The words ‘Self-Help’ glare down at him from their flimsy yellow sign above. An accusation, a taunt, a reminder. As if Alec needs any of those things from the callous unfeelingness of a laminated sign.
season two happens from mid October 2016 - October 2017)

The whole story is already written and I will be updating one chapter a day.
Chapter 1

Alec remains stubbornly still in front of the bookshelf. He stands with an air of reluctant persistence – or perhaps persistent reluctance – back ramrod straight in the tight, painful manner he had been raised in, yet undeniably hunched in on himself in an effort to make his imposing frame seem minimal. His arms are crossed tightly over his chest, fingers digging into his elbows as if that could ground him. He might be trembling a little, a minuscule and involuntary muscle twitch that refuses to leave him alone.

He’s visited this very bookstore on multiple occasions, typically to serve as a refuge whenever he needed to get away from the Institute or whenever Jace and Izzy dragged him into sneaking out; they would slip into the messy tangle of limbs at some mundane club and Alec would fold himself into the horrendous overstuffed green armchair nestled in the back corner of the 24-hour bookstore he managed to find. He hasn’t visited the shop in some years, has replaced it with an increase of paperwork and patrols at the Institute, but it’s comforting in its familiarity. It had been with the distinct scent of printed ink, both new and old, and the particular essence of book dust that Alec, age thirteen, first fell in love. With Shakespeare, that is. And Tolkien. And Tolstoy and Cervantes and Austen and Rumi and Steinbeck and Angelou and Murakami. And many others, any that he had managed to get his hands on really.

Young adolescent Alec Lightwood had once slipped through the cracks of the front door, carved out a little niche for himself among the neat print and worn book covers, vicariously lived a thousand lives all while fearing to live his own.

Adult Alec Lightwood stands still, far too petrified to remove the nondescript book from where it’s nestled snugly amongst an assortment of similar books.

He can’t recall what pushed him to stop by the familiar bookstore on his way to see Magnus. It’s as if his feet moved of their own volition, tiptoeing past some clerk who was definitely older than he last remembered. She had been right around college-aged when Alec had first found the store, and now there’s the hint of wrinkles peeking out from the corner of her eyes. She used to occasionally slip him hard candies with a little grin. Alec doesn’t know if she recognizes him now; a part of him hopes that she doesn’t. What would it look like to her, to see the timid boy who had nervously asked for her help locating books, now secluded in the most avoided aisle possible?

The words ‘Self-Help’ glare down at him from the flimsy yellow sign above. An accusation, a taunt, a reminder. As if Alec needs any of those things from the callous unfeelingness of a laminated sign. He’s been trapped under the foreboding sense of judgment for the past fifteen minutes, too nervous to just grab the book already and far too stubborn to simply walk away empty-handed. With every minute that passes, he feels the dread rooting his feet to the floor and prickling at the back of his neck increase tenfold. What if someone sees him, what if the clerk approaches him, what if she notices the book’s title and knows?

So many what ifs and Alec doesn’t know the answer to any of them. The rational part of his brain – most likely the part responsible for his being there in the first place – seems convinced that the
book he’s miserably glaring at can hold those very answers if only he moves his hand and grabs the
damn thing. But the other part of his brain is worried that if he lets go of his elbow, his hand will
shake. And then he’ll try to grab the book and it will fall and create a huge ruckus in the otherwise
stagnant air and people will come to investigate and discover a 6’3” man pathetically hunched over
on himself, panicking because he’s dropped a book from the *Self-Help* section of an old rundown
bookstore.

And that’s why Alec is very pointedly not making a decision either way. If he leaves, this entire
expedition is a failure. If he grabs the book, it’s a finality.

*Surviving Childhood Sexual Abuse.* A loaded title for such an unassuming green and blue binding.
It’s wedged in between a handful of books that no doubt hold equally as daunting information, but
bear the reassurance of unobtrusive titles: *Breaking Free, The Courage to Heal, Clearing Your
Past.* Alec feels a deep chasm between where he stands and where the books in question are calmly
nestled. How can such an impersonal thing as ink on paper ever detangle the mess of emotion
brewing at the back of Alec’s mind?

His feet tingle with the urge to turn tail and flee, or retreat back to the relative safety of the
Institute. Even though the old church makes him feel cold in such profound ways that he has no
words for it, being there is a known variable. He knows what’s expected, what to do, how to hide.
The bookstore, as familiar as it is, holds no such deeply ingrained sense of understanding; it leaves
Alec feeling off-kilter, teetering on the edge of some drop he can’t see the bottom of. Alec’s hands
itch, and he doesn’t know if it’s with the need to grab the books or the longing to shoot arrows until
his fingers bleed.

He’s overthinking this. He’s always overthinking things. But this is *important.* It’s something that
requires deep thought. What if he makes the wrong decision? What if the books aren’t even helpful
and he just wastes his time? What if someone walks past and knows?

The sudden sharp chiming of a text notification nearly makes Alec flinch; it’s his years of strict
training alone that prevent such a response. He looks down at his pocket for a stretch of several
seconds before he finally forces his arms to move. They feel stiff and heavy, as if Alec has been
keeping the muscles contracted for far too long. He risks a cautious glance at either end of the
aisle, dreading to see any people who have been annoyed by the intrusive noise and have ventured
closer for the sole purpose of judging him.

**Magnus**  
*alrght darling, c u soon client bing >:(*

Alec can’t stop the helpless little grin that pulls at his lips. Magnus Bane, High Warlock of
Brooklyn, centuries old and learned in the many walks of life, perpetually refusing to use the
autocorrect on his smartphone. It’s one of those quirks that seem to be an inside joke or a secret,
just between Magnus and the few people he fully trusts; Alec feels blessed every time he finds
himself privy to a side of Magnus that the world never gets to.

It’s the thought of Magnus, dealing with contrarian clients and pestering Alec with silly texts
throughout the day, that finally pushes Alec to make the dreaded decision. No doubt, if Alec can
just convince himself to get the book then Magnus will already be proud. And maybe – just maybe
– Alec can find it in himself to be proud as well.

Before the lighthearted feeling caused by Magnus’ text can fade, Alec plucks several of the
intimidating books from the shelf and folds them into his arms. He turns on his heel and swiftly
marches over to the checkout, being exceedingly careful to keep the titles hidden from any
onlooker’s view. With his head ducked low, Alec manages to check out all of the books – thank the
Angel for self-scanning machines – and flees the store before he can possibly change his mind.
The walk to the café where he’s meeting Magnus is only several blocks, and yet the books stowed away in his nondescript backpack feel as heavy as the world. Unsettling anxiety crawls into Alec’s stomach, where it festers and stews just as violently as the errant thoughts in his head. He has half the mind to just dump the bag somewhere on the side of the road and leave the offending books to the mercy of a busy New York street.

The café is warm and quiet when Alec lets himself in, the tinkling of a bell softly announcing his presence. The warmth is refreshing and comforting after the brisk chill of a New York January evening. It’s a little café, a local business instead of any fancy dime-a-dozen Starbucks; Magnus has always tried to avoid major corporations whenever he can, and Alec enjoys the more personal touch of smaller businesses.

He shuffles up to the counter and orders, allowing himself to indulge in some over the top sugary drink that he typically avoids for the sake of health. After claiming his caramel macchiato, Alec sequesters himself in the most isolated corner where he can watch the door and the windows. He unceremoniously drops his backpack, hearing the distinct and unsettling sound of multiple books thumping against the tile floor. Alec no longer feels the determination to look through any of his selections; instead, he pulls his jacket tighter against his chest and takes a sip of his drink, not caring if it scalds his throat on the way down.

A glance at his backpack, flopped over to the side where he’s carelessly dropped it, makes a spike of shame crawl up his spine. He lets out a small sigh and leans down to right it and pull out his tablet. If Magnus is going to be running late, Alec may as well get something done. He has several patrol reports to write up (and Jace’s own report to edit, because his foolish parabatai has yet to learn the difference between a comma and an apostrophe) and Aldertree is riding his ass because apparently Alec has been unofficially nominated as the leader of the ‘Irresponsible Shadowhunter Squad’ that consists of Jace, Clary, Izzy, and himself. Not to mention, a multitude of various other official forms need to be completed, because as much as Aldertree likes to play at Institute Head, Alec has unofficially been the proxy leader since he was eighteen, and there are simply matters that Aldertree has yet to comprehend about the New York Institute.

He’s neck deep in detailing how he led a patrol and dealt with a mantid demon nest, while simultaneously plotting out a response to one of the Consul’s recent missives – one hand tapping rapidly at the screen and the other holding his coffee cup halfway between the table and his mouth – when the bell above the door rings and catches his attention. Alec tears his eyes away from the repetitive lines of words and instead they settle on the brilliant purple waistcoated figure highlighted by the evening light. The grin that tugs at his lips is irresistible and infectious, if Magnus’ answering smile is anything to go off of.

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Magnus heads for the counter first, leaving Alec to finish up one last sentence of his report. When Magnus finally does join him at the table, Alec locks his tablet and turns his full attention to the warlock. He leaves one hand wrapped around his cup, relishing the warmth that seeps into his fingers, and lets his other hand tap idly on the table. There’s the urge to reach out and take Magnus’ hand, let it calm the irritating itch that always makes his fingers restless. But he doesn’t; he lets his free hand stay fidgeting uselessly before him.

It isn’t that Alec doesn’t want to hold Magnus’ hand. (He does, he always does; it’s actually sort of pathetic.) And it isn’t as if he and Magnus haven’t strolled down the streets of Paris, Tokyo, Sydney, holding hands and clinging to each other’s sides. It’s quickly become a staple of their dates. But there are small patches of people scattered throughout the café, and they’re close enough to the window that passersby are able to see. And there are those damn books in his backpack, right by his feet, spelling out that sick twist of his stomach that haunted his adolescent years. And there’s an unfinished report on his tablet that he’ll have to go turn into that asshole Aldertree,
gritting his teeth and ignoring how much he hates his apparent superior, and the January chill bites at his fingers until they quiver.

So Alec watches his hands fiddle nervously on the table and allows his leg to bounce a bit; not enough to annoy anyone like he used to as a child, but enough to ease the unsettled need in his leg. He probably shouldn’t have ordered such a sugary drink, in hindsight.

Magnus doesn’t seem bothered by it, thankfully; or at least if he is, he hides it incredibly well. He launches into an emotive diatribe lamenting the trials of dealing with finicky clients, hands waving and eyes bright. Alec is glad for it, both because he loves the sound of Magnus’ voice, loves hearing all the little details that make this beautiful man who he is, and also because it provides a welcome distraction to the itch in his fingers and the twitch in his legs. His eyes wander from his own hands, up along Magnus’ fluttering arms, dancing along the glitter and color of his makeup and hair, before finally settling on warm brown eyes that crinkle at the corners.

It’s weird. Alec has never been much of a watcher when it comes to people. Sure, he admired a few shadowhunter boys growing up, but those had typically been fleeting and superficial. Never has Alec been so thoroughly captivated by someone simply for the way they talk. He feels as if he could sit here, watching and listening to Magnus, all day.

Their eyes meet, Magnus’ softening while a fond smile pulls at his lips over the edge of his teacup. Alec matches his grin and feels his cheeks inevitably heat up, as if it’s a bad thing to be caught admiring your own boyfriend. He has to look away, back down at his still fidgeting fingers, before glancing off to the side and surveying the café with a clinical sweeping look; Alec has unfortunately spent far too much of his short life training to ever lose the tactical awareness that has been drilled into him.

And that’s how he spots the woman. She’s roughly middle-aged, a well-tailored pantsuit and professional laptop clearly distinguishing her as a no-nonsense businesswoman. Her makeup is immaculate, her hair perfectly coiffed, her expression withering and sharp. Although the skin tone and hair color are all wrong, Alec is painfully reminded of his own mother. To make matters worse, she chooses that precise moment to look up and glare in his and Magnus’ direction. It’s a look that Alec has grown quite used to in the months following his botched wedding, one that is hurled at him from his parents and co-workers alike.

He has to look away, feeling shame-faced like some chastened child. His fingers itch, his leg bounces, his cheeks burn, his shoulders shudder. There’s a report to finish, those damn books in his backpack, and now the searing judgment of some nameless mundane woman. A spike of...of some undefinable emotion pierces Alec’s stomach with the ferocity of a ravener demon and his grip on his now cold coffee tightens. It’s that same sensation of dread that he felt as a child, that he has felt meeting his mother’s eyes ever since the wedding, that he felt while panicking in the self-help section of the bookstore. Like he’s dirty, or wrong, or broken. Like anyone can take one look at him and know. Know that he is gay, know that he is a victim, know that those aren’t things he’s accepted about himself. People can sense when you hate yourself; it’s like blood in the water, and it turns people into sharks.

Magnus has stopped talking. Alec doesn’t know when, but probably around the time that he noticed the wretched old woman casting them a disdainful glare. The shadowhunter risks glancing up, only to catch the soft knowing look in Magnus’ eyes. It’s a look of familiar pain, a reminder that two men on a date in public have rarely ever been socially acceptable.

“How about we head to my place?” Magnus offers.

It would sound nonchalant and suggestive to anyone else, but Alec likes to think that he knows
Magnus better than that; Alec at least can hear that long-standing dejection buried deep in his tone. He wonders briefly if it’s a feeling for Magnus himself or more for Alec’s sake. Or, perhaps most likely, it’s for them. Maybe the sting of being denied acceptance is something that one never truly gets over, not even after lifetimes of it.

And it makes Alec angry. Here they are, in the heart of New York City in the 21st century. There’s Bible-toting preachers, neo-Nazi rallies, literal demons haunting the streets, and some uptight woman thinks she has any right to judge the two of them? Magnus doesn’t deserve such casual disregard from others; he deserves to be able to walk in the sun, unafraid of being burned.

But Alec isn’t the one capable of giving him that. Alec, who can’t even hold eye contact most of the time, who would rather tap his fingers against a stupid table instead of holding his boyfriend’s hand, who feels sick at the mere thought of doing anything more.

For all that he’s spent his life fighting demons, Alec Lightwood is still a coward.

“I, um- I have some reports that I need to finish up,” he admits, attempting an apologetic smile and knowing that it comes out as only a grimace. “I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s not a problem, darling.” Magnus holds up a hand as if to physically stop Alec from trying to apologize again. “I guess you’ll just have to make it up to me,” he adds teasingly.

That does manage to draw a genuine smile from him, even if it’s smaller than Magnus might be hoping for. They gather up their things, Alec tightening the straps of his backpack as he valiantly tries to ignore the foreboding weight of it, and they turn their backs on the woman who has successfully chased them away. Alec holds the door open for Magnus and feels the sudden urge to kiss the smile it grants him.

But the other part of him feels as if he will scream if anyone touches him. His skin is buzzing, his head is full of cotton, his shoulders are weighed down with far more than mere books.

“I will,” Alec promises, as they stand side by side in a secluded alley, waiting for Magnus to conjure a portal. “Make it up to you, that is,” he tacks on hurriedly, realizing that there has perhaps been too long of a gap in their conversation.

Magnus grins. “I look forward to it, Alexander,” he assures. “Just seeing you makes my day infinitely better.”

Before Alec can respond as he so desperately wants to, Magnus waves his arms and a circle of swirling blue appears. Alec’s throat feels tight, almost as if the collar of his shirt has suddenly shrunk on him, but he swallows past it and turns to Magnus one last time.

“Thank you,” he says softly.

“It’s just a portal. Wouldn’t want my favorite shadowhunter catching a cold walking home.”

“No, I mean-” Alec shakes his head, pausing to collect his thoughts. Everything else about their date fell apart, and Alec has to get this out before he retreats into the icy solitude of the Institute. “I mean, thank you for... making time for me and- and telling me about your day. I know things have been hectic lately, and we haven’t gotten much time to spend together but just- thank you.”

The blushing and the embarrassment his stumbling declaration brings is all worth it, however, when Magnus rewards him with that heartbreakingly awed look he gets whenever Alec says or does something he doesn’t expect. As if Magnus still has no idea how to process Alec’s
straightforward – and oftentimes blunt – confessions. Alec doesn’t mind, for he himself barely knows how to get through saying them.

“Thank you, Alexander,” Magnus returns, just as softly.

They share a mutually lovesick smile, one which Alec would vehemently deny in front of any other person. Alec nods and, before he can dare overthink it, he steps forward into Magnus’ personal space to lean down for a quick kiss. It’s far too short, there and gone, before Alec pulls back. He can feel Magnus’ disappointment when the warlock tries to chase his lips. But Alec’s skin is crawling, so he turns and flees through the portal to the Institute.

Suddenly standing before the seemingly abandoned church hits Alec like a bucket of ice water. It’s a stark contrast to the gentle affection and playful flirtation that Magnus always exudes around Alec. His backpack grows a few tons heavier in the shadow of the Institute; he reaches up and grips the straps tightly, as if hanging on for dear life. It does little to alleviate the burden, but it gives his hands something better to do than just fidget needlessly.

His feet are heavy. His clothes are itchy. His skin is buzzing. His head hurts. He is exhausted. The kind of bone-deep heavy exhaustion that makes him feel as if he has hunted down a couple dozen demons in the last twenty-four hours. But he hasn’t. Alec went to an old bookstore and then met up with his boyfriend at a café. It’s perhaps the most mundane day Alec has ever lived through; it isn’t supposed to make him feel like shit.

So why is it so hard? Why is it so hard to wake up and get out of bed after a healthy eight hours of rest? Why is it so hard to stand in the bookstore aisle and stare down a handful of books, as if he doesn’t spend his life staring demons down on the daily? Why is it so hard to sit in a café and try to be normal for once in his life?

It isn’t fair. It isn’t fair and it makes Alec want to scream, want to cry and yell and rage against the world. But if he gives in to those urges, then people will know that there’s something wrong with him. Some dirty little secret that he’s kept locked away for years and years. He has already revealed one secret he never thought he would; and while he’s happier now than any other time in his recollection, the cold glares he receives from his fellow shadowhunters often make him want to retreat back into the closet, where he can be safe in his own isolation. The sort of exposure that follows revelations of dark secrets isn’t something Alec can afford; not with Aldertree in power, not with Jace currently kicked out of the Institute, not with Izzy acting unlike herself, not with Clary still mourning the death of her mother at his own hand.

He trudges through the front door, eyes cast low but chin held high – he’s still a Lightwood, and there’s still some semblance of a reputation to keep. No one says any form of greeting to him, no one makes eye contact, no one notices how he has a white-knuckled grip on his backpack or how his jaw is clenched enough to make his teeth ache. Or maybe it’s merely that no one cares, that out of the rotating roster of nearly eight hundred shadowhunters that he lives and works alongside, their co-worker connection is simply not enough to overcome years of Clave rhetoric and social expectations.

That’s fine with Alec. If anyone does try to interact with him, he will just snap anyway. It’s better to just avoid any confrontation, to just slip away unnoticeable into his bedroom. Like he’s just a shadow, like he isn’t really a person, isn’t really there. This is why Alec prefers the Institute. It’s so much easier to forget that he’s human.

He shoves his backpack into the darkest corner of his closet. He doesn’t dare open it.
The reason this took so long for me to crank out is both because a) I am a horrendously slow writer and b) I put a good amount of research into handling this situation. The books that Alec finds in the bookstore are all real books that can be found online (I myself ended up reading a few off of my Kindle). I have never had the misfortune of facing sexual abuse, and as such I can only hope that I am treating the topic with the consideration and sensitivity it deserves. As far as autism goes, I am not on the spectrum and it is not something that will be explicitly mentioned in this story; as such, I was very hesitant to put it in the tags. However, I personally headcanon Alec as being on the autistic spectrum, and it is something that I always keep in mind when working on my characterization for him. If anything regarding these topics has been misrepresented or offensive in any way, please let me know and I will do my best to fix any mistakes.

The title is Latin meaning "do not touch me."

Thank you all very much for taking the time to read this, and I hope you continue to stick with the rest of the tale. I have learned and grown a lot through writing Alec the past year, and I can only hope that Alec's journey helps people through their own struggles.

~PNGuin
Chapter 2

II

It was a gradual thing. Fleeting touches began lingering: fingers petting through his hair, an arm running across his shoulders, a hand rubbing his back. It progressed over months, years even, like vines slowly creeping their way over Alec’s body, until eventually they reached his heart and his throat, choked the life and the love right out of him. Until they covered his eyes and blocked out the light.

It was a gradual thing, but Alec still vividly remembers the first time.

(People always say that you never forget your first. Alec doubts that they intend it like this.)

He remembers that he was twelve, mere months after he had received his first rune and begun joining older shadowhunters on patrols. He remembers that it was the middle of January. He remembers that it was so cold.

His parents were called back to Idris for some official Clave business; he didn’t know what for, but they seemed particularly agitated leading up to the trip. Jace was allowed to join them since it was a few weeks before his tenth birthday; Izzy threw a tantrum until their father gave in just to keep her quiet; Max was still just a baby, was too young to leave at the Institute. And Alec? He can’t remember why, but he was left behind. Perhaps he had made a mistake during training, perhaps he had accidentally interrupted his parents’ work, perhaps Jace and Izzy had done something foolish and had invariably let him take the fall for it.

It doesn’t matter why; what matters is that he was left alone.

Well, not exactly. The Institute was still fully staffed; anywhere from five to eight hundred some active duty shadowhunters operated at the Institute, with at least three hundred residing there at any given time. Alec trained and ran through drills with Hodge for a few hours, sat through several more hours of monitoring duty and tactical planning lectures with some of the younger patrol squads, painstakingly wrote rudimentary reports under the stern eye of the older shadowhunters. And yet, for all that Alec was surrounded by people, never did he feel so isolated.

Alec went to bed alone. It wasn’t something he was used to; although his parents refused to coddle any of their children and oftentimes withheld affection, the Lightwood siblings at least maintained...
their own nightly routine. It was almost a daily occurrence that Alec would find Izzy curled up on his bed beside him, or that Jace would slip into his room in the middle of the night seeking reassurance from some nightmare or another. Sometimes their mother would let the three of them sit in Max’s room and listen to her lullabies. Most nights, however, it fell to Alec to provide what little comfort he knew how to, typically in the form of a butchered rendition of Spanish songs.

And it was discomfiting to be alone that night; to not kiss baby Max’s forehead goodnight, to not save room for Izzy to curl up beside him, to not leave the door cracked enough that it wouldn’t creak when Jace snuck in. He still did what he could; still murmured a soft ‘goodnight, Max’ under his breath, still left one side of the bed empty, still opened the door so that light could creep past the threshold.

He was colder than usual; his father had taken his favorite blanket, the one that he had slept with for as long as he could remember, all because Alec became too attached to it, too dependent upon it, and soldiers didn’t need blankies. Izzy wasn’t there occupying the other half of the bed and Jace didn’t ever join him. He missed the comforting warmth of their bodies beside him and the weight of their limbs haphazardly tossed over him.

The window was cracked open, enough to let an icy breeze in. Usually, Alec would ask one of his parents to close it, but they weren’t there and he was too nervous to ask anyone else in the Institute.

But eventually he fell asleep, huddled under what blankets he had available. It was a fitful slumber, one wracked by nightmares about losing his siblings and never seeing them again. He no longer recalls any details, but he thinks one was about Izzy falling from the side of a cliff, and Alec reaching out to try and grab her but always being several inches too far. Perhaps he watched her fall again and again and again.

Until he woke up screaming, a shrill, piercing cry that would have had both his parents rushing to his room (initially for his mother to offer some comfort, and then ultimately to receive a caning or extra hours of training for such childish behavior). Alec has long since forgotten how bad the dream truly was, but he remembers how his throat was sore, how a shiver crawled up his spine, how he felt as if he failed all his siblings over and over and over until there was no one left to fail. He wanted Izzy to be beside him, Jace to be flopped over at the end of his bed, to creep down the hall to the nursery and see Max sleeping peacefully. But there was no one there.

No one except Thomas Hightower.

One second, Alec was struggling to breathe through the terror of his dreams, and the next a gentle hand was rubbing his back. At the time, it was a soothing warmth that seeped past the chill of his room, such a pleasant tenderness that Alec was so rarely afforded. He utterly thrived off of the affection, yearned for it with every fiber of his being, enough so that Hightower was able to see that. And yet the years of recollection and hindsight turned it into a sharp burn that left scars on his heart and the taste of ash on his tongue. But twelve-year-old Alec didn’t feel that burn, not yet at least, and he leaned so eagerly into that embrace, sought out what little comfort his life as a soldier thus far allowed him.

“Please, Uncle Tommy,” he said. “Please.”

How easily such a word was misinterpreted.

“Shh, shh, Alec. I’ve got you now. You’re not alone anymore. I love you, you know that, right?”

The hands that brushed away his tears were so achingly gentle. And the kisses that pressed into the crown of his head were gentle, too. As well as the fingers that trailed down his back and over his
hips. Hightower was so gentle, even as he whispered comforts in Alec’s ear and slipped a hand past the hem of his shirt, even as he continued to stroke up and down the boy’s back, soothing and violating in the same heartbeat.

“Please,” he whimpered, pushing away even as he tried to cling to any source of warmth.

“Isn’t this what you wanted? I’ll make you feel so much better. Don’t you want to feel good? Don’t you want comfort? Don’t you want to be loved?”

He tried to rip himself out of Hightower’s grasp, landing a half-hearted punch against a sturdy shoulder, but he was exhausted and scared and so, so alone. He just wanted his mother, his father, his siblings; Alec just wanted someone to care, someone to love him so that he didn’t need to be alone. And Hightower was there, and Hightower seemed to love him. It was so easy (too easy) for Alec to fall into his embrace.

“Hush now. There’s no need for tears; shadowhunters don’t cry, after all. I’ve got you, Alec. I love you.”

His cheek pressed against Hightower’s shoulder, the man’s hot breath tickling the baby hairs on the back of his neck. He was hunched in over himself, trying to shield what little of himself he could, but it was ineffective. He lost all control over his own body. Hightower guided him and cajoled him into whatever pose he wanted; it was as easy as arranging the lifeless limbs of a ragdoll. Dread settled, heavy as lead and just as unpalatable, right in the pit of his stomach; it weighed him down, pressing him deeper into the mattress and into his own brewing horror.

Or perhaps that sensation was Hightower, looming over him, stretched out to hover above every inch of him. The metallic shnk of a belt buckle. The rustle of clothing. The disgust, fear, terror, agony, helplessness.

His shirt was slipped off before he even realized it, exposing him to the cold breeze. Goosebumps rippled across his arms, over his chest, down his stomach; Hightower followed the path with calloused hands, snagging against the supple skin and burning it with greed and lust. It seemed as if his hands dug straight into Alec’s bones, into Alec’s very soul with an agonizing accuracy. His skin was buzzing and yet he wanted more, wanted touch and warmth and tenderness and love and he didn’t know any other way to find those.

The window was open, letting in the icy January breeze and the sounds of a New York night. Alec looked outside and focused on the distant bright lights of the city skyline, saw how the lights blurred into abstract, intangible shapes as his eyes filled with tears, felt how cold he was and how warm Hightower’s fingers were. Hightower shifted against him, a slow but steady pace that he maintained like prolonged torture; his hands caressed up and down Alec’s torso with deceitful tenderness; he muffled his gasps and groans against Alec’s shoulder, before finally shuddering with his own release.

Alec was cold, but he also felt the sticky warmth that coated his stomach, the feeling of white noise that numbed every part of his body, the harsh drag of a damp cloth as Hightower wiped away his sins. The very hands that had defiled him carded through his hair with all the affection he had always craved from his mother. Hot breath fanned over his ear, a whispered reminder of “we wouldn’t want anyone to know your shameful little secret, Alec, now would we? Don’t’ worry, I won’t tell if you won’t.” He curled in on himself in the fetal position; cried himself to sleep with silent, earth-shattering sobs; internalized the shame and hatred that coalesced within his heart, crystalizing until it hardened entirely.

But mostly, Alec felt alone and so very cold.
As a point of reference, this flashback refers to events that happened in January 2006 (of my own timeline, not the show's or books' or anything). Alec is 12, Jace is almost 10, Izzy is 7.5, and Max is just under 1 year.

~PNGuin
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

All trigger warnings are listed in the tags. If you find I missed anything, please let me know and I'll add it in.

III

Alec is that peculiar mixture of keyed up and exhausted that always follows a late-night patrol. His hands are practically shaking from the last dredges of his adrenaline, and yet his feet drag on the floor. All he wants to do is take a scalding hot shower to wash away the filth, then collapse into his bed, and maybe sleep for half of tomorrow.

But when he opens his closet to fetch a change of clothes, his eyes are invariably drawn to the cursed little backpack crumpled up in the corner. His stomach twists and his eyes sting, but something deep inside of him drives Alec to bend down and retrieve it. He drags it out of the closet and can’t help the soft snort of bitter amusement; how fitting that those damn books have to be dragged out of the closet just as he had. He gingerly sits on the edge of his bed, careless of how dirty he is and how much grime he will get on the comforter, and simply holds the backpack in his lap.

It has been nearly a week since Alec’s fateful trip to the bookstore. Logically speaking, Alec knows that the books themselves are perhaps a bit superfluous; he could have just as easily found the answers he needs from searching through the internet, could have probably found even more resources. But Alec very much has three nosy little siblings who like to hack into his electronics and see what he’s up to. How could he possibly ever explain a search history involving ‘childhood sexual abuse’ to any of them without dying on the spot? No, it’s a far safer decision to grab something physical and then hide it away in his closet; being the so-called ‘fashion disaster’ of the family means that none of the other Lightwoods will ever bother rifling through his closet.

Not to mention, there’s something grounding, something comfortingly tangible, about holding a book. For all that the Institute has the fanciest and nicest technology available, Alec has never quite enjoyed reading on a tablet as much as he does from a book. The smell, the texture, the weight of a book has always calmed Alec, has made it far easier to sit still for hours on end.

Even now, when that tangibility is a harsh double-edged sword, it still serves to soothe his racing heart just a little. He unzips the bag and blindly grabs one of the books before he can overthink it. For a few minutes, Alec just sits there numbly, staring at the book cover as if it alone can provide a quick fix-it for all his life problems.

(It can’t. Alec knows that. But it doesn’t stop him from wishing for it.)

Ironically, the book he randomly selects is that first one that had caught his attention, back during his spur of the moment bookstore field trip. Surviving Childhood Sexual Abuse. The title still makes bile rise at the back of Alec’s throat, even days after he first picked it. His stomach is simultaneously clenched and heavy, empty and overwhelmingly full at once. Alec is sweating,
and he doesn’t know if it’s leftover from patrol or from the dread that swells in his chest. He feels hollow and cold, even though the furnace is running.

He flips to the first page. And nothing happens. No divine revelation, no magical panacea for his pain, no forgetting how his years under Hightower’s mercy ruined him. Perhaps it has been incredibly naïve of Alec to assume that simply having the books would help anything; he knows better than that, knows that the only way to improve himself is to put forth the necessary effort. But that doesn’t mean that Alec isn’t so viscerally hoping for an easier way out.

The easy way does not equal the best way; it’s a lesson that Alec learned through his years of rigorous training, through his hours upon hours of academic studies, through that soul-deep, agonizing need to prove himself in any capacity he possibly can. No, Alec does not need this process to be easy, he just needs to know that it’s possible, that it’s in any way, shape, or form even remotely feasible.

He just wants to feel normal, feel in control in a way that Alec fears he never really has.

His hands tremble, a barely perceptible shudder that leaves Alec feeling inept and pathetic. He spent so much time, all of his childhood and teenage years, attempting to master and perfect archery, and an archer’s hands don’t shake. To have shaky hands is to miss a shot, is to fail in one of the many regards that Alec can’t afford. To tremble is to feel weak. Alec has wasted too long feeling weak.

So Alec ignores it. Ignores his quivering hands that shake the thin pages grasped between his fingers. Ignores the persistent sting in his eyes, the moisture that gathers there and threatens to spill out beyond his eyelids. Ignores the way his breath seems to collect in his lungs, coalescing there until he can’t take it anymore and then stuttering out in little hiccups.

Alec flips to the first chapter and begins reading.

He makes it through twenty-seven pages. The first thirteen pages are a call to arms, a gentle reminder, a stark reference of statistics. But then, on the fourteenth page, Alec’s stomach curdles. There, printed in uniform black ink, smelling of the bookstore and book dust, are typed recollections of survivors, of adults looking back on their childhoods and remembering fear and tragedy and trauma in heart-wrenching accuracy.

(It’s horrific, but in the way that Alec can’t look away from. Like he owes it to these strangers to bear witness to the devastation of their innocence.)

His hands shake, his knuckles turn as white as the pages of the book. He can’t breathe; it feels like something – someone? – is sitting on his chest, pressing down into him until his lungs creak and the weight sinks deep into his bones. His vision swims, black dots skittering madly at his peripheries. Is it from running after demons all night, or is it from the fatigue that follows years of buried desolation? He can’t breathe, he can’t breathe, he can’t brea-

Alec feels so cold.

Twenty-seven pages in and then bile is roiling in his gut and he’s rushing to his ensuite, dry-heaving for seconds, minutes, hours. He loses track of time, kneeling on the tile of his bathroom and hunching over the lip of the toilet bowl, shaky and sweaty and profoundly cold. Alec can only think of that damn book, of the firsthand accounts that other survivors wrote down and shared, of the young mundane children who were violated and terrified. (Just as Alec was. Just as he was.)

It’s estimated that one in ten children are sexually abused at some point. One in ten. Ten percent of
an entire population. Alec hates himself for the sheer *relief* that floods through him at that morbid statistic. He feels a dull thud of rage behind his heart at the thought of innocent children being treated as things for sexual gratification, and yet there’s a perverse feeling of comfort that stems from their shared abuse. A stark reminder that Alec isn’t the only one, that he isn’t a singularity in this.

(He *hates* himself for thinking that, for allowing himself to benefit from the trauma of others. No, it would be far better if Alec were the only target. The world would be better if only Alec had to shoulder the weight of this burden.)

Because he isn’t a mundane. He isn’t the one in ten; that isn’t a statistic of *shadowhunter* populations. It’s one in every ten *mundanes* – poor, defenseless, untrained mundane children – that are sexually abused. It’s one shadowhunter boy, period. One highly trained, responsible, demon-slaying shadowhunter boy.

Mundane self-help books are exactly that: *for mundanes*. How dare Alec try to pass the blame off of himself? How dare Alec try to ignore the fact that he was trained to deal with aggressors all his life? How dare Alec try to forget that it’s *his* *fault*?

He throws the bag back into his closet. He doesn’t touch it again for several days.
For a few days – a few tragically short days – Alec let himself believe that the incident was a ‘one and done’ deal. His parents and siblings returned from Idris and his life seemed to continue on without a hitch. It made Alec question himself, made him wonder if maybe it was all some twisted dream, if maybe Alec just made it all up. Neither of his parents seemed to notice anything unusual, his siblings fell back into their night routine easily enough – even if Alec flinched when Izzy climbed into his bed too quickly, or when Jace crept through the door – and Hightower simply resumed his usual amounts of casual affection. Alec let himself grow complacent.

Perhaps it was a week or two, but eventually Hightower got alone time with Alec once more. Alec was the eldest Lightwood child and as such he had always been expected to succeed his parents’ role as Head of the New York Institute. Even beyond his birth order, Alec was also the child who took to politics and law and diplomacy far more readily than expected, especially in comparison to Jace – who vehemently complained about any training that wasn’t combat – and Izzy – who was more interested in her science books than anything else at the time. And it was the perfect opening for private tutor Thomas Hightower to get just what he wanted.

They had one-on-one sessions. No Jace obnoxiously whining, no Izzy throwing out witty comments, no parents wandering in to check on them, no interruptions from any of the multitude of shadowhunters that lived and worked in the Institute. Alec was left completely to the mercy of his abuser.

No one ever even noticed.

Alec’s lessons took place in his own bedroom, where he had his desk and bookshelf and the naïveté of his parents’ trust in his tutor. He sat there at his desk and kept his eyes resolutely focused on whatever reading or writing or oral assignment was asked of him. Most times, Hightower forced Alec to sit on his lap, where he was always able to feel the uncomfortable presence of the man’s arousal under him. Sometimes, Hightower simply sat pressed up against him, hands skimming over his shoulders, smoothing down his back, inching up the inside of his thigh. Alec never looked up at Hightower during this, never dared to meet his eye. He merely stayed still, silent tears dropping down to stain the pages of some ancient tome, and focused so intently on his reading that oftentimes he managed to completely ignore the physical sensations.

Hightower always rewarded him for his hard work: a piece of candy for remembering some important law, a gentle hug for knowing the history of the Accords, a kiss on his forehead for correctly translating something. At first, Alec relished in the chance to receive any sort of recognition. He had always had a sweet tooth and his parents denied their children many sugary treats; and his parents also increasingly denied their children much physical affection, so Alec
soaked up whatever hugs or cuddles Hightower offered him. But then things progressed. Until the rewards were cum cooling against his skin, Hightower holding him down on his lap as he ground roughly against the seat of Alec’s pants, being forced to wrap his small hands around Hightower’s length and jack him off as instructed.

And Alec accepted those rewards. Surely, that meant that Alec wanted what Hightower did, that Alec encouraged and supported and caused the abuse. Surely, if Alec just said no, if he didn’t like any of the rewards, if he didn’t accept them, then surely Hightower would have quit, would have grown bored with him and stopped.

So Alec did stop accepting the rewards, and he stopped performing actions that warranted any compensation. He refused to do the correct readings, ceased completing written assignments, promptly forgot all the information on the Clave and the Accords that he had so thoroughly studied, refused to read or speak in any language that wasn’t English or Spanish. He so desperately hoped that if he just stopped being the perfect little student, then he would stop being the perfect little victim. He so desperately hoped that this retaliation of his would have made Hightower stop.

It didn’t work. If anything, it made the circumstances worse.

Whereas the rewards were most often relatively gentle and easy to ignore, the punishments were far more humiliating. Refusing to cooperate just made Hightower mean. If Alec didn’t do the reading, Hightower smacked him, or punched him, or kicked him. If Alec refused to write up a paper, Hightower wrapped his hands around his throat and held him down, if Alec ever talked back, Hightower yanked his pants down, bent him over a table, and spanked him until he was raw and bruised.

Every time he inflicted pain, he kissed Alec’s cheek and whispered into his ear. “I know it hurts right now, but it’s for your own good. I love you, Alec, and I just want what’s best for you.” And how could Alec have argued against that? Because wasn’t that exactly what his parents did, every time Alec earned himself a spanking or a caning or any form of discipline? His mother always hugged and kissed Alec to comfort him following his punishments, and if it was acceptable for his mother to do so, then surely it was acceptable for Hightower. But if Hightower was in the wrong, then weren’t Alec’s parents also?

Alec had never known how to reconcile that contradiction of pain and love. How was it possible for both to exist simultaneously, delivered by the same hand? Jace always said that “to love is to destroy, and to be loved is to be destroyed.” Alec must have been incredibly loved then, because he was utterly ruined.

As painful as they were, Alec preferred the punishments to the rewards, if merely because it meant that Alec stopped being complicit in the pain. At least the punishments were a reminder that Alec tried to rebel, that he didn’t just accept Hightower’s transgressions. And Alec was a shadowhunter, he had trained his entire life to grit his teeth and ignore pain. Physical pain was easier to heal and ignore than the self-hatred that the rewards garnered.

Alec’s achievement in his classes continued to drop and his punishments at the hands of Hightower continued to worsen. Sometimes, if Hightower was in a particularly bad mood and the injuries were not visible, he forbade Alec from using an iratze to heal them. There were occasions where Alec limped through the halls of the Institute and avoided absolutely all contact for days, dreading that anyone would approach him, that anyone would find out.

Alec would have been willing to continue that arrangement. But, like all things in Alec’s life, it quickly fell apart. His parents noticed the steady drop in Alec’s performance, and of course readily stepped in to berate and punish him. He was made to stand before the New York Institute and bite
back his tears in the face of his mother’s stern berating and his father’s firm caning.

Maryse Lightwood had always been a contradiction of exceptionally loving and distant, an unpredictable combination of drill sergeant and mother. For all that she was the one to punish Alec more often than not, she was also the one who had sung Alec to sleep, who had told him endless stories, who had brushed the hair out of his eyes and had held him close. Alec hadn’t ever been able to bear the thought of disappointing her. Even Robert, who was distant and unreachable and perpetually too busy, was an idol in Alec’s eyes. To have either of them scolding him or punishing him to do better, always better, was the worst sort of motivation.

And then there were Hightower’s additional incentives. Izzy, who had time and again proven herself to be the most intelligent of the Lightwood children, and more than likely the most driven as well. Izzy, who would’ve been next in line to study politics and law under Hightower’s supervision, if Alec was incapable of succeeding. And Jace, too. Jace who was reckless and arrogant to a fault but who had always been so diligent with his training. Jace, who had already suffered so much at the hands of his father that the thought of it always made Alec’s heart hurt. Alec will never ever forget how Hightower pulled him aside, how he clamped a hand on his bony shoulder and loomed over the boy, breath hot in his ear. “I wonder if young Isabelle would derive more enjoyment from my lessons. Or perhaps even Jace could benefit from my tutelage,” he whispered. “It would be such a shame to let their talent and beauty go to waste, don’t you think, Alec?”

Alec resumed his lessons without another problem. He excelled in all of the courses, studied law and politics and languages until he memorized entire tomes, and never once allowed himself to do poorly on a single assignment. The reward system returned, and Alec readily accepted it that time around.

Hightower never laid a hand on Izzy or Jace.

He was too preoccupied with Alec.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

All trigger warnings are listed in the tags. If you find I missed anything, please let me know and I'll add it in.

This chapter does get more graphic than the previous few chapters have been. Please proceed with caution.

V

Teeth nibble teasingly at his neck, delicately tracing the deflect rune etched into his skin. Heat sweeps up his chest until a deep flush is staining his neck and face. He feels like he’s overheating, like he’s going to spontaneously combust. The teeth dig deeper into the flesh of his neck, lips closing over them and sucking until a strangled moan rips out past Alec’s throat. His head lists to the side, desperate to have more kisses and bites peppered along his bare neck, and a high, needy whimper stutters out. He would feel embarrassed if not for the sultry groan that hums against his neck, or the hands that skitter there-and-gone over his naked thighs, chest, hips, anywhere they can reach. Except, of course, the one place he most wants them.

Alec spreads his legs further, hoping with a primal fervor that Magnus will get the point and just touch him already. Ring-adorned hands, that wonderful contrast of warm skin and cool metal, smooth down his sides, settling resolutely on his hips as Magnus continues assaulting his neck. Alec knows without a doubt that there will be a plethora of hickies there by tomorrow; he can’t find it in himself to care.

He blinks his eyes open and takes in his surroundings as well as he can – what with his senses very much preoccupied. His head is tilted back, resting half on the broad shoulder of his boyfriend and half on the soft upholstery of the armchair they are currently sharing (and defiling). The walls and ceiling of Magnus’ loft are familiar, as is the smell of sandalwood and some kind of incense that permeates the air and gives off a heady scent.

They’re curled up together in one of Magnus’ overstuffed armchairs, Alec sitting in Magnus’ lap, his back against the warlock’s chest and their legs overlapping. Without a shred of clothing on either of them, Alec can feel every inch of skin where they connect. Between the scent of sandalwood, the hot press of Magnus’ toned stomach against the small of his back, the feeling of his arms wrapped so intimately around Alec, he feels delirious from sensory overload. Like there’s too much to feel and not enough time or focus to comprehend it all, like he’s drowning in Magnus’ embrace with absolutely no urge to save himself.

He reaches a hand behind him, threading his fingers through the soft strands of Magnus’ hair and tugging, not hard enough to hurt but certainly enough to get his attention. Alec grinds back as best as he can, feeling the hot, hard length of Magnus’ cock in the cleft of his ass. Magnus chuckles, the sound low and rumbling pleasantly along Alec’s back, but obligingly traces his hands closer and closer to where Alec most wants his touch. Alec tilts his head back and closes his eyes, letting his mind fixate entirely on the sensation of Magnus’ hands on him.
But right before Magnus’ fist closes around his cock, everything changes.

Gone are the warm hands with the cool metal rings. Gone is the overstuffed armchair. Gone is the heady scent of sandalwood and incense. Gone is Magnus and safety and warmth.

The hands touching him are large and calloused, rough and painful against his skin. He can smell leather and sweat and the pages of old books. He’s fully clothed, but his pants are undone. Underneath him, he can feel the thighs he’s seated on, can feel the pressure against his bottom that can only mean one thing. Arms are wrapped around him, but they aren’t the arms he wants there, and neither is the hot breath against the back of his neck, or the near silent grunts that accentuate each buck of the hips beneath him. He suddenly feels small and insignificant and lost, all the height and muscle tone that he struggled to gain is gone, and he’s left with only the meager frame of a scrawny preteen child.

Alec opens his eyes and is met with the sight of an ancient tome open on a rich mahogany desk. His desk, to be more accurate. The same one that has been in his bedroom since he was seven but that he only grew into at age sixteen. If he focuses on the book, he can see the detail in the ink, can smell the comforting scent that always seems to gather in old books, can see where drops of salty water have stained the pages.

If he focuses on the book, he can ignore the hands stroking him.

*Article the first…* All persons of Shadow World races are subject to the restrictions and laws of the Accords. Whosoever shall violate the Accords is subject to a punishment befitting the crime, as set forth by the Covenant.

Alec’s eyes blur and the words lose all meaning. His throat burns and his stomach aches and his groin feels heavy. He wants to cry, but knows that letting the tears fall will only earn him a swift chastening. His breath stutters in his lungs, and he thinks that he may well and truly die.

There’s the sound of a zipper, loud in the otherwise silent room, and the hands are thankfully leaving him. Alec nearly sobs in relief, but he clamps down on the urge and refuses to let the noise escape. If it does, the hands might return.

Hightower shifts Alec around until they’re facing each other, pants undone and cocks exposed even as Alec resolutely focuses on some distant point far past Hightower’s shoulder. His hands are grabbed and pulled away from where they’re huddled against his stomach, until they’re forcibly wrapped around Hightower’s erection. Alec bites his lip until he can taste blood, but he willingly begins pumping his hands at his tutor’s behest, knowing that the consequences will be far worse if he doesn’t.

“*Now, recite the entirety of Article Five to me. If you do well, I’ll let you finish me off and we can be done for the day. How does that sound, Alec?*”

*Article the fifth…*

He stumbles over his words, his tongue twisting in his mouth and curdling there like soured milk. Hightower tenses and shifts, but before he can offer any form of further encouragement, Alec forces himself to continue. The words pour out from memory, even as he squeezes his eyes shut and tries to forget how Hightower’s cock feels in his grip. The older man groans and Alec knows well enough by now what that sound signifies. He speaks up, louder and louder, hoping that his voice will overpower everything else he can hear, and he speeds his hands up, hoping that it could all just be over please let it be over.
And then Hightower is tensing and moaning, and Alec’s hand is wet and sticky, and there’s the iron tang of blood in the air.

His eyes fly open. Gone is his room, gone is Hightower. Instead, he’s in one of the Institute’s offices. His hand is red, deep red, seeping with it, staining the floor from where it drips down. There, collapsed on the ground in front of him, is Jocelyn Fairchild. Bloodied, her face set in a scream, a savage hole puncturing her chest where her heart was ripped out. When he glances back at his hand, her heart is resting there, still beating, still bleeding, still his fault.

Alec wakes up choking on a silent scream. He immediately hunches over the side of his bed and vomits, bile spewing up out his throat and out of his mouth even as he struggles in vain for more air. He can’t breathe past the burn of bile and he claws desperately at his throat and chest, attempting to ease the panic that wells up in his lungs. Kicking out, Alec tries to roll out of bed and make it to the bathroom, but his legs are tangled in the sheets and he nearly stumbles into his own puddle of sick. Narrowly avoiding face-planting in vomit, he twists and grapples with the sheets until he pulls himself free and dives for his bathroom. He almost slips and brains himself on the edge of the bathroom counter; it’s only years of highly developed reflexes that save him from an embarrassing death on his ensuite floor.

Finally, finally, he collapses into the narrow tub, squeezing himself into the tight space and forcing his head between his knees. It’s been a year or two since he last suffered through one of these attacks while huddled in the dark of his own bathtub; the last time it happened, he was still all bony elbows and gangly limbs and repressed trauma. (And, well, he supposes the repressed trauma bit still applies.) But now his legs are too long and his shoulders too broad and he feels entirely ridiculous curled up on the floor of his bathtub, gasping for breath and tasting only the sick sting of vomit on his tongue.

The first time had been long before Hightower ever even touched him. Young eight-year-old Alec had panicked for some now-forgotten reason and, knowing better than to go to his parents when distressed, he had locked himself in the bathroom. And he had laid with his cheek against the cold porcelain of the tub and had struggled to breathe, gasping for air and thinking that he had been about to die in the darkness, alone and forgotten. The episodes had continued sporadically throughout Alec’s adolescence, increasingly so after he started spending more time with Hightower, until he spent entire nights crying himself to sleep in the tub only to wake a few hours later and repeat the process.

He feels like that eight-year-old kid again. Desperate and alone and so terribly cold. He can’t stop shaking, he can’t breathe, he can’t stop breathing long enough to die. Alec wants to get out, wants to stop, wants to rest or quit or whatever but he can’t because there’s Jace and Izzy and Max and his parents and even Clary and maybe Simon and 8.5 million people in New York that depend on him.

And Magnus.

Magnus needs him, too.

Alec thinks of the near-attack he had avoided in Magnus’ loft, before he had ever revealed the truth to the man. He thinks of how Magnus had held one of Alec’s hands against his chest, how he had spoken so calmly and carefully, even as Alec had just wanted to die already to make it stop. He thinks of Magnus.

Alec takes a deep breath. And lets it out. And takes another breath.

The porcelain is cold and unyielding under him. The whole room stinks of vomit. Alec’s hand – the
hand that *killed Jocelyn Fairchild* – is trembling uncontrollably. He’s shaking and his vision is spotty and he feels like throwing up again, even though he didn’t eat yesterday and all that’s left is bile. He knows that once he gets up, he will have to wash his hand until it’s pink and blistered from the hot water, that he will have to spend hours scrubbing the floors until his nose burns from the smell of bleach, that he will have to fire arrows until his fingers bleed and his arms sting. There’s so much that Alec has to pay for, so much penance that he has to give in order to be forgiven.

Alec just feels so cold.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

All trigger warnings are listed in the tags. If you find I missed anything, please let me know and I'll add it in.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

VI

After spending several hours meticulously cleaning up the evidence of his panic, Alec immediately flees to the shooting range. Where he stays for three hours, purposefully misfiring so that the bowstring smacks painfully into his forearm with every shot. His fingers start bleeding after an hour and a half, his forearm turns a blistered red color even before that. And yet he continues. Again and again, firing arrows with a compulsive single-mindedness that he just can’t stop.

(He doesn’t even know if he wants to anymore.)

But, eventually, he’s obligated to quit wasting time and get ready for a patrol with Jace and Izzy. It’s their first (sanctioned) mission together – and Jace’s first, period – ever since the entire situation of Jace leaving with Valentine; Aldertree has been consistently separating them and ensuring that the three siblings never work together, but somehow this one patrol has slipped through the cracks. Alec doesn’t know how and, honestly, he’s too exhausted and grateful to even care at that point (but the rational side of his brain reasons that it’s most likely due to staff shortages; it’s hard to run such a large Institute with as few workers as they have).

They meet up at the weapons locker, going through the familiar process of gathering what they need and reviewing the details of their patrol route. They’re headed to the far south side of Queens to investigate some reported demon activity at the JFK International Airport and Alec is absolutely dreading the whole affair. Airports and subway stations are two of the worst places to fight demons, and Alec is hardly up for a fight while dodging huge crowds of panicking mundanes and then dealing with the eventual fallout of a demon nest wreaking havoc in one of America’s busiest airports.

It seems as if Alec isn’t the only one not entirely in the mindset for demon hunting that night either. Jace is subdued and fidgety, just as he’s been since returning from the City of Bones, and Izzy has been uncharacteristically fatigued and irritable ever since the demon attack at the Institute. Alec has been noticing their odd behavior more and more lately, but between Valentine and Aldertree and Alec’s own issues bubbling up, he admits that he has failed to keep a better eye out for his younger siblings.

Alec hates the silence that stagnates between them, and he hates even more that once upon a time he had longed for this sort of invasive quiet. He misses their easy banter, he misses Jace’s obnoxious jokes, and Izzy’s confident remarks, and things being clear cut and simple and knowing exactly what’s expected of him. Some part of Alec even misses being in the closet still, misses the safety of no one knowing, of never having to talk about it, of never even thinking about how he feels about other men or how Hightower ruined him forever.
They’re silent as they depart the Institute, activating their glamors and speed runes so that they can race to Queens in no time. Alec knows with painful awareness how terrible all three of them look; they have dark circles under their eyes and their cheeks are gaunt and Alec can’t really recall the last time any of them ate anything. It hurts that none of them speak up, that they’ve gone from calling each other out on their bullshit to suddenly being tacitly complicit in one another’s pain.

Alec opens his mouth a few times to say something, anything; he wants to ask Izzy why she hasn’t been sleeping, ask Jace to talk about what happened with Valentine and then the City of Bones, ask why both of his little siblings feel like they have to hide those answers from Alec when neither has ever bothered to do so before. His arms twitch with the urge to reach his arms out and offer a hug, or a shoulder pat, or even just some lame high-five, to just do something to provide whatever comfort he possibly can. But Alec is far too absorbed in his own pain, too focused on the events that soured his own childhood. It makes him feel selfish, to be so invested in something that happened a decade beforehand that Alec can’t help his siblings with whatever is bothering them now, at that very moment. What kind of big bother does it make him that he’s just never good enough to help?

But Alec doesn’t have the chance to wallow in his self-deprecation. They slip into the crowds of people milling about the airport, expertly managing to weave between travelers. It’s a difficult task that takes the grace of runes and years of practice to perfect, especially in such a heavily congested city as New York. They ultimately separate, syncing up their relay runes to keep in contact and dividing up the vast layout of the airport. Perhaps at any other time, Alec would argue against the plan, would see the danger of three not-quite-alright shadowhunters potentially facing a demon nest alone.

As it is, Alec just can’t seem to care.

It’s two hours later that things, inevitably and predictably, fall apart. Alec feels that familiar jolt near his left hip moments before Jace activates their relay rune. Jace has stumbled upon ibriz demons, which, while incredibly dim-witted are nevertheless a pain in the ass to deal with en masse. And from Jace’s rushed explanation, they’re dealing with a full nesting horde.

Alec sprints like a madman across the span of the airport. He runs into a few mundanes in his haste, but all he can think about is how his parabatai rune burns, how Izzy is closer and will no doubt leap into the fray without hesitation, how Alec is too far away and he isn’t going to make it there in time and how come Alec let them follow through with this plan? Why didn’t he say anything? Why didn’t he just think things through and realize that none of them are prepared for a high-stakes mission, why didn’t he speak up and ask his siblings what was wrong and be the big brother they need him to be, why does Alec always mess everything up?

In order to find his siblings, Alec just has to follow the sounds of screaming. A sudden stampede of panicked mundanes nearly force Alec off of his feet, and he has to take to jumping on the tops of chairs and carts and kiosks, anything he can use to get above the droves of people that threaten to trample each other in their terror. Alec spares half a second to dread the amount of paperwork and diplomacy this is going to take to cover-up; airport attacks are always the worst when it comes to mundane government involvement.

The problem with ibriz demons, beyond their massive swarming numbers, is the fact that they are incredibly slimy, which most often renders blade and whip weapons all but useless. Jace and Izzy are going to be fighting with a major disadvantage; of the three of them, it will be up to Alec to pick off the most demons. When he finds his siblings, locked in a violent and very clearly losing battle, Alec curses himself for his own lack of foresight. He should have reviewed the details more closely, should have known what they were walking into, should have kept a better watch on Jace
and Izzy. Alec should have done better, but yet again he has failed his loved ones.

He immediately falls into the familiar repetition of shooting arrows, watching with grim satisfaction as each and every one hit their mark, the demons dissipating in a spray of ichor and smoke. His fingers still burn from his practice earlier that day and his muscles pull tightly from a strain he hasn’t noticed, but it feels so freeing to be able to do what Alec was born and raised for: hunt demons, protect his siblings, get the job done. It feels like years since Alec has spent the night inspiring terror in his enemies, instead of lying awake in paralyzing fear himself. It’s reassuring to know that, no matter what has happened in his life, his abilities as a shadowhunter haven’t suffered.

Alec finds himself caught up in the flow of combat, dancing between the slashing claws of demons and hearing the sound of Izzy’s laugh, of Jace’s war cry, of his own heart pounding in his ears. His angelic blood practically sings from the adrenaline rushing through his veins and a savage glee pervades his entire being. It’s times like this, where Alec and his siblings are warriors first and foremost, that he wonders where such love of battle comes from. Is it blood, is it conditioned into them, is it Jace’s or his or is it a part of them both that feeds off of each other between their parabatai runes? (And how does the nephilim love of battle end up being superior to the supposed ‘downworlder love of chaos’? Is it not all the same, when the fighting is over?)

Eventually, the battle – and Alec’s subsequent battle-lust – die down until there are just a few stragglers remaining. The siblings dispatch them with ruthless efficiency, all of them breathing heavier, sweating up a storm, blood dripping and ribs bruised. But Alec looks up and sees them smiling, can feel an answering grin curling at the corner of his lips. Jace lets out a laugh, sharper and higher pitched than natural, but it cascades down until Izzy and Alec are both joining in. Alec draws his siblings in for a side hug and they lean on each other, covered in demon ichor and laughing hysterically in the middle of an evacuated airport.

It feels like a victory hymn, like an ode to who they are becoming, like a requiem for who they had been before. They aren’t the same little kids Alec remembers; Izzy no longer curls up against Alec in his bed, Jace no longer sneaks into his room after nightmares, they no longer hide under the covers telling stories until the early hours of the morning. The Clave, their parents, Hightower, Aldertree, Valentine, life has taken that away from them, has forced them to grow up too quickly and too harshly. Has molded them into bloodthirsty soldiers who can talk back as much as they want, but who still fall in line at the prospect of a fierce and glorious battle.

It’s a bitter triumph for a shadowhunter to live to adulthood.

They do not have long to celebrate their unlikely success; mundane law enforcement is already surrounding the building and preparing to breach. The mundanes will be expecting some terrorist activity, but the only evidence they’ll find will be what the shadowhunter clean-up crews plant. For now, Alec and his siblings have to hightail it out of there and report back to the Institute. Although they have avoided any major casualties – quite a feat, considering the density of people in JFK International Airport and the number of iblis demons present – there’s no doubt that Aldertree is gearing up to berate them for a sloppy mission.

The journey back to Lower Manhattan is a much more drawn out trip than the trek to Queens was. Adrenaline always dissipates remarkably quickly following such an intense fight, and so the three siblings are left dragging their feet and stumbling down the streets of New York City. They could easily take the subway, but there’s an electric current charging the air between them. Being jammed into an over stuffed subway car would be nothing short of disastrous. They’re too antsy, too twitchy, too much in the battle-ready mindset to be trusted quite so close to a bunch of unsuspecting mundanes. And maybe too dangerous and volatile to be around each other, as well.
But their unlikely victory renews a strength deep in Alec’s soul that he has forgotten. It doesn’t matter that Alec is dealing with past trauma, that he’s still struggling with the long-term effects of being out. Alec has retained his abilities as a shadowhunter; no doubt, he has also retained his abilities as an older brother.

And so when the three are stopped at a crosswalk, waiting for a red light, he blurts out the first thing that his exhausted, addled, and overworked brain comes up with. “What is wrong with you two?”

Of course, given Alec’s luck, it comes out incredibly condescending and blunt and not at all what Alec means for it to be. It doesn’t matter that he wants to make sure his siblings are alright, that he intends to do absolutely everything in his power to make them feel better; what matters is that he always fucks up the delivery of his thoughts, like there’s some major disconnect between his brain and his mouth that can never seem to sync up like everyone else’s does.

Given his rather cruel tone, it comes as no surprise that Izzy and Jace immediately bristle. It occurs to Alec that this exact scenario has often given rise to their arguments growing up: it has always been that volatile combination of Alec’s inability to communicate his thoughts, mixed with Jace’s impulsive urge to jump to conclusions, with a dash of Izzy’s self-righteous belief that she knows everything about everyone. Put all three of their major flaws into a small space, shake a few times, and the results are always explosive.

“What do you mean what’s wrong with us? What’s wrong with you?” Jace shoots back, expression souring from his previous smirk. “You’ve been even more of a distant asshole than usual.”

Jace’s tendency is to go on the offensive, to strike before anyone else can hurt him. It’s a tactic that was beaten into him – perhaps literally – by his father (by Valentine); seeing the gross abuse of Jace’s upbringing makes Alec sick to the stomach, but it makes Alec infinitely more relieved that he never allowed Hightower to touch Jace. But it doesn’t change Alec’s own methods; if Jace is offensive, then Alec is defensive. He will plant his feet and steady his stance and weather the blows until everyone else is out of steam. And it’s so easy to slip into a defensive stance that Alec hardly even spares a thought about it, crossing his arms and effectively blocking himself off.

“This isn’t about me, Jace. This is about how you’ve been twitchy and erratic since Valentine and the City of Bones,” Alec retaliates, deflecting as best as he can. His tone is harsh, and Alec hates himself a little bit more for it, but the words are truthful nonetheless. Maybe Jace will finally pull his head out of his ass and just talk to his siblings for once. “What happened, Jace?” The words come out more demanding than concerned, but it’s too late to suck them back in and swallow them.

The blond rears back as if he’s been struck, a nasty sneer settling on his face. “Nothing to concern your pretty little heads over. Not like I didn’t already spend ten years being raised by a monster! Not like I had to trade time in the City of Bones for your life, Alec, after you nearly got us both killed!” Even Jace seems surprised that the words have slipped out, vicious and unsettling. His mismatched eyes widen, his mouth drops open, but then he shakes his head imperceptibly and his expression hardens.

Alec feels like he’s been punched in his gut. He can’t breathe; he struggles to get enough air to squeeze out some response, to just say anything. But nothing comes to mind, no defense readily prepared. Alec doesn’t regret trying to track his parabatai through their runes, but he does regret the fallout of such a horribly conceived plan, regrets that Jace had been the one suffering the consequences.

Izzy jumps into the conversation before Alec can fully recover. “You two need to stop fighting
already! Both of you need to get yourselves together and talk or else we’re going to be stuck in this same argument forever!” Izzy is typically the voice of reason negotiating between Alec and Jace’s spats, but this time her usually level voice is sharp and tight in a way that discomfits Alec.

“Cut the bullshit, Iz,” Alec finally interrupts, earning the scathing look of now both of his siblings. “This isn’t just about Jace; you’ve been off your game for weeks,” he accuses, staring his sister down with what he hopes is a stern look. “Don’t think that I haven’t noticed, Isabelle. I saw how you struggled to keep your stance today; I had to work double-time just to keep the demons off your back. And you, Jace,” he turns back to level a glare at his brother, “you hesitated on nearly half your blows. The two of you could have cost us the mission!” Alec snaps out, sudden anger fueling his words. “Maybe Aldertree has been right to ban you both from patrol!”

“What?” Izzy’s outraged shriek, mixed with Jace’s cry of indignation, mixed with the cacophony of the busy New York street, gives Alec a pounding headache that fuels his rage. The three siblings stand there, shouting and pointing and hurling accusations at each other with a sort of vitriol that makes Alec’s head spin. He doesn’t know how they got to this point, how they have gone from supporting each other completely to tearing each other apart in a matter of months. Alec’s heart is heavy, and his head even more so, and his stomach is hollow.

“What?” Izzy’s outraged shriek, mixed with Jace’s cry of indignation, mixed with the cacophony of the busy New York street, gives Alec a pounding headache that fuels his rage. The three siblings stand there, shouting and pointing and hurling accusations at each other with a sort of vitriol that makes Alec’s head spin. He doesn’t know how they got to this point, how they have gone from supporting each other completely to tearing each other apart in a matter of months. Alec’s heart is heavy, and his head even more so, and his stomach is hollow.

“Why the hell are you being so uptight?” Jace spits, jabbing a finger into Alec’s sternum. “I thought we were finally past the whole ‘tight ass Alec’ thing! Like maybe now that you’re finally getting laid, the only thing that should be up your ass is Magnus!”

“Jace!” Izzy yells, voice sharp and high and so very distant in Alec’s ears.

“That’s not- we haven’t- what the hell, Jace!” Alec forces out past gritted teeth. His face feels like it’s on fire, an odd combination of horribly mortified and overwhelmingly frustrated. His hands itch to return to the archery range, but he clenches them into tight fists around handfuls of his jacket.

His stuttered confession pulls their collective meltdown to an abrupt halt, until Alec finds himself with the stinging attention of both his siblings.

“Wait, really?” Izzy asks, suddenly far more invested in her brother’s love life than whatever argument they were having.

Alec folds his arms closer around himself, his shoulders tightening until he can feel the muscles in his back straining from the tension. “Really what?” he demands.

“You’ve been dating Magnus Bane for over three months and you guys haven’t even had sex yet?” Izzy sounds incredulous, which shouldn’t be as surprising to Alec as it is, considering that Izzy’s conception of a relationship almost always starts with sex.

But it still hurts to hear it called out like that. As if Alec hasn’t spent years of his life hating that he’s attracted to men, as if Alec hasn’t struggled to put that behind him and embrace his relationship with Magnus, as if Alec doesn’t want to take the next step every single day but can’t. Something settles heavily in the pit of his stomach, his throat feels blocked off, his eyes sting.

“Shit. No wonder you’re still so uptight. Maybe if you finally got some you’d be more relaxed. How’s this sound, I’ll stay out tonight so you and Magnus can be as loud as you want,” Jace offers, his tone far too mocking and condescending for Alec’s liking.

Standing there, on the curb of some overcrowded New York sidewalk, being glared at by both of his siblings and ridiculed for his lack of sexual experience, Alec feels a chill seep into his very bones. It isn’t from the icy January weather. He can’t breathe past the sudden lump in his throat,
his face feels like it will boil from how hot it is, and his fingers won’t quit tapping and fidgeting against his thigh like an idiot. Alec feels cold.

A cruel, vicious part of him wants to lash out, wants to hurt Jace and Izzy like only Alec knows. How easy would it be to just tell them? To bite out that Alec had gained experience long before Jace and Izzy had even learned what that meant. To snap that Alec had spent his adolescent years being molested behind closed doors while his siblings had lived on completely unaware. To reveal that he had accepted the trauma in order to save their own innocence. To scream and cry and wail over how Alec had suffered while no one had given a single damn.

How easy would it be to utterly destroy Jace and Izzy?

But it would be unforgivably cruel. That isn’t their burden to bear; it never was, and it never will be. Between their parents’ lies, and Hodge’s betrayal, and Jace finding out that he’s Valentine’s son, and all the convoluted brutality they have faced the last few months, Alec can’t bear to add yet another pain to their ever-growing pile.

Instead, he presses his lips into a thin line and turns away. He marches down the street in the general direction of the Institute, utterly ignoring the indignant shouts of his siblings echoing behind him. Alec focuses on swallowing back the growing sting in his eyes, fighting off the blurriness that threatens to overtake his eyesight. His throat is sore and his eyes water and everything hurts.

He wants Magnus. He always wants Magnus, like some pathetic little child who can’t wipe their own tears off and pick himself back up. Alec hates himself for that urge, hates that he can’t ever take care of himself, hates that he’s always running to Magnus for comfort and to deal with all of his trauma. It isn’t fair to take advantage of the man’s infinite kindness and it makes Alec feel even more miserable in the long run. Perhaps it would be nice to let other people know, to have a larger support system that Alec could fall back on, to ensure that it isn’t just Magnus who has to bear the burden of Alec’s misery.

But Alec will be damned if he ever tells another soul about Hightower.

Chapter End Notes

One of my favorite aspects of Shadowhunters is how flawed all of the characters are allowed to be. As such, this chapter highlights some of the contentions between the Lightwood siblings. This won't be the only time someone messes up or makes a mistake in this fic. But rest assured, they all still love each other and will (eventually) make up.

Thank you for sticking with me so far, and for leaving such wonderful comments.

~PNGuin
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

All trigger warnings are listed in the tags. If you find I missed anything, please let me know and I'll add it in.

This chapter is probably the most graphic out of the entire work, so please be cautious.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

VII

Following the initial incident, Hightower was meticulously cautious in when he touched Alec. It was only in Alec’s room, during the designated hours of their lessons, when it was all but guaranteed that they would be left uninterrupted. He never tried anything in public, or even semi-public, and he never allowed his visits to stray into unsanctioned times. So for all that Alec suffered during his lessons, the rest of his days were peaceful, were safe. Alec was still able to spar with Hodge, still able to work on reports and monitoring duty in the ops center, still able to share his bed with his siblings whenever they needed comfort, all without the lingering fear that Hightower might hurt him in those very moments. Hightower was too smart, too methodical.

Until he wasn’t.

It was perhaps a year or so into the abuse, a year of sitting on Hightower’s lap and reading Clave law and politics while ignoring the sensation of pain in his lower regions and the feeling of an unwanted cock wrapped in his own hands. Alec was nearly thirteen and a half, and it was two in the morning, and it was one of the rare nights where a distraught Jace, or Izzy, or toddler Max managed to avoid nightmares and subsequently avoid needing to run to Alec’s room.

When the door creaked open, letting a thin band of light streak into his bedroom, Alec woke up immediately. He had always been an incredibly light sleeper, whether due to his training as a soldier or his dedication as an older brother he had never figured out. But the door opened and Alec was expecting Jace, fresh from a nightmare, or Izzy, awake from reading advanced scientific textbooks and wanting to share her newfound knowledge, or maybe even Max, who had increasingly been denied parental comfort and turned to fraternal instead.

But it wasn’t any of Alec’s siblings, that much was clear by the looming shadow that fell across his room, dousing him in darkness. Alec squeezed his eyes shut, curled into a tighter ball, huddling futilely under his covers, and prayed to the angels that maybe, just maybe, Hightower would leave him alone.

His prays weren’t answered.

Hightower closed the door behind him, the click of the latch echoing with a foreboding that set Alec’s teeth on edge. He walked over to Alec’s bed silently and perched himself on the edge. Alec wasn’t able to breathe; it was as if all the air had been sucked out of his room, leaving only a void of terror in its wake. He wrapped his arms around himself, unable to stop the uncontrollable
shaking that plagued his limbs, and attempted to hold back tears.

“Shh, shh, Alec,” Hightower murmured, voice so achingly gentle, so horrifically false. “I love you, and I’ve decided to give you a treat. You’ve been such a good boy for Uncle Tommy and you deserve a reward for all your hard work. Don’t worry, Alec, I’ll take care of you.” The lies sounded like how rotten fruit smelled, sickly sweet enough to curdle at the back of his throat.

“Please,” Alec begged. “Please, go away.”

But Hightower was single-minded in his pursuit to destroy Alec’s childhood. He chuckled softly, a sound that would have been low and soothing if not for the rough hands that slipped up under Alec’s shirt. The shirt was discarded, allowing Hightower’s hands free range, roaming up the sides of his ribs, pinching at his nipples, wrapping around his neck just enough to make the pressure painful. Alec’s boxer quickly followed, leaving him exposed to the open air. He shivered and let a near silent sob slip past his clenched teeth; Alec bit his lip to stifle the sound, hard enough that he tasted blood.

Typically, Hightower preferred to touch Alec for a short while and then ultimately switch to pleasuring himself, or convincing Alec to do the dirty work for him. But something changed in the way he spat into his palm, the way he curled calloused and scarred fingers around Alec’s penis, the way he began to stroke up and down.

Pleasure crept up Alec’s spine, digging deep into his very bones and worming its way into the pit of his stomach. Alec felt tense and squirmy, but he latched onto the sensation, clung to the only good feeling he had ever received from the ordeal with all the desperation of a dying man. He squeezed his eyes shut, blocked out the sight of Hightower looming over him and the sound of his heavy breathing, hot against his bare flesh. He focused on the hands, on every time a thumb swiped across the head, on how his legs started shaking and his stomach clenched and his heart raced.

He felt tight and hot, like his body was ready to combust. Pleasure dripped down his spine, pooling in the pit of his stomach, gathering until he felt like bursting. And then, all at once, the tension snapped. White hot pleasure flashed behind his eyelids, his back bowed, shudders wracked his body, his stomach clenched, his cock pulsed, and a hot spurt of cum painted his stomach and chest. He laid there, blood dribbling down his chin from where he had struggled to keep his mouth closed, gasping for breath, riding the aftershocks of his first orgasm and letting himself have that one single bit of contentment.

But then his stomach turned to ice. Shame welled, fierce and overpowering and utterly devastating, until Alec drowned in the absolute disgrace, humiliation, contempt that threatened to destroy him. Alec had never felt so wholly betrayed by his own body.

He enjoyed it.

He enjoyed it.

He enjoyed it.

What kind of sick, twisted individual did that make him? That he laid there, accepting Hightower’s rewards and getting off on them? That Alec gained just as much pleasure from the night as Hightower himself? What did it say about him? That Alec had become complicit and willing, that Alec was no longer a victim but a co-conspirator, that Alec wanted it?

Hightower didn’t bother cleaning him up that night. As if even he knew how disgustingly loathsome Alec was. He simply patted Alec’s head, offered some hollow platitude of ‘wonderful
job, Alec, you did spectacularly' and then left, just as quietly and suddenly as he had arrived.

Alec laid in bed, the taste of blood on his tongue and the feeling of his own cum cooling on his stomach, and he hated himself. He was quivering, his stomach was hollow and tight all at once, sweat and tears mixed on his face. Until it was all too much; the terror, the agony, the hatred. It was as if he lost all control of his body. He leaned over the edge of his bed and vomited, bile spilling forth and staining the floors. Sobs welled up from deep in his chest as he collapsed face down and wept into his pillow. A slick warmth spread below his waist, seeping into his bedsheets and spreading out, and for a horrifying second Alec thought that he had come again, as if he had enjoyed the night so much that his body needed to express it twice. But the sharp scent of urine hit his nose and Alec nearly choked on an ashamed sob.

He rolled out of bed and landed on his hands and knees, stark naked, piss running down his thighs, vomit and blood clinging to the edges of his mouth, cum drying on his stomach, and he wanted to die.

Alec just wanted everything to stop. But it didn’t. It continued on, as if Alec’s pain was so insignificant that it didn’t matter one single little bit. Maybe it didn’t, if no one in all of the New York Institute even bothered to check on a sobbing thirteen-year-old boy at two in the morning.

He felt disgusting. Through some strength that he didn’t know existed, Alec crawled into his bathtub and turned on the water. It was ice cold, but Alec didn’t even feel the difference, even as his teeth chattered and his body trembled violently. What mattered was his filth washing down the drain, what mattered was Alec scrubbing every inch of his body until all the old skin flaked off and was forcibly replaced with new cells, ones that hadn’t been touched by Hightower, ones that hadn’t been soiled by Alec’s own shame.

It was impossible to tell how long he lay there, his skin a horrible mixture of a raw red and a freezing blue. He was numb, from the cold or the trauma or the self-loathing. Alec didn’t feel anything.

He moved mechanically. Turned off the water. Dried himself off. Dressed in new sleep clothes. Scrubbed the floor until the stench of vomit was gone. Stripped the soiled sheets off of the bed. Crept down the halls and into the laundry room, alone at three in the morning, with the desperate hope that no one else would be doing their laundry at such an hour, that no one would witness the sniffing, dead-eyed thirteen-year-old dragging piss- and cum-stained sheets with him.

Of course, there was someone there.

Alec pushed the door open, head down to hide the drying tear tracks on his cheeks, and nearly missed the commanding presence of his own mother.

“Allec?” his mother asked, voice surprised but still demanding, still expecting a feasible explanation for what her son was doing up when he should have been sleeping.

Alec turned to ice. In the silent seconds between each pounding heartbeat, Alec wondered what it would have been like to actually be an ice sculpture. Frozen solid, unfeeling and uncaring and unnoticing of the world around it. Molded into whatever shape a sculptor wanted it to be, without any thought to what else it could have been. Ice never bled, or sobbed, or screamed, or begged, or pleaded. Ice just was. It existed, and then as soon as it was no longer useful, it melted. And then it was gone.

Perhaps one day Alec would ask a warlock to turn him into an ice sculpture. He had certainly felt like one for long enough.
But Alec was not that lucky. Alec had not truly turned to ice; instead, he was trapped in the laundry room, holding soiled sheets, avoiding his mother’s gaze, and feeling too much. His skin was crawling, thousands of ants marching over his flesh until he was swimming in the sensation. His vision darkened and blurred, a tidal wave of confusion and disorientation and pure, unbridled fear. He was shaking, vibrating out of his very body until he felt like his atoms would scatter and he would cease to exist.

There was the humiliating plop of wet bedsheets hitting the floor, and then Alec was screaming. A full-bodied, gut-wrenching sound that had been welling deep inside of him for months, ripping past his throat and exploding out into the air around him. He lurched forward, stumbling over his own sheets, and latched onto his mother’s shirt, buried his face against her chest and screamed his agony into existence. No longer was it anchored down to the bottom of his chest, festering and growing like fungus. It was forced out into being, made real and tangible and undeniable in a way that Alec had never allowed himself. In the hollow space between each scream, Alec choked out scattered fragments of Uncle Tommy and Mama and lo siento in such a jumbled mess that even he wasn’t able to make sense of it.

He clung to his mother with a visceral desperation so potent that he was able to taste it in the air. His tears and snot stained her shirt, his knees collapsed under the weight of the truth and it was only his mother’s arms holding him up; the same arms that had first held him, that had rocked him to sleep, that had hugged him whenever he had done something well. The same arms that wrapped around him, tightening their hold until he no longer felt like he was coming undone, like the atoms that he was comprised of finally settled back into a semblance of Alec Lightwood. Hands carded through his hair, scratching lightly at his scalp in a repetitive pattern that made him want to melt into a contented puddle, and there was the whisper-soft caress of his mother’s voice saying ’mijo, mi cielito, que pasa?’ For that fleeting minute, Alec let himself believe that everything would be alright.

But then hands settled on his shoulders and pushed him away from the only warmth he had felt in months, and his sobs increased into a high-pitched keening, hysterical and despondent all at once, and then a hand met his cheek and the ringing smack of skin on skin echoed in his head. And the world stilled.

And Alec felt so cold.

“’Alec,” Maryse said, voice weary and frightened in equal measure. He forced himself to look up, but he wasn’t able to meet her gaze and instead settled at a point just over her shoulder. “You need to calm down. You’re too old to be behaving like this. Just imagine what the Clave would think if anyone saw you.”

That was what Hightower always said, too. But Alec thought that maybe, just maybe, his mother would pick his side. That maybe, for just one singular moment, he wouldn’t have to be alone.

He was wrong.

“This cannot happen again, Alec. Do I make myself clear?”

He finally met his mother’s eyes and flinched at the look warring within them. Her face was stern, the façade of a jaded warrior, but her eyes were wet and glassy. As if it pained her just as much as it did her son. Maybe it did. Alec didn’t know. It didn’t matter if Alec knew or not. His mother was usually right anyway. He nodded and dropped his gaze to the floor, silent and empty and cold.

The next day, Hightower offered him a deal: if Alec willingly participated during lessons, then he
would be left alone at night. Alec accepted, if only because it ensured that Alec didn’t need to sleep with the door locked, that he was able to leave it cracked open for Jace or Izzy or Max to sneak in and slip into the comfort of his bed.

It terrified him, that his bed was both his own torture chamber and a safe haven for his siblings. It disgusted him, that Alec so eagerly let them cling to him hours after he had been forced to scrub his skin raw and clean of cum. He only allowed it because it provided Alec with that simple luxury of cuddling next to someone and knowing, without a doubt, that he was safe. Alec encouraged his siblings’ late night visits because it supplied Alec with more satisfaction and relief than it ever did for any of them. He latched onto his siblings and used their own needs to benefit himself, and didn’t that make him just as twisted and sick as Hightower? To use his siblings’ search for comfort as a means of pleasure for himself?

He hated himself, more and more, each time Izzy curled up in the spot where Alec had sobbed into his pillow, each time Jace stretched out over where cum and piss stains had been, each time Max clambered up the edge where Hightower had sat and touched Alec. But Alec never made the effort to stop them.

And he also never again made the effort to stop Hightower.

Chapter End Notes

I happen to really love Maryse Lightwood as a character, particularly regarding her redemption shown in the TV show. I love that tension between her wanting to please the Clave and her wanting to love her children, and how she struggles to balance those two goals. As such, there will be a lot of conflicting emotions in Alec about his mother (which will be further flushed out later on). Overall, I see her as someone who loves her children, but doesn't know how to accomplish that in the best way. I am considering writing a fic centered around Maryse in some eventual future, should anyone be interested.

Thank you all for reading. And don't be afraid to voice any concerns, worries, or thoughts down below.

~PNGuin
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

All trigger warnings are listed in the tags. If you find I missed anything, please let me know and I'll add it in.

This chapter is a much anticipated reward to all you lovely readers for surviving through so much unending angst. Because I am a sucker for self-indulgent writing and have no sense of self-control, please enjoy eight thousand words of Malec fluff.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

VIII

There’s practically a spring to Alec’s step as he half-jogs down the crowded evening streets, expertly weaving between the huddled masses of mundanes that scuttle along the sidewalks of New York City. He feels antsy and giddy, like there’s pent-up energy sizzling in his blood, just waiting for the chance to be expelled. It doesn’t make any sense; he went on an early patrol that morning and dealt with some particularly nasty dahak demons, and when he got a bit of ichor and blood on his hand, he spent nearly an hour scouring it off, trying to erase the memory of dark red heart blood under his fingernails. And when that failed to calm the itch in his hands, he took to pounding into the punching bag and firing arrows until his hands were sore. When that also failed, he lost hours meticulously typing up reports and scrubbing the floor of his bedroom.

And yet, here he is, nervously wringing those same abused hands as he stands in front of Magnus’ door.

It’s been two weeks since their botched café date, two weeks since Magnus gave him – yet another – chance to run away when it got to be too much. And Alec took it. Alec ran away. (Alec is always running.) He hates himself for it, hates that he keeps pushing Magnus away even when he wants nothing more than to hold on to him, hates that Magnus keeps just accepting this as if the warlock deserves such treatment. But Alec has spent his whole life running and hiding: from who he is, from what was done to him, from his parents and his siblings and the Clave. He doesn’t know how to stop, doesn’t know how to just stay long enough to let Magnus in.

Alec hates himself. Hates that he keeps going back and forth. Does he want to be out, or does he want to keep hiding? Does he want to be with Magnus, or does he want to keep pushing away every time he needs help? Does he even want to get better, or is he just going to keep freaking out whenever he so much as thinks about the past?

He doesn’t know anymore. He doesn’t know how he’s supposed to heal, if he’s ever even going to heal. He doesn’t know what’s up with Izzy or Jace or what happened to their relationship, or how to deal with Aldertree, or how to keep the Clave out of his hair, or how to look Clary in the eye ever since her mother. Alec doesn’t know.

Well, maybe he does know one thing. Alec knows that he wants to see Magnus.
I guess you’ll just have to make it up to me, the warlock said two weeks ago. And Alec fully intends to.

Alec fidgets, straightening the leather jacket he threw on earlier that day, as if just realizing that maybe he should’ve dressed in something a little nicer than a battered, ichor stained coat to see Magnus. And a quick, half-hearted sniff to his own collar confirms his suspicion that he should’ve put on some cologne to hide the familiar scent of his own sweat. He also comes to the stark realization that maybe he should’ve texted first, should’ve checked if Magnus is free, if it’s okay for him to suddenly show up unannounced. He shouldn’t just assume that Magnus will…that Magnus will, what? Want to see Alec just as much as Alec wants to see him? That Magnus will be waiting for Alec to come crawling back, always so patient and understanding in a way that Alec never deserves? It’s naïve, and foolish, and so selfish of Alec to expect those things, to take advantage of Magnus’ kindness by just assuming the warlock will drop everything whenever Alec shows up. But Alec is already there, already within the boundaries of Magnus’ wards; no doubt, Magnus knows that Alec is there and it would be infinitely crueler to just walk away now.

He doesn’t know why it’s so hard. Alec feels like he’s taken several steps back and he doesn’t like the fear and the anxiety that curdles in his chest. He’s been doing so well; he’s been going on dates with Magnus, enjoying their time together, letting go of the years of repression and allowing himself to hold his boyfriend’s hand in public as they take walks on Caribbean beaches. But then those damn books, and the damn café, and now Alec is hesitating outside Magnus’ door and he doesn’t know why he’s so pathetic or what Magnus even sees in him.

But he’s already there. And he can’t turn around and flee now.

So Alec raises his hand and knocks. The door swings open even before his knuckles brush it, spurred on by Magnus’ ever-impatient magic. Alec steps through cautiously, mindful to hang up his coat and his bow, toe off his dirty boots off in the entryway, and deposit his backpack to the side. The loft is a welcome sight, with its warmth – always a perfect temperature, always smelling faintly of burnt sugar and sandalwood and incense – and its soft colors and the quiet music that’s playing in the background. It sounds vaguely jazzy to Alec, but he doesn’t know enough about music to place the era or the musician; it reminds him of the Dean Martin and Ella Fitzgerald and Etta James records that his mother used to listen to.

Magnus had been seated in a plush armchair and had risen elegantly to his feet, sporting perhaps the most beautiful smile Alec has ever seen in his entire life. He’s dressed down in simple lounge pants and shirt, his feet clad in ridiculously fuzzy slippers that Alec would scoff at if anyone else wore them; his hair is still expertly styled and his makeup still immaculate, but there’s a softness to his edges that Alec feels overwhelmingly blessed to witness.

“Alexander!” Magnus greets cheerfully. “What brings my favorite shadowhunter to my humble abode?”

The question is playful in nature, but it makes Alec’s stomach clench. Not in the pleasant way that his stomach so oftentimes acts up in Magnus’ presence, but rather in a guilty, shameful way that makes Alec want to beg forgiveness. He only seems to visit Magnus when Alec is an absolute mess, desperate for any sort of anchor to keep him tethered to the world. It seems like a cruel way to treat Magnus, as if he and his time are commodities that Alec has any right to lay claim on. It makes his stomach roil every time he finds himself doing this to Magnus.

And Alec needs Magnus to understand that it isn’t like that, that Alec isn’t trying to suggest that Magnus owes him anything, that Magnus shouldn’t be obligated or compelled to do anything for Alec. And, more than that, Alec wants to be there for Magnus too, just as Magnus has always been
there for him. Alec wants to comfort the warlock’s woes, listen to his rants about shitty clients and
rambles about increased prices for potion ingredients and how everything is a mess. Alec wants
Magnus to feel comfortable pouring his heart out, just as Alec already has.

But he doesn’t know how to say those words, doesn’t know how to untwist his tongue so it works
or how to force the air up his throat.

“I just- I needed- I wanted to see you,” he admits, stumbling over his words like an absolute idiot.

The only redemption he receives is the gorgeous and utterly foolish smile that his word vomit
prompts. It stretches across Magnus’ face and lights up the whole loft, kicking Alec’s heartbeat
into overdrive. Magnus spreads his arms out wide and gives a playful little waggle of his eyebrows
and shimmy of his shoulders, garnering a warm grin from Alec. “Well, here I am, darling,” the
warlock assures, voice teasing and yet undeniably fond.

He saunters closer and Alec feels a thrill run up his spine. Finally, after wasting all day trying to get
that persistent itch out from under his skin, Alec will be able to hold Magnus and pepper his face
with soft kisses and cuddle on the couch and just stop obsessively thinking about all the things that
have gone wrong in his life. But Magnus abruptly stops short of Alec’s personal space, just far
enough away that Alec can feel the aching absence of his warmth. When Alec meets his eyes, he
can see the hesitance there.

It reminds Alec of the café, of how Magnus was so careful to avoid initiating much of anything, of
how Magnus has been walking on eggshells around Alec ever since he learned about Hightower.
Never moving too quickly into Alec’s space, never intruding, never risking accidental – or
purposeful – brushes of skin, never willing to let go and act on his own wants. It’s such a stark
contrast from the blunt and tenacious flirting that Magnus originally relied on; the sudden change
leaves Alec feeling off-kilter and unsteady, as if he no longer knows what to expect or how to
react.

It’s such an isolating feeling. To stand there, a foot away, and to suddenly have that intimacy
ripped away from him. It’s so novel, so wonderful to have someone to love, someone that wants to
hold and kiss and cuddle Alec while they watch crappy mundane TV. Alec has been distanced
from that intimacy all his life: first his parents, forcibly pulling away from him when he grew ‘too
old’ to be affectionate toward, then his siblings, when he tried to shield them from the whole
Hightower situation. And Alec never reached out for anyone to replace all that he lost, to let that
tenderness and trust back into his life, not until he met Magnus.

Now Alec’s losing Magnus, too. And just like all the other times, it’s Alec’s fault. All because he
can’t be intimate without feeling like he’s suffocating, or because he keeps running away whenever
things get hard, or because he isn’t even able to hold Magnus’ hand in some stupid mundane coffee
shop.

It’s terrifying. Terrifying to get a glimpse of all the happiness he has ever wanted in life, all the
happiness that has been prematurely ripped away from him, only to watch it all fall apart before it
even begins.

Alec’s used to terror, it’s something he’s been trained from birth to overcome. He never hesitates
when he’s staring down a demon, he never allows fear to compromise his mission. He can face a
horde of shax demons and not bat an eye, not cower for a single moment. So why is he always so
scared when it comes to his own sexuality, when it comes to Magnus, when it comes to
Hightower?

He doesn’t know. He never knows. But that fear of the unknown? It hasn’t stopped Alec before.
Not at the wedding, not when he finally chose his own life, not in the weeks following where Alec messed up again and again only to come back to Magnus every single time with an apology and a promise.

So he steps forward, and closes that gaping chasm of space between the two of them. He raises his hands slowly — enough that Magnus can intercept or push away if that’s what he wants — and lets them come to cup his boyfriend’s cheek with a gentleness that seems antithetical to the violence his hands typically commit. When their lips meet, it’s chaste with a tenderness that makes Alec’s heart hurt in all the best ways. It’s his apology and his promise, to Magnus, to them, to himself.

“I’m sorry,” he murmurs once he pulls back, just enough to rest his forehead against Magnus’. He feels Magnus’ hands caress up his sides and rest on the small of his back. His arms are wrapped around Alec, loosely holding him in place, a reminder that Alec is wanted here. It’s a delicate, fragile little embrace. Alec feels like if he moves too quickly or breathes too heavily, it will ultimately break.

“Why are you always apologizing?” Magnus asks, his voice just as soft as if he too feels the precarious nature of their hold on one another.

Alec can’t bear to meet Magnus’ eyes any longer, and he looks away by tightening his grip and burying his face against his boyfriend’s shoulder. He thinks about those books weighing down his backpack, resting innocently off to the side of the front door. They mention how difficult it can be to go through the process of healing alone, about how it’s important to let someone in, someone you can trust to support you. It’s time to quit running, time to quit pushing away every time someone tries to help him. It’s time to let himself heal.

“I’ve done running away,” Alec whispers. It sounds like a confession, but it tastes like an oath. “I’m done letting my past stop me from my future. And I’m sorry that I keep letting other people scare me off and ruin what we have, like that woman from the coffee shop. I’m sorry that I keep taking a few steps forward and then leaping back every time I start making progress. I want to get better, but I- Magnus, I don’t know if I can do it alone.”

When he finally dares to look up and meet Magnus’ eyes, he’s blown away by the profound pride and adoration that shines through. “Then it’s a good thing that you don’t have to do this alone,” the warlock murmurs, achingly tender.

Alec’s heart stutters in his chest and a smile stretches across his face, one that’s immediately mirrored by Magnus as well. They stay like that, foreheads pressed together as they gaze into each other’s eyes, long enough that Alec can easily imagine Jace and Izzy teasing him about it. He doesn’t care one bit.

But they can’t stay like that all night, so eventually Magnus takes a deep breath and pulls away. “Are you hungry, darling?”

“Starving,” Alec admits, only just realizing that he hasn’t eaten anything all day. His stomach has been too queasy to keep much of anything down, but he’s so comfortable and relaxed in Magnus’ presence that perhaps he can finally eat something.

“What are we craving today?” Magnus wonders idly. “We could go to that place in Marrakesh, or this lovely café I know of in France, or – ooh, I know – an authentic Cajun restaurant in New Orleans!” The warlock seems to grow infinitely more excited at each suggestion.

Alec regrets that he will have to burst the bubble, but he fears if he lets them go out and avoid
talking, then Alec will never get the guts to bring up what he needs to. “Actually,” he starts before he can second guess himself, “can we order in and just stay here? There’s something that I want to show you, if that’s alright?” The request sounds hesitant and vague, even to his own ears, but Magnus readily acquiesces and summons the takeout menus he keeps in the loft.

They agree on burgers with fries and milkshakes from an old-fashioned diner a few blocks away. Magnus summons the food with a promise that ‘yes, Alexander, I left money for the order,’ and they settle on the sofa, close enough that their thighs are flush against each other and their elbows occasionally knock together as they eat. It’s a playful affair, where Alec steals Magnus’ fries and Magnus retaliates by tickling him, of all things. They share a strawberry milkshake and their kisses taste like cream and sugar.

Eventually, with their bellies and hearts full, they finish their meal and Alec feels the familiar nerves crawling their way over his skin. He can’t back out now, however; he’s already committed and he wants to do this, regardless of how terrifying the whole ordeal is. Alec is utterly and absolutely confident that Magnus won’t judge or ridicule him.

He reluctantly disentangles himself from his spot on the couch and walks back to the front door. Besides the threshold, next to the little table that Alec always uses to hold his keys and thigh holster, is his backpack. He yanks it off of the ground and carries it back over to Magnus, who is watching with poorly disguised curiosity. Alec collapses back onto the sofa and stares at the bag in his hands for a few seconds too long. He can feel the apprehension and concern radiating off of Magnus, but he doesn’t allow himself to indulge in the comfort; instead, he unzips the bag and drops a handful of self-help books onto the coffee table, just as quickly and painfully as ripping a bandage off.

Beside him, Magnus stills. Alec’s fingers itch and his skin crawls. His leg bounces, and his fingers rub repetitively over the material of the backpack; he focuses on that rather than the sudden, horrifying, silence that engulfs them. Before the panic can truly set in, Magnus moves his hand so that it rests on Alec’s forearm. He begins running his hand down, soft and slow enough that Alec knows he can pull away whenever he wants to (he doesn’t) until their palms are sliding together and Magnus is entwining their fingers.

The warlock tightens his grip, and that point of pressure allows Alec to finally take a breath. Alec clings to Magnus, thumb idly drawing small circles on the smooth skin of Magnus’ hand, fingers fidgeting uselessly until Alec starts twisting the rings Magnus always wears. The combination of Magnus’ tight grasp on Alec’s hand and the sensation of smooth metal under his fingertips cools the incessant twitch, until Alec no longer feels frustrated and nauseated by the annoyingly familiar sensation. If the warlock at all minds this particular idiosyncrasy of Alec’s, he hides it quite well; so well, in fact, that he seems to enjoy indulging Alec in this manner.

Alec doesn’t know how long he makes them sit like that, clutching at Magnus’ hand and staring unseeing at the books, but it’s long enough that Magnus decides to hesitantly break the silence. “Do you need a pen and paper, Alexander?” he asks, voice hushed and gentle.

It’s an easy question, one that Alec logically knows is meant in the kindest of all possible ways, that between the two of them his tendency to lose all his words isn’t something to be embarrassed over. But it still makes shame well up in his chest, sharp and biting. He hates that he can’t seem to organize his thoughts, can’t seem to gather up the necessary words and string them together in the correct order. His mind is like alphabet soup, and half of the letters have already been eaten. He shakes his head, curt and adamant. He doesn’t need the paper.

When he gets the courage to look up, he finds that Magnus isn’t focused on the books at all. In
fact, the older man is staring uninhibited at Alec. He has that awed and incredulous expression on
his face, the one Magnus wears whenever Alec does something thoroughly unexpected, as if the
mystery of Alec Lightwood is the most engaging and phenomenal puzzle to figure out.

“That day, when we had our date at the café, before I got there, I—” he starts, only to stutter and lose
his steam. He takes a deep breath, twists a thin band resting on Magnus’ middle finger, and tries
again. “There’s this 24-hour mundane bookstore that I first found when I was about thirteen. I used
to sneak out of the Institute and run there. Just as a way to— to get out or escape or something. They
have a lot of famous mundane literature that the Clave banned. I used to sit in there for hours,
reading whatever I could get my hands on. No one ever really noticed that I would disappear for
half a day.

“But, um, I went to— there’s— they have this self-help section. And before I met up with you at the
café, I stopped by the store and I— I grabbed these. I’ve been reading through them but it’s— they’re
so— it’s a lot, so I haven’t gotten very far in but I— I think- I think it might be helping, just a bit.” He
finally finishes his little monologue, extremely glad that he’s gotten all the words out, stuttered and
breathy and rushed as they are.

Magnus’ free hand caresses his cheek, delicately moving his head so that they’re facing each other.
There are tears pooling in the warlock’s warm brown eyes, and the smile that curls his lips causes
those little wrinkles at the corners of his eyes to crease. Alec loves those little wrinkles – although
he would never dare to tell Magnus that – and in that moment he wants so desperately to kiss them.
Instead, he holds his breath and waits.

“Oh, Alexander,” Magnus murmurs, in an adoring way that makes Alec’s toes curl. “You never
cease to amaze me. You are so utterly stunning.”

Alec ducks his head, feeling the familiar burn of a flush creeping up his neck. He wants to argue;
wants to say that purchasing a few books from the bookstore and barely reading them is hardly a
momentous step toward being alright, that he’s scarcely done anything remarkable at all. But he
can see the fierce sincerity in Magnus’ eyes, and Alec knows that it isn’t an argument he can win.

He’s fatigued in a way that belies a decade of pain. All he wants is to forget about the damn books
and about Hightower and about how he still isn’t okay. He just wants to be okay for once in his life.

Words bubble up in the forefront of his mind, tripping along until they gather right at the tip of his
tongue. Three little words. Alec wants to say them, yearns to yell them for the whole world to hear,
aches to whisper them in Magnus’ ear as if they are some secret only between the two of them. But
he bites his tongue and holds them back.

Because how can he possibly know? How, when once upon a time he thought he had loved
Hightower, thought that Hightower had loved him? How can Alec possibly say those words right at
a moment where Magnus is benefiting him most? Is it really love, or is it some warped sense of
obligatory payment, like when Alec had enjoyed Hightower’s rewards? Does Alec only feel this
way because Magnus is always helping him so much, and he feels it’s right to repay that in some
way?

Alec doesn’t know. He’s loved several people in his life, almost all of which are family members,
and those are predominately an expected love, not the sort that he has much of a say in. There’s no
previous experience to go off of— or at least not any that Alec wants to go off of. He thinks that he
loves Magnus. But it’s all so confusing; emotions are hardly ever clear-cut, and the body’s reaction
to them even less so.

He remembers how Magnus had once tried to describe the symptoms of attraction: you lose your
breath every time they enter the room, your heart beats faster when they walk by, your skin tingles when they stand close enough to feel their breath. And, yes, that’s exactly how Alec feels whenever Magnus is anywhere near him, or even when he merely thinks about the man. But. That was also how Alec had felt whenever Hightower had come into his room for lessons, when he had slipped through the door in the middle of the night, or even just when Alec had brushed past him in the hallway. Horrific, isn’t it, how attraction and fear can manifest in the same manner?

Alec doesn’t know if he can trust his body or his feelings ever again. Not after they led him so far astray as a child. So how can he trust that now, for Magnus?

He can’t. He can’t trust that. Sometimes, Alec can’t even trust the reason for him being gay. What if it’s because of Hightower? What if the only reason Alec has ever been attracted to men is because Hightower had forced him to enjoy it, and eventually his body had just been trained to react? What if Hightower had corrupted him and destroyed him? What if Alec can never truly love anyone? How can Alec continue to take advantage of Magnus’ care and devotion, if Alec doesn’t even know if he’s capable of loving his own boyfriend?

Alec can’t find it within himself to say anything; all the words in his mind seem to slip through his fingers like sand. Even if he can’t voice it, Alec knows what he wants. He leans over until his head is resting on Magnus’ shoulder, his forehead nestled in the crook of the warlock’s neck, and he takes a deep, calming breath of sandalwood and burnt sugar. Magnus’ arms come up, wrapping around Alec’s back and holding him close.

“Alexander,” Magnus calls in a sing-song voice, softly drawing Alec out of his own head, “I can hear you overthinking everything. Tell me what’s on your mind.”

He wants to say something, anything, that could begin to detangle the maelstrom of emotions cluttering his mind. Alec wants to explain that he’s broken and perverse, that he isn’t even worthy of looking at Magnus. (He wants to be; he could be, one day, if he lets himself heal. He just has to try. Just has to read the books and follow their lessons and get over himself already.) The words are there, but they’re difficult to grab. All swimming around his head, swirling and churning. And so Alec gathers all the words in a net and jostles them around until they may actually make sense. Snippets of I feel wrong, I want to get better, I need you that he tries to compile into a comprehensible statement.

“Can I sleep with you?” is what ultimately spills out instead.

Magnus freezes beside him and Alec’s cheeks darken. He pulls back abruptly, realizes the stupid words that escaped his brain-to-mouth filter, and immediately begins to backtrack.

“No, that’s not- I didn’t mean- not like,” Alec stumbles horrifically over the words, his own tongue getting tied up by his embarrassment, which just makes his embarrassment even worse. “Not in a sexy way!” he finally spits out, only to bury his face in his hands to hide his no doubt incredibly obvious blush.

Beside him, Magnus is quivering. Alec is too mortified to lift his head and face his boyfriend, and he has no clue what’s going on. Is Magnus so pissed at the presumptuous question that he’s literally shaking with it? Or is he crying? Alec doesn’t know but he’s too scared to look up and find out.

But then a chuckle bursts forth from Magnus’ mouth. Magnus is laughing at him. Alec practically flinches from the thought, but then the warlock’s hands are smoothing over his shoulders and tugging him closer.
“No, darling, I’m sorry!” Magnus gets out between involuntary chuckles. “I’m not laughing at you, Alexander, I promise!”

The laughter is quite contagious, now that Alec knows it isn’t meant in a cruel fashion – which Alec should know anyway, seeing as how Magnus would never ridicule him – and he can’t help but begrudgingly join in, even as he crosses his arms and settles his face into a stern expression that Magnus likes to call a pout. (It isn’t. Alec doesn’t pout.)

“Then why are you laughing?” Alec asks, and if his voice borders on a whine then Magnus is polite enough not to mention it.

“Because,” his boyfriend responds, smooshing Alec’s cheeks between his two palms and causing a reluctant grin to curl the shadowhunter’s lips, “you are just so utterly adorable.”

Alec pulls back with an exaggeratedly affronted gasp. “I am not adorable!”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. What I meant by ‘adorable’ was actually ‘tough and badass’,” Magnus corrects teasingly.

Alec nods shortly and offers a satisfied sniff, turning his head up and away in a manner that’s supposed to seem jokingly austere or haughty. “I suppose that will do,” he decides. But his offended façade is easily broken by the grin that curls at his lips, and the kisses that Magnus presses against his neck and cheeks, and the borderline giggle that bubbles up in his throat.

They end up like that – laughing and trading sweet little kisses and poking fun at each other – for several minutes, until their chuckles subside and they tilt sideways on the couch, stretched out with their legs tangled and their arms around each other. Alec is squeezed between the back of the couch and Magnus, and although quite crowded for his tall frame, it’s perhaps the most comfortable Alec has ever felt. He tucks his head under Magnus’ chin and tightens his arms around the other man’s torso, so that they’re flush against each other.

Magnus reaches a hand up and threads it through Alec’s hair, idly twisting the strands and playing with them. Alec can feel his eyelids grow heavier, even as he attempts to force his eyes open. But with Magnus’ warm weight beside him, Alec can hardly resist the draw of sleep. He can’t remember the last time he slept well, between all the stress of his waking hours and the nightmares of his sleeping ones.

Alec knows, in that moment, he truly means the question he asked; he wants to fall asleep in Magnus’ overly-indulgent bed, with silk sheets wrapped decadently around him, and the warmth of another person to melt into. He wants to see what Magnus looks like, fresh in the morning, before he applies his makeup or styles his hair, when sleep still clings to his eyelashes and his hair is messy. It’s been years since Alec has shared a bed with his siblings with any sort of regularity. It still happens on occasion, mostly with Max, but the incidents are few and far between; Alec is the eldest and he isn’t allowed to ask for that to return. But Alec can ask for that from Magnus, even if he still feels quite ashamed and guilty for it, for rushing to his boyfriend for help warding off nightmares. Alec is an adult, he shouldn’t need comfort like this anymore.

(But it isn’t just about comfort. That yet unspoken feeling that burns in Alec’s chest grows brighter every time he sees Magnus; he wonders if it will expand and consume him if he spends a whole night at the warlock’s side. He hopes that it will; the gentle fire of maybe-love is addictive, and now that Alec has gotten a taste of it, he never wants to feel cold ever again.)

“I meant it,” Alec eventually speaks up, voice nearly inaudible in an attempt to preserve the serenity of the moment. “When I asked if I could- if we could share a bed,” he forces himself to
say. The request sounds juvenile to his own ears; no doubt, it’s downright *infantile* to Magnus Bane, who has spent the last hundreds of years bedding seventeen thousand people. No doubt, it’s utterly childish to want something as innocent as cuddles in an adult relationship.

Alec can already feel the sting of rejection; coming from Magnus, it will somehow hurt infinitely worse than it did when Alec was a child and his parents turned him away, when his younger siblings stopped sneaking into his room once they outgrew their nightmares. Alec hasn’t outgrown his yet, and it makes him feel small and insignificant and pathetic.

But he perseveres. Because if Alec Lightwood is anything, it’s blunt and stubborn. “You don’t have to say yes, if it makes you uncomfortable or you don’t like sharing or whatever. It’s not— it’s not a big deal, either way,” Alec tries to minimize the damage, hoping that if he plays it off, then it won’t hurt as much when the answer is a resounding *no*. He focuses his gaze on Magnus’ clavicle, still keeping his head tucked under the warlock’s chin in order to avoid his eyes. “And don’t do that thing where you agree just because you know it will make someone else happy. I want you to be okay with this, as well.”

“Oh, *darling,*” Magnus coos, threading his fingers through Alec’s hair and pressing a kiss to the top of his head. Coming from anyone else, it would seem condescending or patronizing, as if Alec is some child that needs to be coddled. But from Magnus, it’s a soothing balm to the ache that lives in Alec’s bones. “You are *always* welcome in my home; and I do *not* disregard my feelings just for others,” Magnus mumbles petulantly.

“Right,” Alec pulls away just enough so that the warlock can see him rolling his eyes, “because you absolutely *love* having Jace live with you.”

Magnus opens his mouth to retort, but a raised eyebrow from Alec makes him quickly decide against it. “Okay so maybe, sometimes, I might do that,” he admits, fiddling with the cuff on his ear. “And here I thought you would be *glad* that I let your brother stay in my guest suite.”

“I *am* glad that Jace has someplace to stay. But I’m not glad that Jace is being an asshole and taking advantage of you like that,” Alec mutters.

“Jace is…well, *Jace.* But I assure you I have had *far* worse roommates before.”

“Yeah, well, I may have had to bully Jace to be on his best behavior. Otherwise, there would be dirty socks and half-eaten food everywhere.”

“My hero, saving me from smelly laundry and molding food,” Magnus practically purrs, leaning his weight more into Alec and pressing a searing kiss against his lips. But Magnus pulls away before Alec can deepen it, as he so thoroughly wishes to do. He chases Magnus’ lips, dragging him into another heated kiss, but eventually they give way to soft pecks and breathy chuckles. Alec wants to keep pressing feather-light kisses against Magnus’ cheeks for the rest of his life, but his eyelids begin drooping once more, weighed down by the stress and fatigue he’s been dealing with on a daily basis. A yawn crawls unbridled up his throat and past his lips.

“Oh, am I boring you?” Magnus teases.

“Not at all,” Alec replies honestly. “In fact, you should take it as a compliment,” he adds, raising his eyebrows, “Most shadowhunters don’t yawn in front of just anyone, you know. It’s a sign of utmost trust.”

“I feel so honored,” Magnus replied; the dry tone of his voice is utterly ruined by the contagious
smile that lights up his face and the bright shine in his eyes. “Come on, pretty boy, time for bed,” he hums.

Alec blushed at the nickname, a personal favorite of Magnus’, but another yawn interrupts him and he’s forced to agree with the warlock. It isn’t even eight at night yet, but the sun has long since set and the loft is illuminated only by the muted glow of a few scattered lamps. It washes Magnus’ apartment in a soft yellow tone that feels calming and serene, even with the muffled sounds of a never-sleeping city just beyond the walls. An unknowable peace had settled in Alec’s bones the second he had stepped inside, and it has dragged him further and further into its soporific depths since he collapsed on the sofa that is far too comfortable for its own good. He isn’t even sure he wants to get up; but the promise of getting to see how comfortable Magnus’ opulent bed is manages to catch his attention.

They climb off of the couch – which is, quite embarrassingly, a struggle for them to untangle from – and then Alec follows Magnus into his bedroom. It occurs to Alec that he can’t remember the last time he slept in someone else’s bed. His parents kicked him out of any nighttime comfort once he turned four, and his siblings always came into his room – although he has crashed on Izzy’s bed or Jace’s floor several times in recent history. Even the few times Alec has spent the night at Magnus’ place, he’s always ended up awkwardly contorted on the couch or occasionally crashing in a guest bed.

Alec freezes in the threshold to Magnus’ room, struck dumb by the sudden realization of what he’s asked for. There are so many little things that Alec’s neglected to consider when it comes to sharing a bed. What side does Magnus like to sleep on? Alec has always preferred the left; in his own bedroom it’s the side furthest from the door, closest to the window, and nearest to his emergency stele and seraph blade. And it doesn’t really matter in Magnus’ room, as the set up is entirely different, but what if Magnus sleeps on the left side? Or what if Alec has a nightmare – like he has nearly every night that week – and wakes Magnus up? What if he snores, or drools, or talks in his sleep and completely embarrasses himself? (What if he thinks about Hightower? And then spends the rest of the night incapable of sleeping, facing away from Magnus and longing for the dawn, just for an excuse to flee the bed without hurting Magnus’ feelings.)

Magnus doesn’t seem to notice, as he continues on without glancing back at where Alec is standing like a deer in the headlights. The warlock snaps his fingers and the spare sweatpants and t-shirt that Alec left last time appears on the bed.

“You can go ahead and pick whichever side you want, Alexander,” Magnus calls over his shoulder and he disappears into the bathroom. “I’m just going to take a quick shower.”

The door shuts quietly behind him, leaving Alec alone to deal with his internal crisis. He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath; a part of him expects to smell old book dust and leather, like he always has while sitting at his desk, but instead he catches the scent of sandalwood, burnt sugar, and the incense that Alec bought for Magnus when they visited Jaisalmer a few weeks ago. Although the scents are sharp and a tad bitter, they bring an overwhelming peace and certainty to Alec’s aching heart. He knows, without a shadow of a doubt, that he’s safe and cared for. Alec has yet to understand what about Magnus and his loft so easily inspires such a feeling in him, even before they had started dating, but it’s a surety that’s rare and precious in Alec’s life, and he wants to cling to it with all his might.

Opening his eyes, he starts on getting dressed for bed. Before he can overthink it, he pulls off his pants and neatly folds them, setting both the jeans and the pair of sweatpants on a nearby chair. He
tugs off his shirt and contemplates not pulling on the softer sleep shirt. Alec has no problem with nudity, in and of itself – shadowhunters are remarkably blasé regarding it, given their pragmatic warrior culture, and Alec has been completely bare in front of countless shadowhunters before, male and female alike – but spending all night cuddling with Magnus while mostly naked? That will no doubt be pushing all of Alec’s boundary issues, and he absolutely does not want to have a meltdown in his boyfriend’s bed simply because the press of skin against akin reminds him far too much of other memories.

So he decides to wear the shirt and is relieved when the fabric is soft and smooth against his skin. Alec thinks about wearing the sweatpants to bed as well – he hates being cold when he sleeps – but he also dislikes the restricted feeling that sleeping in pants often gives him, and Magnus’ sheets look warm enough that he decides to forgo the sweatpants. Which leaves him standing awkwardly next to Magnus’ bed in just a pair of old faded black boxer briefs and a thin t-shirt. His stomach is tight with nerves, but there’s something deep in his bones that longs to know what Magnus’ bare legs would feel like against his own, tangled together under the decadence of silk sheets. It’s a yearning so strong that his heart aches with it.

He hesitantly and cautiously climbs into the left side of the bed, scared of ruining or breaking something even though he logically knows that there’s only sheets and pillows present. The sheets are a soft golden tone; the color makes Alec’s heart quiver in his chest and he has to draw in an unsteady breath just to clear his head from a sudden haze. He spends several minutes twisting and turning, moving the pillows and fixing the sheets until he feels like he may be able to fall asleep. He’s hugging one of Magnus’ pillows to his chest and is balled up like a young child, and it’s simultaneously juvenile and incredibly comfortable.

And that’s, of course, how Magnus finds him: curled up so that he’s dwarfed by the bed and cuddling with an overstuffed pillow that smells like Magnus. Alec’s cheeks heat up with a blush. Magnus is dressed in a dark blue silk robe, underneath which Alec can see a matching set of a silk button up shirt and pants, and a part of Alec is horribly disappointed that he still won’t know what it feels like to have their bare legs tangled all night. His hair is soft and floppy against his forehead; Magnus has discarded his necklaces and removed most of his makeup – but, oddly enough, Alec can still see traces of concealer, if he looks closely.

Before he can ask about it, Magnus carelessly tosses his robe off to the side – Alec watches the thin fabric crumple elegantly onto the ground – but he keeps an oddly serious eye on Alec as he slides into the opposite side of the bed, as if waiting for some reaction that Alec doesn’t realize he has to give. Magnus turns onto his side, facing Alec. Although they aren’t touching, Alec’s skin grows hot; there’s an intimate tension that settles heavily over them, and Alec longs to reach out and wrap his arms around Magnus.

“It this alright?” Magnus’ soft voice eventually breaks the silence.

It is alright; in fact, it’s more than alright. Alec doesn’t feel any hints of panic or dread, and any anxiety or nerves that linger are no doubt due to not wanting to embarrass himself in front of Magnus. He feels a little hot and a little tense, but the sensation is slowly easing into something more akin to peacefulness and comfort. But, more than just being alright with the situation, Alec yearns for more. The shadowhunter wants to curl up as close to Magnus as possible, until their bodies nearly blend into one another. He wants to run his hands over the smooth silk along Magnus’ shoulders and to feel the hard planes of his chest and torso under the decadent material, to tangle his legs with the other man’s, to rest his head right over his heart so that the beating of it can lull him to sleep.

But the words never manage to arrange themselves correctly in Alec’s head. He’s never been
accustomed to asking for what he wants, and now that the opportunity has presented itself, he struggles to put his chaotic emotions into a semblance of comprehensible order. He finds a loose thread in the sheets and focuses his hands and eyes on that, trying to occupy them so that he can free up space for his cluttered thoughts.

“Magnus,” the whispered word is as good a start as any, Alec supposes. “Why are you-” he stops, reconsiders, and tries again. “Ever since I told you about Hightower, you- I haven’t- you’ve been-” Alec raises a hand and waves it idly, searching for a word that far alludes his grasp. “It’s like you’ve been tip-toeing,” he decides, “when before you were stomping.”

It sounds dumb and Alec can feel the beginnings of embarrassment creep up his back, but he blunders ahead, as blind and foolish as he has always been. It’s too late to stop now. He sits upright, needing some sort of leverage to drag the words out.

“It’s just. The flirting, and the innuendoes, and the casual touching-”

“If all that makes you uncomfortable, then I will stop, Alexan-”

“No!” Alec snaps, voice higher and louder than he intends. “I’m saying that I want it all back!” his voice cracks, and he hates how tears threaten to pool in his eyes. “No one’s ever- people are never so at ease around me, not even my own siblings,” he’s ranting now, the words a sudden wave that breaks past the floodgates; they spill out in whatever way they see fit, with no censorship from Alec. “People are always annoyed or frustrated or pissed off at me. Except- except for you! You waltzed into my life with your over-the-top flirting and your weird remarks and you’ve just always seemed so comfortable around me, even when I was rude or being a dick.

“And- and ever since I told you about Hightower, you’ve stopped doing that and I- I don’t- I’ve never had that before and I miss it, Magnus. You made me feel like, for once in my life, I was normal and not broken or damaged or ruined and I want that feeling back!”

He’s winded from the sudden onslaught, breathing heavier than he should be and shaking imperceptibly, a soul-deep tremor running through his veins. He feels as if he might very well vibrate out of his very skin, and he misses how grounded and settled he feels every time Magnus touches him.

When he dares to glance up at Magnus, he finds the warlock wide-eyed, his mouth parted ever so slightly in shock. The look in his eyes is equal parts startled and upset. His eyes are glassy and Alec fears that he will cry. Alec immediately opens his mouth to apologize, or try to take it all back, or anything that could salvage the entire scenario. Or, if all that fails, Alec knows at least five different ways he can escape the loft in a moment’s notice.

Instead, Magnus’ expression shifts into a salacious grin, his eyes twinkle, and he brings a hand up to brush the hair off of Alec’s forehead. “Well, pretty boy,” he starts, voice low and quiet, “you didn’t have to say all that just to get into my bed.”

Alec can’t help the strangled laugh that slips past. He collapses back against the pillows, dragging Magnus with him so that they’re tangled in a heap of limbs and silk. They bury their heads next to each other’s necks and laugh until they can feel tears in their eyes.

Eventually, they calm down and Magnus tightens his arms around Alec, pressing a close-mouthed kiss to the shadowhunter’s shoulder. “Alexander,” he starts, voice hesitant and timid. “Did I-” Magnus cuts off in a manner that Alec is far more used to hearing from himself. “I didn’t- did you ever feel... pressured into our relationship? Did I push you into any of this?” Alec has never heard Magnus sound so utterly aggrieved, as if Magnus is fully incapable of even considering the
thought, as if he will be completely destroyed if Alec says ‘yes.’ It’s clear from the anguished yet determined tone of Magnus’ voice that it isn’t something off of the top of his head. It’s something that Magnus has been contemplating for some time now, perhaps ever since Alec first told him about Hightower.

“No,” Alec says, simple and to the point. Magnus immediately relaxes beside him. “Sometimes it confused me. Your flirting, I mean,” he admits, soft in the muted light of the bedroom. “But you always gave me that choice, even when it hurt you.”

Magnus hums, but otherwise stays silent. He scoots impossibly closer to Alec, until his body is a long line of warmth against Alec’s side and his face is comically smooshed against Alec’s shoulder. “I’m sorry for not realizing how you felt, Alexander,” Magnus murmurs against his skin.

“Don’t be. I should’ve told you instead of trying to keep it all bottled up. You’d think I’d know better by now.”

“It is quite a steep learning curve,” Magnus agrees. “I will start flirting outrageously and excessively with you again, Alexander, but I want you to promise me something.”

Alec meets his eyes, and already knows exactly what is being asked of him. “If I ever feel uncomfortable, I will tell you as soon as I realize it. I won’t try to hide my feelings from you.”

“Thank you,” the older man presses another kiss to Alec’s chest.

Alec turns a bit, struggling to find a position that’s comfortable and close to Magnus, but without being too close and making him panic. It’s far too difficult of an endeavor, and Alec probably looks like an idiot, twisting around in Magnus’ bed and only succeeding in getting the sheets more tangled. He’s forgotten how awkward it can be to sleep so closely to someone else. Alec was always the one making concessions of comfort when he shared with his siblings; Izzy was a kicker, Jace was a blanket thief, and Max was a space hog. Alec wonders what he will have to sacrifice in order to stay with Magnus.

He can feel the warlock’s eyes on him, reluctantly turning his head to meet his gaze. Alec expects annoyance or frustration, but all he sees is a fond amusement in the older man’s eyes.

“Turn around, Alexander,” Magnus suggests.

“Why?” Alec asks, even as he’s rolling over so that his back is to Magnus.

Magnus doesn’t respond before one of his arms bands over Alec’s waist, another sliding under his pillow. He’s tugged closer to Magnus until his back is flush against his boyfriend’s chest. Alec tenses for a split second, but then the intimate warmth of Magnus behind him, around him, against him, settles deep into his bones. He can feel the solid weight of the warlock’s body all the way down to the tips of his toes, where Alec purposefully tangles their legs together, and he curls tighter in on himself, burrowing into the comfort of the sheets and of Magnus.

Magnus hasn’t removed all of his rings, and they provide a delicate cool counterpoint to the heat of Magnus’ hands. Alec loves those hands. A selfish part of him is eternally grateful for their marked difference from Hightower’s hands; Magnus is soft where Hightower was calloused, the rings a constant pinprick of awareness that reminds Alec where he is and who he is with. Alec lets himself lay his hand over Magnus’, threading their fingers together and holding tight, idly twisting rings around in his nimble fingers. He feels utter bliss, between the familiar smells of the loft and the feeling of Magnus’ chest rising and falling against his back and the tickle of Magnus’ breath on his neck.
Alec just feels so profoundly warm.

“Oh,” he breathes out, shocked at the revelation of just how beautiful it feels to be with someone.

“I always knew you’d be a little spoon,” Magnus jokes, waving a hand and plunging them into a soft darkness. “Goodnight, my darling Alexander.”

Alec just barely manages to rumble out an answering ‘goodnight’ before he’s sinking into the blissful quiet of sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Everyone kept asking when Magnus would pop back up and I hope his return has not disappointed anyone. Is it clear yet that I adore these two beyond all reason? Also, Magnus and Alec are absolute goals when it comes to communication and understanding. What a blessing they are.

I hope you all enjoyed this brief reprieve. Savor it, because we will delve right back into the angst in the next chapter.

~PNGuin
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

All trigger warnings are listed in the tags. If you find I missed anything, please let me know and I'll add it in.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

IX

Alec was thirteen years old when he killed his first demon.

It was a run of the mill, dime a dozen sort of mission, and Alec was in the perfect position to fire an arrow clean through a *shax* demon. The creature exploded in a rain of ichor mere seconds after the impact. Oliver Kingsmill, who was leading the patrol, ruffled Alec’s hair and congratulated him. Hodge gifted him a new bow, larger and sturdier and with better runes. His parents took them out to eat – an occurrence that happened only a handful of times in Alec’s life, ever. His siblings pestered him *endlessly* to retell the story, again and again and again.

(Hightower rewarded him by fucking his mouth and forcing Alec to swallow his cum. Alec threw up afterwards.)

Alec was fourteen years old when he killed his first *person*.

It was Jace’s first actual patrol with the older shadowhunters, and Regina Midwinter and Orion Mayhew made the realization that Jace behaved far better whenever Alec was around, so the two were lumped together. Not that Alec minded, but it forced him into a frustrating and stressful situation. Jace at twelve – fresh out in the field and hungry for glory – was infinitely more arrogant and reckless than Jace at twenty.

So, really, it shouldn’t have surprised anyone – least of all, Alec – when obnoxious and precocious little adolescent Jace Wayland decided to ditch the adults (who he referred to disparagingly as their ‘*babysitters*’) as soon as they reached an abandoned building in Brooklyn. The blond boy crept down some unexplored hallway that was pitch dark except for the single working streetlamp outside that filtered in through a broken window. Alec panicked for half a second, torn between calling for Regina and Orion and following after his brother. Like an absolute *fool*, Alec followed Jace.

They wandered down the decrepit hallways, weapons drawn and feet silent. The Institute had received intelligence on a suspected *shax* nest in the area, preying off of the meth addicts that congregated in the abandoned buildings. Alec let himself wonder if the addicts had been drawn to the building because of the demons, or if the demons had nested there because of the addicts. Which had come first: the demon, or the sin?

There were people slumped along the walls, bedded down on filthy mattresses and staring listlessly into nothing; Alec thought that he and Jace didn’t even need to glamor themselves in front of the mundanes, as vacant as their stares were. The hallways smelled of piss and shit and utter
despair, and Alec wished that Jace hadn’t been allowed to join the mission. Alec had already been out in the field for nearly two and a half years; he had already seen the seedy underbelly of humanity. Jace hadn’t, and a part of Alec – the brotherly part, that comforted Jace after his nightmares – longed for a world where Jace would never need to.

But Jace didn’t seem to notice, aside from a disgusted look on his face and a wrinkling of his nose. He casted a passing glance over at the huddle of withering souls and ignored them, more interested in finding the *shax* nest than anything else. Alec wasn’t able to afford the same level of apathy; his skin crawled and his eyes stung at the sight of the pathetic ordeal, and he wondered what sort of things people could have done to deserve such a piteous end. He stared at their sunken eyes, their thin hair, their sallow cheeks, and he saw mere wraiths of people. They seemed like the Forsaken to him, and he questioned what sins such people had committed to have been so thoroughly abandoned by the Angels.

Alec wanted to do something; to try and find identification, to locate their families or friends or anyone who may have cared about their conditions. But Jace had already disappeared further down the hallway, and Alec knew exactly what his priorities were.

He left the people behind and chased after his brother. (It’s something he still regrets, somedays, leaving those people to wither away into nothing but drug-thirsty skeletons. He wonders what could have happened if he had stopped to help, if anything would have even changed. He doubts it. But he still regrets it.)

Jace was racing from door to door, throwing them open and peeking inside with his night vision rune activated, hoping that they would discover the nest before Regina and Orion found them. Alec snapped at him, telling him to *knock it off* and stop being such an idiot. Jace, in all his infinite wisdom, merely rolled his eyes and mocked Alec. It was then that something loomed behind Jace with a faint rustling sound.

Alec didn’t think, he just reacted. He lunged forward and tackled Jace, just as the figure leaped for the younger boy’s neck. The two landed roughly, rolling with the momentum, and they scrambled to their feet. Jace was up first, drawing his seraph blade and letting out a war-cry, but Alec grabbed his arm and held him back before the idiot could dive head first into a battle.

The figure lumbered closer to them, and it was then that Alec realized what they had gotten themselves into. The Institute’s information had been wrong. They hadn’t wandered into a *shax* nest. They had found an illegal bleeder den.

He pulled back, dragging Jace down a flight of emergency stairs. Their escape route was heavily rusted and crumbling, and it creaked under their weight but held long enough for them to dive onto a different floor. Alec frantically sifted through all of the information he had ever learned on vampires, desperately hoping for something, *anything*, that he could use to get him and his little brother out of the situation alive.

Vampires were just as susceptible to addiction as mundanes were, when it came to drugs that affected the blood. No doubt, the rogue vampire had been attracted to the easy prey of drugged up meth addicts, and had then fallen into a form of secondhand addiction to meth in the bloodstream. Fortunately for Alec and Jace, heavy drug usage was just as physically debilitating for vampires as it was for humans.

The vampire gave chase but it was slowed by its own malady. Alec led them down the hallway, hoping to get as much distance between them and their enemy, but Jace – the absolute *idiot* – kept glancing back with a sort of morbid fascination, as if he wanted to let the vampire catch up to them just to see how well they could handle it. The older boy *refused* to let anything happen to his
brother.

But then Alec made a mistake. He looked back over his shoulder, caught sight of the vampire steadily gaining on them, and stumbled on some broken furniture littering the floor. His feet slid out from under him and Alec fell to the ground, yanking Jace with him and collapsing on his own bow, instantly snapping the weapon clean in half. Alec dropped right on top of some rubble and bruised a couple of his ribs, but Jace scrapped his hands. At the smell of angelic blood, the vampire went berserk.

Before Alec could move, winded as he was from his fall, Jace was already scrambling to his feet with his seraph blade proudly brandished. But even drugged and discombobulated, the vampire was able to grab the boy and knock the weapon out of his hand.

The world moved in slow motion as Alec watched the deranged downworlder sink his fangs into his little brother’s neck. Jace shrieked, or maybe it was Alec. The sound floated through Alec’s ears as if he were underwater – distant, detached, indiscernible. Alec watched as Jace’s body went slack, his face paled into a sickly pallor, as the vampire drank and drank and drank until it seemed like Jace would shrivel right up.

Alec didn’t need to think. He let red wash over his vision, he narrowed in on the exposed chest of the monster, he let his world melt away until all there was left was the rush of adrenaline in his veins. That ancient song of war that had been passed down in his very blood, that battle hymn that had been trained and refined since the day he had been born.

He grabbed Jace’s sword from where it had fallen on the ground and he plunged it right through the vile downworlder’s chest.

It was different than the demons that Alec had killed. Those creatures had always erupted in a shower of ichor, leaving absolutely no trace except for puddles of burning darkness. But the vampire collapsed to the ground with a distinct thud that echoed in Alec’s ears, the seraph blade still lodged right where his unbeating heart was. Alec caught an unconscious Jace and gently laid him on the floor, drawing iratzes with a forcibly steady hand and swallowing back the sobs that threatened to crawl out of his chest.

Regina and Orion came hurtling down the hallway, kneeling beside the boys and taking over Jace’s care. Alec tried to stay helpful, but his hands were shaking and his eyes filled with tears, and sobs ripped past his lips. Eventually, Orion snapped at him, ‘quit crying like a fucking baby, Lightwood,’ and pushed him out of the way so that Alec could scoot back and collapse against the wall. His eyes wandered back to the dead-again corpse across from him.

The vampire was slumped on the floor, eyes still open and mouth parted, Jace’s blood dripping idly from the exposed fangs. Alec wanted to hate the depraved creature, recalling the cautionary tales his parents had often told him of their violence and greed and cruelty. He wanted fire to rip through his limbs and let it burn him alive, because that monster had nearly killed his little brother, had no doubt killed countless innocent people.

But the vampire looked so much like those mundanes a few floors down, sunken eyes and sallow cheeks and so horrifically miserable, crumpled like a puppet without strings on the floor of an abandoned building. Alec felt hollow, even as the tears continued running down his face, and he wondered if it was from the exhaustion or the stress.

Orion scooped Jace up in his arms, shooting Alec a tired glare that promised a major punishment once they returned to the Institute. Regina stepped over the vampire, yanked the blade out of the creature’s chest, and unceremoniously spat on the corpse. She shared a look with Alec, one
composed of a vicious sneer, and scoffed *pathetic little leech got what was coming for him; good job, kid,* before she started leading them back out of the building.

Alec walked past the vampire and spat at the leech’s feet.

He felt so disgusted, but he wondered who he was more disgusted by: the vampire or himself.

His parents were utterly livid once they returned to the Institute. His mother checked Jace’s wounds; she took the boy to the infirmary and cooed over him while he laid recovering in bed. They received the mission report from Orion and Regina, and Alec delivered his own account of the events. His parents shared a look and Alec knew exactly what it meant.

Perhaps Jace would receive a spanking or caning from one of their parents. He was still young enough for such treatment, and it was commonplace among shadowhunters to discipline their children in that manner. But Alec? Alec would be considered too old for such a lenient punishment. He would be forced to spar with Hodge until his muscles quaked and his lungs ached; or perhaps he would be ordered to hold fighting stances for hours, until his knees locked and his vision swam; or maybe he would go a few days without food; or, the worst case scenario, he would face the dreaded *office hours* and stand in front of all the other members of the Institute while his mother and father chewed him out.

(As it turned out, Jace received no punishment aside from being stuck in the infirmary for five days. Alec was ordered by his mother to hold a drawn bow thirty pounds too heavy until his arms gave out. He lasted two hours, and it was dissatisfactory, according to the scowl that settled on his mother’s face. He then received a scathing dressing down in front of the other shadowhunters, where he was forced to repeat the sacramentum – the sacred oath sworn by all shadowhunters - and it was only through sheer strength of will that he bit back the tears of shame.)

Finally, he was released from further discipline by a furious mother and a disappointed father. Alec avoided the infirmary. He should have stopped Jace or protected him or done anything to keep his little brother from being hurt; instead, he had nearly allowed a loathsome vampire to suck him dry. He wasn’t able to face his brother after that, and thankfully Izzy was preoccupied watching over Jace, so Alec was able to retreat to his room and tend to his wounds in peace.

Or, at least, he would have been able to, had Hightower not already been waiting for him.

The man was seated at Alec’s desk, the room illuminated only by the single lamp that resided there. Alec froze in the doorway, felt the sweat inch down the small of his back, and contemplated his chances at escape only to immediately veto the notion.

Hightower didn’t turn around to face Alec. “Close the door behind you,” he ordered, in a tone that brokered zero resistance.

Alec complied, just as he always did. And when Hightower beckoned him over, he followed; and when Hightower told him to strip, he did so; and when Hightower forced him to bend over across the man’s lap, he did not resist.

And when Hightower spanked his bare bottom until Alec was red and sore – and then kept going – he laid his cheek on the chair’s armrest and stared out the window. He let the light dim from his eyes and he bit his lip until he tasted blood. Alec wondered, idly and distantly as if his mind were lost abroad, how he would look to an outsider. Would they see someone with sunken eyes and sallow cheeks and pale skin? A fool, addicted to something that was inherently detrimental to him, always coming back no matter how much of his life he destroyed? Would they see the addict, who
never tried to get away? Or would they see the victim, who never stood a chance?

Hightower grew bored of Alec’s punishment and pushed the boy off of his lap, yanking at his hair until Alec was kneeling in front of him. He pulled Alec closer and forced his cock into Alec’s mouth. The boy took it, willing his throat to open so that he didn’t gag when Hightower jerked and began fucking his mouth.

Why had Alec allowed things to progress so far? Why hadn’t Alec fought back? He knew how it felt to shoot an arrow straight through the body of a demon, how it felt to plunge a seraph blade through the chest of the vampire – the vampire that had tried to suck the life out of Alec’s brother, just as Hightower was sucking the life out of Alec now. Maybe that would make it acceptable to just kill the bastard. If it was acceptable to kill a vampire for such mistreatment, then surely Hightower deserved to die as well.

Alec had been born and raised to kill. It was in his blood, just as chaos and violence were in the blood of downworlders like that vampire. Alec had already killed demons, and he had killed a person as well. The feeling of Hightower’s blood on his hands wouldn’t feel any different. So then why?

Why didn’t Alec ever do anything? Why didn’t he act in self-defense, why didn’t he lash out, why didn’t he grab his bow or a blade or anything? Unless, perhaps, it wasn’t Hightower who deserved to die. Perhaps Hightower wasn’t the vampire in this situation. Perhaps Alec was; the disgusting, loathsome creature who had fallen prey to a self-destructing addiction.

Perhaps Alec deserved to die.

Chapter End Notes

There is a comment about "office hours" in this chapter, which is a nickname given to non-judicial punishment found in the US military. The sacramentum was an oath sworn in ancient Roman culture. Both of these little details stem from my own personal headcanon of Jonathan Shadowhunter living during the Roman Empire (instead of being an 11th Century Crusader). Just because I like the Roman Empire more and this is fanfiction and I do what I want. So expect more references to Roman Gladiator Jonathan Shadowhunter :)

The Clave totally implements corporal punishment and no one can convince me otherwise. Younger kids are typically just spanked, but as they get older the punishments grow more severe. One of their favorite methods is the use of a special adamas rod for canings. Fun times.

~PNGuin
Alec wakes with the sun. It’s a gradual thing, creeping over him like the first touches of dawn, starting with the wiggling of his toes and spreading up his spine until he’s blinking bleary eyes open. He’s disoriented at first, his mind foggy and his limbs heavy, as if his entire being is reluctant to return to consciousness. He’s confused both by the lingering darkness that bathes the bedroom and the hints of morning sunlight that peak past the edges of the drawn curtains. The sheets are far too luxurious, the smells far too palatable, the warmth and the weight behind and around him far too good to be remotely true. If he’s dreaming, then it’s a truly beautiful dream that Alec never wants to wake from; and yet, even with a longing so profound, he still feels a general unease at the confusion that dances in his head. It takes several seconds too long for Alec’s mind to catch up with him, to realize why the scene feels so wrong.

It’s seven in the morning on a Wednesday and Alec isn’t in the Institute.

The sun is already creeping up, the first patrol of the day would have been sent out hours ago, and Alec is still in bed. Alec should have woken up that morning at 5:00 on the dot, just as his internal clock had dictated for over a decade, bright-eyed and alert from the get-go; he should have spent an efficient fifteen minutes showering and getting ready; he should have downed a cup of burnt, plain black coffee in a matter of minutes and should have then proceeded to fall into the flow of work; he should have been at the Institute, training or teaching sparring lessons or filing reports or running patrols. And-

And there’s a pressure. Right there, up against his ass. A terrifying indicator that Alec isn’t the only one up.

He shudders. A sick feeling twists deep in his gut, and it violently wars with the shiver of disgusting want that crawls down his spine. And, fuck, he’s hard too. But he- no, no, no- he doesn’t want to be, he can’t be. How can he possibly want it? He doesn’t, he never wanted it. But his body clearly does, and it clearly did. And Hightower was right, he enjoyed it, and he’s a sick bastard for it, and he deserved every rough touch Hightower ever offered him. His skin is crawling, he’s going to vibrate right out of his very skin, and Hightower is right behind him and-

The arm loosely draped over his side, the hand still clasped in Alec’s own, moves. It drags idly up his clothed chest and settles closer to his panicking heart. Alec tightens his grip on the hand and risks a frantic glance down. And it’s- the palm is soft and smooth, callous free, the fingers long and slender and almost delicate, the nails meticulously trimmed and painted a deep blue, the rings cool to the touch and grounding where they bump against Alec’s fingers.
Magnus. It’s Magnus’ hand. Not Hightower’s. They’re in Magnus’ bed, in his loft, far away from the Institute. The silky sheets are tangled around him, heavier than they appear, holding Alec down inside his own body so he doesn’t feel as if he’s going to float away; they are nothing like the threadbare and neutral sheets Alec allows himself at the Institute. Magnus is still holding Alec tight against the warlock’s body so that Alec can feel the long line of warmth and weight that is Magnus behind him. Their legs are interlaced, one of Alec’s caught intimately between both of Magnus’. Gentle puffs of breath dance over the small hairs at the back of Alec’s neck, where Magnus’ face is buried between the shadowhunter’s shoulder and one of the pillows.

And they both have morning wood.

That’s- it’s fine. It isn’t anything to panic over. It’s a completely normal thing that happens. And Alec knows that it isn’t something inherently sexual. It can be caused by a fluctuation of hormones, or an increase of blood flow, or even just the barest amount of pressure that the body naturally reacts to. It’s okay. Everything is okay.

So then why does Alec feel so overwhelmingly not okay? He’s tense enough that he can feel the strain in his spine, and the painful tightening of his gut, and the ache in his joints from freezing and holding a position for so long. His breathing is heavy and labored, as if he can’t possibly have enough strength for his lungs to work. And he’s still one step away from slipping right back into one of his episodes and how utterly mortifying would that be? For Magnus to wake up and see his dumbass shadowhunter boyfriend freaking out over morning wood?

He can’t wake Magnus up, or let his boyfriend know that anything has gone wrong. It will be embarrassing for Alec and devastating for Magnus, and Alec just knows that the warlock will blame himself and Alec can’t let that happen. Because it isn’t Magnus’ fault, it is Alec’s fault and it’s Alec who has to suck it up and deal with the consequences.

Alec carefully – exceedingly carefully – shifts himself forward until his back and ass are no longer flush against Magnus’ body. He’s still clinging to the older man’s hand as if it’s a lifeline, and one of his legs is still caught between both of Magnus’, and Alec can still feel the gentle puffs of breath against the back of his neck. But he’s away from his boyfriend’s unwanted erection and that’s all he needs. Alec takes several deep breaths, willing himself to calm down. It would probably be better to just completely extract himself from Magnus’ octopus-like grip, but – aside from the obvious issue – it’s nice.

Before his freak out, in that thin band of existence between sleep and wakefulness, Alec felt boneless and content, like in the near eleven hours since they went to bed the two of them had melted into one another, filling all the crevices and cracks and holes that Alec knows mar him. He desperately wants to fall back into that gentle ease, wants to spend all his morning with this new method of waking up – all groggy eyes and heavy limbs and another person wrapped around him. (Just, without the heart-pounding anxiety right in the morning.)

Alec wants that with Magnus. But Alec is not at all trained in the art of laying around in bed after waking up. And while he is slowly relaxing back into a comfortable and content position that makes his insides warm and fuzzy, he still feels an antsy wave of agitation wash through his body. He’s slept for eleven hours; it may have been necessary given the last few weeks of shitty sleep, but he feels energized and anxious and entirely incapable of staying still. His legs are restless and his hands are itching and he just needs to run or pound at a punching bag for a few hours.

So he cautiously extricates his hand from Magnus’ grip, and he lifts the warlock’s arm up off his torso. Alec twists around, wiggling his leg from between Magnus’, and then carefully lays his boyfriend’s arm back down on the bed. Alec is all primed to go – maybe he can cook breakfast for
Magnus; he does make pretty good French toast – but he’s stopped in his tracks when his eyes catch on Magnus’ sleeping face.

His cheek is smushed against his pillow, his mouth parted ever so slightly, his face is free of makeup, his hair free of product, and the lines of his face are rendered so soft in the creeping light that all the breath rushes out of Alec’s lungs. His heart stumbles along in his chest, his stomach clenches, his eyes sting.

Magnus is beautiful.

It’s perhaps the most beautiful Alec has ever seen the other man looking. Better than all the artfully applied makeup, better than all the wonderfully styled hair, better than all the sinfully tight leather pants. Magnus Bane is utterly beautiful, even – no, especially – with messy bedhead, and pillow creases lining his face, and the tiniest bit of drool dripping from the corner of his mouth.

And in that moment, it’s so easy to picture waking up to the same scene every day for the rest of his life. It’s so easy to envision a life where Alec doesn’t panic over morning wood, where he gets to live his life to the fullest, where he gets to embrace all the pieces of himself that he has long since cast away, where he gets to be happy and in love with the man of his dreams. It’s so easy to imagine that Alec Lightwood is in love with Magnus Bane.

Perhaps even too easy.

Tears spring to his eyes and Alec forces himself to swallow back any sounds that try to slip past. His heart is full enough that he fears it may burst out of his chest. He realizes that he’s shaking, the most minuscule tremor that rattles his very bones. Careful not to disturb the still sleeping warlock, Alec lays himself back down so that he’s facing Magnus, close enough that their breaths mingle but far enough away that Alec isn’t accidentally touching him. He wants to, though. He wants to run his fingers up Magnus’ arm, wants to trace the delicate lines of his nose and his lips and his brows, wants to press infinitely gentle kisses to his eyelids and his cheeks. Alec wants to shower his boyfriend with every bit of affection he possibly knows how, and then some.

Alec thinks that he loves Magnus, and that’s freeing and terrifying in equal measures. He’s never believed he could find someone – someone so gorgeous and generous and infinitely kind – to love, someone who seems to care for him right back. And maybe Alec isn’t in love with Magnus, maybe it’s still too early and Alec is still too damaged. But the potential is there, a gentle little light that could so easily grow if Alec just nurtures it. It’s far more than Alec ever hoped for. It’s beautiful and precious and nerve-wracking and painful, and Alec hardly knows how to handle one emotion at a time, let alone such a jumbled mess of so many.

Beside him, Magnus stirs. His breathing rhythm changes and his muscles tense in a luxurious, cat-like stretch that makes his skin pull taut. Alec can’t help how his eyes zero in on the inviting sliver of warm skin that’s revealed by a slipping collar, but he forces his gaze back to Magnus’ face and commits himself to remembering every little detail. The curve of his lips, the cut of his jaw, the tiny little blemishes along his cheeks that Alec has only just noticed. He memorizes the pattern of Magnus’ breath, notices how it changes as the warlock slowly wakes, and the way his nose wrinkles ever so slightly, and how his fingers curl into a loose fist before relaxing once more. Alec wants to gather all the little details that make up Magnus Bane and carry them with him forever, a gentle light to hold close to his chest for whenever Alec doesn’t have the blessing of waking up next to his boyfriend.

Magnus blinks his eyes open and Alec’s heart stops.

They’re golden. The most enthralling shade of gold, the brilliant color of the sun as it’s peaking
over the horizon. It melts into a soft green at the very edges of the irises, fields of golden wheat that give way to a cool forest. Even the slit pupil, unusual though it is, seems so precious – the delicate curve of a sundial, drenched by a sea of sunshine. Alec’s heart trembles and a smile creeps across his face until the corners of his eyes crinkle. He feels as if he could be completely content simply looking into Magnus’ eyes for the rest of eternity.

After several seconds of sleepy quietness between them, Magnus suddenly freezes. The warlock goes utterly still and tense, his eyes widen almost comically. He bolts upright in bed, away from Alec, and the shadowhunter mourns the tragic loss of his warmth. Magnus turns to the side so that he isn’t facing Alec, one of his hands raised to cover his eyes.

Alec is cold and empty and he wants to grab Magnus and pull him back under the warmth of their shared blankets. But the words die on his tongue, tasting of ash, and his hand shakes when he attempts to reach for the warlock. Silence descends upon them, heavy and oppressive in a way that’s a stark contrast from the previous quiet. Magnus’ rejection is abrupt in a way that makes Alec sick to his stomach and it isn’t fair. Alec has already survived one freak out this morning, he can’t possibly manage another one. He just wants to know what he’s done wrong; maybe, if he apologizes for whatever he’s done, Magnus will let them cuddle a little bit longer and Magnus won’t leave.

“Magnus?” Alec’s voice is rough from sleep and concern. He slowly – achingly slowly, so as to not startle the warlock who’s tensed like a scared animal ready to flee – sits up and shifts ever so slightly closer to Magnus. “What did I do wrong?” he asks quietly, scared to know the answer.

Magnus jolts as if he’s been slapped and he immediately turns back around to face Alec. His glamor once again hides his true eyes, and while Alec loves their warm brown color, a pang of loss resonates deep in his gut. Does Magnus not want him to see his true eyes? Does Magnus not trust Alec? Is it because Alec is a shadowhunter and his people have stolen warlock marks for much of history, and Magnus fears Alec doing the same? Alec needs to know. He can’t fix things if he doesn’t know.

“I’m sorry,” he blurts out before Magnus can say anything. Disgust worms its way into his heart at the thought of what his people have done to Magnus’. What if Magnus thinks Alec is like that? How could Magnus ever think that, when Alec intimately knows what it’s like to have something so integral taken from him?

The warlock’s mouth drops open in absolute shock, his eyes softening into a gentle expression – and if Alec feels any bitterness about them no longer being Magnus’ real eyes, well then he promptly pushes those feelings down, down, down into the pit where all his other unwanted emotions have resided for the last two decades.

“Alexander, why are you apologizing?” Magnus breathes. “You’ve done absolutely nothing wrong.”

“Well, I just- why did you- what’s wrong, then?” Alec stutters out. He longs for Magnus to move closer once more, so that their thighs press together and their shoulders bump and Alec can lean his forehead against his boyfriend’s and gaze endlessly into his eyes – his real eyes – and he can count and name all the colors that compose such a heart-stopping canvas.

Magnus purses his lips and the action seems embarrassed…or maybe ashamed, or even contrite. Perhaps it’s an odd amalgamation of all three. He heaves out a sigh that sounds far too exhausted for the morning. “Sometimes,” Magnus admits, haltingly, “my glamor slips, if I’m not thinking about it or I’m preoccupied with something else.”
The words make sense, Alec supposes, but the apologetic tone Magnus says them in does not. Alec is still missing something. Magnus is making some leap of logic that Alec does not have all the stepping stones necessary to follow. He’s being left behind in this train of thought.

“So then you don’t want me to see them?” Alec guesses. He doesn’t mean to keep pushing the subject, not when Magnus is clearly uncomfortable with the conversation, and he doesn’t intend for the question to come out so demanding. But the words slip out before he can censor them and he does truly want to understand what, exactly, happened to ruin the pleasantness of the morning.

And it isn’t as if Alec hasn’t known what Magnus’ warlock mark is. It’s recorded in official Clave documentation – in writing, at the very least. Alec has seen the files in passing while looking through Institute paperwork, but he’s never seen any photographic evidence of Magnus’ warlock mark, nor has he ever seen even the vaguest hint of those eyes behind Magnus’ glamor. Not when they were relaxing alone in the older man’s loft, or when he was performing a powerful spell, or when Magnus was injured by some enemy of any sort. His control was always so precise and exact.

Alec remembers the first time he met Magnus, when a Circle member threatened to take Magnus’ eyes and add them to his collection – before Alec and Magnus promptly disposed of the bastard, of course. And Alec isn’t a fool; he gets that there’s a lot about the Clave’s racism that he will never be able to truly understand, but he knows how likely it is that – throughout the span of Magnus’ life – he has received many comments like that from other shadowhunters. No doubt, it’s truly a traumatic thing to face such caustic hatred for something as uncontrollable as one’s own eyes. And he…Alec understands. He gets it, why Magnus wants to hide them.

But it stings, a little bit. Because Alec has painstakingly stumbled through the most agonizing admission of his entire life, has told Magnus about Hightower, his deepest, darkest, most shameful secret of all – a secret that only one other person in the whole world has ever known – and he sucked up one of his stupid little episodes over Magnus’ dick half an hour ago just so that Alec could remain lying in bed with his boyfriend. And Magnus. Magnus doesn’t even trust Alec to show him his eyes, something that countless others have seen before. And Alec understands why. He does, truly. And it isn’t as if Magnus hasn’t trusted Alec with any of his worries; Alec has spent hours listening to heart-wrenching retellings of the fate of Magnus’ mother and the various horrors that Magnus has been exposed to through his long life. Alec is just being unreasonable and ridiculous and selfish and he hates himself so much.

(But it still fucking hurts.)

Magnus has remained uncharacteristically quiet throughout Alec’s internal meltdown, and his gaze is settled where his hands are folded in his lap. Alec is prepared to just let it go, to ignore the pain that punctures his heart and retreat to the kitchen to make some breakfast. He can do that much, at least, for Magnus. But then Magnus takes a fortifying breath and forces himself to meet his boyfriend’s eyes.

“People have responded quite…negatively to my eyes before,” he admits, quiet and delicate, but so utterly resolute. “Particularly in situations involving a bed,” Magnus adds, under his breath.

It probably takes Alec far too long to comprehend the statement, but eventually an affronted anger bubbles under his skin. He wonders, with a creeping sort of fury, who has ever insulted Magnus – Alec suspects Camille, but he doesn’t think he’s allowed to ask about that yet. It never even occurred to Alec that the problem could be Magnus’ insecurities, and not something inherently wrong with Alec. He’s spent so long dealing with his own hang-ups that Alec often forgets that other people are just as susceptible to them.
And maybe Alec isn’t ready to think about or deal with his own issues, such as the panic that jolted him awake that very morning. But Alec can do this; he can take care of Magnus, prove that he really does care for his boyfriend, provide every ounce of support that he possibly can. It isn’t a hardship at all, to be there for Magnus.

“Magnus,” he whispers, forcing the words past a throat that’s suddenly too tight. He scoots close enough that his thigh presses against the other man’s. “Magnus,” Alec repeats. Slowly he brings his hands up and cups Magnus’ cheeks, brushing his thumbs over the swell of the warlock’s cheekbones. He leans closer until their foreheads touch. “Sweetheart, your eyes are beautiful. You’re beautiful,” he breathes out with every ounce of pure conviction and honesty that lives in his soul, hoping that if all else fails he can at least get this one singular point across. Magnus is beautiful and it is a sin to ever let the man think that he isn’t.

A smile curls at Magnus’ lips, that gentle little grin that Alec has only ever seen directed towards himself, and Alec feels a profound affection sweep through him when the warlock takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, and opens them to reveal the lack of a glamor. The breath rushes from Alec’s lungs and his heart stumbles in his chest, but he eagerly leans forward and crushes their lips together, completely disregarding the lingering taste of morning breath or the fact that his spine is twisted at an awkward angle. It doesn’t matter; all that matters is that Magnus trusts Alec and that maybe, just maybe, Alec has helped Magnus a bit.

Those three little words bubble up again, right at the tip of Alec’s tongue. He drowns them in Magnus’ mouth, scrapes them off on Magnus’ teeth, traces them into Magnus’ inner cheek. Alec can’t say it yet. He can’t, not when he doesn’t really know. But he thinks it with every beat that his heart gives. And he wonders if there are other ways to say it.

Alec has always lived by the old maxim of ‘actions speak louder than words.’ It’s something that was started by Alec’s own truly tragic skill with words, and has been further reinforced by the amount of lies Alec has heard. Hightower told Alec he loved him, even as he set Alec on fire and watched the boy burn. Hodge claimed to love Alec, only to turn on him. His parents often said that they loved him, when they spent all his life beating him down and letting him drown in his own sorrows.

Words mean nothing. It’s so easy for people to lie, for them to twist their meanings until the very foundations of truth crumble into nothingness. All the lies build up throughout a person’s life, and it destroys any chance they may have at trusting empty promises.

But actions? Those speak for themselves. A physical proof of how someone feels. Even if Alec doesn’t often say the words, he shows his siblings he loves them: when he had taught himself how to braid Izzy’s hair because their mother had been too busy, when he had memorized Jace’s favorite song so that he could sing it for him, when he had relearned geometry to help Max with his homework. All the little details add up, day after day, creating a life full of love.

Perhaps Alec has been proving it to Magnus all along, whether consciously or not. Every time he comes back and apologizes for dumb mistakes, every time he peppers Magnus’ face with kisses, every time he leans their foreheads together and just breathes. And he wonders if Magnus says it back, when he brushes Alec’s tears away, when he lets Alec fidget with the rings on his hands, when he opens his eyes and lets the glamor fall away.

So maybe Alec can’t find it within himself to say the words yet. Maybe he will feel that twinge of doubt and fear that coils in his stomach every time someone tries to say them to him. Maybe he will never fully heal from all the lies he’s been told his whole life. But Alec can think those words; he can recite them in his head and put their intention behind every little action he does; he can show
their meaning to Magnus, every single day for as long as he’s allowed.

“Do you have to return to the Institute?” Magnus whispers.

Alec doesn’t want to. He wants to nestle back in bed and tentatively ask Magnus if they can resume their earlier position. He wants to lay amongst the sea of pillows all day, just basking in the sunlight that filters through the windows and committing to memory the feel of Magnus’ body against his. He wants to stay there all morning, not leaving the comfort of the sheets until well past noon.

But that isn’t what Magnus asked, and Alec knows that it isn’t how he’s allowed to answer. Not when there’s patrols to run, and reports to file, and leaders to appease, and a terrorist organization to stop. Not when Alec will already face stony stares and cold whispers and his siblings’ aggravating teasing; if he waits longer, the inevitable scorn will just worsen.

He smiles and presses a soft, closed-mouth kiss to Magnus’ lips. It tastes of warmth and home and maybe even love. Alec wants to drown in it, and that’s a little terrifying. “Yeah. I have to get back before Aldertree throws a hissy-fit,” he admits. “But,” Alec continues, hesitant and hopeful, “it would be a shame to leave without any breakfast.”

Magnus laughs and it’s everything bright and beautiful in Alec’s world. The warlock leans forward and nuzzles affectionately at the junction between Alec’s neck and shoulder. It tickles, teasing a giggle of all things out of the shadowhunter. The world is so light and perfect.

“Well then, I suppose I can conjure something up for us,” Magnus says, already waving a hand in the air. “How about pastries from Paris? Belgian waffles? Or arepas from Venezuela? Have you ever had chilaquiles?”

“Bread, milk, eggs, cinnamon, powdered sugar,” Alec lists off succinctly.

Magnus pauses in his over-dramatic listing of global breakfast foods. “What?” he blinks owlishly and Alec just barely suppresses a chuckle at the dumbfounded expression on his face.

“If you conjure those things up, I’ll make us French toast,” he declares.

An utterly delighted expression overtakes Magnus’ features and he peppers feather light kisses on Alec’s shoulder. “A man who cuddles, enjoys being the little spoon, and makes French toast? Be still, my beating heart!” he cries, fanning himself with an exaggerated gesture that makes Alec laugh. “My darling Alexander, I should invite you to my bed far more often!”

Alec rolls his eyes, but can’t suppress the grin and blush. He climbs out of bed and Magnus lets loose a playful wolf-whistle that has Alec flushing all the way to his toes. It makes him feel self-conscious and more than a little out of his depth, but Alec likes having Magnus’ eyes on him. He’s suddenly more confident, more daring; he wants Magnus to watch him. So he decides to ignore the sweatpants that are folded up on the nearby chair, and instead heads straight for the kitchen in just his boxer briefs and t-shirt, Magnus trailing just a few steps behind him. The kitchen is flooded with golden light, and Alec is warmed by Magnus’ laughter as he gets to work making French toast.

And if the two of them spend far more time tossing handfuls of powdered sugar at each other and generally making a complete and utter mess of the kitchen, well, that certainly isn’t any sweat off of Alec’s back.
I am incapable of writing fluff without at least a modicum of angst thrown in, but I hope it all worked out.

Also, in case no one has noticed yet, while this series is largely canon-compliant (up until season 3), I have changed a lot of aspects of the relationship progression between Magnus and Alec. As such, the first time sex scene that I adore in 2.18 doesn't happen; hence my own substitution for that iconic scene.

Based off of my own timeline, the events of the show start August 23, 2016 (Clary's 18th birthday) and Magnus and Alec began dating mid-October. This chapter occurs around late January/early February, meaning that Alec and Magnus have been dating for just over three months.

Thank you all for your continued support, and I am very glad to see such amazing responses from you all.

~PNGuin
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

All trigger warnings are listed in the tags. If you find I missed anything, please let me know and I'll add it in.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XI

It was February 2008. A year and a half since Alec had received his first rune. A year since Hightower’s abuse had started. Half a year since Alec had killed his first demon. A single month since Alec had killed his first man.

It was February 2008 and Alec was standing at the edge of the Chrysler Building.

It was one of Alec’s exceptionally few attempts at sneaking out of the Institute. He had previously only done so on rare occasions in which Izzy had needed something – makeup or hair products or candy – from some corner store and Alec had been the only one available and willing. But this time was different.

Alec no longer remembers what had triggered the episode – whether it had been a particularly foul time with Hightower, or perhaps a fight with his mother, or maybe he had snapped at his siblings and they had lashed out – but Alec found himself alone in Midtown Manhattan at three in the morning. It was freezing, one of the coldest nights of the year, and Alec was wearing a relatively thin coat and threadbare jeans and worn down sneakers. He could have – should have – activated a heat rune; but the biting cold felt like nothing compared to the gaping hollowness inside his own chest. The numbness that spread across his cheeks and down to the tips of his fingers and toes was a welcome reprieve from the persistent agony that consumed him for the past two years.

He just wanted a break. He wanted the buzzing in his head to cease, and the bone-deep fatigue to stop, and the filth that ate away at his skin to be washed clean. Alec wanted to be able to breathe without shards of glass destroying his very lungs, without the constant pressure of fear strangling his throat. He wanted to live without the endless urge to scream, to exist without the terror that burrowed into his stomach, to fight without the futility that plagued his heart. Alec wanted to sleep, without ever having to wake up.

And so he escaped. He fled the only home he had ever known – the oppressive walls, the clinging silence, the eyes that had followed him all his life. He slipped out past the guards at midnight and not a single person even seemed to notice. Alec supposed that was fine; it wasn’t like any of them had noticed Hightower’s dalliances, either, so why should they care about Alec?

He hopped onto a subway car, but he didn’t last very long before the itch in his feet and the rattling in his brain forced him to depart. He let his feet take him wherever they dared; Alec ran and ran and ran until his heart felt like it would explode, even with his stamina rune activated. The streets of New York were bright, painfully and aggravatingly so, when all Alec wanted was a creeping, all-consuming darkness. The people remaining were the drunkards, the party-goers, the
degenerates who stumbled along blindly. Alec felt a curl of disdain for the raucous and lost mundanes, but then he felt ashamed for it; how was he any different?

He walked until his feet went numb, until the soreness in the balls of his feet eroded away into a tingling sense of nothingness. His face stung from the cold, and his breath shivered in his lungs and his fingers were stiff, but still he walked on. Ever the loyal little soldier boy, marching on to the beat of a battle drum, always lagging behind the standard until he was left behind.

Alec didn’t know how long he walked; he measured time in the frosted puffs of breath that escaped him, in the shivers that wracked through him, in the amount of times he stumbled over his own two feet. But, eventually, Alec ended up standing before the Chrysler Building.

There was no discernible thought process, nothing beyond the convoluted whirlwind thoughts of ‘that’s a very tall building’ and the thought that the world would be much quieter from the very top. He easily glamored himself and slipped past the mundane security without any struggle. But he didn’t reach the topmost floor; instead, he stopped at the observation deck on the 71st floor, hundreds and hundreds of feet above the bustling streets.

Gargoyles lined the corners of the deck, hulking masses of art deco eagles that seemed ready to peel themselves off from the building and launch into the sky. Alec vaguely recalled a story that his mother had once told him, about the origins of gargoyles. It was an old French tale about St. Romanus of Rouen, a shadowhunter, who had slayed a dragon-like demon – the Gargouille. He had subdued the monster with a crucifix, and had dragged it back to the city and had attempted to burn the creature. Its body had caught fire easily enough, but its head and neck had been tempered by its own flame and had refused to burn. So the people had hoisted its remains up and had mounted them on the side of the newly built church, with the intent of scaring off evil spirits and granting protection.

Alec had never seen any gargoyles effectively warding off demons, but perhaps they were capable of chasing off the fear that people lived with. He climbed over the safety railing and seated himself on the head of the artfully rendered creature with a sort of single-mindedness that should have terrified him.

He had been right. The world seemed so still and silent. His mind immediately quieted; gone was the maelstrom of violently swirling thoughts, replaced by an utter calm. Like the world had frozen, like Alec had frozen, like time had simply ceased to exist. He breathed in the sharp, fierce wind and breathed out the pain and agony and fear that choked him. His mind was muted. He was at peace.

And he wondered – idly, a passing sort of morbid curiosity, a gnawing thought – what would happen if he simply…fell. If he tipped over to the side, if he let go of the gargoyle, if the wind-up cogs that kept him ticking finally stopped.

He had seen enough jumpers to know what their bodies looked like, crumpled up on the tops of cars, cracking the sidewalks, bones twisted and broken like some sick contortionist act. It was all too easy to imagine the same fate for a scrawny pale boy, whose hair was black and messy, who was lanky and still growing into his own limbs, whose face was characterized by dark bags and sunken cheeks and the lack of a smile for far too long. It was so easy for Alec to picture himself down there, at the bottom of the Chrysler Building.

He wouldn’t have to wake up. No more nightmares to jerk awake from, no more dread settling in the pit of his stomach every time Hightower entered his room. No more staring out the window waiting for the world to fast forward, or focusing intently on the books in front of him with the
hopes of drowning out reality, no more squeezing his eyes shut and squeezing his heart tight and squeezing his legs together because he didn’t want to be touched there. No more agonizing every time his body betrayed him and Hightower won, no more scrubbing at raw and reddened skin, no more vomiting in the toilet and panicking in the shower.

Alec’s world would be silent and peaceful, if Alec were not there to live it.

Hightower wouldn’t care, aside from being frustrated at no longer having an easy and already trained target. His parents would be utterly disappointed, for their precious first-born and heir to throw away all his potential. The other shadowhunters would be disgusted, for a soldier to desert his duty. His siblings…

Max was almost three. He probably…he wouldn’t remember. Wouldn’t remember the big brother who rocked him to sleep when their parents were too busy with work, who sang all his favorite songs and read all his favorite books on repeat, who cuddled him when he was sad or made goofy faces to cheer him up or dutifully played all the best games.

Jace would be fine. They had only known each other for just under two years. Sure, Jace had gotten used to going to Alec for comfort after nightmares, and having Alec sing along to his piano playing, and laughing during training for so long that they both started crying. But Jace had lost people before. He was well-versed in how to start again. He would be okay.

And Izzy. Isabelle. She had always been the strongest of them. And she would mourn him the most. Would miss how he willingly braided her hair and painted her nails, or how he let her lay in his bed and rant about all her problems, or how he would come into his room and read her college level textbooks out loud. But she would be strong enough. She would take care of their brothers.

They would all be fine without Alec. Perhaps even better without him there. No surly brother telling them how to live their lives, or yelling at them whenever they messed up, or pushing them away when he got too close – whenever Hightower got too close. Alec would be dead and gone and no one would mourn him because he was always a nuisance, an annoyance, a moody boy who had never been much fun.

A particularly harsh gust of wind cut through his thoughts, the cold burrowing deep into his bones, drawing him reluctantly from his own mind. He glanced down at the dizzying drop before him, realized that he had subconsciously scooted closer to the edge and had leaned over the side. The cars looked like tiny little bugs, like the ones that he and Izzy used to catch in the Institute garden and show to their mother. The people looked even smaller and more insignificant, just as Alec felt. The distance and the sharp winds drowned out all the noise, but the lights shone through just as vibrant as they always had. Everything seemed so insignificant: Alec’s life, his responsibilities, his commitments. But also his pain, his sorrow, his fear. Hightower. Everything was so far away, so minor, so forgettable, in the quiet of the early morning.

But his siblings weren’t. He thought of little Max, and Izzy, and Jace, and he cried for them. He screamed into the uncaring coldness of the New York skyline. He mourned the brother they had almost lost – the brother that they had been losing for the past few years. He sobbed and screamed and cried for the three little kids who he had nearly abandoned.

He clawed his way back over the gargoyle, clinging to it with a sudden, all-consuming desperation. His hands gripped the structure until they threatened to cramp, his legs wrapped around it, his body tensed and shook with the strength it took to make it back onto the deck. The quiet acceptance in his mind was shattered by the echo of his visceral, primal screams. He shouted himself hoarse, gagged on the pitiful sounds of a boy breaking. He crumpled on the observation deck and curled in on himself, hugging his legs to his chest and wailing into his own knees, and he felt like he was
falling, even as he stayed on solid ground. He was a black hole of agony, and regret, and desperation, collapsing in on himself and dragging everything down with him.

It was February 2008 and Alec wanted to die.

Chapter End Notes

Not going to lie, this was probably my all time favorite chapter to write. Does that make me a terrible person?

Oh well.

~PNGuin
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

All trigger warnings are listed in the tags. If you find I missed anything, please let me know and I'll add it in.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XII

Things are good. *Great*, even. Alec’s feeling better than he has in over ten years, he has earned the coveted position as top-ranked in-field shadowhunter at the New York Institute (even with the Clave and Aldertree watching him like a hawk), and all his fellow shadowhunters seem to be regaining the respect they once had for him. He dutifully reads his books, at least a chapter or so a day, and he’s steadily improving. Alec’s begun spending more time with Magnus – traveling around the world for day trips, or going to restaurants throughout the city, or just cuddling on the couch and watching dumb mundane TV. He’s even started spending the night curled up in Magnus’ bed every so often, and luckily manages to avoid any more awkward morning wood panic.

Disregarding the looming threat of Valentine, and the failing leadership of the New York Institute, and the increasingly volatile tensions among the Lightwood family, it’s the happiest Alec has been in perhaps his entire existence. Alec feels like he’s in charge of his own life, like he has some semblance of control. He’s lived his life in the shadow of some insurmountable wall, and he’s finally gotten over it. Everything is good.

Of course, Alec should have known that it was never going to last.

All because of Max’s rune party. And it *could* be any number of things that ruined Alec’s day: his father’s absence, his mother’s snide comments towards Magnus, Max being a brat, his mother and Jace fighting, Izzy’s peculiar aloofness, *Clary and Simon* in general, Iris Rouse causing a scene, Magnus losing his spellbook.

It *could* be any of those things that set Alec off, that send him tumbling right back down the deep pit of despair and agony and fear that he just barely managed to crawl out of, that strips him of all his newfound sense of self and thrusts him right back into the claws of his trauma. He’s been doing so well. He thought that he had finally gotten past that soul-crushing pain. He thought that for just once in his life he could be okay.

And instead he nearly dives off of Magnus’ balcony. Right in front of his family, and all their friends, and Magnus.

Alec comes back to himself, sprawled on the concrete and leaning against the short wall of the balcony, Magnus standing nearby with blue magic dancing around his hands and his family crowded around him with unbridled fear. Even laid down on solid ground, Alec is *falling*.

But there’s no time for anyone to question Alec – a small blessing – because then Magnus’
spellbook is missing and they’re all leaping right into action, going through and systematically checking every single guest. Alec’s head is spinning when Magnus corners an orange tabby and his headache only grows once the cat turns into Iris Rouse, who of course makes an even bigger scene by calling on Clary’s blood oath – because of course the girl agreed to one and of course Alec didn’t stop her.

Which ultimately leads to their little ragtag band standing around in Magnus’ now very much destroyed loft. Alec half-expects him to make some terrible pun about messy lairs, but even Alec knows that it won’t be received well by the stressed and high-strung group.

Alec’s unsteady; his knees are wobbly and his equilibrium is off and his vision swims. He tries to discreetly take a deep breath, but his throat is tight and his lungs are burning and nothing about his body seems to be responding correctly. The room blurs until the faces around him are no longer discernible and all the colors bleed into a swirling mush. His skin is buzzing, a flurry of white fog dancing along his limbs and crawling under his flesh. His right hand is burning. Alec tucks it behind him, out of sight. He knows if he looks at his palm, he’ll see nothing but blood.

He feels like he’s fourteen, like it’s February 2008 and he’s precariously perched on the gargoyle of the Chrysler Building. He feels like he’s falling. He feels cold.

He breathes through it, balls his hands into fists until he can feel the pain from his nails digging into his palms, and he pushes the sensation as far down as it can go. There are more important things to do than have a sudden meltdown: Valentine has the soul sword that can apparently kill any and all creatures with demon blood if it’s activated by an angelic being, and Clary just so happens to have pure angel blood. Because of course that’s how their luck goes.

Alec wants to scream. Particularly at Clary and Jace, who always think that it is at all acceptable to keep this sort of information a secret to the rest of them. He wants to punch Jace and snap at Clary and maybe Izzy, too, while he’s at it. Everyone has been acting unusual and they’re running the risk of getting innocent people killed in their poor performances. Alec has already gotten innocent blood on his hands; he can’t stand to let the others follow in his footsteps.

The easiest way for Alec to deal with his problems is to utterly ignore them and focus on someone else’s, and that’s hardly a difficult thing to do, considering how miserable his siblings and their friends are.

Jace looks distraught, his eyes shadowed and heavy, and Izzy just seems exhausted in a way that’s far too uncharacteristic for her. Clary is hugging herself tightly and Simon is hovering near her. Alec wants to do something, anything, that could help the people around him. But there are no easy solutions; Jace’s relationship with their mother has been ruined, Izzy has pulled away every time Alec has tried to help, Clary is still grieving the mother that Alec killed, and Alec simply doesn’t know nearly enough about Simon to be of much help to the vampire.

He looks up and, through the fog of his mind, he meets Magnus’ eyes. The beautiful brown irises are dark and seem to almost glisten, and Alec can’t tell if the shimmer is from a reflection of the light or the building of tears. The warlock’s face is guarded, and to the rest of their party he no doubt appears to just be frustrated and annoyed. But Alec can see how tense the older man’s shoulders are, how his jaw is clenched, how his eyes are drawn at their corners. At some point, he had conjured a glass of some unidentifiable drink; he doesn’t seem to be drinking it, and is instead merely using it as something to hold, but Alec longs to take the glass from his hands and set it down somewhere out of mind. No doubt, Magnus feels quite distressed by the invasion of his home and the theft of one of his most prized possessions. Alec vows that he will do everything he can to retrieve Magnus’ spellbook from Valentine.
Magnus breaks their eye contact first, spinning around to face the others with a falsely enthusiastic clap of his hands. “Alright everybody, as lovely as this party has been, I’m officially kicking you all out!” he declares with a flourish. “Now, shoo!”

None of them really manage to offer any smiles at Magnus’ mannerisms. Clary and Simon bid everyone a good night, before stumbling off onto the dark New York streets. Jace gives Alec a pat on the shoulder, but avoids eye contact as he grabs a jacket and heads off to go get wasted or something.

Izzy stares at Alec for a stretched out moment, and he expects some sort of crushing hug. All he gets, though, is a distant look in her eyes. “You coming home, hermano?” she asks, voice oddly subdued and tired.

Alec wants to hug her, wants to retreat back to his bedroom in the Institute and curl up with his little sister under the covers. Maybe even with a witchlight, so that they can fold the comforter over their heads and tell each other stories until four in the morning, like they used to. But he can’t, not anymore. Alec’s just a hollow shell of the loving big brother he’s always tried to be, an automaton whose cogs no longer spin correctly. He’s depleted, empty, and there’s no chance that Alec can possibly find it within himself to help Izzy, or Jace, or Max, or his mother, or even Clary or Simon. The shame burns in his heart like hellfire.

“Um. No. No, I’m going to stay here and- and um, help clean up,” he decides, and then watches as his little sister shuffles out the front door.

He can’t muster the courage it takes to face Magnus. Not when his skin is crawling and his stomach is plummeting and he’s falling and he’s cold and there’s nothing Alec can do about it. He wants to go back to that morning, when he woke up in Magnus’ arms and they cuddled for almost half an hour before reluctantly returning to the real world. Alec wants to go back to the previous month and a half, where he managed to get his emotions under control and he wasn’t a complete fucking mess. A mere few weeks out of a span of twenty-three years is hardly a good success rate, but Alec will take whatever he possibly can.

Instead of looking back at Magnus, Alec takes the coward’s way out and surveys the loft. The couches and the armchairs and the tables in the living room are all upended, the kitchen is a disaster of broken glasses and plates, and nearly all of the books from the shelves are scattered on the floor. Food from the buffet is tossed everywhere, the ice sculpture has melted and is now just a puddle in the foyer, there’s the smell of expensive – and very potent – sangria that has spilled and seeped into the carpet, there are scorch marks on the walls and the lingering whiff of burnt sugar.

The loft is an absolute disaster, but somehow it seems much less disastrous than the chaotic brewing of emotions bubbling under his skin. The task of cleaning everything up – with or without Magnus’ magic – is far less daunting than the thought of confronting that damn wall that has once again erected itself around Alec’s heart. So, he does what he’s always done best: he pushes all the troublesome emotions down and puts himself to work doing some menial physical activity.

He starts with the bookshelves, both because they’re something Alec prizes above Magnus’ other material possession and also because Alec has skimmed the selections thoroughly enough to know the system of organization that Magnus uses. He kneels down and begins gathering the books, handling the ancient leather-bound tomes with the utmost care. He’s often felt like just breathing on them too heavily would result in the pages crumbling, and to see them tossed so haphazardly hurts his heart just a bit.

“Alexander, you don’t have to do that. I have magic,” Magnus remarks from somewhere behind him. His voice is a far cry from the mask of polite host and High Warlock that he’s worn all night.
He sounds exhausted, and frustrated, and maybe a little lost.

Alec can relate.

“And you expended a lot of it facing off against Rouse,” Alec retorts, tone an odd contrast of sharp and weary. It’s a common argument between the two of them, and Alec is tired of having it every time he tries to help.

He couldn’t save Madzie – a sweet innocent little child – from Valentine, he couldn’t recover Magnus’ spellbook for him, he couldn’t help against Iris Rouse, he can’t take care of Magnus or his siblings or his mom or any of their friends. Alec can’t do anything. Except pick books off of the ground, sort them back into order, put them on a shelf. Alec can do that, at the very least.

“Dammit, Alec, I’m the High Warlock. I still have plenty of magic left,” Magnus snaps. And, as if to prove his point right, he waves a hand with a lackluster flourish and the loft instantly begins righting itself, until there’s absolutely no trace of any mess (except, perhaps, a faint whiff of sangria that stubbornly lingers).

The books float right out of Alec’s hands, reorganizing themselves on the shelf far faster and more efficiently than Alec can ever hope to accomplish. He’s left there kneeling in the middle of a suddenly pristine loft, and the contrast it presents to the utter chaos that storms inside him just makes the volatile emotions all the more gut-wrenching. His hands, bereft of anything useful to do, shake. Anger wells up inside of him, but he doesn’t know what it’s aimed at: himself, Magnus, the party, Iris Rouse, Valentine, his family, Hightower, the Clave? He just doesn’t know. But it rushes through his veins, white hot and blinding in its abrupt intensity.

“What the hell, Magnus!” the fire bursts forth, spurring Alec on and forcing the shadowhunter to his feet so that he can face the warlock. “I’m just trying to help, for fuck’s sake!”

“I don’t need you to help clean the loft!” Magnus shoots back, high-pitched and irritated. All Alec hears is a venomous ‘I don’t need you.’ It wheedles its way into the very core of his being, and he knows that it’s the truth. Alec was utterly useless during the events of the party. Beyond that, he was a burden on everyone. It’s all his fault that the entire mess even happened. He’s the one who had forced Magnus to throw the party; if he hadn’t, then Magnus’ wards wouldn’t have been compromised and Iris Rouse never would have been able to sneak in. Alec had let Clary agree to the blood oath that’s now called upon; Alec let Rouse break in and steal Magnus’ prized book of counterspells. It’s all Alec’s fault and Magnus doesn’t need him sticking around to clean up the mess he’s made.

“I have to- I should- I should go,” he says, already turning towards the door and attempting a quick getaway. He doesn’t want to fight, and he can just feel the anger and pain biting at his insides to escape.

“No, wait! Alexander, please,” Magnus begs, grabbing the archer’s forearm in a tight grip before Alec manages to reach the hallway.

If it was anyone else, Alec most likely would have flinched away from the unexpected contact. As it is, he barely avoids moving anyway. His skin is crawling and his hands are shaking and he’s practically vibrating with the need to go punch something or fire arrows until the anxiety bleeds out of him. The loft is comfortably warm and it blocks out the harsh chill of the weather outside, but it feels like a February on top of the Chrysler Building, or a January where the window is open. Alec is cold.
Except. Except that one little burst of warmth. A flare of heat, almost hot enough to burn. A pleasant sting, a reminder that he can still feel. Magnus’ hand, clutching desperately at Alec’s forearm, a singular point of comfort, an anchor that Alec can cling to when the tidal wave of too much finally hits him. Right there, just where Magnus is holding him, Alec can feel the crawling of his skin ease, can feel the settling of his nerves, can feel the tension eking out. No one has ever been like that for Alec; people are always too much. But not Magnus Bane.

Alec stops trying to leave, but he remains motionless in the doorway, resolutely turned away from his boyfriend as he valiantly attempts to calm the brewing storm in his chest. He takes a deep breath, lets it seep through his body, and then lets it all back out in an exhausted gust. He turns around to face Magnus and immediately feels guilty.

The warlock looks wrecked. Like, somehow, in cleaning the loft he has taken in all the destruction and is holding it within himself. His eyes are watery and his grip on Alec’s arm is tight enough that the fabric of his sleeve threatens to tear and his lips are pinched at the corners. And it’s all Alec’s fault.

“I’m sorry,” Alec murmurs. “I know that you’re upset,” he states, both because Magnus needs to know that Alec actually is aware, and also maybe because Alec needs to say it out loud, to solidify the entire situation. Alec ignores the shakiness of his hands and places them on Magnus’ shoulders, one of his thumbs idly rubbing at the tension he can feel there. “And I promise you, Magnus, that—that we’ll find Madzie and save her from Valentine, and that we’ll get your spellbook back. I’ll do everything in my power to fix this, Magnus, I promise.”

But Alec’s promises do little to cheer Magnus up. If anything, it makes things worse. Magnus looks utterly devastated. His dark brown eyes swim with tears and his mouth falls open slightly and his eyebrows furrow enough that Alec is almost tempted to make some stupid, poorly-timed joke about wrinkles. But the absolutely ruined tone that the warlock gasps out ‘Alexander’ in completely derails that plan.

And Alec doesn’t even know what he’s done wrong. He’s just trying to comfort his boyfriend, only to inevitably mess everything up and make Magnus somehow even more upset. He’s always messing up everything and he isn’t ever good enough to help clean up the disasters he causes.

“Alexander,” Magnus repeats, inching closer until Alec can feel the warmth of his skin through both of their outfits. The warlock drags his hands up the shadowhunter’s sides, along the lapels of his suit jacket, until they finally settle on Alec’s cheeks. Magnus lets his glamor drop; the combination of those beautiful golden cat eyes boring into his, and the heat of Magnus’ body near Alec’s, and the welcoming pressure of warm ringed hands against his cold cheeks finally calms the vibrating that lives deep in Alec’s bones.

“Angel,” Magnus breathes, the endearment so profoundly tender and heartbroken that Alec feels his soul shatter under the weight of it. “I am upset about the situation with Madzie, and about the loss of my spellbook. But, firstly, that is not your fault,” he emphasizes, golden cat eyes piercing Alec’s so thoroughly that he feels completely unable to move. “And, secondly, I am far more upset that—” the warlock cuts himself off, needing to squeeze his eyes tightly closed and take a stuttering breath. “When I heard Clary yelling your name and I came out on the balcony— if I had been one second slower, I would have lost you, Alexander,” Magnus chokes out, and it’s clear that he’s struggling to hold back tears.

“Magnus, I would never,” he tries to reply, but the words stick in his throat and he can tell how much Magnus doesn’t believe him. “I wouldn’t do that,” Alec insists, even as the words ring hollow and false.
Magnus levels him with a somber stare. “Magic can do many things, angel, but it can’t force someone to jump.”

Alec’s struggling to hold back his own tears, as well. His vision blurs and he feels raw and exposed, like a freshly reopened wound. A sudden agony washes over him and Alec feels the pain as strongly as he felt it ten years ago. He quivers where he stands, but it isn’t a January with an open window, or a February on top of the Chrysler Building, it’s a night in Magnus’ loft and Alec doesn’t know why he feels so miserable.

He doesn’t even realize that tears have slipped past his eyes until Magnus is gently swiping his thumbs over the swell of Alec’s cheeks. Alec’s hands slide off of Magnus’ shoulders and come to grip desperately at the other man’s elbows. The shadowhunter tugs, dragging his boyfriend intimately closer so that their chests brush with every breath, a reassurance that Alec isn’t alone.

Magnus leans forward, resting his forehead against Alec’s. Never once do his eyes abandon their intent gaze into Alec’s hazel ones. “Promise me, Alexander. Promise that you’ll tell me if things ever get that bad, if you ever feel like that’s the only way out. Promise me,” he demands, unyielding and comforting all at once.

Alec thinks of that little boy he once was, clinging to the impassive façade of a gargoyle, seventy-one floors above the street, desperately wishing that he could just die already. It was the love – or, perhaps more accurately, the responsibility – he felt for his siblings that convinced him to clamber his way back to safety. But Alec allows himself to wonder what would have changed if fourteen-year-old Alec had already met someone like Magnus Bane, if fourteen-year-old Alec had found some sort of support and love in his wretched existence.

He wants to tell Magnus about it. Alec wants to tell Magnus everything. About the fears and doubts and traumas that Hightower instilled in him, about the hatred and agony that the Clave and his own parents inflicted upon him, about the little boy who had hated himself enough to climb to the 71st floor and think about dropping off the face of the planet. He can’t find the words, not yet. But one day. One day, he will let Magnus know about all the intrusive thoughts that flit through his head.

“I promise,” Alec whispers.

It tastes like resolution.

Chapter End Notes

I always felt so slighted at the lack of a follow up after the rune party episode. Clearly, Alec is canonly suicidal (or has suicidal idealization of some magnitude), and the show did a terrible job of flushing that out. So this is my attempt to fix some things.

Thank you all for continuing to read and leave wonderful comments, they are all very much appreciated.

~PNGuin
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

All trigger warnings are listed in the tags. If you find I missed anything, please let me know and I'll add it in.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XIII

There was no discernible reason for why Alec was standing on the stoop of a 24-hour bookstore, dripping water from the sudden downpour and shivering in a coat that was getting too short. Or, perhaps, there were a plethora of reasons, all stacking on top of one another, an unsteady tower perched on his chest, rapidly growing until it crushed Alec’s lungs beneath the strain. Perhaps it had tumbled, like a mundane game of Jenga that dragged on for too long and was finally lost. Perhaps it had tumbled a long time ago, leaving Alec buried under the rubble, suffocating in a sea of his own making.

It didn’t really matter regardless. What mattered was the way Alec had returned from a morning patrol with blood and ichor on his hands, how Hightower had laid him out on his own desk and had made him come, how he had taken a blistering hot shower and had scrubbed until his skin had been raw.

Alec had bolted from the Institute the first chance he had gotten; he had skipped lunch, had crept out the back doors, and had sprinted through the city on some sort of mindless, frantic chase. He hadn’t known how long he had run, but the rain had crashed against him and he had just kept going. Until his feet had hurt, until his lungs had burned, until his heart had threatened to jump out of his chest.

Somehow, that’s how he ended up in front of an old historic storefront in the East Village, several miles from the Institute and not really knowing how he had gotten there. Something about the building gave Alec reason to pause, to lean against the rough brick of the wall and catch his breath. It ached, his lungs compulsively drawing air in even as he practically choked on it, as if his body was forcing him to keep on going when his spirit had long since abandoned ship. But it was a good kind of ache, the sort that resonated deep in his chest and pounded out a never-ending pattern of ‘live, live, live.’

It wasn’t a feeling that Alec was used to, and yet there was something in that bookstore that called it forth. It could have been the charming storefront, colored a cheerful red in paint that was peeling from old age, with the tarnished sign that read ‘The Attic Author’. Perhaps it was the glimpse of row upon row of haphazardly shelved and stacked books past the windows, or the soft yellow lights that were draped across the shelves, or maybe even the two cats that were curled up in the window sill, one black and one calico.

Alec stood there, panting and shivering, and wondered if the inside of the library was really as warm as it looked. He didn’t wonder for long before the door opened, the gentle tinkling of a bell dancing through the air. There, standing in the doorway, was one of the shortest women Alec had
ever seen. Her hair was shockingly white and curly, her skin olive toned but washed out and wrinkled, her face framed by thick horn-rimmed glasses. Her eyes were profoundly mischievous and playful, what with the youthful light behind them and the lines that crinkled at their corners. And, even with eyes that had no doubt been wearied by age, she looked right at Alec.

A near impossible feat, considering that Alec was glamored.

“Well, are you just going to stand out there all day, dear?” she asked. “Can’t imagine New York rain does any good for one’s skin.”

And then she simply turned back to the building and disappeared, as quickly and unexpectedly as she had arrived. Alec stood there, frozen in his own incredulity and entirely incapable of moving. It wasn’t unheard of for mundanes to have the Sight; there were cases of mundanes who had been descended from rogue nephilim, or even just regular mundanes who had been exposed to some stress point that had granted them the ability. There wasn’t much information on how mundanes could have the Sight, and Alec himself had never encountered someone who was able to perceive the Shadow World. It was disconcerting, especially given the age clear in the woman’s face – most mundanes with the Sight lived short, eventful lives and very few ever made it past thirty with their sanity still in check.

Alec reluctantly deactivated his glamor and moved almost automatically, his feet stumbling up the steps almost as if they were controlled by a puppet master. He gently pried the old door open, winced at the sharp squeak of the rusted hinges and the tinkling of the bell, and was bathed in a comforting cloud of warmth and old book smell that washed over him. The boy stopped right inside the door, and a near-silent gasp slipped out unchecked.

Every spare inch of the building was crammed full of books. Shelves stretched up to the ceiling, tables with books stacked on top created little walkways, even the staircase heading upwards had more books lining it. Every which way Alec looked there was a myriad of books, all of them in various states of wear. Some looked pristine and brand new, others were mangled. There were leather bound books and paperbacks, freshly printed novels and textbooks a hundred or so years old. Little worn away signs indicated the different sections, anything from History to Arts and Crafts, and no doubt there were even more options further up the stairs.

Alec’s hands itched and he wanted to read every single book there. He wanted to find the oldest book and read it, and then work his way through them chronologically until he finally reached the newest. Or maybe he would read them all alphabetically, or perhaps by subject. He could even just read them at random, but Alec had always been an avid fan of lists.

There were a small handful of other people in the bookstore: a young woman leaning behind the checkout counter, an elderly man inching his way along the comic books, a mother and son crammed into an armchair together. Their eyes locked onto him, the lanky and drenched teen with messy black hair and sunken eyes. They all seemed so content in their lives, oblivious to the everyday terrors that stalked the streets of their city, but they seemed so intent on watching the walking black hole of a boy that had entered the bookstore. It felt as if Alec had absorbed all the warmth of the building, had greedily sucked it in until there was nothing left for any of the other patrons. There was a plague – a curse – upon them.

“Would you like any tea? Or, no, you seem more like a hot chocolate fan, don’t you?”

The question, asked so simply and easily, threw Alec off. It was like missing a step while going up the stairs and subsequently stumbling. The old woman had skipped right past all the unofficial rules of first meetings, and instead insisted upon acting as if they were old friends. She didn’t even know Alec’s name, didn’t know a single damn thing about him aside from the fact that he was a
lonely little boy shivering out on the stoop. And he didn’t know anything about her, either. What if she wasn’t actually a mundane, but rather some downworlder? Or possessed by a demon? Or a shapeshifter? What if he had been lured into some sort of trap, completely unaware, and all of the other people were also demons just waiting for his vigilance to drop?

“Hot chocolate, please,” he whispered, the request tasting like a sacrilegious confession upon his lips. He shouldn’t have accepted the woman’s extension of friendship so easily, but he remembered the last time he had tasted hot chocolate (the winter previous, when he and Izzy and Jace had gone ice skating in Central Park) and he wanted to latch onto that precious thought.

He should have darted back out of the bookstore and returned to the Institute. He should have accepted his punishment for sneaking out graciously and dealt with the consequences that his parents no doubt had in store for him. He should have abandoned the peaceful little mundane building with all of its Clave banned books and suspicious writings. He should have shielded himself from all the terrible and truant thoughts that his people despised.

But he didn’t. He stood there awkwardly and watched as the lady puttered around the little kitchenette behind the counter. He listened to her off-tune whistling and felt the urge to join in. He hesitantly returned the toothless smile from the seemingly genial old man. He waved at the overeager little boy who giggled and collapsed back against his mother’s embrace. He accepted the drink, took a delicate sip, and relished in the warmth suffused in his limbs. He offered a near silent ‘thank you,’ a pathetically minuscule gratitude that made the elderly woman grin widely nevertheless. He peeled off his waterlogged coat, sat in an overstuffed armchair in a secluded alcove – from which he was able to watch the entrance and the stairs and all the other patrons – and allowed the old lady to settle in the chair opposite him; he curiously listened to her regale him with tales of heroes and authors and villains and artists.

It was his silent little rebellion. Against Hightower, his parents, the Clave. It was the tiniest bit of freedom that Alec allowed himself, just that minuscule speck of non-conformity that Alec relished in. It was terrifying and beautiful in equal measures, to hear of mundanes who had survived persecution and trauma by their own people, only to go on and produce the most profound words of their times. Alec wanted to read them, wanted to let such words wash over him and offer him some wisdom. How had they done it? How had they survived, how had they continued to live, how had they turned their pain into beauty? He knew that words – or any form of art, for that matter – had never been his forte, but perhaps it would have been enough to absorb someone else’s, to let it sink into his skin and reside in his heart.

Something of his feelings must have shown on his face, as hard as he tried to hide it. The woman abruptly stopped in the middle of her rambling story, and stared intently at Alec for several long moments. He shifted in his seat and tensed under her uncanny gaze. He felt pinned, like some prey animal that had gained enough awareness to know its life was ending; it was a lot like how Hightower always looked at him, and yet it was also very different. Alec didn’t know what, but he knew that something kept him from fleeing.

“Do you like to read?”

Alec thought of the ancient tomes resting on his desk, of focusing on the writings regarding laws and politics and history and language with a sort of violent desperation. He recalled hands pinching at his nipples and sliding down his stomach and wrapping around his cock, words swimming in his vision even as he blinked back tears, drowning himself in the neat little black ink that had saved him time and again from suffocating on his own tragedy. But he also thought of how his mother used to set him in her lap, used to hold him close enough that her warmth had seeped into his being, used to read him his favorite bedtime stories and poems again and again until she had no
doubt been sick of them. He longed for that sense of comfort; his mother had since stopped reading to him, but perhaps Alec could draw some bit of warmth from reading for himself.

“Yes.”

“What do you like to read about?”

“War.”

The word slipped forth unchecked, and Alec bit his tongue. There were not many opportunities for a young shadowhunter to like things, not as mundanes were always afforded. Alec had spent his life reading about law, politics, history, tactics, and war; he had spent all his free time training in physical combat and archery. There were exceptionally few things that Alec had ever derived enjoyment from – dinosaurs, and Izzy’s dolls, and puzzles – and all of those had been forced away as soon as he had been too old.

But the woman smiled, a pitiful, wistful thing that wrinkled along her lips. As if she had expected such an answer. It unnerved Alec, to meet someone – a mundane, no less – who seemingly understood him far better than he had ever understood himself. In a futile attempt to renege his answer, he choked out a different strangled word.

“Archery,” he decided, and the word tasted far smoother on the palate than war ever could.

The woman grinned, surprised and relieved in a way that made Alec’s stomach drop out of his body. She nodded, more to herself than to him, and carefully rose from her armchair across from the boy. He tracked her waddling movement, watched her disappear down one of the rows of books, and anxiously trembled in his seat.

She returned with a book; the cover was an old-fashioned cloth-covered hardback of a deep forest green, the embossed lettering faded and lackluster after the years, the pages uneven and yellowed. But she handed it to him with a sharp and intent look in her dark eyes. Alec was struck utterly still by the gaze, and he ended up holding the book almost reverently, delicately tracing the lettering until the title was branded into his mind. The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood, it read.

“I don’t have any money,” Alec admitted, ashamed at the admission and suddenly desperate to flee the terrifyingly intense stare of the odd woman.

She clucked, a sharp sound that shattered the quiet around them. “I think we can work around that, don’t you?” she asked in a cheeky tone, winking at him over the rim of her glasses as if they shared some secret. “But you have to promise me something, young man.”

Alec gulped, but nodded. “Okay,” he agreed, the word solemn and heavy. Alec wasn’t a stranger to promises made.

“You have to take good care of this book, and bring it back in two weeks. Can you do that for me?”

“Yes.”

She nodded, curt and self-satisfied. Alec thanked the woman, and subsequently fled from the bookstore before he could rethink his actions. He tucked the book carefully into an inner jacket pocket, a heavy weight that dragged down on his shoulders. A burden and a secret that clung to his heart and made him feel cold, even as he dashed out of the store and raced down the streets. The novel thumped rhythmically, tapping into his chest in time with his heartbeat.
Alec slipped back into the Institute, eyes wide and heart pounding and one hand discretely clutching at the contraband book. Alec had been an absolute fool to sneak out in the middle of the day, and he was even more foolish to so carelessly bring back a book he had never even heard of. He had been raised with exposure to plenty of shadowhunter literature, and even at only age fourteen he understood the danger in forbidden words. If anyone found the mundane book burning a hole in his jacket, he would be severely punished for such a shameful dalliance.

But, luckily – and perhaps a bit upsettingly – no one had even noticed his absence. He had disappeared for several hours, and not a single shadowhunter had spared him more than a passing glance as he shuffled through the ops center. His parents were in Idris, and his siblings were all in lessons or training, and not a single damn person cared enough about the eldest Lightwood child to ask where he had gone or why he was shivering in a waterlogged coat.

It was a heavy feeling, to be so easily forgettable to everyone. But, regardless of how lost and alone it made Alec feel, it served a beneficial purpose to him. Being forgotten meant not having to answer a slew of hard question, meant that the forbidden book nestled against his chest was safe from unforgiving eyes.

So Alec slipped unbothered into the false sanctuary of his room. He delicately removed the hardcover treasure from his jacket, infinitely happy that it had been left undamaged by the rain, and tossed his soggy coat into his hamper. Alec traced the letters and yearned to crawl under the covers of his bed, to grab his witchlight and let it illuminate the neat black lines of ink until the early hours of the morning.

A sharp rap sounded at his door, and in a blind panic Alec frantically tossed the book into his closet as if it had burned his very flesh. He threw the door open, and felt the dread consume him. It welled up and washed over him like the violent push and pull of the tide. He was swept away by the feeling, and he wanted to drown in its icy depths, just for the mere tranquility that drowning could have granted him.

No one had noticed that Alec had been gone. No one except Hightower.

Alec was punished for his daytrip around the city. He choked on Hightower’s cock and was then sprawled out on top of his desk, fervently reciting all the articles of the Accords (in French, and then Italian) as Hightower thrust mindlessly along the cleft of his ass. His eyes focused on the beautiful stain glass window that resided over his bed, a small mosaic depicting several of the most revered angels. He wondered if they watched him come under Hightower’s ministrations, if they were as disgusted by Alec as Alec was by himself.

Hightower eventually left with a promise of more punishment should Alec ever sneak out again. Alec crawled into the bathroom and vomited into the toilet before curling up in the bathtub. He showered until his skin was raw and red and he felt the outermost layer of filth painstakingly be scrubbed away. And then he retrieved the book from his closet and curled up under his covers.

In merry England in the time of old, when good King Henry the Second ruled the land, there lived within the green glades of Sherwood Forest, near Nottingham Town, a famous outlaw whose name was Robin Hood.

He stayed up for hours past his self-inflicted bedtime, hidden in the haven of his bedsheets, and he read over every single word in the book. Alec whispered them to himself, a soft mantra that stuttered out of his mouth and danced through his ears. He repeated the words, branded them into his brain as eagerly as he branded runes into his skin. Every single word, every punctuation, every character, and plot, and lesson.
The tales of Robin Hood were achingly familiar to the legends of Jonathan Shadowhunter that his mother had always told him. Robin and Jonathan were both archers, both had trusted second-in-commands (Little John and David the Silent), and both commanded a small army of trusted companions (the Merry Men and the Blessed Legion). They were people who had been disgraced and deemed the underdogs, only to overcome such hurdles; people who fought to save those who weren’t able to save themselves from a terror far beyond their own comprehension. Alec had always wanted to be someone like that.

His tears stained the pages, and his vision blurred, and his hands shook. But he dove onto the cobbled roads of Nottingham Town and ached for the bravery and compassion of Robin Hood. He let his mind wander, far from the hands of Hightower and his parents and the Clave, and he lived the life of another man, one unfettered by the bounds of duty a prestige, a man who had seen such things and who had turned his back on them. Alec was transported between the sheets of his bed and the trees of Sherwood Forest, amongst the quiet rustle of shadowhunters and the imaginings of merry men, with the sharp thwap of a bowstring in his hands.

And in that story, Alec had his first taste of freedom. He was starving for it.

Chapter End Notes

Young Alec finally got some goodness in his life. The poor kid deserves it.

Some comments on those last few paragraphs talking about Jonathan Shadowhunter. I've mentioned before that I headcanon Jonathan Shadowhunter as being from the Roman Empire. As such, the "Blessed Legion" refers to a legion from the Roman Army that Jonathan led and allowed to drink from the Mortal Cup. As such, the soldiers from this Blessed Legion were the first of the nephilim, and many of the modern powerful families are directly descended from these soldiers.

Thank you all for reading so far! We are over halfway there!

~PNGuin
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

All trigger warnings are listed in the tags. If you find I missed anything, please let me know and I'll add it in.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XIV

In the hectic weeks following Max’s disastrous rune party, Alec doesn’t break his promise to Magnus. Not technically, at least. There’s a distinct line separating what is an acceptable amount of not-okay and what is bad enough to warrant concern, and Alec is certain that his particular failings of the month are firmly in the former grouping. They’re minor issues, nothing more than mere irritants in the grand scheme of things. Between the ever-increasing dilemmas facing them – Valentine, the Soul Sword, Madzie, Magnus’ spellbook, Clary’s blood oath, Aldertree’s leadership, dad cheating on mom, Jace acting lost, and Izzy acting anxious – there simply isn’t any excuse for Alec to focus on himself.

So perhaps Alec’s newfound dedication to his mental health falls to the wayside, after lasting a pitiful extent of mere weeks. Those weeks are probably the most blissful and successful of Alec’s life. But the constant strain of forcing himself to read self-help literature and think so intensively about his own emotions is an utterly draining process, and Alec can’t afford to be exhausted. It’s as if fatigue has built up in his bones, deposited there and saved ever since Alec was twelve; and then something snapped, and all of the toxins trapped in the marrow flowed out and invaded his bloodstream. It’s as if Alec has pushed everything down, down, down until it finally revolted and spewed forth, a boiled over mess of confusion and anxiety and terror that Alec doesn’t have the time to untangle.

But all of the worms have already fallen out of the can, and there seems to be no way to just cram them all back in. They lay around him, a mess of his own making, strung out like the viscera of his own organs. He wants to shove everything back into himself, wants to see if it can fill him back up to the brim even now that he feels so empty. But nothing seems to fit anymore; the pieces are misshapen and jagged and they cut open all the wounds Alec had hurriedly tried to suture closed when he was little more than a child. He picked at all the scabs, and now he’s ripped back open and bloodied with his own undesirable mistakes.

He’s drawn out of his thoughts by the distinct sound of fists hitting vinyl and he comes to an abrupt stop in the threshold of the training room. Izzy has apparently beaten him to his designated coping mechanism, and she’s fully immersed in her repetition of throwing violent punches. She’s vibrating with barely suppressed tension and each time she makes contact with the bag, Alec can feel the rattle of his own bones, can feel the impact ricocheting up his arms and dispersing deep in his chest until all of his insides jangle around. He can sense the phantom from his own intimate knowledge of how it would feel: pain, sharp and acute, shooting up through his fingers and knuckles, diving straight into his heart with an abrupt yank. He would let out a short breath, throw another series of fast-paced punches, and breathe back in. The pain would increase with each iteration and Alec
Now, however, all Alec feels is a well of dread settling into his skin. His ears hum and his flesh crawls and his hands itch, but it’s with a dawning sort of horror that makes him want to claw at himself until he’s bloody and bruised. He’s frozen in the doorway and his sister is simply continuing on, throwing punch after punch until the rhythmic *thud* of her attacks echo the beat of Alec’s agonized heart. Alec is suddenly faint, like the air is too thin or his lungs have stopped working. The room spins, the only point of contact that he can maintain being the isolated image of Izzy furiously, *exhaustingly*, swinging at that damn punching bag.

There’s a smear of blood on the black vinyl. It’s hard to detect, but Alec has seen the telltale glimmer of fresh blood enough times to know what it looks like, even from all the way across the training room. He can already taste the iron tang of it on his tongue, can feel the satisfied pang in his own split knuckles. Bile threatens to crawl up his throat. Alec’s going to be sick.

It’s five in the morning on a Saturday and Izzy is falling apart. Her attacks are steadily growing more and more frantic, misplaced on the bag and connecting only weakly. From what Alec can see of her face, her eyes are sunken, her hair lank and unkempt in its messy bun, her hands shaking between each strike, her knees wobbling. The sight is such a horrific contrast to Alec’s usually confident and glowing sister that it makes his eyes sting. It’s always *Alec* who religiously gets up early to attend his regularly scheduled ‘*beat himself up*’ routine. It’s *Alec* who deserves that pain, who takes what little comfort he can from the sanctity of it. It’s *Alec* who should be bleeding and broken.

Not Izzy. *Never* his little sister. Not Izzy, who is courageous and intelligent and passionate. Izzy has never done anything to deserve broken, split open knuckles and bloodstains on the training floor. She doesn’t deserve the lingering pain to gather in her hands, trickle up her arms, and drown her heart. Alec doesn’t even understand how she could ever believe that she *does* deserve such self-inflicted agony.

The realization – and the irony – hits him hard enough that his knees tremble and he almost collapses where he stands. Is it his fault? Alec knows that Izzy is eighteen, she’s an adult now, and she has long since been making her own choices, independent of what other people want from her. But he still remembers the little girl who used to watch him practice archery and who squealed with delight every time he hit the target, the little girl who used to look up to her big brother and pester him nonstop about fighting techniques. How many times has Izzy stood in the doorway and watched Alec do the *exact same thing* she’s doing now? How many times has Izzy shaken her head sadly, sitting off to the side of the room, and patiently waited for Alec to calm down? How many times has she tried to help, only for Alec to push her away? How has Alec grown up letting his little siblings see such a terrible role model? How has he failed them so much?

He wonders if that soul-deep hollowness is how Izzy and Jace and *Magnus* feel every time Alec does something like this. He wonders how they possibly survive such a yawning, desolate pain. He wonders when he let such pain become a fixture of his life. Perhaps Hightower. Perhaps even earlier than that. Perhaps he does not even remember a time from before it.

Alec takes a gulp of air; it shivers in his lungs and makes him quake, but he forces his heart to slow and he takes another greedy breath. Izzy needs him. He convinces his legs to move forward, one step at a time, drawing ever closer to where his sister is beating herself up. Alec stops several feet away; he knows better than to fully approach *any* shadowhunter who’s riled up and focused on fighting.

“Izzy,” he calls, voice soft enough to not startle but tone firm enough to hopefully warrant her
attention.

There’s no reaction, aside from a particularly harsh punch and a hissed out breath of pain. Alec clenches his jaw, opens his mouth to try again, but lets the words die a bitter death at the back of his throat. He has no clue what to say. How is he supposed to convince Izzy that it’s unacceptable to treat herself like this when Alec has behaved such a way ever since he was a child?

“Izzy,” he tries again, a bit louder. “Isabelle!” his voice rises, and his sister finally spins around to face him.

Alec holds his ground; he clasps his hands behind his back to hide their shaking, but he nearly takes a step away from the fierce and pitiful expression in Izzy’s eyes. The brown of her irises are ringed in red and her eyebrows are pulled down into a scowl.

“What, Alec?” she snaps, voice tight and sharp and not at all what she normally sounds like.

“Hey,” Alec tries to soothe, in the soft voice he had often used after Izzy’s childhood nightmares. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” The answer is clipped and quite obviously a lie. It’s almost offending to Alec that Izzy thinks she can get away with that.

He doesn’t mention how easy it is to see through her mask. Instead, he offers a hand, open and palm up. Alec holds it for several seconds, letting Izzy glare at him for the duration of it. But eventually she caves – just as Alec knew she would – and gracelessly drops her hand into his. He’s careful not to rub against the raw skin on her unwrapped knuckles, but he tightens his hold and hopes that it’s enough to suffuse some amount of warmth into her cold hands.

Alec gently tugs Izzy towards one of the benches set against the wall and settles them down so that they’re seated against each other. He reaches into the cubby under the bench, pulls out a roll of bandages, and then grabs his stele from his pocket. Silence descends over them as they sit there, Alec carefully wiping away blood, applying iratzes, and wrapping up his sister’s abused hands. It isn’t an uncomfortable silence, however, unlike most of the kinds that Alec has suffered through. The two siblings have spent their whole lives disagreeing on just about everything, but it there’s one thing that they are always on the same wavelength about, it’s how much they care for one another.

It’s only once Alec is done and Izzy’s attempting to pull away that he finally gets the courage to speak up. “I know- Izzy, I know that something is wrong,” he starts quietly, pouring every ounce of sincerity he can possibly muster into the words. “And I get it. If you don’t want to talk or anything. But I’m your big brother and no matter what happens I’m here for you, Iz. You don’t have to push me away.” Alec’s aware that he’s pleading, that his even tone has quickly devolved into something fragile and broken.

“You don’t get to pull that card, hermano,” Izzy snaps out, whirling around to face Alec with a sudden ferocity. Alec flinches at the heat in her gaze. “You don’t get to say that when you always push everyone else away, Alec! I’ve been trying to get you to open up ever since I was eight and you have never once taken me up on that offer!” Her voice seems to grow in intensity until she’s frantically shouting in Alec’s direction. “You don’t get to march in here all holier than thou and act as if what I’m doing is so much worse than what you always do! Just, fuck, Alec, you fucking hypocrite!”

The silence is suffocating. It slithers down Alec’s tense spine and sinks into his bones like oil. He’s frozen to his spot, collapsed on the bench and staring up at Izzy with his eyes wide and his mouth
open. Izzy is breathing heavily, her own expression mirroring his. But there isn’t a trace of regret there, only a heavy resignation. Alec can’t breathe. He’s never known Izzy to get quite so vehement in her outbursts; and that’s saying something, given how prone to tantrums she’d been as a young child.

Alec used to sit with her on her bed and let her scream and cry all her boiling emotions out. He doesn’t think he’s allowed to do that anymore. He just doesn’t know what to say. Izzy is right. Alec is a stupid fucking hypocrite and he knows that his sister has learned these awful behaviors from him and he doesn’t know how to articulate how painful it is to see someone else acting like him.

Izzy doesn’t seem eager to hang around in the deafening quiet between them. She pinches her lips, hisses a spiteful ‘mierda’ under her breath, and then turns on her heel. Alec’s gaze follows her stiff figure as she marches across the room. He clenches his hand into a fist, remembers the pain of shooting arrows until his fingers bled, remembers a February night on top of the Chrysler building, and can’t help but think please not Izzy.

“Lo siento, hermana. Tienes razón.”

The words echo, drawing Izzy to a halt and dragging Alec’s stomach up into his throat. For all that it’s the language their mother used to murmur to them as children, Alec rarely speaks in Spanish anymore; it’s something he typically only reserves for necessary work-related cases, or when emotions between him and his siblings are especially fraught. His sister looks over her shoulder and, ever so slowly, turns around fully to face him. He has to force his eyes up; it makes him uncomfortable, to meet her gaze, but it’s something that needs to be done.

“You’re right,” he repeats, as the words are worth being said twice. A clarification, a reminder, a conviction. “I’ve been- I’ve been doing this,” he gestures wildly around the general vicinity of the punching bag, “since I was twelve, Izzy. And I know that I don’t have any moral high ground or whatever, and that I’m probably the last person that should lecture you about this.”

Alec rolls to his feet and takes a few steps in Izzy’s direction, painstakingly closing the gaping distance between them. He gives himself a passing moment to wonder when that distance started forming, and when he allowed it to grow so far. “But, please, Izzy. Listen to me when I say that it doesn’t help anything.” There are tears in his eyes now, and in Izzy’s as well, and Alec wants nothing more than to break their gaze and hide the evidence of his weakness. But he doesn’t. He can’t tell Izzy the truth about Hightower, but he owes her at least this fragment of truth.

“It doesn’t take the pain away. It doesn’t soothe the ache in your heart. It doesn’t fit all the little pieces of yourself back together. If anything, it just makes everything hurt more.”

The words are out in the world now, fully actualized by his own traitorous mouth. And he wants to deny them, suck them back into the void of his heart, forget that they were ever said. But. A tiny portion of the pressure that has been constricting his chest eases. He thinks of the persistent ache that lingers in his hands from years of bleeding fingers and split knuckles, and he wonders why it’s taken him so long to realize how painful it is. To feel that pain and not think of it as a blessing, but as the cruelty it truly is. To understand that no amount of his own blood spilled can ever absolve all the blood on his hands.

Perhaps it isn’t something that needs absolution.

Perhaps that isn’t what Alec needs at all.

He doesn’t even notice the tears trekking down his cheeks, not until Izzy steps into his personal
space and raises two shaking hands to cup his face, brushing away his tears with a tenderness that makes his heart break. Alec’s supposed to be comforting Izzy, not the other way around. He feels a little foolish, for crying in front of his little sister. He recognizes that it isn’t a thought worth listening to.

His own hands slide up behind her, coming to a delicate rest at the nape of her neck and the small of her back. They simultaneously tug each other closer, melting into a tangle of limbs and messy black hair and quiet sniffles of suppressed tears. Alec hides his face against her shoulder, cradling her head so that she can do the same. It’s a sanctuary there in her arms, a refuge for his weary head, a haven for his battered heart. Shelter from a storm that they cannot weather alone. Izzy smells of the same orange-scented shampoo that she’s used since she was fourteen, but her arms are stronger and tighter around him than they’ve ever been before. It feels like coming home.

Perhaps that’s all either of them have ever needed.

Chapter End Notes

I adore Alec and Izzy’s relationship and I love writing them together so much. Also, I have a massive love for the ‘Lightwoods are Hispanic’ headcanon and love throwing in bits of information about their Spanish culture whenever I can.

Lo siento, hermana. Tienes razon. = I’m sorry, sister. You’re right. (Courtesy of Google translate because I do not speak Spanish. I apologize if it’s incorrect.)

Thank you all very much for continuing to read!

~PNGuin
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

All trigger warnings are listed in the tags. If you find I missed anything, please let me know and I'll add it in.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alec memorized every word of *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* after only three days. He had always possessed an acute mind and an excellent memory – skills which benefited his studies in Clave law and Shadow World politics and languages – but there was something about literature, so poetic in nature and so profoundly enjoyable, that Alec latched onto. It was so easy to sink into the beautified words of fiction, to hide under the covers of his bed and forget reality. So long as he held his book in his hands, he was free and safe.

He didn’t hoard such happiness, either. Within the first week of his trip to the bookstore, Alec was reciting the tales of Robin Hood to his younger siblings. He always kept the book hidden, out of sight and safely tucked in the bottom of his closet – it wouldn’t have been a good idea to leave banned literature out in the open, particularly around his little siblings – but he kept all of the stories safe in the sanctity of his own mind. Jace loved the daring actions of the infamous outlaw, Izzy loved his stealing from the rich and giving it to the poor, and Max loved the romance between Robin and Maid Marian.

Alec loved telling the stories, loved how he and his siblings gathered on his bed, hiding under the covers. How Alec grabbed his witchlight and used it to illuminate their faces. How they giggled and cried and yelled over silly little mundane stories that the Clave had tried to keep from them. He was not very good at storytelling – he often stumbled over the words, left out little details, created plot holes – and his ineptitude would have bothered him more if his siblings seemed to care. They didn’t mind the mistakes at all, too enraptured by the whole new world of adventure that was laid before them.

After two weeks, Alec was forced to return to the bookstore and give the book back. Well, he could have kept it. He didn’t see any way that they would have been able to punish him for it. He hadn’t given them his name or his address and mundanes were not capable of tracking him. But he was forced by his own promise, by the memory of the kind twinkle in an old woman’s eyes and a cup of hot chocolate shared in front of a fire. Alec had made a promise and he would have felt terrible if he broke it. Besides, he had already memorized the book and had started sharing it. What if there were other kids out there who hadn’t heard of Robin Hood, who would have fallen in love with the tales of heroism? He wanted to use his allowance money to buy the book, but he knew the danger in keeping the novel for too long. It was inevitable that some shadowhunter would find it, and Alec would be punished.

So Alec returned and reluctantly handed the book back over to the same old lady. It was painful and embarrassingly devastating to let go of the worn hardcover but Alec swallowed back his misery and accepted the pain that always followed after pleasure. But that wasn’t the end of the
story; the woman smiled at him and slid a new book across the counter.

“I think you’ll like this one,” she said.

Alec grabbed it with a sort of hunger that was ravenous and insatiable. The cover was colorful, the bright shades of a dragon sleeping over a pile of gold dominating the front. He traced his fingers over the title with reverence. *The Hobbit*, it read in bold print, and there under it in smaller font it continued, *or There and Back Again*. It was another book that Alec had never heard of, but excitement flooded through him at the forbidden tale hidden between those pages.

He read *The Hobbit* in two days. And then he returned and got the first *Lord of the Rings* book. It took him a bit longer to read those books, but after only a few weeks, Alec had devoured all the Tolkien literature the bookstore had available. When Alec ran out of Robin Hood tales to regale his siblings with, he switched gears. And suddenly gone was Sherwood Forest and Nottingham Town, replaced with Middle Earth and the stories of hobbits and dwarves and elves and wizards. His siblings loved the ongoing struggle between good and evil even more than the previous tale of moral disobedience, and it wasn’t long before *Storytime in Alec’s* became a nightly routine.

They all crept out of their beds and into Alec’s room, hid under the covers, and watched and listened in rapture to their eldest brother. Alec had always hated the spotlight, but in the quiet sanctity of his siblings’ awed gazes, he thrived. Max often fell asleep partway through the tale, and Alec was always forced to carry his toddler brother back to the nursery. Izzy made it a habit to go to bed curled up against Alec’s side, and Jace spent more nights passed out at the foot of Alec’s bed or on his floor than he did in his own room.

It was a refuge for the four siblings. It was peace in the middle of war-torn lives, it was a sanctuary in a storm of hatred, it was love and warmth and mercy and all of the tenderness that they were denied in life. It did not solve all of their problems – or any, for that matter – their parents were still distant and largely uncaring, their training was still violent and relentless, Hightower still sat Alec on his lap and rutted against him every day.

But they were able to pretend.

Alec kept reading. He slipped out of the Institute at every chance he got and retreated to the solitude of the bookstore. He fell in love with Shakespeare, and read through the entirety of the bard’s works. *Othello* was probably his favorite; *Romeo and Juliet* was his least. Alec loved Jane Austen’s novels, even though they focused on girls; he enjoyed Ernest Hemingway’s subtlety; he worked through Leo Tolstoy’s bricks. He laughed during *The Catcher in the Rye*, cried during *All Quiet on the Western Front*, shivered at the implications of *Frankenstein*, was devastated by *Beloved* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

*(He hated Lolita.)*

But he didn’t stop there. He found a book of Shakespeare’s sonnets, and Alec fell even harder for literature. He spent weeks camped out in the poetry section of the bookstore, sipping at hot chocolate and idly petting the cats as he devoured all the whimsical and oftentimes nonsensical words. The ebb and flow, the nuance, the push and pull of language so artfully rendered. Poetry was a soothing balm to the ravaged pieces of his heart. He enjoyed Cummings, and Angelou, and Dickinson, and Keats, and Browning. But his favorite was Rumi. Alec learned Persian just to read Rumi and Hafiz’s works in their original dialect, and he drew upon his mother’s Spanish in order to understand Neruda and Lorca.

When he first stumbled upon a collection of Neruda poems in Spanish, Alec was amazed to feel the startling familiarity of the words. *Me miran con tus ojos las estrellas más grandes. Y como yo tea*
mo, los pinos en el viento, quieren cantar tu nombre con sus hojas de alambre. He knew the words. They were the gentle press of kisses against his forehead, and the warmth of his mother’s embrace, and the scent of that specific perfume that Maryse Lightwood always wore. He remembered hearing those words whispered in his ear, seated in his mama’s lap as she rocked him to sleep. Alec clung to the memory, and cherished every Spanish poem he found.

Alec steadily worked his way through all of the greatest classics, some that he picked out himself, but most were given to him by the bookstore clerk. He read novels and poems from Europe, from America, from South America, from Asia, from Africa, from Russia, from Australia. He traveled the world and lived thousands of lives through the words of others. He hid from his own existence, safely nestled between the pages of his books, and it was a successful way of hiding. Until it wasn’t.

It was a routine night for the Lightwood siblings: Alec was sitting up cross-legged on his bed, Max was nestled comfortably in his lap, and Jace and Izzy were stretched out in front of him. His sheets were pulled up over them, creating a tent and the illusion of privacy. Alec held his witchlight so that the reflection gleamed in their eyes. He was in the middle of repeating the story from *The Lord of the Rings* for the third time that month – as per Jace’s request. They were at the very beginning of the Battle of Helm’s Deep, one of Alec’s favorite parts, when the door creaked open.

Alec flinched. His stomach immediately plummeted and his skin grew clammy and his hands began shaking, enough that he fumbled his witchlight. The light winked out of existence, plunging Alec and his siblings into an inky darkness. He struggled to breathe and clutched Max to his chest until the toddler was squirming. A shadow loomed over the sheets, drowning the four children, and Alec quivered at each terrible step that brought the faceless shadow nearer and nearer.

*Hightower promised.* That was the only thing Alec was able to think about. He promised that if Alec kept being good, then he would leave him alone during the night. That his siblings would be safe from the agony that Alec endured every day. It was all his fault; he had clung too tightly to his siblings, had dragged them into the mess that was his life, had allowed them to linger for far too long. It was all Alec’s fault.

Jace yanked the covers back off of them, suddenly exposing the four children to the shock of cool air. There, standing framed in the threshold of his room, outlined with the dim hallway lighting, stood a silhouette that was very decidedly *not* Thomas Hightower.

“Mama!” Max shouted with an innocent joy that none of his older siblings shared. The toddler tossed his arms up and increased his squirming in Alec’s hold. “Stories!”

“Is your big brother telling you stories, mijo?” Maryse asked. Her voice was more gentle than Alec expected, no doubt softened by the presence of the youngest Lightwood. Alec wondered when she had stopped using such terms of endearment for himself. He felt a wave of yearning well up in him.

“We were just getting to the Battle of Helm’s Deep!” Jace explained, completely ignorant of the inescapable punishment headed Alec’s way.

Alec’s heart stopped. He was confident that the punishment for smuggling banned literature into an Institute would be cruel and absolute. A beating was likely, in the form of a caning or maybe a flogging. Deruning, even. Was it technically treason? Perhaps Alec would end up in the Gard.

Cold sweat gathered at the small of his back and he shivered. He forced his eyes up to meet his mother’s gaze. Maryse had always enforced eye contact; she had always told Alec that holding
someone’s gaze was a way to assert control in a situation. Alec had always failed in that regard.

Alec expected anger – white hot and boiling – or perhaps disappointment – cold and far more painful. He expected her lips to pinch at the corners, her eyebrows to draw down, her face to be set in the stone cold façade that he had long associated with a commanding officer rather than a mother. He expected a repeat of the laundry incident from months and months ago; he expected a harsh slew of ‘what would the Clave think’ and ‘you’re too old for this behavior.’

Instead, he met her eyes and saw tears pooling in them. They glistened in the dark, ringed with red and puffy around the edges. There was a weight there, draped heavily over her shoulders, even as her back remained straight from the steel of her spine. Alec recognized her expression and her posture, the same one that Alec saw every time he looked in a mirror. It was the look of a secret, one that a person held in until they broke just to save others from the pain. Their mother smiled, a fragile little thing that was like a shattered glass pane, spider web cracks showing through and creeping over her soul.

Alec had never felt more understanding of his mother in his life. He didn’t know what pain she was hiding, what agony lied underneath her breaking mask. Just as she didn’t know his own secrets, buried shamefully in the pit of his heart. But he understood the red in her eyes and the quiver of her hands and the soul-deep need to be strong for his younger siblings. They shared a look, and Alec wondered if maybe Maryse understood him a bit more for it. For once, Alec felt like his mother’s son.

Maryse quietly shut the door behind her and crept along the floor of Alec’s room until she delicately perched herself on the edge of his bed. Alec shuffled to the side, leaving his mother enough room to settle herself cross-legged beside him. She picked up the dropped witchlight and drew the covers back over all of them; Max giggled and Jace snickered and Izzy snorted and even Alec let a chuckle spill past his lips. It was reminiscent of his childhood long since lost. He felt so old, and yet so incredibly young.

They all rearranged so that they were a giant pile of Lightwoods, cuddling against each other and beating back the shadows of their lives. Alec ended up curled against his mother’s side, nestled warmly under her arm. It didn’t even matter if he was too old or too tall or too gangly at that point; he still fit there in his mother’s embrace. Max crawled into her lap, and Izzy practically seated herself in Alec’s, and Jace sprawled out so that he was able to simultaneously touch all of them. Alec was crushed between Izzy’s weight in his lap and his mother’s presence against his side and Jace’s knobby elbow in his gut and Max’s tight grip on his hand. And it held Alec in place, kept his very soul from creeping out of his body and abandoning him.

“Has Alec ever told you the tale of Beren and Lúthien?” their mother wondered.

Shock shot up Alec’s spine and he imagined his mother – his ultra Clave loyal mother who had always expected nothing less than the best, even to the detriment of her family life – wandering into some mundane bookstore and reading books such as *The Lord of the Rings*. Spanish poetry was one thing, but fantasy fiction was completely different. It made him want to laugh and cry all at once. Maryse grinned at Alec and Alec felt himself smile right back.

For that one fleeting night, there was nothing but love and laughter in Alec’s room.
There was that one throwaway comment in the pilot about Izzy teasing Alec about Shakespeare, and then the cowards never ever brought up Literary Nerd Alec ever again. What a damn shame, because our boy clearly loves literature.

The Spanish poem that Alec recognizes is by Pablo Neruda (one of my fave poets ever). It is Poem 18 or "Here I Love You" and it is beautiful in both its original Spanish and also translated. I would definitely suggest checking out his work.

Thank you all very much for reading, and I hope you all continue to enjoy.

~PNGuin
Chapter 16

Alec fidgets again. He clenches his hands, taps his fingers, rocks back and forth on his heels multiple times. There’s so much raw anxious energy inside him that the only way to expel it is to shift and twitch and move. Annoyance wells up in his chest and he remembers how his father used to smack his hands if he tapped his fingers too obnoxiously, or how his mother used to snap at him when he bounced his leg, or how Hodge used to knock his legs out from under him for rocking on the balls of his feet.

He takes a breath, as deep as he can manage with the tightness of his chest, and he forces himself to stop moving. Alec checks the paper in his hands once more; it’s thin and worn from being folded and opened so many times, and the little line of printed writing is hardly legible anymore. But Alec has repeated the words in his head enough times that he already has them memorized. It’s merely some compulsive need that keeps forcing him to glance back down at the information, as if there’s something that could have changed since he last checked ten minutes ago.

It had been a gaudy orange paper that had first caught his attention, the sort of flyer that had been pinned up on a subway notification board and partially destroyed by graffiti and the like. But the bold font had been legible nevertheless, a defiant statement that had sucker punched Alec right in the gut. ‘Open Group Sessions for Survivors of Sexual Assault,’ it had read, completely oblivious to the horror and anxiety that the words had ripped open in Alec’s chest.

He had stood there, utterly immobilized by fear and transfixed by a dawning dread, in the middle of a New York subway station. Fortunately, it had been three in the morning and the station had been largely abandoned, aside from a few slumped people shuffling around and some half-baked musician dozing against the wall. Alec had surreptitiously glanced at the people around him, had taken note on where all of them had been and how focused they had seemed upon his figure, all with a sort of clinical detachment and precision that had been drilled into him as a young child. When he had come to the conclusion that no one had been watching him, he had taken a hesitant step closer and had ripped off one of the little slips of information. He had crumpled it in his hand and immediately shoved it into his pocket and had bolted before anyone with the Sight could have spotted some intimidating shadowhunter lurking in front of a group therapy information poster.

That had been three days ago. Alec has taken the paper out of his pocket and recited the address every few hours since then. He’s rubbed his fingers over the bright orange paper, has crumpled it into a tight ball and attempted to toss it into a trash can, has almost set it alight with a rune. But he’s kept it. Has fished it out of his pants every day and put it into the next day’s pair, so that it’s always been on him.
And now he’s standing in front of the advertised building. A relatively short, old brownstone in West Bronx. It looks like it’s seen better years – like most of the neighborhood, admittedly – but there’s a clean-cut, polished sign hanging in front that reads ‘Dr. Nicholas Abernathy, PhD’ in a crisp font. He stares at it and mouths the words, like he has to solidify his presence there. His breath catches in his lungs and his stomach roils. Alec thinks he’s going to faint, or maybe hyperventilate. Perhaps both.

This is a mistake. It’s a mistake and Alec is being dumb and there’s no way that this is actually going to help anything. What good can a mundane doctor do him? He’s supposed to be a demon hunter descended from the chosen people of the angels, a Lightwood nonetheless; how can he possibly allow himself to resort to seeking out help from clueless, unsuspecting mundanes?

Alec needs to leave. He’s in the Bronx, miles away from where the Institute looms in Lower Manhattan. There isn’t much of a chance that a fellow shadowhunter will stumble upon him, as the nephilim typically stay within Manhattan outside of patrols and work; but the Bronx belongs to the New York werewolf pack, and Alec can’t bear the thought of a wolf noticing him. Gossip in the Shadow World spreads like a wildfire during a dry summer; people are still talking about his botched wedding. And, while often mortifying and frustrating, people talking about a Lightwood being openly gay and dating the High Warlock of Brooklyn is survivable. Uncomfortable on most days, but survivable. But people gossiping about how the eldest Lightwood was seen going to therapy sessions? That would be the death of his entire livelihood.

The Clave doesn’t take too kindly to unstable shadowhunters; if anyone is a liability in the field on account of some mental or emotional deficiency, then they’re sent straight to the Silent Brothers. Alec has only personally known a single person it happened to – a young woman named Priscilla Whitelaw, who had suffered from a tragic miscarriage and had been broken by the loss. After freaking out and panicking while on a patrol, the Clave had ordered her to the City of Bones. She had returned a few weeks later. She had never been the same.

Alec can’t let that happen. He has his family to think about, the Institute to think about, Magnus to think about. He can’t afford to completely shatter under the pressure; at least, not where anyone answering to the Clave would see it. It’s bad enough that he can’t just fucking get over himself. But Alec will be damned if his dirty little secret gets loose.

He realizes that his vision is darkening, tunneling in on him with an acute sort of anticipation. His lungs stutter and stop and he doesn’t know how to force them back into action, and his hands are shaking so violently that he drops the paper he’s hopelessly held onto for nearly a week. Tears sting in his eyes. He feels light-headed, his skin too tight, like he might float out of his body and slip away. Alec presses a trembling hand to his chest, taps his fingers against the uneven shuddering of his breath. He tries to think about how he deals with his episodes while curled up in his bathtub. He tries to imagine cool porcelain under his cheek and the solidness of his knees pressed against the side of the basin. Alec pictures Magnus, holding his hand to the warlock’s chest and attempting to match his steady breathing.

His understanding of the world fades away until he’s focused solely on the weight of his palm over his breast, the deepening drag of air being forced in and out of his lungs, the sense of calm that slowly seeps into his heart. It’s only once his breathing has returned to some semblance of normal that Alec becomes aware of the sensation of concrete under him and brick against his back. Alec pries his eyes open, and finds that he collapsed against the side of the building at some point.

He blinks, dully and uncomprehendingly. He shifts so that his back rubs across the brick behind him, his coat catching on the rough surface. The sidewalk underneath him is covered in a thick layer of slush, the sort of disgusting week old snow that has long since turned black. He stares at
the ground and thinks of how much he hates February. Alec realizes that his pants are most likely now soaked through by the snow, but the iciness that creeps through the material of his jeans is nothing compared to that in his heart. He’s cold.

Alec digs his fingers through the slush, dipping down further and further until he’s cleared a path to the concrete underneath. He drags his fingertips over the coarse material, frantically grating off the top layers of fragile skin until tiny specks of blood well up and stain the gray slush a spotty red. The sharp sting of pain is a familiar relief from the cold. Alec brings his hand up, stares at the drops of blood clinging to his frozen fingers. He thinks of scrubbing his hand with scalding water until the skin is raw and the heart blood is all gone. He thinks of Izzy pounding into a punching bag until her knuckles had cracked, and the soul-deep agony that he had felt watching her.

And he reminds himself. That is why he’s here. He doesn’t want to cause Izzy or Jace any pain, and he doesn’t want to keep burdening Magnus with all his troubles. Alec needs stronger shoulders to bear the weight of his trauma; and he knows that the only way to grow stronger is to train. That’s what he’s here for.

He forces himself upright, stumbling like some long-legged newborn fawn. His eyes trace the words on the quaint little sign again and he cautiously steps up the front steps on the stoop. Alec only allows himself the briefest of pauses – just one last chance to catch his breath – before he opens the door and steps inside.

A wave of warm air washes over him, seeping into his damp clothes and flushed cheeks. It’s such a stark difference from the late February weather that it’s painful, the burning sort of warmth that sears through him like fire and makes him realize just how utterly cold it is outside. He stifies a shiver, stuffing his hands in his armpits and hoping that he doesn’t look too much like a surly drenched five-year-old for it. Not for the first time, he feels completely out of his depth, like he’s drowning in the maelstrom of thoughts that roil in his head.

“Can I help you, hon?” a gentle voice calls from the reception desk.

Alec nearly leaps out of his own skin as he spins and stares at the woman blankly. He probably looks like a damn fool, clad in damp black jeans, his hands shoved up under his armpits, his eyes wide and mouth hanging open slightly. Like a deer caught in the headlights of an approaching semi. Collision is imminent, and it’s going to tear Alec apart.

“Um- uh- I- I’m here for,” Alec stumbles over the words, flapping a hand in the air uselessly.

But the woman smiles kindly and takes pity on him. “Are you here for the open group session, sweetie?” she prompts.

His throat closes up, and Alec knows that he won’t be able to force any words out. Instead, he nods curtly and prays that it will be enough. The flush on his cheeks darkens and Alec is certain it’s from mortification rather than the cold. She knows. The mundane managing the front desk knows. She’s a complete and utter stranger, has never even seen Alec once in her life, and yet she already knows more about this one facet of his life than his family or the Institute or any of the Shadow World. She knows that Alec is a victim, that he has to be, if he’s coming to attend this session.

But there’s no change to her demeanor. No sudden pity in her eyes, nor disgust marring her face, nor any loathing or disappointment or who knows what else lurking around the edges of her features. Another person knows about Alec’s past, and yet she brushes right over it. As if the world still turns and life still continues and Alec isn’t some broken, pathetic piece of trash. She smiles, just as friendly and seemingly authentic as when Alec first arrived, and collects a clipboard with a few sheets of paper on it.
“Alright, dear, I need you to fill this paperwork out. It’s just some basic information. You get to attend two sessions for free, and if you decide you’d like to continue then we can discuss payment and the like.”

Alec numbly accepts the clipboard and silently shuffles off to a chair in a far corner. He fills out the questionnaire with a solemn dedication, carefully scrawling out the answers with a shaking hand. He gives the information for one of his Institute-issued fake IDs – one that thankfully keeps his first name as Alec because he’s always been terrible at responding to other names. When he reaches the line asking for his address, he hesitates. The Institute owns several mundane residences – used either for undercover work or as safe houses – and Alec knows the address of all the locations by heart. But what if the clinic sends some sort of correspondence? And then when the mail from the safe houses is sorted by other shadowhunters, people would get curious as to why Alec, of all people, is getting mail from mundanes. And then they would look into it and find out about the clinic’s specialty and Alec’s secret and he’d be sent to the Silent Brothers for treatment and Alec can’t let that happen. Pushing the terrifying thought away, Alec writes down Magnus’ address, and fervently hopes that he isn’t overstepping any unknown boundaries.

He returns the completed packet back to the receptionist – reading the name Sheila off of her nametag – and forces a small smile that ends up looking more like a grimace. She grins back and, oddly enough, it puts Alec a little at ease. Sheila doesn’t seem to mind that Alec is a victim, that he isn’t good at forcing smiles, that he doesn’t like to make small talk for no reason. She doesn’t treat him any differently than all the other customer service workers Alec has interacted with. It’s as if Alec is actually normal, regardless of the fact that they’re in a psychotherapist office building.

“Thanks, sweetie. You’re all set. Just head on upstairs and you can join the group. You’re a bit early, so you’ll have time to socialize or get settled.”

Alec stutters out a halting ‘thank you’ that comes out sounding far less sincere than he intends. But it’s too late to go back and fix it, and Alec doesn’t think he has the emotional capacity to even try, so he forces himself up the stairs with anxiety curling in his stomach. There’s a short hallway at the top and the cautious steps that Alec takes down it are the sort of steps one takes on their way down death row. One of the doors, a deep forest green color, has a sign posted on it saying ‘Group Sessions.’ Alec hesitates in front of it, his hand poised in midair just inches away from the doorknob.

It’s a next step that Alec doesn’t think he’s ready for. Alec can’t do it. But. He thought the same thing before he told Magnus, before he started reading the books, before he started making a commitment to healing himself. Every single day is a next step that Alec doesn’t think he’s ready for, and yet he’s survived all of those.

Alec takes a steadying breath and closes his eyes. He imagines that he’s in Magnus’ loft: the smell of incense and sandalwood and burnt sugar pervading the air, the soft murmur of music dancing through the room. He wants to be there, to lay sprawled out on the couch with his head in Magnus’ lap and a fluffy blanket draped over him and Magnus’ fingers threading through his hair, to curl up in his boyfriend’s plush bed and have the warlock’s strong arms wrap around him.

Instead, Alec forces his eyes open and pushes his way into the room.

It’s smaller than Alec expects, filled with warm tones and soft edges. There are paintings on the walls of all different styles; they seem to be handmade – and not mass produced copies – judging by the thick paint sticking out past the canvases. Alec has never had much of an eye for art, but ever since he started dating Magnus and going on art museum dates he’s attempted to try learning more about it. Most of the paintings are more on the abstract side, which annoys Alec a bit
considering he can never understand what those paintings mean, but there’s a little square canvas of a pastel river and forest scene, an androgynous couple nestled comfortably on the grass, that Alec likes. He thinks it’s in some form of impressionist style, but he doesn’t really know if that’s a correct assumption or not.

There are nine other people in the room – more than Alec anticipated – and he immediately feels self-conscious. He doesn’t know what he’s supposed to do, so he stands awkwardly in the doorway and observes the people idly milling about. There are definitely more women than men – which doesn’t surprise Alec at all, but it does reassure him that he isn’t the only guy. Several people have already settled in the chairs arranged in the circle taking up the majority of the room, but there’s a handful of others huddled around a small refreshments table, quietly talking amongst themselves.

Most of the people turn to glance at him and Alec’s flush deepens. He wants to shrink in his own skin, to curl into a ball and hide away. When it comes to patrols, to fighting, to physical activity, Alec has always been comfortable in his body; he knows how hard he can punch, how fast he can run, how far he can shoot. Those are easy, those are simple. Alec has spent his whole life perfecting those skills, and when he relies on them he’s comfortable in his own body. But standing before the unnerving eyes of a group of strangers? Alec has never felt smaller.

The approach of a middle-aged man interrupts his spiraling train of thoughts. He’s a bit shorter than Alec is – though that’s not saying much – and there are crinkles around his eyes that are accentuated by the kind smile spreading across his cheeks. There’s some glow about him that Alec instantly finds parental; it reminds him of the grins his own parents had once given him, back in those rare precious moments when they had been willing to indulge him.

“Hello,” he greets, thankfully staying out of Alec’s personal space, “you’re a new face around here. I don’t believe we’ve met.” His tone makes Alec feel like they’re sharing some sort of friendly secret, like there’s already an establishment of trust there. It’s an odd sensation, and certainly not one that Alec is used to.

“I- um- I’m new,” Alec stutters, curling his hands into fists to stop his fingers from plucking at the loose strands on his coat sleeve. “I’m Alec,” he adds, curtly and probably rudely, sticking his arm out robotically and hating himself more every second. He can practically envision his mother chastising him for such a poor greeting.

The man grins and graciously accepts the handshake. His hands are soft, unmarred by war and violence, but there’s a hidden strength somewhere there. “I’m Dr. Nicholas Abernathy, but you may call me Nicholas, or Nick, or Doc. Whatever you feel most comfortable with.”

“Thank you, Dr. Nicholas,” he nods, and then immediately flushes because Dr. Nicholas wasn’t one of the listed options and what if he doesn’t wish to be called that? Alec purses his lips and tightens his fists. He doesn’t know what to say next.

“Alec?” the doctor suggests, seemingly uncaring of Alec’s blunder. “You can grab some refreshments if you’d like. We have water, coffee, hot chocolate, and tea, as well as some donuts.”

Alec hums out his assent and then turns towards the drinks and food. He pours himself a cup of black coffee – more for the warmth and something to put his hands on than out of thirst – and he resists the temptation to add any sugar or grab a donut. Sugar always makes him twitchier and antsier than usual, and that isn’t something that Alec can afford when he’s already so uncomfortable.

He settles in a chair that allows him the best vantage point of the windows, the door, and all of the
people around him. It helps settle the anxiety gnawing at his stomach lightly, being able to pinpoint a handful of escape routes in the case of an emergency. Alec takes a deep gulp of his coffee and doesn’t even care that it scalds his throat on the way down.

He arrived somewhat early, so there’s a stretch of time in which he just sits there waiting and observing. Several more people join them, until there’s a total of fourteen in the room, and at a few minutes past four, Dr. Nicholas calls everyone to seat themselves in the circle of chairs. There ends up being a couple empty spots, and as such Alec is forced to sit beside only one other person, a relatively young woman – probably only a few years older than himself – with the brightest pink hair he’s ever seen. It reminds him of the bubblegum he used to buy for Izzy from a corner store near the Institute. She notices him staring and offers him a tight grin; Alec feels a flush creep onto his cheeks and he gives a curt nod and small smile before turning away.

Dr. Nicholas introduces himself, even though most of the other people seem to know each other, and starts in on a short tangent regarding the benefits of expressing emotions and being able to talk through and understand them. Alec tries to pay attention – really, he does – but his chest is feeling tight and the walls of the room are collapsing in. He stares at the impressionist painting until his eyes water and he lets Dr. Nicholas’ words blur together into a mindless wave, a white noise that drowns out the hum in his ears and quiets the buzzing along his skin.

At some point, between Dr. Nicholas’ advice and Alec’s controlled panic, other people in the circle of chairs start talking. Their words wash over Alec’s awareness, slowly bleeding in as he drags his consciousness back into his own body. One of the women – older, perhaps of retirement age – is telling them all the story of the first time she’d been sexually assaulted. Her voice is whisper quiet, but it’s enrapturing to Alec; like no matter how the words make his stomach twist, he can’t dare to stop listening.

She had been in her late twenties, recently widowed, working as a secretary in some law firm to try and support her two children. Her boss had been a demanding piece of shit who had hit on all the women and had expected to be able to take whatever he had wanted. When the choice had been between being raped by her boss or losing her job, it had been a frighteningly easy decision. The thought makes Alec sick, that a superior could exert their authority over somebody and abuse them like that.

The next person is a broad-shouldered black man who had been raped by his ex-girlfriend. He had not dared to physically fight back, knowing how poorly it would have looked to absolutely everyone outside of the situation. When he had tried reporting the traumatic experience to the police, he had faced ridicule and mockery. And of course everyone had taken the petite white girl’s sob story over his, because rape isn’t something that happens to men, particularly big black men.

There’s a female Marine who had served in Afghanistan and who had been gang-raped by three of her fellow troops; she had gone to her commanding officer, only to have been silenced by internal affairs. Another man had been molested by an uncle from ages six to fifteen; the girl with pink hair had been impregnated by her own father, and had gotten an abortion all out of her mother’s awareness.

Alec listens attentively to each story and he forces himself to look at every person as they share such personal details. It’s far worse than reading the stories in his books; like this, Alec is forced to know the people affected by the past, forced to see the faces of the victims. Each of these people are haunted by the cruelties others have inflicted upon them. The very least they deserve is someone listening, someone acknowledging their pain, someone refusing to look away even when it hurts their heart.
When it’s Alec’s turn, his throat is too tight to say a single word. His chest is constricted, as if a vermithrall demon had wrapped its tentacles around him. There’s a coldness that seeps into his very bones and he’s certain that it’s not from the weather outside. Dr. Nicholas calls his name, asking if he wants to share anything. Alec can’t force himself to look up and he barely manages to offer a short shake of his head. He isn’t the only one that skips their turn, but he still feels shame well up in his throat. What’s wrong with him that he can’t open up about his past, even when there are others present that have suffered far worse than he ever did? Alec’s childhood had still been good, excluding all of the terrible bits. His parents had still loved him, his siblings had still adored him. Some of the people in the room had never gotten the same luxury.

Alec sits in misery for the rest of the session. He can’t bear to watch the remaining people as they tell their stories, instead letting his eyes settle on his hands resting in his lap. His fingers itch, and he rubs them against the rough fabric of his jeans in an effort to wipe the sensation away. It doesn’t work. He bounces a leg, counts the beats of his heart, picks at a loose thread on his jacket, and valiantly struggles to keep his breathing even.

The room tilts. His head spins. He can smell leather and old books, can feel phantom hands on him. He’s sitting on Hightower’s lap, biting back tears and watching the inky words swim in his vision. Wénzhāng dì yī. Article the first. Artículo el primero. Stat’ya pervaya. Pahala lekh. He’s going to have to lay in his bathtub and cry himself to sleep, wash his hands in scalding water until they’re red, fire arrows until his fingers bleed, scrub his bedroom floor until his hands burn from the bleach. It’s January and Alec is alone and so, so cold.

No. No, it’s late February, almost March. And the windows are closed, and the paintings on the walls are handmade, and Dr. Nicholas is talking. Alec latches onto his voice; he doesn’t even care what the therapist is saying, he just clings to the lilt and lull of his tone. He imagines hands that have warm palms and cool metal rings, the soft tickle of laughter against the shell of his ear, the security that comes from being wrapped up in someone’s arms. He thinks of Magnus, and it helps to make the tremor in his spine slowly melt away.

It isn’t perfect, and it isn’t immediate, but it’s enough that it allows Alec to sit through the remainder of the session. As soon as Dr. Nicholas concludes their meeting, Alec bolts from the room. He doesn’t think about how foolish he must look to everyone else, he ignores the cheery ‘have a nice day, sweetie!’ that Sheila the receptionist calls out behind him, and as soon as his feet hit the slush-covered sidewalk outside Alec is sprinting.

His head and his heart are utterly crammed full. Of frustration, of desperation, of pure potent anger. He wants it all out, wants it to leak out of his pores alongside his sweat. There are too many emotions overflowing from him, and nearly all of them are bad. Alec just wants to be happy, but all the therapy session seems to have accomplished is unleashing the Pandora box of Alec’s carefully repressed traumas.

It is necessary, he reminds himself with every beat of his feet against the snowy concrete. It’s a part of training and improving; you must push yourself beyond your limits. Alec feels worn and stretched thin, like his muscles have been strung out from his body. But he wants, needs, to get better. No matter how much it hurts. He needs to improve because he isn’t good enough as broken as he is, and he can’t afford to mess up. Not as a shadowhunter, or as a brother, or as a boyfriend. He has to get better, no matter what.

Alec will be back for the next session, whether he wants to be or not.

Chapter End Notes
As a note, I have never once been to therapy, so I have zero clue how it actually works. I'm sorry if this is a misrepresentation, but for the sake of the story please just go along with it.

The other survivors' stories that are mentioned in this chapter are modified versions of what some of my family members/family friends/friends have been through. I have their express permission to include these little details, and I aimed to give a broad representation of the different ways sexual assault and abuse can happen.

Thank you all so very much.

~PNGuin
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

All trigger warnings are listed in the tags. If you find I missed anything, please let me know and I'll add it in.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XVII

The painfully short months in the spring and summer of 2008 were utterly blissful for Alec. He read to his heart’s content, learned more languages and words and feelings than he had ever thought possible; it seemed like in the span of only four months, he read his way through the whole bookstore. He spent every night curled up with his little siblings, rattling off increasingly fun-filled and extravagant tales that he had come across in his books. His mother even toned down her expected drill sergeant persona, and began devoting more time to doting on her children than Alec had ever seen. His father largely remained absent, someone to look up to and admire from afar, always conducting business in Idris or traveling to other Institutes, but the familiar absence was innocuous compared to the novelty of his mother’s affections.

The days were sunny and golden, the warmth that radiated from his mother and siblings suffused into Alec’s limbs and melted the stalagmites of ice that had steadily grown in the cavity of his chest. Outside of the confines of training, and patrol, and reports, the Lightwood family spent time in Central Park, imagining shapes out of the puffy white clouds, scooping up iridescent bugs and then playfully flinging them at one another. They went stargazing in the Brocelind Plains whenever they behaved well during an Idris trip, cuddling on a blanket and listening to the gentle whispers of their mother as she regaled them with stories of the constellations. His mother had hidden away a mundane record player in her room, and they threw dance parties to the Beatles and Queen and Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald and Dean Martin and any Spanish records they found at old pawn stores. They got ice cream and went to the movie theater – Alec liked WALL-E the most, but Izzy enjoyed Iron Man, and Jace and Max both loved Kung Fu Panda – and they visited Coney Island and spent hot days at waterparks and used sidewalk chalk to stretch out their own cartoons.

It was all so glorious, but perhaps the best part was his mother’s increased presence in his life. Not only did she begin stroking his hair, and using old Spanish terms of endearment, and singing her favorite songs like she once had when Alec had been far younger, but Maryse Lightwood also seemed to shadow her children throughout the day more. Had the Lightwood children not been so starved of affection and attention, they would no doubt have lashed out for the increased parental supervision. As it stood, all of them relished every second of recognition they were able to draw out of their mother. Maryse finally stepped up to teach Izzy how to braid hair and apply makeup (an impossible task that Alec had attempted to accomplish, with the dubious help of YouTube tutorial videos), and she sat with Jace and sung along to his piano playing, and she toted Max around and cuddled with him when he cried. And with Alec, she laid beside him in his bed and they took turns reciting Spanish poetry.
More of Maryse Lightwood’s attention meant less of Thomas Hightower’s.

The once daily sessions ceased. Hightower, who had grown complacent from a nearly unlimited access to getting Alec alone, scurried off in the face of Maryse’s renewed motherly vigor. She didn’t suspect anything inappropriate occurring between her son and his tutor; in fact, she often joined them during study hours, and increasingly invited Hightower to family dinners. Even so, her presence unwittingly acted as a shield for her eldest child, bestowing upon Alec some much needed sanctuary. He breathed a little easier, read a little more, stopped having to wear jackets in the summer for fear of the cold, stopped looking up at skyscrapers and imagining himself falling.

It was good. It was great.

It was doomed from the start.

Things fell apart abruptly. One day in late August, his mother took Alec and his siblings out for lunch, and when they returned to the Institute the smiles on their faces collapsed in on themselves. There in their parents’ office was Robert Lightwood, stern-faced and tight-lipped and standing with a handful of equally stern-faced and tight-lipped Clave officials. At the time, Alec was nearing fifteen and while he was already been considered an adult and had been groomed for the role of the next Head since childhood, he was shuffled away alongside his siblings. His mother ushered him past the officials, all but shoving him from the room, and she hissed out a sharp ‘go to your rooms’ when Jace and Izzy attempted to argue. The door to the office slammed in their faces, the heavy thud echoing down the hall and rattling Alec’s bones.

If it had been any other time, Jace and Izzy would have insisted on eavesdropping. But perhaps the overwhelming switch between mama who sang and laughed and danced and Maryse Lightwood who bowed to the Clave threw them all off. At least, Alec was certainly thrown. It was a whiplash; one second he was giggling with his mother over some goofy joke Jace told, and the next he was tossed aside so carelessly. Alec felt the warmth leak out of his pores, but he swallowed back the bile in his throat and scooped Max up into his arms. Jace and Izzy trailed dejectedly behind him, and the four siblings ultimately retreated to Alec’s room to collapse on his bed.

The next day, their mother didn’t smile at them once. She banished all loving expressions back under that stern, calculating mask that she had painstakingly sculpted from marble. She kept her hands folded behind her back, resolutely refused to share any affectionate touches with her children, and snapped at all of them in the sort of sharp and biting tone favored by drill sergeants. Maryse threw away her secret mundane record player, she broke all of the priceless records they had once danced along to, she took what few books Alec had actually bought and burned them right in front of him.

Alec watched the pages of To Kill A Mockingbird brown and curl, eventually disintegrating into nothing more than ash. *Pulvis et umbra sumus*, shadowhunters liked to say. Apparently, that was true of all the aspects of their lives, even those little nooks of happiness they managed to carve out for themselves. His mother stood before him then, outlined by the burning light of the fireplace behind her, and she grabbed his shoulders. The touch was not soothing or comforting like he yearned for, but rather painful and desperate enough that it burned just as readily as the novels resting in their ashy graves.

“Listen to me, Alec,” she insisted, shaking him and staring straight into his eyes with a ferocity that made him quiver.

There were tears in her eyes, the same eyes that Alec had inherited, the same tears that he had inherited. Her lips were tight and her forehead furrowed, but her eyes glistened and reflected the flickers of flames. It was a devastating look on her face that night; it reminded Alec all too starkly
of the Shakespearean tragedies he had read. Wives and mothers never escaped such tales unscathed.

“The Clave does not tolerate difference. They hunt down and punish and destroy that which does not agree with them. It is dangerous to be different, Alec. And that is not a danger that our family can afford. Do you understand?”

Perhaps the greatest tragedy was that Alec did understand. He thought of the contraband books he snuck into the Institute routinely, of the forbidden stories he relayed to his siblings, and the mundane music that he danced and sang along to. He thought of how he avoided talking about girls with Jace, of how he watched other shadowhunter boys sparing with a profound longing in his gut. He thought of Hightower, of the shame that promised to follow Alec all his life, of the humility such digressions would bring upon their family. He thought of what the Clave might do to them, in the face of Alec’s differences. And Alec understood.

The Clave had never been the forgiving sort. Not to downworlders, nor to shadowhunters. To be different would be equal to being weak, pathetic, deficient. Incapable of performing one’s duties. And even the youngest nephilim had heard the cautionary tales of what happened to deficient shadowhunters. Deruning, or a trip to the Silent Brothers, or public beatings, or the quiet isolation of being stationed in the middle of nowhere. Alec had been born with the dubious luck of the Lightwood family, one of the oldest shadowhunter bloodlines in nephilim history; there had never been room in his life for books or joy or music or happiness or boys or affection. What little bits of love that Alec had the privilege to hold were painstakingly scraped out from the walls of the Clave’s stern supervision. They were illicit and unacceptable among their people, small rebellions that deserved punishment. Alec had never been in a position where such deviances were anything more than transient.

He stood before that ornate fireplace in his parents’ office, he watched the greedy flames lick up onto the hardcover binding of the books, he felt his mother’s heavy hand on his shoulder. It was a stifling late August evening outside; the heat laid thick as a blanket over the city, invading the New York Institute more effectively than any demon ever could. The fire licked the humid air and did nothing but add to the oppressive stickiness in the office. Sweat dotted Alec’s neck and his shirt clung to the small of his back uncomfortably. But through it all, Alec felt nothing but cold.

Maryse either did not notice or did not care about the horrified pallor plaguing her son. She gripped his shoulder tight enough that it bruised and her lips pressed into a hard line that drove right through his heart like a lance of shame. It hurt far worse than any physical injury could have. Even though Alec had spent the last half year making his mother smile and laugh, he still wasn’t enough. He was sent away to his bedroom with his mother’s disapproving glare following him, dragging his stomach down as if he had swallowed rocks. And Alec hated himself; hated that he let Hightower have his way, hated that he let his eyes follow the other boys, hated that he had messed up and had nearly gotten his family in trouble with the clave, hated that he was never good enough for his mother.

He burrowed under the dreadfully thin covers and curled up into the smallest ball possible. He didn’t feel surprise or dread or worry when the door creaked open. He already knew that it wasn’t any of his siblings or his mother, slipping in for some childishly foolish attempt to escape into fictional stories. Stories were not real life; they never truly meant anything. They were merely idle fantasies to hide away in, far from the tragedies of life. But Alec was a Lightwood, through and through, and Lightwoods were never permitted any respite from the real world.

Hightower sat on the edge of Alec’s bed and Alec felt nothing.
Just when everyone thought young Alec would catch a break. I utterly adore Maryse Lightwood, but man is the Clave awful.

Fun fact: I went and checked to see what movies came out in the spring/summer of 2008. The first Iron Man, the first Kung Fu Panda, and WALL-E all came out during that time. What a great summer!

Thank you all for reading!

~PNGuin
Alec does go to the next meeting. And the one after that, and again for the next one. He tries to attend twice a week, if his hectic schedule permits it. The last dredges of February fly past, and March stumbles along at a steady enough pace, until the sunshine lasts a little bit longer and the cold seems a little less biting.

It isn’t a perfect fix. Alec still struggles with resurfacing nightmares, still longs to be able to hold Magnus but squirms away whenever he gets too close, still feels that soul-deep lance of guilt and shame and coldness that plagued him throughout his childhood. Aldertree’s leadership is still chafing against Alec, and Jace’s extended stay at Magnus’ is scraping at everyone’s last nerve, and Izzy’s peculiar behavior is driving a wedge between all of them. And they haven’t found Madzie yet and Clary’s mysterious blood oath is still an ever present threat, dormant so far but still looming over them.

But Alec is doing better, at the very least. Definitely not great, nor even good, but certainly not terrible. Perhaps it’s not the presence of good, but merely the absence of overwhelming bad that makes the weeks a little more tolerable. Twice a week, Alec will slip away from the Institute, take a convoluted mixture of subway cars and back alleys to reach the building in the Bronx, and he will spend a couple of hours forcing himself to listen and learn.

It gets easier with every visit, Alec learns. Like it’s a new training regimen; something that stretches his body in a new way at first, leaves the unused muscles profoundly sore, but that he eventually grows accustomed to. Alec settles into a routine fairly quickly. He starts recognizing the regulars – the girl with the bubblegum pink hair, the broad-shouldered black man, the US Marine – and commits their first names to memory – Toni, Arthur, and Kate, respectively. Alec even manages to arrive a bit earlier on occasion, engages in some awkwardly stilted, but still somehow invigorating, conversation with a few people. There’s always a cautious air of understanding between them, in that little room with the handmade paintings and creaky chairs.

The hardest leap is finally taking his own turn. The first few visits, Alec merely slinks into the room, camps out in a chair, and attentively listens but hardly participates. However, by his fourth visit, there’s a needling yearning in his chest. When Dr. Nicholas asks Alec if he has anything to share, he swallows back the fear and forces himself to speak up.

That first time, Alec only manages to admit that he was molested by a family friend, someone who was like an uncle to him, before his throat seizes back up and the remaining words are choked off. But no one minds; if anything, Dr. Nicholas and several of the regulars seem pleased at the improvement. So Alec tries again, at the next session. And at every session the words get a little
bit easier – not easy, necessarily, but certainly easier – until his chest lightens and the tension in his shoulders lessens.

The strangers of Dr. Nicholas Abernathy’s sexual assault survivors group therapy steadily learn many little things about Alec’s time with Hightower. Like how Hightower had sometimes choked him just for fun, or how Alec had read his homework while Hightower groped him, or how Hightower had learned how to make Alec come against his will, or how Alec had never once allowed himself to masturbate due to the shame and guilt and hatred, or how Alec still struggles to accept liking men after being molested by a man.

And it’s nice, it’s relieving, to have other people know those things. To suddenly not be the sole bearer of such horrific thoughts. No longer are the beatings and the punishments and the rewards of Alec’s tainted youth a dirty little secret, a tragic tale that he locks away deep in the crevices of his fractured heart. It’s a bittersweet reassurance to not be alone, to have his thoughts heard and understood by people who can actually grasp the significance of his fears.

Dr. Nicholas is phenomenal as well. He’s kind and compassionate, without seeming condescending. He’s understanding and patient, while still being firm in his reminders of self-care and mental health. He never lets his patients talk ill of themselves, never allows people to entertain thoughts that will force them to relapse into unhealthy mindsets. Alec still knows very little about the therapist – he’s been married to his wife for seven years, has two pet dogs he adopted from the shelter, and faced sexual assault once when he had been in college – and yet Alec already feels as if he can trust the doctor. Perhaps not with everything, but at least as far as his abuse goes. After all, Alec is a shadowhunter, and for all the secrets that he can tell his therapy group, there are another three that he has to keep.

Not only does Dr. Nicholas happen to be an incredibly perceptive therapist. He also just so happens to have the Sight.

Alec never notices anything unusual about the mundane doctor. Dr. Nicholas appears as blind to Alec’s glamored runes as all the others in the room, and he never even gives the vaguest suggestion of awareness to the seraph blades strapped to Alec’s thigh. Not once does the therapist demonstrate any peculiar perception of the Shadow World, nor any sense of forbidden knowledge, nor any signs of the insanity that unfortunately has a habit of plaguing mundanes who have the Sight.

And then one day that changes. It’s perhaps Alec’s sixth meeting or so, and Alec painstakingly stumbles over an only half-true explanation of his childhood and his family and his upbringing. He, of course, leaves out the whole coming from an ancient lineage of angel-blooded warriors who fight demons on a daily basis. Alec instead implies that his family is highly involved in the police force, and that he and his siblings had been raised strictly and trained in martial arts and self-defense since a young age. It is absolutely a lie, and Alec feels a sliver of guilt worm its way into his stomach, but the idea behind the notion remains the same. And perhaps the admission, as diluted as it is, nonetheless lifts just a tad of the pressure off of Alec’s shoulders.

Maybe that brief allusion to the nephilim society is the last straw, the last puzzle piece for Dr. Nicholas to solidify his observations and determine to speak up about them. He pulls Alec aside after the day’s session concludes, and Alec hesitantly follows the older man to a secluded corner of the room. Dr. Nicholas has the foresight to allow Alec several feet between them, and he patiently waits while Alec’s eyes flicker about the room until every last person has left.

Alec swallows thickly and feels dread trickling down his back. His mind filters through all the
possible worst-case scenarios like some horrific flip book. He envisions himself getting kicked out of the group, perhaps because he doesn’t participate enough, or because his abuse isn’t bad enough to warrant therapy. Or maybe because Alec has just made up the whole ordeal, that he has blown it out of proportion, that Alec has never even needed therapy because he has survived his whole life without crumbling so why is he starting to collapse now.

“My wife was bitten by a werewolf four years ago,” Dr. Nicholas starts, voice soft and heartbreaking in the calm of the room. It isn’t whatever Alec expected. “It was a difficult transition, but we stuck through it all, together. She’s part of the New York pack now, and things are getting better. But I’m telling you this because I know that you’re a shadowhunter.”

Alec’s heart nearly leaps out of his chest, but he forces a deep breath in, counts his breaths in his head, and pinches his thumb and forefinger together until the skin goes white. Minor little ways that he’s recently learned to help beat the panic back. And instead of feeling fear or anger at being found out, all Alec feels is sympathy for the man’s tale. One which thankfully ends far happier than many unwilling turnings go.

“I know that I’m not supposed to know this, but I also know that the Clave is not…that they’re not understanding when it comes to mental health,” Dr. Nicholas continues, cautiously, as if he’s approaching some skittish animal. Perhaps he is, judging by the way Alec tenses in front of him. “What I’m trying to say is, if you ever need to talk about your experiences outside the mundane aspects, then I’m here.”

The man hands Alec his personal business card, with his cell phone number listed on it instead of the standard office number that Alec has grown accustomed to. And then he offers an encouraging grin and leaves Alec dumbfounded and shocked, standing alone in the cheery little room where Alec has listened to and told far too many real life horror stories.

And that’s how Alec finds himself in his situation. Wandering around the sunlit office and fiddling with the various knick-knacks that Dr. Nicholas has stacked along the filled bookshelves and mildly cluttered desk. There are framed photos of Dr. Nicholas and a woman who must be his wife, and little porcelain elephant figurines scattered about, and a clutter of books shuffled hastily off to the side, and disheveled piles of papers that have no discernible order to them.

The organized chaos reminds Alec of Magnus’ painfully messy apothecary desk, or his – even messier – vanity in the bathroom. There’s an itch in Alec’s fingers that makes him clench his hands into fists. He wants to clean, until all of the loose ends and pieces are put into a proper semblance of order. That’s what he does with his own desk whenever his skin feels too tight. Scrub the wood until it glistens, reorganize the papers and books until they are perfect, polish the two measly photo frames he keeps in his room: one of him and his siblings from several years ago, another far newer one of him and Magnus from when they visited the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul.

Alec is yanked from his thoughts by a creak of the floorboards, and he’s abruptly reminded that he isn’t alone in the office. He jerks around to face Dr. Nicholas, who is nestled nonchalantly in an overstuffed armchair, sipping quietly at a cup of herbal tea. He isn’t even looking at Alec; he seems more invested in the notepad on his lap, where he’s doodling flowers along the margins.

Alec thinks that perhaps he should feel affronted or annoyed or offended by the doctor’s apparent disinterest. But instead of any righteous anger, all Alec feels is relief. Profound enough that his knees nearly wobble from the sudden weight that’s been lifted from his shoulders. As if the secrets boiling away under Alec’s skin are a minor problem, a simple skinned knee to be fixed up with a quickly drawn iratze. As if Alec isn’t someone to be pitied or hated or disgusted by. As if they are
just two acquaintances sitting in an office and sipping tea as they chat about their perfectly mundane days.

It makes Alec feel normal, or as close to it as a shadowhunter can ever possibly get, and it makes Alec relax. The tension that has built up in his muscles all his life eases, just the tiniest bit. And it isn’t much. Not at all. But it does make a difference in the slope of his shoulders, the bow of his back, the heaviness of his heart. He still feels too jittery, too squirmy, too lost in his own skin to take a seat in the armchair across from Dr. Nicholas, and his hands keep itching to grab at any number of the interesting things littered about the room. To avoid messing with any of the therapist’s things, Alec scrapes a fingernail down the length of his thumb and against his palm. The bite of pain is just enough to keep his hands to himself, even if he does feel guilty for the red mark it leaves on his skin.

But eventually the guilt grows until it forces Alec to stop. He stares uncomprehendingly at that red mark, internalizing the lingering pain that radiates from it, and thinks about how he felt watching Izzy beat herself up. He pockets his hands and instead focuses on how his fingers feel tapping out a rhythm against his thighs. His gaze is drawn to where Dr. Nicholas is still seated, still doodling in his notepad. The older man seems so at peace, nestled there in the sanctity of his office, surrounded by all the various trinkets he has gathered throughout his life. Alec envies him. Alec wants to know how to achieve such comfort and ease. He yearns for it with a longing that burns.

“So, uh, how does this work?” he finally stutters out, unable to keep all of his thoughts to himself for another second.

“Oh, however you want it to,” Dr. Nicholas responds easily, not yet looking up at Alec. Alec is thankful for it; he doesn’t think he’d be able to meet the man’s eyes. “You can start anywhere you would like, say anything you would like, do anything you would like. Or, if you prefer, I can ask questions and you can answer.”

Alec has no idea what the hell he’s doing, standing awkwardly in a mundane therapist’s office and trying desperately not to let his memories spill past the floodgates he has painstakingly built up. What would the Clave think? What would his siblings think? What would his mother think? His skin is too tight, his lungs too empty, his arms too heavy. He doesn’t know what to do, and that lack of direction is utterly debilitating to Alec. He’s been trained and raised to be a leader all of his life; he can organize patrols, command the entire New York Institute when need be, orchestrate the downfall of entire hordes of demons. But he doesn’t know how to manage the turmoil that wreaks havoc inside his own being.

Something of his hesitance and fear must show on his face, for Dr. Nicholas takes mercy on him. “What do you enjoy doing in your free time, Alec?” he repeats.

“Aren’t you supposed to ask me how everything makes me feel, or something?” Alec shoots out before he can possibly censor himself. “What kind of question is that?”

There’s a grin curling Dr. Nicholas’ lips and a quiet chuffing laugh slips past. “I’m sure you are an excellent demon hunter, but which one of us do you think knows more about clinical psychology?” he wonders, his tone gentle but still ultimately teasing.

Alec flushes, but concedes to the point. “So, what do you enjoy doing in your free time, whenever you get the chance?” he repeats.

“Um,” Alec responds eloquently. What does he like to do? He trains a lot, but that seems like
something that is more work time and less free time. He reads a lot, but oftentimes it’s law and politics and history in order to improve his understanding for work-related issues. “I go to Magnus’ place a lot,” he finally settles on, giving himself a satisfied nod that he has found something worth saying. “That’s, um, he’s my boyfriend,” Alec clarifies.

“Yes, you’ve mentioned him before,” Dr. Nicholas recalls. “He seems to be a good man, from what you’ve said of him.”

“Oh, absolutely. Magnus is the best person I’ve ever known,” Alec says simply, his heart warming in his chest.

“Tell me about him.”

Alec nearly brings up that they’re supposed to be talking about Alec and all of Alec’s Issues and not focusing on Alec’s gorgeous boyfriend, but he really doesn’t want to discuss his personal problems anyway. He thinks of Magnus, the sunny grin that only curls his lips around Alec, the crinkle of his eyes when he laughs, the way his hands flutter whenever he speaks of something he’s passionate about, the strength in his arms whenever he wraps Alec into a hug.

The tension tightening around his lungs eases and Alec is finally able to breathe. He steps closer to Dr. Nicholas, settling into the armchair across from the therapist, and begins regaling the older man with all of his thoughts and comments about Magnus Bane. Alec hates talking about himself, but he can gush about Magnus like some silly school girl for hours, perhaps even days at a time. Just ask Jace or Izzy. They have certainly learned that the hard way.

“Well, he’s the High Warlock of Brooklyn,” Alec starts, easing back into the chair a bit. “But don’t let the title fool you. It’s not just Brooklyn. It’s actually pretty much the entire eastern half of North America. He just says Brooklyn because it’s where he lives, and also to downplay his own significance. Which is dumb because Magnus is one of the most powerful warlocks in the whole world. He’s also one of the oldest. Supposedly. But no one really knows how old; he changes it up every time someone asks him. Depending on the day, he’s somewhere between three hundred and four thousand. My bet is that he’s around five hundred, but I don’t really know.”

“He sounds quite impressive,” Dr. Nicholas agrees politely, once Alec is forced to pause long enough to take a breath. “How did you two end up meeting?”

Alec freezes, just a bit, and looks up at Dr. Nicholas. He’s still doodling away – Alec takes half a second to be relieved that it’s with a pen; he doesn’t think he would be able to stand the repetitious scratch of a pencil – but when he notices Alec’s hesitation, he looks up. The older man offers a gentle smile and nods in encouragement. Alec swallows past the sudden lump in his throat, hating the fact that he’s so nervous to tell the story.

It occurs to him that he’s never really just spoken with someone about all the events of the past seven months. Not about Clary’s abrupt invasion into his life, about the earth-shattering revelation that his parents had been racist terrorists, about the wedding that wasn’t and Alec’s dramatic coming out, about the fear and pain and trauma and indecision that plagued him (and still does) regarding the hunt for Valentine and the fight against the renewed Circle and the failing relationships between his family.

So, he starts at the beginning, and he finally tells the story.

Chapter End Notes
Alec's session with Dr. Nicholas is long overdue, and I'm sure a lot of you are happy about this development.

Also, a comment on Magnus' title of 'High Warlock of Brooklyn'. I've never read the books, so I have no clue if it's actually addressed there or not, but I've seen many different variations of Magnus' status in different fics. It seems a bit unlikely to me that a High Warlock would only handle just one single borough of New York City. And I love to play-up Magnus' power and importance. So, for the sake of my series, we're all just going to assume that 'High Warlock of Brooklyn' actually pertains to most of the eastern half of North America. Because Magnus deserves it.

Thank you all so very much for your continued support and comments!

~PNGuin
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

All trigger warnings are listed in the tags. If you find I missed anything, please let me know and I'll add it in.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XIX

Alec finally hit his growth spurt when he was about fifteen and a half. He had always been so small as a child; had always been shorter and scrawnier and more pathetic than any of the other shadowhunter kids. But when he hit fifteen and a half, Alec shot up like a weed. He went from short and scrawny to tall and gangly. Which, admittedly, was a minor step up and it presented plenty of its own challenges.

It was a mortifying period of Alec’s life, one in which he stumbled over his own lanky limbs and routinely underestimated his own height (and subsequently stubbed his toes and bumped his head more times that he was able to count). His newfound clumsiness, coupled with the acne and wisps of body hair, made Alec the brunt of his siblings’ teasing, even if he began towering over them. Luckily, Alec got his revenge when Jace proved completely incapable of growing even the slightest stubble, and Izzy’s pimples were absolutely legendary.

Alec avoided mirrors during that time. He desperately stayed away from any sneak peek at the acne marring his face, or the sparse little hairs that sprouted above his lips, or the white stripes that cracked over his thighs and stomach. He hated that feeling of looking in the mirror and not recognizing the boy looking back. He hated that his parents gave him that same look of hesitance, as if they had long since stopped recognizing him as their son, and instead saw him as their soldier.

The only benefit was that Hightower also seemed disconcerted with Alec’s abrupt dive into puberty. With Alec’s sudden growth spurt, he had grown too tall and lanky to be sat in Hightower’s lap. Pubic hair had started appearing. Cute childhood freckles had been superseded by teenaged zits.

Alec was torn between relief and self-loathing when Hightower dispassionately clucked his tongue at the sight of Alec’s no-longer-puerile naked body and carelessly turned away. His touches lingered less and less, his piercing gaze moved on beyond Alec, his praise was resolutely withheld.

Hightower transferred to a different Institute.

And damn it all. Alec hated everything that Hightower had ever done to him. He had been utterly disgusted by each touch, as gentle or rough as they were, and each murmur of praise, and each time his gaze had fixated on Alec’s body to the point of burning. Alec had cried himself to sleep, had curled up in the bathtub while his heart had threatened to race out of his chest, had bashed his knuckles against a punching bag and shot arrows until his hands had bled. Alec had hated every second of his time with Hightower.
So why did his leaving feel like rejection?

All those horrid, loathsome, atrocious touches had burned his skin, had carved out the marrow from his bones, had taken an innocent boy and had utterly destroyed him. But. They had been touches. On occasion, they had even been gentle, and warm, and grounding. On occasion, Alec had even found cause to enjoy the tainted caresses.

His parents were largely absent in his life, and his siblings were often the ones needing his comfort, not the other way around. Hodge was a friendly but distant tutor, and the other shadowhunters had been mildly interactive with Alec during his childhood. And Hightower. Hightower, the man who had wrapped one hand around Alec’s throat and another around his cock and had forced him to cum, had perhaps been the only adult in Alec’s life to have given him a hug past age ten.

Even that pathetically miniscule ounce of comfort was snatched from him. A security blanket cruelly ripped away from a child, letting the winter chill seep into his bones. Sometimes, after Hightower had left, Alec settled back at his desk and flipped open one of his many textbooks. He read until his eyes burned, until the words blurred and drifted off of the page. Article the first. Article the first. Article the first. And each time his body ached, phantom touches that skittered down his spine and across his lap. And each time Alec wondered why.

Hightower had once praised him for his intelligence, and his obedience, and his quietness. Hightower had once comforted him, and cherished him, and educated him. Hightower had once loved him.

Why wasn’t Alec enough?

Because of the hairs that grew on his legs, his armpits, his pubic area? Because he grew until his skin stretched from it? Because his voice began cracking, and his skin began breaking out, and his body grew clumsy?

Why wasn’t Alec ever enough? For anyone. For his parents, for his siblings, for the Institute. Not even his goddamn fucking abuser wanted him for more than a couple years.

Alec hated Hightower, but not as much as he hated himself.

Chapter End Notes

Short and not-so-sweet today, guys. The good news is, Hightower is finally gone. The bad news is, it's still not going to be sunshine and rainbows.

Thank you all for reading.

~PNGuin
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

All trigger warnings are listed in the tags. If you find I missed anything, please let me know and I'll add it in.

I want to preface this chapter by preemptively saying I'm sorry :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XX

Alec is humming as he hops up the stairs to Magnus’ loft. It’s some upbeat song that he can’t remember the name of and it is so thoroughly mangled by his improvised rendition that it could be anything from Spanish jazz to Beyoncé. He doesn’t really care either way, so long as the melody is fun to hum along to. He can’t remember the last time he felt like singing; it’s been too long since his heart was light enough to do so.

Alec is in a fantastic mood. Patrol went smoothly earlier that day, and he managed to save several mundanes from a minor demon threat without any casualties. He attended a private one-on-one session with Dr. Nicholas and worked on some new techniques for overcoming his anxiety. Most importantly, however, it’s date night and Alec can’t wait for the chance to spend it with Magnus, a strawberry daiquiri, and absolutely no interruptions from any of his siblings or their friends.

He doesn’t bother knocking, not anymore, and instead goes straight for opening the door. Typically, Magnus’ magic is tuned in enough to Alec that it swings open with only the slightest hint of pressure; occasionally the magic, in all its impatience, will be a step ahead of Alec and will open the door before Alec even reaches it. Something is different, however; the door seems far too stubborn, and Alec has to actually put some strength into wedging it open.

Once he’s past the threshold, he glances back with furrowed brows. Perhaps some damage has been done to the door, or perhaps even to Magnus’ wards. Now that he’s focusing on it, the familiar feeling of Magnus’ wards – which always wrap around Alec like a warm blanket, settling comfortably right at the edge of his awareness – is distant and prickling against the back of his head, like a static charge. Alec is immediately concerned. Even more so when the loft feels cold, the scent of incense not as prevalent as usual, the lights off and leaving the main rooms bathed in the semi-darkness of the encroaching evening.

“Magnus?” he calls out, anxiety crawling up his spine and making him shudder. He has never once felt uncomfortable in Magnus’ loft, but there’s something eerily chilling about it in that moment.

The warlock is supposed to be home; he scheduled a couple of clients for earlier in the day, but they had both made sure that they would be available for dinner. They’re going to some upscale Italian restaurant that Magnus has been eager to try. The uncharacteristic quiet unsettles Alec, and he very nearly reaches for the comfort of his bow. But then his eyes catch on the slash of light that spills out from the threshold of the kitchen, and a heavy sigh of relief tumbles past his lips.
He puts his weapons down on the little table in the foyer, toes off his boots, and shrugs out of his jacket, depositing it onto his favorite armchair as he makes his way to the kitchen. The soft lighting soothes his heart and a smile teasingly draws at the corners of his lips. When he finally steps into the sanctuary of the kitchen, he’s drawn up short by the image of Magnus.

His boyfriend is seated on one of the stools at the breakfast bar, hunched over so that his shoulders are fraught with tension and his face is shadowed. There’s a bottle of scotch beside his elbow. Open and mostly empty. Alec wants to snatch it away before he will have to watch the rest of the amber liquid disappear. The slope of Magnus’ back seems painful, and Alec’s hands itch with the need to rub the tightness out of Magnus’ muscles, to let all the stress bleed out so that Magnus can enjoy himself. But when Alec takes a step forward to allow himself to act on the urge, Magnus abruptly tenses even further. Alec freezes.

“Magnus? What’s wrong?” he asks, tone fragile in the silence between them. Alec realizes, all at once, that it’s perhaps the quietest Magnus’ loft has ever been. It’s suffocating.

Magnus draws in a deep breath, his shoulders moving with the action, before he drags his head up in an achingly slow fashion. It’s as if Magnus is balancing the weight of the world on his head, terrified of letting it drop. Alec wants to kiss the back of his neck, wants to let Magnus bury his face in the crook of Alec’s neck, wants to help bear all the weight that Magnus has taken upon himself. And yet when his dark eyes meet Alec’s, they’re shuttered and cold and lifeless.

The hairs on Alec’s arms stand upright. He has to swallow past a sudden lump in his throat. His blood runs cold. Magnus’ expression is closed off and reserved in a morbidly tragic way that Alec hasn’t ever seen, not even before they began dating. He doesn’t know what to do with that realization.

"Where have you been?" Magnus asks, the words just shy of slurred, heavy and deliberate in the suffocating stillness between them. His eyes – glamored, a mask to hide behind – are piercing and intense, unblinking, searching for some answer that Alec can’t give. And Alec…

Alec lies.

“I was at the Institute,” he explains, feeling the words like ash on his tongue. He hopes that his voice doesn’t waver, but his resolve certainly does.

It isn’t as if Alec wants to lie to Magnus. He doesn’t. Not a single damn bit. But. Alec hasn’t been at the Institute, not since earlier that afternoon. He was at that little office building in West Bronx, crumpled up in some worn armchair, reliving the most horrific memories of his life and clutching to his therapist’s hand as he plummeted into volatile panic.

Clearly, the answer Alec gives isn’t good enough, and Magnus’ expression closes off even further, a distant, stoic thing that makes Alec feel as if they’re separated by thick glass. Everything between them is distorted. Magnus is on the other side, too far away to reach. Alec feels isolated and alone and cold. He shivers.

“At the Institute,” Magnus scoffs, and Alec flinches back at the sound. “That seems quite odd to me, considering that your dear sister gave me a call trying to reach you. And she just so happened to believe that you were here.”

Alec feels so horrifically cold.

Not for the first time, Alec wishes that he wouldn’t be so fearful of telling Magnus the truth, that he could simply commit to being honest and just reveal where he’s been disappearing to, twice a
week like clockwork. But Alec is a coward, and every time he’s tried to explain, the words die a sour death in the back of his throat, curdling there like spoiled milk. So he’s spent the last few weeks lying to Magnus, and Jace, and Izzy, and absolutely hating himself for the familiar taste of lies on his tongue.

“You’ve done this multiple times now, haven’t you?” Magnus continues, heedless of the panic building in Alec’s chest. “Where have you been going?” he demands, and his voice cracks.

It’s with a dreadful impending terror that Alec forces himself to shake his head. “I-I... I can’t,” he whispers, the words getting lost in the back of his throat. He feels sick to his stomach. Ice creeps up his limbs. His hands are shaking. He needs to go shoot arrows until they bleed to make the anxiety drip out. Alec can’t breathe; his lungs have collapsed in his chest and they no longer work when he futilely tries to drag air in.


“I don’t know!” Alec cries, ripping up past his clenched jaw, all vitriol and frustration and agony. Tears blur his vision. Why are they fighting? It’s supposed to be date night. “I don’t know!” Alec doesn’t know. He doesn’t know. He doesn’t know.

“Who is Nicholas?”

Alec’s heart stops. He’s so cold. A shiver runs up his spine. It’s January. Or February. 71 floors up. A window cracked open. He can’t breathe. His vision blurs, and then spins, and then dances with little black dots. His hands are quivering. He clenches them into fists.

There, held up pointedly in Magnus’ hand, is the little device that Alec immediately recognizes as the cell phone he had accidentally left behind that morning. He had sacrificed punctuality for the sake of lying in bed with Magnus for another handful of minutes, and had proceeded to rush to the Institute just barely on time. Black letters, stark against the illuminated screen on the phone, read the name Nicholas, cautiously saved to Alec’s contacts.

“That’s- he’s- it’s not-” Alec scrambles to say, stumbling over the words as they choke up in his throat. He staggers forward a step, needing with an all-consuming necessity to get closer to Magnus. To grab Magnus’ hands and let it stifle the tremor that plagues his own, to wrap his arms around his boyfriend and hold him close enough that their bodies meld together, so that their hearts beat as one. Magnus retaliates by taking a step back.

“’What time do you think you’ll be by?’” Magnus reads off in a sharp voice, his nose wrinkling and his teeth bared, almost ferally.

“No, no, n-no. I wouldn’t- we aren’t-” The words evaporate, useless and forgotten, between them. He’s cold. His breathing is too shallow and fast. His body is trembling. Tears drag their way down his cheeks. He feels empty.

“What, let me guess. It’s not like that?” the older man mocks. “Then what is it like, Alec! Who the fuck is Nicholas!”

My therapist, Alec wants to respond, wants to scream it out into the world, wants to sob the words so that the tension and the fury and the heartbreak on Magnus’ face will wither and give way to compassion and gentleness and maybe even love. But Alec can’t breathe, his lungs are screaming, and his chest is too tight, and his tongue is dry and heavy in his mouth. The words are trapped, empty little worthless things that dart frantically in his head with no way to escape. He scrambles
desperately to collect the words in his hands, but they slip through like sand. Gritty and ephemeral. Meaningless, when left unspoken.

Magnus’ eyes are watering, Alec can tell by the way the light makes them shimmer. His visage is that of a desperate man, asking for water or food or shelter. A refugee who begs on the steps of a church for sanctuary. Magnus is desperate to hear an answer – a good one – and Alec knows the very words that can put him at ease. That can put them both at ease. That can salvage the entire situation and they can collapse into each other’s arms and cry a little bit and then go cuddle and everything would be fine. Alec can just envision what would happen if his words could work.

But they don’t work. Alec is faulty and broken and pathetic and he can’t get those two negligible words out. It’s his therapist. How hard can it be to say that? But Alec has been trying to tell Magnus for weeks now, and each time the words have withered in his throat. He just doesn’t know how to admit to all the pain and iciness that grows within. Shame wells deep in his gut. It clings to his insides, digs its sharp claws in, and refuses to release him. Why can’t he be better? He hates the burn of it, but not nearly as much as he hates himself.

When it becomes clear that Alec has nothing to say, Magnus’ face falls. “I thought you were different,” he says, bland and plain and so very heartbroken.

Alec has been mauled within an inch of his life by demons before. This hurts far worse. He recoils from the sting, feeling for all the world like he has been eviscerated. His entrails are spilling from his body and there’s no possible way to stem the flow of blood. His heart is shattered and all of the little pieces scatter on the floor, sharp as glass, creating a minefield between them.

“Magnus,” he croaks out, the only word that can grace his lips. A prayer, a plea, an invocation. Please, he wants to say. The word tastes of ash. He can’t spit it out.

Magnus shakes his head. A pitiful little movement that grows with time, until it is resolute and firm. Magnus takes a step back, away from the shattered bits of Alec’s heart and away from Alec.

“Get out,” he orders, all clenched hands and clenched jaws and clenched heart.

Alec stumbles back, bumping into the counter behind him, uncoordinated and lost and scared. He feels as if he’s been punched. The air rushes out of his lungs. Ice crystalizes in his chest. He is so fucking cold.

“Magnus,” he begs, desperate and futile and heartbroken.

But Magnus resolutely turns his head away.

Alec doesn’t remember stumbling out of the kitchen. Doesn’t remember putting on his boots. Doesn’t remember the way the door flies open before him and slams shut after him. He does remember the tears and the pain in Magnus’ eyes – glamored, a mask against Alec. He remembers leaving his heart in pieces on the floor of the kitchen. He remembers the absolute silence that suffocates him in the hallway of the apartment building.

And he remembers a January with the window cracked open, a February on top of the Chrysler Building. He remembers how his parents sent him away, how his siblings grew up and stopped needing him, how Hightower scoffed and eventually left. Because Alec is pathetic and miserable and hateful. Because Alec can’t fight well enough, or have fun well enough, or continue looking childish well enough, or tell his boyfriend the truth well enough. Because Alec is never enough to satisfy anyone’s needs or wants.
Everyone always leaves, and it is always Alec’s fault.

Chapter End Notes

I want to say a few things about this chapter, because I know there are going to be people that freak out over it. First and foremost, I am not vilifying Magnus. He has a history of shitty relationships and Alec was acting admittedly suspicious. Nor am I vilifying Alec. Neither of them are inherently in the wrong. Rather, they both make mistakes, which they will be allowed to apologize and forgive each other for. That is what's truly beautiful about their relationship, that room for forgiveness and growth.

Don't lose hope, my dear readers. We still have four chapters left.

~PNGuin
Alec continued his studies alone. At age fifteen and with a reputation for being uncommonly dedicated to knowledge of laws and politics and history, Alec was permitted by his parents to study without the necessity of a tutor breathing down his neck. They needed to hire a new private tutor for Izzy and Jace – Izzy because for all her intelligence, she had always been terrible at finishing her work and staying focused, and Jace because he had never once willingly studied anything that wasn’t combat or fictional literature or music – but thankfully the new tutor was Miranda Overland, a young twenty-something shadowhunter who was good with kids and who never made advances on any of the Lightwood children.

And so every single day, for a minimum of three hours, Alec secluded himself in his bedroom. No parents who pushed him beyond his limits, no siblings who pestered him, no tutor who groped him. He was alone and isolated and perfectly safe. He was free to bury his nose in his favorite books – his favorite academic ones, at the very least – and was able to whittle away the hours discovering history and law and politics.

It was miserable.

Even with Hightower gone, Alec did not find any rest. He glanced over his shoulder constantly, and he reread the same line again and again and again until his eyes blurred over with tears, always half-expecting the door to swing open and for a distinct shadow to be illuminated there. He flinched whenever any of his family members interrupted his study time, and every single tear stain in his books caused a welling of dread to settle heavily in his chest.

Alec felt listless, set adrift, untethered and cast away in the tumultuous seas. He floated aimlessly, a shredded piece of seaweed that was torn from the holdfast, a balloon released from some careless child’s hand. Alone, forgotten, miserable.

He had always been the sort of person who thrived off of routine; certainly far more than Izzy or Jace or Max. Alec had enjoyed his childhood years of training because they had always been a consistent, predictable, known quantity. Wake up, breakfast, lessons, sparring, lunch, lessons, dinner, sparring, a bit of free time, bed. Every single day. Consistency had always been the secret to retaining his sanity. And without consistency, Alec’s sanity was walking a dangerous line.

It was a creeping thing, watching the hair-thin fractures within the ice split open, inch by inch. It wasn’t sudden, or abrupt, or all-consuming. Alec simply slipped further and further down into the depths of the dark water, steadily leaking air and watching the light grow dimmer and dimmer. The coldness settled in so innocuously that Alec didn’t even notice it.
He wore jackets and black jeans in the middle of the summer, just in a futile attempt to keep the shivers at bay. He piled stolen and pilfered blankets on his bed, until his parents caught him in the act and berated him for the irrational foolishness. He took scalding hot showers so that the water always turned his skin a violent red.

Alec cried a lot in the months following Hightower’s departure. It didn’t make any sense; Alec had long since stopped allowing himself tears over his tutor, and he thought that, surely, he had shed enough tears for himself. But they fell without his permission; when he cried himself to sleep, when he sniveled in the shower, when he woke up with morning wood and sobbed over it.

In the weeks following Hightower’s departure, everything made Alec cry. He teared up at the drop of a hat; if his parents slightly raised their voices, if his siblings teased him, if one of the other shadowhunters critiqued him. Every little comment inspired in him an overwhelming flood of fear and agony. And every single time he swallowed back the tears, bit his lip until he bled, choked himself on his desperation to not disappoint his family and become known as the Crybaby Lightwood.

But Alec didn’t understand it. He had at least been able to fake it when Hightower had still been around. He had been able to grit his teeth and get his homework done, to plaster on a tight-lipped smile until his cheeks had ached, to hold back the tears so that he had forgotten what tears had felt like. Alec had survived nearly three years of unrelenting emotional and physical turmoil, and not a single damn person had been any wiser; and yet once everything settled back down, Alec cracked.

His abuse had stopped, his abuser had left, and for all intents and purposes Alec’s life should have returned to normal. Should have returned to sleeping easy at night, to reading through his homework without sobbing, to taking a shower without the water scalding hot to rinse the filth away. His life should have returned to being warm and safe and good.

But waking up every single day was a chore. Going through the motions of train, patrol, report was utterly dreadful. Food tasted like ash, books lost their luster, his heart dropped into his stomach like lead. His feet dragged, and his eyes developed bags, and every single movement felt like he was living underwater. Muffled, distant, heavy. He was exhausted for every second that he continued living.

That was when Alec stopped feeling like a person. When he locked the maelstrom of all his emotions back, when he forced the tears down until they didn’t even well up in his eyes anymore, when he stopped smiling and laughing, when his eyes looked dead and lifeless, when his skin started growing pale, when his cheeks went gaunt, when he pulled away from his siblings, when he stopped flinching from pain, when he became single-minded and brusque in his mission to be a fearless shadowhunter and nothing else.

The tears dried. The late night visits from his siblings stopped. The idle thoughts of holding hands with boys were stomped into nonexistence. The suffering was ignored, replaced with the manageable ache of firing arrows until his fingers bled. Hightower had painstakingly taught Alec how to strip away all the layers of emotion that made him human, and had replaced the boy with an unfeeling monster. A soldier, a warrior, a shadowhunter.

He stopped feeling human. But he didn’t stop feeling the pain.

Chapter End Notes
Thank you all very much for reading! We're almost to the end.

~PNGuin
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

All trigger warnings are listed in the tags. If you find I missed anything, please let me know and I'll add it in.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XXII

Alec has no clue where he is or how he’s gotten here. He’s been walking for…well, he doesn’t know how long. Long enough that the sun has set and the early May night has grown chilly, long enough that the daytime rabble of New York has been replaced by the night crawlers. They stumble their ways along the stained sidewalks, swaying from the influence of alcohol or drugs or just life in general. Alec can’t help but be reminded of the zombies from that mundane show that Magnus forced him to watch; lifeless, pallid creatures that seem to have no purpose in life except to consume until they fill the voids in their chests.

Typically, Alec would sneer at the pathetic habits of the mundanes that cave under the weight of life. But he doesn’t exactly have any high ground over them, considering that he himself is stumbling mindlessly down the streets of New York, lifeless and pallid and pathetic. He’s among the Forsaken, cursed by the angels for trying to take a blessing that was not theirs to have. That’s how Alec is; Magnus is a gift that Alec has never once deserved, and now the angels are reminding him of that.

Just thinking of Magnus inspires a sob to well up in Alec’s chest, like a balloon that someone blows up until eventually it pops from all of the pressure. Alec idly wonders when his heart will do that. When it will finally shatter from the weight of the agony that grows there, when it will burst and send shrapnel flying throughout his body. Perhaps he will die instantly. Perhaps he will slowly – agonizingly – fade away, the blood leaking out of him like red rivers of broken fate threads.

A part of Alec hopes that he will. Another part believes that he already has, that he’s trapped in some limbo. The world here seems far more gray, all the noise muffled, all the color leeched out, all the joy and happiness and contentment ripped away until only the pitiful scraps of existence remain. He feels empty and cold.

It’s a chilly night. Or maybe that’s just Alec. He isn’t sure anymore. But he left his jacket hanging up on the coat rack right inside Magnus’ door. Where he’s always left it, every time he’s come over, until it became Alec’s Hook, meant for his jacket and only his jacket. A reminder that he has a place reserved in Magnus’ life, in Magnus’ heart.

Alec doesn’t have that now. Nor does he have his jacket, which would be nice at the moment, considering that Alec has been clutching at his arms and shivering for the better part of however long he’s been outside. He allows himself to wonder what Magnus will do with his jacket. Maybe throw it out, maybe burn it. Alec hopes that he will at least give it to charity, maybe save someone from shivering out in the cold as Alec is now. He deserves it; no one else does.
He doesn’t have his stele either. That was left forgotten in his jacket pocket. His seraph blades and holsters were left on the entryway’s side table. And his bow and quiver were abandoned in his haste as well. Not that those two matter; technically, they belong to Magnus anyway.

Odd, isn’t it, how Alec can go his entire life never forgetting things as imperative as his stele and weapons. And yet in light of losing the most important thing in his life, they were utterly overlooked. Minuscule thoughts that rendered absolutely zero significance compared to the turmoil roiling in his heart. Fleeting trivialities that lay useless and abandoned by his bleeding heart.

It doesn’t matter, anyway. Alec thinks that perhaps nothing really matters.

He just feels so exhausted. He always does these days. Whether it’s because of the never-ending situation with Valentine, or because of the relentless bullshit stemming from the Clave, or because of his ever-worsening relationship with his siblings, Alec doesn’t know. Maybe it’s because of that persistent ache that had settled in his head and his heart, back when he had been a boy and he had first learned true horror. Perhaps everything has steadily compiled until it topples down and buries him in the rubble, left to suffocate where he lays, alone and so very afraid.

What’s the point of wasting so many of his precious few hours of free time in some therapist’s office, of staying up past his bedtime and sacrificing hours of sleep reading books on self-help, of painstakingly breaking down the walls he has built up, if those very walls are just going to collapse on top of him? What’s the point? Of everything Alec has sacrificed for the tears that now plague his eyes, of the coldness that shivers in his chest, of the gaping hole that has opened where his heart once belonged, has any of that ever been worth it? Wouldn’t it just be better to keep everything buried, deep, deep down where it can never resurface? Wouldn’t it have been better to have stayed in the closet, to have never confronted that forsaken conflict of lust and fear?

Alec doesn’t know. He just doesn’t know anymore.

He passes by a skyscraper. Alec doesn’t bother to read the name provided on its side, or to even look around him and attempt to recognize where he is. He’s spent his entire life in New York City, has been wandering the streets unsupervised since he was ten. Alec knows New York like the back of his hand – better, even, given that he’s been drilled on subway routes and sewage systems and electrical layouts and ley lines – and yet all of that awareness fades away into a blurred notion. He doesn’t know where he is. He doesn’t really care to know, either.

But he passes by that skyscraper. And he stops in his tracks, and tilts his head back until he can see the top. He can’t help the idle thought of how high it is. At least more than 700 feet. Certainly more than enough to kill someone, if they were to fall. Or jump. Or simply walk off. Even a shadowhunter with a stele available to activate *iratzes* wouldn’t be capable of surviving. Alec doesn’t even have his stele.

That’s a bad thought.

Alec turns and walks away. But everywhere he looks the sky is blotted out with the towering structures of potential death. Why are there so many skyscrapers in New York? Who thought that would be a good idea? And why is the city always so loud and bright? Alec just wants some quiet. Something to settle the maelstrom in his head. He wants to lay back in dewy grass and gaze up at the stars, recall the stories that his mother had once been willing to tell him about, count all the pinpricks of light and wonder how many more he will never get to see.

Magnus took him stargazing. At first, they had just happened upon a beautiful night sky while exploring some rural village in Switzerland. Magnus had wanted to portal to the next interesting city, but Alec had taken his hand and dragged him out to an empty field and had spread his jacket
out for the two of them to lie on. They had laid there and shared stories with each other in reverent whispers. After that, they had made it an unofficial mission to find the best stargazing place in the world. They had traveled to the Atacama Desert in Chile, and the Brecon Beacons of Wales, and tiny little Sark of the Channel Islands. Those were perhaps Alec’s favorite trips.

Thinking of Magnus hurts. A visceral pain that nearly has Alec whimpering to himself like some pathetic little child. He’s been biting back sobs all night. But when he goes to rub a cold-numbed hand over his face, he feels the tell-tale trace of tear tracks. Alec doesn’t bother wiping them off. They will just be replenished with fresh tears.

He should probably go home. Not home-home, as in the place that warms up his frozen bones and soothes his fractured heart. But home as in the Institute. The building that has been the beginning of his life and will no doubt be the ending of it as well. Perhaps he should call Izzy, should rush to her room and cling to her as she once did after her nightmares. Alec wishes that this was a nightmare. And he wishes that he could seek comfort as he once had. He wishes that he wouldn’t hate himself for crying on his sister’s shoulder. But he would hate himself, because Izzy does not deserve his fucked up head and his broken heart; especially not when she has her own miseries to work through, whatever those may be.

And, besides, there’s something spurring him on. Some unknown force compelling his feet to continue on. One step after another, on and on until the pain fades into a numbing buzz, starting at the balls of his feet and crawling up his legs like thousands of spiders. Awareness steadily abates, washing away into a sea of emptiness. It’s a bitter sort of relief that allows Alec to keep walking.

Eventually, that tugging deep in his gut grows into a recognizable feeling. His parabatai bond, perhaps the only sensation that can possibly squirm through the fog obscuring his heart. The rune is sharp and hot to the touch, and Alec can’t stop the stinging pain that plagues his head. A migraine, a stomach ache, a sore throat. Lost, alone, worried.

He needs to find Jace.

Even without his stele to activate his tracking rune, even with his head pounding and his heart cold and his feet like lead, it’s entirely too easy to find his careless, reckless, immature parabatai. Alec ends up in werewolf territory – the Bronx – standing in front of the Hunter’s Moon and staring emptily into the rowdy bar. People are yelling, shoving past each other, hurling insults and slurs and mockeries that fly right over Alec’s head. It’s as if he’s underwater, everything muffled and distant.

But he takes a deep breath of New York air that tastes of booze and smog and he forces all of his frayed emotions down, down, down until his head clears. He catches a flash of blond hair, and he follows the sight with the focus that has been trained into him since before he could walk. Alec is an archer, and any archer worth their salt knows how to track a target through a crowd.

Not to mention, Jace has always been an easy target to follow. He is absolutely shit at blending in. Alec can’t help but sneer at how it is because Jace has never needed to blend in, not like Alec has. But he doesn’t have the energy or the vindictive mindset necessary to hold his anger, and it slips out of his mind like sand. Instead, he channels what pitiful amount of strength he has left to straighten his spine and square his shoulders, a soldier preparing to march into war.

Out of all the bars and clubs that Alec has passed and vaguely glanced at, the Hunter’s Moon is the only one that he has ever liked enough to actually go into. It’s a Shadow World exclusive establishment, protected from mundane eyes by several layers of wards. However, ‘Shadow World exclusive’ typically means that it’s a downworld establishment with obvious disdain for nephilim patrons. It doesn’t help that the Hunter’s Moon is in the Bronx, and is very firmly within the New
York pack’s territory. Alec has never really cared for the contempt and derision; he has never been the sort of person to frequent bars or clubs or any such places of business, but his skin still prickles when he steps over the threshold and is forced to shoulder his way through the rowdy crowd.

Alec has never been much of a drinker and the only times he has ever gone to bars has been to collect his drunk siblings and aggravatingly herd them back to the Institute. But after his first date with Magnus at the Hunter’s Moon seven months ago, he became a bit of a semi-regular. It wasn’t an every week sort of thing, but Alec slowly became a familiar face to many of the patrons, and he’s on first-name basis with several of the bartenders – such as Maia and her co-workers Pete and Simran. He’s met the majority of the New York pack within the establishment, and he’s even helped Maia handle a few of the more disruptive patrons.

Even so, the tension is undeniable as he makes his way further inside. The various patrons shove at his shoulders, pushing back against him as he attempts to make his way through the crowd. It’s more crowded than the laidback bar typically handles, and Alec practically has to fight his way through the masses. Between his exhaustion and the headache pounding behind his eyes and the heartache rippling through his chest, the last place Alec wants to be is in the epicenter of a pissed off, drunken werewolf mob.

Of course, that’s exactly where Jace is.

And in that moment – when a clearly drunk and belligerent Jace gets shoved onto a table by a red-faced werewolf and the crowd is yelling and he can vaguely hear Maia shouting for everyone to leave – it doesn’t matter that Alec feels like he’s breaking apart, piece by piece. It doesn’t matter that Alec walked past skyscrapers and wondered how high they were, it doesn’t matter that Alec has been shivering desperately for hours. Alec doesn’t matter.

What matters is that Jace has gotten himself into trouble. And, when it comes between Alec’s well-being and his siblings’ well-being, his big brother instincts always win over.

He plows his way through the crowd, using his height and angelic strength to fight past the pack of pissed off werewolves, until he makes it to the little pocket of open space – a makeshift fighting ring – where some burly werewolf he doesn’t recognize looks ready to throw a vicious punch. Jace is drunkenly attempting to scramble up from where he had been slammed down on a table, and the sight is pathetic enough that Alec has to stop himself from rolling his eyes. But it further compels him to step between his brother and the werewolf, snapping out a firm “enough” that manages to catch the crowd’s attention.

The bar quiets, but in the way that builds up the tension. Alec pushes on before anyone else can react. “I apologize for anything my brother has done, but getting in a bar fight isn’t going to help anyone,” he reasons in a tone of voice that he often adopts when he’s in charge of a patrol.

The werewolf – clearly drunk and clearly not willing to listen – looks ready to charge at Alec, and the crowd is in the mood for a fight. As an active-duty shadowhunter, Alec technically has the authority to arrest the werewolf and even many of the crowd; he really doesn’t want it to come to that. Thankfully, before the situation can devolve any further, Maia joins him and begins ordering everyone to clear out. It’s nearing 4 AM – the official closing time of any bar in New York City – and, while downworlder establishments rarely follow mundane laws, it gives Maia a good excuse to cut everyone off and corral them out of the building. Alec gets roped into helping herd drunken werewolves and seelies through the maze of tables and chairs and out the doors, a task that he’s surprisingly good at, given how often he’s done the exact same thing for Jace and Izzy.

Half an hour later and it’s just an irritated Maia, a heartbroken Alec, and a passed out Jace left in the Hunter’s Moon. Maia casts a withering glare in Jace’s direction, and then focuses it on Alec.
Her eyes study his face for a fleeting minute, and the glare softens into an exasperated almost-concern that makes Alec’s skin crawl.

“You look like shit,” Maia comments in a casual tone that immediately sets Alec on edge.

Alec knows Maia’s particular brand of tough love. He doesn’t think his heart can manage that, regardless of how well-intentioned Maia may be. “I’m sorry about this idiot,” he deflects, walking over to where Jace is passed out like a sack of particularly alcoholic potatoes on one of the tables.

He smacks the blond’s face a few times and rolls his eyes at the ensuing groan. Jace rolls off to the side, and Alec doesn’t even attempt to stop the bastard from faceplanting onto the ground. Instead, he just bends down and slings one of his parabatai’s arms over his shoulders and bodily heaves him onto his feet. Maia seems thoroughly unimpressed with the entire affair, but her sharp gaze lingers on Alec and follows him as he drags Jace out of the building.

“Lightwood,” the girl calls once Alec has gotten a few steps down the streets.

Alec forces himself to turn back around and makes eye contact. It’s more difficult than he expected. He’s so cold. He wonders if maybe he is so cold that it radiates from his body, that maybe Maia can feel it permeating the early morning air between them.

“Call. If you need,” the words are short, and they would perhaps sound bitchy to anyone else. But they’re the direct sort of permission that Alec understands best.

He nods and offers a tight-lipped grin that’s so obviously fake it hurts. Maia can definitely tell. But Alec turns away from the Hunter’s Moon and resolutely trudges down the street, dragging his entirely unhelpful brother with him.

Alec had spent almost the entirety of his teenaged and early adult years dragging his incredibly drunk (and oftentimes high or stoned) siblings out of various bars and clubs. As soon as Jace and Izzy had hit sixteen and fourteen, respectively, they had gone off the deep end as far as partying went. For several years, every night had been spent patrolling the dark alleys of New York for either packs of demons or the shadiest source of alcohol. And, without fail, Alec had always ended his nights with Jace’s arm slung over his shoulder and Izzy leaning against his side and invariably someone’s vomit on his boots.

It’s one of the darker aspects of the Shadow World. Theirs is a terrifying world, and the burn of alcohol tends to numb someone from the pain and horror. Downworlder-owned establishments aren’t often in the habit of checking IDs, and mundanes can’t even see a glamored shadowhunter, so any young shadowhunter with enough talent or guts to sneak out of the Institute and get shit-faced very easily can, without any safety net for the more gruesome outcomes.

If there is one good thing that has come from Clary’s abrupt intrusion into their lives, it’s the fact that his siblings are too busy finally being responsible to go out and party as much. (Two things. Two good things from Clary’s arrival. Alec would probably have never met Magnus, much less have gotten the chance to spend so much time with him. But that one hurts a little bit more.)

Typically, Alec would painstakingly sneak his inebriated siblings back into the Institute, force some water into them, and then shuffle them off to bed. Alec doesn’t think he can stomach the sight of the Institute. Not now. He won’t be able to stand the stained glass windows depicting righteous, murderous angels, the constant noise of the night-shift currently at work in the Ops Center, the sight of his mahogany desk where he had been laid out and forced to suffer far too many times. The Institute hasn’t been Alec’s home in a very long time. And, well, Jace has been kicked out as well.
Alec and Jace have nowhere to go. It’s a painful feeling, to be without a home. But Alec has been walking for hours and he’s terrified that if he stops now then the weight of his broken heart will collapse in on him. So he keeps walking, keeps dragging Jace alongside him, until eventually his brother actually passes out on him and Alec is forced to drop them down onto a park bench.

They’ve ended up in some little park; it isn’t one of the official parks of New York City, rather just a speck of green in an otherwise overwhelmingly gray neighborhood. The bench is cold underneath him, and the dew eagerly soaks through his pants. There’s a brisk wind that cuts right through to Alec’s heart. The air smells of early morning smog and despair. Jace’s drunken weight is heavy against Alec’s shoulder, and his warmth would be much nicer if not for the rancid stench of barley and hops wafting from his mouth.

There’s a playground off to their side, a simple little thing that features a swing set, a slide, and some monkey bars. The last time Alec went to a playground was years ago. Izzy and Alec had discovered that Jace had never been on a swing before. They had begged their mother to take them to the park, and Izzy had sworn to teach Jace how to swing (but Alec had ended up being the one to push Jace, when he had proven quite incompetent when it came to swinging).

He wants to get up off of the bench and maybe try to see how awkward it would be to swing, what with his tall height. To maybe relive the simplicity and ignorance of his youth, to maybe forget all the pain and strife that clings to him now. Horrific, isn’t it, that the years of abuse and parental neglect seem to be the most joyous of his life?

Alec doesn’t get off of the bench. He’s far too tired. Instead, he simply sits there and allows his achingly weary mind to drift. He can’t tell how long it lasts, only that eventually the sun starts peaking up above the buildings of the city. It’s perhaps around five in the morning when a vibrant beam of sunlight strikes Jace in the perfect angle to startle the fool awake.

The blond flinches from the sudden light and reels back enough that he nearly falls off of the bench. Alec continues to stare at the distortions of light on the worn metal of the slide; he doesn’t even pay Jace any heed, too caught up in the absolute silence of his own head. It’s lonely in there, and it does nothing but remind Alec of how empty his heart feels.

Jace squawks out an indignant noise as he narrowly avoids faceplanting on the floor – for the second time that morning – and he struggles to right himself with all the grace of a hungover newborn deer. A flailing arm catches Alec in the shoulder, rocking him from the impact like a ship tossed asunder. If not for the exhaustion that plagues his limbs and the fog that shrouds his mind, Alec would probably smack Jace back for all the trouble.

As it is, Alec leans into the contact, until the entire length of his body is pressed against Jace’s. It soothes a bit of the freezing agony that nestles in his bones, it calms the storming thoughts that cloud Alec’s head, it warms the chill that devastates his heart. Between all the Clary Problems, and the Valentine Problems, and the Jace Problems, Alec has almost forgotten how comforting it is to simply sit there and soak up the company of his cherished, foolish, reckless parabatai.

“When the fuck are we?” Jace mumbles, squinting and rubbing at his bleary eyes like a child. The odd contrast between his youthful expression and sleep-ruffled hair, and the tousled party clothes and stench of alcohol would usually make Alec laugh.

Alec isn’t much in the mood for laughter, however. To answer Jace’s question, he shrugs. A curt, sharp up and down of his shoulders. His bones feel brittle enough that he thinks maybe he will shatter from the movement.
“Allllleeeeeeeel,” Jace drawls in an obnoxious high-pitched whine that reminds Alec of a toddler, and not at all in any endearing manner. The younger shadowhunter collapses into Alec’s side, smooshing his face against Alec’s shoulder as if hiding his aching eyes from the sun’s rays. “Why are we at a park?” he grumbles.

Because they don’t have anywhere else to go, Alec wants to say, wants to scream. Because the Institute is a prison and they are no longer welcome at Magnus’ and they will just have to live on the streets or something because clearly no one wants either of them to stick around. Why do people always leave? Why is Alec never good enough? And why does it hurt every single time? Why can’t he just get used to it already?

He doesn’t even realize that his shoulders are quivering, that fresh tears are inching down his cheeks, that a whimper has grown deep in his chest until it is finally spilling forth past his lips. He doesn’t notice until Jace is scrambling to keep up, to get closer, to pull Alec into a tight embrace that compresses his chest enough that it almost manages to hold his broken heart together.

“Woah, okay, what?” Jace splutters at first, head spinning with a mixture of leftover booze and sudden confusion. “Alec, buddy, what’s wrong?”

Alec shakes his head and croaks out a wholly unconvincing “nothing” that Jace doesn’t trust for a single second.

“Bullshit,” Jace scoffs, not unkindly, tightening his grip on his parabatai and fervently trying to push any amount of comfort he can through their bond.

Alec clings to him, clutching desperately at Jace’s jacket, face hidden against his shoulder, arms banded tightly around him. There are minute tremors wracking through his body and an unnatural cold clamminess of his skin that sinks into Jace.

“C’mon, Alec, what’s wrong?” Jace tries again, trying to suffuse his words with the sympathy and concern he feels. “Don’t give me any of that I’m fine bullshit because clearly you aren’t fucking fine.”

Alec leans into his younger brother’s embrace even more, allowing the strength and warmth of Jace’s arms to hold him up. He feels boneless, weighed down, exhausted. He can’t breathe and he’s shivering and the entire world feels gray and lifeless around him. His heart stutters in his chest, a fleeting pulse that splutters and dies; he leans his head down and rests his ear as close to Jace’s heart as possible, desperately hoping that the steady rhythm of his pulse will soothe the agony ravaging in Alec’s chest.

It’s a familiar heartbeat, one that echoes his own, a call and response that had set into place when they had been teenagers and had sworn their souls to each other. And there are those familiar arms around him, the same that have casually been slung over his shoulders, the same that have sparred with him, the same that have reached out for him after a childish nightmare. It’s Jace, his brother, his parabatai. Literally the other half of his soul.

But it isn’t who Alec wants, not who Alec needs.

(He wants Magnus. But Alec has never been lucky enough to get what he wants.)

“I messed up,” he whimpers out, voice all high-pitched and sniffly. And the truth hits him, suddenly and violently. He messed up. It’s all his fault.

Of course Magnus would assume the worst. Alec has been sneaking around, has been downright
lying, for several weeks. He’s been cautiously guarding his text messages and he’s been fidgety and suspicious around others. Alec still remembers the nights where – in the sanctity of darkness, when he and Magnus laid with their legs tangled and their breathing in sync – Magnus had revealed the reasons why he had locked his heart away for so long. Alec is not foolish enough to believe it to be the full story, not yet, but it had still made his blood boil to hear of Camille’s countless affairs, of how she had taken other lovers, of how she had fucked them in the bed her and Magnus had once shared, of how she had often forced Magnus to watch.

Alec hates Camille, but he also hates himself. He should have known how his actions would look to Magnus. He should have taken Magnus’ feelings into consideration, instead of just selfishly caring only for himself. Alec should have told Magnus, should have trusted him with the truth.

“I don’t think Magnus is going to forgive me,” he admits, the words final and heartbreaking in the early morning quiet around them.

“Then he’s a dumbass,” Jace declares, immediately and resolutely, not allowing a single moment of hesitation or doubt.

“No, he’s not,” Alec defends petulantly. “I’m the dumbass.”

Jace tuts like some sort of exasperated mother hen. “Oh, my idiot parabatai,” he mumbles, running a hand over Alec’s head. Alec feels like some sort of lap dog, but it isn’t necessarily a bad feeling. “You messed up. So what? We piss each other off all the time, and look where we are now! Having some good brotherly bonding time on a random bench someone in New York,” his blasé tone draws a reluctant snort from Alec, but he doesn’t stop there. “You regret it, so, I don’t know, go apologize and then make out with your boyfriend or something. And if Magnus doesn’t take you back, then he’s a fucking dumbass.”

Jace’s particular brand of comfort would be almost soothing, if Alec were not so offended on Magnus’ behalf. Because Magnus isn’t the dumbass; Alec is. Jace doesn’t have any right to ridicule Magnus like that.

“I’ll fight him,” Jace continues, all brash bravado and unwavering support. Alec is suddenly hit by the profound longing deep in his gut; he’s missed Jace, has missed Jace’s unquestionable loyalty. Between Clary, and Valentine, and their own falling out, it’s a side of Jace that Alec has seen less and less of. And it’s so desperately necessary in that moment.

“I’ll kick his ass. I’ll kick his ass so hard that it’ll knock his stupid pointy-toed designer boots right off. And Izzy will help, Max too. The three of us will beat him up for you. No one messes with a Lightwood and gets away with it. He won’t see what’s coming.”

Jace’s narrative drags a choked laugh out of Alec, one that he is fully too miserable to truly appreciate, but that almost feels nice nevertheless. The laughter is too high-pitched, too reedy and breathless and forlorn to be anything good. But it’s nice to laugh. To let the air stumble out of his chest and stutter out into the chilly air and to let the tears leak out of his eyes and freeze just a bit on his cheeks. Perhaps it makes him feel more alive. Perhaps it’s a reminder of why he doesn’t want to be.

“I don’t want you to beat Magnus up. I just want him to forgive me,” Alec mumbles.

“What’d you do anyway?” Jace wonders.

Alec hesitates. This is Jace he’s talking to. Jace who is brash and insensitive more often than not. Jace who is his brother and parabatai, who has stuck beside him through thick and thin. Jace who
has been suffering through all the revelations of his parentage and the effects of his horrid upbringing. Jace who Alec has shielded from the morbid details of his own abuse for over a decade.

A part of Alec – that scared, lonely child – longs to tell Jace everything, to let the words and the tears pour out unfiltered, to allow himself that bit of comfort, to continue clinging to his brother’s shoulders and hide away from the weight of the world. But a far larger, more consuming side of Alec flinches away, draws back from the idea. Alec is the older brother, the protector of his siblings. Jace is already weighed down by so many things; Alec will never forgive himself if he makes things worse.

He makes a minor concession to the agony in his heart, and profusely prays that it will be enough. “He thinks I’m cheating on him.”

Jace tenses and goes utterly still in an eerie way that reminds Alec painfully of some lifeless statue. Alec tightens his grip on Jace’s jacket, can feel how white his knuckles are, and holds his breath. He’s tense, like a bowstring right at the height of the draw, ready to be loosed and shot forward. But he’s aimless, drifting, no target in sight.

“No,” Jace says, voice a contradiction of flat and livid. “Absolutely not,” he continues, already pulling back from Alec’s embrace and getting ready to stand from the bench. “I’m going to kick his ass.”

“Jace-”

“He has absolutely no right to fucking accuse you of that!” Jace goes on in full rant mode. Righteous fury is apparent in his tone, and it is simultaneously reassuring and aggravating. “After everything you guys have been through, after how you responded to Robert’s affair, Magnus really fucking thinks you would ever cheat? What a bastard!”

“I haven’t been telling him the truth, and he assumed the worst!” Alec shoots out, shoving out of Jace’s hold and glaring at his brother. He wants to both continue the prolonged hug and also punch Jace. But more than anything he wants to go back to Magnus’ loft and beg forgiveness. “I don’t think this is something we can get past and it’s all my fault, Jace.”

Jace heaves out an exasperated sigh, but inches closer to Alec once more and tosses an arm over Alec’s shoulders. The weight of it keeps Alec tethered to reality, a string that stops him from floating away.

“I hate him for this,” Jace mutters, but turns to Alec with intense eyes. Alec is forced to meet his gaze; it’s nearly impossible not to squirm away. “But I know how much he means to you,” Jace admits, seeming almost reluctant to do so, “and I’ve seen how much you mean to him. It’s a lot, buddy. So just, I don’t know, tell him the truth. And things should work out, I guess.”

Alec is utterly floored by the uncommonly reasonable advice from his notoriously blunt parabatai. The ground seems to shift under his feet, and if Alec were not seated on a bench, his knees very well would give out on him. Could it be possible? Could Alec force the words out, enough to explain everything to Magnus, enough for Magnus to understand? Would Magnus even be willing to forgive him?

There’s only one way to find out, and it will make or break Alec.

His brother smiles, warm and loving and fragile, but then it wavers and shifts into a frown. “I know that I-” here Jace falters, looking away and scoffing at himself, “I know that I haven’t been
supportive of you, these past months. And I’m sorry,” Jace’s voice cracks, but he purses his lips and clears his throat before meeting Alec’s gaze. The blond’s eyes are suspiciously wet, and Alec is sure they match his own. “But I am here for you, Alec. I’m always on your side. More than anyone else I’ve ever known, you deserve to be happy. And if Magnus makes you happy, then he better get his shit together before I hunt him down.”

Tears well in Alec’s eyes and he sucks in a sharp, cold breath that hits the back of his throat. “Jace… thank you,” he chokes out.

Jace holds out his arms and Alec gratefully falls back into the embrace, crying (once again) into his brother’s shoulder and feeling so incredibly relieved to have him in his life. The sleeve of Alec’s own shirt grows damp, and Alec can’t help but snort at the pathetic image they must make. Two of the greatest shadowhunters of their generation, and here they are sobbing on a park bench at the crack of dawn.

Something settles in Alec’s chest. The chill slithers away, pushed back by a warmth that nestles in his heart. He recognizes it as all the love and compassion and loyalty that Jace has ever offered him, and he relishes the life it restores to his limbs. He feels human again; his heart beats out an eager rhythm, and he draws in a deep breath, and when he blinks his eyes open it’s to the sight of a creeping sunrise and a new day.

Alec draws back, somewhat reluctantly. As much as he cherishes his moments with his brother, he has things to do. “I have to go,” he rushes out, energized and desperate all of a sudden.

Jace smirks and claps him on the shoulder. “Atta boy!”

Alec rolls his eyes, but leaps from the bench and turns in the direction of Brooklyn. Back when Alec and Magnus had gone on their first date, Alec had recited what he had often heard others mention. Relationships take effort. He can’t just give up on Magnus, can’t give up on himself, can’t give up on them.

It’s time to go home.

Chapter End Notes

I happen to absolutely hate Jace in the show (and in the half book I managed to read). But! I really like the idea of Jace as a character, if only it was flushed out and portrayed differently. So, the only way I can tolerate Jace is if I use my artistic license to write him the way I see him.

Also. Alec and Maia are totally bros. They bond by bitching about the Clave and Jace.

Thank you all for making it this far and continuing to leave me such wonderful comments! I hope you all enjoyed this chapter!

~PNGuin
Chapter 23

It had been six months since Hightower had left, and nothing had changed.

Alec woke up every morning at 05:00 on the dot and crawled out of bed already dreading the day. He spent all his morning hours with the heavy weight of a blade or a bow in his hands, practicing his form until his skin chafed and bled from the strain. He devoted his afternoons to studying, staring listlessly at the pages until the ink began swimming before his eyes. His evenings were spent working with Hodge, sparring with Jace, running patrols until the familiar pounding of his heart echoed deeply in his chest. And every night he dreaded retreating back to his bedroom, loathed separating himself from his siblings for an expected seven hours, abhorred the thought of laying paralyzed with fear in his own bed, resented the long nights he spent quivering and alone curled up in the cold porcelain embrace of his bathtub.

Six months had passed and Alec felt the weight accumulating upon his soul like sediment, dust settling in the crevices around his heart, being shoveled over him as if he were already resting six feet under. Every breath was a strangled gasp, every step was a momentous leap, every fiber of his being protested under the strain of his continued existence.

Someone had once told Alec that *time healed all wounds*. At the time, they had been referring to a particularly nasty infected demon scratch that he had received from a botched patrol. Alec had easily accepted the old adage, had gritted his teeth and bit back his tears from the searing pain; even with healing from the Silent Brothers, Alec had laid in the infirmary for days, trapped in isolating agony. He had chanted the saying in his head, a stark reminder that shadowhunters were never permitted to succumb to pain, that eventually his angelic strength would win out over his body’s weakness.

At age fifteen, months after the wretched abuser had rejected his own victim, Alec learned a valuable lesson. Time existed as a cruel patron, enduring and perpetual, but detached and callous to the plights of the living. It never paused, never offered any consideration to the countless people it ruined. Like Hightower, Time was cold and ruthless, greedy and manipulative; it forced him to make decisions he didn’t want to, and then mocked him for doing so. Time never healed anything.

But it passed, nevertheless.

Until, eventually, it was Alec’s sixteenth birthday. And Alec was very decidedly hiding.

He woke up early, before the sun rose, and retreated to the sanctuary of the Institute gardens. Hidden among the groomed hedges and trimmed flowers, Alec pulled out his seraph blade and
practiced his stances until the sun climbed high above him, sweltering and stifling, and his arms began quivering from the strain. Sweat crawled down his back, dripped into his eyes and blurred his vision, slipped down between his fingers and threatened his hold on his sword. His hands had chafed long before, blisters torn and blood mixing with the sweat.

Alec stumbled, a minor misplacing of his feet that threw his balance off for a split second. His knees hit the ground, the impact vibrating in his very bones, and the muted thump of his blade hitting the grass rattled deep in his chest. He gasped for air, a sudden commodity that he’d gone too long without, and his eyes watered with the familiar sting of tears. He ground his fists – bloodied and bruised – into the dirt in front of him and hiccuped out a pathetic little cry.

That was all he permitted himself. And then he sucked in a deep breath that tasted of flowers and blood, and he dragged himself back onto his aching feet. He tightened his hand upon the sword’s grip until his knuckles whitened, until his hands looked like bone stained a deep red from the blood that leaked out of broken skin. A throbbing ache welled under his skin, trickling down his spine, pooling deep in the pit of his stomach, pervading every atom of his being. He forgot if that pain was physical or not.

He eased back into first position: legs shoulder width apart, knees lightly bent, back straight. A swift slash diagonally down the torso of the nonexistent opponent on his left, followed by a fierce cut across the neck of the enemy on his right. Most shadowhunters never cared much for music, but the singing of an adamas blade was the grandest symphony, amplified by the empty halls of the cold Institute or by the screeching of vanquished demons.

Alec could have easily been out in the garden all day, staining the earth with his blood and sweat, casting long shadows over the grass as the sun stretched out above him. He wanted to spend his day as such, yearned to do so with a visceral need to perfect the movements that Hodge had deemed dissatisfactory, prayed to the angels that no one would discover his latest hideaway and disrupt his devout dedications.

Alec had, of course, the dubious luck of being the eldest brother to three particularly nosey siblings.

Izzy was the one to hunt him down, dashing out into the small clearing that he had made his bloodied oasis with Jace hot on her heels and Max scampering along behind them. Izzy was only eleven at the time, still all scabby knees and snorting laughter and the softness of childhood. It was almost six months before her first rune ceremony, and Alec had begun counting down the days like they were a doomsday clock, dreading the first night that his little sister would be tossed out into the darkened alleys of New York City. Jace was only a bit older, not yet fourteen, not yet hit by the sudden onslaught of puberty. His voice was still high, his face still round, his laughter still contagious on the wind. Max wasn’t even five; he had only just started running through the easiest of rune flashcards for fun and he still stumbled over his feet and his words.

Comparatively, Alec wasn’t much older than his siblings. Jace had been born two years after Alec, Izzy another two after Jace. And, relatively, the four years between Alec and Izzy wasn’t much at all. But Alec watched his siblings skip over to him, watched the lightness that pervaded their beings, and felt centuries older than them. He wanted to pause time, and hold them within that naivety forever.

Instead, Izzy stormed up to him with all the pent up fury of a slighted eleven-year-old. Her evil-eyed look was little more than a pout at the time, and yet Alec saw the hints of the patented Maryse Lightwood scowl within Izzy’s dark eyes. Alec may have been four and a half years older, but he had always maintained a healthy amount of trepidation whenever Izzy approached him with such
an expression.

“Alec! Why are you hiding out here?” she demanded, planting her hands on her hips and glaring him down.

The intrusion of his privacy – by his obnoxious yet lovable siblings – was the very thing Alec had been attempting to avoid all day. It had bought him only a fleeting handful of hours of privacy, hours which had been spent with a blade clutched desperately in his hands. He just wanted to stand out in the melting heat of the sunshine, just wanted the sharp bite of blisters and cracked skin to drown out the festering in his heart, just wanted to let go and stop thinking.

“Happy birthday!” Max’s exuberant cry yanked Alec from his thoughts, and the young boy barreled headfirst into his eldest brother’s legs.

Alec nearly collapsed from the impact and he was forced to toss his still-activated seraph blade into the bushes; he righted himself with only a slight stumble, tossing an arm around Max’s shoulders. Jace and Izzy threw themselves into the embrace, knocking Alec onto his back and driving all the air from his lungs, turning them into a squirming, giggling mass of Lightwoods.

Even after training outside in the heat for hours on end, Alec felt a profound chill deep in his bones. A burden was pressing down on his chest, constricting his lungs and drawing the air out of him until he deflated. And yet, buried under the weight of his three noisy, annoying siblings, Alec found it easier to breathe, felt the warmth drip back into his veins.

“It’s your birthday and you’re spending it out here training?” Jace accused, only half-jokingly.

“This is unacceptable!” Izzy declared, all bold and bossy. “We need to bake a cake for your sweet sixteen! Especially because Mom and Dad didn’t let us throw you a quinceanero last year!”

Alec groaned and rolled his eyes, shoving Jace off of his chest and pushing himself up onto his elbows. “There’s no such thing as a quinceanero, Izzy. Only girls have quinceaneras. And I have to train.”

“Boo! We should have cake!” Max cried, and Jace all too quickly chimed in with a chant of ‘cake, cake, cake!’

Alec had been up since before daybreak and exhaustion weighed down on his limbs; he had still failed to perfect the move that Hodge had demanded of him, and Alec had been avoiding his mother and father all day. He was cold, even in the heat, and lonely, even surrounded by his siblings. It was his sixteenth birthday and it had been six months since Hightower had left and Alec was miserable.

Between one breath and the next, the tears started. Wretched, pathetic, heaving sobs that rattled in his bones and wormed their way up and out of his mouth. His shoulders quaked with each hiccupping gasp and his eyes stung and the world tunneled until all he felt was the sharp pain of his hands and the emptiness that lingered deep in his chest.

None of the Lightwood children had ever been particularly prone to crying; perhaps because none of them had ever been afforded such a luxury. Jace had the propensity to be whiny, and Izzy’s tantrums were legendary, and even Max’s typically easy-going personality was often moved to whimpering cries, but Alec at least had learned at an early age that crying would never grant him any reprieve. Not from his parents, not from Hightower, not from anyone.

In fact, it was perhaps the first time Alec ever cried in front of his siblings. And it was utterly
mortifying, but as soon as the sobs bubbled up they refused to quit. He curled in on himself, trying to shield himself from the piercing gazes of his precocious siblings, and hated himself more and more for every tear that fell.

Jace applied iratzes to help heal his bloodied and bruised hands. Izzy let him rest his head against her shoulder, reminding him so much of their mother by the way she brushed his hair out of his eyes and let him cry into her shirt. Max settled against his side, a comforting warmth that seeped into the frozen planes of his body. They stayed there, protectively huddled up against their eldest brother, a barricade to shield him from the storms they could not see.

Eventually, he cried himself out, until he was a shriveled little mess of heartache and misery. His face was buried against his own bony knees and his arms ached from where he was hugging himself too tightly. He felt exhausted, down to the very marrow of his bones, a heavy weight that collapsed upon his thin shoulders. But, trapped between the persistent presence of his siblings, he was warm.

Izzy dragged him to his feet, Jace slung an arm over his shoulders, Max latched onto his hand, and together the four Lightwood children retreated to the kitchens. Alec had started his sixteenth birthday before dawn, channeling his fury and pain out through a sharpened blade, but he ended it coated in flour and frosting, the sobs in his chest superseded with laughter, the warmth beating back that icy chill. Alec had spent so many years of his life thinking that he was alone, that there was no one in his corner, that it was him against the world. In reality, he had been too busy standing in front of everyone, acting as a human shield to protect them, that he had forgotten to glance over his shoulder, had neglected to realize that he could fall back and they would catch him.

Alec had never been alone. Not really.

Chapter End Notes

I adore writing the Lightwood siblings, especially when they were younger. I might have to write some one-shots just for them.

We're almost there, my dear readers. Just one more chapter.

Thank you all so much for your continued support, and I sincerely hope you enjoyed this chapter!

~PNGuin
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

All trigger warnings are listed in the tags. If you find I missed anything, please let me know and I’ll add it in.

And now, we come to our conclusion.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XXIV

There’s a crick in his neck. It’s the first thing he becomes aware of as he blinks open eyes that are crusted over with sleep. He drags a hand across his face and tries to shake off the fatigue and exhaustion that plague him. The ground is hard and unforgiving under him, his hips aching from the awkward position he has spent the past few hours contorted in. He must have passed out where he was, as the light that streams in from the windows at the end of the hallway is much brighter than he last remembers.

He’s disoriented for a few fleeting seconds – seconds which he curses himself for – before he recalls his memories of the early morning hours. Right. Alec had wandered New York City idly for most of the night, only to wind up at some park and have a heart-to-heart with his parabatai. He had made his way back to Magnus’ apartment building at the break of dawn, but when he had gone to knock on the door, no one had answered and the door had remained resolutely locked. Not knowing what else to do, Alec had simply settled down against the wall in front of Magnus’ door, and had determined to wait until Magnus was ready to talk. Apparently, Alec hadn’t lasted very long before the draw of sleep had pulled him under.

So now he’s blearily trying to force his sleep-addled brain to function. His limbs are heavy, weighed down with the last dredges of slumber and tight from fatigue. He’s exhausted enough that he can readily pass back out and get another few hours of fitful rest, even with the floor as cold and uncomfortable as it is beneath him. But something must have woken him up.

A throat clears in front of him and Alec nearly gives himself whiplash responding to it. Standing across the hall, framed by the door’s threshold, is Magnus. Alec’s eyes immediately latch onto him, drinking in the sight of the warlock like a parched man. It’s only been a single night since their argument, but Alec yearns for him with a visceral need that leaves him feeling hollow inside.

He scrambles to his feet, feeling every inch of his lanky frame like a newborn deer. Alec is positive that he looks like a disaster, his clothes from yesterday wrinkled, his hair disheveled, his eyes red. His hands are still shaky from the cold that had crept into them over his long night, and a soul-deep tremor rattles in his ribcage. He’s a mess, and that fact is even more apparent compared to Magnus.

Magnus who – Alec notes with growing dread – has donned his own particular brand of armor. His outfit is dark and studded with spikes of metal, streaks of his hair dyed a bright red to match the multitude of colors on his face. He looks beautiful and deadly, the intimidating combination that
Alec knows all too well; the sort of appearance that Magnus applies with painstaking care whenever he needs a shield against the outside world.

Or a shield against Alec.

His arms are crossed and his eyes are dark and unreadable. Magnus’ lips twist into a scowl, his forehead wrinkling, and he looks more pissed off than Alec has ever seen him. But then his eyes soften imperceptibly, a minor change that Alec only catches because he knows what to look for, and Magnus struggles to keep his glare in place.

“Did you sleep out here?” he demands, voice softer than his appearance belies.

Alec gives a pathetic half-shrug. He has so much to say, but the words don’t come.

Magnus’ face twists again, and his eyes war between soft and hard. Alec doesn’t envy the battle that must be going on in his head; all he can think about is how he wants to smooth out the aggrieved wrinkles in Magnus’ brow, to kiss away the anger and hurt marring his face. Alec isn’t allowed to do that anymore. He doesn’t know if he’ll ever be allowed to again. But he has to *try*. Because relationships take effort and they promised each other that they would always *try*.

But Alec understands that he hurt Magnus, whether intentional or mistaken or not. Even if the whole ordeal is just a big misunderstanding, it doesn’t stop the anger and heartbreak pooling in Magnus’ eyes from being real. Alec wants to step closer, wants to blurt out that he’s *so sorry* and that it was all just a lack of communication. His feet are rooted to where he stands, and he knows that this isn’t his decision to make. Alec has taken the first step, and it’s entirely up to Magnus whether or not they will even have this conversation. After the lies he’s told and the secrets he’s kept, Alec knows that control over this talk is the least Magnus deserves.

The silence that thickens between them is terrifying, and Alec thinks he could choke on it. He can’t remember the last time silence existed as a pervasive sickness between them, seeping into all the cracks of their relationship and rotting. His hands itch and he longs for a punching bag or his bow; he settles for folding his hands behind his back and digging his nails into the delicate skin between his fingers. The sharp bite of pain keeps him grounded, and he latches onto the feeling in order to stay afloat.

“Can we talk?” Alec asks, his voice whisper quiet and solemn in the empty space between them.

Magnus’ jaw clenches, hard enough that Alec is sure his teeth are grinding against each other. His dark eyes sweep over Alec, and something of the shadowhunter’s bedraggled and pathetic image must strike him, because then he’s nodding – curt and brusque – and moving back from the doorway.

Alec follows after him with slow, steady steps that fall heavily in the muted quiet of the apartment. Everything looks exactly the same, and yet impossibly different. The colors are grayed, the scents of incense and burnt sugar are faded, the sound of the perpetual music that always drifts through the rooms is silenced. Alec remembers the first time he had stepped foot into the apartment, where – even between all of the chaos of fighting Circle members and helping Clary – the warmth and *life* that had pervaded from every corner had seeped into his very bones, digging in and breathing life back into his lungs.

Now, the air almost feels stagnant. Alec is *cold*. He hates it. But he can fix this. If Magnus gives him the chance, *Alec can fix this*. He has to. He doesn’t know what he’ll do if he can’t.

Alec settles onto the couch as Magnus wanders over to the drink cart. He wants to ask Magnus not
to drink while they have this conversation, but he doesn’t think he has the right to request anything of him. And Alec understands that it’s merely one of Magnus’ defenses, to hide behind the cut crystal of a tumbler and let the burn of alcohol shield his emotions. Alec gets it – perhaps more than Magnus believes he does – but he wishes that Magnus wouldn’t have to hide from him.

Magnus delicately settles down onto the couch, a whole cushion separating them, and it painfully reminds Alec of that first night he had stayed for drinks, grimacing at all of the alcohol and flinching away from any accidental touches. His own emotions are in just as much turmoil as they were back then, but now all he wants is for Magnus to fall back into that familiar playful ease, for Magnus to casually brush a hand over his arm and let their fingers touch as he hands a glass off to Alec.

Neither of them speak, and it is the single most painful silence Alec has ever sat through. He had walked back to Magnus’ apartment, repeating an entire essay on what he was going to say if Magnus would listen to him. He would start with ‘he’s my therapist’ or maybe just ‘I’ve been going to therapy.’ He would explain that he was sorry for lying to Magnus, that it wasn’t a malicious intent but rather a fear that had spurred him on. He would apologize and beg forgiveness, on his knees if that’s what Magnus needed from him. And he would promise to do better – always better because he is never enough. He has a plan all set up, the words are right there at the tip of his tongue. He can do this.

“His name is Dr. Nicholas Abernathy,” is what inevitably slips out instead. He immediately sucks in his lips, cursing himself and wishing he could suck the words back in. But he can’t. Alec can’t.

He doesn’t have to be looking at Magnus to feel the flinch the warlock gives. It’s a small movement, hardly even a shift, but Alec feels it like the whole couch has wobbled. It settles deep in his bones and trembles there. But before he can rattle it back out and try to recover, Magnus is bounding up off of the couch and turning away from Alec.

“Oh, he’s a doctor. Well, that’s just great for you!” he snaps, waspish and furious in his attempt to hide the heartache. The warlock takes a deep gulp of his drink, drowning the last dredges left and refilling it with an impatient flick of his hand. He spins to face Alec, and the anger is potent in the harsh lines of his face, but all Alec sees is the sadness etched deep beneath the surface. “If you’ve just come to gloat then why did I let you back in!”

It hurts, but Alec gets it. He understands. People always look at Magnus Bane and Alec Lightwood and believe them to be polar opposites. But that’s a shallow perception of them, one that glances over them and only cares for the most superficial of traits. Over the months of their relationship, Alec has learned that they are remarkably similar in the ways that matter, the ways that make them who they are. Magnus is lashing out, pushing away from the issue and trying to distance himself from the pain; Alec recognizes the defense mechanism as one of his own. They build up these walls as armor against the world, walls that have survived racism and abuse and immeasurable violence; but those same walls have crumbled under the steady weight of the trust and maybe-love that they’ve shared, and Alec doesn’t think either of them were prepared for the vulnerability it created between them.

All of it stems from a simple mistake, a meager miscommunication and some hurt feelings. But they’re both so raw and exposed that all of the emotions between them are heightened and frenzied. Alec feels burnt out and frozen all at once, and his words are lying heavy and sick at the back of his throat. Tears burn in his eyes, a frustrated mirror to the stubborn glimmer in Magnus’ gaze. His chest is tight and empty, his soul heavy and disconnected. He doesn’t know what to do and he burns with his own ineptitude.
Magnus chokes out a strangled laugh. It’s high and sharp, and it cuts Alec to the bone. “What do you want from me, Alec?”

*Everything,* he wants to say. But that isn’t his right to ask, nor would he ever expect it from Magnus. The best outcome he can expect at this point is mere forgiveness or understanding, even if he doesn’t deserve it. Magnus might not even be willing to offer it; maybe Alec has run out of chances, maybe his constant mistakes have piled up enough that Magnus will no longer find him worth the effort.

But something in Magnus’ eyes gives him pause, causes a heavy weight to settle over his shoulders. There’s a stalemate between them, but Magnus hasn’t kicked him out, hasn’t pushed him farther away. They’re at an impasse. And Magnus isn’t trying to end the conversation. There, deep in his eyes, is a glimmer of *forgiveness,* or some premature variant of it. Alec can’t help but wonder if Magnus would offer it, fully believing that Alec had cheated on him. Perhaps even at Magnus’ own expense, at the cost of his own well-being. Alec can’t even fathom the thought of deserving forgiveness for inadvertently lying, let alone for *cheating.*

And yet. There is Magnus, angry and hurt and devastated. But he isn’t going anywhere, he isn’t forcing Alec to leave. He’s just…*standing there.* Expectant and tragically hopeful, waiting for something that Alec doesn’t know how to give. Waiting for the other shoe to drop, or for a simple apology, or for the truth to finally come out. Alec doesn’t know. He knows that he wants everything from Magnus, he knows that he wants to give everything to Magnus. He thinks that he maybe loves Magnus.

In that moment – sitting frozen on Magnus’ couch, getting lost in the achingly dark gaze of his glamored eyes – it all *clicks.* Alec has wasted so much of his life thinking that people always leave him. But here’s Magnus, standing right in the face of that belief, resolute and steady, even under the weight of all of Alec’s mistakes and failings. Magnus isn’t leaving him. That isn’t the issue here. Perhaps that has never been the issue in Alec’s life. Perhaps the problem is that Alec has always been running away.

He doesn’t want to run from Magnus, from what they have, from the potential of what they could have.

And then suddenly Alec is scrambling, rifling his hands through his pockets because the words aren’t there, they’re buried deep in the hollow crevices of his chest, but he can *fix this.* He *has* to. There isn’t any other option, not for this. *Alec has to fix this.* The card ends up being crammed in one of his back pockets, crumpled and partially torn but thankfully still legible. Before he can overthink it, before the sudden moment of clarity fades and leaves him wordless, he thrusts the battered card in Magnus’ direction and lets the words finally tumble from his lips.

“Therapy. I’ve been going to therapy.”

Time seems to freeze around them, a fragile moment that hangs in the balance, delicately suspended by a sliver-thin string that seems ready to snap at any second. His eyes bore into Magnus’, pleading the older man to just reach out that mere stretch of space between them. Magnus stares back, face carefully blank but eyes wide in growing realization. His hands are frozen mid-air, his glass catching the light that filters in from the windows.

In one stilted movement, he sets his crystal tumbler down on a side table, the dull *thunk* of the glass hitting the wood resonating in the silence of the loft. His other hand reaches for the card, delicately and slowly, as if he’s scared of the consequences. Alec understands, because he’s almost shaking at this point and he very nearly tries to retract the outstretched card. Alec knows that once Magnus reads it, everything will be solidified. Everything will be *real.*
Magnus takes the card and brings it up to his eyes. And even though he doesn’t read it out loud, Alec knows exactly what it says: ‘Dr. Nicholas Abernathy, Ph.D. Therapy Sessions: Mon-Thurs, 9-4.’ Alec sees the exact moment that all of the pieces fall into place, sees the exact moment that the aggrieved accusation morphs into regret and understanding, sees the exact moment that tears gather in Magnus’ eyes and his knees give out. He collapses onto the couch, heavy and graceless.

Alec has to look away, because for all that he hopes, he doesn’t know what any of this truly means. His leg is bouncing and his skin is buzzing and his hands are shaking and all of his thoughts flit around in his head like gnats. Without his permission, his mouth is opening again and he’s rambling a mile a minute.

“He’s a trauma therapist. And he- he mostly works with victims of- people who have survived sexual violence. I just started with going to group sessions, but then I scheduled some one-on-one sessions with him, and- and I go probably twice a week now, whenever I can. And- and his wife is a werewolf and he knows that I’m a shadowhunter and we talk about- about the Clave and that whole mess, and I also talk about you a lot and he never gets annoyed by that so he’s pretty great. And-”

His brain could no doubt find any number of other things to stumble over, now that he’s started and gaining momentum, but then Magnus is choking out ‘Alexander’ in that devastated tone of his and Alec is forcing himself to meet the warlock’s eyes.

“Lilith,” the older man hisses out, voice stained with tears and grief, “I am so sorry, Alexander. I just jumped right to a conclusion without knowing the situation and I hurt you and I am so sorry.”

But Alec is shaking his head before Magnus even finishes, and cuts the warlock off before he can continue. “Stop that,” he chokes out. “It isn’t your fault. I’m the one that was lying and sneaking around and I know that- with what you’ve told me I should’ve known how that would look to you and I didn’t even-”

“No, you stop that,” Magnus interrupts, shaking his head vehemently. “I made a kneejerk reaction from my previous relationships even though- Alexander, I know you. And I know that you would never cheat. You have never once given me reason to believe otherwise. I should have trusted you over any bad feelings from the past.”

“That isn’t your fault. I wanted to tell you, but I could just never get the words out and then I was weeks into the lies and I didn’t know how to stop and I hurt you.”

“Damn it, Alec, let me apologize to you!” Magnus cries.

“No!” he shoots back. “I’m clearly the alpha apologizer in this relationship and I have a reputation to keep. Let me apologize.” The words come out quivering, a fragile tease to hide the sniffle in his tone.

Magnus pauses in a moment of silence and then an inelegant snort is escaping. “Now is not the time, Alec,” he tries to chide, but his voice wavers with desperate laughter under his breath.

Alec shrugs, his eyes never leaving the image of Magnus, crying and snorting as he’s wreathed in the morning’s light. His breath catches in his chest, but it’s a good kind of ache that settles there,
grounding and beautiful. “Maybe it’s the perfect time,” he answers softly.

He reaches out a hand, intending to grab Magnus’ arm and tug him into a much-needed hug. But he freezes halfway, curling his hand into a fist and withdrawing it. Is it still his right to seek out such comfort? Even after messing up as he did? Will Magnus even want the contact anymore, even allow it to happen?

But before he can fully retract his hand, Magnus grabs it in a firm grip. He tugs, gentle enough that Alec can resist – if he truly wants – but strong enough that Alec can fall into the pull, can collapse under the weight of his shoulders and lean into Magnus’ chest, distributing all of the pressure evenly between the two of them. It’s easier to breathe once his forehead is leaning against Magnus’, once they’re breathing the same air, once they are clutching at each other as if fearing the other will disappear.

His soul settles and the buzzing of his skin eases and his eyes close so that he can relish in the feeling of Magnus’ body against his, of those wonderful warm hands with cool rings resting easily at the nape of his neck and the gentle little grin that he doesn’t have to see to know is there. It feels right, like finally coming home after an achingly long day. He wants to live in this moment forever.

“I am sorry, though,” he murmurs. “I know you’ve asked me not to push you away. And I try, I really do, but it’s just—”

“Shh,” Magnus hushes him, threading a hand through the strands of his hair and guiding his head until it rests against the warlock’s shoulder. Alec wraps his arms tighter around Magnus’ waist and clutches to him. “I understand, angel,” Magnus whispers against his temple with a lingering kiss. “And I’m sorry for confronting you the way I did, and not giving you a chance to explain.”

Alec sighs, and the last remaining vestiges of his stress leak out until he feels boneless and exhausted. “We should probably work on that. Communication skills, I mean.”

Magnus hums in agreement. One of his hands is stroking soothingly up and down the span of Alec’s back and he wants to sink into the sensation. All of his limbs are suddenly so heavy and his eyelids are drooping and he feels utterly drained from the whirlwind of emotions he’s gone through. He just wants to curl up in Magnus’ bed with Magnus’ legs tangled between his and Magnus’ arms tight around him. He just wants to feel at peace, and he knows exactly what he needs for it.

“Will you stay?” Magnus murmurs, achingly tentative in the minimal space between them, as if he’s worried that Alec will turn away now. “You seem tired and… I didn’t manage to sleep last night.”

“Neither did I,” Alec admits.

Magnus nods and then takes a deep breath, savoring the moment for one more second, and then he’s standing and pulling Alec up with their linked hands. He leads him to the bedroom and changes them into comfortable sleep clothes with a lazy snap of his fingers. And then they’re collapsing onto the plush comfort of the bed, immediately gravitating towards each other, all grasping hands and shuffling legs, until they’re sufficiently tangled together in a knot that will not be undone.

The curtains do an admirable job of keeping the morning sunlight out, but a muted golden glow still seeps out past the edges, painting the room soft and luminous. It’s beautiful, but it pales in comparison to the light and warmth of Magnus’ unglamored eyes, and Alec nearly blurts out his coveted three little words right then and there.
"I love you," his heart pounds out in his chest, loud enough that he’s sure Magnus can feel it thrumming from where they’re pressed up against each other. Alec’s eyes reflect the words, and his hands trace it out on Magnus’ back, and they hum – impatient and restless but not quite ready – in the hollow spaces of his lungs. They breathe life into him, filling those cracks that Hightower left and soothing the jagged edges. He wants to whisper them out, wants to see Magnus’ surprise melt into something softer and more shy as the words settle into his skin and drip down into his very bones. He wants Magnus to know.

Not yet. Not now, in this fragile little moment of quiet. Soon, but not quite.

But if he listens closely enough, Alec can almost hear Magnus’ response in the stillness between them. The steady beating of the warlock’s heart against his ear, the soothing glide of Magnus’ hand along his side, the tickle of his hair against Alec’s cheek. It’s in the rustle of the sheets, and the slow slide of their legs against each other, and the little content hum that Magnus gives as he drifts off to sleep. It’s everywhere around them and it settles, unspoken and heavy on Alec’s soul, like a blanket that covers him from the terrors of the world.

He knows that their struggles are far from over. There will undoubtedly be more fall-out from their shared mistakes. Alec knows that they will have to work to improve, so that such mistakes do not threaten the security of their relationship. Alec understands all of the concerns and pressures that they will still have to face. But those are problems for another day.

He drifts off to sleep with his precious three little words at the forefront of his mind, balancing on the edge of his tongue. They taste of promise, and victory, and hope. They taste of love.

For now, it is enough.

Chapter End Notes

I want to thank everyone for reading this, and for leaving such wonderful comments along the way. I spent nearly a year writing this, and I sincerely hope that it does not disappoint. I know that this last chapter might not be as conclusive as you all hoped, but rest assured that this is not the last you will see of this series. I already have several sequels as well as short one-shots planned out, so keep your eyes peeled.

Thank you all so much. I hope that perhaps reading Alec's journey has helped some of you, as I know that it has helped me in my own ways.

Take care, my dear readers.

~PNGuin

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