Self-Harm and the Pursuit of Control in 
*Shadowhunters* Fan Fiction

Malin Bohman
Abstract

Five fan fictions based on the TV-series *Shadowhunters* are used to analyze the self-harming behaviors of the character Alec Lightwood, as a response to losing, and a method of regaining, control. In addition, this paper explores self-harm in relation to upbringing and culture, self-punishment, and the mental health disorders depression and anxiety. Furthermore, it employs a disability narrative perspective and utilizes two four-stage systems proposed by disability narrative theorist David A. Karp—the illness identity career and the process of adaptations—in order to demonstrate the similarities and differences between fictional and nonfictional disability narratives. The engagement in self-harm is posited to be driven by a desire to regain control, which inadvertently ends up providing the opposite: an increased loss of control, and a hindrance for recovery.

**Keywords:** mental health, loss of control, depression, anxiety, disability narrative
# Table of Contents

**Introduction** ............................................................................................................................................. 3  
The World of *Shadowhunters* .................................................................................................................. 4  
Fan Fiction .................................................................................................................................................... 4  
Disability Narratives and Fan Fiction ......................................................................................................... 6  

**Self-Harm and Control** .......................................................................................................................... 8  
Family Relations and Shadowhunter Culture ............................................................................................ 8  
Self-Punishment ......................................................................................................................................... 13  
Mental Health Disorders ........................................................................................................................... 15  

**Conclusion** ............................................................................................................................................ 20  

**Works Cited** .......................................................................................................................................... 22
Introduction

Mental health has become a much-discussed topic during the twenty-first century, a trend that can be observed in the literary world as well. What research has been conducted on the subject has focused on traditionally published literature, neglecting to include alternate platforms, such as fan fiction, where mental health issues is a recurring theme. This paper makes a tentative attempt to bridge that gap, by examining how self-harming behaviors are dealt with in fan fiction produced within the Shadowhunters fandom. Five fan fictions were retrieved from the website Archive of Our Own (AO3), and analyzed based on the self-harm or implied self-harm of one specific character: Alec Lightwood. Alec engages in self-harming behaviors also in the TV-series source text, in fanfic terminology the canon. The definition of what constitutes as self-harm is here limited to excessive training, or the desire thereof, and, to a lesser extent, suicidal thoughts. The fanfics are set before, during, and after the events in the series, and are here used to analyze the potential origins, causes, and continuance of Alec’s self-harm. I propose that the five texts have one thing in common: what drives Alec to self-harm is a need to reestablish control. I examine this need by dividing the texts into three types of loss of control: structural (family relations and shadowhunter culture), external (other people’s actions), and internal (mental health disorders). In addition, the fanfics are considered through the scope of David Karp’s disability narrative stages.

In 1996, Karp used the testimonies of fifty depressed people that he had interviewed as the foundation for his book Speaking of Sadness. The book was written “to give voice to the experiences of those whose accounts are typically marginalized, shunted off to the side, or discounted altogether” (Karp 2). Based on the respondents’ self-reported experiences, Karp proposes a tool with which to analyze narratives of mentally ill, specifically depressed, individuals, by dividing the development of depression into narrative stages. Two such ‘stage-systems’ are used to explore Alec’s self-harming in this essay: the ‘illness identity career’ (IIC) and the ‘process of adaptations’ (POA). The IIC is comprised of four stages, and is described “as a ‘career’ sequence characterized by distinctive identity transformations […] by critical ‘turning points’ in identity” (134). In other words, the focus lies on how the progression of the depression affects the individual’s view of ‘self.’ The POA is divided into four stages as well, with the difference that the focus is on various ways of adapting, or responding, to the IIC stage at which the depressed individuals currently find themselves. Self-harming behaviors might be described as physical manifestations of mental torment; as such, Karp’s stages have relevance for narratives that center around a character who self-
harm, even when the cause of self-harm is not necessarily depression. In 2019, Diane
Scrofano used both the IIC and the POA system in her analysis of fifty Young Adult (YA)
books, indicating that Karp’s stages, while based on real-life narratives, might be applied to
fictional narratives as well. With Karp as a backdrop, new understandings of Alec’s character
are illuminated in order to prove that, while Alec Lightwood resorts to self-harm to regain a
sense of control, he ultimately achieves just the opposite.

The World of Shadowhunters

Shadowhunters is a TV-series based on the YA book-series The Mortal Instruments by
Cassandra Clare. It depicts a world in which the supernatural exists alongside normal human
society, in the so-called Shadow World. In this world, there are warlocks, vampires,
werewolves, and fair folk called seelies, who are all half-demon and make up the Downworld,
and shadowhunters, who are half-human, half-angel. The role of the shadowhunters is that of
law enforcement. They keep the peace in the Shadow World, make sure that all things
supernatural are kept secret from humans (called mundanes), and hunt demons that find their
way from various hell-dimensions to Earth. The shadowhunters live in a militaristic ‘your job
is your life’ culture and are based at so-called Institutes, situated in larger cities. The TV-
series takes place in New York City and focuses on a group of shadowhunters: siblings Alec
and Isabelle ‘Izzy’ Lightwood, Jace Herondale (adoptive brother to the Lightwoods), and
Clary Fairchild. One other significant character is Magnus Bane, a powerful warlock and
Alec’s significant other.

Fan Fiction

Fan fiction is a version of a text, be it a movie, a TV-show, or a piece of literature, made by a
fan of the original text. The fanfic authors, most often female and commonly using
pseudonyms (Lindgren Leavenworth and Isaksson 8), use an already established framework—
a world and its characters—and alter it to examine specific aspects of it, such as character
background, character development, or what might have occurred between one scene and
another. They “posit the question ‘what if’ to every possible facet of a source text … and
explore situations that the makers of the source text simply cannot” (Derecho 76). The fanfics
can play out before, after, or during the timeline of the source text, or, indeed, in another
timeline or world altogether. A fanfic that takes place immediately following a canon scene is
called a *coda*.

I have selected five works of fan fiction to analyze Alec’s self-harming behaviors:
“The Whole Way Down” by cagetraumasam, “Breathe Deep and Hesitate” by Carmenlire,
“Bruised Knuckles and Bruised Hearts” by thenovaksisters, “Don’t Leave Me Now,” also by
Carmenlire, and “just be” by cuubism. They are all retrieved from the website Archive of Our
Own (AO3), a popular fan fiction site. In December 2019, there were over 27,000 fanfics in
the *Shadowhunters* fandom on the site. The quantity of works means that specific fanfics on
AO3 are typically found through a sort-and-filtered search, where certain tags—identifiers
chosen by the fanfic author to indicate the work’s content—have to be included (or excluded)
in order for a work to appear on the list of results. The tags used for this study were:
*Shadowhunters* (TV), Alec Lightwood, Self-Harm—in which the tag Implied/Referenced
Self-Harm is included—Complete Works Only, and English, as well as Exclude Crossovers,
Exclude Alternate Universe, and Exclude Alternate Universe—Human. The latter three were
employed to prevent fan fictions that do not follow the conventions of the TV-series from
appearing in the results. The search was conducted while on guest mode, as some texts are
accessible only to other, signed-in members, and generated 176 pieces of fan fiction as of
November 5, 2019. Works with Alec Lightwood as a minor character, works with more than
one chapter, and works over 5,500 words have not been included in the material, this in order
to include as many works as possible within the scope of the paper. Through close readings,
this list was narrowed down to the five fanfics that constitute the core of this project.

“The Whole Way Down” by cagetraumasam is a 5,071-word one-shot (one-
chaptered story) that takes place both pre-canon and during canon. It explores the
development of Alec’s self-harm from its initiation when Alec was a preteen, to the time
following season 2 of the TV-series. Tags attached to the work are: *Panic Attacks; Suicidal
Thoughts; Therapy; Complicated Familial Relationships; Self-Harm; Pre-Canon; Post-
Season/Season 02; Implied/Referenced Suicide attempts.*

“Breathe Deep and Hesitate” by Carmenlire is a 1,847-word one-shot that examines
what Alec’s life might have looked like pre-canon. It is a character study that focuses on
Alec’s thoughts about himself and how he copes with the expectations placed on him by the
society he lives in. Tags attached to this work include: *Pre-Canon; Implied/Referenced Self-
Harm; References to Depression; Suicidal Ideation; Suicidal Thoughts; Character Study;
Mental Health Issues.*
“Bruised Knuckles and Bruised Hearts” by thenovaksisters is a 5,376-word coda to the nineteenth episode of season two and deals with the aftermath of Magnus having broken up with Alec for political reasons. In her author’s note, thenovaksisters explains that the purpose of the story is to provide Magnus and Alec “a healthy and LONG conversation” where they talk through their differences before eventually reconciling. Tags used include: *Implied/Referenced Self-Harm; Healthy Communication; Post 2x19.*

“Don’t Leave Me Now” by Carmenlire is a 3,642-word one-shot future fic that offers no external cause to Alec’s self-harming; rather, it is depression and a dependency on pain that drives Alec to harm himself. Tags attached to this work are: *Mental Health Issues; Depression; References to Depression; Self-Harm.*

“just be” by cuubism is a 1,377-word one-shot future fic that offers a glimpse into how Alec might be dealing with emotional upheaval when he has come to accept his anxiety as part of his identity. Tags used include: *Anxiety; Self-Harm.*

**Disability Narratives and Fan Fiction**

In this essay, I examine the five works of fan fiction using two of David Karp’s disability narrative stages: the illness identity career (IIC) and the process of adaptations (POA). In the first IIC stage, the depressed person lacks the proper vocabulary to describe their experiences and suffers from what Karp calls ‘inchoate feelings,’ described as emotional discomfort, often for several years. This is followed by a clear sense of ‘something is wrong with me,’ in the second stage. The third one is characterized by a ‘crisis’ that forces the affected individual to seek professional help. In the fourth and final stage, the depressed person starts to create an ‘illness identity’ for themselves. “Each of these career moments,” Karp writes, “assumes and requires redefinitions of self” (136). While depression prompts internal changes within the person who suffers from it, it also generates specific, external behaviors, or coping mechanisms. The POA stages typically occur alongside and in response to their IIC equivalents; for example, the first POA stage, ‘diversion,’ is often seen to be a reaction to the ‘inchoate feelings’ experienced in the first IIC stage. This is followed by the depressed individual trying to ‘fix it’ on their own, which goes hand in hand with the revelation ‘something is really wrong with me,’ found in the second stage of the IIC. When the afflicted person is unable to resolve the issue on their own—reaching a crisis point—they enter the third POA stage: ‘looking for doctor right.’ This is followed by the final step, ‘incorporation,’
wherein most of Karp’s respondents had realized that their therapist or doctor likely would not be able to “cure” their depression and, thus, their focus “shift[ed] from eradicating depression to living with it” (236).

In 2019, Diane Scrofano conducted a study presented in the article “Disability Narrative Theory and Young Adult Fiction of Mental Illness,” where she examined a sample of fifty YA books in relation to the works of three disability narrative theorists, one of which was Karp. She found that, while Karp’s stages—or categories, as she calls them—are based on the experiences of real-life people, they could also illuminate mental illness narratives in fictional works. I thus propose that fan fiction treating mental health issues might also benefit from this framework.

Two chapters from Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet (2006), edited by Hellekson and Busse, are used for this study: Abigail Derecho’s “Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction” and Deborah Kaplan’s “Construction of Fan Fiction Character Through Narrative.” Fan fiction is defined by Derecho as archontic literature, a term coined by Jacques Derrida in 1995, which is described as “ever expanding and never completely closed” (Derecho 61). This perspective on fan fiction as contributing to an ever-expanding archive is adopted in this study. Kaplan’s essay focuses on the construction of character within the combined constraints of canon and fanon. “[F]anon,” Kaplan explains, is “the noncanonical knowledge about a source text … the sum of the community’s shared interpretive acts … Rewriting characters … is an interpretative act along these lines [and] contributes to and draws from the community’s collective understanding of the character” (136). Shadowhunters fanfics change the medium from the visual to the written, and the latter arguably lends itself better to character reflections and emotional responses by using words to explore what is shown on the TV-show. For the writer, engagement with the source material and the reconstruction and deepening of the characters are central. However, the fanfic authors’ portrayal of Alec Lightwood is not only based on subjective interpretations, but must also draw on the fan-community’s universal understanding of his character.
Self-Harm and Control

The analysis is divided into three parts, based on the three types of loss of control mentioned in the introduction: structural, external, and internal. Each section begins with a short introduction that presents what stance on self-harm will be adopted, as well as which of Karp’s IIC and POA stages will be used. The first and third sections treat two fan fictions each, whereas the second treats only one.

Family Relations and Shadowhunter Culture

Two pre-canon fan fictions, “The Whole Way Down” by cagetraumasam and “Breathe Deep and Hesitate” by Carmenlire, are analyzed based on the assertion that Alec’s mental health issues can be traced back to him lacking control in two areas of his life: the strained home environment he grew up in, and shadowhunter culture. cagetraumasam’s text is examined in relation to the first proposition whereas Carmenlire’s story centers around the second one. ‘Structural control’ here refers to the societal and cultural rules to which Alec is expected to conform. In “The Whole Way Down,” the first, second, and third IIC stages are adopted (‘inchoate feelings,’ ‘something is really wrong with me,’ and ‘crisis point’), as well as the second and third POA stages (‘fix it yourself,’ and ‘looking for doctor right’). “Breathe Deep and Hesitate” employs the first and fourth IIC stages (‘inchoate feelings’ and ‘illness identity’), and the fourth POA stage (‘incorporation’).

In “The Whole Way Down” (henceforth “Down”), Alec’s first experience with a panic attack occurs while he is in the presence of his family. “Alec doesn’t know what it is, the first time it happens. He doesn’t even know why it happens, because really, what is there to be upset about? He’s just having dinner with some of his family” (“Down”). The situation itself appears unremarkable; however, a potential explanation for Alec’s reaction can be gleaned in the tense atmosphere at the dinner table: “the stony silence both of his parents are exuding.” So far, it is indicated that the situation is discomforting. However, a more specific reflection follows about Alec’s father Robert, who “plays the good cop at first, but Alec knows not to expect unending grace from him.” This implies that the Lightwood parents—or, at least the father—cannot be trusted, that his “goodness” only goes so far, and that Alec’s

---

1 Fan fictions are either multichaptered or one-shots. There are no page numbers.
mental health issues might be related to the strained home environment.

During his interviews, Karp noted that many of his respondents came from dysfunctional family backgrounds (138), and, in this fanfic, Alec seems to fall within that category as well. In Karp’s first IIC stage, respondents were liable to hold the external world responsible for their inchoate feelings: “initial definitions of their problem centered on the ‘structural conditions’ of their lives instead of on the structure of their selves. […] Their emerging definition was that escape from the situation would make things right” (138). In contrast to Karp’s respondents, however, Alec does not seem to blame his surroundings for his emotions. A possible explanation for this could be the difference between depression and anxiety-related disorders. Karp’s respondents describe the ‘inchoate feelings’ stage as “feeling different, uncomfortable, marginal, ill-at-ease, scared, and in pain,” without any understanding of why this is and without labeling the feelings as depression (136-137). Given the intense nature of a panic attack, it is possible that blaming the external world might not be an option for Alec in “The Whole Way Down,” as the experience itself is so distinctly internal and so viscerally felt, whereas the feelings described by Karp’s respondents are more nebulous and difficult to define. Nevertheless, Alec is aware of the tension between his parents and attempts to hide his struggles, not wanting to draw attention to himself and escalate the situation: “showing his distress will only serve to make things worse. So he doesn’t” (“Down”). How he responds to the situation is the only thing he can control, and he uses that control to make himself invisible.

The focus on family pressure remains as “The Whole Way Down” progresses. When Jace gets injured in the second part of the story, Alec’s mother expresses her disappointment in him; and, while Alec acknowledges that people getting injured in their line of work is far from uncommon, he maintains that “this time is different. This time it’s his fault.” His reaction indicates that he holds himself to high standards, likely transferred onto him by his parents, and that other people’s opinions, or other people finding him lacking, bother him a great deal: “He thinks he might die, his chest is constricting so much.” In response to these overwhelming feelings, Alec goes to the roof and practices archery “until his fingers are bleeding and his hands are shaking.” At this point in the story, Alec acknowledges that he suffers from panic attacks, and, by giving a name to these experiences, he has left the first IIC stage. Given this awareness, it could be argued that he has arrived at the fourth IIC stage, ‘incorporation.’ However, he shows no real understanding or acceptance of his difficulties, and he keeps refusing help, which is typical for someone at the second IIC stage, ‘something is really wrong with me.’ Karp means that it is common for depressed people to fixate on
enhancing their work performance in an attempt to distract themselves from their inchoate feelings: “Before it completely flattens them and makes work impossible, working at a furious pace gives some people respite from the pain” (217). Training is a way for Alec to regain control and ensure that what happened to Jace does not happen again, by pushing himself to be better. More than that, it is also a way for him to punish himself for perceived failures: “It’s something he does, sometimes […] when he fucks up in training. He practices. Until he breaks. Until it hurts” (“Down”). Through the lens of Karp’s stages, this could be seen as Alec trying to ‘fix it’ on his own, the second POA stage, by literally beating his shortcomings—and, thus, his overwhelming feelings—out of himself. This unforgiving attitude leads to self-imposed seclusion and destructive behaviors; as a result, his anxiety only grows while his control over it decreases, until a crisis point is reached.

In Karp’s third IIC stage, it becomes impossible for the sick individual to hide their depressive symptoms, and they are forced to seek help from others (226). Although Alec does not actively reach out to Izzy, his struggles are apparent enough for her to notice, and he is unable to remove himself from the situation without her help:

 everything feels so off-balance that he’s not sure he’ll be able to make it out the door. Luckily, Izzy is at his side before he has time to even test his theory […] And even though the dining area is still loud and obnoxious, and even though their parents still don’t appear to have said a word to each other, Alec is pretty sure he can get through anything as long as Izzy’s there to hold his hand. (“Down”)

The fact that her involvement calms him enough for him to return to the dining room indicates that this is a problem that he will not be able to handle on his own as the story progresses. Indeed, a turning point is signaled in the second half of the fanfic, when Magnus witnesses Alec suffer through a panic attack. In a way, the narrative circles back to the beginning, where Alec found comfort in others, most notably Izzy. Magnus manages to get through to him and convince him to try therapy, making “The Whole Way Down” the only text of the five that are treated in this essay to mention therapy, as well as the only text that fully conforms to Karp’s third POA stage: ‘looking for doctor right.’

In “Breathe Deep and Hesitate” (henceforth “Breathe”), Alec’s lack of control lies in the expectations he faces in the shadowhunter culture. His struggles are centered on the Institute, his home and workplace, which is described as a place that “makes the air stall in his chest” (“Breathe”). He frequently takes refuge at the Brooklyn Bridge, where he contemplates taking his own life—the only control that remains to him.
In contrast to cagetrumasam’s text, Carmenlire’s Alec blames his surroundings for his misery. He is expected to marry a woman, despite the fact that he is gay, a secret he can tell no one. He feels guilty for hiding who he is and for being untrue to himself, and questions “[w]hy … other people care so much. What gives them the right to dictate what his life should look like.” Alec’s unhappiness lies in the outside world, in the structure he finds himself in, which corresponds to Karp’s first IIC stage. Nevertheless, he has accepted that there is nothing he can do to change his situation and that the world and the shadowhunter culture are set in stone: “There’s no way through the darkness.” In her study of fifty YA novels, Scrofano found that:

in some novels of mental illness, the characters … have accepted the limitations that their illnesses place on their lives. They have given up. These characters do not see their symptoms as adding beneficial qualities to their personalities, but, at the same time, these characters are not willing to make changes that would reduce the symptoms of their illnesses. (19)

This is true for Carmenlire’s Alec as well. In his view, the only thing he can do is remove himself from the situation: “When it gets too much-- when training doesn’t help, when the pain in his hands can’t out-shadow the pain in his chest-- he leaves” (“Breathe”). This helplessness indicates that Alec views himself as a passive member of shadowhunter society, and that he has no agency of his own. And, similarly to “The Whole Way Down,” he uses physical pain to distract himself from overwhelming feelings and an environment that is outside his control.

Throughout “Breathe Deep and Hesitate,” it is indicated “that escape from the situation would make things right” (Karp 138), a line of reasoning that can be found in the first IIC stage. At the same time, the feelings Alec experiences are not inchoate. He has a vocabulary for them: he feels “cold,” “empty,” “numb” (“Breathe”). He has no illusions about not being depressed. As such, he appears to have reached Karp’s fourth IIC stage, where an illness identity is constructed. Building an illness identity involves four processes: 1) reconstructing and reinterpreting one’s past in terms of current experiences; 2) looking for causes for one’s situation; 3) constructing new theories about the nature of depression; 4) establishing modes of coping behavior (Karp 158). There is no reflection on past experiences in this fanfic, but Alec has identified a clear reason for the way he is feeling: The Institute and shadowhunter culture. In the last scene of cagetrumasam’s text, Alec tells Magnus that “‘[m]ental health has never really been a big priority [at the Institute]. If you can fight
demons, in their eyes, you’re okay’” (“Down”). This disregard for personal well-being is mirrored in Carmenlire’s text in the frustration and resentment that her Alec feels at the thought of his future within this system. Furthermore, he has established modes of coping behavior for how to deal with his feelings of hopelessness; namely, training excessively and contemplating taking his own life. As in “The Whole Way Down,” he distances himself from his loved ones and turns to physical pain to cope with his depression and to, in Carmenlire’s words, “make the physical match the mental.” Much like Karp’s respondents who had reached the fourth POA stage, Alec seems to have accepted his suffering: It is part of who he is. However, there are none of the positive, or at least neutral, feelings experienced by Karp’s respondents at this acceptance: “With all its difficulty, it is their life and they see suffering as inseparable from who they are and the sensibilities they value in themselves” (Karp 249). Instead, Alec’s insistence to suffer in silence, while it grants him a modicum of control, only brings him further away from a solution. These destructive feelings and behaviors only start to gradually disappear when Magnus eventually comes into his life and he starts to open up. A possible interpretation is that love is a cure-all to Alec’s issues. More than that, however, choosing Magnus despite the demands of his culture also symbolizes Alec being true to himself, which indicates that that is where the true solution lies.

The two texts have a similar outlook on what Alec’s life may have looked like pre-canon, and their proposals match the emotionally oppressive environment established in the TV-series. It is this resonance between the archontic text—that is, the fan fiction—and the source text that “gives the smaller work meaning and significance” (Derecho 74). This dependency on the source text does not mean that new information cannot be garnered in works of fan fiction, or that fan fictions are merely copies of the source text. Indeed, twentieth-century poststructuralist Gilles Deleuze claims that “‘repetition’ need not mean ‘physical, mechanical, or bare repetitions’” (quoted in Derecho 73). Rephrasing this argument, Derecho notes that “there can be repetition … that appears, at first glance, to be a repeating of the same, but in fact contains differences that make the second iteration to be completely new and distinct from the first” (73). Rather than being a repetition of what is shown in the TV-series, cagetraumasam and Carmenlire both use canon as a starting point from which to examine the significance that these structural issues of family pressure and shadowhunter culture may have had on the development of Alec as a character.
Self-Punishment

The fanfic “Bruised Knuckles and Bruised Hearts” by thenovaksisters is used to examine another cause for Alec’s self-harm: an external loss of control which leads to self-punishment. The difference between external and structural control lies in its focus on specific actions of other characters and an established system, respectively. thenovaksisters’s text is an expansion on the canon event of Magnus breaking up with Alec for political reasons, written from Clary’s and Magnus’s respective points of view (POV). The disability narrative stages that are discussed in relation to “Bruised Knuckles and Bruised Hearts” are the second and third POA stages (‘fix it yourself’ and ‘looking for doctor right’).

While the reason Alec turns to self-harm can be traced back to the structural and environmental components examined in the previous section, the catalyst for his destructive behavior in “Bruised Knuckles and Bruised Hearts” (henceforth “Bruised”) is Magnus breaking up with him. The first half of the story is written from Clary’s perspective. She is the protagonist of the TV-show, the “mundane turned shadowhunter,” and, as such, she offers an outside perspective of the Shadow World, being new both to the world itself and to the other characters. For example, she attributes the concern she feels for Alec to her mundane upbringing, observing that “shadowhunters generally doesn’t deal well with vastly emotional topics” (“Bruised”). In fact, Alec’s siblings are so used to his way of handling his emotions that they, while showing concern for their brother, advise Clary to leave him to his own devices.

Karp’s IIC stages are based on self-reported emotional experiences and, since thenovaksisters’s story follows Clary’s and Magnus’s perspectives, the text cannot offer any insights into Alec’s thoughts on or motivations for his behavior. Nevertheless, there are similarities between Alec’s behavior and the actions of Karp’s respondents, as per Karp’s process of adaptations. In the second POA stage, Karp concludes that “[w]hen depression returned, [the respondents] still might have faith that by fine-tuning the tools they had earlier established for feeling better, the problem would be solved” (223). Izzy tells Clary that “Alec’s hands are always like that” and Jace says that “[Alec is] beating himself up like he always does when something out of his control happens” (“Bruised”). In other words, using physical pain to cope with emotional strain is such an established behavior for Alec that Izzy and Jace attribute it to part of his identity. Whether Alec himself believes self-harm is truly a solution or not is impossible to say, given the POV-restrictions of the text. However, since there is comfort in routine, it could be argued that Alec uses self-harm in this fanfic not only
to punish himself, but as a crutch—something that he can rely upon. The habit provides a sense of control, and becomes a substitute for the security he felt in his and Magnus’s relationship, despite the fact that it is harmful to him.

Just like in “The Whole Way Down” and “Breathe Deep and Hesitate,” thenovaksisters’s Alec isolates himself instead of admitting that he is struggling. What “Bruised Knuckles and Bruised Hearts” also does, however, is explore what could have happened, had the executives and directors of the TV-show chosen differently. Investigating these alternative narrative paths is the core of archontic literature; or, as stated by Derecho:

[F]ic authors posit the question ‘what if’ to every possible facet of a source text (asking ‘What if these two characters became romantically involved?’ ‘What if this significant event had occurred earlier/later/never?’ ‘What if this entire narrative arc took place in another era, in another country, on another planet, in an alternate reality?’) and explore situations that the makers of the source text simply cannot. (76)

The purpose of fan fictions that identify as missing scenes, codas, or as otherwise relating to a canonical event is, by its very essence, to examine these “what if” scenarios. However, these explorations hold little value if they do not correspond to the fan-community’s collective knowledge of canon and fanon. Kaplan means that “a fan fiction work’s interpretation of character can only carry substantial weight if the characters are well-rounded and carefully drawn” (Kaplan 151). One way to make a character well-rounded is to examine him from various perspectives and how he reacts, canonically or to these “what if” scenarios, to external events, which is what “Bruised Knuckles and Bruised Hearts” does.

Alec never reaches a crisis point, nor does he turn to professional help when his ability to ‘fix it’ on his own inevitably falls short—which is hardly surprising, as such resources do not exist in shadowhunter culture. Interestingly, in this third POA stage, Karp notices similarities between searching for the right doctor and searching for a romantic partner. Finding a doctor is “finding someone you believe is right for you, becoming dependent on that person for meeting certain needs, making a commitment, eventually realizing that you may have made the wrong choice, leaving the relationship, and searching once more for the person who is really right for you” (Karp 228-229). Indeed, Clary muses that “Alec stopped wearing the gloves as the bruises faded in the wake of kissing Magnus Bane” (“Bruised”), and she eventually turns to Magnus for help in preventing Alec from self-harming. “Bruised Knuckles and Bruised Hearts” seems to come full-circle when Magnus heals Alec’s hands at the end, indicating that resolving the issues between the two of them
will be a turning-point for Alec’s mental health. However, just like Alec choosing Magnus in “Breathe Deep and Hesitate” indicates self-acceptance, Alec opening up to Magnus and the two of them talking about how they feel is suggested to be the true solution to Alec’s problems. Furthermore, as a result of their reconciliation, it could be argued that Alec regains some of the control he lost when his relationship with Magnus ended and that he, therefore, has no reason to keep self-harming.

**Mental Health Disorders**

The two post-canon fanfics “Don’t Leave Me Now” by Carmenlire and “just be” by cuubism are analyzed based on the notion that Alec’s self-harm not only relates to a lack of control in the environment he grew up in, nor is it always an expression of self-punishment; instead, a lack of control can be the result of a mental health disorder. Depression is discussed in Carmenlire’s text, where it is also posited that Alec’s self-harm is imbued with a dimension of addictive behavior, whereas anxiety is used as the point of departure in cuubism’s story. Karp’s third and fourth IIC stages (‘crisis’ and ‘illness identity’) as well as the second and fourth POA stage (‘fix it yourself’ and ‘incorporation’) are examined in relation to both fanfics, with the addition of the third POA stage (‘looking for doctor right’) in cuubism’s “just be.”

In “Don’t Leave Me Now” (henceforth “Don’t Leave”), no specific event precedes Alec’s self-harming. Rather, the reason for his destructive training is an internal loss of control in the form of depression. When he starts to feel “the darkness rolling in […] like an inky wave,” he acknowledges that he should talk to someone and is, as such, aware that this is not something that he can fix on his own. Still, he is reluctant to do so, as “it would make it that much more real. He wouldn’t be able to hide things from himself any longer.” He decides to handle the situation himself, and he does so by turning to his one tried and true method: self-harming through training. This reliance on training has been established in all texts discussed so far; however, as argued by Derecho, “one scene from a film or television show can be rewritten in fifty, or five hundred, different ways, with each repetition elucidating some different aspect or dynamic of the scene” (76). “Don’t Leave Me Now” provides such a new perspective on Alec’s self-harming by treating it not only as a destructive method to regain control, but also by implying that it contains elements of addictive behavior.

During his interviews, Karp noted that, when the depression returned, many of his
respondents fell back on the coping mechanisms that they had consistently used and honed over the course of many years, hoping that it would break the cycle (223). That is what training is for Alec, “a tried and true method to break through the haze” (“Don’t Leave”). It soon becomes clear, however, that what starts out as a way to reach clarity quickly turns into a quest for pain. Karp means that “choices to relieve pain are made with a conscious and urgent deliberation” (221) in the second POA, and Alec acknowledges that he is in the training room “with the intention of feeling the ache in his muscles and pain in his hands” (“Don’t Leave”). Somewhere along the line, the need to feel something has transformed into the need to feel pain, specifically. Alec rationalizes that it will only be “a few minutes, one solid punch” but is incapable of calling an end to his training session after that first punch that is “like a deep breath after almost drowning.” The fact that he loses himself to the training, and keeps going until long after his hands start to bleed, shows that, while it was a loss of internal control that pushed him to self-harm, he is not, in fact, regaining any control in this situation. Instead, he has exchanged one loss of control, caused by depression, for another, caused by an addiction. He recognizes that “he wants more. He always wants more,” which suggests, if not an addictive behavior, then at least a dependency on training to the point where it becomes destructive and harmful. The short-term effects are experienced as positive, but the long-term ones cause him even more harm, the same as with any other addictive stimulant. Scrofano calls these types of stories—that is, stories that center around the struggles and pitfalls of living with a mental illness—‘chaos stories,’ a term coined by disability narrative theorist Arthur Frank (1). In her study, she concludes that between twenty-six and thirty-eight of the fifty novels she examined could be classified as chaos stories, and she questions why there are so few novels, only eleven in her sample, that focus on the mentally ill character’s recovery process, and how they manage to lead fulfilling lives, in spite of their illness (26). Indeed, while all five fanfics in this study end on a somewhat uplifting note, cagetaumasam’s “The Whole Way Down” is the only one where actual measures are taken to help Alec long-term (although he seems to have come a long way in cuubism’s “just be”).

Alec’s initial reluctance to contact Magnus in “Don’t Leave Me Now” is, in Karp’s view, an attempt to cling to his (public) identity as someone who is not ill, which persists until a crisis point is reached. Or, as Karp phrases it: “It is one thing to deal alone with the demons of depression, or to privately see a psychiatrist for the problem, but once a person ‘shuts down’ altogether and seeks asylum or is involuntarily ‘committed,’ he or she adds an institutional piece to their biography that is indelible” (149). Even though Karp specifically refers to hospitalization as the step that shatters the illusion of sound mental health in the sick
individual, the core of this identity change in the affected person could be said to lie in how other people now being aware of their struggles leads to an inevitable and fundamental shift in how they view themselves. These struggles can no longer be ignored or denied. By involving the public eye, the affliction has become part of their identity.

Throughout the text, Alec shows an awareness of his illness that overlaps with Karp’s fourth IIC stage, much like he does in Carmenlire’s other, earlier fanfic, “Breathe Deep and Hesitate.” He reflects on all the changes that he, with Magnus’s help, has made in order to live a happier life, and acknowledges that there had been warning signs leading up to his relapse. Still, despite his increasingly healthy lifestyle and increased awareness of his condition, these bad episodes keep occurring in his life without any apparent reason. In the fourth POA stage, Karp observes that, “even when [the respondents] were feeling well the depression was always lurking somewhere in their mind or body” (238). This seems to be true for Alec as well: “Alec’s always quietly feared that those feelings would come back, always hovering just under the surface” (“Don’t Leave”). Given his awareness of his illness, the fact that Alec falls back into old patterns when his depression reappears can be read as a form of self-delusion, rather than Alec wanting to distance himself from his loved ones. He is afraid to acknowledge that the depression is back because it is an imminent threat to the control that he has managed to obtain over himself and his life.

While Alec is never explicitly stated to suffer from depression in the source text, Carmenlire is able to argue for this being the cause of his struggles by taking a behavior that is prevalent on the TV-show (his self-harming through training) and identifying it as a symptom of this specific illness. cagetraumasam achieves the same thing in “The Whole Way Down,” but suggests an underlying anxiety disorder to be the cause of Alec’s destructive tendencies. Potential interpretations such as these are, according to Deleuze, as authentic as what actually is, simply because it “could happen” (Derecho 74). Indeed, since what is “actual” originates from something that was once merely possible, it stands to reason that the possible is as real as the actual. Archontic literature, such as fan fiction, exists between these two states of being and “permits virtualities to become actualized” (74). By standing with one foot in canon, and never straying too far from what is accepted as fanon, both Carmenlire and cagetraumasam are able to provide new insights into Alec’s character by looking at his canonical behavior from a new, potential, vantage point, through which it is possible to find alternative explanations for it.

In “just be,” Alec experiences excess energy caused by an unprompted anxiety attack, which leads to him contemplating self-harm. The story begins in the middle of this
crisis point and, as witnessed in the other texts treated in this paper, cuubism’s Alec is hesitant to reach out for help. It can be argued that Alec attempts to ‘fix it’ on his own, since he only calls Magnus after the worst of the attack has passed. However, even though his boyfriend is not present during the attack itself, it is still Magnus that breaks Alec out of his spiral. Alec imagines what his boyfriend would say to him if he were there and is able to calm himself down. This indicates that Alec is open about his struggles to Magnus, and it can thus be argued that Alec has reached Karp’s third POA stage, as his illness is not something that he feels compelled to keep a secret. He seems to be on his way to a state where he searches for help in others instead of distancing and harming himself, even when part of him finds it uncomfortable: “the still-jittery, disconnected part, wants to jerk away from the touch — but instead, he leans into it, lets Magnus’s calm and comfort soak into him” (“just be”). This can be read as how recognizing when help is needed and reaching out to someone, despite the initial discomfort, is the first step to getting better. Moreover, Alec does end up calling Magnus and admitting to him what happened, which makes “just be” the only fanfic out of the five where Alec regains control through comfort rather than self-harming.

In all fanfics discussed, except thenovaksisters’s “Bruised Knuckles and Bruised Hearts,” Alec has displayed some degree of awareness of the destructive nature of his coping through training. Still, he is shown to have trouble finding other, non-harmful, alternatives. Out of all the Alecs in this paper, cuubism’s Alec seems to be the one who is furthest along in constructing his illness identity. He is aware of his condition, knows what usually causes his anxiety attacks, is aware that some of the methods that he used in the past were not healthy, and has replaced them with healthier ones: “Touch, apparently, is more effective in slowing his thoughts than hurting himself or burning himself or exhausting himself — but Alec thinks he knew that already” (“just be”). This awareness, found in Karp’s fourth IIC and fourth POA stages, is observed in “Don’t Leave Me Now,” with the notable difference that, there, Alec self-harms before he seeks comfort in Magnus, possibly because a part of him is still in denial about the (re)occurrence of his depression. Likewise, in “The Whole Way Down,” he has become accustomed to his anxiety throughout the years, but refrains from talking to anyone about it, not wanting to be seen as weak or a burden. In “just be,” Alec seems to be more accepting of his emotions, even if he still muses on his old coping methods. In his fourth IIC stage, Karp categorizes his fifty respondents into “two broad categories” in terms of how they viewed their relationship with depression: Either, the condition will stay with them for their entire life (chronic depression), or it is something that they have, or will eventually, overcome (periodic depression, 161). Although Alec initially questions why the panic attack occurred,
he acknowledges that unprompted attacks do happen sometimes. He seems to have come to terms with his anxiety being a permanent part of his ‘self,’ whereas the initial denial experienced by Carmenlire’s Alec suggests that his view on his depression was that it was periodic, believing that he had been free from it, given its lengthy absence.

It can be argued that it is redundant to have two depression-fics and two anxiety-fics in this analysis. However, the texts examine different aspects of Alec’s self-harming. For example, in “Breathe Deep and Hesitate,” Alec has still not come out as gay, and he blames his depression on others and the situation he finds himself in, as per Karp’s first IIC stage, ‘inchoate feelings.’ His life circumstances are different in “Don’t Leave Me Now,” where he has been together with Magnus for many years and sees his depression as a part of himself, corresponding to Karp’s fourth IIC stage, ‘illness identity.’ As such, how Alec identifies and thinks about himself in relation to his depressive feelings are not identical in the two texts: There is “repetition with a difference” (Derecho 75). Likewise, cagetraumasam’s fanfic examines the beginning of Alec’s anxiety, whereas cuubism’s text proposes what his life might look like when he has accepted his illness as part of his ‘self.’ In terms of Karp’s stages, the two texts begin on opposite sides of the four-stage spectrum (‘inchoate feelings’ and ‘illness identity,’ respectively). Given the archontic nature of fan fiction, however, it seems unlikely that the texts are not influenced by one another, or by what is accepted as fanon; rather, they exist in relation to one another.

Edouard Glissant, a Caribbean intellectual, coined the concept “relation” in his book Poetics of Relation (1990). He means that the world, and everyone in it, should be identified through their relation to others. In Derecho’s reading, Glissant claims that “[r]elation can and should take place […] not only between people, but between nations, between objects, between ideas, between words” (75). With its ever-expanding archive and dependence on the give and take between canon and fanon, writer and writer, and fanfic and fanfic, the concept of relation rings true for archontic literature such as fan fiction as well. In other words, the fanfics are neither mutually exclusive, nor copies of one another. Instead, their coexistence, and influence on the fandom’s collective understanding of Alec’s character, provide alternate perspectives on and new information about the origins, causes, and continuance of his behavior.
Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine how self-harming behaviors are treated in fan fictions produced within the *Shadowhunters* fandom. Based on the analysis of five fan fictions, all focusing on the character Alec Lightwood, I posit that there is a correlation between control and engaging in self-harm. I use two pre-canon fanfics, “The Whole Way Down” and “Breathe Deep and Hesitate,” by cagetraumasam and Carmenlire respectively, to examine self-harm as a result of a structural loss of control; that is, the familial and cultural constructions that Alec grew up in. In this restricted environment, Alec clings to his destructive behaviors, the only thing that he can control, and distances himself from his loved ones, which only brings him further away from leading a healthy life. “Bruised Knuckles and Bruised Hearts” by thenovaksisters is used to illustrate how external events—being dumped by his boyfriend—make Alec fall back into old habits. When the two reconcile, it is indicated that this will be a turning point for Alec’s well-being: He regains some of the control that he lost and no longer needs to engage in destructive behaviors. In addition, I use the two post-canon fanfics “Don’t Leave Me Now” by Carmenlire and “just be” by cuubism to examine an internal loss of control, in the form of a mental health disorder. In “Don’t Leave Me Now,” Alec engages in self-harm to escape his overwhelming feelings and ultimately loses himself to his destructive behaviors. Meanwhile, “just be” is the only fanfic where he refrains from engaging in harmful behavior, and instead manages to find comfort and stability in his loved ones. All five fanfics support the notion that trying to regain lost control through self-harm only leads to a more substantial loss of control.

Four of the five fanfics are shown to relate Alec’s self-harming to a mental disorder already in the tags (thenovaksisters’s “Bruised Knuckles and Bruised Hearts” being the exception). Carmenlire’s two texts refer to depression, whereas cagetraumasam’s and cuubism’s suggest anxiety to be the cause. This study did not set out to examine fan fictions where a mental disorder had to be present in the character Alec Lightwood. As such, Karp’s disability narrative stages of depression are applicable to the fanfics only to certain degrees. Moreover, given the shortness of the fan fictions used in this essay, both in regard to word-count and narrative timespan, it is to be expected that none of the texts correspond fully to all of the IIC stages proposed by Karp, which develop over years of living with depression. The fanfic closest to conforming to Karp’s stages is “The Whole Way Down,” which starts with Alec being at the first IIC stage and ends with him reaching a crisis point (third stage of the IIC) and Magnus convincing him to try therapy (third stage of the POA). Interestingly, “The
Whole Way Down” does not propose that Alec suffers from depression, but anxiety, which raises the question of whether Karp’s stages could have merit for analyzing disability narratives by people suffering from anxiety disorders as well as those suffering from depression. However, “The Whole Way Down” is also the story with the longest timespan in my sample, so it is possible that the overlap with Karp’s stages has to do with the timeframe rather than it indicating a connection with anxiety narratives. Future studies might find it fruitful to explore this potential overlay by using a larger sample with an explicit focus on anxiety narratives. Furthermore, Karp’s stages are based on the stories of real-life people, not literary analyses, which might offer another explanation to the differences in narrative progression. For example, the majority of novels in Diana Scrofano’s study focus on the struggles of living with mental health issues; that is, on Karp’s second IIC and POA stages, where the illness is kept a secret and the protagonist attempts to resolve it on their own. This imbalance in Scrofano’s sample, which corresponds with my own findings, indicates that there are differences between real-life narratives on mental health and fictional ones, another topic that might be worthy of further study. While some overlap with Karp’s stages certainly exists, there is much left to explore regarding the structure of disability narratives in fictional works, be it fan fiction or otherwise.
Works Cited


cuubism. “just be.” Archive of Our Own, 2019. archiveofourown.org/works/21319879.


