in his hands over and over; looked at the back; even took out his phone and turned on the flashlight app to shine some light through the paper but there was nothing that he could pick up.

On his right, Magnus was doing the universal ‘gimme’ gesture and Alec bit the inside of his cheek when their fingers touched. But he quickly forgot his own reaction when Magnus got a good look at the invitation, because his face fell and the rest of his body tensed immediately. This was… unusual. Or at least it was in Alec’s limited experience of Magnus. It was almost as he knew the damn thing.

“Blacklight?” Magnus asked to Lydia after a minute of silent inspection.

“Blood,” she answered with a wince.

That raised one of Magnus’ eyebrow comically high and Alec felt himself frowning at Lydia.

“How?”

“I’m not a scientist,” Lydia shrugged. “I cut my finger on the edge of the invite when I was trying to understand why my parents were so riled up. I have no idea how *they* knew though.”
She had barely finished to speak that Magnus was already taking a small knife from his pocket and slicing up his left pinky.

Against his better judgement, Alec got up and went to stand behind Magnus to see what would happen. The second a drop of blood touched the invitation, the paper of the invite soaked it up and turned red, leaving a neat script in white appeared. Alec couldn’t read it though, but he vaguely remembered that Lydia’s mother was old French money… the letter was obviously for her.

“Le Cercle blabla bla Prague, blabla, paiement en diamants blabla ou vos secrets seront révélés bla bien cordialement…” well that’s ominous,” Magnus read at out loud, his perfect, unaccented French making Alec smile a bit.

“What does it say?”

“Ah, yes. You’re French impaired,” Magnus said with a smirk in his direction. He took a large gulp on his whiskey, made a small sound of approval then continued. “An organisation called Le Cercle—the Circle—wants to exchange sensitive intel against money.” The tension in his voice was palpable.

“Common blackmail? Lyd- Countess, your parents should pay,” Alec recommended her quickly.

“Lydia’s fine, Alec.” Her smile was as kind as he remembered. “I think they will. But that’s the thing… you can’t just buy your secrets.”

“You have to bid for them,” Magnus finished for her through gritted teeth, “in diamonds.”

What on earth had gotten into him?

“That’s… new,” Alec said. Quite clever too. If other rich people had been targeted—rich, bored and powerful people—they would rather fight among themselves to gain leverage or revenge over old feuds rather than quietly pay for their own dirty laundry. The Circle could triple, quadruple even, the value of any sordid affair with the right people involved. “I’m to infiltrate the auction and retrieve the intel before it can be sold?” he looked at his mother for confirmation.

She wasn’t looking at him. No, Maryse was typing something on her tablet with too much force and… fear. The realization startled Alec. Fear wasn’t common to her. Anger, open scorn, the occasional motherly smile to Jace and that was it. But it was all over her face, her heavy frown and breathing pattern spoke volume. His mother was afraid of something.

“Mother?” he asked.

That seemed to bring her back to the present conversation and Alec repeated his question. She nodded, slow and deliberate, to recompose herself then elaborated.

“Of course. The intel might be useful, even if I doubt that the rich and powerful of England are actually hiding anything from us. But at the very least we’ll have something to compare notes with. Primary objective is to stop the buy and steal the intel. Just in case, the diamonds will be marked with an innocuous radioactive isotope—easy to track. You will need to go down the Q dept for your equipment and get the diamonds from the Vault. A car will be waiting for you to take you to the airport after that. Early morning flight to Prague in two hours and not a word about this… Circle to anyone.”

And with that, she was gone, hurrying from her own office like the devil himself was at her heels. After all this time, Alec still felt a pang in his heart at her behavior. She had loved him once, cared for him; greeted him with a smile when he entered a room and let him go only after a tight hug.
Had he outgrown it? Was his sexuality so much of a problem that the very idea of showing him motherly love was unthinkable? Was she simply done pretending to want anything else than M’s office and her name on the door?

For a year those questions had been swarming around his head. Alec Gideon Lightwood, son, spy, disappointment.

“Well, I better head back for the Handlers’ floor and take a catnap before you land,” Magnus mused out loud, breaking Alec away from his inner turmoil. He was halfway through the door when he gracefully backtracked toward the table and took his mug of whiskey with him. “Woody,” he said to Alec with a wink. “Pleasure to see you again Lyds,” Magnus did a outrageously graceful bow in her direction and smiled.

He was out of the door before Alec could even entertain the folly of calling him back to… to do nothing, he gritted his teeth together. Magnus was off limits both by regulations and Alec’s rule of “don’t fuck up other people with your crazy”.

“You like him,” Lydia teased immediately. Alec’s head turned back to her -shit, he had followed Magnus with his entire body, like a bloody sunflower would have with the sun. The blond was beaming at him.

“What?”

“You avoided looking at him far too conspicuously for it to be natural during the whole meeting."

“Perhaps I just dislike his face,” Alec retorted. Damn Lydia and her perceptiveness.

Lydia gave him a look a tad too close to Isabelle’s bitch please for his comfort and, filled with unease, he vowed to never introduce the two women.

“No one would object to a face like that!” Lydia said wickedly.

She had a point but like hell Alec was going to concede it.

“Also that,” she raised her hands to air quote, “Woody he said to you… far too wanton to be innocent. Ch- err, Magnus, always has been a flirt but damn, that’s some new level.”

And what?

“What do you mean “always been a flirt”?” Alec asked, taken aback by Lydia’s declaration.

Lydia frowned at him before answering, “I didn’t even know he worked here before today but Magnus and I were at Le Rosey together for a while -it’s a boarding school.”

“In Switzerland, I know…” the kind of school that had a price tag above $100 000 a year.

Alec had read Magnus’ file and Le Rosey wasn’t even referenced in the damn thing… god, he was such a creep for for remembering most of the details after a year.

Magnus did call her Lyds … to think that paying attention was one of Alec’s strength. Around Magnus, picking more than his eyeshadow color or if he was wearing a goddamn earcuff was a hard fought victory. Stupid, stupid, stupid...

“How did you convince my mother to get a private meeting here?” Changing the subject so abruptly was less than graceful but Lydia wasn’t Alec’s mark anymore, he didn’t have to bother trying to be
“My granddaddy is probably on the MI6 board, or perhaps it’s my aunt? -I’m not sure,” she shrugged. “You think it will be alright? The auction, I mean.”

“I’m good at what I do,” he reassured her.

“And Magnus?”

“He’s better.”

The Q department was running at full capacity, even in the middle of the night, when Alec got downstairs to fetch his equipment and the radioactive diamonds. Everywhere the little Q helpers were running tests, mixing powders or shooting with flame throwers at dummies with ill-concealed glee.

Alec made a beeline for Izzy’s office but it was locked and when he asked, he was told that she had gone home a few hours ago and that Q was taking a nap (at his age, the poor fellow might consider to retire for good but Izzy had joked more than once that she would probably have to pry the title from his dead fingers).

That left Alec with only one option: Raphael Santiago.

He and Rafa (as Izzy insisted on calling him) had a complicated relationship for a number of reasons.

One, he was Magnus’ best reluctant friend and always glared at Alec whenever he entered a room, especially when he would come back from a mission.

Two, while Raphael was one of Izzy’s best friends too, he was also after the Q department direction when the old man was going to kick it (bless him) so they could get overly competitive and spend weeks at a time fighting like two lions coveting the same territory before making peace without telling Alec. It was like walking blind on hornet nests; one day saying hello to Rafa owned Alec a glare from Iz and the day after, Alec would get roasted by his sister for saying the other Q assistant was an arse.

Three, Alec might have -allegedly- destroyed a leather messenger bag belonging to dear old Rafa. Said bag had been a gift from his boyfriend… and Alec burned it. Allegedly. But it wasn’t his fault as the Q departement was bloody fire hazard. Raphael had never forgotten and never forgiven the (alleged) crime.

“Lightwood! I’ve been waiting for you too long already, get your arse here,” Raphael shouted from the other side of the armory.

“Rafa how are you tonight? Hoping that your diligence on the night shift will get you good points with Q?” Alec asked as pleasantly as he could.

Raphael muttered something and rolled his eyes before gesturing for Alec to follow him.

“Radioactive diamonds, earpiece, wrist command disguised as a moderately expensive watch -that you better bring back unscratched!-, local intel on Prague with hideouts and key infrastructures, the usual flash bombs disguised as keychains and lighters…” Raphael enumerated while walking. “Your
mother made a note that your cover will be a trusted bodyguard from the Branwell family, so you get to have a gun at the very least -if you’re authorized to bring it wherever you need that is.”

Raphael stopped in front of a long table.

Designating a gun he said, “the usual Glock but Izzy’s been tweaking the grip for a while.” Raphael took the gun in his hand and showed Alec the blue shine the grip had from a certain angle. “Print coded. To you, obviously. Anyone trying to use it will get a nice shock to the system, enough to knock them down for a few seconds… we’re still trying to miniaturize the charge around the magazine and the print recognition device, so it’ll only work once for now.”

Alec nodded. Too often his own guns had been turned against him by bigger opponents, or clever ones that brought their friends along. A few seconds of disorientation was all he needed.

“Sounds good,” Alec said, nodding.

“We also have the brand new lockpick kit, my design impressed.” Raphael sounded smug and Alec couldn’t help but crack a grin when he pocketed the small case. “May I ask that you give a review of it while you’re in the field? Always good to have feedback. Oh, there’s the matter of the intel you have to steal!” Raphael turned away from Alec and went to a huge steel cabinet, unlocked it after what Alec counted as a thirty-five characters alphanumeric password. “Meet the Red Thief.”

Raphael then put a small case on the table and opened it.

Alec wasn’t that impressed. It was just a obnoxiously big, dark pink precious stone mounted on a rose gold ring. The design was thick, simple and obviously in the style of men’s jewelry despite the coloring.

“It’s called the Red Thief and… it’s pink?”

“Yeah I know, I tried to convince Magnus to pick something less flashy or at least coherent but he said that he wanted that sapphire specifically.”

“A pink sapphire?” Alec asked. That was definitively extravagant.

“Rubies are so passé, Rafa,” Raphael imitated Magnus with dead accuracy, down to the hand gestures. “Like I care… It’s just bling, the real genius is in the nanotech inside the ring and stone. I must say that Izzy surpassed herself… this beauty will emit a low signal that will learn and then mimic any other to siphon data from any electronic devices from the room you’re in. Magnus wrote the program that runs it himself, so I doubt you will have any trouble.”

“Won’t that be a lot of data?”

“Terabytes and terabytes of it. The Archives dept will have a field day going through it,” Raphael said viciously. He obviously was still recovering from his break up with Salmon from the Archives. Isabelle had been very crossed about it too, because Rafa had been so sad ever since the fall-out he had not challenged her intellectually enough for the past month.

Priorities.

Alec looked down at the ring. It really didn’t look like much.

“Won’t that thing on me attract attention?” Big bodyguard, looking ten kind of mean and serious with a Tiffany’s ring costing more than car on his finger? That wouldn’t be normal.
“I think your cover includes a recent engagement. But yes, you don’t look the type.”

Alec felt his eyebrows rose up, up, up at Raphael’s words.

“I mean to wear anything but black and steel jewelry. But Magnus insisted.” Raphael rolled his eyes again, and his opinion on the matter of Magnus’ quirks was pretty clear to Alec. “That being said, the tech is pretty expensive and this prototype is the only one we have as Q isn’t convinced yet… sometimes I’m pretty sure he believe we still live in a time when intel was on floppy disks. So if you come back without it or so much as look at it the wrong way, I’m emasculating you.”

“Gee, Rafa, tell me how you really feel.” Alec forced himself to not cross his arms. It was like with wild animals, you weren’t suppose to show them fear. His cock and balls might not be up to much but he liked them where they were and intact, thank you very much.

“Magnus wouldn’t like that, he fancies that stupid face of yours too bloody much to let me damage you,” Rafa sneered. Again, it was clear what he thought about Magnus’ tastes.

Alec internally swore. This wasn’t a conversation he wanted to have. Not now, not ever.

“The diamonds?” he prompted instead.

“In the Vault, I had Lily prepare them.”

* *

A few hours later, Alec was in Prague. It was such a beautiful city but he wasn’t there to play tourist (thank god) and had to hurry to his hotel room to get ready for the recon of the auction venue. The event was two days away and the place, an expensive hotel in the historic center, would be swarming with security. He needed to work on some exit strategies with Magnus in case plan A went to the window.

“Don’t be overly charming during the auction, okay?” Magnus said in his earpiece when Alec finished to check his hotel room for bugs or cameras. It was the first thing his handler told him since their parting last night.

“Why? Charming works.”

Alec pictured Magnus glaring at him.

“You will be surrounded by everything that Europe has to offer in the better-than-thou aristocrats. They’re not charming, believe me. For them, blood and lineage is everything,” Magnus said bitterly, some of the venom he had last night in Maryse’s office was back. “No matter how handsome or competent you are, they’ll only see a hired gun from the peasants. You have to play it down. Know your place.”

Alec stopped himself from asking Magnus how he knew this and who had put that much resentment into him but abstained. He needn’t to know that.

“Okay. You think we’ll meet some resistance?”

“Depends on what those Circle goons are packing. It could be a bluff after all, or it could not even be about intel. Hell, imagine that. So many rich people in one place, with diamonds overflowing from their pockets… nice way to prepare a hold up to invite your prey to come to you with their fortunes.”
Magnus was right of course but there was something about the invitations that didn’t resonate like a armed robbery with Alec; it was just too elaborate, too ridiculous. The work of someone that enjoyed his own intelligence, that had access to tech and enough basic intel to know who to target. Lots of effort to just rob people.

And there was also his mother’s reaction; the uncharacteristic fear. Now Magnus seemed to be oddly invested in this mission, starting when he had saw the damn logo on the invitation.

“You know something you’re not telling me,” Alec said in a breath. It didn’t sound like an accusation but with Magnus, Alec could only hope it didn’t offend him as it was.

Silence answered him.

“I saw your face, Babe. You knew that logo.”

Alec could only hear Magnus’ breathing over the comms, the only reassurance that the handler hadn’t cut the line.

“A friend of mine received one of them the other day,” Magnus finally said.

“What? Why didn’t you say something!”

“Because we didn’t know what it was. It’s just a piece of paper, Woody. And it’s not like I could smuggle it inside the MI6 for analysis or that I thought I needed to… We… We thought it was some kind of advertisement.”

Well, it was just two red circles on a blank paper after all.

“Is your friend rich?”

“Extremely so,” Magnus answered with an edge of hysteria in his voice.

Alec served himself a glass of water and pinched his eyes closed. That rich friend was probably Magnus’ current boyfriend and he wasn’t comfortable talking about it with Alec.

“Oh, does Maryse or M know?”

“I told M this morning, after I checked the invite to be sure.”

“Good. Your friend’s coming? Sending someone?” Not that Alec would like to meet them, he would probably get worked up and break something.

“In a way.”

That was downward cryptic but Alec didn’t feel like talking about Magnus’ boyfriend too much so he didn’t pry.

“Okay,” he repeated. “Well, I suppose that I have to apply myself extra hard now that you’re implicated.” Alec patted himself on the back for keeping most of the jealousy out of his voice – he had no right after all.

Nevertheless, Magnus choked on something at his words. “Implicated? I am not...”

“Through your friend?” Alec frowned. Magnus had never been this cagey.

“Oh yes... I thought – you should take a nap, you’re not getting any sleep with all the planning we
And the line went unnaturally quiet. Magnus had hung up on him, so to speak and Alec could feel his guts trying to wrap themselves around the concept. He had never done that before...

Alec was missing something big and he had the feeling that he wouldn’t get an clear answer out of anyone.

Strangely enough, Alec had been authorized to bring his gun to the auction. Or rather, Ludovic Grant -bodyguard to the Branwell family- had been.

“Name?”

Alec forced his face to remain stoic, as per Magnus’ advice.

“Grant,” he said to one of the security guards at the hotel’s ballroom entrance. Above the man’s shoulder Alec could see rows and rows of seats, a buffet and a stage, all richly decorated. A second guard started to frisk him and Alec went rigide. He hated that.

“We don’t have a Grant on the list, move a-”

“Grant for the Branwells, then,” Alec said as his patience ran short. “I’m not paid to do your job.”

The security guard seemed to be taken aback by Alec’s tone and went back to the list before grunting.

“Here you are,” the guard said, “seat C42.”

The one that had frisked Alec gave a “All clear” and Alec was authorized to enter the ballroom.

“You shouldn’t have done that. Be as forgettable as possible,” Magnus hissed in his ear.

Alec couldn’t reply, not with so many people around but huffed loudly to convey his annoyance.

He had got to the auction venue early but it was already full of men and women in black suits, far more people than Alec was comfortable with and by the numbers of empty chairs, more were still expected.

Alec had spent the last two days making discreet inquiries around town about the auctions and the number of guests. Two hotels were packed, a luxury caterer had been booked for at least three hundred guests for the night but no one had hired local security. That was usually a huge clue about the level of nasty that someone was planning when they brought their own guns and muscles. Trained, loyal and who didn’t shy away from blood and dirty jobs.

By the way most of the guests were carrying themselves, it was easy to see they were bodyguards and soldiers; all walking like battering rams or silent and watchful with an effortless sense of decorum that comes with always being two paces behind someone important. Alec could see odd bulges under their vests, aborted movement to their ears -the usual gear. They all had briefcases cuffied to their wrists, much like Alec.

They all carried a king’s ransom to be used to buy something that The Sun would publish in a heartbeat in the TV & Showbiz section. Alec wasn’t even sure that said intel existed but people had
still came, like flies around a turd.

“Your ten o’clock, platinum blond is packing a knife or something between her shoulderblades,” Magnus announced with some disgust.

Alec glanced at the woman and he could see it as clear as day. There was something rigide in the way she moved her upper body and, while her vest was a bit loose on her, the unnatural ridge of her spine was rather obvious. A deadly trick: anyone asking that woman to put her hands behind her head was offering her a nice killing blow shot.

“Can you move around her a bit? I rather try the face recognition software and put a name on her employer. It’s not everyday you see bodyguards with that kind of gear.”

Alec did as he was told, moving around small clusters of people that were socializing; none of those were bodyguards, that much was obvious. People secure enough in their money or arrogance that didn’t sent a proxy to deal with their affairs. They were wearing ball gowns and tuxedos, glasses of champagne in hands, while their bodyguards stayed a respectful distance behind them with the diamonds.

Alec took his phone out and faked calling someone.

“You’re getting a clear shot?” he murmured, eyes not looking at the woman directly but in a way that she was in his field of vision.

“Five by five aaaaand… Alphonsina Caiazzo … ew, please stay away from her, she’s an enforcer for the Amato-Paganà family, a neapolitan mafia. Seems like the Circle hooked some pretty toothy fishes for tonight, might not get pretty…”

“Cop killer, then.” That explained the knife strapped on her back. Members of the Gamorra weren’t known to be law abiding citizens.

“Rap sheet the size of Switzerland,” Magnus commented, “nothing stuck but that doesn’t surprise me. Go to your seat now, I don’t want her so close to you and your stupid danger magnet charms if things get sour.”

“Your concern is heart warming,” Alec deadpanned, making his way to his seat. He looked down at his watch -still half an hour before the beginning of the auction. “This is getting worse by the minute. First aristocrats, rich people and now the mobs? This Circle is extremely confident that they can weather the storm they conjured to their doorstep.”

“Well, I hope the Q dept packed an umbrella for ya.”

“That… was terrible, Babe.”

“You wouldn’t have me any other way,” Magnus answered immediately but Alec could detect some level of doubts in the quip. Still, it was a little too close to the truth and Alec didn’t like it.

“So now I wait?” Alec said rather than deny Magnus’ claim or agree with it. He knew his place and it wasn’t at Magnus’ side.

“Well, that’s what you’re supposed to do? Wait until everyone is here and they show us the goods… then the Red Thief will do the rest.”

“What if the intel isn’t digital?” Alec asked, wincing. The thought had nagged at the back of his mind since the plane ride and they would be in deep shit if that was the case.
“No one uses hard copy anymore, Woody.” Magnus’ voice was dripping with disdain and Alec rolled his eyes. “Paper is dead, get used to it grandpa.”

“You better be right,” Alec muttered.

Alec saw someone making their way toward him and he tensed, but the man, one of the many bodyguards by the looks of him, simply sat on Alec’s left without a word.

“Well, someone’s happy to be there.” Magnus snorted.

“It’s understandable,” Alec answered into his phone, still faking a call. “I’ll call you back when the auction starts, sir.” Alec put as much respect and deference into his voice as he could and placed his phone back in his pocket before obnoxiously sighing.

“Ooooh call me sir again, I like that very, very much,” Magnus flirted and Alec had to close his eyes against Magnus’ words and the images they conjured in Alec’s mind.

“Playing errand boy too?” the other bodyguard asked with a thick russian accent. Alec could hear the resentment loud and clear in his voice - good, Alec needed an ally here in case something turned sour.

He nodded before putting his elbows on his knees and hanged his head low. “I hate this job.”

“Me too. I asked why can’t I shoot this Circle people and take secrets? But now I have to wait like, how do you say? idiot?” the big bear of a man asked.

Alec cracked a grin at the man and nodded again, as friendly as he could. All the man could see was a young, bored bodyguard in Alec. A useless puppy, picked rather for his stature than his smarts.

“Woody, that-that’s not a bodyguard,” Magnus announced with dread. “He’s FSB, Andreï Sokolov and this so monumentally bad. I’m sending a message to M.”

FSB. Shit. Federalnaïa Sloujba Bezopasnosti, the russian secret services. If they were here, how many other agencies were actually in the room?

“My boss was too scared to come himself,” Alec complained as if nothing was wrong apart his boredom.

“Bosses are good to give orders, not very at taking bullets,” the russian said philosophically.

Alec tensed immediately and only half of it was faked for his interlocutor’s profit.

“You expect trouble?” he asked with a squeaky voice before wildly looking around. No one would believe that Alec was a seasoned spy, a professional. Just an incompetent boy a tad too jumpy for the line of work he was in.

A hint of disgust passed on the russian’s face before he grinned. It’s so easy to fake weakness around strong people.

“Calm down malen'kiy chelovek, no bullets for now.” The man punctuated his reassurance with a less than gentle clap on Alec’s shoulder.

Alec stopped himself from rolling his eyes, he was nearly as tall as the russian… no reason to call him little man.

“M and your mother are throwing you under the bus, you need to stay no matter what,” Magnus said with alarming calmness.
Alec rubbed his nose to acknowledge what Magnus just said and sighed.

*Typical.*

The auction in itself started a few minutes later, the last guests being ushered in the ballroom by security before the doors were shut closed behind them.

The sound wasn’t loud but Alec could see it ripple through the guests. The few bodyguards that weren’t already sitting went to their startled bosses and directed them towards their seats.

“Ah, *malen’kiy chelovek* don’t wet your pants yet,” the russian spy said, clapping him on the shoulder jovially.

“Woody, don’t activate the Red Thief right away, we need to see what’s the procedure for handing the goods to the winners first.”

Alec knew that of course as Magnus had spent the last two days drilling him on the different approaches. His handler was the worst micromanager in known MI6 history.

Would the Circle bring anything on stage? In one big haul or secrets by secrets, distributed at the very end of the auction to let the winner bid on something else? Would the winners be sent somewhere in the hotel to exchange the diamonds against the intel? Would every bidders be executed and the diamonds taken, because there was simply no secrets to buy?

In any case, Alec had to be ready. He got his phone and “dialed” his boss.

“Sir? The auction is about to begin, they closed the door.”

“If I wasn’t so attached to Babe, I would asked to switch to Sir, really… okay. I don’t want to scare you but someone is hacking in the hotel security and it’s not me. I’m getting lots and lots of nois—” the rest of the sentence was lost to furious typing.

“Sir?” Alec asked.

“Sorry, I diverted the hack on local child tv program. They’ll have some trouble getting out of that one,” he chuckled, “what was I saying? Ah yes, bidders are massively communicating with their bosses… this is so bloody stupid, I can retrace every call they’re making and every message they send with a program but I can’t monitor it all…” a pause, then, in a hushed tone, “we should be more than one team on this.”

That was, of course, absolutely fucking true. But Maryse and M had kept the mission between Alec and Magnus, for better or for worse.

Definitely for worse.

“You’re right, sir.”

A group of people entered the room via a side door and quickly made their way to the stage. The FSB agent sitting at Alec’s side muttered “it’s beginning” in russian. There were two women, elegantly dressed in black shimmery dresses and four huge goons following them.

None of them were carrying anything big with them, except for the assault rifles the guards were packing. Magnus whistled in Alec’s ear.
“Last gen M16, they’re definitively not kidding around… uh. The blond girl is carrying something in her hand I think.”

Once all of them were on the stage, the women took place in front while the guards fanned out behind them, hands on their rifles like they expected to shoot any second now.

“Welcome!” one of the women said. They must have been equipped with mics because her voice resonated everywhere in the ballroom. The bidders fell silent and the second woman repeated the greeting, in german this time, then in spanish.

“Tonight, The Circle offer you the unique possibility of buying the one true resource that in this day and age, we all need and all fear to lose. Secrets.” The second girl echoed the words in russian and italian.

“The bidding starts at 500 000 dollars; I’ll announce the name of the person or the company that the intel is about and everyone is free to bid in using the tablet under your seat. The intel you purchased will be delivered to you at the end of the auction against payment.”

The last bit provoked an uproar in the room. Alec looked around and, while some bodyguards seemed to be unhappy by the development, their employers were loudly making their disagreement heard. A woman in a teal dress even tried to leave the room but was stopped at the door by guards with assault rifles.

“While the auction is open, no one can leave,” the blond woman added from the stage with a wry smile.

“Well, there goes half of our plans,” Magnus muttered. “Be still and look pretty until they mention the Branwells.”

“Yes, sir.”

For some reasons, and to Alec and Magnus’ annoyance, the Circle had decided against going alphabetically through their list of intel.

“It’s not even a ranking by power or net-worth!” Magnus moaned at some point.

The rest of the room was a haze of murmurs as the bidders made offers on their tablets and the proxies were reporting on the results to their bosses on the phone. Magnus himself was gossiping his way through boredom, his uncanny knowledge of the rich and powerful evident as he played Who’s Who with every faces he could put a name on.

“Raytheon is here… that’s never good news. That’s one of the Duchess of Kent’s bodyguards… what does that old crone got to hide I wonder… Oh! That one? On your left with the navy blue suit and the pretty eyes? That’s a Dassault. So much money in those pockets, but he's not buying anything yet, that’s weird.”

Magnus spent a good hour name dropping and distracting Alec with weird anecdotes that baffled Alec. It was like Magnus didn’t need to wait for the face recognition software to name some bidders. And then there was the bitterness that Magnus exuded. It pained Alec just to listen to it, like he was drowning in something thick and rotten. It felt intimate and Alec wondered how that came to be.

Perhaps it’s because of his boyfriend? After all, Magnus had hinted that the friend who received an invitation for this bloody auction was rich… perhaps he was one of the british blue blood?

Then, after a moment, a man raised his voice and began to scream at a bodyguard that he was sure
had outbid him not two rows away from him. It seemed clear that the man just lost his own secrets to whomever the bodyguard was working for. Or at least he thought so.

The reaction from the Circle security guards was immediate, the ones closer from the man (“That’s the owner of Crazed Cosmetic,” Magnus said) were dragging him away through a side door, while his bodyguard was held at gunpoint, completely frozen.

A heavy silence fell on the room, as everyone was staring at the door. Alec unclenched his jaw when he realized he was bracing himself for a gunshot, but none came and the blond woman on the stage continued like nothing unpleasant had occurred.

“And now, the new bid will concern Charles Pemberly Senior and Junior, as well as massive amount of data recovered from As-

“What a fucking nightmare,” Magnus said loudly in his earpiece. “I like Lydia less and less by the second for bringing this to us.”

Alec couldn’t help but chuckle.

“She certainly could have left me out of this, sir.” Luke would have been perfect for this mission. He was far more patient than both Alec and Magnus combined (which wasn’t as impressive as it should be).

Alec looked down at his tablet, curious to see how the bidding was going. The price for the Pembersomething the blond woman had announced was quickly increasing.

“We reached one million,” she announced at loud a few seconds later.

Alec looked around and realized that most of the room seemed to be bidding for that particular intel. The Dassault heir was furiously typing on his tablet while muttering something to his phone. Unfortunately, Alec couldn’t ask Magnus for precision, that wouldn’t work with the cover he had going. The russian agent was typing a new amount every few dozen of seconds, the angry set of his jaw showing the importance of the intel.

“No bidding malen’kiy chelovek? Your boss doesn’t know what’s good for him, slaboumnyy, ” he said, as if he had felt Alec’s eyes on him.

“Don’t bother, we’ll have everything we need when the Red Thief is activated,” Magnus warned. “The Branwells wouldn’t have use of weapons designs or a client list ten years out of date.”

Alec frowned. There it was in Magnus’ voice again, that bitterness, that tension that first took hold of him in Maryse’s office when he saw the Circle’s logo.

“Sir?” he began before stopping himself and scratching the back of his head soothingly. “Sorry… it’s nothing.”

On his tablet, Alec could see that the bidding was slowing down but it still reached five millions easily before finally going for six.

“Well, that’s money badly spent,” Magnus declared.

The bidding continued, but it was obvious that there was only a few people left in the race, until the bidding came to a standstill when someone outbid everyone by offering ten millions.

“Ten millions once, ten millions twice and the Pemberly and Asmodeus Industries intel goes for ten
millions,” the blond woman announced with a bright smile.

Alec swore that he heard Magnus snarl.

He was not the only one to do so. The bidding might have been over but people were groaning and accusing each other of foul play across the converted ballroom… Two men in tuxedos stood up and insulted each other in a language Alec couldn’t recognize for the life of him.

The Dassault heir threw his phone down in spite and the russian agent swore something so foul that Alec was grateful Magnus didn’t ask for a translation.

“Well that was funny as hell but can’t this be over already?” Magnus groaned. Alec could almost picture him spinning around in his chair but his free hand clenched at the thought; he had no idea if Magnus was actually the type to do that. It troubled Alec that he needed to know those kind of little things, to know Magnus rather than just the idea of him.

The next bid wasn’t about the Branwells, nor the next or the one after that. They nearly reached the end of their rope when finally, after three full hours of waiting, the blond speaker announced Lydia’s family name.

Some people seemed interested but not enough to follow Alec going for two millions after a few minutes. After a few seconds of expectant silence, the woman announced that the Branwells intel was sold and Alec sighed in relief.

But the auction wasn’t over. An other hour was wasted on people that Alec didn’t know but Magnus kept entertaining him through it, to the point that Alec had to muffle a laugh more than once not to attract attention on himself.

He barely realized that the blond woman had stopped announcing names and it was finally the two dozen of armed guards that entered the room with some women and men looking uncomfortable that clued Alec that the auction was over and it was time to play.

“Facial rec is IDing those people as professional diamonds graders from GIA… they don’t look too happy to be here tonight,” Magnus commented. “They’ll judge the real value of the diamonds every buyer carries -yes, this could take hours.”

The Academy didn’t only provide an education in assassination or sleuthing (as Izzy liked to call it). Spies needed to be knowledgeable in an unspoken language that every rich people on the planet talked: luxury. So Alec had spent hours and hours learning about arts and fine foods, looking at gemstones until he could quickly evaluate a price, determine who was old money and nouveaux riches at a glance.

Luckily enough, the diamonds in his briefcase were ranking high in the Four C’s charts, so they shouldn’t have any problem passing the muster.

“Two millions coming right up,” Magnus joked.

The people who actually bought something were held back in the room while the others were hushed outside quickly and Alec felt like the mouth of trap had closed on him when the doors closed behind them.

“The intel is in the little baggies?” Magnus asked with heavy skepticism. The bags in questions were wheeled on golden carts inside the ballroom by more guards -so many guards swarmed the ballroom now that Alec could barely count them all. They were simple party gift bags, like the ones that celebrities always got handed at events on the telly.
“I don’t know, sir.”

“Okay, wait for everything to be in the room and activates the Red Thief, everything will be neatly siphoned inside and just, hand off the diamonds and takes whatever their giving you in excha-”

“Mister Grant?” a guard interpellated Alec politely, cutting Magnus short. “Please come this way.”

The man was forming lines so that everyone would meet the diamond graders in an orderly fashion.

Alec nodded and went to the table that had been quickly set on the side of the room, but not before lightly pushing on the pink sapphire on his ring finger, sinking the stone a little deeper in gold, as he didn’t know how much time it would take for his diamonds to be approved.

“Datamining began, damn that’s fast,” Magnus said with pride. “A bit too fast,” he added a few seconds later, voice far less assured. Alec couldn’t ask him for precision but the ring was getting somehow warmer than what was truly comfortable.

The woman who sat at the table gestured for him to open his briefcase and Alec did, carefully shielding the combinaison like a good little bodyguard would. After all, it contained five millions pounds in diamonds, it was no laughing matter.

“Exquisite cut,” the grader commented offhandedly after looking at one diamond through her monocular loupe. She picked another one, looked at it for a bit and compared it to her masterstones grading scale. “Perfectly clear, no inclusion to speak of” then repeated the process ten times with other diamonds. She took some more from the briefcase, among the bigger ones, and weighted them each twice. “Five carats, six carats, five carats,” she announced in a quick succession, then reported her results to the diamonds’ certificates that was inside the briefcase. “All seems to be in order,” she said to the guards standing by her side.

He nodded and asked her to select diamonds for exactly two millions dollars. On Alec’s finger, the ring continued to get hotter and hotter. The bloody prototype was going to burn his finger, Alec was sure of it.

“Okay we’re getting there, they placed the intel in tablets, so people could consult it right away,” Magnus said.

The graders separated some diamonds from the rest, and after fifteen minutes of utter inconfort with the scalding ring on his finger, Alec was finally given a little baggie and the right to leave.

He made a show of checking the bag and the intel, and replaced it quickly inside the bag, before relocking his briefcase where the remaining diamonds where safe from the Circle’s dirty hands.

That’s when it all turned to hell.

Alec was halfway to the doors when someone’s tablet seemed to stop functioning all together and the woman began to shout her outrage. A bodyguard had the same complain a few seconds later and Magnus swore.

Then a tablet caught fire.

Literally.

The woman holding it threw it away with a piercing scream and the wretched thing cracked, letting out black smoke.
Then it happened again and some bags that were still on the carts burst into flames, burning brightly. It was panic and between the people shouting at the Circle security guards and them beginning to point their guns on people, Alec barely heard Magnus shouts “Take your contacts and earpie-” before it began to malfunction and his voice was distorted beyond recognition.

He extracted the earpiece and threw it away with his eye contacts, barely managing to reach his phone in his back pocket and dropped it on the ground just in time before they all exploded and his watch burned the sleeve of his vest and some skin before he could take it off. The bag and the tablet burnt next, foul smelling smoke making Alec choke while a jet of flame burnt the polished floor.

All around him people were screaming in panic, watches, phones and light bulbs in flames. Some bodyguards were clutching their bleeding ears and a men that Magnus had identified earlier as a mafia boss grunted before crumbling on the ground, hands halfway to his heart right in front of Alec.

Bloody hell. On his fingers, the Red Thief was guiltily hot and Alec fumbled to turn it off.

“Bloody hell,” Alec said out loud for good measure. He was going to kill Magnus.

From afar.

With his eyes.

Then he would kill Izzy and Rafa too.

Alec ran but the doors were closed, the digital lock on them fried and no amount of force could get them open. He turned around, faced the madness for a second before he unlocked the cuff around his right wrist and abandon the briefcase containing the diamonds -they would just slow him down and M might bitch but the Red Thief was more important.

Then he took out his Glock.

What he would give for Magnus annoying micromanagement right now. Hell, just Magnus’ voice.

Someone shot, Alec couldn’t tell who or what but it was like once a gun had been used, everybody was firing around hysterically.

Alec spotted a Circle guard pointing a gun at him and before he knew it the man dropped dead. Alec had dispatched him with a killing shot without thinking. Easy, clean, efficient.

Mummy’s little killing machine.

Calming breaths were out of the question, not in a near warzone so Alec run to the buffet table so he could hide behind it and cross the side of the room to the staff entrance, the one that Magnus had find after studying the plans of the hotel to plot Alec’s emergency exit if things turned bad.

Alec just hoped that the Circle hadn’t bolted the door but it was behind the stage, well into the corded area around it and hidden by an expensive looking tapisserie depicting two battalions of men with spears, fighting. It was only a matter of this Circle group being thorough or too cocky enough to cut short a escape route for their employees (and the diamonds they acquired!) and Alec would be trapped here with too many guns trained on him.

People were hiding under the table, badly keeping quiet and Alec had to roll his eyes. Those fearless people that had braved the Circle by coming themselves to the auction weren’t acting so high and mighty at the moment. Someone tried to grab at his burnt wrist, either to bring him to safety or hurting him, Alec couldn’t guess, but he broke the person’s wrist in a swift move -Crack!- to keep
going. He felt the bones break and heard the person scream in pain but he couldn’t stop, couldn’t care because he had to fuck the hell out of here before he got shot and the intel was lost.

Alec reached for the corner of the tapisserie and pulled it up -no door.

He was not panicking, not really but his guts twisted badly and pulled the tapisserie more, exposing a small service door in the middle.

It was locked.

Of course it was, but it was nothing than a well-placed kick to the frame didn’t solve and then he was running through a corridor, passed an intersection but didn’t bother, as Magnus’ voice resonated in his head “first intersection lead to the service stairs, and only up, the kitchen is the only exit point on ground level from there so you keep running until you smell coq-au-vin,” Magnus had say as they were reviewing the hotel plans.

The kitchen was a mess of activity when Alec entered it from a side door but not the kind that one might expect. Six security guards, Circle ones, were pointing their shiny M16 at the cowering kitchen staff, who had been herded to the back wall and on their knees, facing the wall execution style.

None of the guards had heard Alec come in so he sprang forward silently and grabbed at the one at the back, clamping his hand over the nose and mouth of the guard and gave a hard twist.

The guard sized up before slumping against Alec. He waited a few seconds, arms tight around the guy to provide some cover.

No reaction from the other guards, who were still keeping their attention on the staff, like waiting for further instructions. This must have been a cleaning crew who got nervous about the gunshots and the comms down, cutting them off from their little buddies.

Alec slowly put his own gun in his hip holster and raised the guard’s M16.

Three guards hit the ground before the two others could even register what was happening and then they returned fire, hitting the human shield that Alec was holding in front of him several times, the brunt force of it would have thrown Alec down if he hadn’t widen his footing and distributed his weight right.

Didn’t stop a bullet from slicing his bicep, through.

The kitchen staff’s screams were half drowned by the gunfire, a cacophony of sounds that would follow Alec in sleep for a while, as it always did.

He dispatched one guard before the man could sink behind a work station but the last one hid behind a large stove and Alec had no choice than to drop his shield and go to the floor, creeping as quickly as he could towards his firing target and jumped on the stove, firing down and breathing out, finally.

The last guard was dead.

Alec looked around the kitchen, at the turned over cooking appliances, the bullets holes in the walls, the spilled out food and the blood.

Shit. It will be some time before this kitchen can pass health inspection, he thought with a sick bile rise in his throat.
“Pozor!” one of the cooks screamed.

Alec was throwing himself on the floor, rolling away from the stove and firing towards the side door he had himself took before he knew what he was doing. He didn’t have to speak Czech to recognize a warning when he heard one.

Someone grunted in pain but he could hear more people running, getting closer perhaps? Alec wasn’t sure if they were guests or Circles members so he elected to get the hell of the kitchen before he had to regret wanting to find out.

“They have a walk in freezer that opens in the delivery area to facilitate everyone’s work, you go through, pass the door and get out of the hotel by the side street,” Magnus had advised since going through the hotel lobby would leave Alec too exposed and public.

He fired the M16 once again toward the door, before stealing some ammo from the body near him and ran to the freezer.

The street outside was near empty, since it was mostly used by the staff for deliveries and Alec ran towards the motorcycle he had stashed there last night behind the garbage boxes. He uncovered it, put on his helmet and…

“Stop.”

Alec tensed.

Shit.

“Turn around.” The woman’s voice wasn’t heavily accented, but he could detected the slightest Italian accent.

Alec turned, hands held in front of him in surrender.

The platinum blond from the auction was standing there, not thirty feet from him, pointing a M16 at him steadily despite a growing blood stain on her white shirt.

“You knew where to go,” she said coolly.

And yes, Alec had known. It had looked probably mighty suspicious but it’s not like he could have just stand there, waiting for someone to shoot him or something as equally unpleasant.

“My employer made sure I was prepared for the worst,” he answered as calmly as possible.

“Lucky you… throw me the keys,” she ordered.

Alec had all the difficulties in the world not to laugh. She wanted his keys. The keys that were attached to his MI6 issued keychain. The one that Izzy and Rafa were always making more and more efficient in going BOOM and blinding anyone who had the misfortune of having their eyes opened and to be too close of the violent sound.

The flash bomb keychain.

Thank god the damn thing wasn’t electronic but simply mechanic and full of chemicals. Alec had never been more grateful for the Quartermaster’s love for old school gadgets.

Alec was happy to obliged the woman but winced for show, eyes darting to his motorcycle worriedly.
“In my left pocket,” he announced.

“Slowly then…”

Alec reached for his pocket as innocently as he could, and took out his keys (a bunch of fakes that opened nothing at all), pressing on the Aston Martin insignia five times in quick succession before showing them to the woman - five- and throwing them at her - four.

She caught them without breaking eye contact - three- and smirked - two.

“Now you’re going” one, and Alec closed his eyes “to tell me ho-”

The keychain exploded in a loud bang in her hand, probably burning like hell and she screamed in pain. Alec threw himself in a roll the moment the light burst through his eyelids to avoid any wild gunshots and sprang back on his feet on his left, opening his eyes and running toward the momentarily blind and disoriented woman to kick the back of her knee with a powerful kick - crack!- she stumbled down, screaming in pain anew, knees hitting the ground with a grunt and Alec broke her neck immediately, letting her limp body fall head first with a dull thud.

He picked her clean, ripping her vest to untie the bloody knife holster and quickly putting it on as riding a motorcycle with two M16 passed over his shoulders would have been hard to explain to the Czech police if he was arrested.

Someone else burst into the alley and Alec shot at their feet in warning, as it was two bodyguards and run for his motorcycle, the handprint scanners on the handles turning the motor on immediately and he was off the alley, back in a busy street where people were scattering around, running for their life as the gunshots that he fired might have alarmed them. There was police officers everywhere but they were busy storming the hotel and creating a perimeter.

The traffic was dense but that didn’t stop Alec from driving in-between cars, avoiding a few collisions that he was more than happy Magnus didn’t see -he would have throw a feat of monumental proportion and there was no stopping him when he started insulting Alec’s driving skills.

He ditched the bike near his own hotel -some MI6 grunt would pick it up later, probably- and tried to correct how disheveled he looked, so as to not attract too much attention. There was nothing to do about his burnt sleeve and wrist, the blood splatters on his trousers and some funny smelling stain too that he probably got during the fight in the kitchen of the hotel. His hair was a mess of sweat and grime with all the rolls he performed today.

I’m a mess, he thought.

He cracked his neck from side to side and got into his hotel, as natural as you please, looking like nothing was wrong with his get up.

The manager gave him a dark look but got back to his phone and Alec took the stairs three at a time and soon enough, he was in his room.

He stumbled against the door, fumbling with the lock as his adrenaline started to crash and his hands began to tremble. It was difficult to undo his tie, shrug out of his vest and unbutton his sweaty shirt; unbuckling the knife holder was a nightmare and it took him a moment to work out the leather straps. Each breath was taking more out of him than actually helping so he forced himself to hold his breath for a minute, picturing a dial slowly going down.
It took him three tries but his breathing was back under control and his heart rate followed.

He checked around his room before taking his spare comms, a regular wrist command rather than one disguised as a watch, and an earpiece and turned them on. He had to put the wrist command on his right wrist since the left was nastily burnt and a fucking pain.

“Babe?”

Silence.

“Babe?” he called again, more frantically this time. It wasn’t like Magnus not to answer.

“009?” someone asked him over the comms. Alec didn’t know the voice and was suddenly wary that the channel had been compromised. “Requesting identification.”

Alec frowned.

“Juliett Mike Juliett Eight November Seven Zulu Alpha Tango Four Golf Three November Eight Zulu Yankee Mike November Echo Quebec ,” he still said out loud as clearly as possible. He knew this by heart, in his sleep, in panic and half dead, bleeding in a gutter. He knew it better than his own name.

Alexander Gideon Lightwood, he forced himself to say in his head, clinging to that identity with desperation, like it was slipping through his fingers. He wasn’t just a spy, no, he couldn’t be. He was Izzy, Jace and Max’s big brother, he was his parents’ son, perhaps Rafa’s friend and Magnus’... yeah.

He didn’t have a word for that one. But he was, wasn’t he? As much as he didn’t like it.

“ID confirmed,” the voice announced with some relief, “this is H7, ID Six Seven Two Romeo Delta Quebec Kilo Papa Charlie Eight Seven Seven Charlie Three Eight Alpha Whiskey Six Four Victor , glad to hear back from you 009.”

Oh. Ragnor Fell. Alec had never worked with him but Magnus was always referencing to him and weird adventures they had.

“Where is H11?” Alec asked, using Magnus’ designation -it tasted strangely on his tongue after so much disuse.
“Uh. He’s not available at the moment,” Fell said as evasively as humanly possible. “What’s the situation?”

Alec’s hands spasmed and he walked in the bathroom to run some warm water on them to ease out the muscles as he talked, but not before taking off the sapphire ring and pocketing it. His burnt wrist didn’t agree one bit with the hot water treatment but Alec gritted his teeth and gave a quick report through them.

“Red Thief went apeshit and fried everything in the room, perhaps in the hotel, I didn’t linger to check -I had to shut down the damn thing at some point. Heavy casualties when the bodyguards and the security decided that guns were a valid answer... the Circle had a cleaning crew waiting in the kitchen, perhaps elsewhere in the hotel too. Escaped okay without too much damage. I’m back at my hotel now.”

The mirror above the sink was giving Alec a rather unpleasant view and Alec closed his eyes against his reflection, incapable of maintaining eye contact with himself. He had stopped counting how many people he killed a while ago but it didn’t stop the weird feeling in his hands, the echo of muscle memory to take over; suddenly his hands were cramping, fingers useless and hurting even under the hot water, clutching around a invisible gun.

Shit.

“Well that’s something at least, everyone is glad that you’re not dead with your eyes burned out surrounded by lousy appetizers... He sure will be able to calm the fuck down when I get a hold of him...”

“Ma-” Alec stopped himself. He didn’t need precision, Fell’s words were clear enough. Swallowing past the lump in his throat wasn’t easy but Alec managed. “Demanding extraction asap, I don’t feel like staying in here with the Red Thief in my pocket.”

“I requested it the moment I confirmed your ID,” Fell huffed.

“Good. ETA?”

“A jet is getting ready at Václav Havel Airport as we speak,” a pause, “I commanded a private car to take you there; it should be arriving at your hotel shortly.”

“Okay. I’ll be waiting.”

Surprisingly, Fell ended the connection and Alec sighed heavily. He had got used to Magnus making conversation to him during downtime and never leaving him truly alone. He had been spoiled, of course. He just didn’t like to think the why of that, even if he knew.

The warm water finally worked and his fingers unclenched, muscles relaxing slowly.

He checked his wrist and sighed, before fetching the med kit in his bag and cleaned the burn before treating it; he had some cuts and scratches peppered on his skin, but nothing too troublesome.

So he went back to the bathroom and took a fast shower, just the time to wash the sweat and blood down with cold water (his left hand away from the water). Drying himself with one hand was awkward, since his left hand was numb from the local anesthetic he had sprayed on it with some burn ointment. After reflection, he went back to the front door to fetch the knife holster and, some swearing later, put it in place with difficulties. You couldn’t be too prudent sometimes, especially with millions and millions worth of intel in your pocket. He passed a new crisp suit, without a care in the world for the creases in the fabric and forgo the tie.
He checked himself in the mirror near the bed; a controlled mess looked back and it would have to be good enough. Hell, it was practically Alec’s standard setting.

Alec was supposed to be going straight to the private jet but something hooked deeply in his guts directed him to a tourist shop in the airport and its snow globes display. At least he had changed from his ragged clothes and no one was giving him weird looks.

Praha was written on little metallic plates everywhere (and on so many other items) while rows of tiny Prague castles were covered in white plastic chips under a glass dome. Alec quickly paid for one and put it in his pocket.

He hadn’t bothered with his bag, just took his gun and fake ID, gun permit and passport (all in Ludovic Grant’s name) and some money for the very stupid little shopping he had in mind all the ride to the airport.

Someone was able to tell him were his jet was waiting for him and an employee showed him the way with professional deference, insisting for Alec to take a flute of champagne with him as he walked up the passengers stairs to make up for the pilot lateness.

Once he was sitting down in a comfy leather armchair, he put the bubbly down, untouched for now, and contacted Fell.

“H7? I’m in the jet.”

“Well, I’ve got my back turned for five hot minutes and you’re already cheating on me with one of my best mates? I thought we had something special Woody,” Magnus accused hauntingly, sniffing around like he was about to cry.

He might have done that already, Alec thought guiltily. He was relieved though, to hear Magnus again.

“I wouldn’t cheat on you with H7… Q3 now… Yeah, probably,” he forced himself to joke. No way in hell he would actually think of sleeping with Fell or Rafa but he needed he and Magnus to be, well, not okay (as he doubted that they ever could be) but functioning.

Functioning would do. The snow globe in his pocket weighted that thought down but Alec ignored it. Functioning would have to do.

“Oh, I see how it is. You nearly die and I’m not good enough for you.”

The jab had obviously been intended as a joke but Magnus’ voice had lost its fake cheeriness in the middle of the sentence and turned abjectly helpless. Shit, the Red Thief going crazy obviously had Magnus blaming himself. Alec winced and his left hand spammed, the numbness in it was nearly gone and the pain was rolling back in his wrist slowly. The champagne wasn’t going to last long as a pain killer but the mini bar was just a few feet away…

“That’s statistically impossible,” Alec tried. “I nearly died too often; I would have requested someone else a long ago if I thought that you were responsible for that.”

Dead silence answered him and Alec frowned, checking the reception on his wristband.
The screen was black, as if turned off... He took off his earpiece and wristband as fast as he could before checking the Red Thief in his pocket but the sapphire ring wasn’t turned on, as the stone was raised and not two millimeters deeper in the gold band.

Alec put the sapphire back in his pocket and looked around but the flight attendant that had shown him his seat was just fussing over a platter of food.

“Excuse me, could I have a pho-” Alec was interrupted by a loud staple gun noise. He knew that shit and it was the best that a silencer could do -Alec was glad, he might be have died a hundred of times if silencers were as effective than the ones in movies.

Before the flight attendant even dropped down, Alec was already up and taking cover behind the mini bar, firing his Glock twice against...

Shit.

That was that bloody FSB agent from the auction, his face reflected on a mirrored glass shelve.

“Malen’kiy chelovek isn’t so little,” he called from where he was hiding near the airlock. “But you might want to learn how to check you’re not followed… MI6 isn’t what it used to be.”

Shit.

“I don’t know what you want, but I don’t have it,” Alec said, more to win some time than to accomplish any kind of diplomatic nonsense.

A bullet whistled above his head and he tried to make himself as little as possible but, well, he was hidden behind a mini bar... and there was nothing mini about Alec’s built.

“I know you have the intel, you looked smug after you exchanged your diamonds. Good acting before that though, but no one looks smug two millions lighter.”

Alec didn’t remember slipping out of his role of useless bodyguard but he obviously did.

“The intel is gone!” Alec shouted. “The device malfunctioned -you think the plan was to burn the place to the ground?”

“Oh this was bad. Getting followed by a FSB agent was one (bad) thing but having said arsehole hack into his comms was definitively a capital offense in the MI6 handbook. Alec had to kill that man and make contact with Magnus asap to sound the alarm about the comms system being compromised to russian intelligence… not good for any of the agents undercover at the moment in that snowy death trap that they called Russia.

The russian rolled from the airlock to behind a couch and Alec barely grazed him with a bullet.

“You cannot win this, not with the way you were favoring your wrist when you got out of your hotel. I’ll make it quick, klyanus’.”

Alec wanted to laugh but it would have being mirthless. They always said that, always promised a quick death, like it had the power to make people more complacent. Death was death though, no matter the sugar coating you put on it.

“Yeah, I’ll pass Sokolov,” Alec answered. “But I make the same offer if that can decide you into
At least Alec had the advantage, as the Russian might not know what the Red Thief actually was. He would need Alec to tell him and right now, both of them were mutually pinned down. The first to move out of their hiding place would die.

The trick was to force the FSB agent to attack before he received possible reinforcement and nothing better to lure out a Russian than vodka.

“You will have to come over here for that,” Alec answered carelessly before opening the mini bar, taking out a medium sized vodka bottle and uncapping it. He retrieved his lighter from his trousers pocket. Thank god it was functional even if its main purpose was to be a flash bomb - bless Rafa and Izzy for their hard work. He poured most of the fuel inside the vodka bottle and tore a strip of an expensive looking hand towel to use as a wick.

It wouldn’t really work, not with so little actual flammable agent and absolutely no thickener but Alec wasn’t in any position to ask for a time out and go fetch some more appropriate ingredients for his molotov cocktail. He lit the now soaked wick with the barely working lighter.

Alec only had a second but he fired two bullets with his Glock towards the couch with his left hand, grunting as the recoil tore the skin of his burnt wrist, and aimed for the top of the couch with the burning bottle with his right hand.

The bottle arched and crashed against the wood decoration and the couch was engulfed in an impressive ball of fire, exceeding any of Alec’s expectations. Alec’s bloody *fuck* was drowned by the scream of surprise (and pain?) from the Russian - Izzy and Rafa had not fucked around with that lighter fluid. He then rapidly twisted the bottom of his empty lighter twice and threw it behind the couch, where it exploded in a flash of light and a ear-splitting *bang*.

Not waiting for his opponent to recover his wits form both attacks, Alec sprang away from the mini bar and to the burning couch, firing before he-

The Russian was fine if a bit pissed and he kicked Alec down, batting his gun away before twisting his wrist painfully, skin ripping some more, and punching him once, twice in the belly, a definitive *crack* answered that and Alec was throwing up bile before he even knew which way was up or could retaliate.

*Click,* the sound of someone cocking a gun.

On him.

Again.

Alec looked up - breathless - the taste of bile and blood in his mouth making him nauseous; and there was the Russian, standing above him like a towering giant, aiming Alec’s own bloody Glock at him.

In that moment, Alec loved the Q department more than he loved Magnus.

“Oh put your hands on your head, *malen’kiy chelovek*!” the Russian ordered. “What is that *Red Thief*?!”

Alec felt dizzy and he blinked owlishly, managing to look up, up at the FSB agent, straight in his beady eyes before hurling down and vomiting some more bile on his shoes.
“Mudak!”

The russian shot him in the shoulder.

Tried to.

Alec bloody flinched still, expecting the bullet to rip through him, half feeling it in an oh-so-common pain déjà vu.

The modified Glock had zapped the russian, his huge body seizing up and he staggered back, hands clenched around the gun and incapable of letting go of it - just like an idiot touching a live wire. Alec reached out to the top of his shirt collar, unsheathed the knife and, with all the forces he had left after today, brought the massive knife above his head and down, cutting the FSB agent from sternum to pelvis, effectively gutting him and showering the floor between them with entrails and blood.

The smell was terrible and Alec retched again but he had nothing else to vomit anymore. He heaved for a minute before he checked the dead body. Alec didn’t even remember hearing it fall to the floor.

He found a small disruptive device in the russian agent’s pocket, simply turning it off with a bloody switch, and stumbled back to the table where he had put his wristband and earpiece on when he had thought that the Red Thief was fucking with them. He slipped both of them in place and slumped on the armchair, head dropping against the table with a thud.

“Hey. So turns out ya were kinda right ‘bout me being,” he panted, “danger mag’et,” he murmured, he didn’t have the force for more. His vest was getting wet and when he looked at his pocket he saw a growing wet patch - not blood, water, and he remembered the snow globe in his pocket. It must have broke during the fight, much like Alec’s ribs.

“What the hell just happened?” Magnus shouted.

Alec winced, both at the memory and the level of anxiety in Magnus’ voice.

“FSB ‘gent tried to do svidanya me,” Alec slurred… shit, he reopened his eyes, blinking rapidly to chase the sleepiness out of them.

There was a silence, but not the worrying kind; the Magnus kind, which consisted of annoyed puffs of breath and mad typing.

*The best kind of silence*, Alec thought. Perhaps asking Magnus to record himself working on his computers to use it as white noise would help Alec sleep when he couldn’t?

“I take that you do svidanya’d him?”

Alec giggled.

“Woody?”

“Bleedin’ internally, ‘think.”

“Holy shi- I’m alerting the airport security and the nearest hospital. Do not fucking die.”

“Na, havta tell…” his siblings that he loved them. His parents that he tried. God, did he tried. “Not you guys’ fau-” something spasmed inside of him and Alec groaned in pain.

He coughed violently, his throat left raw with it. He didn’t look down at his hand; he could taste the blood in his mouth, feel the warm stickiness of it on his hand.

“Kay, no sleep. Just… talk.” Alec requested. If he was a goner, he was going to fool himself thinking he was fine, with Magnus’ voice lulling him to safety.

There.

Alec thought it. He was a goner, he had escaped death for too long, had dragged this bloody farce for as long as he could but… yeah. He was only human.

“I can do that,” Magnus assured, and Alec could see him, picture perfect in one of his soft-looking silk shimmery shirts and clingy trousers. Perhaps with blond streaks in his jet black hair like the first time Alec saw him, dark eyes rimmed with gold eyeliner… “-talk your ear off, the first thing you’ll do out of the hospital will be buying me a muzzle,” Magnus was saying and Alec needed to pay attention, he didn’t want to miss anything.

He could hear sirens, faint but there.

“‘bulances…” he mumbled.

“Yeah, yeah… they’ll patch you up all right, perhaps a little less handsome, God knows that would make it easier on me. Pst, that’s a lie. I don’t see that ugly mug of yours that often to be attached to it. It’s that sparkling personality under the grumpy face I like best,” the handler said in a rush.

Lightheaded as he already was, Magnus’ words knotted Alec’s guts something awful. Or was that his punctured stomach?

Both? Who cared, he was dying.

“You’re not dying!” Magnus growled into his ear. Alec must have spoke out loud.

“No’ your say so, innit?”

God, Alec hated his job.

Mummy’s little toy soldier, all broken and stiff.

He hoped Izzy, Jace and Max would forgive him. That Maryse would not instrumentalize his death to keep Max in the Academy, feeling obligated to follow his big brother into the grave out of duty.

He was distantly aware that people were storming the jet, shouting at each other. The strong chemical smell of fire extinguishant was in his nose and he sneezed, pain slamming in his belly like punch. He had forgotten about the fire and the burning couch.

Damn Molotov cocktail.

A paramedic was talking but Alec couldn’t piece the words together anymore, so he just nodded and passed out, Magnus’ beautiful voice in his ear.

*  

First thing he did out of the hospital a few weeks later wasn’t buy a muzzle. He went to the MI6 headquarters and thirteen floors down to leave a little broken snow globe on Magnus’ desk.
Second thing he did was to head out to his mother’s office for his new assignment. Maryse’s assistant had said something about shadowing a diplomat in Seoul over the phone. Might be a nice change of pace.

Chapter End Notes

Title from *Die Another Day* by Madonna

Thank you for reading <3!
But it is such a perfect place to start

Chapter Notes

Indecent things are done to marshmallows, so this chapter isn’t for the faint of heart <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You’re either being stupid or naïve… all of you are fired!” Maryse shouts.

Alec is waiting for steam to come out of her nose and ears and she seems close to it. It was to be expected. They went rogue after all and even if it was to save their own, it can’t be accepted. Alec is ready to suffer the consequence of his actions.

“You can’t do that,” Luke says calmly. He doesn’t look worried or upset but in perfect control of the situation. A tad smug, perhaps.

“Pray tell why, Garroway?” Maryse turns her razor sharp glare toward Luke, ready to pounce.

“Three of your children -two double-os, one Q junior-, a senior handler and your top double-o agent, all of them under your direct supervision went on a unsensored mission and destroyed millions worth of scientific equipments of a multinational corporation, leaving a high body count behind in retaliation of a terrorist attack, all to rescue a kidnapped handler. If you denounce us or contradict the version of events I personally sent to M earlier today, you’re finished because she has been waiting for years to get rid of you and your ambitions.” Luke smirks. “You’re accountable for our disobedience,” he finishes.

Smug doesn’t start describing his expression and Alec gapes at him in admiration.

Maryse opens her mouth to say something but she knows she’s beaten and closes it, knuckles going white on the top of her chair.

“Don’t worry, everyone will understand that you had to keep it a secret. Morgenstern could still have spies here after the raid,” Izzy lightly adds. Alec can tell she’s enjoying this as much as Luke.

Jace is another matter.

“Mum, we did what we had to,” he pleads from the wall he’s slouching on, as there are only four chairs for guests in Maryse’s office.

But their mother seems pissed enough to ignore her golden child and give a disgusted look to them all.

“Go!” she screams, beaten.

Ragnor is the first to rise, as dignified as always. Izzy, Jace and Luke follow at a slower pace while Alec stays perfectly still on his chair, fighting the need to massage the back of his head to sooth himself or look away. He nearly stands up and gives up on his plan but bits his inner cheek viciously to remind himself of the stakes.

He waits for the door to close behind his friends before standing up. They know he has to do this last
part alone.

Maryse opens her mouth to say something but he cuts her.

“I quit,” he says. It’s not defiance in his tone, just weariness. His plan worked (most of it) and now he owes it to himself to have a chance to be himself.

“You can’t be serious! We have lost too many agents in that attack. We still have to bring that Verlac in. I can’t have you galavanting around like a royal prince. We won’t speak—”

“I wasn’t asking. I’ve already spoke to M. She agreed that I’ve been dangerously pushing myself for too long and expressed concern,” he explains. M had actually said that him butchering assignments because of an inevitable nervous breakdown was out of the question. Such a caring woman she is.

“So you’re all just going behind my back to complain to M,” she sneers.

“Only when you screw up,” Alec shots back. It’s a sick satisfaction to say that out loud. M is one stone cold bitch, with her lips forever pursed in disapproval, a black hole of despair as she signs operatives to their death for Queen and country without blinking. Everyone hates her—especially Maryse—but the old bat has her uses. Right now, it’s telling his Mum off for once.

Both stay silent for a while, looking at each other like gladiators before a fight.

“You always excelled at disappointing me,” Maryse finally says as she turns away from him, dismissing him with a sharp gesture. Unsurprisingly, she thinks that insulting him will win her the argument—it wouldn’t be the first time.

He rolls his eyes.

“Morgenstern hinted that you did way worse than quit in your time. Perhaps I’ll dig into that when I’m, uh, galavanting.”

He doesn’t wait to see her reaction, doesn’t want to hear her voice or her attempt at explaining and just leaves her office, quietly closing the door behind himself.

He’s done. Done.

“How did it go?” Izzy throws herself at him the second the door closes, trapping him in a strong hug, but still mindful of his broken ribs.

“Badly... but that had to be expected. She can’t do a thing about it anyway,” he answers, lightheaded. A jolt of vertigo takes him by surprise when it finally sinks in.

I actually did it, he thinks.

He looks around and both Jace and Luke are smiling at him, pride (and relief) on their faces. God he’s glad he went through with it. Scared too, but the novelty of choosing himself this time makes up for it.

“Good.” Isabelle hugs him tighter. “What are you going to do with your first day of freedom?”


“I need to go home… my wife and stepdaughter are waiting for me at home,” Luke says, a huge smile on his face.
Damn that must be good.

“Na, I have to talk to M about the wedding…” Jace shudders. “For someone that don’t want to be my grandmother, she’s pissed that I got married without her knowing.” He looks pale.

M is not known for forgiving people giving her any lip or slighting her. Alec wouldn’t like to be Jace right now.

“And when are we meeting this mysterious wife of yours?” Izzy frowns up and down at Jace, like his get up might clue her in Jace’s wife’s identity. “You literally quit everything for her, she better be worth it!”

Alec would like to know more about her too. It’s not everyday your brother elopes and disappears from the surface of the earth. His (oh my god) sister-in-law was Jace’s mark and that all Alec knows about her -and even that he knows from Maryse.


“What.

“Go on then, M doesn’t like to be kept waiting,” Luke huffs.

Jace doesn’t wait to be told twice and wave quickly at them, breaking in a run towards the stairs case leading to M’s top floor office.

“Okaaaay what do you know that we don’t?” Izzy pokes Luke on the side to make him understand she means business.

“Don’t worry, I made Jace feel very bad about it,” Luke answers enigmatically, smiling at them still. He turns around, whistling despite the fact he’s walking with crutches, leaving them feeling very out of the loop all the sudden.

“Since when are Jace and Luke secret buddies?” Izzy asks, annoyed.

“Brazil? They had a joined assignment there a while ago I think.” Alec racks his brain to remember exactly when Jace began to get all goo goo eyes when he received texts. It oddly follows Jace saving Luke’s life from an explosion.

“Bah, they’ll tell us in time. Plus, we have ice cream, that’s still better than secrets right?” Alec passes an arm around his little sister’s shoulders and directs her to the elevator.

“Ice creams beats everything,” she says with conviction and Alec can’t help but to feel like a little kid again -in the best way possible.

*

**THEN**

“You should take a vacation,” Magnus said offhandedly, unruffled by the fact that Alec was following a target through the crosshair of his AS50 semi-automatic rifle. “Not that one, he’s a newbie, you better spot a core-group member asap.”

Alec sighed but switched to another face, waiting for Magnus to give him the go if the face rec was
conclusive.

“But I’m serious about the vacation. You deserve it,” Magnus persevered.

“You’re just saying that so you can get a leave,” Alec breathed, “and go party in Cancun.” It’s silly, he’s a mile away from the terrorist boot camp, no chance to be heard, yet he’s barely speaking above a whisper.

“Not that one, he’s DGSE,” Magnus dismissed Alec’s current target with a derisory tone. “And what of it? Cancun is fantastic, we could go together or if you wanted something more intimate, I’ve heard that 007 has some kind of love shack somewhere in…”

“DGSE is here?” Alec cut him. “We should pack up and go.”

Alec might be on foreign soil to breach international law of non-interference - a crime that would put Britain on a very uncomfortable position if they had to explain it- but crossing another agency while doing so? That was a bigger no-no, if not the biggest.

You could never know when they would take revenge.

Magnus groaned over the comms, then “I’m not an amateur, I’ve notified your mum the moment - holy shit she’s here!” he hissed.

Alec frowned, hearing some kind of movement over the comms, wondering what Magnus was doing.

“Babe?”

“009,” his mum answered sternly, “I see you’ve managed to find the boot camp. Finally.” Her tone was cold and completely unimpressed -it had been an entire month without a direct word with her.

_Hi to you too mum, how are you?_ Alec bit his bottom lip, viciously, before he droned, “Standing by and requesting new orders.”

“H11, what’s the status on primary objective?” she asked.

“Still acquiring target to create a killing ground… our angle is that they’ll be more inclined to take new members in -009 in that number- without too much fuss after thinning the herd.”

“Air strike would be faster,” Maryse commented.

“We spotted several civilians on camp -women, children in addition to that DGSE agent,” Alec could feel his heartbeat increase, saw it in the way his crosshair pulsed with it. She always did that, insisting to use a hammer when a scalpel would work just fine… like she enjoys the mess, he thought.

He shivered, unsettled by the truth pounding in his mind like a recurring headache.

“Did I ask for your input, 009?” Alec couldn’t hear the question in her tone, just not-so-subtle warning.

Alec answered by the negative, nearly choking on the word and the quickness of his breath, years and years of training and obedience pulling the expected answer out of his throat. It felt like throwing up shredded glass.

“There are evidences of chemical weaponry on site, far too advanced for anyone to cook up in those
mountains,” Magnus said deliberately. “An air strike will destroy any traces of the supplier.”

God.

It was like Magnus had the preternatural ability to speak pragmatic to Maryse to achieve his own agenda (i.e. not hate himself too much at the end of a mission, as he said so himself more than once).

She huffed, loudly, the sound alone shaking Alec to the core. How many time that huff had been directed at him, usually followed by barbed remarks?

“You better follow up on that,” she threatens Magnus. “As for the DGSE agent, just ignore him, I’ll contact the french to clear things up and this a joined assignment.”

“Woody, hum, you’ve got a perfect target on your line of sight, white shirt and red hair, just passed the food tent on your two,” Magnus announced.

Alec spotted the man easily because of his ruddy curls. He didn’t ask for a name, didn’t wish to know. The man, after all, was a traitor, a terrorist in training. A target to be put down. Couldn’t be more than twenty, three years younger than Alec.

Focus, he chastised himself.

He took aim, holding his breath, the neck of his target in the center of his crosshair -not a killing shot… not right away at least. People would shout, panic, some would take cover, some would try to help, gathering around the injured man...

Lining like bloody ducks, Jace had muttered the day after his instructor had taught him the trick.

Alec breathed out as he pressed the trigger and a few seconds later, the man stumbled, fell, mouth opened in a scream perhaps, grunting, gasping for a breath he couldn’t take or release. The red headed man hitted the ground and Alec felt nauseated, not by guilt but by the rush of adrenaline that flooded his system, already waiting for more.

“You’ve got a small window, make it matter,” Magnus said, voice far less detached than his technical words. The handler had never been squeamish -it wasn’t possible in their line of work- but he didn’t have to like it. Perhaps he was just worried about Alec, about what killing all those people might do to him. Not a productive idea, Alec thought, crushing a treacherous warmth in his guts...

He realigned his scope, shooting in quick succession at the small group of people that were green enough to attempt a rescue and were gathered around the redhead.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Neat head shots.

He reloaded his rifle, grabbing a box magazine blindly -a practiced gesture- while keeping his eye on an arm he could see, betraying someone hiding behind a huge wooden crate. Click. Someone tried to make it to a hummer, but never reached it.

“That’s enough, disengage and fall back to your extraction point,” his mum ordered, “you’ll be
informed of your infiltration details at the safe house.”

Alec didn’t spare a second. The AS50 was a preference of his, for accuracy and weight of course, but the fact that the rifle could be disassembled in three minutes top was a non-negligible advantage when he had to get the hell out as fast as possible.

“She’s gone,” Magnus announced, relief evident. “Good job, you might want to hurry up a bit, the extraction point is still three miles away.” He had regain some of his signature cheer and Alec smiled against his will.

Alec placed his backpack on his shoulders and strapped it at the chest, before breaking into a steady run. He didn’t linger too much on the absence of parting words from his mother, it would have been as useless as shouting at the wind.

“Alees?” he asked instead, focusing on the matter at hand.

“My drone is still overhead and showing some major freaking out. You have a good window before they recover their wit and give chase.”

“Send the drone after them,” Alec suggested between even breaths. The desert was hot and merciless but today, it wouldn’t be for him. He had a warm bath and a bottle of very old Macallan he lifted from a hotel bar waiting for him at the safe house.

“What?”

“It’s mounted with a small gun right with, what? Two bullets? Fire it on someone and show the drone, they’ll give chase to it.”

“Not the same caliber Woody,” Magnus noted, yet he hummed his approval of the plan and a staccato of keystrokes filled the comms.

“You said it, they’re not in their right minds, they won’t stop and check,” Alec said still, even if he knew deep in his gut that Magnus was already flying the drone in position.

“Done and done,” Magnus said a moment later. “Now, back to Cancun.”

“I don’t need vacation, Babe.” Alec winced at his own tone, how unsure it sounded.

“Now you’re just outright lying, and that’s baaaad,” Magnus sing-songed. “Satellite images show two groups, one after the drone, the other rounding the camp in a spiral. You cleaned up after you I believe?”

Alec didn’t bother answering that and focused on jumping across a crevasse on the ground, hitting the other side with a grunt and pulling himself over the edge, arms burning after a day sitting still under the sun and the sudden exercise. He looked around -more sand and rock- and resumed his run, as he had lots of ground to cover.

“Indiana Jones, calm down a sec, you could have break your damn neck!” Magnus shouted. “There was a nice passage on your left.”

“Quicker that way.”

“Agents,” Magnus complained and it was clear it came from the heart. “Please try to stay alive long enough for reaching the extraction point.”
“Made it this far, didn’t I?”

Magnus made a complicated noise over the comms, a strange cross between a heavy, exasperated sigh, a whine and a giggle. “Sheer luck runs out and I might cure myself from the sick case of masochism that keeps me coming back from more…” Magnus’ faltered on the last words, the way it always does when someone has a revelation as they speak. “Though I’m not holding my breath for that,” he added absently a few seconds later.

Alec didn’t say a word, focused on his feet and breathing and viciously took apart any thoughts that swarmed in his head about how he was the cause for Magnus’ melancholy.

He felt more guilt over that than over all the people he killed back at the boot camp with his rifle.

So he ran. For one, Magnus stayed silent too.

*

NOW

After two months of retirement, Luke comes to see how Alec is fairing.

Alec likes to think 007 is pleasantly surprised by his progress. Apart from jokes on his beard and a weird squirrel situation in the little cabin Alec’s living in, Luke only wants to talk about the weather and the beautiful spring that they’re having. But Alec can read right through him and the way he holds himself. The older agent is dancing around something -pretty badly, Alec thinks, for a spy of his competence.

This must be bad.

So Alec makes tea and places steaming cups in front of them, staying silent until the other man winces, drops his shoulders and begins to play around with his little spoon.

“Valentine Morgenstern is alive,” he blurs before taking a sip of burning tea.

“You’ve got confirmation then?” Alec croaks, nearly choking on a mouthful of earl grey.

This changes everything, doesn’t it? They had hoped that the man had died, crushed in the explosion of Verlac’s research facility. Now at least they were sure that they hadn’t been safe from retaliation...

Three months that Alec’s been lounging around in bloody Devon, like a sitting duck. The thought makes him dizzy.

“Bastard wasn't in the building when we brought it down -the searches are finally over, took forever with personnel stretched so thin. Fell thinks that Morgenstern wasn’t even in the country, courtesy of Verlac,” Luke explains, voice rough with anger. “He just toyed with us.”

“We need to find him,” Alec says without a pause. “He can’t be allo-”

“No, no, no. You mistake my intent.” Luke shakes his head. “I only told you because you have a right to know. You stay here and get better. Valentine and I have a score to settle and I need to investigate that Verlac too. His money might protect him right now but I have some experience with guys like him… he won’t get away with killing those people.”

“You can’t go after them on your own!” Alec shouts, standing up and already inventorying his
belongings in his head. He isn't going to leave Luke go after Morgenstern without backup. That’s the kind of folly that Alec would be set on doing... Luke is supposed to be the smart, sensible one.

“I won’t. I’ll have the entire MI6 behind me,” Luke reassures, patting Alec’s forearm and gently gestures for him to sit back at the small table.

Alec does so, reluctantly.

“But… okay. What’s his damage? Why did he called you a traitor?” Alec finally demands.

There are too many secrets about the former 006 and Alec needs to know, to clear the air. He’s not letting Luke out of his sight as long as he’s not given a straight answer.

Luke grimaces like he is trying to swallow something really sour and unpleasant before he looks around the cabin, eyes lost. It occurs to Alec that Luke is after the peace here as much as he is. After all, this place had been his sanctuary after his best friend went rogue. Luke had needed an entire year to accept the betrayal and now that the old wound was reopened...

“You remember in the Quiet Room… I told you about nearly losing my girlfriend because I couldn’t let her in after what happened with Morgenstern?”

Alec nods.

“That was 006’s wife,” Luke confesses, eyes fixed on his tea cup.

Alec sits there, shocked and silent for a moment.

“He went rogue because his wife was cheating on him?” he asks, incredulous.

“No. Jocelyn and I… we loved him both, we would have never… He had began to speak of the MI6 leaders with contempt, like they were an hindrance. He kept hiding intel from them and, like a fool, I let him. So did your parents and an a handful of others.” Luke pauses, twisting his mouth down in what Alec identifies as disgust. “It was a different time. Spies were dying by the dozen and no one blinked, the council and M -the one before Herondale- kept on their course. Sacrificing us left and right as it suited them.”

“Morgenstern promised otherwise?”

“But it didn’t have a limit, the council, M… the bloody government. Everything that we had been trained to protect he wanted control of it. His appetite grew until I couldn’t stomach it. Jocelyn was worried and scared. She was pregnant with Clary at the time and he was… violent. Controlling.” Luke stops, voice going hard, unforgiving. “I told everything to M about his plans. He fled and I…”

“You felt guilty,” Alec concludes.

“Part of me always wondered if I could have helped him. If perhaps, I had let it go too far so I could have Jocelyn for myself,” Luke admits in a low voice.

“That’s… Luke, you’re the best man I know! You would have never put your needs above your country or your friends.”

“I know that now,” he smiles, then adds, “Jocelyn knew it already but… well. I don’t have to tell you that sometimes it’s hard to see past the pain.”

Alec smiles sadly. In the two months he had lived in Luke’s cabin, lost in the woods, he has been
able to sort some things out.

“So you’re going after him.”

“Twenty-three years that we’ve been dragging this weight around… It’s time I put this to rest,” Luke says simply. There isn’t any anger in his voice, no resentment. This is a man determined to set things right.

“Okay. But promise me Luke. Promise me that if at some point you need help, you-”

“Come straight to you and ask for help. Yes, Alec. I promise,” Luke cheekily says as he stands up.

“Not that I’ll need too. I’m the best after all.”

Alec watches him go with a pang in his heart but he also knows that Luke is right.

*007 is the best.*

*Four months later, Alec regained some tranquility after Luke dropped by. He’s not really worried, not anymore at least. Morgenstern’s loathing has always been directed at the MI6 and Alec has been retired for the past six months (it’s a funny word to use, being just twenty-six and all, but also because his life expectancy had never let him hope for retirement before).

If the man was planning to make a move, it was getting late for it and Alec had other things to think about beside constant vigilance for something that might never come -if it did, well. He’ll deal, he always did.

So he stays put, learning how to breathe without the menace of imminent death on his mind. It’s weird.

The cabin is small but clean and Alec doesn’t mind the lack of running water as the river isn’t far. There’s a generator on the back and it’s powerful enough to charge the lights, the radio and keep a semblance of modernity in his refuge.

He sighs, pushing away a squirrel from the table. Damn creature isn’t even scared of him anymore. He can already hear Isabelle laughing at him for being a disney princess when he’ll tell her about it. She’s been getting more and more impatient about his return to London (not that she says anything but he can read between the lines) and honestly, he doesn’t have a answer for her or himself.

This place is too good to him, he fears that his sobriety and peace might slip from his fingers if he leaves.

So he pesters her for news of Jace, who’s never been that much of a writer. Their brother finally decided to give up field work to train the new recruits in the double-o program. Secretly, Alec thinks Jace wants to make sure that the trainees are treated right and not shoved into a life they’re not prepared for. His wife -who turned out to be Luke’s daughter! - is apparently grateful about not having to worry about him on top of worrying about her dad

Izzy is beside herself for finally having a friend that understands how reckless her brothers are. Alec snorts a lot reading her letters. Jace is apparently whipped (and very, very scared of both Luke and his wife) and Alec can’t wait to see it with his two eyes. He wonder, briefly, if Clary knows about her biological father and what her parents went through -it can’t be easy.
Alec hasn’t seen much of Magnus since they rescued him. It’s hard, far worse than it has any right to be. He went to the hospital of course, Magnus’ words after Cabo loud in his ears.

*That’s what friends do.*

They small talked for a while but both their minds had been on other things. You can’t really mend a relationship when you’re a stranger to yourself or trying to get past a huge trauma. Too many stupid, irreparable things could come out of it. They had stared at each other, not saying a peep but still having an entire conversation; agreeing that they both deserved a better chance at talking about this undeniable link between them. So Alec had squeezed Magnus’ shoulder, a sort of promise mashed with a wordless *take care*, and left.

He had been in no state of helping anyone, not when he was so lost himself.

He writes to Magnus though. Most of it is silly, silly descriptions of the woods and the small balls of fur that seem to believe that Luke’s cabin is theirs to lord over. Some of it is more personal, sometimes a weird “*do you remember…?*”. More often it’s about nightmares fading a bit (sometimes not), sleeping being easier and Alec learning to cook on the small stove (progresses are minimal but he doesn’t care, it’s still better than anything Izzy could make). He keeps it simple, unwilling to further burden Magnus with his problems.

The letters for Magnus are not difficult but a bit more raw than the ones for Izzy and Max. He writes weekly (sometimes more), not really hoping a reply. He wouldn't know what to do with it. But none comes and that too is okay, as the handler doesn’t owe Alec anything -never has. Magnus needs time to heal himself and should concentrate on that, not worrying himself over Alec like he did during their time working together. Also, Alec might have done something stupid if he had detected anguish in Magnus’ letters, which the other might have known.

Today though, he doesn’t feel like writing anything. Even in the middle of the woods he feels a bit cooped up when he doesn’t move enough so he grabs his running gear and ties his shoulder length hair in a bun (that would have Izzy rolling on the floor, howling with laughter) and closes the door behind him. He walks down the porch and into the clearing, eyes gorging themselves on the view.

It’s been six months since he got here but the wildness of the forest around him still leaves him in awe. It’s pure here. Well, except for the cabin. But Alec isn’t so far gone that he needs to actually sleep *in* the woods to recenter himself.

He stretches conscientiously in the september sun, breathing in the warm air evenly. He honestly doesn’t know what he’s going to do when the weather turns cold since the cabin doesn’t have a fireplace or a heater. Winter might kick his ass once it’s there.

*I’ll worry about it later*, he thinks. He has the time to go in town and gets supplies until the rain and the cold take over completely.

The run goes on for hours and in no particular direction. He doesn't push himself, though. He doesn't have to. He just runs.

Luke, of course, was right when he told Alec that he needed to leave London and the job behind. Perhaps he will take back his post when this is over, like Luke did. Perhaps he won’t. But right now there’s just the regularity of his feet hitting the ground and his breathing to think about, until he doesn’t have too and he can just run without a worry in the world.

For the first time of his life, he feels at peace.
The sun begins to set when Alec comes back from his run and enters the clearing where the cabin is but he doesn’t go home immediately. He stops running and takes off his running shoes, socks and shirt before throwing himself in the river, seeking refreshment.

It’s not too deep or vicious enough to be dangerous; he once crossed the Channel by swimming (hypothermia is a bitch), so this is no challenge. Alec just immerses himself in the cool water to get rid of the sweat and the dirt. Fuck this is heaven.

He exits the water a few minutes later, soaked and thoroughly tired, his running short clinging to uncomfortable places. He’s about to get rid of it (advantage of being the only human in a five mile radius) when he stops dead in his tracks.

Magnus Bane is on his porch.

Alec shakes himself of his surprise and starts walking again. As he draws near he realises that Magnus is wearing sensible hiking shoes. That, in itself, is proof enough he's hallucinating. Shit, he probably tripped on a root and knocked himself down while he was running. Probably.

But hopefully not.

Magnus never looked this good in any fantasy Alec might have had about him. Alec looks down at himself, half expecting a clown outfit or something as equally ridiculous. But he's just shirtless (something that does happen a lot in aforementioned fantasies) and Magnus’ eyes are riveted on his chest. Magnus, who has always been so suave and self-assured, is openly gaping at Alec’s wet chest like it’s the center of the universe and he lost his ability to compute.

Alec empathizes as Magnus looks mind-numbingly good on his porch (even in sensible, yet fancy clothes) and exhausted by his hike to get here. He looks healthy and Alec’s heart beats a little faster at the realisation. There’s a huge backpack resting at his feet and a Vuitton carry-on on the chair by the door.

It's all very ridiculous.

When Alec is at the bottom of the stairs, Magnus rolls his gold rimmed eyes at him.

“Bizarrely enough, I can dig the hair, very... sexy pirate,” he gestures to Alec’s head with a bejeweled hand, “but the beard is... no. Just no.” Magnus says without any explanation about his presence. It's just so Magnus.

“The beard stays,” Alec replies, crossing his arms over his chest -not that he minds Magnus looking, he just needs to assert that he's the boss of his facial hair.

“At least trim it right.” Magnus takes his phone out and swears, “No signal, of course... how very Bear Grylls of you.”

“There's electricity,” Alec defends the cabin automatically.


Alec winces and glances at the river on their left. Magnus, whose face is quickly falling, follows his eyes and snorts.
“Well I guess that explains why you dived in a few minutes ago… I thought that you just perfected your dramatic entrance,” he says, smirking. “Now please, I’m pretty sure I was followed by a bear on my way so if you could open the door that would be nice. I’m far too beautiful to die being eaten alive.”

Alec frowns.

“Door’s open.” There’s a lock but Alec never bothered with it -anyone with nefarious intent against him would just use the gas in the generator and burn down the cabin with him in it. Though, better not say that to Magnus.

“Well, it’s not like I tried to open it when you didn’t answer,” Magnus says quizzically.

“You did that in London.” It’s not an accusation but Alec finds it curious that Magnus changed his behavior.

Magnus looks at his feet, shuffling them self consciously.

“Last time I was extremely pissed at you -which doesn’t excuse me forcing my way through your flat but… no. Actually no but. It didn’t work so well for me anyway, I would be crazy to use the same strategy again,” Magnus explains shyly.

“Okay. Well it’s open,” Alec repeats simply.

* *

The cabin is, obviously, not made for two. Or at least not made for two people not sharing the same bed and not having a high level of intimacy.

The thought seems to hit Magnus the moment he enters and takes in his surroundings; Alec can’t help but mock him a little.

“What did you expect? The Hôtel Fouquet?” he chuckles.

“You’re making jokes now. In front of me no less. Uh, this place must be magical after all,” Magnus comments as he hauls his baggages inside. “Lucky for my back, I stole one of those bedrolls that Isabelle is working on. Supposed to be very forgiving even in rough-”

The rest of Magnus’ words are lost to Alec.

Somehow, six months of living here made him forgot that he was, in a way, incurably scared of Magnus.

God, he’s human, Alec thinks. Magnus is not an unreachable godlike entity that lives among the clouds and that Alec’s touch would muddy. It took Alec this long to realize that. Now he needs to lower his IQ score on his MI6 file and hide under a rock forever.

“Oy! Are you even listening?” Magnus asks.

“Yeah sure,” Alec nods along and sits on a chair, quietly calling himself names in his head before mumbling, “there are squirrels in here sometimes. Most of the time. They steal stuff and sleep on me.”

“Squirrels now! I could be in the Bahamas but I picked squirrels,” Magnus gets out of his green coat
and smooths down the black clingy shirt he’s wearing (Alec lowers his IQ by a few points again, because it never occurred to him that Magnus had abs, the man is so deceptively soft looking). “This is perfect,” Magnus says, shuddering dramatically. He swirls around on his feet until his eyes find Alec’s and he forces a smile down -badly, honestly - and clears his throat. “You look well.”

Something tells Alec that Magnus isn’t talking about his physique.

“Like I said in my letters, there’s isn’t really anything to worry about out here.”

“Yeah, I get that. London is just…”

“Well?”

Magnus nods and sits on the other chair.

“You can tell me to go if that’s what you need,” he says, looking him straight in the eyes.

“I know,” Alec smiles, “honestly the squirrels don’t have your conversation skills. I was getting tired of them.”

“That’s… I don’t know if it’s adorable or worrying. But I’m too tired to care. And starving!”

Alec chuckles and stands up, walking to the stove and the food cabinet. Shit, it’s nearly empty and so is the mini fridge, he’ll have to trek to the little village that borders the woods tomorrow to restock with Magnus in mind.

“You can live with macaroni and cheese? Because it’s that or I have to go hunt something fluffy and I rather not.”

“Depends. Are you a better cook than Izzy? Because for someone that can build everything, she’s hopeless at following a recipe,” Magnus scowls likes he’s been put through too many meals prepared by Alec’s sister and that is not suspicious at all.

“Do I looked starved to you?” Alec snarks above his shoulder as he gets the cheese out of the fridge.

Magnus doesn’t answer but he’s openly staring at Alec’s arse with approval. It’s enough. Though perhaps Alec should change as he feels a little underdressed in only his wet running shorts. There is also the matter of his numerous scars; on his back, chest, legs and arms, small or big lacing his skin in a deadly pattern. Of course, Magnus knows about them, as he was there when most of them were made. It doesn’t stop Alec feeling a little self-conscious.

“That’s not really proof,” Magnus looks away, “she was wolfing down her version of my raclette cheese *hachis parmentier* the other day and let me tell you that I certainly couldn't eat more than two bites before giving up.”

Alec remembers eating the dish that Magnus had left behind in his flat more than half a year ago. He had cried eating every serving (and not just because he thought that he was a mess that didn’t deserve good things, that dish was just out of this world) and had been heartbroken when it was all gone -just like Magnus.

“Hey has a weird sense of taste,” he agrees. He puts two plates on the little table and turns back to the stove, puts a pot on it and fills it with water he collected from the river in the morning (filtered, he’s not suicidal).

“No shit. She’s a menace,” Magnus accuses.
“So… you went back to work?” Alec tries to sound inconspicuous but fails.

“Not really,” Magnus begins to play with his mismatched cutlery, “I don’t think that’s right for me right now. High stress could be… bad. So I’m terrifying students at the Academy at the moment.”

There’s no trace of shame in his voice and Alec is glad. He's also 95% sure that Magnus’ students are probably slobbering all over him at any given opportunity; Magnus is just that attractive.


“Nope. I stick to the handlers’ recruits. Field agents are just too much,” he says fondly.

Alec nods and turns back to the cupboard.

“So I have water, water, tea and half a bottle of Irish whiskey that Luke must have forgot when he left,” Alec announces. He only mentions the whiskey because he remembers that Magnus loves his alcohol probably just as much as his glitter.

“Water will do thanks,” Magnus answers without enthusiasm. “Another thing I have to thank Morgenstern for I guess.”

“What do you mean?”

“Alcohol doesn’t mix well with anxiety medication. But my liver will probably thank me in the end,” Magnus says bitterly.

Alec’s hand clenches around the pot handle. Alcohol had been the biggest part of his medication process when he was a double-o agent, as it numbs the brain enough to sleep. Fortunately, those days are behind him. The fact that Magnus didn't turn to alcohol that way is a relief.

“Yeah, I get what you mean,” he says, focusing on the little bubbles forming in the water.

They fall into a companionable silence after that. The macaronis are okay and Magnus doesn’t mock Alec for it.

Not too much at least.

Strangely enough, they don’t have any life changing conversation after dinner. Both of them are tired and just unpack Magnus’ high tech bed roll (which seems to be far better than Alec’s mattress) before going to sleep in their respective side of the cabin.

Alec lies in the dark for a moment, biting his lips before he says:

“It’s possible that I’ll wake up from a nightmare during the night. Just… don’t try to get near.”

“Okay,” Magnus acknowledges from the other side of the cabin. “Wouldn’t have done it… I’m not that cuddly either when I wake up from one.”

His serious tone tells Alec that he understands how very lethal Alec, disoriented and scared, could get.

“You still have them?” is out of Alec’s mouth before he can think better of it. Stupid question. Nightmares don’t go away that easily, as he well know.

Magnus takes some time to answer and Alec silently curses himself for overstepping.
“Nightmares aren’t the worst,” Magnus says in a small voice. “Obviously some of them are bad but… it’s manageable. The panic attacks aren’t. Sometimes I’m working on something I will feel the barrel of her gun pressed against the back of my neck…” Alec has to restrain himself from crossing the cabin to hold him. “Had to upgrade security at my place but it never felt right. So I went North to the Academy but trainees can be…”

“They have all those preconceived notions about violence and heroism,” Alec finishes for him when it’s clear that Magnus can’t quite found the words.

“They wanted to learn all about being kidnapped and killing people… Like they were asking me about a tourist trip to Greece.”

“They’re kids and some instructors sold them dreams to get them to join,” Alec amends. He experienced it first hand growing up or in the past few years when people would come and congratulate it for doing something he has nightmares about.

“I made jokes,” Magnus says, guilt so thick it nearly makes Alec choke.

“You might have not been there with me, but you had to-” a pause, as Alec’s words fail him, then, “to hear me nearly die a lot. I’m actually aware of the stress I put you through. Your jokes kept you sane and me alive.”

Alec is terrified that Magnus will fight him on this but, miraculously, he doesn’t.

“God… you even make sense now,” Magnus dramatically accuses and with that, Alec knows that the handler’s cutting the conversation short.

“Good night then,” Alec says.

“Good night? What? I don’t get the full slumber party experience? Who’s going to do my nails?” Magnus mock complains.

Alec stays silent for a minute.

“I can actu-” he yawns “-ally do that in the morning,” he proposes. God he’s sleepy.

“Uh. It’s a deal, Woody.”

\*

Alec wakes up to the radio quietly humming some generic nonsense and grunts. It’s too far away for doing anything about, though. He considers shooting it but that’s probably not something very smart or sensible to do. He peeks at the alarm clock on the dresser near his bed and immediately burrows his head in the pillow and grunts louder. He tried to be more indulgent about his sleep schedule over the last months but habits die hard and he usually never gets up after 7 o’clock.

But it’s 10. Alec refuses to make a connection between that and Magnus’ presence. Instead, he concentrates on the awful music and how Magnus seems to be in his element.

“Everyone else in the room can see iiiit, everyone else but youuu,” he sings with enthusiasm, “Baby you light up my world like…”

“I’ll trim the beard if you switch stations,” Alec begs over the music, sitting up on his bed, eyes
foggy so it takes him a few precious second to see that Magnus is down to his boxer and a tshirt, in a middle of a enticing choreographic move near the door.

Alec stares.

Magnus stares right back.

The radio sings that someone doesn’t know they’re beautiful and Alec feels like he needs to make sure that Magnus knows.

“And even up the hair,” Magnus raises with great seriousness, oblivious to Alec’s pinning. “The hair is nice but it could be nicer.”

Alec passes a hand in his hair. It’s full of knots and yeah, he can see what Magnus means.

“Why I want you so desparelyyyyy,” the radio continues in the cabin.

“Fine,” Alec capitulates, throwing his blanket away like a sulky child. Everything to stop this horrendous garbage.

Magnus reluctantly switch the radio to a news station. “Happy?” he asks as a monotone voice fills the cabin, in a middle of a weather report.

“A mug of coffee and the papers would be nice,” Alec says, before laughing at Magnus’ outraged expression. “I don’t have coffee.”

“Joking. Again. If I go inspect the back of the cabin, would I found Luke’s weed farm?” Magnus asks suspiciously.

Alec kinda want to kiss him stupid. The need is so visceral, so all consuming that he’s left breathless.

“Alexander?”

Alec shudders. That’s new; nobody ever calls him that.

“I saw some…” he stops. He was going to say that he saw some weird plants out there, but that’s what old Alec would have done - useless Alec. Just like Magnus accused him back in London, his reflex had been to deflect. He takes a calming breath in, out. “I like this,” he says finally.

Magnus frowns, probably trying to piece together what just went through Alec’s head.

“You,” a pause, “you here.” Alec has to use all his will to maintain eye contact with Magnus. He doesn’t think it would be right to say the rest. Not yet at least.

“That’s…” Magnus swallows, “good. Since I’m here and all. Tea?”

* *

They drink tea on the porch that morning, wrapped tentatively together in a blanket to shield themselves from the crisp air. It’s always cold in the morning because of the river’s nearness and the threes shadows but today it just makes Alec grateful for the company.
Half an hour later, Alec takes a very cheery Magnus to the town, backpacks full of grocery bags. It’s not as monotonous a trek with Magnus rambling about the shrewd ways he found to humble down his students at the Academy.

Before they can truly realize, they’re in town.

The store is little but well stocked and before Alec can do anything about it, Magnus puts every fancy food his eyes can find in their shopping cart, enough for a small army. The owner, who’s always been wary of Alec (the hair and beard might have played something in that, as much as his taciturn behavior), looks at the mismatched couple they make with surprise.

He tries to see them from her perspective: one man with caveman-like facial hair and well worn clothes, friendly and engaging as a prison door for the six months he’s been coming here. Then there’s Magnus, swirling around the store with effortless grace in his brand new colorful outfit; a newcomer here that doesn’t bother keeping his voice down, his enthusiasm making it hard to remain stoic too.

Alec has to smile at his antics and the way he turns everyone’s heads around -Alec’s included- like a massive celestial object catching them all in his gravity field.

Alec winces at the metaphor… he needs to stop putting Magnus on such a pedestal, which is so easy to loathe and fall from. It’s inhuman to do so, unfair… . To himself and Magnus.

The little old lady is polite, if still looking strangely at them when they get to the checkout and asks Alec if he has any letters today, since the store double as a post office.

“No, thank you,” he says fishing his wallet from his pocket to pay.

She smiles indulgently at them.

“Well, I suppose it’s sweet that your boyfriend came to keep you company. All alone in the woods, really…” she says disapprovingly, the same kind of tone that people use to comment on an toddler misbehaving. She turns to Magnus and asks with a twinkle in her eyes “The strong and silent type, isn’t he?”

Magnus beams at her and doesn’t correct her assumption about them. Alec’s breath catches and he bites his lower lip before doing something that could shock the old woman.

Like ravish Magnus against the counter.

“Oh yes,” Magnus is gushing, “I bet everyone in the village tried to seduce him at some point!” he gives a stern look at the woman, suspicious, and Alec rolls his eyes.

“Oh dear, my Hubert wouldn’t be very happy with me chasing handsome boys,” the woman says. “But Tracy McMillan and her friends showed up in the store all summer when he was here. We had to call the police when they got lost trying to find his cabin. Silly youngsters.”

“Oooh,” Magnus pokes Alec gently on the arm, “you certainly didn’t mention that in your letters.”

Alec winces and looks away. God help him that had been very embarrassing to live through, no way he would have told that to anyone.

The trek back to the cabin is, not to mock Magnus or anything, slow going.
Obviously, with all the stuff Magnus had selected, the bags are stuffed. Magnus’ cheeky demeanor stopped after a mile, when it might have truly sank in that shouldering the weight of his excess for five miles was going to be a pain.

“W-why didn’t youuuu,” he pants dramatically, “stop me!” Offended birds scatter at his shout.

Alec doesn’t answer and just smirks, accelerating his pace just to hear Magnus swear again. It’s kinda hot. His brain is absolutely not recontextualizing the cussing to something else, though.

Right.

“I don’t care! I can watch your arse way better like that!” Magnus assures. “Way better.”

“This isn’t that heavy,” Alec teases. Nevermind that his backpack is killing him and the two grocery bags in his hands are cutting into his palms mercilessly. Hell if he’s going to admit that to Magnus, though. Plus Magnus’ pjs this morning left little to the imagination. The man is covered in muscles. He’s just being dramatic.

“Not heavy?! And I suppose that the ground is cotton soft and even? That the air isn’t disgustingly warm? Worst - huff - workout, EVER!”

Alec bites his tongue to stop himself from proposing, well, Magnus.

“You know, I’m pretty sure you told me before that my missions were and I quote, quite romantic. This is a piece of cake in comparison,” he lies, blinking his eyes against the sweat that’s dripping down his forehead.

Thankfully, they’re reach the cabin around two pm and Alec makes quick work of putting away the groceries, even if half of it has to stay in the bags because there’s just not enough space in the cupboards and fridge. Damn Magnus.

“I’m not going to shower in the river,” Magnus says after drinking a tall glass of water. “I really can’t.”

“There a basin on the porch. I use it for the laundry but…” he makes a vague gesture toward the door, “well, you’re smart, you can figure it on you own,” Alec says from his bed, too lazy to help.

“A basin!” With some grumbles, Magnus leaves the coolness of the cabin with a huge part of his stuff and steps outside.

Some time later, he wakes up Alec with his soft singing. Alec blinks the sleep from his eyes and looks around for Magnus but the man is still on the porch, voice carrying through the gaping door.

Alec shakes himself and joins him there, where Magnus -looking all soft in a white silk shirt and jeans- is applying clear nail polish on his right hand. His bare feet are dangling over the edge, the only part of him directly in the sun.

Alec stares for a minute. He spent nearly three years robbing himself of this. Given a say in his future, Alec won’t do that mistake again.

“Didn’t I say that I would do it?” he asks, startling Magnus. He didn’t realise that he had been that quiet. “I used to do Izzy’s nails when she broke her arm in the Academy.”
“Oh don’t worry, I’m going to put your hands to good use,” Magnus says without a hint of shame as he rubs some cotton on the smear of nail polish he made when Alec surprised him. “Come sit.”

Alec does as he’s told, face burning. He reaches for Magnus’ right hand and just… that’s a very soft hand, he thinks, blushing harder. He concentrates on Magnus’ rings, the little silver chains that dangles from one of them, forming a triangle that cover the back on his hand and loops around his wrist as a bracelet.

“What color do you want?” Alec asks, voice rough. Magnus is kind enough not to comment on it and just frowns down at his beauty case, before he takes a forest green nail polish out with his other hand.

“This one. It will be…”

“Thematic,” Alec finishes for him.

Magnus smiles and Alec takes the bottle from him.

“Wait,” he says as he spots the fancy ring that ornates Magnus’ left ring finger, “Is that…?”

Magnus looks down at his hands and winces.

“I might have liberated it from the Q department,” he says.

“You libe- Magnus!” Alec shouts, squinting back to the rose gold and pink sapphire ring. He had worn it once during a mission in Prague a year and half ago, an extravagance that had clashed with his austere bodyguard suit. Seeing the ring on Magnus’ finger now is… strange.

“What? Magnus exclaims, defiant now. “I designed the damn thing with Izzy, working our arses off; she didn’t want it, so it’s mine. Q had it locked in the disused gadgets locker… don’t you worry that pretty head, your mother had the whole mission file scrubbed clean from the servers as soon as we lost contact with you the first time…” Magnus abruptly stops, lost in thoughts of Prague and fire.

“Plus it goes so well with my complexion,” he finishes hastily.

Alec can understand the need to see hard work rewarded but… oh well. It’s not like the Red Thief was going to be missed. The ring had been useful but the glitches were, well, quite phenomenal.

“As long as you keep it turned off, I guess it’s not a problem,” Alec says in hope of appeasing Magnus.

“Like there’s that many electronics to fry here.”

“You never know,” Alec begins to say as he unscrews the nail polish cap, “Luke could have a secret base under the cabin,” he says as he looks at the empty clearing with great seriousness, like he’s sharing a state secret. “This could be a hub of british intelligence!”

Magnus bursts into laughing and Alec gorges himself of the sound and the sight of him. He kinda wants to do that for the rest of his life.

“God, what if you spent the last six months flashing interns!” Magnus cackles, then looks at the river a bit wistfully.

Alec scrowls. “I don’t go around naked in the woods,” he says briskly.

Magnus gives him an unconvinced look, “not even a little?”
Alec really tries to tone his expression down and lie but he can’t, not with Magnus right there, his broad shoulders already shaking with laughter.

“It might have happened,” he concedes. Summer had been warm and the river had been his only salvation. “But considering that I have a audience now…”

“Little old me? Like I would object,” Magnus says coyly.

Alec bites his bottom lip and clears his throat.

“We’re doing this or what?” he asks, gesturing at the nail polish and Magnus’ hands.

That, strangely, gives Magnus a pause. He cocks his head to the side, eyes searching for something on Alec’s face. Whatever it is, he seems to find it as a slow smile spread on his lips and he says, “yes, I think we are” before nodding, more to himself than to Alec. He imperiously put his right hand in front of Alec’s face. “I’m really glad you finally got on with the program,” he murmurs.

Alec isn’t sure that he was suppose to hear that.

Later, when his nails are dry, Magnus insists that Alec must make good on his promise to groom his hair and beard.

Trimming the beard is actually a relief and when he’s done, Alec has just reasonably long stubble on his face. The hair is another matter and Magnus is forced to help.

“See? This is what happens when you don’t put on hair mask…” Magnus looks down judgingly at Alec’s split ends and dry hair. “Also I don’t know how to cut hair so it might be worse after I’m done.”

Alec shrugs.

When the sun sets, he’s lost most of the hair, since Magnus needed to make it shorter and shorter still to cover up his numerous mess ups. Alec’s back is itchy with cut hair and Magnus is looking at him like he’s trying to control a fit of giggles.

“I like it,” Alec says. Truth is, he hasn’t seen the result yet but he doesn't care, even as he passes a hand in his hair and can feel how uneven it is.

“Well it’s something I guess,” Magnus is laughing out loud now.

It’s really a nice sound and Alec busies himself with sweeping the porch clean of his cut hair. Magnus goes inside and reappears on the porch almost immediately with an unopened bag of marshmallows and his phone.

“It’s a shame there is no fireplace. Think of all the s’mores we could be eating!” Magnus moans before ripping the bag open and shoving a sickening number of marshmallows in his mouth. Obviously, the candies they bought in the morning aren’t going to make it far into Magnus’ visit.

“Yeah, fire in the middle of the woods… can’t see what could go wrong…” Alec snarks. “Gimme one of those, will you?”

Magnus throws a lone marshmallow toward him and Alec catches it with his mouth, chewing on it slowly. He can’t remember the last time he bought or ate sweets.
“I see you kept those super spy reflexes intact,” Magnus mocks with glee before snapping what must be a pretty unflattering picture of Alec with his phone. “With tricks like that, you can integrate a canine unite in no time.”

Alec smiles. At least dogs wouldn’t try to shoot him. He lets Magnus take another picture before glaring at him. That owes him a new picture followed by some giggling and he sighs, a part of him already planning five different ways to pickpocket the bloody phone to wipe it clean of evidence. His siblings can’t see him with the ugly mop that his hair must be right now.

Magnus seems pretty aware of that, as one of his brows arches with dare. He looks like temptation itself.

Then he shoves some marshmallows in his mouth again… It doesn’t really diminish his sex appeal and Alec is concerned for his own state of mind.

“Bu’ really, can’t ya build a fire pit or somethin’?” Magnus tries again around the candies, looking like a disgruntled chipmunk.

A sexy one.

The mental image is so weird that Alec laughs so much he rolls off the porch and finds himself starfished on the ground, arse hurting and pride bruised.

Magnus pokes his head over the edge, not bothering to hide his amusement.

“Super spy reflexes,” he judges. “Really a marvel to witness, thank you for this demonstration Alexander.”

Alec answers with a rude gesture, telling Magnus where to shove it.

The next day, they drink tea on the porch again, this time with more breakfast food that they truly need. They do the same the day after and the next after that and the next and the next, falling into the sweetest routine that Alec ever developed in his life. It goes on for a week, sipping searing hot tea in their pajamas, watching the fog getting thinner in the clearing as the air warms.

Alec had felt more at ease than he ever been since Magnus arrived at the cabin. The last six months had been good for him, the calm a solid start to rearrange himself to a more balanced man. But this week had taught him more about intimacy and self-indulgence than all his years combined. This is what had been missing all along.

In truth, some part of him had dreaded that being confronted with Magnus would bring back the stress level Alec had always associated with his handler, since his voice was so viscerally linked to his missions. But he should have known better. After all, Magnus’ voice had always meant salvation and the promise of a safe return.

Unfortunately, Alec can’t say as much about his own. Not that Magnus is particularly distressed around him but it’s obvious that some part of him is still in that Verlac Inc research facility in Scotland.

The first few days of his stay, Magnus would tremble if Alec was moving too quietly and startling him -since then, Alec makes a big show of being as loud as he can when he moves. The way Magnus keeps his back to the walls is telling too, as is the hyper-vigilance he displays. Twice already Alec woke up in the middle of the night to find Magnus staring through the window, clutching a
knife. Alec got up and went outside to patrol, without a word to Magnus. He wasn’t sure if he would appreciate or accept the help, so Alec just did what he thought was best. Magnus nodded to him when he came back and went back to his bed roll, breathing easier.

Alec gets it, went through it. But he had to have closure to nearly everything bad happening to him. Arrests and death were the lot of his enemies and people who harmed him during his missions. In a way, even his mother paid for her lack of care since Izzy, Jace and Max are avoiding her these days.

Magnus doesn’t have that. Not with Morgenstern and Verlac still at large -Luke, despite his dedication, hasn’t been able to find the ex-006 in the last four months. Like a ghost the man had vanished and like a ghost he could return. Obviously, Magnus’ fears are founded and Alec feels for him.

One chilly Monday morning, Alec leaves for the village to go buy milk and post a letter for Isabelle. Magnus is on the porch, stuffing his face with the last piece of Cadbury’s they had, looking far too good doing so.

Alec grumbles at the memory.

“Hey, you seen that Cadbury’s bar?” Alec asked sleepily.

Magnus, suspiciously, didn’t answer.

Alec turned around and sure enough, the former handler was holding the big purple package in his hands and a smug expression masquerading as guilt.

“You were going to share that of course?” Alec pointed at the chocolate.

Magnus didn’t even try to defend himself and dashed for the door but Alec caught him in his arms, manhandling him off the floor. But however slender Magnus was, he was made of muscles -hard and corded along his arms, shoulders, thighs and legs- and the proximity left Alec all flustered. Worst, Magnus wiggle (his arse against Alec’s front), roaring with laughter like a mischievous sexy… Magnus.

Alec tripped on the carpet and they fell down in a heap, Magnus still holding the chocolate bar out of reach before Alec pushed him aside and straddled him in a swift move so he could take the candy from him. He looked down in triumph, ready to gloat when he got trapped by Magnus’ intense gaze.

Suddenly he was overwhelmingly aware that he was in his boxer and that Magnus was wearing little more. That he was straddling Magnus. Over a bar of Cadbury’s. Fuck the Cadbury’s.

And then Magnus tickled him. Tickled him so hard that Alec collapsed on top of him, completely helpless with giggles until Magnus rolled them over (straddling him!), and seized the bar.

Alec was left staring at him, stomach clenching from more than the tickling. The window just behind Magnus was pouring morning light in the cabin and into Magnus, outlining him in gold with religious icon level of ethereal beauty. It was breathtaking.

Something like molten heat rolled over Alec, smothering his thoughts, leaving only scorching need in its wake.

He gripped Magnus’ hips, ready to haul him down for a kiss when Magnus took a huge bite out of the chocolate bar and made an indecent moan at the deliciousness.
“It tastes bet-” chewing, “ter tha’ the othar. Like,” chewing,” chweet, chweet victor- yyyyyy !”

Alec hadn’t resisted tickling Magnus back, determinate to make him rethink his food sharing philosophy. He couldn’t even be mad at the missed occasion for a kiss.

Or at least not too mad.

Which is why he decided to walk to the village on his own, to think. Magnus had not been hard to convince and said that he had to work on something anyway, hinting that Alec’s presence didn’t make for good concentration.

Perhaps midway on his trek, Alec stops dead in his track and gently knock his head against the bark of a tree. Their situation is ridiculous.

They hadn’t … talked during that week.

Not about them at least.

They talked about work, Magnus being curious to know how Alec was feeling about reintegrating the MI6 at some point in the future (on the fence and sightly lining with training rather than field operations if it ever happened).

Alec dared ask if Magnus was seeing someone… that was met with a “are you for real” glare of such intensity that Alec feigned the sudden need to run, disappearing for two long hours, feeling stupid but hopeful at the same time.

And sure, they flirted everyday (more than in the two years they had worked together). It’s so easy to do so here and now, to accept Magnus’ lingering eyes, to feel good about them but especially to do it back . Just yesterday, Alec surprised himself and led Magnus into a little dance in the cabin, awkwardly trying to follow the slow music as well as Magnus did once his surprise faded. It had made Alec happy to be this silly. He could have, still, use his well-oiled (and faked) charm. But he didn’t have to and Alec could finally accept that there was a third option, rather than pretend or flee. He just had to try and Magnus smiled and corrected his posture, making them sway gently in the dying light.

Sometimes it’s more crude, Magnus shamelessly giving up on whatever he’s working on his laptop to watch Alec exercise in front of the cabin. It was strange, Alec had never been too fond of people looking at him like he was a piece of meat. Men and women had flocked toward him since since puberty and it has always meant secrets, lies and duty to him -leaving a rotten taste in his mouth. But if Magnus’ gaze was hungry and lustful it was also so much more. Kind. Warm.

Alec felt loved.

But they kept quiet about it. About the very real words that Alec felt tattooed on his heart more deeply with every passing minute. About why Magnus came here in the first place. About the weight behind the growing number of casual touches between the two of them: shy at first but more and more natural. Hugs were common, falling asleep on the other’s lap on the porch even more.

Sometimes Alec felt their interactions so bubble thin, like the Cadbury’s incident, that he expected them to burst if they touched just the right way. The tension building and building under his skin, into the room, all over Magnus too and, instead of pushing them over the edge and finally do something, anything , the tension deflates and coils back deep in his belly.

Alec, in frustration, punches the tree.
The tree wins and through the pain, Alec sees that he’s been an idiot.

Magnus has been waiting on him. Always have. During their partnership; for that awful month of self loathing; during his captivity and the following six months apart. Magnus always gave him space and, above all, agency.

And still, he’s giving him just that. He came here, intent obvious to even Alec’s dim brain and now he’s waiting, letting Alec take his time.

Because he knows that Alec has more baggage than an airport on Christmas Eve. Because he was there when Alec was duty-bound to sleep with people and knows what kind of scars it leaves behind. Because he’s an impossible man who can’t quit, even if it might hurt him in the end.

Alec loves him so much.

So he turns back to the cabin, ready to give a piece of his mind to Magnus, who’s been so insufferably selfless for too long.

Should I do that before or after I kiss him? Alec muses over. Probably before. He doubts he will be in a state where words are something he can string together once he kiss Magnus.

As he walks back, the wind changes and Alec’s entire body sizes up with tension that has nothing to do with his feeling for Magnus.

He smells fire.

Chapter End Notes

You’re a Mean One, Mr. Grinch plays in the background

Keep an eye out for (the heart is a) Weapon, the second part of this fic!

Title from from The World Is Not Enough by Garbage

You can come say hi on my tumblr or on twitter

Thank you for reading!

End Notes

Thank you for reading!

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