He was curled up on the seat, headphones caressing his ears with the tunes of another song by American Authors because he had really enjoyed *Best day of my life* and didn't actually know any other songs from them. Raphael wasn't aware of humming along until he finally felt Magnus staring at him with wide but amused eyes.

"What is it, Bane?" He asked and deliberately used the other's last name to show annoyance even though both of them knew it was just an act he kept up for whatever reasons. Habit, maybe.

"Nothing. Just...you seem happy," his best friend replied with a shrug and a genuine smile tugging at the corners of his lips. Raphael paused with a frown, his eyes narrowing before he realised that Magnus was actually right. He felt relaxed and...happy. It was weird that
he hadn't even noticed it himself, considering the tension he had carried around ever since the breakup. But here he was, feeling comfortable and relaxed in a van with his best friend and a not-so-stranger, humming along to some good music with a smile on his face.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter 1

I don't know how many chapters this story will have because my initial thought of finally starting one after planning it properly failed once again because I just had to start it. So, seeing as I don't quite know what this story will contain, there will be tags added on the way, characters and maybe relationships as well, even the rating might change over time so keep an eye on that stuff :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Raphael!"

The boy's head jerked upwards almost quickly enough for the movement to hurt, eyes wide with fear at the sound of his father's angry voice booming through the small house. His mother wasn't at home, she had to go to another check-up because she expected twins and there were only a few weeks left until the expected delivery.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to leave the damn skateboard in the driveway?!" His father yelled and then the door to the living-room flew open, crashing into the wall but nobody paid attention to the door handle causing the already there dent in the drywall to grow a little bigger at the impact, some of the material crumbling to the floor and covering it with a little bit of white dust.

Raphael swallowed thickly and he had already let go of the toy car he had been playing with until this moment. Every nerve ending in his body screamed at him to get up and hide somewhere but that was useless because his father had seen him by now, there was no way of hiding from him now. He contemplated telling his father that he hadn't even used his skateboard in almost a week because he had borrowed it to one of the older kids in the neighbourhood. Well, he hadn't borrowed it to the boy willingly because he had simply taken it but Raphael couldn't say that.

His father would be mad at him no matter what because he wasn't supposed to give his stuff to other kids and if he admitted to being bullied into giving the other boy his skateboard, his father would probably just call him a wimp and that he should stop acting like a scared girl but fight to protect what was his. Raphael was pretty sure that a six-year-old boy wasn't supposed to fight with others over toys and there was nothing girlish about not wanting to get hurt because of a stupid skateboard.

"Get up!"

Raphael scrambled to his feet, heart pounding against his ribs in a panicked rhythm and he already felt his eyes burn a little with upcoming tears but he forced them down - he had gotten better at holding his emotions in check in front of his father and many times he actually managed not to cry until the angry adult was gone. He still couldn't keep his body from trembling in fear, though, and the grim expression on his father's face told him that he had noticed as well.

Raphael could only hope that his face wouldn't get bruised again. He didn't want his mamá to worry, especially because he knew it would only cause another fight between his parents and end with his mother getting hurt as well. Raphael was a boy, he was supposed to become a man and deal with this kind of stuff, right? If only he was better at learning to keep his emotions in check.
His father stepped closer and the looming body of the angry adult would never not scare the shit out of him and it felt like this would never end. Raphael wasn't stupid and he knew nothing was forever but when something horrible happened over and over and over again, it was very difficult to be convinced that it would end someday. Being afraid of his father seemed like something eternal like it had long since wrapped around his bones and would stick to them forever.

Raphael gasped in shock when the front of his shirt was grabbed roughly and the ground disappeared from under his feet when he was lifted off the ground as if he didn't weigh anything and he probably didn't to his father. He resisted the urge to squeeze his eyes shut and instead stare back into the face of his begetter, even though he knew it was impossible to keep the fear out of his eyes and that being afraid made the punishment even worse.

To his surprise, it wasn't a hit in the face that followed but his father cursing him in Spanish, telling him he would grow up to be a disgrace of a man because he cried and got scared too easily before he was simply flung to the side as if he weighed nothing. He crashed into the old coffee table and a jolt of pain radiated off his shoulder that had connected with the corner of the table but even with the first tears trickling down his face and limbs trembling from fear, his main thought was the fact that at least was a body part where he could hide the surely following bruise easily.

Chapter End Notes

Consider this chapter the prologue and it's (obviously) a flashback, maybe there will be more flashbacks later but nothing graphic or worse than this one. Also, this story is not supposed to be more than maybe mild angst and I can guarantee a happy ending because I'm incapable of anything other than that and I love all of these dorks too much to not let them have their "happily ever after" ♥

The other chapters will be longer than this one - if it works out probably always around 3 k but I will have to see about that.
"Raphael? What's going on?"

He didn't pay much attention to Magnus's confused voice when he brushed past his best friend and into the other's pretty spacey apartment. It was obvious that Magnus came from a rich family and that his parents spoiled him quite a lot but Raphael had never found it in himself to be jealous about this or feel patronised whenever Magnus or his mother helped him or his family financially. It would never be comfortable to depend on others like this, even if money was absolutely no issue for the Banes and it didn't hurt them in the least to help Raphael's family every now and then when they couldn't afford to pay their bills.

"What did he do?" Magnus asked and now it was worry that crept into his calm voice, his usual protectiveness surfacing as it always did when Raphael was even remotely unsettled. Sure, him showing on the other's doorstep with his backpack and two duffel bags in tow was probably a worrying sight but Raphael couldn't even feel bad about it right now.

"He was just his usual asshole-ish self and I ended it," Raphael replied with a shrug, trying for nonchalance while letting the two duffle bags slide to the floor, his backpack followed and he bent down to untie his shoes. It was weird to act this calm on the outside while his skin prickled with the storming emotions of hurt and anger. The childhood with his abusive father had taught him how to keep his feelings bottled up and even years after his old man had finally taken off for good, he still felt incapable of lowering this wall again.

Magnus had a certain talent of managing to get through to him and looking past said wall and sometimes it was easy for Raphael to let his best friend in, other times it felt impossible to open up and show himself vulnerable. This was probably a moment where the latter applied and he felt distantly sorry to show up here like this but it wasn't like he had much of a choice. There were only two places he could go and his family home wasn't an option because he wouldn't want his mother or younger siblings to worry.

Of course, he didn't want Magnus to worry either but the other had already dealt with him at his worst and always made sure to tell him it was okay to reach out whenever he needed help in whichever way. The other had basically saved his life once; maybe more than once if Raphael considered all the times his best friend had just sat with him and quietly kept his company, allowing him to crumble and break down when it was impossible to keep it together any longer. And Magnus had once told him that he'd rather share his pain, worry about his best friend while being by his side than finding out that Raphael had decided to suffer alone and shut himself in.

The only reason Raphael had given in to the plea of seeking comfort in Magnus's company was probably the fact that the other was also broken in a very similar way. Even though the other's childhood trauma was probably even worse than Raphael's because while his father had yelled and physically lashed out at him, Magnus's had almost gotten his wife to the point of committing suicide and he had even tried to strangle his own son. But while Magnus had experienced even worse, he was a lot better at dealing with it and he had been better at fighting against the urge to close himself off from the world.

"While I'm glad to hear you finally broke up with this douchebag, I'm sorry that he hurt you again," Magnus said gently after the silence drew out long enough for him to know that Raphael wouldn't elaborate on his own. Raphael huffed and, ignoring his bags, walked into the living room to plop down on the soft cushions of the couch that was coloured in a rich purple, dark enough to almost seem black in dim lighting. He felt the cushions dip lightly next to him and then felt something small press against his lower arm, accompanied by a high-pitched meowing.
Raphael lifted his arm just enough for the kitten to climb onto his thigh and slip into his lap, small fuzzy body pressing against his abdomen and rumbling with content purring.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

The couch dipped again when Magnus sat down next to him, a considerate distance between them to not invade Raphael's personal space. Raphael was usually a person who enjoyed physical contact and he craved the touches of his loved ones, probably the result of his father's horrible treatment and the longing to internalise the fact that being touched didn't equal being hurt. When he was hurting, even if it was just emotionally, he wasn't too fond of being touched without a warning, though. It wasn't that he didn't want the comfort but rather that he had the mostly irrational fear of lashing out - his father had always processed his hurt, frustration and anger by inflicting physical and emotional pain to the people around him. Raphael had just been a small child and hadn't been able to understand why this had been happening to him, why he had been treated this way, and so his brain had drawn the connection that such emotions would lead to hurting the ones he loved if they got too close.

"No." It was a simple enough answer and Magnus hummed softly but kept quiet because he knew even if Raphael said he didn't want to talk about it, he would eventually come around and open up in his own time.

Raphael had his head lowered, narrowed eyes watching the small kitten curled up in his lap and he didn't even know when his fingers had found their way into the softness of the animal's fur. It was oddly calming to run his fingers through the fuzzy texture of the feline's coat and his irrational fear of hurting others in his emotional state, fortunately, didn't include animals. Raphael knew he wouldn't and couldn't hurt a human either, that he wasn't like his father and wouldn't just lash out, but that was just the things with such fears - they didn't make sense and you could rationalise them logically but that still didn't make them vanish.

"It was just one of his stupid jokes but I'm tired of explaining myself to him over and over again because he simply doesn't understand," Raphael breathed out after a few minutes of silence and his voice sounded a little raw from the storm of emotions whirling around in his body. He felt Magnus's gaze rest on the side of his face, taking him in and contemplating the situation.

"I will probably be tempted to go over there and murder Barnaby but what did he say?" Magnus asked carefully and this time his habit of using wrong names for people he didn't like didn't even manage to make the corner of Raphael's mouth twitch. Brandon - the real name of Raphael's now apparently ex-boyfriend - had always glared and Magnus for being called wrong names but that had only caused him to get more creative and annoying with the names. Raphael had only corrected him in the beginning but a few weeks in he had given up on it because it had been admittedly amusing what Magnus came up with sometimes.

"Oh, you know, the usual. It was basically something like "Remember back when you actually thought you were asexual?" because apparently that never registered with him. Not that I'm actually surprised about it. He always acted like I just needed some good sex to realise I'm not really asexual," Raphael answered after another beat of silence, his eyebrows drawing together in obvious anger and it was surprising that he managed to sound this calm and collected.

"Oh my god...I'm surprised the guy manages to make me dislike him even more but I think we're entering the hate territory by now. He probably didn't even bother to inform himself beyond your brief explanation. What an asshole!"

If the situation were different, Raphael would have probably thought that his best friend's reaction was amusing because Magnus rarely resorted to insults and it would never not be weird to hear
him call someone an "asshole" or other slurs. Right now Raphael didn't feel very amused, though, more pissed off and not only at Brandon for being a piece of shit but also at himself for ever thinking that this could work out. It wasn't like he had been in love with the guy and he had only liked him enough to imagine that a relationship could work out. And it had been kind of good, in the beginning. Brandon had been a quite sweet guy and seemed to be really understanding when Raphael told him that sex might not be an option or at least take a while to warm up to.

But somewhere between now and their first year together something had changed and his boyfriend had turned more and more into an asshole, joked about things that were no joking matter to Raphael. They had moved into a small apartment together when Raphael had started university and it had just seemed logical because they always hung out anyway. But living together already brought a strain to their relationship because even though Raphael had a scholarship, the financial aid was still not enough to pay for everything and he still had to work to earn more money and he couldn't just go to every party or afford to eat in restaurants all the time.

Brandon's family wasn't wealthy like Magnus's was but they were doing pretty good nonetheless so he didn't really know the struggle of having to think about every "unnecessary" purchase and he didn't understand that Raphael sometimes preferred to save his money instead of going to some club. He even started to twist Raphael's explanations for why he didn't want to go somewhere to make it sound like they were simply excuses to not spend time together. Raphael hated clubs, the music was horrible, there were too many people, it was sticky, loud and he honestly couldn't care less about alcohol but he went every once in a while just because Brandon wanted to. Magnus had dragged him along to parties every once in a while as well but he always paid attention to Raphael and they always left if he did feel too uncomfortable.

"I'm honestly glad you decided to kick him to the curb because that guy doesn't deserve you," Magnus added after a moment and slowly inched a little closer but he still kept a distance, not entering the other's personal space even though his fingers were tempted to reach out and comfort his best friend. Raphael looked up at that, for the first time since he arrived, and blinked at Magnus with his dark brown, almost black looking eyes.

"I guess I'm kind of glad as well? But it still feels shitty," Raphael admitted in a mumble and shrugged in a helpless little gesture, reminding Magnus of the nine-year-old boy he had met ten years ago because he had a similarly lost expression on his face that time. He couldn't help it anymore and finally gave in to the urge to reach out, gingerly placing his hand on Raphael's lower arm and expecting the other to shake him off but the opposite happened. Raphael's shoulder slumped and the turned towards Magnus, leaning closer and it didn't need any more for the other to open his arms and pull the younger man into a comforting hug.

"He might have been a douchebag but you were still close, it's normal that it hurts and it will probably continue to do so for a little while but that's okay," Magnus mumbled into the other's soft curls - only now realising that Raphael hadn't even styled his hair and probably just packed his stuff to leave without stopping to consider what he looked like. It was another sign for Magnus that Brandon had definitely screwed up for good this time because Raphael always found the time to make sure his looks were impeccable, especially his hair.

"You can stay here as long as you want," he added even though Raphael knew that and probably wouldn't have shown up with so much stuff otherwise. Magnus knew the other wouldn't want to go to his family in his current state and that he also didn't want to stay with them, even though Guadalupe would certainly welcome her oldest son with open arms and tell him to stay as long as he needed.

The "Gracias" mumbled somewhere against his clavicle caused Magnus to smile softly and he pulled Raphael even closer to that he was basically sitting in between Magnus's long legs by now.
His kitten, Chairman Meow, made a few protesting sounds at all the movement and the shifting of his designated nap-lap but he wasn't bothered enough to get up and leave, instead resettled and started snoring softly while Magnus kept on embracing his best friend, rubbing slow circles into his back. He knew Raphael wouldn't cry but soothing him this way still felt like the right thing to do.

It took a while until they disentangled their bodies and Magnus ordered some takeout while his best friend went to store his bags away in the guest room before heading back into the living room. It didn't take too long for them to decide on a movie to watch and the food arrived about an hour into said movie.

"You know, the offer you moving in with me still stands," Magnus mentioned between bites of the Chinese takeout and he glanced at his best friend, expecting a dismissive gesture or at least an eye roll but instead Raphael surprised him with a thoughtful hum around a mouthful of fried noodles with shrimps and vegetables.

"Maybe I will take you up on that after all but I honestly don't know. Right now I just want to stay away from him and try to get back to studying. I have three exams left before the end of the semester and my essay is almost finished as well," he sighed with a little shrug before shovelling some more food into his mouth with the chopsticks. Magnus snorted softly when one of the noodles stuck to Raphael's chin and the other was clearly done with today when he didn't even give a damn about his table manners.

"Don't worry about it, just stay and tell me when you made up your mind but you can focus on your studies for now and we can think about it together when you're done with the semester, okay?" Magnus offered with a smile, watching his best friend wipe his chin with a napkin and it sometimes baffled him a little how this nine-year-old boy was now a young man - a 19-year-old who was stubborn, strong, yet a little bit broken but still carried so much love in his young heart and would probably try to move mountains for his family.

"Okay," was the short reply he got but it was all Magnus wanted to hear. He didn't want his best friend to pile the stress of what to do about his living situation on top of the stress of his final exams of his first semester at university. He still didn't quite get why Raphael had chosen to study "business and technology management" because it sounded horribly dry but the other was certainly bright enough to meet this challenge.

Ten minutes went by with them eating and watching the movie that was closing in on the end, when Magnus placed his now empty takeout container on the coffee table in front of the couch with a triumphant sound, before pointing one of his chopsticks at Raphael to draw his attention in.

"I've got an idea!"

"And here I thought my day couldn't get any worse..."

Magnus frowned with a scandalised huff before shaking his head to get rid of the urge to protest about this distrust in his ability to come up with brilliant plans.

"It's the best idea ever and I won't tell you about it because you dare to give me that face! You will have to deal with it being a surprise and in order for it to work you will have to cancel whatever job you chose to take over the semester break," Magnus ordered, still pointing the chopstick at his now frowning best friend. He already expected that Raphael would shake his head and before the other could do as much as open his mouth to protest or reason with him, Magnus already went on.

"Just trust me on this and don't worry about the damn money. I know you hate to rely on other people's money but let me talk to my mum, let us help you guys."
"You already did enough. I know you horrible rich people don't notice a few hundred bucks less on your accounts but it still feels awful to depend on others financially, we had this talk multiple times already," Raphael replied, placing the now empty box of his food on the table as well before crossing his arms in front of his chest and glaring at his best friend. Magnus managed to keep the corners of his mouth from twitching upwards because the other loved to call them "horrible rich people" from time to time, even though he didn't mean it in a bad way but it was still understandably frustrating for him how easily Magnus offered money to him and his family without expecting anything in return.

"I know but this idea is really great and it won't work when you have stuff planned but I need you with me on this. Please, darling. I promise I will talk to your mum as well and make sure she's okay with it," Magnus pleaded with a hopefully sweet smile and batted his eyelashes even though he knew Raphael was completely unimpressed whenever he did this.

"Good luck with that, mamá won't agree to it anyway," Raphael snorted and his best friend knew he had basically won. Because he would make sure to convince Guadalupe to agree. She was a proud woman and hated to accept other people's charity, no matter how bad her financial situation was, but her children and their well-being were reason enough to put aside the pride. Raphael was always studying and working to not only finance his own things but also to save up money for his family and especially now with this added stress he definitely deserved some time off to relax. And Magnus was more than determined to make this happen!
Chapter 3

I don't know how well my self-proclaimed goal of updating once a week (on Friday) will work out or for how long but we will see about that. One more chapter is done already, let's hope it will continue to work out smoothly.

I hope people weren't scared off by the first chapter or some of the tags, it sounds worse than the whole thing is going to be. There will be drama but everything will be okay in the end and happiness will win, as usual :D Because I'm a sucker for happy endings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Guadalupe hummed thoughtfully and she didn't exactly look happy at Magnus's proposition but he knew that the whole "It's for Raphael's well-being" purpose stopped her from declining right away.

"Your mother already helped us out with more money than we will ever be able to pay back," she sighed and smoothed her hair back, pinning a dark strand behind her ear and Magnus smiled softly because the gesture was very similar to Raphael's habit of pushing his fingers through his hair when he was indecisive about something. His best friend and Guadalupe were very alike anyway and even though Raphael also shared quite a few similarities with his brothers, he was still resembling his mother the most.

Raphael had the same almost-black hair, a little curlier than his mother's, the same shaped face and his lips and nose looked like they were copied right from Guadalupe's features. The form of their eyes was pretty alike as well but they differed in colour - while Guadalupe's eyes were more of a lighter brown with golden specks, Raphael's were a much richer colour, darker and sometimes they were dark enough that the transition into the pupils was barely there. That mostly happened when he was very emotional - either angry or sad/hurt - and the brown darkened to resemble the shade of his hair.

"You know that she doesn't expect you to pay any of it back. She didn't lend the money to you and it was never given to you in pity or with the thought that you owed her anything in return. Also, you guys already pay us back with your friendship and believe me, that's worth so much more than the money we can't spend anyway. Mum works non-stop and doesn't even have the time to spend all of the money and she insisted on keeping to pay for my expenses even though I earn my own money now and don't depend on her's anymore."

Magnus shrugged with a crooked grin and he loved his mother dearly which was the reason he didn't put up much of a fight. Sure, he did enjoy his carefree life and the fact that he never had to pay attention to the price tags, could always buy whatever he wanted because he could afford it, but it still didn't feel completely right to always just take from his own mother. But he also knew that was what she wanted and that she felt bad for not being around because of her work, that it was her way of trying to provide the best life for him after everything that had happened with his father.

He presumed it was also a rich people thing, like Raphael always put it so very eloquently. They always ended up trying to solve things with money because it was basically the path of least
resistance, the easiest solution. Magnus was very well aware of the fact that money wasn't the solution for everything but it certainly helped to get there a lot faster.

"I know, cariño, but it still doesn't feel right to take your money," Guadalupe replied with her motherly smile and reached out to cover Magnus's hand with her own, squeezing his finger gently. This had always been something he loved about Raphael's mother - not only was she always thoughtful and so very humble but she treated Magnus like one of her own children. To him it always felt like he had a second mother and most of the time Raphael felt like a brother to him, so did the other's younger siblings.

"You can always invite us over for dinner in return, you know that," Magnus offered with a cheeky grin, trying to lighten the too serious mood and his lips softened into a smile when Guadalupe patted his hand with a laugh.

"I will do that either way," she answered and leaned back on her chair, scrutinising Magnus with a thoughtful expression before she nodded very slowly. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Confío en ti con él," Guadalupe stated with another nod and Magnus smiled because after ten years of being friends with Raphael, spending so much time with his family, he had already learned quite a lot of Spanish and understood most phrases easily, even though his passive language knowledge was a lot better than the active one because he couldn't speak it very well. But he got used to the switch in languages that seemed to happen unconsciously most of the times and only around close family members. Another reason that showed Magnus that he was indeed considered family by the Santiagos because sometimes they seemed to forget that he didn't actually speak Spanish.

"Thank you. I promise I will take good care of him and we will keep you updated about our whereabouts," Magnus promised with a wide, thankful smile and he felt almost hyper at the prospect of getting away from everything for a little while, just spending some quality time with his best friend and explore other corners of the country.

"I know you will and I can never stress enough how thankful I am that you are such a good friend to my boy. Tell him that he doesn't have to worry about money for us and that he should go make this time just about him - about you two. Both of you deserve it."

Magnus felt like he was close to tearing up but he pushed the lump in his throat down, smiled brightly and got up from his chair to wrap his arms around Guadalupe who immediately returned the embrace lovingly.

He mumbled a muffled "Te quiero" against her shoulder, feeling Guadalupe tighten the hug just a little bit more as she reciprocated a "Yo también te quiero, hijo mío", pressing a kiss to his temple.

"We are doing what??" Raphael stared at his best friend with disbelief written all over his face. He had just gotten home from his last exam and therefore was done with going to university for this semester and Magnus had finally revealed his oh-so-secret plan to him. A plan that Guadalupe had gotten roped into as a means of convincing Raphael to play along.

"A road trip, darling," Magnus repeated with a wide grin, spreading his arms as if said road trip was a physical thing he was presenting to his best friend.

"It will start in two weeks because they couldn't do without me at work sooner but then I'll have three weeks leave and we can take our time exploring the country," he added cheerfully while
Raphael was almost gaping at this very questionable idea. He should have expected something slightly insane after all the years of friendship and the stuff Magnus had pulled in the past but the other still managed to take him by surprise sometimes.

"We don't have a car and Sarwenda needs her's for work, so...Dios mío, please don't tell me you bought a damn car!" Raphael stared at his best friend and he wouldn't put it past Magnus to spontaneously buy a car just for a two weeks holiday trip.

"We're neither borrowing my mum's car nor did I buy one. Rapha, please, give me a little more credit. I rented a van, obviously," Magnus answered with a pout and playfully poked the Chairman who was spread out across both of their laps, making his tiny body bigger than strictly necessary to provide maximum surface for both humans to pet him.

"Obviously," Raphael echoed dryly and rolled his eyes but the corners of his lips curled into the hint of a smile because Magnus was at least reasonable.

"So you want to spend like two weeks living in a van? How are you going to survive that?" He teased his best friend while gently poking the kitten's haunch, causing it to make a protesting sound and move its leg in a silent order to stop it.

"It's a sacrifice I'm willing to make and we don't have to spend every night in that hellish vehicle, we can get a hotel room every few days for a proper shower and bed," Magnus mused and scrunched up his nose, clearly realising just now that he might have made a mistake with the whole plan. Raphael grinned in amusement because he knew the other was pretty spoiled and not used to go without anything.

Raphael himself didn't mind the prospect of living in a van for a while; He grew up in a rather poor family, a house too small for two grown ups and three kids - everything cluttered with toys, clothes and other things - and it had been common for half of the family to take a cold shower because the others had used up all of the warm water.

"Maybe we should make it a bet and see how long you can manage without a hotel," he suggested with his sweetest smile and held back a smirk when Magnus glared at him in return, clearly not amused.

"How about we don't do that?! I'm doing this for you, little satan, so be nice to me. Say thank you for being the bestest friend in the whole world, kiss my feet and be grateful for the honour of having my presence in your grumpy life!"

Raphael lost it a little at this declaration and snorted, failing in his attempt to hold back his laughter. Chairman Meow, startled by the sudden sound, scrambled to his feet and leapt into his owners lap to stare at him with a seemingly indignant glare that only caused more laughter to bubble up in Raphael's chest.

"Bestest friend? I think you spent too much time around the twins," he commented, shoulders still shaking with laughter and dark eyes sparkling with glee. Magnus tried to look annoyed but it was impossible at the sound and sight of his friend who had been quite withdrawn into himself ever since he had ended things with Brandon and (temporarily) moved in with him. He knew that the breakup itself wasn't the cause of Raphael's sadness and pain but rather the fact that he had trusted this guy, opened up to him about who he was, and this asshole had used it against him.

Raphael might not love easily but there had definitely been quite a lot of affection he had felt towards Brandon and in a way the scenario probably reminded him of his father. It had taken ages for Magnus to learn about everything that had happened before him and his mother had stumbled into the Santiagos' life and he was so damn glad about the fact to be the first one Raphael had
opened up to. Not only because he understood the toll abuse took on you - especially living through it as a child that couldn't comprehend what was happening to it and why and that felt everything so strongly - but also because he had always been very empathic and caring, unable to not share other's feelings.

It had been painful to trust one another and exchange even the darkest experiences but it had formed such a strong bond between them that would always keep their lives intertwined. And it had been important for both of them to build this deep understanding and trust because if it hadn't been them, if it had been someone like Brandon first, it would have destroyed the ability to trust again even more. Especially for Raphael because despite his often cold demeanours, he had always been rather sensitive, especially as a kid. Trusting someone and being honest to them didn't come easily to Raphael - how could it, after how his father had treated him?

Children were born with the purest sense of love and trust, especially towards their parents. But if one of his parents didn't reciprocate it and met their innocent feelings with emotional and physical abuse, it broke said purity and polluted it with distrust, the need to close off from others with the need to protect themselves. Raphael had told him how he had started to keep his emotions in, how he had been able to not shed a single tear when he was seven and his father had hit him, causing the boy to tumble into a shelf and smashing face first into a corner that had caused his skin to split open - the scar of said incident was still visible on Raphael's left cheek and would forever remind him of what happened.

The day Raphael had told him about this, Magnus had been the one to shed tears because he had been so angry at the other's father and at the same time he had felt the aching pain of a helpless child faced with the cruelty of an adult that was supposed to love and protect them. Magnus was a gentle soul but if he ever ran into Raphael's dad he would probably be unable to resist the urge of hurting the man for abusing his own family.

"That may be true and we both know I was always tempted to steal them and run off to raise them as my own but instead I got stuck with the evil one," Magnus sighed theatrically and grinned at the unimpressed stare he got in return.

"Maybe that's why we get along so well because you're clearly related to some demonic creature yourself - that would at least explain quite a lot of your actions."

"Oh please, I'm the purest angel in existence!"

Raphael snorted at this declaration and shook his head in silent disbelief, watching the Chairman slowly climbing the armrest of the couch and hop onto the backrest from there, almost tumbling off the furniture in the process because he was still too young to have the on-point coordination and grace cats were supposed to move with.

"And what's with the little monster? Your mum is barely home and I doubt she could take him to the office," Raphael asked, still watching the small animal balancing along the backrest of the couch with wobbly steps.

"Well, mum number one is barely home, true."

"Really? You asked mamá to babysit the furry fiend?" Raphael rolled his eyes but laughed when the kitten's eyes snapped to him as if it understood that the insult was directed at it. He resisted the urge to nudge the cat's nose with his fingertip because he didn't want to be responsible for the animal to fall off - Magnus would never let him live it down if that happened.

"Yes, and could you stop calling him evil names? You're hurting his feelings!"
"I'll stop whenever you stop calling me evil names," Raphael proclaimed with an innocent little smile and mumbled a "Thought so" when Magnus opened his mouth in protest but closed it again without uttering a word.

"Okay, back to your insane idea. So, we have a car and the hairy imp is accommodated," Magnus glared at him for the choice of words but held himself back from interjecting, "but do we have some kind of goal? Or did you think we would just drive wherever we feel like?"

"That's...exactly what I thought. Why set a goal when we could let God guide us?"

"You don't even believe in God."

"I know, my sour friend, but you get what I mean. If you have someplace you want to go, we can go there but if not, I suggest we just drive and see where we end up," Magnus explained with a shrug and it was kind of amazing how he could just do that. He could simply venture out into the world without a plan and without a care in the world because Magnus never minded the unexpected. Raphael knew he would probably regret agreeing to this trip sooner or later but he still felt himself nod slowly, giving the okay to set their destination to wherever.

Maybe it would turn out like the best idea ever to not set a goal because this way they didn't expect anything in particular and the journey couldn't turn into a disappointment because they didn't see or find what they wanted to. This way they would simply leave New York behind and maybe come across some things that they would have never seen if they headed out with a clear destination in mind.

At least Raphael hoped that it would turn out to be a good idea but he supposed he would have to wait and see about that.

Chapter End Notes

_Cariño_ - Dear  
_Confío en ti con él_ - I trust you with him  
_Te quiero_ - I love you  
_Yo también te quiero, hijo mío_ - I love you too, my boy/son
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Another slower chapter with a lot of thinking and the usual amount of banter but Simon will show up soon and it will hopefully become less boring then. Sorry for all this rather dark background stuff all the time *laughs* But Simon will certainly lighten the mood some when he finally makes his appearance ;D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Raphael was very much aware of the fact that his best friend could come up with the most ridiculous ideas sometimes but part of him still expected the whole road trip thing to be some kind of joke. Turned out it wasn't. Two weeks after Magnus had announced the plan, they had brought Chairman Meow to Guadalupe together with an instruction for proper cat-sitting (Raphael had barely suppressed the urge to comment on that one) and the next day they had gotten up at seven in the morning. Magnus only got up at such an hour when he had to go to work but never on his days off because he was anything but a morning person.

They had packed their stuff the evening before and after having breakfast together they were finally ready to leave the house around 9 am. The rented camping van they had picked up after bringing the cat to Raphael's mother looked actually more spacious and comfy than Raphael had expected but of course, Magnus hadn't chosen the cheapest version of the vehicle. Not only did it have a tiny bathroom with an actual shower but also a small kitchen unit with a stove, microwave and fridge. The dining nook was opposite of the kitchen unit and the table could be moved to the side to fold out the bench to sleep on. The other sleeping place involved a little climbing because it was located above the driver's cabinet and Raphael placed his pillows and blanket up there because he knew Magnus wouldn't want to sleep there anyway.

Seeing the van in the light of the day actually managed to make Raphael look forward to this little adventure because he could definitely imagine spending the next two weeks in the small but comfortable space of the camper with his best friend by his side.

Raphael relaxed into the soft seat when they were finally ready to go and the engine roared to life, sending small vibrations through the vehicle. It felt like the humming of the car started to melt the stress and tension from his bones that had clung to him even after the last exam had been written. He hadn't slept too well ever since he had moved into Magnus's apartment and he always felt a weird kind of restlessness that could probably be blamed on the whole breakup instead of stressing over exams. On one hand, Raphael felt fine being single again and he might have loved Brandon but he hadn't been in love with the guy so the feeling was more one of disappointment than hurt.

He had always been used to falling asleep with someone next to him - for the greatest part of his life he had shared his bed with either one or both of his younger brothers and even at the age of 12 it had still been pretty common for them fall asleep piled on the couch or one of their beds. Moving out of his family home a little over a year ago had been weird for him because he missed having his annoying little brothers around all the time but at least he had moved in with Brandon and there had been no need to get used to always sleeping alone. And it wasn't even about physical contact - Raphael rarely felt the need to cuddle up to his ex-boyfriend - but about knowing someone was there, right next to him and that he could always reach out to close the small distance.
Now that he lived with Magnus and slept in the guest room, Raphael always had a hard time falling asleep because it was too quiet. No tossing and turning next to him, no one tugging at the blanket and no calm breathing to fall asleep to. It was just so foreign to him and even though the first few nights had been fine, by now he was just frustrated because it only seemed to become more difficult to get some sleep. But maybe this trip managed to help with the sleeping troubles because at least there would be another person in the same "room" at night for the next few days and maybe the travelling would be exhausting enough to help along as well.

"This trip was probably one of the best ideas I ever had. Hopefully the urge to go back to your old place and strangle Brandon will have vanished when we get back - I'm not exactly keen on getting arrested for murder," Magnus said conversationally after the driver's cabin had been filled with the sound of the engine and some pop songs from the radio for a while. Raphael raised his eyebrows at this exclamation and looked to his best friend, the corner of his mouth twitching upwards in amusement.

"Are you telling me you wouldn't know how to not leave any evidence? I thought you're oh so brilliant?" Raphael teased with a grin that widened even more when the other huffed and rolled his eyes.

"Even a genius can get caught and I don't really want to risk it."

Raphael laughed softly and shook his head because his best friend would probably always be at least a little bit insane but he actually didn't mind it too much. Magnus might be quite eccentric and completely different from him but Raphael couldn't imagine finding a better best friend than him.

When the semester break had started, Raphael had decided to head back to his old apartment to get the rest of his stuff and Magnus basically forced his company on him. Brandon hadn't supposed to be home but they had encountered him unexpectedly and Raphael had been so damn glad to have his best friend by his side. His ex hadn't even thought of apologising for the shit he had said but instead told him to not be so fucking oversensitive. Raphael usually had his emotions in check and never got physical during an argument but he had been this close to just punching Brandon in the face for telling him to chill when he wasn't taken seriously and his sexuality was made fun of.

"I could help," Raphael offered and this time it was Magnus's turn to laugh.

"I know but I thought you were raised a good catholic and I kind of doubt that the guy up there would be okay with murder. Though I would be more scared of Guadalupe than a heavenly punishment."

"You're right, I wouldn't risk getting on mamás bad side," Raphael sighed but an amused grin tugged at the corners of his lips because of this ridiculous conversation. They were both incapable of willingly hurt another person - a punch in a situation of self-defence maybe but other than that...no. Magnus sometimes joked that he wished voodoo or magic was a real thing so he could just curse people who deserved it, without having to hurt them directly.

"I just remembered this one time when you tried to steal a candy bar and she made you help re-stocking the store for the rest of the month. I still wonder how she managed to get the owner to play along because you weren't nearly old enough to be working."

"Well, I didn't get paid for it so I guess that helped. Mamá was so mad at me for this and I never even dared to think about stealing since then. It was only this one time anyway and I'm honestly glad she caught me because that was so dumb," Raphael said, watching a few pedestrians cross the street while the had to stop at a red light. He was looking forward to getting out of the city. New York might be pretty cool but he still remembered the first couple of years of his life, when
they had still lived in Mexico, and even though the living conditions there had been worse, it had been so much more fun for a child. Because he had been allowed to play outside with the other kids by himself without the danger of being hit by a car or being shot at. America was a little more dangerous, especially when you were a foreigner.

"Everyone does stupid things when they're young but at least you learned from it and the punishment could have been worse, I guess," Magnus replied and Raphael didn't have to look at the other to know he was smiling. He hummed in agreement and he wouldn't even call it a punishment but a means of teaching him a lesson that had obviously worked perfectly. At least his father hadn't heard about this incident because that would have turned into a real punishment and the ones he got for basically nothing had been bad enough already.

His father was probably responsible for his "quick learning" when it came to making mistakes, though. Because even if his mother never did and never would use any methods of parenting that could harm her children, Raphael had always been overly weary when something went wrong, even if it wasn't his fault. But he had always a certain amount of trouble being honest about the smallest things, even if it was just an accidentally dropped glass. His mind knew Guadalupe would never even think about something like raising her hand against her kids but his body still seemed to anticipate every little mistake to be followed by a certain amount of pain. It was definitely a motivation to always try his best but Raphael was aware that he might have developed an unhealthy obsession with trying to be perfect due to how his father had treated him.

He had expected for it to get better when he moved out because not only would he get out of the house that was connected to these negative expectation but it also meant he was old enough that he didn't have to account to someone else for whatever he did. Of course, he still tried his best because, like every child, he wanted his mamá to be proud of him but the pressure was decreased or at least that was what he had hoped for. But thinking back it hadn't decreased, it had mostly just shifted from education to socialising - Brandon hadn't cared much about attending every course and studying, he mostly cared about parties and hanging out with other people. And his boyfriend expecting him to always be available to tag along had definitely been a new stress factor.

Raphael wasn't a recluse, he enjoyed having people around as long as he knew who those people were. As long as most people were familiar to him, he didn't even mind a larger crowd. But he felt horribly uncomfortable during these campus parties where he knew basically no one. He wasn't good with small talk, hated it when strangers pushed into his personal space and drunk people made him uncomfortable anyway, not just because his father had always gotten even more violent after drinking but because he simply couldn't assess people anymore. Raphael was sure he was fairly good at measuring up other people during the first few minutes or even seconds but as soon as someone was drunk, his instincts kind of lost their footing.

"Whatever you're thinking about, stop it. No sour faces on this trip!"

Magnus's voice managed to pull him out of the swamp that was the bad memories part of his mind and Raphael blinked a few times before he felt his frown smoothen and his shoulder relax. He breathed out a soft "Lo siento", even though he knew there was nothing to apologise for, and Magnus rolled his eyes in return.

"How many times to I have to tell you that you don't have to apologise for stuff like that until you will finally get it through that thick skull of yours? It's completely normal and okay to zone out but when you pull that face I know you're headed in a more unhealthy mindset and it seems better to intervene. Thinking is good but overthinking is bad, my dear friend," the other pointed out with a weirdly light tone as if he was talking about the weather. Raphael once again answered with an agreeing hum because what else was he supposed to say? Magnus was right and they both knew it.
"I can't believe I'm actually saying this but...you would make a much better boyfriend than Brandon." The words left his lips before Raphael was able to stop them and he snorted at how much weirder it sounded out loud.

"That's not too difficult to achieve, darling, but I guess I'll take it as a compliment. You do realise that I will never be your boyfriend, though, right?"

"I knew you would say something likes this. Also, yikes, I don't even want to try thinking about you like this. You're like a very annoying brother to me, that would just be so wrong," he replied and shuddered a little at the mere thought of Magnus being anything more than his best friend.

"You're like a brother to me, too. That wording was really questionable, though. But I get what you mean. Also, even if you weren't like a brother, you're not my type anyway."

"You have a type? You mean the manipulative and horrible kind? Thinking about it, Brandon is your usual type, right?" Raphael asked teasingly and his lips pulled into a grin when Magnus fake gagged at the suggestion.

"No! Just...no. And my type is more of the tall, dark and handsome type and not short, glum and insulting," Magnus huffed with a grimace and shook his head as if the image of Raphael's suggestion was still stuck in his mind.

"I might not be tall from your point of view but the rest applies for sure. Or are you trying to tell me I'm not handsome?" He raised his eyebrows in this think about your next words kind of expression and he could already tell from Magnus's short glance in his direction, that the other was tempted to give a false answer just to tease his best friend some more.

"I guess you could be considered handsome. You have a quite adorable face - the childish innocence with your dark eyes and long, thick lashes. Kind of like a typical choir boy! You have this whole he looks like a little angel vibe going on but I bet you would never get a halo but horns instead because your sweets looks are pretty deceiving," Magnus started to explain and Raphael wasn't quite sure if he felt insulted or amused about this description. Probably a mix of both.

"A choir boy? Seriously? This whole description sounds kind of creepy and just...wrong. I bet a paedophile would talk like this," Raphael replied and now it was his turn to grimace before he burst out laughing because of the horrified look on Magnus's face.

"Did you seriously just compare me to a paedophile?!

"You tried to compare me to a demon or the devil, that wasn't exactly subtle, mi amigo. If you're allowed to insult me, I'll gladly return the favour." Raphael grinned at his best friend who glared at him and mumbled something under his breath that didn't really sound like English, so Raphael assumed Magnus probably insulted him in Indonesian but he held back from calling him out on it. Raphael always tended to throw in a few terms in his mother tongue as well so he really couldn't blame Magnus for being the same, even though he barely knew any Indonesian while Magnus was kind of good with understanding Spanish by now.

"Where are we headed right now, anyway?" Raphael finally thought of asking this probably important question. Sure, they didn't have some kind of end goal for this road trip but Magnus had to have some kind of destination in mind right now - at least Raphael assumed or hoped he did.

"West," was Magnus's simple answer, as if that explained everything.

"West??"

"I have no destination in mind so we're simply headed west because I didn't plan on going to
Canada or Mexico," Magnus shrugged and stopped at another red light before they would finally turn onto the highway to leave the city behind.

"I thought because it's the first day we will drive quite a bit to just get a proper distance to the city and the next days will be more chill and we will see how many hours or miles we're in the mood to," Magnus added with a smile and it sounded like a reasonable idea to Raphael. They didn't have anywhere to go so they could take their time and stop wherever or whenever they wanted.

Because Magnus had three weeks off now, they had plenty of time to travel through the US and make up their mind if they could come up with some place to visit or if they would just spend the whole time choosing their path on a whim like they would do in the beginning. Raphael might have been sceptical about the idea at first but now, sitting in the car, watching the landscape fly by and listening to the monotonous humming of the engine he actually had to agree with Magnus, that this might have been a really good idea and he was certainly curious about exploring a little bit of the country with his best friend by his side.

Chapter End Notes

Lo siento - I'm sorry
Mi amigo - My friend
They had driven quite a long way the first day and were on the road for probably eight hours with the breaks in between until they decided to stop for the night in the parking lot of a pit stop near Pittsburgh. The first night in the van was pretty weird and both of them didn't get much sleep because they were used to sleeping on much softer mattresses. Because they were still very tired, they decided to just stay the next day and maybe get going again the day after. They didn't have anywhere to be anyway so they could take it as slow as they wanted.

Magnus spent half of the second day of their trip complaining about the cheap food in the diner and Raphael gave up on rolling his eyes, simply chose to ignore his best friend. That was what happened when you agreed to go on a road trip with your rich, pampered friend who wasn't used to eat something worth only a few dollars. He wondered how long it would take for Magnus to insist on going to a hotel or at least some ridiculously expensive restaurant for some "proper" food. Raphael would never consider rich people food proper but it was pretty useless to start a discussion about it with the other.

When the evening drew closer and they had only spent their day visiting a few stores in the city, Magnus suddenly got the idea that they could go to a club to celebrate the beginning of their trip together and to just have some fun. Party wasn't exactly Raphael's definition of fun but his best friend was insistent on going out and so he at least managed to convince Magnus to head to a smaller bar instead of a crowded club with horrible, loud music. He could deal with a bar but clubbing sounded like a horror trip and not like fun, especially with Magnus by his side who always wanted to convince him to dance and relax. Raphael loved dancing but it was impossible for him to relax around a larger crowd of strangers and dancing was no fun in an uncomfortable situation either.

They took the van and drove for about half an hour until the found a small pub and a nearby parking space that was open 24/7, so they could spend the night there and Magnus would be able to have a few drinks if he felt like it. The bar was small and even though all of the few tables were occupied - several only by one person - it wasn't crowded at all and they at least managed to get seats at the bar. Of course, the barkeeper immediately asked for their IDs and glared grumpily at Raphael, actually wanted him to leave because he wasn't 21 yet, but Magnus somehow managed to convince him to let Raphael stay. He had no intention of buying something alcoholic anyway because most of the stuff tasted disgusting, to put it nicely. Raphael ordered a simple cola while Magnus asked for some complicated cocktail that the barkeeper had never heard of and so he ended up with a much simpler drink.

"This is why I wanted to go to a club, they have much better drinks," Magnus sighed when the barkeeper was out of earshot and serving another customer. Raphael lifted his eyebrows with an unimpressed stare and shook his head with a sigh because his best friend could be such a diva every once in a while, it was pretty exhausting to deal with sometimes.

"Yeah, well, you can go to a club if you prefer that but I won't come with. You know I hate the horrible techno-pop or whatever they're always playing in most clubs and there are way too many and mostly sweaty, drunk people. No, thanks," Raphael muttered and grimaced at the memory of the last time he had let the other drag him to a club. He still didn't know how he was even allowed to enter that club because he was pretty sure you had to be 21 but Magnus was persuasive and rich - two things that basically got you almost everything if you knew how to use them effectively.

"I know and I won't force you to go to a club. This trip is primarily for you so I want you to be comfortable," Magnus replied with a sigh of his own and bumped his shoulder into Raphael's.
"If you want me to feel comfortable, you should consider stopping complaining all the time because that's not very relaxing and getting on my nerves. You really didn't think this whole trip through, did you? The pampered rich boy having to sleep in a van and eat cheap diner breakfast; a nightmare come true, huh?" He grinned at his best friend with a teasing expression, fingers wrapping around his glass that was moist with drops of condensation running down the sides.

"I'm not pampered. I'm just used to...a little more luxury," the other corrected and scrunched up his face, realising that this didn't really sound much different from being pampered. Raphael snorted and held himself back from pointing out just that, instead lifting his glass to take a sip from the cool liquid, ice cubes clinking against the rim in the process. Magnus might not be the typical rich brat but he had grown up without ever having to worry about money. Sure, that still didn't provide a sheltered and happy childhood but his mother had been able to get away from her abusive husband with her financial means. It had still taken Magnus's father to almost drown him and his mother to have a mental breakdown bad enough for her to almost take her own life but they had gotten away luckily mostly unharmed.

Magnus sometimes joked that them both being broken had lead to them meeting and meant for them to be friends but Raphael sometimes actually considered it. And it had nothing to do with his family being religious, even though his mother seemed definitely sure of Magnus and his mother being a miracle and a blessing in their lives. They would probably still be stuck with Raphael's father if it hadn't been for Sarwenda helping them. She had paid for the divorce and had even given Guadalupe's husband some money so he could get a place to stay - it had only been to get him out of the house and not to help him in any way but some people easily agreed and left when they were offered some money in return. Sarwenda hadn't cared about her money but just about getting the abusive asshole away from his wife and children.

Without Sarwenda, they would have never managed to get on their own feet. Even though Raphael's father hadn't earned a lot of money and mostly with rather dubious work, they were still heavily depended on every dollar to feed the whole family. No matter how hard it got, Guadalupe would have never given one of her kids up for adoption and she had always managed to feed them, working almost all the time and never asking anyone for help. It had been weird and difficult to accept Sarwenda's help when she showed up in their lives and found out about what was going on because she immediately insisted on helping. She didn't want anyone to experience the same terror she and Magnus had to endure and it didn't matter for her that their families didn't know each other for too long at this point.

Raphael had always been careful to hide his bruises, mostly because he didn't want to worry his mother or give her a reason to start a fight with his father that would only end with her getting hurt again as well. But one time, about a year after he met and befriended Magnus, he had visited the Banes and couldn't hide the way he had flinched at certain movements because his ribs had been bruised. Raphael had always been stubborn with a probably unhealthy amount of pride but Magnus had managed to get his 10-year-old self to open up to him - after several hours of talking the boy had given up on denying what was going on and he had shown his new friend the marks his father had left on his body.

And Magnus had called his mother immediately, telling her what was going on and asking her to help. Raphael still remembered his confusion when Magnus pulled him into a hug and then took care of his wounds, gave him something against the pain because he had only been used to his family to worry about him. But suddenly there was this older boy in his life who wanted to be his friend for some reason, who worried, took care of him and wanted to help. Who was rich but didn't see Raphael and his family as some kind of charity case but was simply a genuinely good person, just like Sarwenda.

They talked for a little while and decided to head further west when they got back on the road the
next day. Raphael sipped his second cola when his best friend excused himself to go to the restroom and not paying attention he didn't notice a person from one of the tables getting up and walking to the bar. He hadn't looked around at all, not caring about the other customers or potentially drunk people. Raphael assumed part of him not liking and barely drinking alcohol was the fact that his father sometimes had been drunk and that his aggressions had gotten even more unpredictable in an intoxicated state so he automatically drew the connection of alcohol or at least drunk people to being dangerous.

He jerked a little when someone slumped heavily into the barstool next to him, where Magnus had sat before. The way the person almost lost their balance, nearly toppling off the stool, already told Raphael that the person already passed the level of just tipsy.

"I'm sorry to jus' come over but you seem nice," the clearly male person said, slurring the words a little. Raphael frowned and he was pretty sure wherever the guy came from, he could have only been able to see his back so he had no clue how he could have seemed nice but whatever. He chose to neither look nor react to the guy in hopes he would leave when he got no reply but drunk people rarely reacted logically or got a pretty obvious hint of "I don't want to talk to you".

"Your friend looks intimidating, though," the guy added and reached for the small bowl with peanuts that was sat on the counter, moving it around to occupy his seemingly restless fingers. Raphael glanced at the guy's hands, pale skin and slender fingers that looked like they belonged to someone young. The voice also sounded more his age than someone in their thirties, forties or older. So it was at least not some old creep but Raphael still felt uncomfortable, even though he looked calm and relaxed from the outside.

"Most people here are so old and creepy. 't is weird travelling alone. 'm probably gonna get murdered sooner or later," the young man kept on chattering and Raphael's eyebrow drew together a little but he still pressed his lips together, holding back any kind of reaction that showed he was actually paying attention. He sipped his cola, trying to act nonchalant, and when he put it back down, the guy suddenly reached out and Raphael flinched away from the touch.

"Ah, sorry, I didn't mean to--I like your bracelet," the guy said, retreating his hand after vaguely pointing at Raphael's wrist. The bracelet he referred to was on that Magnus had given him for his 18th birthday. For some reason, his best friend had though it would be a great idea to get a bracelet with the colours of the asexual flag. Raphael hadn't worn it for almost a year because he was not necessarily confident in his sexuality and Brandon's comments didn't exactly help the matter. But he was growing to be more comfortable with his identity and had started to wear it to remind himself that it was nothing he had to be ashamed of. Most people didn't know what the colours meant anyway and it was more of a reminder to himself, to not hide and be proud of who he was because the important people in his life loved and accepted him this way.

"I know the colours...but I can't remember where from," the guy mumbled more to himself and Raphael bit his tongue to not point out that it might be because of the alcohol. He still didn't want to show this guy any reaction but his curiosity finally won and he turned his head to steal at least one short glance at the other person. The short glance didn't quite work out because looking to his right he immediately caught the other's gaze and involuntarily froze.

"You must be the prettiest person I have ever met," the other blurted out and his dark eyes widened because he clearly hadn't meant to say this out loud. Raphael couldn't help but notice that the guy was kind of pretty himself. Round, brown eyes with thick lashes, framed by dark glasses that had slipped a little low on the bridge of his nose, finely shaped lips curved into a rather dorky grin and an unruly mop of hair falling into his forehead.

Raphael knew he must have made some kind of sound because the other blinked at him with a quizzical expression and he couldn't stop his cheeks from heating up a little. It usually didn't
happen to him that he saw a guy and immediately thought they were good looking. Sure, he recognised it when someone was beautiful but it was usually a general observation and not that he personally thought of others as pretty. This young man, though, was definitely nice to look at.

"You do realise that it's questionable to get drunk and then walk up to complete strangers in some bar?" Raphael heard himself ask when he was kind of unable to stop looking at the guy and it was getting pretty awkward without saying a word while staring at someone. That could be interpreted as questionable behaviour as well, he supposed.

"Uh...I guess? I usually don't do this."

"Get drunk or talk to strangers in a bar?"

"Both. I don't like the feeling of being drunk and I didn't want to get drunk but it kind of happened," the other admitted with a sigh and his shoulders slumped a little. Raphael was still sceptical but the young man didn't exactly scream dangerous creep. The Batman shirt probably helped to make him look more likeable.

"I'm Simon, by the way," the other suddenly thought of introducing himself and he offered his hand with an almost shy smile. He almost seemed sober for a short moment but his tongue still stumbled over some of the words and his eyes looked glassy in the dim light from the bar. Raphael contemplated if he should introduce himself as well but he wasn't impolite enough not to and Simon hadn't done anything wrong. He was drunk, sure, but he still seemed kind of okay, surprisingly.

"Raphael," he finally gave in but ignored the offered hand and kept his own curled around his still half filled glass. Raphael didn't want to be rude but he also didn't intend to get too friendly. He briefly wondered why Magnus was taking so long but was distracted by the bowl of peanuts moved in his direction and gently nudged against his lower arm that rested on top of the bar.

"You want some?" Simon asked and Raphael held himself back from pointing out that he would have already taken some if he wanted to because the bowl had been standing only a meter away from him this whole time anyway. He wondered if Simon was always this weird or if it was the alcohol's influence.

"Nope," Raphael denied and took a sip of his drink but the bowl was nudged against him again.

"You look like you could use some food," Simon said and then reached into the bowl to grab a peanut, pressing his fingertips against it until the shell cracked before offering the thing to Raphael on his palm. Raphael frowned at the other's hand.

"You look like I could use some food? What is that even supposed to mean?" He questioned and Simon made a sound that was similar to a whine, probably out of protest because Raphael ignored the offered food.

"Uh. I don't know. It jus' means what it means, I guess."

"That makes absolutely no sense."

"Me in a nutshell. And, speaking of nuts, peanut?"

Raphael couldn't help the soft laugh that escaped him at Simon not very smoothly pointing out that he was still holding a half-cracked peanut in his palm. He looked into Simon's dark eyes, glanced at the peanut and back to the ridiculously hopeful expression on the other's face. Instead of taking the one Simon had already opened, though, Raphael gave in by reaching over to take a different peanut from the bowl, cracked it open and popped it into his mouth.
"You can keep yours," he commented with a hint of amusement and Simon actually pouted before simply dumping the content of his palm onto the top of the bar.

"Nah, 'm allergic to peanuts," Simon said with a shrug and nudged the half broken peanut with the tip of his finger, spinning it slowly in the crumbs of its own shell. Raphael raised his eyebrows in confused amusement at this declaration and now he understood even less why the other had offered him the peanuts in the first place. Though he did like nuts and he was actually getting a little hungry again because they had their last meal several hours ago already.

"Sorry to crash the party but there was only so much time I could waste at the jukebox until the drunk people got annoyed and shooed me away. Pretty sure one of these Neanderthals called me a faggot," Magnus's voice suddenly appeared, followed by his hand on Raphael's shoulder. Of course, Magnus hadn't just taken ages in the restroom, he had seen his best friend got company for some reason had decided to leave them alone for a little while longer.

"And why did you think you had to waste more time instead of coming back here right away?" Raphael questioned while Simon's big eyes gazed from him to Magnus and back, clearly insecure if he was supposed to leave now or if his presence was still okay.

"Because it didn't seem like you were molested by some drunk lunatic," Magnus answered with a shrug and he was way too got at reading Raphael's body language so he probably figured out quickly that his best friend didn't feel horribly uncomfortable with this guy.

"That's still no reason to not come back here sooner," Raphael pointed out with a glare but it had no heat and he figured if Magnus had shown up earlier, he would have immediately told Simon to leave without really giving him a chance. Now, though, he didn't even think about shooing Simon away and Magnus simply sat down on the stool on Raphael's other side after scrutinising Simon from close up for a few seconds.

"I'm Magnus," he introduced himself and nodded when Simon told him his name in return as well.

"So, why are you here, Shaine? You don't exactly look like someone who frequents bars and it doesn't seem like you're here with friends either?" Magnus questioned curiously and Raphael rolled his eyes at his nosy best friend. The other had never really been got at subtlety - if Magnus wanted to know something, he didn't beat around the bush but just asked it straight away.

"Hm, no. I don't really like bars and I'm on my own. I'm currently doing some kind of...road trip and the motel nearby didn't have any rooms. I just wanted to get a drink before I head out to search for another motel but," he finished the explanation with a helpless little shrug and nudged the peanut in front of him with the tip of his index finger again, pushing with enough force so that it almost fell off the other side of the counter.

"Let me guess: it ended up being more than just one drink?" Magnus assumed, clearly amused and he didn't even hold back his laughter when Simon belatedly pointed out that his name wasn't Shaine. Raphael snorted as well and turned to face Simon again who looked like he couldn't decide if he wanted to pout or look amused which resulted in a weird mix of both expressions.

"Are you guys from here?" Simon asked after a beat of silence and smiled carefully. He seemed almost shy now that Magnus was back and Raphael had to hold back an amused smile because of this unexpected behaviour.

"No, we're actually on a road trip as well," Raphael answered and it was kind of funny that the first person they started a conversation with was on a road trip just like them. He hadn't expected too many people to do such a thing.
"Oh, wow. Cool. Weird coincidence," Simon chuckled and this time when he nudged the peanut in front of him it was with a little too much force so the nut turned around its own axis while it sailed off the other side of the counter and bounced off a cupboard to land somewhere on the floor. Simon made a small surprised "Huh" sound but shrugged and turned back around to the other two, smiling at them.

"Where are you guys staying? Maybe they still have an affordable room."

"We're travelling in a camping van," Magnus said with an apologetic smile and Simon's face fell with a small "Oh..." but his smile was back in a matter of seconds, not looking as bright as before anymore, though. Raphael was confused that he felt genuinely sorry for the other and also kind of worried because where would Simon stay if he couldn't find a cheap place with a room? It was closing in on ten and he didn't know if there were many places where you could check in this late.

Simon fumbled another peanut out of the bowl but instead of pushing it across the counter, he offered it to Raphael again who raised an eyebrow but this time took the offered food without a word. When he cracked and ate the peanut, his gaze wandered to Magnus who looked at him with amusement clear in his eyes and his lips curled into a soft smile.

"You like the weirdo, huh?" Magnus asked after leaning a little closer so only Raphael could hear his question. His best friend huffed and rolled his eyes but he didn't deny it because...he actually did? He didn't even know why - Simon really seemed like quite the weirdo but he still had something about himself that almost drew Raphael in and made him curious about this boy.

"We could help him find a place? I doubt being intoxicated helps to get a room. Or...he could just stay the night with us in the van," Magnus added silently after another beat of silence and Raphael's eyes widened a little at the suggestion. He honestly hadn't thought of this and it was more like Magnus anyway to get the idea of offering a stranger a place to stay for the night. He eyed his best friend for a brief moment before turning around to let is gaze wander over Simon's now slightly slumped form on the barstool next to him. The other had a small duffle bag and a backpack resting against the bar to his feet and something about the discouraged and tired expression on Simon's face caused him to make a decision he usually wouldn't make but he still found himself nodding at Magnus in silent agreement.
Here we are with the next part and it seems like the Friday updates work out pretty well for me. Also, I finished writing chapter 9 today and I think I will mention such progress updates in the notes from now on :) 

"I would love to have such a van and make a proper road trip, not just hitchhike half of the way and probably get killed by some maniac before I'm even close to my destination," Simon rambled when they arrived at the camping van in the parking lot, his backpack loosely slung over one shoulder while Raphael carried the slightly worn duffle bag. Magnus snorted in amusement next to his best friend and reached for the keys to unlock the door. Simon - still pretty drunk even though the slightly cool air had managed to sober him up a little but it was only noticeable in the way he talked, his coordination was still pretty much shit - seemed eager to get inside and almost face planted into the van because he misjudged the height of the first step.

Magnus didn't even bother to react while Raphael's hand shot out just in time to grab the neck of Simon's jacket and haul him backwards to keep him from smashing his face into the floor of the van. He stumbled backwards and his back bumped into Raphael's front with a surprised little squeak.

"Ten cuidado," Raphael said a little gruffly and he was surprised to hear a "Lo siento" in return because he hadn't actually expected the other to understand and even reply to him.

Simon's second attempt to enter the van was more successful but still pretty clumsy. Raphael suppressed a sigh and followed him inside, letting the duffle bag slip to the floor while Magnus locked the door after entering as well.

"And it's really okay for me to stay the night?" Simon asked after he had looked around with wide eyes, clearly awed about the almost luxurious interior of the van. Magnus simply shrugged and slipped his jacket off.

"If you would want to kill us, you would probably stab yourself before you even managed to hurt one of us," he said with a smirk and Simon puffed up his cheeks, looking like a pouting chipmunk. Raphael resisted the weird urge to poke the other's cheek with his index finger.

"Well...you're probably right," Simon admitted after a beat of silence and his lips curled into a lopsided grin. He was probably always clumsy and not just while being drunk. Simon watched a little awkwardly how Magnus started to pull out the bench for his sleeping space and Raphael realised only now that the sleeping arrangement might get a little awkward because they had just the unfolded bench and the area on top of the driver's cabin.

"Uhm...I can just sleep on the floor, I guess," Simon suggested after coming to the same realisation and they clearly didn't think this through. Raphael frowned a little and he was tempted to just agree because he didn't exactly want to share his sleeping space with a stranger but he would probably feel guilty later for banning the other to the uncomfortable floor. Simon was quite talkative, loud and gestured a lot but he seemed like a quite nice and likeable guy, certainly not...
someone who deserved to sleep on the floor like a dog.

"You don't have to sleep on the floor. You can share with me, there should be enough space for the both of us," Raphael gave in to his less selfish side and his lips curled into the hint of a smile that was hopefully convincing enough, even though he wasn't exactly convicted about this being a good idea at all. He had agreed to help Simon without thinking this far and now they had to deal with the situation at hand. As long as the other stayed on his side, it should be okay to sleep next to each other.

"O-okay. If that's okay?"

Raphael rolled his eyes and just pointed at the small ladder in a silent order for Simon to climb up there. The other made a small sound in the back of his throat before turning around to reach for his bag and to get clothes to change into.

"How about we just order food? I'm hungry," Magnus suggested after he finished setting up his "bed" and he already reached for his phone.

"Are you serious? You want to order takeout to a van?" Raphael asked while leaning his hip against the small counter of the kitchen unit, trying to ignore the way Simon stumbled through the van to get to the tiny bathroom to get changed. Magnus shrugged, clearly unbothered by the thought of ordering food here and what people might think of them.

"I could definitely use some food so...why not," Raphael shrugged and sat down next to his best friend to be able to look at the display and the menu Magnus had already opened. It was a restaurant that had Chinese and Thai, as usual, because Magnus loved this food, and his best friend had already selected his choice before passing the phone to Raphael. Simon literally stumbled out of the small bathroom when he had just decided on something to eat and Raphael gestured for the other to step closer so he could choose something as well.

"I don't really want anything," Simon shrugged but his stomach betrayed him and growled at the mere mention of food, causing the young man's cheeks to flush a soft pink.

"Come on, choose something. If it's about the money, don't worry. Get whatever you like," Magnus said with a dismissive gesture and a bored tone, clearly not in the mood for discussions and he already knew reactions like this from Raphael, who would rather not eat anything than admit that he didn't have enough money to buy take out all the time. Simon gaped at Magnus with wide eyes.

"No, really, it's totally fine, I don't--"

"Shut up and choose something or we will choose for you," Magnus ordered and almost glared at their guest. Simon glanced at Raphael, clearly not knowing what to do and obviously a little bit intimidated by Magnus's tone.

"Believe me, he wouldn't say this if he didn't mean it. Just choose whatever you like," Raphael said and was surprised by his own gentleness. He softly nudged the other's lower arm with his elbow and showed the menu to him, not trusting Simon's uncoordinated drunk ass with his best friend's expensive phone. When the other had finally decided to give in and choose some of the food, Magnus nodded at him with a small smile before finishing the order and Raphael gathered a few things to go and change into more comfy clothes as well.

"So, Shamus, why are you on a road trip and all by yourself, it seems?" Magnus asked when Raphael stepped back out of the small bathroom and Simon had awkwardly sat down in one of the two seats close to the front of the van, fiddling with the hem of his shirt.
"My name is Simon, that didn't even sound close. And...uh...I just...I finished university about a month ago and this is to celebrate, kind of?"

"Are you asking or telling?" Magnus questioned, clearly amused and teasing. Raphael huffed softly and sat down in the opposite seat to Simon's, resting his elbows on the small table that was folded down between their seats.

"Well, there's more than just finishing university but...it's pretty personal," Simon muttered with a shrug and whatever it was, he clearly felt uncomfortable about the topic and Raphael was weirdly tempted to reach out, touch the other's lower arm and comfort him. It was just weird to feel like this because of a complete stranger - he always needed quite a lot of time to warm up to new people but Simon was somehow different. Which sounded like the start of some cheesy romance novel.

"No worries, you don't have to tell us if you don't want to." Magnus smiled at their new acquaintance who visibly relaxed because he clearly wouldn't be asked to elaborate and Raphael almost smiled about the other's relieved expression. Simon seemed to be one of these people who were incapable of hiding their emotions, always wearing whatever they felt openly in their expression for the whole world to see.

"I didn't really plan this trip properly, though. I thought I could just hitchhike part of the way and use public transportations for the other parts of the way but...it's not exactly easy to get someone to take me along and some people are just fucking weird," Simon admitted after a moment of silence and grimaced, causing Magnus to laugh.

"What did you expect? You probably get creepy truck drivers and paedophiles to stop for you but most people would rather stop for a girl than for a guy - though not out of the goodness of their hearts either."

"I'm 22, that's not even close to the target group of a pedophile, dude," Simon replied with a frown and Magnus glanced at his best friend with an incredulous "Did he seriously just call me dude?!", causing Raphael to snort and muffle the sound behind his hand.

"But, yeah, that's basically what I realised. Some of the guys who did stop clearly thought I might want to...pay them with a favour if they took me along," Simon added with another grimace and a visible shudder. Even Raphael couldn't help but pull a face at the mere thought that there were so many people with bad intentions out there. Sure, he already knew about this, but it was still creepy to hear about it from someone because it just made it all even more real.

"I asked my best friend to come with but she's preparing a portfolio for job applications and couldn't just leave for a few weeks. I'm not even sure if I should really continue this trip. It would probably be best to just turn around and head back to New York," he sighed and his shoulders slumped, previously cheerful expression falling with the realisation that this whole thing wasn't working out the way he had hoped.

"You're from New York, too?"

"Yeah, Brooklyn," Simon nodded and smiled awkwardly at Raphael before he properly realised how the other worded his question. "Wait, that means you are from New York as well??"

"From Manhattan - born and raised," Magnus informed with a grin.

"We're from Manhattan but neither of us was born there," Raphael corrected his best friend with an eye roll and shook his head. He would never get Magnus sometimes, how he just said things that weren't accurate for no other reason than it sounding better or whatever. Magnus was
ridiculous like that.

"Wow, cool. The world is small, huh? And...why are you guys on a road trip? Where are you headed?" Simon asked with a bright smile, curiosity clearly taking over. His gaze was mostly glued to Raphael who felt a little out of his depths and really wondered how it came as far as him agreeing to let a stranger join them for the night in the van.

"You see, my glum looking friend here--"

"It was Magnus's idea to go on this trip, just to get away for a little while," Raphael interrupted and he was definitely not comfortable with Magnus blurting out the real reason behind their trip. Simon didn't need to know about his breakup and this being a distraction, something to take his mind off things and forget about everything for a little while. They didn't know the guy and while Raphael might be kind of surprisingly okay with having Simon around here, he still didn't need him to know such personal matters.

Simon looked confused for a brief second but then his expression changed to understanding - even with his still partly alcohol fogged mind he seemed to notice that there was more to it but that it wasn't something for him to know about, just like he didn't want to reveal his own reasons completely - and he nodded at Raphael with the hint of a smile.

"That's cool. It's really awesome to get away from the big city for a while and I suppose it's even better with a friend." Simon sounded a little sad, clearly unhappy about himself being on the road by himself, but he still managed to put on a convincing smile and brushed it off almost too easily. Raphael was confused to find himself wondering why that was and if the other might be used to doing things on his own because his best friend couldn't join him. He didn't know why he even cared.

"So, what about your goal? Where are you guys going?"

"Nowhere in particular. We're just driving wherever the mood takes us," Magnus replied while typing away on his phone, probably writing with either Catarina or Ragnor.

"What about you? You mentioned having a destination in mind?" Raphael heard himself asking before he even realised he was about to say anything and he quickly added an "If you want to talk about it" after reminding himself that Simon might not feel comfortable with telling them but the young man considered him for a brief moment, then smiled.

"It's okay, nothing secret about it. I wanted to go to the Grand Canyon but...maybe I should put this trip off until I have a proper and safer way to get there." Simon grinned sheepishly, hand reaching for the back of his neck to rub the skin there with the pads of his fingers. Raphael hummed thoughtfully and nodded but he kept himself from pointing out how dissatisfied Simon looked with the idea of giving up on this trip. Part of him actually wanted to know the reason Simon was out here alone, why this trip seemed pretty damn important but he knew it wasn't his place to ask. They didn't know each other and it was none of his business. Simon would leave again in the morning and they would probably never see each other again so why bother about things he would never find out about anyway.

They switched topics to a little less private things, talking about university until the food finally arrived almost an hour after ordering it. Raphael hadn't expected Simon to have studied Accounting. For some reason, it didn't seem right and the other had this weird tone while talking about it, like it hadn't been the subject he had wanted to study. But, again, he didn't ask and simply talked a little about his own studies, that he had started with Business and Technology Management half a year ago before Magnus had dived into a lengthy monologue about his own
time at university, studying *Fashion Merchandising* before he landed his current job as a Visual Merchandiser.

When the food finally arrived, the guy delivering it seemed a little weirded out judging by the rather hesitant knock at the van door and the slightly suspicious expression when Magnus opened it. It probably didn't happen too often that the restaurant had to deliver to a camping van in a parking lot but Magnus didn't care the least bit about it, simply paid and retreated back inside to hand out everyone's food.

After they finished eating, mostly in silence, it was Simon who started yawning first and despite having sobered up some more, his coordination seemed to have become even more useless thanks to obvious exhaustion. Raphael couldn't help but hover close behind their guest when Simon somehow managed to climb into the bunk on top of the driver's cabin without major injuries because he expected the guy to just fall back down. He only hit his head twice and banged his elbow a few times before he managed to get settled and only then did Raphael dare to climb up as well without accidentally being maimed by Simon's limbs.

There was more than enough distance between them and they had separate blankets but Raphael still felt kind of weird to sleep next to someone he barely knew. He tried to get comfortable without moving too much while listening to Simon's breathing and the sounds of Magnus in the small bathroom who got ready for bed as well.

"I didn't even thank you guys properly for letting me stay," Simon mumbled after a moment of silence and Raphael didn't even know why the other was almost whispering when they were the only ones in the room right now.

"I'm really lucky that I ran into you two, not everyone would be so nice to help a random stranger," he added and Raphael didn't have to glance at Simon to know that he was probably smiling. He actually seemed to be someone who smiled quite a lot.

"We usually don't pick up strays. Well, at least I don't."

"But Magnus does?"

"You could say so." Magnus had befriended him out of nowhere and had decided for Raphael and him to be friends without even knowing him. His best friend didn't trust easily but he managed to like people pretty quickly. Raphael didn't say any of this out loud, of course, because he didn't really feel like elaborating on the whole subject and Simon clearly got the hint because he didn't ask any questions about it.

"I'm certainly glad you decided to pick me up. This definitely beats sleeping in the streets because I don't think I would have managed to get a cheap hotel room at this hour anymore."

"Certainly not in a drunk state, true," Raphael noted with a huffed out laugh and he really didn't get why Simon had just gotten drunk instead of looking for a place to stay first. That seemed like a very stupid way to go about this and stopping the whole trip might actually be a wise idea for the other, considering how poorly he had dealt with this situation.

"I know...It was stupid," the other murmured, sounding sheepish, and the blanket rustled a little when Simon moved around in the rather confined space but he stilled when the bathroom door opened and Magnus returned, turning off the dim lights before crawling into his own "bed".

"Sleep well, you two and Sidney, keep your hands to yourself."

Simon spluttered at Magnus's words, obviously embarrassed by the ridiculous implication and
Raphael didn't even understand half of the words that tumbled out of the other's mouth in protest.

"Don't mind him, he's an idiot," Raphael intervened with a sigh because his best friend didn't think it was necessary to tell Simon that he had only been joking. Magnus's stupid kind of humour easily went past people that didn't know him.

"Please, I'm a genius," Magnus corrected and Raphael couldn't help but laugh at the ridiculous statement.

"Sure thing...go to sleep, estúpido," Raphael replied easily and added a "Buenas noches, Simon", ignoring the fact that his voice might have been a tiny bit softer than it usually would be with an almost stranger. He was tired, he was allowed to be less cold around other people when he was exhausted! Magnus mumbled something into his pillow that was clearly in Indonesian and Raphael resisted the urge to curse back at him in Spanish because he knew he was at a disadvantage here, not understanding the other's mother tongue at all.

Simon's almost shy "Buenas noches" caused the corners of Raphael's mouth to curl into a faint smile and he curled up a little more, tugging the blanket closer around his body while burying half of his face in the pillow. It took him almost an hour to fall asleep because he listened to Simon's relaxed breathing right next to him and the soft snoring that followed soon after indicating that the other had managed to fall asleep rather quickly. He envied people who could fall asleep in a matter of a few minutes and always wished he would be able to get rest so quickly but his always working brain rarely let him off that easily.

Chapter End Notes

Ten cuidado - Be careful
Lo siento - I'm sorry
Estúpido - Stupid
Buenas noches - Good night
I decided to add PTSD to the tags because I think it fits after what Raphael (and Magnus) experienced? But please correct me if I use the term incorrectly! And you can always suggest tags that you think are important and should be added - I'm always open to suggestions :)

Raphael woke up to the feeling of a warm palm pressed to the right side of his chest and a body curled up next to him, close enough so he could feel the warmth radiating off of the other person. He slowly blinked his eyes open, trying to get rid of the sleepy daze and it took him a moment to remember that he was in the van and Simon, the guy they had taken in for the night after meeting him drunk in a bar, was sleeping next to him. The other was still asleep, half of his face buried in the blanket, fingers of the hand not resting against Raphael curled into the soft material of said blanket and face relaxed, framed by an unruly mop of hair that was almost as curly as Raphael's own.

"Such an adorable sight," Magnus suddenly whispered, causing him to jerk slightly and resist the urge to get more distance between himself and Simon. His heart made a small leap and hammered against his ribs from the little shock right after waking up. Raphael glared at his best friend who smiled sweetly back at him, phone in hand.

"You didn't seriously take a photo?!!" He growled, trying not to be too loud so he wouldn't accidentally wake Simon. Magnus's smile widened and he shrugged, innocent expression not really convincing.

"Maybe? You two look kind of adorable," the other admitted with a small shrug and raised his phone again, clearly to take another photo and Raphael wished he had something to throw at his best friend other than a way too soft pillow.

"Pinche idiota," he murmured before carefully sitting up - well, as much as possible with the roof of the car barely leaving a metre of room to do so - while trying not to jostle the sleeping space too much so Simon could get his clearly needed sleep. The guy had looked really exhausted the night before and it was impossible to disturb his sleep now, that he looked relaxed and soft. Raphael scrunched up his nose at the thought and wondered why he kind of cared about some random stranger but he guessed Simon was just one of these people you simply couldn't dislike.

"Love you too," Magnus chirped, unbothered by the insult, and sat back on his still folded out bed, yawning while typing away on his phone.

"How are you even awake already? It's barely half past nine," Raphael asked while helping himself to a cup of coffee. Magnus usually slept in as long as possible and never woke up before him when he didn't have an alarm set but now he was already up, dressed and had made coffee. This road trip seemed to have a weird effect on his best friend.

"Well, I would still be asleep if it wasn't for this rather uncomfortable bed," Magnus sighed, dramatically touching his chest with his free hand while navigating his phone with the other. Raphael rolled his eyes at the other's antics, taking a sip of his coffee after adding some sugar and
leaning his hip against the small countertop. He wasn't cold but still wrapped the fingers of both hands around the mug, cradling the container of warm liquid to his chest while resisting the urge to let his gaze wander to the bunk where Simon was lightly snoring without any indication that he would stir anytime soon.

"I kind of like the guy," Magnus mused after a brief moment of silence and Raphael blinked, not really following before realising that his best friend was talking about their "stray". Now he did end up glancing at the sleeping form curled up in his sleeping space before he gave in, humming in affirmation.

"We barely know him, though," he pointed out and wasn't surprised that Magnus simply shrugged.

"I'm an expert in knowing people. When I met you for the first time it only took me half a minute to know that I liked you and I wasn't wrong about you being a good guy, despite being a little shit," Magnus teased with a smirk, raising his phone to take another photo of his best friend who once again rolled his eyes - Raphael should get rid of this habit or he would have aching muscles in his eyes by the end of this trip.

"Could you stop with the photos? And what are you getting at anyway?"

"No, I need to document this trip and I promised your mum to send her pictures to prove I haven't accidentally got you killed yet," he replied while typing again, probably sending said photo to Guadalupe. Raphael wasn't too surprised that his mother wanted a few photos during their trip but he knew it wasn't for the reason Magnus said but simply to see how her son was doing in general, to know if he was enjoying the trip and had a good time, not because she didn't trust them on their own.

"Are you answering my other question as well or...?" Raphael prompted and cocked his head, taking another sip of his coffee that had just the right temperature to not burn his whole mouth.

"What? Oh, right. Well, I'm not getting at anything, really." Magnus made a dismissive gesture and Raphael didn't get a chance to follow up on this - his best friend probably really didn't mean anything by it anyway - because suddenly The Imperial Death March started playing from Simon's pile of clothes on one of the seats. The best friends both stared at said clothes while the sound of Simon hitting his head after sitting up too quickly echoed through the van. The other scrambled down the small ladder, surprisingly without falling on his face, to get to his phone and answer the incoming call, almost dropping the phone in his haste before pressing it to his ear.

"Mum, hey," he greeted the caller and Raphael's other eyebrow shot up as well, Magnus only snorted in the background and resumed typing on his own phone.

"Yes, I'm still pursuing the stupid road trip. I'm currently near Pittsburgh, in case you wondered."

Raphael couldn't help but watch Simon's shoulders tense, his hair sticking up in all directions like it had exploded overnight. He was standing mostly with the back to the others, speaking in a hushed voice or what was probably supposed to be hushed but his still sleep-hoarse voice was definitely louder than a whisper and it was impossible to avoid listening to his end of the conversation.

"I can't tell at this point. I just started the trip, how am I supposed to know how quickly I can get to the other end of the country? I have more than enough time to get back by then, stop worrying about it." Simon sounded like he barely managed to suppress the annoyance to seep into his voice and Raphael couldn't help but wonder what this was about. It didn't necessarily sound like the other was on bad terms with his mother but the ring tone and slightly pained undertone in his
voice showed that *something* must have strained their relationship.

He shook his head and tried to ignore what Simon was talking about. It was the polite thing to do, to give at least the illusion of privacy in the small space of the van. Raphael continued to drink his coffee, eyes roaming the van in search of something to distract him from the weird urge to analyse whatever might be going on. It was none of his business and he usually wasn't nosy, that was clearly Magnus's speciality but for some reason, he couldn't help it with Simon. He didn't even get why. Simon seemed likeable enough, sure, but that was no reason to get so curious about what his deal might be.

Raphael managed to block the sound of Simon's voice out mostly and the call was rather short anyway. The sight that followed after hanging up was one that resonated deep within Raphael because he knew this sound too well - it was the sound when you had explained yourself to someone over and over but they still didn't *get* it. Brandon had been the cause for him sighing like this most of the time and, in retrospective, that should have been a dead giveaway that the relationship had been a bad idea.

"Everything alright?" Raphael heard himself ask before he was even aware that he was about to say anything but Simon's slightly sour and resigned expression made it impossible not to say anything. Simon blinked and his expression seemed to brighten immediately as if he had only now remembered that he wasn't alone and flipped a switch to hide his mood. Another thing Raphael could relate to on a very personal level.

"Yeah, sure. That was my mum, she just thinks this trip is an idiotic idea and never fails to mention it at every given opportunity," Simon replied with a shrug as if it was no big deal when, clearly, it was to him. It was obviously affecting him and Raphael was wondering what the more personal reason for the other's trip might be.

"Well, the fact that you didn't seem to have planned this very well does make it kind of idiotic," Magnus chimed in and Raphael was very tempted to throw something at his best friend's head but the only thing currently available was the still partly filled coffee mug in his hand and that was probably a tad too much.

"Eres increíble," Raphael mumbled, shooting a disapproving glare towards Magnus who simply shrugged unapologetically. Fortunately, Simon didn't seem to mind the blunt words too much because his lips curled into a sheepish little smile that became a little more tentative when his gaze met Raphael's.

"It's okay. He's absolutely right. I barely planned this trip and just thought *how hard could it be to travel to the Grand Canyon?* Well, apparently harder than I expected."

"You can stay for a cup of coffee if you'd like. We're not in a hurry and there's no need to make a hasty exit," Raphael offered with a small smile and ignored the surprised confusion in Magnus's gaze when his head snapped up to stare at him in disbelief. Simon's eyes widened in surprise as well and his cheeks actually reddened a tiny bit, probably because he was embarrassed about being read so easily.

"Uh, if-if that's really okay with you?" Simon questioned and his cheeks flushed an even darker shade of pink when Raphael couldn't help but roll his eyes at him.

"I wouldn't have offered if I didn't mean it and Magnus doesn't mind anyway - the more people to bully, the happier he is," he dismissed easily and grinned at his best friend's offended huff. Simon
chuckled and he still seemed insecure but he didn't decline when Raphael poured him a cup of coffee, their fingers touching briefly when he handed the mug over. Simon sat down on one of the two seats at the front of the van, sipping the hot liquid with a happy little sigh and Raphael bit back a smile because he knew Magnus was still watching him.

"To the Grand Canyon, huh?" Magnus asked after a thoughtful pause and his phone was momentarily forgotten, attentive eyes fixed on their guest who swallowed as if he had just been accused of a crime instead of asked about the destination of his trip. Simon nodded carefully, clearly sceptical about where this conversation was headed and his fingertips pressed a little harder against the mug so that they started to whiten.

"That's quite the long way to go, all the way across the country."

Raphael was starting to wonder about Magnus's reason behind all of this as well. His comments earlier had been without any deeper meaning but this right now...He was clearly up to something and Raphael wasn't too sure if he was supposed so intervene or just let this conversation continue on and simply wait where it was headed. You never knew with Magnus.

"Yeah, well. I have my reasons why it had to be the Grand Canyon but I'd rather not talk about it," Simon replied sheepishly and he was so obviously uncomfortable that Raphael almost interrupted the whole thing but he held himself back. Especially because he knew Magnus wouldn't let him live it down when he acted kind of protective over some random stranger.

"No worries, I didn't mean to pry into your reasons. I was just thinking...We don't have a destination in mind and the Grand Canyon actually does sound like a pretty good goal to have."

Raphael's eyes widened and he finally realised what Magnus was about to suggest. Part of him had expected his best friend to maybe offer Simon to ride along for a little bit because they were currently headed west anyway but now the other was clearly thinking about all of them going there together? Raphael wasn't too sure what to think of this idea. On one hand, he had never been to the Grand Canyon and he was certainly curious to see it at least once but on the other hand, it seemed like a slightly insane idea to go there on a whim just because they met someone who was headed that way.

"I was just thinking, we could head there together? It might be fun to have someone else on board and in case you get on our nerves we can always throw you out, no big deal," Magnus continued, his lips curling into a teasing grin now, even though he would certainly tell Simon to leave in case he did actually turn out to be annoying. His gaze met Raphael's then, silently asking for his opinion on this matter because Magnus might be a spontaneous person who had kind of insane ideas every once in a while but he still considered his best friend's feelings and wouldn't insist on this if Raphael felt uncomfortable.

Raphael didn't actually know how he felt about it. It was unexpected and certainly not what he had in mind but he wasn't instantly put off by the thought of Simon tagging along. He simply shrugged in reply to his best friend's unspoken question, signalling his stance on this matter because it was hard to tell when they still barely knew Simon. Maybe they would get along fine and it turned out to be fun but maybe they didn't get along - it was hard to tell when you barely knew someone. Though Simon was likeable enough to at least try, he supposed.

"How about this: we don't set anything in stone and just head in the direction together for the time being and see how it will turn out?" Magnus suggested with an amused smile while Simon was still staring at him wide-eyed, not quite believing what was currently going on. Raphael would probably think he was still half-asleep but he had known his best friend for long enough by now to know it wasn't just a very weird dream. They were actually offering a guy they had just met to join their road trip. Which meant sharing his bed a little longer and Raphael was surprised to
realise that it wasn't the worst thing he could imagine. Last night had been okay so...it would probably work out a little longer as well.

"Uhm. That's unexpected. Not-not that I don't want to and such a kind of trial period is certainly a good idea but won't it be a little too crowded in here with three people? I don't want to make it awkward or uncomfortable for you. Or intrude on your trip together." Simon's cheeks didn't seem willing to return to their natural colour anytime soon and his eyes were still wide behind his black-rimmed glasses, thick lashes enhancing the warm dark brown of his round eyes.

"If you want to stay, just stick around until the next stop and we can make a decision then," Raphael finally added to the conversation and shrugged, trying for nonchalance despite his own insecurity on this matter. It unsettled him that the thought of a stranger joining the didn't bother him as much as it usually would. He didn't what it was about Simon that made him act this way but it was almost a little bit scary.

He wasn't one of the people who made dumb decisions simply because a cute boy showed up - there was really no denying that Simon was, in fact, kind of adorable in his awkward, clumsy way - and he had never reacted this way to someone new. Raphael had always needed quite the long time to warm up to strangers which was the reason he usually avoided meeting new people because the time until he started to feel comfortable was all the more awkward and stressed him out. In his opinion, most people weren't worth it to go through all of this trouble.

Magnus had been stubborn enough to not give up and basically forced himself into Raphael's life. It had been unsettling at first but in retrospect, it had certainly been the best thing that could have happened to him. Magnus was his best and closest friend and he had been the only one for a few years until he had introduced Raphael to Ragnor and Catarina. It had been absolutely impossible not to like Catarina with her positive and loving attitude while Ragnor sometimes felt like he was a mirror of Raphael himself. Ragnor was grumpy, didn't like socialising and loved to talk shit about other people - a few of the traits they shared and had quickly bonded over.

"Okay, I'd love to. It would be cool if it did work out and we could head to the Canyon together. It's so weird to travel all alone and not have anyone to share the experience with, to be honest. And I basically only have Clary as a friend so...there was no other choice," Simon admitted with a slightly wistful smile, scratching his nose before he took another sip of his coffee to hide his awkwardness. Raphael couldn't bring himself to regret agreeing to take Simon along; the guy was weirdly endearing and he might manage to liven up the trip some more.

"It's settled, then," Magnus decided with a pleased smile, nodding to himself before he suggested to make something for breakfast so they could hit the road soon. Raphael was almost looking forward to travelling with Simon for at least the next part of the way and maybe they would actually manage to make a new friend. At least Simon seemed like someone who could make a good friend.

Chapter End Notes

*Pinche idiota* - Stupid idiot

*Eres increíble* - You are unbelievable
"You only have games on this thing??" Simon's incredulous voice from the backseat caused Raphael to glance over his shoulder at the other and snort, briefly watching him fiddle with Magnus's tablet. His best friend had looked something up on the tablet during breakfast and Simon had asked if he could maybe use the thing later because his phone was almost dead and he never actually had gotten his hands on anything but the cheaper kinds of tablets so he was curious to see what was so different about the "fancy" variety.

"No, there are also various photo apps," Magnus corrected with a dismissive gesture before his hand found its way back to the steering wheel, only glancing over from the corner of his eyes before focusing back on the road. Raphael was, of course, sitting in the passenger seat and despite it being meant for two people, Simon had chosen to take one of the seats right behind the driver's seat. Raphael was admittedly thankful for the decision, not in the mood to spend hours sitting shoulder to shoulder with Simon. Sleeping next to each other had been one thing with enough room between their bodies but he wasn't too big on unnecessary body contact with an almost stranger - he really had to stop referring to Simon like this or it would become ridiculously annoying rather quickly because the term wouldn't apply anymore sooner rather than later.

"Wow, yeah. Of course. But why do you have such an expensive tablet if you don't seem to use it very much? No social networks, no reading app, nothing to write..."

"The social networks are on my phone, why would I need them on the tablet as well? And I have the thing because I can," Magnus shrugged and Raphael rolled his eyes. Rich people. Simon scrunched up his nose but decided not to ask further, clearly realising that Magnus was a rather hopeless case anyway. He resumed poking the screen, probably opening and closing various different things and Magnus didn't seem to mind in the slightest. Raphael wouldn't even hand his phone to Magnus without feeling unsettled about someone seeing his personal stuff on there, even though he didn't really have anything on the thing that was embarrassing - especially not in front of Magnus.

"You only have selfies and pictures of a cat on here? Oh, and selfies with the cat, apparently."

Raphael barely held back his laughter at that comment and he was already so used to Magnus's slightly self-centered self that it was quite hilarious to see someone else react slightly disbelieving to getting to know such things about his best friend.

"That's not just a cat, that's Chairman Meow!!"

Simon choked a little bit trying to suppress the laughter of surprise bubbling up in his throat and he glanced at Raphael, silently asking him to say that Magnus was only bullshitting him now. Raphael simply shrugged, a wordless what can you do and Simon's eyes widened a little.

"Wait, he's serious? His cat is called Chairman Meow?? I don't even...what kind of name is that?"
"A brilliant one, thank you very much," Magnus commented a little sourly and Raphael felt his lips curling into a smirk that he tried to hide by scrubbing his hand across his face, pretending to yawn. He was really starting to enjoy Simon's company because it was admittedly hilarious to witness someone else banter with his best friend for a change. Especially because the other wasn't as shy as Raphael had initially thought.

"Hey, how about I make us a playlist?" Simon suddenly suggested after a brief moment of silence and only the hum of the engine and a rather bleak pop song in the radio filling the van. "Half of the music on the radio is horrible and it's always so repetitive. We need a proper soundtrack for the road trip!"

"We don't even know for how long we will travel together," Magnus mentioned offhandedly but it didn't seem to deter Simon from his plan, face split into an enthusiastic grin and Raphael was starting to wonder if the other had actually graduated from university, not middle-school because he acted more like an overexcitable kid right now. He didn't give in to his brain suggesting the description kind of cute and pushed the thought back into the corner it came from. No. Just no.

"So? I can still listen to the playlist in case I end up travelling on my own again and if you're asking nicely I might even share it with you," he shrugged with a playful grin and went back to poking at the screen of Magnus's tablet to seemingly download an app.

"You should really have Spotify on here anyway. How can you live without music?" Simon muttered more to himself than to Magnus who raised one eyebrow before shaking his head with a silent sigh. It was fascinating to actually see his best friend at a loss for words and Raphael was very tempted to thank their new acquaintance for it.

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Samantha, but sure," Magnus replied and Raphael knew very well that the other had the app on his phone, always using it to torture him with some weird dance electro-pop stuff of whatever the shit was called. Since he had temporarily moved in with Magnus, the other had mostly played this music to get on his nerves while dancing around in the kitchen he barely used because he was barely able to cook. Raphael had done most of the cooking lately, at least when he had been in the mood to. With two younger brothers and a mother who spent most of her time working, it had quickly become his job at home to man the kitchen and that included learning how to cook because the twins shouldn't have to grow up on instant food.

"That's a girl's name," Simon pointed out dryly but didn't comment any further, already getting accustomed to the oldest's weird habit of calling random names that didn't even sound like his. Magnus usually only did this with people he didn't like - like Brandon - but in Simon's case it was clearly just to tease the boy.

"So, Marcus, do you really not have Spotify? In that case, I will make an account for you because that's just unacceptable."

Raphael was unable to hold back the huff of laughter this time because not only did Simon barely blink at the names Magnus threw his direction, he honestly turned it around and his best friend looked taken aback for a split second before his lips tugged into an amused grin. Raphael was doubting that Simon would only be with them for a short time at this rate - his best friend clearly liked the other and, well, he didn't even want to really think about his own thoughts on the subject.

"He does have an account," he sighed before Magnus was able to reply, probably with another stupid name that would only fuel this stupid teasing game even further, and snatched the tablet out of Simon's hand. He opened the app and quickly typed his best friend's login information before handing the device back to a surprised looking Simon.
"How do you know that?" Magnus asked, squinting at his best friend who simply pointed at the road to wordlessly order him to pay attention to where he was driving.

"You never really hide your phone when you log into your stuff," he shrugged with an innocent smirk and leant back into his seat, getting more comfortable again after pulling a bottle of water out of his backpack resting in the legroom in front of his feet.

"Yeah, because I trust you not to look and memorise the stuff!"

"Quit being so dramatic. What am I supposed to do with the stuff, anyway? Other than deleting the horrible playlists you saved and replace them with real music. Which would be a service to mankind, not abuse of sensitive information," Raphael said with another shrug, opening the bottle to take a few swigs and offering it to Magnus afterwards who took it with a small huff, taking a gulp of water.

"I have to side with Raphael, your choices are indeed 90% horrible," Simon interrupted while looking at the other's saved playlists before shaking his head and typing something into the search bar to first follow his own account and then start to work on putting together a road trip playlist, while the two best friends continued their bickering.

"You did not seriously do this?" Raphael stared incredulously at Simon, distracted from fixing a few sandwiches for all of them, while his best friend's laughter rang in the background. The laughter was mostly drowned out by Highway to hell playing from the tablet in the hands of a widely grinning Simon who was clearly proud of himself for choosing this song.

"Well, it was the obvious choice for a road trip playlist," he answered innocently but the still lingering grin on his lips betrayed the tone of his voice. Raphael huffed, rolling his eyes up as if to ask the heavens how he deserved any of this - no wonder Magnus had taken a liking to this boy, he had a ridiculous kind of humour as well - before going back to fixing the sandwiches. His best friend had just driven off the highway to find a pit stop where they could eat something, fill up on gas and just stretch their legs after several hours sitting in the van already.

"Come on, this song is a classic. Don't tell me you don't like AC/DC!"

"They have a few okay songs, I guess, but I don't like the guy's voice. It's okay to listen to every once in a while but if I had to listen to a whole album I would certainly get a headache," Raphael commented gruffly, not in the mood to start a ridiculous discussion about his taste in music but Simon actually hummed softly before nodding, seemingly fine with this explanation.

"Okay, I can live with that. His voice takes quite some getting used to and I can't listen to them all the time either. This one is a must-love song, though. Just like Back in black or Thunderstruck!"

He didn't even have to look at Simon to know the other was once again grinning from ear to ear. He seemed pretty into music, judging by the enthusiasm with which he had silently worked on putting together a playlist for the past hour. Simon had even put on his headphones while choosing the songs so he could listen into some to judge if they were deemed worthy of a road trip playlist; this way the other two didn't have to suffer through minutely switching of songs.

"I do hope there is some other stuff on your precious playlist as well," he muttered and placed another finished sandwich on a plastic plate - they hadn't taken any dishes with them that could break in case something fell down while they were on the road.

"Yeah, sure." Simon nodded despite Raphael not even looking at him and fumbled with the tablet to switch to the next track of the playlist.
"I had a dream so big and loud. I jumped so high I touched the ground."

Simon immediately started to sing along when the vocals of the next song started and Raphael mumbled an exasperated "Por el amor de Dios" when his best friend chimed in with the Wo-o-o-o-oh, wo-o-o-o-oh in the background. Great, he was on the road with two nut jobs. Magnus had already tortured him with his singing-along-to-the-radio during the first part of their trip when they were headed in the direction of Pittsburgh, and now they had only added to the madness by having Simon tag along. Though Raphael had to silently admit to himself that at least their new friend actually had a singing voice and didn't just make his ears bleed with undefinable screeching (okay, maybe that was a little too dramatic, Magnus didn't sound that horrible but pretty close).

"I stretched my hands out to the sky. We danced with monsters through the night."

Raphael wondered why Simon considered the song fitting for a road trip but the tune was admittedly catchy and the boy could indeed sing so it could have been worse, he guessed. At least his best friend seemed to stick only to the background wailing singing instead of joining in for the whole song.

"I'm never gonna look back. Woah, never gonna give it up. No, please don't wake me now,"

Simon continued to sing along with a gleeful smile while dancing along with the melodies. Well, if you could call it dancing to move with the music in a sitting position, at least. Raphael tried to ignore it and stick to a gloomy expression, on principle, but the joy that was almost radiating off of Simon sitting opposite of him was kind of hard to ignore.

"This is gonna be the best day of my life. My li-i-i-i-ife."

He exchanged the day with trip when the refrain was repeated and Raphael couldn't help but shake his head in amusement, gaze finally trailing off from the last sandwich he was preparing to watch Simon bounce in his seat like a kid on a sugar-high, brown orbs sparkling happily behind his round glasses and smile brightening when their eyes met.

"Eres tan jodidamente ridículo," Raphael muttered and he got the feeling that he would utter different variations of this statement a few more times during the upcoming days. Simon simply laughed at him before resuming his sing-along, placing the tablet on the small fold-out table between them to spread his arms to both sides while warbling the "But all the possibilities. No limits just epiphanies" part and Raphael chose to use the next Wo-o-o-o-oh section to simply stuff one of the sandwiches in Simon's mouth, effectively muffling his singing and shutting him right up.

"Oh, you were serenading me, huh?" Raphael questioned, one eyebrow raised and lips curling into a smirk when the other's cheeks suddenly coloured a pretty shade of pink that almost crawled up to Simon's ears. Someone had not thought about his own words before blurting them out, it seemed.

"Uh, well, I--"

"Kids, we have landed!" Magnus interrupted Simon's awkward stammering, hitting the horn for good measurement and Raphael cursed under his breath because he jumped slightly at the unexpected and certainly unnecessary sound. Simon stared at him for a beat longer before smiling sheepishly and scooping up his sandwich again to resume eating it while scrambling up to his feet, the still playing music momentarily forgotten. Raphael watched the other fumble with the door of
the van - *always fumbling and flailing* - until he had managed to open it and almost fall face first out of the vehicle. This boy was an absolute mess but until now Raphael had never thought there was such a thing as a possibly *good mess*.

"I like him," Magnus announced while slumping down on the seat Simon had occupied just a minute earlier, reaching for one of the sandwiches to take a bite out of it with an appreciative hum.

"You're repeating yourself. And he's...well. Awkward, bouncy and weird, I guess."

"Exactly!" His best friend agreed with a smile and tilted his head to the side, assessing the younger boy.

"You seem like you're enjoying yourself quite a bit as well, darling." Magnus smiled softly in this almost motherly way that had always been a little bit weird to Raphael but he had accepted that the other could easily turn into a clucking hen when it came to his loved ones - or mostly Raphael because he was still *oh so young*.

"Hm. I haven't died of boredom yet," Raphael shrugged, deliberately not making an effort to say anything properly positive about the situation because he knew the other would react exactly the way he did.

"Oh, come on. Don't give me that. I saw you pretending to be annoyed but you actually smiled at this goofball," Magnus huffed, pointing into the general direction where Simon had disappeared to wherever, and raised one hand to point accusingly at Raphael, almost touching the tip of his nose in the process.

"You like him too, just admit it. I swear I will not tell anyone that this cold, dead heart of yours might not be as cold and dead as you want everyone to believe."

"Magnus, I don't--"

"Shush! I didn't mean *like* like, you cretin. I know how you tick, dear, and that you don't just fall in like with someone or whatever, no worries. I meant like as in *you think he's likeable* or maybe even *cute.*" Magnus had the nerve to wink at him and all he could do was roll his eyes in return because his best friend was horrible and should stop reading him so easily. It was unnerving and unfair.

"How about you shut up and eat your food, *tonto,*" Raphael huffed and ignored that his cheeks might have heated up a tiny bit but clearly not enough to be visible, otherwise his best friend would certainly point it out gleefully.

Why, exactly, had he thought to agree to this road trip was a reasonable idea? He might never know...

---

*Por el amor de Dios* - For the love of God  
*Eres tan jodidamente ridículo* - You are so fucking ridiculous  
*Tonto* - Fool/idiot

So, I started a playlist on Spotify for this story - basically the one Simon is making in
this chapter - and if anyone wants to listen to it you can do so here :) 

And: the song Simon (and Magnus) a singing along to in this chapter is *Best day of my life by American Authors.*
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

I'm currently a little slow but I'm kind of almost finished with chapter 12 now. Hopefully, I will get at least one more done until next week because I'd prefer to stay ahead of the uploads.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"We could play I spy", Simon suggested when he had finally managed to get himself to stop singing along with Imagine Dragon's On top of the world that his road trip playlist had started a minute ago. Raphael sighed and reached for the bottle of water to take a sip, trying to keep himself from commenting on the sheer stupidity of this idea.

It was day number four of their trip, the second one with Simon tagging along, and they had spent the last night in a parking lot near Louisville. It was ten in the morning and they had hit the road not even an hour ago but Simon already seemed bored and seeking something to occupy his mind with. Apparently, he had momentarily lost interest in adding songs to the still rather short playlist - Raphael was pretty sure it didn't even have 20 tracks yet - so he had reverted to suggesting such useless games.

"So?" Simon prompted and Raphael chose to glance back to the other before the guy got the idea to poke his shoulder or try different means to get his attention. He raised an unimpressed eyebrow at the older boy who simply beamed brightly back at him, without a care in the world and clearly without realising the fact that his idea made absolutely no sense.

"And how is this supposed to work? We don't have that many things here and it would probably be very easy to guess the words," Raphael finally gave in to explain the problem with this childish game because the other clearly chose to no think about the stuff he blurted out.

"Well, we could--" Simon started while gesturing towards the windshield but he interrupted himself, finally realising what Raphael was getting at. It was a little difficult to play the game properly while moving along the highway in a car because everything outside was useless for the game due to the fact that they drove past it. Simon made a small, disappointed "Oh"-sound and his shoulder dropped a little but he bounced right back with a thoughtful expression, fingertip tapping against his lower lip. Raphael was surprised to notice it was rather difficult to not follow the movement which would result in staring at the other's lips.

"I'm sure there's a useful quiz app out there. Quizzes are fun, right? And it would be something Merlin could participate in as well."

Raphael suppressed a groan because of the still ongoing game of "let's give each other ridiculous names that only start with the same letter but don't sound remotely like our real names". That title was clearly way too long but so was the list of moronic things those two were bonding over.

"I think that's a good idea. Also, Santa, you said you have a license, right? Ever driven something of this size?" Magnus asked, unfazed by the name calling and reciprocating the sentiment without batting an eye. Simon snorted softly in reaction to the name but didn't comment on it either. Raphael really failed to see the point of this bullshit because they clearly didn't even get on each other's nerves with the name-calling - he was the only one suffering.
"Yeah, actually. I was in a band from middle school until the end of high school and I was mostly the one to drive the crappy old van because the band member it belonged to was the shittiest driver on the face of the earth and would have probably gotten all of us killed," Simon answered with a shrug while searching for a quiz app on his phone for them to play. It took about half a minute for his head to shoot up with wide eyes.

"Wait, are you asking me to drive this thing?"

"You're brighter than I thought you were. Yes, Smeagol, that's exactly what I'm asking or proposing, rather. Rapha here doesn't have a license so I can't switch with him but it would be nice to not be the lone driver all the time and get some time off the wheel as well. If you're comfortable with it and think you can handle the vehicle."

"Yeah, I can do that, no problem, dude."

"Could you stop calling people dude?! That's a terrible habit." Magnus pulled a face and grimaced even more when Simon deliberately replied with a "But why, dude?", causing Raphael to barely bite back a snort of amusement. He was on the road with the two most ridiculous people he could imagine and it surprisingly wasn't too terrible.

"Okay, I think I got a good one. Let's see who's more knowledgeable!" Simon grinned happily and Raphael only rolled his eyes with a sigh. It wasn't that he actually minded and a quiz was certainly a better idea than I spy - and it would hopefully help pass the time a little better.

"First question: How many time zones does the world have? Oh, wow, okay..."

Magnus gazed at Simon through the rear view mirror, amusement clear on his face at the other's slightly baffled reaction.

"20-something, I guess," he offered with a small shrug while Raphael was actually tempted to try and roughly count them, though realising that he had no clue how many times zones they had outside of the US, so it was pretty useless to even try.

"I never thought about that," Simon mumbled and shrugged before tapping on the question to reveal the answer because he had absolutely no clue and Raphael didn't seem inclined to try an answer either.

"Wow, it's 24. You're pretty good, Magnus," he grinned. "I guess it makes kind of sense that it's 24, though."

Simon stared at his phone for a moment after and then grabbed the tablet still playing the music he had put together. Raphael frowned and turned in his seat to watch the other, mildly curious what this was about now. After a few moment, Simon made a small sound in the back of his throat.

"I felt like googling it and this site here says there are actually more than 24 time zones because they're not all one hour apart. Apparently, there are time zones that only differ 30 or 45 minutes?? I have never even heard of that, to be honest. Wow."

"So, how many are there according to that site?" Magnus prompted with a surprised little frown and it was kind of hilarious that them playing a random quiz game was now turning into them actually learning something in the process.

"It says there are 39," he answered after scanning the text with his eyes, followed by a soft "Huh" from the driver's seat. That was certainly a surprise. Raphael had thought there were probably a lot and, of course, 24 sounded pretty reasonable but he hadn't known that not all differences were one
hour. That was actually kind of interesting but these things weren't the ones you were taught about in school, sadly.

"Wow, that was actually educational," Simon voiced what Raphael had just thought and chuckled before switching back to the quiz app. "I guess this turns into more of a let's learn new stuff than just a quiz. Okay, next question: What is Japanese sake made of? Seriously??"

"Considering the fact that it's called rice wine, the answer is kind of obvious," Raphael noted with a roll of his eyes at this rather ridiculous question. Why did quizzes always have either impossible questions to answer or some that were way too easy?

"Yeah, I think we can just move on from this one, that was too easy. How about: In which city can you see Michelangelo's David? That's...not difficult either."

"I have actually seen David when I went to Italy with my mum after my graduation. We visited different cities and, of course, Florence as well. It's a quite beautiful statue when you stand in front of it, though the poor man got a quite tiny--"

"Magnus, cállate por favor," Raphael groaned because it was obvious where his best friend was going and it was thoroughly unnecessary to discuss the size of a statue's junk right now. Especially because he knew Magnus probably wouldn't just stop there - he always drifted off to the most ridiculous and embarrassing stories when he started up with stuff like this. Not today, thank you very much.

"So, I skipped a few questions because they were just as simple. This one is better: Who said I think therefore I am?"

"Hamlet," Magnus said with a shrug and caused both of the other's to gape at him. Raphael even made a disgusted noise in the back of his throat, even though his best friend's lips curled into the slightest hint of a grin, indicating that he wasn't actually serious.

"That was to be or not to be and I really hope you didn't seriously mix that up right now," Simon complained before looking back at the question on his screen with a slight frown. "I know that but I can't recall the name right now."

"Descartes," Raphael offered mildly amused about the other's face that was scrunched up in concentration.

"Oh, right! René Descartes, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, the French philosopher," he agreed with the hint of a smile while Magnus was the one giving them a disgusted side glance now.

"You two are such nerds," he scoffed, clearly amused and shaking his head with a smile before switching lanes to allow another care to pass by them on the highway. There wasn't too much traffic today, surprisingly, so the ride was mostly relaxed.

"So people who actually remember some of the stuff they learned at school are nerds to you, huh?" Raphael teased and his best friend was all for forgetting about the information he had learnt and deemed useless for his future life. Magnus did like to read but he was more for those tacky romance novels or sometimes a crime one but mostly modern stuff while Raphael actually liked to spend his time with reading a classic every now and then.

"I think these question might actually be too easy for us." Simon squinted at his screen, tapping a few times before his eyebrows drew together in a frown. "Which Mexican rebel was shot in 1923 and died?"
"Francisco Villa; called Pancho Villa. He was one of the most important figures in the Mexican Revolution," Raphael answered with a slightly bored tone and blinked when he noticed the way Simon stared at him, something akin to awe in his brown doe-eyes.

"What?" He felt a tiny bit uncomfortable all of a sudden, being stared at like this, but fortunately, Simon snapped out of it immediately, grinning sheepishly.

"Nothing, sorry. It's just cool you know this."

"Well, I am from Méxiko and I grew up there so...I better know at least some important things about my home country," he shrugged and felt weirdly embarrassed all of a sudden.

"Well, I'm of Cuban and Colombian descent but I wouldn't know such things. Probably because I was born in the US. Though my mum did tell me a little about Colombia where she grew up but it's not a lot," Simon admitted with a shrug and his eyes briefly took on a distant expression as if his thoughts drifted off for a few seconds and Raphael swallowed the question on his tongue, for some reason not sure if it would be okay to ask if that meant the other's father was from Cuba and why he hadn't told Simon about it as well.

Simon talked quite a lot most of the time and didn't hesitate to tell random personal stories about his childhood but he never really mentioned his family too much. He had talked about his older sister, Rebecca, the day before and briefly mentioned his mother here and there but there had been nothing about his father. Raphael didn't know the reason but he was fairly sure it was probably best not to pry into it and only ask about it in case Simon himself brought up the subject.

It was all too familiar for Raphael to avoid mentioning certain things - he always paid attention to not mention his father, either. Hopefully, Simon had a less horrible reason to do so but Raphael sensed that there was definitely a heavy story hidden underneath the other's silence when it came to his father.

Raphael cleared his throat and almost gently prompted Simon to read the next question before the atmosphere grew even heavier than it already did for some reason. Magnus glanced at his best friend, a silent question in his eyes, but he simply shook his head with a small smile to indicate everything was fine.

"You're actually a pretty decent driver," Magnus said and didn't even try to hide the surprise in his voice.

"Gee, thank you." Simon rolled his eyes but the way the corners of his mouth tugged upwards a little showed he wasn't really as offended as he made it sound.

"Considering how twitchy you are, I thought we might end up curled around the next tree five minutes in," the oldest offered with a shrug but there was a teasing glint in his eyes. Magnus leant back in the passenger seat that he had taken after their lunch break where they had decided to switch drivers and Raphael was seated in the back, the tablet in his lap because Simon had asked him to maybe work on the playlist because it badly needed more songs to not loop after like half an hour already.

Raphael had never used Spotify before but it was easy enough to get the hang of it and he actually lost himself a little in the sheer amount of music, switching between various artists and playlists to find good songs that might fit to listen to on the road. He was curled up on the seat, headphones caressing his ears with the tunes of another song by American Authors because he had really enjoyed Best day of my life and didn't actually know any other songs from them. Raphael wasn't
aware of humming along until he finally felt Magnus staring at him with wide but amused eyes.

"What is it, Bane?" He asked and deliberately used the other's last name to show annoyance even though both of them knew it was just an act he kept up for whatever reasons. Habit, maybe.

"Nothing. Just...you seem happy," his best friend replied with a shrug and a genuine smile tugging at the corners of his lips. Raphael paused with a frown, his eyes narrowing before he realised that Magnus was actually right. He felt relaxed and...happy. It was weird that he hadn't even noticed it himself, considering the tension he had carried around ever since the breakup. But here he was, feeling comfortable and relaxed in a van with his best friend and a not-so-stranger, humming along to some good music with a smile on his face.

He knew Simon glanced at Magnus and him, curiosity on his face, but he didn't actually question the brief exchange or ask why Raphael wouldn't be happy. It was unexpected and quite fascinating that Simon was barely able to shut up, a trait that made him seem likeable but also a bit naive. He was the type of person you expected to blurt out everything, not considering their words or thinking about whatever he was about to say. Sure, Simon did have such moments as well but by now only with the result of feeling embarrassed himself. He really seemed to have a sense of more sensitive topics, though, and clearly kept himself from asking questions when it seemed like it might be too personal.

To Raphael, it felt like a mutual, unspoken understanding of their boundaries and it was a weirdly intimate thing in a way. They didn't know much about each other and didn't exactly trust each other but there was trust in the way they moved around on another - literally and figuratively. It was probably the reason why Raphael had managed to warm up to Simon faster than with any other person before. They were so different but at the same time similar in all the ways that mattered. Simon was full of energy, bouncy, all-smiles, positivity and too many words for his head to contain while Raphael was quiet, grumpy, introverted and rather pessimistic or at least sarcastic.

After Magnus turned back around to watch the landscape fly by and started a conversation with Simon, Raphael focused back on the tablet and to searching songs for the playlist. Even if he didn't end up finding a lot of songs that seemed right for it, he still discovered a few really good artists that he either hadn't heard of before or simply never listened into because he never had a reason to think they could be his taste.

He actually managed to doze off when he got bored by searching through all the music and decided to simply listen to another playlist he had started - he would get the app and make an account later but seeing as playlists could be shared he could easily access it again so he hadn't bothered switching from Magnus's tablet to his own phone. Raphael was confused that he had actually managed to fall asleep and even more so when a weird but comfortable feeling spread in his chest when he saw the soft amusement in Simon's smile while he tried to wake up properly and complained to Magnus about his neck hurting from the crappy position.

"Come on, sleepyhead. We almost managed to get through Missouri but we decided to stop here in Springfield for the day. It's late enough and I want to treat you to a proper meal," Magnus grinned widely and gently patted his best friend's thigh, playfully prompting him to get up and going. Raphael made a small sound of trying to suppress a yawn, rubbed his face and pushed himself up from his slumped position to get up and stretch a little.

"Just give me five minutes and we can leave," he replied and glared at Magnus who laughed, clearly delighted by his slightly disoriented state right after being awoken from a nap. Raphael huffed but when his eyes met Simon's his mouth still curved into the faintest of smiles before he shuffled to his bag, pulling out a proper shirt and jeans because he was only in a hoodie and sweatpants - he did take care of his looks but no way in hell wouldn't get comfy if he spent hours on end in a cramped van!
When Raphael pushed the door of the small bathroom shut behind him, listening to the friendly banter that immediately started up between the other two, he caught his own smile in the mirror and he couldn't help but stare at himself for a brief moment, assessing the relaxed slope of his shoulders and the sleepy but thoroughly unconcerned expression on his face, his eyes crinkling a little at the corners. *You seem happy,* Magnus's words echoed in his mind and despite knowing that it probably won't last, Raphael still enjoyed the momentary lightness in his chest and the fact that this trip was actually successful in making him forget about his worries for a while.

Chapter End Notes

*Cállate por favor* - Shut up please
Chapter 10

The next day was mostly spent driving again and when they arrived in Oklahoma City after about 10 hours on the road - with breaks and taking their time because there was no rush whatsoever - Magnus finally declared that he wanted to sleep in a proper bed for the night and that they should take a break from driving the next day. They had been on the road for three days in a row and even though they had Simon on board now who could drive as well, it was still kind of exhausting.

Raphael agreed with the break but scrunched up his face when Magnus announced his choice of a hotel and finally decided he would stay in the van. He knew Magnus could easily pay for all of them to stay in the rather fancy hotel without even noticing it on his bank account but Raphael didn't want his best friend to spend even more money on him. Another reason might be the fact that he would feel horribly out of place in such a hotel and besides, he didn't mind the van that much. It wasn't the most comfortable place to sleep but there had been worse and it kind of grew on you after a few days.

Simon - also not happy about the prospect of a fancy, expensive hotel - announced to stay with Raphael in the van and Magnus had finally given up trying to convince them. He had dramatically collected the things he needed for his stay in the hotel and went to check in, only to text Raphael his room number and tell them to feel free to join him and at least take the chance to use the shower in the morning.

"He's kind of intense, isn't he?" Simon asked with a chuckle while preparing a simple dinner for them and watching Raphael trying to open the window in the roof of the van because it was pretty stuffy and always too hot during the night without it being open. It was early summer, after all.

"Need help with that?" He finally offered with a badly suppressed chuckle because Raphael was not quite able to reach the handle of the window, despite standing on the bench that folded into Magnus's bed. He wasn't that short but still missing the few crucial centimetres to reach the damn thing properly and it was mildly frustrating.

"With your coordination of a drunk goldfish? I don't think so. You probably get yourself killed in the process," Raphael replied, partly dismissive and partly teasing. He could almost hear the other's pout and couldn't help but look in Simon's direction, lips curling into a grin without his permission.

"I'm not that clumsy! And why do you know what the coordination of a drunk goldfish is, anyway?" He should have expected this question.

"Maybe I should change it to you have the elegance of an elephant in a porcelain shop?" Raphael offered with a smirk, resting his hands on his hips now and resisted the urge to glare up at the damn just-out-of-reach window.

"Pretty sure the saying is like a bull in a china shop," the other corrected, this time chuckling openly and Raphael rolled his eyes.

"I was not trying to repeat some nonsensical saying, even though it fits just as well, idiota."

"You do realise I understand Spanish?"
"Even people who don't speak Spanish understand that, genius. Okay, if you're so keen on helping - please, feel free to give it a try but I'm not to blame if you break your neck." He shrugged and tried to ignore the fact that he might actually be a little concerned about Simon's safety. Even in a sober state Simon always kind of stumbled in and out of the van, not quite able to master the three stairs without incident. It was as amusing as it was disconcerting.

"¡No soy tan torpe!" Simon complained weakly, frowning at the other before making a shooing motion for Raphael to get off the bench and let him climb up there to open the window. He was only a few inches taller than Raphael but his arms were apparently a tad longer as well so he could reach the window quite easily, unlatch it and push it open so a puff of fresh but warm air wafted inside.

"Wow, I'm surprised you actually didn't--" Raphael's comment was interrupted by Simon's foot slipping off the bench when he wanted to climb back down and he instinctively reached out to somehow stop the fall but it only resulted in both of them landing on the small patch of floor between the bench and kitchen unit. Simon's alarmed shriek was followed by the sound of Raphael's head hitting the wooden side of the counter painfully.

"Shit, shit, fuck. Are you okay??"

Raphael slowly blinked his eyes open and he wasn't sure if he had actually blacked out for for a second from the sharp pain of hitting his head. The part that had connected with the counter was throbbing uncomfortably and his sight was a little blurry at first until Simon's scared expression came into focus. His eyes were wide, panicked and face pale.

"I'm so sorry! Shit. Are you--How are you feeling?" The older boy stammered and gently cupped Raphael's head with his hands, carefully lifting it to tentatively push his fingers through Raphael's hair to the back of his head - probably to check the damage. He couldn't help a pained groan from escaping his lips when the other's fingertips brushed the already forming bump and Simon sucked in a breath.

"Sorry, sorry. At least the skin doesn't seem to be broken," he muttered after inspecting his fingers that were fortunately not coated in red. Raphael couldn't help but have an unwelcome flashback to the day his father had pushed him into the shelf at home in a fit of rage, resulting in his cheek being split open badly enough that he would always carry the scar of the incident. This scene was weirdly similar to that one, yet completely different because it hadn't been deliberate and this time someone was actually worried about the consequences.

Every time his father had hurt him, he hadn't even checked if Raphael might be badly injured, only called him more slurs and told him to not be such a pussy. It was unfamiliar to be touched so gently and be treated with worry now - which was probably a sad and twisted thought to have but it was only the truth.

"Could you say something?" Simon's pleading voice pulled his muddled thoughts back into the here and now. Raphael blinked slowly before mumbling a soft "Estoy bien" in hope to get the freaked-out expression to leave the other's face. Of course, his mother, siblings, Magnus and Sarwenda had always been worried about him whenever he got hurt but this was still such an odd situation because Simon barely knew him, yet here he was with his wide doe-eyes and an expression as if he had just put a knife into Raphael's chest instead of merely knocking him over.

"You're clearly not fine," the other complained and exhaled a shuddering breath, his hands both cupping Raphael's head again. He shuffled back a little to carefully pull Raphael into a sitting position with his back leant against the counter. Until know, he hadn't even realised that the other boy was basically straddling him and his heart did a funny little flip but he couldn't get his tongue to form the words to inform Simon of the slightly questionable position they were in.
"I guess you were right about my coordination. Though I doubt goldfish fall off benches after opening windows," Simon joked with a still slightly shaky voice from the shock and his finger absently carded through Raphael's messy curls as if to soothe the pain. He wanted to roll his eyes at the idiotic statement but the movement only caused the back of his head to throb more and so Raphael decided to just huff in mild, put-upon annoyance.

"I almost managed to light my socks on fire with a gas stove in the house my family lived in when I was younger," Simon said with a helpless little shrug and his lips curled into a sheepish grin. Raphael had no clue where this admission suddenly came from but he squinted incredulously at the other boy because how did that even happen?! Simon seemed to pick up on the unspoken question and exhaled a shaky laugh.

"Well, I tried to pick up a pen next to the stove...with my foot. I have no idea why I thought that was a good idea. It was such a spur of the moment thing, just to try if I could manage to do this? I ended up accidentally touching the dial, turned on the stove and my socks almost caught fire," he explained and his pale cheeks gained a more pinkish colour now, flushing with embarrassment.

"You really are a hazard to yourself and everyone around you," Raphael rasped, his voice still sounding a little groggy after hitting his head, and he meant it to be joking but accidentally made it sound like an accusation. Simon's whole body tensed up like a switch had been flipped and his eyes widened, sheepish smile slipping off his lips.

The breathed and utterly sincere "I know" paired with Simon's expression broke Raphael's heart and before the other managed to pull back and get up, he caught the older boy's hand. His fingers wrapped around Simon's, squeezing gently.

"No. I meant it as a joke. Sorry, that was probably uncalled for. You're clumsy, sure, but far from being a hazard," Raphael corrected his earlier words and he wondered why Simon just accepted these words so easily with such a lost expression. What had happened to this usually joyful boy that he honestly thought he was a danger to others?

"It's okay. I--"

"No, it's not. I swear I didn't mean it."

"I hurt you," Simon mumbled and he sounded genuinely sad as if he was about to start crying and Raphael felt like he had missed something. It was only a bump to the head - painful, yes, but not the end of the world. Not something to warrant such a strong reaction all of a sudden.

"It's not that bad. Come on, I'll be fine," he said gently, not letting go of Simon's noticeably shaky hand in his grasp. His thumb brushed the back of the other's hand, trying to soothe whatever had initiated this strong response.

"I've had worse, believe me. And I know you didn't deliberately hurt me. It happens." He smiled at Simon, headache momentarily forgotten by the sudden need to comfort the other and get him to smile again. Simon squeezed his eyes shut for a brief moment before blinking them open again after taking a few steadying breaths.

"Lo siento," he murmured.

"I already told you--"

"No, I'm sorry for freaking out," Simon corrected, voice low and sounding like a scared child. Raphael surprised himself by suddenly wrapping his arms around the other boy, pulling him against his chest in a gentle embrace.
"Don't worry about it, Simon. It's okay," he whispered against the side of the other's head who hid his face in the crook of Raphael's neck for a moment, breathing him in and sinking into the contact. Raphael wondered when the last time had been that someone had touched the other like this, just embraced him without asking questions and understanding without explanation.

Raphael knew there was a difference between hugging someone out of compassion and hugging someone with comprehension of the situation. He might not know what had caused Simon's strong reaction but he did know what it was like to have more intense reactions to something than what was supposed to be normal.

He didn't know how long they stayed like this, on the floor of the van, Simon in his lap and wrapped up in his arms, but it was slightly awkward when they finally disentangled their limbs and got up again. Simon resumed preparing their meal and they had a rather tentative chat during dinner, both not quite knowing how to act after what had happened.

Simon asked about his head every once in a while, clearly unable to stop worrying about it, but his smile was back when his suggestion to sleep on the bench now that Magnus wasn't here was dismissed by Raphael. He didn't mind sleeping next to Simon and it was actually kind of...nice? And maybe he even liked to wake up and realise the other had moved closer during the night, one of his hands resting against Raphael's chest or arm. It was weirdly soothing to wake up and have someone right there.

"You seriously stole food from the breakfast buffet?" Simon laughed, clearly delighted when Magnus placed several things on the table - buns, small packets of butter and spreads. Raphael only frowned at his best friend but he wasn't even surprised.

"I didn't steal anything. I paid for a room with breakfast and it was all you can eat. It didn't say all you can eat at once," he explained with a carefree shrug before sauntering to the kitchen unit to grab two plates and a set of cutlery for both, seeing as he already ate in the hotel.

"The more I get to know you, the weirder you get," Simon commented with amusement and Raphael barely held himself back from smiling. After what had happened last evening he was glad to see a genuine smile back on the other's face. The back of his head still felt tender and painful to the touch but it wasn't too bad and he just tried to ignore it.

"Believe me, none of this came close to his level of weird yet," he commented and smiled sweetly at his best friend who glared at him, clearly disapproving of his comment. Magnus mumbled a "Rude" under his breath but went back to the kitchen unit to fill two cups with coffee.

"How about you two shut up, eat your breakfast and let me look up things we could do today?" Magnus suggested after a few more teasing comments, rolling his eyes fondly. He sat down on the seat at the front of the van and reached for his tablet to browse for activities in the city.

"If there's nothing interesting to do, we could always go shopping. Shirley could clearly use some better clothes and maybe they even have a sale on sense of style if we're lucky," Magnus mused and Simon spluttered a "Hey!" while almost choking on his coffee in his haste to react to the not too subtle insult directed at him. Raphael hid his grin behind his own mug, slowly sipping the still hot liquid and feeling himself relax into the cushions of the bench, watching the teasing exchange.

"Just because I don't dress up like a model doesn't mean I don't have a sense of style!" Simon complained with an accusing finger pointed at Magnus who chuckled, apparently delighted.

"Why, thank you," he replied at the probably accidental compliment weaved into Simon's words, who scowled at the realisation, "but what you call sense of style looks more like I got dressed in
the dark. And you probably do your shopping in the dark as well because most of the things I have seen so far are...well..."

Simon glared harder when Magnus just finished the sentence by grimacing in disgust, causing Raphael to almost burst out laughing but he managed to bite his tongue and only kind of hiccuped instead. Simon glanced at him, squinted but involuntarily started smiling when Raphael's mouth curled into an innocent grin.

"Sorry to disappoint but I have been a poor student for a few years now and couldn't exactly go buy fancy clothing."

"Oh, that's just not true, darling! I know, for a fact, that you can also buy decent clothing with little money. Buttercup over here is living proof of that."

Raphael frowned and incredulously mouthed the ridiculous nickname back at his best friend with his best what the fuck is wrong with you expression. Magnus should really stop giving people cringe-worthy names. Simon only snorted because he clearly hadn't managed the art of holding back laughter yet and Raphael sighed at the mumbled "Sorry" in his direction.

"First, stop with the horrible names. Second, at least a quarter of my wardrobe is stuff you forced on me."

"Presents, dear."

"That's what I said." Raphael made a dismissive gesture. His best friend had this habit of randomly buying clothes when he thought they would suit Raphael and because he knew the other didn't like it, he always said they were presents. It was a horrible habit in Raphael's opinion but he had long since given up on fighting it and he couldn't exactly deny that his best friend had quite the impeccable taste and always got things he actually really liked.

"You almost sound like a sugar daddy," Simon suddenly commented and Magnus's face morphed from shock to disgust.

"You do know what that means, right?" He inquired and even Raphael grimaced at the mere thought of this comparison. Simon's eyes had widened as well because he had clearly not meant to blurt this out.

"Yes, of course I know and that's not...Sorry?" He grinned sheepishly and Magnus shuddered.

"Let me make one thing very clear: I love this spawn of Satan very much but only like a brother and besides, I am clearly not old enough to be considered a sugar daddy!" Magnus complained and Raphael held himself back from pointing out that those were technically two things. He also didn't quite know why the other thought it was necessary to clarify that there was no interest in having a closer-than-friendship relationship with him. He would never quite get what was going on in that pretty head of his best friend.

"Can we just forget I said anything??" Simon pleaded, almost whined, and hid his face in his hands for a brief moment before turning back to his breakfast, clearly determined to pretend the past few seconds never happened. Raphael breathed out a huff of laughter, shaking his head before glancing at his smirking best friend who had the nerve to wink at him. The joys of being on a trip with two weirdos.

Chapter End Notes
No soy tan torpe - I'm not that clumsy
Estoy bien - I'm fine
Lo siento - I'm sorry
Magnus had honestly tried to convince them to spend the day in Oklahoma City with shopping instead of looking for something they couldn't do anywhere else as well but Simon had suggested getting some culture - at least kind of - and either head to the science museum or the Myriad Botanical Gardens. Magnus was not particularly into the thought of the science museum but would prefer the art museum and Raphael didn't necessarily care either way because he deemed both interesting so they ended up heading to the botanical gardens and took a relaxed stroll. Raphael rolled his eyes at the other two every once in a while for taking quite a lot of photos with their phones. He only took a hand full of pictures of the really beautiful flowers and a sneaky one of Magnus and Simon bickering over something, sending these photos to his mother to share a few glimpses of this trip with his family.

After the trip to the gardens, they still had enough left of the day for Magnus to still get his wish of going on a little shopping tour until it was time to grab something proper to eat instead of the quick stop for fast food they made at lunchtime. Magnus suggested the Cattlemen's Steakhouse because Google said it was an experience to make whilst in the city but when Simon almost sheepishly admitted to being vegetarian they simply went to a small Italian restaurant for pizza and pasta. Simon seemed actually surprised that they changed their plan without hesitation and Raphael had resisted the temptation to call him an idiot for apparently expecting them to react negatively or simply heading there without him.

"My mum still thinks it's just some kind of phase and she always forgets that I don't eat meat, even after almost four years," he had explained with a shrug and Raphael had thought that Simon's mother apparently didn't agree with much her son did. Well, her being against the road trip he did understand but why couldn't she accept his food choices?

When they were curled up in the bunk of the van that night, Magnus spending another night in the hotel before they would get back on the road again the next morning, Raphael had a brief moment where he wanted to reach out and just curl his fingers around Simon's hand for no other reason than wanting to feel the other's warm skin against his. He brushed it off and turned around to keep himself from doing anything weird like that, trying to listen to Simon's calm breathing instead of the unnecessary frantic beat of his heart.

This night, for some reason, he dreamt of his father and his yelling, a loud mix of English mingled with Spanish curses and slurs. He jerked awake with a sheen of cold sweat covering his forehead and it took hours to get rid of the shaky feeling that had settled in his bones. Magnus's worried glances were answered with small, probably insincere looking smiles and shrugs. It happened. Sometimes small things during the day reminded him of his father and he would visit Raphael in his dreams. He had been okay over the past few days, even since they had started the road trip, so it had only been a matter of time for one of the nightmares to return and remind him that he wasn't as okay as he might feel.

Simon was the first one to take the wheel that day and despite clearly noticing the shift in Raphael's mood, he didn't comment on it and simply hummed or sang along to the music of the playlist, chatting about useless things like the weather or stupid things he and his best friend, a redhead named Clary, did when they were still kids.

"Lupita sent a message and asked if we're in the mood for a video chat later?" Magnus announced
when they were taking a break about five hours into their ride. Raphael was almost tempted to say no, simply because he still felt a little out of it and didn't want to worry his mother who would certainly notice his mood but he would feel even worse if he said no.

"Lupita?" Simon asked with a questioning frown while, once again, stumbling into the van and almost dropping the Popsicle he had just bought in the small store of the gas station they had stopped at. It was getting kind of ridiculous how incapable this boy was when it came to climbing into the van and Raphael suppressed a sigh at the fact that he actually found it weirdly *endeearing*.

"Guadalupe, my mamá," he explained and smiled a little at the soft "Ah" Simon made in return. Raphael didn't really need to think much about his answer and he finally nodded at Magnus to agree, not even wondering why his mother had sent the question to his best friend rather than him but Magnus had always been the one paying more attention to his phone and therefore was the one who would actually notice important messages in time.

Part of him was admittedly a little anxious for his mamá to notice that he was slightly down today but the greater part was looking forward to seeing her, talking to her and hopefully the twins would be around as well. Emanuel and Luciano were 13 now and even though they had always been quite the handful, Raphael loved them to bits and he would probably do everything to ensure their happiness. Family meant everything to him and he mostly blamed his experiences with their father for the fact that he was horribly protective of his siblings, always worrying too much about their well-being.

Magnus sent the answer to Guadalupe and it didn't take too long for the reply to arrive and with that, it was settled. Raphael definitely felt better for agreeing and not following the slightly dull feeling in his chest that tried to convince him to climb into the bunk, curl up under the blanket despite the warm temperatures, and just stay there for the rest of the day.

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a few seconds before opening them again, catching Simon staring at him with a worried little frown that immediately turned into a softer expression and a tentative smile playing on his lips. Raphael felt the corners of his own mouth curl upwards in return and it was kind of weird how at ease this young man made him feel, despite only knowing him for a few days.

Simon actually managed to rope him into playing a card game when they were back on the road and Magnus had taken over the wheel. Raphael tried to seem annoyed and unwilling but it didn't take too long for him to actually enjoy playing with the other. Simon was ridiculously triumphant when he won the first round and his beaming grin was admittedly adorable.

"I'm a pro at this game," Simon stated while mixing the cards again and Raphael snorted, his chest seemingly rising a little easier with every breath, feeling less constricted.

"Sure thing. I didn't even know it was possible to be a pro in UNO but whatever helps you sleep at night," he replied with a teasing smirk and Simon pouted in return, sticking his tongue out like the 5-year-old he apparently was at heart.

"Let's see how teasing you are when I win every round with my pro-ness!"

Raphael bit back a comment about how that probably wasn't even a legitimate word and barely managed to not grin about this dork while they started another round. He didn't hold anything back when the round was over, though, and burst out laughing when he was the one winning which resulted in Simon complaining and accusing him of cheating. Suffice it to say that didn't stop Raphael from making fun of the other.
Video chats were kind of weird, Raphael thought to himself when the connection finally worked and a part of the small but comfy living room at his mother's tiny house came into view with the beat up old couch and Guadalupe sitting slightly too close to the camera, squinting at her screen until the faces of her son and Magnus finally popped up and her whole expression changed into a happy one.

"Raphael, mi lucero, ¿cómo estás?" Every syllable rolled off her tongue smoothly and carried her smile through the speakers, causing Raphael's lips to curl up a little further and the warmth in his chest to spread even more. He was happy to see his mother and to hear her voice, to see her smile brightly because she was just as happy to see him.

"Estoy bien, mamá. ¿Y usted?" Raphael suppressed a grin because he could almost feel his best friend's urge to roll his eyes at them for speaking Spanish, despite understanding the simple conversation with ease.

"Estoy bien así, gracias. And you, Magnus, how are you doing, querido?" Guadalupe's switch from Spanish to English wasn't as smooth as her son's but by now she didn't mind it anymore and didn't pause before using English to shake off the accent first. She used to do that when they moved to America, trying to suppress her accent to fit in better and to keep her boys from slipping into the same habit because she knew speaking with an accent could lead to them getting bullied at school. By now, though, she had gained the confidence to openly embrace that her accent showed every now and then because she was proud of who she was, where she came from and she taught her kids the same attitude.

"I'm doing just wonderful, Lupita," Magnus replied with a brilliant smile before motioning off screen to where Simon was huddled in the bunk with a book, clearly trying to not disturb the chat but seeing as he hadn't turned the page at all, despite staring at the bottom of it for nearly five minutes now, he was listening to their talking instead of reading.

"Spencer, come on down and get over here. Introduce yourself to the lady," Magnus ordered and Raphael felt his lips twitch in amusement when Simon's eyes widened and he shook his head vehemently. He had said earlier that he didn't want to intrude and would just stay silently in the background but of course Magnus was having none of it.

"Oh, your new travel companion? I'd really like to meet him, he seems like a really nice boy from the photos you sent," Guadalupe immediately said with a curious expression and Simon actually whined but it was low enough to not be picked up by the tablet's microphone. Raphael barely held back an amused snort, especially when the other climbed down from the bunk and, once again, almost slipped and fell in the process. He honestly hadn't believed in miracles before encountering Simon but the fact that this boy was still alive and in one piece, considering his clumsiness at times, could truly be considered somewhat of a miracle.

"Hi. Hey. I'm Simon. Simon Lewis. The guy who...uh...travels with these two - as you already know because you just said so. Well, uh, nice to meet you?"

Raphael had absolutely no idea why Simon was all nervous and twitchy all of a sudden but it was bordering on hilarious how the boy stared at the screen with wide eyes, halfway bent into the area the camera captured, and his hand twitched a little as if he was about to offer his hand to shake. Guadalupe seemed to hold back her amusement as well, even though it was clearly dancing in her dark eyes, and her lips curled into a soft smile.

"Well, aren't you adorable? I'm Guadalupe - as you may know, I'm Raphael's mother," she replied kindly and Raphael already knew that she would take a shine to Simon, who chuckled awkwardly and pushed his glasses back up from where they had slipped to the tip of his nose.
"Yeah. Yes, I've heard," he muttered sheepishly and yelped softly when Raphael unceremoniously grabbed the back of his shirt to pull him backwards, making him sit down on the narrow bench as well so that all three of them were squished together. The fact that Simon stumbled backwards and fell on his butt more than actually sitting down resulted in Raphael's arm being trapped behind his lower back and seeing as he couldn't really pull it back he ended up curling his arm around the other's lower back to not have his hand squished in an uncomfortable angle.

Simon's mouth opened and closed, the faintest of blushes colouring the area of his cheekbones and Raphael had to force his gaze back towards the screen to keep himself from staring. He caught his mother watching the whole scenario and actually felt his own cheeks heat up as well, heartbeat speeding up the tiniest bit.

"So, boys, what were you up to today?" Guadalupe asked, mercifully not commenting on the slight awkwardness, and her soft smile lingered on her son for a moment before directing it at Magnus who didn't even try to hide his mischievous grin, secretly nudging Raphael's side with his elbow before smiling innocently at the screen.

"Well, mostly just driving. I mentioned that we decided to head to the Grand Canyon? So it makes sense to always drive longer stages every day; otherwise, it would take forever to get there," he explained with a small shrug, smile still firmly in place and shoulders relaxed.

"I hope you're taking enough breaks in between? Driving can be exhausting," Raphael's mother asked, a bit of worry slipping into the warm sound of her voice and her son smiled fondly because even someone as relaxed as Guadalupe couldn't help but worry at least a little bit about her children.

"Yes, no worries. Simon has a licence as well so we always switch in between, that works really well. And it's not like we're in any rush so we don't spend the whole day driving anyway. Mostly we're like 6 or 7 hours on the road and the rest of the day is enjoying the freedom," Magnus explained laughing, fingertips catching a strand of hair falling over his forehead and brushing it away.

"That's good. I'm glad you're being careful and taking care of yourselves," Guadalupe said with a smile and she was clearly relieved, despite knowing that they wouldn't be reckless but Raphael understood that it was always difficult to not worry in such a situation. "So, Simon, you were headed to the Grand Canyon?"

Raphael felt Simon tense the slightest bit and he wasn't even aware of moving until he felt his hand carefully touch the other's side, offering comfort and assuring him that there was no need to worry. He had known that his mamá would end up asking about it, she was a curious woman but she was also good at picking up on other's mood and Raphael knew she wouldn't insist on detailed answers when she sensed someone wasn't comfortable with it.

"Yeah, it's--I always wanted to go there and now that I finished my studies...it seemed like the perfect time, you know?" Simon offered a slightly awkward smile and fidgeted a little while pressing into Raphael's touch, clearly trying to seek comfort in the contact.

"I have never been to the Grand Canyon but I have seen it on pictures and in documentaries. It's a really beautiful sight and surely worth a visit," she offered in return and Raphael knew she already picked up on Simon's discomfort concerning the matter because she would usually ask some more about his motivation to pick this goal. Though Raphael had already briefly mentioned in a message to her that there seemed to be a more personal reason behind all of this that Simon wasn't ready to talk about.
"Yes, it must be such a cool view to stand right there. But, honestly, it will be a little bit of a challenge for me because I'm terribly afraid of heights," Simon chuckled and rubbed the back of his neck with his fingertips. He clearly hadn't meant to offer this piece of information because his blush returned and he pressed the pad of his index finger against the bridge of his glasses even though they hadn't even slipped down again. Raphael was weirdly fascinated with taking in all these little nervous habits and he was barely able to keep himself from smiling whenever he noticed them.

"I'm sure you will do just fine, honey. Many people are afraid of heights, me included. Moving to the US, the flight, was absolutely horrible for me. Raphael had been so young back then, he spent most of the flight crying because he was so scared," Guadalupe replied and now it was Raphael's turn to blush. He should have expected such stories to pop up during their chat sooner or later. His mamá loved telling other people about her beloved children and she didn't care that they might think of it as embarrassing because to her it was sharing precious memories. Raphael got it, he did, but sometimes he still wished she wouldn't offer his childhood stories to other people so willingly.

"When did you move to America, if I may ask?" Simon was clearly curious but he was still thrumming with nervous energy and Raphael could basically feel the tension of the other's nerves thanks to them still being pressed close together thanks to the lack of space on the small bench.

"It was...Raphael was 5 at the time so it was 14 years ago. We moved here when I was pregnant with the twins," she answered with a smile that hid the uncomfortable memories connected to all of this. They had moved because Raphael's father had wanted to go to America and it hadn't been about better job options to provide for his growing family but to get better living conditions mostly for himself, to get away from the rest of their family to get the chance and treat his own the way he deemed right. Meaning that without his own parents living in an apartment in the same house he had the freedom to yell louder at his wife and son and that he hadn't been too careful about where he hit anymore.

Raphael knew his mother had agreed to move because she had hoped for her family, her children, to get better chances in this richer country and that her husband would become calmer, more loving again because he could relax for the same reasons. But, no, it had only gone downhill from there but there had been no going back after moving here. Not only didn't they have the money to move back to México but their family was also pretty strict with traditions - a woman leaving her man, especially with three kids in tow, wouldn't have it easy back where they came from. Not only because providing for all of them would be nearly impossible but everyone would judge not only her but her children as well. So they stayed and endured what Alejandro put them through until Sarwenda and Magnus had come into their life to turn it upside down in the best way possible.

"That must have been difficult, especially with such a young child. I imagine it's really hard to not only leave one's hometown but the whole country. I was born here because my parents already came to the US in their teens so I don't have any personal experiences with this struggle to adjust to a completely different country," Simon replied and is was the closest he had ever gotten to talk about his father, Raphael realised. Guadalupe's smile fell the tiniest bit and her eyes briefly got a saddened expression but it vanished as quickly as it appeared and was replaced by a gentle warmth.

"Yes, it was difficult and I admit that I regretted the decision at first but by now I'm very glad the have done it because I know it was the right choice after all," she said with a soft voice and her gaze lingered on Raphael who couldn't help but feel a little embarrassed about the loving attention. He knew his mother would do anything for him and his brothers, to provide them with the best opportunities possible and that she was especially happy about his development, despite all the
hardships he had been through at such a young age. And Guadalupe was not only thankful for Sarwenda but even more for Magnus because she just knew he had saved her boy in more ways than one.

He knew Simon was looking at him with questioning eyes but Raphael kept his gaze on the screen and only breathed a little easier when Magnus decided to change the subject and talk about their day in Oklahoma City and Guadalupe willingly went along with the obvious distraction, thanking both of them for the photos they took and sent to her that day.

Chapter End Notes

Mi lucero, cómo estás - My little bright star, how are you
Estoy bien - I'm good
Y usted - What about you
Estoy bien así, gracias - I'm good as well, thank you
Querido - Dear
"Mamá, para, por favor," Raphael interjected and barely resisted the urge to bury his face in his hands - well, hand, because his arm was still wrapped around Simon's lower back and for some reason, he found it impossible to change anything about this position. Guadalupe had used the past ten minutes to tell Simon stories about Raphael's first days at school here in America and he already felt his cheeks burn with embarrassment. Simon stating how it sounded like he had been an incredibly adorable child did not exactly help him feel less flustered by the whole situation.

Magnus, of course, was of no help whatsoever because he simply laughed about the whole situation or added some things of his own because he had heard these stories several times already and just loved them way more than he should. His best friend was way too happy about seeing him embarrassed and Raphael would probably slap him over the head if his mamá wasn't watching.

Guadalupe simply chuckled at his exclamation but fortunately, there was the sound of a door opening in the background and she was distracted by Raphael's younger brothers coming home. Of course, as soon as they heard that their mother was talking to Raphael and Magnus, they basically flung themselves onto the couch to both sides of Guadalupe, beaming at the camera.

"Rapha!" They greeted him in unison and Raphael couldn't help but chuckle softly at the sight of his brothers, both staring back at him with their large, round eyes that were a little brighter in colour than his own and always kind of resembled those of a puppy with their eager sparkle.

"Hola, Chio y Nuel," Raphael greeted his brothers with a gentle smile and he laughed when they echoed the greeting before Nuel jumped right to the "Who's this guy?" question, obviously talking about Simon who made a small sound in the back of his throat when all of the attention was suddenly directed at him.

"I'm pretty sure mamá told you about him already but this is Simon, we met him during our stop near Pittsburgh and he joined us on our trip. He's the reason we're headed for the Grand Canyon now," Raphael introduced him and explained the reason for Simon being with them.

"And, Simon, these are Emmanuel and Luciano but we mostly just call them Nuel and Chio," he added, addressing Simon who greeted the twins with a bright smile before noticing Nuel's shirt that depicted *The Flash* and as soon as he mentioned it, the two were suddenly off on a rant discussing superheroes. Raphael probably should have expected Simon to get along with his brother perfectly fine because they could be pretty nerdy as well but it was still kind of fascinating to see them interact. It caused a weird, warm feeling in his chest and Raphael barely held himself back from watching Simon talk.

Guadalupe interjected after about ten minutes because it was impossible to talk over the boys, especially when Chio had started to contribute to the conversation and was honestly bringing up the whole "What's better, DC or Marvel" discussion that never led to anything good as far as Raphael remembered. Their mother effectively silenced the slightly heated argument about why Ironman and Captain America were better than Batman and Superman, causing both Raphael and Magnus to exhale a relieved breath.

"I think we kept you boys long enough now. I'm happy we could talk for a little while and I'm glad we got to know Simon," she smiled gently at Simon who squirmed a tiny bit next to an
amused Raphael, "and we should talk again in a few days."

"Absolutely," Magnus agreed, smiling softly and brushing a strand of his hair from his forehead, "we should actually reach our goal tomorrow if everything goes smoothly. We could reach Peach Springs in the late afternoon or evening and head to the Canyon from there the day after. Also, we haven't discussed it yet, but I though we could just stay a few days. It would be relaxing after all the days of travelling and I'm pretty sure it makes sense to take a little more time to discover the area."

Raphael blinked because they actually hadn't talked about this before but it sounded logical to spend a few days there after reaching their goal. Magnus had three weeks off and they had "only" been on the road for one of them, which meant they could allow themselves a break of a few days and still get back with enough time to spare before Magnus had to get back to work.

They said their goodbyes and "I love you"s and Raphael smiled with a warm feeling in his chest after they ended the video call. He was glad he hadn't given in to his slightly down mood and said no to talking to his family because this had certainly helped to lighten him up quite a bit and he was kind of happy that he had been able to introduce Simon to the other's properly. His mamá had already seen Simon in a few of the photos and surely had shown them to the twins as well but it was still different to see them interact.

"Your mum is amazing and your brothers are absolutely adorable," Simon exclaimed with an eager grin and his cheeks flushed a little when he turned around to face Raphael, clearly only now realising how close they were to each other. Magnus snorted softly before getting up from his side of the bench, reaching for his phone with the announcement that he wanted to call Catarina and then he was already on his way to leave the van. Raphael shook his head in amusement about this not very subtle retreat of his best friend before he faced Simon again.

"They are. Chio and Nuel can be little shits sometimes but they are usually really sweet boys," he said with a soft voice and his lips curling into a loving smile. Simon's lips mirrored a similar smile and he placed his lower arms on the table, intertwining his finger with a soft sigh.

"I'm really happy you allowed me to join you," he admitted after a beat of silence and shifted a little, his thigh now pressing a little more against Raphael's and the latter briefly wondered why they were still sitting so close together because there was no reason to, with Magnus gone and the empty space on the bench to his left. But Raphael honestly didn't feel like scooting over because he had to admit that it was nice to be this close to Simon, feel the warmth radiating off the other's body and the weight of them leaning against one another.

"Me too. I was sceptical at first but now I'm definitely glad Magnus has slightly crazy ideas sometimes," Raphael agreed with a chuckled and he knew that Simon wouldn't be here if it weren't for his best friend. He himself would have never thought of offering a stranger to sleep in their van and then to tag along. But Magnus had a habit of being unusual with surprisingly good results.

"I probably would have given up on the trip and went back to New York if it wasn't for you guys. This trip is really important to me so you probably don't get what an enormous favour you're doing me with this and not just that, I'm honestly really happy to have met you in general. I'm not exactly good at making new friends, being all clumsy and awkward all the time." Simon shrugged a little self-consciously and Raphael honestly wondered how this boy could have trouble making friends. To him Simon seemed like one of those people that just got along with everyone because of their cheerful and open minded nature - not like Raphael himself who needed quite some time to warm up to others and always seemed rather distant and cold to most people.

"I really can't imagine you having trouble getting to know people," Raphael voiced his thoughts
with a raised eyebrow and he playfully nudged Simon's shoulder with his own.

"I only had the courage to talk to you because I was drunk and I was still awkward as hell. I tried to feed you peanuts, that doesn't exactly scream good social skills," Simon laughed, his cheeks flushing a slightly darker shade of pink and Raphael couldn't help but think that the other looked kind of pretty like this. It was endearing to see the older boy flustered like this and it only made Raphael question how anyone could meet Simon and not like him.

"I admit that was a little weird but yet here you are. At first, I thought you were a complete weirdo, sure, but it was almost adorable that you wanted to make sure I ate something. Though I believe peanuts aren't that nutritious to actually do much but it's the thought that counts, I guess."
He grinned at Simon, his tone playful and a little teasing.

"Yeah, well, it was the only food available in the bar so you really can't blame me for this," the other replied with a pout and Raphael wondered if it was deliberate how Simon's body leant a little more against him or if it was unconsciously but he admittedly didn't mind it either way.

"I'm not blaming you for anything. It might have been weird but it still worked out, didn't it?"
Raphael replied with obvious amusement in his voice and he held back a comment about how it had actually been quite endearing. It had been an unusual way to start a conversation but it had certainly managed to get his attention and Magnus's as well.

"That's true," Simon agreed, sheepish grin still in place on his soft looking lips and Raphael almost frowned at this unexpected observation, forcing himself to not look at said lips for too long. Fortunately, Magnus was back a moment later and started talking about his call with Catarina, passing her greetings on to Raphael, who tried to shake the weird feeling that had started to build up in his chest all of a sudden.

The next day was spend with more driving, singing along to songs from the playlist on Simon's and Magnus's part, and card games during the breaks they took for food and stretching their legs. They got into a traffic jam that cost them almost a whole hour and quite a few nerves because it was an especially hot day and the van's AC didn't really do much against the temperatures. It was such a relieve when they saw the sign that told them they were finally entering Peach Springs and Magnus, having called a motel in the area hours before, pulled up in the parking lot of said motel with the declaration that he didn't want to get back behind the wheel for at least three days now.

Nine days of travelling with only two of them to relax had been pretty exhausting - even for Raphael and he didn't even drive so he really didn't judge his best friend for being done for now. Their room was small but comfy, with three beds and even a tiny kitchen unit that had a hotplate with two electric heating elements so they could actually cook food if they felt like it but after each of them took a shower they simply decided to head for the nearest diner.

Raphael and Magnus headed out in the morning to go to the nearest bakery and grab breakfast for all of them and it had admittedly been quite refreshing to sleep in a proper bed again, though it had actually been slightly weird to not have another body right next to him. He had already gotten used to sharing his sleeping space with Simon and part of him was honestly worried about this development because all of his was just temporary, nothing he should get used to.

They entered the bakery and suddenly Raphael's phone started to ring while they were waiting in line. He reached for his phone and frowned at the screen that told him the caller was an unknown number, probably someone who had accidentally typed in his number so Raphael simply ignored it. When his phone started ringing again right after it finally shut up, Raphael rolled his eyes and shrugged at Magnus while accepting the call, stepping back towards the door because he didn't want to disturb the other customers. He was getting ready to tell some stranger that they got the
'Raph, babe~ How are you doing?'

His heartrate picked up immediately and he motioned to Magnus that he would head outside because apparently, the logical reaction of hanging up was not the way he chose to deal with this. Raphael knew he should hang up and not talk to this asshole but he still decided to step out of the building for some privacy because he knew Magnus would make him end the call if he knew who was on the other end.

"Brandon, why the hell are you calling?" He hissed into the phone as soon as the door shut behind him and his fingers curled a little tighter around his phone, pressing it a little closer to his ear without realising he was doing it. If he hadn't been pretty awake from the walk here already, he sure as hell was wide awake now.

'Aww, come on, don't be like that. Why shouldn't I call? I haven't heard of you in days and thought by now I could check in and ask if you got over your little hissy fit?" His ex's voice drawled and Raphael could picture the other's grin.

By now he really couldn't fathom what he ever saw in this guy. Brandon had never been the nicest guy but it had been good until this day when Raphael had ended things because it was like a switch had been flipped and maybe all of this now was the real Brandon. Raphael seriously wondered if the other had always been this way and he simply hadn't noticed or if his former boyfriend had actually been this good at pretending to be someone he was not.

"Oh, I don't know...maybe the fact that it's over between us might be a hint not to contact me? And there was never a hissy fit to get over. You were an ignorant asshole so I ended the relationship because that's not the kind of person I want to be with. The only thing I got over is you, Brandon," Raphael replied and he was so glad his voice didn't give away the slight tremors running through his body from the anxious energy spreading into each and every one of his nerve endings.

'You're just pissed that your magical made-up sexuality made no sense and that I proved you wrong,' Brandon snorted and, once again, he didn't take Raphael's sexuality serious in the least bit. He was over this asshole, he really was because it was impossible to still care about someone who treated him this way, but that didn't mean these words weren't hurtful anyway. Because it had been difficult enough to come to terms with his sexuality and to even learn that there was actually a word for what he was feeling - or wasn't feeling - and sometimes he still slipped into thinking that maybe he was wrong, maybe there was a different explanation for him being this way.

"It's not made-up and the only thing you proved was how much of a douchebag you are!"

'A douchebag you had sex with, multiple times. How does that make sense with your weird sexuality, huh??'

Raphael didn't even know why he indulged in this conversation but maybe part of him just wanted Brandon to get it and to understand that he was wrong. It was frustrating that the other still didn't realise his mistakes and that he obviously didn't even take the breakup seriously - Raphael really couldn't have been more clear about this.

"It makes sense because it's about the lack of sexual attraction, not about whether I want or have sex and I explained this to you multiple times. What's so difficult to understand about this?" He didn't even mention that he was technically demisexual because Brandon would just turn that around again as well and Raphael was tired of explaining himself - another reason why this guy was more than wrong for him. Nobody should feel like they couldn't be themselves in a
relationship or feel like their partner didn't understand them, didn't even try to understand them.

'Okay, whatever you want to believe. So, are you coming back? I miss you, babe,' Brandon replied in a lofty tone and he could have just said I don't care because that was exactly was his dismissive words conveyed. Raphael felt his cheeks heat up a little, angry and frustrated but also embarrassed that he had even tried to reason with this asshole.

"Don't call me that and I won't come back to you, don't you get it?! It's over, I'm done with you!" He still managed to keep his voice from shaking but his trembling fingers betrayed him and Raphael suddenly just felt tired. He had been so much better thanks to Magnus and thanks to this trip but of course, something had to screw it up and he basically let it happen.

'Yeah, well, that's your damn loss then! I highly doubt anyone else will put up with your bullshit - who would want a guy who doesn't want sex for ages and then it's not even worth waiting for? Good thing I had some other guys to give me what you didn't! I would have been willing to forgive you but--'

Raphael finally hung up and barely resisted the urge to throw his phone to the ground - instead, curling his finger around the device hard enough for his knuckles to turn white. Just when he had thought Brandon couldn't get any worse he suddenly admitted to cheating on him and once again Raphael felt like the biggest idiot on earth. How could he have been so damn blind?!

"Rapha?"

Magnus's voice made him aware of the fact that he must have zoned out for a moment and he rapidly blinked his eyes, clearing his slightly blurry view, before looking up to his best friend. The confusion on the other's face was quickly replaced by worry and Magnus took a step closer, slowly reaching out to rest his hand on Raphael's shoulder, giving him enough time to draw back in case the touch wasn't welcome.

"What happened? Who called?" Of course, Magnus immediately caught on to the fact that the call and therefore the person on the other end must be responsible for the change in his mood and Raphael felt like shaking his head. He didn't want to mention it and didn't want to talk about the shit he had just heard. But he also didn't want to lie to his best friend and therefore forced his suddenly heavy feeling tongue to at least form Brandon's name.

He saw the subtle change in Magnus's posture, how he tensed up and the breath he took, ready to scold him for answering the phone and talking to his ex, but then he thought better of it. Magnus exhaled the air in a sigh, fingertips pressing against Raphael's probably noticeably trembling shoulders and he only replied a soft "Let's head back" instead of pointing out the incredible stupidity of the younger boy's actions.

Raphael knew the other would give him a piece of his mind about this later but he was incredibly thankful that Magnus never did so when his mind and emotions were all messed up. His best friend was not one to shy away from pointing out errors and calling him an idiot but he was always mindful enough to wait with his speech until he knew Raphael was able to handle it. Right now, though, he wasn't even close to being able to handle anything but his best friend's support.

Chapter End Notes

Para, por favor - Stop it, please
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Yes, I'm aware that it's not Friday but with the new episode that fucked up even more (I didn't watch it and don't know what happened but a friend's reaction told me enough to know it was bad) I thought I could post an extra chapter in case anyone who watched it and reads this story needs a little something. It's not exactly a happy chapter but maybe it's still a tiny distraction. Maybe I will do the same thing next week for the last episode before the break as well? But other than that I will stick to the Friday schedule - at least until I got the story finished, then I will update more often but that can still take a little while because the end is not in sight as of now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Simon was understandably confused when they got back and his beaming smile when he greeted them fell as soon as he noticed Raphael's expression. His "What happened?" was answered by Magnus who simply shook his head to indicate not now. Raphael heard his best friend put the bakery items down on the table while he himself simply slumped face first on his bed. His limbs felt too heavy and he just wanted to stay in bed for at least the rest of the day, his mind too fogged up to care about anything else.

He could hear the other two talk but it wasn't loud enough for him to understand and he didn't even try to listen in any way. Raphael didn't want to hear anything, just lie here and not think, not feel. He fell asleep surprisingly quickly despite his still racing pulse.

When Raphael slowly woke up again, he felt even more exhausted than before but he noticed that he was now curled up on his side, wrapped in his blanket that Magnus must have placed over him. It was quiet in the room and he assumed the other two probably left - his best friend knew he just shut down and that he wouldn't want anyone to stay with him because there was nothing much else to do than waiting for him to get better.

A small sound caused him to slowly blink open his eyes and Raphael hadn't expected to spot Simon on the other bed, back resting against the wall, headphones on and a book propped open in his lap. The other seemed to notice his movement from the corner of his eyes because he turned around and reached up to pull one of the earbuds out of his ear, smiling tentatively.

"Hey," he greeted Raphael softly and the way he wrapped the cable around his finger almost seemed nervous, "Magnus told me we should leave you alone for now but...I couldn't just go away and have fun while you're here feeling bad. I get that you're probably not too fond of company right now. Believe me, I get it, but I hope it's okay with you if I stay?"

Raphael was surprised that Magnus hadn't dragged the other out of the room because his best friend clearly wasn't here. He knew Magnus hated leaving as well but the other also knew that Raphael would end up feeling worse if he realised he "held others back" so he always unwillingly gave him some space.

Raphael realised that Simon was probably waiting for him to answer and he surprised both of them by nodding ever so slightly. He didn't know why he agreed but the other's worried, pleading
expression probably had something to do with the decision. It was kind of adorable that Simon was so determined to stay and keep him company even though Raphael clearly wasn't any use right now but it still felt kind of nice - as much as he was capable of such emotions right now, at least.

"Thank you," Simon replied and it was kind of weird that the other thanked him because it wasn't just Raphael's room, so he couldn't simply throw the other out, but it was still surprisingly considerate of the other to put him first and make sure he was comfortable. He wasn't used to other people paying attention to his needs like this, other than his family (including Magnus and his mother, of course).

"Magnus wanted to go look at some of the shops in the area and we decided the Canyon can wait until tomorrow - hopefully, you will feel better by then and can come with," the older boy said and he wasn't quite rambling and his voice stayed low, soft, instead of swelling to its usual cheerful chatter. If Raphael had the mind for it, he probably would have mentioned that he had never expected the always jittery seeming Simon to be able to calm down like this.

"Is it okay for you if I talk a little? Like...I don't know about you but whenever I'm depressed and feel like just hiding from the world it helps to have something to focus on. It's usually music but sometimes I wish there was someone around to talk to me but most people often want to talk to someone which...it's not helpful. So, I could talk about random stuff and you just listen. Would that be okay?" Simon offered with a soft voice and Raphael was surprised to feel himself nod before he even made up his mind if that was actually what he wanted.

The other was right, though, silence would only make him think - about Brandon, his words and wondering about when he had cheated for the first time, how often he had done it and the ridiculous feeling of having caused him to do so. Thinking was the last thing Raphael wanted to do right now so he was thankful for Simon's low, gentle voice that didn't demand a reply and simply poured over his messed up mind, wrapping around the insecurities before they could blossom even more and pushing them back to where they came from for the time being because he was unable to focus on them.

"I think I mentioned Clary a few times already. She's a petite but fierce redhead and my best friend. I met her in kindergarten and she actually saved me from a bully back then. Thinking back to it, it's actually quite hilarious. She was so small but her temperament can get as fiery as her hair," Simon started to tell and Raphael closed his eyes, not to sleep but to concentrate all of his senses on the other boy, the slight rustling of fabric when he moved his hands while talking mixing with the gentleness in his tone.

"This guy was two heads taller than me - or maybe it just felt that way - and he stole my glasses so I was even more scared of him because I couldn't see properly. I will never understand why even such young kids act this horrible. Well, but then Clary showed up and she just shoved the guy, this tiny girl, and he landed ass first in the wet sandbox. I still remember that it had been raining all day and had only cleared up around noon so we were allowed to go into the yard."

Raphael could hear that the other was recalling the memories of that day, probably picturing it in front of his eyes and he would have liked to open his eyes again, look at Simon to know the expression he was wearing right now. He sounded so soft and fond, despite having been treated like this by some douchebag but he clearly preferred to cling to the good part of this little story and its positive outcome.

"My glasses fell down and the frame was bent afterwards but I didn't even care because this amazing girl had saved me and we decided then and there that we would be best friends. Even before introducing ourselves. The first thing she said to me was we should be friends and that this way she could always protect me from guys like this bully."
Simon had shown him a photo on his phone the other day, a selfie of him with a red-headed girl - Clary - and it was kind of difficult to imagine this small, fragile looking girl protecting anyone but the idea was somewhat adorable. Especially because Simon didn't exactly make the impression that he could protect himself from anything. The boy was clumsy beyond belief and way too soft. Raphael could understand this little girl's need to help Simon and to protect him. He probably would have done the same if he had met the other boy back then.

"I probably mentioned that Clary is an artist. She always loved drawing, even back then when it was mostly stick-figures and unidentifiable blobs of colour. Sometimes she would try to draw things from my comics or she would ask me to tell her about the ones I was currently reading. Well, reading, back then I simply looked at the pictures and made up my own stories about what was going on until I was able to make sense of the letters and words in the bubbles."

Raphael didn't even realise how he started to imagine pictures along to the words. A small Simon with too big, round glasses that always slipped to the tip of his button nose and probably falling off more often than not. He probably gestured even more widely back then, when he was telling his best friends his made up superhero stories with bright eyes and flushed cheeks. Simon was absolutely adorable now, it was difficult to try and imagine him as an even cuter child with bigger brown doe-eyes, maybe slight buck teeth like Raphael himself had as a kid and an unruly mop of dark brown hair on top of a head that never stopped producing the most tremendous stories.

"I could only convince her to read a few comics when she found out that there weren't just male superheroes. She never really liked the stories where women needed saving from the guy but she loved the other way around. And she said the women were nicer to look at than the men anyway," Simon chuckled.

"I guess it was no surprise when she came out as a lesbian, years later. The signs had always been there. Sadly that hadn't kept me from developing the biggest crush on her but it was somewhat easier knowing that it wasn't my fault because she simply couldn't like boys that way. But, well, that's a story for another time, I guess."

Raphael was glad that the other didn't elaborate further on the subject because after the talk with Brandon he really didn't need to hear about Simon being hopelessly in love with his best friend. He liked that the other simply put it off for another time and indicated that he actually wanted to tell Raphael about it, just not right now. And Raphael wanted to hear about it; learn more about Simon, the way he cared about others and loved them.

"We were in different classes in elementary school but we got into the same one when we started middle school. Or, at least, we shared most courses. I went through the whole ordeal of having to wear braces and there were even more people Clary had to protect me from because I was just this typical nerd. The guy with the braces and glasses, who was always clumsy and too shy to ever get a girl, who was eternally in the friends zone of his best friend...Middle school was just horrible."

Simon sighed and Raphael felt like apologising to him for having to go through this. Children and teenagers could be cruel and he had gotten his fair share of mobbing as well, even if it had been for different reasons.

"Starting high school had been kind of difficult as well. It had only been Clary and me until then but she brought other people into our little circle and I spent almost one year being afraid of losing her. I think I always expected her to someday meet other people she would befriend and then she would notice how boring I really am. By now, I came to like all of our new friends even though it always feels like they are Clary's friends and I'm just tagging along but it's still nice to have a group of people."

Simon took a breath and either he was thinking about what to tell next or he knew what he wanted
to say but didn't quite know if he should voice it. Raphael felt the exhaustion pulling at him again, despite his mood feeling a little lighter just from the constant stream of words dancing through the room and keeping him from falling further into this mental hole. But he didn't want to fall asleep again; he wanted to keep listening and know what was on the other's mind.

"I really enjoy this trip, though. Don't get me wrong, I would have loved to have gone on the road trip with Clary but I probably wouldn't have met you this way. It's like...you're the first friends I made myself, you know? And I don't feel like I'm just tagging along, even thought that's basically what I'm doing. You guys are best friends and clearly know each other for quite a while already but it still doesn't feel like I'm that much of an outsider," Simon suddenly admitted in an even softer voice and Raphael finally managed to force his heavy eyelids to open, glancing at the other boy who was looking back at him.

Simon's smile was genuine and almost shy, his cheeks dusted with a soft shade of pink. Raphael didn't know what he was up to when he scooted backwards on his bed but the other boy apparently knew because he pushed the book off his lap and got up, slowly making his way over to Raphael's bed and sitting down on the edge, never really breaking eye contact.

Raphael was cocooned in his blanket that was like a small barrier between their bodies when Simon finally laid down next to him, stretching his slightly taller body out on his half of the bed. When the older boy reached out, his fingertips tentatively brushing over the back of Raphael's hand that was curled into a loose fist on the pillow next to his head, he turned his hand around and spread his fingers without a second thought, allowing Simon's fingers to fit into the spaces between his.

"I think I want to tell you about the reason I wanted to go here, why the Grand Canyon is so important to me," Simon admitted and his voice was barely above a whisper as if he could shatter the relaxed atmosphere his previous story-telling had built around them. Raphael hummed softly and the fingertips moving across the back of his hand caused his eyelids to flutter closed on their own accord.

"But that should wait until you're feeling better because it's not a happy story. Now, just sleep some more and I can tell you more silly childhood storied later if you like. Descansa, Rapha."

Raphael barely registered how the other started humming a soft melody because he already drifted off into a more relaxed sleep than before, senses focused on the warmth radiating from their intertwined fingers instead of chasing the acidic thoughts his ex had once again planted in his mind.

The second time Raphael woke up was to hushed voice and he groaned softly, his fingers curling tighter around the warmth they were holding on to and he tried to fight against waking up. He felt surprisingly relaxed and almost weightless, warm and comfortable. Raphael didn't want to let go of this feeling but a soft chuckle drew him further into the here and now. The familiar feeling of Magnus's finger pushing through his hair caused a sigh to escape his lips and his eyelids finally fluttered open, blinking up at his best friend leaning over the bed.

"Hey, sleepyhead. Feeling better?" The other asked in a light, almost motherly tone and Raphael barely resisted the urge to roll his eyes at the other, especially when Magnus leant down to press a kiss to his temple after brushing a few dark curls out of the way.

"I'm assuming that frown is a yes. I brought some food. Are you hungry, pedacito de cielo?"

Seeing as Raphael hadn't eaten anything so far this day, of course his body was already protesting and demanding food but he was kind of thankful for the other's wording. Magnus knew that these
moods sometimes made it impossible to get food down, even if he was technically hungry and logically needed to eat something. He actually didn't feel like he would throw up at the mere thought of food but instead nodded, his nose already picking up on the rather delicious scent of still hot food wafting over from the small table in the corner of their room.

Sitting up he finally realised that Simon was still right next to him, leaning with his back against the head of the bed. Their hands were still holding on to one another and Raphael felt a small wave of embarrassment for clutching the other's hand for who-knew-how-long while he had been asleep. He felt an apology at the tip of his tongue, opened his lips to let it slip out, but Simon's bright smile caused him to pause and suck in a breath instead. His heart stumbled on the next beat before picking up a slightly faster pace.

"Did you sleep well?" Simon asked gently and squeezed Raphael's fingers softly, brushing the thumb over his knuckles as if it was an all too familiar gesture for him to touch Raphael like this.

Raphael's answering "Sí" sounded a tiny bit rough, his voice still sleep-heavy and deeper than usual but the syllable was already enough for Simon's smile to brighten up even more. Raphael was pretty sure he saw the other's gaze flicker over his face but it was so quickly, he might have imaged the movement.

"Come on, boys, let's eat before it gets cold," Magnus pulled them out of their little bubble and the moment was over. Raphael tentatively led go of Simon's hand, missing the contact as soon as it was gone, and he pushed the blanket aside to swing his legs off the bed. He felt a little wobbly, his mind still a little foggy and unfocused, but definitely better than before. Raphael padded over to the small table, tried to mirror his best friend's almost loving smile and sat down, glancing at Simon when he did the same before accepting the container of take-out that Magnus pushed towards him.

Chapter End Notes

*Descansa* - Rest well
*Pedacito de cielo* - Little piece of heaven
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Another not too happy chapter but, hey, Simon backstory and our boys are once again being fluffy and soft with one another; hopefully that makes up for some more sadness?

Also, I made this aesthetic for the story in general but half of the pictures fit this chapter, obviously, so it seems fitting to mention it :) And I just really like how it turned out, I love making these things, even if they are really simple and it's sometimes difficult to find pictures that look the way I imagine stuff to be like *laughs*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Of course, he had known that the Canyon would be impressively big - it was called Grand Canyon, after all - but seeing it with his own two eyes was still something entirely different. The wide gap boring into the earth looked like it was splitting the state in half and from their point of view they couldn't even see the bottom. If it wasn't for the clear blue sky and bright sunshine, this scene might have reminded him of all those end-of-the-world types of movies. Where the earth cracked open due to an earthquake or maybe because of monsters, aliens that attacked the world.

It was a little ridiculous to think about such nonsense but it was absolutely bizarre, feeling this insignificant and tiny at the sight of nature. Part of him wanted to step closer, to see over the edge and find out if there was a visible bottom to this seemingly endless pit but another part of him wanted to stay away and in the safety of steady ground instead of stepping closer.

It took a few minutes for him to pull his eyes away from the sight and to notice that Magnus had already wandered ahead towards the building where the skywalk was and his head turned to search for Simon, who just stood several meters back and stared at the Canyon. He watched the older boy for a moment, how the sun reflected in this slightly too big glasses and prevented Raphael from seeing his eyes.

"Simon?" He called and the other jumped a little, turning around to face him with a startled look before he finally started moving again after clearly having been lost in his own thoughts. Raphael frowned and watched the other closely. Ever since they had left the small diner where they had breakfast, Simon was uncharacteristically quiet and seemed lost in his thoughts. His face didn't give much away of what was going on inside his head but it didn't seem all too happy which was weird considering they had reached their destination. Simon had said that this was very important to him and Raphael had expected the other boy to be excited about finally getting to see the Grand Canyon.

"It's not a happy story," he remembered Simon's mumbled words from the day before, blurred by the fact that Raphael had already been falling asleep. But somehow the words had still reached him and he had to resist the urge to ask Simon about it now. It may not be a happy story but it was Simon's story and would certainly help to get to know and understand the boy a little better. Raphael found himself unable to getting Simon out of his head since last evening because he had almost asked the other to share a bed when they went to sleep around midnight. He felt drawn to Simon and the feeling only seemed to increase over time, it was getting difficult to deny it was
"¿Estás bien?"

Simon blinked at him when he finally caught up again, his eyes a little wide and almost a little distant, the smile tugging at the corners of his mouth not quite reaching them. He nodded with a soft "Sí, estoy bien" and Raphael frowned a little but decided not to point out that it didn't seem very believable. Raphael reached out, his fingertips brushing the sun-warm skin of the other's lower arm and he barely resisted the temptation to wrap his fingers around the older boy's hand, instead only tugging lightly at his lower arm before breaking the contact again.

"Come on, let's catch up with Magnus," he smiled and stayed by Simon's side the rest of the way until they reached the building. Magnus was already waiting for them, amusement dancing in his eyes and he only shook his head with a playfully scolding "Kids" before stepping out of the shade of the tree he was leaning against and brushing imaginary dirt off his vest. Raphael had no clue why Magnus had almost dressed up - they went to watch a gigantic gap in the ground, not to some fancy restaurant but his best friend had never been much for reason.

Raphael pushed his baseball cap further up his head to brush a few sweat-damp curls from his forehead and his eyes found Simon once more while Magnus was about to push open the door to go inside and purchase their tickets for the skywalk.

"We'll be right with you," he called after his best friend and his hand reached out again, this time giving in to the urge to take Simon's. The older boy was pale, his cheeks flushed a little - maybe from the heat, maybe from the swirl of emotions dancing in his big, brown eyes - and Raphael tugged him gently aside. He led Simon to a more secluded area a few steps away from the building and the other followed willingly, didn't even seem to have the strength to resist. Sitting down on a wooden bench in the soft shadow of a few smaller trees, Raphael pulled their still linked hands into his lap, thumb brushing the back of Simon's hand and he noticed the faint trembles running through the other's body.

"What's going on? And don't tell me again that you're fine, Simon. You're clearly not." He didn't want to push Simon but it was impossible not to ask when the other was clearly distressed and unwell.

"You mentioned having trouble with heights, is that it? If you don't want to head out there, you don't have to - we don't have to," Raphael offered gently but he knew this wasn't it or at least not the main reason for Simon's behaviour. The older boy ducked his head, dark mop of hair preventing Raphael from seeing his eyes but he did notice the way Simon pressed his lips together, clearly to keep the lower one from trembling visible but Raphael still noticed it.

"It's...it's not that," Simon's shaky voice was barely above a whisper and he breathed in deeply, clearly trying to get a grip on his emotions while squeezing Raphael's fingers. He was starting to get more and more confused by the second but the feeling of worry also swelled in his chest and it was difficult not to push for an answer.

"My father...h-he should be here with me," the other finally breathed after what felt like minutes and Raphael's eyebrows drew together. The first question at the tip of his tongue was why isn't he but he wasn't stupid, he knew this was the wrong thing to ask and even if Simon had never mentioned his father before this moment, this one sentence was already enough to make him realise which direction this conversation was headed. He intertwined his fingers with Simon's and his other hand curled around it as well, cupping the other's hand gently with both of his.

"I didn't realise it would be this hard. Being here. Without him."
Raphael watched the other's trembling lips slowly form the words that were almost swallowed by a warm gust of wind that rustled through the leaves of the trees they were seeking shelter under. *What happened to him?* Another question Raphael didn't quite dare to ask because this was Simon's story and it was his decision which information he wanted to give away at what pace.

"When I was little he always told me about how he went to the Grand Canyon with my grandpa when he was 13. It was to celebrate his Bar Mitzvah," Simon offered another piece of information with his trembling voice and all Raphael could do was squeeze his hand, caress it with his fingertips and silently ask the boy to go on.

"He promised we would do the same when I had my Bar Mitzvah. That we would make a trip to the Grand Canyon, just the two of us," Simon continues in a thin and slightly wet sounding voice, clearly trying to fight back tears. Raphael resisted the urge to wrap his arms around the older boy because it probably wouldn't help Simon to finish his story and it felt like he should really do just that. Talk about this and let it all out, share the pain he clearly carried around. Raphael had to think of this dumb saying, that sometimes the people who smiled the brightest carried a deep sadness.

"He was hospitalised and diagnosed with lung cancer about a month before my 13th birthday."

Simon's grip on his hand was almost painful but Raphael still didn't pull away, only reciprocated the gesture by squeezing the other's fingers gently while his heart hammered against his ribs. The words seemed to hang heavily in the air around them, making it a little harder to breathe.

"Of course, we couldn't go on the trip then. He got chemotherapy and it felt like it took forever until he got better, until he could come back home. He promised me we would catch up on this trip as soon as he recovered properly but...we never did...never could. The cancer kept coming back," Simon started to sound a little distant and Raphael knew this feeling all too well - trying to emotionally detach yourself from the situation so it would be less painful, so you could manage to get through it. It was what he did back when his father was still around to be able to endure his screaming and beating. It had been the only way he had known how to deal with it. Some kind of protective mechanism of his mind.

"6 years. He battled the cancer for six years before," he stopped and ducked his head even more but Raphael felt a warm droplet hit the skin of his wrist and he loosened one hand from Simon's, raising it to curl it around the nape of the other's neck. Simon basically fell against him with the slightest pull, curling into his body and burying himself in the embrace Raphael provided. Both of his arms wrapped around Simon's trembling body and he drew him in as closely as humanly possible, fingertips dancing across the thin material of the other's graphic shirt, rubbing gentle circles into his back.

"Lo siento oír eso, querido," Raphael mumbled into the mess that was Simon's hair, a few strands of it tickling his nose when they were moved by another warm gust of wind. He heard the unsuccessfully stifled sob that was mostly muffled by his shoulder and Raphael closed his own burning eyes, his fingers curling into Simon's soft hair as if he could shield the boy from the emotional pain that was almost palpable, radiating off of his body, if he only managed to wrap himself around him.

"Lo extraño tanto."

The shaky, hiccuped words broke Raphael's heart and he felt a few tears trickle down his own cheeks, unable to keep the strong emotions wafting off of the other from wrapping around his own heart, squeezing it painfully.

Raphael didn't know for how long they sat there, Simon clinging to him like a lifeline and sobbing into his shoulder, but the other's trembling finally subsided just like his sobs. Simon sat up and
awkwardly brushed his cheeks with his fingertips as if he wanted to hide the fact that he had been crying. Raphael reached out and carefully slipped the glasses off of the other's nose, gingerly balancing them on his own thigh before cupping Simon's face. His thumbs brushed away the salty, wet trails and the other's eyelids fluttered close when Raphael's fingers touched the sensitive skin underneath them.

He couldn't help but carefully brush the pads of his thumbs over Simon's eyelids, removing the small droplets from the other's thick, dark lashes that were fanning over his usually pale, now slightly reddened skin. Raphael rested his thumbs against the corners of the older boy's eyes, knuckle curved around the other's cheekbones.

Raphael's eyes flickered over Simon's face, took it all in and even rested on the shiny, bite-redened lower lip before following the line of the other's chin and forcing himself to stop staring at this admittedly inviting looking mouth. This was so far from the right moment for such thoughts and Raphael felt bad for the pull he felt towards the other boy right now, for thinking how absolutely beautiful Simon was even with the red blotches on his cheeks from crying. He drew Simon's head in but instead of following the sudden urge to taste his mouth, his lips pressed against the warm, slightly sweaty skin of Simon's forehead, just above his eyebrow.

"Do you want to head back?" He asked gently, hand finally slipping down to curl around Simon's jaw before moving a little further down and rest against the slope of his neck, fingertips brushing she soft skin there and feeling the faintest hint of goosebumps.

"No. Just...just give me another moment," Simon murmured with a muffled voice thanks to his nose probably being stuffed from crying. His cheeks seemed to have gained a little more colour but Raphael didn't think too much about the meaning of this and kept himself from connecting it to the way he had just touched the other boy. He nodded with a gentle smile and a whispered "Lo que sea que necesites" before Raphael reached for the other's glasses still perched on his thigh, carefully placing them back on the bridge of Simon's nose and pushing the up with the tip of his index finger.

"And here I thought you may have gotten lost and stumbled into the bottomless pit of the canyon. You boys are pretty but I'm sure you wouldn't look as good in the form of human pancakes," Magnus commented blithely when they finally entered the building and joined him. He was lounging in a cushioned chair next to the entrance, three tickets for the skywalk resting on the table next to him, pinned down by a water bottle.

"Sorry to disappoint, Bane," Raphael retorted but his lips curled into the faintest of smiles because, despite his best friend's little act, he knew the other's eyes were asking him if everything was alright. He nodded his head slightly, motioning for the door that would lead them back outside to the skywalk.

"Come on, old man, we don't have all day," he teased and automatically pressed his shoulder a little more against Simon when he heard the other's soft chuckle. Magnus only rolled his eyes before gracefully getting up from his slouched position in the chair, pressing the water bottle into Raphael's chest and waving the tickets in front of their noses.

"You better behave, kids, or you will have to go to bed without dinner today," Magnus scolded while trying to fake an old-man-voice that simply sounded like he was constipated. Raphael snorted and barely resisted the urge to comment on it. Magnus led the way towards the entrance to the skywalk and showed their tickets before the woman opened the door for them to enter the outside area. They were handed something to wrap around their shoes to protect the glass surface of the skywalk from scratches and they had to wait a moment for a few other people to leave the walk until they were allowed to enter.
Magnus didn't hesitate for a second and stepped forward with sure strides. Raphael didn't have any troubles with heights but even he paused for a brief moment and looked over his shoulder when he felt a warm hand slip into his. Simon looked a little paler again and his fingers trembled but he smiled shyly at Raphael and nodded at him. Raphael squeezed the other's fingers and gently tugged him along when he finally stepped onto the see-through surface of the skywalk.

He resisted the urge to look down immediately, instead took in the surrounding view and softly pulled Simon closer to his side - whether to reassure Simon or to soothe the fluttery feeling in his own stomach, he couldn't tell. The sight of the gigantic canyon was impressive and simply breathtaking even if a part of Raphael's attention was focused on the boy right next to him, who was gripping his hand a little too tightly and pressed into his side, making small noises of fear and amazement alike.

Simon's breathlessly squeaked "Oh shit" followed by him crowding even more into Raphael's personal space caused him to stumble a tiny bit, fingers tightening around the other's in reflex.

"Are you alright?" Raphael questioned, his voice laced with the hint of worry and he was probably a little overly alert after Simon's breakdown earlier, immediately scrutinising the pale, wide-eyed boy by his side.

"I looked down," Simon admitted with a small, sheepish voice and he almost cast his eyes down in embarrassment but the fingers of Raphael's other hand pressing under his chin prevented him from making the same mistake again.

"Hey, no reason to be embarrassed. I usually don't mind heights but even I'm a little shaky right now. It's kind of scary up here," Raphael offered with a soft voice and let his hand drop again before it lingered on the other's skin for too long. Simon squinted against the bright sun, blinking at him with his still red-rimmed doe-eyes but his lips twitched into the hint of a smile.

"I'm really glad you're here with me. I would have never set a foot on this on my own," he admitted with a wobbly chuckle and took a few deep breaths, trying to shake at least some of the fear. Raphael watched the other's profile with a smile, his heart beating a tad faster at the sight of Simon's soft features illuminated by the soft glow of the afternoon sun, the frames of his glasses casting dark shadows across his pale bronze skin.

"Me too. Holding Magnus's hand would have been a lot more awkward," Raphael replied jokingly and grinned when Simon laughed in return and gently nudged his shoulder before carefully taking another step forward.

"Come on, let's overcome our fear together and show this canyon that it can't scare us!" Simon decided with a wide grin and this time it was him who tugged Raphael further until they finally reached the part of the skywalk that was the farthest away from the solid ground of the canyon's edge. Raphael finally dared to risk a glance down and he actually did feel a little bit dizzy when he saw through the glass beneath their feet because they were high enough to barely make out the bottom of the Grand Canyon. He sucked in a breath and carefully leant against the bannister that was made out of glass as well, his fingers still firmly intertwined with Simon's, both of them not caring about the moisture building in between their heated palms.

It was absolutely stunning to see the bright sunlight pouring into the canyon, a stark contrast to the dark shadows enveloping the rocky walls where the warm beams couldn't reach. The air was hot and humid, causing Raphael's curls to stick to his moist forehead and Simon's hair wasn't off much better. And the other's forehead and nose were already turning a little more pinkish, clearly not agreeing with the constant sun exposure.
"You should have used sunscreen, you're getting a sunburn," Raphael commented before pulling the base cap off his own head to place it on Simon's, shielding his face at least a little bit from the sun.

"I don't have sunscreen."

"You could have bought some, idiota. Don't act like a child," Raphael replied with a huff of laughter and he playfully pinched the other's hand before he turned around when he saw someone step up to his other side from the corner of his eyes.

"Quite the view," Magnus commented and, with a cheeky grin, mumbled an "and the Canyon is pretty impressive as well" into Raphael's ear, causing his cheeks to heat up. He gently thrust his elbow into Magnus's side who simply laughed and curled his arm around Raphael's shoulder with a content sigh, letting his gaze wander over the canyon stretching before them.

Chapter End Notes

_Estás bien_ - Are you okay?
_Sí, estoy bien_ - Yes, I'm fine
_Lo siento oír eso, querido_ - I'm so sorry to hear that, dear
_Lo extraño tanto_ - I miss him so much
_Lo que sea que necesites_ - Whatever you need
Raphael was almost asleep, didn't even pay attention to the way the sheets on the bed next to his rustled or the sound of bare feet padding across the room because his mind was already drifting off, when the slight dipping of his mattress startled him into a slightly more awake state. He made an incoherent, confused noise in the back of his throat and his eyelids fluttered open with some difficulty, protesting against the movement with the heavy pull of exhaustion.

They had spent most of the day at the Grand Canyon, strolled along the deep, seemingly endless fissure carved into the ground by the force of nature itself and only stopped here and there for a small break, to eat and drink or take a few photos for their loved ones and as memories for themselves. The sun had burnt down on them and even his baseball cap hadn't been able to protect Simon from a light sunburn - he had finally managed to convince Simon to get some sunscreen in a small shop at a path leading off the way they were headed.

Now, he could see the slightly blurred outlines of Simon sitting at the edge of his bed, hand hovering in midair before it finally came to rest on his bare shoulder. It was way too hot to sleep fully clothed and Raphael had stripped down to his boxers for the night, the thin sheets curled around his lower body because he was too used to sleep with a blanket that he needed to be partly covered with something in order to be able to sleep despite the heat making it quite unbearable to be covered by anything.

"No puedo dormir."

The words were more of a breath than an actual whisper and Raphael's tired mind needed a second to make sense of the words, despite being in his mother tongue. He grunted sleepily and scooted backwards until his back gently hit the wall at the other side of the rather narrow bed. Simon understood the silent invitation and carefully slipped into the empty space next to Raphael, stretching out on the too soft mattress. Raphael could feel the heat radiating off of the other's body and part of him wanted to draw further back from it because it was too warm already, he really didn't need the additional heat from another body, but a different part of him felt like closing the small gap between them.

He exhaled softly and his eyelids fluttered close again when gentle fingers slipped between his, the heated skin of a palm pressing to the back of his hand. It was too hot and yet he still wanted to be closer, his body curling up a little, causing legs to bump into one another and he barely resisted the urge to hook his foot around Simon's ankle. Raphael felt the other body shuffle the tiniest bit closer, still not quite touching his but Simon's warm breath fanned over his forehead, the bridge of his nose and almost reached his slightly parted lips.

Raphael didn't register the "Buenas noches" whispered against his forehead, the soft lips brushing his skin in the process, because he was already drifting off again and falling back asleep with the hint of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.
Raphael woke up enveloped in heat, skin uncomfortably sticky with the moisture of a fine sheen of sweat and he still felt weirdly relaxed. He forced his eyes open and jerked back a little, immediately stopped by the wall in his back, when he found himself almost nose to nose with Simon. The other boy was clearly still asleep, cheeks flushed from the heat and lips parted - Raphael was pretty sure the other was even drooling a little but he pulled his gaze away from the soft looking mouth before he could be sure about it.

He was wide awake in a matter of seconds, heartbeat spiking thanks to the close proximity to the other boy. Their legs were tangled together, his hand still clasped in Simon's loosened grasp and his heart skipped another beat when he realised the heated spot near his clavicle was caused by Simon's other hand resting there. His skin tingled at the feeling of the other's skin on his, taking his breath away and causing his thought to become slightly fuzzy.

When he had still been with his ex, Raphael had mostly avoided such a closeness in summer because he had hated the feeling of becoming even hotter through another body right next to his. He had never liked to be touched when it was too warm already and now he had not only willingly agreed to share the confined space of the bed with Simon but he felt surprisingly okay with being touched by the other boy as well. It was still too hot and he immediately longed for a cool shower but he couldn't get his body to move - not only because he didn't want to disturb Simon's sleep but also because he felt drawn to the other boy, enjoying the relaxed moment.

"You boys are not very subtle," Magnus's low voice carried over and Raphael resisted the urge to sigh, raising his head a little to squint at his best friend who was seated at the small table near the window, a steaming cup of, presumably, coffee in his hand and bright grin on his lips.

Raphael didn't deem his words with an answer, only huffed softly and sank back into the small part of the pillow that Simon hadn't claimed as his. His gaze skimmed the relaxed, fine shaped features of the older boy and the fingers of his free hand longed to reach out and trace the other's face. There were a few small beads of sweat glistening at Simon's hairline and on his temple, cheekbones reminding of the polished red arch of an apple but much softer, inviting his lips to press against them.

All these feelings were unexpected and confusing because he had never felt these things so strongly. He had liked to be close to his ex, had felt the need to touch him sometimes, but it had never been remotely this difficult to resist giving in to this urge. Raphael had never even felt like calling it an urge but now it seemed like the only word suitable for the nervous flutter of his heart and the tingling of every nerve ending in his body.

It reminded him of stupid romance movies and novels that he always had been unable to relate to when they started describing the feelings caused by "this one special person". It had always seemed ridiculous und over-the-top, made him feel more uncomfortable than anything else and when he had found himself kind-of-loving Brandon, such feelings still hadn't come up. It had only been proof to him that these stories were just that - fiction that painted a much more colourful picture of the inevitable pull between two people.

The way Magnus sometimes talked about love, or being in love, had sounded just like said stories - an unrealistic exaggeration, too intense and overly sweet to be true. To be fair, Raphael never really linked this intensity to physical attraction, mostly because he barely grasped the concept of it in theory and it simply wasn't on his mind. He just didn't get physical attraction.

He had liked kissing after he realised he had developed romantic feelings for his ex, sure, but the rare need of closeness and wanting to touch had never been more than something entirely innocent. Kissing had never exactly been something more for him either. Raphael had liked it, had even ended up being okay with sex but he had never sought it out. His former boyfriend had always been the one to initiate more.
Right now, staring at Simon's sleeping face with a weird tingly feeling pooling in his stomach and curling in his chest, Raphael suddenly felt like maybe he suddenly did understand all of this a little better. It was foreign and kind of scary, the unexpected intensity, but he didn't exactly mind it. It wasn't like he hadn't noticed the feelings that had started to bloom in his chest for the other boy over the past few days and he wasn't naïve enough to deny the fact that he was falling for Simon. There was something between them and he was pretty sure it wasn't one-sided either but after the course of his last - and first - relationship, Raphael was admittedly too cautious and scared to really act on it.

His thoughts were interrupted by Simon finally waking up as well, long lashes fluttering before his eyelids finally slid open to reveal wide pupils in a pool of sleep-hazed brown. Raphael's breath caught in his throat that suddenly felt a little too dry. Simon blinked a few times before his eyes widened and, realising the surely unexpected closeness, he yelped softly and tried to scoot backwards to get a more appropriate distance between their faces.

Raphael grabbed the other's hand a little tighter and wanted to reach for the front of Simon's shirt but his reflexes were still too slow after waking up only a few minutes prior so he was unable to prevent the other boy from toppling off the bed, landing on the wooden floor with a rather squeaky sound leaving his throat. Simon's hand had slipped from his grasp and Raphael poked his head over the edge of the bed while Magnus's laughter rang through the room.

Simon stared up at him with wide eyes, his cheeks impossibly red and limbs sprawled out in a rather unnatural looking arrangement. Raphael's heart hammered against his ribs from the shock of the other's fall but as soon as he was sure the boy couldn't have seriously gotten hurt in the process, laughter bubbled up in his throat at the ridiculousness of the situation.

"Are you seriously laughing at me?!" Simon protested in a fake offended tone but his still widened eyes started crinkling at the corners and it only took the fraction of a second for him to join with laughter of his own.

It took them a few minutes to calm down again and Raphael finally sat up, offering his hand to Simon and helping him up from the hard surface of the ground. He didn't miss the way the other's eyes flickered down to his bare chest, Simon's cheeks darkening a few more shades, and then the boy was scrambling to his feet with a few mumbled words. Raphael was only able to catch the word **shower** before Simon was almost slamming the bathroom door shut.

"Sharing a bed already, I see."

Raphael had almost forgotten that his best friend was still in the room as well and he barely resisted the urge to grimace at Magnus who had this horribly smug expression plastered all over his face.

"So? It's not like we didn't do just that in the van already," he replied with a shrug, trying for casual even though he knew the other could see right through him.

"Yes, because there was no other option. Here, though," Magnus trailed off and sipped his coffee, free hand pointing at the other beds in the room to underline the fact that sharing a bed was currently absolutely unnecessary.

"Well, what do you want me to say?" Raphael questioned and swung his feet off the bed, getting up to stretch and not paying attention to the sound of the shower starting in the bathroom.

"Nothing. I was merely making an observation," Magnus shrugged and glared at his best friend when Raphael padded over to him, stealing his cup to take a swig of still almost-hot coffee before
"Sounded like you were about to tease me," he commented dryly and narrowed his eyes at Magnus who grabbed his chest in fake-hurt and a too dramatic gasp to be even remotely believable.

"I would never! Though, if you wanted me to--" He broke off laughing when Raphael glared at him.

"You're not very intimidating with this impressive bed hair," Magnus chuckled and leant one elbow on the table next to his mug, the other arm reaching out to run his fingers through the other's tousled curls. Raphael huffed and kept on glaring but he didn't pull away and endured Magnus correcting his hair for a moment until he had enough and gently batted the other's hand away.

"The boy likes you."

Raphael looked over the rim of the once more stolen mug after another sip of coffee and he tried to ignore the way his heart reacted to Magnus's casually uttered words.

"Yeah, sure, but he likes you too," Raphael replied with a shrug and put the cup down again, pushing it back towards Magnus with the tips of his fingers, not paying attention to the other's huff and eye roll.

"True. He likes me but he likes you, honey," Magnus commented and he sounded so sure of his words.

Raphael scrunched up his nose and traced the pattern on the surface of the table with his eyes. Sure, he had already thought that what he was starting to feel didn't seem one sided but maybe he wasn't exactly the right one to judge. Emotions clouded judgement and maybe he simply projected what he was feeling onto Simon? It was entirely possible. If you liked someone, you wanted them to like you back and therefore saw hints where there were none sometimes.

"When we met him he was clearly trying to flirt with you, darling. He didn't just head over because he was drunk or because we were the only people around his age in that bar. The boy waited for me to leave until he walked up to you because you specifically caught his attention."

Magnus wrapped his fingers around the cup and took the last swig of coffee, regarding his best friend with raised eyebrows and something akin to a dare sparkling in his already black rimmed and glittery painted eyes. A dare to disagree. He knew Raphael couldn't come up with arguments against his statement because he had never been able to realise when someone was interested in him or flirting with him. Maybe it was due to the fact that he lacked the whole physical attraction thing or maybe he was simply oblivious to such things by nature.

"Flirting doesn't mean anything, though. You always say it yourself, that you like flirting with people you think are good looking because it's fun, not necessarily because you're interested in them," Raphael argued and he wasn't even sure why he was so keen on disagreeing with Magnus. Probably because he didn't want to get his hopes up just because his best friend was once again way too optimistic.

"That might be right but the way he's looking at you all the time and how both of you always invade the other's personal space now, clearly without even being aware of it...Believe me, I know what it looks like when someone is interested and that boy is already smitten with you." Magnus winked playfully, his lips curling into an amused grin and he reached out again but this time Raphael ducked his head before the other's fingertips could do more than brush a few of his curls.
"Okay, alright. *Por el amor de Dios*, I got it. But--I don't know." Raphael deflated a little and curled his ankle around the leg of the table, his eyes falling to the tabletop once again.

"What's on your mind, pumpkin?"

He rolled his eyes at the ridiculous nickname but swallowed his protest, knowing that it wouldn't stop Magnus anyway, and he was just about to open his mouth and voice the worry that maybe he wasn't interested enough. Considering his earlier realisation it seemed ridiculous to think that what he was feeling wasn't enough or the right feeling to act upon it but...how was he supposed to know? He had never felt like this. It had been different with Brandon, less intense, and maybe he was just scared because of just this fact - because of the way it had ended the last time. Now, with more intense feelings after such a short period of time of knowing Simon, he knew it would end in much more pain if he made the wrong choice again.

Before Raphael was able to utter even one word, he was interrupted by the bathroom door unlocking and opening, his eyes automatically flickering towards the source of the sound. He felt his mouth drop open a little when Simon entered the room with nothing but a towel wrapped around his middle, hugging his slim waist. Raphael was caught off guard by how unable he was to pull his eyes away from the sight of so much skin, the surprisingly muscular stomach. Thanks to Simon's usually very loose fitting shirts he had never realised that the other boy's shoulders were actually pretty broad.

The sheepish mumble of "I forgot to bring my clothes" finally managed to snap Raphael's attention back to reality and he barely caught a glimpse of once again red cheeks before Simon had grabbed said clothes and had slipped back into the bathroom, the door clicking shut. Raphael barely managed to keep his hand from rising to his chest and pressing against it in an attempt to calm his thundering heartbeat. Well, that certainly was new.

Chapter End Notes

*No puedo dormir* - I can't sleep  
*Buenas noches* - Good night  
*Por el amor de Dios* - For the love of God
"We should go to a club tonight," Magnus said with a grin while his fingers toyed with the straw of his iced coffee, causing the ice cubes in it to move and clink against the glass. His purplish-red fingernails glittered in the sun when they tapped against the glass, catching a drop of condensation with his index finger before flicking it on a spot of sunlight on the tabletop where it would probably vanish in a matter of minutes.

"No, we really shouldn't," Raphael replied, leaning back in the cushioned armchair of the small coffee shop they had chosen to take a break in. He had just finished the piece of pie he had ordered and had yet to empty the rest of the hibiscus-raspberry drink that was admittedly delicious, especially cold.

"Aw, come on, darling. Maybe it will be fun? And I heard this club plays quite a bit of pop-rock and no electronic stuff," Magnus tried to convince him but Raphael scrunched up his nose in obvious distaste. He never liked clubs, especially not with the current temperatures where a crowded club sounded like an even worse idea than usual. Raphael certainly didn't feel like being rubbed against sweaty, moving bodies half of the night.

"Why are we even having this discussion again?" He groaned and he would never understand why Magnus couldn't just go on his own. He knew Raphael wouldn't agree anyway but he never stopped trying and, sure, every once in a while Raphael indulged him and tagged along but certainly not because he enjoyed it.

"What about you, Simone? Are you such a party hater as well?"

Simon blinked and mouthed a "so close" that almost caused Raphael to burst out laughing. Magnus would always find a way to avoid using the other's correct name.

"Well, Manuel, I don't necessarily hate parties but I'm not a big fan of them either. If the music's good and the company as well, I don't mind," he answered with a small shrug and took a sip of his cola, the straw discarded on the table beside his glass. Simon licked a droplet of condensation from his bottom lip and Raphael barely managed to avert his gaze to avoid tracking the movement.

Ever since this morning it had suddenly become incredibly difficult not to stare at Simon sometimes. Raphael felt uneasy and restless, with the constant tingling running through his body and the need to somehow be close to Simon. He wanted to reach out and take the other's hand or just brush the damp curls off his forehead and maybe touch said forehead with his fingertips in the process.

"Can't get better company than us," Magnus beamed, gesturing from himself to Raphael and back. Raphael rolled his eyes and snorted because he knew what kind of game his best friend was playing right now. He wanted to convince Simon to agree to go to the club in hopes that Raphael would then join them as well. A really cheap and useless method.

"I only go if Rapha will, as well," Simon replied with an almost cheeky grin in Raphael's direction who blinked in surprise. That he hadn't expected. He didn't have to look at his best friend to know the asshole was now grinning from ear to ear because Simon had played right into his hands with this statement.
"I really don't--"

"Please?"

Raphael deflated and it was absolutely impossible to say no to Simon when he stared at you with impossibly wide puppy-eyes, bottom lip jutting out for an adorable little pout. He rolled his eyes, this time mostly to prevent staring at the other's lips and accidentally giving in to the urge to taste them. Raphael exhaled loudly before muttering a "Whatever" with a dismissive gesture, clearly giving up and then glaring at Magnus for the triumphant expression on his stupid face. Why did he befriend such a manipulative asshole?

"Don't poke me in the eye!"

"If you would stop moving there would be no risk of me poking you in the eye. Stop. moving!"

Raphael shook his head with a sigh and tried to ignore the bickering that could be heard from the bathroom. Why Simon had agreed to let Magnus help get him ready for the stupid club, he would never know. He turned the page of the book he was currently reading and tried to focus back on the words instead of the fact that Magnus was currently applying some kind of makeup to Simon's face. The other's eyes were captivating enough without being enhanced by makeup, thank you very much. Raphael regretted agreeing to this whole ordeal and he was already thinking about ways to get out of it again.

Almost five minutes passed until the bathroom door was pushed open again but Raphael kept his gaze fixed on the book in his lap, at least wanting to finish the paragraph but Magnus's with rings adorned hand showed up in front of him, taking the book and placing a piece of paper in between the pages before closing it.

"Now it's your turn," he announced and Raphael glances up at his best friend, an unimpressed look in his eyes when he replied with a dry "No", definitely not in the mood to play dress up or whatever it was that Magnus had planned.

"Come on. Just a little kajal." Magnus nudged his knee with his fingertips and Raphael gave in with a sigh because he wasn't in the mood to start a discussion and as long as the other didn't insist on more makeup it would be fine. His best friend grinned triumphantly and already went back towards the small bathroom while Raphael got up from the bed and his eyes finally landed on Simon.

He paused and actually couldn't help but stare at the older boy whose eyes were now enhanced by dark kajal that only managed to make them look even bigger, enhancing the rich brown colour by making it pop more. Simon made a small, insecure "Uh" sound when he noticed his staring and even averted his gaze, cheeks flushing a warm shade of pink.

"Did he put glitter on you?" Raphael finally asked after clearing his throat, his own cheeks heating up with embarrassment because he usually didn't end up just staring at people. But it was admittedly impossible to not stare at this gorgeous boy and his pretty doe-eyes and he realised how gone he already was for the other.

"No, he didn't," Simon replied and then frowned, "...did he?"

Raphael snorted softly and stepped closer, ignoring the fact that he was supposed to follow his best friend into the bathroom. Instead, he raised his hand and pressed the pad of his index finger gently against the soft, heated skin of Simon's cheekbone before presenting the now faintly glittery
"He clearly did," he commented and felt the urge to press his finger back against Simon's skin that was flushing even more now, wanting to feel the heat of the blush under his touch and think about how he somehow managed to make the older boy react this way. He was honestly about to give in to the temptation when he was interrupted by Magnus clearing his throat.

"Would you move here already? I wanted to head to the club today and not next week."

Raphael rolled his eyes, grinned softly at the still sheepish looking Simon and finally walked towards the bathroom to get it over with before his best friend truly started to complain.

"If mamá knew you had a fake ID made for me and forced me to use it she might finally stop thinking that you're good for me and a positive influence," Raphael commented dryly over the bass of some dance-pop song blasting from the speakers as soon as the entered the club. As expected, the area was packed with mostly dancing people and he already felt like turning around and fleeing the scene before properly entering the venue.

"She won't know if you don't tell her, sweetcheeks. I think we both don't need Lupita mad at us," Magnus replied with a dismissive gesture and he knew Raphael would never tell his mamá about this because he was *raised a good Catholic* and despite this being Magnus's stupid idea, he still kind of went along with it and Guadalupe wouldn't be any happier with him either, that much was sure.

"You're a horrible person," Raphael muttered without any heat behind it and his gaze swept a little more closely over the crowd in the large area of the club, noticing that most of them were men and spotting two women making out against a pillar in a darker corner. He hadn't paid any attention to the kind of club his best friend had chosen but he wasn't surprised to find out that it was not a straight one. Of course not. His eyes automatically swept back to Simon who seemed unbothered by their surroundings and Raphael was pretty sure he must have already noticed what type of club they were in as well.

Raphael honestly hadn't even really considered the other's sexuality so far - he had never been one to categorise a person or be eager to find out about their sexuality because it simply didn't matter to him, as long as the person wasn't an asshole about anything. Now that he was well on his way of falling for this young man, though, of course he ended up thinking about the topic and wondering if there even was a chance for him in this aspect alone. Simon clearly wasn't bothered by being close to a guy, already having shared a bed with him and everything, but that didn't mean a damn thing.

Sure, Magnus had been pretty damn sure about Raphael's interest not being one-sided but maybe it was just a misconception? Simon could still be straight, couldn't he? He suppressed a groan at his own thoughts and tried to push the bullshit back to where it came from because he really didn't want to spend the evening pulling himself down.

Magnus led them to the bar and just ordered for all of them, not even asking what they wanted or if it was okay for him to choose but, well, that was Magnus. He turned back to them after a moment, handing both of them glasses with rather colourful drinks; Simon's was a deep green with an almost turquoise-ish shimmer, Raphael's had a nearly bloody red and Magnus's own was an electric blue.

"Are you sure this won't poison us? Doesn't look too healthy," Raphael couldn't help but comment, staring incredulously at his best friend's drink that certainly had the most worrisome colour of their drinks but Magnus shrugged, grinned at him and lifted the sugar-rimmed glass to his glistening lips to take a sip of the sickeningly looking blue liquid.
"Hmm, wow, that's actually pretty good," Simon commented after giving his own mixture a taste and Raphael resisted the urge to glare at Magnus - of course this asshole had chosen the green drink for Simon because the colour would complement the guy's eyes even further. Only his best friend would think of matching the colour of a drink to someone's eyes, seriously. Raphael huffed softly, the sound being easily swallowed by the noise in the club, and finally gave in to take a sip of his own drink. It was as sugar sweet as expected with a mild burn of alcohol and a hint of cherry but it was frustratingly delicious.

"I was wondering if you two would mind if I made myself a little scarce this evening? I know I was the one dragging you here but I'm sure you will manage to have some fun without me and I really feel like getting me a nice man, maybe for the night."

Raphael scrunched up his face because he really didn't want to think about his best friend in bed with anyone, that was just traumatising. Magnus was like a brother to him, sometimes even like a second - well, third, counting Sarwenda as well - mother, and those were people he never wanted to think about in any sexual connection. Not that he wanted to think about other people that way either. Raphael took a bigger gulp of his drink in hopes of washing away the mess of thoughts in his head.

"You do realise that we're sharing a room? Are we supposed to stay away for the whole night because you might have--whatever going on or how did you think this would work?" He ignored the amused expression Magnus shot him at his unwillingness to say sex but, fortunately, he didn't openly tease him about it.

"Well, and you do realise a motel has more than just one room? I could either just get another one for the night or, I don't know, pretty sure most people here live in the area and therefore have a home to go to," Magnus replied with a shrug, amusement still dancing in his eyes that briefly swept over the crown and Raphael resisted the urge to give in to the shudder creeping up his spine. He didn't judge his best friend for wanting a one-night stand or for being completely fine with having sex with some stranger but he still couldn't help being appalled by the thought in general. Raphael couldn't imagine hooking up with some random person and merely trying to imagine it was causing him to feeling a little sick.

"Well, as long as we can safely return to our room," Raphael sighed and ended the sentence with a dismissive gesture towards the crowd. By all means, go for it.

"Don't worry, honey, I wouldn't do that to you," Magnus chuckled, his fingers that weren't curled around the glass gently patting Raphael's cheek and briefly caressing his cheekbone with the thumb before dropping his hand back to his side. "Now, Siegfried, you promise me to have an eye on Rapha and not leave his side."

Simon raised his eyebrows at that and opened his mouth in protest but Magnus's finger were back in his face immediately, ringed index finger pressing against his lips to shush him while his intense eyes were focused on Simon who looked like a deer in headlights at the sudden seriousness in Magnus's voice.

"Uh...I didn't intend to go anywhere? Hookups aren't my thing," Simon replied with wide eyes and a flush high on his cheeks when the second sentenced tumbled off his lips. Magnus stared at him for a moment longer but finally nodded, a smile back on his lips.

"Good boy. You kids have fun, don't get drunk and always stick together!" And with that, Magnus took off into the crowd with a wink to Raphael who just stared after his best friend with a mildly indignant frown.

"Well...that was weird?" Simon chuckled almost nervously, both hands holding on to his glass,
making him look uncharacteristically insecure.

"It's Magnus," Raphael shrugged, "you should be used to it by now."

"I guess I still need a little more time to get used to his kind of weirdness," the other replied, laughing, and sipped his drink while scanning the room over the rim of his glass.

Raphael's eyes were mostly fixed on Simon, watching him lick his lips after drinking and absentmindedly pushing his glasses back up his nose. The faint traces of glitter on Simon's cheeks sparkled in the dancing lights of the club and the kajal made his doe eyes look even bigger and rounder, seemingly giving the warm brown orbs even more depths.

Raphael finally dropped his eyes to his own drink before the other boy could catch him staring, heart in his throat and suddenly feeling horribly awkward because the whole situation almost seemed like a date all of a sudden, with Magnus gone.

A few minutes passed without them exchanging a word, silently tending to their drinks and finally setting the empty glasses down on the counter of the bar. Simon pushed his hands into his pocket after fiddling with the hem of his shirt for a bit to keep his hand from twitching to reach up to his face and push his glasses back up again - clearly out of a nervous habit rather than necessity.

"How about dancing?" Raphael blinked at the sound of his own voice or, more precisely, at the meaning behind them because he hadn't really intended this question but Simon looked so lost and uncomfortable and there wasn't really much else to do in a club. The other's eyes snapped to him, widening a little and lips falling open in surprise.

"Are you asking me?" Simon inquired, clearly not having expected that and Raphael pushed through the urge to deny it, to back paddle and say he simply meant that the other should go dance a little if he felt like it instead of being stuck here standing awkwardly next to him.

"Maybe?" He was fully aware of the ridiculousness of the counter question, inwardly cringing at the whole situation and silently blaming his best friend for getting them into this awkward situation. Simon stared at him but then his lips curled into an almost shy smile.

"I didn't take you for a dancer but if you were actually asking...why not? I mean...I'm not exactly good at dancing, I guess? But, you know, I could try," Simon stammered, cheeks gaining even more colour and Raphael couldn't believe this whole situation was actually happening. Simon's answer made it sound like a *I'm not good at it but I want to try because it's you who's asking.*

He was probably reading too much into it but then again...why not indulge a little and try to make the best of the evening? It didn't have to mean anything but Raphael was willing to try something out of his comfort zone with Simon by his side and that was a pretty surprising realisation.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will be an interesting one. Pretty sure you will like it (and hate me for the ending lol) ;P

On a different note, I just stumbled upon this song and it's kind of a perfect fit?
*laughs*
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

I know, I know...I said back to only Fridays but seeing as I'm currently already writing chapter 23 and I'm assuming that I will be done with 25 or 26 chapters, I thought I could change the schedule to twice a week. I dare say that this should be quite manageable even if I do start to slow down with writing for whatever reasons :)

I'm not adding the final chapter count yet, though, and wait until I'm definitely finished because I never know if I don't end up writing a little bit more. I'm kind of shit at planning such things but at least for once I know how I want to wrap it up - I usually just write and end stories when it feels right *laughs* This story is quite the learning curve in many aspects.

Okay, enough of the blabla, enjoy this chapter :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Simon did look kind of clumsy and like he had no proper control over his limbs - sure, he had already proven that on multiple occasions - but he somehow still managed to look good while being awkward. Which made no sense whatsoever. Raphael groaned inwardly at the realisation that his opinion on that matter was heavily influenced by the fact that he was falling for this endearing young man at an alarming rate.

Raphael didn't particularly like dancing in such an environment, with so many strangers around, but he actually did enjoy dancing itself quite a bit and he knew he wasn't too bad at it either but the way Simon's eyes widened in awe when he started moving to the beat of the music still caused his heart to stutter a little in his chest. He had never felt the need to impress anyone but Raphael certainly couldn't deny that it felt pretty good to notice Simon watching him and not in an uncomfortable way but just in sheer fascination. Maybe going to the club hadn't been such a bad thing after all.

The thought of this not being a bad idea evaporated pretty quickly when the music changed about five minutes later and a song came on that seemed to be very well-liked judging by the additional crown flooding the dance floor. Raphael lost sight of Simon in a split second and this fact mixed with the feeling of being surrounded by moving bodies was causing his breath to quicken, a feeling of discomfort and anxiousness pooling in his stomach.

The feeling of a hand grabbing his hip from behind did nothing but cause the anxiousness to rise to something close to panic and Raphael tried to move away, shake off the unwelcome contact but the guy clearly didn't receive the message because he just placed his hand back on Raphael and even tried to pull him closer. His view blurred with the panicked feeling constricting his breathing and he stumbled a step forward, trying to get away from this stranger's touch, bumping into a few other people in the process.

Raphael tensed up when fingertips brushed his wrist, moving down to grab his hand but even before he was able to look for this new source of contact he realised the familiarity of the feeling and his shoulders relaxed the tiniest bit when his eyes met Simon's. The older boy's eyebrows were pulled into a worried frown but he smiled softly when Raphael looked at him and nodded slightly before tugging Raphael closer and starting to move through the dancing people.
Raphael knew the grip he had on the other's hand was probably bordering on painful but he was unreasonably scared of losing Simon in the crowd once more. He only loosened his hold on the other's hand when they finally managed to get into a less crowded area of the club, close to the entrance that Simon was actually steering them towards and Raphael couldn't find it in himself to pretend like he didn't want to leave this place.

"Are you okay??"

The air almost felt a little cool on his skin when they finally stepped out of the humid, too hot air of the club, blissful silence enveloped get them as soon as the door fell shut. Raphael took a deep breath, fingers still intertwined with Simon's and unwilling to let go, before finally answering with a nod.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm--It's fine. It was just a little too much all of sudden," Raphael answered honestly and it was obvious that Simon had noticed his distress a few minutes earlier. He was just thankful that the other had been so quick to react and that he had managed to get back to him as well.

"I don't really like too crowded places either, it's horribly uncomfortable when unfamiliar people get too close," Simon agreed and tugged Raphael a little closer before silently prompting him to sit down at the kerb. They kept on holding hands and sat close enough for their shoulders and sides to be pressed together and even if the closeness caused Raphael's heartbeat to quicken, he still felt a lot more relaxed and calm than a few minutes ago.

They didn't talk for a few minutes, just enjoyed the moment and sharing it with one another. Raphael couldn't help but glance at Simon after a while, watch him tilt his head back to look at the night sky before averting his eyes to take in their entangled fingers. The back of Simon's hand rested on top of his thigh, close to the knee, and Raphael's placed on top of it, palms pressed together and fingers slotting together perfectly.

He felt the slightly rough material of the other's leather bracelet pressing against his own wrist and couldn't help but smile at the thought of the Star of David that he knew was embedded on the other side of said bracelet. It was somewhat soothing, to know that Simon wore a sign of his faith just like Raphael did with the small golden cross resting against the skin of his chest, the one his mamá had given him when he was younger.

"I didn't even thank you for the other day," Raphael finally broke the silence, still watching their hands while softly squeezing Simon's fingers. He could feel the other turn his head to look at him.

"For keeping me company and...and for filling the silence," he added, deciding against saying for silencing the noise in my head but for some reason he felt like Simon understood the meaning of his words anyway. The other was very perceptive and somehow always seemed to just get it.

"Anytime," Simon replied and he poured so much sincerity into this one word, that it caused Raphael's heart to ache. "I'm glad I could help and that you're better now. I was wondering if I could ask you about it? Of course, I understand if you don't want to talk about it."

Part of Raphael had expected this question sooner or later but another part was still a little surprised about it. He expected to feel uneasy about it but despite his heart rate picking up to a more nervous flutter, he still felt surprisingly calm and Simon squeezing his fingers probably had something to do with it. The other's whole presence seemed to calm his nerves while simultaneously making him nervous in a good way - it was the weirdest mix and Raphael was sure to never get used to it.

"My ex-boyfriend called when Magnus and I were at the bakery," Raphael heard himself answer
honestly and he went back to staring at their intertwined fingers, Simon's thumb brushing over the back of his hand in slow, soothing circles. The other had shifted a little, turned his body so he was mostly facing him now but Raphael couldn't quite bring himself to look up into the other boy's face.

"He's a douchbag and by now I don't even know why I got together with him in the first place." He shrugged and squeezed Simon's fingers, concentrating on the warm and slightly sweaty palm pressed against his instead of giving in to the pain growing in his chest at the memory of Brandon's phone call.

"He's the reason we started this trip. I broke things off and Magnus convinced me to make this trip - just to get away, clear my head and get over him."

Simon hummed softly, just a small sound to show he listened and understood but he didn't interrupt Raphael, giving him all the space and time he needed to decide which information to offer and at what speed.

"I'm...I'm asexual and Brandon never understood it, never even tried to. He made some stupid joke like remember that time you thought you were asexual and that's why I finally broke up with him. He thought having sex was proof of my sexuality being made up and during the call, he asked if I got over my "hissy fit". And he told me that he cheated because it took me so long..."

The words bubbled up in his chest and poured from his lips. He was kind of relieved that he could get the outing over with this way but Raphael still couldn't help but duck his head, feeling the unreasonable shame creep up on him once again.

"I'm so sorry, he sounds like a terrible person and he clearly never deserved you if he treated you this way," Simon replied and his free hand softly touched Raphael's cheek, brushing away the wetness he hadn't even realised was there. Raphael was tempted to pull away from the touch but he ended up doing the opposite, pressing his cheek into the comforting warmth of Simon's palm while he felt his cheeks heat up with embarrassment that he had actually started crying in front of the other.

"I will never understand why some people feel the need to invalidate other's sexualities. It's difficult enough already to come to terms with being different from most people, even without the one supposed to love us giving us shit for it," he added with a soft voice and Raphael looked up in surprise, for a moment not caring that Simon would see his face now - a few tears still burning in his eyes and cheeks still flushed from shame and the crying alike.

"I'm pan; I know what it is like to get shit for something that's part of you and that you can't change," Simon offered with a small smile, eyes looking as warm as his palm felt still resting against Raphael's cheek.

"I really hope you're not blaming yourself for the shit your ex did and said? Because it's not your fault. He did this because he's clearly a narrow-minded asshole," he added with a frown and Raphael realised the other was actually angry on his behalf. He couldn't help but smile a little at this fact because Simon was once again absolutely endearing.

"It's difficult not to," Raphael replied honestly, in a whisper, after a short moment of silence and he never even managed to openly admit this to his best friend because he knew it would only cause Magnus to worry more about him than he already did.

"I get it, sometimes we know we didn't make a mistake but still can't help blaming ourselves or trying to find fault in what we did as an explanation to why things happen. Sometimes, bad things just happen without us doing wrong, though," Simon murmured and his thumb brushed over
Raphael's cheekbone, touching the corner of his eyes gingerly to collect a lingering teardrop stuck to his lashes. "I irrationally blamed myself for the longest time for what happened to my father."

Raphael's eyelids had fluttered down but now they flew open again, his heart stumbling a little at this admission and the broken smile accompanying the words. He was about to ask why but Simon shook his head slowly.

"Come on, let's head back to the motel first and continue talking there, okay? It's more comfortable than sitting on the kerb," he suggested and got up when Raphael nodded, offering his hand to pull him to his feet as well. Simon didn't let go afterwards, his fingers slotting into the spaces between Raphael's who fumbled for his phone with his left hand to send a quick message to Magnus, just in case his best friend noticed they were gone.

The walk back to their motel was quiet and they didn't exchange a single word but the silence wasn't uncomfortable. Raphael breathed in the slightly humid air to calm himself down from his earlier outburst, the weight of Simon's warm hand in his own soothing the taut feeling of his nerves.

Back at the motel and in their room, they kicked off their shoes and silently decided to change into sweatpants before Raphael sat down on his bed while Simon went to the bathroom to find something to remove the bit of makeup Magnus had put on them for the evening. Raphael's was probably smudged from crying anyway and there was no use in keeping it on, now that they were back in their room.

"I would be way too lazy to take the stuff off every time. That's probably the reason why I never really use makeup in the first place. That and the fact that I would surely stab myself in the eyes. I can't even put in contacts without hurting myself," Simon rambled when he came back with a facial tissue from a package Magnus had flying around in the tiny bathroom. He motioned for Raphael to scoot further back on the bed, until his back rested against the head of it, and sat down in front of him, legs crossed.

"Better close your eyes, I don't wanna risk poking you in the eye either," he prompted with a crooked grin and Raphael huffed softly but complied, his eyelids fluttering down. He couldn't help but flinch a little at first when the wet, slightly cool tissue made contact with his eyelid but he kept still when Simon gently started rubbing over his lash line to remove the black from his skin.

"Why'd you say you blamed yourself for what happened?" Raphael spoke low enough that he wasn't even sure Simon heard his question but the faintest pause of the other's movements told him otherwise. He heard the older boy inhale deeply and exhale slowly before the tissue moved along his lower lash line.

"We were playing in the garden the day he was hospitalised, just throwing a baseball back and forth, and there was a moment where he wasn't paying attention - I guess he must have started to feel that something was off or that his chest hurt - so one of the balls I threw hit him in the chest," Simon slowly started to explain while he continued to clean Raphael's other eye as well, fingertips brushing his warm skin every now and then in the process. Raphael couldn't really focus on the touches, though, because his whole attention was on the other's voice, listening to this painful story.

"Logically, I know that I couldn't have thrown it hard enough to cause any real pain; I was only 12 and I had always been a wuss when it comes to sports, but he basically broke down right after. He clutched his chest in pain and had trouble breathing, I barely managed to scream for my mum and almost had a panic attack because I thought I had caused his reaction," he continued and his voice started to sound more unsteady.
Raphael felt the other's fingertips shaking ever so slightly against his skin and he curled his fingers around Simon's hand as soon as the other was finished cleaning the makeup off. He opened his eyes and was met by Simon's wide brown orbs, looking a little darker from the emotions swirling around in them.

"I knew it wasn't my fault. He was diagnosed with lung cancer the next day. I still couldn't shake the feeling that I was responsible for him being in the hospital. It was ridiculous but maybe I thought so because I had always been horribly clumsy and I had always been scared of seriously injuring someone by accident."

Simon pressed his lips together, trying to curl them into a smile that would never reach his eyes and broke Raphael's heart. Before he could give into the urge of pulling the other into a hug, Simon gently pushed the facial tissue into his hand, silently asking him to return the favour of getting rid of the makeup. Raphael reached up to cradle the other's jaw with one hand, softly touching Simon's now closed eyelids with the moist cloth.

"Is that why you reacted so strongly to that little accident in the van when I hit my head?" He asked carefully, remembering the panicked look in Simon's eyes and slowly piecing together what must have been going on in the other's head at that moment.

"It's dumb, I know," Simon breathed, a wet laugh leaving his slightly trembling lips.

"It's not. It's really not. There's absolutely nothing dumb or embarrassing about something triggering you," Raphael objected gently, thumb brushing the other's cheek while his other hand continued to remove the eye makeup.

"I get it, though. It feels horrible to lose control over your emotions like this - that sometimes something harmless happens and it brings back memories, you can't help but instinctively connect it to the terrible emotions you felt back then and you can't do anything about it," Raphael continued and his own voice sounded a little rougher now. Their stories were so different but the raw emotions connected to them were very similar, almost shockingly so.

"What happened?"

Simon's question was quiet but Raphael wasn't surprised that the other picked up on the fact that he wasn't referring to the thing with his ex with these words; not entirely, anyway. Raphael let his hand sink, finished with cleaning the other's eyes and briefly brushing the drying cloth over the older boy's cheeks that were still slightly glittery.

"My own father happened. He was a terrible person; well, still is, I'm assuming," Raphael finally answered carefully, not quite sure if this was even the right time to bring this up right after Simon told him a little bit more about his own deceased father. Now it was Simon who reached for his hand again, tugging the tissue from it and discarding it carelessly to the side where it dropped to the floor. Their fingers intertwined once again with the other's whisper of "Tell me?"

"He always had a bad temper but he just yelled every now and then when we still lived in México. I'm pretty sure mamá thought it would get better when we move to the US because his moods were mostly because of the struggle to get a job and everyone always said the chances here are better," Raphael started, gaze dropping to their linked hands and shoulders hunched up a little. "They weren't, not by much."

He caught his bottom lip between his front teeth, biting down softly while pressing the tips of his fingers to the back of Simon's hand, focusing on the feeling of soft, warm skin.

"He got jobs but only shitty ones with even shittier pay where he was treated like scum. It resulted
in him being even more aggressive at home and...it quickly stopped being just yelling." Raphael knew the other would understand even without him elaborating too much. He raised his free hand, index finger tapping against the faint but obvious scar on his left cheek.

"He did that?" Simon gasped softly and his fingers replaced Raphael's, softly touching the marred skin, tracing the scar as if he was scared he could hurt Raphael if he applied too much pressure. He didn't know what he expected the older boy to do but it certainly hadn't been the sudden feeling of warm breath fanning over his face or the careful press of soft lips on his cheek. Raphael's eyes widened and his heart leapt into his throat, cheeks heating up.

"Gracias por confiar en me." Simon's lips brushed his cheek with every word and Raphael couldn't help but cling to the other's hand a little tighter, tilting his head into the innocent, loving touch. He was so sure that Simon must be able to hear how frantically his heart was thumping against his ribs and he was wondering if it was the same for the other boy.

"Por supuesto," he murmured in return, sounding unreasonably breathless all of a sudden and almost dizzy when Simon's lips pressed another kiss to the now heated skin beneath his scar, followed by one more that resulted in the other's soft bottom lip gracing the corner of Raphael's mouth.

The tips of their noses brushed when Raphael tilted his head a little more, free hand reaching up to gingerly touch the side of Simon's neck, and all the pain and sadness of revisiting their pasts seemed to vanish in an instant when the other's mouth finally pressed against his.

Chapter End Notes

Gracias por confiar en me - Thank you for trusting me
Por supuesto - Of course

So, this happened. I know, it's a dickish move to end the chapter at this point but I couldn't resist :D
I'm such a sucker for them being all soft with each other and Simon supporting Rapha ♥
Raphael felt slightly dizzy with the intensity of emotions washing over him, causing his every nerve ending to tingle and his heart to thump against his ribs at an almost alarming pace. His eyelids slid closed on their own accord as soon as the gentle pressure of Simon's lips against his had appeared and he felt like he was melting against the older boy - or maybe it was the other way around, he wasn't sure.

Simon made a small noise in the back of his throat as he carefully leant further into Raphael's personal space, one hand still intertwined with his and the other coming to rest on Raphael's thigh, close to his knee. Raphael's hand wrapped around the nape of the other's neck, gently pushing into the soft hair and carefully holding on to it as if he was scared that the moment would just disappear otherwise.

Somehow this gentle, innocent press of lips felt the way books and movies always described first kisses to be - a tiny bit clumsy but all tingly and warm, dreading the need to breathe that would surely end the soft contact way too soon. Raphael almost got lost in the feeling and taste of Simon's lips, the careful way they moved against his as if scared he could break when he wasn't touched with enough caution.

It felt like ages and mere seconds all at once when they finally parted, both breathless, pink-cheeked and blinking at each other with something akin to amazement in their wide eyes. The fact that Simon actually breathed out a "Wow" in reaction to the kiss involuntarily caused Raphael to chuckle, sounding out of breath and a little scratchy from the intense emotions still coursing through his body.

"So...this happened," the other muttered with wonder in his beautiful brown orbs, kiss-swollen lips tugging into the hint of an ecstatic smile and Raphael only managed to hum in agreement, unable to find any words to express what he was currently feeling or to voice that he would really like to repeat this but the older boy seemed to have the exact same idea.

"Can I--May I--" Simon stuttered, clearly not able to sort his thoughts any better than Raphael but trying to form them into a question nonetheless. Without much success. Raphael's fingers curled further into the other's silky hair, playfully tugging him closer and Simon followed willingly, their mouths meeting a second time with the same careful shyness as before.

Raphael completely lost track of time while they kept exchanging sweet little close-mouthed kisses and even when Simon somehow ended up kneeling between his legs, one hand cupping Raphael's face and the other resting on his side, the contact still stayed completely innocent. There was no need for more and Raphael was amazed how comfortable he felt despite the closeness and the fact that they were on a bed together while kissing because with Simon he didn't feel any fear of this suddenly turning into something more.

They only decided to stop when Simon ended up accidentally yawning into a kiss before burying his face in the crook of Raphael's neck with an embarrassed noise, muttering apologies in Spanish and then cursing the younger boy for laughing at him. Raphael kissed the red tip of Simon's ear before gently pushing him off and suggesting they should go brush their teeth and then sleep. It was probably past midnight already and even if their visit to the club had only been short, after all the heavy topics they talked about afterwards Raphael felt a little exhausted and he could imagine it was the same for Simon.
Both boys padded into the small bathroom together, brushing their teeth in silence while watching each other in the mirror every now and then, the white foam of the toothpaste a stark contrast to the red of their lips and the bright pink colouring their cheeks.

Raphael stripped out of his sweatpants and his shirt when they were back in the room, slumping face-first onto his bed only wearing shorts and stifling a yawn by pressing his face into the pillow. He heard the rustling of clothes when Simon got rid of his own sweatpants as well, followed by a brief moment of silence until warm fingers brushed the skin in between Raphael's shoulder blades, leaving goosebumps in their way.

He answered Simon's "Can I?" by scooting over until he felt the cool wall against his shoulder and turned his head to watch the other boy stretch out on the mattress next to him. Simon was still wearing his t-shirt and Raphael felt the soft material brushing against his upper arm and side. The older boy turned off the bedside lamp before properly getting comfortable next to Raphael, warm breath fanning over his shoulder and gentle fingertips finding their way to his side, hot palm pressing against his ribs.

"This trip turned out so much better than I ever imagined," Simon mumbled into the silence and Raphael hummed softly, eyes already closed and body relaxed despite the closeness causing his heart to beat a little too fast. He felt Simon shuffle just a tiny bit closer, his fingers travelling up Raphael's back until they reached the nape of his neck, thumb brushing the sensitive skin behind his ear.

He knew what Simon was up to even before the other boy leant closer and his hot breath touched Raphael's face but he stayed completely still, lips curling into a grin when their noses bumped clumsily before he could feel Simon's smile against his own, tasting minty from the toothpaste and just as soft as earlier.

Raphael fell asleep with Simon's whisper of "Buenas noches" in his ear, warm breath on his cheeks and the familiar sensation of a hand slipping into his.

Something soft hitting his side pulled Raphael from the relaxed calm of his dream, a soft groan escaping his lips when his eyelids slowly fluttered open. The first thing he saw was a blurry view of the wall right in front of him, followed by the feeling of heat pressed against his back and his brain had to catch up to the fact that he had once again shared his bed with Simon. His cheeks were already warm from sleeping and the general heat building between their bodies but they grew even hotter at the memory of their kisses last night. He hadn't dreamt that, had he?

"Come on, get up you lazy asses," Magnus's voice cut through the sleepy haze in his head and Raphael yawned, reaching for the pillow his best friend had thrown at him half a minute earlier and blindly chucking it back towards the general direction of the other's voice.

"¡Cállate!" It might be way too hot but Raphael still didn't feel like moving because Simon's arm was curled around his stomach and his face hidden in the curls at the back of Raphael's neck, breathing against his neck and sending shivers down his spine. It was too hot and he felt sweaty but for some reason he enjoyed the moment because it still felt calming to have the other by basically curled around him like this but of course Simon was now stirring as well, unable to continue sleeping with Magnus throwing the damn pillow at them again.

"Just because you're adorable doesn't mean you can sleep until noon. Get up and get ready, we're going out for breakfast, I'm hungry."

Raphael pressed his face into the pillow with a groan before he finally got himself to sit up which
caused Simon's arm to now be draped across his lap, curled around his hip. His heart stumbled a little bit but he forced the feeling away and rubbed his eyes, glancing towards the table where a very amused looking Magnus sat, perfectly styled as usual.

"So, what did I miss? You guys went back early," he asked and Raphael rolled his eyes, gently patting Simon's lower arm to get the boy to wake up properly because he did not want to try and climb over the other body, that was an accident waiting to happen. It took about another minute until Simon finally sat up as well, all tousled hair and hazy eyes, with a sloppy smile on his lips that Raphael barely resisted pressing his own mouth against. What he didn't resist was the urge to raise his hand and brush over the slight pillow crease on Simon's cheek and his heart skipped a beat when the other boy leant into the contact without hesitation.

"I will get my answers sooner or later but, first, breakfast. Get going, kids," Magnus interrupted the moment once again and Raphael glared at his best friend, getting a mischievous smirk in return before he finally got up and grabbed a few clothes to head into the bathroom for a quick shower.

When he returned to the room, Simon's cheeks were bright red and he almost fled into the bathroom, causing Raphael to fix his best friend with a glowering gaze but Magnus simply raised his hands innocently.

"So," Magnus prompted when Raphael slumped into the other chair at the small table in their room, fingers pushing through his wet curls and brushing them away from his forehead.

"So?" Of course, he knew what his best friend wanted to hear but that didn't mean Raphael felt like complying so easily. Magnus might be his best friend but that didn't mean he couldn't tease him a little bit - he knew how much it irked the other to be out of the loop and not know the newest developments immediately.

"Don't be a little shit about it. Something happened, didn't it?"

"Maybe," Raphael shrugged, trying to sound nonchalant about it but his cheeks grew a little warmer and betrayed his attempt at not giving it away too quickly.

"We...may have kissed," he finally gave in at Magnus's thoroughly unimpressed stare and the other's face immediately lit up like a Christmas tree - he certainly was just as sparkly and colourful as one.

"Congratulations, darling. I knew it would happen sooner or later but I didn't expect one of you to make a move so quickly," Magnus commented with a chuckle but he seemed genuinely happy, there was barely anything teasing about his tone. Raphael's cheeks felt even warmer now but his lips curled into a smile and his heart rate picked up a little because he still couldn't quite believe it actually happened. They had kissed. Multiple times.

"I'm really happy for you. This boy is a much better choice than Bart," he added and Raphael felt a 'speaking of him' coming but Magnus seemed to decide against lecturing him on the whole thing with the phone call, instead he tried to get more details on the last evening and how the kiss was.

Walking to the small diner close to their motel for breakfast felt a little bit awkward because neither Raphael nor Simon was quite sure how to act around each other, especially in Magnus's company but when the oldest in the group almost ordered them to just hold hands or kiss or whatever the atmosphere seemed to shift to something more comfortable again. It still took five more minutes for them to tangle their fingers together with red cheeks and carefully exchanged glances.
Magnus talked briefly about the guy he had spent the night with during breakfast but he spared them any details of what happened after leaving the club. He did mention that the guy had been mediocre, at best, *despite his pretty face* and Raphael barely resisted the urge to throw his croissant at the other's head because that was already more information than he had ever wanted to hear.

After breakfast, they decided to grab their laundry from their room and visit a nearby laundromat because they wanted to hit the road again the next morning and clean clothes sounded like a very good idea anyway. Magnus got bored not even five minutes after starting the washing machine and announced that he would go look at some shops to buy souvenirs for Sarwenda and Guadalupe. The other two didn't stop him, not minding waiting for their laundry to be done and have some more time to themselves.

The laundromat was pretty tiny and there were just two other people - some guy with headphones and an elderly lady - and those were at the front of the room while Raphael and Simon were in the back, next to the two machines they had loaded with their laundry. Magnus had one for all his colourful and glittery clothing while the other two had chosen to put their clothes together because it wasn't that much and they had nothing too colourful with the risk of bleeding into other items of clothing.

Now that they were basically alone again, the atmosphere went back to being a little awkward and it was admittedly amusing how intently Simon was watching the laundry spin in the washing machine, clearly trying to avoid looking at Raphael who had already surrendered to the urge of watching the other boy with a smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"Are you just going to stare at our laundry for an hour now?" He finally questioned and cocked his head a little, hand reaching out to brush his fingertips over Simon's lower arm, his heart fluttering at the feeling of goosebumps this simple touch caused.

"Uh...no? I don't know," Simon mumbled and glanced at him from the corner of his eyes before dropping his gaze to watch the way Raphael's fingertips feathered over his slightly tanned skin. Raphael briefly wondered if the older boy would actually manage to gain a little bit more of a tan when summer properly started but he had a feeling that Simon spent so much time holed up inside that he didn't get to see much of the sun.

"What's the matter? Are you uncomfortable because--" Raphael paused, frowning, and he drew his hand back when the thought occurred to him that the other boy could actually be uncomfortable with the whole development. Sure, he had seemed pretty into the kissing last night and Simon had held his hand when they walked to the diner but it had only been after Magnus basically ordered them to. Maybe the older boy didn't want *whatever this was* and simply didn't know how to tell Raphael?

"No! I'm not--You're not making me uncomfortable, if that's what you're thinking!" Simon stared at him with wide eyes, turning to face him fully and following the movement of his hand to catch it with his own, lacing their fingers together gently. "I just don't really know how to act because...I've never been in such a situation."

Raphael frowned slightly at this confession, not quite sure how to take this, and Simon seemed to realise as well that his words didn't exactly explain anything.

"I only ever had two...*flings* so far - I don't even know what to call it, honestly. Like, one was basically an accidental one-night-stand after prom in middle school where I went with this girl from my band. I didn't know she had a crush on me, I sort of got drunk because I still had the biggest crush on Clary back then because she went to prom with a girl - that was kind of the point where I really understood that she was indeed only into girls. It's safe to say that prom and my first time were quite disastrous."
Raphael blinked a few times, trying to catch up with the waterfall of words suddenly pouring out of Simon who clung to his hand and stared at the floor with wide eyes and reddened cheeks. It was kind of fascinating how much this boy could talk without taking a breath but Raphael didn't interrupt because it was equally weird as it was interesting to hear about these things, to learn more about the other boy.

"The morning after was actually worse because not only did I not remember what happened, I even called her *Clary* because my mind was still so fuzzy. So the girl, Maureen, was understandably pissed off and left after telling me what an ass I was only for my mum to show up and lecture me not only about safe-sex but about underage drinking as well. That might have been the most mortifying 24 hours of my life and that's saying something..."

Simon actually did pause to take a breath now and to glance up at Raphael because he was unable to suppress a huff of amusement. He couldn't help but feel a tiny bit uncomfortable because of the whole one-night-stand thing but Raphael pushed the feeling away and told himself, as he always did when Magnus mentioned such things, that it was completely normal and nothing to feel appalled by but it never fully worked. At least it was just the 'casual sex' part that irked him, not that people he knew indulged in it.

"Well, and the second one was three dates during my first semester with a girl I met in my classes, Maia. We're still friends and she's absolutely amazing, we get along really well, but for some reason, dating and the whole romance thing was another disaster. The first date was fine, for the second one I made the mistake of getting advice from Jace - the brother of Clary's current girlfriend - who told me to act disinterested because according to him that's a thing that works great on women - spoiler alert, it doesn't - and the third one ended with us realising that we were better off as friends. So...that's basically my whole 'dating' history which is...nothing."

He played nervously with Raphael's fingers who didn't really know what kind of reaction was expected from him after all these new information. It definitely didn't change anything for him, even though Simon seemed to think that way, but he still didn't quite understand why the other felt like telling him all of this right now.

"Okay? Am I supposed to share mine now? Because that would just be Brandon and you heard how that turned out...Why are we having this conversation right now?" Raphael finally asked, tentatively, and he felt his frown deepen a little more while watching Simon's face.

"What I was trying to say is...I don't know what this, *us*, is and I know it's ridiculous to expect to define it already but I don't really know how to act around you after last night, I guess? You're on this trip to get over your break-up so I don't know if it's okay to--We don't know each other for that long but I really like you already and I enjoy being close to you - cuddling, holding your hand, the kissing was amazing as well - so..." Simon trailed off, clearly not sure how to put his thoughts into words and he pushed the fingers of his free hand through his hair with a small, frustrated noise.

Raphael had some trouble following the slightly stuttered mess of words but he was pretty sure that he understood what Simon was trying to say or *ask* actually. He felt his heart pounding against his ribs in a nervous rhythm, throat a little dry and mind buzzing from all the input. *I really like you already*, it echoed in his head and there was nothing to stop the fluttery feeling in his stomach.

"Are you trying to ask me if this is just some kind of 'fling' or something that could become more serious?" Raphael spoke the words slowly, weighing them on his tongue and not quite believing that they were actually having this conversation right now. Of course, all of this had kind of been building up over the past few days and there were clearly feelings on both sides but it was still
unexpected to have such a serious conversation about it the day after they first kissed. Though
admittedly, they both had their respective amounts of emotional bullshit from the past to carry and
it would probably be good for both of them to at least try and define all of this at least roughly.

"I guess that's what I'm trying to ask, yeah," Simon admitted, words barely above a whisper, and
his dark orbs finally found Raphael's again, a mixture of fear and hope to swirl in their warm
depths, their intensity taking his breath away.

Chapter End Notes

_Buenas noches - Good night_  
_Cállate - Shut up_

I decided that it would make more sense to change the tags a little or to at least kick
the demi tag for Raphael and make it ace because I realised that it fits better
considering his reactions and everything. I wrote him as demi in most stories and
figured it would apply here as well but, turns out, it doesn't. Not that it changes
anything for the story but ever since I started to think about it, it feels wrong to still
have him tagged as "demi sexual", I don't know. Just thought I should mention it in
case someone wonders why the tag is suddenly different *laughs*
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

As you can see, there is a final chapter count now aka I finished writing the story and therefore: how about we cancel the upload schedule (once again) and make it daily? :)

Also, I really hope the ending will be satisfying but I guess we will see about that when it's posted.

"Are you trying to ask me if this is just some kind of 'fling' or something that could become more serious?"

"I guess that's what I'm trying to ask, yeah."

Raphael regarded the older boy with a thoughtful expression and, surprisingly enough, he hadn't actually thought about this so far. What this meant or where it was headed. He was fully aware, though, that his feelings were already on their way of becoming something serious and even if this whole mess with Brandon was still fresh on his mind, there was certain fear of starting anything again, he still found himself trusting Simon not to hurt him like this.

"It's difficult to say anything definite already but...we could try? I like you as well, very much so, which is honestly kind of scary especially considering how things with Brandon ended. I want to get to know more about you and be close to you, that much I can say for sure," he finally replied with a soft voice, squeezing Simon's fingers, and he briefly realised that they actually had such a serious conversation in a damn laundromat. It was difficult not to comment on that fact and the slight ridiculousness of the location they had chosen for a heart-to-heart.

"It's the same for me. Well, except for the Brandon part." Simon's lips pulled into a slightly crooked grin and it was obvious that his mouth was once again running away with him but he continued nonetheless. "So...does that mean we're kind of dating now?"

"Sounds like that's what we just established, yeah," Raphael chuckled and the beaming smile he received in return caused his heart to skip a beat before it started thrumming in his chest at an even faster pace when Simon leant closer, low enough in case he wanted to pull back but Raphael did the opposite. He leant in as well and a sigh left his throat when their lips met just as carefully as the first time last night. It was difficult to be insecure if he made the right decision when it felt so amazingly perfect to be this close to Simon, feel his mouth move so gently as if he was scared to break something.

Simon was always so clumsy in everything he did but not when it came to kissing; he was all careful and soft, lodging their lips together as if he had all the practice in the world when, in fact, he had basically less experience than Raphael himself judging by his earlier stories. Raphael's only experience so far had been him but this honestly felt so much better already and he felt like he could get lost in the other boy's touches, craving Simon's plush lips as soon as they left his to breathe.

The strong emotions were unfamiliar yet intoxicating and Raphael was already glad he gave this a chance instead of giving in to his insecurities and anxieties that his ex had left him with. He just
Simon was different, that he was better, even if it might not work out after all. So far, Simon had been nothing but sweet and considerate towards him, the complete opposite of his former boyfriend, and Raphael caught himself actually wishing for this to work out.

"Good thing we live in the same city. Otherwise, the dating thing might be a little tricky - is there such a thing as long distance dating?" Simon asked after another, shorter, kiss and he chuckled in embarrassment when Raphael just stared at him for a brief moment, trying to figure out if this question was serious or simply one of the usual Simon blurting out random stuff because he had no filter situations. He decided on the latter but still ended up answering for some reason.

"I doubt it, how would the dates work that way?"

Simon made a little noise of agreement before closing the small distance between them once more, pressing his mouth softly to Raphael's who was more than glad to notice he wasn't the only one who seemed slightly addicted to this new kind of closeness between them.

When the laundry was finally done, they filled it into two dryers and kept holding hands while talking about nonsense, waiting for their clothes to be completely done. Magnus joined them shortly before everything was done and fortunately he kept himself from commenting on their still intertwined hands but winked at Raphael with a sly grin, causing him to roll his eyes and blush slightly.

"I wish we could've just stayed. I don't want to head back already," Simon sighed, chin propped up in his hand and eyes wistfully watching the landscape fly by. They were in the van after getting back on the road after breakfast and Raphael couldn't deny that he felt the same.

"Well, we still have a week until we will be back in New York," he shrugged with a small smile but he knew the week would be mostly spend driving, though it was still time he could spend with Simon so he really didn't mind. Being on the road was weirdly relaxing and fun, despite Magnus's slightly out of tune humming to a song from the radio in the background.

"Yeah, I guess. I still wish we could just...stay away," the other mumbled and Raphael frowned slightly before leaning on the small table between them to gently grab Simon's hand that was resting on the wooden surface. Their fingers slotted together easily and the gesture was already so familiar that it made Raphael's heart ache a little. It would be weird being back in New York and not seeing Simon every day.

"You don't sound too ecstatic about getting back home," Raphael commented and he hoped Simon would catch the silent question about the reason for that. They had learned quite a lot about each other during the past few days, opened up about things they never really talked about to anyone else, but Raphael was still careful about the things he asked because he didn't want to pose the wrong question by accident.

"Not too much. It's just...I'm starting this job in an accounting firm in autumn that my mum helped me get - she knows someone who works there and put in a good word for me - and...I wish I didn't have to do that."

Raphael frowned at the wording and cocked his head to the side."You don't have to work anywhere, nobody can force you to. What do you want to do instead?"

"I kind of have to, though. My mother got this job for me and I can't disappoint her. She didn't want me to go on this trip so I could spend the summer with an internship in that firm but at least I got out of that," Simon sighed and absentmindedly played with Raphael's fingers. "I never wanted to study accounting but something with music. I love playing the guitar and singing, it would have
been so great to do that professionally. And I'm not talking about becoming famous in a band or anything like that but maybe...becoming a teacher or music therapist - something to help people with."

Raphael felt his lips curling into a gentle smile because he could imagine Simon maybe teach music in elementary or middle school. The thought of the older boy working with children was really endearing and the other was definitely good with kids if the way he immediately got along with the twins was anything to go by.

"I told my dad about it when I was in middle school and he said it was a great idea, that I should go for it and he wanted to talk to my mother because we both knew she wouldn't be too happy about it because it wasn't a 'proper' job or whatever. But he never got the chance to get the right moment to talk to her," Simon explained, his voice almost a whisper and Raphael had leant closer to be able to understand the words over the sound of the van's engine. He squeezed the other's fingers gently and watched Simon's face intently, heart thumping painfully against his ribs at the sadness reflected in the other's expression.

"He felt better for a little while and started talking about the trip - this trip - again, that we could maybe make it when I finish high school if he keeps on getting better but it didn't last too long and he rapidly got worse again and...I graduated three months after the funeral." Simon's voice broke a little and Raphael got up to sit down next to the other boy, wrapping him up in his arms and pressing a soothing kiss to his temple.

"Sorry, I didn't want to," Simon took a shuddering breath and tried to get his voice back under control but Raphael shushed him gently, catching a tear from the corner of the other's eye with the pad of his thumb.

"There's nothing you have to apologise for. You don't have to avoid talking about your father because it makes you sad. I like to hear whatever you want to tell me, even the sad parts," Raphael admitted in a soft voice and cupped Simon's face, turning it towards him to press a tender kiss to the older boy's pinkish cheek before leaning their foreheads together.

"Thank you for trusting me with all of this. I know it's not easy talking about any of this," Raphael murmured and smiled at the teary-eyed Simon, brushing his thumb over the curve of the other's cheekbone and trying to offer as much comfort as he could. It broke his heart to see Simon struggle with his emotions like this, the grief about the loss of his father still very prominent whenever he mentioned the man because he probably never really allowed himself to talk about it.

Raphael really saw himself in this behaviour - he tended to close such parts of himself off as well, just buried it somewhere and avoided talking about it but he knew this way he wouldn't be able to really heal and it was clearly the same for Simon. The other boy couldn't mention his father without thinking about his death and that made the situation even sadder to watch because you should be able to talk about your parents with love instead of pain but both of their fathers had left them broken for very different reasons.

"It feels like I'm always fighting with my mother since then because I can't seem to make anything right. I didn't talk to her about wanting to study music - only mentioned it once and she didn't even take me serious - because it felt like I couldn't do that to her. She was in so much pain already and I didn't want to make it worse by acting up. It's not like I could tell her that dad wanted me to pursue my dream and that he told me to just go for it." Simon's voice was muffled when he pressed his face into Raphael's shoulder - stumbling over a few words here and there because his tongue struggled to form them properly, thick with emotions.

"I love my mother but I was so glad to just get away and get her off my back for a little while. I feel terrible for not wanting to go back but I'm tired of fighting and not being listened to because I
don't even know how to make her listen," Simon admitted softly, sniffing and burying deeper into the embrace. Raphael's hands rubbed gentle circles into the other's back, fingertips brushing the nape of Simon's neck ever so often and playing with the soft strands of hair.

"There is nothing to feel bad about, it's understandable. You don't want to be unhappy in a job you never wanted but you also don't want to cause your mother pain by 'acting up' and following your heart. It's a difficult situation and I get it. I probably would have done it the same way if I were you."

In a way, Raphael was doing it in a very similar way. Sure, his mother never told him what to study or even that he should go to university but he still felt like he owed it to her and his brothers - to try and get a useful, well-paying job and somehow make up for the shit his father put him through. He felt responsible for taking care of his family as the oldest son, otherwise, he probably wouldn't have chosen to study such a dry and strenuous thing as Business and Technology Management.

Raphael knew Guadalupe wouldn't blame him if he changed the subject he studied or even dropped out of university to pursue something else; all she ever wanted was for her kids to be happy, to do what they wanted to. He felt bad for choosing his studies based on what he was capable of and what would result in a useful education rather than what he cared about and enjoyed.

They had spent quite a while just hugging and exchanging a few kisses until Simon was cheering up again and suggested playing a card game to distract themselves from the heavy subjects. Magnus, who had stayed quiet for the most part during their emotional moment, stroke up a conversation as soon as he noticed the mood had lightened up again and he chatted a little about the phone call he had with his mother before breakfast.

It was another hour of driving, chatting and playing games later that they decided to take a break. The tank needed to be refilled and they all felt like stretching their legs a little. Raphael jumped out of the van after it was parked, stretching and blinking against the bright sun burning down on them. Simon ventured towards the restroom of the roadhouse and Raphael watched him, only flinching slightly when his best friend's lower arm suddenly came to rest on top of his shoulder.

"So, you two are a thing now, huh?"

"A thing?" Raphael questioned with a small frown, shaking his head at the wording but feeling his lips curl into a smile nonetheless, "Something like that."

Magnus laughed softly and Raphael couldn't even find it in himself to protest when the other's fingers playfully dug into his hair, ruffling his loose curls gently before he was pulled further against the elder's side.

"I'm happy for you. When I suggested this trip to get over Bruce-" Raphael snorted and he didn't even know why it was still kind of hilarious that Magnus simply refused to address Brandon with his real name but he still hoped this habit would never get lost, "-I didn't expect it to turn out like this but I don't mind. I'm still surprised how all of this developed between the two of you, especially how fast it happened, but I'm actually starting to believe something like fate might truly exist."

Raphael's eyebrow jumped up towards his hairline and he tilted his head, finally averting his gaze from the building where Simon had disappeared a moment earlier to look at Magnus.

"Even I don't believe in fate and I'm not the atheist here," Raphael commented dryly and grimaced
when the other pinched his cheek in return as if to chide him.

"I don't need to be religious to believe in fate."

"Right, you just have to be a hopeless romantic and slightly insane."

"Scratch the hopeless part but the rest sounds about right. We're all a little bit insane, that's part of human nature, and it would be boring if we weren't." Magnus replied with a shrug, amused grin tugging at the corners of his mouth while he patted Raphael's cheek whole rolled his eyes with a heavy sigh.

"But, on a serious note, I'm really glad we picked Simon up. He has a surprisingly good influence on you and you seem a lot more relaxed and happy, especially with the newest development," he returned to the initial topic, now with a lower and softer voice, smiling gently and Raphael almost squirmed out of the half-embrace because he felt embarrassed by the sudden earnestness of his best friend.

"It's kind of scary, to be honest," Raphael heard himself reply after a beat of silence, back to watching the building as if he was scared that Simon could suddenly show up again and overhear their conversation - even if there was nothing being said that he wouldn't be allowed to hear.

"It was different before. Less...intense," he added with a helpless little shrug and felt his cheeks heat up a little even if he knew there was nothing to be ashamed of; Magnus knew him and despite all the teasing, he knew the other would never honestly make fun of him and always knew when to not make silly jokes.

"I know. Despite the fact that, as we both know, I fall for people way too easily, it still scares me as well when it happens. The knowledge that you're on the track of falling in love with someone and therefore giving them the power to break your heart is terrifying but it can also be the most amazing thing with the right person." Magnus smiled wistfully and Raphael knew the other involuntarily started to think back to Camille. The woman Magnus had loved so deeply that it had broken him when she turned out to not be the right person but the exact opposite.

A few years had passed since the breakup by now and Magnus had bounced back, dated other people and continued to put himself out there in search of something, someone, better. Raphael never quite understood how the other did it or why but...maybe he was currently well on his way to figure just that out for himself. After Brandon, he had thought that maybe this relationship stuff wasn't for him and maybe he simply couldn't be involved enough to make it work, that it was bound to fail because of him and he should just stay away from such things. Now, though, Simon had managed to completely make him forget about this decision.

"Simon is amazing and I really want this to work out which...I didn't even have that with Brandon. I don't think I would have minded it too much if it had never gotten serious with him but this...this is different and I'm suddenly scared of fucking it up," Raphael mumbled with a sigh and this time he actually leant into the touch when Magnus ruffled his hair.

"I don't think you will fuck it up. Sure, you barely know each other for two weeks now but there is already a surprising amount of trust between the two of you and you're definitely building a great basis for something more here," Magnus said with a soft smile and even pressed his lips against Raphael's temple for a brief moment, causing his lips to mirror the smile with another fond eye roll.

"Maybe. Let's see how it'll go and hope for the best."

Simon returned a moment later and convinced Raphael to accompany him into the store while
Magnus went to fill the van up on gas - 'convinced' as in 'grabbed his hand and pulled him along' but Raphael went willingly, following the other's bright smile that caused his heart to stumble against his ribs at a slightly faster pace.
The night had been almost unbearably hot, at least in the bunk where they slept so it had been nearly impossible to get a shut eye while Magnus seemed completely unbothered. Simon had started the morning with a certainly unhealthy amount of coffee before deciding he would take the wheel first - Raphael basically ordered his best friend to take the passenger seat and keep an eye on the other because he was too tired to trust himself in the slightest.

Raphael ended up pulling out the bench Magnus always slept on in hopes to get some more rest because not only would the bunk be still too hot but it was probably too dangerous to sleep up there while on the road anyway. Falling off the bench would surely leave less damage in case anything were to happen.

Only dressed in some loose fitting basketball shorts and with Magnus's way too cheerful voice in his ear, it didn't take Raphael too long to fall asleep. He had no clue how long he had been out but a warm palm on his lower back finally woke him up again. Raphael groaned softly and pressed his face into the pillow, unwilling to wake up properly and trying to shift away from the too hot touch.

"Mind if I join you?" Simon's voice reached his sleep-hazed brain and he replied a murmured "Hace demasiado calor" that was muffled by the pillow because having a warm body pressed against his did not sound very appealing at all right now. His answer was followed by the other boy basically whining his name and a few gentle nudges against his shoulder that was all it took for Raphael to scoot over the tiny bit until he reached the wall of the van.

Simon's body was radiating warmth when he stretched out in the tiny space next to Raphael and a mild jostling of the vehicle thanks to some pothole almost threw him off the bench again. Raphael groaned once more and turned on his side to throw his arm over the other's side, curling it around Simon's stomach and pulling him close enough so their bodies almost touched.

"I thought it's too hot?" Simon asked in a barely audible mumble, clearly tired and about to drift off while his hand came to rest on Raphael's, fingers intertwining. The familiarity of this gesture caused Raphael's heart to skip a beat and his lips tugged into a smile.

"It is but I'd rather endure that than you whining about cracking your head open by falling off," he murmured back, patting Simon's chest absently before giving in to the pull of exhaustion once again, drifting back off to sleep.

It wasn't too much of a surprise when Raphael woke up again due to being way too hot. Simon had shuffled closer in his sleep and he was basically trapped between the side of the van and the other's back that was radiating too much heat for his liking. He groaned softly and it took him a good ten minutes to somehow free himself from Simon's death-grip on his hand and lower arm - the other didn't even wake up from all his moving and kept on sleeping calmly.

Raphael yawned and rubbed his eyes, grabbing a bottle of water to take a few swigs until he padded to the driver's cabin to slump into the passenger seat. He squinted against the way too bright sun and it took him a moment to realise that they were stuck in a traffic jam.

"Sleeping beauty one woke up again, I see," Magnus commented with teasing amusement, chin
propped up in his hand and lazily glancing at Raphael before motioning for him to pass over the bottle.

"Simon is too hot," Raphael mumbled and blinked slowly before his eyes widened a little when he realised what he had just said, "Body temperature wise!"

"Chill, I know what you meant, darling," Magnus laughed at his reaction and shook his head in amusement, drinking from the water before discarding the bottle into the cup holder in between the seats where it barely fit.

"It's really quite unbearable since last night. I wish we could start moving again because that helped at least a little," he added, his left arm gesturing out the open window as if Raphael hadn't been able to tell that he meant the breeze generated by the movement of the vehicle because it was otherwise pretty windless today.

"Doesn't look like that's going to happen anytime soon," Raphael sighed and squinted at the quite long line of cars in front of them, their metal reflecting the bright sunlight and blinding his still sleep sensitive eyes even more, to the point where it was slightly painful.

"I'm surprised you even shared the small space with him. You hate body contact when it's too hot already."

Raphael grimaced a little and part of him was tempted to say he thoroughly regretted that decision because he would have been at least a little less sweaty without Simon's body pressed against his but he couldn't bring himself to.

"Yeah, I don't know. It's hard to say no to him," Raphael replied with a small shrug and felt his cheeks heat up a bit more but they were probably already pinkish so it hopefully didn't look like he was blushing for basically no reason.

"You're so gone on this boy, it's adorable. And you were seriously doubting that your feelings were enough to act on them? You're clearly way more interested in him than you ever were in Balthazar."

"The names are getting more and more ridiculous."

"Not the point," Magnus huffed in fake annoyance but he smirked at Raphael and reached out to ruffle his still sleep mussed curls, not even caring that they were slightly sweaty.

"Estoy orgulloso de ti."

Raphael glanced at his best friend and he felt weirdly embarrassed by the words - he would probably never get used to such praise, even though Guadalupe had made it a point to say the exact same words every now and then but it would never not feel weird or misplaced for some reason. He didn't even do anything that warranted pride.

"¿Por qué?"

"Por darle una oportunidad," Magnus answered and scrunched up his face, probably thinking about how to say whatever else was on his mind before switching back to English because his Spanish wasn't good enough to properly put his thoughts into words. "I know this wasn't an easy decision after what happened last time, especially because that's still so fresh, but he's obviously good for you and therefore I'm proud of you for listening to your heart instead of the pain he left you with. That's not an easy thing to do and I know it's scary, putting your heart on the line again this soon."
"Well, it's mostly thanks to you so you should probably be proud of yourself for this? You dragged me on this trip, otherwise, we would have never met him," Raphael commented and made a noise of protest when the other softly slapped his upper arm - the sudden contact didn't hurt but simply startled him.

"Stop being like this for once. Accept the fact that I'm proud of you because I may have dragged you into this situation but it was you who acted on his feelings; I didn't make you choose to be with him, I didn't make you cuddle with him or kiss him."

Raphael's cheeks heated up a little more and he really wanted to disagree with the other on principle but he knew Magnus was kind of right. His best friend barely intervened and only subtly stayed back to give them room to get to know each other and grow closer. Magnus definitely helped but at the end of the day, he and Simon had gotten to this point mostly on their own.

"Maybe you're ri--"

"Hey, why aren't we moving?"

Simon's head suddenly popped up in between the seats and his fingers brushed Raphael's shoulder when he supported himself on the backrest of the seat, causing him to flinch in surprise because he hadn't even heard the other approach. Raphael muttered a curse in Spanish and pressed his hand against his chest from the slight shock while Magnus started laughing because he had noticed his reaction.

"Traffic jam," Magnus managed to answer in between laughter and Simon frowned a little, glancing from Magnus to the younger boy. Raphael huffed, mildly annoyed, before tipping his head back a little to look up at Simon, his lips tugging into a smile without his permission.

"Hey," Simon greeted and deliberately brushed his fingertips against the heated skin of Raphael's shoulder now, leaning closer to press a playful little peck on the tip of his nose.

"You two are so cute, it's sickening," Magnus sighed, clearly unable to resist destroying the moment and this time it was Raphael blindly swatting at him, hitting his best friend's side in the process and making the other flinch.

"Good thing we're not moving, then; you can always jump out of the van if you need to throw up," Simon replied and Raphael groaned softly, closing his eyes and inwardly asking God why these two had to be like this. He felt the other's warm breath on his face when Simon chuckled - either because of his reaction or because of whatever face Magnus was making right now - followed by another press of soft lips, this time against his cheekbone.

"Mind if I join you?" Simon then asked and Raphael sighed deeply but he still gave in without any further protest, scooting over a little to make room on the passenger seat that was more of a small bench with just enough space for both of them to fit.

"We could play I spy now, seeing as we're not moving."

Raphael stared at the side of the other's head with disbelief and maybe he shouldn't be surprised that Simon brought this up again with the mind of a 5-year-old that he seemed to have every now and then. Magnus made a thoughtful noise in the back of his throat before he actually ended up agreeing to it and, of course, Raphael got roped into it as well.

The rest of the ride, after the traffic jam finally cleared up and they were able to move again, was pretty uneventful and they managed to almost reach Albuquerque before they decided to find a
place to stop for the night. It didn't need much convincing from Magnus for the other two to agree to stop at a motel because it was still way too hot in the van and a proper shower plus less heated sleeping space was more than welcome after the night before.

Because they knew they would end up sharing a bed anyway, they decided on a room with only two beds, one double, so Simon and Raphael were able to share a bed with enough space to not having to lie too closely to one another. Simon pouted a little because he refused to cuddle but seemed happy enough when Raphael offered his hand to hold so they spent the night sleeping a little apart, with their fingers intertwined in between their bodies.

They had wanted to drive the route from Albuquerque to Oklahoma City the next day, the same way the had taken to the Grand Canyon, but they spontaneously decided to only drive about two hours that day instead - to the Santa Rosa Lake State Park. So they could spend most of the day relaxing and swimming the lake to cool off. Luckily they even got a spot on the camping ground for the night that wasn't too expensive.

They got out of the van after parking it in their spot and Simon was almost immediately jumped by some small fluffy dog that almost tripped him by running in between his legs. Raphael poked his head out of the door when he heard ecstatic barking and couldn't help but laugh when he spotted Simon squatting in front of the stairs with a wiggly dog halfway in his lap trying to lick his face.

"Veo que ya hiciste un amigo," he commented with a soft chuckle and his heart skipped a beat when Simon looked at him over his shoulder, lips curled into a beaming smile and face lit up with pure joy while the dog was still attempting to lick his face but only managed to reach the boy's chin with the tip of its pink tongue.

"Siempre quise un perro."

"Please don't steal other camper's pets, Sheldon," Magnus commented while squeezing past Raphael to leave the van, eyeing the tiny, yipping dog with a small frown before walking away from the van with his phone in hand.

"I didn't plan on stealing the dog," Simon muttered, childishly sticking his tongue out at Magnus's retreating back before turning towards the small animal again, ruffling its fur with his fingers before someone called the dog and it quickly scurried off, back to its owners.

"Don't mind him, Mags isn't much of a dog person," Raphael said with a dismissive gesture before offering his hand to pull Simon back on his feet, resulting in the older boy slightly stumbling against him with his usual grace.

"How can he not love dogs??"

"He's a cat person through and through. That's why he has a cat," Raphael answered, mildly amused by Simon's almost indignant expression that turned into a thoughtful one now.

"Right, I remember the selfies with the cat on his tablet," he recalled after a brief moment and suddenly leant closer to press a kiss to the corner of Raphael's mouth without any warning. Raphael's eyes widened a little, heart skipping half a beat before thumping at a faster pace to spread a tingly warmth through his whole body at the innocent, playful touch.

"I really hope you like dogs, though?"

Raphael huffed out a laugh when Simon continued the topic and his fingertips curled a little into the other's shirt where his hand rested on Simon's side, keeping the other boy close and resisting the urge to seal his lips with a proper kiss.
"Yes, I like dogs and cats as well."

Simon beamed at him and mumbled a "Right answer" before gently cupping Raphael's face with one hand to finally pull him into a kiss, pressing their lips together with gentle eagerness. His arms curled around Simon and tugged him a little closer, sighing against the other's soft mouth while his eyelids fluttered close, thoroughly enjoying the tender moment.

Their kiss was interrupted by a few younger kids running past, screaming about how they wanted to go on the water course and Raphael already knew what was going to happen next even before Simon pulled away with wide eyes.

"They have a water course??"

"Apparently so," Raphael chuckled and the other boy immediately tugged at his hand get him back into the van so they could change into their swimming trunks because he wanted to go and check out said water course as well.

"Maybe it's only a small one for kids?"

"Shut up! And even if that were the case, I don't care."

"Well, you surely do behave like a kid sometimes but I'm pretty sure you still won't pass as one."

Raphael started laughing when the older boy attempted to glare at him but trying to look intimidating certainly wasn't one of Simon's talents. He stepped closer and pressed an apologetic kiss to the other's cheek before grabbing his swimming trunks and disappearing into the small bathroom and get changed while Simon did the same in the van.

"Does that look like an obstacle course for small children to you?"

Raphael flinched when Simon poked his side teasingly after they headed towards the lake - they had somehow managed to find Magnus to make sure the other knew where they had disappeared to before heading out - and were now faced with an actually quite impressive watercourse that had not only children trying to climb it but teenagers as well.

"Okay, it's for slightly bigger children," Raphael relented with a teasing smirk and burst out laughing when Simon shoved him playfully in return before taking off to run to the edge of the water. Raphael shook his head in amusement, watching the other boy jog away before he followed at a normal walking pace, enjoying the heat of the sun on his skin and the slight breeze blowing over the land from the actually impressively vast lake.

Of course, the obstacle course was already pretty packed with kids and teenagers of all ages so they decided to wait for a little before getting on it as well. Simon pouted a bit when Raphael suggested waiting and grimaced when he was reminded of using sunscreen but he seemed rather fine with the prospect when Raphael offered to do his back.

"You forgot your face, idiota," Raphael commented when the other dropped the tube with sunscreen onto blanket they had spread out on a shadowy patch of grass, reaching out to grab the object and squeeze a little bit of the milky white substance on his fingertips.

"Ven aquí," he beckoned Simon with a fond eye roll when the other boy groaned in fake annoyance before scooting closer willingly anyway. They both sat cross-legged, facing each other, and Simon's eyelids fluttered close when Raphael reached up to dab a bit of sunscreen to his nose and cheeks before starting to gently spread it over the sun-heated skin.

"You will thank me later when you didn't get burnt," Raphael murmured distractedly, focused on
watching the movements of his own fingers skimming over the other's pretty features and maybe
his eyes dropped down to Simon's plush lips every once in a while as well. Simon only hummed
in return, clearly not wanting to reply with words and Raphael couldn't say he minded because he
enjoyed this suddenly relaxed, calm moment.

Simon was giddy and full of energy a lot of the time but as soon as he was close to Raphael and
they touched, he immediately seemed to settle into a much calmer mood, leaning into every
contact between their bodies without hesitation. They knew each other for barely two weeks now
but there was already so much trust between them as if it had been months or maybe even years.

"Eres tan hermoso." Raphael wasn't even aware of saying it out loud until Simon's eyes suddenly
flew open and the other stared at him with a blush high on his cheeks. His fingertips stilled and he
was basically cupping the older boy's face right now while his own cheeks grew a little hotter with
embarrassment.

"Pero no soy tan hermoso como tú." Simon uttered after a beat of silence, his cheeks growing
even warmer against Raphael's fingers. Raphael almost forgot how to breathe for a few seconds
before he sucked in some air and pulled the other closer, rapidly beating heart in his throat, to
press his mouth against Simon's a little rougher than intended.

Simon made a surprised little sound in the back of his throat but he was quick to react, placing his
hands on Raphael's sides while reciprocating the soft pressure of his lips and almost melting into
the contact. Raphael ignored the fact that he could taste a little bitterness from the sunscreen when
he opened his lips to gently nudge the other's bottom one with the tip of his tongue. His brain
short-circuited a little bit anyway when Simon's mouth immediately opened up without a sliver of
hesitation, allowing him to carefully deepened the kiss and initiate a first shy contact of their
tongues.

Chapter End Notes

_Hace demasaido calor - It's too hot_
_Estoy orgulloso de ti - I'm proud of you_
_Por qué - For what_
_Por darle una oportunidad - For giving him a chance_
_Veo que ya hiciste un amigo - You made a friend already, I see_
_Siempre quise un perro - I always wanted a dog_
_Ven aquí - Come here_
_Eres tan hermoso - You are so gorgeous/beautiful_
_Pero no soy tan hermoso como tú - But I'm not as gorgeous/beautiful as you_

The lovely Tania helped me out with the Spanish translations ♥
Chapter 21

Just like with their first kiss, Raphael felt almost dizzy when their tongues touched for the first time and his fingertips pressed a little more against Simon's warm skin that was slightly slick from the sunscreen. He took a short breath through his nose, tried to calm his nerves at least a little bit, before gently nudging the other's tongue with his own. Simon sighed into the kiss and pressed closer to him, almost causing Raphael to lose balance and fall on his back but he barely managed to prevent that from happening.

Their tongues tangled, nudged one another playfully and brushed against each other with shy curiosity, sending tingles down Raphael's spine and leaving goosebumps on his skin. He couldn't remember ever having such an intense kiss before and for a fraction of time, Raphael actually forgot that they were sat on a blanket out in public with other people able to see them. He had never been much for PDA but right now, Raphael honestly couldn't care less.

When they had to part, both breathless and pink-cheeked, Raphael felt his lips tug into a smile that felt little too big for his face and probably looked absolutely ridiculous. Simon mirrored the expression and, just like after their first kiss, breathed out a soft "Wow" that caused their cheeks to gain even more of a darker tinge. Raphael couldn't help but laugh breathlessly about the fact that the other had the exact same reaction.

"I have no idea why that just happened but I definitely can't complain," Simon admitted with a shy grin and wide eyes, while his fingertips gently caressed Raphael's side, running over his warm skin in slow movements and causing even more goosebumps.

"What just happened is you saying way too cute things. You should really stop that."

"And why would I do that?"

"Because when you say things like that it really makes me want to kiss you, obvious," Raphael replied and he was honestly surprised by his own bluntness. He never really said things like that before but he had to admit that it felt kind of good, despite the embarrassment he felt right now; he was simply being honest and the way Simon's eyes widened and his lips parted a little in something akin to awe, it was certainly worth a little embarrassment on his own behalf.

"You do realise that doesn't exactly convince me to stop complimenting you? Quite the opposite, actually," the older boy chuckled in return after he got over the initial surprise and Simon leant closer to press a sweet little kiss to Raphael's lips. "Besides, you started with the compliments."

"Hm, guess I did."

Simon shook his head, laughing under his breath and eyes shining with fond amusement before he reached for the tube of sunscreen, motioning for Raphael to turn around so he could do his back as well. Raphael sighed but offered his hand to the other boy, palm up, silently asking him to squeeze some sunscreen into it so he could spread it on his chest and arms.

Raphael's mamá had always made sure for her kids to use sunscreen before leaving the house in summer but sometimes he was honestly a little bit too lazy to stick to it - just like a few days ago at the Grand Canyon where he only put a little bit of sunscreen on his face, ears and neck - but the prospect of spending the better half of the day in the water surely was enough to convince him that it was better to protect his skin against the sun.
They spent almost half an hour lazing on the blanket, exchanging a few less heated kisses until they could safely go onto the water without the sunscreen immediately washing off again. By now, a lot of the kids had left the water and the obstacle course because they had lunch with their families and Simon took the opportunity to climb onto the beginning of the course - with slight difficulties and shooting Raphael a few glares for chuckling about him.

"Considering your clumsiness, I don't see how you will ever make it to the end of this," Raphael commented with a teasing smirk after pushing himself onto the platform with ease, causing the older boy to narrow his eyes and full on pout at him, even going as far as crossing his arms in front of his chest.

"Oh, just you wait! I will master this course like a pro and you will be green with envy." He pointed his finger at Raphael as if accusing or challenging him - neither made much sense but he kept himself from commenting on it because Simon seemed determined enough already and any further teasing would probably only fuel it more.

Raphael mumbled a "This is bound to fail" under his breath but luckily Simon didn't catch it because he was already occupied trying to scramble up the first obstacle, a slope with a few ropes you could use for help to get up the rubbery surface that was extra slippery with wet feet. Raphael barely muffled a laugh behind his palm when Simon almost face planted into the soft surface during his first attempt, feet unable to find purchase and one hand on the rope. The other boy still glared at him over his shoulder, with flushed cheeks and his lower lip jutting out a little.

The second attempt at least got him almost halfway up the slope until he lost balance and toppled to the side, barely avoiding to fall off the edge and into the water and this time Raphael couldn't help but laugh because of the other's helpless falling while he tried to regain his balance, unsuccessfully so.

"It's hard! You didn't even try yet so shut up!" Simon complained and if it hadn't been for the slight twitching of his lips Raphael might have believed the other was mad at him but the older boy was only mildly frustrated; though it wasn't directed at Raphael. He hummed softly, looking up the slope before his fingers curled around one of the other ropes, pulling a little so it was taut until he started his attempt to climb up. It was pretty unsteady, slippery and wobbly but it wasn't impossible to keep his balance with his feet spread a little wider paired with slow movements.

When Raphael climbed over the edge and stood on top of the slope, letting go of the rope and looking back down, he saw Simon gaping at him with wide eyes and disbelieve colouring his expression.

"How did you--what---that's not fair!" He complained and Raphael laughed once again before cocking his head and raising an eyebrow in a silent challenge. Simon narrowed his eyes but got up from his slumped position at the edge of the slope and carefully tried to mimic how Raphael had done it before; pulling the rope taut, widening his stance a little and moving slowly so the ground wouldn't start to wobble too much and throw him off balance again.

Raphael offered his hand when the other finally reached the top of the slope and his fingers curled around Simon's hand to pull the other boy up, already prepared for the body to stumble into his so they didn't end up falling down the other side.

"I may have underestimated this a little," Simon admitted, a little bit breathless and with pinkish cheeks, pushing a few wet strands of hair back so they wouldn't stick to his forehead while his other hand was still in Raphael's, squeezing his fingers absently.

"Obviously," Raphael deadpanned and his lips curled into a teasing smirk when the older boy pouted but he tugged Simon a tiny bit closer, pressing a quick little peck to his heated cheek, "but
"maybe it'll help if we work together?"

"Hm. Maybe." Simon's reluctance was obviously fake and Raphael rolled his eyes before playing along, letting go of the other's hand with a shrug.

"We don't have to, if you want to take all day to complete this course," he commented with a smirk in the corners of his mouth and rolling his shoulders a little, gaze taking in the next part - they would have to slide down the other side of the slope that wasn't as steep on this one but if they weren't able to stop, reaching the bottom, they would slide right off the obstacle and fall into the water.

"Okay, okay. Let's do this together, please! So, what's the next move?" Simon gave in rather quickly instead of complaining about the fact that Raphael clearly didn't think he would manage to get through this otherwise; they both knew it was true, anyway.

"This shouldn't be too difficult - just try to slide down slowly so you will be able to stop at the bottom and it's fine," Raphael said with a small shrug and Simon motioned for him to go first, probably not trusting himself and wanting to watch how he did it first.

So Raphael went first and successfully stopped before falling off the edge but, of course, Simon wasn't nearly as elegant when he slid down because he didn't do it slowly enough and instinctively tried to hold on to Raphael and prevent landing in the water but he had too much momentum and caused both of them to fall into the waist-deep water.

"Are you alright? Did I hurt you??"

Raphael would probably have rolled his eyes at the exaggerated amount of worry in the other's voice and wide eyes but now that he knew about Simon's issues about being scared that he could hurt others with his clumsiness, he smiled reassuringly at the other boy.

"Don't worry, it's fine. I'm fine. There's literally nothing that could have hurt me - the ground is just sand and there is no harm in accidentally swallowing a little water," he replied and pushed a hand through his dripping wet curls, removing some that stuck to his forehead.

When Simon mumbled something along the lines of "Maybe this was a stupid idea", Raphael breathed out and slowly reached for the other boy, brushing Simon's lower arm with his fingertips before intertwining the fingers. He got up and gently pulled Simon back into a standing position in the process, tugging him a little closer and pressing a soft kiss to his wet cheek.

"It wasn't. This is fun and the obstacle course is for children as well so they made sure that people can't get hurt because falling down and bumping into things are pretty much a given. So, there's no need for you to worry - being clumsy is part of the challenge and it's fun. If you do want to stop, we can just go swimming or head back to the blanket but I don't mind continuing; even if it means you dragging me down with you." Raphael grinned playfully and squeezed Simon's fingers that curled around his hand a little tighter at his words.

"Are you really sure?"

"I am. I have two younger brothers who are at this age where they can't really judge their own strength so I'm used to other's bumping into me on purpose, pretty sure I can handle it happening on accident. And you're not that heavy, anyway." Raphael gently poked the index finger of his free hand into Simon's side, causing the other to flinch and giggle a little because he was clearly ticklish. Raphael filed the latter information into his memory for another time and nodded to the course with a smile, unspoken question in his eyes.
"Yeah. Okay. Let's give this another shot and I will try to be more careful," Simon agreed after a brief moment, his thoughtful, insecure expression turning back into a cute little smile that caused Raphael's heart to skip a small beat.

A few kids were back on the obstacle course as well now and they waited for two of them to get past until they climbed back into the course where they had fallen off it earlier. The next part of the course would probably be a little more difficult, seeing as it consisted of several floating surfaces that were strung together with ropes and of course they started bobbing in the water as soon as someone stepped onto them.

It took them quite a long while to complete the whole obstacle course and they fell into the water quite a few more times but they did manage to get through the whole thing and Simon had a few successful moments as well because at some parts he was the one doing better than Raphael. He couldn't even pretend to be mad about Simon's obvious happiness when Raphael failed a part of the course because his wide smile and twinkling eyes were simply too adorable. Of course, Raphael wouldn't admit that at least two times of him falling into the water was caused him being distracted by Simon.

When they finally returned to their blanket, Magnus was lounging on it, with his back resting against the tree it was spread out under and a book propped up in his lap, phone resting next to his thigh. Raphael didn't even ask how the other had been sure that this was the right blanket - Magnus probably wouldn't even have been embarrassed if it had turned out to be the wrong one - and he only grinned widely when his best friend complained about the droplets of water hitting him when they both slumped down on the blanket next to him. He couldn't resist to shakes his head a little and therefore cause even more water droplets to fly around and he only started laughing when Magnus pushed him off the blanket and onto the grass in return.

Magnus had brought two bottles of water and a few snacks that they shared while the warm wind dried the water lingering on their skin before they reapplied some sunscreen and headed towards a few food stands on the camping ground to get some proper food for all of them. Magnus took a few photos with his phone throughout the day and even a short video when they were playing a card game after Raphael and Simon came back from a second time in the water.

They only headed back to their van when the sun was slowly setting and Magnus was the one suggesting to climb onto the van after dinner - there was a small ladder at the backside of the van so it wasn't too difficult to get up there. They spread a blanket on the roof of the van and Magnus joined them with a small cooling box that actually contained a few bottles of beer mixes - with cola, grapefruit or berry flavour.

"I'm underage," Raphael remarked dryly when his best friend offered one of the alcoholic beverages to him after sitting down cross-legged next to them. Magnus only rolled his eyes and pushed the opened bottle into his hand.

"You're a terrible role model."

"Stop being so dramatic. I'm not getting you drunk and one or two bottles don't harm anyone so shut up and behave like a good boy," Magnus replied, rolling his eyes again for good measure and Simon chuckled, causing Raphael's lips to tug into a faint smirk that he had been trying to hold back. It couldn't be so easy to annoy Magnus sometimes. His best friend actually flipped him off before taking a sip of his own drink.

"Why are we up here?" Simon asked after a brief moment of silence, peaking over the edge of the van with a grimace and Raphael motioned for him to scoot a little closer. It was still pretty hot and humid outside but the wind had picked up a little and certainly helped a lot so that Raphael didn't
feel like getting some distance to the other bodies. His arm curled around Simon's side to draw him in, resulting in the older boy sitting in between his legs and his side almost leaning against Raphael's front. The other's big brown eyes blinked at him before his lips curled into a thankful smile and he leant properly into Raphael, sipping from his own beer-mix.

"No particular reason. Just to enjoy the view, the temperatures, some good company? Choose whatever you like best if you need a reason," Magnus replied with a shrug while watching them with the hint of a smile in the corners of his mouth.

Raphael definitely thought it was a good idea to be up here. It kind of felt like they were all on their own here, despite the other vans, tents and a few bungalows all around them on the campground. The sun was down but some people were having a BBQ somewhere around, the scents wafting over with every other gust of wind. Raphael briefly wondered if the smell bothered Simon but the other boy didn't seem to mind, he was curled up against Raphael, nursing his drink and his eyes directed at something in the distance.

"This is nice. I wish we could just stay here," Simon muttered after a moment and a soft sigh left his lips. Raphael recalled their talk the other day and he really wished he could help the older boy somehow.

"Not to meddle in things that are none of my business but I overheard part of what you told Rapha - about the job as an accountant and not wanting to disappoint your mother - but...may I say something about the subject?" Magnus broke the silence that settled over them after Simon mumbled statement and Raphael felt the other boy shift a little, probably so he could look at Magnus more properly before he just hummed in confirmation.

"There are more options than being stuck with that job or giving it up completely. You could try to find a compromise and maybe that could help not getting into a fight with your mother. If you don't want to disappoint her by rejecting the job completely, then don't. But you also shouldn't give up completely on what you really care about. Getting stuck in a job you already know you don't want is going to drain you sooner or later if you have to force yourself to do it."

Raphael sipped his drink and leant his chin against Simon's shoulder, briefly watching the other's slight frown before looking back at his best friend who was glancing towards the calm lake, probably watching the reflection of the crescent moon on the surface.

"Why give up one for the other instead of trying to do both? I'm imagining that it's pretty difficult to get a job when it comes to music, especially one that pays well enough to live off that only. So...I suppose you would need a proper paying job on the side anyway. Why not ask the office where you're supposed to start if, for example, you could work only part time? And then you can try to get another part time job in addition to it - something that has to do with your passion?"

Magnus had spent many interactions with Simon during this trip with teasing the other boy and even though Raphael knew his best friend really did like Simon underneath all of that attitude towards him, he was still a little surprised about him offering advice.

"Actually...I haven't thought about that. I thought it's either one or the other, especially because I would like to work in music therapy or something similar but maybe...maybe that's a little too big? At least at first. I know people who want to become a therapist basically have to finance the training themselves so I always felt like it would be kind of impossible."

"Does it have to be therapy, though?" Magnus inquired, now looking at Simon again before he continued, "You did mention teaching as well, I think? That sounds like an easier goal to set for yourself for the time being. You could always put an ad in the paper and offer private lessons for children."
Simon made a thoughtful noise in the back of his throat that Raphael felt rather than heard. His fingertips brushed Simon's side, moving over the fabric of the other's shirt and feeling his body heat seeping through the thin material.

"I have to admit that this is kind of a brilliant idea. I have no idea if the office would be okay with just switching my position from full time to half time but I guess it's worth a try? And then I could go from there and see what else I can do. My mum still won't be happy about it but I guess she might not get as mad if I still have a 'proper' job," Simon considered before his lips formed a soft, happy little smile.

"I have no idea why I never considered such an option. Thank you so much." He beamed at Magnus who simply laughed with a dismissive gesture.

"Don't worry about it. I know the whole struggle and I'm glad at least you seem to take something from my advice as opposed to this airhead." Magnus pointed at Raphael who glared at him in return and huffed softly.

"Yeah, well, not all of your advice are easily implementable, mi amigo. And it's not like I really have a dream job or anything that I'm keeping myself from," he shrugged and, sure, the subject he was studying was not necessarily something he loved doing but most of the time it was okay and he didn't have to force himself too much to actually get his stuff done.

Simon's situation must be quite a lot harder because the other had something he wanted to pursue but he was kept from it by his guilt and the feeling of owing it to his mother to choose something different. Raphael was really glad that his best friend could offer Simon some useful advice that might help him find some middle ground without ending up in a job that made him miserable or with the constant feeling of having let the people he loved down.
"Maybe I should talk to the boss and ask if I could just work halftime instead? Can't do much harm, can it?"

Raphael averted his eyes from the lake that's water was shimmering in the pale moonlight, the reflection of the crescent-shaped natural satellite blurring a little every once in a while through the small ripples on the water's surface caused by the light breeze, to glance at Simon. The other boy was sitting cross-legged in the middle of the van's roof, having shuffled to this spot farthest from the edge of the van after Magnus had climbed down to head inside.

"I guess so. It's certainly worth a try and maybe it could work out somehow," Raphael replied with a soft smile and he surely hoped for it to work because that way the situation would lose some of its tension for Simon - at least it would mean the other didn't have to look for a different halftime job, that would probably only cause even more disagreements with his mother.

Simon hummed thoughtfully in return, hands resting on the blanket behind his back and head tilting back to look at the night sky. Now that they were in the middle of nowhere and quite a bit away from the next city, it was actually possible to see an uncountable amount of sparkling dots in the almost blackish sky. Raphael followed Simon's gaze and he simply lay down next to the other boy, looking up more comfortably from this position.

"I always wondered how people were able to see constellations up there. I don't see any shapes," Simon uttered after a moment and shuffled a little until his back hit the soft blanket as well, legs outstretched and his whole side pressed against Raphael's. Reaching for the older boy's hand and tangling their fingers together seemed like a completely natural thing to do by now, a reaction without thinking, and Raphael kept his eyes firmly on the night sky above them.

"Hmm, no idea. It's not like you can really see the stars in New York; the city is way too bright," he muttered and shrugged halfheartedly, gently tugging the other's hand closer until both of theirs rested on Raphael's stomach. His thumb brushed the back of Simon's hand, moving in small circles over the soft, warm skin absentmindedly.

"Yeah, I only ever saw the stars when we went to Luke's little lake house," Simon breathed and Raphael didn't even get a chance to voice the question forming in his head before the other continued,"He's Clary's dad. Well, stepdad, actually, but her real dad disappeared during the pregnancy and Luke raised her. He's amazing and always made me feel like I had a second dad or sometimes a big brother."

Raphael smiled a little at the fond sound of the other's voice and it was more than obvious that Simon really loved this guy. After learning that the other's father had died a few years ago, it was kind of relieving to hear that Simon at least had someone else who was kind of like a father to him. Of course, that never replaced the own father or fill the hole the loss had left but having several people around you that cared and loved you certainly helped the healing along.

"Luke has this little house outside of New York at a lake - a smaller one than this here but it's in the middle of nowhere as well - and we went there quite a lot when we were younger. Usually, we made family trips there when I was still in elementary school but that stopped when dad had to be hospitalised for the first time so they took just me and Rebecca along until she got older and preferred to spend her summers at home with friends or the occasional boyfriend."
Simon's voice sounded a little distant now, clearly lost in the memories from the past and Raphael kept quiet not to disturb him, continuing to caress the other's hand with his fingers and pressing a little bit closer to the side of the body next to his.

"This reminds me a lot of back then because Clary and I used to lie outside in the grass when it got dark and watched the night sky together, holding hands. It was basically the same, yet completely different. I had the biggest crush on her for most of my life. I guess I only really got over it in high school when she got her first girlfriend for a couple of months because that made me realise that I definitely didn't have a chance. Like...of course, I knew she was a lesbian for years already, ever since she told me, but I guess it still didn't register properly with me until I actually saw her with a girl?"

Raphael didn't point out the fact that Simon kind of told him about this already but he didn't mind listening to this little story again, especially because now he actually was in a mindset where he also wanted to hear about this some more; about Simon's crush on his best friend.

"Did she know about your feelings?" He asked softly when a few minutes of silence settled over them and he could feel Simon shake his head before the other boy answered verbally.

"No. At least I don't think so. I never told her and I'm pretty sure she stayed oblivious to it until the very end," Simon chuckled and there was a slightly sad tone to it but he mostly sounded amused by it. It must have been difficult to carry these feelings around without her knowing even if telling Clary wouldn't have made a difference because she hadn't been able to reciprocate the feelings anyway but maybe it could have helped Simon deal with it.

"It was difficult back then. Feeling like this and always having her around - lying there watching the sky and holding her hand but knowing it would never mean the same for her as it did for me. I loved every second of it but the memory will always be bittersweet even now that I moved on and got a new crush," Simon sighed and he tensed a tiny bit at his last words; Raphael could only imagine that he hadn't meant to say the last part out loud and his heart skipped a beat at the indication.

"New crush, huh?" He couldn't help but inquire and his lips tugged into the faintest of grins while he still kept himself from looking at the older boy.

"Yeah, you know...I met this gorgeous boy and his weird best friend during a road trip and I may have developed a little bit of a crush on him," Simon replied and Raphael finally gave in to the urge to look at the other. Even the pale moonlight wasn't able to hide the pink on Simon's cheeks and Raphael's smile widened a little more.

"Hmm, sounds like a familiar situation."

Simon chuckled at his reply and finally turned his head as well, their eyes locking and fingers pressing together just that little bit harder.

"I wonder why that is," Simon murmured and his voice suddenly sounded a little breathless, like all the air had been sucked out of his lungs. He sounded the way Raphael felt and his heart was once again beating up to his throat.

Raphael didn't know who moved first after a brief moment of just drowning in each other's eyes but his hand was suddenly in the nape of Simon's neck while the other boy leant over him, their lips locked together in a gentle eagerness and it only took one hesitant touch of the other's tongue against his bottom line for Raphael to willingly part his mouth.

He felt how Simon pressed their still intertwined hands onto the blanket next to his head and he
was surprised that he didn't mind it when the other body settled on top of his - the older boy straddling his hips and their chests almost touching. Raphael's fingertips dug into the soft strands at the back of Simon's head, tugging ever so slightly while their tongues danced together and stole each other's breath.

"Sorry, I hope this wasn't too much," Simon muttered against his lips when they finally parted to get some badly needed air back into their lungs and Raphael barely managed to force his eyes to open, blinking away the slight haze that had settled over his mind.

"Don't worry. I...I liked this," he answered and was surprised by how much he meant this. It wasn't like he didn't enjoy more intense kissing or almost making out but Raphael had never been very into it - it was fun and felt good but never this good.

Simon sat up a little to grin down at him, his eyes shining with happiness and lips curved into an almost shy little smile.

"I'm glad you did. I did, too," Simon replied a little awkwardly and he lifted their intertwined hands to loosen his grip before gently pressing Raphael's hand palm first against his chest. Raphael immediately felt the rapid thumping of Simon's heartbeat, the sensation causing his fingers to tingle and his own heart to stumble a little against his ribs.

He gently pressed his fingertips against Simon's chest, staring up into the other's gorgeous eyes before sitting up to capture his mouth in another kiss. The contact was a lot less heated and soft this time, just a tender press of lips that still tasted the faintest bit of cherry and grapefruit.

They spent a while longer with exchanging such sweet, innocent kisses before Magnus interrupted them and told them to maybe head inside again before they accidentally fell asleep on the roof of the van. Raphael rolled his eyes fondly, causing Simon to giggle, and they disentangled their bodies to grab all the stuff spread out on the van before climbing down.

Magnus greeted them leaning in the doorway, a knowing grin on his lips and eyes sparkling even with their usual glittery make-up already removed. Raphael felt his cheeks heat up at his best friend's expression but he still beamed back at him, unable to hide the happiness he was currently feeling and when he was finally lying in the bunk, limbs entangled with Simon's, it took him forever to finally fall asleep because his heart felt too big for his chest and wouldn't stop beating like crazy.

"What are you grinning about?" Magnus asked and Raphael averted his gaze from the two kids playing with the small dog that had greeted Simon after their arrival on the campground to look at his best friend with a confused little frown. He realised Magnus had been talking to Simon who indeed had a happy little grin plastered on his face while looking at his phone.

"Clary sent me a photo of her with the other's," he answered and looked over his shoulder when Raphael shuffled closer to glance at the screen Simon willingly turned towards him. The photo showed Clary in the front left corner with a bright, dimpled smile and a dark haired girl right next to her, pressing a kiss to her cheek while two boys in the background - a blonde one and one with black hair - were looking rather grumpy. Well, the blond one was clearly amused but the other guy was pretty obviously rolling his eyes at the whole scene.

"That's Isabelle, she's Clary's girlfriend," Simon pointed at the dark-haired girl as if it hadn't been obvious enough that he was talking about her, "and the two in the back are Izzy's brother's - the blond dude is Jace and the other one Alec."

A small appreciative sound from Magnus caused both of them to look up and, sure enough,
Raphael's best friend was looking at the picture as well and Simon tilted his phone a little so the photo turned around and Magnus didn't have to look at it upside down the whole time.

"He's kind of hot," Magnus commented and Raphael snorted while Simon made a small, disbelieving sound in the back of his throat.

"Why does everyone always love Jace? He's a terrible person! Well, not as terrible anymore, I guess. Ever since he got over his own crush on Clary and over the confusion of realising that he wasn't as straight as he believed himself to be--"

"I'm not talking about the blond Neanderthal but the handsome, brooding one," Magnus interrupted Simon's little rant, effectively shutting him up but not even paying attention to it because his gaze was still glued to the screen, "Alec, you said? I'm assuming that's short for Alexander?"

"Uh, yes."

Raphael glanced at his best friend, to the photo and back to Magnus again, the corners of his mouth stretching into an amused grin.

"Are you serious? You think Alec is hot? He's kind of terrible as well. The guy hates me. He's always annoyed by my presence and probably wouldn't even tolerate me if I wasn't the best friend of his beloved sister's girlfriend," Simon complained and poked Alec's face on the screen as if that would do anything to punish the guy for being mean to him.

"Well, you can be quite intense," Magnus offered with a teasing grin and Raphael barely resisted the urge to glare at his best friend but he did curl his arm around Simon loosely, resting his chin against the other boy's shoulder.

"Come on, I actually decided that I like you, don't make me regret it," Simon whined in return but Magnus only laughed before snatching the other's phone from his hand. Simon made a noise of protest but didn't even try to stop Magnus from scrolling through his photos, probably looking for more with Alec on them.

"I have maybe a hand full of pictures with him."

"That's a shame. You should ask his sister to send you some more."

"Why would I do that? The dislike is mutual, I don't want his stoic face on my phone. His negativity will probably cause my phone to collapse!" Simon tried to get his phone back but Magnus leant back, holding it out of reach and after a few pressed of his thumb on the screen he pointed the phone at them.

"Say cheese, lovebirds." His words were accompanied by the telltale click of a picture being taken, closely followed by another click before he finally handed the phone back to Simon. "Seriously, though, you should ask her for more photos. Tell her it's for a dear friend."

"I'm not going to ask her for photos of her brother so you can use them as jerk-off material," Simon protested with a disgusted expression and this time it was Magnus who made the disbelieving sound and tried to look positively disdainful.

"I would have asked for nude pictures if that was the case. I merely want to see his gorgeous face a little better," he complained and Raphael choked on nothing, muttering a "No puede ser en serio" against Simon's shoulder where he hid his face for a brief moment.

"So, tell me about him," Magnus demanded, pointing at the younger boy.
Simon blinked at the other and Raphael resisted the urge to groan in annoyance because Magnus could be insufferable if he spotted someone who looked interesting.

"Anyone wants some snacks? Pretty sure there was a van around selling ice-cream," Raphael interrupted, hopefully succeeding of getting his best friend off this topic but in the end, he was the one who got up to go get ice-cream for all of them while Magnus basically ordered Simon to stay and tell him everything he knew about Alexander. He could only shake his head over this ridiculous behaviours and sent Simon an apologetic glance, followed by a short kiss to his cheek and the promise to be back as quickly as possible.

When Raphael was on his way back to the blanket they had once again spread out in the shadow of a tall tree, he almost stumbled over the tiny dog jumping right in front of his feet. With his hands balancing three cups with ice-cream, he couldn't exactly lean down to pet the small animal despite its barking and obvious wish to be pet.

"Sorry, little guy, I can't right now," he said to the fluffy thing and the dog just barked at him again. Raphael rounded the animal but it stubbornly kept following him, whining pitifully because it didn't get his attention the way it wanted.

"You went to get ice cream and return with ice cream plus a dog?" Simon chuckled and got up from the blanket to approach Raphael and take one of the paper cups from him while the dog was barking at both of them now, bouncing around them.

"Uh, you took Mags's cup and I wouldn't recommend eating it," Raphael pointed out while gently pushing the dog aside with his foot before the small animal could jump in between his legs again.

"Well, he stole my phone earlier so it seems fair to steal his ice cream in return," Simon joked and Raphael rolled his eyes fondly.

"I might agree if it wasn't for the fact that he chose hazelnut and if I remember correctly, you are allergic, querido."

"Oh. Right."

Raphael shook his head in disbelief and offered the correct cup to the other boy, exchanging it with the one that contained Magnus's ice cream before they headed back to the blanket and he gave the cup to his best friend who was currently typing away on his phone.

"I messaged Izzy and told her that Magnus was curious about her brother and they are writing back and forth now." Simon nodded towards Magnus who hummed absently when he took the paper cup with his ice cream, balancing it on his thigh before going back to typing a message.

"With Izzy? Or her brother?"

"With Iz. I doubt Alec would agree to just give his number to a weird stranger," Simon shrugged while sitting down and he raised the hand that held his own ice cream before the dog's snout could dive into it because the small animal had followed them to their blanket and was sitting in between Simon's and Raphael's thigh now, glancing at them with beady eyes.

"A wise choice," Raphael commented with amusement before finally starting to eat his already slightly melting ice cream while Simon did the same and the dog intently watching them with small pleading noises, clearly begging to get some of the frozen treats as well.

"I hope Izzy won't tell Alec about this or at least not that I told Magnus that he's gay, he's not too fond of telling people about his sexuality," Simon mumbled around another spoonful of ice cream.
"Why did you tell him, then?"

"Because Magnus asked if Alec was straight and wouldn't shut up until I answered properly? He's intimidating, okay?!"

Simon pouted when Raphael started laughing and despite knowing that his best friend wasn't just harmless glitter and teasing humour it was still kind of ridiculous to describe him with intimidating. He didn't pay much attention to the other's mumbled "Shut up", distracted by the small dog nudging its head against his elbow.

Raphael stared at the dog for a moment but finally gave in to the pleading eyes and dipped his index finger into the ice cream before offering it to the tiny canine. The dog yipped happily, wagging its tail while happily licking off the milky sweetness, trickling his finger in the process.

"That's disgusting," Magnus commented offhandedly, finally having put down his phone and eating his own ice cream, scrunching up his nose while watching the small dog lick Raphael's finger clean.

"Says the guy who lets his cat always slobber all over his hand," Raphael deadpanned with an unimpressed gaze and his best friend immediately started complaining that Chairman Meow did not slobber, thank you very much but Raphael made a dismissive gesture and went back to eating his own snack, not paying attention to his best friend's indignant protest while Simon was clearly holding in his laughter.

Chapter End Notes

No puede ser en serio - You can't be serious
Querido - Darling
After finishing his little monologue about his cat, Magnus started telling them about the messages he had exchanged with Izzy who apparently seemed more than ecstatic about his interest in her brother. Simon explained that she always tried to help Alec find a boyfriend but her brother always refused because he was actually pretty damn awkward and was too shy to talk to anyone, especially when they were his type.

"And how is it a good idea to meddle in it and forcing someone onto him? If he wants a relationship, he would probably look for someone or ask for help," Raphael commented with a sceptical expression and he didn't know this Alec guy but he really couldn't imagine anyone being happy about friends or siblings setting them up with some random guy.

"I'm so incredibly charming, I'm sure he won't mind as soon as he meets me," Magnus grinned playfully and Raphael sent an internal excuse to Alec for his slightly too intense best friend. He really hoped that Magnus either lost interest in this complete stranger quickly or at least realised that there were better, less questionable ways to get to know the guy.

"Sure thing," he muttered, shaking his head and absently patted the small dog's head that was resting on his thigh after the animal had licked their paper cups clean of any remaining droplets of ice cream and seemed to be contently taking a nap curled up in between them.

"You should be a little less forceful with him, though. I might not really get along with him but as far as I know it took him quite a while to come to terms with being gay - especially because their parents, or at least the mother, is kind of homophobic as far as I know - so...you know...think about what you're doing," Simon mentioned cautiously and with a small frown.

Raphael couldn't help but smile softly at the words and he could understand the other's worry. Magnus was always someone who was easily infatuated by sight only and it wasn't like he lost interest just as quickly but sometimes he just went for it with everything he had without a proper basis and other people wondered if he was even serious about any of it. His best friend was definitely a weird one.

"Don't worry, it's not my intention to make him uncomfortable or to come on too strong. I promise I'm going to behave if I ever get the chance to meet Alexander and for now he's simply a very pretty face that I'd like to get to know more about," Magnus replied with an amused smile, lightly patting Simon's knee before he reached for his phone again that pinged with a new message - probably from Izzy.

The dog stayed with them for a while longer and they even spent a few minutes playing with it, throwing a branch for the animal to fetch, until the owners finally showed up and called for it - apologising to them for the fact that their pet had bothered them but they were quick to dismiss the worries and made clear they hadn't minded it in the least bit.

The rest of the day was spent with more swimming, card games and a small barbeque in the evening before they went to sleep early. They wanted to get back on the road early the next morning because they already took a day longer than initially planned and Magnus had to get back to New York in time for work, otherwise, they might have just stayed another day.
When they were back on the road and had long since left Santa Rosa behind, Simon finally dug out their playlist again and started adding more songs to it - by now it somehow wasn't just songs fitting for the road anymore but generally fitting songs for their trip. Raphael couldn't help but smile when the other decided to play *Perfect Strangers* by Jonas Blue and started to sing along to it, ignoring Magnus's fake annoyed groan.

"You were looking at me like you wanted me to stay when I saw you yesterday. I'm not wasting your time, I'm not playing no games. I see you!"

Of course, Simon couldn't resist pointing dramatically at Raphael who rolled his eyes, trying not to show that his heartbeat picked up a little because he really enjoyed the older boy's voice and the fact that he was basically serenading him with this.

"Who knows the secret tomorrow will hold? We don't really need to know 'cause you're here with me now, I don't want you to go."

Raphael cocked his head a little, amused smile on his lips, when Simon reached out to take his hand and pull it up to his face, pressing a feathery kiss to his knuckles before the refrain started. He would have never thought that he would ever enjoy being flirted with by song but it was kind of impossible to not be charmed by the endearing way Simon chose to do this and his amazing voice surely helped a lot as well.

"Maybe we're perfect strangers" - Raphael mouthed a "We're no strangers anymore" at him - "Maybe it's not forever. Maybe the night will change us. Maybe we'll stay together" - he couldn't help but hope that this one turned out to be true, at least for a while longer after getting back to New York - "Maybe we'll walk away. Maybe we'll realise we're only human. Maybe we don't need no reason."

Simon repeated the refrain, their hands still intertwined and resting on top of the small table between the seats they currently occupied. Raphael knew his cheeks were probably visibly pink but he couldn't even bring himself to care because Simon looked absolutely adorable with cheerfully sparkling eyes and a brilliant smile on his lips that kept on forming the lyrics along to the song pouring from the speakers of the tablet in front of him.

Raphael snorted softly when, at one point, the other boy messed up the lyrics a little bit but even that couldn't stop Simon from singing along to the whole song and getting all dramatic again during the *No one but you got me feeling this way* line, making wide eyes at Raphael pressing the free hand over his heart at the same time.

It was absolutely ridiculous and impossibly charming all at once - Simon in a nutshell, basically - and he didn't even let the other finish the whole song. Raphael let go of the older boy's hand somewhere during the end of the song to playfully grab the front of Simon's shirt and pull him closer, effectively silencing another *Come on, come on, come over* by pressing his lips to the other's. He grinned into the kiss when Simon didn't even try to protest but simply melted into the contact and neither of them paid attention to Magnus's commentary about them being terribly cheesy and disgusting that was muttered in the front of the van.

Of course, Magnus spent the rest of the day teasing them about the whole thing - mostly Simon - but neither of them really minded and Raphael knew his best friend wasn't annoyed in the least bit. Magnus was the biggest sap on the planet and probably thought it was ridiculously adorable how they acted together.

They had driven for over seven hours the day they had left Santa Rosa and the following day was no different. A few traffic jams every now and then only added to their time but sadly they had to
make some progress now or it might become a little difficult to get back to New York in time. Magnus had three weeks off from work and they were on the road for 2 1/2 weeks already. Despite wanting to get back in time, they still decided to add another day to take a break because they would definitely need another two days to get back to New York and four days of driving would be irresponsible.

The city they had stopped in was Fairfield and they spent the day looking through a few shops and taking a few photos while sitting in a small café. The evening was spent with another video chat with Guadalupe and the twins - especially the latter were ecstatic to hear their brother would be back home in two days and Guadalupe suggested all three of them to come visit next Sunday for breakfast. Simon seemed surprised by the invitation but accepted with a bright smile after exchanging glances with Raphael who nodded at him with a roll of his eyes.

Magnus was still messaging back and forth with Izzy and even told Raphael's mother about the boy with the soft looking dark hair, gorgeous hazel eyes and strong jawline who apparently loved to do archery and kickboxing - the latter together with the blond Neanderthal aka Jace.

During one of Simon's small rants, when the boy described their day at the lake and told the twins about the adorable little dog they met, Raphael caught his mamá's eyes and the loving, knowing smile on her lips caused him to blush and duck his head but he wasn't too surprised that she surely noticed the change between him and Simon. Raphael knew he wasn't a very obvious person but Guadalupe had always been able to read her boys like an open book and he was no exception. He hadn't mentioned what was going on between him and Simon yet, wanted to wait until they were back and actually decided what to call it, how to move from here, but it seemed like it wouldn't be too much of a surprise when it happened.

"Clary asked to meet you two when we're back," Simon mentioned with his eyes on the highway, only briefly glancing at Raphael next to him who had his bare feet propped up on the dashboard and one hand dangling out of the open window.

"The others as well?" Magnus asked and Raphael snorted in amusement because his best sounded a little more hopeful than he probably intended but seeing as he had always 'casually' mentioned Alexander - he stubbornly refused to use the boy's nickname that everyone else seemed to call him, despite his usual habit of always using rather silly nicknames for most people - ever since he started writing with Izzy and Raphael was quite sure his best friend already developed a small crush on the guy despite not having talked to him once. He wasn't even sure if Alec was aware of Magnus's existence or if Isabelle had kept quiet about it so far.

"No, just her and maybe Iz as well," Simon replied with a small shrug but Raphael caught the tiny, almost mischievous grin in the corners of the other's mouth and barely held back a grin of his own. He was already sensing where this was headed and he was admittedly curious how it would play out.

"She suggested to meet in the Java Jones sometimes - the coffee shop somehow became our meeting place when we still went to university and we kind of decided to stick to the tradition," Simon added with a small smile and it was obvious that there were fond memories connected to said place, other than just good but cheap coffee.

Before Raphael was really aware of moving, his hand somehow found its way to Simon's thigh, resting close to his knee with his palm pressed against the slightly fought material of the other's jeans while his fingertips brushed the warm skin of his knee where the shorts ended. Simon's hand immediately fell on top of his, fingers slotting together perfectly and Raphael tilted his head back, eyes fluttering close whole enjoying the warm breeze from the open window that played with his loose curls.
They had started this trip so he could get over the breakup with Brandon and Raphael had never expected to return home holding the hand of another boy who had managed to steal his heart as if it was the easiest thing in the world. The way Simon made him feel had been more than unexpected, it was still kind of scary, but it also put everything from before in a whole new perspective. Raphael had honestly started doubting his feelings - not the ones he was having now but the ones he did have weeks and months ago, for Brandon.

He had been so sure of kind of loving Brandon, simply because his feelings had been different from the affection he felt towards friends and family. The only logical conclusion had been the romantic kind of love. Sure, it had been romantic feelings but when he thought about the way Simon made him feel - how his heart fluttered in his chest when the other boy only so much as looked at him - he wasn't too sure if he hadn't misinterpreted his feelings for Brandon before or at least their intensity.

Brandon and him had said their "I love you"s a few months into the relationship and the words hadn't been a struggle to say - they hadn't felt wrong but they also hadn't felt like anything different than saying it to his mamá, his brothers or Magnus (saying it to the latter sometimes felt a whole lot more awkward, admittedly).

Now, when he dared to think about saying these words to Simon...that was a completely different thing altogether. His chest felt like it was constricting at the mere thought of it, heartbeat picking up and his hands even became a tiny bit sweaty. Maybe the nervousness was simply caused by the fact that they only knew each other for a little over two weeks and it felt way too soon for this step or maybe...maybe it was due to the fact that he already sensed they would hold a completely different, heavier meaning than ever before.

"Rapha?" Simon's voice and a gentle tug at his hand brought him back to reality but he kept his eyes closed, only humming in agreement and muttering a low "I don't mind"

"You don't mind? Did you even listen?" Simon tried to sound indignant but there was barely hidden laughter dancing in his voice and Raphael's lips involuntarily curled into a smile before he slowly blinked his eyes open.

"I don't mind meeting Clary and whoever else in that café," he said, raising his eyebrow and feeling confusion rise when he saw the way Simon was looking at him - like he missed something and the other couldn't decide if to call him an idiot or just shake his head in amusement.

"We talked about this about ten minutes ago. You zoned out completely, huh? So, again: Magnus and I were thinking about stopping for food, there's either a pizza place about 15 minutes down the road from the highway or we grab some sandwiches and other stuff at the next roadhouse we pass," Simon repeated the current topic and Raphael blinked a few times because he hadn't even realised the other's had continued talking while he had been apparently completely lost in his thoughts.

"Well, the answer still applies."

"I don't mind is not exactly a logical reply to a this or that question, Rapha," Simon chuckled, playfully tugging at his fingers, "Are you in the mood for pizza and pasta or would you rather just get something boring like sandwiches?"

"Sounds like it's already decided anyway? But pizza and pasta do sound a lot better. Pretty sure we have the time to stop for an hour and eat properly." Raphael glanced at Magnus over his shoulder who was clearly amused but nodded his head yes to his assumption. They weren't in that much of a hurry.
"I might not be very knowledgeable when it comes to cars but I'm fairly sure that it's not a good sign when there's smoke coming from the hood."

Raphael had just left the small bathroom and he followed Magnus to the front of the van where Simon was briefly glancing at them with a worried frown before pointing outside where a small emission of smoke was visible, curling around the hood of the van.

"Pull over," Magnus ordered immediately and reached over to press the button in the middle of the dashboard that activated the hazard lights before Simon hit the blinker before stopping the van at the side of the highway - fortunately there was no ditch and he could steer a little off the road where it was less dangerous.

"Let's hope this isn't too bad. We almost reached Pittsburgh and still have quite a bit in front of us until New York." Magnus sighed while Raphael opened the door to hop out and he was just quick enough to catch Simon's hand before it could reach out for the hood.

"Don't just touch it without any protection. The engine is hot enough on its own and the smoke does not make it seem any less of a hazard," he chastised the older boy who looked at him with big eyes before a sheepish expression settled on his face and he mumbled an apology. Raphael rolled his eyes but drew the other's hand up to his face, kissing Simon's knuckles softly before brushing the back of the hand with his thumb.

"Here, maybe that'll help." Magnus offered two of the thicker dish towels to Raphael, who took them with a nod, before climbing back into the van to pull the small lever to open the hood because Simon clearly forgot about that as well.

Raphael motioned for Simon to step back a little and he tried to keep a little distance as well - as much as possible - while carefully lifting the hood with the help of the dishtowels to protect his fingers from getting burnt by the hot metal. He was greeted by hot puffs of smoke curling around the engine and riding into the air now that it wasn't contained by the hood anymore and Raphael huffed softly, propping the hood open properly before stepping back a little.

"Okay...now what?" Simon asked and grimaced, rubbing the tips of his fingers over his thighs in a nervous little gesture that had Raphael reach out and take his hand.

"Guess we better call a breakdown service because I have absolutely no clue about cars and I'm pretty sure neither do you," he replied with a small shrug and Magnus groaned softly but he still reached for his phone because Raphael was right about neither of them knowing shit about fixing a car. Magnus called a breakdown service after checking where exactly they had ended up but of course, it would take at least half an hour for anyone to drop by.

"What if it's something that can't be easily fixed?"

"Then we will have to find a different way to get back home but let's hope that won't happen," Raphael sighed and he knew it didn't make a difference for him or Simon if the way back took them even longer now but Magnus had to be back at work in three days so it would be more in their favour if whoever came by was able to fix the problem right here.

Raphael closed the hood again before he entangled his fingers with Simon's and gently tugged him back into the van where Magnus was sitting at the small table with a sullen expression, absently toying with his phone before he thought of maybe calling the company where he had rented the van and informing them of the fact that the vehicle had broken down.
Chapter End Notes

The song in this chapter is *Perfect Strangers* by Jonas Blue & JP Cooper.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It took a little more than half an hour for the breakdown service to arrive and all the hoping unfortunately didn't change the result that the van wouldn't be easily fixed. It could be repaired but they were told that it would take at least three days because a spare part had to be ordered and then build in. Of course, waiting for three days or even longer was out of the question and while they were in the truck that was towing the van, headed towards Pittsburgh because it was the closest city from their position, Magnus once more called the car-rental place to inform them about the news.

After quite a bit of back and forth with Magnus stressing that it was impossible for them to stay until the van was done because he had to get back to work he finally managed to convince them to take responsibility for getting the van delivered to New York when Magnus paid a rather small extra fee. He didn't care about having to pay extra, as long as the stupid van would be taken care of without getting in trouble for the damn thing breaking down.

"There is a hotel close to the station and there are still rooms available according to their website. I guess it's best to check in there for today and figure out how to best get back to New York from here," Magnus sighed after hanging up with the rental place and typing away on his phone, obviously looking up a place to stay now that they wouldn't have the van for much longer.

"I hope there is a way we can get back tomorrow or we won't make it in time," Raphael added, pushing his fingers through his hair and this was certainly an unexpected turn of events. At least it had happened when they weren't too far from home anymore. Well, not too far was still several hours but if they managed to get some kind of ride it would be a journey that could be managed in a day.

"Pittsburgh is not that small, I'm sure there has to be a train or bus connection, right?" Simon asked tentatively and he had been mostly silent even since they had entered the truck. Raphael hummed in agreement and he did hope so. He looked from Magnus in the passenger seat to Simon by his side and rested his hand on the seat in between them, palm facing upwards in a silent offer. Simon looked back at him, then at his hand and he didn't hesitate in the least before placing his hand in it, his fingers slipping into the spaces between Raphael's.

Lucky for them, the hotel was on the way to the workshop where the van was taken and the guy from the breakdown service was nice enough to stop at the hotel, as well as wait for them to collect their belongings in the van before he drove off. Magnus had already given the rental service the number of the workshop and the other way around so they could take care of this mess themselves and they didn't have to deal with it apart from the extra fee.

Magnus checked them into the hotel and because there had been no room for three available, he simply got two rooms on the same floor. They took the elevators to their floor and agreed to meet up again in about an hour because Magnus wanted to call his workplace and tell them what was going in, just in case they didn't make it back in time, plus he wanted to 'freshen up' a little.

Raphael unlocked the room he shared with Simon and sat his travel bag down on the floor next to the bed before sitting down on the soft mattress and plugging in his phone to charge it.

"Well, this situation is a bummer," Simon broke the silence and he stood a little forlorn in the middle of the room, fiddling with the hem of his shirt and it was obvious that he felt a little
anxious. Raphael placed his phone on the nightstand and beckoned the other to come over with a small inviting gesture. Simon's features softened a little and he didn't hesitate before walking up to the bed, clearly meaning to sit down next to him, but Raphael had none of that and surprised both of them by gently grabbing the other boy's hip and pulling him into his lap.

Simon's cheeks flushed a soft pink when he ended up straddling Raphael's thighs, hands automatically landing on the other's shoulders and eyes wide with shy astonishment.

"There's nothing to worry about. We will get back to New York and everything will be alright." Raphael looked up at the older boy who was already a few inches taller than him and now, sitting on his lap, Simon was towering over him by another hand-full of inches. He tilted his head back a little, arms loosely curled around Simon's middle and fingers linked behind the other's lower back, almost resting low enough to be pressed against the top of his butt.

"But Magnus has to get back in time for work."

"And he will. Even if we can't find a way to get back tomorrow, I'm sure he can get another few days off. As far as I know the people at his workplace are pretty forgiving and it's not like any of this is his fault - or anyone else's, for that matter." Raphael added the last part because he suddenly started wondering if Simon was trying to place the blame on himself because he had been driving when the van broke down. The other had told him about his anxiety of accidentally harming others with his clumsiness and maybe he felt like irrationally faulting himself for the car breaking down.

"I know this is no one's fault. I still feel bad about it - not because I think it was my fault but just in general, because it's causing trouble," Simon muttered, apparently having caught on to Raphael's train of thought and wanting to clear this up right away. He shrugged a little and watched his right hand that had started absently caressing Raphael's shoulder, tracing his clavicle through the thin material of his tank top, brushing the warm skin every now and then in the process.

"Try not to dwell on it. A smile suits you much better than this frowny-face," Raphael chuckled and gently pressed the tip of his index finger on the spot above the bridge of Simon's glasses, smoothing out the wrinkles caused by his eyebrows being drawn together. The other boy sighed and his eyelids fluttered down, his whole body relaxing further against Raphael.

"It's not that easy," the older boy muttered but a tiny smile made itself a home in the corners of his mouth and Raphael's heart fluttered in his chest at the sight. He hooked his index finger under the bridge of Simon's glasses to carefully slip them off his nose and blindly place them next to the charging phone on the nightstand before cradling the other's face with both hands.

"Maybe I can offer some distraction?" Raphael smiled when Simon tilted his head into the touch, cheeks heating up against his fingertips and he pulled the other boy closer. His lips playfully brushed the skin of Simon's forehead, followed by the space between his eyebrows, the bridge of his nose and following its slope down to the tip before he moved on to the right cheek, pressing feathery kisses to the curve of Simon's cheekbone.

Raphael was still surprised by his own actions and how incredibly comfortable he felt with Simon. He had never been able to fully enjoy loving moments like these - which, honestly, it had never been like this - because he had always been aware of his and Brandon's movements, wary of accidentally causing the situation to develop into something more when all he wanted was just some non-sexual closeness.

He didn't even have a talk about this whole topic with Simon yet, despite the other knowing and acknowledging his sexuality, but he still felt completely at ease. Simon was the most mindful, sweetest guy he had ever met and this boy was so unbelievably soft, seemingly always aware and
in-tune with other people's emotions. Or maybe this was just the case with Raphael? He would love to believe that this was actually something special...

Raphael silenced his thoughts by finally capturing the now familiar lips in a tender kiss, pressing his own to Simon's bottom lip first and brushing over the other's mouth to repeat the same with the upper one, playfully trapping it between his own lips. He could feel the shiver that ran down Simon's spine at the contact and how his whole body pressed more against Raphael's, melting into the embrace and the kiss alike.

Raphael's own eyes finally fluttered close and he blanked out everything that wasn't Simon or their kiss, focusing every sense on this moment and the way the other's lips parted in a silent invitation to deepen the kiss. Simon's warm palm pressed against his upper arm while the other one was curled around the nape of his neck, tangling in his loose curls and caressing the back of his head absenty while their tongues entwined on another in a slow, teasing dance.

"After a little bit of searching, I found an intercity bus service that would get us directly to New York. Everything else would be a whole more inconvenient. It leaves near the main station at 9 tomorrow morning and we would arrive in New York around 6 in the evening. Not exactly fun to spend a whole day in a bus but it's our best bet and at least we don't have to change on the way," Magnus told them when they headed downstairs to get something to eat at the hotel's lunch buffet.

"Sounds like that's our only choice?"

"That or zigzag from one city to the other, taking a bus here and a train there or taking taxis that will cost a fortune. I might have the money but I have absolutely no interest in an expensive taxi ride, to be honest," his best friend sighed at Raphael's question and he simply nodded in return, not even thinking about arguing with that. Even if he didn't have to be back home urgently because there were still a few weeks until university picked back up and he had more than enough time to finish a few things for his courses, Raphael still felt like it would be nice to finally get back home.

It had been fun to travel the country in the van, especially with the amazing company, but he had his fill of adventure for now and getting back into familiar territory, being able to visit his mamá and the twins, it sounded more than compelling. Raphael knew he would miss having Simon around all the time because he had gotten used to the other boy's presence but he was also curious to get to know the other surrounded by their everyday life. He had gotten to know the clumsy, rambling mess Simon who had wanted to travel across the country to fulfil a promise his deceased father had made him almost a decade ago but he had yet to get familiar with the son and best friend Simon; the one who was currently struggling to fit adult responsibilities and his dreams together without disappointing the people he loved.

"Bus it is then, huh?" Simon chimed in with a lopsided grin and a little shrug while taking the place right next to Raphael on the bench in the dining area of the hotel after they had filled their trays with drinks and food.

Magnus hummed and nodded, simultaneous sipping his coffee and reaching for his phone to make the reservations for the bus. Raphael was surprised his best friend hadn't done that really because it was obvious that they would have to choose it anyway but he was also glad that Magnus was considerate to at least inform them about their limited options first.

They spent the next half hour having small talk while they ate their slightly late lunch and Raphael gently pressed his thigh against Simon's, resting his hand on the other's knee when he was done eating. All of this was almost scarily easy - being close to Simon and touching him - and he was briefly entertaining the though if this might change when they were back home but one glance at
the older boy, his brilliant smile and the way he looked back at Raphael with such adoring softness in his brown doe-eyes, and the doubts vanished into thin air.

There had been a time, only a few weeks back, when it had been so much easier to assume the worst or at least expect the good things to end soon enough but Simon actually made it difficult to keep up this habit of negative thoughts. Not because Raphael's feelings for the other had magically healed him or any nonsense like that but Simon's presence made him want to change his look on things - and the older boy was way too sweet to honestly expect him to just walk away from one day to the other.

Giving in to pessimistic thoughts about the future of this 'relationship' would mean doubting Simon and that felt terribly unfair and plain wrong.

They spent the afternoon being dragged from store to store by Magnus who basically forced at least two new items of clothing on both of them, not caring about even the most logical of protests, only stopping for some cool drinks and cake or ice cream at a vintage looking little coffee shop. They had dinner back in the hotel and decided to go to bed rather early because they were all kind of exhausted after this day.

Simon showered first and was already curled up on the large bed when Raphael left the bathroom a little later, his curls still wet from the shower but they would dry in no time with the current temperatures, even if the room had air conditioning. He slipped into the cool sheets next to the older boy, wearing nothing but a pair of boxers - another thing he was unbelievably comfortable with around Simon - and his lips curled into a smile when a pair of arms immediately enveloped him to pull him against a warm body.

Simon nuzzled his face against the expanse of skin between Raphael's shoulder blades, warm breath leaving goosebumps in its wake, and he immediately relaxed back against the other boy. Raphael barely remembered reaching out to turn off the bed site lamp and the only halfway closed blinds let enough light into the hotel room to bathe it in cool moonlight interrupted the soft yellow glow of a streetlamp nearby.

"I will miss this so much when we're back." Simon whispered the words into the silence of their room and his hand shifted from Raphael's upper stomach to his chest as if he knew that Raphael's heart would skip a beat before continuing to thump against his ribs at a slightly faster pace in reaction to the soft confession.

"You make it sound like we won't see each other anymore," Raphael replied, placing his hand in Simon's, pressing it a little more against his chest in the process.

"I know we will still see each other but still...I've gotten so used to having you around all the time over the past weeks and I know it's childish but I don't really want to let you go already," Simon muttered against his skin, his voice almost inaudible now and clearly sheepish.

Raphael felt his cheeks heat up a little because this was just the sweetest thing anyone had ever said to him. He carefully loosened Simon's embrace to be able to turn around and face the other boy, despite not being able to see very much in the dim light, but it would definitely feel better if Simon didn't have this conversation with his back.

"It's the same for me, believe me. I actually thought about it earlier - that I'm looking forward to getting back after almost three weeks of being on the road but it's also going to be weird because I won't have you around all the time," Raphael admitted softly and raised one hand to gently push his fingers through Simon's hair, playfully messing it up even more, "It's scary how comfortable and at ease I feel around you."
"But that's a good thing, isn't it?"

"It is but it's...unfamiliar. All of this is so different from how it was with Brandon and I started wondering about it over the past days. About everything with Brandon, not you and me." Raphael closed his eyes because he couldn't see the other's face properly anyway, pressing his cheek a little more into the soft pillow and resting his fingertips against the side of Simon's neck, actually feeling the older boy's slightly increased pulse through the contact.

"With him, it sometimes just felt like...too much. I didn't like lying in bed with him and in each other's arms, especially not in summer - I hated it when it was too hot and he wanted to get close or just touch me. And I liked kissing and everything but I guess I was always wary that he would..." Raphael shrugged and he knew what he was trying to say but the words suddenly seemed to stick to his throat and the roof of his mouth, unwilling to leave his lips. His hand fell from Simon's neck, drawing back, but the other boy caught it gently and intertwined their fingers as if he wanted to offer some kind of lifeline with this contact.

"That he would initiate more? That he wouldn't leave it at just kissing?" Simon asked, his voice barely above a whisper and fingertips soothingly brushing the back of Raphael's hand, calming his nerves before they could really act up.

"Yeah. Because it always felt like that's what he wanted all the time, especially after we had sex for the first time - he acted like that meant we could do it all the time or at least whenever he wanted." His cheeks felt like they were burning now and Raphael realised that it must be the absolutely weirdest thing to tell Simon about his ex when they were kind of headed towards a relationship. But maybe it was a good thing, talking about this and putting this out there, so Simon knew what he would be getting himself into.

"I don't mind sex and it can be enjoyable but at some point it kind of stopped feeling...worth it? Because for him it didn't seem to be a big deal - clearly, judging by the fact that he cheated on me - to him it didn't matter if it was me or someone else, as long as he was getting some. He didn't take my sexuality serious, therefore didn't think of making sure if I was okay with whatever he was initiating and then he acted like a douchebag when I stopped him."

His heart was beating up to his throat at the memory of the uncomfortable confrontations that had happened more often towards the end of the relationship. The more time passed and the more distance he gained to this time with Brandon, the more did Raphael realise how unhealthy the relationship had been, especially in the last few weeks and months.

"I know this is probably not why you're telling me all of this but I still want to say that you don't have to worry about this with me. I would never do anything that you're not comfortable with but in case it ever happens, please always tell me about it. I would never get mad if you tell me that you need some space and I'm more than happy with just kissing and cuddling so...no pressure."

Simon trailed off and Raphael didn't have to open his eyes or be able to see the older boy's face properly in order to know that he was surely blushing furiously.

Only Simon would manage to follow up such a sweet confession by basically saying that he didn't mind not having sex. Considering the fact that they hadn't done anything more than kissing, it felt terribly awkward to have this mention of sex up in the air all of a sudden because Raphael had honestly not even thought that far and he only realised now that, sooner or later, they would get to the point where they had to talk about this topic anyway.

"Sorry, that was...Just--just know that you can always tell me if anything makes you uncomfortable, okay?"

"I will, promise," Raphael replied with a chuckle, his cheeks still hot and heart racing but even
that did not manage to make him uncomfortable. Simon's clumsiness, no matter if it was with his limbs or words, was simply endearing and even a little bit of mutual awkwardness couldn't change that. Simon was about to add something but was interrupted by a yawn that caused Raphael to laugh once more and they decided that this whole conversation was probably something for another time.

When Simon's lips brushed against his cheeks and made their way to his lips, Raphael pulled the older boy a little closer and pressed their smiles together, followed by a whisper of "Duerme bien" that was answered by Simon with a half-yawned "Buenas noches, Rapha" before they snuggled up together and fell asleep surprisingly quickly, even after another slightly emotional talk.

Chapter End Notes

*Duerme bien* - Sleep well
*Buenas noches* - Good night
Raphael wasn’t sure what woke him up but it was probably a mix of movements next to him, soft whimpers and the fingers that clung almost painfully to his upper arm. He groaned sleepily and slowly blinked his eyes open, confused, until he realised that Simon next to him was constantly moving and making small sounds in his sleep. The noises sounded almost scared and Raphael was immediately a little more awake, turning to face the other boy better and carefully reaching out place his hand on top of Simon’s on his upper arm.

"Simon? Simon! Hey, wake up." He sat up a little to gently nudge the other's shoulder in hopes of waking Simon up but it took a few more nudges and calling his name until his eyes finally fluttered open. Even in the dim light, Simon’s pupils seemed dilated, tears shimmering in the corners of his eyes, and his chest was moving with quick, panicked little breaths.

"It's okay, you had a nightmare. You're safe," Raphael said gently and carefully placed his hand on the other's cheek, brushing away a tear trickling down Simon's sleep-warm skin. The other boy flinched a little at first but then he seemed to realise who was with him because he whispered Raphael's name with a slightly broken voice before shuffling a little closer to curl into him.

Raphael immediately wrapped his arms around the other boy, pulling him into a firm hug and cupping the back of his head with one hand.

"Shhh, I got you, everything is alright," he muttered into Simon's mussed up hair, pressing a kiss to the top of his head and moving his fingertips in soothing circles over the other's neck while his other hand did the same on the older boy's back. He could feel Simon shaking and heard his slightly erratic breath which caused Raphael to place his hands on the other's cheeks after a moment to get Simon to face him.

"Hey, open your eyes," he prompted in a gentle whisper, "Mírame y respira, bebé."

Simon hesitantly opened his eyes when Raphael's thumbs brushed the corners of them and he wished he would have turned the light on but he didn't want to avert his attention from the other boy even for a second so the dim light from outside had to do. Raphael leant his forehead against Simon's, gently caressing his cheeks with his thumbs, and he was close enough that even the tips of their noses almost touched.

"I...I dreamt about my dad," Simon mumbled with a broken voice and a few more tears slipped down his cheeks only for Raphael's thumbs to catch them and brush the wetness away.

"I'm sorry. If I can do anything to help, just tell me."

The hint of a tiny, wobbly smile tugged at the corners of Simon's mouth and even though it didn't reach his eyes, it still warmed Raphael's heart. He leant a little closer to brush a kiss to a wet trail on the other's cheek, tasting the saltiness of the tears on his lips.
"This is helping. You being here is helping," Simon admitted softly and he finally scooted a little closer again, almost hesitantly pressing his lips to Raphael's mouth and tangling their legs together, clearly seeking comfort in the physical contact that Raphael willingly provided.

They only exchanged short and sweet little kisses that were less of a romantic interaction than just the need to soothe and the feeling of not being alone. It took a long time until Simon calmed down completely and until he was tired enough to fall back asleep and Raphael kept himself awake as long as it took to make sure the other was definitively asleep again.

Of course, both of them were quite tired the next morning and Raphael briefly explained to his best friend what happened when Simon had left for the restroom before breakfast. Magnus had teased them about still being sleepy at first but after knowing what had caused the slight lack of sleep he held back any other stupid or teasing comment, especially when it came to Simon.

The bus ride was boring, to say the least. They arrived early enough and got on the bus - Raphael and Simon sitting next to each other while Magnus took the seat opposite of them. Simon spent the first hour watching the scenery fly by from his window seat but exhaustion finally won and he tried to settle into a comfortable nap position with his head on Raphael's shoulders and their hands linked in his lap.

Raphael spent a good portion of the ride napping as well or talking to Magnus who was, once again, exchanging messages with Izzy who even sent a hand full of photos of her brother. Raphael was more amused than annoyed when his best friend basically started waxing poetic about Alexander's eyes, his lips, face and body. Magnus was ridiculous and he would never understand how the guy managed to fall for someone based on photos and other people's stories but trying to understand it would lead nowhere.

Raphael's heart sunk a tiny bit when the streets outside finally started to look remotely familiar again because that meant saying goodbye to Simon soon, even if it was just for now. Part of him wanted to offer the other boy to come home with them, with him, and maybe even spend the night but he knew that was bordering in ridiculous. That didn't stop him from feeling reluctant about getting up from his seat when the bus finally stopped at their destination.

"I miss you already," Simon sighed with slumped shoulders while they were waiting for their luggage to be unloaded and Raphael couldn't suppress a sigh of his own.

"Me too. Text me on the way home and how about we talk later on the phone?" He suggested with a smile, tugging Simon the tiniest bit closer to press a sweet kiss to his cheek, brushing the warm skin with the tip of his nose and nudging it playfully.

"I would love that."

Simon still looked a little exhausted and his smile wasn't as bright as usual but Raphael couldn't blame him, he felt a little down about having to say goodbye as well.

"I didn't thank you for last night..."

"Don't worry about it. And you can always call me, by the way, if this happens again. I don't care if it's the middle of the night - if you feel bad and need someone to talk, I'm there," Raphael said gently, low enough for only Simon's ears to catch it, and he brushed another lighter kiss to the older boy's cheek. "You're not alone with this."

Simon took a shuddering breath and his eyes looked a little glassy but the mouth pressing against Raphael's in the next moment was curved into a thankful smile and his heart fluttered with relief at
the feeling. They kissed until they were handed their luggage and then they exchanged some more
kisses while Magnus waited patiently a few steps away, giving them all the time they needed until
they finally said their goodbyes.

Raphael smiled when Simon even hugged Magnus briefly and thanked him for everything but he
slumped against his best friend's side as soon as the other boy was out of sight a few moments
later. It was weird, missing someone who had been in his arms only a few minutes earlier. It was
exaggerated and ridiculous but Raphael still couldn't help but wish Simon back to his side
immediately.

They took a taxi back home - well, *home* being Magnus's place - and the first thing Raphael did
after being back was taking a long hot shower before he took care of unpacking. His thoughts
were with Simon the whole time, though, and he couldn't wait for the phone call later after they
only exchanged *I got home okay* messages so far.

"Magnus is impossible. I don't even know why I put up with him," Raphael sighed into the phone
while trying to shift into a more comfortable position on his bed without disturbing Chairman
Meow too much. The small cat was curled up in his lap, purring contently while he was running
the fingers of his free hand absently through the soft fur.

'Maybe because he's your best friend?' Simon suggested with barely contained laughter in his
voice and the sound might never not cause the butterflies in Raphael's stomach to go crazy or his
heart to skip a beat. He wished to be able to reach through the phone and just pull the older boy
into his arms even though he knew they would be seeing each other the next day.

A little over a month had gone by since they returned to New York, he and Magnus had met
Clary and Izzy a few days after the Sunday breakfast at his mamá's place where Simon had spent
half of the time geeking out with the twins while Guadalupe had wanted to know everything
about the trip. Raphael had even mentioned that he and Simon were dating now - there had been
absolutely no surprise in his mamá's reaction - but that they hadn't defined their relationship yet
because it was still too soon so it kind of wasn't really official at this point.

Still, Guadalupe had been clearly happy for him and she was obviously adoring Simon already, as
were the twins, so that was certainly a good thing. He still missed the older boy almost all the time
because they mostly only met on the weekends and spent the rest of the weeks texting and talking
on the phone.

"I guess so. He's still insufferable, though. I don't even know how he got to the point where Alec
agreed to go out with him but hopefully, he will shut up about it afterwards."

'I highly doubt it...He will probably wax even more poetries about the guy after the date and be
even more infatuated with Alec, for whatever reason. I really don't get why he's into this grumpy
guy, they are so completely different, but who am I to judge,' Simon chuckled and there was some
rustling to be heard on the other end because the other boy was never able to just sit back and
relax. Every time they were on the phone, Simon started to walk up and down in his one-room-
apartment sooner or later, or start fiddling with anything in reach, not caring if it made annoying
sounds.

"*I know* but let a man dream, would you?" Raphael sighed and stared down at the fur ball in his
lap that was vibrating against his thighs with every purr and it already felt like the Chairman was
his pet as well because he was mostly hoarding the small cat in his room for company and
cuddles. Especially because Magnus had started talking about Alexander more and more over the
past two weeks, after finally getting the guy's number and messaging with him, and Raphael spent
more time in his room to get away from the constant monologues.
Maybe Magnus was mostly difficult to handle for him lately due to the fact that he himself was kind of love-sick and moping around because he couldn't see Simon as much as he wanted to - which would be all day, every day - so it was a little depressing to hear his best friend constantly swoon over this guy. If he wouldn't be missing Simon so ridiculously much all the time it would surely be amusing how Magnus was actually worried about the effects of his flirting for once.

'Sorry, I didn't mean to burst your bubble. But, lucky for you, you won't have to deal with him immediately because you will spend tomorrow night and the one after at my place,' Simon reminded him with an audible smile and this time it was a more wistful sigh that left Raphael's lips because he couldn't wait for tomorrow to come. It was frustrating that he still had three weeks of semester break and basically all the time in the world but still couldn't be with Simon all the time because the older boy had given in to spending the time until he started his job with an internship.

Raphael knew Simon had mostly agreed to appease his mother until he got around to talking to her about his change of plans and just to earn at least a little money until he would start working properly. It still sucked that Raphael had all the time in the world and he still couldn't spend it with Simon.

"I really can't wait to see you again."

'I miss you too, Rapha.' The adoring softness in Simon's voice caused Raphael to close his eyes briefly and he really wanted to kiss the other boy right now but, of course, that would have to wait until the next day.

Raphael flinched slightly when the door to his room suddenly flew open without any warning and a slightly dishevelled looking Magnus appeared in the doorway, pointing at him dramatically while grabbing his chest with his other hand.

"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"

Raphael's eyebrows drew into a frown while Chairman only shifted a little, blinking lazily at his owner before yawning and pressing his face back into Raphael's hand, clearly unbothered by the ridiculous antics.

"Uh...what?" Raphael stared at his best friend in confusion while he heard Simon's chuckle in his ear because the other had clearly heard the slightly slurred words as well and somehow managed to form an 'Is he drunk?' between giggles. He only answered with a soft hum and had to roll his eyes because it was Thursday night Magnus had to work tomorrow, why on earth did the moron think it would be a great idea to get drunk?

"You're hot," Magnus exclaimed and Raphael frowned even more until it registered with him that this had to do with the weird question before. Apparently, it was time for bad Shakespeare pick up lines. He had never wanted to find out that these existed but he probably shouldn't be surprised in the least.

"I really hope you're not planning to say that during the date tomorrow because I can tell you now, he will probably walk away immediately and regret to agree to the date," Raphael replied and shook his head with a long-suffering sigh, mumbling a "This is what I have to deal with" into the phone that caused another wave of laughter from Simon who apparently was having the time of his life right now. Raphael would probably complain about the lack of sympathy if the older boy didn't sound so terribly adorable, especially when his laughter was interrupted by a cute little hiccup.

"The date! I need your help."
"I could have told you that a long time ago and please don’t try to talk in rhymes now, that one was terrible."

"I want to be a poet. He likes to read so he has to like poets, right?" Magnus ran a hand through his messed up hair, that now was adorned with red strand since a few days prior. His makeup was a little smudged and shirt mostly unbuttoned - Raphael was considering taking a photo just to be able to show people that his best friend could be a complete mess sometimes and wasn't always the perfectly styled, seemingly put together young man he let people believe. He wasn't enough of an asshole to really go through with the idea, though.

Instead, he sighed again and apologised to Simon because it seemed like they had to cut their call short today. "I have to take care of this nut job."

'It's okay. I wouldn't have expected him to get this freaked out by a simple date,' Simon replied gently, his voice still dancing from all the laughter and Raphael couldn't wait to see the other's smile again, the way his gorgeous doe-eyes crinkled at the corners.

'Keep me updated on the situation and don't let him terrorise you too much," he added with another chuckle, hiccuping once more and Raphael couldn't help but snort in amusement. He was surrounded by ridiculous people.

"Te veo manana, bebé," Raphael almost breathed into the phone, successfully ignoring how his best friend was now babbling a "Thou art more lovely and more temperate" in the background and he was actually surprised Magnus was able to remember the correct words in his state but the next line turned into "Rough winds do shake the darling's butt" so his surprise didn't exactly last very long. Simon, having caught Magnus's dumb monologue in the background, started laughing again and only managed to get out a 'Can't wait. Bye, Rapha' in return before they hung up.

"Magnus, stop being so terrible! It's a weekday, what's gotten into you?" Raphael sighed, plopping his phone down onto the pillow next to him and burying the fingers of both hands in the soft fur of the Chairman's back, causing the animal to stretch out in his lap and purring louder, clearly enjoying the little massage.

"I'm not terrible! I'm amazing. And I'm amazingly planning how to woo Alexander tomorrow," his best friend replied, putting his hands on his hips while jutting his bottom lip out. Great, Magnus was actually pouting now. What even was Raphael's life right now?

"This is neither amazing nor does it look like planning. You're clearly just losing your mind over some boy you don't even know. Maybe he turns out to be an asshole, ever thought about that?"

"He's a gorgeous angel sent to me by the heavens to light up my life with love!"

"As far as I can tell he's more of a human tree with a resting bitch face but whatever," Raphael muttered loud enough for Magnus to hear and his lips pulled into a smirk when his best friend made a noise of protest, puffing up his chest.

"As if you're one to talk! And you're more of a bonsai than an actual tree but you have a bad case of resting bitch face as well! And you're not even cute."

Raphael couldn't find it in himself to feel the least bit offended by any of this, only muttering a "Por el amor de Dios" while resisting the urge to reach for the small golden cross around his neck to pray for some sanity to get back into his best friend.

"I'm adorable, shut up," he replied and almost burst out laughing when Magnus sighed an "I know, it's terrible" in reply with his face twisted into a resigned grimace.
"Okay, now that we established that, how may I be of help before you drive both of us crazy? I have no idea why you are suddenly freaking out because it's just a date and you have never been worried about any other date before. It's not even like you have a reason to be worried."

"This isn't just a date. It's the date! This boy is a dream like a prince finally descended for me from--"

"Let me guess: from heaven? Not sure it works that way but whatever floats your boat."

"Rapha, don't be such a little shit when your bestest friend in the world is suffering and needs your help," Magnus whined and finally crossed the room to flop down on the bed in front of Raphael, causing the Chairman to hiss in annoyance because the mattress was bouncing and disturbing the cat's relaxed peace.

"Okay, alright. How about you stop freaking out about this guy? Just meet the guy tomorrow and see if he's any good. Act like yourself and don't twist this into a challenge where you have to impress him. If he's not impressed by getting to know the way you are, he's clearly a douchebag and not worth your time. Camille was a pretty face as well and we know how that turned out...and I'm not saying this will be the same but do me a favour, dial down the expectations in him and yourself a notch because I don't want you to get in way over your head again."

Magnus turned his head a little to grimace at him but he sighed after a brief moment and made a small noise of agreement. "Sorry. I guess I was acting a little terrible? He just seems like he might be different than others - at least from what I can tell so far."

"Ever the hopeless romantic and it's okay, you're always putting up with my moods as well and I wouldn't still be here if you were that terrible. So, again, how can I be of assistance?"

"I wanted to do my nails but my hands are too shaky," Magnus replied, clearly pouting despite his words being muffled by the blanket he had pressed his face into again. He moved one hand in front of Raphael who leant back a little to not get hit by the flailing limb. He caught Magnus's wrist and pulled it closer, stifling his laughter at the sight of a very sloppily painted nail - well, it was more like half of the fingertip was painted, not just the nail.

"I could have told you that trying to do your nails while being intoxicated might not work out too well. Just give me a second, I will get the stuff from the bathroom. Which colours?" Raphael sighed and patted the back of Magnus's hand gently before dropping it onto the mattress and getting up, lifting a protesting Chairman in the process and unceremoniously discarding the small cat on its owner who didn't even react to the feline literally walking all over him.

Raphael barely caught the muffled "Surprise me" and shook his head in amusement before leaving the room to grab the nail polish, the remover and tissues. While collecting the things he typed a quick message to Simon, having brought his phone with him, to inform him that his room was apparently turned into a nail studio now with a grumpy looking emoji. Simon's reply, a cheerful you got this, I believe in you with a beaming smiley face plus heart emoji, caused him to chuckle and shake his head. He simply sent a message with just a heart emoji back before locking his phone again and heading back into his room to take care of the mess that was his best friend.

Chapter End Notes

*Mírame y respira, bebé* - Look at me and breathe, baby
*Te veo manana, bebé* - See you tomorrow, baby
Por el amor de Dios - For the love of God
"Maybe you should consider doing this as a job instead of studying a boring subject you barely care about," Magnus suggested while sipping the glass of water Raphael had brought for him that fortunately had the wanted effect of sobering the other up a little.

"Absolutely not. I can imagine better things for my life than spending it with painting other people's nails, thank you very much," he muttered in return, concentrating on not making a mess while he carefully moved the small brush over Magnus's fingernail to paint it in a dark and sparkly red that complemented the strands in his best friend's hair perfectly.

"You're really good at this, though. Your hands are a lot steadier than mine," Magnus sighed and Raphael tightened his grip on the other's hand a little to warn him not to move it. Magnus's hand was resting in Raphael's because they were sat on the bed and they had to improve the missing tabletop that would usually be a much wiser choice for this.

Chairman Meow had already slipped in between Raphael's pillows and had curled up there to resume his earlier interrupted nap, not in the least bothered by their constant chatter.

"Doesn't automatically mean I should start working in a nail salon," Raphael replied with an eye roll and finished painting the last nail on Magnus's hand but he kept on holding it in his own because he didn't want to risk getting nail polish on the sheets. His best friend wasn't yet completely sober so he didn't quite trust him to be careful with his still freshly painted nails.

"What if he doesn't like this? Or that I'm wearing makeup?" Magnus asked after a brief moment of silence, eyes focused on his now red and slightly glittery nails and Raphael was honestly taken aback by this question. The other had never voiced any kind of insecurities about his looks; Magnus was always proud to be who he was and never cared what other's thought.

"If that's the case, you're gonna tell him he's an asshole and then you're going to forget about him to look for someone who deserves your attention." Raphael knew this was easier said than done and that he wasn't exactly the one to give this kind of advice but he still thought it would be the best way to handle it. If the guy didn't acknowledge and like Magnus the way he was, he could fuck right off. Raphael would not watch his best friend get messed up by another person he developed feelings for.

Magnus's father had already left enough damage - someone who had been supposed to love him unconditionally - and then he had been better and Camille came along to destroy all the progress. Raphael preferred not getting another call in the middle of the night and having to talk his best friend out of doing something really stupid. It had been absolutely terrifying and heartbreaking how much Camille had hurt Magnus and how much he had wanted to just...give up.

Raphael had been only 13 when it happened and, admittedly, he sometimes had had a very similar mindset during that time about wanting to give up but spending hours talking Magnus through his feelings - telling him that he was loved and needed by his mother, by Raphael and his family, that they would be devastated to lose him - it made Raphael realise the same applied to him as well.

Raphael had been 13 when he had been able to save his best friend's life and Magnus had been 20 when he, unknowingly, did just the same for him just by needing his help and listening to him, by believing him and making him believe at the same time. He had never explicitly told Magnus...
about it but he was still kind of sure that the other knew.

"If he doesn't accept you, he's not worth a second of your time so stop doubting yourself. You're amazing and anyone who can't see that is a moron," he added with a smile and for a brief moment, Magnus's eyes actually looked a little watery.

"I always knew you could be nice!"

"And there you go destroying the moment...I'm never again saying anything like this," Raphael grumbled and he felt admittedly awkward but still couldn't help but grin softly when Magnus leant closer to press a few slightly too wet kisses to his face. He swatted at the older boy and pushed his head away with a fake disgusted noise before scolding Magnus to be careful with the damn nail polish.

"He's actually blushing when I compliment him. I think I'm in love!"

Simon snorted when Raphael read his best friend's text message out loud, rolling his eyes for good measure, before discarding the phone on the bedside table. They had finished a simple little dinner ten minutes earlier and decided to cuddle up on Simon's bed, seeing as he only had a rather uncomfortable and old little couch in his one-room-apartment, so the bed was a much comforter choice to sit on.

"I never knew Alec could blush," Simon mused, wrapping his arms around Raphael's middle, head resting against his chest while Raphael's fingers absently carded through his hair, "but I'm glad it's going well. Maybe Alec will lighten up a little when this works out and Magnus certainly would be happier as well."

Raphael hummed in agreement and if anyone deserved to have an acknowledging partner, it was his best friend. When Raphael could manage to find someone, surely it should be easy as pie for Magnus.

"I finally talked to my mum yesterday," Simon changed the topic after a moment of silence and Raphael looked down at the messy mop of hair resting against his chest, his other hand instinctively reaching out to take the older boy's hand in his own and squeeze his fingers soothingly.

"How did it go?"

Simon didn't have to mention what it was that they talked about. It was about his dream, about his idea of only working as an accountant halftime and getting a job with something music related in addition to it.

"Better than expected. She wasn't very happy at first, scolded me and told me it was stupid but...when I told her I already talked to the boss and that he's okay with keeping me in a halftime position instead of full time like initially planned...and that I have good prospects of getting a second job...she seemed a little less negative about it. She's still not happy and clearly convinced that this is too risky but at least she seems to accept my decision."

"Guess mamá doesn't have to adopt you after all, huh?" Raphael joked because Simon had dramatically anticipated for his mother to disown him (of course, he hadn't been serious about it) and that Guadalupe would have to take him in if that happened. "And, wait, what is that about good prospects of getting a second job?? Why haven't I heard about this?"

Simon actually laughed at that, the sound muffled against Raphael's chest before he sat up a little
and carefully straddled his lap after only brief hesitation. Raphael placed his hands on Simon's hip, not minding the closeness and even pulling the older boy the tiniest bit closer while assessing his slightly pinkish cheeks and sparkling eyes.

"I actually wanted to tell you about when it's sure but...guess I fucked that up now...soooo...two weeks ago I went to this small musical school a few blocks away and asked if they had any use for someone to teach guitar lessons. There's nothing definite yet but they sounded really optimistic and are currently working it out so I may be able to start working there as well. But I get some kind of trial period next month where I help another teacher three afternoons every week," Simon started explaining and his face seemed to light up, eyes sparkling with pleasant anticipation.

Raphael caught the other's hands because Simon was gesturing a little too wildly and almost smacked him in the face without realising it but his heart was swelling with pride and love for this boy. Simon had been understandably insecure and almost scared of voicing his new plans to his mother but now that she had kind of given her blessing to the whole idea, he was clearly feeling a lot more relaxed.

"If everything works out I would teach younger kids the basics and they said if I brushed up on proper singing techniques they might even consider giving me a chance of teaching that as well," Simon added, now positively beaming and his fingers twitched with nervous excitement in Raphael's hold.

"That's amazing, bebé. I'm so glad everything seems to work out, especially with your mum," he smiled and let go of Simon's hands to cup his face, gently pulling the older boy closer to rest their foreheads together. Raphael breathed the "Estoy orgulloso de ti, corazón" against the other's soft mouth before capturing it in a sweet kiss, his lips mirroring the smile he could feel on Simon's.

As usual, Simon melted into the contact, their chests almost touching and his fingers softly digging into Raphael's lose curls - he usually prefers to style it when leaving the house but the older boy clearly loved his curls and therefore Raphael skipped using any gel more often lately.

"None of this wouldn't have happened without meeting you and Magnus," Simon mumbled a little breathlessly when they ended the kiss, his fingertips playing with the soft hairs at the nape of Raphael's neck and sending a tingly shiver down his spine.

"If you hadn't gone on the trip, you wouldn't have met us. Your own actions led to this," Raphael replied with a smile and kissed the tip of Simon's nose. He was incredibly thankful that everything had happened the way it did because not only had he been able to get over all this shit with Brandon surprisingly quickly, he had also gotten a new and absolutely amazing boyfriend out of it. Well, he had already started calling Simon his boyfriend in his thoughts but they had yet to properly determine that.

Raphael was about to mention this topic and maybe just ask about it right now but Simon beat him to changing the topic by speaking up first. "So, I hope this isn't weird and you don't have to answer this, but...you told me you are ace and I was wondering where on the spectrum you are?"

This was certainly a topic he hadn't expected but Raphael raised his eyebrows in surprised amusement, his heart doing a weird little flip at the mere thought that Simon really cared about this part of him and wanted to know more about it.

"Honestly...I never really defined it properly. I mostly know about it from Magnus and from briefly researching it but I never thought too much about it. Probably because it didn't feel important or like it mattered enough. Brandon didn't acknowledge it anyway so it seemed useless to figure out the exact term," Raphael admitted sheepishly and he realised how stupid this must sound because he should have tried to figure it out for himself, not for others.
Maybe a part of him had always thought that not acknowledging it too much himself by naming it too exactly would somehow help to lessen the impact of his sexuality on the relationship? Which...it didn't make the least bit of sense but Raphael had absolutely no idea what exactly had kept him from figuring it out properly.

"Hey, don't worry about it," Simon said with a soothing voice, clearly picking up on the mess of thoughts building up in his head. Raphael blinked and looked into those beautiful brown orbs that always managed to make him feel like he was drowning, absently recognising the gentle touch of soft fingers against his cheeks when Simon cupped his face like he had done before.

"Maybe, if you want, we could research together and figure it out? If you don't want to, that's fine as well. When I tried to figure out my own sexuality - after realising that bi somehow didn't feel quite right - I only read about asexuality briefly and I always wanted to get back to it. It's kind of fascinating to read about all these different sexualities out there, especially all the ones nobody seems to bother talking about."

Simon smiled brightly at him, causing Raphael's heart to skip a beat, and it wasn't the first time that he wondered how he had ended up with this beautiful boy. Even when he had been with Brandon, or maybe because of it, Raphael had been so sure to never find anyone who would really accept all of him. Ironically, the relationship with Brandon had managed to make him feel more broken and maybe even unlovable than he already had before.

But suddenly there was Simon in his life, who hadn't even batted an eyelash when Raphael came out to him as ace, who hadn't touched or looked at him any different afterwards. Simon, who always pressed into him during every kiss, who didn't shy away from kissing him a little more eagerly but was still always obviously paying attention to it not getting too much. This boy who had been too clumsy for his own good from the very beginning who managed to perfectly balance physical closeness without turning it into something even remotely sexual despite not even being able to keep himself from tripping over his own feet.

"I would love that," Raphael replied softly and he really wished he could somehow put his feelings for Simon into words, to tell and show him how incredibly thankful he was for the older boy's thoughtfulness and the fact that he was never expected to explain himself. Sure, all of this went both ways and Raphael was always considerate of Simon's feelings as well, trying to be in-tune with the other's feelings and reacting accordingly to them.

"How about we do it right now?" Simon suggested brightly before his eyes widened a little, cheeks flushing a darker shade of pink. "The research! How about we do the research right now," he quickly corrected his choice of words and Raphael couldn't help but burst out laughing.

They spent the next few hours reading up on the asexual spectrum and Raphael admitted that he had kind of thought himself to be demisexual after his own brief research a few years ago but it had mostly been due to the fact that he didn't mind sex and the fact that he had been okay with having it after a while into his first relationship had seemed to prove it.

Simon actually spent a good portion of an hour trying to explain sexual attraction to him - how it felt, that there were different kinds of attraction and that wanting sex with someone wasn't the same as feeling sexually attracted to someone. It was terribly awkward when Simon carefully asked if he was okay sharing his experiences with sex but Raphae still tried to be as honest as he possibly could, despite his cheeks burning the whole time.

It was long past midnight when they settled on him being asexual - not demi, not grey, just ace - and Simon even made him aware of the fact that something like aromanticism existed as well and
it seemed like he was in this spectrum as well. It was a little confusing to hear about these new terms but Simon's input certainly helped to figure it out and, after hours of researching and wrapping their minds around it, they both decided that asexual and grey-homoromantic seemed to be the most accurate for him.

Raphael had to admit that, as confusing as all of this was, it also felt relieving to have a slightly better understanding of his sexuality and to now also have an explanation why he never really had a crush before Bradon - and, Raphael realised, maybe that was all it had been, a crush that he had thought meant he loved the other because he hadn't known what the romantic kind of love actually felt like. It was just like he had confused enjoying sex with sexual attraction. It was difficult to tell these things apart when you weren't even sure what they were supposed to feel like.

Now, thanks to meeting Simon and thanks to the other boy taking the time to researching all of this together, Raphael felt like he had a better understanding of himself and of the fact that everything he had experienced so far was valid, not a result of him being broken.

"You're really amazing, you know that?" Raphael muttered against the older boy's clavicle when they were wrapped around each other under the covers, both on the verge of falling asleep. Simon chuckled softly and his fingertips pressed into the warm skins of Raphael's back.

"Now I know and you're even more amazing. Or should I say ace-mazing?"

Raphael groaned and mumbled something about the older boy being a horrible person, not amazing at all, but it was drowned out by Simon's soft giggles but Raphael didn't mind because it was a lie anyway - the other boy was very far from being terrible and even such a stupid pun wouldn't change that.

"My ace-mazing Rapha," Simon added with another giggle and hugged Raphael a little closer, pressing a kiss to the top of his head and wrapping around him like an octopus.

"Shut up and go to sleep, idiota," Raphael mumbled into the older boy's shirt but the sound of his voice probably gave away the fact that he couldn't help but grin as well. Simon hummed softly and pressed another kiss to Raphael's temple before he finally stopped moving around, sighing contently.

"Buenas noches."

Chapter End Notes

Estoy orgulloso de ti, corazón - I'm proud of you, sweetheart
Buenas noches - Good night
Here we are with the last chapter. We started this journey with a short chapter and we are ending it with one but it's certainly a lot nicer than the beginning :)

"I added a new song to the playlist," Simon mentioned, successfully interrupting Clary who was currently talking about the trip she had made with Izzy the previous weekend. The redhead glanced at her best friend with raised eyebrows but Simon didn't seem to notice that he had interrupted her.

They were all sat around two pushed-together tables in the Java Jones - all meaning almost their whole group of friends: Clary, Izzy, Magnus, Alec and Jace, plus Simon and Raphael, of course. Magnus had tried to get Catarina and Ragnor to come as well, to finally get all of them together, but Catarina had to work this afternoon and Ragnor had been his usual anti-social self, not interested in meeting a bunch of strangers at once.

"The playlist? The one you made during the road trip? That thing still exists?" Raphael asked, amusement clear in his voice and he admittedly wasn't too surprised about this fact. This was Simon, after all.

"Of course it does! Why would I delete it? It contains the memories of how we met and got to know each other," he replied with an indignant huff but his lips curled into a smile again soon enough. "And I added more songs to it since. It's not really a road trip playlist anymore but just our playlist, I guess."

Alec and Jace simultaneously groaned at this and Simon pointed his finger at the latter, while Magnus was nudging the other with a scolding glance - Raphael still couldn't quite believe his best friend was actually dating Alexander now, especially because these two were so absolutely different, but it seemed to work out just fine.

"You, shut up! You can't even manage to walk up to Meliorn and ask them out so how about you stop being judgemental of or annoyed by other people's relationships. Go over there and do something about your crush instead of moping around all the time," Simon almost hissed at Jace who glared at him but the almost slightly anxious expression in his eyes was reason enough for Simon to stop and simply huff in mild annoyance. He dropped his arm that he had pointed towards the counter of the coffee shop with, where the barista by the name of Meliorn was currently handing two young women their orders with a kind smile.

They weren't too sure why Jace didn't manage to ask them out already. He hadn't held anything back during the time all of them had met and he had been interested in Clary. It had been nearly impossible to get him to stop flirting with her. Simon had told Raphael the little he knew about Jace's past - that he had lost his parents at a young age and the man who had taken care of him after the accident had seriously messed him up before Jace ended being adopted by the Lightwoods.

Maybe the fact that it had taken him years to come to terms with not actually being straight played a part in it as well - Jace seemed to have slight difficulties when it came to approaching someone.
who wasn't a woman, hinting back at the apparently still lingering insecurities about his sexuality.

"Simon, new song, what about it?" Raphael prompted to get his boyfriend's attention back to the conversation he had started because he had yet to get to the point of mentioning this. Simon made a small 'ah' sound and fumbled to get his phone out of his pocket.

"I found this song a few days ago, it's by a band called A Rocked to the Moon and I decided that it should be our song from now on," he grinned brightly before hitting the button to start the song.

Raphael wasn't too surprised that Simon intended to sing along - he had kept this habit and seemed to enjoy singing along to songs he liked, pretending to serenade Raphael. It was absolutely endearing, if not a tiny bit ridiculous, but it was impossible to tell him to stop. And Raphael didn't want his boyfriend to stop this habit anyway because he honestly loved the other's voice and the obvious joy in his expression whenever he started singing.

"You deserve someone who listens to you; hears every word and know what to do when you're feeling hopeless, lost and confused," Simon started singing along in time to the song, his voice not loud enough to disturb any of the other customers in the small coffee shop but loud enough for at least their friends to catch it. "There's somebody out there who will."

Raphael felt a tiny bit embarrassed that Simon was doing this in front of their friends and his cheeks felt a little warm but still leant back and listened to the other boy with a smile on his face, heart beating happily against his ribs.

"You need a man who holds you for hours. Make your friends jealous when he brings you flowers and laughs when he says they don't have love like ours," the older boy continued and Raphael's heart stumbled a little bit, missing a beat, because he slowly realised that maybe this was it. Maybe this was Simon's way of initiating to say I love you for the first time? Or maybe he was just reading too much into it.

They hadn't voiced their feelings yet, even if they were pretty much out in the open in every touch and glance already, despite having decided to call each other boyfriends about two weeks after returning from the road trip. Admittedly, Raphael had been this close to just blurting it out more times than he could count by now but he had always held himself back for unknown reasons.

"There's somebody out there who will. There's somebody out there looking for you. Someday he'll find you, I swear that it's true. He's gonna kiss you and you'll feel the world stand still. There's someb--"

Raphael decided to simply take the lyrics literally and seal Simon's lips with a kiss, effectively interrupting his singing and drawing a small surprised noise out of the back of his throat. The older boy didn't hesitate a second and immediately reciprocated the kiss eagerly, pressing a little more into Raphael's body like he always did.

His heart was in his throat when Raphael finally mumbled an embarrassingly breathless sounding "Te amo" against Simon's lips as soon as they broke the kiss to get some air back into their lungs. His cheeks were burning and a second later slightly hurting from the too wide smile tugging at the corners of his mouth when the older boy basically leapt at him - however Simon managed to do that, seeing as they were only inches apart, but he certainly did and almost knocked both of them off the bench with the force of it. He felt his boyfriend's lips against his ear, sending a tingling shiver down his spine when the "Yo también te amo" was whispered only for him to hear.

Simon's lips brushed his earlobe, followed by a kiss on the cheek and finally their lips met in another sweet, loving kiss. Raphael tugged his lover impossibly closer, causing Simon to almost end up sitting in his lap if it weren't for the table in the way, and he got completely lost in the
tender press of their lips, tongues curling around one another with playful nudges.

Isabelle clearing her throat made them aware of the fact that they were actually in public right now, with their friends witnessing everything going on, and Raphael felt his cheeks heat up immediately. He saw, from the corner of his eyes, that Simon's cheeks turned a bright pink as well before Raphael sheepishly dropped his gaze to the cup in front of him on the table.

"Seems like I was right about him being all dramatic and cheesy about it," Magnus commented with a cheerful tone as he put his hand on the table, palm facing upwards. Clary groaned softly but reached into her the pocket to place a ten dollar bill in Magnus's hand, followed by Izzy and Jace doing the same - the latter with a sour expression.

"Wait, did you guys seriously bet on our first love confession?" Simon's voice was a little squeaky, either from embarrassment or disbelief, Raphael couldn't tell. Magnus drew his hand back, fingers curling around the bills.

"Of course not, Siegfrida. We would never do such a thing," he replied loftily, lips curling into a mischievous smirk, and Raphael was tempted to either throw something at his best friend or just hide his face in his hands. He decided against both, though, because he was honestly too happy about finally having confessed his feelings and, more importantly, Simon saying them back. Raphael could ignore their friends placing bets on them for now and at least Magnus ended up using the money to pay for all of them after ordering another round of drinks and snacks to celebrate.

Raphael curled his arm around Simon's side and tugged him closer, nuzzling his face against the older boy's shoulder, when they had finished their food and simply listened to a story Magnus and Izzy had started to tell about their little shopping trip two weeks prior. He had never been a fan of being in a group but Raphael really didn't mind this because it was just comfortable to listen to the other's talk, feeling the warm body of his lover wrapped up in his arm, while snow was silently fluttering against the big window pane next to their tables, making the whole scene feel even cosier.

Chapter End Notes

Te amo - I love you
Yo también te amo - I love you too

The song in this chapter is Somebody out there by A Rocket To The Moon and I obviously had to add it to the story because it fits just perfect ♥

Gosh, it's weird to post the last chapter of this and I really hope the way it ends it somewhat satisfying. A huge thank you to everyone who read this (not so) little story, especially everyone who took the time to leave kudos and/or comments. It's amazing to see that people enjoyed reading all of this as much as I enjoyed writing it ♥ :D

I usually stay away from writing multi-chapter stories but this one was really fun and I hope I can come up with another longer story sometime in the future. Until then, I still have a few prompts to write and will surely spam with more Saphael one-shots every now and then :)
As you might know if you read other of my stuff, I don't speak Spanish so excuse the mistakes and always feel free to point out mistakes, it's definitely appreciated ♥

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