Learning To Fly

by Ravanne

Summary

As another school year starts at NYADA, Kurt seemed to have it all. The respect of his teachers, a group of wonderful friends and best of all, getting to live with the man that he'd come to love. So of course, the universe would throw a few curve balls in his direction.
Chapter 1

Kurt didn’t have class until ten that morning and no one would have faulted him for wanting to get a bit of extra rest. His school schedule was admittedly quite overloaded with extra classes and workshops on top of his required curriculum. While he still needed one additional course to be completely caught up with the rest of his class, his ambitious schedule was at least as much due to choice as necessity. The past summer of performing had woken a hunger in him for honing his craft that was a little bit intimidating at times, even to himself. Kurt was keenly aware of how far he’d come in such a brief period of time, but also how much more he needed to learn.

He had seen clearly that raw talent, which he had in abundance, would only get him so far. New York was brimming with talented performers and it would be easy for him to get lost in the crowd. He needed to learn as much as he could possibly absorb and get every bit of experience that he could scrape together. It was probably a very good thing that his student advisor was able to rein him in a little bit, otherwise between his heavy class schedule and his job he’d probably burn himself out before the fall semester was over.

Looking across the table to his lover, Kurt mused that when he and Adam decided to live together that neither of them expected that they would actually see less of one another than they did before. They probably should have anticipated that to at least some degree now that Adam was no longer a student at NYADA. They wouldn’t get to enjoy chance meetings in the hallways or quiet moments stolen between classes.

Adam’s schedule was no easier than Kurt’s, as he was currently holding down two jobs and attending every audition that his agent was able to schedule him for. As a result of their harried schedules, the early morning was the one time during the week that they would be able to spent together most days. Even though it meant a bit of lost sleep for Kurt on the days when he could rest in, it was worth it to have a little uninterrupted time without one of them running out the door. A few moments to share a cup of coffee and catch up before the day began was the single most important ritual that Kurt insisted on following.

“So, is Ms. July still being a total dragon?” Adam asked, a sly twinkle in his eyes as he buttered his toast. “You were pretty stiff yesterday, and not in a good way.”

Kurt couldn’t refrain from making an ironic grin, as he’d been doing a very commendable impression of the Tin Woodsman before his oil treatment after class. “A bit,” he admitted. “But it’s a different now. I mean, she’s still insulting and uses those ridiculous nicknames depending on how she feels about you at a given moment. I’m still China Doll, in case you were wondering.”

Adam grinned appreciatively, giving his boyfriend a teasing lift of his eyebrow.

“But it’s a much, much smaller class now that she’s scared off the clumsy and the weak. The good side is that we get a lot more individual attention. Or is that the bad side? I can never decide.” Kurt shrugged as he considered his own question. “But the ones who made it this far seem to have earned her respect. At least as much respect as she’s willing to give.”

His knife scraped at the nearly empty jar in his hand, trying to get out the last traces of jam at the bottom. “We have to tell your mom to send more marmalade,” Kurt insisted. “I haven’t been able to find this brand anywhere.”

“I’ll tell her the next time we speak, love,” Adam promised. He chewed thoughtfully on his toast, gazing at the younger man. “How is your voice class going? I’m sure that Madam Tibideaux is still
Kurt sighed, having bemoaned before about how the current semester was going to be challenging as far as his voice training went. “I had a meeting with her the other day and she’s made it clear that while she’s pleased about my current abilities, she has ‘expectations’ for my continued development.” He held up his hands to make quotation marks.

Adam nodded understandingly. “Teachers like her are always hardest on the ones that they see the most potential in,” he reminded the younger man. “Wasn’t she especially brutal towards Rachel at times?”

Kurt nodded, wincing at the memory. “She’s an absolute monster if she thinks that you’re not working hard or not performing up to her standards. I suppose that I should feel pretty privileged that she considers me worth the attention. But two voice sections as well as individual instruction? I sometimes wonder if I’m biting off more than I can chew.”

Adam smiled kindly, squeezing Kurt’s hand lovingly. “I’ve never seen you falter in front of a challenge before, and this won’t be any different.”

Kurt nodded, but couldn’t help from sighing morosely. “Between Madam Tibideaux, Ms. July and Professor Collins, I’m being put through the wringer this semester. I’m surprised I was able to walk home yesterday.”

Adam reached out to smooth Kurt’s hair back from his face, his expression understanding. “Well, it’s a good thing that we’ve got a proper bath so you can soak away the aches and pains,” he consoled. “I’m fully stocked up on Epsom salts and Ricola.”

The older man chuckled. “Always the practical one,” he praised. “I wish that I had half your determination, love. You put me to shame sometimes.”

That earned a reproving stare from Kurt. “Oh hush,” Kurt admonished. “You traveled halfway around the world by yourself for school and work. You can’t tell me that you don’t have determination.”

The resolve in his lover’s voice brought a flush to Adam’s face. “Don’t mind me,” he insisted, his cheeks flushing a bit in embarrassment. “It’s just my nerves getting the best of me again. I’m just going to be anxious until I get another job lined up.”

Kurt’s gaze softened in sympathy, knowing that Adam had reasons to be a little anxious. While it had been just about a month since they finished their run with the Shakespeare festival and Adam had been getting good feedback from his auditions, he hadn’t been offered an acting job yet. His agent was encouraged by the number of call backs Adam was starting to receive and remained confident that he would be able to land a role before long. Adam knew that it wasn’t reasonable to expect him to find anything so quickly after graduation and that it would take him a bit of time to find the right part.

But that meant putting himself through the audition mill and facing repeated rejection while making due with the jobs that he’d managed to line up; working at a local café and tending bar several nights a week. He would be able to manage financially for the foreseeable future, but it was difficult at times to keep his confidence up when no real offers seemed forthcoming. Things that they planned, like finding a larger flat, were on hold until they knew what would happen for his employment prospects.
“We knew that it would take a little bit of time,” Kurt consoled. “I know that something will come through for you soon.”

Adam smiled thankfully, grateful for his lover’s support. “I really shouldn’t complain,” he granted. “I’m just out of school, and I don’t know of anyone from my class in anything very much as of yet. The fact that I’ve been getting call backs is encouraging. Professor Mackey even called to make sure that I didn’t chicken out of my meeting with the production company.”

“Well, you’re entitled to feel a little sorry for yourself every now and then. And it’s my job to encourage you and cheer you up,” Kurt reminded him. “I was talking to Jules and everyone wants to go out for a few drinks. Maybe an Apples mini-reunion might lift your spirits. Interested?”

Kurt didn’t miss the flash of longing in Adam’s eyes, but after a moment of consideration, the older man shook his head. “I’m afraid I can’t, sweetheart. I’m working until midnight tonight.”

Kurt bit back his disappointment, but quickly rallied. “Then maybe you can swing by the school tomorrow. We’re having a practice session, and…”

“Darling… thank you,” Adam said sincerely. “But I don’t think that would be a very good idea.”

Kurt cocked his head in confusion, looking at his boyfriend in concern. “Why not?” he asked. “Everyone really misses you. They’re always asking for you. And there wouldn’t have been any Apples without our Adam.”

The Englishman gave him a fond smile, but Kurt didn’t miss the regret lurking in those lovely blue eyes. “I’m not a student anymore,” Adam reminded his young lover. “I would love to see them, but I think we need to give it a little more time while you all figure out how to manage without me putting in my two cents at every turn.”

Kurt sighed, knowing that Adam was probably right and this hadn’t been an easy decision for him to make. It would have been painfully simple for him to fine excuses to show up on regular occasions and to offer his advice and feedback on what they were doing. He would have quickly slipped back into a leadership role and that would rob another student of getting the opportunity to lead the group, to help shape it and continue its evolution. Kurt could tell that the thought of leaving the Apples behind, at least in an official capacity hurt Adam. That didn’t change the fact that it was probably the right thing for him to do.

“All right,” he finally relented with obvious reluctance. “We won’t pester you, but you have to promise that you won’t stay away forever. They’re your friends too.”

Knowing better than to try arguing the point with his determined boyfriend even if Kurt was giving in for the moment, Adam nodded in acquiescence. “I won’t avoid them,” he promised. He didn’t dare because he knew that the group was more than capable, and more importantly that they were more than willing to carry him off bodily if he tried to hide from them for too long.

Checking his watch, Adam sighed. “I’d better get going. Wish me luck?”

Kurt smiled and leaned over the table, giving his boyfriend a warm kiss on the lips. “You’re going to be great,” he insisted. “Have a good day. And call me when you get a chance.”

“I will,” Adam promised, giving Kurt a loving smile. “Have fun in class.”

“Should I wait up for you tonight?” Kurt asked as Adam picked up the leather messenger bag that had been part of his graduation present from his parents.
“No darling. You go to bed. And don’t worry about me… I’ll have time to come home and change before going to work and I’ll make sure that I eat,” he promised.

Kurt couldn’t resist kissing him again. “Wake me up when you get home,” he ordered firmly before letting Adam leave. He felt his smile fade a bit as the door closed behind Adam, their little apartment no longer quite so warm and homey with him gone.

Sighing to himself, he got up and made himself a fresh cup of coffee and found his school bag. He had a bit of time before he needed to get dressed and he might as well use the opportunity to get a jump on his class work.

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Adam tried valiantly to avoid visibly fidgeting as he waited to be called in for his meeting, very much wanting to present a dependable, professional image. This might very well be the single most important meeting of his life and he couldn’t risk screwing it up by looking nervous or overly eager. Just play it cool, Crawford, he told himself firmly. He tried to keep in mind that they were the ones who wanted to meet him. That had to mean something, right?

He certainly looked the part of a seasoned professional, dressed in the slacks and sport jacket that Kurt had selected for him with a mind on having him look well put together for this meeting but no too stuffy for his call back in the afternoon. He had a folder with a printout of his script and some notes that he’d written for himself about the revisions he’d worked on since he’d staged his play at school. Hopefully it would be enough to convince the producer that it was a solid enough work to bring to the stage.

The past few weeks had been challenging for Adam and he sought work in his highly competitive industry. His agent was getting him plenty of auditions to attend and he’d made it through several call backs, but so far he hadn’t been offered a job yet. Rationally he knew that it would take a bit of time to land a role and he had enough work to keep him afloat financially until he did. All things considered, he really was in a pretty good place. That didn’t ease his more than understandable concerns about his prospects.

He had talent, and he certainly had the training that should make him a desirable prospect for any number of productions. The lack of a tangible job offer, though, was starting to wear on him. The longer he went without any firm offers, the more anxious he became. At first he’d been worried about choosing the right role for himself. Now he was just hoping to be offered something… anything… just so he’d know that he wasn’t wasting his time.

Kurt had been absolutely wonderful in supporting him during this trying time, but he didn’t want to burden his boyfriend who had his own worries. Kurt had school to focus on and he didn’t need the distraction of soothing Adam’s unreasonable expectations.

The office door opened and Adam looked up expectantly. The producer was a man who looked to be around his father’s age, but much fussier looking in appearance. Kurt would insist that the man looked like he probably should be trading stocks than staging plays and musicals, but his welcoming smile seemed pleasant enough. “Adam, why don’t you come on in,” he offered invitingly. “We’ve got a lot to talk about.”

Well, that could either be a very good or bad thing Adam thought to himself as he rose from his seat and accepted the friendly handshake. Professor Mackey had insisted that Martin Glass would give his script a fair reading and offer some good feedback and he wanted to trust in his old professor. He wouldn’t have advised Adam to meet with someone that wouldn’t be receptive. The last thing he’d want for his student was to have his first experience be with someone who would reject his script out
of hand, or who wouldn’t take him seriously since he was right out of school.

The office was neatly appointed save for the desk that was covered with folders and bound scripts. “You’ll have to forgive the mess,” Mr. Glass apologized. “My secretary has the day off and we’re in the middle of reviewing a number of prospective shows. I’m afraid that it gets away from me a bit.”

“I can certainly understand. My place gets a bit disorderly when I’m working on something because I get too single-minded,” Adam said agreeably, though he hoped that his script hadn’t vanished into that pile somewhere. To his relief, it seemed like Mr. Glass had some kind of system in his clutter and his script was plucked from the top of one of the piles and moved to a clear spot on the desk.

“Can I get you anything before we start? Coffee? Or would you prefer tea?”

“No thanks. I’m quite curious to find out what you thought about the script,” Adam said, unable to resist pressing what he was there for. “Professor Mackey speaks very highly of you.”

Mr. Glass didn’t seem at all offended by Adam’s directness. “I’ve known Gerry Mackey for more years that either of us is comfortable admitting to and we’ve worked together quite a bit,” he acknowledged. “He’s steered a lot of talented writers in my direction. Some of them were former students of his, but this is the first time he insisted that I look at a script written by someone who was still a student of his at the time. And I’m not going to lie… I was a little dubious at first. I’ve read more than my fair share of scripts by young writers that came across as amateurish.”

Adam swallowed tightly, not quite sure what to make of that statement.

Mr. Glass turned a confiding smile to him. “I should know by now to stop doubting him on his judgment.”

It took Adam a moment to work the nervous dryness from his mouth and he could speak. “So it was good?” he asked.

“It’s got some serious potential,” Mr. Glass stated. “Now to be sure, it’s a bit rough around the edges and as it’s written now, it’s a very small show. Gerry sent me the video of your staging and direction and I have a better sense of what you were aiming for with this story. The script is a little bare on the details that came out in the actual performance because you were directing and knew what you wanted. If someone else was directing, it probably would have been an entirely different show.”

Adam felt himself wince inwardly at the criticism, but he knew it to be fair.

“Now, that’s not necessarily a bad thing,” Mr. Glass insisted. “That can sometimes give directors a lot of freedom to put their own stamp on a show, but I think that your own vision as a writer gets a bit lost. And it’s a pretty short show, so I think there’s plenty of room to expand on the storyline and fill in some of those blanks.”

Adam must have made some show of distress because Mr. Glass offered him an encouraging smile. “But your script does have good bones and the overall story is very engaging. The two characters are fantastic and I appreciate that you managed to avoid a lot of clichés that we usually see in small shows like this. I think that there’s some really good stuff to work with here.”

Adam quickly rallied, wanting to make the best impression he possibly could. “I’ve already worked on some revisions,” he offered, checking his notes. “Professor Mackey made some suggestions and I worked on the script over the summer.”

“Well, I trust what Gerry would have advised. And as I said, I do see a lot of real potential here that I would like to see achieved.”
Adam looked up from his notes hopefully. “Then you’re interested in producing my script?” he couldn’t help from asking.

“It’s definitely got my attention. I don’t see us being able to get it staged for this season,” Mr. Glass admitted. “The script is still too rough and as I said, we would need to expand the plotline a bit for an appropriate run time. I don’t think we would be able to get everything ready in time for a spring opening.

“But I do think that we can look forward to next winter as a real possibility,” the producer said thoughtfully. “I think that we could get a positive response from one of the smaller off-Broadway venues because looking at the list of shows debuting this year, I’m expecting that there should be a lot of openings as shows shut down. But I would want to see a full rewrite of the script and getting it up to two acts before we take that step.”

Adam nodded eagerly. “I can do that,” he insisted. “There are things that I wanted to explore in the storyline that I didn’t have the chance to do with the original staging. I was very much limited on the stage time for my project. And Professor Mackey offered to continue advising me and will review my rewrites.”

“Well, I’m looking forward to seeing what you come up with,” Mr. Glass assured him. “Once we get the script in order we can consider the timing of a run. That will give us enough time to line up the right venue and getting a director on board.”

Adam blinked in surprise. “I… I’m sorry, but I’d assumed that I’d be directing.”

Mr. Glass looked at him patiently and suddenly Adam felt foolish for what was clearly as serious presumption. “I know that you directed your school project, and you did a very credible job,” the producer granted. “It’s obvious that you’ve got good instincts in that area and I understand that you have a pretty deep personal investment in this script. But I think that the show would benefit from a more seasoned hand guiding things. We know it’s your writing and we want to make sure that we bring in someone who can help make it the best show it can be.”

Adam nodded numbly, feeling his cheeks burning in mortification. He sounded like a spoiled child when he should be delighted that this man was even considering backing his little play.

“Besides, I think you’re going to be too busy since we would definitely want to bring you in to play Daniel,” the producer added. “I thought that your performance was wonderful. It was complex and nuanced and really remarkable when you consider that you were directing at the same time. I’m curious to see what you would do under the guidance of a director who shared your vision.”

Adam looked up at him in surprise and it took him a moment to grasp what he was being told. “I…” He paused to clear his throat. “I wasn’t sure of what kind of involvement you’d want me to have in the production.”

“It was something that we definitely considered after seeing your performance. Daniel is the core of the play and it seems fitting to have the man who both created him and originated the part get to play him. Now I understand that we’re talking about something that may not happen until a year from now at the earliest,” Mr. Glass granted. “We don’t know where you’ll be and what you may be doing at the time but I’d like to keep this on our radars because you’re our first choice for the part.”

“So let’s focus on getting through the first steps and have you do that rewrite. We’ll give you feedback and once the script is in order, I’ll be able to present it to our financial backers and we can see about putting it on track to be staged. This is just the first step of what’s going to be a long process,” he warned Adam. “But I think the material is worthy so I’m hoping that we will be able to
When Adam finally walked out of the office, he felt physically drained and not totally able to shake the feeling of disappointment. He knew that by all rights the meeting had gone exceedingly well. To be told that the producer was not only interested in his play but that they wanted him to reprise his role in it should have been gratifying, but he felt quite deflated at the prospect of someone else directing. Rationally it made sense to bring in an experienced director since the backers would probably balk at financing a play with a first time writer and director. For all his personal investment in his play, he knew that he would need to step back a little and let more experienced hands help guide it.

And maybe it was unrealistic to have hoped that they would want to move on it more rapidly, but he hadn’t been able to totally tamp down the hope of staging his play more quickly. He was still in the process of finding work and having a clear timetable on his play would have relieved his anxiety over the issue. To find out that it would be at year, at the very least, before they would be able to stage his play was disheartening.

Checking his watch, he thought that Kurt should be done with his morning classes and might even be taking his lunch break. He’d been in Mr. Robson’s office longer than he’d expected to be. Getting out his phone, he dialed Kurt’s number and waited for his answer. He very much needed to hear Kurt’s voice.

“Hi sweetie!” Kurt answered brightly. “How did it go?”

“Not bad,” Adam admitted, the sound of the younger man’s voice immediately cheering him. “They’re interested, but they want a full rewrite of the script. And they want me to play Daniel if and when the play gets staged.”

“Really? That’s fantastic, babe!” Kurt exclaimed.

Adam couldn’t help from smiling. Kurt always was supportive and good at helping him put things in perspective. “I’m not going to lie… I was admittedly disappointed when Mr. Robson talked about bringing in another director, but that’s probably the best option and it will be interesting to get some unbiased direction. I just wish that it would be workable to get staged sooner than next year at the earliest.”

“That probably isn’t unreasonable,” Kurt acknowledged. “But seriously… they’re still interested in your play! And they want you in it! That’s really amazing.”

The words of encouragement soothed Adam’s admittedly hurt feelings. Things had gone better than he had any reasonable right to expect and Kurt helped him see rationally just what a huge accomplishment this had been.

“I’m glad you think so, sweetheart,” Adam said. “In the meantime, I’ve got just enough time to grab some lunch before my call back.”

“Call me afterwards,” Kurt insisted and Adam could all but feel the love from the younger man coming over the connection. “And good luck. We’re all cheering for you.”

“Love you, darling,” Adam answered. “Have fun in class.”

After speaking with Kurt, Adam left a voice mail for Professor Mackey, thanking him for setting up the meeting for him and letting him know that it had gone well. Checking the time, he decided to find something for a fast lunch because he hoped that he had a long and fruitful afternoon waiting for
Stepping out of his Comedy and Character class, Kurt knew that he had a bare twenty minutes before his voice session with Professor Collins. That would allow him just enough time to rush out to Starbucks to pick up a tea and he was going to need it to make it through his class.

Hurrying over to the coffee shop, he found a thankfully short line and put in his order. He was perusing the display case to see if there were any snacks to tempt him when he was tapped on the shoulder. Turning around, he found Mei grinning at him as she sipped her iced coffee. She looked absolutely adorable in her latest interpretation of Asian street fashion, pairing a frilly black dress with stockings decorated with kitty faces at her knees and chunky shoes.

“Hi Kurt,” she said brightly. His fellow Apple cocked her head at the large paper cup in his hand. “Afternoon refuel?”

Kurt smiled and shook his head. “More like a throat soother because I think that Professor Collins is in a conspiracy with Madam Tibideaux to see if they can break me this semester.”

Mei giggled playfully. “Well save some of that for tonight,” she warned. “Jules has very definite plans. Were you able to convince Adam to join us?”

Kurt’s smile faded a bit. “I’m afraid not,” he informed her. “He’s working a late shift at the bar. I probably won’t be seeing him until morning.”

“But Kurt, he hasn’t hung out with us at all since school started,” Mei reminded him. “We really miss him.”

“He knows that, hon,” Kurt assured her. “But he’s working and going to auditions all the time. It probably won’t ease up until he finds a role and can relax a little bit.

Mei’s expression wilted at Kurt’s explanation, but nodded in reluctant acceptance. “You’ll tell him that we’re all thinking about him?” she asked.

Kurt nodded, offering her a reassuring smile. “Of course I will. Mei, he knows that you all miss him,” he insisted. “He wants to make sure that he doesn’t step on anyone’s toes while we work out where the Apples go from here. We all need time to figure out how we move on going forward.”

She sighed, knowing that pressing the issue wouldn’t change things. “I’d better get going,” she sighed reluctantly. “I have my workshop starting in a little bit. I’ll see you later?”

“Of course!” Kurt promised. “I also have to run… if I’m late, Professor Collins will have my head on a platter.”

Mei smiled and kissed him gently on the cheek. “Go on… I’ll see you tonight.”

Kurt grabbed his cup and rushed back to campus as quickly as he could manage without giving himself a third degree burn. He all but ran through the front doors, nimbly dodging a pair of freshmen leaving the school for the day. He charged down the hallway and arrived at Professor Collin’s studio with a bare two minutes to spare. Just enough time to catch his breath before his session began.

Thankfully he knew Professor Collin’s habits and he had a chance to put his bag down and mentally settle before the hand on the old fashioned clock on the wall hit three and his instructor strolled in,
“Good afternoon, Mr. Hummel,” he greeted cheerfully. Professor Collins was the exact opposite of Madam Tibideaux in every manner possible; encouraging and approachable instead of demanding and imperious. But he was a serious instructor and wouldn’t waste his time on anyone who wasn’t willing to put in the work. There was no coaxing or cajoling into getting students to work with him. And Kurt had found that he was benefiting from both instructors. Seeing his development from different angles was pushing him in ways that he wouldn’t have received from a single mentor.

“I hope that you’re ready to be put through your paces today,” Professor Collins warned genially.

Kurt nodded, taking his place next to the piano. “Yes sir.”

“Have you done your vocal warm-ups yet?”

“No sir,” Kurt said.

Professor Collins smiled kindly, giving his assistant a nod. The young woman sat down at the piano and set her hands on the keys, waiting for further instruction.

“Well, let’s not waste time then,” the teacher proposed. “We’ll start with scales.”

In his time at NYADA, Kurt’s voice had climbed a virtual Mount Everest of scales. Some singers might think that the exercise was beneath them, but Kurt recognized that this fundamental was one that would always serve his education well. To develop not just his voice, but his ear as well. To know what a note was supposed to sound like so that he could make sure that he preformed them with accuracy.

They started in the key of A, then A sharp. Three octaves each with his voice hitting each of the notes cleanly, going from the deepest tones of his range to his highest. The pianist guided his voice through the exercises, giving him the reference points and tempo. The exercises had become familiar enough but he knew not to get complacent because Professor Collins liked to throw in surprises here and there.

When he got up to the D sharp notes, Professor Collins called out, “Staccato, if you please Mr. Hummel. Let’s switch up the pace.”

That was harder, needing to hit notes cleanly and quickly with little recovery time between them. He had less time to think and focus and just had to throw himself completely into the exercise. Kurt knew the point of this exercise and he could see that it would not only strengthen his voice, but his instincts and ear as well. It would also expand the types of music that his voice could comfortably suit.

By the time they were finished with the F scale, Kurt felt a sense of relief and accomplishment. He could hear the improvement in his voice and his increasing strength. He was getting more confident about his abilities. He knew that his biggest disadvantage had been his lack of formal voice training and now that he was receiving it, the difference in his abilities as a singer was showing.

Professor Collins nodded approvingly. “Very nice, Mr. Hummel. Let’s move on to your breathing exercises. We’ll see if we can’t get a bit more strength for that upper range of yours.”

Kurt nodded and took a quick sip of tea. His work was just getting started.

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Adam arrived back at the apartment, feeling better now that his call back was done. It seemed to
have gone well and he felt that he was still in the running for that role. It might be off Broadway and a replacement role, but it was a good prospect and if he got the role it would certainly help in setting him on the road to working on a regular basis.

He tried to keep his spirits up, especially around Kurt. His lover had been so supportive these past few weeks, keeping things in perspective and far more confident than Adam was that he’d find a role before long. The last thing Kurt needed was to see Adam moping because of his unreasonable expectations.

All in all, things were going well for him. He was doing fine financially and he didn’t mind his jobs all that much. To be honest, he actually enjoyed tending bar as his natural accent made him popular with the customers and they tended to tip generously. He could keep on like this for some time, giving him the luxury of time to find work.

The apartment seemed dark and cold when he arrived, which was surprising. He’d lived on his own for two years now and was used to having the flat to himself. How is it that in such a brief amount of time that he would come to so genuinely miss the constant presence of the younger man? In just a few months simple attraction had transformed into a need that could not be appeased by any substitute. Kurt had become a vital center to his life in a way that Adam had never expected but now could not imagine having to do without.

To arrive home and know that Kurt would still be at school and that he wouldn’t see him until after midnight… he sighed, telling himself to stop moping.

He moved into the kitchen to consider dinner before he had to head out to the bar and saw his favorite tea mug sitting on the counter with a teabag in it, just ready for some boiling water. A plate of shortbread biscuits sat alongside a note written in Kurt’s neat handwriting. Adam smiled as he read the brief missive advising him to eat and have a good night at work and that Kurt would be waiting for him when he got home.

Adam knew how incredibly lucky he really was. He had some halfway decent prospects and something should come through for him. His play had been received probably as well as he could have reasonably expected and he had enough employment to keep a roof over his head and food on the table. And last but in no way least was that he had the most amazing man in his life.

Things would work out for him. He was sure of that. It would just be a matter of time.

* * *

Carman Tibideaux sighed to herself, knowing that she wouldn’t be leaving her office anytime soon. Even though they were in the relative early weeks of the semester, a remarkable amount of work was waiting for her to clear away. There were lesson plans to revise based upon what she was seeing in her classrooms that affected the long range planning for her students’ development. The freshman class was still in the process of showing what they were capable of, while her sophomores were growing by leaps and bounds.

It was not all good news. Two of those she had personally selected for that first class ended up not being able to keep up and failed enough classes to be expelled, and one promising singer found the demands of the curriculum too much to handle and transferred to a less demanding environment. It was a bit disappointing to see gifts that had seemed so promising fall short and provided a reminder that for all her experience and knowledge that she wasn’t infallible. She was as prone to making mistakes as anyone, a fact that she found humbling. She carried an incredible responsibility to this institution and its students to live up to, and that she needed to keep in mind at all times.
Second guessing her decisions was not her way, but she could see how her errors in judgment could have such long reaching impacts. It was to be expected that at least a few incoming students would find NYADA more than they were able to handle, but she had been hoping to defy that trend. But apparently she was as prone to making errors in judgement as anyone else.

Looking over the notes for two of her most promising students, she knew that she had made mistakes where both of them were concerned. Rejecting Kurt Hummel after his first audition had been a clear misjudgment on her part, as he had shown her from the start that he had the kind of gift that NYADA should nurture. But that initial rejection had revealed Mr. Hummel’s most valuable attributes to her. He proved his fortitude and strength and hunger to learn that she wondered would have been revealed quite so profoundly if he hadn’t had that struggle.

She’d found the exact opposite issue with Ms. Berry, she considered looking over the notes from their last session. She saw Ms. Berry’s gift and despite her failed audition, granted her admission over other promising applicants. She then compounded that error by giving her a place in the Winter Showcase that just exacerbated her sense of entitlement that nearly derailed Ms. Berry’s education completely.

Would she have seen that same strength in Mr. Hummel if she’d given him the admission that he’d originally deserved, or would the weaknesses that Ms. Berry revealed had she followed her initial instincts to reject her application? Would Ms. Berry had shown some hidden strength to overcome that momentary setback and not fallen prey to her own ego? Would Mr. Hummel have shown the same remarkable drive and growth?

She would never publically express the doubts she had in her own judgment or the sense of relief that if she had made errors that things were working out well in the end. Mr. Hummel was growing in leaps and bounds and was standing out at NYADA in all the ways that she could have hoped for, and Ms. Berry’s weaknesses were slowly being overcome and she was starting to find that she had more to offer than being just another cheap Streisand mimic. Both of them might truly become the performers that she hoped they would be despite her mistakes. That was a humbling and eye-opening thing to contemplate.

Well… enough with the navel gazing, she told herself firmly as she sipped at her afternoon tea. She would need to completely switch around her plans for the second level voice students to make the most of the developments she was seeing. Mr. Hummel, Ms. Berry, Ms. Khorey, Mr. Mclean… her students needed to be pressed and challenged a bit more. They were ready.

A knock on her door shook her from her musings and she looked up in surprise. “Who is it?” she demanded, a trifle annoyed at being startled.

“It’s me, Carmen,” a woman’s voice called from behind the door. “Do you have a minute?”

Madam Tibideaux smiled at the familiar voice. “Come on in, Alexa,” she invited.

The door opened and Alexa Carmody stepped in. “I don’t know why I’m surprised to see you here so late,” she said teasingly.

“All right?” Madam Tibideaux chuckled. “I’ve got some hot water. Lady Grey all right?”

“Thanks,” the other teacher said thankfully, watching as the dean expertly prepared the cup the way that her friend liked it. “Mmmm… you’re going to have to tell me one day where you get your teas.”

“A lady needs to keep a few secrets,” Madam Tibideaux chuckled. “So what’s going on?”
Professor Carmody sat back in her chair and looked at the other woman appraisingly, as if wondering how what she wanted to say would be relieved. “It’s about this year’s spring musical. You know that the board wants to tie it in with the annual fund raising drive.”

Madam Tibideaux nodded, knowing that this was going to put extra pressure on her friend to turn out a world class production. “Have you decided what we’re doing this year?”

Professor Carmody nodded. “You’re going to think I’m insane,” she warned

Madam Tibideaux felt her eyebrow arch in surprise when her friend told her just which show she was considering. “That’s… ambitious,” she said carefully.

The other teacher nodded in agreement, looking a bit rueful. “Yes, it is,” she admitted. “But we really need to pull out all the stops. Especially after NYU’s production of South Pacific last year. We can’t rest on our reputation if we want NYADA to continue being known as the best conservatory in the country.”

Madam Tibideaux felt herself nodding in agreement. NYU had gotten some extremely positive write ups for their production, which had gained more notice than NYADA’s own spring musical. That apparently was grating on the members of NYADA’s Board of Directors. The pressure to surpass their rival institution would be intense.

“Well, I don’t envy what you’re going to be in for,” Madam Tibideaux said sympathetically. “Just the scale of the production is going to be daunting. Are you going to be able to get enough students to cast?”

“It’s going to be all hands on deck,” the other teacher granted. “All the seniors and juniors in the musical theater program are automatically guaranteed at least a soloist spot and we’re going to drag in every dramatics student that can carry a tune to help fill out the stage. And that’s something I wanted to discuss with you.

“I know that you have no objections to sophomores auditioning, but we’re really going to need as many of them as we can get to join the cast. If you can give your support to your students to try out, that would help us tremendously.”

Madam Tibideaux considered the request, her mouth frowning slightly. “That’s going to make a huge demand on their time,” she warned carefully. “I doubt that any of them will reject a chance to perform but they might find it too much to handle at this point in their education.”

“I think that participating in the production will be invaluable to a lot of them,” Professor Carmody argued back. “And most of them have pretty extensive performance credits already. This can be a good challenge for them. But I’ll respect what limits you think are appropriate.”

Madam Tibideaux nodded, considering her students. “Unfortunately there aren’t very many roles for the women and I’m assuming that they’ll go to seniors and junior, correct? Some of the boys might be ready for the smaller roles.”

“I have a few that I have in mind that I’m going to do my best to convince to try out,” Professor Carmody confided. “You’ve got some very talented prospects. And you can assure the girls that they might get soloist lines in the bigger numbers to make up for the fact that I can’t cast them in anything more than chorus. That might be enough of a consolation for them.”

Madam Tibideaux nodded, knowing that her friend was correct. As for a few students that readily came to mind, being in the chorus would be especially educational “You’re right… the opportunity
will be a valuable learning experience. I’ll make the announcement at the next class.”

The other teacher smiled thankfully. “Thank you Carmen. This is going to be a huge help. I want this to be the kind of show that gets talked about for years.”

Madam Tibideaux chuckled, sipping at her tea. “Under your guidance, how can it be another but?”

* * *

Adam was grateful that the pub wasn’t so far from his flat so that getting home so late at night wasn’t as daunting. Their neighborhood was a relatively safe one and Adam had been living there long enough to know the quickest way to get to his building. And it was New York, after all. There were still plenty of people out late, even on a work night.

Climbing up the stairs, he was more than ready to just fall into bed. The routine was now familiar enough that he knew exactly what he’d find, and after closing the door behind him he saw that he had no reason to be disappointed.

Kurt was asleep in their bed, curled up on the far side by the window so that Adam wouldn’t need to climb over him. The younger man was bundled in their fall weather bedding, his hair mussed and mouth open a bit as his breath came out in little sighs. Adam paused, admiring the way the light peeking through their blinds highlighted the shine in his hair and gave Kurt’s skin a nearly ethereal glow. The shadows cast lines on developing muscles on the shoulder and arm that clutched a pillow to Kurt’s chest.

Smiling to himself, Adam went to the bathroom to quickly wash up and brush his teeth and changed into his sleep pants so that he could slide into bed. He settled in carefully, not wanting to wake his lover but there must have been some signal that moved Kurt on an instinctual level. No sooner had Adam slid beneath the sheets that Kurt shifted towards his warmth, making a small murmur of satisfaction.

Adam smiled tiredly, letting the younger man settle into his arms. “Good night, love,” he said softly.

Kurt grunted sleepily in response. “’Night Finn,” he murmured.

Adam lifted his head in surprise. “Finn?”

He thought that he could detect just the slightest trace of a smile on Kurt’s face in the shadows. “Sam?”

Adam couldn’t help from laughing. “No, not Sam.”

“Artie?”

“Now you’re just being ridiculous,” Adam accused, giving the younger man a playful poke in the ribs. Kurt giggled, his eyes sparkling as they opened.

“Is this something that I need to be concerned about?” Adam asked teasingly, pulling Kurt up against him. “You’ve been getting closer to Artie and Sam lately.”

“Not at all,” Kurt assured him, settling on top of Adam like a living blanket. He was enjoying the way Adam’s long legs parted a bit, giving him a comfortable space to settle into. They could enjoy the closeness and even fall asleep comfortably in this position, though Kurt was hoping that they wouldn’t be falling asleep just yet.
Adam ran his hand through Kurt’s hair, savoring the feeling of the soft strands as he trailed his fingers through. “You weren’t waiting up for me the whole time, were you?”

“No,” Kurt assured him, kissing his lover softly on the lips. “But I heard you coming in.”

“I’m sorry, love,” Adam said apologetically. “I was trying not to make any noise.”

Kurt’s fingers traced the line of Adam’s jaw, admiring the gentle strength in the Englishman’s features. Adam was truly a beautiful man and Kurt never got tired of studying his features. It had become his favorite hobby since their first meeting. He would never have expected them to be so well matched but here they were.

“It’s fine. I wanted to be up when you got home,” he insisted. “I thought that we could have a mini-celebration.”

Adam felt his weariness start to fade as Kurt’s intentions became clear. “Did we have something specific to be celebrating?” he asked suggestively, tightening his hold on the younger man.

“Well… your play is on its way to getting staged,” Kurt suggested.

Adam couldn’t help snorting. “At least a year from now,” he pointed out.

“Hush,” Kurt reprimanded playfully. “You’ve also been getting some amazing call backs, so you’re going to land a role sooner or later.”

“Hopefully sooner,” Adam mused, his hands starting to slide down Kurt’s back to grip his gorgeous ass.

“And we’re living together,” Kurt reminded him. “We get to sleep together every night in the same bed. So I think that we’ve got plenty to be celebrating.”

The older man’s eyes softened at his lover’s words. “You’re so very right, sweetheart. And I’ll be thankful for this every day of my life.”

Kurt leaned into Adam’s embrace, feeling so incredibly secure with the other man’s arms around him. He kissed Adam again, feeling things get a bit more heated and parts of their bodies expressing mutual interest in things progressing. Adam’s hands tightened on his ass, pulling him close and it was clear that they wouldn’t be getting sleep anytime soon.

At least he didn’t have to be up at the crack of dawn this morning.

* * *

If there was one thing that Kurt loved about living with Adam, besides the obvious, was the convenience of their apartment to school. At worst it was a quick trip by subway or bus, but he enjoyed the walk while the weather was still nice enough to do so. The half hour or so that the walk took him gave him a bit of fresh air and exercise, something always appreciated on days when he might be stuck in classrooms all day. It gave him the opportunity to think and clear his head. He could consider his performances and his studies from a fresh angle. The chance to decompress a bit before and after school was helping him significantly to handle the pressures of his studies.

He also was getting the opportunity to explore the larger area around his new neighborhood and finding all kinds of interesting shops and businesses. He’d found a street vendor with the freshest fruit salads and best smoothies, and a bakery that made the most amazing donuts for the days when he needed a sugar boost. There was a tiny coffee bar that always had the most intriguing smells
coming out of it and a new ramen place that opened up a few weeks ago that was rapidly becoming a
favorite of his.

He’d been in New York just about a year now and his world had been completely opened up. Back
in Lima Kurt had fantasized about his future, with images of luxurious apartments he’d seen in
magazines and performing in some spectacular show. He’d imagined in dining in world class
restaurants, but he’d never really been able to picture what he was eating or how it would taste. He’d
imagined Blaine at his side, the perfect partner to his career and aspirations.

He never thought that he would have a part time job at Vogue, walking among world famous models
and designers and have them know his name. He never thought that he would be working as hard as
he was and loving it so much. And that he would be so happy living in a tiny shoebox of an
apartment with a man who was Blaine’s opposite in every meaningful way.

He had friends who weren’t movers and shakers in the business, but who had come to mean so much
to him. He went to bars and clubs where he stood out, but for the right reasons. He had teachers who
could give the most hardened drill sergeants lessons in toughness and rather than being coddled and
guided, he was being pushed and challenged and allowed to take absolutely nothing for granted. All
of his certainties had been thrown into flux, but so had all of his fears.

He was capable of so much more than he had ever thought, and his dreams had opened up in a way
that still staggered him. He was learning to let go of the future that he’d always imagined for himself
because what he was on the path to accomplishing was so much more than his sheltered, limited
imagination had been capable of foreseeing.

Spotting his best friend outside the main NYADA building, he knew that he wasn’t the only one in
that position. Rachel had also had her mental images about what the future would hold for her
shaken in a rather dramatic fashion and it nearly broke her. But she had found a fortitude that he had
never seen her display before and had managed to grow in ways that he was delighted to see. She
was still driven and competitive and he knew that there were times that he would be as much a rival
as a friend in her eyes, but it was no longer to the point that he felt that their friendship couldn’t
thrive. She’d learned to be more open and giving, both as a performer and a person.

Rachel spotted his approach and gave a wave to make sure that he saw her. “Good morning!” she
said brightly. “I was just about to get a cup of coffee. Want something?”

He gave her a quick kiss on the cheek in greeting. “Have I ever turned down caffeine before?” he
asked playfully.

The MUD coffee truck was in its usual spot on the corner, ready to provide students with the coffee
drinks that they would need to survive their day and Rachel put in the orders for their usuals. “Nope,
it’s on me today,” she insisted when Kurt got his wallet out and paid before he could protest. “Tips
had been very good the past week.”

“Thanks,” he said gratefully, accepting the paper cup with his mochaccino and sipping
appreciatively. The combination of chocolate with coffee provided just the kick that he needed to
jumpstart his day.

“Late night?” Rachel asked teasingly, sticking a straw into her iced coffee.

“A bit. Adam got home late last night.”

“And of course you didn’t just go right to sleep,” she surmised playfully. “Not that I blame you, of
course. But Madam Tibideux isn’t going to be pleased if you doze off in class.”
He nodded, falling into step at her side as they walked inside. “I won’t,” he promised. “In fact, I was thinking about what we’ve been working on and I wanted to try something new.”

“Well, I can’t wait to see it.”

Arriving at the voice studio, they greeted their friends and classmates as they took their seats, Kurt sitting between Rachel and Analisa. They chatted quietly about their latest assignment as they waited for their teacher to arrive. When Madam Tibideaux walked in, they immediately fell silent and granted their instructor their full attention.

The imperious teacher looked over her class, pleased to see everyone in their places and looking alert and ready to work. She smoothed the lay of her violet caftan and took her place at the front of the room.

“Good morning, everyone,” she greeted. “We have a lot to get through today, so let’s begin.”

Kurt settled in as another day at NYADA formally began.
Chapter 2

Rachel walked out of the classroom, nearly buzzing with excitement. “Can you believe it?” she asked her friend, grabbing his arm. “Les Miz! In our school! Oh my God, Kurt! We have to audition!”

He nodded, not bothering to hide his own excitement. “How ironic is that? For us to go from singing it at Midnight Madness to actually being in a production.”

At one time the mention of her Great Defeat, as she phrased it, would have made her bristle. But now she merely accepted it as part of the steep learning curve she had to endure. “You know, if you told me last year that I’d be thrilled to be in a chorus spot, I would have suggested an appointment with my shrink,” Rachel laughed brightly. “But this is going to be such an amazing opportunity.”

Kurt smiled down at his friend. “I’m really happy that you see it that way. I really enjoyed being in the ensemble this summer and it is a great chance to really learn.”

She nodded, brushing her hair back from her face. “Well, I’m not going to lie… I always wanted to play Eponine. It’s one of my dream roles and you and I would totally be amazing doing ‘A Little Fall of Rain’, but I can understand why the upper classmen are getting those roles. They’re the ones who really need to think about finding work. They need the exposure more than we do at the moment.”

Kurt nodded, thankful that his friend was keeping her ego firmly in check. At least for now. It might be another story once they actually started work on the show and she faced the realities of being in the chorus because she was never comfortable as a supporting player. It would probably be a very good experience for her to play a background role for once, but he still knew that she would be wondering how the show would work with her playing her favored character.

As if reading his thoughts, Rachel gave him a pensive look. “I know what everyone says about me,” she admitted. “I gave myself a pretty bad rep as far as being willing to work with others. This can give me the chance to change people’s minds and help my chances in junior year when we’ll be eligible for leads.”

Kurt smiled, draping his arm about her shoulders and pulling her close so that he could press a gentle kiss to the top of her head. “You’ve come such a long way,” he praised honestly. “A few years ago, you would have stormed out of the room in a huff at the very thought of someone else getting a lead instead of you.”

She nodded, her mouth twisted into an ironic smile. “I really was a brat, wasn’t I? I mean, if the director thinks that I’d be perfect to play Eponine… which I am… I won’t say no,” she warned playfully. “But I know that I still have some repair work to do as far as my reputation goes, so I’m going to be a good sport. But do me a favor?”

“Sure,” he said readily. “What do you need?”

Rachel looked up at him frankly. “If you see me getting out of hand and starting to act like an idiot again, don’t hesitate giving me a smack down. Even if it takes another Midnight Madness beat down, I need to keep myself in check.”

Kurt could see that Rachel was seeing this as a test for herself; to see if she could control herself and he understood what a challenge it would be for her. There was only so much he could reasonably expect her to rein her competitiveness in. “I will,” he assured her. “But do me a favor? Don’t give me
“I’ll try,” she promised. “I really will. I need to do this right.”

Kurt sighed and nodded. He really hoped that it wouldn’t have to be the one to keep Rachel’s ego from flying out of control again. He had more than enough on his plate right now.

His friend’s expression brightened as she tried to turn their attention to more enjoyable matters. “Well, we need to plan our audition material, because we both at least deserve to get a solo line or two.”

* * *

“Thanks, mate,” Adam said, picking up the bills placed on the bar for him. The young man he’d been serving for the past few hours was in a good mood, having scored the phone number of the curvy blond he’d been chatting up the past half hour and that translated into a generous tip for his friendly bartender. Adam had leaned by now that people who were lucky in love tended to be very generous to the barmen who helped facilitate their conquests.

He remembered his own days when he’d go out on the pull looking for company. It had been hard when he first came to the States. He didn’t know anyone and he felt like something of an odd duck; a young gay man from England who dreamed of being the next Sir Lawrence Olivier. Reality had hit him quickly enough, when late at night he’d be struck by just how far from home he truly was. There were times when he was so lonely that cruising the local gay bars to look for temporary company was a far more appealing preference than sitting in his dorm room alone night after night. Apparently American men went mad for British accents and there were more than a few one night stands in his background.

It took him time to find his place and slowly, he began to build a circle of friends. Then the Apples came into being and over time became his substitute family in New York. He managed to have some good, albeit brief, relationships along the way but nothing that made him want to linger for too long. Not until the night that he saw a gorgeous young man taking the stage and heard a voice that would haunt him all the days of his life. He fell in love, and eventually was loved in return.

He never would have expected that his greatest reason for staying in the States would have nothing to do with his professional aspirations. Before that night, returning to England to pursue a career on the West End was an option that he’d kept open for himself. But then he met Kurt and now couldn’t bear the thought of leaving him.

So what if he was tending bar at night and serving coffee during the day? He was building his dream. Slowly, and maybe by baby steps, but he was moving forward. And he had the most spectacular, loving man at his side, urging him on when his own failings got the better of him. Kurt made him want to try harder, to push beyond the momentary disappointments. He had a reason to want success far beyond his own selfish aspirations. After all, given how ambitious Kurt was, he needed to up his game to keep up with him.

It was nearing eleven o’clock and things were starting to quiet down a bit since it was a work night. With the crowd thinning out, Adam’s boss looked over from the empty bottles that he was boxing away.

“Hey Adam… you can take off if you want,” he offered. “It’s quieting down and I can hold down the fort until closing.”

“You sure, Peter?” Adam asked. “I don’t mind staying.”
“Nah… it’s okay,” the older man insisted. He looked over the fading crowd. “I’m going to do last call in about twenty minutes and shut down. If you can drop the box off at the recycling bin it would be a huge help.”

“Sure,” Adam said agreeably. “I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

It would be nice to be getting home before midnight, Adam thought. Kurt had been more than tolerant with his work hours, but both of them were feeling the strain of their conflicting schedules. It was becoming rare for them to have a full day together without one of them running off, and to be frank… it was starting to wear on him.

He was about to get his jacket when the door opened and he heard the laughter and voices of a fairly large group coming into the pub. With a sigh, he turned back to the bar, knowing that there was no way that he could leave Peter to handle the late arriving group on his own. He pasted on a warm smile, valiantly hiding the disappointment about having to stay until the end of his shift. Hopefully this lot would be generous with their tips to make it worth his while.

Any disappointment faded when he recognized the noisy people coming into the bar. His Apples had apparently reached their limit with his hiding and decided that if Mohammed refused to visit the mountain then it was time to bring the mountain to Mohammad. It looked as if everyone was there… Jules, Corrine, Tommy, Jill, Mitchel… a few new faces that he didn’t recognize and assumed were new recruits who joined after his graduation.

And leading them in was his Kurt, looking a trifle bit smug and a smidge too pleased with his clever self.

“Bartender… give me a Blow Job,” Kurt requested primly, sitting down in an empty barstool.

Adam’s eyebrow cocked curiously at his boyfriend’s mischievous nature. “Seriously?” he asked, and Kurt nodded enthusiastically. With a shrug of resignation, Adam placed a shot glass down on the bar in front of Kurt. He had a feeling that he was being set up for something.

“I always want Blow Jobs from you,” Kurt cooed flirtatiously, batting his eyelashes at the older man.

Adam ignored the tittering of their friends and poured a measure of Bailey’s and Kailua into the glass, then topped it with a generous squirt of whipped cream. “Normally you’re polite enough to ask for them in private, but here you go,” Adam proclaimed, presenting the drink with a proper “Ta dah!”

The group watched in amusement as Kurt dramatically placed his hands behind his back and gave a little shimmy before leaning over the glass. Adam watched as Kurt reached out with his tongue to flick away the top of the whipped cream before opening his mouth and picking up the glass carefully with his lips. Jules was beating out a drum roll on the bar top as Kurt tossed his head back and downed the sweet concoction in one gulp before neatly placing the glass down on the bar top to the applause and cheers of their friends. He took a brief bow before turning an expectant gaze back to his boyfriend.

Adam tried to keep his mind on the fact that he was in his workplace, but the sight of Kurt licking a trace of cream from his lips with that oh so clever tongue was putting images into his head that were not at all work appropriate. Some of his old friends noticed his discomfort and quickly chimed in to increase the pressure.

“Ohhh… I want a Blow Job from Adam too!” Jill exclaimed, only to have Mitchel laugh at her.
“Girls don’t get blow jobs,” he insisted sagely. “They give them.”

“I can get a Blow Job too if I want one!” Jill insisted indignantly, pulling Tommy up to the bar. “One for Tommy too! It’ll be his first!”

“I’ll take a Blow Job,” Corrine chimed in, leaning close to Kurt. “I’m good with my mouth.”

“Which comes from having no gag reflex,” Tommy quipped, getting a jab in the ribs from Corrine’s elbow in response.

“Blow Jobs for everyone!” Jules proclaimed, loud enough that the entire bar, and quite possibly everyone within a two block radius, would hear him.

“Except for our newbies… Shirley Temples for them,” Mei interjected, to the protestations of the younger Apples who wanted to join in the fun. And score a bit of alcohol if no one was paying too much attention since they were under aged.

Adam laughed good-naturedly at their ribald humor as set out the appropriate number of shot glasses for the group. Peter came over to see what was going on and chuckled, giving Adam a warm supportive pat on the shoulder.

“Friends of yours?” he asked, highly amused at the groups antics. A bit of entertainment on a slow night was always appreciated, though having his boss witnessing his friends doing their best to embarrass him wasn’t helping matters any.

“They may not be after tonight,” Adam answered as he carefully poured portions of Bailey’s Irish Cream. He’d gotten very good at eyeballing the right amounts for drinks in the past few weeks. It was a good thing that his boss didn’t mind his friends invading the bar like this. “Apparently they feel that I need to be punished for avoiding them the past few weeks.”

“Hey guys… should we mark this as the night that Adam gave Blow Jobs to everyone in the group?” Mitchel proclaimed, causing the rest of the group to burst out laughing. The few other customers were watching Adam’s humiliation in amusement, apparently enjoying the free show.

Mei giggled, sitting down next to Kurt and leaning into him playfully. “Adam, I never knew that you were such a floozy,” she joked.

He just shook his head, knowing that he had to take his medicine. He’d brought this on himself by hiding from his friends for so long. “Yeah, that’s me… cheap and easy,” he bemoaned playfully. Taking great care, he set out the drinks for his friends. “Well, you all ordered them. Blow Jobs, courtesy of Adam Crawford. Enjoy.”

Kurt watched in amusement as some of the group made to pick up their glasses and called out, “Not like that! You can’t use your hands. Do it the way I did.”

Adam leaned back, watching in amusement as Kurt guided the group in the fine art of downing this particular drink. The girls had no problem, making a big show about their previous oral experiences, but some of the boys lacked the dexterity to do it cleanly and he got the pleasure of laughing at their struggles. Mitchel had no problems, as he bragged about his extensive blow job expertise, but Tommy and Jules very nearly ended up spilling their drinks over themselves.

Kurt turned to Adam, his blue eyes twinkling mischievously. “Does it make me a bad person that I’m laughing at straight boys that can’t handle a Blow Job?”

Mei sat back in her seat and licked at her lips dreamily. “Mmmm… Adam does the best Blow Jobs.”
“You know that you’re running that joke into the ground, love,” Adam warned as he served up virgin drinks to the new faces in the group. The kids looked like they shouldn’t be out of middle school, but they accepted their drinks with resigned grace and thanked him. He made a mental note for Kurt to introduce him to everyone that joined since the school year began.

Kurt blinked, looking concerned that they might have gone too far. “Are you angry?” he asked carefully. “I know it’s a bit much but they all really wanted to see you and…”

Adam looked to his boyfriend, his expression softening. “It’s more than all right, sweetheart,” he insisted. “I was being a bit of a prat in avoiding them. And I was rather expecting them to press the issue at some point.”

Kurt grinned, smiling in relief. “Good. They really did miss you.”

“I promise… no more hiding,” Adam insisted, holding up two fingers to his head. “Scout’s honor.”

Kurt cocked his head. “When were you a Boy Scout?”

“Never… but shhh… don’t tell anyone.”

Kurt giggled, reaching over the bar to pull Adam close enough to kiss on the cheek. Adam felt a wave of warmth running through him, secure in the knowledge that he had friends that wouldn’t allow him to hide away and a loving partner to support him. All in all, he was very happy with his life at the moment.

“Well, come on, love,” Adam urged. “I see a few new faces here. Why don’t you introduce me to everyone?”

* * *

Madam Tibieaux nodded in approval as Kurt finished with his warm up vocal exercises. “Very nice,” she complimented. “There is definite improvement in your projection. It’s coming across much more effortlessly. I’m not seeing you telegraphing nearly so much as I did previously.”

Kurt smiled in quiet satisfaction that his skills were progressing. “I’ve been doing those exercises you showed me,” he told her. “They definitely seem to be helping.”

“Good… good,” she granted. “I’m glad that you’re finding them useful. Our voices are instruments and just like any instrument, they require constant tuning. You’ve been showing more strength and we’ve managed to clean up some of the vocal ticks that you’ve picked up over the years.”

Kurt had worked with Madam Tibideaux long enough to recognize that her compliments were as valid as her criticisms. If she was telling him that he was improving, he could take her word for it. It was still sometimes hard for him to accept a compliment after having his self-esteem left in tatters too many times, but he was getting better. As important as it was for him to know when he was doing something wrong, he also needed to know when he was doing something right. There was no place for false modesty in this room.

“I’m also seeing more warmth coming into your tone, especially in your middle and lower range,” his teacher appraised thoughtfully. “Your upper range still has the brightness that we expect in a countertenor, but I dare think that you could certainly handle a singing role that requires a lyric or dramatic tenor at this point.”

Kurt nodded. “That’s good to know, because I know that there aren’t a lot of musical theater roles written specifically for a countertenor. I’m going to have to take tenor roles if I want to work.”
The dean had to grant him that. “That’s true. Your voice is very unique so we’re rather in a position of developing it to suit the roles that you will realistically be seeking while at the same time training its specific qualities. Unfortunately we don’t have the luxury of knowing that there is a surplus of countertenor roles available in conventional theater. Now if we were preparing you for an opera career that would be another story.”

It wasn’t anything Kurt wasn’t already well aware of. Most parts were not written with a voice like his in mind. Unless he resigned himself to waiting for the producers to gender switch some traditionally female roles just for him, he had to develop his voice to be strong and elastic enough to handle more conventional tenor parts. Maybe one day someone would write a part with his voice in mind, but for the time being he would have to make his square peg fit into a round hole.

“Fortunately your voice is flexible enough that we can train it to take advantage of a wide range of roles and as you mature, your voice continues to mature,” Madam Tibideaux assured him. “Speaking of roles… you are planning to audition for the spring musical, correct? Because it would be a shame to deny yourself the opportunity.”

“I was definitely planning on it,” Kurt assured her. “I’m just trying to figure out how it’s going to work with my schedule right now. Between the extra classes and my job… it’s going to be a lot.”

“I’m surprised to see hesitation from you,” Madam Tibideaux stated with a sly glint in her eyes. “After all, you have such an affinity for this particular musical.”

Kurt tried not to laugh. At this point it shouldn’t come as any real surprise that the entire faculty was probably well aware of Midnight Madness.

“You are one of the few students that I’m totally confident can handle the extra work without it affecting your overall development,” his teacher insisted. “I’ve seen how organized you are and you never fail to put in extra work when necessary. This would be an excellent addition to your CV.

“And just between us… you are one of several students that Professor Carmody hopes will join in,” Madam Tibideaux confided. “She really is going to need everyone that she can get, and you would be more than just a warm body helping to fill the stage.”

Kurt felt his cheeks warm a bit at the praise and wondered when being wanted for something would cease to always be such a surprise to him. “I shouldn’t disappoint her then. Do you have any suggestions for my audition?”

The dean sat back in her seat and gazed at him thoughtfully. “What you did for your critique last semester… that was probably some of your finest singing and you showed the range of characters that you can easily play. I know that you wanted to show me something unexpected, and I was very pleasantly surprised with how convincing you were with each piece of material. And I think that your experience this past summer will serve you very well.

“This musical requires a specific style of singing that I am confident falls well within your abilities. It’s dramatic, but you have to approach it the same way you would an opera. There’s no written dialogue to support the emotion if it’s not coming out in your voice, but that’s not something that’s ever been a problem for you. Use that ability to your advantage,” Madam Tibideaux advised. “She knows that you can sing. Show her that you can act as well and be able to actually embody a character. There are going to be places for people to just stand around in the background and fill space on the stage, but I expect more from you. And so do you, I believe.”

Kurt nodded in understanding. He knew what he needed to do. “Thank you, Madam.”
Her dark eyes shined warmly behind her glasses. “You are more than welcome, Mr. Hummel. Now let’s put you through your paces. We have a lot more to focus on than just this one performance opportunity. I’d like to see what you do with ‘Le Jazz Hot’ now.”

Kurt smiled, glad that she had chosen one of his favorites that really took advantage of his entire range. He took a sip of water to lubricate his throat and let his mind focus on the much loved and familiar material.

“About twenty years ago… way down in New Orleans…”

* * *

With Adam’s work schedule and Kurt’s classes and commitment to Vogue.Com, Sundays were usually the only days where they got to spend the entire day together. It was a chance to sleep in and recover, to reconnect and find something fun and relaxing to do.

This morning found them lazing in bed, reluctant to leave their warm nest. They were curled about one another like a pair of cats, naked skin pressed close. They made love slowly, taking their time to enjoy one another’s bodies and renew the bond that they shared. Later on, if they could be bothered to drag themselves out of bed, they might go to their favorite local café for brunch. But for now, they just wanted to savor being together.

Kurt sighed happily, his head resting on Adam’s chest so that he could listen to his lover’s strong heartbeat. He felt Adam’s broad hands stroking up and down the length of his body while the older man’s strong arms cradled him in a warm embrace. He felt sheltered and secured and would have been happy to remain in that exact spot for the rest of his life.

“Mmmm… I could stay here forever,” he said softly, closing his eyes. He felt Adam’s arms tighten about him, holding him even closer if that was possible. The light scattering of dark blond hair on the Englishman’s chest tickled Kurt’s cheek as he rubbed his face against Adam’s chest.

“The thought is very appealing,” Adam answered back, his accent thick in Kurt’s ear. “Though we would have to make allowances for food and bathroom breaks.”

“And the occasional shower,” Kurt added. “We’ll have to leave the apartment once in awhile for groceries.”

Adam pouted teasingly. “I hate it when practicalities get in the way of an utterly fantastic promise of non-stop leisure and debauchery.”

Kurt turned his eyes up to gaze at Adam, giving him a teasing smile. “Well, you can debauch me any time you want in between school, cooking, shopping and laundry.”

“And don’t think I won’t take advantage of that,” Adam promised. His eyes softened as he gazed at the man in his arm. “I love you.”

Kurt’s smile grew tender. “I love you too,” he said softly.

Adam’s ears picked up a low gurgle coming from Kurt’s body, as his stomach was making it clear that the periodic need for food was not merely theoretical. Adam chuckled at the flush on mild embarrassment that started on Kurt’s cheeks, but quickly could be traced down his chest.

Taking pity on the younger man, Adam kissed him lightly. “Why don’t we hop into the shower and wash up. Then we can head out for brunch. I’m getting a bit peckish.”
Kurt nodded, thankful for his boyfriend’s consideration. “That sounds like a perfect idea. If you care to join me, I’ll start the shower.”

“We’d better keep it to just showering, otherwise we’ll never get out until it’s time for dinner,” Adam warned. “Not that I would mind that so much, but I fear that you’d just waste away from hunger.”

“So considerate,” Kurt cooed and kissed him on the lips. “I promise to keep our mutual shower activities strictly for cleaning up so we can go eat.”

Kurt slipped from his arms and rose from the bed to give a long stretch and work out any aches. Adam sat back against the pillows, eyeing the younger man’s body with admiration, still feeling the thrill that he got to see and enjoy that gorgeous body whenever he wished to. Not that Kurt’s beautiful form was the only thing that interested him. Not by a long shot. His spirit and mind were even more engaging, endlessly fascinating him. He watched as Kurt walked into the small bathroom to get the water running, smiling to himself. He really did have a wonderful life and it was hard to be discouraged in Kurt’s company.

Kurt turned on the shower, knowing that it would take a few minutes for the hot water to kick in. One thing that they would have to consider when they were looking for a larger place was a better bathroom, Kurt thought to himself as he brushed his teeth. They really did need more space. Adam joined him at the sink, the two of them at ease with one another in the tight quarters as they went about their morning rituals.

They decided on brunch at a café that was walking distance from their apartment that had become a favorite of Adam’s in the past few weeks. It was still fairly warm and Kurt smiled tolerantly as Adam perused the menu, knowing already what his lover would be ordering.

“I don’t know why you bother with the menu,” he chuckled as their usual waitress poured coffee for them. “You get the same thing every time.”

Adam’s nose wrinkled indignantly at his boyfriend’s teasing. “I don’t get it every time,” he protested mildly. “And they might have an interesting special today.”

Kurt poured cream and added a packet of sugar into his coffee. “You’ve ordered it the past three weeks in a row,” he pointed out, amused at his boyfriend’s habits. “And the one time you ordered something else, you kept going on about how you should have ordered the chicken and waffles instead.”

Adam’s cheeks blushed as he placed the menu down. “But it’s so good,” he insisted. “I mean, fried chicken and a waffle? It’s just the most amazing thing and we never see anything like that in England.”

Kurt just rolled his eyes and turned to his own menu, trying to decide if he wanted to be healthy or indulge himself. He usually tried to watch what he ate because he was proud of his toned body and he managed to avoid having Ms. July making critical comments about his weight, but he knew that the scents of Adam’s usual order would only stimulate his appetite and an egg white omelet just wasn’t going to cut it. And he’d been working hard. He deserved a bit of a treat.

Once they placed their orders, Kurt having finally decided on French toast with a side of turkey bacon, they could focus on just being together. There would be no talk about Adam’s employment situation, because that would only be more stressful to the older man, who Kurt knew was trying his hardest to keep his spirits up. Instead they talked about plans for their lives together.

“So Rachel was telling me that she and the roomies decided against doing a big Halloween party
since there will be parties at NYADA and NYU that we’ll be hitting,” Kurt advised. “We also have
the party at Vogue. You are coming with me, right?”

Adam nodded, sipping at his coffee. “Like I would ever want to stay away from that. You still
haven’t told me what you’ve got in mind for costumes.”

Kurt gave him a sly smirk. “You’ll find out when I’m dressing you,” he warned. “I’m raiding the
NYADA costume shop, with my teacher’s blessing of course. I think that you’re going to like what I
have in mind.”

“I trust you,” Adam said approvingly. “I’m sure that you’re planning something truly grand.”

Kurt couldn’t help from grinning widely. “Well, I am warning you… I intend to win every costume
contest,” Kurt pronounced firmly. “So you’d better be prepared to play your part and stay in
character.”

Adam couldn’t help from laughing at Kurt’s excitement. “It would be helpful if you gave me some
notice about my role so I could properly prepare.”

“Hush, you’ll be fine. And Dad was asking if we plan to come to Lima for Thanksgiving. I didn’t
want to commit until I checked with you, but he said that it’s no big deal if we can’t. Finn’s not
going to be going back and they can do something in Washington.”

Adam considered the question and looked at his lover frankly. “If you wouldn’t mind terribly, I’d
very much like to do the holiday here. It will be our first holiday together. Living together, I mean,”
he explained. “It just means a lot to me.”

Kurt’s eyes softened and he couldn’t resist reaching out to take Adam’s hand in his. This was an
important part of building a life together, setting their own traditions as a couple. As a family.

“I think that sounds perfect,” he insisted gently. “And maybe next year we can invite them to spend
the holiday with us. If we have a bigger place, I mean.”

Adam’s sunny grin caused Kurt’s heart to do a little somersault in his chest and again he marveled
that this lovely, gentle man was really his. That of all the men in New York, Adam had chosen him
to be with. And wanted to stay with him. Despite the months that they had been together and his
confidence in the sincerity of Adam’s feelings, it still caused him to marvel.

Their orders arrived and Kurt couldn’t help grinning at the nearly child-like delight on Adam’s face
as a golden waffle topped with two pieces of fried chicken was placed in front of him. The
Englishman’s eyes brightened at the sight of his breakfast and immediately slathered the waffle with
softened butter and poured on a generous portion of warm maple syrup over the entire thing.

“Mmmm….” he groaned, savoring the sweet and savory taste. “You don’t know what you’re
missing, love.”

Kurt used a more measured portion of syrup and butter on his own breakfast and turned a raised
eyebrow at his boyfriend’s display. “I know what I’m missing… a triple bypass in my future.”

Adam smiled tolerantly, knowing not to tease Kurt about something like that. He full well that Kurt
had concerns over his family medical history and tried to take care of himself as best he possibly
could. He knew that he would never see his lover smoke, drink too much or eat fattening foods in
excess. After the health scares that his father had endured in recent years, it was not something that
Adam would ever make light of.
“In the meantime… I know that we have some time before your lease is up but I was thinking that we should at least start window shopping for a new place,” Kurt suggested as he delicately nibbled on his turkey bacon. “Just to get a sense of what’s out there and what we can afford at this point.”

Adam nodded. “We’ll have to base our finances on what we’re earning now,” he reminded Kurt. “Not what I may or may not be earning once I find an acting job. It’ll probably mean tightening our belts a little bit for the foreseeable future.”

Kurt couldn’t help from smiling at Adam’s down to earth practicality. “Of course,” he agreed readily. “I’ll keep my flights of fancy under control. No penthouses or marble bathrooms. Though I would like to avoid a basement apartment if at all possible.”

He took a bite of his French toast and mused, “It would be nice if there were any vacancies in our building. I really love the neighborhood and it’s convenient to everything.”

“We can talk to the landlord and see if there is anything due to open up around the time we need to move. They might even let us transfer our first and last month deposits, which would be very helpful.”

The idea was an appealing one if anyone was moving out of any of the one bedroom flats, Adam thought. He’d been a good tenant the past two years and always paid his rent on time. Their landlord might be willing to work with them to free up the less expensive studio which would be more likely to rent out quickly.

“In the meantime, I’ll keep an eye on the listings to see if anything interesting comes up,” the younger man decided. “It’ll be nice to have a bit more space. And for us to really have a place of our own.”

Adam knew exactly what Kurt meant. The studio flat wasn’t large enough for the younger man to really put his own mark on it the way Adam had over the years and despite having lived there full time for several weeks, it didn’t feel completely like their shared apartment. Many of Kurt’s things that had previously decorated the loft were in storage because they just didn’t have the space. He could easily understand Kurt feeling at times like a guest on an extended stay and he wanted to remedy that.

They finished their breakfasts and were lingering over cup coffee when Kurt got a text on his phone. “It’s Rachel,” he informed Adam. “She wanted to know if we were still on for Monday night for dinner with the group.”

“I’m going to be working,” Adam said regretfully. “I’ll check with Peter to see what time he needs me to start, but I’ll try to at least come for a little bit before having to leave.”

Kurt nodded, fighting down the sense of disappointment. It sometimes felt like he and Adam were leading separate lives more often than not lately. But that wasn’t Adam’s fault. It was just the demands of their individual schedules at the moment.

“I have an idea,” Adam proclaimed as he finished his coffee. “Why don’t we head over to the High Line and enjoy the day? We can go out to dinner at that Mexican restaurant you like.”

He took Kurt’s hand in his, looking into Kurt’s eyes. “I miss our time together and I just want to be with you today with nothing to distract us.”

Kurt smiled, squeezing Adam’s hand. He knew that his lover was feeling the strain of their parallel lives as much as he was and he was trying to make things better.
“We’re still trying to find out balance,” Kurt surmised. “Both of us have so much on our plates right now. We’ve got to grab what time we can.”

Adam’s blue eyes softened at Kurt’s words, thankful that his lover was mature well beyond his years in matters such as this and that he wouldn’t make demands that Adam was unable to meet. “Then let’s get going,” he urged. “I want every second with you that I can manage.”

* * *

Kurt settled on the sofa in the loft, feeling a bit bereft after Adam departed for work. The Englishman was working hard and the last thing Kurt wanted to do was behave like a spoiled child because his boyfriend wasn’t able to spend the evening with them. Adam had lingered as long as he could, but he really needed to get to work and made an apologetic early exit.

Kurt had seen him to the door and made him promise to make sure that he ate something for dinner before sending him off with a kiss. His friends granted them a bit of privacy to make his goodbyes before quickly enfolding him back in the comfortable relations that Kurt had seen develop in the past weeks. It was pretty remarkable just how much better he got along with most of them since they didn’t exist in one another’s back pockets all the time.

Santana quickly took his arm and pulled him close, claiming possession. “No complaints from you, Berry,” she warned, giving her roommate a playful look of reproach. “You get him all the time at school.”

“Right,” Tina agreed, settling down on the other side and claimed his other arm. “We miss him.”

“I wasn’t saying anything!” Rachel insisted, her lips drawn into an amused grin at her friends’ antics.

Artie watched from his wheelchair as his girlfriend and Santana were in a competition to see who could snuggle closest to Kurt, laughing at their antics. “Hey, I’m free over here,” he reminded Tina. “No fighting necessary.”

“I can have you whenever I want,” Tina proclaimed loftily, sticking out her tongue at her boyfriend. “I need some Kurt time.”

Kurt couldn’t help from laughing as the two young women playfully tried to haul him in their directions and gently pulled his arms free from their grasps, least they spent all night playing tug of war with him as the role of the rope. “Let’s order dinner,” he suggested. “I’m starving.”

Rachel went to the kitchen drawer where they had always kept the take out menus and pulled out the neat stack. “How about Indian?” she suggested.

“We’ve eaten Indian three times in the past two weeks,” Santana reminded her, resting her head on Kurt’s shoulder. “The fridge is starting to smell like an incense factory.”

“I’m okay with Chinese,” Kurt suggested. “Or Italian.”

“How about that Turkish place that just opened?” Artie asked. “We’ve been wanting to try them.”

Rachel nodded. “That sounds good.”

Once their orders were placed, Kurt focused on catching up with everyone. “So how’s school going for you two?” he asked Artie and Tina. “Is it what you were looking for?”

Artie grinned and nodded emphatically. “It’s amazing,” he claimed. “It’s only a few weeks, but it’s
like a whole world opened up to me. No one cares about me being in a chair. All they care about is my mind and what I can create. With modern filmmaking technology, my chair isn’t a factor at all. It’s pretty mindboggling.

“And the women… It’s a good thing that I’ve got Tina back because I could be getting into so much trouble.” He gave his girlfriend a loving smile.

Tina blew him a kiss. “Well, NYU is fantastic. There are so many talented people there but the teachers really give us plenty of chances to prove ourselves. No offense Rachel, but it’s a nice change from high school.”

Rachel just smiled and nodded. “You don’t have to tell me that things weren’t fair to any of you. I know that I really used that unfairly.”

“Argh… enough with the martyr act, Berry,” Santana sniped. “We get it. You changed.”

Kurt gave a playful swat to her thigh, a warning to play nice.

“Anyway, my acting professor is a total riot.” Tina continued. “Las week he had us spend an entire class pretending to be toddlers. It was hysterical.”

“What is it about first year acting teachers and make us do these crazy things?” Rachel demanded. “Ours had a thing for traumatic toilet training experiences.”

Santana cackled at their woes. “You’re making me very glad that I’m not in school now. It was bad enough with Coach Sylvester wanting to inspect our shits to make sure we got enough fiber.”

Kurt laughed, but couldn’t help from shuddering at the memory of how… invasive… Sue Sylvester could be. He never forgot the time that she wanted to personally inspect him to make sure that he was wearing a properly supportive undergarment before a competition. He’d been so mortified that he completely tuned out her rant about not wanting responsibility for accidentally ending the Hummel lineage if he hurt himself doing a back handspring.

“Ahh, high school,” Kurt sighed mockingly. He raised his glass to his friends. “Here’s to us… we survived it.”

“Here here,” Artie agreed. The group clinked glasses, celebrating having endured the unendurable.

Rachel checked her watch. “Well, dinner should be ready shortly. Ladies, want to come with me to pick it up?”

“We’ll get the table set,” Kurt offered. “I’m assuming that everything is still where it was before.”

Rachel nodded and kissed him on the cheek. “We won’t be long.”

Artie followed Kurt into the kitchen. “Let me help,” he insisted. Kurt smiled and took a stack of mismatched dishes from the cabinet and handed them to the younger man who balanced them carefully in his lap. Artie wheeled himself back to the dining room, Kurt following with glasses and silverware.

As they set the table, Artie looked up at his old friend. “I’m glad that the girls left for a little bit,” he said as he placed the plates around the table. “We really haven’t had much of a chance to see each other sine school started and I kind of wanted to talk to you.”

Kurt caught the hint of nervous hesitation in the other boy’s voice and wondered what had him so
anxious. “Sure,” he said agreeably. “What’s on your mind? Something with school?”

Artie sighed. “Kind of. Do… do you think you could sit down?” he asked. “It’s kind of hard to get this out when you’re walking around.

“Okay.” Kurt pulled out one of the dining room chairs and sat down to face Artie. “What’s going on?”

The younger man looked a bit uncertain as he nudged his chair closer to Kurt. “I… this is really hard for me, but I really owe you a huge apology for how I treated you.”

Kurt cocked his head. “What for? I thought we were getting along pretty well.”

Artie nodded. “We are now, but things haven’t been the same between us since before you left for New York. During your senior year, you started pulling back and there was this barrier between us that never quite went away. This is actually something I should have apologized for a long time ago.”

Kurt didn’t say anything, giving the other boy room to get his thoughts on order and to speak.

The younger man sighed deeply, clearly forcing himself to face Kurt and give his friend what he was owed. “You see, in one of my classes we were talking about how prejudices affect casting choices,” he explained. “You know, that you think that only a certain type should play a character and that it can blind you other actors might be capable of. And it got me thinking about how we all treated you during the West Side Story auditions.”

Kurt’s eyes darkened slightly at the memory of Artie and the others laughing at him, but he quickly pushed that memory aside. “Artie, it was a long time ago. It’s okay. I’m over it.”

“No, it’s not okay,” Artie insisted. “Kurt, you’re my friend. I’ve known you for years and for that alone, what I did was reprehensible. And as a director, it was unprofessional. You didn’t deserve me laughing at you like that, or just rejecting you from consideration.” Artie’s hands folded in his lap, betraying the deep sense of shame he felt. “I know what it’s like to be dismissed out of hand because you don’t meet someone’s expectations and I’m really ashamed that I turned around and did it to someone else.”

“Artie, it’s okay,” Kurt assured him, not wanting to acknowledge the hurt that he still felt over the incident. “Why bring it up now?”

“Because I was wrong,” Artie said. His cheeks burned red with embarrassment when he thought about his past behavior. “In my class, we talked about what to look for when casting parts and how it’s so easy to get caught up in looking for an actor who fits the part as you see it rather than finding someone that would bring something new. And it got me thinking about why we cast Blaine instead of you.”

“Blaine was the ideal Tony,” Kurt reminded him. “I couldn’t have played him that way.”

“No, you wouldn’t have. And that’s the point,” Artie insisted. “Blaine played Tony the way anyone who ever watched West Side Story before would expect. There was nothing particularly different or interesting that would make his performance stand apart from ninety nine percent of other renditions. And as a director, I should be trying to make my works stand out. We did the same thing with Maria, casting the predictable actress instead of one that would stand out and challenge impressions of that character. Now I love Rachel, but she’s not especially imaginative in how she approaches a character. So between the two of them we had predictable casting and had a good, but predictable
“I know how talented you are,” Artie insisted. “You have a much broader vocal range than Blaine and I know that you are a better dancer and actor. You could have brought something interesting and exciting to the role. But I couldn’t look past you… the guy that I’ve known for years… to see how you’d play the character. And that’s on me, as a director. I wasn’t watching your audition and seeing how the talent you were showing would make Tony click. I just saw you. And it proves just was a rank amateur I was.”

He looked up at Kurt, the remorse clear in his eyes. “For whatever it’s worth, Kurt, I am so sorry. I didn’t give you a fair shot. Or Mercedes either. Looking back now, I would have loved to see how the two of you would have played those characters. Maybe then it would have been more than a typical school show. And it might have been something that I could look back on a lot more proudly.”

Kurt didn’t say anything at first. He didn’t want to think that getting rejected from a high school play would still sting after all this time. Still, having Artie apologize, even nearly two years after the fact was gratifying.

He had managed to let go of a lot of the lingering anger and hurts left over from the injustices he’d endured. In the months since, he’d grown beyond the limitations he’d been forced to operate under. He could see how sincere Artie was with his apology and there was no point in holding on to these old angers over how he’d been treated.

Taking pity on the younger man, Kurt reached out and grasped his arm, giving it a reassuring squeeze. “Arte, I’m not going to lie. You really hurt me back then. We were friends, but the way you laughed at me…”

He sighed, steeling his resolve. “I’ve had a lot of time to move past that and there’s no real point of hanging onto hard feelings. It wasn’t the first time I got rejected for a part and it’s sure as hell not going to be the last. You said that you’re sorry and I’m taking you at your word. Just promise me one thing.”

“Anything,” Artie insisted, looking hopeful for the first time since he’d initiated such a difficult conversation.

Kurt’ pursed his mouth thoughtfully. “Someday you’re going to be a famous director and you’re going to be picking actors for parts. Just promise me that you’ll give anyone who tries a fair shot. And that you’ll treat them with more respect than you showed me.”

Behind Artie’s glasses, Kurt could see the tears beginning to well. The younger man nodded, wiping behind his glasses. “I will. I promise. But I hope that one day I can convince you to be in one of my projects, because I promise that you’ll get a much better reception.”

Kurt finally allowed a smile to cross his face and nodded. “Most definitely. Because I think that you’re going to be an amazing director someday.”

Artie smiled thankfully that his old friend was forgiving the grievous insult he’d been paid with a lot more kindness than most would, knowing that he was fortunate to have a friend like Kurt. “I’m glad,” he said gratefully. “Because I may just be writing a few parts with you in mind.”

“Well, I’m looking forward to seeing what you come up with,” Kurt chuckled. He inhaled deeply and looked about the room to break the tension. “We’d better finish setting up. The girls should be back soon.”
They hustled about, getting the table set, Kurt placing out glasses with ice and a few bottles of sparkling water. The girls arrived back, laughter shared between them as they carried the takeout bags into the loft. “We’ve got food!” Rachel proclaimed.

“Great!” Artie answered, letting Tina settle on his lap as he wheeled her into the dining room. “Let’s eat. I’m starving.” He glanced to Kurt for a bit of masculine confirmation and Kurt couldn’t him from smiling back and nodding.

“I could eat,” he affirmed.

Rachel began to unpack the packages of food and place them on the table. “You should have come with us, Kurt. It was hysterical watching the guy ringing us up at the restaurant flirting with Santana, and totally clueless that she wasn’t at all interested.”

“He was cute, though,” Tina inserted, fighting back a giggle.

“I am going to give Santana credit, though,” Rachel continued, giving her roommate a teasing smile. “She didn’t verbally eviscerate him the way I was expecting. It was kind of sweet in the way she let him down.”

Santana just shrugged as she dipped a piece of bread into the hummus as popped it into her mouth. “He wasn’t trying to be a jerk,” she pointed out. “If he had less in the way of dick and more in the way of boob….”

Kurt didn’t say anything, but he took this as more evidence of how all of them were changing. Santana would never truly be a soft and tender person but since she had shed much of the venom that she had used to protect herself, her barbs and fire had become part of her charm.

Rachel opened up a dish of assorted mezze and took some stuffed grape leaves before passing the package about. “Well, this week will certainly have some exciting things for all of us. Kurt and I have our auditions for Les Miz…”

“Which means that we’re going to be subjected to more of Berry’s six in the morning caterwauling that she refers to as practice,” Santana snarked. “I, on the other hand, will be now performing in prime Friday and Saturday night slots at the piano bar. Apparently I now have a following.”

“At least the right kind of following this time,” Kurt teased, giving her a fond smile. She made a swat at his head, but like most of her tactics as of late, it was more for show than anything else. He didn’t miss the glint of humor in her eyes.

He was grateful to have these friends in his life, and was thankful that they were all managing to grow beyond what they were in Ohio. Kurt didn’t know what the future was going to hold for all of them or what additional changes they’d undergo, but he was looking forward to seeing it.

* * *

Adam was in the middle of his shift at the café when his cell phone vibrated in his pocket. After placing the order he was serving in front of his customers, he paused to see if they needed anything before having a chance to surreptitiously checking to see who had called. Seeing that it was his agent trying to reach him, Adam looked up.

“Angie, can you cover for me for a bit?” he asked one of the other wait staff. “I need to take five.”

“Sure thing, hon,” the older woman said agreeably.
“Thanks love,” he said gratefully. “I’ll be quick.”

Ducking into the back area by the kitchen door, he called the office back and thankfully his agent wasn’t already on another call. “Adam, thanks for calling me back so quickly,” Mr. Reagan told him.

“Not a problem,” Adam said assuredly. “I wasn’t sure if it was something important. Do you have some more auditions lined up for me?”

“I’ve got something better. I just got a call from Dustan Colton’s office and I’ve got some good news for you.”

Adam nearly dropped his phone in shock, and it took a second for his brain to stop mentally screaming enough for him to shakily ask for the details. As he listened to his agent’s cheerful voice, his spirit careened from jubilation to devasation when it truly dawned on him what this would mean. How as he going to tell Kurt?

* * *

Kurt stepped out of the bathroom, tying the belt of his robe about his waist. His freshly washed hair was being given a chance to air dry a little bit before styling in order to have it look its best. He’d already shaved and moisturized and had used his morning preparation as the opportunity to mentally run through his audition material a few times. He was pretty confident with his choices and thought that he would make a good showing.

Adam was taking breakfast out of the oven and Kurt was surprised to see that Adam had baked his famous cinnamon rolls. “What’s this?” he asked, stepping into the tiny area that constituted their kitchen. The whole place smelled of warm cinnamon and sugar.

Adam looked down at his lover, his blue eyes crinkling as he smiled. “I thought that you deserved a little treat before your big audition today. So I baked my ‘good luck’ buns.”

Kurt felt his stomach do a little back flip at seeing that loving smile directed at him. “Oh honey, you didn’t have to go through so much trouble!” he protested. “You work so hard and…”

“It was no trouble at all,” Adam insisted, giving Kurt a quick peck on the nose. “I put the dough up yesterday so it would be ready to pop into the oven this morning.”

Kurt felt himself quiver a bit at the casual consideration that Adam always showed for the least thing that Kurt had on his agenda. Despite working until late the night before, he still woke up early to give Kurt a proper send off and a bit of pampering. “But I don’t do things like this for you,” he said softly, suddenly feeling a bit ashamed at not being as supportive of his lover. “You go to auditions nearly every day and…”

Adam quickly cut off his protestations with a kiss. “Darling, you have no idea how much you do for me,” he claimed with as much conviction as he could muster. “Every day for the past few months, you’ve been so totally supportive of me and urging me on. When I started to get down about not finding work so quickly, you’ve been the one to encourage me. You keep me optimistic and remind me that I’ve got so much more in my life than just my aspirations.”

He gently stroked Kurt’s cheek, savoring the feel of that soft skin against his hand. “So if I can do little things like this that put a smile on your face before you go to your audition, then that is the very least that I can do.”

Kurt felt his heart flutter at Adam’s pronouncement and all but threw himself into his lover’s arms,
kissing him deeply. “God, I love you,” he said against Adam’s lips.

Adam looked down him with a gentle, wistful expression. “I love you too, darling. Never think that I don’t.”

“Now come on,” Adam urged, nudging Kurt towards the table. “Let’s get some breakfast into you so you can show them all what a star you are.”

Kurt watched in bemusement as Adam poured coffee for the both of them and set out a plate of fresh fruit. The warm buns smelled absolutely delicious and for once, Kurt wasn’t going to worry about his waistline. He took a bite of the pastry that Adam had served him and closed his eyes to savor the sweet taste.

“Mmmm… you are the absolute best,” Kurt praised, licking glaze off his fingers. He looked over to his boyfriend, who was watching him eat with an intensity that made him a bit nervous. “Babe? Are you okay?”

“Oh, yes,” Adam insisted. A bit too quickly for Kurt to see as being totally sincere. As if to distract Kurt, he took a bite of his own breakfast.

Kurt felt his eyes narrow a bit. “You sure?” he asked. “You’re acting a little funny.”

Adam nodded, swallowing a bite of sweet bun and gave Kurt a loving smile. “It’s fine, sweetheart,” he insisted softly. “I just was thinking about how good we have things that it feels almost selfish wanting more.”

Kurt’s gaze softened with the love that he felt for this lovely man seated beside him. He couldn’t resist reaching out to touch his face, feeling the contrast of skin and rough beard against his fingers. So many wonderful contradictions in the man that he loved; that he was so strong and yet so gentle too. Intelligent and talented, but sensitive to the needs of others. Kurt didn’t know what he’d done to deserve this amazing man in his life, but he would never take it for granted.

“You deserve everything,” Kurt stated firmly, not wanting Adam to slip into another of his moods. “I wish that I could give that to you.”

Adam turned his face enough to kiss Kurt’s hand, closing his eyes. “You are everything I could ever want, sweetheart,” Adam promised. “Anything else I get… that’s just a bonus.”

Kurt couldn’t resist kissing him again. “Mmm… I think that cinnamon roll-flavored Adam has something going to it,” he flirted.

Adam couldn’t help from chuckling as he placed another pastry on Kurt’s plate. “Go on, you tease. Finish your breakfast. You’ve got a big day ahead of you.”

Kurt grinned and took a healthy bite.

An hour later, Adam saw him to the door. Kurt had been well fed, caffeinated and dressed and given the remaining pastries in a bag to take along for snacking and sharing. Adam had no doubt that he would make a good showing at his audition. “Good luck, sweetheart,” he urged, kissing Kurt for luck. “I know that you’ll do splendidly.”

“I’ll call you later to let you know how it went,” Kurt promised. “You have a good day.”

“I will, love,” Adam promised. He handed Kurt his bag and kissed him again before closing the door.
He heard Kurt walk down to hall, humming to himself and couldn’t help from smiling. His love’s spirit was certainly infectious. Moving to clean up from breakfast, Adam felt his spirit begin to drop as he contemplated what he’d avoided blurting out to Kurt. He knew that his lover needed to be told about his agent’s call, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it just yet. Not with Kurt having an audition of his own.

He knew that hiding this wasn’t fair to Kurt, because this decision affected his lover as well. It was such a huge choice and Adam was fortunate that he was being given a little time to weigh out his options before having to make a final decision. But he didn’t have forever and the longer he put it off, the harder it would be.

Tonight, he resolved. He would tell Kurt tonight and they would discuss their options as a couple. He just hoped that this opportunity wouldn’t derail everything that they had planned. The last thing he ever wanted to do was cause Kurt harm.

* * *

Rachel entered the west auditorium, somehow both excited and at peace about her audition. Without having a lead role at stake, it was much easier to relax and just focus. At the very least she would have a place in the chorus, which was more than fine with her. She wanted to approach this as Kurt would; a chance to learn and begin to build her professional reputation.

And in her case, do a bit of repair work. No one needed to remind her that she wasn’t exactly known for playing nicely with others and that she needed to change peoples’ minds about her conduct. She was well aware that while her talent made her valuable, she wasn’t indispensible. Not with so many other talented performers that she would be competing with.

She saw the rest of her voice class sitting together and walked over to join them. “Is there room for one more?” she asked, hoping that they wouldn’t say no.

Katya looked up and smiled. “Sure. We were just exchanging wild theories about how this was all going to play out. I don’t think NYADA’s ever staged a production this big.”

Jamie nodded in agreement. “I’m guessing that someone wants to prove that they’ve got the biggest dick in the room.”

Rachel couldn’t help from chuckling. “Frankly that wouldn’t surprise me at all. Theater people are nothing if we’re not competitive. It does look like someone is nursing a bit of a sore ego. If there’s anyone who would recognize that, it’s me.”

The others laughed, but it was good natured humor. Analisa looked about the room, not seeing her favorite duet partner. “Kurt is auditioning, isn’t he? I don’t see him.”

Rachel nodded reassuringly. “Don’t worry, he’ll be here. He might have gotten distracted by Adam.”

Jamie nodded, a teasing glint in his eyes. “I’m not surprised that they’re basically inviting nearly everyone in the school to participate,” he said. “Do you know how many seniors there actually are in the voice program right now?”

Rachel shook her head. She doubted it would be that many since it was expected that at least a few would drop out or get cut along the way. There own class had several withdraw.

“Only eleven.”

“And not all of them are able to participate. I heard that a few were either currently working or committed to a show outside of school around the time that we’re supposed to stage our show. And the junior class isn’t so much better at the moment,” Jamie explained. “I talked to one of the seniors and Professor Carmody is dragging everyone possible in to fill out the cast.”

“Well, I don’t know about you all, but I’m thrilled that we have this chance,” Rachel insisted. “Even if we’re just chorus, it’s still going to be exciting to be in a production like this.”

Katya nodded in agreement. “We play this right and we can really build some good will for next year when we will be eligible for leads.”

Rachel was glad that she wasn’t the only one being practical here, though she was glad that she wasn’t the one who said it. But proving themselves to be good team players would be vital to cementing solid performing reputations that will carry over to their professional careers.

Jamie looked about the auditorium and spotting their missing classmate. “There’s Kurt. He’s over there talking to some people.”

Rachel turned and spotted him standing with some of the Apples who had apparently decided to audition themselves. She gave a wave to get his attention and he smiled and waved back and motioned for her to come over. She hesitated for a second, not sure of the reception she’d get from Kurt’s friends. While she’d seen a few of them once of twice since Adam’s party last year, she couldn’t call them her friends. More like watchful acquaintances who wouldn’t hesitate to make her miserable of she went against Kurt again.

“Hey Rachel,” Corrine greeted as she came over. “This is exciting, huh?”

“I wasn’t sure how many of you were going to audition,” Rachel answered, letting Kurt take her hand and pull her closer. “I should have known better since you all do love singing.”

Mei shrugged. “It’s a good credit to get. And with the size of the cast that it looks like they’re aiming for, one of two iffy singers aren’t going to stand out.”

“Well, I can’t wait to see what all of you have up your sleeves,” Rachel insisted, smiling warmly. “I’m just glad to have some friendly faces around here. It’s a big difference from my last audition.”

Jules cocked his head thoughtfully. “Thanks, Rachel. You know… if you ever wanted to join in on any of our sessions, we wouldn’t mind. I know that you probably don’t have a lot of time, but if you can, feel free to stop by.”

Rachel blinked, genuinely surprised by the invitation. She looked to the group and saw that most of them were nodding in agreement and Kurt had a quiet smile on his face.

“Thank you,” she said sincerely. “I’ll check with Kurt to see when you meet next and I’ll definitely try to make it.”

“I’ll see you all afterwards,” Kurt advised the group, placing his arm about Rachel’s shoulders. They walked back to join the rest of their voice class where Kurt was warmly greeted by their peers.

After taking their seats, Professor Carmody stepped onto the stage and approached the microphone waiting for her. “Good morning everyone,” she greeted, and the students fell silent. “I’m glad to see so many people here so early in the morning. I know that we have a lot of people to get through today so I’ll keep this brief and we can get started.

“By now you’ve probably heard that this is going to be the largest production that’s ever been staged
at NYADA. We are also tying in our spring musical with the annual fundraiser drive, so your work is going to be a huge aid in helping NYADA’s mission in the future. And because of these factors, we will not be staging our production at the school this year. We will be doing a special limited run at the New York City Center Theater for seven nights and two matinees.”

The students began the chatter and cheer excitedly at that bit of news, shocked to have the opportunity to perform in that kind of venue. Rachel looked to Kurt, who wasn’t even trying to hide his surprise or excitement.

Professor Carmody smiled at their response. “Yes, I know that’s exciting. This is a production where the entire school will be actively showing what we are training our students to do. All programs will be participating, from the voice and dramatics majors to the costuming and stage technician students. It’s a true joint effort and I’m honored to be leading you on this endeavor.

“So thank you all and good luck!”

She stepped off the stage and went to the technical table where Kurt wasn’t especially surprised to see many of the voice and theater faculty joining her. Madam Tibideaux was easy to spot in her royal blue velvet turban and it was fairly obvious that she would be using these auditions to help her judge how they were progressing as performers, not just singers.

They were being called in alphabetical order so Kurt knew that he was going to have a bit of a wait. He watched the other students taking the stage. When Rachel’s name was called, the first of their class, he gave her a quick hug for encouragement and was gratified that the entire class was cheering for her as she took the stage.

“Many a lassie as ev’ryone know’ll, try to be married be for twenty-five,” she trilled, bring out the elegant soprano tones that often got overlooked in her focus on power. “So she’ll agree to most any proposal. All he mus’ be is a man. An’ alive.”

Kurt found himself chuckling with Rachel at the statement. The expression of exasperation at her foolish female peers was amusing and sat back to enjoy her performance. Rachel had such a naturally beautiful voice and it was a pleasure to see her using her real talents instead of always focusing on belting and doing vocal tricks.

She needed to work a bit on her accent, Kurt thought. Her Scottish brogue wasn’t terribly convincing and she probably would benefit from the Diction class he was taking. At least now he was sure that if her flaw was pointed out to her that she would be receptive to the criticism.

“Though I’ll live forty lives till the day he arrives, I'll not ever, ever grieve,” she confided to the audience. “For my hope will be high that he’ll come strollin’ by; for you see, I believe! That a laddie weary, and wanderin’ free, who’s waiting for his dearie. Me!” she proclaimed to loud applause from their class and the other auditioners. Kurt cheered and whistled loudly; giving her a brief standing ovation for what he thought was one of her best performances in years.

When she got back her seat, he gave her a quick hug. “That was fantastic!” he praised sincerely. She gave him a grateful smile. “Thanks. I wanted to try something a little different this time around.”

She gave him a grateful smile. “Thanks. I wanted to try something a little different this time around.”

“He thought that you probably impressed a lot of people,” Kurt surmised, earning a loving and thankful look from his friend.

They settled in to watch the other auditioners and several in the Apples made their way to the stage.
They sounded more than decent, though Kurt knew that they wouldn’t be up to the same standards as the voice and musical theater students. But that was okay; they could carry a tune and Kurt was sure that all of them would be assigned at least chorus spots. He was looking forward to being able to work in a real production with his friends.

When his name was called, he hurried to the stage and couldn’t help from grinning at the loud cheers from all his friends. He found his mark at the center of the stage and took only a brief second to center himself before he nodded to the pianist to begin.

He normally thought long and hard about his material, weighing out the pros and cons of each. This time around, though, the selection was fairly simple for him to make. He wanted something that would evoke a similar musical feel but still give him room to tailor it a bit to his own style. This song had jumped out at him and he was interested to see how it was received.

“You’ve been a fool, and so have I,” he sang along with the gentle music. “But come and be my wife. And let us try, before we die, to make sense of this life.”

He paused for a beat, letting the music lift his voice. “We’re neither pure, nor wise, nor good. We’ll do the best we know. We’ll build our house and chop our wood. And make our garden grow…”

He usually had little problem finding some element that he shared with each character that he played that allowed him to translate that character through his own experiences. This time, the link was easy to find. They’d both been through their own trials and hardships and had emerged still hopeful, but not as naive or deliberately blind to the realities of the world around them. Kurt could now look at his past experiences and his own future with clear eyes.

“I thought the world was sugar cake, for so our master said,” he sang with the tang of regret in his voice. Innocence was something that could never be regained once it was lost. “But now, I’ll teach my hands to bake our loaf of daily bread.”

His life with Adam was not always easy. They weren’t wealthy and the careers they’d chosen would often mean struggling but he wasn’t afraid. They were building their lives together, brick by brick, making their relationship one of love and support that he never thought he’d truly have.

Blaine was the fantasy. A teenage dream of a handsome boy that would sweep him off his feet. The reality was a needy man-child that demanded all of Kurt’s consideration while offering precious little in return. His infidelity had been the final blow, but now that Kurt could look back with clear vision, it was inevitable that their relationship would fail. If it wasn’t the cheating, it would have been Blaine’s incessant neediness and sense of competition that would have sucked Kurt dry.

The reality of Adam, with all of the imperfections of their lives, was far preferable. He could only hope that Adam knew just how much he meant to Kurt.

“Let dreamers dream, what worlds they please,” he declared assuredly. “Those Edens can’t be found. The sweetest flowers, the fairest trees, are grown in solid ground.”

He looked to the audience, feeling the security of all that he had to his advantage. He had his talent and his love and the support of his friends and family. No fantasy could possibly compete with that. And he realized that he no longer needed those fantasies to aid him through the hard times.

“We’re neither pure, nor wise, nor good. We’ll do the best we know. We’ll build our house and chop our wood. And make our garden grow.

“And make our garden grow!”
He heard the cheers from his friends and his classmates, and he was gratified by their regard. It was pleasing to know that they had liked what he’d managed to do, but he also realized that he knew that he deserved it. It was starting to feel less strange to actually be getting applause. He returned to his classmates and let Rachel pull him into a hug, her praise sincerely given and received.

Returning home that afternoon, Kurt was still enjoying the high that he always felt after a good performance. Everyone had seemed complimentary of his work and Kurt was thrilled that his risk seemed to have paid off. He knew that his piece was an ambitious one and it seemed like he managed to pull it off. The way Jamie had ranted, Kurt knew that he had made an impression.

“I cannot believe you! You had the balls to do Candide? And to turn the finale into a solo?”

Kurt just shrugged, grinning widely. It had gone better than he’d expected. All in all, it had been a tiring but satisfying day and he was looking forward to a quiet evening to recover so that he could be cheerful for Adam when he got home from work.

He was whistling to himself as he opened the door to their apartment, mentally running through his options for dinner before starting on his homework. After hanging up his jacket, he thought about making a cup of tea for himself when he was started by Adam’s voice.

“Hello, darling? Did it go well?” the older man asked, a tense smile on his face.

Kurt nearly started, but quickly calmed when he realized who he being greeted by. “Hey… what are you doing here?” he asked a little breathlessly, giving Adam a quick hug and kiss. “I thought you’d be at work.”

“I left early today,” Adam explained, gazing down at Kurt. “Wanted to be here when you got home.”

“Well, I’m not going to complain about that,” Kurt teased, giving his boyfriend a warm kiss. “And it went great. I’m kind of looking forward to whatever feedback I get. And of course, Madam Tibideaux was there so I’m sure that she’ll have something to say about it.”

Adam nodded, not taking his eyes off of Kurt. Normally Kurt didn’t mind his boyfriend staring at him, but for some reason the intensity of the older man’s gaze was a trifle unnerving.

“Hey… is everything okay?” he couldn’t help from asking. “You’ve been acting weird all day.”

Adam didn’t denying Kurt’s query immediately, which was only setting Kurt’s nerves a bit more on edge. “Something did happen that I need to talk with you about,” he said, the tone of his voice betraying the older man’s unease.

Kurt was starting to get a little nervous as his mind began to race about what might be wrong. Adam couldn’t be breaking up with him. Not after the way he’d treated Kurt so beautifully that morning. Was his father sick? Was he sick?

Adam saw the fear crossing his lover’s face and quickly moved to soothe him. “No, darling… it’s nothing bad,” he insisted, reaching out to smooth Kurt’s hair back reassuringly. “Not really.”

Kurt didn’t bother to try to hide his unease. “What’s going on, babe?”

Adam licked his lips nervously and gave Kurt a tentative smile. “I got a call from my agent yesterday. One of the productions I auditioned for got back to him and offered me a part.”

Kurt’s eyes widened in surprise and his worried expression transformed into one of pure delight.
“Are you kidding me?” he exclaimed, flinging himself into Adam’s arms. “Oh honey! I’m so happy for you.”

He all but dragged Adam to the couch and pushed him down, sitting down next to him. “Tell me all about it,” he demanded, taking Adam’s hand in his. “What show is it? I was hoping that something would come through soon. I want to know everything!”

Strangely, Adam’s expression didn’t appear any more pleased to finally have a job offer. He squeezed Kurt’s hand and looked at him with a somber look in his eyes.

“Sweetheart, we need to talk about this.”

* * *

Songs used:

Rachel's solo: "Waiting For My Dearie" - Brigadoon

Kurt's solo: "Make Our Garden Grow" - Candide
Kurt blinked and felt the joy within over him Adam’s good news starting to evaporate. “What about?” he asked, not bothering to hide his concern at his boyfriend’s abnormal behavior.

Adam looked down at their entwined hand and couldn’t resist lifting them to press a kiss to Kurt’s fingers. “I didn’t accept the job right away because I needed to speak with you first. My taking this part affects you as well.”

Kurt inhaled, wanting to steady his nerve and gather his thoughts. “Tell me everything,” he demanded, pulling Adam over to the couch. “You’re making me very nervous.”

Adam sighed and sat down next to him. “I’m sorry, darling. I didn’t mean to do that,” he said sincerely. “It’s just… this isn’t the way I wanted this to happen.”

Kurt’s unease didn’t ease entirely, but he could see that Adam was genuinely distressed by whatever this offer entailed. “It can’t be that bad,” he insisted gently, taking Adam’s hand in his. “I mean, it’s a job offer. It’s what we’ve been waiting for.”

“I know… it’s just…” Adam sighed deeply, looking down at the floor.

Kurt took Adam’s face in his hand and turned it to his, gazing intently into his lover’s eyes. “Sweetheart, there is nothing that you say that will make me angry. What is it that’s got you so twisted up?”

Adam didn’t answer immediately. “You know that I love you,” he insisted. “I love our lives together.”

“I know that,” Kurt answered with full confidence.

Adam closed his eyes, knowing that he couldn’t be looking at Kurt when he told him just what he’d been offered.

“It’s a new show by an English playwright about soldiers in the trenches during the first World War,” he explained. “It takes place the night before they are to go over the top and I’ll be playing the Lieutenant who’s wrestling over following orders and knowing that he’ll be sending the men that he has come to care about to almost certain death.”

Kurt smiled reassuringly. “That sounds like it could be very interesting.”

“It is,” Adam agreed. “There’s a lot of dark comedy and the writer is absolutely brilliant. But… it’s not going to be staged in New York. At least, not yet.”

Adam looked down at their entwined hands and sighed deeply. “They’re talking about a type of touring production, where we perform in several major cities. If the reception is good, the production will then come to New York. Probably an off-Broadway staging but they’re not ruling out a Broadway opening of the interest is there.”

Kurt nodded, starting to see what had Adam so upset. “And you did agree to take the part, right?” he asked.

Adam shook his head. “Not yet. Not before I spoke with you.”
He looked at Kurt, his blue eyes glimmering with tears that he’d been holding back since he first got the call from his agent. “Kurt, they’re looking for at least a six month commitment from me, and most of that will be out of town. You just moved in here and I’m being asked to leave you behind for a job. That’s not fair to you.”

Kurt’s mouth firmed into a tight line, keeping his own emotions in check for the moment. His concern was for Adam at the moment, because his boyfriend looked absolutely devastated. “Is this why you were acting so strange this morning?” he asked gently.

Adam nodded, feeling the flush coming into his cheeks.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Kurt asked, realizing the turmoil his boyfriend had been in. “Sweetheart, you’ve been holding all this in since yesterday?”

Another nod and the first tears escaped Adam’s eye. “I didn’t want to distract you before your audition,” he explained. “That was too important for you.”

“Oh, honey…” Kurt leaned in to kiss Adam softly on the lips. “I wish you would have told me. At the very least, it would have lent some very interesting emotional resonance to my performance given my choice of material.”

His mild teasing caused Adam to smile just a little bit.

“When did they say that they needed an answer by?” Kurt asked.

Adam’s expression lightened a little bit now that the burden of what he’d been holding in was lifted. “They were very understanding and gave me a bit of time to make my decision. I explained that I needed to look into some arrangements and see how it would all work out. And I wasn’t going to take it without talking to you first.”

Kurt nodded thoughtfully. He’d been with Adam long enough that he wasn’t surprised at Adam’s consideration of his feelings on the matter, but he was pleased. “But do you want it?” he questioned gently. “The part sounds great, but I know that it’s a big lifestyle shift to be in a touring production.”

Adam sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I know that it’s a good part. And it could lead to something more significant.”

Kurt gave him a tender smile. “You silly man… then what are you waiting for? Call your agent right now and tell him that of course, you’ll take the part.”

“Kurt…”

Kurt took Adam’s face in his hands, holding his gaze steady. “This is too good an opportunity for you,” he insisted. “This is the kind of job that will give you a lot of exposure and I’m not going to let you turn it down.” He kissed Adam soundly, making sure that he understood that he was completely on board.

“We’ll work the rest of this out,” he assured the older man. “But I don’t want to see you sacrifice what could be a real chance to move your career forward.”

Adam looked at his boyfriend with an expression of wonderment. “What did I ever do to deserve you?” he whispered.

Kurt didn’t say anything more, reaching for Adam’s jacket to pull out his cell phone and press it into the Englishman’s hand. With Kurt’s supportive hand on his arm, Adam dialed up his agent and with
a brief conversation lasting less than five minutes accepted the job that he had been agonizing over. After accepting his agent’s congratulations, he turned to Kurt, his energy spent.

Kurt let Adam sink into his arms, holding him close as the older man fought to regain control of his conflicting emotions. He felt Adam sniffle against his shoulder and ran a hand through the unruly blond curls. He didn’t say anything, wanting to provide the comforting, stabilizing rock that Adam so clearly needed at the moment.

“Sweetheart,” he heard Adam say softly against his chest. “We need to talk about…”

“Later,” Kurt urged gently. He laid his cheek against Adam’s head, just wanting to savor the solid presence of the man in his arms. “We’ve got plenty of time to figure everything out.”

In the meantime, they needed some quiet time to absorb the change that was about to be inflicted on their lives.

* * *

Signing the contract and getting his preliminary production schedule seemed almost anticlimactic after the stress of the day before, Adam considered. Rehearsals were set to start in December for five weeks with the premiere set for mid-January in Boston. They would tour ten cities around the country with the run ending in late May. After that, the producers would make a decision about a New York staging for the late fall.

He walked out with his script and the realization that he and Kurt would only have a few weeks to settle matters, but Kurt seemed to be in no real hurry to start those discussions. When Adam returned home from his shift at the café, Kurt was there to greet him with a smile and a sense of excitement.

He looked at Adam’s script and smiled broadly. “It’s like holding this makes it real,” he said in wonderment. He thumbed through the script, seeing Adam’s part and dialogue highlighted and wasn’t at all surprised that his boyfriend would have a significant role.

He closed the script and held it to his chest, his eyes shining with happiness for his partner. “I’m so thrilled for you. This is everything we ever wanted for you.”

“Well, I would much have preferred a job that kept me in New York,” Adam admitted regretfully. “I’m just worried about you. We have to figure out where you’re going to live while I’m away.”

Kurt kissed him, thankful for his consideration. “I’ve been thinking about it, so don’t worry. We’ve got a little bit of time to for me to figure things out. You just focus on this fantastic role and giving it your best.”

“I still feel terrible about this,” Adam admitted. “We were getting ready to start looking at flats and…”

Kurt placed his finger over Adam’s lips, silencing him. “All we’re doing is putting those plans on hold for a little bit. Honey, it’ll all work out. You’ll see.”

Adam thought that Kurt sounded a touch too optimistic given the pending upheaval that was pending in their lives, a bit of cool brittleness behind his tone that betrayed that the younger man wasn’t quite as assured as he pretended to be. But he knew better than to press the issue now. Kurt would deal with things in his own way and pushing him would only get him overly defensive and anxious. Realty would hit them both in the coming weeks and he could only hope to be as supportive to Kurt as Kurt was being for him.
He finally nodded, letting his concerns go for the moment. Opening his arms, he let Kurt slip into his embrace, offering what love and support he could. He felt Kurt’s strong arms wrap about him, giving him the grounding he needed in order to make such a huge leap.

“I think that we need to go out and celebrate,” Kurt decided, craning his head up to kiss his boyfriend. “Just you and me. I want to have you all to myself before we make the big announcement to our friends.”

Adam smiled, kissing Kurt back. “And you need to update me on what’s been happening at school and tell me all about your audition. I’m sure that you did splendidly.”

Kurt nodded, the color in his cheeks warming a bit at his boyfriend’s instinctive assumption that he had done well. “I think that I did,” he said agreeably. “It’ll be interesting to see if I get a few solo lines.”

“I have no doubt that you will,” Adam assured him. His thumb gently rubbed the skin over Kurt’s cheekbone. “And you’ll steal ever scene you’re in.”

Kurt kissed him. He still got a little thrill over having such a supportive man in his life. “Come on… let’s get going. I want to show off my talented, gorgeous man to all of New York and make everyone insanely jealous of me.”

Adam laughed and let Kurt manhandle him into his jacket and all but drag him out of the flat. Whatever Kurt had in mind for their night out, he was certain that he would enjoy every second of it.

* * *

“What do you think?” Rachel asked as she looked to Kurt, her expression betraying her uncertainty.

Kurt looked over at the skin care products in Rachel’s hand. “Those should work for you, but I think you should get the purifying masks also. You’re still prone to break outs and stage makeup can play havoc with your skin.”

After the strain of another insane week of school, Kurt was enjoying some girlfriend time with his ladies by going shopping with them for skin care products in Koreatown. Some of the lady Apples swore by products from this shop to keep their complexions clear and fresh and Kurt planned to blow his play money for the week on some things to pamper himself and Adam with. It was a no-brainer to invite Rachel, Santana and Tina to join him.

“I don’t mean that,” Rachel corrected, though she did go over to the rack of sheet masks and place several in her shopping basket. “I’m talking about Adam.”

“I’m really proud of him and I think that this will be an amazing opportunity,” Kurt insisted, studying the selection of eye creams. He picked one that was supposed to relieve puffiness and placed it in his basket. Now to find something for Adam… He tossed another tube of exfoliating sugar scrub into his basket.

“I’m sure it will be,” Tina inserted, coming over with her collection of products for Kurt’s approval. “But what about you?”

“What about me?” Kurt asked, shrugging indifferently. “I’ll be busy with school and probably the musical while he’s away. I’ll be okay.”

“And where are you supposed to live while he’s off being a big star?” Santana demanded. Her harsh tone betrayed her concern for their friend. “You just moved in with him and…”
Kurt looked up at her with an appreciative smile. “I know. And believe me, he’s more anxious about that than anyone else. And he feels terrible about the offer being with a touring production. I had to push him into taking the job.”

“That doesn’t answer the question on where you’re going to live while he’s away,” Rachel insisted. “Honey, we know this is a big deal for Adam, but this affects you too.”

“I know, and I really do appreciate it but you’re worrying over nothing,” Kurt insisted. “I’m looking at my options and will have a decision long before Adam leaves.”

“I wish that you would just move back into the loft,” Tina said with a trace of sadness. “I feel horrible that Artie and I took your space.”

Rachel touched Kurt’s arm, her concern for him evident. “We’re just worried about you, Kurt. This wasn’t what you were expecting and I’m afraid of you being left without a place to stay. I know that it’s not Adam’s fault, but…”

“Maybe you can move back into the loft,” Tina suggested. “We can squeeze in another bed.”

Kurt frowned to himself, appreciative of her consideration but knowing that it wasn’t a realistic option. As spacious as the loft was, adding another sleeping area would be problematic. And with only one bathroom, it just wasn’t a workable solution for everyone involved.

“Ladies, look… I appreciate your concern, but really… It’s okay,” Kurt insisted, carrying his basket to the register. “I’m looking at some options and you don’t have to worry. I’m hardly going to end up homeless.”

“Are you going to keep the apartment?” Santana asked, selecting a body cream for herself. “Can you afford that?”

Kurt shrugged. “It’s something I’m looking at. Adam and I are going to talk to the landlord to see if they’re willing to extend the current lease and sign it over to me, but that’s going to depend on how much I’m able to work with school and the musical to consider. I’m also checking with the housing office at school about dorm space. They almost always have rooms available.

“And it’s only for a few months,” he reminded them. “I can survive a semester on my own. Adam will be back in New York by the summer and we’ll pick up where we left off.”

Rachel looked a bit dubious at Kurt’s relaxed attitude. “It’s just unfortunate that he has to leave. I don’t think any of us had any real luck with long distance relationships, but maybe you’ll be the one to break the trend,” she said thoughtfully.

Kurt felt a slight jab in the gut at the mention of how each of them standing there had seen relationships that they thought were secure collapse once they were no longer in close proximity to their partners on a daily basis. He certainly didn’t need the reminder that it had taken only a few weeks for Blaine to stray once Kurt’s attention was focused on setting up his life in New York, and he’d be lying if he tried to claim that the thought of another relationship blowing up in his face on account of distance hadn’t crossed his mind at least once. But Adam wasn’t Blaine and Kurt had been tried his very best not to saddle him with Kurt’s unreasonable fears just because his last boyfriend had proven himself to be a shallow, faithless asshole.

And he certainly wasn’t going to try to hold Adam back just because of his fears. Adam deserved this opportunity and there was no way in hell that Kurt would stand in his way. It might end up being a real test of their relationship, but Kurt knew that they had to face it. It wouldn’t be fair to either of
them otherwise.

Kurt was a grown man and he wouldn’t be the one to hold Adam back because of his own insecurities. He would face this head on and just endure what would likely be a lengthy separation. He had more than enough on his plate to keep himself busy while Adam was away and the months would pass in no time.

Maybe if he told himself this often enough, he might start to believe it.

* * *

Kurt hurried after his last class to meet Adam at their pre-designated restaurant to grab an early dinner together before Adam had to head to the bar for his shift. His stage combat class ran a little long and he needed to shower before inflicting himself on the general public. Not to mention letting the hot water soothe away the aches that an hour wielding a prop sword and shield left.

He saw his boyfriend standing outside their favorite Indian restaurant and trotted up to him. “Hey… sorry I’m late,” Kurt apologized, turning his head up to receive a kiss from the older man.

“No worries, love. I just got here a moment ago,” Adam assured him. “I don’t know about you, but I’m positively famished.”

“Me too. I don’t know what I was thinking, having dance and stage combat on the same day,” Kurt complained playfully, letting his boyfriend slip and arm about him and guide him into the restaurant.

“Well, didn’t your advisor warn you?” Adam chuckled, giving Kurt a brief squeeze.

“Hush… you know how stubborn I am.”

Inside the restaurant was the combination of India and England that reminded Adam very much of the curry houses he used to frequent back in London and the food in this place was particularly good. This early in the evening, they were seated immediately and ordered their drinks. Adam ordered a mango lassi since he would be working, but Kurt treated himself to a beer that he more than felt was earned after his long day.

Kurt took a nibble of papadum dipped in spicy chutney and finally felt able to relax for the first time all day. He might only have an hour or so with Adam, but he was going to savor it.

“So when is the cast list going out?” Adam asked, sipping at his drink. “I’m sure that everyone is excited.”

“We’re supposed to be notified tomorrow about what role we’ll have in the chorus,” Kurt answered. “It’s kind of nice not being anxious over whether or not we get a part. I think that everyone is just happy to have the opportunity to be in the production in any capacity. Even Rachel isn’t acting like a total lunatic, which is rather nice for a chance.”

“I do have to say that I’m a trifle envious,” Adam teased. “They never invited drama majors to be in any of the musical productions before.”

“I’m really happy that so many of our Apples auditioned. It’s going to be a lot of fun to have so many friends to work with,” Kurt insisted. “And I can’t wait to see what the stage looks like once the prop and costuming students get hold of things.”

The Englishman smiled fondly at Kurt’s enthusiasm. “I’m sure that everything will be grand. And once you have the dates of the performances, I’ll be able to see if I can swing a quick visit to New
York to see it. I’m afraid that it’s all going to depend on what city we’re performing in, but I should be able to manage at least a night off.”

Kurt felt his heart warm at his boyfriend’s insistence on being there for a school production when he had his own job to worry about. “Thanks for the reminder of why I love you, but don’t worry if you can’t,” he maintained. “As much as I would love for you to cheer me on while I’m standing in the background, I’m going to more than understand if you can’t.”

“Well, we’ll see how things go,” Adam promised as their waiter set out bowls of rice and curry in front of them and a basket of fresh naan. “In the meantime, let me be proud of my gorgeous, insanely talented boyfriend. Even standing in the background, you’re worth watching.”

Kurt couldn’t help from laughing. “If you’re looking to get laid when you get home from work tonight, you’re off to a good start.”

“Oh? I wasn’t aware that I had to put in extra effort,” Adam teased, his eyes twinkling with the knowledge that he was egging the younger man on. “Usually all I have to do is breathe and you’re all over me.”

“Sweetie… I love you. But keep this up and you’ll be saying goodbye to any chance for a blow job for the foreseeable future,” Kurt warned half-playfully. “I’d think you’d want to get plenty of below-the-belt time in before you leave, so don’t ruin it.”

Adam couldn’t help from laughing as Kurt primly lifted a forkful of lamb vindaloo to his mouth and blew on it delicately before tasting the fiery stew. Kurt’s increasing love of all things hot and peppery was a never ending source of amusement for the older man, leaving him to wonder if Kurt would ever find his limitations. He’d yet to see Kurt limited in any capacity and doubted that this would be much different, though he’d probably draw the line at eating hot coals.

“Then again, with the way you seem determined to turn yourself into a fire-breathing dragon, perhaps I’d best keep your mouth away from my tender bits,” Adam quipped, enjoying his flavorful but much tamer tikka masala.

Kurt’s eyebrow arched at his boyfriend’s teasing. “Just for that, I’d say that you and your right hand should get reacquainted, because the two of you are going to be exclusive for the foreseeable future.”

“You and me both,” Adam reminded him, his smile fading at the unwanted reminder that they would be separating in the not so distant future. His expression fell as it dawned on him just what he said. “Sweetheart, I’m sorry…. I didn’t mean…”

Kurt’s gaze softened and he reached out to take Adam’s hand in his. “Hush. It’s okay,” he assured the older man. “We’ll deal with this. But in the meantime, I just want to enjoy the time we have together and not worry so much about the future. It’ll come and we’ll handle it.”

He speared a cube of tender lamb with his fork and held it out to Adam. “Want a taste?”

Normally Adam would shy away from such fiery food. He probably would never understand the kind of pleasure that Kurt seemed to find in parboiling his tongue with whatever mutant capsicum the chef decided to toss into the pan, but he refused to back away from a shared experience that they would be able to laugh about in the future.

Eyeing the offered morsel dubiously as if Kurt were trying to feed him napalm, Adam manned up and opened his mouth and allowed Kurt to slip the fork between his lips. Heat from the spicy curry washed over his tongue and Adam fought against his own resistance to accept the food that his lover
found so alluring. Warmth from the chilies and curry blended with a sharp bite of vinegar and beneath it all, the sweet flavor of young lamb. A scorching but still delicious balance of contrasts.

Much like the young man watching him with a teasing smile on his lips. Kurt was surprisingly simple and complex all at once. He was upfront about his flaws, which were considerable, but shy about his virtues. He was sweet and generous and loving, while at the same time as prickly as a hedgehog and would hold a grudge to the grave. A bit of fire and ice to ensure that one could never be bored in his presence.

“It’s delicious,” Adam granted, giving his young lover a sly glance. “Maybe later we’ll have to test how fireproof some parts of our bodies really are.”

The teasing tone in Adam’s voice caused the amused look in Kurt’s eyes to become more heated. “I’ll make sure that the ice tray is fully loaded for us,” he promised impishly.

Something about the teasing tone in Kurt’s voice just went right to Adam’s balls, and the prospect of Kurt’s wonderful hot mouth on his body followed by the sting of ice were not the kind of mental images that he needed right before starting his long shift at the bar. His lover, of course, just sat there smirking like a little demon at him as he squirmed in his seat.

“Just remember, love… turnabout is fair play,” Adam warned, a lustful edge coloring his voice. Leaving Kurt to spend the evening alone and on edge as he waited for Adam’s return was more than fair in his opinion.

The younger man’s grin was completely unrepentant. “Bring it on, big guy.”

* * *

Those that knew Rachel Berry best accepted that that among her many qualities, being a morning person was something that she was especially proud of. From the time she was in grade school, she had always been able to wake up early and quickly, ready to spring into action least any moment of daylight that could bring her closer to her dreams be wasted. Whether it was waking for an early morning class or to get her exercises in before the day officially began, her body was primed and ready to go the instant that her eyes opened.

This morning there was something particularly exciting to look forward too. The cast list for Les Miz was to be posted and she was looking forward to seeing what role she would play in the show. Being as familiar as she was, she could imagine herself in any one of a number of ensemble positions, though she did have hopes for something that gave her some room to show her improving acting chops.

She took her laptop off of her night table and powered it up before logging into the school website. Then she got her phone, knowing that Kurt would already be awake since he had an eight o’clock Diction class.

“Good morning,” he greeted brightly, answering the call almost immediately.

“Were you up waiting for me?” she teased.

“Nope. Never got to sleep last night,” he chuckled “Though I think I did wear Adam out. He’s out like a light.”

Rachel couldn’t help from laughing. “I don’t want to know the details, but you are so much fun when you’re sleep deprived.”
“It was worth it,” Kurt insisted. “Let me tell you, there are things that Adam can do that…”

“La la la! Not listening!” Rachel giggled, feeling her cheeks warm as she tried very hard not to think about Kurt and Adam together. While she was no more immune than most girls to the idea of two such gorgeous men, there just was something wrong about picturing Kurt having sex. He was like her brother!

“So are you ready?” Kurt asked, unable to keep the playful tone out of his voice.

“I was just waiting for you,” she shot back, opening the email folder waiting for her. “Now if you’ll just stop bragging about your boyfriend’s sexual prowess…”

“I was wondering how long your zen act was going to hold,” Kurt teased. “Okay… On the count of three…”

As expected, the list was an exceptionally long one, with well what looked like well over fifty students in total cast. “Wow. They really are looking to totally fill the stage,” Rachel remarked. “This is going to make some of the bigger numbers look and sound absolutely amazing.”

“I like some of the casting choices for the leads,” Kurt said. “Professor Carmody made some interesting choices, but I think that it’s going to really work.”

Rachel saw the name of the student cast as Eponine and felt herself nodding. She only knew the senior by reputation, but knew that she would acquit herself admirably in the part. “I really can’t fault any of her choices. But then, she had some amazing students to choose from.”

Her eyes scanned down to the list for the chorus parts and was thankful that everyone was listed in alphabetical order so she found her name quickly.

*Berry, Rachel B.:*  
Charsus – Act One: Solo (Lovely Ladies), Act Two: Solo (Turning)

“Kurt! I got two solos!” she exclaimed, bouncing elatedly on her bed. To have one in each act would give her just enough focus to satisfy her.

“I see! You get to be a prostitute! I’m so proud of you!” he laughed.

“Oh shush,” she admonished, giggling in her excitement. “Let me see about you…”

Her eyes scanned down the list for Kurt’s name and she felt herself smiling widely at the entry.

*Hummel, Kurt E.:*  
Charsus – Act One: Solo (Work Song)  
Understudy (Enjolras)

“Oh my God… Kurt, this is fantastic,” Rachel praised sincerely. “I didn’t think they’d be casting anyone from our class as understudies.”

“Neither did I, but it’s nice to be considered,” he admitted, sounding more than a little surprised to her. Even if he never got to take the stage in the role, Rachel knew that it was a huge credit to him to be assigned the responsibility. He would have to learn a significant role as well as his place in the ensemble numbers.

She couldn’t help from being envious, but knew that it would be a huge burden for Kurt to carry, with little promise of real reward outside of his early solos in the show. It made sense for him to be chosen for the spot since he’d already proven that he could learn two roles at the same time from his time with the Shakespeare Festival.
“It looks like all of us got a little something in the show,” Kurt nodded, very pleased to see all of their friends listed.

Rachel checked the names of their friends and couldn’t help from giggling. “Well, Katya gets to be a prostitute with me. Nice to see that I won’t be alone in my infamy.”

She could almost mentally see Kurt nodding to himself as he looked over the list. “And it looks like all of my Apples that auditioned get to be in the chorus. They really are pulling in every warm body they can.”

“It’s going to be nice to have so many friends around us for this,” Rachel insisted. “I know that it’s going to be a lot of work, but it’ll probably be a lot of fun.”

“Definitely. Well, I’m going to hang up and give Adam the news,” Kurt informed her. “And Rach? Congratulations. I’m really glad that you got those solos.”

Rachel felt her smile widen at his sincere compliment. “I’ll see you at school, Mr. Understudy. And take it easy on your old man there.”

Kurt laughed before hanging up, leaving Rachel a moment to savor this small but very tangible triumph. It wasn’t as huge an accomplishment as a Broadway lead or Kurt’s star turn this past summer, but it was an affirmation that she was moving forward. This was the evidence that she so very desperately needed to show that she had maybe begun to repair the damage that she’d done to her reputation.

Checking her clock, she knew that it was awfully early to be calling her fathers, but she couldn’t resist the need to tell them her good news. She hardly thought that they’d be mad would very likely be booking their plane tickets the instant they heard.

* * *

“Kurt! Kurt!” Mei squealed as she rushed up to her friend and flung herself into his arms. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

“For what, sweetness?” he asked, giving her a quick hug. He wasn’t surprised to see several other members of the group coming up behind her wearing wide grins on their faces.

She gave him an absolutely brilliant smile. “For convincing us to audition for the musical,” she reminded him.

“Oh… that little thing?” he said offhandedly, his tone fondly teasing. “I saw that everyone’s in chorus.”

“And I even got a solo line,” Mei proclaimed. “It’s not much, but considering I’m not a voice major I’ll take it.”

“And we saw that you’re also an understudy. That’s so amazing,” Mitchel insisted.

Kurt felt a small swell of pride at her praise, having learned to be honest enough with himself to recognize what kind of accomplishment he’d managed. If Professor Carmody thought enough of him to make him understudy to such a significant character, the odds were that he would have actually been cast in a role he had been a junior. While he would have loved to actually play a real part, he knew that this was probably the best he could possibly be offered.

“Well, I’m just glad that I’ll be on the stage,” Tommy said. “Put me in the background for ‘Master of
the House’ and I’m more than fine.”

Jules gave Kurt’s shoulder a supportive squeeze. “Well, us tech students are also going to be busy on this, even if we don’t get the limelight. Seriously though… no one would ever have auditioned if you hadn’t pushed them.”

“Well, you guys are really talented and it’s long past time for the Apples to be taken a bit more seriously,” Kurt stated. “And what person wouldn’t want to do a show like this with all of his friends around him?”

Mei kissed him on the cheek, positively beaming. “Well, we are thrilled and this is going to be a lot of fun.”

Kurt gave her a quick squeeze. “I’ll see you all later at practice,” he promised. “It looks like it’s probably going to be one of our last actual Apple rehearsals for awhile, and we’ve got a lot of things to figure out. I don’t want to lose our new members because we’re going to be focused on this production. That’s not fair to them.”

Jules nodded in agreement. “We’ll figure something out,” he said assuredly. “Even if we’re not able to have regular practices, I’m sure that we’ll find some time to get together.”

Mei hugged Kurt again before they dispersed and headed of to their respective classes, babbling happily amongst themselves. Kurt felt himself smiling, happy over their obvious delight at the opportunity presented to them. It’s been a long time since he faced the prospect of being in a production with so many friends around him.

He’d known that his time at NYADA would mean working harder than he’d ever expected to in his life, and being pushed in a manner that no teacher ever cared to before with him. But it was the moments like this that made putting himself through this meat grinder so very much worth it.

* * *

Adam sipped his tea as he reviewed his final schedule from the producers, realizing that this was the best that he could possibly expect. He was grateful that rehearsals would be held in New York, so he’d at least get to spend the holidays with Kurt. The tour was expected to end right around the time that Kurt’s spring semester would be winding down, after which a decision would be made about a New York opening.

He still felt terribly conflicted about having taken the job. On one hand, he had needed very much to find work and he was hardly at the stage of his career where he could afford to be too choosy. And this was a good role in an intriguing production. It was a good opportunity for him and he was glad that Kurt convinced him to take the role. He knew that it was a rare chance to actually originate a part and build professional contacts, as well as giving him the opportunity to explore more of the country that he was building his life in.

It was leaving Kurt that troubled him so deeply. His lover had been nothing but supportive about his taking this job and Adam was deeply torn about leaving him for several months. So far Kurt had been taking this very well. Too well, a small, dark spot in his heart kept insisting.

It wasn’t totally unreasonable for him to be anxious, he told himself. This was an unexpected burden he was placing on his boyfriend when Kurt should be focused on school and he wouldn’t be surprised for Kurt to be upset by the disruption of their plans. Or that Kurt might harbor regrets about investing so much in their relationship in just as Adam was running out the door.
So far, Kurt had handled the disruption with his usual aplomb and showed no real evidence of distress about their plans being upended. Adam couldn’t help from wondering how long that would last, because the closer they got to the day he had to leave the more the pressure would be placed on Kurt to bear.

He looked up at the sound of a key being inserted into the lock of their door and Kurt walking in, looking absolutely delectable in his oxblood leather jacket and a check print scarf wrapped about his elegant throat. “Hi love,” he greeted, getting up to give Kurt a kiss. “What did they say?”

Kurt wrinkled his nose a bit as he slipped off his jacket and draped it over the back of a chair. “Well, they’re willing let me sign a lease for the apartment since I appear to be so responsible, and they’re being generous by not raising the rent. But want for a full year’s commitment. That would lock us in until next winter.”

“That’s not so bad,” Adam surmised. It was actually better than he expected and they’d managed to survive living in close quarters so far.

Kurt shrugged. “I was really hoping that we’d be in a bigger place by then, and to be honest I’m a little concerned about being able to work enough hours to cover things. With school and rehearsals… I’m just not sure what I can really manage.”

Adam nodded understandingly, a trifle disappointed but he fully understood Kurt’s reservations. It was one thing to have roommates that could pick up the slack when money got tight. Kurt would be totally on his own and not only have to cover the whole rent, but utilities and groceries. The idea that Kurt might be left short on money for groceries at times in order to keep a roof over his head made Adam’s stomach clench uncomfortably. The last thing he ever wanted was for Kurt to be left struggling in order to support his career.

“I’ll be making decent money doing the tour,” he reminded his boyfriend. “I can certain help cover things while I’m away.”

Kurt shook his head firmly. “No… that money you’re going to need after the tour ends until you either find another role or until your show gets a commitment for a New York staging,” he reminded Adam.

The older man sighed, wanting to argue the point even knowing that Kurt was right. It was something that they both learned in their first year at NYADA in the required Managing an Acting Career class. It was easy for inexperienced actors to get dazzled by a sudden rush of money that came with a job, and that they could leave themselves with nothing when the job ended if they weren’t careful. He needed a financial cushion to support himself in between jobs and he was thankful that Kurt was mature enough and responsible enough to recognize that fact.

“What about a roommate?” Adam suggested. “I know that the place is a bit on the small side…”

He didn’t finish the thought. It wouldn’t work, he recognized even as he was saying the words. It was one thing for lovers to share such a tiny space, but for Kurt to manage with someone that he wasn’t sleeping with… no.

“The girls suggested that I consider moving back into the loft, but with Artie and Tina there now, it just won’t work,” Kurt explained. “And none of our friends have room for another roommate and to be honest… I just don’t want to live with someone else. Not like that.”

Kurt sat down and ran a hand through his hair to smooth it back, gathering his thoughts. “I… I stopped by the housing office at school the other day, just to ask some questions. There would be no
problem with me taking a room in the dorms for the spring semester. It would cost a lot less than trying to cover rent and expenses and with my grades I’d even qualify for a merit grant to help cover my fees.”

Adam felt his heart sink a little bit, but he quickly recognized that it would make sense for Kurt to move into the dorms while he was away.

“I did some thinking on the way home and the more I thought about it, the more sense it made,” Kurt explained, looking up at his boyfriend with eyes that pleaded for understanding. “Even if I could manage things financially, I just don’t know if I’d want to be living entirely on my own. It just seemed like a lot to deal with on top of school and work and rehearsals. Doing all the shopping and laundry and cooking for myself.”

And just being alone. That went unsaid, but Adam knew his lover well enough to pick up on Kurt’s concern loud and clear. Being alone all the time, spending his nights with no one to talk to if his friends weren’t free. Kurt wasn’t emotionally needy by nature and was so astonishingly self-sufficient, but Adam understood his concerns about becoming too isolated. For someone so used to taking care of himself, it would be easy for Kurt to slip into a solitary shell and not recognize just how lonely he was until he was completely boxed in.

It might not be an ideal solution but it was the best one for them, Adam recognized. “That sounds more than fine,” he granted, giving Kurt a reassuring smile. “We can put all of our furniture into storage for the time being and I’ll have time to find us a new flat when I get back to the city.”

Adam knew that he would have to make some arrangements of his own since he wouldn’t be having an apartment to come right back to, but he doubted that he would have trouble finding a friend with a couch that he could stay with until he found a new flat for himself and Kurt. He’d have a bit of time between the conclusion of his tour and the end of Kurt’s spring semester. All going well, they’d be in their new place by the start of summer.

“You’re not upset?” Kurt asked, looking up at Adam hesitantly. “I know this means giving up your apartment and…”

Adam quickly kissed him, easing Kurt’s concerns. “It’s going to be fine,” he assured Kurt. “Now that I’m thinking about it, I feel a lot better knowing that you were staying someplace secure and not so alone while I’m away. The dorms aren’t at all bad and you’ll have some friends there. And a storage room is a lot less expensive than rent here. I don’t want to leave you stressed about trying to manage everything while I’m working.”

Kurt’s expression relaxed when he realized that Adam wasn’t opposed to the idea. “I was really afraid that you’d be upset,” he admitted. “I didn’t want you to lose your apartment and I feel like it’s a step backwards.”

Adam just smiled kindly, reaching up to smooth Kurt’s hair back from his face. “Not at all, darling,” he insisted. “Finding a new place isn’t that serious an issue and I’m more concerned with you feeling like you’re not taking on too much to manage. It’s a lot different living totally by yourself and managing everything, and I know that you’re going to have a lot on your plate to handle the next few months.”

The look of relief in Kurt’s tore at Adam. He’d never wanted his lover to be put under such stress over his aspirations. Kurt had his own future to focus on as well, and Adam didn’t want him to risk his future while Adam built his career. They would both have to make some major compromises, and Adam would not allow all the sacrifices to be made by his partner.
He opened up his arms to embrace the younger man, wanting only to express his support for what Kurt needed to get him through the weeks that were certain to be difficult for the both of them. There were still so many issues that they needed to resolve and things to discuss, but he didn’t have the heart to disturb the fragile peace that they’d reached at that moment.

Adam desperately wanted this experience to be a new beginning for both of them. But how could there be a beginning if there wasn’t an ending?

* * *

The first full cast meeting for Les Miserables was held on a Friday afternoon in the largest of NYADA’s auditoriums. Besides all of voice and theater students in attendance, Professor Carmody had also called in the prop, costuming and technical students who would be working behind the scenes. It was the first time that all of the students really got a sense of the entire scope of the production. It almost looked like the entire student body was in attendance.

“I know,” Professor Carmody acknowledged a little smile on her face as she faced the assembly. “It is a lot to take in. Our production is going to be on the scale that we would see only in some of the largest professional shows. And for us to pull that off successfully, we need each part of the whole working together.”

She looked out on the students, seeing that they had self-segregated to some degree. Voice students sat with other voice students, while dramatics majors clustered together. The technical students kept to their own group, used to being ignored by the performance-focused students. That was something she was going to address now.

“This show won’t work unless we all pull together as a single team,” she waned. “No one element is more important than the other. Our actors may get most of the audience’s attention, but they won’t impress anyone very much if they’re standing on a bare stage in their street clothes. Just as our technical students aren’t going to make an impression on anyone if there is no one on stage to focus those elements on. It all has to come together as a seamless whole.”

She paused to let that sink in, hoping that they really grasped what she was telling them. She knew from personal experience that it was easy for those on stage to disregard the contributions of the technical students, and for the technical students to feel that their hard work is overlooked in favor of the performers.

“We also are going to be joined by several very talented child actors who will be playing Gavroche and Young Cosette and Eponine,” she advised, filling in the blank that she was sure that many of the students probably had in the backs of their minds. “They are performers with a local theater group and are remarkable singers and actors who might one day be students here themselves. I hope that you’ll be as supportive to them as I know you will be to one another since you are going to be in the very unique position of being able to help teach and guide them at this early stage of their performing careers. The experience they get working with us is going to have a big influence on their futures as actors.

“Now starting next week we’ll have our first official rehearsal. Chorus members will get their sheets with their solos and understudies will work alongside the performers they’ll be shadowing. Costumers will be scheduling everyone to come in for measurements so they can get started on wardrobe and our set builders and lighting techs will start designing the stage. This is going to be a tremendous effort on all our parts, but I have every confidence that this production will exceed the expectations that I have.”

Once they got the message of just what they’d let themselves in for and how high her expectations
were for their behavior during the course of the production, she dismissed the group with an urging to start really learning the material so they could hit the ground running. Once the students had filed out of the room, she turned to see Carmen standing in the wings of the stage, having watched her talk with the students.

“Keeping an eye on me?” she teased, a wry smile on her face.

Madam Tibideaux just smiled, stepping out to join her old friend. “Just seeing what was going on since it’s going to influence how I handle some of my students over the next few months,” she advised. “You’ve given them quite a challenge.”

Professor Carmody looked about the empty stage, her mind already racing ahead as she considered the rapidly approaching rehearsals. “I know. But I think that it’s going to be good for them. Our seniors and juniors will get a real taste of what they can expect in the world out there, and our younger students... I know that a t lot of them come in thinking that they’re the most talented things ever and...” She paused, gathering her thoughts on just what she wanted to say.

“Some of them do have a certain sense of entitlement and I want to nip that in the bud,” she explained. “It’s a problem that I’ve been seeing for some time. All of our students are valuable and have skills that are vital to the theater world, but how often have we seen our acting and voice students totally disregard the costumers? Or the set builders or the lighting crew. They sometimes act as if those students have no purpose except to showcase the performers and they don’t see how every single element is vital to putting a production together.”

The Dean nodded, in full agreement with her assessment. “There’s always been a pretty rigid hierarchy here, and I agree… the performing students do often tend to treat the production side of things rather callously.”

Professor Carmody just chuckled. “They can be a bunch of arrogant little snots,” she insisted. “I know it’s not just in our school. We’ve both seen plenty of cases out in the world.

“But my whole point is for everyone to be equally invested and that no one is more important than anyone else. The leads are no more important than anyone in the ensemble or the lighting techs or the students designing the programs.”

“Well, at the very least that should help you avoid too many students putting on airs,” Madam Tibideaux said sagely. “It’s a hard balance that we have sometimes as teachers. Our students are talented and their abilities should be encouraged, but not in a way that puts others down.”

Professor Carmody gathered up her things to follow her out of the auditorium. “Well, I’m glad that you see it my way,” she said thankfully. “Because with the scale of this production, I’m not going to have time for handholding or breaking up fights. And I’d hate to cut anyone because they forget their manners.”

The other teacher just smiled, giving her friend’s hand an encouraging squeeze. “I’ll do what I can to head the worst ones off at the pass,” she promised.

And there were a few that she knew that would probably need a bit of watching on her part.

* * *

Rachel took a quick sip of water, delicately swishing it about her mouth before swallowing and moistening her throat. Madam Tibideaux was not taking it at all easy on her, putting her through a rigorous vocal workout and continuing to press her on the weaknesses in her performance style. It
was hard to have her deficiencies brought to her attention so often and she had to mentally remind herself that this was for her benefit. How was she ever going to achieve her goals if she ignored the lessons that her teacher was putting so much effort in imparting to her?

Before NYADA, Rachel would be hard pressed to remember a single teacher that was so critical of everything that she did, and she doubted that she ever had one that nitpicked on her flaws the way Madam Tibideaux did. Or who hadn’t couched their careful critiques with reminders of how talented and unique she was as to avoid offending or instigating a tantrum.

To Madam Tibideaux, talent was the smallest part of her interest in working with students. The ones at this school were a given, and Rachel was constantly reminded that she was surrounded by immensely talented performers. She knew that she had power and polish, but it was Madam Tibideaux’s opinion that she wasn’t a particularly interesting performer because she was so reluctant to push beyond what she was already comfortable doing.

Madam Tibideaux wasn’t critical simply for the purpose of being critical. She had made it abundantly clear that however schooled or talented her students were, it was only a starting point and she expected them to progress in their development. Those that weren’t able to were a waste of her time and there was nothing that her august teacher despised more than having her time and effort wasted. That was something that Rachel knew from personal experience.

Rachel knew that her teacher’s assessment of her was harsh, but not entirely incorrect. She did tend to select material that showcased the best qualities of her voice and there were certain composers and songs that she tended to gravitate towards. And after a lifetime of training herself to imitate her favorite singers, it was a hard to climb out of that rut. Her efforts outside of her comfort zone were, admittedly, a bit hit and miss.

This lesson was just such a case. Madam Tibideaux had wanted to see more of her singing where her power was reined in and not used as a crutch to make up for the lack of real emotional connection. She had made an effort with a rendition of “A Change in Me” that Rachel thought showed a softer, more introspective performance style and would hopefully please her incredibly fastidious teacher.

Madam Tibideaux listened closely, paying close attention to every word and breath that Rachel uttered. Her focus was not just on what notes Rachel sang, but how she sang them. When Rachel was finished, her teacher gave her a brief nod, a look of approval apparent in her dark eyes.

“That is much more of the effort that I wanted to see from you,” the older woman complimented. “You’re a much more engaging singer when you’re not actively trying to impress with the power of your voice.”

Rachel nodded, a small smile on her face at the compliment. “I’ve been told that before, and admittedly it took some time for the lesson to sink in.”

“Power and projection are important, but they can be overused,” her teacher advised her. “And when you overuse your power, we miss that you really do have a lovely vocal tone.

“And I do see you showing more real connection with the material,” Madam Tibideaux said thoughtfully. “I’m definitely getting more of a sense that you’re really understanding what the song is intended to communicate and not just paying attention to how it was performed by others in the past. That’s going to be vital to your future as a singer.”

Rachel carefully absorbed her teacher’s assessment, recognizing it for the compliment that it was. “Thank you, Madam,” she said sincerely. “I’ve been having more opportunity to experiment with material the past few weeks.”
“Good,” Madam Tibideaux said, nodding in approval. “I’m glad to see that from you. It’s very easy for a singer to get complacent and lock themselves in a trap. Even the best singers in the world have to keep pushing themselves, otherwise they’ll just end up doing repeated nostalgia shows.”

Rachel knew full well that she had done just that, resting on her laurels and remained in place while others around her passed her by. And it had taken some time for her to grasp that it wasn’t them in the wrong, denying her what she believed was hers by right. She had done that to herself.

Emerging from that hole had been painful and humbling, but she was digging her way out. And she would be all the better for it.

“I understand that you are in the ensemble for the spring musical,” Madam Tibideaux said, opening the door for Rachel to smile and feel like she had something to be proud of.

“Yes… and I’m very excited about it,” she insisted, her expression bright with the excitement was that she could not hide.

“And you have a solo? Let me see,” Madam Tibideaux requested, holding out her hand for Rachel to hand over her book.

“I’m doing a solo in both act one and two,” Rachel explained, opening her script to the bookmarked pages, her solos highlighted.

“Hmmm… ‘Lovely Ladies’,” Madam Tibideaux considered thoughtfully as she looked at the lines for Rachel’s solo. “Interesting.”

“I know it’s not a lot but I think I can really do something with this,” Rachel insisted.

“Oh, I don’t doubt that,” her teacher agreed. “This is a complex song, because it starts out so brightly. As if the prostitutes are enjoying their lives. It’s only at the end where your solo line comes in that we get the real tragedy of their existences.”

She looked at her student appraisingly. “Your lines require those emotional walls to come down. So don’t be afraid to really embrace that character. It’s going to be pivotal in Fantine’s story progression.”

Rachel nodded in understanding, her expression brightening at her teacher’s guidance.

“When you’re in the ensemble it’s very important that you see the musical as a whole,” Madam Tibideaux advised. “You may not feel as if you are getting very much in the way of individual focus, but each role is a thread in an overall tapestry. Some threads are bigger, certainly,” she granted. “But all are important. And all are needed to make the full picture. Do you understand?”

Rachel nodded and couldn’t help from smiling. “In other words, there are no small parts. Only small actors?”

Her teacher seemed taken aback at having the lesson she was trying to impart to bluntly rephrased, but nodded and couldn’t resist smiling in return. “Well, I was trying to put it in a more subtle way,” she said, a trace of amusement in her voice. “But Ms. Berry, let me be frank with you… this is going to be a challenge because I never got the impression that you were ever happy to be a supporting player.”

Rachel had to grant her that. Her behavior the few times when someone else was given the spotlight
over her was lacking, to say the very least. She made many of the people who’d worked with her in the past pretty miserable on account of her demands and outbursts.

“I know that you imagine yourself in one of the lead parts,” Madam Tibideaux informed her. “And you’re going to have to watch someone else play those roles and probably do them very differently than you would want to play them. And knowing you as well as I think I’ve come to, it’s going to be hard to step back and not imagine how the show might work with you as a lead.”

Rachel felt herself flush a bit, knowing that her teacher was right. She probably would be doing just that, and seeing someone else playing Eponine… that was going to be hard.

“I’m not going to lie,” Rachel admitted reluctantly, her voice soft and betraying her uncertainty. “I know that this is going to be a challenge for me. I know that my reputation for working well with others is not the best.”

Madam Tibideaux chuckled a bit at her student’s obvious discomfort, drawing a rueful smile from the younger woman.

“Yes, I know that’s an understatement,” Rachel acknowledged honestly. “Last year was a big wake up call for me, and I think that I finally got it through my skull that if I continued acting that way that I was only hurting my own prospects. I need to show that I can keep myself under control and work with the rest of the cast in whatever capacity they need of me.”

She composed herself, keeping her expression placid and her voice calm. “As much as I want a lead part… and make no mistake, if they offered it I would jump at the chance… but as much as I want that, I know that I need to show that I can be in the ensemble and be a productive member. This is going to be hard but I have to challenge myself. Otherwise how am I going to show that I’m not as self-centered as everyone thinks that I am?”

She would never admit it to her teacher, but despite knowing that she had more than earned her selfish reputation, it hurt to have people constantly expecting the worst from her. It had been a hard lesson for Rachel to accept that the reason that others viewed her so negatively was due entirely to her own behavior. For the longest time she shielded herself from criticism by insisting that her critics and rivals were motivated by jealousy of her obvious gifts. Accepting that she alone was responsible had been a painful lesson and one that she still struggled with. Her arrogance had nearly cost her everything, including the best friend that she’d ever have in her life.

And watching Kurt, using him as her example, had gone a long way in moderating her conduct. Kurt was tremendously talented and was increasingly confident in showing it, but people still liked him and wanted to be around him. He didn’t use his gifts as a shield to keep others at bay, but he drew them in and surrounded himself with those who wanted to work with him. Rachel had always envied Kurt’s ability to make friends once he’d dropped his icy walls and let them in.

She still had a lot to learn, and she had no doubt that she’d make some stumbles along the way but her path was now clear. If she could keep her head and focus on her work, she could earn a lot of good will and repair the damage that she’d done to her reputation. Rachel knew that it wouldn’t be easy since she was her own worst enemy, but having her friend at her side to show her the way and perhaps help keep her from letting her ego from running away with her.

But it was all on her shoulders. And she knew that if she failed there might be no way to fix the damage.

“Well, let’s get back to work,” Madam Tibideaux urged, gazing at her student thoughtfully. “Let’s see what you do with one of your old favorites now, and see if you can’t personalize it a bit more this
Rachel nodded and shifted her focus back to her training, quickly making the mental calculations on how she going to tailor “It Had to Be You” and avoid sounding like a Streisand impersonator. Taking a quick inhalation, she began to sing.

* * *

Kurt felt marginally better as he left the housing office. Not only was he able to confirm residency in the dorms for the spring, but he had managed to get a single and wouldn’t have to deal with a roommate. This would give him the best of both worlds. He would still be around his friends when he was in the mood to be social, but he would have a quiet space to retreat to when he needed his privacy.

Ideally he’d rather be in Adam’s little tiny apartment with the Englishman curled up around him at night, snoring in his ear. But they had to play the hand dealt to them, and he was genuinely thrilled for Adam’s opportunity. It was going to be a trial to deal with Adam being away from several months and figuring out how he was going to avoid dwelling on the older man’s continued absence.

Kurt never considered himself to be an especially clingy individual and he had nothing on his ex who spent months being the proverbial gum that he couldn’t scrape off his shoe after their breakup. But he’d be lying through his teeth if he tried to admit that he was fighting the urge to fling himself into Adam’s arms at every opportunity. Or that the thought of spending weeks apart cause his heart to clench painfully.

Kurt sighed as he placed his housing materials in his messenger bag and began the long walk back to their apartment. This wasn’t what he wanted at this stage of his life. Not with how much he loved Adam and wanted to get started on their lives together. There were so many things that they wanted to do and now… it felt like he was just going to have to put those dreams aside for the time being. When Adam returned home…

What would be of them? The girls had been right. None of them had been able to prevent their relationships from withering as time and distance took their tolls. It didn’t matter how much love they had. Nothing mattered once a few miles was put between them and the reasons to part overwhelmed any desire to stay together.

In a short time, Adam would be gone and immersed in a world that Kurt had barely gotten a taste of. He’s be busy traveling and performing, surrounded by other professional actors and he wouldn’t have time to think very much of his theater student boyfriend back in New York. Kurt didn’t think that Adam would cheat on him; that just wasn’t the Englishman’s way. Of all Kurt’s concerns, that was one that didn’t even cross his mind as a serious consideration. But how long would it take for him to start regretting that he tied himself to a silly schoolboy when the theater world had just started to open its doors to him?

No… He shook his head almost angrily. How could he think so little of what he and Adam shared? He knew that Adam loved him, and he adored the older man. But was that enough? It hadn’t been before and he hated that he was letting what Blaine did put a fear into him that didn’t belong here. Adam had done absolutely nothing to earn Kurt’s mistrust. It was his own weakness and fear getting the better of him here.

How could Adam leave knowing that Kurt as so afraid? Knowing his lover the way he did, Adam would probably give up the job and that was something Kurt could never let happen. He would never forgive himself if Adam sacrificed his career prospects in order to appease Kurt’s immature anxieties. Adam deserved a partner who could handle things and let him focus on his job, not a child
who’d distract him from what he needed to do.

Adam had been so loving and supportive of Kurt even before their relationship officially began. He’d urged Kurt to spread his wings and seize every opportunity in his grasp. Kurt knew that the Englishman deserved significant credit for the confident performer that Kurt was growing into.

So now it was Adam’s turn to grow and soar. And Kurt would do whatever was necessary to give him that chance. Living in a dorm room for a few months was the absolute least he could do

He deserved just as much support in return. And Kurt could only hope that when it was over that he and Adam would be able to find their ways back together and build their relationship anew. The alternative, though, was what filled him with dread. And he’d fight with everything he had in him to avoid that from happening.

In the meantime, he was going to savor every moment that he could. Hopefully it would be enough to hold him through the long separation.

Kurt returned to their tiny apartment to find Adam in the kitchen singing to himself as he started preparations for their dinner. Kurt paused at the door, savoring the sight of the man stirring a pan of vegetables and playfully adding dashes of seasoning and his hips moved to the music in his head. A pot of water was on the boil for pasta and a loaf of ciabatta sat on the counter, ready for slicing.

“Cheer up, sleepy Jean,” he warbled as he dumped a can of tomatoes into his pan with the vegetables and gave it a stir, making a quick sauce. “Oh, what can it mean to a daydream believer and a homecoming queen…”

Kurt dropped his bag off at the table and laid his jacket over the back of a chair, coming up to embrace Adam from behind. “You once thought of me as a white knight on a steed,” he joined in, drawing a surprised and delighted smile from his boyfriend. “Now you know how happy I can be.”

Adam turned so that he could hold Kurt, looking down at him adoringly. “Oh, and our good time start and end, without dollar one to spend,” he answered, his blue eyes shining. “But how much, baby, do we really need?”

He pulled Kurt along with him, dancing about the kitchen as they sang together. “Cheer up, sleepy Jean. Oh, what can it mean to a daydream believer and a homecoming queen…”

Kurt leaned into him, letting Adam lead and laughing delightedly as they sang. He savored the feel of those muscular arms about him and when Adam dipped him back to steal a kiss, Kurt couldn’t resist clinging to him. And for a moment, Kurt was able to push aside his worries and just enjoy the moment shared with the man he loved. And to lose the concern that these moments were coming to an end.

* * *

Song sung by Adam and Kurt: "Daydream Believer" by the Monkees
While the initial cast meeting had given Kurt a sense about the size of the NYADA musical, it was only once rehearsals began that he truly grasped just what the scale of the production numbers were going to be. He’d seen Les Miz done before, back when he was about twelve years old and had badgered his father into taking to see a touring company production at the local community college. While his father napped through most of the show, waking only by the loudest numbers, Kurt had been enraptured the entire time. He remembered watching in wonderment as what seemed like dozens of performers brought the grand tragedy to life and it stood out as one of the moments that pushed him towards his future as a performer.

In retrospect, he knew that it had in actuality been a relatively modest production. The number of performers on the stage for just the opening in NYADA’s production, making up both the cast of prisoners and guards, was more than that show’s entire cast. Given the sheer number of performers she had to work with, Professor Carmody had reserved NYADA’s largest stage for the duration of their rehearsal schedule.

There were around twenty-five men on the stage playing the prisoners, and ten portraying the guards. With so many bodies Kurt had to wonder how Professor Carmody was going to keep track of who was who and what she wanted them to be doing at any given moment. Fortunately for everyone the teacher had a remarkable memory, not to mention a collection of talented and dedicated student assistants, to manage them.

Many in Kurt’s voice class were in this number, as well as Mitchel from the Apples playing a guard. They were scattered about and mixed in with the juniors and seniors filling out the chorus. The students portraying the prisoners was miming doing various acts of hard labor while the guards were armed with cardboard tubes that stood in for the rifles they would carry during the performance. Whenever one of the “prisoners” acted out of line, they were quickly struck by the guards who watched their every move.

They’d run through the musical’s opening number a few times that morning and they sounded pretty good. Professor Carmody was watching everything closely and nothing was left unfinished. All the tiny details that might catch the notice of someone in the audience, down to the tilt of a head or the flexing of a muscle, was examined and fine tuned so that the who number would be polished but still look harsh and organic.

“All right everyone, let’s give the opening another run through. Up until we get Javert’s entrance,” she ordered. “And guys, really throw your bodies into the movements. You’re supposed to be abused, starving and struggling. Make it look like you can barely manage.”

Kurt nodded to himself and took his mark in the middle of the group. Jamie gave him a quick smile and knelt on the floor while everyone around them took their positions. Mitchel took his spot with the rest of the “guards”, shouldering his cardboard tube and setting his normally jovial face into a stern frown.

“All right everyone, let’s give the opening another run through. Up until we get Javert’s entrance,” she ordered. “And guys, really throw your bodies into the movements. You’re supposed to be abused, starving and struggling. Make it look like you can barely manage.”

Kurt listened to the familiar refrain of the opening, setting the grim scene. He bent over, as if trying to lift a heavy sledge hammer and struggling with the weight. Fortunately he’d wielded some pretty hefty tools at his father’s garage and knew just how much strength it took to handle them. He flexed the muscles in his back and shoulders to show that they were bearing the strain as he lifted his imaginary hammer and dropped it down onto his imaginary rocks.
“Oh uh! Oh uh!” they groaned mournfully to the music as they mimed their labors. Kurt swung his hammer while Jamie pretended to be trying to move a heavy stone.

“Look down! Look down! Don’t look them in the eye,” the prisoners sang, each focused on their labors and casting furtive glances at the guards who wasted no time in putting any they thought were out of line back in their places. “Look down! Look down! You’re here until you die!”

One young man, a junior if Kurt remembered correctly, dared to raise his head to wipe the imaginary sweat from his brow. “The sun is strong,” he complained. “It’s hot as hell below!” A guard gave him a rough shove and he returned to his labors.

“Look down! Look down!” the prisoners warned. “There’s twenty years to go!”

“I’ve done no wrong!” a senior protested, looking nearly crazed in his misery. “Sweet Jesus, hear my prayer!”

“Look down! Look down! Sweet Jesus doesn’t care,” his fellows reminded him dolefully.

Kurt looked up, casting his face in an expression of desperate hopefulness. “I know she’ll wait!” he insisted, clearly fighting despair and keeping his character in mind. “I know that she’ll be true!” A guard came up behind him and struck him in the back with the butt of his “rifle”, knocking Kurt to the floor.

“Look down! Look down! They’ve all forgotten you,” the prisoners mournfully warned him. Kurt struggled back to his feet and returned to his labors.

Jamie looked up, his face twisted in anger at his situation. “When I get free, you won’t see me,” he warned. “Here for dust!”

“Look down! Look down! Don’t look them in the eye,” the chorus of prisoners droned sadly. One young man who appeared to be struggling more than most looked up from his labors, his face a study of suffering and pain.

“How long, O Lord?” he prayed mournfully. “Before you let me die?”


Professor Carmody called out “Okay guys… that’s not bad at all. But some of you are still not putting your whole body into it. You need to have your physical actions match your singing.

“And guards… let’s see a bit more brutality,” she instructed. “When you’re hitting the prisoners, don’t be afraid to put a little force into it. We want the audience to believe that the prisoners are being brutalized, not getting love taps.”

She turned to two performers waiting on the sideline for their cues. “Let’s do another run through and then bring in Javert and Jean Valjean.”

It was the fifth time that morning that they were running through the song, but the repetition wasn’t bothering Kurt at all. He never got bored with rehearsals and knew that they’d be doing this song a few hundred times before their first time in front of an audience. The repetition gave him the chance to develop his character and build up his back-story.

On paper, his character might just be known as Prisoner #3, but Kurt had already given him a name
and a story. In his mind, he was Luc. His sweetheart’s name was Marianne and she had Quinn’s cool beauty, Brittany’s sweetness and Santana’s intelligence. They were cruelly separated by Luc’s imprisonment and Kurt knew that there would be no happy reunion for them. Thus a great heartbreak would be expressed in just two lines of a song.

He also took the time to watch the seniors, both in the chorus around him and in the lead roles. The actor playing Javert was a remarkable singer with a rich baritone voice that Kurt would happily spend hours listening to. Jean Valjean was also being played by a senior who was gifted with a gloriously pure tenor voice that made Kurt’s toes curl. The level of talent in this production was staggering and he was glad to just be a part of it.

Watching the seniors perform reminded Kurt of just what he was aspiring to. These were performers who were ready to take on professional roles and this show would likely help to launch their careers. It showed very clearly how high the standard in the theater world were and that he had made the right decision to seek out the training that NYADA offered him. No matter how good he thought he was, he needed to be here.

When Professor Carmody called a break before they started work on At the End of the Day, he made a small sigh of relief and shared a quick smile with his friends he gratefully sipped from the water bottle he’d stashed in his bag. This was one of the biggest numbers, consisting of nearly the entire chorus and he was looking forward to hearing how it would sound in full voice. Their work had barely begun.

* * *

“Well, I do have to say that you totally outdid yourself,” Isabelle complimented, handing a glass of wine to Kurt and raising her own glass to toast him. “Those costumes are spectacular.”

Kurt smiled proudly. Coming from someone that he deeply respected and considered a fashion icon, her compliment meant a lot to him. Especially given how his boss was dressed in a perfect replica of Glinda’s movie costume, right down to her tall crown that gave the petite woman the illusion of height and grandeur. Though that could have also helped by the glittery Milano Blahnik stilettos she was wearing. While Kurt had worn heels a time or two in his past for performances, his feet positively ached at the thought of trying to wear the shoes that his boss did on a daily basis. Isabelle had some serious shoe mojo that was to be envied and respected.

“And I’m not even annoyed that you won the employee costume contest,” she insisted playfully, giving him a light swat. “You and Adam made quite the showing.”

Kurt glanced up to where his boyfriend was chatting with a few of Kurt’s coworkers that he’d met at previous gatherings and one of the editors from the Times fashion section. He felt himself smiling, admiring at how the Englishman looked absolutely edible in his costume. Which was pretty apt considering what he and Kurt were dressed as.

The Vogue Halloween party was quite the event in the fashion world and even though Kurt had become accustomed to being surrounded by models and designers, this party was on a whole other level. There were quite a few celebrities in attendance and Kurt was grateful that enough actors and models passed through the Vogue building since he started working there that he wasn’t completely star struck when he spotted someone that he had seen on television or in the movies. When a well known actress dressed in an elaborate anime-inspired costume paused to compliment him on his outfit, Kurt managed to keep his cool and get his thanks out without stammering. Having Isabelle at his side and Adam hovering nearby helped his confidence tremendously.

They had posed for quite a few pictures over the course of the evening and Kurt wondered if any of
the shots of him and Adam would make the society and fashion blogs. They looked so good in their matching costumes and the pair of them played their characters perfectly. The two of them had spent a good part of the evening dancing about one another, Kurt being dangerously flirtatious and Adam defiant but unable to hide his genuine and mounting interest in his persistent suitor. They’d gotten quite a bit of attention, more than a few admiring stares and a few daring requests from both men and women to become the filling of a sandwich with them as the bread.

“Well, I hate to party and run but we do have to leave for our other engagements,” he said regretfully, tossing back the last of his wine. “It’s going to be a long night.”

Isabelle laughed brightly, reaching up to smooth back a lock of Kurt’s blond wig. “Well, you certainly are appropriately dressed for it,” she insisted, eyeing his costume admiringly again. “Go on… I’ll make sure that your prize gets back to the office.”

Kurt kissed her cheek gratefully, glad that he wasn’t going to have to lug the basket of wine and gourmet treats around with him all night. “I’ll see you on Monday,” he promised before moving to retrieve his boyfriend.

Adam was talking with Chase, who was dressed provocatively as a sexy Spartan warrior, his dark skin shining from the oil rubbed into it. But as good as Chase looked, Kurt only had eyes for his Englishman and he couldn’t resist pausing before approaching to admire his boyfriend. He was thankful that he’d kept in mind just how stunning Adam looked in riding breaches and tall boots when putting their costumes together because his legs deserved to be put on display for Kurt’s pleasure as often as possible.

“Ah, here comes the Brat Prince,” Chase chuckled as Kurt came up to Adam’s side and put his arm about him possessively. “You’d best watch yourself, ‘Louis’, or he’ll never let you go.”

Adam laughed brightly, revealing the acrylic fangs capping his eyeteeth. “No fear about that. I’m perfectly capable of holding his unholy desires at bay.”

“But do you want to?” Kurt purred dangerously, revealing his own fangs. One of his friends in the costuming program had a small sideline making fangs for the Goth and live action role play communities and Kurt had traded a velvet lounging robe that he’d long since outgrown for his and Adam’s accessories. The fangs were so well fitted that they could easily talk without lisping at all.

He trailed a finger teasingly over Adam’s firm jawline, the nail painted with several coats of high gloss polish to look nearly like glass. “My ‘unholy desires’ can be a lot of fun,” he all but growled.

Adam cocked his head thoughtfully, looking at the slim, elegant man beside him who was eyeing him with a possessive hunger that was only partly from the character he was playing. He wouldn’t have expected Kurt to find so much in Lestat’s character to bond with, but he should have known better. His lover dove into the role with a passion that left him a trifle breathless at times. Kurt was flirtatious and arrogant and more than a little dangerous playing his character, and all the more alluring for it.

It made sense for Adam to play the more reserved Louis despite the fact that he was the blond of the pairing. A long brown wig gave him the proper appearance of the more serious vampire and he was rather enjoying Kurt courting him so outrageously. Adam had the feeling that by the end of the night, Lestat will have won his Louis.

“Are we leaving? I think that the girls were expecting us by now” he reminded, accepting Kurt’s arm.
“I think so,” Kurt answered. “Everyone else should be there and we can make our grand entrances.”

Adam looked admiring at his partner, and the way he seemed to nearly vanish into his character. “Ah, so your grand scheme of being fashionably late has come to fruition,” he teased playfully.

Kurt laughed brightly, resting his blond head against Adam’s shoulder. “You know me so well. Come my love… the night awaits us!”

The car Kurt had called to pick them up was running a few minutes late because of traffic but it gave them a few moments to enjoy the celebratory street scene. It seemed like most of New York City was in the festive Halloween mood and decked out in all sorts of fantastic and frightening garb. Adults strolled by on their way to parties or the city parade while parents lead their children about for a night of trick or treating. In their lavish costumes, the two of them fit right in and garnered a great deal of attention while they waited for their car.

Kurt was reveling in the merriment and Adam decided that there was nothing more endearing in the world than seeing his boyfriend dressed in a costume authentic enough for a film kneeling down to converse playfully with a little boy who looked to be about six years old dressed as Dracula. Seeing Lestat paying homage to the young Count delighted both the child and his parents and got a lot of admiring and amused stares from those passing by on the street. Several people got out their phones to snap a quick picture of the adorable scene.

“You are so good with children,” Adam complimented, chucking as they climbed into the car.

Kurt grinned, displaying his fangs and resting his head on his boyfriend’s shoulder. “He was absolutely precious. When my parents used to take me out trick or treating, I didn’t care much about the candy… I just loved it when people noticed what I was wearing. My mom and I would plan things out for weeks.”

The Englishman laughed brightly. “So that hasn’t changed at all, did it? I think you’ve had our costumes in mind for months,” he accused playfully.

“Of course I did,” Kurt confirmed haughtily. “Halloween is one of the most important fashion days of the year and I wasn’t going to show up in something that just got thrown together. I do have my pride.”

“Spoken like a true vampire prince,” Adam teased, bending his head to give Kurt a searing kiss. One of his fangs scraped lightly against the younger man’s lower lip, drawing a groan that didn’t sound at all pained to Adam’s ears.

Well… that was intriguing. Something to keep in mind for later he decided, letting his hand run down Kurt’s arm and enjoying the feel of velvet covered muscle beneath his fingertips. Apparently Kurt might be more than a little receptive to adding a bit of spice to their role playing games. Adam mentally filed this new development for further investigation when they weren’t sitting in a car on their way to a grand party with their friends. If Kurt wanted to keep his fangs on all night, Adam doubted that he would mind too much.

He let Kurt settle against him, resting his head against his shoulder and enjoying the closeness. He looked down, once again admiring how becoming Kurt was in his costume. In the dim light of the car’s interior, the blond of Kurt’s wig looked nearly white and the shadows created by his expertly applied stage makeup made the fine structure of his jaw and cheekbone stand out, casting shadows in the hollows. Contrasting with the dark blue of Kurt’ velvet jacket, he looked absolutely ethereal.

Kurt sense Adam’s gaze and turned his eyes up at him, his mouth drawing into a smile. “What?” he
asked lightheartedly. His eyes looked dark and nearly fathomless in the soft lighting.

“Just admiring the view,” Adam assured him. “You are so beautiful.”

Kurt’s eyes seemed to almost glow in happiness. “Not nearly as beautiful as you,” he insisted softly, drawing Adam’s face in for another kiss.

Given that theater students jumped at any opportunity to dress up and have an outlet for their creative impulses, it wasn’t surprising that Halloween was a special night that they looked forward to. The party at Irving Plaza had been adopted as the unofficial gathering for students from the NYADA, NYU and Julliard theater and music programs. Many would be attending the parade and other parties first, which boded late nights for pretty much everyone.

When they arrived at the club Kurt thanked the driver and held the door for Adam to exit the car, returning to character and letting the older man thrill at having his younger partner taking the lead so assertively. Kurt offered Adam his arm with a teasing smile and Adam happily accepted, letting himself be lead into the club.

The party had been well underway for awhile by the time they arrived with a huge crowd already taking up the dance floor and clustered at tables about the club. The venue had been decorated appropriately with haunting lighting effects, cobwebs and the fog machine seemed to be working overtime to fill the space with an eerie ambiance that suited the celebration perfectly. What appeared to be several hundred students, guests and a few that Kurt would swear were faculty filled the club and were already dancing up a storm.

“Come on,” Kurt urged, giving Adam a wicked smile as he lead him into the crowd. “Let’s see if we can find anyone.”

Locating their friends was going to be a challenge given the crowd. The masks and elaborate makeup would make it hard to spot a familiar face, but Kurt seemed to zero in on where his friends had staked out a table by the bar where the music wasn’t quite as overpowering. Rachel spotted them first and jumped up to greet them.

“You’re finally here!” she exclaimed happily, rushing up to Kurt. They air-kissed, least they mess their carefully applied makeup.

“Let me look at the two of you,” she commanded. Kurt grinned and did a fashion turn, showing off his gorgeous velvet frock coat decorated with elaborate silver embroidery and the white shirt with lace at his throat and cuffs. He knew that his legs would look fantastic in the white breeches and tall boots, and with his wig and expertly applied makeup he looked to be the perfect vampire prince.

Adam’s costume was similar to Kurt’s with a green jacket and tan breeches, which suited his more somber character. Together, they made a perfectly matched set.

“Oh my God, you look amazing,” Rachel praised, clapping her hands. “Why didn’t I think of pairing up costumes with someone? Because you two are going to steal all the attention.”

Kurt nodded sympathetically. “No Fiyero to join you tonight, Elphaba?” he asked sympathetically.

Rachel sighed dramatically. “No Fiyero to join you tonight, Elphaba?” he asked sympathetically.

Rachel sighed dramatically. “I’m afraid so. Not even a flying monkey to keep me company.”

“Well if it’s any consolation, you’re the most beautiful witch in Oz,” Kurt assured her. And he wasn’t exaggerating. While her costume choice might have been a bit predictable, she was impeccably turned out as the title character of her favorite musical. “You did a lovely job on the makeup.”
“Tina and Santana helped,” Rachel admitted. “The green paint was getting absolutely everywhere!”

“And where are our other lovely ladies?” Adam asked, draping his arm about Kurt’s shoulders and drawing him near.

“She’s dancing with Artie right now and as for Santana…” Rachel turned to look about, one hand going to her witch’s hat to keep it in place. “I have no idea where she took off to.

“Oh… and I saw that we’re both signed up for the singing contest,” she warned him. “Just be prepared to lose.”

Kurt laughed brightly, letting his character come to the forefront again. “I hardly think so, sorceress,” he boasted. “Not with my beautiful Louis at my side.”

Adam preened happily and let Kurt caress his cheek possessively. Who would have guessed that he would feel such arousal at having Kurt taking on such an aggressive and alluring persona? Or that his young lover would do it so adeptly?

Rachel giggled at Kurt’s brazenness, picking up her prop broomstick. “Well, since you’re so sure that you’re going to win you can buy me a drink,” she demanded playfully. “A cranberry and vodka would be lovely. And get something for the others, while you’re at it.”

Kurt’s mouth drew up into a sardonic smile, knowing that she had bested him for the moment. He looked to his boyfriend’s amused stare and reprimanded, “Don’t be looking at me like that. I’m going to need your help carrying our drinks back.”

“Of course, my love,” Adam answered agreeably.

By the time it took them to wade through the crowd at the bar and get their order from the costumed bartenders, Tina and Artie had returned from the dance floor and several of their classmates made their arrival.

“Let me look at you two,” Kurt demanded when he spotted Analisa and her boyfriend dressed as Tania and Naveen from The Princess and the Frog. “Where did you get these costumes? They’re amazing.”

Katya and Jamie followed, dressed as Daenerys and Khal Drogo. “You guys missed an amazing parade,” he informed Kurt.

“I know,” he said regretfully. “But if it’s any consolation, I won a basket of treats for our next get together/brainstorming sessions. And I think that I spotted a few Kardashians at the Vogue party.”

Katya laughed and gave her friend a hug. “Well, I hope that you’re up to a few dances, because this lug has four left feet,” she complained, giving Jamie a playful glare of reproach. “I have no clue how he managed to survive dance class.”

Rachel looked up at Adam curiously. “You took dance at school, didn’t you?” she asked, her nose wrinkling adorable.

He nodded. “Just enough to fulfill the base requirement,” he admitted. “It’s not my strong suit.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Kurt purred, leaning into Adam’s space. “I think you move just fine.”

“The horizontal mambo doesn’t count, Lady Britches,” a sharp voice behind Kurt reminded him. Kurt turned to see Santana coming up to the group dressed appropriately as Satan. Well, that was if
Satan had a thing for red micro mini-dresses that barely reached the top of her thighs. Kurt thought that he recognized the dress from Santana’s clubbing wardrobe and she just paired it with a pair of petite devil horns and an adorable little tail pinned to her shapely rear.

“I was wondering where you were,” he responded, arching his eyebrow curiously. Standing next to Santana was a curvy young woman dressed, rather ironically in Kurt’s opinion, as an angel. An angel wearing a white dress nearly as short as Santana’s and a pair of wings so dainty that they probably wouldn’t keep a well fed pigeon aloft.

“Who’s your friend?” he asked, noting that they were standing awfully close and holding hands, If they stood any closer, they could wear the same dress.

Santana’s smile was all sharp teeth and attitude, but Kurt thought that he could detect just the barest trace of sincere excitement in her expression as she introduced her “friend”. “This is Dani,” she said. “We hooked up a few weeks ago at that Wet and Wild party at the beer garden and just ran into each other.”

Given that Santana rarely gave her past hookups much thought, the fact that she remembered this girl at all had to mean something. Kurt knew that she was still nursing a bit of a broken heart over Brittany and he hoped that she might finally be moving on. And the smile that Dani was giving Santana looked very out of place on an angel, so the feelings seemed to be mutual.

“Are you a student?” Rachel asked curiously.

Dani shook her head. “Not a theater student, but I’m meeting a friend of mine who’s at NYU. He was supposed to be here already but I guess his show ran late. And then I ran into Satan here and…”

“And we spent the last thirty minutes reminding ourselves that we click just fine,” Santana finished.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Dani,” Kurt said sincerely. He made a quick round of introductions and invited her to join them until her friend arrived. He had the feeling that he’d need a crowbar to pry Santana off of her.

“So… vampires,” Santana noted archly, looking over Kurt and Adam’s costumes. “I figured you’d pick something that involved a lot of sucking.”

Dani gave Santana a poke in the ribs, nearly causing her to laugh. “Be nice,” she warned.

Santana tilted her head close to nuzzle at Dani’s throat. “I don’t have to be nice,” she insisted. “I’m the devil.”

“And don’t we all know it,” Rachel chuckled.

“And what happened to your mask, Berry?” Santana asked, glancing at her roommate. “I thought you knew it was a costume party.”

“Ha ha…” Rachel said mockingly, rolling her eyes. “You’re not exactly one to talk.”

Tina planted herself on Artie’s lap, looking lovely in her Rosie the Riveter costume, while Artie was dressed as a vintage flying ace. “Face it… both of you stayed true to form,” she insisted, sticking out her tongue.

Rachel sighed dramatically and shrugged. “I can’t argue with that.” She sipped at her drink carefully so as not to damage her makeup.
Kurt looked to Adam and gave his hand a tug. “Come on. I want to dance.”

What started out as a dance with just the two of them soon became more of a group dance, as Kurt’s friends and classmates moved in to join them. Adam soon found himself squeezed between Tina and Rachel, while Analisa and Katya had taken possession of Kurt. Artie stuck close by Tina, moving his chair back and forth in time with the music and doing an occasional spin or wheelie while Analisa’s boyfriend tried to keep in her orbit. As for Jamie… judging by his enthusiastic but uncoordinated bouncing, Kayta hadn’t lied about his dancing prowess. Poor lad.

Santana remained close by Dani, though Adam wasn’t quite certain that he could label what they were doing on the dance floor as actual “dancing”. The young woman seemed to be enjoying Santana’s company and apparently wasn’t anxious that her friend was making a very late appearance.

After a few rounds of dancing and a few drinks, the group was happily buzzed and a very statuesque drag queen dressed in an outrageous cave-girl costume stepped out onto the stage, a spot light falling on her and the DJ cut the music.

“Hello, hello, hello! Good evening all you gorgeous monsters,” the drag queen cooed. “I’m your host for the evening, Lady Marmalade and it’s my pleasure to welcome you to this year’s Halloween gala!” She paused to let the crowd cheer excitedly, playfully fixing the oversized bone in her teased up wig and gave them a moment to settle down before continuing.

“Now our singing contest will be starting in about half an hour, so everyone who signed up should get their glam on and get ready to totally amaze us,” she advised. “And for the rest of you, let’s get our party on!”

The DJ started up the music again, letting the party attendees resume dancing until the contest started. Rachel squealed excitedly and all but snatched Kurt away from Adam, dragging him back to their table. She began to babble happily about her song choices, leaving Kurt to smile tolerantly and turn a glance to his boyfriend.

“Can you run to the bar and get us something to drink?” he asked. “Need to lubricate the pipes before we go on.”

Adam nodded, giving Kurt a quick kiss. After all that dancing the two of them had to be thirsty. “Of course, sweetheart. Be back in a tick…”

The bar was crowded and it took him a little while to wade his way through the throng of thirsty party goers to procure glasses of club soda with lemon for his two songbirds. By the time he arrived, the entire group had retreated from the dance floor and were crowded around their little table.

“Dani, is your friend coming?” Tina asked, sipping at her soda.

“He just texted me. He’s wrapping things up, so he’ll be here in a little while,” Dani answered, settling down next to Santana and letting the other girl wrap her arm about her shoulders. “Do you mind if we hang with you? I don’t think San here is going to let me go any time soon.”

“Yeah… not happening,” Santana determined. “If I have to listen to a bunch of Broadway wannabes butchering my favorite songs, then I need something pretty to distract me.”

“You still haven’t told me what you’re singing,” Rachel complained to Kurt, pouting a little bit too much to be sincere.

Kurt just laughed and let Adam pull him close. “It’s a surprise,” he insisted, giving her a wink.
When Lady Marmalade took the stage again, the crowd was well lubricated and well primed. “Okay darlings,” she proclaimed, grinning into her glittery pink microphone. “We’re going to get started now. Remember that there’s a five hundred dollar prize for the winner, so make sure we know who your favorite is. We’ve got some amazing singers, so let’s get started with Jasmine Morales from NYU! Step up here girl!”

A tall woman dressed as Wonder Woman ran up to the stage and accepted the glittery pink microphone from Lady Marmalade and started singing a spirited rendition of “Sisters Are Doin’ It For Themselves”. Kurt thought that her voice was more than decent, but the song choice was a bit cliché and she basically was copying the original version note for note. One of the downsides of the kind of training he was getting at NYADA was a lack of tolerance for copycat performances, he thought, though he would give her credit for selecting a song that fit with her costume.

As others took the stage, Adam leaned close to his boyfriend. “You sure that you want me to come up with you?” he asked.

Kurt nodded, giving the older man a quick smile. “I’ve got it all planned out.”

Rachel was called up shortly, and she dashed up to the stage where she gave an absolutely gorgeous and stripped down rendition of “Wrapped Around Your Finger”. Kurt cheered loudly for his friend, delighted to see how much she had grown as a performer in the past few months. Rather than overpowering the delicate notes, she let the song carry her voice and made it entirely her own. When she was done the audience applauded and cheered for her, with their table making their presence known.

“That was lovely, honey,” Lady Marmalade praised, accepting the microphone back. She looked to the audience with an ironic smile. “Well, it looks like NYADA is being well represented here tonight. Let’s bring up Kurt Hummel!”

Kurt grinned and grabbed Adam’s hand. “Come on,” he urged, all but dragging his boyfriend up onto the stage with him.

“Mmmm… we’ve got some yumminess here,” Lady Marmalade purred as they came up onto the stage. “Now I’m guessing that you two are a pair, but I doubt that I’d be complaining if you wanted to take a nibble on me. Am I right ladies?”

The women in the audience screamed their agreement, causing Kurt to blush a bit under his makeup. He accepted the microphone and slipped back into character, letting his face settle into the cool arrogance that Lestat should have.

“Kurt, what am I supposed to do?” Adam whispered frantically, at a complete loss.

“Just follow my lead,” Kurt urged him. “It’ll be fine.” The music that he’d chosen began, discordant and abrasive with a deep, steady rhythm.

“The street’s a liar,” he growled dangerously, stalking towards Adam and pressing towards a chair that had been placed at the center of the stage. Adam watched him carefully, uncertain of what to do but that worked in with what Kurt had in mind for their performance. He wanted Louis to be confused and he nudged Adam to sit into the chair. “I’m gonna lower you into the dark.”

Kurt lifted one booted foot to rest on the seat next to Adam and leaned over him dangerously. He could hear the crowd cheer and hoot through the music but keep his focus on the man he had trapped. “My cold desire, to hear the boom boom boom of your heart.” He tapped his hand over Adam’s breast in time with his words before stepping back enough to prowl around the chair where Adam
watched him warily.

“The danger is I’m dangerous, and I might just tear you apart,” Kurt warned, eyeing Adam like the predator that he was. “Oh ah oh!

Kurt spun Adam about in the chair, stepping back so that the other man could scramble to his feet. “I’m gonna catch ya! I’m gonna get ya, get ya! Oh ah oh!” he proclaimed. He paced towards Adam, forcing him to retreat. “I wanna taste the way that you bleed! Oh!”

He pinned Adam to the spot that the older man was standing with a fierce stare. “You’re my kill of the night.”

Kurt allowed a smile to touch his face as he walked about Adam, eyeing him up and down the length of his body and paced about him, showing his ownership of the other man. “Now you’re mine,” Kurt warned. “But what do I do with you, boy?”

He trained an appraising finger over Adam’s shoulders, only to have his hand swatted away. Adam was starting to understand the role he was to play and showed Louis’s resistance to Lestat’s advances. He looked annoyed with the other vampire’s presumptiveness.

Kurt cocked his head, his smile widening as he apparently decided what to do with his new possession. “I’ll take your heart, to kick around as a toy.

“The danger is I’m dangerous and I might just tear you apart! Oh ah oh!” He paused dramatically, stepping close into Adam’s personal space, eyeing him intently. They began to move together, the movements part waltz, part combat.

“I’m gonna catch ya! I’m gonna get ya, get ya! Oh ah oh!” Kurt warned, leading Adam in this dangerous dance. He leaned in close to nuzzle at Adam’s throat, looking up at him with raw hunger in his eyes. “I wanna taste the way that you bleed! Oh!”

Adam pushed Kurt back, standing his ground which only heated Kurt’s interest further. He reached out a hand to stroke Adam’s cheek and leaned in for a kiss, his tone almost mocking.

“This is a bad town, for such a pretty face. This is a bad town, for such a pretty face,” he cooed. The heat sparked in Adam’s eyes and Kurt knew that the audience would see the instant that his character was giving in to Kurt’s. Adam joined Kurt in singing the refrain, the two of them circling one another like they sharks that they were.

The audience began to join in, chanting with them and when Adam allowed Kurt to pull him into his arms, the battle had been won. “Oh!” Kurt roared in triumph and Adam grinned back at him, ready to join Kurt at the finish. “I’m gonna catch ya! I’m gonna get ya, get ya!” They sang together. “Oh ah oh! I wanna taste the way that you bleed! Oh….

“I’m gonna catch ya,” Kurt warned, pulling Adam close and grinding his body against him. “I’m gonna get ya, get ya! Oh ah oh. I wanna taste the way that you bleed! Oh…”

The music fell silent and Kurt looked deeply into Adam’s eyes. “You’re my kill of the night…”

He felt Adam melt against him and bent to press his lips to Adam’s bared throat. He could hear the audience cheering and applauding their regard, but the only thing that Kurt cared about was the panting man in his arms. Kurt found himself painfully aroused, and judging from the way Adam was pressed against him, he wasn’t alone in feeling a bit… overheated.

Lady Marmalade broke the mood, stepping in and fanning herself dramatically. “Whoo! You two
need to go find yourselves a room now! Or don’t complain if I join in,” she warned. She playfully shooed them off the stage to make way for the next act.

They staggered down to where the rest of their friends were waiting and were greeted with cheers and wolf whistles. “Damn, I wasn’t expecting a sex show up there,” Analisa giggled, leaning into her boyfriend.

Rachel shook her head in mock disapproval and wagged her finger at them. “For shame on the both of you,” she reprimanded playfully. “There are freshman present here.”

“Oh, I didn’t mind,” Tina insisted, giggling wickedly and snuggling close to her boyfriend. “That was seriously hot.”

“I’m going to agree with that,” a new voice inserted. Dani looked up and squealed happily as she threw herself at the tall newcomer.

“Elliot! You are so late!” she complained, giving the man dressed as a sexy genie a swat in annoyance.

“I’m sorry, but I got caught up at the cabaret. Things ran a little late,” the newcomer explained, giving her hug. “You look great, babe.”

He looked at the group, his striking blue eyes rimmed with expertly smudged black eyeliner and making them stand out from the light teal paint covering his face and bared torso. His costume was elaborate and beautifully turned out, though the turban reminded Kurt more than a little of Madam Tibideaux.

His voice though… Kurt couldn’t help from wondering if the man sang because if his voice sounded that amazing just speaking he would be an amazing singer.

“Let me introduce you,” Dani offered, turning to the others. “This is Santana.”

Elliot’s eyes widened slightly. “Isn’t that the one you met that…?” He twirled a finger meaningfully, causing Dani to laugh and nod.

“Yeah, that’s her,” she confirmed. “These are her friends.”

Rachel immediately took over, thinking that Dani might not remember all their names. “Hi! I’m Rachel. This is Kurt and his boyfriend, Adam. And this is Artie and Tina.”

Elliot smiled brightly. “Nice to meet all of you. Thanks for taking care of Dani until I got here.”

“It was a pleasure,” Santana insisted. She reached out to grasp the other girl’s hand and pull her away from her friend. Dani laughed and went along with Santana’s antics, nestling close to her.

Elliot turned to Kurt and Adam, a wide smile on his face and Kurt couldn’t help thinking about how good looking the other man was.

“That was a hell of an act,” he complimented. “You guys would fit right in with our cabaret group.”

Kurt cocked his head curiously. “What kind of cabaret is it?” he couldn’t resist asking. While he certainly had enough on his plate at the moment, he never wanted to dismiss a performance opportunity without properly weighing out his options first.

Elliot pulled over a chair and took a seat at their table. “It’s just an informal group. Some of us are
students at NYU with me and we’ve got a few other artsy types. There are singers and dancers and a fire eater…. We get together every now and then and to do shows every few months.”

“It’s all very avant garde,” Dani inserted. “They can get really provocative.”

“Oh… that sounds interesting,” Kurt claimed, not bothering to hide his curiosity. Adam just smiled and shook his head tolerantly at his boyfriend’s apparent enthusiasm.

“You guys should check out our next meeting,” Elliot invited. “We’re always looking for like-minded talents to join in. A performance like that would be right up our alley.”

Adam could see just how tempted Kurt was. He had that bright, animated look in his face that he always got when presented with a performance opportunity. No matter how busy he might be with other commitments, Kurt had absolutely zero resistance when it came to being offered a chance to show off his talent and could very well overextend himself. With rehearsals for Les Miz taking up most of his free time, Adam had some genuine concerns about Kurt taking on too much.

As if reading Adam’s thoughts, Elliot assured him, “It’s all really informal. Unless we’re rehearsing for a show, it’s more about experimenting and bouncing ideas off of one another. People drift in and out depending on their other commitments.”

“That sounds like a lot of fun,” Artie agreed. “My studies don’t give me much room for singing anymore. I kind of miss it.

Kurt was already doing the mental calculations, trying to see how he could squeeze yet another activity into his schedule. With school, his job, rehearsals and the Apples, he was already stretched thin. Finding even a spare hour every now and then would be a challenge, but it sounded so much like something he wanted to get involved with.

Adam felt himself unconsciously inching towards Kurt, placing an arm around his shoulder that was purely affectionate and not at all proprietary, he insisted to himself. Just because this Elliot fellow was handsome and charismatic didn’t mean that Kurt’s eye was likely to wander. There were all sorts of handsome, talented men at NYADA and Kurt was around models and actors all the time at Vogue. He was as loyal as anyone could ever demand in a partner.

He still hated the draw that this other man seemed to have with Kurt. And he hated the spike of jealousy that began to pool in his gut.

Tina cocked her head curiously at Elliot, trying to figure something out. “I thought that I recognized you,” she claimed. “Didn’t you play the lead in South Pacific last year?”

Elliot grinned and nodded. “Yeah… it’s not really my genre but I was kind of surprised when they offered it.”

Kurt’s interest was kindled again as he looked to the older man. “From what I understand, the critics loved your production. You must be an amazing singer.”

Elliot looked like his was blushing a bit under his makeup at the compliment. “Well, I’m not bad,” he admitted. “You were pretty fantastic up there.”

Kurd smiled appreciatively at the compliment. “Thanks.”

“But then, you were the one who won a Midnight Madness contest as a freshman,” Elliot reminded him. At Kurt and Rachel’s looks of surprise, he chuckled. “Yeah, I think most of the theater school community knows about that. It’s not like we don’t have our own little pissing contests and big wins
tend to make the round on the blogs.”

Rachel sighed, shaking her head. “Terrific,” she groaned. Kurt patted her hand comfortingly and she couldn’t help from smiling back at him. It wasn’t as if she expected what happened that night to remain some kind of great secret and thankfully she had moved past the lapse in judgment that pushed her into that confrontation.

Elliot laughed brightly, his teeth looking amazingly white against the bluish lipstick he wore. “Well, there are all kinds of rumors floating around about what NYADA’s got planned for their big musical. Care to share a little inside information?” he asked teasingly, giving a playful wink to the pair.

Kurt and Rachel shared a conspiring glance before he shook his head “Afraid not,” he said. “Not until they make the official announcement.”

The older man pouted a bit. “Aw, come on… just a little hint?” he pleaded.

Elliot seemed to be quite a character, Kurt considered. He seemed a born showman and Kurt always enjoyed people who lived to perform. Elliot was flamboyant and confident in a way that Kurt had always wanted to be and he very much wanted to explore more of the theater scene in New York. Even if he didn’t have the time to join Elliot’s cabaret at the moment, it was something that he thought he might want to dip his toe into.

Adam felt the good spirits he’s enjoyed all evening start to wane a very small bit. Elliot seemed like a perfectly nice fellow and was friendly enough. Under normal circumstances he wouldn’t have thought anything wrong with Kurt finding a new friend. He’d never felt threatened by anyone that Kurt came in contact with before, but for some reason he couldn’t totally quash the feeling of insecurity that was starting to take root. Elliot seemed just the sort that Kurt liked to associate with, but his good looks and charisma would be all too appealing and Adam would be gone.

He knew that Kurt wasn’t the kind to cheat. Not after what Blaine had done to him. But Adam couldn’t help from wondering how long it might take before Kurt would come to regret tying himself to a stogy, dull man who wouldn’t even be around for him? Especially with so many options available to the younger man. Would he return to find Kurt bitter that months of his life were wasted waiting for him?

This Elliot was a reminder that Kurt’s life in New York would go on without him. He would grow and meet new people and become the kind of man that Adam knew he had within him. And he would miss seeing Kurt evolve. He would return to find a stranger.

Watching Kurt talking animatedly with the other man, Adam couldn’t fight down the feeling of jealousy welling up within him. He didn’t want to lose Kurt, but the last thing he wanted was or Kurt to be diminished in any way.

Lady Marmalade took the stage to proclaim the winner of the contest, and it wasn’t Kurt or Rachel. As a singer from Julliard took the stage to accept her prize, Elliot looked to them sympathetically. “You were so much better that her,” he insisted.

Kurt just shrugged, not at all bothered. “I had fun,” he stated cheerfully. He looked to Adam, a heated look in his eyes.

Adam pushed his worried thoughts aside and returned Kurt’s smile. “I certainly enjoyed it,” he confirmed. He couldn’t resist stroking Kurt’s cheek and was deeply gratified when Kurt’s leaned into his touch, closing those beautiful eyes.
Rachel rolled her eyes. “Well, I think we need to dance away our sorrows. Care to join me,” she invited, giving Kurt a nudge to get his attention.

He nodded, taking Adam’s hand in his. “Let’s go,” he agreed, looking to all their friends. “Coming?”

It was after two in the morning when Adam and Kurt stumbled back into their apartment, wrapped around one another. Kurt kissed Adam almost violently, trying to pull the other man’s jacket off as they fell through the door. Adam tried to use his foot to close the door behind them, one hand tangled in Kurt’s clothing while the other fumbled to set the lock.

“God, I want you so much right now,” Kurt growled, looking disheveled and dangerous with his fangs and smearing makeup.

Adam pulled the wig off Kurt’s head and tossed it onto their dining table, the wig cap all but torn away so that he could run his hand through those silken locks. “I’ve been aching to do this all night,” he groaned.

Kurt took off Adam’s wig, needing to see his lover’s familiar features. He savored the feeling the other man pressing him up against a wall, Adam hard against him with one strong leg pressing between Kurt’s and holding him fast. He pressed his mouth to Adam’s again, his tongue running over the sharp acrylic still capping Adam’s canines.

Adam drew back, breathing hard and looking at Kurt with an intensity that caused Kurt to unconsciously shiver. “Do you want me to keep them on, love?” he asked, his accent thick and harsh.

Kurt nodded, breathing hard. “Yes… I want to feel them…”

Adam’s eyes darkened slightly, understanding what Kurt was asking for. He wanted to leave his marks on the younger man, to let the world see that Kurt was his. That all those young studs at NYADA who he’d seen look at Kurt longingly and handsome Elliot and that horrible ex of Kurt’s … he wanted them to see that Kurt loved him and trusted him enough to do this.

He brought his mouth up against Kurt’s again, kissing him harshly and drawing a nearly pained groan from the younger man. His lips trailed down Kurt’s jaw to his ear that Adam nipped at lightly. Kurt groaned happily and closed his eyes, tilting his head to give Adam access to his throat.

Adam smiled as his drew his lips down to the pulse point in Kurt’s neck that he teased with his tongue before sucking in the sensitive flesh with his lips, drawing the blood to the surface. Kurt groaned and writhed deliciously against him, his hips thrusting against Adam’s as he sucked and nibbled on his throat. When Adam finally brought his fangs down to lightly brush the bruised skin before carefully biting down, Kurt stiffened and let out a breathless gasp as his arousal short-circuited his brain just a bit.

Kurt couldn’t quite figure out how Adam managed to manhandle him to their bed and get his jacket off. His shirt had been torn open and Adam’s nimble lips were tracing a trail down his collarbones to his nipples that were sucked and nibbled on, causing Kurt to writhe and bite his lower lip to keep from screaming. When one of Adam’s fangs scraped lightly over one of the taunt peaks, Kurt couldn’t hold back a shout.

Adam pulled himself back up Kurt’s body, hushing him with a kiss and soothing him gently. “Shhhhh…,” he said softly, smoothing back Kurt’s hair. “We don’t want to alarm the neighbors. Imagine someone breaking down the door and finding you like this.”
He gently grasped Kurt’s leg and pulled it up to settle about his waist, giving himself a space to press into. Kurt bit back a pained groan when he felt Adam’s hard cock press against his thigh, his own erection achingly hard against the front of his pants. Adam’s hand reached between them and palmed the taut flesh, causing Kurt to arch deliciously against him.

“I’d love for them to see you like this,” Adam said teasingly, bending to scrape his fangs down Kurt’s throat again to bite where his neck met his shoulder, causing another bruise to form. “Bending and twisting beneath me, totally wreaked.”

Kurt groaned when he felt Adam bite down again at his neck, careful not to break the skin and bringing another bruise out. They’d role-played before, but he couldn’t remember Adam taking such a controlling, forceful role in their sex life and he found himself loving it. Adam normally was so careful with him, mindful of the difference in their ages and experiences and not wanting him to feel pressured into anything. Having him taking charge and pushing their passionate games to a new level was disrupting all of Kurt’s higher though processes.

Afterwards Kurt felt totally boneless and deliciously sore, draped over Adam’s naked body. The older man was panting from his exertions, sweat ruining what was left of his makeup. Kurt knew that he probably looked no better and didn’t care in the least.

Adam’s neck and chest were peppered with bruises that Kurt’s own fangs had left, and there was a little bit of blood on Adam’s shoulder where Kurt had bitten a bit too deeply when he came. “We’re a mess,” Kurt murmured tiredly, enjoying the feel of Adam’s strong hands stroking down his back soothingly.

Adam yawned and looked down at Kurt lovingly. “You’re still beautiful, love,” he assured Kurt. He eyed the dark bruising on Kurt’s skin worriedly. “Did I hurt you?”

Kurt smiled and shook his head. “No. And we’re keeping the fangs,” he warned Adam. “It was nice not to be treated like I’m made of glass once in awhile.”

He heard Adam chuckling and felt the rumble of his chest under his cheek. “You always keep surprising me, love,” he explained. “But you don’t always have to be so careful. I’m not going to break. And… I kind of like you making me yours so completely.”

Adam bent his head enough to kiss Kurt’s head. “That belonging to goes both ways,” he reminded his young lover. “I love you, and the last thing I ever would want to do was hurt you.”

“I know,” Kurt assured him. “Which is exactly why I can be so free with you. Now… how about a shower so we can get this stuff off our faces and then round two?”

Adam felt his body kindle again at the impish tone of his lover’s voice. “That sounds like an absolutely capital idea love. Race you…”

* * *

Kurt probably shouldn’t have been surprised to find a text on his phone from Elliot the first Monday after Halloween, asking if he was free to grab coffee at some point that afternoon since he’d be nearby for an audition. He knew that he had a break after his stage combat class and decided that he was certainly going to be in need of a caffeine fix before rehearsals that afternoon. He texted back that he’d love to and offered to meet him at the local Panara at two o’clock.
Despite the cool late autumn weather, Kurt decided to forgo a scarf when he returned to work and school after their night of debauchery. The dark bruises showed clearly on his throat and he wanted to put Adam’s marks on display. Isabelle merely rolled her eyes, while Chase gave him knowing smiles and teasingly flirted with him all morning.

At school his friends gave him meaningful stares and smiles all day, and even his teachers seemed rather impressed by his proud markings. Kurt knew that while his image had relaxed a bit over the past months, showing up looking like a chew toy probably perplexed a lot of people. He didn’t bother to tell anyone that he’d given Adam just as good and his boyfriend was going to have a real challenge hiding his marks at work. For whatever reason Adam felt the need to proclaim to the world that Kurt was his, Kurt has his own reasons for putting those bites on Adam’s throat.

He wasn’t blind to the admiring looks in his stage weapons class from other young men. Dressed in a tank top that showed off the increased definition of his torso and arms, he was increasingly comfortable with showing off his body. For the first time in his life Kurt was actually accepting that other men found him appealing and felt gratified by that. After so many years of feeling odd and fearing that no man would ever really find him attractive or sexually appealing, he finally was grasping his own real worth. He knew that he was handsome and talented and a real catch. His ego no longer needed constant reassurance about that anymore, though it was nice to hear it once in awhile from someone other than Adam. He could enjoy their attention even if he had no interest in reciprocating.

His afternoon would be occupied with rehearsing on of the musical numbers for Enjolras alongside the senior playing the role. Professor Carmody was a stickler for attendance, especially for those in primary roles and their understudies. Unless you were absolutely dying of something highly communicable, it was in their best interests to make sure that they didn’t miss a session. Not that Kurt had any intention of skipping, but he decided to take advantage of his coffee date with Elliot to fuel up for what was promising to be a long afternoon.

He arrived at the café a few minutes early and was pleased to see it relatively quiet, coming just after the lunch rush. He ordered a cup of soup and a sandwich, knowing that he needed something more substantial than a salad to fuel him through the rest of the day and found a table that gave him a full view of the front door so he would see when Elliot arrived. In the meantime, he could enjoy his late lunch while he waited for his new friend.

He was finishing his turkey and avocado BLT when the door opened and a very tall young man with jet dyed hair walked in and order a drink at the counter. It took Kurt a moment to recognize Elliot without the elaborate costume and makeup, but those startling blue eyes were unmistakable. The older man was clean shaven and dressed casually in jeans and what appeared to be a surplus army wool coat.

Elliot spotted him and a wide smile crossed his face before coming over. “Kurt?” he confirmed, shaking the younger man’s hand. “It’s great to see you again.”

“Likewise. I wasn’t sure what to expect beneath all that makeup,” Kurt admitted playfully. “And your costume was gorgeous.”

Elliot laughed brightly, a sound that was so infectious that Kurt couldn’t help from smiling. “I love Halloween,” he admitted, sitting down. “Not that I need the excuse to play dress up, but I really pull out the stops then.”

“Me too,” Kurt said agreeably. “It’s always fun to really push boundaries and not have people look cross-eyed at you.” He thought back to the week that New Directions was experimenting with Lady Gaga. It had been brilliant but shot lived and the response of some of the other students was not
encouraging to further experimentation.

Elliot smile, his teeth white and amazingly even. “In the real world I’m not quite as out there as my stage persona,” he admitted. “I find that in serious theater and music circles, a look like that might not go over too well, so I keep Starchild separate from my other performance gigs.”

Kurt cocked an eyebrow at that. “Starchild?” he couldn’t help from asking archly.

Elliot nodded. “That’s my stage name in the Hellfire Circus. We all use stage names there because a lot of our acts are pretty risqué and might hurt our other performance prospects.”

That made sense, Kurt considered, nodding in understanding. “And Starchild… a bit of Bowie inspiration?” he asked.

Elliot nodded. “I’m a huge fan of his Ziggy Stardust phase, and I’ve always loved glam rock. So that went a long way into crafting my alias for the group.”

“I always leaned more towards the Thin White Duke, but I think that’s very smart for you to do,” Kurt said understandingly. “It’s a shame that some in our field aren’t more open minded about being experimental and a bit more daring. My old show choir, for example…” He shook his head regretfully, again thinking about their sometimes lavish experiments compared to their positively conventional competition performances. So many lost opportunities…

“Yeah, I’ve seen that a lot since I came to New York,” Elliot said regretfully. “They always tell you to be yourself and show why you’re unique. But not too unique. You can’t be anything too much… too wild, too assertive, too gay…

“I mean, I was in the closet back in high school, but I don’t think I was fooling anyone. I thought that coming to college in New York would mean total freedom but I sometimes feel myself being boxed again in as a performer. That’s what got me into performing with the cabaret,” he explained. “I feel like I get to be more myself there and really let loose.”

Kurt felt himself nodding in understanding. “I know what that’s like,” he said softly. “I have a group that I work with where we do a lot of experimenting with music that I couldn’t get away with in class. And I don’t have to worry about being judged for being too outrageous.”

Kurt liked this nearly immediate sense of kinship that he felt with Elliot. To find another gay man in their field wrestling with some of the same concerns that he felt was gratifying. Despite all the affirmation he was getting at NYADA, there were times when he still felt like he was forcing himself to fit a role as much as he was rewarded for being himself.

Elliot nodded enthusiastically. “That’s exactly it. Sometimes I feel like I can’t reconcile the mixed messages that I get about what I should be striving for as a performer. The thought of being an everyday, conventional performer…” He shivered visibly in disgust.

“But you did South Pacific,” Kurt reminded him, remembering what Tina had said. “That’s about as conventional a role as you’re going to get.”

Elliot sighed ruefully. “I’m a senior now and I’m still trying to figure out exactly what direction I want to go with my career,” he admitted. “I don’t know where I’m going to end up. Theater would be the logical place because it’ll give me real options for long-term, but I find it so constricting at times. And while the cabaret is great, it’s not exactly something that I can build a career on. So I’m still really up in the air about what to do because I don’t want to commit to something where I’ll be bored, miserable or starving.”
“I guess I’m a bit luckier,” Kurt admitted. “I’ve always loved theater and it’s what I’ve wanted to do since I was a kid. My big angst was maybe being too gay even for theater. You have to admit, I’m pretty obvious.”

Elliot just shrugged. “I didn’t think so. All I thought was that you were a really cool guy that I wanted to get to know a bit better. Those costumes you and your boyfriend had on were fantastic,” he insisted. “And I loved your act in the contest, so I was kind of hoping I could convince you to check out our cabaret. You and Adam” His blue eyes took on a playfully pleading look and Kurt couldn’t help from giggling.

“I’d really like to. It sounds so interesting but I’m completely swamped right now,” Kurt admitted with sincere regret. “And Adam is leaving town soon for a job. He’s going to be away until the summer.”

Elliot nodded understandingly. “We’d really like you to join us, even if Adam can’t” he pressed, not quite able to hide his eagerness and leaving Kurt with the rather uncomfortable impression that he was the one that Elliot really wanted and Adam was something of an afterthought.

“Between school, work and rehearsals, I barely have any free time as it is,” Kurt said regretfully. “I’ve got a chorus that barely has time to get together as it is.”

Elliot nodded, clearly disappointed. “I get that, man. But I hope that once you’re done with your show that you’ll at least consider it. Look at it this way… it’ll give you something to help fill the time until your boyfriend gets back.”

“I’ll definitely think about it,” Kurt agreed. He was very, very tempted but he had no idea of what might be awaiting him next semester. Knowing his habit of overextending himself, his schedule was likely to be just as pressing.

“Great,” Elliot exclaimed, taking a sip of his cooling tea. “In the meantime, we can just hang and maybe jam once in awhile. You’ve got a great voice and I think we’d sound great together. I sometimes meet up with Dani just to relax and sing a bit.”

Kurt smiled and nodded. “That sounds like fun,” he said agreeably. It looked like he just made another interesting friend in New York, easing the sting of what was facing him in just a few weeks.

* * *

Adam sighed tiredly when he got home from his shift at the café, feeling a bit sorry for himself. He’d given his notice about leaving his position, though he promised his manager that he’d be able to stay on through the Thanksgiving holiday to give them time to find and train someone to take his place. Fortunately he’d done well there and would be leaving on good terms with the promise of a job if he needed one when he got back to New York.

That was one notice down. He’d talk to Peter at the bar during his next shift and get that out of the way. Then it would just be passing the time while waiting for rehearsals to start.

He’d left himself a bit of free time to spend with Kurt before he left the city, wanting to spend as much time as he could manage with his boyfriend before they were separated. If he didn’t have two jobs to attend to, he could be flexible around Kurt’s school and rehearsal schedule. It seemed deeply unfair of the universe to be making it so difficult to spend time together due to their congested and often conflicting schedules. It just wasn’t enough and Adam wanted to squeeze every second he could before he had to leave.
It seemed that with each passing day the reminders that he would be leaving Kurt behind became more apparent. Neither had started packing yet, but Kurt had stopped visiting the local thrift shops and flea markets where he’d looked for interesting curios for their shared space. Adam had already arranged for the storage company to pick up his furniture right after the new year and Kurt was musing about what to bring with him to the dorms to make his room a bit more homey.

Adam hated this.

Another thing he didn’t like… the text he’d gotten from Kurt that afternoon, that he’d met with that Elliot fellow for coffee and what a nice guy he was and they had so much in common and… it took all of Adam’s control not to fling his phone into the nearest wall.

Kurt had seem so taken with Elliot from their meeting that he checked out the man’s NYU profile and saw some of the videos of his performances. The man had an absolutely stunning voice and magnetic stage presence, making it more than understandable that Kurt would want to develop a friendship with him. And with the knowledge that Blaine had made Kurt absolutely miserable for having friendships that distracted from their relationship, showing intense jealousy over anyone that Kurt associated with that might be a rival, Adam had sworn to himself that he would never do that.

Which was why this wave of jealousy was taking him very much by surprise. He refused to be the kind to resent Kurt’s perfectly innocent friendships just because of his irrational insecurities. He was a grown man and knew better. He wasn’t going to make Kurt feel guilty for having friendships to help him through the next few months just to make himself feel less threatened.

For the umpteenth time, he wondered if he had made the right decision. Having the security of an acting job for at least a few months had eased one worry but opened a Pandora’s box of others. And he had absolutely no clue of how to deal with this. He’d been keeping his worries to himself, not wanting to say the wrong thing and upset Kurt and it was killing him inside.

His cell phone rang and Adam checked the notification, surprised to see Burt’s number come up. While the elder Hummel had asked for his number in the event of an emergency, Adam had been touched. Getting a call when his boyfriend’s father knew that Kurt would be at school. Suddenly worried, Adam quickly answered.

“Hi son,” Burt greeted cheerfully. “Are you busy right now?”

Adam sat down on the couch and ran a hand through his hair. “Oh, not at all. Just doing some stuff about the flat,” he assured Kurt’s father. “Is everything all right? Kurt’s at school right now… he’s got rehearsals so I’m not expecting him for a bit.”

“Everything’s fine,” Burt said. “I actually needed to talk to you. Kurt had mentioned that your show will be making a stop in Richmond and I wanted to get the dates so I can make sure that we’re in town.”

Adam couldn’t help from smiling, touched that Burt was interested in his play. “Oh, you don’t have to,” he insisted. “I mean…”

“Adam, Carole and I want to be there,” he assured the younger man. “We support all of our sons and you’re a part of the family now. So give me the dates so I can make sure that we’re in town.”

Feeling his cheeks burning, Adam got out his binder and gave Burt the dates. “That’s really very kind of you,” he said softly. “And I’m grateful. Just let me know what day you want to attend and I’ll make sure there are tickets for you.”
“I’m looking forward to it,” Burt claimed. “Now are you okay? You sound a bit frazzled there.”

Adam sighed, feeling himself slump dejectedly. “I’m just being foolish and feeling a bit maudlin about things. It’s nothing,” he claimed.

“Well, it doesn’t sound like nothing,” Burt insisted. “Talk to me, son. What’s bugging you?”

Adam didn’t answer immediately, feeling astonishingly foolish for getting himself into such a tizzy. “I’m just feeling a bit conflicted about leaving town for so long,” he finally explained. “It’s putting a lot on Kurt, and he’s been totally supportive and amazing. I just can’t help from feeling like I’m asking too much of him.”

“Adam, you know that Kurt wants good things for you, right?” Burt pressed. “He’d never ask you to turn down an opportunity that could really help your career.”

“But that’s just it,” Adam claimed. “I know he’d never ask me to but I still feel guilty about it. But he’s moving into the dorms because of me… after I asked him to move in. He’s got so much to deal with and I’m just adding to that burden. He doesn’t say anything and acts like everything is just fine when I’m totally falling apart. The last thing I want to do is ask more of him just because I’m being a big baby about things.”

“Adam, calm down,” Burt advised evenly. “Let’s talk this out before you totally lose your head. Now I get that you’re anxious about the tour and leaving New York, but this is important for your career so you shouldn’t feel guilty about taking the job.”

“I just feel awful about putting so much on Kurt,” Adam said regretfully. “He’s got so much to focus on with school and work. He shouldn’t have to worry about…”

“But he’s going to, because he cares about you,” Burt reminded. “And you’d do the same if the situation was reversed. So tell me what’s really eating at you.”

Adam felt his cheeks redden, knowing that he was going to sound like a peevish child. It was positively mortifying to divulge what he was about to tell his lover’s father.

“Kurt is so amazing, and I see how men look at him,” Adam admitted. “Normally it wouldn’t bother me, because I was so proud that Kurt chose me. Burt, he could have anyone he wants. And there’s this man we just met… Burt, I trust Kurt implicitly. I know that he’s not someone who would ever cheat but he can do so much better. I’m terrified of coming back and finding that he’s with me out of a sense of obligation.”

“Adam, you’re a nice kid but are you out of your mind?” Burt demanded, humor taking some of the sting out of his harsh words. “Kurt loves you.”

“I know that he does,” Adam exclaimed. “He loves me and he’s tying himself to someone who can’t be a proper partner for him. He’s been wonderful and supported me when I was looking for work and pushed me to take this job and he’s handling everything so well. I’m the one who’s falling apart and one day he’s going to realize that he’s wasting his life on me.”

Burt let him vent and get what he needed to say into the open air before questioning, “Adam, have you talked to Kurt about this since you took the job?”

“No,” he admitted, wiping at his eyes that had started to sting from unshed tears. “I don’t want to burden him more than I already have.”

“Well, you should talk to him,” the older man advised. “Because if you’re feeling like this, you can
be sure that Kurt is too.”

Adam frowned, thinking back on Kurt’s cool and steady support. “He hasn’t said anything,” he explained. “Not once since I told him about the offer.”

“And he’s not going to. Look, I know my son better than anyone,” Burt reminded. “And if there’s one thing I know about Kurt is that if something is bothering him… something really, really serious… he just shuts down. He’ll whine and complain about the little things like a kid but the really big, serious stuff? Not a peep. I’ve lost more hair worrying about what he doesn’t tell me than anything he would admit to.”

Adam inhaled sharply, surprised that he had not considered that himself. “I didn’t think about that,” he said, a bit sheepishly. “I thought that he was just being mature and…”

“I’ve got no doubt that he’s trying to be,” Burt acquiesced. “But I’m sure that he’s scared too. This is a big change for the both of you and not talking about it isn’t going to make it any easier.”

Adam considered what Burt was telling him and he was a bit mortified that he hadn’t thought to talk to Kurt about his own fears for what his new job was going to entail. He had been afraid of putting even more of a burden on Kurt, but it seemed that by keeping his fears to himself that Kurt might not have felt comfortable voicing his own insecurities.

He shook his head, annoyed with himself for his lack of insight into how his boyfriend’s mind worked. “I really made a hash of this,” he sighed, mentally berating himself for not noticing that all might not be well with Kurt.

“Don’t beat yourself up too much,” Burt advised. “Kurt’s a master at hiding when he doesn’t want people to see him hurting. Sometimes you really need to draw it out of him.”

“I’ll talk to him,” Adam promised. “Burt… thank you.”

“You’ll be fine. Both of you,” Burt answered confidently. “And let me know if you need help pinning Kurt down.”

“I will. Talk to you soon.”

Hanging up, Adam felt a tad better. He’d been so afraid of voicing his concerns and coming across as weak and even ungrateful for the opportunity he was being given than he was letting things slip by. He very much loved Kurt and knew that their relationship would survive the coming months, but not if they continued to hide their fears and hurts.

Kurt would not be back until late, rehearsals taking up so much of his time and he will have already left for his night job. That gave him a bit of time to plan just how he was going to broach the subject with his young lover. It was a conversation that they very much needed to have and was apparently quite overdue.

* * *

Kurt’s song for the contest: "Kill of the Night" - Gin Wigmore
As dedicated as Kurt was to his education, he would be the worst liar in the world if he tried to claim that he was in any way disappointed to receive voice mail from Professor Collins regretfully cancelling their morning voice session because of an emergency dental appointment. Having a chance to enjoy a quiet morning and a leisurely breakfast at home like a normal human being rather than just grabbing a coffee and muffin on the go while he rushed to class was just too rare a luxury not to take advantage of.

Adam had already left for his morning shift at the café, leaving Kurt to laze in bed for a bit before getting hungry enough to seek out something to eat. He whipped up some scrambled eggs and toasted a few slices of whole grain bread. Sitting on the couch in his pajamas with his breakfast and coffee while he watched the morning news and did a little frivolous net surfing was a luxury he almost never got to enjoy.

He was nibbling on some grapes that he’d found in the fridge when his Skype app pinged for his attention. He grumbled in mild annoyance, not really wanting to be bothered when he had so few occasions to truly relax but opened the program to see who was trying to contact him. He was surmised to see that it was Adam’s mother. He mentally calculated the time difference, noting that it would still be well into the work day for Ellie Crawford and it was not typical for her to try contacting them from the office. They usually got calls from her or her husband in the evening, when Adam was at home.

Hoping that there was nothing wrong, he checked to make sure that he was semi-decent and that his hair wasn’t doing anything particularly crazy before opening the link to accept her call.

“Good morning, Ellie,” he greeted cheerfully as Adam’s mother appeared on his screen. “Or rather, good afternoon for you.”

Ellie Crawford smiled warmly at her son’s boyfriend. “Good morning, darling! I hope that I’m not disturbing you.”

“Not at all,” Kurt assured her. “One of my classes got cancelled so I’m having a bit of a lazy morning.”


“Is everything okay?” he asked curiously. “Adam’s not home and…”

“I know, love. I just wanted to touch base with you,” she explained. “I had a little bit of a lull on my calendar today and I saw that you were on line. I can ring up my favorite American lad every now and then, can’t I?”

Having been on the receiving end of her affectionate behavior numerous times since their first formal meeting, this out of the ordinary call really wasn’t too surprising when he thought about it. Her smile was infectious and Kurt couldn’t help from relaxing. “Of course, you can,” assured her, settling in so he could balance his laptop comfortably on his knee.

“Adam’s been telling me that you have all kinds of exciting things happening at school,” she declared. “Getting such an important role in your school production at your age… that’s so thrilling.”

He couldn’t help from smiling at her enthusiasm towards his achievements. “Well, it’s a lot of work. Adam’s always worried that I try to do so much, but I can’t help it. And it seems to be working in
my favor for the time being, so…” He just shrugged.

Ellie chuckled fondly. “He cares about you, love” she pointed out. “He just doesn’t want you to overextend yourself.”

“I know he does. I worry about him too,” Kurt assured her. “He’s got so much to focus on with his new job and I just want to take as much pressure off him as possible so he can concentrate on what he needs to.”

Ellie nodded, appearing thoughtful at his statement. “And how are you handling things?” she asked, showing sincere concern for her son’s boyfriend. “I know that Adam working out of town is not exactly going to be convenient for you.”

Kurt sighed, running a hand through his hair. “It won’t be so bad,” he claimed. “I’ve got a dorm room reserved for next semester, which will probably give me more time to focus on my studies. There is a bit of an advantage to living at school with everything going on.”

“Oh, I’m certain, darling,” Ellie agreed. “But it’s going to be a bit of a shock, going from having your own place to more communal living.”

Kurt just shrugged. “I’m sure that it’ll be okay. I’ve got a single so I’ll have my privacy,” he assured her. “So long as the showers aren’t too disgusting, I’ll manage.”

“Well, if you need anything, you be sure to let us know,” Ellie reminded him. “I’m always ready to send a care package now that I know what tea and jam you like.”

Kurt couldn’t help from laughing. “Ah, you’ve discovered my secret,” he confided. “I’m only with Adam for the steady supply of tea and jam.”

Ellie laughed brightly, shaking her head in mock admonishment. “Oh, you scoundrel!” she accused dramatically. “Using my poor lonely boy so cruelly.”

“Well he’s returning the favor,” Kurt teased. “Abandoning me when I need him most.”

Ellie’s laughter quieted and her gaze turned more serious as Kurt’s deceptively light words sank in. “Darling, you know that he’s not abandoning you,” she insisted. “He adores you so much.”

“I know he does,” Kurt said soberly. He blinked in surprise when he realized what he’d just said. “I never doubted that. I… I don’t know why it came out like that.”

Ellie eyed him sympathetically, her voice taking on a soothing tone. “Talk to me, love,” she urged. “Are you really all right with Adam taking this job? You can be honest with me.”

Kurt looked at her image on his computer screen, seeing her sympathetic gaze and felt incredibly disappointed with himself that he’d allowed his darkest thoughts to slip out so casually. “Of course I am. Ellie, I really do want him to do what’s best for himself and I’m so proud that he got cast in that part,” he insisted with absolute honesty. “I’m not blind to the challenges it’s going to make for the both of us, but we’ll have to deal with them.”

Ellie nodded understandingly. “I know you will, darling,” she acknowledged gently. “I just worry about both my boys.”

Kurt couldn’t help from smiling. “My dad is the same way,” he admitted. “He tries not to be too overbearing and lets us live our lives but he does watch out for us. Adam included.”
“Then you won’t mind if I want to make sure that you’re going to be all right,” Ellie stated. “I know that you’re both big boys and can take care of yourselves, but this is a huge change for the both of you. And I can’t help from feeling that not everything is quite as rosy as you are pretending it to be.”

She smiled at him reassuringly. “Don’t forget, I am a solicitor. I’m very good at reading people.”

Kurt sighed, knowing that she had him nailed. “Ellie, please believe me… I support Adam in this one hundred percent,” he claimed ardently. “This is so important to him and the last thing in the world that I ever would want is for him to think that he should have turned down the job because I’m being childish or insecure.”

“Darling, it’s perfectly normal to feel uneasy about being separated for such a long time,” she assured him kindly. “You shouldn’t punish yourself for that.”

Kurt bit his lower lip, not sure of just how much he wanted to tell her. “I don’t know how much Adam told you about the relationship I was in before we met,” he started uncertainly.

“Only that things ended badly,” she answered. “And that you were taking things slowly at first as a result.”

Kurt nodded, grateful once again for his boyfriend’s consideration. “I was with someone for nearly two years. We met in high school and I was very much in love with Blaine. But he was a year behind me and after I graduated and came to New York, he didn’t respond well. I was only away for a few weeks when he told me that he’d been with someone else.”

Ellie didn’t comment at first, but her gaze was easily readable event through the computer screen. There was a hint of anger at the boy who’d hurt him, but more concern over how that betrayal had impacted him.

“Sweetheart, Adam isn’t like that,” Ellie reminded him gently. “He adores you.”

“I know that he does,” Kurt insisted. “And I trust him more than anyone except my father. Believe me, it took a long time for me to get to that point. I don’t trust easily under the best of circumstances and after what Blaine did…”

“But I knew that wasn’t being fair to Adam, making him deal with something that Blaine did to me,” he acknowledged. “He deserves so much more and I’ve worked very hard to not keep putting my Blaine issues on our relationship. I know that Adam would never something like that to me.”

“Then what is it that’s upsetting you so?” Ellie asked softly, her eyes kind and expressing her concern for her son’s partner.

Kurt was afraid to look that deeply inside himself, not wanting to see that the scars left from Blaine’s betrayal might still be a bit raw around the edges. “I lost Blaine because I was too busy focusing on school and work,” he started, only to be cut off irritably by Adam’s mother.

“No, he lost you because he was an immature brat,” she stated firmly. “Don’t try to take ownership for his poor choices, love.”

Kurt had known that he still felt some sense of responsibility for Blaine’s infidelity. Even after all this time. Rationally he knew that Blaine was solely responsible for his choices, but it was still difficult to not take on the blame himself. He knew that it was Blaine’s choice to respond to anything that he did or didn’t do by fucking someone else, but that didn’t ease the hurt that still lingered. And he was so damn tired of hurting over it.
“You’re worried that Adam will cheat on you as well,” Ellie surmised, looking at him sympathetically. “Once you’re apart and busy with your own lives.”

“I know he won’t,” Kurt insisted ardently. “He is the kindest, most generous, loving man I’ve ever met. But he’s going to be out there in the real world, meeting all kinds of people who can offer him a lot more than I can. And one day I’m afraid, he’s going to realize that he’s been wasting his time with some silly school boy back in New York.”

He felt his eyes stinging and had to pause to wipe at them, angry with himself for revealing what he’d just said. Fantastic, he reprimanded to himself. He just revealed to Adam’s mother just how childish and insecure he was, absolutely ruining the carefully crafted veneer of maturity that he’d tried so hard to cultivate. Adam’s mother would now see that he was a foolish little boy and totally unworthy of being with her son.

He was surprised to see her gaze holding steady and calm, her eyes so much like her son’s as she waited for him to regain his composure. “Kurt, I’m not going to patronize you,” she promised. “I know that you have very good reasons to be fearful about things.”

“I’m sorry,” he said sincerely, feeling even more foolish for his mini-break down.

“Oh sweetheart… there’s nothing to be sorry for,” she claimed, looking at him fondly. “Kurt, have you spoken to Adam about any of this?”

He shook his head adamantly. “No. The last thing I wanted to do was make him think that I didn’t want him taking the job. These are my problems.”

“No, sweetheart. This affects the both of you,” she reminded him gently. “Do you think that you’re the only one worried? I know for certain that Adam’s been working himself into a tizzy over leaving you.”

“He has?” Kurt hated how weak he sounded, but he had to know. “He’s been so calm about everything… I thought that he was really happy.”

“Oh, he’s glad that he found a job,” she corrected. “He’s been very anxious about getting work since he finished school, but make no mistake his first choice would certainly have been to stay in New York with you. Darling… are you telling me that you really think that Adam wants to leave you?”

When he didn’t answer, she made an annoyed sound. “Kurt, for such a smart lad you’re astonishingly dim sometimes. He loves you and the last thing he wants to do is be away from you.”

Kurt knew that his old baggage was making a very unwanted reappearance, but he needed to get this out of his system. “I thought that Blaine loved me,” he admitted. “And it didn’t take him long to find someone else. What’s going to happen when Adam starts meeting people more on his level and I’m not there for him?”

“First of all, the idea that you’re not Adam’s equal in every way is absurd!” Ellie scoffed. “What, do you think he hasn’t been around other people before he met you? If anything, he finds them totally lacking in comparison to you so you can put that silly thought out of your head.

“I’m not going to tell you that it’s going to be easy,” she admitted. “I respect you too much for that. But I can tell you from personal experience that you can get thought this if your both willing to put in the effort.”

Kurt had nearly forgotten that Adam’s father had traveled extensively during his professional career, and he doubted that Ellie would have been able to go with him all the time. “How did you and Peter
manage things?” he asked, hoping that she could give him some guidance.

Her eyes seemed to brighten when she realized what he was asking. “It wasn’t so bad at first, right after we got married. I was still in school when he first signed with the orchestra. Much of the time he toured, I was so busy with class that I didn’t have much time to miss him. And when I could join him on my school breaks it felt like wonderful holidays together.

“But after I got my degree and started working, I couldn’t go with him so often,” she admitted. “And then Melissa came along and my career started to demand more time and we would sometimes have to be apart for weeks at a time when the orchestra was touring. It wasn’t easy, having a baby to care for all on my own while managing work and a household. I’ll admit that I was very lonely much of the time and we had our fair share of fights over how often he was away.”

Kurt’s eyes softened when he realized that she really did understand what he was feeling. “How did you get through it?”

Ellie smiled at him sympathetically. “It took a lot of work on both our parts,” she acknowledged. “Phone calls as often as we could manage and just taking the time to be there for one another. We had to make staying in regular contact a serious priority, otherwise our marriage would never have survived.

“It wasn’t any easier for Peter, mind you. He felt like he was missing so much of the children’s lives while he was traveling.”

Kurt absorbed what she was telling him, understanding that he was not so unique in his situation or concerns. “Was it worth it?” he asked.

She considered what he was asking and nodded. “I think so. As much as I would have preferred having Peter with me all the time, he would have been miserable if he wasn’t able to pursue music the way he needed to. He needed it as much as you and Adam love the stage. It’s in your blood. Just like the law was in mine. It was the nature of the fields that we chose.

“And in the end, we both got our chance to grow into ourselves as individuals. Not merely as part of a couple,” she mused. “I think that we’re the better for having that chance. And because we had to spend so much time apart, we very much appreciate the time we have together.”

She looked at Kurt sympathetically, fully understanding his fears. “Darling, you both chose a field that may require you to be apart at times. This time Adam is the one who needs to travel for work. One day you might get hired for a play or a film and you’ll be the one on the road. This is something the two of you will have to work out between yourselves.”

Kurt sat silently for a moment, taking in the lesson she was gently imparting and could not feel anything other than grateful for her advice and guidance. He’d had no one around him who’d faced what he was and had their relationship come out intact in the end. There were so many examples about him that long distance relationships were doomed to end in failure that he’d forgotten that it was indeed possible for them to survive this as a couple.

Their relationship would change, for certain. But change wasn’t always bad. They could come out stronger and closer if they put in the work. And Kurt realized that he did want to make the effort in a way that he hadn’t wanted to with Blaine.

But Ellie was right. He needed to talk to Adam, and he needed to tell Adam the truth.

“Thank you,” he said sincerely. “You gave me a lot to think about.”
“I’m always here if you need to talk, love,” she promised. “We’re all so fond of you and if you find yourself needing some advice, or just someone to hear you rant and scream about things, Peter and I are here for you.

“And don’t put off talking to Adam,” she urged gently. “I know it’s not an easy thing to bring up, but you need to do it. One of you needs to take that first step.”

Kurt couldn’t help from smiling, thankful that the Crawfords were so gracious towards him. “I will,” he promised.

She gazed at him fondly and blew him a kiss. “You’ll be fine, darling. Let me know how it all goes.”

“I will. And Ellie… thank you.”

She smiled brightly. “Have a good day, sweetheart,” she urged, giving him a happy wave before turning off the connection. That left Kurt alone in an unsettling quiet with a head full of thoughts.

He knew that Adam’s mother was right. He wasn’t doing himself or Adam any favors by keeping his fears to himself. He’d always found himself able to talk to Adam, but he also had a bad habit of hiding away his deepest hurts and fears. He knew that Adam would be understanding and would try to ease his fears, but he didn’t want his boyfriend to need to do that. He needed to be able to get his own emotional house in order.

He had a few hours before Adam would be getting home from work and he had class and rehearsals to focus on that afternoon. That would give him a chance to clear his head and consider just how he was going to broach this uncomfortable subject and make some real plans on how they were going to go forward from here.

Unquestionably he had some thinking to do. Ellie had made some very good points and delaying this very much needed conversation when they had so little time left to spend together would not help them weather they long separation they were facing. It was past time for him to face up to his fears.

* * *

The flat was quiet when Adam returned home late in the afternoon. He’d worked a few extra hours at the café since he didn’t have a shift at the bar that evening and he wanted to squirrel away as much money as he possibly could. All going well, he would be able to save most of his pay from the show to tide him over until they either got picked up for a New York opening, or until another prospect came along. While it was gratifying that both his current employers would be happy to take him on again when he returned to New York, he’d much prefer not needing that type of employment.

It would be nice to have some time to relax before Kurt got home and they could maybe have a late supper. Even with all their efforts, they saw precious little of one another most days, a fact that was troubling him greatly. They had just a few weeks until his rehearsals were to begin and before they knew it, the year would be over and he’d be leaving. But their respective schedules kept pulling them apart.

Maybe it was time to give up his bartending gig. The extra money was nice, but it was just taking up too many hours that he could be spending with Kurt. He’d already given his notice to his boss, so telling him that plans had changed and he would need to leave earlier than expected wouldn’t be a huge issue. This would leave his nights free to spend with Kurt.

Knowing that Kurt would be starving when he finally got home, Adam began to rummage through the refrigerator to see what he could cook. He frowned at the meager contents, thinking that they
really needed to do some proper shopping. They both had been meaning too but their schedules had made even basic chores a challenge. Wondering if he’d have a chance to run down to the store before Kurt got home, he sent Kurt a quick text to see what he was in the mood for.

To his surprise, he got an answer almost immediately.

Am on my way home now. Will pick up dinner on the way. See you soon!

He felt a smile etch its way across his face, happy that he and his boyfriend would have an evening to spend together. That reinforced his decision to quit his second job, because the thought of possibly missing out on more opportunities like this. It just made sense for him to be a bit more flexible with his time for the next few weeks and work a bit more around Kurt’s schedule.

It was nearly an hour later that Kurt came through the door, burdened with his school bag and a plastic sack filled with take out. “Hi honey,” he greeted, barely taking a second to drop the bad before turning to Adam for a kiss. “Did you have a good day?”

“Oh, fair enough,” the older man granted, taking a moment to pull Kurt into his arms. “Mmm… I missed you all day.”

Kurt kissed him again. “Come on… I picked up Chinese and I’m starving.”

They settled on the couch in front of the television with their take-out cartons and chopsticks, Kurt settled happily against Adam’s side. Adam couldn’t help from smiling at the selection of food, seeing that Kurt had selected their favorites to share and enjoy. He handed Kurt the bowl of wontons in hot oil and grabbed the container of sesame noodles.

“Thank you, darling. This was just what I needed today,” Adam said happily as he slurped down the savory noodles. “And we had absolutely nothing in the fridge.”

“I figured we both needed a break with the way both of us have been working,” Kurt answered, enjoying the mild burn of Chinese hot oil on his lips. He reached for a container of cumin-spiced beef and dug in happily.

“Well, things might start getting a bit easier,” Adam promised. “I’m quitting my job at the bar, so my evenings will be free until my rehearsals begin.”

Kurt looked up at him, his eyes widening happily. “You are! That’s great,” he said with obvious delight.

Adam just stroked Kurt’s cheek lovingly. “I’m tired of us fighting to find time to spend together,” he explained. “It might mean tightening our belts a wee bit, but I want to spend as much time with you as I can. This way I’ll be here when you get home from rehearsals.”

“Oh honey… you didn’t need to quit your job,” Kurt insisted. “I know that my free time is kind of short right now, but…”

“No, it’s a bit overdue,” Adam claimed, quite content with his decision. “I’m going to need to quit sooner rather than later and I’d rather do it when it gives us the chance to have more time to spend together.”

Kurt felt his heart tighten at his boyfriend’s consideration. “It’s my schedule that’s out of control. I can…”

“No, darling,” Adam interrupted, taking hold of Kurt’s hand and giving it a reassuring squeeze.
“You need to focus on your lessons. I know that my schedule is a bit more flexible for the time being, so let’s take advantage while we can.”

Kurt tilted his head to kiss Adam warmly. “I knew that there was a reason that I loved you.”

Adam gazed down at him, his blue eyes warm and tender in a way that made Kurt feel safe and loved. “There’s nothing that I wouldn’t do for you, sweetheart,” he said, his accent thick with emotion. “I hate the fact that I’m going away.”

“Adam, it’s okay,” Kurt stated insistently. “I know that you need to do this.”

“I could have waited,” Adam said softly, his eyes starting to water from the emotion he’d been holding back. “I didn’t have to take the first job offered to me.”

Kurt put down the food container he’d been holding and shifted on the couch so he could face Adam fully. He made sure to look directly into his lover’s eyes to make sure that there was no mistaking his meaning. “Adam, you need to start working on your career. You couldn’t turn down an offer just because it wasn’t especially convenient. This is what you need to do for yourself at this point.”

Adam pulled Kurt into his arms, burying his face in Kurt’s shoulder. “I hate that I have to leave you,” he said, his voice muffled slightly by Kurt’s shirt. “I love you.”

Kurt wrapped his arms about Adam, holding him close. “And I love you. Which is why I want you to do this,” he said with a resolution that surprised him. “I don’t want you to go, but the last thing that I would ever want is to stand in the way of something you need.”

Adam lifted his head to look at the younger man in his arms. “You have been so amazing,” he said with a trace of wonder in his voice. “This is asking so much of you and I’m terrified that one morning you’re going to wake up and decide that I’m not worth it.”

Seeing the genuine fear in his lover’s expression caused the reserve in Kurt to finally begin to crack. Ellie was right, he realized. Neither of them had been talking and he’d totally missed Adam’s own misgivings in his efforts to support his lover.

“You’re not the only one,” he admitted softly, hating the weakness that he detected in his own tone. Adam blinked and pulled back slightly to look at him. “Whatever do you mean, love?”

Kurt sighed, knowing that there was no going back. “I didn’t want you to think that I’m not supporting you in this. Because I am,” he insisted. “It’s just…”

Adam’s gaze softened. “Talk to me, sweetheart,” he urged gently.

Kurt paused to gather his thoughts, wanting to make sure that there was no chance of Adam misinterpreting his meaning. “I’m afraid too,” he explained. “Let’s face it… none of my friends had any luck with trying to manage a relationship over long distance and I’m at the top of the list. I get too focused and too absorbed in whatever I’m doing at the moment. And right now, I’ve got a lot that’s going to demand my attention and I’m afraid that I’m…” His voice trailed off.

Adam bit his lower lip nervously. “What are you afraid of?” he asked softly, giving the younger man a gentle nudge. “It can’t be that bad.”

Kurt sighed and just dove in, knowing that there was no easy way to put this. “I never wanted what happened with Blaine to be an issue with our relationship,” he insisted.
“And you haven’t,” Adam assured him.

Kurt gave him a thankful but frank expression. “Not by lack of trying, I’ll admit. I hate that things he did still bother me and that I’m letting it interfere with us. I’m so happy for you getting this opportunity,” Kurt stated resolutely. “But I can’t help from being terrified that history is going to repeat itself. That I’ll be too busy with my things and you’ll be out there with all kinds of people seeing just how amazing you are and you’ll wonder why you’re bothering with a kid still in school when you can have anyone that you want.”

The confession came out in a rush, as if Kurt had to get the words out as quickly as possible before he lost his nerve. Adam felt his heart tighten uncomfortably at seeing his lover so distressed. “Kurt, I do understand but listen to me,” he said urgently. “There is no one that I want other than you. Please believe me… I don’t care how handsome or successful anyone I meet may be. It won’t mean anything because they’re not you.”

He reached out to cup Kurt face in his hand, his thumb gently caressing his lover’s cheek. “From the moment I first saw you, I was absolutely entranced. And it’s only gotten stronger since,” he promised. “Every moment that we share together just makes me realize all the more of how in love with you I am. Don’t think for a moment that I’m as foolish as Blaine and would look at someone else.”

Kurt wiped at his eyes, the expression on his face was one of profound thankfulness and once again Adam fought down the desire to seek out and pummel Kurt’s ex for betraying his trust so profoundly. That this beautiful, intelligent man should feel grateful that his lover promised not to cheat on him was just appalling, in Adam’s estimation.

“It goes both ways,” Kurt swore, reaching up to take Adam’s hand in his. “I love you and I don’t care how long we’re apart. There is no one that I want in my life more. Next to my father, you are the most important person in the world to me. Losing you would…”

He paused, inhaling deeply. “I want everything for you,” Kurt insisted. “I want you to go out there and be the star that you deserve to be. And there’s nothing I won’t do to support you.”

Adam bent his head to kiss Kurt lingeringly, taking his time and feeling his lover shudder against him. When he drew back, he looked deeply into Kurt’s eyes so that there would be no mistaking his meaning.

“I know that this isn’t going to be easy,” he admitted. “And there are going to be times when we’re both lonely and frustrated with our situation. But it’s only for a few months. I am going to come back to you. I promise.”

His broad hand stroked Kurt’s hair, savoring the feel of the silky strands slipping between his fingers. “I want you to have all the kinds of wonderful experiences that you can have while I’m away,” Adam insisted. “I want you to go out and go to parties and have all sorts of fantastic friends. Even if they’re fit, handsome blokes like that Elliot fellow.”

Kurt couldn’t help from laughing at Adam’s urging, his eyes shining as they gazed into one another’s.

“I want you to learn and grow and continue all these wonderful changes that I’ve been watching since we met,” Adam said softly. “And I can’t wait to come back and learn about the man you’ve become.”

Kurt felt a tear begin to trace its way down his cheek but didn’t bother to reach up to wipe it away.
Not if it meant relinquishing his hold on the older man. “I know that I haven’t always been very good about expressing myself and not letting the past get in the way of our lives,” he said softly. “But I am trying. I want my feelings about not wanting you to be away to be strictly about missing you and wanting you to come back. Not because I’m afraid I’m going to lose you.”

Adam smiled and with his thumb wiped the tear stain from Kurt’s face. “I know that this is going to take a lot of work on both our parts, but I think we can do it. I will call and Skype you every chance I get and I’ll want to know about everything that you’re doing,” he promised. “We’re going to break that trend. I’m going to be back this summer and we’re going to have a grand time rediscovering one another.”

Kurt smiled as Adam pulled him into a tight embrace, the two of them holding on to one another as if for their lives. The knot in his chest that never totally went away from the instant that Adam had told him about his job finally began to unravel and he felt like he could really breathe again. They would beat the odds, he told himself. And they’d be stronger as a couple as a result.

Kurt knew that the survival of their relationship was no certain thing. He wasn’t so delusional as to believe that it was a foregone conclusion, not after living through Blaine’s betrayal. But they both very much were willing to put in the effort to allow their relationship to survive the changes that they were facing.

Adam was not Blaine, but likewise Kurt was not the same young man that he had been over a year ago. He knew what he wanted and Adam was a large part of that. He knew that it would be a struggle, but it was one that they face head on and together.

For now though, Kurt was content to let Adam just hold him. The future would come soon enough.

* * *

“This is the best idea we ever had,” Rachel chirped happily as she came up to Kurt’s side. Her best friend put his arm about her shoulders and pulled her close, pressing a kiss to her cheek.

It had been a wonderful idea, Kurt considered as he surveyed the dining table in the loft that was already groaning with food. The living area of the loft was filled with friends, old and new, and it felt like a nearly perfect way to celebrate Thanksgiving.

It probably shouldn’t have been a surprise that no one had plans to go back to Ohio for various reasons. Travel was difficult for Artie, so he and Tina decided to postpone a trip home until the winter break to make the effort more worth their while. Santana didn’t want to be the only one to go back and would rather deal with her mother’s complaints than be left out of the fun. Fortunately the Lopez family gathering was large enough that one missing person wouldn’t mar the festivities.

“Did you talk to your dads?” he asked as he opened the oven to pull out the guest of honor. “Damn, could we have gotten a bigger bird?”

“We’re feeding a lot of people,” she reminded Kurt. “And yes, I did. They flew out yesterday and are down in Miami now. They’ll spend a few days there before the cruise sets out.”

If she was upset that her fathers decided to book a cruise and would be out of town for several weeks rather than spend the holiday with her, she made no sign of it. “They invited me to join them, but I think that they’re treating it like an extended honeymoon now that their nest is empty,” she explained without a hint of disappointment.

Kurt nodded understandingly as he covered the immense turkey with foil to rest before carving.
There were several covered dishes to be popped into the oven to warm before serving. In the meantime, there were tons of snacks and hors d’oeuvres to enjoy and a chance to enjoy one another’s company before stuffing themselves silly.

The living area was good and crowded with those who had become their second family over the past months. Santana sat on the couch with her arm wrapped about her girlfriend, Dani chatting happily with Artie and Tina with Santana adding her own biting observations. Elliot and Adam were talking over by the window, drinking wine and laughing like old friends. After having eased Adam’s concerns about his new friend, Kurt was glad to see them getting along so well.

And standing next to Adam, leaning into him and laughing at Elliot’s jokes was Mercedes, who had made the long-overdue trip to visit to surprise her friends before returning home to spend a few weeks with her family. Kurt had very much missed his friend and was thrilled to have a chance to catch up with her for a bit.

He poured himself a glass of red wine and approached the trio with a broad smile on his face. “Well you all look like you’re having fun,” he teased, getting their attention. “I’m feeling left out.”

“Well, if you’d get out of the kitchen and join us instead of hovering over a turkey,” Mercedes chuckled, pulling him into a one-armed hug so that she wouldn’t lose her wine. “I was feeling neglected until these two handsome men took pity on me.”

“Well, I should have to thank them for their consideration,” Kurt chuckled, turning to Adam. He kissed his boyfriend warmly, letting Adam pull him into a tight embrace.

“This is quite a gathering,” Elliot complimented. “And I very much appreciate the invite. It saves me the drama of the annual argument between my folks over who’s place I’m spending the holidays at.”

Adam gazed at him sympathetically. “They never learned to share, did they?” he asked.

Elliot shook his head. “There’s a very good reason why they’re divorced.”

“This is a lower key party than we had last year,” Kurt advised, chuckling at the memory. “We’d invited my boss because she was at loose ends and she showed up with what looked like half the fashionistas and drag queens in New York City.”

Mercedes laughed. “Only half the drag queens?” she asked teasingly.

“That was enough!” Kurt insisted, his eyes sparkling with good humor. “We were sweeping up glitter for the next week!”

Adam laughed riotously, nearly dropping his glass. “How did I possibly miss that?” he asked teasingly.

“I’m afraid that was before we met,” Kurt answered regretfully. “A shame about that, because I think that Miss Chantelle would have loved you. And she had the most stunning legs.”

“Not better than yours,” Adam corrected, nuzzling his nose against Kurt’s throat. “Impossible.”

Kurt looked about the room, seeing those he was closest to enjoying themselves and shook his head. “I like this better,” he claimed. “I mean, we had a total blast but I’m glad to have everyone here this year.”

Mercedes just smiled and kissed her friend on the cheek, leaning into him.
“Mercedes here was telling me about her album,” Elliot explained. “I’ve got to say that your friends are pretty amazing, Kurt. A recording deal, two accepted into NYADA, a film student and someone in NYU… all from one show choir group.”

Kurt looked to Mercedes, who gave him a knowing smile. They were very aware of just how special their group of friends were. To have so many intensely talented people in one school and drawn together almost by happenstance was nearly too much to be believed. It was even more outlandish when one considered Quinn’s Ivy League acceptance and Santana’s own budding music career.

For all of William Schuester’s flaws as a teacher and a choir director, he had the wisdom to give his intensely talented students a place to grow. None of the would be where they were without that and whatever misgivings they might have had over favoritism and how the choir was managed, they were grateful for the opportunities they’d had.

Rachel came over and touched Kurt on his shoulder to get his attention. “We’d better start getting dinner on the table before we fill up on snacks. I mean, we’ve got a lot of food.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Kurt chuckled. He looked to his boyfriend and Elliot. “You two want to help?”

With the promise of a veritable feast, the group broke off from their conversation and hurried into the kitchen to help ferry platters and bowls of food to the table. Dani took over the task of carving the immense turkey, skillfully slicing the breasts before moving on to take off the legs and thighs and neatly arranging them on the waiting platter.

“Where did you learn to do this?” Kurt asked curiously, snagging a bit of meat and taking a taste and raised an eyebrow at the seasoning which clearly showed Santana’s influence. “Last time we tried this, it looked like a crime scene.”

Dani chuckle, placing the carving knife in the sink. “Dad taught me,” she explained. “He got really good carving turkeys for holidays on whatever base he was stationed at since we ended up with at least a few dozen birds for the crew.”

“Where is he stationed now?” Mercedes asked curiously.

“Okinawa,” Dani answered. “I love my folks, but there was no way I was going to fly halfway around the world for Navy turkey.”

Santana’s eyes softened a trace, and she reached over to touch her girlfriend’s arm. She knew that Dani had been a military brat and living in New York for school and work had been the most stability she’d had her entire life. It was one thing to be apart from family by choice, but it was a different matter when your family was halfway across the world the way Dani’s were.

Kurt knew that Adam had to endure the same kind of separation, but he seemed to find solace with his relationships, professional and personal, here in New York. He hoped that his presence, and the way his friends had pulled Adam into their tight-knit little group offered some measure of comfort to him.

As if to answer his concerns, Adam leaned over to kiss him on the cheek as he took the seat next to Kurt. “I’m glad that we did this,” he admitted, placing his napkin neatly across his lap. He kept one arm on the back of Kurt’s chair, wanting to maintain the casual contact between them.

“So am I, but I thought that you wanted to do the holiday with just us,” Kurt said. “Making our own traditions.”
Adam smiled, looking about at the happy group taking their seats about the table. “This is making our own tradition. A wonderful meal with the family that we’re making of our friends. And we’re together.”

He leaned close to kiss Kurt again. “That sounds like the best tradition of all, to me.”

Kurt felt his cheeks warming. “I think that you’re right,” he answered softly.

He looked about the table, seeing the smiling faces of friends old and new taking their places. The dishware and glasses were all mismatched, and some were a bit chipped about the edges. The silverware was a collection of random styles and Kurt was entirely sure that the salt and pepper shakers had been stolen from the diner that Santana and Rachel had worked at.

Much like the people seated around the table, he considered. They were a varied and mismatched bunch who had little in common but a love of performing. They had come together and formed friendships that had their bumps and outright fights and resentments that could last for years, but managed to survive and become stronger. These were people that he loved as much as his own family and had become another family to him in their own right. Kurt knew that he would make many friends over the course of his lifetime, but he doubted that he would ever be as close as he was to this select group.

Rachel took her seat at the head of the table and accepted a glass of wine from Tina. “Well, everything looks amazing,” she complimented. “And before we get started, I thought that we’d engage in a little tradition that my fathers started. Before we ate, we would go around the table and everyone gets a chance to say something that we were thankful for from the past year.

“So I guess that I start us off… I’m thankful for all my friends being here today,” she said happily. “The past year was really challenging in a lot of ways and that I’m thankful that you managed to put up with me when I was at my worst. I know I didn’t deserve your friendship a lot of the time, but I’m ever so grateful to have it now. If I can’t be with my fathers, there’s no other people that I’d rather spend the holiday with.”

They went about the table and there were expressions of thanks for things large and small. For friendships and a warm welcome and delicious food. Artie was thankful for finally being in a place where his talent and aspirations were the first thing associated with him, not his handicap while Elliot and Dani both expressed thanks again for the warm welcome that they’d found and their hopes for continuing these new friendships in the coming year.

“Yeah, can we hurry this along?” Santana growled irritably. “I’m getting hungry here.”

“Santana, aren’t you thankful for anything?” Rachel pressed, a knowing smile on her face.

“Yeah, I’m thankful that we’re going to be eating soon and that I didn’t let you ruin the turkey.”

Adam gave her a fond smile, having long since reached an understanding that the young woman hid her tender feelings in a cloak of barbs and jabs. He thought that he could read her rather well by this point and knew that she would never be able to show real vulnerability in front of an audience. It just wasn’t her way.

“Well, since it’s my turn I’ll make this quick,” he promised. “Not quite a year ago, I got my first look at the most remarkable creature. And since then, he’s given me so much to be thankful for. I’ve found love and support and new wonderful friends. His family has welcomed me and he’s made this past year the happiest and most fulfilling I’ve ever had.”
Kurt looked up at Adam, his eyes warm with the love he felt for the older man. Despite a long history of masking his vulnerabilities, Kurt had no problem with expressing his feelings of love and friendship before others. He smiled and pressed a soft kiss to Adam’s lips before speaking to the others at the table.

“This time last year, I was in a pretty miserable place,” he admitted. “I got turned down to my dream school and except for my internship I didn’t feel like a whole lot working in my favor.”

Adam squeezed his hand reassuringly, silently letting his lover know that he was there for him.

Kurt’s expression softened into a warm smile. “Things really shifted not long after that. I got into NYADA and I have so many wonderful friends, old and new, that have made my life so full. I have a wonderful family that supports me every step of the way. And I have the most amazing man that I love with everything I have in me.”

He looked into Adam’s eyes, hoping that the older man could see just what he felt towards him. “I couldn’t be more thankful for what the past year has brought me.”

He needn’t have worried. Adam kissed him, not caring that they had an audience. Kurt made a contented sound when he felt those strong arms tighten about him, pulling him as close as he could manage in their chairs.

“Oh God… enough already!” Santana snapped, snatching up the bowl of Kurt’s sweet potato casserole and dumping a large spoonful onto her plate. She then grabbed for the serving tongs and went for the turkey.

“Um, I didn’t get my turn,” Tina pressed, but the older girl shook her head and demanded that someone pass her the gravy.

“Nope… time’s up,” Santana stated firmly, pouring a generous spoon of gravy over her turkey and looking about for whatever struck her fancy.

Rachel looked at her in amusement and shook her head. “I guess that’s our signal, guys,” she chuckled, watching her roommate shovel a heaping forkful of sweet potatoes into her mouth. “Can someone pass the veggies?”

The meal was delicious and reflected the diversity of the individuals enjoying it, yet somehow it all came together. Santana’s Latin spices on the turkey were nicely balanced with mole-style gravy and Rachel’s traditional cornbread dressing. Kurt closed his eyes, savoring the flavor of the vegetable casserole that Elliot had brought.

“Elliot, you have got to give me the recipe for this,” he insisted. The creamy mixture of fall vegetables in a lightly spiced cream sauce was a perfect complement to his sweet potatoes.

“I did a variation of a korma recipe,” the older man explained as he served himself some mashed potatoes and added a heaping spoonful to Dani’s plate. “I changed up the spices to fit in more with what we’d been eating.”

“It’s delicious,” Tina agreed, dipping a piece of bread into the sauce. “Everything is so good.”

The conversation flowed with the wine and good food as they stuffed themselves nearly to the point of a stupor. Mercedes looked over to Kurt as he served himself a third helping of dressing and turkey and shook her head in astonishment.

“How are you able to eat so much?” she demanded teasingly. “Your man there barely ate half of
what you did.”

“I don’t even try to keep up with him,” Adam laughed, giving his boyfriend a playful nudge.

“Don’t poke him! He might explode,” Tina exclaimed, holding up her napkin as if to shield herself from an imminent shower of food.

“Oh, you are all hilarious,” Kurt complained, but the glimmer in his eyes confirmed that he wasn’t at all offended. “Can someone pass the cranberries?”

Dani moved to pick up the bowl in front of her to hand to Kurt, but was stopped by Santana. “No way… you get your hand to close to him and he’d probably eat it,” she warned. Using an oven mitt for protection she gingerly nudged the bowl towards Kurt, taking care to remain a safe distance away from him.

Kurt accepted the dish of relish gracefully and loftily dismissed both Santana’s mocking and the laughter of the others at the table as he spooned a portion onto his plate. “Sorry Satan, but there’s only one person seated at this table who’d get his body parts eaten,” he informed her with just enough haughtiness to get a pause from some of his friends before they realized what he really meant.

Adam blushed furiously, turning his gaze to the ceiling while Mercedes burst out laughing. Rachel and Tina giggled and Artie and Elliot couldn’t help from joining in. Santana just gave him an admiring smile and let Dani pull her back to her seat. Through it all, Kurt just had a playful smirk on his face as he finished his dinner.

Once everyone had eaten their fill, they remained at the table to chat and bemoan about the amount of exercise they were facing in order to work off the amount of food they’d consumed. Kurt let Adam pull his chair closer and place his arm about Kurt’s shoulders to hold him close while they talked. Artie was all but dozing in his chair and the girls looked stuffed to the point of pain.

“Ugh… I’m dying,” Dani moaned, patting the little swell where her flat belly had been.

“We’d better start putting the leftovers away,” Rachel mused, looking at the mess on the table. “And I don’t know about you all, but I’m going to need awhile before I even want to think about dessert.”

Tina made a pained noise, holding her stomach. “Oh please… no more food.”

“Wait until you see what Adam baked,” Kurt teased gently. “You’re going to want to find room for that.”

Once the leftover food was packaged and tucked away in the fridge, they got all the dirty plates and glasses off the table and loaded into the sink. Adam quickly took over, rolling up his sleeves.

“We don’t need everyone here for this,” he explained. “Why don’t you all go for a walk? You’ll feel better and by the time you get back, I’ll have this done and we’ll be ready for dessert.”

“Are you sure?” Rachel asked. “That’s awfully sweet of you, but…”

“I insist,” Adam said, smiling. “Take Kurt with you. He looks like he can use a bit of fresh air.”

Dani looked over to Santana. “I really need a walk,” she said almost plaintively, earning a quick kiss from her girlfriend.

“Alright everyone… grab your jackets,” Santana ordered. “Let’s waddle off some of this so we don’t
get so bloated that we gross out the rest of the neighborhood.”

Kurt got his jacket and wrapped a gray scarf elegantly about his throat before going over to his boyfriend for a hug and a kiss. “We won’t be long,” he promised.

“Take your time, love,” Adam urged, giving Kurt a smile.

“I just don’t want to be away from you,” Kurt answered back, taking hold of Adam’s shirt and pulling him in for another kiss.

“Are you coming or not, Hummel?” Santana demanded. “Lord Byron will be here when you get back.”

Adam laughed, giving Kurt a gentle nudge. “Go on, you. Before it’s time for Christmas.”

Kurt sighed, reluctantly joining the others. Dani was slipping on her coat and noticed that Elliot had made no moves to join them.

“Aren’t you coming with us?” she asked, slipping her hand into Santana’s.

He shook his head. “Nah… I’ll hang out here and help Adam,” he advised, giving her a smile. “You all go have fun.”

“Thanks, mate,” Adam said appreciative. “We should be able to get this done in no time.”

“If you’re sure,” Dani said, grinning as she was pulled along with the others.

“Have fun!” Elliot called out as he joined Adam in the kitchen. “What can I do to help?”

“Why don’t I rinse while you load the dishwasher?” Adam suggested as he surveyed the pile of dishes. The dishwasher was a rather new, and very deeply appreciated addition to the loft since Kurt had moved out. It made sense, with so many people living there and keeping different schedules. The convenience would make their lives much easier, and he made a mental note that this would be a must have in his and Kurt’s new flat when he got back.

The two men worked efficiently, loading up the plates, serving bowls and silverware into the machine and setting it to wash. They then tackled the platers, wine glasses and roasting pan, Adam washing them by hand and Elliot drying. Between the two of them, they managed to get the kitchen and table cleaned and ready for dessert when the others returned.

Adam turned on the oven to warm the pies sitting on the counter before turning to Elliot. “Want a cup of tea while we’re waiting? Or coffee? I’ll put on the kettle.”

“Sure, that sounds great,” Elliot said agreeably. “Thanks.”

He watched the Englishman move about the kitchen, clearly knowing where the tea and coffee were stored. Adam filled the kettle, setting it on the stove and set the coffee maker to brew a pot. He got out mugs and turned to Elliot.

“We’ve got an assortment,” he advised. “Any preferences?”

“Is there any chai?” Elliot asked.

“I think so… Ah! Here it is,” Adam exclaimed cheerfully, finding the box and dropping a teabag into one of the mugs and selecting Earl Grey for himself. “Santana is absolutely addicted to the stuff so I figured there had to be some about.”
Elliot couldn’t help from smiling. “You certainly know your way about here,” he noted pleasantly.

Adam chuckled in amusement. “I ought to, for all the time I spent here before Kurt moved in with me,” he explained. “If he wasn’t at my place, I was usually here.

“And I got rather fond of his roommates. They’re a pretty formidable lot.”

“Yeah, I kind of noticed that,” Elliot laughed. “They do tend to stick together. I was meeting Dani here once and it was like facing the Spanish Inquisition. You’d think they’d remember that I’ve known Dani for years before she met Santana.”

“There’s a lot of history there,” Adam said sagely. The kettle began to whistle and he lifted it off the burner, filling their mugs. “All of them faced a lot of challenges and even when they squabble, they’ll have one another’s backs.”

“They are definitely something else,” Elliot said admiringly.

“Kurt especially,” Adam insisted. “But then, I am biased on the subject.”

Elliot looked thoughtful for a moment, as if trying to figure out how to say something. “Adam, I like Kurt a lot. But as a friend,” he insisted. “I didn’t want you to get the wrong impression of my motives.”

Adam nodded understandingly. “I know. And it’s okay. Really,” he assured the other man. “I’m glad that Kurt will have friends to distract him while I’m away.”

“A lot of guys wouldn’t be so accepting of someone hanging around their boyfriend,” Elliot insisted. “Especially when they’re not around.”

Adam went to the refrigerator for milk and got out the sugar bowl. “Kurt and I had a talk about things,” he explained as he prepared his tea to his liking. “And while I’ll admit to having some reservations, I know that he’s going to need his friends over the next few months and I’m not going to dictate who he can have around him.”

Elliot spooned some sugar into his tea and poured in a healthy splash of milk. “I knew that you two were really solid, and even if I wanted Kurt like that I’d never stand a chance,” he claimed. “And it’s not that Kurt isn’t totally amazing. I mean, he’s talented and he’s seriously hot but I’m not the home wreaker type.”

“Elliot, it’s okay… you don’t have to convince me,” Adam insisted, sipping his tea. “I’m glad that Kurt has you for a friend. In fact, there’s a favor I wanted to ask you.”

“Sure. Whatever I can do,” Elliot claimed, leaning against the kitchen counter.

Adam looked down into his cup, studying the swirl of tea as he gathered his thoughts. “Kurt has a habit of taking on too much and burying himself in commitments. Especially if he’s trying to distract himself from something that bothers him. I know that he’s a grown man but with school and work and rehearsals, I’m afraid that he’s going to neglect himself. He puts everything else first and I don’t want to see him get overwhelmed or burned out because he tries to do too much.

“I just want you to be there for him,” he explained. “To be his friend and watch out for him. Make sure he comes up for air every now and then. Drag him out for a bit of fun or to parties… anything to give him a bit of diversion. In all honesty, as much as I love Kurt’s friends, they do tend to focus on themselves a great deal of the time and if Kurt insists that he’s doing well, they might not see that he needs a bit of extra attention. I just want someone to be looking out for him since I can’t.”
Elliot nodded. “Definitely. I really like hanging out with Kurt, and I’m kind of honored that you’re trusting me with him.”

Adam chuckled ironically. “I trust Kurt,” he clarified. “ Completely. Even if you weren’t totally honorable in your intentions, I know that Kurt would keep things from getting out of hand.”

Adam wasn’t blind to how other men saw Kurt, and if he were a less secure individual it would be easy to find all that attention his boyfriend gathered threatening. The only way they would be able to manage was for him to trust in Kurt and he’d never been given cause to doubt the younger man’s loyalty. Even if Elliot was hoping for a relationship to extend beyond friendship, Kurt would have no difficulty making sure that his boundaries were respected.

He was at first worried that he might have offended Elliot by placing his trust in Kurt, but the other man didn’t seem bothered at all. Elliot seemed to understand that Adam was entrusting someone that he barely knew with something very precious and gave Adam a reassuring smile. “I get that, and I appreciate your honesty,” he acknowledged. “I like Kurt a lot and I’ll help out any way I can.”

Adam smiled back. “That’s all I can ask for.”

Adam put the pies he’d baked into the oven to warm while Elliot set out plates and cups for when the others returned. The two settled on the sofa to enjoy their tea and chat while they waited. Now that he had cleared the air with Elliot, Adam felt a great deal better about things and he knew that Kurt would have people there for him. And Elliot was a really nice fellow. He could see why Kurt was drawn to the charismatic man and Adam found himself liking him more and more.

By the time the loft door opened, heralding the return of the others, the loft was filled with the delicious scent of cinnamon and baked apples. Kurt hurried over to Adam, his cheeks rosy from their walk in the brisk fall air and all but threw himself into his boyfriend’s arms.

“Hello there, love,” Adam said cheerfully, giving him a quick kiss. “Did you have fun?”

Kurt nodded, his eyes bright and cheerful. “Yes, but I missed you,” he pouted playfully, giving Adam a coy blink of his eyes.

“You cheeky little...,” Adam murmured, tightening his embrace and ignoring the others in the room until Santana loudly cleared her throat.

Adam looked up at her, cocking an eyebrow at her bemused stare and how she had her arms wrapped casually around her girlfriend. “If we wait for you and Cock Robin here to get your mack on, we’ll never get our dessert,” she pointed out. “And Thanksgiving isn’t Thanksgiving if I don’t get my pumpkin pie.”

Elliot couldn’t help from laughing. “I think you’ve got your marching orders,” he advised the Englishman, who gave a dramatic sigh in response.

“I suppose so,” he said with an air of exaggerated resignation. Giving his boyfriend a quick kiss, he went to the kitchen to retrieve his pies from the oven. The walk had apparently reinvigorated the appetites of his friends and it was best to appease them as quickly as possible.

* * *

It felt odd to be able to wake up so late, Adam thought as dressed for the day. Six o’clock might not seem especially late to most, but when he had a morning shift at the café he had to wake up at an absolutely obscene hour in order to get there before the breakfast crowd. That would not be a consideration he would have to face for a very long time. He would still have hard work and long
days, but now they would be focused on preparing for his show’s debut, not just keeping a roof over his head.

Kurt was coming out of the bathroom, freshly showered and wrapped in a flannel robe that was just ratty enough to look stylishly shabby. He approached his boyfriend and turned his face up for a kiss. “You look very handsome,” Kurt complimented, looking Adam up and down.

Adam smiled, pleased that his appearance met Kurt’s approval. He needed to be dressed comfortably in clothes that he could move easily in since he’d be at rehearsal all day, but tried to incorporate some of the little touches that Kurt liked. A soft scarf was draped about his neck and he wore a set of braided leather bracelets on both wrists. His hair was pleasingly tousled, probably in need of a trim but Kurt so enjoyed playing with his curls that he’d been putting it off. As if having read his thoughts Kurt reached up to run his hand through Adam’s hair, smoothing the curls behind his ear.

“Nervous?” Kurt asked, his voice gentle and loving.

Adam couldn’t help shrugging. “Would you think I was silly if I said that I was? At least a little.”

Kurt smiled and shook his head. “Not at all. I’d probably be freaking out myself. Just a bit.”

Adam sighed and pulled Kurt into his arms, pressing his face into Kurt’s hair and savoring the scent. The herbal component from the shampoo he favored that left his hair like silk. The tang of citrus from his favorite body wash. And beneath that, the clean and unique scent that was entirely Kurt’s. It comforted him in a way that nothing else ever could.

“Why don’t you go pour us some coffee?” Kurt suggested. “Let me get dressed… I’ll be ready in just a minute.”

Adam nodded and gave him a quick kiss before retreating to the kitchen and got their mugs out of the cabinet. Their coffee maker was set on a timer so that there was always a fresh pot waiting when they woke up and made starting their day just a bit easier. Adam prepared their mugs, adding milk and sugar to their preferred tastes and sat down on the couch to wait for Kurt to join him.

They sat quietly together, holding hands as the enjoyed their coffee and what time they could have together before their day began. “What’s on your agenda for today?” Adam asked. Kurt was outfitted in some of his better casual pieces that could easily be accented with a few accessories to make it a bit dressier. “Going in to the office for a bit?”

Kurt nodded. “I promised Isabelle that I’d come in to finish those edits for her and I’ve got my session with Madam Tibideaux. Then rehearsal this afternoon so I’m not quite sure what time I’ll be getting out.”

“Me neither,” Adam mused. “How about whoever gets home first texts the other and we’ll play dinner by ear? We can always bring something in if one of us is getting home too late.”

Kurt nodded in agreement. “That sounds like a good idea. I’m not going to lie… I’m getting spoiled seeing you so much in the evenings now.”

Adam wrapped his arm about Kurt, holding him close as enjoying the luxury of being able to. However rigorous the next month promised to be, it was a far cry from having two jobs to manage.

“I should get going,” Adam said with a trace of reluctance, not wanting to leave Kurt just yet but he knew that Kurt would need to leave shortly themselves. Having a somewhat more predictable schedule didn’t mean that they both wouldn’t be very, very busy.
Kurt kissed him and went into the kitchen where he brought out of the refrigerator an insulated bag. “I packed some things for you,” he advised, handing Adam the sack. “There’s a bottle of water there. And some fruit and snacks.”

“Darling, I’m sure that we will be getting meal breaks,” Adam reminded him, but Kurt shook his head.

“I know, but you’re going to be working hard and you need to keep your energy up. Just… take it. Make me feel better.”

Adam smiled and pulled him into another hug. “Thank you, sweetheart,” he said softly. “I don’t know how I’d get through this without you.”

Kurt handed him his jacket and tote bag. “Do you have everything you need?” he asked. “What about your book?”

Adam double-checked for his script, finding it in his bag where he’d placed it last night. “Yup… I have everything,” he assured Kurt. “I’m all set.”

Kurt reached up to smooth his hair back again. “Go and show them how amazing you are,” he ordered. “I can’t wait to hear all about it when we get home.”

Adam kissed him gently. “You have a good day, love,” he urged. “I’ll see you tonight.”

“Call me when you get a break. Just to tell me how everything is going.”

Adam nodded. “I will, sweetheart. See you later.”

Shouldering his bag, Adam forced himself to leave the apartment and hurried down to the subway to catch the train to the theater district. He wanted to leave himself a bit of extra time to find the building and so that he wouldn’t be the last to arrive, very much wanting to make a good impression. The production had reserved a rehearsal stage in a large warehouse-like building where many shows were developed. It was his first time in this particular space and having the reality of what this job entailed was finally starting to hit him.

He checked in with the security guard and was advised that their room was up on the third floor. Taking the lift, he felt his body starting to quiver with pent up excitement. Walking down the hallway, he found the door with a piece of paper taped to it with the name of his show.

Butcher’s Bill – Cast and Production Only.

This was it, he realized, taking a deep breath to steady his nerves before opening the door and stepping inside.

The room was very much like a large dance studio, with polished wood floors and a mirrored wall. But there were no barres and at the center of the room was a large rectangular table with enough chairs for a good-sized group arranged about it. A small group of men were already seated there, drinking coffee and eating muffins or bagels as they chatted and reviewed their scripts. Adam immediately recognized Edward Keen, the director off the play talking to an older man that Adam thought he recognized from his audition but couldn’t remember if they’d ever actually been introduced.

Mr. Keen looked up at Adam’s entrance and got up to greet him. “Good to see you again, Adam,” he said cheerfully, shaking Adam’s hand. “Excited to be getting started?”
“Very much so,” he admitted, giving the director a smile. “It’s been a long time coming.”

“Definitely. Well, we’ve got some more people that we’re waiting for, so why don’t you something to eat? We’ll start as soon as everyone gets here.”

“Thank you,” he answered before going to check out the food set out buffet style on a table pushed up against the wall. Serving himself a croissant and some fruit salad, he got a cup of coffee and took a seat at the table where he was greeted warmly by the other actors. They were all young men around his age, and while most were American he was pleased to see that he wasn’t the only refugee from the United Kingdom in attendance. They introduced themselves and chatted casually as the last of the group arrived and took their seats.

Mr. Keen gave them a few minutes to get settled before addressing the group. “Good morning, everyone. I’m absolutely thrilled to finally be officially starting rehearsals for Butcher’s Bill. Now before we get started I’d like to reintroduce Malcom Jellicoe, the writer of this amazing play.”

Adam smiled, now remembering the man from his audition and the actors gave a round of applause. The writer nodded his appreciation to the group, giving a brief statement about how pleased he is to see his play being brought to life but letting Mr. Keen keep control over the rehearsal.

“We’re going to be on a tight schedule since our official opening night in Boston is the twelfth of January, so it’s important that rehearsals go smoothly. By now, I expect that you’re all familiar with your lines and that you should be ready to perform off book relatively quickly. Today we’ll be doing our readthrough so that we all are on the same page about the direction and feel of this show. Malcom and I will be able to give you a clear idea about your characters and by tomorrow you should be ready to dive in.

“So don’t be afraid to speak up and ask questions today,” Mr. Keen urged. “I want you all to be comfortable with your roles before we start blocking and working out the staging. Thank you all for your hard work and let’s get started.”

Adam swallowed the piece of melon he’d been chewing on and opened his script. Time to get to work.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

With the end of the semester on the horizon, the students of NYADA began to work themselves into their usual early winter tizzy. There were written tests to sit for and mid-winter critiques and evaluations to endure. Days were spent in brutal practices to make sure that their skills were up to the high standards demanded or studying the finer elements of the lessons that their professors had been trying to impart on them for the better part of a semester.

The invites for the Winter Showcase were distributed and if Kurt held any real disappointment that he did not get an invite this year, it was certainly tempered by the fact of just how busy he was. With all his classes and exams he had to prepare for, plus the rehearsal schedule for Les Miz, he was rather grateful to not have another demand placed on his already strained schedule. Even Rachel had merely shrugged at not getting an invite and put her focus on preparing for her dance critique since that was still her weakest area.

The upper classmen were fortunate in some ways, Kurt considered. Despite the heavy burden of work that they had to shoulder as the semester wound down and the elevated expectations of them, he and his classmates already knew what was expected of them and had already shown that they could rise to the occasion. For the freshmen, however, it was a harsh reminder of just what they had let themselves in for by pursuing an education at this particular conservatory. It wasn’t unusual to see one of the younger students running out of a classroom in tears because they were so completely overwhelmed by what was demanded of them.

Which was the reason that he found himself in the Starbucks near school one afternoon after his last class, plying a freshman with hot chocolate and cookies and trying to help her regain her lost composure. Meredith Calvanico was a rarity in Kurt’s estimation. A voice and theater major like himself who had not been put off by the relatively low reputation of the Apples and found in their group a respite from the intense pressure that everyone at NYADA endured. She was talented, but very level-headed and didn’t use her talents to look down on others. Kurt very much appreciated her down to earth nature.

She’d been nicknamed “Merry” by the older Apples an account of her perpetually cheerful disposition and her deep love of all things Tolkien, but she wasn’t living up to her nickname at the moment. The young woman was rather distraught at how she felt her voice critique had gone and knowing Madam Tibideaux the way he’d come to, he doubted that their professor left any doubt as to her opinion of Merry’s efforts.

“I just don’t know what I’m doing wrong,” she said morosely, clutching her cup in both hands as if to comfort herself. “I’m doing everything that she’s told me to do all semester but it doesn’t seem to be working.”

“I’m sure it can’t be that bad,” Kurt said smoothly, sipping at his coffee. He was quite aware of how melodramatic theater students tended to be and it was easy to blow even the most constructive criticism well out of proportion. He certainly was guilty of that on more than a few occasions. “I know that she can be really harsh, but she’s always looking to help us be better performers.”

Merry looked up at Kurt with tears in her dark eyes. “She told me that I was wasting my time and hers. I don’t think that there’s a whole lot of room for creative interpretation there.”
Kurt was well versed in handling Rachel when she got into moods like this and had a pretty good
idea of how to help Merry cut through her own hurt to see what was really going on. “What exactly
did she say?” he asked kindly, knowing that the young girl very much needed to recognize what she
was really being told behind the harshly worded critique. “What were you singing?”

Merry sighed and took a moment to think back. “I did ‘Always a Bridesmaid’,” she said. “I’d done it
before in high school and it was always received well. I tend to better with character roles since I’m
not your traditional lead type.”

Kurt frowned slightly at that self-assessment. It was true that Merry wasn’t conventionally beautiful.
She was tall and gangly with a long, solemn face and tended to dress in jeans and hooded sweatshirts
that wouldn’t have looked out of place in Finn’s wardrobe. She would benefit from a bit of makeup
and having her dark blond hair styled in a more flattering manner than the scraggy ponytail she
tended to wear it in, but he hadn’t managed to figure out a way to suggest the possibility of a
makeover without insulting her. With her height and severe features, she could be a striking presence
and she had a gorgeous contralto voice that would lend itself easily to a wide range of roles, both
lead and supporting.

“So I did my solo and I thought I did it really well,” Merry insisted. “But Madam Tibideaux ripped
into everything. She didn’t like my choice of song or my demeanor or anything. And that if I want to
content myself at being nothing more than a second-tier player, there’s no need for me to attend a
place like NYADA.”

The young girl looked down in her cup, completely dejected. “Maybe I’m not cut out to be here,”
she said despondently. “I was shocked that I even got admitted. I mean, it was crazy that I even
applied since It’s not like I ever got leads in high school so maybe they made a mistake.”

Kurt didn’t think so, but he kept that thought to himself for a moment as he considered what Merry
had told him. It seemed that Merry’s experiences mirrored his own in some ways; stuck in supporting
roles and never given the opportunity to shine on their own before arriving at NYADA. But whereas
he had started to discover his real worth as a performer with his trial by fire audition, Merry still
apparently saw herself as being only worthy of supporting roles.

Come to think of it, Kurt couldn’t remember her ever trying to take the lead during an Apples
number. At first he’d thought it was because she was new and because their rehearsals had been so
infrequent the past few weeks. Now he was starting to think there was a more significant reason.

“Merry, I think I get what Madam Tibideaux is driving at,” he proposed. “I know that she can sound
really brutal, but you really need to pay attention to what she’s trying to tell you. I don’t think that
she wasn’t saying that you don’t deserve to be at NYADA. She was saying just the opposite.”

Merry blinked back her tears. “What do you mean?” she asked. “I thought that she was pretty clear. I
totally suck.”

Kurt offered her a reassuring smile. “One thing I learned here is that you need to have a really thick
skin, and be able to take criticism with a clear mind otherwise you’ll never survive. Are you taking
dance with Ms. July?”

Merry’s nose wrinkled in distaste. “She calls me Olive Oyl.”

Kurt couldn’t help from chuckling sympathetically. “That’s not too bad. My nickname isn’t a whole
lot better,” he confided. “But what does she say about your actual dancing?”

Merry shrugged offhandedly. “She’s harsh on everyone. I get complaints about my posture and
balance mostly, and the fact that I’m so tall that it’s hard to find someone to partner me. Otherwise it’s a lot of nitpicking.”

Kurt nodded approvingly. “That’s good. She’ll always be extra critical about form, but if she’s not going on about you working hard and not picking up things quickly enough then you’re really doing well,” he explained. “Who she goes after the hardest are the people who don’t give her the effort regardless of their talent levels. You can be the best dancer in the world, but if you’re just coasting along she’ll happily gut you and leave you bleeding on the floor.

“Madam Tibideaux is the same in some ways, although she’s a bit more refined in how she does it,” he advised. “When I was struggling to see why I deserved to be at NYADA, she gave me a bit of tough love and explained that she picks students on the basis of the potential for growth she sees in them. Not necessarily because they were big stars in their old schools. It didn’t matter what I was before. All that mattered was that I was fulfilling her expectations and becoming what she thought I could be.”

Merry blinked in surprise at his confession. “I can’t imagine you not being a big star before NYADA,” she said softly. “When I saw you at the showcase when we were auditioning… you were amazing.”

Kurt smiled at her gently. “I was the strange gay kid with a high-pitched voice and no real formal training,” he explained. “My old show choir leader didn’t seem to know what to do with me most of the time and apparently couldn’t imagine me as a soloist. He worked out that I sounded great when I was singing with the girls, or when he wanted a brighter tone with the boys. But every time we had a show or a competition, I was in the background. That doesn’t do much for your confidence, especially when my first attempt to get into NYADA was rejected.”

Merry was silent for a few moments as she absorbed what she was being told. “I wouldn’t have thought that,” she insisted. “You’ve always struck me as being so self-assured.”

Kurt nodded. “I’m learning to be,” he corrected. Those lessons had not come easy and he wasn’t ashamed to admit, at least to himself, that he still struggled at times.

“I’m not going to lie… it’s not easy,” he admitted. “I’ve always felt like I had to fight to get any kind of positive attention and it never amounted to anything. But I had to decide that I deserved to be in the spotlight and demand it for myself. I deserve to be here and one day, I will get the kind of roles that I’ve always dreamed of.”

Merry looked uncertain, apparently understanding what he was trying to tell her but not really accepting it. Kurt knew that he would have to turn the discussion around so that she could see what he was trying to explain from her perspective.

“Tell me… if you could be cast in any role you wanted, what would it be?” he asked, giving her a reassuring smile. “Your dream role… the kind that you have to pinch yourself if you ever got it.”

Merry’s cheeks heated, as if embarrassed with herself that she had even dared to imagine this for herself. “Evita,” she murmured, looking down at her cup to avoid his stare.

He felt a smile cross his face at her confession. “Honey, that would be such a great part of you,” Kurt insisted gently. “You would be amazing in that role.”

“Are you kidding me?” Merry demanded almost angrily, as if she thought he was mocking her. “Evita is strong and glamorous and look at me! I’m ugly and….”
“You are not ugly, Merry,” Kurt said firmly. He realized that he was dealing with some pretty serious self-esteem issues and that he needed to shift tactics if he wanted Merry to change how she was seeing things. Take the focus from what she saw as her shortcomings and move them to her strengths.

“Think about who Evita was. She came from absolutely nothing. She was nobody, but became the most powerful and admired woman in Argentina strictly by strength of will,” he reminded her.

Her eyes widened in surprise as his words began to sink in. Kurt saw the shift when what he was trying to get her to see was becoming clearer and he smiled, knowing that he got her.

“Evita never let anyone or anything stand in her way,” he said, reminding her of her favorite character’s story. “All the people who looked down on her and treated her like dirt… she made herself into what she wanted to be. She made herself an actress, then the first lady, and then an icon. All the people who mocked her? They were kissing her feet by the time she was done. Not because she was the most beautiful or the most talented, but because she was smart and driven and would not let anyone or anything stop her from getting what she wanted.

“There’s a big difference between being confident and being a prima donna,” he stated. “We have to be team players and play supporting parts at times. I mean, we both know that expecting to play every lead isn’t reasonable. But there is a big difference between taking a supporting role because we know that’s the best way we can help a production and not going after a lead because we don’t think that we’re good enough. Because if we don’t believe in ourselves, no one else is going to.”

Merry looked at him carefully, mentally weighing out his words. “You really think so?” she asked.

“I know so,” he insisted. “Madam Tibideaux knows that you have it in you to be that kind of performer, which is why she’s being so hard on you. She wants you to fulfill the potential that she saw in you.”

Merry considered what he had told her, pursing her lips thoughtfully. “How do you think I can do that?”

Kurt reached out to squeeze her hand reassuringly. “I think that for your next critique, you should walk in there and sing ‘Buenos Aires’ and ‘Rainbow High’. Find Evita’s strength and drive and make it your own. And start showing Madam Tibideaux that she wasn’t wrong about you.”

The young womaninhale deeply before nodding, a slight smile starting to ease the harsh lines of her features. She really would grow into a remarkably handsome woman once she fully matured, Kurt considered. She just needed a little help to smooth the way.

“I’ll think about it,” she promised. Her brown eyes sparked with a hint of mischief as she looked at the young man who was very much her mentor in these things.

“That’s all I can ask, though I’m going to be very disappointed if you chicken out,” Kurt chuckled as he finished his coffee. His phone chimed for his attention with the tune that indicated a text message from Adam.

“Excuse me,” he requested politely as he keyed in his access code. Seeing the message brought a fond smile to his face and he quickly typed an answer before turning his attention back to Merry, who was giving him a teasing smile.

“Adam?” she guessed, giggling at the flush that colored his cheeks becomingly. At his nod, she took a last bite of cookie and got up from her seat. “I’ll take that as my cue to leave since you obviously
have something else to take care of. But thanks… I really will think about what you said.”

“If you need to talk, you have my number,” he reminded Merry. “Don’t be afraid to use it.”

“I won’t,” she promised. “And I’d better head out to do some practice for my dance practical. Since apparently I’m on Ms. July’s good side and I don’t want to waste that.”

Kurt couldn’t help from laughing. “That’s a very wise thing,” he agreed, thinking back to his own critique that morning. Having Ms. July’s favor was definitely something he wanted to hang on to.

* * *

Adam looked at the laughing men around him, smiling fondly at Ifan’s ribald joke and the way Logan blushed furiously at the teasing regarding the questionable charms, not to mention virtue, of his sweetheart back home. The jokes had taken on a rather morbid tone as the wait for the final orders was coming to an end. The odds were that Logan would never see his girl again, and none of them would see their families. But they had their duty to fulfill.

They heard the whistles and orders for men to line up on the recording of the background noises playing and Adam sighed, knowing that he needed to be strong for them. Swallowing down his own fear, he got to his feet.

“All right lads, let’s get ready,” he ordered gently. The group fell silent as the moment that they’d dreaded had finally arrived. They hurried to put aside their cups and plates and gathered up their rifles, falling into formation.

“Fix bayonets,” he commanded, his voice becoming firmer as he took on his responsibility as their officer.

Adam walked by, making a quick inspection to make sure that they were ready for what faced them. He checked Conrad’s rifle, giving him an exasperated glare at seeing that his bayonet was fastened upside down.

“Billington, at the rate you’re going, I’m afraid that the only German you’re likely to kill is one that died of typhus three weeks ago,” he said archly, fixing the weapon and handing it back to the young man. Given that he had been giving the young man sardonic comments like this throughout the play, it was likely to get a laugh from the audience.

But Adam tempered the moment by giving the youngest of them a reassuring clap on the shoulder to remind him that he was among friends. It was a reminder of what they all would be facing very shortly. Ifan gave him a terse smile and Logan just nodded as Adam took his place at the head of the line. As their leader, he would be the first to face the line of fire.

“It’s been good to serve with you, sir,” Logan said softly, not bothering to look at his friend least he lose what composure he was managing to hang on to. The men needed them to be strong. “Good luck up there.”

Adam reached over to grasp his arm, taking comfort that the man he’d come to trust beyond all others would be at his side. “I’ll see you up top, lad,” he promised solemnly as they waited for the final order.

Drawing his sidearm, he tucked his baton under his arm and placed the whistle placed it to his lips and he waited for the final signal. At hearing the shouts and whistles being blown, he blew it loud and piercingly. The men behind him roared as they surged forward, weapons at the ready. They froze in place at the cue where the stage lights would go dark, holding their pose until their director...
clapped his hands and called a halt.

Mr. Keen looked them over before giving a nod of satisfaction. “All right, everyone. I think that’s enough for today,” he granted. He looked over the group and nodded approvingly. “That was excellent and I think that it’s really coming together now. Really… good work everyone!”

“Now tomorrow I want everyone to put their books away. No more falling back on them for reference.”

Adam nodded in agreement, not worried about the increase in pressure that going off book would mean for the cast. They’d been working very cleanly the past few days and very rarely needed to refer to their scripts, but it was a signal that they were edging closer to their premiere date and the demands on the cast would only increase exponentially as they moved forward. By this stage of the process he was very comfortable with his part and the cast was really starting to come together as a cohesive unit. It was time to start fine tuning the staging and character interpretations. Mr. Keen was giving them a good amount of room for them to develop their characters and Adam had some very clear ideas that he wanted to try out for Lieutenant William Strictland.

“Hey Adam… some of the guys were talking about grabbing a pint or two once we get out of here,” Logan confided as they prepared to close rehearsal for the day.

Adam couldn’t help from smiling at his fellow Brit, enjoying the sound of the familiar accent though the actor playing his Sergent was a Liverpool native in contrast to his more London-tinged cadence. “That sounds like a great idea,” he said agreeably. “Let me just check Kurt’s schedule to see what time he’s getting out.”

He checked his calendar where he’d carefully charted out Kurt’s classes and rehearsals to maximize the amount of time that they were able to spend together. The younger man was busy right now with winter critiques on top of his rehearsals and Adam didn’t want to miss out on a moment that he was able to spend with his boyfriend. He was rather pleased when he noted that this would not be one of Kurt’s late nights, but Kurt had his winter dance critique that morning so he might need a bit of comforting.

“Sorry, but Kurt’s free this evening,” he advised with sincere regret. While he enjoyed spending time with his castmates, there was nothing to keep him from Kurt.

“Oh, come on Adam,” Ifan, the sole Welshman in the cast complained. “You skipped out on the last two times.”

“I’m sorry, but I really should head home,” Adam insisted, wanting to hold firm. He enjoyed socializing with the other men in the cast, but his time with Kurt was so limited before they left to start the tour. He didn’t want to miss a single hour of time he could spend with him.

Several of the others made groaning noises and Adam knew that it was noticed that he wasn’t spending enough time outside of work with his castmates. He knew very well that the bonding time they spend outside of the rehearsal room was important given that they would be living in one another’s back pockets for the next few months, but he couldn’t just ditch Kurt on one of the evenings that they had together.

“Why don’t you have Kurt meet us there?” Logan suggested. “We’re not going to make it a late night.”

“That’s a good idea,” Ifan agreed. “Go on… let him know to meet us at St. Andrews.”
“Don’t be a baby,” Niall, the other English ex-pat in the cast insisted. “My wife’s going to meet us there too. It’s about time you stopped hiding him from us.”

Morgan Fanelli, the oldest member of the cast chimed in, “We promise that we’ll be on our best behavior and won’t scare him off.”

Laughing and knowing that he was beaten, Adam got out his phone and texted Kurt.

Am being kidnapped. Want to meet at St Andrews for a pint and ransom me?

As they were getting their coats on, his phone pinged and he checked for Kurt’s answer.

Sounds like fun. You’re buying.

Relieved that his lover wasn’t put out that their plans for a quiet evening was now going to be drinks and possibly dinner at the pub, treating Kurt was the very least that he could do. His boyfriend had been working so hard lately that Adam felt a bit badly at having so much more free time. While it was nice to be flexible enough to take advantage of Kurt’s rare free time, it was showing rather starkly the shift in going from being a student to a working actor in a show.

“He’ll meet us there,” Adam informed the others, who gave a bit of a cheer that their castmate would not be ditching them yet again. “And I’m sorry… I didn’t realize that I missed so many times.”

“It’s okay,” Niall insisted, patting Adam on the shoulder. “Cynthia’s been a marvelously good sport, but if I leave her home too often, I might not have a wife to come back to when we’re done.”

“That’s why I’m staying single,” Conrad, the youngest in the cast claimed. “No worries about leaving someone at home and I can take advantage of all the hot girls on the road.”

Logan burst out laughing at the kid’s assumption about what life in the tour might entail. “Oh, like you’re going to have a lot of time or energy to get laid that often,” he claimed. “You can tell this is going to be your first time in a touring show.”

Adam couldn’t help laughing, because it was true. Most of the time, actors in touring productions had to amuse themselves and dating between cast members wasn’t at all unusual simply because they didn’t have the time to explore other options. So long as they remained friendly even when the relationship ended, it was a lot more convenient than trying to hook up in whatever town or city they were visiting. But a straight boy like Conrad in a cast of only male players would find his options very limited.

Conrad was Kurt’s age, but he couldn’t help from feeling that Kurt was miles ahead of him as far as maturity went. He was nice enough, Adam supposed though there was no telling how Conrad would handle the realities of life on the road. Having someone to miss and come home to made the hardships worthwhile, in his estimation. He wanted to have someone to look forward to when this job was done.

They arrived at the pub, which had become their regular hang out joint since rehearsals started. Adam ordered a pint for himself and kept an eye on the door for Kurt. The conversation was easy going as they chatted about how rehearsals were progressing and their preparations for the tour. Adam was already acquainted with Niall’s wife as she had joined them on several occasions before.

He was looking forward to Kurt meeting the rest of the cast and having a chance to showing off his boyfriend a bit. The others would probably give Kurt a bit of light teasing, but he wasn’t at all worried about Kurt not being able to hold his own with the group. Kurt had always been able to give as good as he got and the men that he worked with were a good-natured lot. They wouldn’t take
Kurt arrived about a half hour after they did, looking tired but still beautiful to Adam. He swept Kurt up into his arms and gave him a warm hug. “How did it go, love?” he asked.

“Brutal,” Kurt admitted. “I need a drink desperately. What are you having?”

“Cider. It’s quite good.”

“That sounds perfect. Can you get me a glass?”

“Right away, love.”

Once Kurt had a pint in his hand and had a chance to refresh himself a bit, Adam introduced him to the other members of his cast and felt a touch of pride at the admiring glances Kurt was getting from a few of the others. Adam knew that he wasn’t the only gay or bi man in their group and he couldn’t help from preening inwardly when he saw the nods of approval and admiration that he had managed to catch someone so spectacular.

Niall’s wife quickly took possession of Kurt’s arm and drew him aside. “It’s nice to finally meet you,” she said sincerely. “I’m glad that I’m not the only plus one anymore.”

“It’s nice to meet you too. Adam’s told me a lot about the cast and I was surprised that one of them was actually married,” he chuckled, taking the barstool next to her. She was a pretty woman a few years his senior, and her auburn hair cut in a very smart pixie style that made her blue eyes look absolutely huge in her delicate heart-shaped face.

“And technically I suppose you can consider us newlyweds,” she chuckled, sipping at her ale. “We’ll actually be celebrating our first anniversary while they’re in Chicago.”

Kurt couldn’t help from wincing a bit. “Ouch,” he said sympathetically.

Cynthia just shrugged. “I knew what I was letting myself in for when we got together,” she admitted. “You don’t get involved with an actor if you prize stability.”

Kurt couldn’t argue with that assessment. He was very well aware of what his profession entailed.

Cynthia looked over to where her husband was laughing with his castmates and smiled fondly. “Neither of us expected him to have to travel so soon after our wedding, but that’s how things played out,” she said with soft resignation.

Kurt’s eyes softened in understanding. “We’re in the same boat,” he confided. “We just moved in together a few months ago.”

“Then I’m very glad to meet you,” Cynthia said sincerely. “I’m going to need someone to help keep my sanity while they’re away. And someone who understands what I’m going through.”

“Me too,” Kurt admitted. He put on a cheerful face in front of his friends but having someone who really would understand being separated from the one he loved. As much as he knew that he could depend on them, this wasn’t something that they really could understand. Finn freed Rachel before she came to New York, so they technically weren’t a couple when they broke up for good, and Santana had already broken up with Brittany when she left for college. Neither of them knew what it was like to try to maintain a relationship over distance the way he’d had.

He was fortunate, he realized. He had so many friends now, more than he could ever remember
Old friends and new would give him the support that he needed. But catching a loving glance from bright blue eyes as Adam turned his gaze to him while laughing at a joke made by one of his castmates just reminded Kurt that the one that he wanted most would be leaving him before too long.

But not permanently, he told himself with a smile as he sipped his cider. Not forever. He could have forever to look forward to when Adam got home.

* * *

Adam sighed as he looked about the flat. The usual clutter that was the natural result two grown men trying to live in a space that was genuinely too small for them and all of their possessions was markedly reduced over the past few weeks as he and Kurt began the process of packing up the studio. A process that had started slowly was now picking up speed with only a few short weeks before Adam was to leave for the start of his show and Kurt moving into the NYADA dorms.

Even with Christmas fast approaching, they’d done almost no decorating. Last year Adam had squeezed in a tree that was far too large for his tiny flat, and had strung up lights and decorations on every surface that he could manage. This year, the decorations were minimal, and nearly an afterthought. The tree they’d purchased was barely a meter tall, bedecked simply with a few cherished ornaments and strings of popcorn and cranberries. It was a trifle depressing.

Adam had packed away much of his clothing into their storage unit since he wouldn’t need most of it until he returned to New York. If he needed anything, he could always buy it on the road. The bookcase was empty now save for Kurt’s text books and the bust of Shakespeare that Kurt had claimed for himself.

I’ll need something to decorate my room with.

Over the past few days, Kurt had been laying claim to several select things for his dorm room to make it a bit homier. To fill it with reminders of the time they’d shared in this little flat and the time they would be enjoying in the future. He wanted the oversized fleece blanket that they liked to snuggle in while watching television together. The battered throw pillows that had been the victims of several playful pillow fights between them. The poster from the Globe Theater that had decorated Adam’s childhood bedroom.

Kurt was sporting one of his beanies at the moment, a red cap with a white band around its hem. He looked absolutely adorable as he sorted through the box of Adam’s hats, picking out a few that he wanted to keep with him.

“I want this one too,” he claimed, pulling out a cap in navy blue wool. He fingered the fabric gently, a soft smile on his face.

“You were wearing this one the day I met you,” he said with fond remembrance. “I thought that you were so handsome and I couldn’t quite figure how why this gorgeous man was trying chat me up.”

Adam smiled and sat down on the couch next to him, gently grasping the hand that clutched that silly cap. “I actually wasn’t wearing this the first time I saw you,” he corrected with a teasing glint in his eyes. “I wasn’t wearing a hat because I was dressed in my best suit and sitting in the audience at Winter Showcase, watching the most beautiful man I’d ever seen singing his heart out. And I spent weeks afterward trying to figure out how to meet you.”

Kurt smiled, nestling so closely that they could have been wearing the same shirt. “It all worked out
in the end, didn’t it?” he asked. “I got NYADA and I got you.”

“I’m the fortunate one,” Adam insisted, his hand reaching up to cup the back of Kurt’s head and draw their mouths together for a lingering kiss. “I’m so glad that I worked up the courage to talk to you.”

Kurt grinned, settling happily in Adam’s arms. “I like to think we would have found each other somehow. I would have been rushing to class one day and not looking where I was going…”

“And I would have my nose in a book, oblivious to the world,” Adam added, rubbing his cheek against Kurt’s hair.

“We would have bumped into each other and I would have been stammering and embarrassed as hell,” Kurt insisted, savoring the feel of the muscular arms holding him close.

“I would have been absolutely entranced, wondering how I could not have known such a gorgeous man was attending the same school I was,” Adam swore. “And I would have asked you out right then and there and not taken no for an answer.”

Kurt craned his head about to look at Adam. “Why didn’t you just ask me out?” he asked curiously. “Why go through the whole song and dance with the Apples?”

Adam’s cheeks began to flush with color, his mouth drawing up into a rueful smile. “Well, the group did need someone with your talents, but would you believe that I was nervous about approaching you?” he admitted. “You were the toast of the Showcase and probably had people throwing themselves at you all the time.”

“Not so much,” Kurt corrected gently.

“Well, you should have,” Adam claimed. “You were beautiful and talented and I was…”

“Totally amazing and you got me to follow you,” Kurt insisted. “You made me listen to that insane performance that made me laugh more than I’d laughed in months. You have no idea how much I needed that.”

“I’m glad we were able to make you smile,” Adam said happily. “You deserve to smile all the time.”

Kurt shifted so that he was straddling Adam, able to face him directly and wrapped his arms about the older man. “You have no idea how much the past year has meant for me,” he insisted, looking into Adam’s eyes. “Being with you taught me so much. I’m always so careful and deliberate and you taught me the reward in taking chances. I’m so glad that I took a chance on you… on us.”

Adam felt the lump in his throat swell a bit at the emotion and love in Kurt’s eyes. He gently pulled the cap off Kurt’s head so he could run his fingers through the younger man’s hair. “You’ve surprised me in so many ways… and made my life so full,” he claimed without reservation. “I never knew what I was missing before I saw you that night, and I don’t know how I’ll manage without you.”

Kurt leaned in to kiss him gently, taking his time to savor the taste and feel of the man beneath him. “We’ll figure it out because the reward will be getting to be together when you get back,” he said softly. “There’s no plan B for me.”

Adam smiled, his hand gently squeezing the back of Kurts neck. “For me either, love,” he promised.

Kurt spent several long seconds staring at Adam, as if committing his features to memory so that he
could hold onto them and find comfort in the months that they would be apart. The soft, sad smile on his face caused Adam’s heart to tighten in his chest, but Kurt soothed his concerns with another languid kiss.

Adam would have been content to sit there forever, holding Kurt in his arms when he heard the quiet murmur of Kurt singing very softly. Nearly humming the tune to himself, Kurt had a nearly dreamy expression on his face as he gazed at Adam.

“What are you singing there, love?” Adam asked, running his hand through Kurt’s hair.

Kurt smiled, leaning in to nuzzle Adam’s throat. “Just something that came into my head,” he explained. “It just… it fit.”

Adam looked at him lovingly, not at all surprised that Kurt found a song to suit what he could not voice himself. “Sing it to me,” he requested gently. He never tired of hearing Kurt’s glorious voice.

Kurt nodded, leaning in close so that Adam could hear him, looking as vulnerable and emotionally bare as he’s ever been in his life. Adam knew that Kurt sometimes needed the cushion of a song that would allow him to express what he could never find the words to say himself.

“Have you ever fed a lover with just your hands? Closed your eyes and trusted, just trusted? Have you ever thrown a fistful of glitter in the air? Have you ever looked fear in the face and said, ‘I just don’t care’? Have you ever hated yourself for staring at the phone? Your whole life waiting on the ring to prove you’re not alone.”

Adam knew that Kurt had every reason to be fearful over what the future held for them. He’d been hurt so many times by those who’d professed to love him that it would be entirely understandable for Kurt to be mistrusting. How many times had he allowed himself to be vulnerable only to have that trust misplaced?

Once again, Adam found himself tempted to hop onto a plane and find wherever Blaine had settled and pummel him for having caused Kurt so much pain. To be so selfish and self-absorbed that he would deliberately seek to hurt the man he promised to care for and let him think that he wasn’t deserving of being loved. That if he wanted anything for himself that he shouldn’t expect to be cared for and supported.

Kurt stroked Adam’s cheek, turning his face so that he could feel Kurt’s breath on him. “Have you ever been touched so gently you had to cry?” he all but whispered. “Have you ever invited a stranger to come inside?”

“It’s only half past the point of oblivion. The hourglass on the table, the walk before the run,” Kurt
sang, and Adam understood of just how hard it had been for Kurt to take those first steps when they got together. To accept that another man was genuinely interested in him and was attracted to him. To truly accept that Adam was in love with him. To finally feel secure enough to admit that he could love and have that love returned. His beautiful, brave darling…

Kurt’s lips brushed against Adam’s. “*The breath before the kiss, and the fear before the flames. Have you ever felt this way?*”

Adam had never felt this way before. He’d felt love, been in love but never this consuming need that caused his breath to catch in his throat. He’d never known that he could feel this way about someone, but with Kurt it was so easy.

Kurt’s eyes were shimmering with unshed tears as he gazed at Adam, a soft, sad smile on his face. “*Have you ever wished for an endless night?*” he questioned, subtly tightening his grip on Adam, least the older man slip away from him. Neither of them wanted this moment to end. “*Lassoed the moon and the stars and pulled that rope tight?*”

Adam’s hands reached up to cradle Kurt’s face, drawing him close so that their foreheads touched. His fingers caressed Kurt’s cheek, trailing down the smooth line of his throat.

“*Have you ever held your breath? And asked yourself if it ever gets better than tonight?*”

Adam looked at Kurt, holding the younger man as if he were something precious and sacred. “It will be better, sweetheart,” he promised. “I…”

His voice trailed off, not able to find the words to express what Kurt deserved to hear. But Kurt just smiled.

“I know,” he insisted softly, kissing Adam deeply. “I know.”

So much of the future was uncertain, Adam knew. But the one thing that he was sure of was that whatever was waiting for him to face, he wanted it to be with Kurt at his side. Call him a foolish romantic, but he would do everything in his power to ensure that would happen.

“Let me take you to bed,” Adam requested softly. “Let me make love to you.” He needed to show Kurt just how important he was now that they had so little time.

Kurt smiled and carefully slid from Adam’s lap, holding out his hand so the older man could guide him to their bed. With reverent hands, Adam slowly undressed Kurt, each layer of clothing slipping to the floor until Kurt stood entirely bare before him. Slipping off his own clothing, Adam eased Kurt back onto their bed, kissing him deeply. With gentle fingers he carefully eased into Kurt’s body, savoring the gasps and shudders of the man beneath him.

When he finally slipped into Kurt’s body, Kurt’s arms and legs tightened about him to hold him close. They made love slowly, with slow rolls of his hips and gentle touches. Kurt breathed into Adam’s mouth, his breath hitching when Adam pressed deep within him. When they came, it was with a groan and a sigh of contentment.

Neither of them looked at the clock by the bedside, not wanting to see the precious seconds slipping by. They just held one another, trying to make this moment last as long as possible. Maybe if they ignored the clock long enough, time might simply stop.

* * *

“Come on!” Mei called out, leading the way. Dressed in a bright red wool coat and a Santa hat on
her head, she was easy to see and made the logical choice as the Apple’s point person, least they get
separated by the throngs of tourists crowding Rockefeller Center.

The annual trip to see the Christmas Tree on the last night of finals was an Apple tradition dating
back to when Adam had first founded the group and no Apple, old or new, would think about
missing it. It was one of the rare opportunities that poor theater students had to enjoy something in
the city that didn’t cost anything. They might not have the luxury of being able to enjoy many of the
theater and holiday festivals that the city had to offer, but this was something that they could take
advantage of.

Now that they were done with finals and their winter critiques, it was the last gathering of the Apples
before the dispersed for the long winter break. And for everyone but Kurt, it was their last
opportunity for them to see Adam before he left for his tour, giving the gettogether a somewhat
bittersweet feel. They wanted to celebrate their friendships that they had built and being able to
celebrate the successes of those who were moving on in their adult lives.

The evening started with dinner at an inexpensive Vietnamese restaurant near the school, where
bowls of steaming pho prepared them to face the chilly night. Then they started their procession to
appraise the holiday department store windows and holiday lights, passionately debating the merit of
their favorites as if life depended upon it in between singing rounds of Christmas songs to an
appreciative albeit fleeting audience. By the time they finally arrived at Rockefeller Center, their feet
were sore and they were feeling the effects of the cold but none of them were in a rush for the
evening to end.

Kurt grinned and tugged on Adam’s hand, dragging him along in his wake as he nimbly dodged a
family of tourists who were too busy looking up to get out of their way. “Having fun?” he asked, his
eyes sparkling impishly as he pulled Adam along. He was impeccably turned out in his stylish pea
coat, but added a touch of whimsy by wearing a pair of reindeer antlers on his head.

“Of course, darling,” Adam laughed, letting Kurt drag him about and making sure that his Santa hat
didn’t fall off. He was more than happy to tag along while the youngsters enjoyed the holiday
festivities. They’d all been working so hard at school and now could finally let loose just a bit.

They found a precious open space where they had a clear view of the immense Norwegian Fir
bedecked with thousands of colored lights and crowned with a crystal star. Kurt felt himself grinning
and letting Adam pull him into a tight hug from behind, sharing body warmth. About them, delicate
snowflakes began to fall, dusting their hair. It was an almost picture-perfect evening.

Jill looked over to the two of them and couldn’t help from grinning. “Do you think you guys can
keep your hands off one another? Just for a little bit?” she asked teasingly.

Kurt laughed, kissing Adam quickly. “We have a little surprise for you,” he advised his boyfriend
with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

“Oh dear… am I in trouble?” Adam asked as Kurt nudged him towards a bench where he dusted off
the snow so Adam could sit.

“Not at all,” Corrine assured him, looking absolutely winsome in her patchwork coat and her red
curls peeking out from beneath her knit cap. She took Kurt’s arm and pulled him over to where the
others were standing so that Adam could see the tree behind them.

Jules cleared his throat to and gave their founder a fond smile. “Adam, the Apples wouldn’t exist if it
weren’t for you. You gave us a space where we could experiment and grow both as singers and in
our chosen fields. We became stronger and more confident because of the friendships that we made
Mei nodded in agreement. “You’re about to set out on the most amazing adventure,” she stated. “But we wanted to make sure that we sent you off properly. And that you know that you will always a part of the Apples, no matter where your career takes you.”

Mitchel grinned widely. “We love you, man,” he insisted, following by a chorus of affirmations from the rest of the group.

The men fell into formation behind the woman of the group, humming to provide the opening for the girls to begin to sing.

“I don’t want a lot for Christmas,” they crooned gently, their voices smooth and flowing. “There is just one thing I need. I don’t care about the presents underneath the Christmas tree. I just want you for my own. More than you will ever know. Make my wish come true. All I want for Christmas is you!”

Kurt took a place at the front, alongside Mei and Corrine, taking over the lead. “I don’t want a lot for Christmas,” he sang brightly, using his higher register to provide a bright counterpoint to the other men. “There is just one thing I need. And I don’t care about the presents underneath the Christmas tree.”

Mei and Corrine danced about him, their voices rising to harmonize with him. “I don’t need to hang my stocking, there upon the fireplace,” the trio sang. “Santa Claus won’t make me happy with a toy on Christmas day.”

The group then joined in, following the simple choreography that had obviously been worked out in advance and left Adam to watch, smiling like a fool. “I just want you for my own. More than you could ever know,” they caroled, the singers with lower ranges supporting the ones with higher voices. “Make my wish come true! All I want for Christmas is you!”

Adam couldn’t help from noticing that the group was gaining an audience, with tourists and sightseers gathering around to watch the free show. He clapped his hands happily, watching as his Apples spun about in the lightly falling snow.

He couldn’t help from wondering how long they’d been working on this because it clearly was too well organized and thought out, what with the deliberate choreography and the way their voices harmonized. It was entertaining and glorious and Adam laughed with delight at watching his friends perform for him.

Kurt pivoted to take the lead again, his eyes shining with love as all of the girls joined in to support him while the boys provided the lower counterpoints. “Oh, all the lights are shining, so brightly everywhere,” Kurt sang, leading off the girls who provided the bright harmonies. “And the sound of children’s laughter fills the air. And everyone is singing, I hear those sleigh bells ringing.

“Santa, won’t you bring me the one I really need?” Kurt asked, giving Mei and then Corrine a spin. “Won’t you bring my baby to me?”

The entire group then fell into full voice, focusing on Adam. “Oh, I don’t want a lot for Christmas, that’s all I’m asking for,” they sang, coming to dance around the bench where Adam was sitting. Mitchel’s curls were flying wildly and Jules looked absolute absurd raising both hands in metal devil’s horns while wearing what had to be one of the ugliest Christmas jumpers Adam had ever seen. Mei was swinging her skirts around her legs while Jill, Corrine and Tommy spun about like children in the snow. The younger singers seemed to be doing something that looked like a cross
between a Bunny Hop and the Macarana and it was insane and wonderful. At the center was Kurt, leading the group and providing an eye of calm for their chaotic storm.

“Oh, I don’t want a lot of Christmas. This is all I’m asking for,” Kurt sang, allowing the rest of the group to provide the harmonies and counterpoints. “I just want to see my baby standing right outside my door.”

The Apples gathered about Kurt, their voices falling into line. They reined in the joyous chaos and brought the focus to the man that they were singing to. “Oh, I just want you for my own, more than you will ever know! Make my wish come true…. Baby, all I want for Christmas is….

“You!” they proclaimed loudly, dancing about Adam’s bench. Kurt jumped into Adam’s lap and kissed him soundly while the group finished with a flourish of jazz hands.

The crowd that had gathered to watch the performance cheered loudly and applauded and the Apples accepted their regards with bashful aplomb. When Kurt rose from Adam’s lap and pulled him to his feet, the crowd cheered louder, clapping and whistling. A few of the Apples bowed while the others ducked away, giggling.

“Come on, you lot,” Adam commanded happily, taking on the role of the Apple’s leader for one last time. “Let’s give them something to remember us by. Something suitably Appleish.”

The group cheers and quickly huddled to pick their song, the choice bringing laughs as they fell into position and stuck exaggerated poses that earned amused chuckles from their audience who waited to see what they would do next. Adam stepped to the front with a rakish grin and placed his hands on his hips.

“Are you hanging up a stocking on your wall?” he asked the appreciative crowd. “It’s that time that every Santa has a ball!”

“Does he ride a red nosed reindeer?” Jules joined in, giving Kurt a playful and rather meaningful nudge. “Does he turn up on his sleigh? Do all the fairies keep him sober for a day?”

“So here it is, Merry Christmas!” the whole group sang. “Everybody’s having fun! Look to the future now. It’s only just begun!”

Corrine gave a twirl to the front and sang out, “Are you waiting for the family to arrive? Are you sure you got the room to spare inside?”

Kurt stepped forward, smiling impishly and looking like the elf who’d get sent to detention. “Does your granny always tell ya that the old songs are the best? Then she’s up and rock n’ rollin’ with the rest?”

Mei all but jumped into Kurt’s arms as the entire group began to dance about, leaping on and off benches to the delight of the crowd watching them. “So here it is, Merry Christmas! Everybody’s having fun! Look to the future now. It’s only just begun!”

Adam pulled Kurt away from the girls and wrapped his arm about the younger man’s shoulder to hold him close. “Are you hanging up a stocking on your wall?” they sang together, trying hard not to laugh in delight. “Are you hoping that the snow will start to fall?”

Mitchel, Jules and Tommy leaned in to join them. “Do you ride on down the hillside in a buggy you have made?” they caroled together. “When you land upon your head then you’ve been Slade.”

The entire group fell in around them, their faces bright with cheer as the audience clapped with them.
“So here it is, Merry Christmas!” they all but yelled, delighted when some of the audience began to join in. “Everybody’s having fun! Look to the future now. It’s only just begun!”

Kurt turned in Adam’s arms, looking into his eyes as the rest of their group caroused about them. “Look to the future now… it’s only just begun,” he sang softly, the meaning clear in his eyes. His cheeks were rosy from the cold and if Adam weren’t already stupid in love with him already, he would have fallen for him right there.

He nodded, blinking away the tears that suddenly tried to make an appearance. “It’s only just begun,” he promised, touching his forehead to Kurt’s and barely hearing the cheers and applause around them.

They were so lost in one another that they didn’t notice that their audience was drifting away to enjoy the other sights of Rockefeller Center. Mei finally gave them both a pat on the shoulder to get their attention.

“Come on,” she urged, giving them a playful smile. “I’m freezing and would love some hot chocolate.”

Adam took Kurt’s hand in his and felt the younger man’s chilled fingers. “I think that sounds like a wonderful idea, sweetheart, he said to Mei. “Why don’t you round up the others? Kurt and I are…”

“We’re just going to enjoy the tree for a bit more,” Kurt inserted, giving Adam a meaningful smile.

“Take all the time you need,” Tommy urged them, putting his arms about Corrine and Jill and drawing them away to give them a bit of space. The various Apples stepped back to watch the skaters on the ice rink and let their former leader and friend have their privacy.

Adam smiled and pulled Kurt under his arms and savored his presence. Together they walked the perimeter of the plaza, talking quietly and laughing at the small jokes that they made to each other. They arrived at the base of the Christmas tree, looking up at the bright lights and savoring another special moment that they would be mentally cataloging away to get them through the coming weeks.

Kurt looked up at Adam, enjoying the way the colored lights seemed to set Adam’s blond curls aglow. “We shouldn’t abandon the others for too long,” he said with playful reluctance. “And I could use something warm to drink.”

Adam bent to give him a quick kiss. “Let’s get back,” he suggested. In truth, all he wanted to do was run off with Kurt and find some private place to be together. But their friends didn’t deserve to have him sneaking off on them. And they deserved to have a little bit of time with him before he left. “We can go to that market that we saw earlier.”

“That sounds like a great idea, Kurt said agreeably. He let Adam lead him to where the other Apples were holding court and gathered up the group.

“Come on, you reprobates,” Adam commanded cheerfully, keeping Kurt under his arm comfortably. “Let’s go get something to warm us up.”

The group cheered happily and fell into step behind them, chattering cheerfully as they followed Kurt and Adam down the street. Their evening might be drawing to a close but no one was in any great rush to head home. In the coming days, most of them would be leaving for home to spend time with their families before having to face the spring semester. For now, they could laugh and play and cherish the time spent with friends. Tomorrow would take care of itself.

* * *
“I don’t know, Rachel. Let me talk to Adam about it,” Kurt all but pleaded, rubbing his eyes tiredly. Even over the phone, Rachel’s persistence was getting on his nerves. “We were planning on a quiet night together.”

“I know you were, but we really want to see him before he leaves,” Rachel insisted. “It doesn’t have to be for the whole night… we’ve already got a table reserved at Callbacks and everyone is bailing on us.”

Kurt sighed, wishing that he had the resolve to stand his ground, but he was tired from packing and feeling emotionally drained as the final countdown to Adam’s departure had official begun. Most of Kurt’s possession had already been moved into his dorm room and their apartment was looking very bare and sterile. He was doing his best to keep a cheerful demeanor around Adam and he just wasn’t up to handling Rachel’s demands at the moment.

He knew that she wasn’t going out of her way to be difficult. Most of their classmates, including Artie and Tina, had already left New York to take advantage of the school winter breaks to visit with their families. Kurt had been looking forward to having some peace before Adam left. He felt badly for being annoyed that Rachel and Santana had elected to stay in the city and had been keeping his distance the past few days so he could devote his focus on Adam and what time they had left to spend together.

“Elliot has a gig with his cabaret so he won’t be joining us, and Dani wants to go see him perform. She won’t be coming by until later,” Rachel explained patiently. “We already paid for the tickets so there’s no problem there. Come on… it’ll be a nice night out.”

“It’s an open bar,” Santana added, chiming into the call. “And dinner.”

“Please, Kurt,” Rachel beseeched.

Kurt looked over to Adam, who was folding laundry on the couch and gave his boyfriend a curious glance.

“Rachel reserved a table at Callbacks for tomorrow night,” he explained softly. “They’d like us to join the for a little while.”

Adam frowned a bit in obvious disappointment, having looked forward to a quiet night with just the two of them seeing the new year in. “I suppose it can’t hurt,” he said with a trace of reluctance. “A few hours won’t be so bad, I guess.”

Kurt smiled thankfully, grateful that his boyfriend was so willing to be flexible and allowing him to avoid offending his friends. “I’ll make it up to you,” he promised, picking up his phone again.

“All right… we’ll come for a little bit,” he said, not hiding that this was an imposition on them. “But just for a little while. We’ll have a drink or two, but then we’re leaving.”

“That’s wonderful!” Rachel cheered, forcing Kurt to pull the phone from his ear least he be deafened. “We’re going to get there around eight. See you tomorrow!”

Kurt hung up with a sigh. “I’m sorry,” he said sincerely to Adam. He hadn’t missed the disappointment in his boyfriend’s expression with the sudden change in their plans. “We don’t need to go for too long. Just an hour or two and then we can come home and spend our night the way we want to.”

Adam forced a smile onto his face, not wanting Kurt to feel badly just because he was in a bit of a snit. “It’s fine, sweetheart,” he assured his lover. “In fact, it’ll probably do us a bit of good to get out
Kurt nodded, looking about the room that was nearly bare, stripped of all the elements that had made it first Adam’s home and then his as well. Now it was just a set of rooms that they were sleeping in. A basic hotel would offer more warmth than their apartment did at the moment.

There was no question that the two of them had been isolating themselves somewhat. Partly because so many of their friends had left for the holidays, but it was also by their own preference. With just a few days left to spend together, they were determined to squeeze out every second that they could. Shutting out their friends was an understandable but unintended result.

Kurt nodded, letting Adam pull him into a warm hug. He wanted to focus on the feeling of the strong arms wrapped around him and not how little time they really had left.

“It’ll be fun, darling,” Adam insisted, a bit more joy in his voice now that their plans were confirmed. “I’m rather looking forward ot it now.”

Kurt smiled, turning his head so that he could kiss the nearest body part of Adam’s, which turned out to be his forearm. “Me too.”

Admittedly, as reluctant as he’d been Kurt felt much better about things as he dressed for their night out. It was probably a good thing to be socializing and getting out, Kurt considered, and not just sitting at home feeling maudlin. He’d found something stylish enough for the evening that he hadn’t packed away yet and got himself showered and shaved so that he was fit to be seen in public.

Adam’s wardrobe was very limited since nearly everything he had was either in storage or packed in suitcases for his travels, but he had a suit that he had packed for press appearances and any formal events that might come up while he was on his tour. Kurt had always liked how Ada looked in the charcoal grey pinstripe that was saved from being too severe for the occasion by the absence of a tie and the red shirt he wore with it.

“You look so handsome,” Kurt mused, reaching out to fix Adam’s pocket square.

“And you are gorgeous,” Adam assured Kurt with a smile. He took the younger man’s hand in his, giving it a reassuring squeeze. “It’s funny, but would you believe that I’m actually glad that we’re doing this?”

Kurt cocked an eyebrow curiously. “You are?”

Adam smiled ruefully and nodded. “I know we just wanted to spent tonight together, but I think that going out is going to be good for us.”

“I’m starting to think so too,” Kurt agreed. He realized that he very much needed the distraction that going out might provide, otherwise he would probably be in tears long before midnight. He needed a little bit of time to think about something else and to actually enjoy the time they had left. Adam didn’t deserve to have him being a weepy mess all the time.

Callbacks was already very crowded by the time they arrived, filled to capacity with happy couples and groups looking forward to a wonderful evening. Adam brought their coats to the check room while Kurt scanned the packed club for Rachel and Santana. With so many people laughing and drinking, spotting the two girls was going to be a challenge. Getting out his phone, he sent Rachel a quick text to let her know they’d arrived and to find out where their table was. She quickly responded that she would come get them.

Adam returned and placed his hand gently on Kurt’s arm. “Any sign of them?” he asked.
Kurt shook his head. “No, but Rachel should be here in a second.” He held up his phone meaningfully.

Adam grinned broadly. “You are so clever,” he praised, giving his lover a gentle peck on the cheek. “If it had been up to me, we’d have been wandering about like two idiots until we’d wasted the whole night.”

“Which is why we leave finding my crazy friends to me,” Kurt teased.

Rachel made her way to them, carefully pushing her way through the crowd before rushing up to throw her arms about Kurt. Despite his previous irritation with her demands, Kurt pulled her into a hug and was admittedly glad to see her.

“I’m so glad we convinced you two to come out of hiding!” she exclaimed as she took both of them in tow. The young woman looked absolutely stunning in her ruby red dress, her hair pinned up into a neat chignon.

Kurt felt himself smiling and for the first time in a few days, it didn’t feel at all forced. “I’ll admit it,” he acquiesced graciously. “We both needed to get out for a little bit.”

Adam nodded in agreement, waving to Santana when the other girl came into view. “Yes, we did,” he agreed, looking more relaxed than Kurt had seen him in the past few days. It was clear that Adam needed this outing as much as Kurt did.

The girls had managed to get a table where they would have a good view of the stage and just far enough from where the buffet was set up so that they wouldn’t be disturbed by other celebrating attendees. Kurt was pleased to see that rather than the usual single piano, there was a jazz quartette playing that night.

Rachel saw that the musicians had sparked Kurt’s interest and nodded enthusiastically. “I know…it’s going to be nice to have some proper accompaniment,” she claimed. She gave him an arch stare. “You are planning to sing, aren’t you?”

Before Kurt could answer, Santana gave them a knowing smirk. “Well… look who finally came up for air,” she teased.

Adam smiled at her fondly. “Hello, gorgeous,” he greeted, admiring the way the silver beaded dress showcased her figure and complexion. “And I do apologize for keeping Kurt from you.”

Santana snorted indignantly. “Oh sure,” she mocked playfully. “I mean, what would Hummel rather be doing? Hanging out and listening to our latest dramas, or getting banged like a screen door in a hurricane?”

Kurt felt his cheeks burning since he couldn’t actually deny that he and Adam had been having a lot more sex lately. “We’re not just having sex,” he grumbled, tempted to shove a napkin into Santana’s mouth.

The young woman barked out a laugh. “Oh please… like you’re not riding Adam like a Kentucky Derby longshot every chance you get.”

Adam couldn’t help from laughing, his cheeks bright red because just a few hours ago, Kurt had been doing just that. “How about I get us something to drink? Red wine for you, sweetheart?”

“Yes, and cyanide for La Chupacabra here,” Kurt answered, giving Santana a sour look. He did not drag himself out of their bed for this kind of abuse. Adam just chuckled and gave Kurt a quick kiss.
“Before heading for the bar.”

“Santana, be nice,” Rachel admonished with a sly twinkle in her dark eyes.

Kurt looked at her in surprise, pleased that she recognized just how difficult this whole thing was for him to deal with. “Thank you, Rachel,” he said sincerely.

“After all, we know that Kurt doesn’t bottom all the time,” Rachel added with a giggle.

Kurt turned a surprised and irritated glare to her, ready to give her a sharp retort when Adam returned. The older man handed him his glass of wine and took the chair next to him.

“Everything all right, sweetheart?” he asked, seeing that Kurt’s hackles were up.

“Just Rachel and Santana being Rachel and Santana,” Kurt answered, giving the girls an annoyed stare. The two of them just laughed, enjoying their moment of teasing their old friend.

“Berry, did you ever think that we’d get to tease Hummel here about his exceedingly active sex life?” Santana asked, sipping at her cocktail. “Whatever happened to our sweet little baby gay?”

“Do I really need to go into the details?” Kurt asked ironically, arching a perfectly groomed eyebrow. “We’re not kids anymore.”

“We know,” Rachel said soothingly, patting her friend’s hand. “We just wanted to keep things as normal as possible. I mean, it’s not like we don’t joke about on another’s personal lives all the time.”

Kurt’s gaze softened and he took a sip of his wine. He couldn’t deny that he had certainly given both of them just as much ribbing about their love lives as they’d given him. He knew that he was being a bit oversensitive and forced himself to relax, recognizing that they weren’t being malicious.

And to be honest, he really needed that bit of normalcy right now. It was a good thing that they weren’t treating him with kid gloves or expecting him to start crying at the drop of a hat. Getting out tonight probably was going to do both Adam and he a great deal of good. More good than sitting home in a nearly empty apartment and dwelling what the next few days would hold.

“It’s okay,” he granted, giving both of them a reassuring smile. “And I do appreciate you two dragging us out tonight.”

Rachel smiled and reached out to take her friend’s hand. “I’m glad. We really do want to spend some time with both of you.”

“Yeah, Hummel,” Santana added. “No fair of you keeping Rob Roy here from us.”

“Rob Roy was Scottish,” Kurt corrected.

“I do have some Scot in me, love,” Adam inserted. “On my dad’s side.”

Kurt’s eyes brightened. “Does that mean I’ll get to see you in a kilt again someday? Because your legs…”

Santana rolled her eyes dramatically. “Oh God… they’re getting all moony on us again. Let’s get something to eat before I totally lose my appetite.”

The buffet was better than expected, with a nice assortment of hot and cold offerings and the four of them relaxed into the evening, laughing and talking about anything other than Adam’s imminent departure. Kurt felt it easier to focus on the festive atmosphere and the pleasure of having several of
those that he was closest to close at hand. He let himself relax and enjoy the wine, music and company, the moment that he was dreading not seeming so ominous at the moment. And he no longer felt the urge to rush out quite so fast.

It was always a pleasure to listen to the various people who braved facing the audience to perform. It was always easy to pick out the trained performers, but Kurt enjoyed seeing average people giving it their best as well. It was worth the pitchy parts and cracked notes to see the absolute joy on someone’s face as they sang a favorite to the cheers of their friends and loved ones.

When a young man who gave an imperfect but passionate performance to his girlfriend finished his song, Rachel grabbed Kurt’s hand and pulled him to his feet. “Come on!” she urged playfully. “We haven’t sung together in ages.”

Kurt just smiled tolerantly and followed her up to the musicians.

Adam watched the pair with amusement as the musicians began to play the opening notes of one of Rachel’s favorite duets. Listening to the two of them sing together was always a pleasure and he never thought that they sounded so well together as they did now. They had chosen to sing “Let’s Call The Whole Thing Off” in a way that was playful and joyous and very fitting with the celebration and he was content to sit back and watch them having their fun with the light hearted performance. It was nice to see them just singing for the sheer enjoyment of it and Kurt looked relaxed and happy.

Santana leaned over to him, her slender hand touching his. “How is he holding up?” she asked quietly so that she wouldn’t disturb the other party goers.

Adam considered the question carefully before answering. “There are good days and not so good days,” he said, not wanting to give her a blithe answer. She would see right through that. “We’re managing as best we can.”

She nodded, turning he gaze to her friend who looked pretty happy at the moment. But then, Kurt was always happiest when singing. Or with Adam, she realized.

“I just wanted to let you know that I’ll be there for him,” she promised. “I’ll make sure he takes care of himself and doesn’t just do school and get all boring.”

Adam smiled appreciatively, squeezing her hand. For someone with such an acid tongue, Santana really did care about the few that she allowed behind her walls. “Thank you,” he said sincerely. “I know that you and Rachel will watch out for him. That does put my mind at ease a great deal.”

“Well, just make sure that you don’t do something stupid the way the Grease Stain did,” she warned only partly playfully. “Because if Hummel doesn’t gut you, I will.”

He looked at her, seeing the spark in her eye that warned that she was serious. It wasn’t a threat; it was a promise of what she would do if he even thought of betraying Kurt. And it gratified Adam that Kurt had people around him that were so protective of him.

“That won’t ever happen,” he promised sincerely. “I haven’t even looked at another man since I met Kurt. He’s it for me.”

“Just so long as we understand one another,” she granted with a smile that was all sharp teeth.

Adam chuckled at how Santana had to cloak her love for her friends with a predator’s threats. She was definitely someone that he didn’t want to cross, because she would destroy him and not lose a second’s sleep.
Kurt and Rachel finished to appreciative applause and returned to their table all smiles and laughs. Adam got up to hold out Rachel’s chair like a gentleman so she could sit.

“That was wonderful, you two,” he complimented, kissing Kurt on the cheek. “Did you have fun, darling?”

Kurt nodded, his eyes shining with the pleasure that he always found with performing. “I did,” he admitted.

Adam motioned to Kurt to sit down. “I’ll be back in just a minute,” he assured the younger man. “Wait here for me.” Kissing Kurt again, he hurried over to the band before someone else could jump in ahead of him and spoil what he had in mind.

Once he conferred with the band and they’d agreed on the arrangement, Adam took his place at the microphone. “Good evening all,” he said carefully. “I thank you in advance for your indulgence, because this is a very important night for me and someone very special. Sometimes you can never find the right words to say what you really feel, so I hope that he understands just what he means to me.”

Nodding to the musicians, the pianist began to play softly. Adam inhaled deeply, steadying his nerves and closing his eyes to center himself. He hoped that Kurt would grasp what he was trying to express. He wasn’t as gifted a singer as Kurt was, but Kurt deserved his best effort.

“I sit and wait,” he sang softly. “Does an angel contemplate my fate? And do they know? The places we go when we’re grey and old? ‘Cos I have been told that salvation lets their wings unfold.

“So when I’m lying in my bed, thoughts running through my head…. And I feel that love is dead…. I’m loving angels instead.”

Adam knew that he couldn’t avoid hurting Kurt. This separation was going to be difficult and painful for the both of them, and he knew that there would be moments when both of them might ask if it was worth it. He wanted Kurt to see that he was determined to see this through.

“And through it all, he offers me protection,” Adam proclaimed, wanting the world to see how much Kurt had brought into his life. “A lot of love and affection, whether I’m right or wrong.”

Kurt had stood at his side when Adam had been questioning his future, giving him love and support and keeping him focused on building their future. He knew that he wasn’t the strongest person in the world and the unwavering support from Kurt over the past months had done more than anything else to keep his spirit from failing.

He looked to Kurt, hoping that the younger man understood how much he meant to Adam. “And down the waterfall… wherever it may take me, I know that life won’t break me;” Adam affirmed confidently. He knew that he could shoulder any hardship so long as Kurt was at his side. “When I come to call, he won’t forsake me. I’m loving angels instead.”

There were times when Kurt did sometimes seem too good to be true, with his generous heart and brilliant spirit. And Adam wondered what he’d done in this or any past life to deserve having such a remarkable creature gracing his life.

“When I’m feeling weak, and my pain walks down a one way street,” Adam sang, thinking back to the past months. The worries that he had about his future had been so difficult to move past and he couldn’t help from wondering if he would have just given up if Kurt had not been there to encourage him. “I look above, and I know I’ll always be blessed with love.
“And as the feeling grows… he breathes flesh to my bones. And when love is dead, I’m loving angels instead.”

Kurt made him want to be a better man. A stronger person, and to build the kind of life that Kurt deserved. He would work hard to be successful and be the kind of partner that Kurt needed him to be. He wanted to build a life with Kurt, to have the privilege of watching him mature and grow. To see him complain about the fine lines that would appear about his eyes and the grey that would touch his temples. He wanted it all.

Adam smiled at his lover and saw the tears that Kurt was fighting back. Kurt felt so much and so deeply and expressed it with every fiber of his being. His beautiful boy would learn that he had nothing to fear when it came to Adam, because Adam had everything to fight for. A life with the man he loved. There was nothing that he’d allow to stand in the way of that.

“And through it all, he offers me protection,” Adam proclaimed, wanting the entire world to know what Kurt meant to him. “A lot of love and affection, whether I’m right or wrong.”

“And down the waterfall, wherever it may take me,” Adam insisted. “I know that life won’t break me. When I come to call, he won’t forsake me. I’m loving angels instead.”

The audience applauded and there were whistles and cheers of appreciation but the only regard that Adam wanted was from Kurt. His lover had risen from his seat and wasn’t trying to hide his emotions. Tears were shining in Kurt’s eyes and his mouth was drawn into a wide grin.

“You are insane,” Kurt complained, pulling Adam into his arms. “Absolutely mad.”

“Mad about you, sweetheart,” Adam insisted, looking down into that beautiful face. “And I meant every word I just sang there.”

“If you two get any sweeter, I am going to vomit. Right here,” Santana warned, resting her chin in her hand. “And I certainly haven’t had enough to drink for that yet.”

Kurt looked to his friends, seeing the amused look on Rachel’s face and Santana’s tarter expression. He looked back to Adam. “Want to get out of here?” he asked.

Adam nodded. “Let’s celebrate tonight the way we wanted to.”

Kurt turned to Rachel and Santana and made their apologies. “I think that we’re going to head out now,” he explained. “We need to have some time to ourselves tonight.”

Rachel gave a dramatic sigh, shrugging her shoulders. “I suppose that’s okay,” she granted with feigned reluctance. “It’s not like the two of you are going to do anything but stare into each other’s eyes all night.”

Kurt smiled thankfully and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. “I’ll give you a call next year,” he teased.

“Oh, go on, you two,” Santana sniped as she studied her manicure, looking totally bored but Kurt knew it was an act.

Adam bent to give Santana a quick kiss and didn’t miss the way her eyes softened. “Goodnight, gorgeous,” he said gently.

She nodded, and Adam thought that he detected a flash of sadness in her gaze. “Good luck on your tour,” she wished and Adam kissed her cheek again.
“I’ll call you from the road,” he promised, gathering Kurt under his arm. He wanted to get home as quickly as possible.

They hurried out to get their coats and find a cab. There was a bottle of champagne waiting in the refrigerator to toast in the new year and some precious hours to spend together. Neither of them wanted to waste a single one of them.

* * *

Kurt and Adam arrived at the rehearsal building early in the morning to meet the bus that would be carrying the company to Boston for the first stage of their tour. Kurt huddled in his coat as he watched Adam stow his suitcases in the luggage hold, holding on to Adam’s backpack for him.

Around him, other members of the cast were making their own goodbyes to friends and family who’d come to see them off. He saw Niall and Cynthia making their own farewells, both of them shedding tears and holding one another closely. Kurt blinked back his own tears, finding no comfort in that they weren’t the only couple facing separation.

Once Adam’s bags were taken care of, he returned to Kurt and accepted his backpack back.

“Thanks, love,” he said gently, slinging the pack over his shoulder.

“I packed some snacks for you,” Kurt said. “And a few bottles of water.”

“Thank you, darling. I’m sure we’re going to stop for food at some point on the road,” Adam reminded him.

“I know… but I don’t want you to be hungry,” Kurt insisted. He just needed to do something.

“What time does your flight get in?” Adam asked.

“If there are no delays, I should be landing at around two,” Kurt confirmed. “I’m renting a car and will meet Dad and Carole in Lima.”

Adam nodded, glad that Kurt was taking some time to go home before the semester began. Having some time to spend with his family would provide a good distraction and keep him from dwelling too much on them being apart.

“You’ll call me when you land?” Adam requested, taking Kurt’s gloved hands in his.

Kurt nodded. “And you’ll call me when you get to Boston?”

“I will,” Adam assured him.

The other actors began to board the bus and Adam inhaled deeply, knowing that the moment they’d been looking forward to and dreading had arrived.

“You’d better get going, or they might leave without you,” Kurt said, his voice growing hoarse.

Adam nodded, pulling Kurt into his arms. Their kiss tasted of salt.

“I’m not saying goodbye,” Adam insisted ardently. “Because this isn’t goodbye. I’m going to see you soon.”

Kurt nodded, blinking back tears. “You are going to be so amazing,” he affirmed confidently. “And I am so proud of you.”
Adam smiled sadly, pulling Kurt in for one last lingering embrace. “You take care of yourself,” he urged.

“I will,” Kurt promised. Biting his lip to keep from openly crying, he nudged Adam toward the bus door.

Kurt watched as Adam climbed into the bus and through the windows, saw him take his seat. Adam turned to look at him again, holding up his hand against the window and mouthed something to Kurt.

_I love you._

Kurt sniffled and nodded, letting Adam know that he understood. He stayed until the bus pulled away and headed down the street, carrying Adam towards his future. Feeling like he was missing a limb or some vital organ, Kurt forced himself to turn and face his own.

* * *

Songs used:

Kurt's song: "Glitter In The Air" - P!nk

Songs with the Apples: "All I Want For Christmas Is You" - Mariah Carey
"Merry Xmas Everybody" - Slade

Adam's song "Angels" - Robbie Williams

Chapter End Notes

I've tried very hard not to re-use songs that had been performed on Glee, but there are a number of songs that I felt were poorly used and had little connection with the story lines or were performed by the wrong singers (*coughRachelBlainecough*). "Glitter In The Air" is one such song. I've always found it to be one of the most beautiful songs about throwing caution to the wind for love and it became a throwaway solo for Rachel. I feel absolutely no guilt about re-purposing it in a more appropriate manner and with a singer who would do it justice.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

There was something oddly comforting about waking up at his old home. In his old bed, Kurt considered as he slowly came awake. It helped ease the feeling of displacement and feeling totally adrift in the world. The home that he’d shared with Adam no longer existed and his lover was no longer close at hand to reassure him that everything was going to be all right. For someone who’d always prided himself on being so self-sufficient, this sense of vulnerability was extremely disquieting.

He and Adam had spoken on the phone the previous night for what seemed like hours. The Englishman was settled into the hotel room he was sharing with Niall and told Kurt about how interesting Boston was and that he and the others in the cast planned to spend a day or two sightseeing before they went into tech and all of their free time vanished. He was glad that Kurt was taking a bit of time to spend with his family before the school term began.

*It’ll be good for you, sweetheart*, the older man had insisted when Kurt had first proposed his plans to visit while his father was home on winter recess. *I don’t want you to be alone right now.*

Better to crawl home to lick his wounds than hide away in his dorm room in a nearly empty school, Kurt thought petulantly as he curled up under the heavy layer of blankets that provided a warm nest and pulled a pillow to his chest. He would be content to hide there for the duration of his visit.

A knock on his bedroom door roused his unwilling attention. All he wanted to do was huddle under the blankets like he did when he was a child and the outside world became just too much to bear.

“Kurt?” he heard his father’s voice call out gently. “You awake, buddy?”

Despite himself, he sat up and emerged from the covered. He didn’t want to worry his father unnecessarily. “Yeah...” he answered, his voice sounding wan even to his own ears.

His father opened the door and peeked in to make sure that Kurt was decent before coming in and sighed when he saw that he was still in bed. He stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. “How are you holding up?” he asked gently, sitting down on the edge of Kurt’s bed.

Kurt shrugged, feeling too mentally and physically tired to feign otherwise.

“Did you get any sleep at all?”

Kurt shook his head. “Not really,” he admitted, knowing that it wouldn’t do any good to lie. His father would know from the dark circles under his eyes that he’d been tossing and turning most of the night.

Burt sighed in sympathy. “I know that telling you that everything is going to work out isn’t going to make you feel at all better, so I’m not going to try,” he said. “But you can’t hide away from the world the whole time Adam is away. And you’re going to have to get your head back on straight before you head back to school. Adam wouldn’t appreciate you letting your grades slide because you miss him.”

Kurt couldn’t help from smiling a tiny bit at his father’s blunt form of comfort. It was kind of gentle kick in the pants that he needed.
“I know,” he granted. “I just need to feel sorry for myself for a little while.”

“That’s okay. You’re allowed under the circumstances,” Burt granted. “But not too long. Got that?”

Kurt nodded, inhaling deeply. He knew that however much he wanted to wallow, his own nature would push him to push past his pain and shift his focus on his education. But right now, he just hurt.

“Why don’t you get dressed and come downstairs,” Burt suggested, though there was just the slight edge of command in his tone. “Carole’s making breakfast. Just between you and me, I think that she’s looking forward to feeding you up while you’re here.”

Kurt couldn’t help from smiling. His stepmother apparently missed having boys around to take care of and he could look forward to plenty of home cooking and hearty meals during his visit. He’d have to make sure that he was running every day if the weather permitted, otherwise he’d probably gain twenty pounds before he returned to New York.

“I’ll be down in just a little bit,” Kurt assured his father. “I just need… Let me just wash up.” He needed a bit of space to get his mental feet under him.

“You got it, sport. Better get a move on while there’s food left,” Burt said, pleased that he at least was able to get Kurt out of bed. He ruffled Kurt’s hair playfully, hoping to coax another smile out of him before leaving his son to make himself suitably human.

“Don’t eat all the bacon before I get there,” Kurt called out, hearing his father chuckle at the not-so-playful admonishment. His father did still need to watch his diet and now that he was home for a little bit, Kurt was going to remind him of his dietary restrictions.

He arrived in the kitchen about fifteen minutes later, his face washed and teeth brushed, a soft robe wrapped comfortably about his body. The warm scents of coffee and cinnamon greeted him and he went right for the coffee pot to pour himself a mug. The kitchen table was already set with plates and a bowl of fresh fruit salad.

Carole was standing at the counter in front of an electric skillet, turning over the pancakes she was cooking. At seeing Kurt, she placed down her spatula and pulled him into a warm embrace. “Good morning, sweetie,” she greeted gently, seeing immediately that he wasn’t his usual chipper self.

“How are you feeling?”

He wasn’t going to lie to her. This was the one place where he felt that he could let down his shields and admit how much he was hurting. “Not so good. I didn’t sleep much and… I miss Adam.”

Carole smiled understandably and pressed a kiss to Kurt’s forehead. “I know you do, honey. But he’ll be back before you know it. And I’m sure that he misses you just as much,” she insisted kindly.

Kurt felt himself smiling a little sadly. “I know he does,” he granted. “It just hurts… being away from him like this.”

Carole hugged him again. “Why don’t you sit down? Breakfast is almost ready. You’ll feel better after you get some food into you.”

His stepmother’s cooking skills hadn’t deteriorated since he was home the last time, Kurt noted. And while she had prepared what she’s hoped would be comfort food for her stepson, she did it with a nod towards Kurt’s normal eating habits and her husband’s health. The pancakes were whole wheat, studded liberally with blueberries and accompanied by a plate of turkey bacon.

“This looks great, Carole,” Kurt complimented, feeling his appetite start to kindle. He took two
pancakes and some fruit onto his plate, along with several strips of bacon. After pouring a healthy amount of syrup onto his pancakes, he took a bite and made an appreciative moan. “I missed your cooking.”

His stepmother smiled broadly as she served herself. “Well, if you came to visit every now and then, or came down to Washington while we’re there...,” she hinted playfully.

“Carole, let the boy be,” Burt admonished gently, chuckling at her teasing. “He’s got school and work to worry about.”

“Thanks Dad,” Kurt grinned and nibbled on a piece of bacon.

Carole huffed with mock indignance, but offered her stepson a tolerant smile. “Well, I’ll just have to send a few extra care packages your way. Especially since you’re going to be living on dorm food for the duration.”

“I won’t say no,” Kurt said agreeably, sipping at his coffee. While the dorm cafeteria kept the eating habits of their student body in mind with lots of healthy options, he was sure that it would get boring after a while. Between Carole and Ellie Crawford, he’d be the envy of all the dorm residents.

“Do you have any plans for today?” Burt asked, looking at his son pointedly. It was clear that he did not want to see Kurt moping around the house, feeling sorry for himself during the whole duration of his visit.

Kurt sighed, knowing that he needed to find something to occupy himself with besides quality family time. Thankfully McKinley High School was out for winter break, so he wouldn’t be tempted to pop in on New Directions. He’d made some tentative plans to meet up with Tina and Artie while they were all home, but he really need to find something to occupy himself with. And at the moment, he needed something to clear his head.

“I thought I’d head over to the garage this morning,” he proposed. “I kind of want something to tear apart and put back together again. I’m sure they’ve got something I can get my hands into.”

Burt nodded approvingly. “That sounds like a great idea,” he agreed. “I was going to stop by later on, but I’m sure the guys won’t mind you going in to help out.”

Having a goal now perked Kurt’s spirits up a bit. “I figured that some of the guys might be taking some time off for the holidays and they might need some help. And it’ll feel good to get my hands dirty for a little bit.”

Carole chuckled brightly at Kurt’s apparent enthusiasm. “It’ll also give you an excuse to treat yourself to a manicure,” she teased.

Kurt couldn’t help from laughing a little bit. “Well, I do have to keep myself in good condition,” he advised. Oil under his fingernails and obvious calluses would not help his employment options as audiences liked their actors to be pretty.

After finishing breakfast and helping to clean up, Kurt returned to his room to find something suitable to wear to the garage. He was sure that he had a set of coveralls in the back, but he didn’t want to risk any of his good clothes with stains that he knew from experience would never come out. He found an old pair of jeans in the back of his closet and pulled them on, wondering if they still fit.

They were a bit short since he’d bought them before his last growth spurt and a little snug about his thighs, but he definitely needed a belt because they were loose in the waist. Squatting a few times, he thought that they’d be comfortable enough to work in. Topped with an old henley that stretched...
across his shoulders, he realized just how much he’d changed since leaving for New York. The physical changes were just as profound as his mental and emotional ones, and he felt a certain amount of gratification that he was so far from the boy he’d been just a few years ago. He liked who and what he’d become.

Tugging on an old pair of Doc Martins, he headed downstairs. His father and Carole were lingering over another cup of coffee and talking quietly when he entered the kitchen. “Dad, I’m going to head over to the garage now.”

“Okay, sport. Tell the guys that I’ll by a later this afternoon,” Burt advised, sipping at his coffee. “Have fun destroying something.”

Kurt grinned and gave them a quick wave before bundling up to face the bitter Ohio winter. The drive to the garage went quickly, the route permanently imbedded in Kurt’s memory and he parked behind the building in the employee area. Dodging slush puddles and snow piles, he walked into the garage area where several of the mechanics were already at work.

The manager spotted Kurt as he entered and exclaimed happily, “Kurt! We were hoping you’d stop by!” Bill hurried over to hug the younger man warmly.

“Hey Bill. Good to see you,” Kurt greeted, smiling at the man who’d been mentor and baby sitter for a good portion of his childhood. He accepted the hug, feeling a sense of comfort to be around friendly faces and a familiar setting.

The other mechanics came over to offer their own welcome, glad to see Kurt. Greg leaned against the Ford SUV that he was working on and looked to him expectantly. “Your dad warned that you were in town for a little while,” he said, wiping his dirty hands on a rag.

Kurt nodded, letting himself relax a bit. “I’m on winter break and Adam had to go out of town for work so I thought I’d come home for a little bit.”

“And you’re doing well in school?” Bill asked, making his near-parental concern clear.

Kurt thought back to his winter critiques and let himself nod confidently. “It’s hard work, but I’m doing okay. We’ve got a big musical this spring and I got cast as an understudy for one of the major roles.”

“That’s great, kid,” Greg complimented. The mechanics might not know all that much about musical theater but they knew enough to understand that being cast as an understudy at this stage was no small thing.

“I was kind of hoping to get my hands into something,” Kurt explained, looking about the garage. “I need a little automotive therapy.”

Bill nodded understandingly. “I think there’s a set of your old coveralls are in the back room,” he offered. “Go get changed and I’ll see what we’ve got around for you to play with.”

Kurt smiled appreciative and headed to the staff room. Pulling on the heavy cotton material felt comforting in its own strange way and he marveled that he could still be as comfortable in an oil stained jumpsuit as he could in the most elegant couture fashion. Adam would just smile and say that it was an example of how complex a person he was.

Thoughts of his boyfriend dimmed his smile a bit. He really needed to get his hands on an engine and start taking it apart so he could clear his head a little bit.
Returning to the work area, Bill pointed him in the direction of an Audi that had clearly been on the wrong end of a significant accident. The whole front end was crunched in and the airbag had been inflated, warning that the impact had been substantial. Hopefully the driver was not seriously injured.

“Oh, you poor thing,” Kurt cooed sympathetically to the car, running his hand over a crushed bumper. It was an absolutely crime for such a beautiful vehicle to be in such sorry condition. “What happened to you?”

“This just came in yesterday,” Bill explained, amused at how Kurt always treated damaged cars like he would a wounded kitten. “Got into a fight with a lamp post after skidding on some ice and I think the lamp post won. Think you can you get started on the diagnostic so it can be submitted to the insurance?”

Kurt nodded, feeling his mood start to improve. This was exactly the kind of thing he needed. Rolling up his sleeves, he pulled a tool cart over to where the damaged car sat and carefully popped open the hood to get a look at the engine and see what needed to be done.

Running the diagnostics gave Kurt something to focus on, taking his mind away from his loneliness. He had to pay attention to what the instruments were telling him and what his own eyes were seeing. This was the part of working with cars that he’d always found the most interesting; trying to figure out just what was wrong and how to fix it in a way that was economical for the customer. It was like working out a large, greasy puzzle and he’d always been pretty good at it.

He took his time, going over the entire car and made careful notes of all the things that were wrong and needed immediate repair. There was a good crack in the radiator that he wasn’t sure could just be repaired and might need a complete replacement. Several hoses were torn or pulled loose, but those were easy fixes. One of the engine mounts was missing and definitely would need to be replaced, otherwise the owner would hit a bump and end up with the engine in his lap.

The rest of the engine seemed okay, he needed to check out the undercarriage and make sure there was no other damage. Getting a creeper board and hanging light, he lay down and slid under the car to see what was going on.

Fortunately, there didn’t seem to be any damage to the major structures and while the repairs would be considerable, the owner was lucky that the car wouldn’t have to be junked. Sliding out from under the car, he wiped off his hands and wrote up the report to be submitted to the owner’s insurance.

There were other jobs on the list that he took over to give the guys a little breathing room. It felt good to do simple tasks like oil changes and brake jobs where he got a bit dirty but was able to keep his head clear. Focusing on the tools in his hands and the machinery in front of him prevented him from dwelling too much on the other things in his life. Here there were no worries about the pressures of school or the loneliness of Adam being away. One of the guys turned on a radio and Kurt found himself humming along with the classic rock tunes, dancing a bit as he worked.

“I don’t hear any singing,” Greg complained from his station, where he was elbows deep in the engine of a Dodge Charger. “What do we have to do around here to get some entertainment?”

Bill laughed, giving Kurt a playful nudge. “Come on, kid,” he urged. “Give us a little show while we still can afford to see you.”

Kurt couldn’t help from grinning at their urging. They’d always been so supportive of him when he was growing up, despite the fact that he couldn’t be more different from them. When he came out, it was probably not much more of a surprise to them as it had been for his father and they never treated him any differently. The teasing was good natured and affectionate and he would always have a
“Oh, Mama, I’m in fear for my life from the long arm of the law,” he began, using the lower end of his register. He was standing underneath a classic Chevy, draining the old oil into a disposal pail. He could certainly sing while he worked and gave his father’s employees the show that they wanted.

Kurt left the garage a few hours later after having lunch with the guys and returned home to clean up. He was feeling a bit better about things now that he had a chance to clear his head a little bit. He washed his hands in the kitchen sink with a bar of abrasive soap that his father kept there to scrub the stains off his hands, using a nail brush to get the grime out from under his fingernails. He would need to seriously moisturize his hands afterwards because the soap was so harsh on his skin, but by the time he was done, his hands were in pristine condition. A quick shower and a change of clothes left him fit to face the world again.

Coffee, he decided. He needed coffee and something sweet. It had been over a year since he last went to the Lima Bean and hoped that they were still serving the gingerbread loaf cake that he’d always loved. With a vanilla latte. That would be just the kind of pick-me-up he needed.

Driving to the café, he slipped back into instinct. He knew the way like the back of his hand, having followed the path hundreds of times before leaving this town for good. It still felt a bit strange that he was now starting to see Lima through a visitor’s eyes and not that of boy desperate to leave. Now he was more aware of the charms of the town and less focused on its obvious shortcomings. The feeling of nostalgia was almost pleasant.

The Lima Bean seemed much the same as it ever was; brightly lit and clean, the display cases filled with appetizing treats and smiling baristas preparing drinks. For a moment when he walked through the doors he felt a flash of the panic he’d felt when he’d worn one of those aprons. He’d lived in absolute anguish, fearful that he was doomed to spend his life trapped in Lima and working here because he didn’t have any other options. It had just been something to do that filled his days until he managed to find the courage in him to take the plunge and leave nearly everything and everyone that he knew in order to chase his dreams.

Going to New York without a place or plan had been terrifying, but less frightening than being stuck behind that counter with a fake smile pasted on his face so that the customers would never know that he was screaming inside. Thankfully he had escaped this trap and now felt that could walk in with his head held proudly. He wondered if the day would come when he no longer saw his hometown as a place just waiting to snare him and drag him back.

He was still seeking the balance, Kurt realized as he pulled himself mentally together. He didn’t have many fantastic memories of life in Lima, so coming back home was still hard in a lot of ways. But he had family here and it would always be a part of him no matter where his career took him in the future. Be it a Broadway stage or touring the country the way Adam was, Lima would always be a huge part of his past. It helped make him who he was.

Looking over the offerings in the case, he was torn between the gingerbread that he’d been craving and an absolutely scrumptious looking cranberry scone. He couldn’t afford to eat both, not with the way Carole was going to be stuffing him the whole time he was home. There was no way he would dare show up back at school having gained an ounce because Ms. July would certainly notice and make him suffer the consequences. One treat only.

He ordered the gingerbread since he could get scones back in New York anytime he wanted, along with the much-needed latte. The café was pretty full with the afternoon rush and there didn’t seem to be empty tables. Maybe he could find someone who would be willing to share so he could enjoy his afternoon snack.
He smiled to himself when he saw a tall blond woman sitting at the table in the back reading a magazine while nursing a large coffee that Kurt knew from past history would be black with no fewer than five packets of sugar.

Taking his plate and cup, he walked over to the table. “Mind if I join you?” he asked to get her attention.

She looked up at him with a sharp-eyed glare and prepared to launch what was probably a viciously worded refusal that would have left him gathering up his own entrails when she realized who was standing there. Her blue eyes widened in shock and, Kurt suspected, pleasure.

“Porcelain,” Coach Sylvester said softly, very clearly surprised by his presence. Her mouth drew into a wide smile. “Sit that tight little tush down right now.”

Kurt couldn’t help from smiling at the command in her voice. He placed his food down and took the chair opposite her. “It’s good to see you, Coach. Even if you are out of uniform.” It felt odd to see her dressed in anything other than her customary track suit.

“I’m off duty right now, and I’m not your coach anymore,” she reminded him playfully. “You can call me Sue if you want.”

Kurt recognized this for the honor that it was. There were moments when he felt like he was one of the few students that she’d not only genuinely liked, but respected in some way.

“What the hell are you doing here?” she asked. “I would have thought that the only way you’d ever come back to this town would be dragged kicking and screaming. You were already halfway out the door during your sophomore year.”

Kurt was reminded that for all her cutting comments and bizarre behavior, Sue had been one of his chief supporters while he was in high school. He’d never forgotten the lengths that she went through to protect him during the worst of the bullying he’d suffered and he knew that she’d been very upset during her stint as principal that she hadn’t been able to do more. Even after he gave up being a Cheerio, he remained one of her chosen few.

“Just here for a little while on winter break,” he explained. “I start classes again in a few weeks so I thought I’d enjoy a little family time. Dad’s home on recess, so it seemed like a perfect time.”

She nodded understandingly. If there was anyone who appreciated the need for family, it was Sue. “And that gorgeous hunk of English beefcake that looked like he’d follow you to the ends of the earth?”

Kurt couldn’t help from sighing. “He graduated last June and he got cast in a show that’s doing a national tour,” he explained. “We’re going to be doing the long-distance thing for a couple of months.”

His former coach gave him a sympathetic stare. “Well, if he gives you any problems, you let me know. I have several highly skilled and very discreet assassins on retainer if you need a referral.”

Kurt could only stare at her in surprise, but the twinkle in her eyes betrayed her and he realized that she was joking a little bit. He couldn’t help from laughing. He’d long suspected that Sue’s outrageous behavior at school was something of an act, but this confirmed it for him.

At least, he hoped that it did.

He nodded his head at the magazine, seeing an overly perky cheerleader photographed in mid-leap
“Professional research?” he asked, not hiding his amusement. “I assume that you’re going to be gearing up for Nationals when school restarts, right?”

She chuckled, nodding. “Just getting a sense of what some of the other teams may have in mind,” she explained. “You know, considering what a few of them tried last year trying to outdo me, my plan to shoot Brittany from a cannon wasn’t that insane.”

“Well, you were always a trail blazer,” Kurt reminded her, taking a taste of his gingerbread. It tasted just the way he remembered, the bite of ginger and cloves perfectly tempered by the creamy glaze.

“I don’t think we ever did so well as when we had you on the team. Your Celine Dion solo was a total showstopper that no one has been able to match,” she reminisced fondly. “What I wouldn’t give to have you back and doing a ten-minute Italian aria while doing a perfect handstand at the top of the formation.” She sighed happily at the concept.

“How NYADA is treating you? I’m assuming that you’re doing well there.”

Kurt smiled. “It’s good,” he insisted. “I’m learning a lot and we’re doing this huge musical in the spring. It’s a pretty amazing place.”

“And you’re looking awfully fit,” she noted admiringly. “It’s a shame I can’t steal you back for the team.”

Kurt couldn’t help from feeling flattered at her appraisal. “I run now pretty regularly and I’ve been doing a lot of upper body work. And I’ve got dance three times a week with a teacher that I would love to run a DNA test on, because there is no way that she’s not related to you in some way.”

“And she’s going to let you get away with eating that?” Sue asked archly, pointing to Kurt’s cake. “Because I would have had you doing jumping jacks until your limbs came flying off.”

“I usually burn it off pretty quickly because I’m so active, and I’m keeping up on my physical regimen while I’m here,” he assured her. “Ms. July will personally cut off any flab she sees with a letter opener so I need to take care of myself. My body is one of my instruments, after all.”

Sue nodded approvingly. “Well, whatever you’re doing, the results are certainly impressive,” she complimented, eyeing the breadth of his shoulders appreciatively. “You look like you could probably toss any of our fliers one handed now.”

Knowing how rarely Sue gave unvarnished approval gave Kurt a sense of pride at her positive appraisal. “We did a lot of pairs work in dance the past semester and I wasn’t always matched with the lightest girl,” he admitted. “Missing a lift always ends up with Ms. July bitching us out in the middle of class and no one wants that. And I’m taking stage combat this semester so I really need to be in good shape.”

“Now that is something I would look forward to seeing you do,” Sue chuckled, mentally picturing him wielding a sword and slicing through the bullies that had tormented him when he was younger. She paused to look at him, her eyes softening in a way that Kurt rarely remembered her showing to anyone other than her sister.

“Oh Porcelain… I’m glad to see you doing so well,” Sue claimed with clear sincerity. “I never doubted that you’d manage to find your way out of Lima. I think that you would have crawled out of here on your hands and knees if that’s what it took. If only to spite anyone who ever tried to make you feel like nothing.”

Kurt nodded, knowing that there was more than a grain of truth there. All the times he’d ended up
atop a pile of trash in a dumpster, the times when he did laundry as soon as he got home from school so that his father wouldn’t see the stains from food being thrown at him or the time when he spent several weeks’ worth of allowance money to buy a designer sweater to replace the one that his father had given him as a gift and ended up destroyed… it had all been fuel to Kurt’s determination to escape Lima.

“And that was something I always appreciated about you,” she explained. “You didn’t need anyone carrying your ass the way Berry did. I mean, Schuester all but ferried her to New York on his back.”

Kurt winced a bit internally, not liking to hear the harsh reminder of how unfair an advantage Rachel had back then and not surprised that Sue still had a rather unforgiving opinion about his friend, but she hadn’t seen how Rachel had matured since coming to New York. His friend had a better understanding of her own flaws and Rachel was constantly striving to prove to Kurt that she could be the kind of friend that she wanted to be. He hoped that in time others might see that shift.

“I’ve run into your father a few times, when he’s in town,” Sue confessed. “I always liked Burt. He’s always talking about how well you’re doing, which is the best ‘screw you’ to everyone in this town that looked down on you. He mentioned that you were in some plays this past summer. I would have liked to have seen that.”

“I’m sorry,” Kurt answered softly, surprised at her statement. “I didn’t even think…”

“It’s okay. I’ll forgive the lapse this one time,” Sue assured him, a touch of teasing in her voice. “I checked out some videos on line and your dad gave me a program for the Cheerio display at McKinley. You’re definitely turning out to be one of our prouder legacies.”

Kurt wouldn’t put it past Sue to wanting to brag about him, setting up the constant reminder that someone who she had personally chosen had been mocked and put down so harshly was now succeeding. It didn’t matter that he’d only been on the squad for a few months. In Sue Sylvester’s eyes, no one ever stopped being a Cheerio once they donned the uniform.

“And next time you’re in a show, I expect that you will tell me and have a ticket for me,” she said warningly, a familiar spark that bordered on madness in her eyes. “Because if you don’t, I will personally carve out your right kidney with a grapefruit spoon and sell it on the black market to compensate my hurt feelings. Am I clear?”

He couldn’t help from laughing a bit. “Yes. I promise,” he assured her.

“Good, because I don’t think your boyfriend will be happy to be visiting you in the dialysis unit,” Sue warned playfully.

Kurt’s phone beeped for his attention and he quickly checked it in case it was something important. “Speak of the devil,” he pronounced at seeing that it was a message from Adam.

Sue smiled, amused at the way Kurt’s expression brightened at just receiving a text from his lover. It gratified her that her protégé had found someone worthy of him. “What does he have to say?” she asked, chuckling to herself at the starry-eyed look on Kurt’s face.

Kurt opened up the message and immediately started to laugh. He pressed his hand over his mouth to keep from disturbing the entire café. Adam had texted a photo of him and Niall at what looked like Boston Commons, both of them with their hands raised in surrender because a man dressed in a colonial military uniform was guarding them at musket point. Adam had added a quick caption, *Bad day to be a Brit in Boston.*
Kurt handed Sue his phone and watched as she chuckled at Adam’s silly antics, but not in a way that felt like his boyfriend was being mocked.

“I’m glad that you found someone more on your level,” she insisted, handing him back his phone. “He looks like he can keep up with you.”

Kurt nodded. “I’m very happy with him,” he stated confidently.

“Good. I’m glad about that. Otherwise I’d have to take steps,” Sue warned with apparent seriousness. “I have friends in several government agencies that could have him shipped back to England before he could finish his tea.”

“Well, as much as I appreciate the gesture, that won’t be necessary,” Kurt chuckled. “He treats me like absolute royalty and besides… he can’t be deported.”

“Oh?” Sue questioned, one thin eyebrow rising in query.

Kurt couldn’t help from grinning, knowing that he was going to be surprising her. “He’s got dual citizenship,” he boasted, popping the last bit of gingerbread into his mouth.

Sue cocked her head, the surprise apparent in her expression. “Does he now? Well… that does raise my opinion of him a bit.”

“He’s not Blaine,” he assured his former coach. “Not by the furthest stretch of the imagination.”

She nodded evenly, her eyes softening. “That’s good, because if I had any inclination that he was anything at all like that weaselly Muppet that you foolishly allowed yourself to become enamored with, I’d have to arrange for your immediate kidnapping and deprogramming. I know people at Langley that excel in such matters, but I suppose that would put a crimp in your Broadway career aspirations,” she mused.

Kurt laughed at her outlandish threat, accepting that at least the sentiment was sincere. “I think that it would, so I’ll avoid doing anything to warrant such drastic actions,” he promised.

Sue laughed riotously and got a few stares turned in her direction, but she clearly didn’t care about anyone looking. She gazed at him adoringly, reaching out to touch his cheek. “Oh, I’ve missed you. You, Lopez and Fabray… you were my special ones. I saw a lot of me in all of you.”

Kurt smiled, smart enough to recognize what an honor that actually was in Sue’s estimation. “So make sure that you enjoy your visit here,” she advised. “Take a look around and see how far you’ve come. Because as time goes by, you’re only going to push further away from this place.”

Kurt felt himself nodding, having had very much the same thoughts since he arrived in Lima. He’d long ago made the decision not to let Lima become a trap for him. There was so much waiting for him in New York. Hard work, to be sure, and undoubtedly disappointments with no promise of success. But it was what he hungered for.

He knew that in a few days, he’d be returning to New York. Classes would be starting at the end of the month and he would be moving towards the future he wanted. He looked to his former coach, deeply grateful for all that she had given him.

“I have to thank you,” he said sincerely. “I don’t know if I would have made it out of here if it weren’t for the help you gave me over the years. Or if I’d be able to survive NYADA if I hadn’t experienced learning with you. Surviving you gave me the kind of tough skin I needed.”
Sue chuckled ironically, a touch of color reaching her cheeks. She seemed touched by his statement and a bit at a loss for words. He doubted that too many people thanked her for the insults and teasing, but he recognized how it was helping him now.

“I’d better get going,” he said reluctantly. “I promised my dad that I’d be home for dinner tonight.”

Sue just smiled. “Go on,” she urged. “And say ‘hi’ to Burt for me.”

Kurt nodded and gathered up his trash. Impulsively he bent to quickly kiss Sue on her cheek. “Thank you for everything,” he said again. “I’ll let you know about my next shows.”

It took Sue a moment to recover her wits, but she reached for her wallet and pulled out a business card. “Here’s my personal information,” she said, a suspicious hoarseness in her voice as she tried to maintain her customary air of detachment. “If you need my help… or just to brag about what you’re doing so I can rub it in Schuester’s face.”

Kurt snickered, knowing too well that she would do just that given half a chance.

* * *

“Are you kidding?” Finn asked, astonished at what his stepbrother was telling him. “Sue Sylvester?”

Kurt nodded, laughing out loud. “Finn, I’m telling you that beneath that diamond-hard exterior beats a heart that is pure marshmallow.”

“For you maybe,” Finn said cautiously. “She threatened to rip my spleen out when she thought I’d knocked up Quinn and I didn’t even know what my spleen was at the time.”

“Oh, she’s not that bad,” Kurt insisted, only to be cut off by Finn’s laughter.

“To you! You were one of her favorites,” Finn pointed out. “She would have happily murdered anyone else.”

Kurt leaned back and looked at his brother’s laughing expression on his computer monitor. “Oh, I miss you so much,” he sighed fondly. Finn had always been able to get Kurt to smile. “How are things going down there? The job working out?”

Finn nodded enthusiastically. “It’s been great. You would love it here,” he insisted.

Austin certainly seemed to be agreeing with Finn. He looked tanned and fit and really happy with things. Happier than Kurt could remember him being in quite some time. He seemed to have made some progress on finding his own path, which gratified Kurt tremendously. He’d hated how Finn had felt so lost, but he appeared to be much more secure with himself now.

“And the new apartment is okay?” Kurt asked, glad that his brother had managed to find better accommodations. The one room that he and Puck had managed to find when they first arrived in Austin was neither comfortable nor safe, and Kurt was relieved when they quickly moved out.

“It’s fine,” Finn assured him. “And work has been really great. Our boss has been teaching us a lot and we’ve been going out on a lot of jobs with him. There’s this mansion that we’ve been working on that’s really amazing. Robb, our boss, said that we’re doing so well that he’s giving us a raise and wants us to stay on for good.”

Finn paused, looking a bit contemplative. “You know, I didn’t expect things to turn out this way but I think that it’s really working out well for us. Robb said that we can really do well as craftsmen and
I like the work,” he assured Kurt. “He said that if you find something that you’re good at and you like it, you can really be successful if you work hard. And I think I can really see myself this.”

“That’s great, Finn,” Kurt praised happily, delighted that Finn finally seemed to be finding a pathway for himself. “Austin really seems to suit you.”

Finn nodded. “We really like it here. I mean, the people are great and it’s fun and there’s all kinds of stuff to do. Puck and I are looking to put a band together,” he confided. “There are so many clubs down here and the music scene is amazing. We think we might be able to get something going. Just for fun. And we seem to have found another guitarist so we’re off to a good start.”

“I’m so glad, Finn. That sounds amazing!” Kurt said sincerely. He could understand how the two of them might miss music and even if the band turned out to be nothing more than a hobby, it would be good for the both of them.

Finn chuckled to himself. “It’s kind of cool because he moved in with Puck and me. We can share expenses and jam whenever we want,” he explained. “And Robb gave him a job so we can afford to stay here.”

Finn cocked his head. “You want to meet him?” Before Kurt could answer, Finn turned his head and called out, “Hey! I’ve got Kurt on Skype!”

There was a bit of jostling on Finn’s end as the computer image shook and Puck’s face came into view. “Hey, little dude!” he greeted happily. “Good to see you!”

“Hi, Puck!” Kurt couldn’t help from grinning at the sight of his old friend. Like Finn, Puck was looking healthy, tan and happy. Getting out of Lima has definitely been to both of their benefits.

The image on Finn’s end jostled again as the boys shifted so that a third man could squeeze in. Kurt felt his jaw drop in shock at seeing a familiar blond head come into view.

“Sam? Is that you?” he gasped.

Sam’s familiar wide smile came into focus. “Hi Kurt,” he greeted happily. “Bet you’re surprised.”

Kurt nodded, his eyes wide with shock. “You could say that,” he admitted. “How did this happen?”

Sam cocked his head towards the other boys, who sat behind him laughing at Kurt’s reaction. “Well, I’ve been keeping in touch with these bozos and they called me up one day that their boss was looking for more workers and if I was interested in a change of scenery. So, I flew down to Texas last week and the rest is history.”

Finn leaned forward, throwing an arm around Sam’s broad’s shoulders. “It’s really cool,” he told his stepbrother happily. “It’s kind of like us having our own New Directions offshoot down here. All we need is a bassist and we’ll have a proper band.”

Kurt looked at their smiling faces and felt a sense of relief for them. “That’s great,” he stated. “I’m so glad that it’s working out for the three of you.”

Puck gave Finn a playful nudge. “And tell him about Jane,” he urged.

That sparked Kurt’s curiosity. “Jane? Who’s Jane.”

Finn began to blush so deeply that Kurt could see it over his computer, and that got some teasing laughter from the other boys. “I… I kind of started seeing someone,” he confided shyly.
Kurt’s smile widened. “Oh? Tell me more…,” he urged.

“She’s a student over at the university, studying to be a social worker,” he explained. “I met her at this bar where she works as a waitress and we started talking. You’d like her…. She’s really cute and smart and…” His voice trailed off and he started blushing again.

Kurt remembered how moonry he’d been when he first met Adam and fully understood what Finn was feeling. “She’s sounds nice,” he agreed. This was the first girl that Finn seemed to be really interested in since his break up with Rachel and Kurt grasped just how big a deal it was for him. It was the last step in Finn moving on.

His phone began to ring for his attention and Kurt quickly checked to see who it was. “Oh, I’ve got Adam trying to call me,” he explained. “Gotta go.”

Finn nodded understandingly. “Okay… say hi to him for us,” he urged.

“I’ll talk to you guys soon,” Kurt promised. “Sam, you keep those two out of trouble!”

“I will,” Sam assured him. “Talk to you soon.”

“Bye Kurt!” Puck chimed in before Finn ended the connection.

Kurt shook his head in amusement at their antics before answering his phone. “Hi sweetie!” he greeted happily, putting his laptop aside.

“Hello darling,” Adam answered and Kurt could all but hear the smile in his voice. “Oh, I miss you!”

“It’s only been two days,” Kurt reminded him, though he wasn’t going to protest as he missed Adam just as much.

“I know,” Adam acquiesced. “But I still miss you.”

Kurt felt his eyes start to water from the emotions that he’d been pushing down all day. “I miss you too,” he confessed. “But you look like you’re having fun.”

Adam laughed a bit. “We had most of the day to ourselves so we did a bit of sightseeing about the city,” he explained. “We visited the Freedom Trail and Faneuil Hall… I’ll tell you, love, that there seems to be a bit of anti-British bias in all this.”

Kurt chuckled in amusement at the playfully hurt tone in his lover’s voice. “Imagine that,” he teased.

Adam sighed a bit dramatically. “Well, I suppose that’s to be expected,” he granted. “Admittedly this part of history gets a bit glossed over in school across the pond.”

“I assume that it would be,” Kurt laughed. “So, tell me everything. What do they have planned for all of you?”

He could hear Adam settling down more comfortably on the other end. “The hotel is quite nice and I’m rooming with Niall. Apparently, the others decided that us ‘old marries’ should bunk together, but that’s fine. He and I get along well enough. Oh, and we saw the theater this morning and it’s huge! I’ve never performed in a venue this large before.”

“That’s so exciting,” Kurt said happily. “That sounds like it’s going to be amazing. Now what kind of schedule do they have for you?”

“Tomorrow we have a cast and crew meeting that’s probably going to take up a lot of the day,”
Adam explained, “And in the afternoon, there’s a meet and greet with the local press so you’ll probably see some things in the next few days before our opening.

“Then we go right into tech and our final dress rehearsals before our opening night,” Adam sighed. “The producers have already warned that most of our run in Boston is selling out. It’s a bit intimidating.”

Kurt wished that he could reach through the phone and wrap his arms about the older man. It broke his heart that Adam was facing such a huge step in his career and that he wasn’t there to support him in person. He knew that Adam was capable of meeting this challenge and that he would be wildly successful, but he wanted to be at his lover’s side to encourage him.

“You have no idea how proud I am of you,” Kurt insisted. “You are going to be so amazing and everyone is going to see what I see in you. You deserve this so much.”

Adam didn’t answer for moment and Kurt thought that he could hear the older man sniffling. “Thank you, darling. But I wouldn’t be doing this if it weren’t for you,” he insisted. “You’ve been so generous in encouraging me, even when it caused difficulty for you. I owe you so much…”

“Hush,” Kurt admonished gently, feeling his heart swell for this wonderful, gentle man. Adam had been so giving and supportive since the two of them first met that he couldn’t imagine not making the same effort for his lover’s benefit. “I’m fine and the next few months are going to go by so quickly for the both of us. Before we know it, your tour will be done and you’ll be back in New York with me.

“And you’ll be the big star that everyone will the clamoring to hire for their shows,” Kurt claimed. “It’ll be worth all the hard work in the end.”

“I hope so,” Adam sighed.

“It will be,” Kurt insisted gently, sensing that Adam needed a bit of metaphysical hand-holding.

He heard Adam huff a bit, as if trying to regain his composure. “Tell me what you’ve been doing, love,” he urged. “How are Burt and Carole?”

Kurt could see a deflection from a mile away but decided that it wasn’t worth pointing out. Adam was going to have to deal with his worries on his own for now. He didn’t want to start an argument right at the start of Adam’s trip.

They chatted quietly about the kind of small, unimportant things that they always discussed when together. Kurt listened to Adam’s amusing stories about the cast and updated him on his family’s antics. They laughed as they shared their stories, both of them wishing that they could be with their partner.

Kurt lay down on his bed and stretched out, cradling his phone against his cheek so he could hear Adam’s voice clearly. He closed his eyes as he listened to Adam regaling him to stories about a group of British expats on the wrong side of American patriotic exhibitions and feeling a bit on display to the other tourists.

“It was so absurd darling, but I thought that this flock of schoolchildren were actually going to demand that we personally apologize for the starting the war,” Adam laughed. “One little boy was eying me very angrily. I thought he was going to start kicking me.”

“You poor thing,” Kurt chuckled teasingly.
“Their teacher was most apologetic,” Adam reassured him. “She reminded her class that none of us had been born at the time and that we shouldn’t be held responsible for what Old King George did.

“Oh… and maybe you can clear up something for me,” he requested. “That bell… why didn’t anyone ever fix the crack? Because it’s looks so odd!”

Kurt just smiled, listening to Adam chatter about the things he’d seen and was content to let his boyfriend tell his stories. He kept his eyes closed so he could imagine that Adam was in the room with him and not several states away. And maybe if he waited long enough, he would feel Adam’s hand reaching out to touch his.

* * *

“See anything interesting?” Kurt asked as he thumbed through the racks of sheet music.

Tina shook her head. “Not really. I just don’t know what my teachers are going to be asking me to do,” she sighed.

The past few days of his vacation had gone quietly for Kurt as he’d settled into something of a routine. He would wake up early, have a cup of coffee and then go out for a quick run. He stopped by the garage a few times to help out, glad to have a chance to see the guys for a bit before he returned to New York and keep his mechanic skills up to snuff. He spent time with his father and preparing meals with Carole. He did some studying for school, rested a bit and talked with Adam every moment that Adam could steal away from his work.

To be honest, he was very much looking forward to getting back to school and what passed for normal in his life at this point. Being at loose ends was wearing on him and he wasn’t very good at coping with not having a hundred things to do at a time. He just wasn’t made for inactivity.

He had been lazing in front of the television while his father and Carole were out for the day, feeling his brain cells dying one by one from too many hours of appalling stupid daytime television shows. Not sure if he could stand another moment of watching pathetic dramas about paternity claims, he was nearly delirious with gratitude when Tina had called to ask if he could join her at *Between The Sheets* to help choose some material for the upcoming semester.

Kurt looked at the stack that she’d picked, seeing that she had chosen an assortment of classic and contemporary musicals. “I think you’re off to a good start,” he consoled. “You’ve got a little of everything. Some of these are just perfect to showcase your voice.” And to push her a little out of her comfort zone, he added mentally.

She looked at the books and shrugged. “I guess,” she conceded. “I just wish that I knew myself as a performer a bit more. Rachel never had that problem.”

“That is not true,” he corrected. “Rachel thought that she did and learned the hard way that trying to copy her favorite performers wasn’t going to get her the career she wants. She’s trying to find herself just as much the rest of us are so don’t feel like you’re at a disadvantage. That’s what going to school is supposed to be about. Don’t be afraid to try new things.”

Tina looked over her selections, making sure that the music she had selected was in the key for her voice. “Did you find anything for yourself?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I don’t need any classic musicals and they don’t have too much contemporary for my range,” he admitted. There was a decided lack of anything written specifically for a countertenor’s range, so he was concentrating on traditional tenor material. “I’m going to check out some other
While Tina continued her search in the musical theater section, Kurt moved to where the books for other musical genres were kept. Working with the Apples had expanded his comfort zone and he wanted to utilize that more unorthodox material in his voice work in class to help him stand out from the other students. He pulled out a book of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas that looked promising and began to thumb through it. He’d like to be able to surprise his voice teachers with some unorthodox material.

“Kurt?”

He felt himself freeze at the tentative greeting, his shoulders instinctively stiffening. Taking a breath to maintain his calm, Kurt turned to find his ex-boyfriend standing too close for his comfort.

“Blaine,” he said with cool indifference, pleased that he was able to keep any anger out of his voice.

The shorter man gave Kurt a tentative smile. “Hi. I wasn’t sure if I would see you while I was in town,” he said carefully. “I’m home on winter break.”

Kurt nodded. “Dad’s home on winter recess from Congress so I thought I’d spend a little time with him before classes start.”

“That’s nice,” Blaine responded, still clearly trying to gage Kurt’s reactions.

Kurt looked Blaine over, seeing that his olive complexion was darker from the California sun and that he still had the tendency to dress like a color-blind geriatric. And he felt…. He was surprised that he felt nothing. No real anger or frustration or lingering affection. Just a bit of annoyance at being bothered when he had things to do.

It was as if he was looking at a stranger that he had no past or present contact with.

“Is… is your boyfriend with you?” Blaine asked carefully, obviously putting out feelers over Kurt’s current relationship status.

Kurt snorted, not surprised that Blaine either couldn’t be bothered to remember Adam’s name or couldn’t bring himself to actually use it.

“No, Adam is out of town right now on a job. He got cast in a play that’s doing a national tour,” he proclaimed proudly. “And yes, he and I are still together. Just in case you were wondering.”

“No! I mean…. That wasn’t…,” Blaine stammered, clearly caught off guard by Kurt’s blunt assessment of his motives. His cheeks began to burn red. “I just saw you and stopped to say hi. Nothing more, I swear.”

Kurt shrugged, honestly not caring what Blaine’s motives were. “Sam said that you’re going to school in California,” Kurt said indifferently, as if he was making polite party conversation. He eyed Blaine’s gelled helmet of a hairstyle and wondered what the hell he’d ever seen in his former boyfriend.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Tina notice the unwanted intrusion on Kurt’s personal space and gave him a silent signal to see if he wanted her to step in. He shook his head, letting her know to keep her distance, aware that she didn’t want to be around Blaine any more than he did but he was grateful to see that she was ready to step in if needed.

Blaine seemed to brighten a bit at Kurt’s vague knowledge about his current activities, apparently
All the emotions that had accumulated in Blaine's daily interactions with Kurt were finally released in that moment. He had been waiting for this, or something like this, for far too long. The emotions that Blaine had been holding in since the day Kurt had moved away were overflowing now, and Blaine didn't have the words to properly express them. He just knew he had to say something, anything to Kurt, but the words wouldn't come. The moments they spent together in the past were the only ones that Blaine could think of. He remembered times when they talked about anything and everything, from the latest music to the latest news. The memories flooded Blaine's mind, and he knew that he had to do something.

"Kurt, listen… It's been a long time since we've seen each other. Why don't we go grab a cup of coffee? My treat,” Blaine offered, a bit desperately in Kurt's opinion. “We can talk… catch up a little…”

Kurt just shook his head. “No thanks. I've got to get going,” Kurt pronounced, a trace of firmness in his voice that warned Blaine not to try to argue him into lingering.

"Oh, come on Kurt,” Blaine whined. “It's been so long since we've seen each other, and…”

“I said no, Blaine,” Kurt said again, making the refusal as clear as possible since Blaine was determined to be obtuse. “Tina’s waiting for me, but good luck in L.A.”

Blaine’s expression fell at the realization that Kurt was so totally closed off to him. He could only nod in defeat and mutter, “It was good to see you, Kurt. I've missed you.”

Kurt didn’t say anything more, only gathering up his purchases to join Tina over by the cash register. She looked over to him with gentle concern while the cashier bagged up her purchases. “You okay?” she asked. “I wasn’t sure if you wanted me to cut in, but you seemed to be handling him.”

Kurt smiled brightly, openly displaying the emotions that he refused to with Blaine. “Oh, definitely,” he assured her. “Let me just pay for my stuff and we can go grab lunch. There’s a burger joint that opened up that the guys in the garage said is really amazing.”

“Sounds good,” she chirped, accepting the shopping bag with her music.

Neither of the bothered to look behind them to see Blaine’s longing stare, the final realization of just how much he’d lost evident on his face.

* * *
the casual atmosphere. The restaurant had been designed to look like a roadhouse, but it was clean and the staff appeared to be friendly.

Tina picked up the menu and looked it over. “Well, there goes my diet,” she laughed when she looked at all the choices. “This all looks so good.”

“You don’t need to diet,” Kurt assured her honestly as he looked over the options. He could see why the guys at the garage liked this place so much, as the overwhelming majority of the menu was meat-based and there didn’t seem to be a low-calorie option in sight. Well, there was a salad but given how woefully out of place it looked on the menu, Kurt decided that it probably wasn’t the best offering.

Once they gave the smiling waitress their orders, Tina settled back in her seat. “Are you sure you’re okay?” she asked. “I know that Blaine can be a pill and he didn’t look like he wanted to take ‘fuck off’ for an answer.”

Kurt couldn’t help from laughing at his friend’s words. He was so glad that they had reconciled and that he had given her the chance to regain his trust. “I’m starting to think that I’m never going to totally shake him,” he sighed dramatically. “I could be celebrating my ten-year anniversary and I’ll have him showing up, trying to serenade me with Katy Perry. I really wish that he’d meet someone else so he’ll forget about me.”

Tina smiled gently. “You are kind of unforgettable,” she advised. “And I know what it’s like to be hung up on an ex longer than is healthy.”

Kurt’s gaze softened. He hadn’t been around when Tina was dealing with the aftermath of her breakup with Mike, but he had been on the receiving end of some of her poor behavior. He was glad that she woke up and recognized what she’d been doing and only hurting herself before it was too late.

“So, tell me more about your classes,” he urged, changing the conversation to something more pleasant. He didn’t want to discuss Blaine any further.

He let Tina ramble on about her teachers and classmates while they waited for their lunch, giving her his full attention. On some things, NYU didn’t seem all that different than NYADA. Demanding teachers, challenging classes and competitive classmates. Tina was faced with the same challenges that he and Rachel faced; figuring out how to stand out in a school filled with talented students while developing her own unique gifts as a performer.

“Are you taking any dance classes this year?” Kurt asked, sipping at his iced tea. “You should do well in that.”

She nodded. “Dance, voice and acting,” she confirmed. “I’m going to have a pretty full schedule.”

“How are your teachers?”


“That’s good,” he assured her. “I know that it doesn’t feel like it at times, but the tougher they are, the better a performer you’re going to become. The key is to learn to take criticism and use it to grow. Not let it demoralize you.

“You know, you can always talk to Elliot if you’re feeling a little overwhelmed,” he reminded her. “He’s still at NYU, and I’m sure he’d be glad to help.”
Tina smiled gratefully. “Thanks,” she said sincerely. “There are times when I envy you and Rachel being able to support one another at school. I feel kind of on my own.”

“Well, you’re not,” Kurt promised. “Just because I’m at NYADA doesn’t mean that I can’t be there if you need me. NYU isn’t that far away.”

Tina couldn’t resist reaching out to grasp his hand in gratitude. “Thank you, Kurt,” she said earnestly. “I’m so glad that we’re still friends. Especially after how I treated you. I was such a jerk, and…”

“Shush. It’s fine,” Kurt insisted gently. “We went through a rough patch, but we’re good now.”

And they were. Kurt recognized what a dark place Tina had been in and that Blaine had taken advantage of her vulnerability, playing with her feelings in order to make himself feel better about his lot in life. Holding a grudge would not do either one of them any good. And it would give Blaine a win by letting him destroy a friendship that Kurt had cherished. He was sure that Blaine must have been annoyed to see Tina with him and not willing to give him even a word of greeting.

He probably should feel a trace of sympathy for his ex. After all, he was the one exiled to the other end of the country with none of his old friends to support him, but Kurt didn’t have quite that much nobility in him. There was just enough vindictive pettiness within him to take a rare bit of pleasure in Blaine’s misfortune.

“Kurt Hummel! Is that you?”

Kurt looked up in surprise at the familiar voice calling his name and grinned when he saw Dave Karofsky approaching their table with a huge grin on his face.

“Oh my God,” Kurt exclaimed happily, letting the bigger man sweep him up into a hug. “How long has it been?”

“Too long,” Dave admitted, letting Kurt find his feet again. He looked Kurt over from head to toe. “Wow…. You look fantastic.”

“Thanks! So do you.” And Dave did look good, in Kurt’s opinion. He was still a big, brawny young man but he was solid muscle underneath his snug fitting shirt. But what made him good looking was the brightness of his brown eyes and the open smile that contained none of the anger that had so marked him back in high school.

“You remember Tina, right?” Kurt asked, motioning to his table-mate.

Dave nodded animatedly, offering her a warm smile. “It’s good to see you,” he greeted sincerely.

“So how are things at OSU?” Kurt asked curiously.

“Good… good,” Dave confirmed. “It’s been great there.”

“You still majoring in sports business?”

Before Dave could answer, a tall young man approached him with a warm smile. “Hey, I paid the check. Are you ready to go?”

Dave’s eyes softened at the other man’s approach. “Hey, come here… I’ve got someone I want you to meet. Taylor, this is Kurt… from my high school.”
He looked to Kurt, with a gentle smile on his face. “This is Taylor. My boyfriend.”

Kurt’s eyes widened in surprise, but he quickly remembered his manners and moved to shake the other man’s hand in greeting. “Hi! This is… wow… It is so good to meet you.”

Dave’s boyfriend was a good looking young man with dark brown hair and bright blue eyes that seemed to glimmer with spirit. He appeared to be about Kurt’s and Dave’s age and was dressed neatly in a pair of dark wash jeans and a soft knit sweater that clung to surprisingly broad shoulders.

And it didn’t miss Kurt’s attention that Taylor bore more than a fleeting resemblance to himself, and he turned a teasing arched eyebrow to the larger man. Dave just gave a small shrug, as if to say, “Hey, I’ve got a type.”

Taylor seemed just as surprised at the unexpected introduction. “So, you’re the Kurt he’s always talking about,” he laughed. “Dave was always going on about you and how I reminded him of you a bit so I feel like I probably already know you.”

Kurt felt his cheeks warm. He probably shouldn’t be too surprised that Dave apparently still regarded him so strongly.

Dave placed his arm about Taylor’s shoulders and pulled him close. “Taylor’s also a student at OSU. We met when he came to see a rugby game that I was playing in.”

The other boy laughed brightly. “I was actually there to cheer on my cousin when I saw Dave. He was totally adorable pushing around the other guys and totally kicking butt.”

Dave blushed at his boyfriend’s compliments and Kurt noticed the way the slimmer man leaned in to nuzzle teasingly under Dave’s jaw. To see Dave so easily accepting physical affection warmed Kurt’s heart because he knew just how fearful Dave had been when he was younger. It was gratifying to see just how far Dave had come. And if he had any worries that Dave’s attraction to Taylor was because of any resemblance to Kurt, the genuine affection between the two of them put his mind at least. Dave clearly liked his boyfriend for himself and not any lingering torch he might have carried.

“You’re home visiting your folks?” Kurt asked. Dave looked so happy and he hoped that everything was well with his family.

“Yup,” the larger man confirmed. “I wanted them to meet Taylor since we’ve been together for a while. Dad’s just happy that I’m happy, and Mom… she’s learning to deal.”

Kurt nodded sympathetically, knowing that Mrs. Karofsky was still learning to accept that her son was gay. Still, it sounded like she was trying, which was a lot better than the outright rejection Dave had experienced when he was first outings.

“We’re going up to Dayton to spend a few days with Taylor’s family before we head back to school,” Dave explained. “This is kind of the ‘meet the mutual folks’ tour.”

“And they’re gonna love you,” Taylor insisted.

“So, what are you doing in Lima?” Dave asked. “I would think you’d have to be pried out of New York with a crowbar.”

He turned to his boyfriend and explained, “This guy is at the best singer you ever heard. He got into this super-elite theater school. It’s like the best in the country.”
Tina couldn’t help from laughing at Dave’s effusive praise of her friend. “Careful Kurofsky, or you’re going to make your boyfriend jealous,” she teased.

“You’re mine, big guy,” Taylor reminded his boyfriend possessively. “And I don’t share, so don’t forget it.”

“Yeah, I don’t want to do that,” Dave agreed, giving Taylor an affectionate glance. “We already saw what happens if he thinks that someone is poaching.”

Kurt found himself liking Dave’s guy, if only for the fact that he seemed completely head over heels for his former classmate.

Dave gave Kurt a rueful grin. “We were at Scandals the other night and ran into your ex,” he admitted. “Taylor was in the bathroom and Blaine… Well, he started hitting on me.”

He paused, gaging Kurt’s reaction to that bit of news but Kurt just sighed.

“I’m not surprised, to be honest,” Kurt said evenly. “That’s a primary reason why he’s my ex. Was he drunk?”

Dave nodded. “He’d definitely been drinking. And he was really pushy. He kept going on about… well, about what happened back in high school and that I could do so much better.”

Kurt couldn’t help from wincing. After the way Blaine had behaved at the music store, he was left wondering if Blaine had any real feelings at all besides his own immediate gratification. Trying to use Dave’s old crush to entice him seemed to be just the kind of childish pettiness that was up Blaine’s alley. And trying to use Dave to get back at Kurt for rejecting him really ticked him off.

“Anyway, this one,” Dave continued, giving his boyfriend a playful nudge. “He comes out of the bathroom and…”

“I see this badly dressed, drunk creep all over my boyfriend and I told him that if he didn't remove his hands from my man, then I was going to rip his arms off and beat him over his greasy head with them.”

Taylor laughed wickedly. “You never saw someone back pedal so fast in your life!”

“And he would have done it!” Dave insisted, giving Taylor and affectionate look. Having someone that looked like him being treated with such possessiveness was more than a little satisfying.

Looking at Taylor’s hands, Kurt had to agree with Dave’s assessment. They were surprisingly strong-looking, with unexpected calluses on the fingers and palms that hinted at a lot of hard physical activity. The young man’s forearms were corded with powerful muscle and sinew. Paired with those strong shoulders, there was a lot of upper body strength there. Taylor looked like he could probably lift Dave without too much effort.

Dave couldn’t resist leaning close to Kurt and whispering confidingly, “He’s on the gymnastics team.”

Kurt cocked an eyebrow. “Impressive.”

Dave nodded, looking very pleased with himself. “He’s super bendy.”

Kurt couldn’t help from laughing. He was genuinely happy for Dave, glad that he was finally in a good place and seemed really content with his life. That was all Kurt could have ever wanted for
“Are you still seeing that guy you met at school?” Dave asked curiously.

Kurt nodded and got out his phone. “Yup. Adam’s working on a national tour right now, but we’re still together.”

“They’re disgustingly in love,” Tina inserted, giving her friend an affectionate smile.

Kurt pulled up a photo of the two of them from Thanksgiving and showed it to Dave and Taylor.

“Oh, he’s gorgeous,” Taylor cooed admiringly. He looked to Kurt and nodded in approval. “Very nice.”

Kurt smiled proudly. “We know how to pick the good ones,” he informed Taylor, causing Dave to blush.

And Dave was a good guy to Kurt. He’d come so far from the fearful, bullying boy he’d been and was now a man who was confident and open about who and what he was. It was wonderful to see.

When the waitress returned with Kurt’s and Tina’s lunch, Dave stepped back. “It was great to see the both of you, but we’d better get going,” he said graciously. “I promised my dad that we’d spend the afternoon with him.”

Kurt nodded, turning to shake Taylor’s hand again. “It was really great meeting you,” he insisted sincerely. “Take good care of the big guy here.”

Taylor nodded. “I will. Good luck back in New York.”

Kurt smiled appreciatively, glad to see that Dave had found himself a really good guy. He turned to give Dave a hug. “Take care of yourself,” he urged. “And let’s make sure that we keep in touch more.”

“You got it,” Dave confirmed. He glanced over to Tina and gave her a friendly wave. “It was nice to see you, Tina.”

She smiled back. “You too!”

Once the two men left, Dave’s arm casually thrown around the other man’s shoulders to keep him close, Kurt and Tina sat down to enjoy their lunch. Tina picked up a french fry and popped it into her mouth, chewing thoughtfully.

“It’s funny,” she mused. “Some people change so much and others… they don’t really change at all. Do they?”

Kurt knew that Tina was talking about Blaine and sad realization that the behaviors he’d been displaying of late were his true colors showing through. And that he probably had been showing for a very long time. And that it hurt to have loved and trusted someone who clearly had been so unworthy of that consideration.

And he wasn’t the same person that he’d been when he first left Lima. He was discovering strengths and desires that he’d barely begun to tap. He could see the boy he’d been when his father first put him on a plane for New York and the man who had returned for a brief visit.

All they could do was take what they had learned from the experience and move on. Kurt took a bite
from his burger and took a moment to savor the taste, putting Blaine from his mind. He had so much to look forward to in life and it was something of relief that his old relationship no longer haunted him quite so strongly.

Blaine, like Lima itself, could hold him back only if he permitted them to. And he had long since made the decision that they wouldn’t.

He had dreams to follow and Blaine had long since ceased to be a part of them.

* * *

The last days of Kurt’s visit home were pleasant and easy ones. He allowed Carole to mother him, and spent quiet hours with her and his father to reconnect. He rested and prepared for his upcoming classes and rehearsals. He hung around with his friends who were in town. And he spoke with Adam every moment that his boyfriend could spare during his tech preparations.

Still, he would be lying if he tried to claim that he wasn’t glad to be returning to New York. Back where he really belonged.

He nearly went back to the apartment that he’d shared with Adam, only recognizing after he stepped onto the subway with his luggage in tow that he couldn’t go back there again. A change of trains brought him to NYADA, which would now be his base of operations in all things.

His room in the dorms was stark and bare, the only amenities being the bed, dresser and desk that had clearly seen a lot of wear and tear since they were installed. The cinderblock wall behind his bed was painted a clean white, providing him with a blank canvas that he could transform into his own space. The boxes and bags containing his possessions sat on the floor, waiting to be unpacked.

Kurt sighed to himself, the realization of what the next few months would really entail finally hitting him. But there was no use in moping, not when he had things to do. Adam needed him to be strong enough to stand on his own two feet while the older man was away and the last thing that Kurt wanted to do was disappoint him. He needed to be able to do this for the both of them.

With quiet resolve, he took up the box cutter and opened up the first box. A framed photo of himself and Adam took a prominent spot on the desk where he would be able to see it from anywhere in the room. After that, the rest of things would fall into place.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the long delay in getting this chapter finished. Real Life has been kicking my ass lately...
Chapter 8

As much as Kurt had enjoyed his visit home and the trip down memory road, it felt good to be back in New York. Somewhere along the line, New York had truly become his home and the place where he felt most comfortable. It didn’t matter if he was in the loft or the tiny studio that he’d shared with Adam or a dorm room at NYADA. There was a relief that came from being in a place where he didn’t need the armor of a fantastic wardrobe or frosty demeanor to protect himself. This was the city where he was meant to be and coming back always made him feel better about things.

Still, it felt strange to be living more or less alone for the first time in his life. He had determined that the secret to not dwelling on Adam being away was to keep himself as busy and possible so that he’d be physically and mentally exhausted at the end of the day. With his heavy class load and work schedule, he was fairly sure that he just wouldn’t have enough time to focus on his absent lover.

Still, he might have overdone it. Just a bit.

He had his final semester in Intermediate Dance, which was three days a week. Stage Combat was two days a week, Thursday finding him with both physical classes on the same day. He still had his two sessions of voice with Madam Tibideaux and Professor Collins. For his acting section he had chosen to take the second level of Diction and Dialects, along with Performance Methods and Scene Study: all of which would help round out his skills as an actor and give him more scope overall as a performer. After the past two semesters, it was a somewhat lighter schedule than he was accustomed to since he was no longer playing catch up, but between school, rehearsals for Les Miz and his commitment to Vogue, he’d be kept a very busy boy.

“Are you even going to have time to sleep?” Rachel asked teasingly from she sat cross-legged on his bed. She’d come over to help him put the fine touches on decorating his room, insisting that he needed his own gold star to remind him of his potential. Kurt had accepted her hand-crafted gift graciously, hanging the foil-covered cardboard on his bulletin board where he kept his most important things. Among those things was an article from the Boston Globe profiling the cast of Adam’s play, dubbing them “The Boys of ‘Butcher’s Bill’” with a lovely photo of the group. Kurt couldn’t help from smiling at the image of Adam, who looked so handsome in his costume. Next to it was a map of the United States with a collection of colored push pins. Red pins marked each of the cities that Adam’s play was scheduled be showing in. They would be changed out for a green pin when Butcher’s Bill was running in that city and then blue once the production moved on. Kurt was looking forward to the day when all the pins on the map would be blue.

Rachel looked over Kurt’s class schedule again and shook her head in bemusement. “Are you sure that you squeezed in everything you wanted to?” she asked, handing him back the printout. “You do know that you have another two years of school, right?”

Kurt shrugged, used to being so busy. “I was really hoping to get in Script Analysis and maybe a writing class, but my adviser suggested that I wait until next semester,” he explained.

Rachel nodded, knowing that once they were finished with their sophomore year they would have the opportunity to take more electives that would help in developing their individual interests as performers. She would just be glad that all of her dance requirements will have been satisfied and she could focus on other elements of her training that weren’t so torturous. It was clear to everyone that no matter how hard she tried, she just never would be a credible dancer.
She looked about the room, glad that Kurt had been able to transform it into something that he would be comfortable in. Decent sheets and a stylish comforter in dark and light tones of grey made a comfortable nest for him to rest in. The walls were decorated with framed theatrical posters, including one from the production of Much Ado About Nothing that he’d performed in. Photos of friends and family would keep him company, the ones of his father and Adam holding special places of honor.

Kurt reached into the mini-fridge that he’d purchased for two cans of Diet Coke and handed one to Rachel. “I’ll be okay,” he assured her. “Admittedly, staying in the dorms will give me extra time for practice since I don’t have to commute home.”

“Yeah, but knowing you, they’ll find you at three in the morning in one of the classrooms practicing when you can’t sleep,” she pointed out. “You don’t have Adam to look out for you and you do need to make sure you take care of yourself.”

Kurt sipped at his drink thoughtfully, knowing that she was right. He needed to pace himself and make sure that he gave himself enough down time, otherwise he would end up just burning out. “I will,” he assured her.

“Because you do not want me to sic Santana on you and have her go all Auntie Snix on your ass,” she warned, wagging her finger admonishingly.

Kurt laughed, offering Rachel one of the shortbread biscuits that came in his first care package from Adam’s mom. She’d made sure to pack his favorites and he knew that he didn’t dare store them in the communal break area if he wanted to keep them. He’d already been warned by other dorm residents that particularly special snacks were the first to vanish from the pantry.

“It will be nice to have a place to come when I have breaks between classes,” Kurt mused, looking about the room. Rather than having to drag everything he needed for his day and being out of luck if he forgot something, he could appreciate the convenience of being able to be at his room in just about five minutes. Whether he needed a nap or just a change of clothes in between classes, there was something to be said about actually having the access to both quickly.

“I just worry about you being alone,” Rachel said gently, nibbling on her treat.

“Well, it’s not going to be Finn’s and Puck’s party pad,” Kurt granted. And for him, that was the point. This room would be his refuge. His quiet place when he needed to study or rest or just decompress from the pressures of the day.

“I just remember that I hated the dorms,” Rachel sighed, looking around. “I was so lonely and that was with a roommate.”

Kurt didn’t respond immediately, sipping at his drink. Rachel’s history of being off-putting and not opening herself up to new people was largely responsible for her loneliness. Back then, there were only two kinds of people that Rachel recognized; those that helped serve her interests and those who stood in the way of her pre-ordained destiny of stardom. Kurt himself had deviated between the two more than a few times in her eyes.

“I’ll be fine,” he assured her. “I’ll be seeing you every day and I’ve got some friends who are also dorming. It’ll be okay. Jamie is also in the dorm this year, and so are some of the Apples. I promise… I won’t lack for company when I want it.”

“All right… I know that you can take care of yourself,” Rachel granted. “It’s just… this is going to sound silly.”
Kurt’s gaze softened when he realized that something was really bothering her. “I’m sure it’s not,” he insisted gently.

Rachel placed the empty soda can down on Kurt’s desk and looked up at him with wide, soft eyes. “It just feels like we’re losing you a bit,” she said. She saw the confusion in his expression and went on to explain, “Back when you were living in the loft with us, it felt like we were all this tightly knit group. Like we were New Directions alumni first and everything else second.

“Even when you moved in with Adam, it was more like him being pulled into our group than you leaving. You being here… it’s like NYADA is stealing you away from us.”

Kurt found himself blinking in surprise, having not expecting her to say anything like that. It was so unlike what he had previously experienced with her. Had she made some comment about him being able to take advantage of extra practice time or chance to network with his fellow dorm-mates, that would have been completely anticipated. But making this a New Directions Alumni vs NYADA was… well, unexpected to say the least.

“I’m just being stupid,” she sighed. “But you’re here and Mercedes is in California and Finn is in Texas now. It feels like our group is falling apart. We don’t hear from Quinn that often and Mike is in his own world.”

She brushed her hair back, huffing a bit as she reluctantly examined her feelings. “I just don’t want to lose you too,” she said sadly.

Kurt sat down next to her on the bed and took her hand in his. “That’s not going to happen,” he promised. “I know that we’re not kids anymore and we’re facing a lot of changes in our lives. There are going to be times when we have to be apart, but that doesn’t mean our friendships have to fade. We just need to work a little more at it.

“I mean, look at Mercedes and me,” he insisted kindly. “We make sure that we talk regularly because it’s important to us that we don’t lose touch with one another. Just because you and I aren’t roommates doesn’t mean that our friendship is going to fall apart, or that we won’t be in a position to help one another. If anything, the fact that we aren’t in one another’s back pockets all the time will make the time we do spend together all the more important.”

Rachel looked up at him, her dark eyes meeting his. “I know that I’m being stupid,” she sighed, letting Kurt pull her into a warm hug.

“No you’re not. A little needy maybe,” he teased gently, getting her to laugh. Kurt then realized just what might be the real reason behind Rachel’s sudden bout of clinginess.

“This isn’t about Finn, is it?” he asked.

Rachel’s cheeks turned a deep red at the mention of her ex, leaving Kurt to wonder if the two of them would ever really be totally over one another.

“A little,” she finally admitted. “This is just me being stupid again. We’ve been broken up for over a year now… by my choice, mind you. And I did have another boyfriend in the interim. I don’t know why him dating is bothering me.”

Kurt suspected that there were several reasons why that was. He knew that Rachel still loved Finn and probably always would, even if she accepted that their lives just didn’t mesh together anymore. And so long as Finn had remained single, she could harbor the fantasy that one day they might find their way back to one another after she had satisfied her dreams of stardom. She could have her
dalliances, but the dream of reconnecting with Finn never really faded. Not until now when she had to recognize that he wasn’t going to sit around and wait for her to be ready to settle down in a decade or two.

He wasn’t going to reprimand her for being childish and putting unreasonable expectations on someone who was entitled to live his own life. She knew that she wasn’t being rational and didn’t need him to point that out to her.

“You need to start dating again,” he informed her. “You haven’t been with anyone since you broke up with Brody.”

She shrugged disinterestedly. “I’m just so busy now… You know how tough things are for us.”

Kurt was aware since he was under the same level of pressure but that didn’t stop him from having friends and being able to manage a fairly healthy and equitable relationship. Rachel’s usual laser-guided focus often caused her to neglect the other important elements in her life.

“Yes, they are,” Kurt agreed. “But that doesn’t mean that you can’t have a life outside of school and work. I know that it’s easy to just lose yourself in your work, but you have to find some balance if you don’t want to totally burn out. And that means socializing just for fun, not just interacting to create professional contacts.”

Kurt took her hand in his, giving it a reassuring squeeze. “There are some things coming up in the next few weeks that would be fun,” he offered. “And with everything on our plates, we’ll need some time to decompress a bit.”

She took a deep breath, as if to steal herself for what she needed to do, but turned to him with a bright smile and nodded. “You’re right,” she agreed. “It’s time for me to get out of the slow lane and start living my life.”

Kurt laughed when she flung her arms about him to pull him close. “I love you so much… I don’t know what I’d do without you. You always know just what to say to get me to see sense,” she insisted.

“I love you too,” he assured her. “And I just want the best for you. You deserve it.”

Reluctantly releasing her friend, Rachel sat back and looked about the room again. “Will you mind if I pop in here once and awhile to check up on you?”

“Of course not. I’ll be offended if you don’t. I promise to keep my dirty underwear out of sight,” he promised playfully.

She gave him an arch look. “As if you’d ever let your designer briefs touch the floor.”

“Well, not without Adam tossing them there,” Kurt chuckled.

* * *

The days before classes started were relatively quiet ones. Kurt took his morning cup of tea in the student lounge, watching as fellow classmates began to trickle in for the start of the semester. He’d previously wondered about the logic of such a large dorm building given the relatively tiny student body, but it was making much more sense now that he was actually living there.

The majority of residents were freshmen, but there were more than a few older students taking advantage of the school housing. Whether it was because rent became too much to manage, or
because their roommate had to leave or a romance fell apart, NYADA made sure that their students were not left homeless and struggling. The life of a theater student was unpredictable and it wasn’t considered that unusual for students to suddenly move in right in the middle of the semester when they had no other options for their housing woes.

He was taking advantage of the lull before the semester officially began by putting in a few extra hours at Vogue while he had the chance, as well as catching up on some leisure reading. It was kind of nice to read something light that didn’t tax his brain too much since he would have some heavy studying to do before the term was over. He’d learned well to take advantage of what rest time he could scrape out since it would become quite rare as the semester progressed.

Adam, unfortunately, didn’t have much time to speak now that they were in the final preparations for their official opening night. The few texts that his boyfriend managed to send during breaks hardly made up for the older man’s absence, but Kurt refused to feel badly about it. Once the play officially opened the following night, the pressure would ease up a bit. In the meantime, Kurt would be supportive and send as many positive vibes in Adam’s direction as he could. The Englishman was nervous enough about the show’s debut, and the last thing he deserved was Kurt guilt-tripping him because he was feeling a bit lonely at times.

He was contemplating what to do for lunch when his cell phone rang for his attention. Checking to see who was calling, he was pleased and surprised to see that it was Niall’s wife, the other Butcher’s Bill widow.


“Oh, fine…. I just got home from the night shift and wanted to surprise you,” she said. “Guess what I’ve got waiting for me?”

“Please let me that it’s not a specimen from the hospital,” Kurt pleaded playfully. “I think they’d frown on you taking home anything that needs biohazard disposal.”

“No, you silly thing,” she laughed. “How about two tickets to see the boys on their opening night.”

Kurt sat up suddenly, nearly spilling his tea. “Are you joking? Those tickets have been sold out for weeks.” He’d looked for any way to wrangle a ticket, having checked the re-sale websites and saw that the price would just take too big a bite out of his savings. Adam would not want him to put himself into financial difficulty in order to see his show. He hadn’t told Adam that he was trying to find a ticket, not wanting to disappoint his lover in case he failed.

“How did you manage that?” he asked.

He could practically hear her preening on the other end of the call. “These are courtesy of the producers,” she explained. “I called the other day to see if there was any way they could arrange for me to see the show.

“I’ll admit to playing the wife card,” she admitted, laughing a little. “Niall would be proud because that was some of my best acting. I got a little teary about this being the first time we’ve been apart since we got married and how proud I was of Niall and before you know it, there are two tickets waiting for me at the box office for tomorrow night.

“And get this…. We’re going to the after party too,” she crowed happily.

Kurt suddenly felt a wave of guilt that he hadn’t thought to do the same thing, though he doubted that an actor’s boyfriend would rate as importantly as an actor’s new bride. There was something
distinctly unfair about that.

“So… do you have any plans?” Cynthia asked playfully. “Because I really hate traveling alone.”

Isabelle would be expecting him at the office, but there was no way in hell that he was going to miss this and she would more than understand his last-minute change in plans. “Are you kidding?” he demanded, grateful that she’d thought to invite him. “I’ll make sure that I’m free.”

“Great!” Cynthia said happily, glad to have a partner in crime. “I figure that we can grab the bus tomorrow afternoon that will get us to the theater in time and we can grab a late morning bus back if that works for you. We can crash with the boys.”

That meant a few precious hours to spend with Adam, a chance to celebrate his accomplishment before he was forced to focus on his own studies and rehearsals. It might be the last time he got to see his boyfriend before the summer and the only chance he’d get to see his show. There was no way he was going to miss it.

The following day found Kurt meeting Cynthia to catch the Bolt Bus for Boston. He stowed their overnight bags in the rack over their seats before settling in next to Niall’s wife. She reached into the paper bag on her lap and handed Kurt one of the acai bowls they’d purchased for lunch.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked, seeing how tired she looked.

Cynthia looked at him, her normally bright eyes shadowed and bruised looking. “Just tired,” she admitted. “I traded shifts with a friend and pulled a double so I’d be free tonight and tomorrow.

“It’s okay… I’ll nap on the ride up. We’ve got a few hours and I’m used to not sleeping a lot. I’ll have plenty of energy for tonight,” she assured him.

“Well, thank you for inviting me,” he said sincerely, stirring the fruit in his bowl. It looked like an unappetizing mess but the mixture of berry puree, coconut and granola was really delicious.

She smiled warmly. “Who else would I bring?” Cynthia chuckled, tucking into her own meal. “Niall’s folks are in London and none of our friends would appreciate seeing the show the way you will. And besides… I couldn’t enjoy myself if I saw Adam moping. He’s going to be so happy to see you.”

“They’re both probably at the theater by now,” Kurt surmised, looking at his watch. “I can text Adam and…”

“No, don’t disturb him,” Cynthia insisted, swallowing a mouthful of fruit. “Let’s surprise the boys. I don’t want to distract Niall and he’d be too focused on impressing me. We’ll have time to see them after the show.”

Kurt reluctantly put his phone aside, wanting to share the good news with his boyfriend but Cynthia was probably right. Their men would be anxious enough about opening night and it would be a wonderful surprise for them to see their loved ones after a successful performance. To be honest, Kurt couldn’t wait to see the thrilled expression on Adam’s face when they saw one another. It might be only a few weeks since they saw one another but Kurt missed Adam so much that he positively ached.

Once they finished eating, Kurt bagged up their garbage and turned to his friend. “I’m going to do some work. Why don’t you get some sleep?” he proposed.

She nodded, fighting back a yawn. Getting out an eye mask, she settled against the window and
snuggled down into her seat. “You don’t mind?” she asked, clearly fighting the call of badly needed rest.

He smiled reassuringly. “I’ve got some work to do for school,” he explained. Even though the semester hadn’t started yet, he had some things to work on before classes began.

Cynthia yawned, finally giving into her exhaustion. Putting on her eye mask, she rested her head against the window and within a few moments was sound asleep.

Knowing that she would probably sleep soundly the entire ride, Kurt pulled out his headphones and plugged them into his phone to listen to the music he’d downloaded earlier. He’d found an amazing cast recording of Les Miserables and wanted to listen to the full run through without the visuals to distract him. He needed to really pay attention to the lyrics and the singing.

He knew that it didn’t matter how familiar he thought he was with the material. He hadn’t exaggerated when he’d told Adam so many months ago that he’d been singing those songs since childhood. Standing on a stage in a production was entirely different than singing for his own pleasure. He now had to look at the well-loved music from a very different perspective and actually see how the songs would play out from an audience’s perspective.

He closed his eyes when the music reached “At The End Of the Day” and began to lose himself in the music. It was a pretty spectacular bit of song writing and the way the voices were layered to build an image of the population of a city plunged into poverty and devoid of hope. He pictured himself in such a setting, remembering the edge of desperation with starvation and disease always close by. The chorus opening the song needed to set the tone that explained the state of the nation that would explain the events that followed.

It was rare to have a musical where the background players had so much influence over the flavor of the storyline. Whether they were playing beggars, prostitutes or common townsfolk, they had as much importance as any of the primary players. They had to be just as invested, not just be content to be window dressing.

He took out his book and looked over the notes he’d made for playing Enjolras. After having worked with Wade, he could see why the senior had been cast in the role. He had an absolutely magnetic stage presence and a stunning bright tenor that sounded exactly the way one imagined that the passionate revolutionary he was playing would be. Wade was tall and handsome and looked like the kind of man that others would be willing to follow to their deaths.

Kurt knew that he had a serious challenge measuring up to a performance like that. After seeing Wade singing “Red and Black” during their last rehearsal before winter break started, Kurt couldn’t help from worrying that he wasn’t going to be able to come close to matching those standards. Wade looked like a commander while Kurt felt that he looked like a street urchin in comparison. He probably would be more believable as Gavroche than Enjolras.

Even though he knew that it was highly unlikely that he would have to play the part, he had to give as much attention to playing Enjolras as he did his ensemble parts. Which basically meant having twice as much work, he thought with resignation. He took it more as a compliment to his work ethic than any actual belief that he could carry off the part since Wade would have to be bleeding out of every orifice to even think about missing a performance.

Having the work to focus on made the trip go faster and by the time he finished listening to the soundtrack in full, they were halfway to their destination. Kurt put his book down and glanced at his companion, who continued to sleep soundly. Deciding to let Cynthia get as much rest as possible, Kurt put on the music again, focusing on Enjolras’s parts and working out how he imagined playing
them. He had to figure out his own way that might be a bit different from Wade, but would be just as compelling.

When the Bus reached the Boston city limits, Kurt put his things away and felt the twinge of excitement that he’d been trying to keep under control. Cynthia was still totally out of it, and he gently nudged her.

“We’re almost there,” he said gently, not wanting to startle her.

She started a bit despite his care, pulling off her mask with a jerky motion. “Boston?” she questioned sleepily, running a hand over her face.

“Yes. We’ll probably be dropped off in about half an hour,” he advised. “I figure that if you’re anything like me, you need a little bit of time before you feel human after a nap.”

She smiled tiredly, rubbing at her eyes. “I just need coffee and I’ll be good for the rest of the night,” she promised.

Kurt had endured his fair share of all-nighters and figured that she would get her second wind soon enough, once they were off the bus and had the chance to walk about a little bit, and once the excitement of seeing their partners began to hit her again. He knew that Cynthia would be fine.

Of course, getting changed in a bus station bathroom would probably go down in his book as a relatively new experience. It took a bit of careful maneuvering to keep his dress pants from dragging on a floor that he didn’t think was too clean as he pulled them on and ended up sitting on the toilet when he changed his shoes and socks. It wasn’t something that he wanted to repeat any time in the near future. After slipping into his stylish jacket and combing his hair in the bathroom mirror, he judged himself suitably prepared for the evening.

Knowing that Cynthia would need a few minutes more to dress and put on her makeup, Kurt set out to find some coffee for the two of them. He returned about ten minutes later, carrying two cups when his friend stepped out of the ladies’ room. Her short hair had been smoothed down and a bit of eye liner and lipstick made her look much more awake and cheerful.

“You look fantastic,” he complimented. While the black dress was a bit conservative to his tastes, she had dressed it up with an attractive silver necklace and elegant tall boots that drew attention to her legs. “Niall is going to be thrilled to see you.”

She took Kurt’s arm and pulled him in for a quick hug. “Let’s get going. We can get a cab to the theater and then find someplace to grab dinner before the show.”

“Sounds good to me.”

They caught a taxi to take them to Cutler Majestic Theater at Emerson College and Kurt felt a wide smile cross his face. He had seen proper theaters before, but this one looked especially grand. It was a large building with a classical beau arts design and an elegant marquise displaying the name of the show.

“I read that this is one of the finest performance venues in the city,” he said, seeing Cynthia’s awed expression. “It’s a real credit to the production to be staging here.”

She didn’t answer immediately, her eyes focused on the display with the cast photos. Seeing her husband featured prominently seemed to touch something in her and it took her a moment to find the words to express what she needed them too.
“When I met Niall, I had a lot of doubts about getting involved with an actor,” she admitted softly. “I’ve always been the cautious kind, and to be with someone who’s career prospects weren’t in any way certain… Well, let’s just say that my mother tried to talk me out of it when things started getting serious between us. She warned me that I’d end up supporting him for the rest of our lives.”

Kurt didn’t say anything, since clearly she had worked her way through whatever misgivings she had about their relationship since they were married now.

“Seeing this…” Cynthia paused and drew in a shuddering breath. “I knew he was talented, but I was afraid that no one else would see it.”

Kurt smiled gently, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze. “I know what you mean. It’s not the easiest or most stable career to get into. Not everyone is cut out for it.” Or to be involved with someone who is, he added mentally.

Cynthia wiped at her eyes, careful not to mess her make up. “I’m just so proud of him,” she insisted. “There’s no one that deserves this more than Niall.

“Oh, and Adam too!” she insisted, laughing a little. “He’s so lucky to have someone like you supporting him.”

Kurt smiled, looking at the picture of Adam on the display. “We support each other,” he insisted. “I know that he would be here for me if our positions were reversed.”

Cynthia smiled at Kurt leaning into his comforting presence. “Thank you for coming with me tonight,” she said a bit tearfully. “I’m glad to have a friend with me to remind me that this isn’t totally crazy.”

“Thank you for inviting me along,” he insisted. “I wouldn’t have wanted to miss this.”

“You hungry?” she asked. “I think that Niall mentioned that there’s a good Chinese place right around the corner.”

“That sounds perfect,” Kurt agreed. He offered her his arm. “Shall we, my lady?”

* * *

A good case of opening night nerves is perfectly normal, Adam told himself as he settled down at his makeup table. He’d arrived at the theater well in advance of when he absolutely needed to so that he could prepare without rushing and get into his performing mindset. He knew that he needed to be aware and alert the entire time in order for the show to run smoothly. It had never been his way to just cruise through a performance, but first showings always needed a bit of extra focus. How they performed tonight would set the tone for their entire tour and determine whether their tour would be successful or not.

The dress rehearsals had gone smoothly and the early press had been very complimentary about the writing, the staging and the acting. A positive review of their first official performance would give the entire team the confidence to power through the rest of the tour. For that to happen, everyone needed to be at the top of their games.

The flower arrangements wishing the cast well had started to arrive the day before and pretty much the entire cast found their areas festooned with an assortment of blooms from family and friends. The arrangements from Adam’s parents and sister arrived yesterday, wishing him well and expressing how proud they were. When he arrived at the theater for a morning cast meeting, he’d found an bouquet of roses from Kurt’s parents, urging him to break a leg.
The flowers from his young lover had been delivered just a few moments ago, bringing a smile to Adam’s face. The arrangement was tasteful in the manner that he’d learned to expect from Kurt, the flowers all in creamy white and pale green, displayed in a clear crystal vase. He read the note, smiling at the gentle words of love and encouragement from Kurt before tucking it into a pocket of the jacket from his costume. He didn’t want to lose it and this way he could have his close to his heart while he performed. It would be his good luck charm.

He was sad that Kurt couldn’t be there, but understood that it wasn’t reasonable for him to drop everything and come out of town when he had classes starting in just a few days so Adam hadn’t pressed him. The flowers and a text message that he’d received earlier in the day to call when he had a moment was more than enough to show Kurt’s support for him. He just missed the younger man.

The backstage was chaotic, with the cast trying to get ready and backstage crew running about to make sure that the set and rigging were prepared. He could hear the staging director yelling out instructions over the chatter as lights were checked and props were placed into position. Adam looked at his reflection in the dressing mirror and took a deep breath to calm himself. This was old hat for him, he told himself firmly. Nothing that he couldn’t do with his eyes closed.

Still… he reached into his pocket for his phone and found the first contact on the list and listened to the ringing on the other end of the line. He felt himself biting his lip, hoping that Kurt was free to answer because he very much needed to hear his sweetheart’s voice. He listened to the dial tone on the other end ring twice before being answered.

“Hi honey!” Kurt exclaimed happily.

“Hello, sweetheart,” Adam answered, feeling his spirit lift. Just the sound of Kurts voice was enough to bring a smile to his face. He heard a lot of noise and chatter over the connection and that Kurt was speaking loudly enough to be heard above the commotion. “Are you at a party?”

“Just a little pre-class mixer at the dorms,” Kurt said hastily. “It’s a chance to meet some of the other students boarding here. Are you at the theater yet?”

“Yes… got here a while ago,” he assured Kurt as he settled down in his seat. “I didn’t want to be rushing through my prep tonight.”

“Did you get my flowers?” Kurt asked.

Adam looked at the stylish arrangement and leaned in to sniff at one of the white roses, enjoying the scent. “Yes, I did. And they’re gorgeous, but you didn’t have to…”

“Shush… I wanted to make sure that you knew that I was thinking about you even if I couldn’t be there,” Kurt insisted gently and Adam could all but hear the smile in the younger man’s voice. “Are you excited?”

“Excited… nervous,” he admitted. “Just the usual opening night jitters.”

“Well, you’re going to be amazing. I don’t think I can ever express how proud I am of you.”

Adam smiled, closing his eyes so he could picture Kurt’s expressive face clearly. He wanted to see Kurt as he was at that instant, surrounded with friends but taking a moment to soothe his boyfriend’s nerves. He could see his lover smiling, his cheeks rosy and his eyes bright with excitement. Kurt was always his most beautiful to Adam when the young man was happy and involved in something that interested him.

“I miss you so much,” Adam admitted. “Being here without you… it just doesn’t seem right. I
wouldn’t have done this if you hadn’t been there to encourage me.”

“Don’t be silly. You’re there because you’re a phenomenal actor and you are going to totally knock their socks off,” Kurt stated confidently.

Adam felt his heart flutter a bit at that confident assessment from his lover, feeling better now that he’d heard Kurt’s voice.

“I’m not going to keep you on the phone because I know you need to get ready,” Kurt said. “But you can call me later and tell me about how well it went. I want you to get on that stage and show everyone there just how good I know you can be. You step into that spotlight and prove that you own it.”

Adam found himself blinking back tears and drawing a breath to regain control over his emotions. It never failed to astound him just how supportive Kurt could be to those that he cared about and being on the receiving end of that consideration still took him by surprise.

“I’ll do my best,” he promised, reaching for a tissue to wipe his eyes. Damn it… he hoped that he didn’t turn into a bawling mess and have his eyes get all red because he didn’t think he had eye-drops in his kit.

“I know you will,” Kurt said soothingly. “I’m going to let you go now so you can finish getting ready.”

Adam didn’t want the call to end, wanting to keep what he could of Kurt as close as possible. But the younger man was right. “All right,” he granted. “Can I call you after the show?”

“We’ll talk when you get out of the after party,” Kurt promised. “Go enjoy yourself, superstar.”

Adam smiled again. “I love you,” he insisted.

“I love you too,” Kurt answered. “Break a leg.”

It was a bit silly, but Adam felt positively bereft when Kurt ended the call. He mentally chided himself for being so idiotic, because Kurt would be very disappointed if Adam let himself be distracted and not give his best effort. Rather than dwelling on his partner not being at his side, he needed to focus on the very real support Kurt was so selflessly giving him.

Inhaling to regroup his emotions, he reached for the pot with his foundation and began to carefully dab it over his face. This was his night to shine and he wasn’t going to insult Kurt’s confidence in him by doing anything less.

* * *

Kurt looked up as Cynthia returned from a run to the bathroom and took her seat next to him. “I spoke with Adam,” he admitted. At her teasing look of admonishment, he insisted, “I couldn’t help it! He called me and there was no way that I wouldn’t speak to him on such a big night. But don’t worry…I didn’t tell him that we were here.”

She shook her head in playful reprimand before letting a smile crack her face. “That’s okay. I called Niall,” she confessed, giggling a bit. “I told him that was out with a friend for the evening, which isn’t exactly a lie. I just didn’t say where we were.” She gave him a playful nudge, getting him to laugh.

Kurt looked about the theater, a bit in awe of the venue. It was a beautiful venue, decorated in a
classic manner that gave it an air of grandeur. A performance in such a theater was an event and he knew that many of theater’s finest performers had stood on that stage. Kurt had always gotten a thrill out of seeing a live production but knowing that Adam would be the one standing on that stage… he could barely contain his excitement.

Looking down at the program in his hands, he took a moment to savor the pleasure of his boyfriend having achieved something so momentous. It didn’t matter that this wasn’t Broadway. Adam would be seen for the remarkable talent that Kurt knew he was and to be in the audience to see that happen… Kurt saw it for the gift that it was. He owed Cynthia for this.

Opening the program, he quickly found Adam’s picture and traced his finger over the black and white photo. The biography was brief, telling how Adam had come to America as a teenager to pursue his artistic education and his extensive theater credits. Adam looked like a classic movie star and if Kurt wasn’t already totally in love with the Englishman, he would be seriously infatuated on the basis of that picture alone.

They were talking quietly, waiting for the house lights to dim when a young woman carrying a clipboard approached their seats. “Ms. Russell?” she asked.

Cynthia looked over. “Yes?”

The young woman smiled. “Mr. Keen asked me to make sure that everything is okay for you. After the show, I’ll come get you,” she explained. “This way we can get you backstage to see your husband and avoid the crowd.”

“Oh, my friend has to come too,” Cynthia insisted, grasping Kurt’s arm. “This is Kurt, Adam Crawford’s boyfriend and I know that Adam will want to see him.”

The young production assistant glanced over to Kurt, her eyes widening slightly in surprise. “Of course,” she agreed, smiling reassuringly at him. “That’s not a problem at all. I’ll come get the two of you right after the curtain call.”

“Thank you so much,” Kurt said thankfully. This would be much better than trying to catch the boys at the stage door.

“Well, enjoy the show,” the young woman urged. “I’ll see you a little later.”

“Thank you so much,” Cynthia said. “And please pass on our thanks to Mr. Keen.”

The house lights began to dim and blink, advising the audience to take their seats. Kurt and Cynthia passed an excited glance between one another as they turned their attention to the stage. Kurt felt his friend grasp his hand excitedly at the realization that the moment they had been waiting for had finally arrived, and he gave her a supportive squeeze in return.

The house lights darkened and the music began, causing Kurt’s heart to pound excitedly in his chest. He turned to the stage, his eyes wide as the curtain began to rise.

* * *

If anyone were to ask Adam any specifics about his opening night performance, he’d be hard pressed to come up with anything in particular. From what little he could tell from his perspective, it seemed to go very well. The audience laughed in all the right places and the dream sequences seemed to be well received. The stage crew were all smiling during the show; a good sign that things were going as planned. When the lights went out at the final scene, you could have heard a pin drop in the house. It took a moment for the shock of the abrupt ending to fade before he heard the sound of
applause through the darkness.

It was only afterwards, as the cast took their bows that he got a sense that the audience really appreciated what the play was trying to achieve. The standing ovation they received was long and riotous and it took multiple curtain calls before they were able to leave the stage. Once the curtain came down for the last time, the entire cast came together, hugging one another and offering well-deserved pats on the back.

Mr. Keen hurried over, his face bright with happiness. “Boys, that was stupendous!” he praised exuberantly. “The audience loved it. You were all absolutely fantastic!”

Malcom Jellicoe hurried over to the group, eager to offer his own compliments. “Gentlemen… thank you so much!” he exclaimed, clapping his hands. “This was everything I could have hoped for with my play. You did such a wonderful job and I am honored that you put in so much work.”

Getting that kind of praise from the playwright was especially gratifying. Adam personally understood just how much of oneself a writer put into their work and it felt especially important that he felt that his vision of his work was fulfilled.

Their director shook each of their hands, offering his personal compliments for their work. “I know that you’re all a bit tired, but we’ve got a heck of a party set up to celebrate. So, all of you… go get cleaned up and I’ll see you at the party,” he urged.

The back stage area was the kind of organized chaos that he’d come to expect from a well-run production, with crew hurrying about as they shut down for the night. While the actors could now rest, Adam knew that the costumers, riggers and other crew were hard at work to make sure that everything would be set for the next day’s performance. It was a pity that they didn’t get more notice since without their hard work, none of this would have been possible.

His head still buzzing from the high of his performance, Adam made his way to his dressing table and stripped off his costume, making sure to retrieve the note from Kurt before handing it off to the costuming staff to clean and prepare for tomorrow’s performance. After slipping on his robe, he slumped tiredly into his seat. Looking in the mirror, it was obvious that he had given his all for this performance and it looked as tired as he felt. All he wanted to do was fall face-first into his bed and get a good night’s sleep, but he had things he had to attend to first. He needed to face the stage door, hoping that the audience had enjoyed the show as much as he thought they did, and spend a few hours at the party. There would be press and VIP guests attending and he knew that the opportunity to network would help his future prospects. Fortunately, they’d all be able to sleep in because they didn’t need to be at the theater until a few hours before the evening performance and he knew that he was going to need the rest.

Getting out a packet of makeup wipes, he began the process of cleaning the layers of cosmetics off his skin. He took care, making sure that he got the heavy foundation and powder off his face and neck, wanting to avoid any break outs or irritations. Using a cotton pad doused liberally in witch hazel, he got off any remaining residue and felt much more refreshed.

He had a clean change of clothing for the after party, having chosen items from his limited wardrobe that he was sure that Kurt would approve of. Not that he would ever be as fashion conscious as his lover was, but he wanted to present himself well. He knew that there would be media there and influential figures in the theater scene, so looking well put together and professional was important.

“Hey Adam, I’ve got someone here to see you,” Sam, one of the production assistants called out as she approached his area. “Are you decent?”
Adam sighed a bit tiredly, hoping that it wasn’t the press or someone particularly important because he needed a bit of time to mentally and physically recover from the performance. Pasting on what he hoped was a pleasant expression, he turned in his seat and was shocked to see Kurt being lead to his table.

“What…,” he stammered, totally stunned by the arrival of the one person that he’d wanted to see most.

Kurt grinned and stepped forward, letting the older man pull him into a tight hug.

“Darling, what are you doing here?” Adam asked in astonishment, not quite able to believe that Kurt was actually standing there. “You’re supposed to be in New York.”

“No, I’m right where I’m supposed to be tonight. Cynthia was able to wrangle us a pair of tickets so we could surprise you both,” Kurt explained, not releasing his hold on Adam. “You were so amazing. I would have hated it if I didn’t have a chance to see the show.”

Adam looked over to Niall’s area and saw him joyously embracing his wife, clearly as surprised as Adam had been to see her. She was laughing and babbling happily, letting him swing her about in his delight.

“I can’t believe how wonderful you were,” Kurt insisted, his eyes shining. “I’ve seen you act before, but I could barely believe that was you standing on that stage.” He leaned in to give Adam a warm kiss.

Adam felt his cheeks warm at Kurt’s exuberant praise. “I’m so happy that you enjoyed it,” he finally answered.

Kurt’s eyes began to glimmer with happy tears that he was holding back. “It was everything I could have wanted it to be for you,” he said softly. “I’m not going to lie… I’m biased as hell. But everyone around me was feeling the same thing. We were laughing and crying… usually at the same time! And that ending!”

Adam trusted Kurt’s assessment of the audience’s response and hoped that the critics would be as kind. He pulled Kurt against him, absorbing the feel of the younger man’s body against him. It might have only been a few weeks, but it had felt like ages. Having Kurt there made the night as perfect as it could have ever been.

Kurt allowed Adam to hold him for several minutes before giving him a gentle nudge. “Okay, as much as I’d like to stare at you in your underwear, you’d better get dressed,” he advised, pushing Adam towards his chair. “You’ve got a crowd by the stage door waiting for you. And a big party where we get to celebrate.”

Adam grinned and bent to press a kiss to his lips. “Give me five, love.”

Kurt smiled and watched as Adam stripped off his robe, standing in his briefs and giving Kurt a nice view of that gorgeous muscular body before he found his pants and slipped them on. A bit of deodorant and a splash of cologne freshened him before he slipped on the slate grey button-down shirt and the black tailored jacket.

The younger man stepped over to help with some finishing touches, adding a royal blue pocket square and making sure that everything was buttoned straight and neatly. “You look amazing,” he complimented. He found where Adam’s overcoat was and handed it to his lover. “Ready to face your adoring public?”
Adam inhaled and nodded, holding out his arm so that Kurt could settle comfortably against him.

They met Niall and Cynthia by the door as the other man was signing out for the night. “Okay, mate… you ready for this?” he asked, his voice betraying just a trace of apprehensiveness.

Adam nodded as he signed the production assistant’s list. “Of course,” he answered as nonchalantly as he could. Facing the public after the first performance was always a bit intimidating. With the encouragement of their partners, they stepped outside.

They were greeted by a roar of cheers and flashes from phone cameras going off as he and Nialls stepped forward toward the waiting crowd. Both men were surprised by the number of people who had waited to greet the cast, the fans pressed up against barricades that had been set up and holding out their programs to be signed, calling out to the actors by name. Conrad and Logan were already out there, signing autographs and talking with their fans and the security guard who’d been standing by the stage door gave the two men an amused smile.

“They’ve been here almost since the first curtain call,” he warned, handing the two men markers.

Niall inhaled deeply and looked to Adam. “Well, let’s not keep them waiting any longer.”

Cynthia smiled, giving her husband a nudge. “We’ll wait for you,” she offered, moving to take Kurt’s arm. The two walked past the crowd, leaving their men to soak up the adulation that they so clearly deserved.

Kurt smiled in delight as he watched Adam signed the programs for a group of teenagers that appeared to be theater kids. They looked so in awe of the actors and Kurt couldn’t help from being reminded of himself when he was that young. Back when the dream of being on stage seemed far out of reach. The occasions when he got to see a live performance and actually meet the actors had shown him that it wasn’t an unrealistic fantasy.

Seeing Adam smiling at a young woman who was holding out her program to be signed, it would be easy to be jealous, he considered. These people were seeing the man that Kurt had known all along was deserving of their acclaim and were happily rewarding him with the regard he was due. That Adam was on the path to achieving the dream that Kurt held for himself, and that so many would now see him as talented and marketable and damned sexy while Kurt was sequestered away at school. There was a small part of Kurt that envied Adam.

But was he jealous? Not at all. Unlike Blaine, who could never let an opportunity for Kurt pass by if he could steal it for himself, Kurt genuinely was happy for Adam felt nothing other desire than to support him during this major milestone in his career. He was so proud that Adam was getting the accolades that he so richly deserved. He would have his own chances in due time. Tonight, though… this was Adam’s moment. And he couldn’t be happier than to be there to see him enjoy this triumph.

Cynthia wiped at her eyes as she watched her husband accepting the regard of the audience and her mouth drew into an amused smirk at a young woman who flirted a little too aggressively with Niall.

“I see that we’re going to need to have a little discussion about theater groupies,” she chuckled, watching as her husband graciously accept the girl’s praise while gently and firmly shutting down the flirting.

“I don’t think you need to worry,” Kurt assured her. “Not with the way he adores you.”

As if on cue, Naill turned to give his wife a wink and a droll rolling of his eyes at the girl’s
blandishments.

“Besides… he and Adam are rooming together so they’ll keep each other out of trouble,” he reminded her.

When a few of the other cast members arrived to join the reception line, Adam and Niall were able to step back and allow them their time with the fans. Hurrying back to their partners, Niall pulled Cynthia into his arms and kissed her soundly.

“Well, I’m glad that’s done with,” he insisted, wrapping his arms about his wife and holding her close.

“Sure…” she teased, her eyes glinting playfully. “Having pretty girls flirt with you… what a hardship.”

“Sweetheart, you know I…” Niall began, only to be cut off by her kissing him.

“Honey, it’s okay,” she assured him. “Just keep in mind that I love you. And I’m the one with the keys to the apartment.”

Adam laughed brightly as their teasing banter, keeping Kurt tucked neatly under his arm to keep him close. “That won’t be a problem,” he promised. “The others put us together because we’re the only ones in relationships. That way we don’t spoil their fun.”

“Just remember… no groupies,” Kurt teased, confident that the reminder wasn’t necessary. He trusted Adam’s commitment to their relationship.

Adam kissed Kurt passionately, leaving no doubt about the sincerity of his feelings. “As if anyone could compare with you,” he warned, his thumb caressing Kurt’s cheek.

“I don’t mind you looking,” Kurt compromised. “But no touching.”

“Darling… please…” Adam actually looked sincerely offended at the concept.

“Boys, don’t you think we should be getting to the party?” Cynthia reminded them, giving Niall a not too subtle nudge with her elbow. He teasingly nudged her back, only to have her laugh and retaliate again.

Adam nodded, giving his lover an adoring glance. “Shall we, love? I can use a drink right about now.”

“Lead the way,” Kurt urged. “I can’t wait to be there to hear the reviews.”

* * *

By the time they stumbled back to the hotel room, all four were feeling the effect of too much wine, not enough sleep and the joy of knowing that Butcher’s Bill was on the path to being a genuine hit. Kurt smiled dizzily while he leaned against the wall of the hotel hallway as he watched Adam and Niall spend around five minutes of trying to get the electronic key for their room to work because they were so wasted. Cynthia was wobbling on her high heels and he reached out to steady her, but that caused him to lose the support of his wall and putting his own ability to remain upright in serious peril. The four of them were literally holding one another up, having consumed a lot more wine that was probably advisable.

The boys were absolutely floating as a result of the very strong reviews their show had received as
well as the Pinot Noir that had been freely flowing at the after party. While the entire cast was praised for their excellent performances, both Adam and Niall were specifically cited. Niall’s comic timing and Adam’s charisma and deep substance as an actor were both noted in the Boston Globe’s review as standouts of a decidedly excellent cast. The production was praised for bringing together such a talented cast of unknowns, with the expectation that they wouldn’t be unknown for very much longer.

“I know,” Niall said, very loudly, as his wife pulled him into the hotel room. “We should lead a revival of Moose Murders! It will be brilliant…”

“The show is total garbage, mate,” Adam disagreed vehemently, shaking his head so hard that he nearly fell over. He struggled to get his coat off, forgetting that he needed to undo the buttons until Kurt helped him with fumbling fingers. “Trash… absolute trash.”

“But it would be absolutely epic trash!” Niall insisted, nearly flopping onto his wife as they fell onto their bed.

“I’m going to side with Adam here,” Kurt inserted, winning a beaming grin from his inebriated partner. “It is garbage. No saving that one.”

Niall’s handsome face drew into a petulant frown. “No one recognizes my genius…”

“Niall… you’re squishing me,” Cynthia complained, nudging her husband enough that she could roll out from underneath him. She shrugged out of her coat and let it fall to the floor before falling back onto the bed.

Adam stumbled to the pair and clumsily pulled Niall to his feet. “Come on, you silly wanker… let’s get you ready for bed so Cynthia can have the bathroom after us. She doesn’t need to hear your bitching.”

“Sod off,” Niall shot back, giving Adam a playful shove that nearly sent the both of them tumbling to the floor.

“Need help?” Kurt asked as he carefully sat down on the bed and nudged off his shoes. He had to place his hand down on the night table to stop the world from spinning.

“We’ll manage,” Adam chuckled as he dragged Niall along with him. “Just give us a few.”

“Keep the noise down,” Cynthia warned. “We don’t want the management kicking you out.”

It took more than a few minutes, but Adam and Niall eventually emerged from the bathroom dressed in their sleep clothes, their faces washed and teeth brushed. Kurt went in next, quickly changing and washing up before relinquishing the bathroom to Cynthia and joining Adam. The bed was just barely big enough for the both of them if they cuddled very close together.

By the time Cynthia emerged from the bathroom, Adam was wrapped about Kurt like an octopus and snoring against his shoulder and the younger man was smiling tolerantly. Niall was stretched out on his bed and grinned widely when he saw his wife approach dressed in a pair of flannel sleep pants and an oversized University of Greenwich hoodie.

“Come here, wifey!” Niall bellowed drunkenly, holding out his arms. She smiled tolerantly and lay down next to him, letting Niall snuggle close. Before long, he was sleeping as contentedly as Adam was. And as loudly.

Kurt and Cynthia exchanged amused smiles before settling down to rest themselves. Fortunately,
both of them were so tired that the noise from their partners wasn’t enough to keep them from quickly drifting to sleep.

Morning found the four of them slow to awake and more than a little hung over, but neither of the men wanted to squander what few hours they had with their loved ones before they needed to return to New York. Swallowing down heroic amounts of aspirin and coffee, they fortified themselves enough to entertain their partners before their return trip to New York.

Adam and Kurt headed out on their own, wanting to give Niall and Cynthia a bit of privacy. “I’ll have to tell the hotel to make sure they change the sheets in our room,” he chuckled painfully, his head still a bit tender. “Hopefully they’ll stay to his bed.”

“Are you sorry that you’re letting them have the room?” Kurt asked. Unfortunately, that greatly diminished their options for any kind of physical affection for the next few hours.

Adam smiled, looking a little ragged about the edges but still his usual optimistic self. “I’m just glad that I’ll have a little time with you,” he insisted sincerely. “I’ll take it however I can get it.

“Now come on… let me treat you to breakfast,” Adam offered, his arm firmly around Kurt’s shoulder’s and holding him close. “We found this little place that makes the most delectable pastries. Some sugar should perk you up a bit.”

Kurt just smiled, letting Adam lead him to the café and simply taking pleasure in having a few hours to spend together. Sitting at a tiny table and sipping at his coffee, he listened to his lover babble about the misadventures of the cast and how the past night had been beyond his wildest expectation.

“Sometimes I feel like I have to pinch myself,” Adam insisted, taking a bite of his egg sandwich. Now that his headache was starting to ease, his appetite was making itself known. “I tried not to have any real expectations so I wouldn’t jinx things, but I’m so happy that the show is being well-received.”

“And so it should be,” Kurt stated, popping a piece of pecan roll into his mouth. “The writing is compelling, the direction is intelligent and well done and the acting… well, I think that we can take the Boston Globe at their word that you were all brilliant.”

Adam sighed happily, still absorbing that his opening night had actually been a success. “I’m still dizzy over all this,” he admitted. He reached out to grasp Kurt’s hand, not caring about the crumbs clinging to Kurt’s fingertips. “But I’m so grateful that you’re here with me. Having you here, knowing that you saw me last night… that’s just the icing on all this.”

He kissed Kurt’s hand, then licked his lips. “Mmmm…. Delicious,” Adam sighed. “And I’m not talking about the pastry.”

“Don’t start something you can’t finish, Mr. Crawford,” Kurt cautioned. “Otherwise I’ll be dragging you back to the hotel and I won’t care what they’re up to.”

Adam laughed brightly, his eyes glinting dangerously. “No promises, love,” he warned playfully, waggling his eyebrows and getting Kurt to laugh.

“God, I missed that sound,” Adam sighed, looking at Kurt adoringly. “That’s been one of the hardest things for me. I keep listening for you and I get surprised when I can’t hear your voice if I expect it.”

“I’m in the same boat,” Kurt admitted. “It’s nice having my own room in the dorms, but it can get really quiet. And I’m not used to sleeping on my own anymore.”
“Me either,” Adam acknowledged. He looked to his lover with a resigned smile. “But we will get through this. Feeling your absence just reminds me of how much I love you and that I can’t wait until we’re back together again.

“And in the meantime, you’ll have Bruce to keep your company until I get home,” he teased. “I’d get one for myself if I didn’t know that Niall would laugh himself sick over it.”

The rest of the morning was spent walking about town, with Adam showing Kurt some of the sites since he’d never been to Boston. But all too quickly it was time for Kurt and Cynthia to catch their ride back to New York. Niall and Adam insisted on seeing them to the bus and would head over to the theater afterwards.

Before Kurt boarded, Adam pulled him into his arms and held him tightly. “This is just to tide you over for the next few weeks,” he explained. “Call me when you get back to the city?”

“Of course,” Kurt sniffled. He kissed Adam deeply, not caring if anyone was watching. “Break a leg tonight. I don’t want to read on the theater blogs that you’re slacking off.”

“Never,” Adam promised, kissing Kurt again.

Kurt took his seat next to Cynthia and they waved at their partners as the bus pulled away from the curb. The young woman sighed sadly and settled back in her seat as her husband faded from view.

“It was worth it. Wasn’t it?” she asked.

Kurt knew what she was talking about. Renewing the pain of leaving their other half was the price of those few precious hours together. As much as Kurt hoped that he and Adam would be able to see one another in the coming months, he knew that the odds were very against that. Not with school starting soon for him and the play would be moving on in just a few weeks to their next city.

Still, he nodded. He would be strong for Adam. And rather than dwelling on their separation, he would focus on his work and the day that Adam would return to him and make Adam proud. He couldn’t do anything else.

“Absolutely.”

* * *

Classes started and Kurt found himself diving in with his usual drive and strong work ethic. It felt good to get back into the swing of things, even if the challenges that his education presented seemed even steeper than just a few weeks ago. The students had survived this long now had expectations to satisfy and however good they were at that moment, they had to show how much better they would become.

His teachers had never had any reason to complain about his efforts and they fully expected that he had not even begun to touch his full potential. They were going to be pushing him to the breaking point, but Kurt relished the challenge. When he’d first applied to NYADA, he hungered for the real training that he’d never gotten before. And he still wanted to learn just for the sake of seeing how far his talent could be taken. But how he was seeing his education had subtly shifted. The hunger to absorb everything that his instructors were trying to impart to him was as powerful as ever and his gifts continued to evolve and grow.

But having seen Adam taking the first steps in his post-school career had been something of a wake up call for Kurt. It was a reminder that he had a purpose at this school beyond honing his craft. He had a career to prepare for. All of the tools that he was being given would certainly make him a
better performer, which was something he craved in its own right. But there was another, more practical goal and that was to make him more employable. NYADA’s reputation as a school would not be well served if it turned out immensely talented students that couldn’t find work.

Being at NYADA wasn’t about making him the best performer possible so he could sing for his own gratification. It was about giving him the tools he needed to go out into the world and show himself to be marketable to prospective employers. This was something that Kurt had always been somewhat aware of, but it was a fact that had started to move to the forefront of his mind.

Getting changed for his first dance class of the semester, Kurt considered how Rachel had been so totally focused on her post-NYADA career that she’d totally neglected what education she was being offered. It had cost her dearly. He’d been much more focused on the here and now, but he needed to consider how his studies were going to get him acting jobs in the future. The classes he picked and how he approached them would help determine how successful his career was afterwards. It was a good thing that he enjoyed the learning process, but he needed to give some real consideration as to what kind of performer he saw himself as after his completed his education..

Ms. July was in her typical form following the holiday break. As they were no longer novices, she expected them to be on time and finished with their warm ups by the time she walked into the studio, her heels clicking ominously on the wooden floors.

“All right, everyone,” she barked, the entire class snapping to attention. “Get on the line and let’s see if you haven’t forgotten everything.”

She gave a loud yawn, feigning boredom. “Amaze me,” she challenged.

Kurt could help from smiling as they hurried to form two lines, positioning themselves in a staggered formation so that she had a clear view of every dancer. There were no attempts to hide within the group and they were giving their best efforts as they went through the moves that she called out, her eagle-sharp eyes looking for the least mistake. Running through the basics without too much in the way of cutting insults was a real sign of how far they had come. The students that didn’t measure up or have the desire to really push themselves had long since washed out. The one left were the students that she had some chance of making into dancers.

By the time the class was drawing to a close and they were doing their cool downs, Ms. July was leaning against one of the barres and studying her exhausted, sweaty students.

“I hope you all realize that I took it easy on you today since it’s our first day back,” she advised. ignoring their groans. “That will not be the case next time. It’s going to get a lot harder going forward, so you all had better prepare because I am going be pushing you like you’ve never been pushed before.

“Out there…” She gestured at the world outside the studio windows. “You’re going to have to fight to earn your place. Because there are no guarantees. Not even with NYADA on your CV. Do you know where 90 percent of theater school graduates are today? Not on Broadway, I’ll tell you that. They’re waiting tables and working in offices.”

She gave them a smile that was positively feral. “Some of them are even doing exactly what I’m doing here. So don’t fool yourself into thinking that you’ve got some kind of in when it comes to getting a job. Or that getting a job means that your career is set, because all it takes is one screw up and your career will be over before it even begins.”

Kurt couldn’t help from wincing, because there was no one who knew that better than Cassandra July. His teacher wasn’t ignorant of the fact that many saw her as the cautionary tale… the one who
had it all and threw it away in a moment of anger that rendered her unemployable. But it was because she was such a good teacher that she wanted to make sure that they didn’t make that same mistake.

He knew how fortunate he was. That he’d found a place where his abilities were recognized and was being given the chance to see just how much he could grow. He wasn’t going to squander that chance.

Adam was out in the world now. It would only be a matter of time before Kurt was out there with him. He needed to be ready.

But first… he needed to take a shower and get himself to his Diction and Dialects class.
Kurt couldn’t help from grinning as he passed through the hallways of NYADA, carrying a ridiculously huge bouquet of red roses that had been delivered while he was in his Scene Study class. He probably shouldn’t have been too surprised in retrospect. Valentine’s Day had brought a steady stream of deliveries to the students throughout the day, offerings of flowers or boxes of chocolates from partners and loved ones interrupting classes to the delight of the recipients. It was a pleasant break from the routine and it felt good to see so many people made happy to be remembered.

Knowing his lover’s fondness for romantic gestures, he should have been prepared for something special. Fortunately for him, Adam’s gift didn’t arrive during his dance class because he had no doubt that Ms. July would have beaten him over the head with the flowers before shoving the stems someplace very uncomfortable. Fortunately for the students receiving gifts, Professor Cutkosky had been pretty tolerant of the Valentine’s Day antics about the school even though his classes had been repeatedly interrupted.

“Well, Mr. Hummel… I suppose we should be grateful that your sense of timing is better than your suitor’s,” he said teasingly, giving Kurt a smile to confirm that he wasn’t annoyed at having his class sidetracked for the third time in the past hour.

Kurt couldn’t help from blushing at the playful smiles from his classmates, including Analisa who’d had her earlier workshop interrupted by a delivery of flowers and chocolate. Kurt resumed his seat and placed the vase to the side of his chair. Jamie, who’d been sitting behind him gave him a playful nudge.

“I hope you remembered to get something for Katya,” Kurt whispered. “Otherwise she’s never going to let you hear the end of it.”

“All right everyone,” Mr. Cutkosky admonished, not bothering to hide the amused glimmer in his eyes. “If Mr. Hummel isn’t too distracted, let’s see if he can explain how the macrocosm reflects the microcosm in this scene and their impact on the central themes of the plot.”

After class, Kurt returned to his room to refresh the water in the vase and placed the arrangement on his desk where he could enjoy it. The entire room seemed filled with the scent of roses and Kurt couldn’t resist leaning in to savor the fragrance. Leave it to Adam to not only show Kurt that he was remembered on the day for lovers, but also do it in a way that was sure to ward off any interlopers that might be sniffing about. He knew that he probably shouldn’t enjoy that kind of display of possessiveness, but he wasn’t going to lie to himself… it felt good to have a man like Adam making a public show of claiming him like this.

After taking a quick selfie of himself with his flowers, he texted it to Adam and waited for his lover to call back. Even though they’d spoken in the morning before Kurt went to class and Adam would need to leave for the theater shortly, Kurt knew that Adam would have been waiting to see Kurt’s response to his gift. As expected, within five minutes, Kurt’s phone rang.

“Hi sweetie!” Kurt chirped happily when he answered.

“Hello, darling,” Adam answered, and Kurt could practically see the smile on his face just from his voice. “How was your day?”

“Long and exhausting,” Kurt admitted. “Ms. July seems determined to kill us all after she saw two girls with a box of chocolates. And Professor Collins is having me do more of the opera technique
that Madam Tibideaux has me working on, so it’s like running a vocal obstacle course.”

“And you loved every minute of it,” Adam teased, knowing just how much Kurt hungered for learning.

Kurt couldn’t help from laughing. “Well, maybe not dance class today.”

He paused, looking at the flowers that were his link to his lover. “I love the flowers,” he admitted.

“I’d hoped you would,” Adam answered softly. “This is our second Valentine’s day as a couple.”

Kurt smiled, feeling his eyes tearing a bit at the reminder. “I know. Last year, I was still trying to figure out just what you saw in me. You were this gorgeous, worldly senior and I was…”

“The most beautiful man I’d ever seen,” Adam insisted. “You still are.”

Even after all this time, Kurt couldn’t help from blushing at the compliment. “Are you guys doing anything after the show?” he asked. “I’m sure that the boys are going to want to take advantage of all the V-day festivities.”

Adam laughed a bit. “They talked about going to a pub near the theater that’s having a party. Niall and I will probably tag along to babysit and watch the others make fools of themselves on the pull. Better than sitting at the hotel feeling sorry for ourselves.”

“Go have a good time,” Kurt urged. “I’m sure that you’ll find some pretty drunk college girl to flirt with you and have absolutely no chance because your mine.”

Adam couldn’t help from laughing at Kurt’s statement of possession. “Yes, I am,” he affirmed happily. “Are you still going to Elliot’s cabaret?”

“Yes. Rachel’s meeting me after her last class here so I can dress her,” Kurt explained. “Elliot’s insisting that we perform so we want to make an impression.”

“What’s the theme?” Adam asked curiously.

“Fallen lovers and broken hearts,” Kurt mused. “I’ve got some ideas of what to wear and we’re meeting Elliot over at his place so he can help with our makeup.”

“Wear the leather pants, darling,” Adam advised. “You always look absolutely smashing in those.”

Kurt chuckled at the hint of lust in his lover’s voice. “I would have thought you wouldn’t want me to look too good tonight,” he teased.

“Nah. Tart yourself up and have a good time,” Adam urged. “Go make all those men fall in desperately love with you and break their hearts.”

“I’ll give you all the details tomorrow,” Kurt promised, laughing brightly.

“Oh, please do,” Adam begged. “I’ll need something to distract me from Niall’s bellyaching about the hot resident that Cynthia has her shifts with. Better yet, send pictures.”

“I can do better than that. Elliot said that they’re recording the show so I’ll let you know where you can watch it,” Kurt answered. “I love you. Break a leg tonight.”

“You too, darling. Love you.”
Kurt was still smiling when he hung up the phone, thinking that he and Adam just passed a test of some sort. They both would be going out and around potential temptations and neither was worried about the other straying. Knowing that Adam trusted him and that he trusted Adam took a tremendous weight of his shoulders. He no longer felt that he had to draw back and tone down his own flights of fancy in order to keep an insecure partner content or worry about what might be happening when his back was turned.

Adam was more than happy to let him be himself and to explore who he was capable of being. Cheating never crossed his mind but knowing that Adam trusted him made him want all the more to stay faithful. Knowing how much being cheated on had hurt made him never wish to inflict that kind of pain on anyone else, least of all Adam. So he planned to go out and dance and make himself the most desirable man in the room with the knowledge that none of them could have him.

That fact, along with the theme of the cabaret gave him quite a few ideas about what to wear and he began to pull out several pieces from his wardrobe. Checking the time, he saw that he had about an hour before Rachel would show up. Just enough time for a shower and to do his hair while he considered what would work with what he planned to sing.

Rachel arrived right on time, bright-eyed and nearly quivering with excitement. “So what do you have for me?” she asked the instant he opened the door to his room, nearly clapping her hands in excitement.

“Well, you look like you’re aiming for something fabulous,” Rachel commented, reaching up to pat Kurt’s tall crest of hair. She knew that he liked to style his hair high and proud when he was going out on the strut.

“You’re one to talk,” Kurt teased, eyeing Rachel’s blown out hairstyle. “If your hair gets any bigger, it’s going to need its own zip code.”

Rachel looked at the clothes spread out over Kurt’s bed and arched a surprised eyebrow. “And Adam’s letting you walk out in that?”

Kurt laughed, nodding his head. “He was the one who suggested the leather. I’d hate to disappoint him.”

He went to his wardrobe rack and pulled off a garment bag. “Let me show what I picked out for you. No comments until you try it on,” he warned.

Rachel looked at the brocade corset a bit dubiously, but she trusted her friend. Kurt wouldn’t let her walk out looking foolish. After months of communal dressing rooms, any trace of modesty had long since faded and she stripped down to her underwear. Kurt motioned for her to take off her bra too, which she did so with a resigned sigh.

“You know… the last time someone asked me to take off all my clothes, he at least bought me dinner first,” she complained playfully as she waited for Kurt to sort out her costume.

Kurt glanced up and gave her a wry smile. “Stop complaining,” he warned, holding out a light gauzy shirt for her to slip into. “Be glad that Santana isn’t the one helping you because while I am completely indifferent to the sight of boobs, I can’t say the same for her.”

“True,” Rachel granted with a tolerant sigh. She’d been on the receiving end of many comments
about her breasts, or more to the point, the size of her breasts which in Santana’s opinion was entirely lacking.

She let Kurt dress her like a doll, layering the corset over the short, ruffled skirt and off the shoulder blouse. He carefully tightened the strings, pulling in her waist and giving her a perfect hourglass figure but left enough give so she could inhale properly.

He stepped back and nodded approvingly. With the tall boots and fishnet stockings he’d instructed her to wear, she looked perfect. “I was right,” he said proudly. “You look stunning.”

She looked in the standing mirror and saw how he had managed to make her relatively modest breasts look generous with the way the corset supported her bosom. The purple blouse underneath complimented her skin tone perfectly and she could tug it up to give herself a bit more coverage if she felt too exposed. The skirt was playful and just the right length to make her legs look long and slender.

“Now for the final touches,” Kurt insisted, helping her with the accessories. Long fingerless gloves decorated with delicate chain mail and crystals. A velvet band about her throat and lastly, a pair of black and purple translucent wings, completing the transformation from theater student to wicked fairy.

Kurt’s own outfit was no less fabulous, Rachel decided as she watched him strip down to dress and she raised a curious eyebrow at the fact that he was wearing a thong under his clothing, giving her quite a view. Kurt might not have any inclination towards the female form but she had no such reservations when it came to a man’s body and she wasn’t going to pass on the opportunity to ogle Kurt’s.

His favorite leather pants paired with tall buckled boots with a slight heel that made his already long legs look even longer. His shirt had billowing sleeves that he rolled up to his elbows and was just sheer enough to let his skin glow through the deep blue fabric. He wore a chain mail decorated belt that sat low on his hips and drew attention to his ass and crotch in a way that made it hard to look away.

“Wow,” Rachel marveled. She’d always thought that Kurt had the best ass of all her male friends, but she could see why Adam loved him in those pants so much. And the way she could see his chest through the fabric… “If you weren’t one, gay and, two, very much taken, I’d be all over you.”

“We have got to find you a man,” Kurt teased. “And dressed like that, you’re off to a good start. This is our ‘Rachel Berry is officially on the market’ sign in big neon letters.”

Rachel gave a little wiggled to get the corset to settle and eyed her exposed cleavage. “Well, either that or getting in some practical practice for my debut as French prostitute.”

“You look amazing,” Kurt assured her. “And this is the kind of place where you can really go all out and be outrageous. You’ll be fine once you get into character.”

He helped her take off the wings so she could put on her coat and slipped into his own outerwear. “Come on,” he urged, the prospect of an enjoyable evening bringing a glint to his eyes. “Elliot’s probably waiting for us.”

It was a short cab ride to Elliot’s apartment in the East Village. Fortunately, he lived on the second floor of a six floor walk-up because Rachel did not relish the idea of climbing multiple flights in her heels. Their friend opened the door with a huge welcoming grin.
“Hey guys! Glad you’re both coming tonight! I was worrying that you’d might be having second thoughts.” Elliot exclaimed as he ushered them inside. “Are you cold? Can I get you anything?”

“No, thanks. We’re fine,” Rachel assured him as she slipped off her coat. “It wasn’t that cold out.”

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I am so looking forward to tonight. I think that you two are really going to add a lot to our show. Let me get a look at you so I get some ideas,” Elliot stated, motioning for the pair of them to stand before him. He was already fully dressed and made up for the night in full steampunk glory with tall boots, tight trousers and a man’s waist cincher decorated with silver beading.

“Looks like you’re already in full Starchild-mode,” Kurt noted. He had come to greatly his friend’s ability to build such a compelling stage persona, and every element of Elliot’s costume, right down to the touches of glitter around his bright blue eyes that built a creature that was so different from his mundane personae. Decked out in black, red and silver, he looked both alluring and menacing.

Elliot grinned, giving Kurt a wink as he got out his makeup kit. “Of course. This isn’t a place for plain old Elliot Gilbert,” he chuckled. “You’re both good with being recorded? The show’s going to be posted on our YouTube channel and I just want to make sure that you’re both still okay with being associated with the group.”

“We’re good,” Rachel assured him. “It’s risqué but nothing that we would be worried about being connected to. After all, I’ve been told that I need to branch out more and switch things up.”

“Great. I’ll text Tai before we leave so she can have the releases for you to sign. Now let me see what I’m going to do with the both of you…” He paused, looking the over appraisingly.

“Where’s Dani?” Kurt asked as he settled down on the couch carefully, tugging at the seam of his pants near his crotch to avoid injury. The pants were just on the right side of being nearly too tight for comfort.

“She’s already over at the club with Santana so we’ll meet them there,” Elliot said as he set out his extensive makeup kit. “You’d think that I’d see my roommate occasionally, but since she started dating Santana…” He shook his head with playful mournfulness.

“Is Neil joining us?” Kurt asked. He’d met Elliot’s other roommate a few times before and this kind of outing didn’t seem up his alley.

“He’s supposed to,” Elliot answered, motioning for Rachel to take the seat opposite him. He carefully wrapped a towel about her shoulders to keep her costume from being stained. “He’s got a club meeting so we’ll probably have to throw him into his costume as soon as he get here.

“Let me see now… we’re looking at fairy theme, right?” Elliot looked to Kurt for confirmation. “Okay then… let’s do something glittery and really pretty for you. Close your eyes.” He picked up a makeup brush and went to work.

Kurt leaned forward, watching in fascination as Elliot expertly transformed Rachel into the character he’d envisioned. Her eyes were shadowed in deep purple and outlined with smoky kohl that made them look huge and fathomless. Shimmery powder was dusted over her cheekbones and clavicles, giving her skin a subtle glow. Using a silver liquid eyeliner, he carefully drew a delicate pattern of spirals extending from the corners of her eyes and down her cheekbones. A delicate spray of glitter in her hair and a touch of pale pink gloss to her lips made Rachel looked ethereal and nearly doll-like.
“Wow,” Kurt marveled as he eyed the effect. “That’s amazing.”

Rachel looked at herself in the mirror and couldn’t help from smiling at the effect. “Thank you so much,” she said sincerely. “I would never have been able to get it to look this good.”

“It just takes practice,” Elliot assured her. “I’ll have to show you some pictures from my early days with the cabaret… some of my looks were pretty clunky.

“Now let me see about you, Kurt,” Elliot commanded, taking in Kurt’s outfit. “This is going to work wonderfully with your song choices. You definitely can pull off an ice prince or fallen angel look.”

“That’s kind of what I’m going for,” Kurt acknowledged.

“Something beautiful, but untouchable,” Elliot mused as he draped the towel over Kurt to protect his costume. “How about a little guyliner to start off?”

“I can never get mine to look as good as yours,” Kurt groused as Elliot carefully traced the outline of Kurt’s eyes with the soft pencil and carefully smudged it out with a cotton swab. “I always end up looking like a raccoon after a rough night.”

“Well, the secret it to use only a tiny bit at first,” Elliot confided while he worked. “You can always add more but it’s a bitch to clean up if you use too much right off the bat. Get it on your waterlines and then smoking it out gives a softer look. Here… see what I mean?”

Kurt accepted the hand mirror and saw that Elliot had done an expert job of tracing the outline of Kurt’s eyes, which only drew attention to the bright color of his irises. It was a striking effect and he could understand why the older man enjoyed wearing makeup for occasions other than just performing.

“Use a really good quality pencil. If the color is soft, it’s a lot easier to worth with,” Elliot advised as he checked his work. “Now… let’s really kick this up.”

Kurt sat patiently as Elliot applied touches of silver glitter about his eyes, highlighting the shadowed effect of the kohl. A touch of clear lip gloss and Elliot sat back, smiling in a very self-satisfied manner.

“Man, I wish you had your ears pierced because you need some jewelry,” he mused, eyeing the total effect of the makeup with Kurt’s costume. “They would add just the right… Hold it!”

Elliot rushed into his room and Kurt could hear him rummaging about before returning to the living area. He held a sparkly ornament out to Kurt and ordered, “Let’s see how this looks.”

It turned out to be a heavy silver wire that had been twisted so it would sit behind Kurt’s ear. Strands of blue and silver crystals hung from both ends to drape over his ear and trail down his neck. The colors matched Kurt’s costume and he could feel the weighted swing when he turned his head.

“Oh, that’s perfect,” Elliot insisted. “You have to wear it tonight.”

It was a bit more than Kurt was accustomed to wearing, he considered as he studied the effect in the mirror. He normally avoided jewelry choices that could be seen as being too feminine, preferring items like his brooches that worked best when paired with clothing in clean masculine lines. His experiments in androgyny were relatively tame; the kilts and sweaters that pushed boundaries back in Lima were positively uninspired compared to what he’s seen on the streets of New York. After spending so much time as being seen as too ladylike by too many people, he realized how he’d actively toned down those elements in how he presented himself.
He’d been proud of how he’d been changing since he arrived in New York. His body was stronger, his shoulders now showing breadth and strength and he could lift his dance partners with ease. He’d starting to find more confidence in his own worth, both as a performer and a person. But was he doing it at the cost of losing who he was?

It was past time he stopped letting others dictate what was right and wrong for him, Kurt considered as he fingered the glass beads against his throat. So what if he liked pretty things? That didn’t make him any less of a man and he needed to stop apologizing for being who he was. He would either be accepted, or he wouldn’t be. And the opinion of those who didn’t accept him wasn’t worth having.

If there was ever a setting to play around with gender boundaries, it was the Hellfire Circus. And if Elliot could feel completely at ease wearing wear a waist-cinching corset with his costume and enough makeup to stock a department store counter, there was no reason that Kurt couldn’t wear jewels and glitter if he wanted to. He could embrace all sides of his nature without fear.

“I love it,” Kurt proclaimed, letting a wide smile touch his features. He turned his head to watch the effect of light dancing off the crystals, highlighting the glitter adorning his face. “You’re right… I did need some more sparkles. Can we put some of that shimmer powder on my chest?”

Elliot’s grin widened even more. “Sure! Let’s highlight those gorgeous pecs.”

Kurt grinned as he loosened the ties on his shirt, putting more of his hard-won muscles on display and enjoying the whistle of admiration from his friend. Nothing wrong with gilding the lily, he told himself as Elliot swiped a bit of bronzer down his sternum and under his pectorals before dusting a bit of shimmer on to highlight his muscles. He decided to leave the neckline of his shirt wide open to show off his body even more.

Rachel gave a low wolf whistle and Elliot nodded in approval. “Damn, that looks good. Leave your shirt open a bit more,” he instructed. “Now if you ever decided to pierce your nipples…”

“No way,” Kurt insisted, laughing a little. Though the thought of doing his ears was intriguing. He mentally filed the idea away, deciding to revisit it later when he’d had a chance to think on it a bit. But nothing below the neckline, he told himself firmly.

The apartment door opened and a tall, strongly built young man entered, whistling loudly to himself. Elliot looked up and greeted, “Hey Neil… just in time. Go wash up. We’ll have to get going in a little bit.”


“Thanks. Neil, this is my friend, Rachel,” Kurt explained.

“Well, then you’ve got to be very talented,” Neil said thoughtfully.
“I try,” Rachel answered, smiling a bit. “What about you? Are also performing tonight?”

“Nah… I couldn’t carry a tune if it had a handle on it,” Neil chuckled.

Elliot nodded in agreement. “He really can’t,” he confirmed. “The first time I heard him singing in the shower, I thought that he was strangling a small dog. And his dancing is worse, but he can psychoanalyze you within an inch of your life.”

Neil shrugged in a way that amused Rachel. “Is that what you’re studying?” she asked curiously.

He nodded. “Forensic psychology, to be specific,” he explained. He read the confusion in Rachel’s face and chuckled. “I’m hoping to work at Quantico.”

“Neil’s going to be a Fed,” Kurt confided mischievously.

“And I’m going to be your token normie for the evening,” Neil chuckled, giving Elliot a playful nudge.

“Yeah, well our token normie had better go get his ass changed,” Elliot inserted. “Or he’s going to spend Valentine’s Day by himself.”

“I’m going…” Neil vanished into his bedroom and closed the door behind him.

Rachel tossed back her hair and sat down so she could save her feet for the evening. “He seems nice,” she mused.

Elliot couldn’t help from laughing. “He’s the straightest straight boy in the world, but I love him like a brother. And I’m not going to lie… It’s fun watching him at the cabaret because he is so totally out of place.”

As if on cue, Neil yelled from his room, “Elliot! I’m not fucking wearing this!”

“Yes, you fucking are!” Elliot hollered back. He looked to his guests who were laughing at the exchange and shook his head. “He fights me, but I always win.”

Five minutes later, Neil stepped out in the outfit that Elliot had laid out for him. It was much tamer than anything being worn by the others, but the black jeans and a rather basic goth-style shirt and jacket would be enough so that he wouldn’t stand out from in any undo manner. Elliot just sighed in relief that they were able to leave on time.

Kurt wasn’t quite sure of what he should have expected but there was a significant crowd at the club by the time they arrived, and they appeared to already be well lubricated and ready for the show to begin. They seemed to be a very mixed crowd, from college students to business men to a few grey heads, dressed in everything from fine suits to the most risqué of clubwear. The bar was busy where two handsome shirtless men were mixing potent cocktails and the music was loud and pounding.

A tall, slender woman dressed in a gold costume that looked like snake scales hurried up to them with a clipboard. “Hi guys,” Tai greeted. “Just need you to sign off on tonight’s taping. We won’t be using anyone’s real name so we can list you under a stage name in the credits.”

“Sounds good to me,” Kurt answered, quickly reading the release before signing it and jotting down the name he wanted to be known by in credits. He’d thought long and hard about it, inspired by Elliot’s alter-ego. There was something liberating about having a stage persona that would give him the freedom to perform in such a venue.
Tai checked the form and grinned when she saw the pseudonym that he would go by that evening. “Well, Mr. Zephyrus… and I love that name… it’s a pleasure to have you with us tonight.”

“I’ve been looking forward to this,” Kurt laughed. “Elliot’s been telling us how good all of you are.”

Tai blushed, highlighting the gold cosmetics on her olive complexion. “Well, I’m looking forward to seeing what you’ve got up your sleeve. Elliot’s been bragging about the new talent that he’s pulled in.”

Rachel signed her release and jotted down her stage name with a flourish. “This is going to be so much fun!” she insisted. Handing the clipboard back to Tai, she grabbed Kurt’s arm. “Come on… let’s take a look around.”

The venue was a lot bigger than Kurt had been expecting and at the center of the room was a stage of sorts, set up like a ring from a circus with a tall stripper pole at the center and several painted boxes of multiple sizes set up to provide props for the performers. It was designed so that the performers could be seen from all angles in the club and suited the circus theme of the cabaret. Kurt considered the variety of singers and dancers lined up to perform and thought that the set up would work with just about any act he could think of.

He smiled and looked to Rachel. “I can work with this,” he pronounced, and she nodded in agreement.

“Looks good to me. Let’s find the others,” she suggested.

It didn’t take long to find the table where Santana was holding court. She and Dani had arrived early enough to make sure they’d get a spot with an unobstructed view of the performance area. Their friends were dressed in matching outfits of black and red that showed a lot of skin, Santana’s long hair pulled into a high, tight ponytail while Dany had woven hers in a complex braid. Artie and Tina had arrived and were chatting with the two girls and taking in the festivities around them.

“About time you all showed up,” Dani complained, playfully swatting away Santana’s hand that wandered a bit too close to her breast. “I was afraid that we were going to have to start without you.”

“Would I miss this?” Elliot demanded, giving her a wide smile.

Santana nodded at the more plainly dressed man in the group. “Hey Neil,” she greeted her girlfriend’s roommate.

“Hi Satan,” Neil answered, giving her a fond grin. “You look great. Did you suck out any souls on your way over?”

Dani rolled her eyes at the teasing banter between her roommate and girlfriend. “Well now that our master of ceremonies has finally arrived, I’ll let the others know that we can get started,” she announced, sliding off Santana’s lap, not minding the way the other girl’s hand slid over her backside as she stepped away.

Kurt felt the tiny quiver of excitement that always preceded a performance. This was going to be fun.

* * *

“Oh! Do you know what you got into?” Elliot sang, fully in his Starchild headspace. Around him the other performers danced and spun about, enticing the audience. Besides the singers, there were acrobats and contortionists, fire eaters and dancers from multiple disciplines.
“Can you handle what I’m about to do?” Elliot demanded of the crowd that was watching avidly. “Because it’s about to get rough for you. I’m here for your entertainment!”

Elliot saw Kurt out of the corner of his eye and pulled him close, turning his friend so the audience would get a clear look at his beautiful face. “Oh, I bet you thought I was soft and sweet. Ya thought an angel swept you off your feet.” As if on cue, Kurt gave the spectators a smile that had just the right hint of menace in it.

“Well, I’m about to turn up the heat! I’m here for your entertainment!”

The song ended with the two fire eaters spitting out streams of flame, causing the audience to rise to their feet and cheer loudly at the spectacle. Elliot took a bow as the other performers slipped back from the spotlight, taking their seats near the stage and leaving Elliot to absorb the regard of their audience.

“Good evening, everyone!” Elliot called out. “Welcome to the Hellfire Circus!”

The audience cheered and whistled again, and Elliot waited for them to calm before continuing. “We’ve got a very special show for you all tonight. Tonight, my friends, is the night for love.” He gave the audience a sly smile. “Love is like oxygen. Love lifts us up where we belong.”

The spectators cheered and laughed that the movie reference, but Elliot quickly bought them to the real focus of the show.

“But, let’s remember… love bites and bleeds. Love is the one thing that can give you meaning, and utterly destroy you,” he reminded them. “Tonight the creatures of the circus will remind you about love’s dark side, so be careful about falling in love… because there’s no covering up that scar when it’s done.”

Elliot stepped back as the first acts took the stage. A young woman with waist-length white-blond hair dressed in a very revealing belly dancing costume who began to writhe and undulate in time to a slow and sensual rhythm. Kurt couldn’t help from being impressed by her technique and the way she was able to isolate her abdominal muscles to create such subtle and fascinating movements. It was almost hypnotic in how she could control every element of her movement, from the slow rolling of her hips to how her torso could be moving in a completely independent way from her lower body.

A tall young man dressed all in black stepped into the center of the ring and began to sing, his voice a lovely baritone that clearly wasn’t as trained and elegant as anyone at NYADA but it worked perfectly alongside the music and the dancer who was apparently trying to entice him. Kurt didn’t recognize the song, but the longing in the man’s voice was very apparent. As was the element of danger presented by the dancer. And the end of the song, the singer has given in, falling to his knees, the dancer wrapping her arms about him as his body fell limp.

Rachel smiled and applauded loudly, very impressed. “They were amazing,” she said to Neil, who had been watching the performance avidly.

“That was something, all right,” he agreed.

“I liked how they ended with his fate a bit ambiguous,” Rachel stated. “They didn’t spell out specifically what their characters were, but you definitely got a sense of her being a somewhat malevolent being. That he knew loving her would destroy him, but he couldn’t help himself.”

Neil shrugged. “I guess…”

“You didn’t like them?” she asked, curiously. He even seemed a little bored from her perspective.
He gave her a sheepish smile. “Don’t tell Elliot because he’s just going to laugh at me, but a lot of this goes right over my head,” he admitted. “I mean, I enjoy watching it and I know how talented you all are. It’s just… the finer points? I just don’t get it.”

“Oh,” Rachel said, her eyes widening in surprise. While she had not enjoyed some performances she’d seen in the past, she couldn’t imagine being completely indifferent the way Neil was.

“It’s okay,” he assured her, offering a self-deprecating laugh. “It’s just not my thing. But I like watching the show.”

Rachel cocked her head, trying to wrap her mind around what he’d just said. It didn’t make sense that Elliot’s roommate didn’t have a real understanding of theater. She couldn’t imagine that someone without any interest in performing would room with two people who were, since they would have almost nothing in common. It had been awhile since she’d been around someone who didn’t seem to get it and she wasn’t quite sure what to say to him.

The next few acts continued in the same vein, the romance hinted at was tempered with a sharp edge that titillated and teased the very invested audience. Rachel couldn’t remember ever seeing a crowd so totally engaged with whatever was being displayed before them, cheering the acts that they had just seen and eagerly awaiting the next.

Santana reached out to grab Rachel’s hand. “Come on, Berry,” she demanded. “We’re up. You didn’t forget your part, did you?”

Rachel snorted indignantly. “As if…”

She got up and did a quick costume check to make sure that everything was in order and nothing was hanging out that shouldn’t be before hurrying to join her friend. Neil cocked his head slightly, watching her walk away and it didn’t escape Kurt’s notice how Elliot’s friend was looking at Rachel’s legs.

He smiled to himself, mentally filing that tidbit of information away for another day. He settled back to watch his friends while waiting for his own moment to perform.

It was rare that he saw Rachel so at ease doing a performance with someone that was as much a rival as a friend, given how jealously she’d guarded her place in the spotlight in the past. Sure, there had been moments when she had willingly partnered with others, but it nearly always had been if it served her interests in some manner. To see her singing with someone else for no other reason except that they sounded wonderful together and could play off one another effectively was heartening. If nothing else, it showed how far Rachel had come since he first met her.

The costumes for the girls suited their number and showed the real differences in their personalities. Kurt hadn’t chosen a dark fairy for Rachel by accident. There was always an edge to her, but also a fragility that she often couldn’t hide. Santana’s more demonic persona was more obvious and expected, but it was a mask to hide her sincerely tender heart. They were well suited to perform together, and Kurt sat back to enjoy the show.

Starting up with a cover of “Cry Me a River” set the tone for the first phase of their set; trying to appear brave and beyond being hurt by lovers who had disappointed them. Rachel perched herself on one of the boxes, crossing her legs and expressing an air of indifference to the woes of her former lover. Santana leaned in alongside her, hip cocked and playing fiery anger in contrast to Rachel’s coolness. It was a great study of contrasts and worked beautifully.

He applauded them loudly, whistling his appreciation when the music shifted to something buzzy
and a bit retro. Rachel slid off her perch and stalked across the ring, the look of power and aura of threat she presented belying her diminutive stature.

“I hear you’re leaving town,” she crooned, thrusting her chin forward with a sense of determination. She gave the audience a cool warning stare. “And I am feeling down. You should know that nothing leaves my side.” She fluttered her eyelashes winsomely, cocking her head.

“I’m gonna come around. I’m gonna shoot you down,” Santana sang with poignant emotion, layering anger with regret as she made a gun with her fingers and mimed firing it at her unseen target. “You knocked my crown... now you’ll go six feet underground.”

Rachel came up to Santana’s side and joined hands with her. “Your lies have broke my life,” they sang together. “Say goodbye my angel. I gave you all my love, to sleep alone my angel.”

Kurt couldn’t help grinning. He knew this song and it was a perfect choice for the two girls. They both loved and lost and had bumpy roads to finally moving past that old hurt. Having a chance to express their old senses of anger and regret in song would be quite therapeutic, in his opinion.

Santana turned a toothy grin to the audience as she and Rachel belted out the chorus. “Hey Ho, nobody knows you’re not coming home,” they sang in harmony, Santana’s warmer tone balancing Rachel’s brightness. “Hey Ho, nobody knows you’re not coming come.”

“Don’t you take me here,” Rachel warned dangerously.

“Don’t you touch me there,” Santana commanded, to which Rachel bent slightly to show off her cleavage and gave her displayed breasts a little squeeze while Santana boldly grabbed her own crotch.

“I am digging your grave, and you stay there,” they sang waringly in harmony. Rachel did a neat turn into an arabesque, Santana catching her leg to help hold her in position. “Can you see the light, and think you’re still alive? Believe me baby, you won’t come back again!”

Santana used Rachel’s leg to push her into another turn, holding the smaller girl against her and giving the audience a wicked grin. Next to him, Kurt heard Neil laugh and cheer and he could only shake his head in bemusement. What was it about two girls that straight boys found so appealing?

“It didn’t have to be this way, playing games and lost one day,” Santana lamented, giving her shoulders a little shimmy. Rachel hopped back onto the boxes to sit down, pulling Santana towards her.

“Have mercy on my lonely soul,” she insisted, wrapping her arms about Santana to hold her close. “It wasn’t me, it was you ya know!”

The girls paused dramatically, looking over their audience with a coy mixture of hunger and distain. As if the people they were appraising were barely worth their notice.

“Your lives have broke my life. Say goodbye, my angel,” they reminded, offering smiles that were all sugar and poison. “I gave you all my love, to sleep alone my angel.”

“Your lives have broke my life,” Santana cried out, to which Rachel answered back, “Say goodbye my angel!”

Rachel pulled Santana to her, letting the taller girl rest her head against her shoulder. “Hey Ho, nobody knows you’re not coming home,” they sighed. “Hey Ho, nobody knows... you’re not coming home!”
Kurt got to his feet and applauded his friends loudly, cheering and whistling for them. The girls grinned and took their bows, still holding hands before the lights dimmed to allow them to clear the stage. They hurried back to where their friends were sitting, laughing happily over how their set had gone.

Dani quickly took possession of Santana and pulled her in to press a lingering kiss on Santana’s lips. “That was amazing, babe,” she praised, giggling when Santana kissed her again and gave her ass a good solid squeeze with both hands.

Rachel looked to Kurt, her eyes shining happily in the way that only happened after a performance she was happy with. “What did you think?” she asked, accepting the bottle of water he offered her.

Kurt considered briefly before granting her a pleased smile. “You two definitely need to sing together more,” he insisted sincerely. “I haven’t seen you sing with such abandon since high school. It was great.”

“Definitely,” Elliot added, giving the two girls a happy hug. “You both were amazing. Two totally bad bitches that had the audience eating out of their hands.”

“Although, I thought tonight was about putting you back on the market,” Kurt reminded Rachel. “A performance like that is going to scare all the guys off.”

“I don’t know about that,” Neil added, giving Rachel a reassuring wink. “I think that the guys here really liked it.”

Rachel gave him a curious stare before accepting his praise with a soft smile. “Thank you,” she said, a rosy flush coloring her cheeks. Whether it was a result of her performance or the praise of Elliot’s roommate, Kurt wasn’t going to guess at that moment. He was content to let things play out without pushing and see.

They enjoyed the next few acts that included a few other singers, along with dancers and a young woman doing a performance on aerial silks that left Kurt breathless with wonder. He could understand now why Elliot felt so much love for this group. The level and range of talent in the regular members of the group was dazzling and that they did it primarily for enjoyment made a showing like this especially remarkable. It would be so easy to get sucked in.

As much fun as he was having, Kurt knew that he was right in making this a special occasion only treat for himself. He had so much to focus on with school and he knew that between classes and rehearsals, not to mention the job he was holding down, he just couldn’t handle another commitments on his time. Not if he wanted to have even a few hours for mundane considerations like sleep and eating on occasion. Now was not the point in his life when he could afford to run away and join the circus, he thought amusedly.

“Hey Kurt… You’re up,” Elliot prodded, offering his younger friend a supportive smile.

Kurt grinned as his friends began to cheer and urge him on, getting up and taking a quick sip of water before finding his way to the darkened stage. He quickly found his mark by the pole at the center and gave a quick nod to the stage crew to let them know he was ready. The music began to play and a cool white spotlight fell on him.

Kurt knew that with his costume choice, the light was bleach out his coloring and cast him in shades of blues, greys and black that suited his song choice. Tossing back his head, he took hold of the pole and leaned forward, balancing on his toe.
“Come to me, run to me. Do and be done with me,” he sang with an air of quiet melancholy. “Cold… cold… cold…”

He calmly used his weight to turn about the pole until he was leaning backwards on his foot, holding the pole to balance his weight. “Don’t I exist for you? Don’t I still live for you? Cold… cold… cold…

“Everything I possess, given with tenderness,” he sang, his voice ringing out clearly. He swung his body about to stand on both feet, releasing his grip on the pole’s support. “Wrapped in a ribbon of glass. Time it may take us, but God only knows how I’ve paid for those things in the past.”

He always loved this song and how it revealed the vulnerability of the singer and it had spoken to him over the past few weeks. Missing Adam and feeling emotionally adrift at times had been very hard for him and figuring out how he was going to stand on his own for the next few months was a challenge. He didn’t want to give in to despair and it would be so easy to lose confidence in their ability to preserve their relationship.

He looked through the stage light to see the shadowy form of the audience beyond the boundary of the stage. “Dying is easy. It’s living that scares me to death,” Kurt proclaimed. He closed his eyes, picturing Adam’s smiling face gazing down at him. “I could be so content hearing the sound of your breath…

“Cold is the color of crystal, the snow light that falls from the heavenly skies. Catch me and let me dive under, for I want to swim in the pools of your eyes.”

Kurt opened his eyes and spun about, jumping so that he could catch the pole and swing his body about it, one leg wrapped about the pole to support his weight as he spun.

“I want to be with you baby!” he sang, wishing that Adam could have heard those words. “Oh oh… Slip me inside of your heart! Don’t I belong to you baby? Don’t you know that nothing can tear us apart?

He came to a halt and dropped to the floor, letting the sorrow at being apart from his lover wash over him. “Come on now… come on now… Telling you that I loved you right from the start… But the more I want you, the less I get. Ain’t that just the way things are…”

He caught the pole again and spun about a few times before coming to a slow stop as the music softened. He looked up into the distance, as if seeking out his missing partner.

“Winter has frozen us. Let love take hold of us,” he sang gently, wrapping his arms about himself. He let a soft smile touch his features, imagining Adam’s strong arms being the ones holding him. “Now we are shivering. Blue ice is glittering.

“Cold is the color of crystal, the snow light that falls from the heavenly skies. Catch me and let me dive under, for I want to swim in the pools of your eyes.”

He could hear the applause of the audience and let himself smile, pleased that everything had worked out as he’d hoped. The lights shifted, the cool spot giving way to brighter stage lighting that illuminated the entire performance area and let him see the audience more clearly. The music changed, shifting from soft jazz tones to a crisper rock rhythm.

Kurt let his eyes grow cooler and his smile harsher as he immerged fully into his Ice Prince character. Vulnerability gave way to brittle brashness. “Yes, it’s true that I believe… I’m weaker than I used to be,” he confided with a sharpness that hadn’t been apparent in his last song. A warning to his absent lover if he disappointed him. “I wear my heart out on my sleeve. And I forget the rest of me.”
That had been true for so long, he admitted. Opening up to love invited hurt and he had been hurt by those he’d loved. Finn at first, then Blaine. How often had he put himself in second place in order to support someone else?

He caught the pole and leaned to the side, swinging lazily about it. “Yes, there’s time I’ve been afraid. And there’s no harm in that I pray. Cuz I’m more frightened every day, someone will take the hope I have away.”

After Blaine cheated, opening himself up to a new relationship had not be easy, he admitted to himself. And few men would have been as patient as Adam, letting Kurt get his emotional feet under him and being willing to accept friendship if that was all Kurt was willing to give. He’d been so very lucky that morning at school when Adam had sought him out.

“But you gotta give it up to get off sometimes! You gotta give it up to get off sometimes,” Kurt snarled, leaping atop one of the boxes. “You gotta give it up to get off sometimes, I know.”

Jumping back down to the stage, he stalked about the ring, taunting the audience members sitting close by with coy stares and teasing smiles. “All the times I’ve given in…. You fit me like a second skin,” he sang, leaning in close to a young man who was watching him with naked hunger in his eyes. Kurt grinned and trailed a finger down the man’s cheek, tilting his head back so Kurt could glare into his eyes. “And one by one I will begin… to wear you on the days I’m feeling thin.”

He leaped away for the young man, thinking about the man he wished had been sitting there to watch him. Adam did provide Kurt with that support he needed, lending strength and confidence on the days when Kurt felt anything but. Kurt knew that the man he was becoming was due in no small part to the love and care that Adam gave him so selflessly.

Others had taken advantage of Kurt’s giving nature and learning to set boundaries had been a hard and painful lesson for him. People like Blaine, who had become a black hole that would have sucked him dry. Learning that he deserved better and that he didn’t have to suffer poor treatment just to avoid being alone had been a harsh lesson, but one that he was glad to have finally really learned.

“You’d better stop! Stop! Stop using me up,” Kurt demanded, proclaiming to the universe that he wasn’t going to stand being stepped on or taken advantage of again. “You’d better stop! ‘Cuz I’ve had enough, and I’m ready to forget the reasons that keep me here.”

He jumped up onto the tallest of the boxes, turning to face the crowd with a determined glare. This was his world and everyone else existed in it on his sufferance.

“Walk in the rain, you will even if you’re never going to change,” Kurt snarled, making his feelings well known. He would not stand for neglect or abuse. “Good God, need a little love now. You’ll find what you think you’re going to be, child.”

He could hear his friends cheering and urging him as he danced to the music, aggressively thrusting his pelvis and dropping down low. It was a considerable leap to go from his perch to the pole but was so caught up in his performance that he made the jump without a hint of hesitation. He caught the pole with his both hands and spun about until his feet touched the floor. He danced wildly, flirting with the audience who were whistling and cheering him on.

“You’d better stop!” Kurt commanded, knowing that he had full command of the audience. “Stop! Stop using me up! You’d better stop! ‘Cuz I’ve had enough, and I’m ready for forget the reasons that keep me here!”

With a haughty flick of his hand, he dismissed the crowd and turned to walk away in time to the
music, his stride confident and his hips swaying enticingly. When the lights went out he heard the crowd cheering and applauding loudly and grinned to himself and savored the feeling that came with another well-received performance.

But as much as he enjoyed the regard of the audience that had paid to see them, it was the reaction of his friends that meant more. Whether it was Rachel’s gaze of rapture, Santana’s devilish grin or Elliot’s nod of admiration, having those around him who respected his abilities was his greatest reward.

There were several more acts, and Kurt used the chance to regain his breath and enjoy a cool drink before the show drew to a close. Elliot took his place back on the stage to sing a final number and gathered all of the performers around him to accept the applause of the appreciative audience. Kurt took his bows and accepted the accolades happily, holding a laughing Rachel’s hand. Santana and Dani were wrapped about one another, enjoying the attention while making it clear just how above all this they were.

With the show over the group had the opportunity to relax, have a few drinks and mingle with the audience. Kurt ordered himself a beer, wanting something that he could nurse while he worked the crowd. He was shallow enough to enjoy the compliments and flirtations, keeping in character so no one got the wrong idea. And damn it… it felt good to have so many people appreciated what he’d done.

He noted how different it felt to perform in front of a real audience compared to being in the classroom. He kept in mind what he’d learned and used those tools, but without worrying that he was going to be judged for every little thing. He could just let the performance flow with the confidence that it would all flow the way he wanted it to.

He thanked an older couple for their regards, laughing at the teasing compliments from the older woman who was easily as saucy as any of the girls in the cabaret and had him blushing with her frank appraisal of his “attributes”. Thanking them again for their kind words, he backed away and felt himself bump into someone else.

“Oh, excuse me!” Kurt apologized, glad that he had managed not to spill his drink over the well-dressed man who’d been standing behind him.

The other man smiled, his eyes brightening in recognition at who’d collided with him and Kurt realized that it was the man he’d interacted with during his performance.

“No problem,” the man assured Kurt. “I was actually hoping to have a chance to meet you. I’m Andy,”

Kurt let himself smile, always pleased to get some positive feedback. “Kurt,” he answered, introducing himself, holding out his hand for Andy to shake. He didn’t comment when Andy held his hand a bit longer than might be considered proper.

“That was a hell of a show. I’ve seen the circus a few times, but this show was something else,” Andy commented, taking a sip of his cocktail. “I haven’t seen you here before.”

“This was my first time. Thanks for playing along during my act.”

“It was my pleasure. Really,” Andy insisted. He looked at Kurt more closely, his appreciation apparent. “You were fantastic. And I’m always happy to help out a gorgeous man when the opportunity presents itself.”
Kurt couldn’t help from blushing slight at the praise and flattery coming from a good-looking man. He was a bit older than Kurt had originally assumed, but still quite fit and handsome with his blond hair well styled and wearing a designer suit that was perfectly tailored to his body. Conservative until Kurt noted the black nail polish the man wore and the edges of what appeared to be a tattoo peeking out from the cuffs of his white dress shirt. Probably a professional of some kind, Kurt suspected, who had to keep his wildness under wraps at the office.

At another time and another place, he might have expressed a bit of mutual interest and flirted a bit to see where things went. But not that night. Not when he knew what he had waiting for him.

“Listen, can I buy you a drink?” Andy asked, cocking his head towards the bar.

Kurt chuckled, holding up the glass that he’d barely made a dent in yet. “Already have one.”

Andy laughed, and Kurt noticed that the eyes that were sparkling with humor were a lovely shade of blue grey. “Well, I can get another drink and you can join me. Maybe we could talk… get to know one another,” the older man suggested, offering an engaging smile.

Kurt shook his head, needing to put a quick end to the other man’s tentative flirtations. “I’m sorry,” Kurt said gently but firmly, not wanting to hurt Andy’s feelings but needing to make the situation very clear. “I don’t want to give you the wrong impression, but I’m seeing someone seriously.”

Andy’s smile faded a bit in disappointment, but he quickly rallied and put on the brave face that all rejected suitors seemed to master at some point. “Oh… I didn’t know,” he said carefully. “That’s unfortunate… for me.”

Kurt couldn’t help from smiling at his clarification.

Andy looked Kurt up and down again and gave a resigned sigh. “Well, whoever he is, he’s a lucky man.”

Kurt offered him a reassuring smile. He didn’t want to mention that he was fortunate as well. “Thanks.”

Andy sighed, smiling ruefully. “Then I’m going to go get myself another drink to soothe my wounded ego. Because, damn….” He tossed back the last of his bourbon and shook his head.

“You were great,” Andy complimented again, giving a regretful stare before heading off to soothe his wounded ego and maybe find someone more receptive to his interests.

Elliot came up beside him. “Everything okay?” he asked, making it clear that he was watching out for his younger friend.

“Oh, yeah… it’s fine,” Kurt assured him. “He was just expressing his… his admiration for my performance.”

“Like that was all he was admiring,” Elliot chuckled knowingly, nodding his head towards Kurt’s legs. “Those pants are going to be talked about for months to come.

“In the meantime, come with me,” the older man urged, throwing an arm about Kurt’s shoulders and drew him away. “I’ve got some people who want to meet you.”

* * *

Kurt hurried down the hallway, all but running, so that he didn’t arrive late for rehearsal. Stage
combat ran over a few minutes and they’d been doing pairs work, leaving him no choice but to take a few minutes to shower. His cast mates would not appreciate him arriving smelling like an old gym sock. Thankfully he had fresh clothes because he had no time to hurry back to his room.

Wade was already there with the students portraying the Friends of the ABC and doing some vocal warmups when he arrived. “It’s okay,” he assured Kurt, seeing that he’d been rushing. “Professor Carmody’s not here yet. Catch your breath and grab a drink.”

Kurt nodded thankfully, dropping off his back and grabbing a sip from his water bottle. He’d gotten to like the older student since they’d been working together so closely and appreciated being taken under his wing a bit. He remembered that NYADA professors lived by the rule that professors were never late. It was the student who was early, which was a good thing. She would expect them to be ready to start work as soon as she arrived.

With just over two months until their opening night, Professor Carmody had taken her foot off the brake petal and things were speeding along. Kurt had learned that his time spent in rehearsals had nearly doubled as a result, requiring him to spend time with the chorus as well as working with Wade doing his scenes. That meant him attending rehearsals nearly every afternoon and evening, as well as the weekends. Having to memorize multiple roles for multiple scenes made him feel like he was preparing for two shows at once and whatever free time he’d had outside of class and work totally evaporated.

Despite all the work, he was relishing the experience. Rather than being impatient for the show to stage, he was enjoying the process of building the production. Seeing the evolution of the large numbers as their director figured out ways to arrange voices to create the effect that she desired. Kurt didn’t want to consider how much time their director devoted to working out the arrangements, listening to all of their voices as individuals and seeing how they would fit in the puzzle she was piecing together.

The smaller numbers and solos were challenging in a whole different manner and Kurt was getting a very clear sense of what was going to await them in the professional world. There was no such thing as perfect and she wanted to see the very best they had to offer as individuals and as a group. Every run through was done multiple times so that all the principles and understudies got adequate attention.

By the time Professor Carmody arrived, Kurt had just enough time to get his own warmups done and was ready for whatever he was going to be asked to do. More often than not, he was there to observe and make sure that he understood how the scene worked and where his marks would be. He watched the scenes play out repeatedly, jotting down his notes and humming along to the music so that it was engrained in his memory. He was always asked to sing and show that he’d picked up the choreography at some point during the session, and he tried to prove that he would be able to handle the part if called upon.

Kurt sat with the other understudies as they watched the scene, making note of the changes that had been made since their last rehearsal. The small gestures and placements that had been tailored in that shifted or deepened focus. He reviewed his notes, seeing the evolution of the scene and committing to memory the directions.

The principles had run the number several times, each time making small changes that Kurt tried to keep track of. After a fourth run through, Professor Carmody nodded and called out, “That looks good, guys. Wade, take a break for minute. Kurt, can you jump in here? Let’s do another run through.”

Kurt hurriedly put aside his notebook, knowing that he didn’t have a chance to review his notes
because she would expect him to have been paying attention. He climbed the steps to the stage, quickly finding the green tape maker that was the starting point for Enjolras. The senior playing Marius gave him a smile of reassurance, letting him know that the others would be there to help him if he needed it before stepping off the stage. Kurt inhaled deeply, steadying himself and taking his position leaning against the table as the other member of the revolutionary group gathered about. Kurt crossed his arms, on hand rubbing at his chin as he considered everything around him.

“Cue music,” Professor Carmody ordered. “And action!”

The instant the command left her mouth, the stage erupted into a flurry of action as the revolutionaries hurried about and called out information to their fellows. Documents were spread out on the table and a red banner was propped up against the wall.

“At Notre Dame, the sections are prepared!” the student playing Combeferre called out.

Feuilly hurried in, bringing his urgent news. “At Rue de Bac, they’re straining at the leash!”

Courfeyrac smiled happily at the information, seeming to realize that the pieces were finally coming together. “Students, workers, everyone,” he noted excitedly. “There’s a river on the run. Like the flowing of the tide, Paris coming to our side!”

Amid the chaos, Kurt remained calm, like the eye of a storm. He listened to the news, taking it all in and looked up with a beatific smile on his face. Everything that Enjolras had been working for was finally coming to pass.

“The time is near...” Kurt sang, restraining the excitement that was clearly building within him. “So near... it’s stirring the blood in their veins! Yet be aware...”

He stepped over to where Grantaire was standing, snatching a bottle from his hands. “Don’t let the wine go to your brains!” Kurt commanded, giving the drunkard a disapproving glare. He turned to the others, quickly taking command of the situation.

“For the army we fight is a dangerous foe,” he reminded them urgently. Kurt reached out to grasp Combeferre’s shoulder, giving in a firm squeeze as he pulled the other man close. “With the men and the arms we never can match! Oh, it’s easy to sit here and swat ‘em like flies... but the national guard will be harder to catch.”

He struck a thoughtful pose, considering the drastic imbalance between his passionate group and the might of the forces that they were looking to face. “We need a sign,” he surmised, everything now becoming clear. “To rally the people! To all them to arms! To bring the in line!”

Marius stepped onto the stage and Kurt turned an annoyed stare to him. “Marius, you’re late,” he reprimanded, not bothering to hide his irritation.

“What’s wrong today?” the student playing Joly asked the newcomer. “You look as if you’ve seen a ghost.”

Grantaire approached, having regained the bottle that Kurt had taken from him. “Some wine and say what’s going on,” he urged, holding out the bottle to their comrade and taking a drink when it was refused.

Marius looked to his friends, his oddly blank expression becoming more animated as if he suddenly realized where he was. “A ghost you say... a ghost maybe,” he mused happily, taking a seat with several of the group who laughed at their friend’s antics. “She was just like a ghost to me. One moment there, and then she was gone!”
Graintaire seemed highly amused as seeing his normally stoic, single-minded friend turned about by a pretty face. “I am agog! I am aghast!” he sang dramatically, stumbling a bit to show that he had been drinking more than wise. “Is Marius in love at last? I’ve never heard him ‘ooh’ and ‘aah’!”

He planted himself on Marius’s lap and pressed a sound kiss to the top of his head only to be laughingly shoved away. “You talk of battles to be won, but here he comes like Don Ju-an.” He thrust his hips lewdly. “It’s better than an opera!”

Kurt turned an annoyed look to his group, irritated at the distraction that had drawn their attention away from their important matters. He stepped forward, quickly taking command of the situation and returning their focus to the critical issues they’d been discussing before Marius’s arrival.

“It is time for us all to decide who we are,” he reminded strongly, the reprimand harsh in his voice at their foolishness, arms crossed over his chest. “Do we right for the right to a night at the opera now?”

He looked to his fellows, pacing across the stage as he tried to rally them to their cause. “Have you asked of yourselves what’s the price you may pay?” he demanded. “Is this simply a game for rich young boys to play? The colors of the world are changing day by day.”

Kurt understood Enjolras’s character well from both the novel and the show. The son of a wealthy family who was a true believer. A fanatic, Kurt considered, who had no qualms about dragging the less fervent members of their group into their cause and was willing to openly shame them for their lack of devotion. He’d seen Wade express those traits, his portrayal expressing both the beauty and terror of the character’s nature. Kurt grasped Enjolras’s total ruthlessness; that he would not allow anything to stand in the way of bringing their righteous fight to their enemies.

“Red! The blood of angry men!” Kurt roared, reminding the group of what they were fighting for. “Black! The dark of ages past! Red! A world about to dawn! Black! The night that ends at last!”

Marius got up from his seat and approached his friend, trying to get him to see reason. There were times when Enjolras’s passion frightened the others, and now that Marius’s eyes had been opened to love, he tried to get Enjolras to see that there was a life outside of their political cause.

“Had you been there tonight, you might know how it feels,” he pleaded for his friend’s understanding. “To be struck to the bone in a moment of breathless delight! Had you been there tonight you might have known how the world may be changed in one burst of light! And what was right seems wrong, and what was wrong seems right!”

Graintaire came up behind Marius, taking a long slug off his bottle before singing teasingly, “Red!”

“I feel my soul on fire!” Marius cried out, his expression nearly ecstatic at the thought of his beloved.

Graintaire shook his head in bemusement. “Black!”

“My world if she’s not there!”

The rest of the group watched their friend’s dilemma and joined Graintaire in singing. “Red!” they sang out, baritones and tenors blending beautifully.

“The color of desire!” Marius answered.

“Black...”

“The color of despair!”
Kurt had been watching Marius with a determined stare, but now it was time to remind the other man of what they had been fighting for. “Marius, you’re no longer a child,” he reminded with gentle firmness, ignoring the fact that the other man was several years older than he was. He tried to maintain an air of command and maturity as he sang. “I do no doubt you mean it well, but now there is a higher call.

“Who cares about your lonely soul. We strive toward a larger goal. Our little lives don’t count at all.”

With a flourish, Kurt snatched up the red banner that had been hiding the rifles that they had gathered. Waving the banner, the rest of the revolutionaries were reminded of the cause that they were willing to die for and fell in behind him, singing as one.

“Red! The blood of angry men! Black! The dark of ages past! Red! A world about to dawn!”

Kurt tossed the banner to Courfeyrac to wave as Marius came up to him and grasped his hand, making it clear that he was with his friends and joined them in song.

“Black! The night that ends at last!”

The group cheered and through the noise Kurt heard Professor Carmody’s command to stop. “That looks good,” she said appraisingly. “Kurt, I’m glad to see that you’ve been paying attention. You seem to be a lot more comfortable up there now.”

The praise from their director was reassuring, but the grins and pats on his back from the older students and Wade’s nod of approval gave him the feeling that he’d actually accomplished something significant.

“Let’s take ten everyone,” Professor Carmody suggested. “We’ll take it from the top again.”

Kurt exhaled in relief and went to find his bag so he could get a drink and send Adam a quick text. He was thrilled that he’d done as well as he apparently did. Wade sat down next to him and patted him on the shoulder.

“That was great, Kurt,” he complimented. “Your voice is a lot stronger now. I can see how much you’ve been working on it.”

”Madam Tibideaux has really been pushing me,” Kurt explained, taking another gulp of water. “I’m glad that it’s showing.”

“It definitely is,” Wade assured him. “Listen, after rehearsal, some of the guys and I are going out for a bite. Want to join us? We’re just going over to the diner down on 10th street for burgers.”

Kurt blinked in surprise, having not expected the invitation. While the older cast mates had been friendly enough to him at rehearsals, this was the first time that any of them had expressed any interest in socializing outside of school. Kurt hadn’t been insulted as he really didn’t know any of them and everyone was so busy with their own work and studies.

Guessing that he must have proven himself in some way, he decided not to try to read more into the invite now. He was being accepted by this accomplished group. Looking for insult when clearly none was intended made no sense at this point.

“Sounds great,” he said agreeably. He smiled at the older man. “Thanks for asking.”

Professor Carmody returned and called the group together. “Okay principles… let’s try that again.
I’d like to see a little more energy at the opening. And Mike...,” She looked to the actor playing Marius.

“The way you interacted with Kurt at your entrance... let’s see how that works with Wade. It was an interesting dynamic.”

Wade chuckled and gave Kurt a knowing wink as he took his mark. Kurt grinned back, setting in to watch the run through and make his notes.

Looks like he did something right.

* * *

Songs used:

Elliot's solo - "For Your Entertainment" by Adam Lambert
Rachel's and Santana's duet - "Hey Ho" by Gin Wigmore
Kurt's solos - "Cold" by Annie Lennox
  "Stop" by Matchbox Twenty
Rehearsal song - "Red and Black" from Les Miserables
Chapter 10

Back when he was still in school, Adam’s teachers had lectured him about the rigors of a touring company and he’d been amply warned about the sense of isolation that could come with being on the road. With a faculty made up of professional actors, singers and dancers, they had the experience to justify this warning. And he was finding, much to his frustration, just how correct they were. Sleeping in hotel rooms, living out of a suitcase and eating way too much fast food made it difficult to maintain the routines that kept him healthy and centered and feeling well. All the little rituals that he had developed over the years, like baking when he felt stressed or sitting by the window with a cup of tea to relax, were no longer options and already the pressures were starting to wear on him. Maybe he’d been naive, but he hadn’t expected it to be so difficult at this stage. He’d never been a fussy sleeper and didn’t consider himself to be high maintenance. But he missed having his own space and waking up next to the man he loved. He missed the two of them cooking in his tiny kitchen or sitting in the living room working on his writing while Kurt was studying. It seemed like he just didn’t have any time to decompress and since he only really had his castmates to socialize with, never really could escape the show. As much as he personally liked his friends in the cast, he still felt very much adrift at times.

Maintaining a proper sleep schedule when one was in unfamiliar surroundings or sitting in a bus traveling to their next destination wasn’t easy and Adam wasn’t terribly surprised that he was still wide awake after midnight. Niall was seated in the pair of seats across from him, stretched out as much as physically possible and snoring away, his eyes covered with a pink sleep mask that obviously was stolen from his wife. Most of the others were either sleeping or at least resting as best they were able.

Well, if he couldn’t sleep, he might as well get something constructive done. There were a number of emails he hadn’t answered yet. A note from his sister, finally having resolved the horse welfare seizure in the courts after months of hard work. A reminder from his parents that they were finally taking their overdue holiday to Spain if he needed to reach them. A reminder from Mr. Tillman about the upcoming auditions for the Shakespeare company summer season.

Adam sighed tiredly. He wanted very much to call Kurt, just to hear his voice. That alone would ease the knot of loneliness that seemed to permanently settle in his chest. But it was so late, and he didn’t want to disturb Kurt’s rest. He knew that Kurt would not be upset at all upset being awakened if he saw that Adam really needed to speak with him, but he had so much to deal with that Adam didn’t want to be yet another burden for Kurt to have to carry.

Even though he got along well with the rest of the cast, especially Niall, he was often reminded of how alone he was and far from the people that he wanted to be with. His parents and sister were across the pond and Kurt was in New York while he was sitting on a bus traveling from Boston to Richmond. They’d left Boston directly after their final performance so that they’d arrive in Virginia early in the morning. The plan was to give them two days to rest while the crew got the sets, props and lighting set up before a set of rehearsals to get accustomed to the new theater began. Previews for the local media would be staged just five days after their arrival with the official opening night scheduled two days later, leaving very little real down time. This was going to be their pattern for the duration of the tour.

He thought that he’d be better prepared but apparently one truly had to experience this kind of challenge to understand it. There would be good days and not such good ones. There would be days when he missed Kurt so much that the ache would be felt physically and other days when the both of
them were so busy that they barely even had the time to focus on their separation.

If there was one good thing about not being able to sleep on the bus was that he could take advantage of the WIFI. He really should be working on his play since he has promised the rewrites would be done by the time the tour concluded but he just didn’t have the mental energy to focus on it. Instead he found himself cuing up the YouTube channel for Elliot’s cabaret group to watch the Valentine’s Day performance.

While he enjoyed most of the acts, especially Rachel and Santana who were so perfectly matched together, it was Kurt that he wanted to see. And his lover didn’t disappoint. Besides looking so breathtakingly gorgeous, he performed with elegance and passion, creating a character that was so different from himself yet still managed to portray Kurt’s own nature so beautifully.

He wished that he could have been there, but after watching Kurt’s set for the third time he had to wonder if his lover would have given such a performance if he had. Despite the clear sense of abandon, there was something about Kurt’s performance that was so refined and mature that expressed clear expediency growth since Adam left New York. Maybe their time apart was to Kurt’s benefit, he considered. Had he been coddling Kurt too much and preventing him from maturing in the way that he deserved to be?

He sighed to himself, watching as Kurt spun about a stripper pole on his screen looking like some otherworldly tempter. He’d never wanted to be the one to hold Kurt back, nor did he want to be pushing Kurt to do things that he didn’t want to. Kurt deserved the chance to develop on his own and seemed to be having a marvelous time doing so. Maybe being away from him was best for Kurt at this point, giving him room to find who he was both as a performer and a person without his well-meaning interference.

He couldn’t help from remembering something his Aunt Magda had told him once when he was visiting her country cottage as a child for an early spring weekend. A champion hobby gardener, she took advantage of her young nephew’s free labor and he’d wondered why she was taking young plants out of her hothouse when it was still so chilly out.

“It hardens them, pet,” she explained patiently, smiling as she handed him pots of seedlings to place down by the path. “Going into the cold makes them stronger so they’ll be able to survive if the weather turns.”

Adam looked at the plants in his hands, feeling a bit sorry for the poor things. He didn’t want to be outside when it was this cool and he couldn’t imagine how such young plants wouldn’t freeze.

Aunt Magda laughed warmly. “They’re not going to be out all the time,” she assured him, ruffling his hair playfully. “Not until it gets warmer. We’ll put them back in the hothouse before supper and they’ll spend the night all toasty warm. Then tomorrow we’ll put them outside again until they’re used to it.

“Now, when we’re done here we’ll go back inside so you can wash up. I’ve got some fresh biscuits for your tea.”

Adam smiled to himself at the memory, remembering how relieved he’d been that the poor baby plants weren’t going to be left to freeze but the lesson his dear aunt taught him seemed to fit his situation now. Both he and Kurt were those young plants, just starting to emerge from the safety of their school hothouse. Adam was a bit further along and could be expected to survive in the cold world, but Kurt was still a tender seedling. He needed the opportunity to strengthen. To harden as his aunt had phrased it before he could find his place in the world.
Being on his own would likely do Kurt far more good than harm, Adam considered as he watched Kurt dancing for a clearly appreciative audience. He would get the chance that Adam did, to explore and grow and discover himself as a performer. And without Adam there tempted to guide him or protect him from struggle or failure, Kurt would harden. He would strengthen and grow and be prepared to face the world outside of NYADA.

This was important for the both of them, Adam considered. They could both come out of the experience stronger both as individuals and as a couple. They just needed to endure the next few short months. Then he would be returning home and see just what sort of remarkable flower Kurt had blossomed into.

* * *

Kurt grunted as he was driven backwards, sweat streaming down his face beneath the protection of the fencing mask. Mr. Hansen was taking no mercy as he put on display every flaw in Kurt’s technique. He would have some pretty spectacular bruises by the time they were done from being struck by the heavy wooden sword, but he knew better than to complain about the rough treatment. As far as Mr. Hansen was concerned, getting hit would be his fault for not blocking the blows.

At least the fencing mask would protect him from a potential black eye.

Mr. Hansen finally called a stop when he’d driven Kurt back to the edge of the practice area, giving him a chance to recover. He pulled off his own mask, offering his student a reassuring smile. “That was much better, Kurt,” he assured his student. “You managed to block me most of the time.”

“Didn’t feel like it,” Kurt complained ruefully, rubbing a sore spot on his shoulder that he knew was a blooming bruise.

“Trust me, you did,” Mr. Hansen assured him. “I wasn’t holding back that much and you were able to anticipate what I might be doing. If you’re able to do that in a free flow fight, you’re going to have no trouble following some pretty complicated fight choreography.”

He looked to the rest of the class, all of which looked like they’d been put through the wringer while their teacher looked fresh as a slightly sweaty daisy. Mr. Hansen might be pushing forty but his endurance was to be respected with the way he ran his students around the room.

“I think that you’re all about ready to finally get your hands on some live steel,” he proposed, placing the wooden swords in their storage stand. He reached for two swords and swung them so that the light reflected off their lengths. He handed the first, a broadsword, to one of the other boys and the second, a katana-styled sword, to Kurt. “They don’t have edges, but you still need to be careful.

“In our next class, we’ll be working with several different styles of blades and you’ll learn to control them all before we move on to actual combat. Remember our primary rule…”

“Safety first, safety last, safety always!” the entire class recited dutifully.
The teacher chuckled as he retrieved the weapons. “Hit the showers people,” he ordered. “I’ll see you next week.”

Kurt handed him back the sword before heading over to where he left his athletic bag, musing that the next few sessions would likely be very interesting. He was looking forward to working with actual stage weapons. His growing proficiency at stage combat would certainly help his prospects when he auditioned for the Shakespeare festival. Wiping his face and grabbing a sip of water, he sat down on a bench to rest for a moment. Grateful that this was his last class for the day, he had time to cool down, shower and grab an early dinner before he was due at rehearsal.

“Hey Kurt?”

He looked up to see Dale standing over him. The other student had been a casual sparring partner since they’d started in stage combat and had playfully flirted with him from time to time but had kept things light and respectful. In all honestly, Kurt was just shallow enough to get a bit of a kick out of a good-looking guy finding him attractive and asking him to make muscles. The past few weeks he’d been a bit more forward in his compliments, though not enough to bother Kurt. Yet.

“You were pretty amazing holding your own with Mr. Hansen,” Dale complimented. “He totally kicked my ass last time.”

Kurt nodded in acknowledgment of his compliment. “Thanks. I felt like mine was getting kicked around a bit today.”

“No, you were doing okay.” The dark-haired man sat down next to him, a trifle close for Kurt’s comfort. “I was wondering if you’re free before rehearsals tonight,” he said enquiringly. “There’s this new Thai place that opened down on Fifth. I thought maybe we could check it out.”

Kurt mentally sighed, recognizing that the invitation was for a lot more than a casual dinner between friends and wishing that Dale hadn’t gone there. Not that Dale wasn’t good looking, with his thick dark hair and wide grin, but he just wasn’t interested. Dale had flirted with him many times before in class, but this felt different from his usual teasing. Kurt generally liked the other man and wanted to maintain a pleasant working relationship with his classmates, so he needed to make a few things clear.

“No, but thanks for the offer,” he said carefully, offering a friendly smile. “I’m going to relax a little bit before rehearsal. It’s been a long day.”

“Oh, come on Kurt,” Dale urged, smiling enticingly. “You have to eat. This will give us a chance to hang out a little bit. Get to know each other a little more outside of class.”

Kurt sighed, knowing that he would have to be a bit blunter. “Look, I appreciate the invite but I think that I’m just going to grab something in the cafeteria and take advantage of my break to give Adam a call.”

Dale cocked his head. “So… you two are still together? Even with him away?” he asked, a bit too smoothly to be believed.

Kurt felt his gaze narrow in annoyance. It wasn’t exactly a secret and he wasn’t aware of any rumors floating around about their relationship being in trouble. His friends would have alerted him. “Yes, we are,” he confirmed. “Quite happily so.”

“And he’d be upset if you just went out to dinner with a friend?” Dale demanded, a bit of challenge in his voice. “You don’t strike me as the type to be bossed around by a boyfriend when he’s not
around. I always thought you were your own man.”

After having dealt with Blaine for so long, Kurt could easily recognize when someone was trying to manipulate him, and he was not going to fall for it. It felt a bit too much like Sebastian’s old “I don’t mind if you don’t mind” game that he’d tried while he and Blaine were still a couple. Blaine might have been tempted when deprived of his boyfriend’s attention for more than five minutes, but Kurt wasn’t that needy.

“No, he doesn’t mind at all because he trusts me. Like I trust him. I just get the feeling that friendship isn’t exactly what you’re after so let me make it clear that I’m not interested.”

“Oh, come on Kurt. I’m not looking for anything serious,” Dale purred, inching closer into Kurt’s personal space. “Your man is away and I’m sure that you’ve got to be lonely. This would just be two friends scratching an itch together.”

“No thanks,” Kurt said firmly. “I am more than capable of scratching my own itch.”

Dale just shrugged, apparently not offended at Kurt’s refusal. “Okay, I get it,” he acquiesced. “I didn’t mean to push too hard. It’s just… you are really hot so you can’t blame me for trying.”

Kurt sighed, knowing that he would have to let this go. He and Dale would be working together a lot and it didn’t pay to make an enemy over a bit of aggressive flirting. He would just chalk it up to a misunderstanding and leave it at that.

“It’s okay,” he finally said. If he could forgive Mercedes for smashing his car window, he could get past Dale’s pushy behavior. He probably should just be complimented that he had that effect on some people.

“Cool,” Dale exclaimed agreeably, switching from assertive suitor to pleasant acquaintance now that Kurt had reaffirmed his boundaries. “Don’t want to lose my favorite sparring partner after all.”

Kurt nodded, getting up and slipping into his NYADA warmup jacket and tugging a dark blue beanie onto his head that felt like a security blanket. “Well, I’m going to head out. I’ll see you at rehearsals tonight.”

“You got it,” Dale said agreeably, moving to retrieve his own belongings before heading to the showers. “Catch you later…”

Kurt couldn’t help from breathing a sigh of relief that he was able to resolve this little matter neatly. He didn’t want to make enemies over something like this and it was fortunate that Dale was smart enough to accept Kurt’s refusal without getting offended. And in all truth, it was flattering to have someone wanting him like that. Best to just take it as a compliment.

Returning to his room, he stripped down to his briefs and tossed his dirty clothes into his hamper, making a mental note that he needed to do laundry over the weekend or risk his room smelling like Finn’s used to. The beanie was placed in a place of honor on Kurt’s dresser where he could enjoy having something of Adam’s in plain sight. Kurt grabbed his robe off its hook on the back of the door and slipped it on, finding comfort in the warm fabric and pushed his feet into the flip flops that he always wore to the showers. He’d wash up, get something to eat and would be ready in plenty of time for rehearsals.

But first… He got out his phone and checked his messages, seeing that Adam had texted him a few times while he was in class.

*Arrived in Richmond, safe and sound,* his boyfriend assured him. *Am at the hotel and plan to fall flat*
Kurt smiled, seeing that the note was a few hours old. Hopefully Adam had gotten plenty of rest because he could imagine just how draining the long drive was. Going to his map, he exchanged pins to mark Adam’s new location and to indicate that the run in Boston was concluded. Still a long way to go, but now he had evidence that their separation was indeed finite and would at some point come to an end.

Hoping that Adam was rested and awake, he checked the second message and saw that Adam would be going out to dinner and would try to check in after Kurt got back from rehearsals.

“Oh…” Kurt bit back a sigh of disappointment, knowing that he had no right to be upset. He and Adam often found that they rarely were able to plan times when they could talk to one another and were dependent on chance when both might be free. Usually it in the afternoons after Kurt’s last class and before rehearsals when he was able to catch Adam before was due to be at the theater or late in the night after Adam’s performance. That wasn’t Adam’s doing and his boyfriend would not have known that Kurt had a few hours to himself before making his plans.

He dialed Adam’s phone number and wasn’t surprised when it went directly to voice mail.

“Hi babe,” he greeted with as much cheer as he could manage. “Hope that you’re out having a good time. When you get back, give me a call. I’ll be up late. Love you.”

His eyes stung a bit as he hung up, feeling rather alone and depressed but quickly shook himself out of it. Resolutely picking up his bath supplies, he headed down to the showers to clean up. He needed to keep his mind on what he needed to do that evening, and not crying over his absent partner. He was going to get through this.

* * *

“This is so nice of you, but you really didn’t need to go so out of your way,” Adam insisted as they drove to the restaurant where their diner reservations were made.

Carole turned to the young man seated in the back seat of their car with a wide smile. “Don’t be silly, sweetheart,” she insisted. “There was no way that we were going to miss seeing you now that you’re close by.”

“Well, close being a relative term,” Burt teased, not taking his eyes off the road as he drove. “It’s not a bad drive and it gives us an excuse to get out of Washington for a little bit.”

“One of Burt’s staffers recommended this restaurant and we thought it would be a nice break for you,” Carole proposed. “I’m always worried that you boys aren’t eating right.”

“Prepare to be mothered,” Burt warned, laughing. “She’s been itching to take care of someone since Finn moved out and it’ll be nice for her to have someone to focus on besides me.”

Adam couldn’t help from smiling, his heart clenching when he realized that he felt the same kind of need. He missed his family and he only got to see them a few times a year at best. And he missed Kurt. Seeing the elder Hummels made him feel a bit less disconnected to those that he loved, and he was grateful that Kurt’s family had embraced him the way that they did.

“We’ve really been looking forward to seeing your show,” Carole informed him. “Especially after reading the reviews from Boston. We were so happy to see that the play was well received.”

“We all were relieved,” Adam admitted. “I mean, we thought that it’s a great play and everyone’s put
in so much work, but it was still a relief that the critics saw that. I really hope that you like it. I’ve made sure that you’ve got the best seats in the house.”

Burt grunted in approval. “It sounds like a great show,” he assured Adam. “And maybe a little media attention about having a Congressman attending on opening night might goose attendance just a bit.”

Adam pursed his mouth thoughtfully. “I doubt the producers would mind that at all.”

The restaurant where their dinner reservations was casual enough to be comfortable, but the young chef there had a reputation for putting a modern and healthy spin on traditional southern recipes. It was early enough that there wasn’t a long wait for their table where their smiling waitress took their drink orders and left a basket of warm cornbread with honey butter for them to enjoy. Carole passed the basket around the table, taking the small pleasure that only a mother would understand about seeing the men in her life eating well.

“You’ll have to guide me,” Adam requested politely as he looked over the menu. “I’m not familiar with a lot of dishes like this.”

“I’m sure it’s all good,” Burt claimed, swallowing a bit of cornbread.

Deciding to be adventurous and not to go with the safe and familiar option of fried chicken, Adam placed his order and turned his focus on the older couple. “I really do appreciate this,” he insisted. “And admittedly, I kind of needed to see some familiar faces.”

“Life on the road not to your liking?” Burt asked sympathetically.

“It’s really not bad for the most part,” Adam assured him, not wanting to complain. “Actually, it’s been quite an interesting experience so far. The rest of the cast is fantastic and a really bunch of nice fellows. And I really can’t say enough about the director and the rest of the production team. The play is really amazing, and I can’t wait for you to see it.”

Carole smile warmly, glad that Adam had positive things to say about his experience.

“But..,” Burt prodded knowingly.

Adam sighed. “I can’t lie. Being away from Kurt is hard. Harder than even I expected,” he admitted. “We talk as often as we can, but I miss our life together. I miss our friends and having my own place. The novelty of hotels wore off pretty quickly. I’ve rather resigned myself that the rest of the tour is going to be something of a slog.”

“Well, then I’m very glad that we’re going to be close by for the next few weeks,” Carole pronounced.

“What’s your schedule like?” Burt asked after taking a sip of water. “Is it the usual theater schedule?”

“Yes, we have shows five nights a week and matinees on Wednesdays and Sundays. Mondays are our free days.”

“So you have off Sunday afternoons after the matinee?” Burt confirmed.

The Englishman nodded. “I don’t have to be at the theater until Tuesday morning for our run through before the evening performance,” Adam explained. “They wanted to make sure that we had adequate downtime, so we don’t burn out before the end of the tour.”
“That’s perfect,” Carole pronounced. “That will give us plenty of them to sightsee and have fun before I need to get you back in time for work.”

Adam swallowed the bite of bread he’d just taken and blinked in confusion. “Pardon? I mean…”

“You didn’t think we’d just run in to see you in the show,” Burt admonished teasingly. “If it’s all right with you, the plan will be that we pick you up after the Sunday matinee. You’ll spend the night at our place and on Monday, Carole can take you sightseeing around D.C. while I’m at work and we can all have dinner together.”

Carole nodded happily. “We’ve got plenty of space in our apartment, so you’ll have your own room and can get some real rest. And I’m sure some home cooking will be a nice change from eating out so much.”

Burt couldn’t help from laughing at the dumbfounded expression on the younger man’s face. “I wasn’t lying that Carole planned to mother you. I hope that’s okay.”

Adam looked to the smiling woman, then back to Kurt’s father. “That’s… that’s very generous of you,” he said softly. “I really do appreciate the offer. But Richmond is so out of your way, and…”

“Nonsense,” Carole snorted indignantly. “You might as well come willingly because I have no qualms about badgering you until you give in.”

“I’d just go along with her,” Burt advised, with a wry glint in his eyes that reminded Adam so much of Kurt. “She’s been making plans to play tour guide to you since we got your tour dates.”

Adam couldn’t help from smiling. Niall would probably be pleased to have some privacy for a night or two. “Well, I suppose that I can’t turn down a lady’s generosity for a weekend.”

Carole laughed. “A weekend, he thinks. Burt, that’s so adorable.”

“Adam, I think that you’d better resign yourself to be our guest for the next few weekends,” her husband advised wryly. “If she can’t have Finn or Kurt, you’re next in line.”

“Adam, believe me, this is no trouble at all for us,” Carole promised. “We can do all kinds of touristy things around Washington and Burt’s even going to arrange a special tour for you at the Capital. This way you get a real break and a chance to really relax. I’m so looking forward to spending some time with you.”

It had always been something of a relief to Adam that the Hummels had accepted him as Kurt’s partner, but this display of generosity went well beyond what he rightly could have expected from them. It was more how he might have expected them to treat a son-in-law. To his shock, he realized that was exactly how they did see him.

It would be a nice break for both himself and Niall, who would probably be thrilled to have the occasional night with the hotel room to himself. As well as they got along, bit of privacy would be very much appreciated on both their parts.

Humbled and grateful for how the Hummels had accepted him into their family, Adam smiled warmly at the both of them. “That sounds like a splendid plan. Thank you both so much,” he said sincerely.

Their waitress returned with their entrees and placed a plate of shrimp and grits in front of Adam. The dish was unfamiliar but still looked, and smelled, very appetizing. Maybe this was how he needed to embrace all of these strange, new experiences with a bit more openness. Accept the good
and the bad and look forward to all the kinds of encounters that he could learn from.

Sitting at a table with parents that were not his own but had embraced him was such a moment where the strange melded with the ordinary. The Hummels were quite unlike his folks in many ways, but he felt completely at ease in their presence. He felt a very familiar warmth from Carole’s smile and concern, reminded of how his own mum worried over him. And Burt’s quiet concern did remind him much of how his father would watch out for him. He hadn’t known just how much he’d needed a bit of family kindness until that moment. It was definitely the kind of balm to ease his sore heart.

He had urged Kurt to take advantage of their time apart to try new thing and it was clear that he needed to do the same if he was going to be a man worthy of Kurt’s effort. There would be moments where he was unmoored from everything familiar and comforting and he would learn to not just weather those instances but embrace them. Kurt’s strength had always astounded him, and now he would learn to be strong as well.

When he was deposited back at his hotel with hugs and words of support and caring, Adam felt better about things than he had since they’d left Boston. Their room was empty, Niall having left a note that he and the lads were going out for drinks and to do a bit of exploring. Glad to have a bit of privacy, Adam checked his phone and found a voice mail that Kurt had left a few hours earlier. Listening to his lover’s voice brought a smile to his face.

Ringing up his lover, he felt himself smiling in relief when the younger man promptly answered the phone. “Hello darling,” Adam greeted happily. “Did I wake you?”

“Hi honey! No, rehearsal ran a bit long and I went out for coffee with some of the guys. I just got in about an hour ago,” Kurt admitted. Adam could detect the weariness in the younger man’s voice but he knew from experience that Kurt had a few hours of work ahead of him before he’d retire for the night.

“This is late for you all,” Adam noted.

“We’re working on the big numbers right now, so rehearsals take longer than usual,” Kurt explained, yawning a little. “Did you have a good time tonight?”

Adam smiled, realizing that Kurt’s family hadn’t informed him of their plans at abduction.

“Very much so, and you’re going to laugh when I tell you about my evening.”

Over the phone he heard Kurt settling down, shoving books out of his way so he could get comfortable. “Well, don’t keep me in suspense. Tell me all about it.”

They had quite a good laugh together.

* * *

Elliot turned to tap Kurt on the shoulder to get his attention. “I’m going to get something to drink,” he yelled over the pounding music.

Kurt nodded that he’d heard, and Elliot watched as the younger man said something to the man he’d been dancing with about taking a break, leaving him with a charming smile and no promise of anything further that night. It wasn’t hard to catch the look of disappointment on Kurt’s erstwhile partner, and Elliot quickly moved to place himself between Kurt and the man he was leaving behind least the other man think of pressing his attentions further.

Elliot couldn’t blame him, if he was being totally honest with himself. He might think of Kurt as a
good friend, but he wasn’t blind. Kurt was gorgeous and those tight jeans he was wearing left absolutely nothing to the imagination. Watching Kurt losing himself in classic dance tunes like Frankie Goes to Hollywood and seeing the sweat dampening his shirt so that it clung to his toned muscles was certainly engaging and it wasn’t a surprise that he had garnered the attention of quite a few of the men that night. And when the two of them danced together, they were the envy of most of the men in the club. Like Elliot, Kurt was a natural showman and didn’t mind putting on a display.

Watching the younger man walk ahead of him, his hips moving in time to the music brought a smile to Elliot’s face. It might have taken a bit of cajoling and badgering, but he’d finally gotten Kurt to agree to a gay boys’ night out. With all of Kurt’s commitments, finding free time had not been easy and what little free time Kurt had was usually spent with their larger group of friends. The last thing that Elliot wanted was to be yet another person making demands on what little time to rest that Kurt had.

Elliot knew that he was more fortunate than most that he got along as well as he did with his roommates and genuinely enjoyed socializing with them. Dani was his best girl and Neil was one of the coolest guys he’d ever met and never minded hanging out at gay clubs with him, even enjoying being hit on occasionally. But sometimes a gay boy just needed another gay boy to hang out with. Having a friend who could appreciate their shared experiences and challenges was something that most people didn’t really appreciate until they didn’t have it.

But as the night went on, it became clear just how much Kurt had needed this time to decompress. Elliot knew how much he needed to let off some steam and just enjoy himself without worrying about entertaining others. Since Dani started dating Santana, Elliot had plenty of exposure to Kurt’s friends and he could easily see that Kurt would benefit from some time away from them. It was good that his entire social life didn’t circle around them every waking minute.

It had been an enjoyable night of hitting several of the more notable gay spots in Manhattan. They started off at the Monster Bar, enjoying the quiet ambience and the chance to catch up and enjoy a drink in the sophisticated setting. They strolled over to the Stonewall Inn; Kurt posing for a selfie in front of the historical landmark and posting it to his Instagram account. After grabbing a late supper, they made their way to the Highline Ballroom to get their dance on.

Watching the stress start to ease from Kurt’s face, Elliot was glad to see him finally letting go of some of the pressure he’d clearly been under the past few weeks. It had been a lot of fun to watch him dive head first into the greater gay culture of New York City in a way that he hadn’t had the opportunity to do before and Elliot was glad that he’d promised Adam to watch out for Kurt and drag him away from his textbooks for an evening.

“I’m so glad we came out tonight,” Kurt sighed happily as he sipped his rum and cola, leaning against Elliot casually and resting his head against the taller man’s shoulder. “I needed this.”

Elliot grinned brightly. “I could tell. You were seriously wound up.” He took a gulp of his seltzer. “I thought that I was going to have to resort to kidnapping.”

“Well, thank you for not giving up on me,” Kurt insisted. He raised his glass in toast. “Here’s to three-day weekends and a well-needed break from classes and rehearsals.”

“Cheers,” Elliot toasted back, his blue eyes twinkling with good spirits. He always like going out to clubs with friends, even if he wasn’t looking to get laid. Sometimes he just needed the chance to decompress and work off some stress by dancing. Kurt and Adam had sometimes gone out to clubs together, but it was good that he was seeing that it was perfectly fine for him to hang out and dance even if his boyfriend wasn’t around. Adam trusted Kurt and wouldn’t begrudge him the chance to bask in the admiring stares of other men since Kurt had absolutely zero interest in reciprocating. And
to be honest, Elliot thought that that Kurt could benefit from seeing that other men did appreciate what he was showing.

He didn’t mind playing wingman for Kurt and watching out for him while he danced and had a few drinks. Most of the men who asked Kurt to dance seemed nice enough and were respectful of his boundaries, accepting that he was just looking to dance and enjoying himself for the evening. Elliot was able to deflect those who didn’t seem to know when to back off, letting Kurt have a good time without having to deal with jerks. Not that Elliot blamed them, because a man would have to be devoid of a sex drive or just plain stupid to not think that Kurt was amazing and wanting to get with him. He wanted Kurt to have the opportunity to enjoy himself without the aggravation of putting off overly determined suitors.

It was nearly three in the morning before the two of them stumbled into an all-night eatery to refuel, and in Kurt’s case, sober up a bit before calling it quits for the night. The diner was crowded with late night partygoers looking for coffee and sustenance. After hours of dancing, they all but crawled into their booth. Both of them were starving and tired, their feet sore and Kurt needed some carbs to soak up the remains of the alcohol he’d been consuming. He wasn’t drunk, and Elliot was glad that Kurt had the good sense to keep his drinking under control and hadn’t had to police him all night. He was just happily buzzed and relaxed enough that the whole world felt fantastic and even his aches and pains were wonderful.

“Well, you sure look like you had a good time,” Elliot teased, taking in to the sight of Kurt looking like a slightly rumpled, slightly tipsy and totally adorable sleepy kitten.

“I’m going to feel it later on,” Kurt complained playfully as he sipped his coffee. The dose of caffeine seemed to be perking him up a bit. “I’m so glad that I don’t have plans until evening today, because I don’t think I’ll be coherent enough to actually get anything done without screwing it up.”

Elliot nodded understandingly. At that moment, the only thing he’d probably manage was to fall face first into bed. “What do you have lined up?” he asked as the waitress placed their meals in front of them. French toast with a side of bacon for Kurt, and huevos ranchero for him.

“Just a night with the others at the loft. Something about a ‘worst movies’ film festival. We all need a break from our classwork,” Kurt yawned, pouring a generous portion of syrup over his food. He took a bite, closing his eyes and making a low moan in his throat. “This is so good…”

Elliot chuckled and gave him a little nudge with his foot. “Knock it off, or you’re going to get everyone in here all hot and bothered, Sally.”

Kurt laughed at the film reference, looking at his friend with eyes that were just a little too bright to be completely sober just yet. “What about you,” he asked. “Anything exciting to do today?”

“Going to relax today, but I’ll head to Jersey tomorrow to see my folks,” Elliot admitted. “I’ve been putting it off for a while, so I’ll do brunch with mom and dinner with my dad. That way I’ll be able to keep the peace between them for the next few weeks.”

“I can’t imagine having folks separated like that,” Kurt mused. “I mean, I lost my mom when I was young, so it’s just been Dad and me for a long time. I don’t know how it would be if they divorced and I had to split time between them. Or worse, feeling like I had to choose between them. Do your parents really hate each other that much?”

“I wouldn’t say that hate is the right word,” Elliot explained. “But they find a way to fight over everything. Me especially, at times. Personally, I think that they just enjoy trying to get a rise out of one another.”
Kurt winced reflexively. “But they must have cared about each other at one point,” he insisted. “I mean, they got married and they had you.”

“I know, but love doesn’t always last forever,” Elliot said sagely. “No one starts a marriage expecting it to end at some point, but it does happen. I mean, we’ve all had relationships that didn’t last.”

“Oh, that’s definitely true,” Kurt snorted. He was very cognizant of that fact of life.

Elliot cocked his head curiously. “That guy you were with before Adam. You don’t talk much about him,” he prodded gently.

Kurt sighed, his good mood fading slightly at the mention of his ex. He stabbed a piece of his French toast and chewed it thoughtfully before answering.

“Things weren’t good between us for a long time. A lot longer than I’d wanted to admit,” he admitted. “There were things that when I look back, I realize were wrong even before we got together as a couple. But I was in love and I really wanted to make it work. I was willing to put up with a lot for us to stay together as a couple, and it took a long time before it reached a point where I just couldn’t keep overlooking everything that he was doing. I didn’t realize that I was losing myself in the process. It was only after I ended things with Blaine that I started to understand just how much I had sacrificed to keep our relationship going and it wasn’t good for me.”

Kurt looked down at the table, suddenly embarrassed by what he was revealing. “When he told me that he’d been with someone else, I just felt like my whole world was ripped out from under my feet. After everything that I’d done… all the chances for myself that I gave up for him…”

Elliot nodded understandingly. “I get it. I’ve had my share of shitty relationships and been screwed around on. And no matter how good your reasons are for getting out, you can’t help from feeling like some kind of failure for it not working out.”

Kurt nodded in agreement. “I felt like absolute garbage for quite a while afterwards. That I wasn’t enough of man to keep Blaine from cheating on me. It didn’t help that pretty much everyone around us saw him as the handsome, desirable one and I should just feel lucky that he wanted to be with me at all.”

Elliot’s eyes softened in sympathy. “Kurt, you don’t really believe that, do you?” he asked gently. Kurt was such an amazing man and he hated the idea of his friend having such a low opinion of his worth.

“Not anymore,” Kurt assured him, offering a smile. “I’m not going to lie… it did take a while. I was a real mess for a couple of weeks and I didn’t see myself having anything to offer anyone. But then I got into NYADA, and I was starting to see that just maybe I was worth more than what being with Blaine gave me. Then I met Adam, but I’d already figured by that point that was I’m better off alone than being in a relationship that’s not good for me. Having Adam was kind of just the icing on the cake.”

Elliot nodded approvingly. “That’s good, Kurt. I’m glad to hear that. Sometimes it’s hard to recognize just how much damage you’re doing to yourself by staying in a bad relationship,” he confided. “And you’re right… being single is definitely better than being treated badly by someone that says he loves you.

“I mean, I love Adam,” Kurt insisted. “I really do. The difference is how he treats me compared to Blaine was really shocking because I didn’t know that a relationship could really be like that. It took
me a long time to be able to put what happened with Blaine behind me and learn to really trust again. To be able to open myself up, which is the hardest thing for me. I was just so tired of being hurt all the time by people that were supposed to care about me.”

Elliot didn’t say anything, seeing that Kurt really needed to unload these concerns. Whether it was because he really trusted Elliot as a friend, or just because he had a few drinks in him, he seemed willing to talk and Elliot wanted to give him the space to do so.

Kurt’s expression softened as his memories drifted back to the early days of his relationship with Adam. “I know that you don’t know Adam so well, but he was so amazing those first months,” Kurt insisted. “He was so patient with me and put up with a lot of my bullshit because I had so many trust issues. I didn’t feel pressured or pushed to do things before I was ready because he’d get impatient. He just let me know that he loved me and let me work things out in my own time. He supported me and let me see that I deserve so much more than I’d been willing to settle for. And when I freaked out over things, he didn’t get offended and he let me understand that I deserve to be loved and treated well.

“The same goes for how my friends and I get along,” he pointed out. “I love Rachel and we’ve been friends for a long time now, but there was a point when I was really ready to cut ties with her altogether.”

The older man sipped at his tea thoughtfully. “She can be a handful,” he acknowledged tactfully. “To be honest, that doesn’t surprise me.” He’d seen Rachel’s type many times before. People who were so focused on their own ambitions that they were willing to sacrifice anyone around them to facilitate their advancement. Thankfully, he didn’t see her unless they were all hanging out as a group. While he couldn’t claim to know her that well, he didn’t think that he liked her very much personally. Still, he was sure that she had to have some good points for Kurt to be her friend.

“It wasn’t easy between the two of us, because we were rivals as much as friends a lot of the time. And her competitiveness can be difficult to deal with,” Kurt mused, remembering all the times that Rachel would run roughshod over those she claimed as friends in her pursuit of a solo or role or romantic partner.

“We went through some really rough times, but unlike Blaine, Rachel proved that she can change for the better,” Kurt insisted. “By point that I was ready to call it quits, I was meeting new people at NYADA and I realized that I could be better off without her. I deserved friends that cared about me and supported me, and I wasn’t afraid of being alone. I made it clear where my limits were and showed her that I wasn’t going to be stepped on her for convenience any longer.”

“And she stepped up,” Elliot granted.

Kurt nodded, a fond smile touching his features. “She really did,” he said with a sense of quiet satisfaction. “For all her faults, Rachel really does care and when push came to shove, she’s been there for me.”

Elliot grinned over the rim of his mug. “I’m glad, Kurt,” he stated. “I know that it’s hard to push away people that aren’t good for you, but it’s good that you learned to stand up for yourself. That’s not easy to do with someone that you care about.”

Kurt’s eyes dimmed. “No, it definitely isn’t,” he acknowledged. “But I was surprised that I found myself so willing to do so. Not just with Rachel. Most of my old friends from Lima… things got really weird for a time and I wasn’t sure if it would be worth the effort to keep those friendships.”

Elliot watched the younger man carefully, seeing both regret and resolve there. He had no doubt that
if Kurt had truly believed that the friendships were no longer salvageable that he would have walked
away from them. That he hadn’t revealed a great deal about Kurt’s character and his loyalty to those
he cared about than anything else. That level of loyalty was a rare thing and something to be
admired, but he knew from personal experience that it wasn’t always appreciated or reciprocated by
those it was directed towards.

“I’ve been there,” Elliot assured him. “I had some friends in high school that ended up being total
douchebags after we graduated so I cut ties with them. Life is just too short. I mean, all friendships
go through rough spots, but it shouldn’t feel like work all the time. Or that you’re the one constantly
bending over backwards to make things happen.”

Kurt nodded understandingly. “I went for a long time without any real friends,” he admitted softly.
“And once I had some, it felt like I was in a constant battle with them. We were always competing
for solos or attention, so it probably wasn’t the healthiest start to relationships.”

Elliot just laughed. “Par for the course with theater students,” he confirmed with a grin.

Kurt chuckled, looking down at his plate ruefully. “I guess that we’re still working on finding the
balance between friendship and healthy competition. I mean, there are things for me that are deal
breakers, but I’m still learning when and where to draw that line.”

“Don’t feel bad about that. There’s a pretty broad range between cutting everyone out of your life
and being a total doormat,” Elliot advised. “It doesn’t make you an asshole for standing up for
yourself when you get pushed too far.”

There was a clear look of relief on the younger man’s face at that assurance. “Thanks,” he said
sincerely. “I think I needed to hear that.”

“Yeah, you kind of did,” Elliot chuckled, finishing his breakfast. “Sometimes it’s good to hear that
it’s okay to expect your friends to treat you the way you treat them. Or give yourself permission to
raise a fuss if they don’t. Your real friends will come around and respect your boundaries.”

Kurt pursed his lips thoughtfully as he considered Elliot’s advice, absorbing it and seeing that the
older man was right. He did no one any good by giving in all the time. All it did was build
resentment in him and feed into the inclination of others to keep taking whatever he was able to give.
Letting Rachel, Sam and the others know where his lines were and that he would not stand to have
his limits breached went a long way in smoothing over a lot of the hurt feelings and resentments he’d
been harboring for way too long. Or deciding that keeping contact was no longer worth the
aggravation, as he had with Blaine.

“Now, on to more pleasant subject for conversation,” Elliot pronounced. “I did have an ulterior
motive for inviting you out tonight.”

Kurt grinned impishly. “Oh? Do tell…”

Elliot added a dash more hot sauce to his eggs. “Your school musical…”

Kurt couldn’t help laughing because his friend had been pestering for details for weeks now.

“You saw the announcement,” he reminded Elliot. Even the professional industry publications had
taken notice of NYADA’s ambitious project and listed it as one of the major theatrical events of the
season to keep an eye on.

“I know, but you guys totally wreaked aspirations for most of the senior class at NYU,” Elliot
warned. “That was a totally ballsy move to stage something that huge. I can’t believe you didn’t tell
Kurt chuckled and shook his head. “And have Madam Tibideaux find out that I spilled the beans? Sorry, but I value my life.”

When the waitress stopped by their table with a fresh pot of coffee, Kurt happily accepted a refill. “What about you?” he asked, adding milk and sugar to his drink. “Aren’t you planning to be in NYU’s show?”

Elliot shrugged. “Actually, I wasn’t planning to this year.”

“But wouldn’t that help your prospects after graduation?” Kurt asked.

“Normally I’d say yes, but they’re doing ‘On The Town’ and after last year I just can’t bring myself to be in another musical like that,” the older man sighed. “Besides, I’m not a fan of the professor directing. He’s a real ball-buster and I’ll bet that half the cast quits before opening night.”

Kurt couldn’t help from wincing. “Why would they have him directing then? I’m sure there have to be better options.”

Elliot nodded. “There are, but if NYADA manages to pull off your show the way I expect that you will, whatever we do is going to fall flat. No one who really values their reputation wants to be seen in comparison.”

“But it would still be a chance for you to get yourself seen,” Kurt argued gently. “I mean, agents and producers will see the show and…”

“Yeah, seen in a production that doesn’t speak to anything about who I am as a performer. I can understand why you love traditional theater, Kurt, but if I had to face doing endless revivals of classic musicals that are so old that they can be carbon dated, I know I’d be miserable.”

Kurt nodded understandingly. While he might love the grind and the routine, Elliot needed something where his own creative juices could find an outlet. The older man would probably make a serious go of being a rock star if that was where his ambitions lay, but he enjoyed acting as much as he did singing.

“So what are you going to do?” Kurt questioned.

“I’ve been doing a lot of thinking the past few weeks. I know that taking the more conventional theater approach is the logical thing to do, but it just wouldn’t work for me. There are some independent theater groups that are doing some really interesting things,” Elliot answered, a happier glint in his eyes. “Not as crazy as the Hellfire Circus, but not your usual stuff.

“Some of them are doing unorthodox takes on familiar shows or doing stuff that’s really new and exciting,” he explained. “Since it’s not on Broadway for mass-market consumption, they’re able to be a lot more experimental and I think something like that might be a good fit for me. It’ll give me a chance to try lots of new stuff to see what really rocks my boat.”

Kurt nodded, thinking that his friend just might be on to something. “That sounds like it can be really exciting.”

“I’ve lined up auditions lined up with the Attic Theater here in New York and I’ll be flying out to audition with the Steppenwolf and Magic Theater companies over the next few weeks,” Elliot confided. “I’ve seen a lot of their productions and really like what they do. It’ll really give me the chance to do the kind of work that will let me push myself creatively and maybe make a living at it.”
“That’s fantastic,” Kurt insisted, grinning at his friend. “They’d be idiots not to snatch you right up.”

“Thanks. I really needed to hear that I’m doing the right thing,” Elliot sighed. “I figure that I can do that for a year or two before really deciding how I want to focus my career. And it’ll put my folks at ease because I’ve been getting a lot of flak from the both of them.”

Not for the first time, Kurt was thankful that he understood his own aspirations as a performer and what he hoped for in his career. Elliot was one of the most talented and charismatic people he’d ever met, and he understood what it was like to feel like you were not fitting in. Or that your dreams didn’t mesh with what others thought you should pursue. Elliot needed to find a niche that suited his inclinations and allowed him the freedom to grow.

“I’m serious… I’m really happy for you,” Kurt insisted. “I think that you’ll really do great with any of them, though you’ll have to excuse me if I hope the Attic Theater offers you a chance that you can’t refuse. I’d love for you to be based in New York for a bit longer.”

“Hey, they don’t call working actors ‘gypsies’ for no reason,” Elliot reminded his friend with a smile. “We might end up roaming all over the place, but our homes are where we have our friends.”

Kurt nodded with a soft smile on his face, thinking about his own wandering “gypsy” who was following his dreams and remembered his conversation with Adam’s mother. They hadn’t chosen careers that were stable or stationary, and it was a good thing that he was seeing that now. He would be prepared with it was his turn to flee the nest and see where his fortunes took him, and he would be even more confident that he and Adam would be able to weather whatever life and fate threw at them.

In the meantime, he had his friends and his studies. That was enough.

* * *

Rachel winced as the student costumer accidently stuck her with a pin while taking in the bodice of her dress.

“I’m sorry,” the young man exclaimed, checking the spot where she’d been inadvertently stabbed though Rachel thought that he was probably more concerned about getting blood on the shift than actually injuring her. “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” she assured him, pushing down any annoyance she was feeling and settling so he could get back to work. The sophomore working on her costume was one of the many underclassmen working on the mass of costumes needed for the ensemble players, leaving the more senior students free to work on the major players. She knew that he had several people to get through that afternoon and didn’t have the luxury of taking his time or chitchatting. That was saved for the leads, whose costumes were their priority. The costumes for the ensemble just needed to fit well enough and look appropriate for their scenes.

In another corner of the room, Rachel could see the student playing Eponine having her fitting done. Kimberly Larkin was well known to the entire school; a senior with what everyone claimed was a once in a generation voice that earned accolades whenever she performed. Known to be as talented an actress as she was a singer, she was laughing and joking with the student costumer and seemed to be having a good time as minute adjustments were made so that her costume would be perfect. Professor Menkes came over to check her student’s work and offered her own suggestions.

The student working on Rachel’s costume finished and sat back with sigh. “Okay, that should do it,” he pronounced. Rachel looked down and saw that her hem was neatly asymmetrical and would look
suitably ragged from the audience.

She had two basic costumes for the show, a basic shift and bodice that would be adjusted with various caps and shawls for the various group scenes she was involved in and her prostitute costume. Normally she would have enjoyed the chance to play dress up and see what the costumers had come up with, but it was hard to take pleasure in it when her jealousy was starting to rear its ugly head.

Rachel knew that she had no cause to be upset about anything. She had the opportunity to perform in what was one of the most anticipated events of the theater season. It was a chance to be seen and show that she could defy her reputation and be a solid member of a larger cast. She had, for the most part, truly enjoyed herself. She had classmates that she was friendly with in the cast and the larger musical numbers sounded absolutely amazing. And there were several seniors that didn’t have many more solo lines than she did. She could rightly be very proud of the role she was playing.

But seeing someone else playing the role that she knew she could do well… that had eaten at her more than she wanted to admit. As she changed back into her street clothes, she thought back to what Madam Tibideaux had asked of her so long ago; having to watch other actresses playing the parts she wanted while she was in a supportive part and thinking that it should be here in that role. She was sure that she would be able to handle it, but could not deny that she was jealous.

It was clear just how selfish and naive she had been. She thought of Kurt and Tina and Mercedes and how ruthless she’d defended her domination of New Directions. It was no wonder that they’d thought she was such a bitch and that no one wanted to be her friend. She’d more than deserved the distain they’d shown her.

Sitting down to pull on her shoes, she thought back to high school and even her early days at NYADA. She had been so focused on cementing her place as NYADA’s brightest star that she didn’t notice that she was repeating the same pattern that she’d followed at McKinley, though with drastically different results. There was no Mr. Schuester to protect her from her own impulses and acquiesce to her demands, least she storm out for the umpteenth time. Her classmates now were not willing to step aside for her. She had nearly lost everything because she was so stupid and stubborn and refused to acknowledge what everyone was trying to tell her.

She needed to get beyond this, Rachel told herself firmly. Yes, she would make an astonishing Eponine and one day, she would be the one in the starring role. She knew that there were more than a few people that fully expected her to flake out and start throwing a diva tantrum and six months ago, she couldn’t guarantee that she wouldn’t have. But in a room full of her classmates? She managed to keep herself under control.

But that didn’t change the fact that was really, really wanted that part. She wanted to be a star and one day she would be. Her participation in this show would be about proving herself. Rachel knew what she needed to do so it was time to tell her ego to take a back seat for once and just focus on her job. She needed to do this for herself if for no other reason. Because if she gave in to her impulses now, no one at NYADA would trust her with a role again and that could have career-long repercussions.

When she emerged from the changing room, she saw that the boys had started to trail in for their own fittings. Now Kurt was standing on the block, patiently allowing the student to adjust the fitting of his townsman costume. He was chatting with Jamie, who was wearing his prisoner rags, and looked totally at ease. She knew that he was easily as ambitious as she was and had no idea how he was managing being an understudy. She knew that if it was her in that spot that she would not be able to help imagining all kinds of ways to engineer an “unfortunate (though not too serious) accident” that would allow her to assume the role that she should have had in the first place.
Kurt spotted her and waved her over. “Hey Rach… you already finished?” he asked.

She nodded, making sure to stay out of the costumer’s way while he took in Kurt’s pants. “All done,” she confirmed. “And they look really good.”

“I can’t wait for dress rehearsals to start,” Jamie chimed in. “It feels like we’ve been working on this forever.”

“I can’t wait to see the sets,” Kurt insisted, turning so that his fitter could see how the alterations looked from all angles. “With a stage as big as we’re going to have, they’re going to be able to do something pretty spectacular.”

“Well, we’ve only got a few weeks until we go into tech,” Rachel reminded. “We’re getting into the home stretch.”

Kurt nodded, getting a delighted expression on his face. “This is going to be so amazing,” he insisted. “We’ve dreamed about being in a production like this. With this group on a stage like that… this is the next best thing to a real professional show.”

“Speaking of professional shows, are you going to do the Shakespeare company again?” Rachel asked curiously. “You were so good that they’d be idiots not to ask you back.”

Kurt nodded. “Thankfully I don’t have to audition until we’re done with Les Miz, so I’ll have some time to recover and prepare a bit.”

“What are you guys doing this year?” Jamie asked curiously.

“A Midsummer Night's Dream for the comedy and Troilus and Cressida for the tragedy,” he answered.

“Oh, those sound like fun,” Rachel said approvingly. “Are you reading for Puck?”

Kurt nodded with a smile. “Definitely. And for Troilus I’ll read Patroclus and Paris. I think I’ve got a pretty good chance of getting at least one of them.”

“After last season, I think you’ll have your pick of whatever roles you want,” Rachel insisted.

His alterations finished, Kurt stepped down from the block and turned to Rachel. “Why don’t you send in your CV?” he asked. “They’re always looking for new talent and it’ll be a lot of fun.”

Rachel felt her heart beat just a bit faster in surprise. “Are you sure you want me there?” she asked frankly. She wouldn’t totally blame him if he wanted to keep her as far away as possible from the place where he’d found his first professional success. Not with the way she’d used every other opportunity to upstage him.

He nodded emphatically. “Sure! I’m asking Tina also. I’d like to have some more friends there and it would be a great line in your CV.”

“I’d hug you, except I don’t want to get us both stuck full of pins,” she proclaimed, smiling so widely that she felt like her face might split. She couldn’t believe how generous he was being, giving his approval to her step into a place that he had already gained a level of respect. “I just… I don’t want to intrude on your space.”

Kurt just snorted and handwaved away her concern. “Don’t be silly,” he admonished gently. “I wouldn’t have invited you if I didn’t want you there. It’ll be a good experience for all of us.”
Rachel could not have felt more gratitude for anyone else’s show of open-handedness. Kurt had no reason to make that offer outside of the desire to help his friends get a leg up into their profession. It was something that had their situations been reversed that she couldn’t honestly claim that she would have done the same since her ego would have demanded protecting.

Kurt had always been more caring and willing to share with his friends. Even at his worst, he would never have sought to take advantage of someone else’s opportunities. He had no ulterior motives and no reason beyond wanting to share his good fortune to issue this invitation to her, especially given her past behavior.

This was another test, she realized. Not that she thought that Kurt meant it as such, but it was a test nevertheless. Kurt had a right to expect her to support him and too often in the past she failed to do so. She was determined to prove once and for all that she wasn’t that greedy, selfish, insecure child any longer.

“I love you so much,” she sighed. “How about I take you out for dinner tonight? So I can pick your brain about auditioning since I really need help there?”

“Can we make it tomorrow?” Kurt asked. “I’ve got a rehearsal session this afternoon and I wanted to call Adam tonight.”

She smiled brightly. “Sure.”

Unable to resist, she reached out to hug him and ignored the pin that suddenly stuck into her arm. So much had happened over the past year, good and bad. But she could look back and see how far she’d come from the child who’d been so convinced that missing out on her dream role meant that her life was over. She was proud of who she was becoming and wanted to see just how far she could go.

One thing was clear, though. She no longer wanted to do it alone. She wanted her friends with her so they could share and celebrate one another’s successes. That would make all the hard work worthwhile.

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Adam arrived at the theater with the rest of the cast in plenty of time to prepare, feeling the gentle sizzle of excitement that came with an opening night. It didn’t matter that they had already completed a successful run in Boston. A new theater meant a new audience and a new chance to introduce their play.

He’d stopped by the box office to make sure that the tickets for Kurt’s family were set aside before heading to the dressing room that he shared with Niall and Ifan. Niall was already seated at his table and digging into a box of chocolates that had been waiting for him.

“Oh have one,” he offered, holding the box out to Adam, who took what he hoped would be a cream-filled bonbon and popped it into his mouth.

“From Cynthia?” he asked, nodding his head towards the small vase of flowers at Niall’s table.

His friend nodded, grinning happily. “She wants to make a big deal each time we open in a new city. But then, she’s not the only one.”

Chewing on the chocolate that turned out to be filled with an orange cream, Adam went to his own area and wasn’t surprised to see several flower arrangements waiting for him. One was from the Hummels, wishing him well and expressed their excitement over seeing him perform. Another from
his family, least he think they were forgetting about him.

It was the third bouquet that was most dear to him; a small arrangement of white roses and lavender that looked as lovely as it smelled and left him with a sense of calm and peace. He didn’t need to read the card to know that it was from Kurt and would express nothing but love and regret that he could not be there to offer his affection in person.

Suddenly all of the fears about the weeks of separation facing them and whatever uncertainties faced them didn’t matter. Adam knew what he was working for and that was the day that they would be together again. Knowing that Kurt would be supporting him and working just as hard left Adam secure that they would survive this time. They would continue to grow and thrive, becoming stronger as individuals and as a couple.

In the meantime... he sat down at his dressing table to start the lengthy preparations for that night’s performance.
“Come on!” Analisa giggled as their group all but ran down the street, urging the others to pick up their pace.

Kurt laughed as he followed in her wake, holding Rachel’s hand as they rushed along. “It’s not like they’re going to lock us out,” he reminded his friend.

Jamie came up from behind them, his arm about Katya’s shoulders so that his girlfriend didn’t fall behind. “Oh, don’t try to play it so cool, Hummel,” he teased. “You want to see those sets as much as the rest of us.”

Kurt couldn’t deny that. With just a short three weeks before they went into tech, the excitement over their impending opening night was taking hold of the entire cast. Even with the increased rehearsal times taking up what little time outside of class they had, they were relishing the hard work because they were now starting to see all their efforts coming to fruition. Seeing the stage and sets would really cement just how close they were.

“Oh my God!” Rachel squealed as they approached the theater and saw the poster proclaiming the limited run of NYADA’s benefit production. The poster bore the classic illustration of young Cossette from the Castle on a Cloud number. In lieu of featuring the lead actors, the poster listed the faculty involving in staging the show since all were well known in the industry and sure to pull in a crowd. Rachel was positively quivering with excitement.

Katya was calmer, at least on the surface, looking at the façade of the theater with an admiring eye. “It’s so beautiful,” she marveled happily, running a hand over some of the decorative tilework.

Jamie stepped up to her and wrapped his arms about her body to pull her close. “I can’t believe that we’re actually going to be performing here,” he chimed in, looking up at the marque. “I feel like we’re dreaming.”

Analisa laughed brightly and took Kurt’s other arm, resting her head on his shoulder. “This is real,” she sighed happily. “It’s really happening.”

Kurt gently kissed the tops of both his girl’s heads. “Come on,” he urged. “Let’s get a look at those sets.”

They walked to the closed stage door and Jamie knocked on it politely. The door unlocked and a stocky older man in a security uniform poked his head out. “Yeah?” he asked questioningly. “You kids with NYADA?”

They all held up their freshly minted theater ID cards that would grant them admission to the stage area. “Yes sir,” Rachel answered politely. “We know that there’s no rehearsal scheduled, but we just wanted to see the stage area. If that’s okay.”

The guard shook his head in mock annoyance. “It’s been a damn parade with you kids coming in all day. All right… come on.” He held the door open for them.

They hurried past, not wanting to strain his good will. “Thank you so much,” Kurt said sincerely as they stepped inside.

“It’s okay,” the guard assured them, a tolerant smile on his face. He’d seen enough young performers during his years at the theater and could appreciate their excitement. “There are a bunch working on
The sets right now, so don’t get in their way. Take a look around and let me know when you’re ready to leave.”

“We will,” Analisa said happily. “Thanks again.”

“Have fun, kids,” he urged with a smile.

The five students walked through the backstage area and looked about, checking out the dressing rooms with long lines of makeup tables with lighted mirrors and racks to hold costumes for the actors. Kurt couldn’t resist sitting down in one of the chairs, mentally picturing himself getting ready for a performance and feeling his stomach flip with excitement. He began to picture where everything would go…. Adam’s picture would need to be in a place where he could easily see it, and his makeup kit would be at his right so that he would have no problem finding things. His friend classmates would be clustered as they prepared for the show with the air buzzing with excitement… It was perfect.

Rachel leaned over his shoulder so that they shared the reflection in the mirror, her hand pressed gently to his arm. “It never gets old, does it?” she asked softly, her dark eyes shining. “The excitement of a new show, I mean. All the hard work getting us to this point makes it worthwhile.”

He shook his head, smiling. “No, it definitely doesn’t,” he agreed. “Even back in high school, there was always that trilled before a performance. I think that I love the preparation as much as I do the actual show.”

She nodded, resting her head against his. “I know you do. I’m still learning to,” she claimed. “And I don’t think that I could be more thrilled right now, even if I had a major role. Just being part of this show… getting to be in this theater…”

He reached up to squeeze her hand.

“Hey guy,” Analisa chirped happily from the door. “Come on! They’re working on the sets now.”

Rachel stepped back to let Kurt rise from his seat, holding his hand as they rejoined the rest of the group. Jamie was studying the lights and rigging, pointing out just how complex a system this theater boasted. It was far more advanced than even the largest performance stage in NYADA. The technical team would be able to do pretty much anything they wanted, creating all sorts for interesting lighting effects for whatever their production required. Kurt could only imagine what they would be able to do for scenes like the barricade battle.

“Oh… wow…” Katya breathed when she got her first look at the elaborate set taking form on the stage.

Kurt looked and felt his mouth drawing into a wide grin. It appeared that this was the set for the Saint Michele scenes, showing the worn, weather-beaten frontage of the slums they were supposed to represent. Somehow the set builders managed to create the illusion of a town square framed by several two-story buildings. There were balconies and walkways that would allow the actors to work on multiple levels, giving the audience the impression of a slum teeming with the destitute and desperate. There were signs for businesses, including the café where the Friends of the ABC would meet, a few streetlamps and even a workable street cart.

Rachel’s eyes were shining and her smile brilliant as she looked over the set. Someone decided at that moment to test the electrical elements and the windows within the buildings began to glow with what would look like soft candle light to the audience. The streetlamps began to flicker with what looked like gas flames. The shadows cast on the buildings was beautiful but deepened the realistic
sense of poverty they were meant to portray.

“This is fantastic,” she gasped in amazement. “I can’t believe they built all this so quickly.”

“They’ve been working on the sets for months,” Kurt reminded her. “They’ve been working as hard as we’ve been. And for as long.”

Rachel nodded, raising her head so she could see the balconies and signages. “It’s funny, but I’ve never given a whole lot of thought about what the technical teams do,” she admitted. “Or about how much work they put into it. I could never have imagined that our sets would look like this.”

Kurt nodded, admiring the way the creative way the designers seemed to fill the stage. Unlike the original Broadway production, they didn’t have the luxury of a turntable stage to work with, so the set builders had to be more creative. Kurt saw that they could use the sheer size of the stage, easily the largest he had ever stood on, to show the passage of distance and time. The stage was easily big enough to contain multiple set pieces that could be moved about on tracks and wheels, and quite a few elements could be used for multiple scenes.

Analisa walked across the stage from one end to the other, sizing it up. “I can’t believe that we’re actually going to be performing here,” she marveled. “This is…” She shook her head, at a loss for words.

Kurt totally understood what she was feeling. They’d all performed in some fairly sizable venues before, but this was completely on another level for all of them. Kurt compared this stage to the one for the Garrison Festival and it felt like he was standing in another world altogether. He was having a hard time wrapping his mind around the fact that this was real and actually happening to him.

“Guy… you’ve got to see this,” Jamie called out from the edge of the stage. He motioned them over and urged, “Take a look.”

Kurt and Rachel stepped forward to join him and Katya and Kurt felt his jaw drop open in shock. With the curtains drawn back, they could easily see the entire theater. Kurt eyes were wide with wonder as he looked about, amazed by the sheer scope of the place.

The first things that struck Kurt were the seats. There were just so many of them, upholstered in peacock blue velvet. He started to count them but quickly gave up because of the sheer number. From the stage and with the house lights on, they could easily see the size of each section; orchestra, mezzanine, and balcony. He knew that he shouldn’t have been surprised as they’d all looked up information on the theater and knew that the main stage boasted over two thousand seats. But seeing it in person from the stage and realizing that in just a matter of weeks all those seats were going to be filled with people watching them… he felt his knees start to tremble.

He forced himself to look away from the ocean of seats, least his nerves get the better of him and send him running from the theater. The space itself was astonishingly beautiful, probably one of the most stunningly elegant venues he’d ever stood in. Done in a Moorish revival style, the fanciful woodwork designs made the entire theater look like something out of some sort of fantasy. He looked up at the ceiling, seeing the intricate design of stars and geometric patterns supporting an elaborate hanging chandelier.

This was not a basic auditorium. This was a stage that demanded excellence in every way and it was now striking the group that this was far beyond any of them as individual performers. This was far beyond even NYADA. This was about a spot in a shared history of theater that they needed to rise up to. Whatever they accomplished in this venue would hold a significant place in their careers and could be an important mark in the rich history of this beautiful theater.
It wasn’t as if they didn’t know why they were at NYADA. However much they felt they needed to learn or enjoyed their classes, this was all about preparing them for a professional career. To be able to stand on stages like this and be able to handle the pressure. This challenge would help give them the strength and the confidence to step into that phase of their lives.

Kurt looked to Rachel, who had the same dazed expression that he was sure was on his own face. Part of him was glad to see that his friend was just as taken aback by the grandeur of the theater that they would be performing in. This was so different from the time when they’d stood upon the Gershwin Theater stage, because that moment had been all about dreams and fantasies about the future. This was reality and it was terrifying.

And if Rachel, with her legendary confidence was overwhelmed by what they were facing, what hope was there for him? For any of them?

The five of them stood in silence, looking over the empty theater and imagining the seats filled with and appreciative audience. They pictured friends and family seated in the front rows, cheering their performances. The weight of the awaiting task struck them all and they huddled close together for mutual support.

Hours later found Rachel and Kurt in his dorm room, taking a moment to relax and have a snack before they were due at rehearsal. Kurt look to his friend, who was sitting cross-legged on his bed with a thoughtful expression on her face.

“Are you okay?” he asked, offering a box of brownies that had come in his last care package from Carole. “You’ve been awfully quiet since we left the theater.”

“Just thinking,” she admitted, accepting a piece but not bringing it to her mouth. She sat there holding it in her hand, looking deep in thought and a little lost.

“Anything I can help with?” he asked, taking a bite and washing it down with a sip of tea.

She didn’t answer immediately, taking her time to consider what she needed to say. It was rare that Kurt saw her so introspective, so he gave her the room to gather her thoughts. It was several minutes before she spoke up.

“When we were at the theater, I couldn’t help thinking about Funny Girl,” she said carefully.

Kurt offered her a gentle, supportive smile. “That doesn’t surprise me,” he acknowledged. He was aware of just how much that missed opportunity still haunted her.

She smiled, grateful for his understanding. “Back when I was rejected, that was without question the worst moment of my life. I know that it sounds positively childish, because I know that a lot of people have been through so much worse. But it felt like my world was ending.”

Kurt nodded, remembering the funk of self-pity that she’d sunk into those first days before she was able to claw her way back to some semblance of normalcy. Accepting failure, this failure in particular, had come very hard for her. Admittedly, his patience with her at that time had been somewhat limited given how easy a road she’d had up until that moment. After all the time’s he’d been rejected, often in favor of her, watching her orgy of self-pity had been hard to swallow.

She sighed and took a bite of her brownie. “When we were standing on that stage and looking out over the theater… well, it made me realize how lucky I’d really been. To not get Fanny, I mean.”

He raised an eyebrow in surprise. That had not been the respond he was expecting.
She saw his expression and couldn’t help from smiling. “I guess you weren’t expecting to hear that coming from me,” she chuckled ironically.

Kurt shook his head. “No, definitely not that. If there’s anything you’ve ever been confident about, it’s been performing.”

She shrugged, swallowing the last of her treat. “I just understand now that I really wasn’t ready. Not for auditioning, not for handling rejection or criticism… how would I have been able to face an audience like that by myself?”

Rachel looked down into the depths of her teacup. “You know me as well as I do about how I would have behaved. I would have totally ignored the rest of the cast and the tech team,” she admitted. “It would only have seen them as being there to showcase myself. And I probably would have flamed out pretty quickly.”

Kurt couldn’t find fault with anything she was saying. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t thought those very same things, but it was a shock to hear it coming from Rachel herself.

She nodded, as if satisfied with her answer. “I’ve been dreaming of playing parts like Fanny and Eponine my whole life. It was everything that I ever wanted and missing out on that chance… I’m not going to lie. It nearly broke me. But I understand now that sometimes just wanting something really badly isn’t enough. I understand that I needed to go through that process, and not get it, so I could see just what I’m getting into.”

“Hopefully, one day I’ll really be ready for it,” she said with determination. “I know that right now, I’m not. Being in the chorus for our show… I get that this is what I need. Facing a huge audience like we’re going to by myself… I just wouldn’t have been able to handle it. So I understand that losing Fanny was really the best thing for me in the end. I’m just sorry it took me so long to see it and that I made it so hard on you.”

"It’s okay,” he assured her gently, moving closer and placing his arm about her. “I know how difficult that was for you, and I’m so proud of how far you’ve come since then. Admitting that you’re not ready for something is never easy, but I know that you’ll get your moment.”

“I just hope that when it comes that I’ll really be ready for it,” she said with a sigh. “What happens if I can’t?”

He just smiled. “You’ll do what you’ve always done. You might struggle, but you will shine.”

She rested her head against his shoulder, taking comfort in his presence. “I don’t know what I would have done without you,” she said softly. “You’ve always been such an inspiration for me. I wish that I had half your strength.”

Kurt signed, not wanting to examine his own fears too closely at the moment. If Rachel was afraid of failing when her moment of stardom arrived, what did that say about his fear that his moment might never come at all?

“Sometimes I don’t feel so strong,” he admitted reluctantly, knowing that his friend deserved his honesty. “I’m not going to lie to myself. I know that I’m not going to get the kind of chances that you will. I’m not as easy to fit into roles, and…

“Now you stop it right there,” Rachel interrupted, looking up at her friend with a stern expression. “I know that you’ve gotten shafted in a lot of ways. Quite a few times because of me, but look how far you’ve come! You’re in the one of the best schools in the country…”
“That I had to audition twice for,” he reminded her.

Sher gave him an impatient stare. “So what?” she demanded. “What does it matter how many times you had to try? You made it! There are thousands of people out there who’ve tried multiple times that never made it as far as you have. I might have gotten in first, but I had my head so far up my own ass that I nearly threw it all away.

“And look what you’ve done since! You’re a standout at NYADA. You’ve already performed on a professional stage,” Rachel reminded him. “Maybe you won’t hit it big on your first attempt. Or your second, or your third. I didn’t either, and you didn’t let me wallow. You’ve been proving how amazing you are since the moment I first met you and I don’t think there’s anything you can’t do. You don’t just have the talent… you’ve got the strength and the determination that I wish I had.”

Kurt couldn’t help from smiling at her full-throated show of support. “You’re not going to let me give up ever. Are you?”

She grinned, giving him a playful poke in the ribs that caused him to laugh. “Nope. So suck it up, mister. I’m going to need a suitable escort when I’m accepting my first Tony… someone that matches my talent and success and you’re obviously it. There’s no way that I’m walking it there without the biggest star next to me on my arm.”

* * *

If anyone was delusional enough to think that their teachers would be taking it a little easier on them with tech week rapidly approaching, they at least weren’t foolish enough to complain when that didn’t come to pass. If anything, the challenges became steeper, the pressure on them to excel pushing them to the point of breaking at times. Adequate sleep became a distant memory as their every waking moment was filled with work, whether for their classes or the show.

And it came as no surprise to anyone that Madam Tibideaux was the most difficult of the lot. She swept into the classroom in an elegant swirl of silk and brocade, dressed in rich tones of green and blue as if to herald the slowly approaching spring and followed by her favorite pianist, who would provide the music to accompany the students.

“Good morning all,” she greeted with a calm smile on her face.

They answered back politely from their seats and waited for her to take her place at the front of the room. She pulled her lesson plan folder out of her briefcase and opened it to review her own notes for the day’s session.

“I know that for most of you tech week is rapidly approaching and you’ve been working very hard outside your classes. But I’d be remiss as your teacher if we let that interfere with our lesson plans,” she pronounced, chuckling at the mild groans coming from her class. “Still, I think that we should try something a little different today that you should enjoy.

“By now, all of you should have a better understanding of who you are as artists. You’ve had a chance to learn and grow at NYADA and hopefully have begun to discover what you are truly capable of. For some of you, that probably means a real shift in what you’ve come to expect of yourselves. So today, you’re going to show me what you’ve learned is your greatest attribute as a performer in a single song performance.

“What I’m looking for is a deeper understanding of the material you’ve chosen and your connection to it,” she explained them. “And to shake things up a little bit, I’m giving you the freedom to pick a song from any genre you’d like. In fact, I’m encouraging you to look beyond musical theater so that
you’re not tempted to emulate a specific character. Whatever genre you feel lets you encapsulate who you believe you’ve become as an artist, I want to see you and your personal emotional journey. This is going to test your musical knowledge as well as your ability to interpret your choices and I’m hoping to see some interesting things this morning.”

“So… let us begin, shall we? Mr. Michalec, if you don’t mind…”

Kurt saw that they would not be going in alphabetical order, which meant that they could be called up at any moment and had best be prepared because few things enraged their teacher more than being delayed by someone else’s tardiness. Picking a song that reflected who he was as a performer was a challenging prospect, and he wanted to make sure that he picked something that fully displayed his abilities.

As several of his classmates went up before he was called, Kurt thought quickly about what his best attributes were and what songs would best reflect them. He considered what sheet music he had with him and thought that he had a very appropriate choice.

When Rachel was called before him, he paid close attention to his friend, wanting to see what she had in mind. She stepped to the front of the classroom and handed her sheet music to the pianist before turning to face her classmates. When the music began to play, she turned her mental focus inward.

“Don’t want to be second best. Don’t want to stand in line. Don’t want to fall behind,” she sang softly, making it clear that she was willing to acknowledge her shortcomings in a very public manner. “Don’t want to get caught out. Don’t want do without. Oh, and the lesson I must learn is that I’ve got to wait my turn?”

She restrained her normal tendency to belt, making her performance more introspective than they usually saw from her. “Looks like I got to be hot and cold,” she admitted. “I got to be taught and told. Got to be good as gold.”

“But perfectly… honestly… Oh, I think it would be good for me,” she proposed, her voice carrying through the classroom sweetly and gently. “’Cause it’s a hindrance to my health, if I’m a stranger to myself.”

Kurt felt himself smiling, glad to see Rachel putting on such a vulnerable display. Admitting to mistakes was never easy, especially in front of people who’d seen you when you did so. Everyone in that room had seen Rachel’s rise and crashing fall so confessing her flaws like this had to be difficult for her.

“Oh, miniature disasters and minor catastrophes bring me to my knees,” Rachel admitted. “Well, I must be my own master. Or a miniature disaster will be… oh… it will be the death of me.”

Admitting that she was entirely at fault for the misfortunes that had befallen her had to difficult, he thought. But it showed how much she’d grown that she was able to do that, and prove that she had come such a long way since she nearly flamed out.

She looked gently vulnerable standing before her classmates, laying her frailties bare. To see someone who normally displayed overwhelming confidence so emotionally exposed was heartbreaking. Kurt believed that even Rachel’s worst detractors would be moved by her performance.

“And I’ll find out the answers when I know what to ask,” she promised. “But I speak a different language, and everybody’s talking too fast.”
“Well, I’ve got to run a little faster,” Rachel sang, finally allowing some of the power that she’d been so adeptly restraining to show. “Or a miniature disaster will be. Oh well, I need to know I’ll last… If a miniature disaster hits me…. It will be the death of me.”

Madam Tibideaux gave a nod of approval. “Lovely, Ms. Berry,” she complimented. “That was probably one of the most emotionally sincere performances I’ve seen from you.”

“Thank you, Madam,” Rachel said sincerely, offering her teacher a small smile.

“You had a clear connection with that song and it certainly came out in your voice, which is what we were aiming for.” Their teacher paused, appearing thoughtful for a moment.

“If there was one flaw, it is that your voice still comes across as a bit too polished, which can sometimes make the sentiment feel artificial,” she said carefully. “I’d like to see you try to relax a bit more. I think the emotional resonance would be stronger if you let a slightly rawer edge come out in your tone.”

Rachel nodded, accepting the criticism with good grace. “I’ll definitely try that. I just find it hard to relax that much.”

Their teacher nodded understandingly. “It’s going to take a bit of practice,” she acknowledged. “Because you’re going to be unlearning some of the habits you’re gotten into, but it will help you with playing many characters. Especially with a lot of the more modern musicals. Being able to adapt your voice to a wide variety of styles is going to be vital to making yourself a marketable prospect. You have to keep in mind not to allow your chosen style of singing to interfere with the character you’re seeking to play.”

Rachel nodded, making it clear that she was paying attention before taking her seat so the next student could perform.

“You were great!” he whispered.

“Just once,” she muttered, just loud enough for Kurt to hear. “Just once I’d like to get feedback from her that didn’t point out what I didn’t do.”

Kurt chuckled, giving her a playful nudge. “Like that’s ever going to happen.”

She offered him a soft smile. “Hey, I can dream. Can’t I?”

After their classmate had received his critiques, which in Kurt’s opinion was harsher than the feedback Rachel had been given, Madam Tibideaux summoned Kurt to take his place at the front of the room.

“Mr. Hummel? If you’re ready,” she invited. “I hope that you’ve got something interesting in mind.”

Kurt handed his sheet music to the pianist before turning to face his teacher. When the music began, he took a breath, hoping that he made the right choice.

“Feeling broken, barely holding on,” Kurt sang, his voice slipping neatly into the lower end of his range so that he could start in the song’s original key. “But there’s something so strong, somewhere inside of me. And I am down, but I’ll get up again. Don’t count me out just yet.

“I’ve been brought down to my knees,” he stated, thinking back to all the times when life had just seemed too hard to stand. “And I’ve been pushed way past the point of breaking. But I can take it. I’ll be back on my feet. This is far from over. You haven’t seen the last of me.”
How many times did he think it would be easier to just give up? How often should he have been expected to just shake off the cruelties that life foisted upon him? Losing his mother, nearly losing his father. Growing up in a town that hated him for just being and finding himself the target of whatever petty torments his peers felt like inflicting.

“They can say that I won’t stay around,” he claimed, remembering the dark moment when ending it all seemed like more than just an idle consideration. He wondered if anyone really knew just how close he’d come to that irreversible decision. How much of the reason that he was standing there was only because he didn’t want to prove the naysayers right. Maybe sometimes that was all that he needed to keep going.

“But I’m gonna stand my ground! You’re not gonna stop me!” he proclaimed. “You don’t know me, you don’t know who I am. Don’t count me out so fast.”

All of the things that nearly broke him only made him stronger. The mornings that found him crawling out of a dumpster before class. The nights when he had to shower off urine thrown at him before his father got home and found him. The numerous times when he had to content himself to being in the background, and when Blaine’s infidelity shattered his heart. Any one of them could have destroyed him, but they only made him more determined.

“I’ve been brought down to my knees. And I’ve been pushed way past the point of breaking! But I can take it! I’ll be back, back on my feet,” he warned. “This is far from over. You haven’t seen the last of me.”

He heard the key change in the music and looked up at his classmates with a stare of fierce determination. “There will be no fade out! This is not the end!” he warned, his voice sliding neatly into his mid-range. “I’m down now but I’ll be standing tall again! Times are hard, but I was built tough. I’m gonna show you all what I’m made of!”

“I’ve been brought down to my knees. And I’ve been pushed way past the point of breaking! But I can take it! I’ll be back on my feet,” he proclaimed confidently. “This is far from over. I am far from over! You haven’t seen the last of me! No, no! I’m not going anywhere! I’m staying right here! Oh no, you won’t see me begging. I’m not taking my bow, can’t stop me! It’s not the end, you haven’t seen the last of me. Oh no! You haven’t seen the last of me…”

His voice trailed off as the music, leaving him standing to face his teacher’s judgement. Madam Tibideaux considered her student thoughtfully, his expression inscrutable as she considered his efforts. This was the part he hated, because he knew that she would miss absolutely nothing and would not hesitate to call him out on any mistakes in front of the rest of the class. But this is what he needed, he mentally reminded himself.

“Well, yet again you’ve shown your adeptness in selecting material,” his teacher granted graciously. “That was an ideal choice for you and it was clear that you not only have a lot of affection for this song, but feel a deep personal connection to its message. That came out very clearly in your performance.”

So far, so good, he mentally sighed. He’d succeeded in the major focus of the lesson so that was a bit of a relief. Now for the nitpicking on technique that he knew was coming.

“You made very good use of your lower and middle range,” Madam Tibideaux said appraisingly. “And I did like the measured use of power at certain points, because this would have been an easy song to over sing. Balancing restraint and power is always a challenge that we have to consider in
presenting a song to its best potential. But I do think that you missed a chance to make use of the whole of your range. The song might have benefited from some points done in a higher octave since that’s one of the chief elements that make you such a unique singer.”

Kurt nodded, not able to fault his teacher on her reasoning. He had been shying away from his upper range lately in a lot of classwork exercises and it had been only a matter of time before she called him out on it. Just because he was training his voice to take advantage of conventional tenor roles didn’t mean that she didn’t want him to develop all of his talents.

He considered her critique of his performance and realized that he needed to show her that he wasn’t dismissing that aspect of his talents at his private session with her that morning. Many students found being alone with her in a classroom intimidating, but Kurt was looking forward to trying something new. Worse comes to worse, she would help him refocus on the direction she felt would serve him best.

“I was thinking about what you said in class,” he acknowledged as he handed his sheet music to the pianist. “I didn’t realize that I’d neglected my upper register that much lately.”

“We have been focusing on your lower and middle range to strengthen your control and projection the past few weeks,” Madam Tibideaux granted with a gentle smile. “But I don’t want to lose sight of the rest of your abilities. Granted, there aren’t very many roles written that would utilize that aspect of your register currently, but we don’t know what might exist in the future. You have a very unique talent and I want to make sure that you develop it to its fullest potential.

“So… let’s see what you have to show me,” she urged, nodding to the pianist to begin.

Kurt mentally centered himself and closed his eyes, letting the gentle music washing over him. This would be something quite different than Madam Tibideaux has heard from him before and he wanted to give it his best effort.

“When the dark wood fell before me, and all the paths were overgrown,” he sang softly, his voice slipping neatly into his upper register. “When the priests of pride say there is no other way, I tilled the sorrows of stone.”

Kurt looked to his teacher, his voice lilting gently and sweetly on the swell of the music. “I did not believe because I could not see,” he claimed. “Though you came to me in the night. When the dawn seemed forever lost, you showed me your love in the light of the stars.”

“Cast your eyes to the ocean. Cast your soul to the sea,” he urged, feeding a bit of power into his high notes. “When the dark night seems endless, please remember me.”

He could feel his teacher’s gaze upon him, her dark eyes catching every element of his performance. His voice, his breathing, his expression… he left nothing to chance and wanted to give his teacher what she expected of him.

“Then the mountain rose before me, by the deep well of desire,” he sang, going into the highest notes of his range. For once, they felt well supported and didn’t sound thin or weak. “From the fountain of forgiveness, beyond the ice and the fire.”

Madam Tibideaux was making notes, her pen scratching on the pad in her hands.

Kurt tuned out whatever he thought she might be writing about him, focusing on engaging his head voice in a way that sounded like notes on a spring breeze. “Though we share this humble path, alone,” he breathed, engaging his diaphragm to support the notes. “How fragile is the heart. Oh, give
“These clay feet wings to fly. To touch the face of the stars. Breathe life into this feeble heart. Lift this mortal veil of fear. Take these crumbled hopes, etched with tears. We’ll rise above these earthly cares.”

The pianist began to play with more volume as she brought the music to its climax and Kurt tried to bring more power into his voice. This was the most difficult challenge for him, pushing his voice to its limit.

“Cast your eyes to the ocean,” he urged, letting his voice free like a dove taking flight. “Cast your soul to the sea. When the dark night seems endless, please remember me… please remember me…”

His teacher didn’t launch immediately into her critique, taking a moment to consider what he’d just offered her. When she finally smiled, he let out a sigh of relief.

“That,” she said, pointing at him with her pen. “That is exactly what I wanted to see from you. That was everything I knew you were capable of.” She shook her head in befuddlement. “Why are you so afraid of that… that gift?”

Kurt blinked, not having expected a question like that.

“I…”

She looked at her student with a frank expression. “I’ve taught so many students in my career. Some of the most talented vocalists in the world, but I have never met someone capable of so much and so intimidated by it. You don’t just have talent. You have a genuine gift as a performer! Why are you holding yourself back? Because there is no one in this school who could have sung that song the way you just did.”

Kurt’s intake of breath went hard into his chest, her words taking him by shock. He wasn’t afraid. Was he? Not of his voice, which he had always seen as one of his most important assets. He was even more surprised when his teacher turned to the pianist and asked her to leave.

“Megan, can you take a break and give us a few minutes?” she requested. “Mr. Hummel and I need to have a chat.”

“Of course,” the other woman said agreeably. “I’ll be back in five or so.”

Once the door closed behind her, Madam Tibideaux took Kurt’s hand and guided him to a seat. “Talk to me,” she urged gently, sitting down next to him. “What’s going on in that head of yours?”

Kurt looked down at his feet, feeling the heat of an embarrassed flush coming onto his face. “Madam… I…”

She gave his hand a reassuring squeeze, her grip gentle and firm.

He inhaled deeply, not wanting to make a fool of himself. “Back in school… before I came to New York, I knew that I was talented,” he acknowledged, hoping that he didn’t sound too arrogant. “But it never got me very much. In our choir, I never was chosen for a lead or solo when it mattered. You saw my application. The one solo I had was because the guy I liked at the time was trying to win me over. I never got one because anyone thought that I actually deserved it. I know that I was one of the best singers in my group, but I always was passed over in favor in guys who… well, who sounded like guys. Singing like this… I just get so tired of being told that I sound like a girl.”

He looked at her, daring to speak frankly. “The only times I ever seemed to get rewarded was when I
sang like everyone else. Even my NYADA audition… I had to sing in my lower range to get it. My first audition didn’t work so why kind of a message was I supposed to get? It’s not that I’m afraid of my voice, but I know that my only shot of having any kind of career is to make myself as conventional as possible.”

Madam Tibideaux watched him carefully, her normally flinty gaze softening. “If that was the lesson that you took from your admission, then I deeply regret that. The feedback I gave you that day when you first auditioned was sincere. I meant every word of it. And the song you sang and the way you sang it had absolutely no bearing on why I had to reject you. Nor was your song choice and the way you sang it at Winter Showcase the reason why I admitted you, beyond its excellence. The only reason I had to reject you the first time was your lack of performance experience, nothing else. I knew that you had talent. What I needed you to prove to me was that you were able to take a blow, get up again and keep trying.”

She lifted her free hand and patted his chest over his heart. “That, you proved to me. You proved your strength and your heart. And you know that you have that strength judging by the song you performed this morning. There are hundreds of talented people that don’t get nearly as far as you already have because they don’t have a fraction of the courage you have in you. That is what separates you from ninety percent of the other students in this school. And that is going to the reason that you succeed in life.”

The smile she offered was just enough teeth to be dangerous. “Of course, having a three-octave range isn’t going to hurt, will it?”

Kurt couldn’t help from laughing. “No, I guess not,” he granted. “I just am so tired being laughed at the way I’d been for daring to think that I could handle a part.”

“Do you see me laughing?” his teacher demanded gently, granting him a rare smile. “The one thing I will never do is lie about my opinion about your talent or your prospects. I’m not going to paint a rosy picture and tell you that it’s going to be easy, but I’m also not going to shoot you down before you even try.”

She patted his hand and released it to stand before him. “I’m very glad that you proved me right, Mr. Hummel. That you had the strength and the courage to keep trying. And that you are everything that I hoped you would be.”

Kurt looked up and watched as she walked across the room, her robes swirling softly about her feet. “I think that we’re about done today,” she proclaimed. “I want you to think about what we discussed and keep it in mind going forward. You’re going to find many obstacles in your career, Mr. Hummel. Don’t be one of them yourself. That was a lesson that I needed to learn myself when I was in your place.”

He nodded in understanding. “I will, Madam,” he assured her.

Her smile softened. “Good. Now one last thing…” She went to her bag and pulled out an envelope of fine heavy stationary embossed with the NYADA logo. “If you’re going to work in the next day or so, I’d appreciate it if you could bring Ms. Wright her tickets for the opening night of our production and the benefit gala. And my letter to thank her for her exceedingly lavish donation.”

“Isabelle did that?” Kurt asked in surprise, to which his teacher nodded and chuckled.

“Yes, she did. And very, very generously,” Madam Tibideaux confirmed. “She mentioned believing very much in NYADA’s mission. And the mission of a particular student.”
Kurt felt his cheeks burning but accepted the envelope. “I’ll make sure she gets it,” he promised. “I’ll run it over this afternoon.”

“Good. Good,” his teacher said agreeably. “Then I will see you at class later this week. And Mr. Hummel… make sure that you’re prepared to work your upper register a bit more. Let’s not allow that gift of yours to go to waste.”

Kurt nodded, finally allowing himself to smile. “I’ve got a few songs in mind to try out,” he offered, and she nodded in approval.

“Then we’ll see what you’re really capable of,” she warned with a twinkle in her eye.

He couldn’t help from laughing, wondering if she thought that she had been taking it easy on him thus far.

* * *

The offices of Vogue were their usual display of highly fashionable chaos, with editors, writers and designers running in and out. Kurt loved being there, enjoying being in the thick of things. Whether it was setting up for meetings with VIP guests, copywriting articles or answering the phone and running interference for Isabelle, he had a lot of fun working and felt like he fit in a way that he rarely did elsewhere.

Isabelle’s door was open and he heard her and Chase inside talking avidly about some project they were working on. “Isabelle? Do you have a minute?” Kurt called out to her, placing his jacket and bag at his desk.

She poked her head out, her long curly hair pulled into a lose tail at the back of her head. “Kurt? I thought you weren’t due in until tomorrow morning.”

“I was just bringing over your tickets from Madam Tibideaux,” he answered, holding up the envelope.

His boss’s smile brightened. “Oh good! Why don’t you come in here? I’ve got something to show you.”

Kurt grinned and stepped into her office. “You didn’t tell me that you were donating to NYADA. I mean, that’s amazing that you did,” he commented.

She reached up to take his arm. “I just wanted to surprise you,” she explained. “I know how much NYADA means to you and we wanted to support you there. It’s all for a good cause and I’m happy to do it.”

“That’s still really generous of you,” Kurt insisted.

She laughed and gave him a quick squeeze. “Sweetie, I’m so happy to! You’re one of ours and while I’m still lamenting your career choices, we want you to achieve everything you’ve dreamed of. I can’t wait to see you on that big stage, showing off what you can do so everyone sees what we’ve seen all along.”

Kurt felt his throat tightening, momentarily overwhelmed by her confidence in him. No matter where his career took him, he knew that he would always owe a great deal to Isabelle who had supported him nearly from the moment he first set foot in New York.

Chase was working on a dressed manikin by the window and looked up at their approach. “Well, I
guess the cat is out of the bag,” he mused teasingly. He stepped back so Kurt could see. “So… what
do you think?”

“What’s this?” Kurt asked curiously, eyeing the men’s formal wear on the dress form. “I thought that
we’re doing swimsuits for the next issue.”

Isabelle just smiled. “This is for you, sweetheart,” she explained. “We wanted to surprise you with
your outfit for the gala.”

“Are you kidding?” Kurt gasped, looking over the outfit displayed. It was an elegant tuxedo done up
in classic European lines that would suit his figure ideally. At first, it looked simple with its crisp
white shirt and neat black bowtie, but Kurt could see a contrasting pattern in the weave of the jacket
that looked like snake scales when the light shifted.

“Of course,” Chase insisted, giving his younger colleague a smile. “There are going to be agents and
producers at the gala and we wanted to give you a look that makes you stand out, but for the right
reasons. This way you look elegant, but with a little bit of a youthful edge.”

“You’re going to look amazing in this,” Isabelle assured him. “After all, you’re going to be
representing Vogue as well as NYADA.”

Kurt looked over the tuxedo again and saw that Isabelle and Chase really understood him and what
he’d needed. There was a nod to convention with the classic cut of the suit and its elegant black
color, but the patterning of the jacket was a display that he wasn’t a generic player. It was perfect.

He felt his eyes watering because he was so emotionally overwhelmed by this show of support from
two people that he respected. They didn’t have to do this, he knew. Supporting his acting career was
clearly outside of what he should expect from his employer, but they still did so with astonishing
grace and generosity. He didn’t quite know what to say.

“Thank you,” he said, wiping at his eyes. “That sounds so inadequate but thank you so much!”

Isabelle hugged him. “Oh, honey… it’s our pleasure! You know we love you. And you are going to
be stunning.”

Kurt nodded and sniffled. He gave her a quick kiss to her cheek. “I’d love to stay, but I really need to
get back to school,” he said quietly. “More rehearsals tonight.”

Isabelle gave him another hug. “We’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

Kurt looked over to Chase. “I’ll be in bright and early. And I’ll stop by the bakery to pick up
breakfast,” he offered, remembering that his friend loved the pastries from the place he could stop off
at near the dorm.

Chase smiled brightly. “Sounds great, Kurt. Have a good night, superstar.”

Kurt left the office feeling a little overwhelmed, wondering just how his life had gotten to this point.
There were so many people that seemed to have so much faith in him, so the fact that he still
harbored doubts about his prospects bothered him. When would he finally prove his worth to
himself? Why did he keep letting his doubts and fears get the better of him?

He thought about what Madam Tibideaux had spoken about and knew that this would be his greatest
challenge. Whatever else the world had to throw at him, if he didn’t get his head into the game he
knew that he wouldn’t stand a chance.
He knew what he was afraid of, but how much would he need to accomplish before he started letting it go. It was long past time that he let Why was he still letting what happened in high school have such a hold over him? What was it going to take before he finally let it go?

Madam Tibideaux was right. He had a lot of thinking to do.

* * *

Rachel knew that it was silly to go so far out of her way for cupcakes since there were perfectly good bakeries in Brooklyn. But the last time Kurt had brought dessert to the loft she had fallen totally in love with the light, sweet desserts from this little shop in the East Village. The vanilla cake with matcha icing lingered in her memories and if she was going to spend precious calories on a treat, it had better be a totally mind-tingling, toe-curling one.

Walking out of the bakery with the precious white box in her arms, filled with six delectable cupcakes, (and one in a paper bag for snacking on the way home), she turned to head towards the subway. They had a rare night off from rehearsals, and she had every intention of spending it on the sofa in front of the television. A little pampering, a few cupcakes that she might be convinced to share with Santana and Tina and some junk television sounded like a perfect way to spend a relaxing evening.

She was nearing Washington Square Park when she saw a familiar figure walking up the block towards her wearing a battered leather jacket and carrying a Whole Foods shopping bag in each hand. She was momentarily surprised to see Elliot’s roommate, but then remembered that their apartment wasn’t that far away.

“Hi Neil,” she greeted brightly, wanting to be friendly.

He looked up and pulled his earbuds out of his ears. “Oh, hi Rachel. What are you doing here?” he asked. “You’re quite a bit away from NYADA.”

She held up her bag. “Cupcake run. I’ve got the night off and needed supplies for a suitable binge. Doing some grocery shopping?” she asked, nodded towards his bags.

He grinned and nodded. “I totally forgot that it was my turn to make dinner tonight so I needed to pick up a few things. You do not want to be around my roommates when they’re hungry.”

Rachel found herself really liking his smile. He wasn’t a stunningly handsome man, but his smile just lit up his whole face and made his eyes sparkle. And that jacket was doing some very nice things for his shoulders.

“Well, I won’t keep you,” she said, giving him a warm smile. “Say hi to Elliot and Dani for me.”

“Will do,” Neil agreed, and Rachel turned to head back up the block. She had gotten maybe fifteen feet away when she heard him calling out her name.

“Hey Rachel! Listen… I know that you’re really busy with rehearsals and all,” he said. “But if you’ve got some free time… maybe we can meet for a cup of coffee?”

She looked up at him and smiled. “I’d like that,” she said agreeably.

Neil looked like he wanted to get his phone out but was hampered by his shopping bags. “Is it okay if I get your number from Kurt?” he asked.

She nodded. “Sure. And I’m sure that Dani will be happy to pass along yours when I see her.”
“Great!” he said, smiling at her again. Maybe he was more handsome than she thought at first.

“I’ll talk to you soon,” she promised.

“I’m looking forward to it.”

“Good.” She smiled again before forcing herself to continue on her way. And if she felt his eyes lingering on her as she walked… Well, that wasn’t a bad thing at all.

* * *

“So you two have a coffee date?” Kurt asked as they walked through the halls of NYADA. Rachel had apparently been so excited about her pending assignation that she arrived early for the day and met Kurt directly after breakfast.

She shrugged. “It’s just a casual get together,” she insisted. “I ran into him and he was just being polite.”

“Sure… because he asks every cute girl that he runs into on the street for coffee,” Kurt teased archly. “Not just the ones he saw in tall boots and a corset.”

“I don’t know why I’m feeling like this,” Rachel admitted. “You’d think that I’ve never gone out to coffee with a guy before.”

Kurt gave her a playful nudge of his shoulder. “Maybe because he’s a really nice guy. It’s awhile since you’ve had one of those. I mean, your last guy made some questionable employment choices and I’m as aware of my brother’s shortcomings as anyone,” he said frankly. “Neil could be good for you.”

“I just don’t know what we’re going to talk about,” she confessed, a trifle worried. “He doesn’t do theater. At all. And while I do have years of therapy under my belt, that’s probably not the best thing to bring up on a first date.”

Kurt laughed. “No, probably not,” he agreed. “Look… talk about the weather or the fact that the Mets are going to suck again this year. You’ll find something to talk about.”

She nodded, knowing that she was probably overthinking things. “It’s weird… I think this is the first guy that I’m remotely interested in that’s not a performer of some kind,” she reminded.

“Well, maybe that’s what you need right now,” Kurt advised.

“Maybe. We’ll see what happens. I mean, I’m not running out to pick out a wedding dress just yet,” she promised with a laugh.

“I should hope not! After all, I’m counting on being your date to the Tonys,” he teased.

She smiled and gave him a hug. “Well, I’d better get to class. I’ve got Scene Interpretation this morning.”

“Ohhh… that sounds like fun,” Kurt teased. He gave her a quick kiss on her cheek. “Try to stay awake.”

He began to walk down the hall, then remembered something and turned back around. “Before I forget… Friday night I’m taking you, Analisa and Katya to Vogue to pick you dresses for the gala.”

Rachel positively beamed at the prospect of going shopping in the legendary Vogue fault. “Have I
mentioned how much I love you lately?" she asked.

“You just love me for my day job,” he teased back. “See you later!”

* * *

Alexa Carmody watched as the student left her office, closing the door behind him and felt the sudden urge to just sweep all the papers off her desk. Either that or curl up in a corner and start screaming in frustration. This was not what she needed now.

Taking a deep cleansing breath, she knew that she didn’t have time to wallow in self-pity. She knew what had to be done. But first…

She picked up her desk phone and dialed up the one person who could give her the assurance that she needed. “Carmen, do you have a moment?” she asked. “I need to run something by you.”

* * *

“Let’s go, people!” Ms. July snapped, banging her dance stick on the floor in time to the music. “Keep up with the beat!”

Kurt grunted as his partner literally flung herself into his arms in order to keep up and he felt his muscles strain as he fought to keep her in position. With a mighty heave, he lifted her up and straightened his arms so that she could arch properly over him. Keeping in line with the other dancers, Kurt turned and with as much control as he could manage lowered his partner to the floor and balanced her as she turned a neat pirouette.

The rest of the choreography was challenging in its speed and complexity but thankfully there were no more lifts. Kurt kept up with the pace, keeping mindful about his form because he didn’t want to give Ms. July anything to complain over. He mentally counted off all the steps, keeping in formation with the group until they came to the end.

Ms. July walked down the line of dancers, taking in their positioning and making changes if she saw something not to her satisfaction. There were no insults or harshly worded comments. Not with the students that she had already judged were worthy of her time and effort. There were just firm, precise corrections. Kurt felt her hand on the back of his neck as she tilted his head just a bit to get his posture more to her liking. Once she had made her way through all of her students, she stood back and looked them over one more time.

“That was good,” she finally complimented, nodding in approval. “More than decent. I’d say that all of you would be able to handle professional chorus choreography at this point. Nothing too complicated, but still… good job.”

Kurt couldn’t help from smiling and heard the sighs and nervous laughs of relief coming from his classmates. Given how sparingly she granted any kind of compliment, they could not expect anything better.

Ms. July grinned dangerously at her students. “What that means for now is that things are about to get a lot tougher. Because now that I’m convinced that you have some genuine potential to be more than stage fillers, I’m going to push you to become real dancers.

“And no, I’m not going to take it at all easy on you just because of the show,” she warned, enjoying their groans of dismay. “If anything, that’s reason for me to be harder on you. This is where the
rubber hits the road, people. Some of you are going to be looking for professional work shortly. And this production is the next best thing. If you all can’t prove that you’re up to the challenge, boys and girls, then you’re in the wrong school.”

Kurt nodded, understanding just what she was telling them. Several in the class, including himself, had already had a taste of a professional stage and was looking to get it again. This is what they wanted to do with their lives and they needed to be willing to put in the work to be prepared.

Once she dismissed them with a command to shower, Kurt turned to retrieve his belongings. He had just enough time to grab a shower and lunch before his Diction class, and then he had rehearsals in the late afternoon. Tossing his athletic bag over his shoulder, he was about to follow the others into the changing room when he saw one of Professor Carmody’s assistants enter the room.

The young woman spotted him and hurried over, cradling her clipboard in her arms. “Oh Kurt, thank God you’re still here. Do you have a minute?” she asked.

“Sure,” he said cautiously, wondering what this was about.

“I won’t keep you long, but Professor Carmody really needs to see you in her office before rehearsals this afternoon,” she advised. “Are you free anytime soon?”

Kurt felt his mouth dry in confusion and worry, wondering what this was about.

“I’ve got a class at two, but I can see her before that,” he proposed. “I just need to grab a shower first.”

“That’ll be great,” she said, offering a quick smile. “She’s in her office now so stop by when you’re ready. The sooner, the better.”

He nodded, realizing that he was going to have to skip lunch if he didn’t want to miss his class afterwards. “Any idea what it’s about?” he asked, trying to hide his anxiousness. Being summoned like this was rarely a good thing in his experience.

She shrugged. “No clue. She’s kind of frazzled so I’d get down there as soon as you can.”

Kurt nodded, biting his lower lip nervously. “I’ll be down there in about ten minutes.”

He hurried into the changing room and washed as quickly as he could before changing into clean clothes. As he walked down to Professor Carmody’s office, his mind was racing over all the possible reasons that she could be calling him to her office so abruptly. Being summoned unexpectedly to a professor’s office rarely meant anything good, but for the life of him he couldn’t imagining that he’d done anything to be in any kind of trouble over. He hadn’t missed a single rehearsal and had been working hard. All of the feedback he’d gotten so far had been very positive, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that something wasn’t right.

Professor Carmody answered the door at his knock, smiling when she saw him. “Kurt, come on in,” she urged, holding the door open and ushering him inside. “I’ve got a situation that I need to discuss with you.”

No, that didn’t sound good at all, Kurt thought worriedly and felt his stomach lurch. But he obediently followed her and took the seat offered to him. Fighting down the feeling of panic, he waited for her to take her seat behind the cluttered desk and face him.

“It never fails… with any production, you always get unexpected challenges,” she advised him with a rueful smile. “No matter how carefully you plan things or try to account for all contingencies,
something ends up not working the way you’d hoped. But you always have to be ready to adjust and make changes when necessary.”

She looked at him appraisingly, taking a long moment before just jumping in. “Wade’s dropped out of the show. He got an offer for a film role and he’s leaving NYADA this week.”

Kurt inhaled sharply. “But it’s only a few weeks until opening night. Can he do that?” he couldn’t help from demanding. How could he put in all that work and just quit a few weeks before opening night?

Professor Carmody shrugged. “It’s not unexpected with theater students,” she explained. “Especially seniors. They start looking for work and sometimes they get an offer that they feel they can’t turn down. From what he told me, he’s a replacement for someone else and had to jump if he wanted the part. It was a choice between a professional role or a week-long run of a school production. While it’s inconvenient for us, I can’t exactly blame him.”

Kurt had to admit that if he were in the same situation he didn’t know which he would choose, and he found himself sympathizing with the older student.

“If it’s any consolation, Wade feels terrible about this,” Professor Carmody granted. “It wasn’t an easy choice for him to make, but fortunately it’s still enough in advance of our opening that we have time to make the changes we need to for the production going forward.”

She looked at him frankly. “I’m pulling you from the chorus. Starting today, you’re the principal for Enjolras.”

Kurt found himself staring at her dumbly, not quite sure he was hearing her right. “But… I’m only a sophomore,” he reminded her, wondering if this was some kind of mistake.

“Yes, and you are Wade’s understudy,” she reminded him. “Since he’s no longer going to be in this production, I need you to step up and take over the role.”

He felt himself blinking in surprise, not quite sure of what to say. She couldn’t be serious…

Professor Carmody sighed a bit impatiently, running a hand to smooth down her hair. “Kurt, the students I picked to be understudies were chosen because I was confident that they would be able to jump in at a moment’s notice,” she explained, not bothering to hide the rebuke in her tone. “You are one of the standout performers in your class and if I wasn’t committed to casting the featured roles with graduating students, you would be a clear candidate to have the role outright.

“Now you’ve been working well and you are at least as good in the role as Wade was. I’ve spoken with Madam Tibideaux and she agrees that you’re capable of handling the part. What I need is your assurance that you are up to the job because we are running out of time and if I need to pull someone else to play Enjolras, I need to know now.”

“No… no, I can do this,” Kurt assured her, still feeling shocked at this sudden change. He was trying to mentally process what was happening and wasn’t sure that he was managing so well. It probably wouldn’t hit him until later.

Professor Carmody smiled. “That’s good, Kurt. I want you to remember that I wouldn’t have cast you as an understudy if I wasn’t confident that you were capable of handling it, so don’t worry so much. It’ll be fine. And fortunately, we’ve got enough notice for you to get comfortable before opening night.

“Now I’m going to need you to meet with the costume team so Wade’s costumes can be tailored for
you. Can you be down in the shop tomorrow morning before class? Thankfully you’re close to the same size but let’s not leave that for the last minute. The costumers have enough to worry about.”

Kurt nodded, feeling his chest tighten at the realization of just what was happening.

Professor Carmody made a tired sigh when she realized that she had another issue to concern herself with. “Oh crap… now I need to find an understudy for you.” She looked at him plaintively. “Please do me a favor and don’t get sick for the next few weeks. Or break a leg. Or get hit by a bus.”

Kurt couldn’t help from laughing at the elegant woman’s hangdog expression. “I won’t,” he promised, feeling the anxiousness starting to be replaced with excitement. This was really happening…

“Then I’ll see you this afternoon,” she promised. “Five o’clock. Don’t be late because I’m going to be working your ass off today.”

Well, that wasn’t anything new, he thought though he didn’t dare voice that opinion. “I never am,” he reminded her, feeling a bit of confidence starting to take root. “Thank you so much for this chance. I won’t let you down.”

She just smiled at his promise. “I know you won’t, Kurt. Thank you for being willing to take this on.”

He closed the office door behind him, wanting to get away and find some privacy before the buzzing in his head overwhelmed him. This couldn’t be happening. Things like this didn’t happen to him. But apparently it just did. He was so confused.

Thankfully he arrived at his Diction class early and there was no one in the room. Getting out his phone, he called the one person that he knew would be able to make sense of this.

“Please don’t be busy,” he muttered as he listened to the ringing on the other end of the line, hoping that Adam would be free and would answer. After a few tense seconds, he heard the call being answered.

“Hello sweetheart,” Adam greeted, and Kurt could almost hear the smile in the other man’s voice. Kurt nearly sobbed in relief.

“I hope I’m not bothering you,” he answered. “I know that you’re usually busy and I was going to call you after the show, but…”

“I’m never too busy to talk to you, darling,” Adam assured him with a gentle chuckle. “I’m just out with the lads doing a few errands. What’s going on? How are things at school?”

“Insane,” Kurt responded with a sigh. He slumped into a chair and wondering why everything outside of that room seemed to be going on so normally when he was on the verge of self-combustion.

“Well, you must be so busy with rehearsals,” Adam said knowingly. “And I’m sure that the teachers aren’t making it easy on you. They never do.”

That got Kurt to laugh a little. “Ms. July is certainly putting us through our paces, and Madam Tibideaux has decided that now is a good time to twist me into mental knots.”

“So, the usual again,” Adam chuckled. “You sound a bit frazzled, love. Is everything okay?”
“I’m not sure,” Kurt mused.

He could positively feel Adam’s mood shift, growing more serious at even the hint that something might not be right. “I’m just stepping away from the others,” he told Kurt. “Now tell me… what’s going on?”

Kurt bit his lower lip, trying to think of a way to say what he needed to without sounding absolutely insane. It still sounded crazy even after having a few minutes to sink in. “The student that I’m understudying for… he quit the show,” Kurt said. No, it still sounded crazy.

Adam didn’t answer back at first. “Does that mean what I think it means?” he asked, a quiver of excitement in his voice.

Kurt sighed. “I just found out. I’m going to be Enjolras.”

Adam laughed brightly. “Seriously? Oh darling, that’s wonderful!” he exclaimed. “I’m so happy for you! You’re going to be absolutely amazing!”

“I think that the news is still sinking in,” Kurt admitted, feeling his body relax a bit. Adam’s encouragement always cleared the muddle in his brain. “But it’s crazy. I mean, I’m the only principal who’s not a junior or senior.”

“That just shows how much faith your director has in you,” Adam insisted. “They don’t cast anyone as an understudy if they don’t feel they could handle the part if needed.”

“That’s exactly what she told me,” Kurt said, smiling a little in spite of himself.

“Well, while I hope that nothing is bad for that other fellow, this is a lucky break for you and I know that you’re more than ready to handle it.”

Kurt couldn’t help from smiling at the confidence that his boyfriend had in him. “Thanks. I kind of needed to hear that after a little bit of a freak out,” he admitted. “I think my brain short circuited when she told me.”

“It’s going to be fine, sweetheart. Now, have you told your father yet? Because I can’t wait to hear what his reaction was,” Adam teased.

“No, not yet. You’re the first one I told. I literally just found out five minutes ago.”

Adam fell silent for a moment. “Oh, sweetheart… I wish that I was there to hug you right now.”

Kurt felt his eyes tearing. “I wish you were too. I kind of need it because the world seems completely off the tracks.”

“No, it’s not,” Adam assured him. “The world is just giving you what you deserve. And what you can handle.”

“I hope so, otherwise we’re in trouble,” Kurt sighed. “Well, I’ll let you go now. I’d better call Dad.”

“I’ll call you tonight after the show,” Adam promised.

“Okay. Love you,” Kurt answered, finally feeling like the spinning in his brain was coming to a halt. It felt like he’d just gotten off a ride at an amusement park and still hadn’t quite gotten his feet under him yet.

“I love you too,” Adam said gently. “Good luck at rehearsal tonight.”
Kurt hung up the call, feeling momentarily better. He dialed his father’s personal cell phone, hoping that he wasn’t in a meeting or on the House floor at the moment. To his disappointment, he got the voice mail prompt telling him to leave a message.

“Hi Dad,” Kurt greeted, forcing himself to speak calmly so he wouldn’t worry his father. “Just got some really big news about the show next month, so give me a call when you have a chance. I’ll be out of class at three and then free until rehearsals at five. Talk to you later. And don’t worry… it’s good news.”

Kurt put his phone away, knowing that his father would be absolutely thrilled once Kurt gave him the news. But there was one more person that he needed to tell, and her reaction was one that he couldn’t be sure of. Rachel’s behavior had been so good the past few months and she’d been really supportive of him. But this news was going to change things a bit. How she was going to handle the news that he was stepping into a major role while she was in the chorus was going to be a pretty big challenge to her new outlook in life.

Kurt wasn’t a praying man, but he couldn’t resist hoping that something out there would keep this from exploding in his face. He sent Rachel a quick text, asking her to meet him for coffee after her workshop. She texted back a confirmation and a trio of heart emojis, which brought a smile to his face.

He made it through his Diction class, somehow able to focus enough that the hour wasn’t a total waste for him. They were working on different American regional accents, which turned out to be a lot more difficult than any in the class expected and the challenge was enough to keep Kurt’s attention engaged. As he walked out of the school, his cell phone rang and he wasn’t surprised to see that his father was calling back so quickly.

“Hi Dad,” Kurt greeted brightly. “Hope that I wasn’t interrupting anything important.”

“Nah… With Congressman Gendron’s non-stop yammering, it gave me an excuse to leave the committee meeting on time for once,” Burt chuckled. “So what’s going on? It sounded important.”

“Well, hold on to what’s left of your hair,” Kurt teased.

“Hey! Watch it, sport.”

Kurt laughed, feeling the relief of tension being released. “The role that I’m understudying for in the show… the guy who was playing the part dropped out. He got a professional job so now the part is mine.” Kurt felt himself starting to grin, the idea no longer sounding so insane. “I’m going to be Enjolras for the whole production.”

“Are you kidding? Kurt, that’s fantastic!” Burt exclaimed with a laugh. “That’s the guy who dies, right?”

“Most of them die, Dad,” Kurt chuckled. “But I do get a big dramatic death scene. And a bunch of songs. It’s a really amazing part.”

“I’m so happy for you, son,” Burt insisted. “Really, I’m so proud and I can’t wait to see the show. Carole’s going to be thrilled. I’m going to call her right now.”

“Well, the opening night should be interesting,” Kurt mused happily. While his father never took personal advantage of his position in government, being a Congressman was enough to score tickets for the opening night performance, rather than having to wait for the following night for friends and family of the cast. “Is Finn flying directly to New York?”
“He’s going to come to Washington first and we’ll all fly up together,” Burt advised. “I’ve got our hotel booked so we’re all set. I know that you’re going to be busy until opening night but if we can drag you out to dinner the night before…”

“I’ll try,” Kurt promised, knowing that the odds were that he wouldn’t be seeing his father until after the curtain call. But knowing that his family would be there meant the world to him. It was just a shame that they wouldn’t be able to get tickets for all their friends for opening night.

“I’ll talk to you soon,” Burt promised. “And Kurt… I really am proud of you.”

Kurt smiled and wiped at his eyes. “Thanks Dad. Can’t wait to see you.”

“Have fun at rehearsal,” his father urged before hanging up.

Kurt tucked his phone into his pocket, knowing now that he’d have to hurry if he was going to beat Rachel to the coffee shop. Maybe he’d better get some cookies too to sweeten her mood before he told her the news.

* * *

“So, what’s going on?” Rachel asked as she sipped her latte. “Not that I’m not grateful for an impromptu coffee date because I definitely needed the break before rehearsals.”

Kurt inhaled deeply before answering, mentally pleading that she didn’t disappoint him by reverting to her old habits. “Professor Carmody called me into her office after my dance class,” he said carefully.

She looked up in surprise. “You’re not in any kind of trouble, are you?” she asked in concern.

“Well, that was my first instinct,” he admitted. “I was kind of freaking out that maybe I did something wrong. But it wasn’t me. Wade dropped out of the show.”

“What?” Rachel demanded, her eyes widening in shock. “Why would he do that? We open in just a couple of weeks!”

Kurt shrugged. “That was exactly what I said. But he’s a senior and he got an offer for a professional job that he felt he couldn’t pass up,” he explained. “Professor Carmody told me that things like this happen all the time, but that’s not the craziest part. I’m going to be Enjolras now.”

There. He said it. Now he just had to wait for the fallout.

Rachel fell into stunned silence, staring at him in astonishment with her jaw dropping open and Kurt couldn’t help from wondering if he was going to have to deal with her feeling slighted over not getting a similar opportunity. But once she’d absorbed what he had told her, her mouth drew into a delighted smile.

“Are you kidding me?” she exclaimed, her dark eyes sparkling brightly. “Seriously? You’re the principal now?”

Kurt nodded. “I’m still trying to wrap my mind around it. It’s crazy.”

“Why would you think that?” she asked. “We know how talented you are. I personally think that you should have gotten the part outright and you would have if we were seniors.

She cocked her head curiously. “Why are you so surprised about this? I mean, you were an
understudy for a reason!”

“I know,” he granted. “It’s just… I never expected to have to actually step in.”

She clapped her hands, looking as pleased for him as she would be for herself. “I’m so thrilled for you! You really deserve this and you’re going to be absolutely amazing.”

Kurt couldn’t help from smiling at her support. “I’m not going to lie, but I was a little nervous about telling you,” he admitted. “Not that you haven’t been totally supportive. I just didn’t want you to be upset because I know how much you would love playing Eponine.”

She couldn’t help from laughing. “I’m jealous as hell!” she admitted, grinning. “But I’m so happy for you. I really am. And I can’t wait to see you really play Enjolras.”

Before Kurt could react, she jumped from her seat and rushed to hug him. “This is so amazing!” she proclaimed. “Oh, I can’t wait to tell everyone when I get home!

“And we’re going on tomorrow night after rehearsal to celebrate!” Rachel insisted. “No arguments!”

“Who am I to argue?” Kurt laughed, hugging her back. Now that the news was out, it finally was making some kind of sense to him.

Rachel finally released him and sat down again, grinning from ear to ear. “This is so amazing,” she insisted. “Come on… tell me everything now.”

Kurt took a sip of his coffee and leaned forward. They had enough time before they needed to get back to the school.

**

The fates apparently decided that they’d taken it easy enough on Kurt and rather than having his first rehearsal with just the actors playing the Friends of the ABC so he could ease into his new role as principal, he was also going to be dealing with Jean Valjean, Javert, Eponine and a good portion of the chorus for the battlement scenes. A few of the older actors were turning appraising stares to him, giving Kurt the impression that Wade had told at least a few of them about the change.

Professor Carmody would expect him to be warmed up and ready to work when she arrived so he turned out the curious looks and focused on his vocal exercises. He needed to be totally on his game that night, and ready to prove that he was able to jump into the part and be as good as Wade. Any faltering now could be disastrous.

When Professor Carmody arrived at precisely five o’clock with several of her assistants trailing in her wake, she appeared much calmer now that the casting issue had been settled. “Good afternoon everyone,” she greeted. “I’m glad to see everyone here on time because we have a lot to get through today.

“Before we start, I have an announcement to make,” she said firmly. “Some of you may already be aware that Wade Thomsen is unfortunately leaving our production. He’s taking on a professional role and while we will very much miss his presence, this is a wonderful opportunity for him and we wish him all the best in this next stage of his career.”

Wade smiled ruefully as several of his friends in the cast patted him on the back and offered their own congratulations. He turned to Kurt and gave him a quick nod of encouragement.

Professor Carmody waited for the group to quiet down before going on. “Kurt Hummel, who’s been
understudying the role of Enjolras has very kindly agreed to take over the part going forward. I know that all of you will help him settle into his role and he’ll help us make this production the best NYADA has ever staged.”

There were a few gasps of surprise coming from the other players, and Kurt felt some of the other understudies patting him on the back to congratulate him on his ascension.

“So… let’s get started,” she commanded, taking her seat in the theater. “Kurt, we’re going to take it slow so you can get comfortable with the blocking. Wade will help you with the staging. What I want to see from you is taking command here and being confident in the role.

“Everyone, take your places.”

Kurt hurried up onto the stage, taking his place in front of the boxes set up as their barricade. Wade handed him a prop rifle and gave him a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry,” he assured Kurt. “You got this.”

Kurt nodded, letting his expression settle into Enjolras’s fierce stare. He looked to the seats where the chorus was waiting for their scene and Rachel grinned, giving him a thumbs up for support. Nodding that he got her message, Kurt shifted his focus to the task at hand. The music began to play and Professor Carmody called out “Action!”

The actors playing the various rebels began to run about the stage, and in it all, Kurt kept calm like the eye of a storm as he directed their efforts.

“Here upon these stones we will build our barricade,” he ordered, forcing as much command into his tone as he could manage. “In the heart of the city we claim as our own. Each man to his duty and don’t be afraid. Wait! I will need a report on the strength of the foe.”

The actor playing Javert stepped forward, pushing his way through the revolutionaries. “I can find out the truth,” he informed Kurt. “I know their ways. Fought their wars. Served my time in the days of my youth.”

No one complained that they went through the scene several times until Kurt was comfortable with it. He was surprised that it wasn’t taking him long to adjust. He’d been shadowing Wade long enough that he basically knew what he needed to for the scene and he’d always picked up choreography quickly. But it felt completely different now. Knowing that the role was his changed how the other performers were playing off him. They were no longer just going through the motions but actively working with him. To his surprise, it felt absolutely wonderful.

After their fourth run though, the actors playing Jean Valjean and Javert came over to him. “You’re doing great Kurt,” Sean insisted, the sunny grin looking totally unlike Jean Valjean’s normally dower stare. “That last run through especially. Your voice is amazing.”

“Thanks,” Kurt said sincerely. “I’m not going to lie… I was a little nervous before we started.”

Javert’s player, Drew, patted him on the shoulder. “Well, you’d never know going by the way you sing. I think you’re going to be just fine.”

Kurt smiled, grateful for their support. Wade came over with a big smile on his face.

“I told you that you could handle it!” he exclaimed, patting Kurt on the back. He looked to the others with a grin. “Didn’t I tell you how good he’s going to be.”

Drew laughed, nodding in agreement. “Yeah, you sure told us. He almost makes up for you leaving
us high and dry.”

Sean nodded and looked to Kurt. “To be honest, I was a little anxious about how you would handle things,” he admitted. “Just because you haven’t had the chance to play it out the way the rest of us have. But you really know your stuff. I think that everything is going to work out for us.”

As the evening went on, Kurt found himself growing increasingly confident that he really could do this. Wade hovered nearby, offering advice and Professor Carmody issued corrections and changes as she felt needed. By the time they called it quits for the evening, Kurt was absolutely exhausted and mentally drained but thrilled that he seemed to be holding his own.

“All right everyone, I think that’s enough for the day,” Professor Carmody granted to the relief of her players. “Good work everyone.

“Wade, thanks for helping out tonight,” she said sincerely. “And Kurt… nice job. This was exactly what I wanted to see out of you.”

Kurt smiled in relief, happily accepting a few pats on the back from his castmates, who were understandably relieved that he was getting up to speed so quickly.

Rachel came rushing up to him, her fact absolutely beaming despite her exhaustion and threw herself into Kurt’s arms.

“I told you that you could do it!” she exclaimed happily.

“Yes, you did,” Kurt granted with a tired smile. “I should listen to you more.”

“Yes, you should!” she teased, sticking her tongue out at him.

Wade chuckled and came over to Kurt. “Well, the least I can do is take you out for a drink to make up for dumping this on you,” he insisted.

“I can definitely use one after the day I just had,” Kurt agreed. He’d been put through the mental and physical wringer and felt more than a little beat up. Grabbing his jacket and messenger bag, he told Rachel that he’d see her tomorrow and followed the older man out of the building to one of the nicer Irish pubs near the school.

“I feel like I owe you a bit of an apology for you getting ambushed like this,” Wade admitted as he sipped at his beer.

“Professor Carmody said that it was something you really had to jump on.”

The older actor nodded with a somewhat regretful look on his handsome face. “I actually auditioned for this role at the beginning of the semester. When I didn’t get it, I just kind of forgot about it until I got the call the other day,” he explained. “They guy they cast didn’t work out and they needed an immediate answer if I would take the part. They start filming in two weeks.”

Kurt nodded understandingly. “I get it,” he insisted gently. “Something like that would be really hard to turn down.”

Wade smiled, thankful for Kurt’s understanding. “I felt like shit dropping out of the show like this, but it was the right thing to do,” he insisted. “I’ve got to think about my career going forward and this was just too good an opportunity to pass up.

“And I’ll be honest… knowing that you were ready to jump in for me? That really eases my guilt a
lot. I’m glad that I’m not screwing up the show.”

Kurt was glad that he had been up to the task. “What would you have done if I wasn’t ready?” he couldn’t help from asking.

Wade considered the question carefully, turning a frank look to the younger man. “I still would have dropped out,” he admitted. “I would have felt terrible, but I just couldn’t say no to this opportunity. At least now I know that I’m not screwing up the show and I’ll sleep better at night.”

Kurt took a sip of his ale, taking a moment to gather his thoughts before he answered. On one hand, he wanted to be angry that Wade would have left the show regardless of having appropriate backup to fill in. But he did appreciate that the other man needed to do what was right for him. Their shared profession was nothing if not a mercenary one and Kurt was not blind to what Wade leaving would mean for him.

“Given that I would never have gotten the chance to play a major role this year, I really can’t complain,” Kurt admitted. “I do understand and I really can’t blame you. I don’t know what I would have done if I were in that position.”

Wade sighed. “It’s hard sometimes,” he admitted. “It’s feast or famine. Sometimes there’re no roles to be found and your career is stuck in reverse and other times it seems like everyone wants you. But in all seriousness, I’m really glad that you’re going to have this chance. You’re a very talented actor and I think you’re going to be fantastic.”

Kurt took advantage of sipping at his drink to think of a response. “I’m not to lie… I was terrified that first run through. Even though I’d been working alongside you, it’s one thing to be an understudy. Being asked to take over the part is pretty daunting.”

“‘I know it is;’ Wade acknowledged understandingly. “But you can do this. And I can’t wait to hear from everyone how well the show goes. Don’t worry so much. You’re going to be able to handle it.”

Kurt smiled gratefully, glad for all the support he’d received. Whatever fears he had about being able to handle the responsibility of such an important role were starting to ease and he was regaining the sense of excitement that he’d felt when he first started rehearsals. Madam Tibideaux was right about him being his own worst obstacle at times and he needed to make sure that he didn’t continue to do that. He would have enough things trying to hold him back. A lack of confidence in himself as a performer and a man could not be one of them.

Returning to his quiet dorm room and waiting for Adam’s call gave Kurt time to think. He thumbed through his script, reading over his scenes and the myriad of notes that he’d been jotting down over the past few months. All the attention that he’d been paying since the start of rehearsals would serve him well going forward. It was a steep challenge, but he knew that he needed to rise to the occasion. There were a lot of people depending on him.

Nearly more importantly, he needed to do this for himself. If he was going to have the career he wanted, then he would need to handle whatever role came his way. Kurt had dreamed of parts like this his entire life and he was smart enough to appreciate just what a rare opportunity he was being given.

No matter what, he was going to meet this challenge and prove to the world that he did have what it took.

* * *
Rachel's solo: "Miniature Disasters" - KT Tunstall

Kurt's solos: "You Haven't Seen The Last of Me" - Cher

"Dante's Prayer" - Loreena McKennitt
Chapter 12

Rachel rushed down the block, knowing that she was running late. The mandatory hair and makeup workshop set up by the costuming team ran longer than she’d planned, and she had vastly underestimated what a chore it was to clean up when she’d made her date with Neil. The timing wasn’t great, but between both their class schedules and her every-increasing rehearsal burden, this was one of the few chances she’d have to see him before she went into tech. And after their successful first coffee date, she didn’t want to let it pass by. She’d have just enough time to see him for a cup of coffee and a snack before she was due back in school.

She finally arrived at the Third Rail Coffee Shop, chosen because it was conveniently between NYU and NYADA and dashed inside, hoping that she hadn’t kept Neil waiting too long. Arriving late so early in a relationship made a terrible impression, but so would showing up covered in thick grease paint looking suspiciously like she had some sort of unpleasant social disease.

Looking about the shop, she couldn’t help from smiling when she saw that he’d not only already beaten her there but staked out a table but had already procured refreshments. He noticed her hurried entrance and grinned, the brightness of his smile causing an intriguing tingle to bubble up within her. As should be expected from a proper gentleman, he stood at her approach.

“Hi Rachel,” he greeted happily, his warm eyes shining.

She felt her cheeks warming. How did she ever think he was plain looking? That smile was causing her stomach to flip in all kinds of interesting ways.

“Hi,” she said softly, smiling back. She stood up on her toes to press a polite kiss of greeting to his cheek. “Sorry I’m so late. Our workshop ran a bit longer than expected.”

“It’s okay,” he assured her, holding out her chair so she could sit down. “I’m just annoyingly punctual. I’m almost always the one kept waiting, so don’t feel bad.”

Rachel couldn’t help from thinking how adorable it was that he painted what anyone else would consider to be a virtue as some sort of personal failing.

“I hope I got your order right,” Neil said as he took his own seat.

Rachel took a quick sip, trusting that he did and marveling that he cared enough to even try after one date. “Vanilla latte with soy milk. Perfect,” she assured him, earning another brilliant smile from her suitor.

He pushed a plate across the table towards her. “I figured that you’d probably be hungry,” he offered, and Rachel nearly beamed in delight. He’d even remembered that she’d liked the hibiscus glazed donuts the last time they’d met.

“Thank you,” she said sincerely. “We have rehearsals starting at five, and I’ve got no idea when I’ll have a chance to grab dinner tonight.”

“Well, don’t forget to take care of yourself,” Neil urged, looking a little concerned for her. “Even if you just take some snacks for when you have a break. Honestly, I don’t know where you and Kurt find the energy to do this on top of your classes.”
She just offered a tired smile. “It’s easy when you love it,” she explained. “All the hard work really pays off when you’re standing in front of an audience and all they see is an amazing story that they’re transported into. That’s when it all becomes worthwhile.”

Neil nodded in understanding. “I know that you have to love it,” he acknowledged. “I mean, I live with two performers and seeing them absolutely living for those moments that they go on stage… there’s no way to do that unless it’s what you love.”

His smile grew wider and there was a teasing glint in his eyes. “Even if you end up walking around with makeup smears on your neck.”

Rachel’s hand shot up to her throat and she felt the telltale tackiness of the cosmetics that she’d applied earlier that afternoon. Her fingertips came away covered in the makeup that she’d used to simulate dirt over her exposed skin.

“Oh damn… I thought that I got it all,” she insisted. Wiping off her hands on a napkin he offered her, she reached for the mirror in her purse and saw that she did have streaks of brown and grey all over the side of her neck where her hair had hidden it. “Wonderful… it looks like I haven’t bathed in the past six months.”

Neil couldn’t help from laughing. “Wasn’t that the point,” he asked playfully. “What are you supposed to be int hat scene? Peasant number twelve?”

Rachel chuckled in response. “More like prostitute number eight,” she clarified. “And this after spending about twenty minutes cleaning up. I looked like a hungover panda.”

Neil laughed again. “Now that would have been something to see. You would be one skanky looking prostitute.”

Rachel couldn’t help from smiling. From anyone else that might have come across like an insult, but she immediately recognized it for the joke that it was. Neil might not have a real appreciation for performing, but he seemed to have a lot of tolerance and a sense of amusement about the foibles of the profession that so many of the people around him aspired to. She’d never really been interested in spending time with someone like Neil, but now found herself looking forward to every minute.

“So how’s that lab going for you?” she asked, remembering his playful complaints about one of his classes during their last meeting. “Is your partner still trying to make you neurotic?”

Neil shook his head. “No, he seems to be settling down,” he assured her with a chuckle. “I could do without having Erica in the class, but she seems as determined to keep things civil as I am.”

“Erica?” Rachel asked curiously.

Neil nodded. “She’s… well, we dated for a while,” he explained a bit cautiously, gaging Rachel’s reaction.

She felt a momentary pang of jealousy that there was someone that Neil had been involved with in the not too distant past, but she knew that it wasn’t something reasonable for her to get worked up over. At their age, there would be a good number of exes in both their histories and getting upset over Neil’s past relationships was a bit silly.

“What happened?” she asked carefully, not wanting to press if he didn’t want to talk about a breakup that she got the sense wasn’t that long ago. She hoped that he was really over it because she wasn’t looking forward to being a rebound.
“I think it was a class of just never getting a break from one another,” he admitted with a shrug. “We met at school and we’re in the same program, so we hit it off really well. It seemed kind of natural since we’re both looking to work in the same field and we had a lot in common. Her dad is a cop and mine works for the government. It was easy for us to talk. I mean, I don’t usually meet too many women who are interested in what I’m doing, let alone understand much of it.”

Rachel nodded in understanding. “I can see why that’s appealing. My last boyfriend was also a NYADA student,” she admitted. “It seemed like the perfect situation, but it didn’t take long before I saw that we really weren’t well-matched outside of our career aspirations.”

Admittedly, that was a very sanitized version of what happened with Brody, Rachel considered. She wasn’t quite ready to blurt out that she’d dumped her last relationship because her boyfriend had a socially unacceptable way of funding his education. Neither of them handled the revelation well, with her judgmental nature and his defensiveness, so it wasn’t much of a wonder that whatever existed between them quickly and permanently fizzled.

“It was kind of the same thing with Erica,” Neil explained. “Not that she wasn’t terrific, but I just found that even when we weren’t at school that all we tended to do was talk about our classwork. Or things that we read in professional journals. It was like our lives didn’t exist except for work. There wasn’t any real downtime for us, and I started to see that except for our work, we really didn’t have that much in common. We didn’t talk about anything else and I was just tired. And even though we broke up months ago, we can’t help from seeing each other all the time.”

Rachel nodded in understanding. It had been something of a relief to her when he got cast in a show out of town and she wouldn’t have to see him every day. She could only imagine how unpleasant it must be for Neil to be sharing so many classes with someone that he’d been involved with.

He sipped at his coffee thoughtfully. “I think that’s one of the reasons why I like living with Elliot and Dani,” he theorized. “Because we’re such different people, the time I spent with them is a real break from my work. It doesn’t matter that I don’t get half of what they’re up to… it’s just interesting being around a different kind of energy.”

Rachel found that admission utterly charming. “Pretty much everyone I’ve ever been involved with has been a performer of some kind. I have to admit that you’re probably the first guy that I’ve ever liked that wasn’t an actor or singer.”

“Yes, you definitely are,” Rachel thought as she sipped her latte. She felt relaxed in his presence, knowing that she didn’t need to put on a show for him. While there as something that she’d always liked about the chemistry she could find with guys like Jesse and Finn who were performance as much as romantic partners, this felt oddly comfortable. And she wasn’t quite sure what to make of it.

But there was nothing wrong with seeing where this went and enjoying the ride.

* * *

Taking time to do absolutely nothing of consequence was not something that came naturally to Kurt. Not with his current schedule and the incessant demands for excellence. Having a rare hour with nothing planned or required during the day was something that Kurt very much cherished, and he’d learned the hard way to indulge himself when the moment was presented. His first instinct would always be to use that time to study or practice, leaving him exhausted by the end of his long days. Taking a bit of time to actually relax in the school common area with a cup of tea and doing a bit of frivolous web surfing did wonders for his mental outlook.
Kurt knew that no matter how demanding his teachers were, he tended to be more demanding on himself than anyone. It had taken him quite some time, but he’d finally come to accept that no matter how much pressure he felt in his classes and rehearsals that he still needed to give himself some time to rest mentally and physically. It hadn’t come easily but he could already see the benefit he was deriving from the self-imposed downtime. He was no longer facing the mounting challenges ahead with such dread. He was able to give a better effort in his classes and rehearsals because he wasn’t exhausting himself every waking second of the day.

Once he’d updated his fashion blog with a few pictures of an outfit inspired by the costume he’d worn while performing at Elliot’s cabaret, he checked his social media feeds to see what was going on with his friends. He probably shouldn’t have been too surprised that the primary topic of discussion amongst his friends was confirming plans to come to New York and see their show, but it still warmed his heart. For all the drama and insanity that their group had seen over the years, it was gratifying to see that so many loyal friendships had been forged.

He’d known what Finn was, of course, coming to see them. Reading his brother’s latest posting on Facebook left Kurt chuckling to himself at seeing Finn’s excitement over his upcoming trip and bragging to the rest of the group that he’d get to see the show before everyone else since the Hummels would be attending the opening night gala. Plans had already been confirmed for him to fly first to Washington and spend some time with their parents since it had been a few months since he’d seen his mother. The three of them would travel to New York together and would be staying in a hotel not far from the theater.

As delighted as Kurt was to see his brother, it was tempered with the disappointment that Sam and Puck would not be joining them. Money for the three of them was tight and while the Hummels would have happily paid for their plane tickets and he had no doubt that Rachel and the others would have found a way to squeeze them into the loft, it just wasn’t going to work out. Their boss in Texas was a great guy, but the company was busy and he couldn’t allow all three of them to take off several days at the same time. In the end, there had been no argument that it was more important for Finn to have the chance to see his brother. There would be other chances for Puck and Sam to see Kurt perform in the future.

Quinn had emailed him, confirming that she would be driving from school and would be staying in the loft, giving Santana a chance to reconnect with one of her oldest friends and Kurt was looking forward to seeing her. But it was Mercedes’s email that brought a real smile to his face. For a few weeks, it hadn’t been certain if she would be able to attend at all since her album was nearing completion and her label would not tolerate any delays that might interfere with its release. It was entirely understandable, and Kurt had resigned himself being disappointed.

She wanted to make sure that there was still a ticket for her because she’d managed to work things so that she could be in New York in time to see the show at the end of its run. Her label wanted her to meet with their publicist in New York and she managed to coordinate her meeting with the show because there was no way that she was going to miss seeing her “boy”.

Kurt wrote back to let her know that he was thrilled to be seeing her and that, of course, there was a ticket for her. He was deeply appreciative that she went through so much effort to schedule a meeting that could be important to her own career around his show and knew that no matter how busy his week was, he really needed to find a way for them to spend a few hours together while she was in town. At the oldest and most enduring of his friends, he owed her no less.

Having so many friends traveling to see their show eased the disappointment over the ones that couldn’t attend. Besides Sam and Puck, Mike had sent his sincere regrets. He was too tied up with his own classes and performances and couldn’t take a few days off at this point. Brittany had taken a
job at a local dance school while attending school herself and her students were in the middle of preparations for their spring recitals. Kurt emailed them both to let them know that he understood, and they would be missed. The sentiment was sincere, and he hoped that he would have a chance to see them performing in their own venues at a later date.

Blaine made no comment about the show and if he intended to see it or showing even the most remote interest. His few recent posts made note of his own activities and bemoaning how he missed everyone but seemed to be deliberately avoiding any conversations about Kurt’s and Rachel’s upcoming show. In all honesty, Kurt was relieved over Blaine’s tendency to ignore anything that he couldn’t appropriate attention from. Neither he nor Rachel had made any overtures to him on the matter. While Kurt wanted to keep his ex as far away as possible, he could admit that he was just petty enough to hope that Blaine finds out just how well he was doing.

He and Rachel and decided to play a joke on their friends and not tell anyone that Kurt had been elevated from chorus to primary, hoping to surprise them. Of course, the secret would be out after the first performance and between NYADA’s social media and the very efficient New Directions grapevine, Kurt was fairly sure that the news would reach Blaine without too much delay.

He’d already found out from Rachel that Mr. Schuester would be arriving in New York to see their show and she’d arranged for him to see the Sunday matinee so that he wouldn’t miss work with his choir back in Lima. Part of Kurt wondered if he shouldn’t be more annoyed that it was Rachel’s invitation that their old teacher had responded to, but in the end, it just wasn’t worth losing sleep over. Rachel had always been Mr. Schuester’s special favorite and he doubted that anything would ever change that fact.

At least Mr. Schueste’s wife had the consideration to respond to Kurt’s invitation herself. Emma Schuester apologized that she was not able to attend with her husband because their new baby was just too young to travel and she couldn’t leave him with a sitter just yet, but that she was very proud of him and wished him well for his performances. He wrote her back a short note, expressing that he understood and would miss her. He really would. Emma had a good and kind heart and he had not forgotten how she’d her best to try to help him back in high school.

Whatever slight he might have felt from Mr. Schuester was more than made up by the fact that he had his own McKinley faculty offering her peculiar brand of support. He hadn’t been sure if Coach Sylvester would actually want to attend his show, but he was pleased when she responded with a firm commitment that she would come. He offered to secure a ticket for whatever performance she found convenient to attend, promising the best seat in the house, but she assured him that she had made her own arrangements and was looking forward to seeing him. At his query over what night she was coming, her response was quick and typical of her usual bluntness.

None of your bee’s wax, Porcelain. You’ll see me when I get there. Just make sure you do a good job and make using my frequent flyer miles worthwhile. Remember… you’re still representing the Cheerios.

He couldn’t help from smiling, seeing the gentle teasing behind the brusque words. He knew Sue Sylvester well enough to recognize what a rare honor he was being paid. The abrasive woman was many things, not the least of which being at least a little insane, but he understood that he was one of the very few people who had managed to earn her honest respect and fully realized how special a tribute that was. Knowing that she was going out of her way to support him gave him a sense of satisfaction that few others could inspire. And he wondered what her response would be at seeing him the primary in such a significant role.

A shadow fell over his table as another student approached. “Hi Kurt. Got a minute?”
Kurt looked up to smile at Merry, always happy to see any of the Apples. “Hey… sure!” he answered brightly, moving his bad so she could sit. “Grab a seat. What’s going on?”

The tall young woman seemed quite happy about something as she grinned at her mentor. “Well, I did it,” she informed him with a twinkle in her eyes. “I did exactly what you told me to for my critique.”

Kurt sat up straight, his grin widening. “Seriously?”

She nodded, her haphazardly-done braid falling over her shoulder. “Yup!” she pronounced proudly. “I did both ‘Buenos Aires’ and ‘Rainbow High’ and switched up the key and arrangement to fit my voice better.”

“And? What did Madam Tibideaux say?” he asked eagerly, knowing that the response had to have been positive judging from the way Merry seemed too pleased.

“Well…. I do have to work on my projection more. And she warned that I can get a little screechy when trying to push my upper register. But otherwise… it was good!” Merry laughed, clapping her hands happily. “She said that I had presence and I understood the character and that I was finally starting to show what I am really capable of.”

He couldn’t resist reaching out to pull the young woman into a tight hug. “Oh, that’s fantastic,” he praised. “I knew you had it in you!”

She nodded, wiping at her eyes. “Well, I wouldn’t have done it if you hadn’t pushed me to,” she insisted with a shy smile. “I figured after the way my last critique went that I didn’t have anything to lose.”

Kurt nodded understandingly. “I know how that feels,” he confided. “Sometimes feeling like you’re up against the wall is what you need to unleash what you need. You just needed to get out of your own way. I’m so damn proud of you!

“And you’re going to have to do them for us the next time the Apples get together,” he warned. “Once we’re done with the insanity of this show.”

Merry giggled and nodded. “Have you totally lost your sanity yet?” she teased.

He chuckled ruefully. “Not yet, but check after tech week,” he advised.

Merry smiled again, getting to her feet. “Well, I won’t keep you because I know that you’re crazy busy. I just wanted to say thanks for your help,” she said gratefully. “I’m not going to lie… I wasn’t sure if I could really hack it here. I don’t know what I would have done if I didn’t have the Apples and you.”

“It was my pleasure,” he assured her, delighted for her accomplishment. “I’m totally thrilled for you. And I promise that we will start having regular gettogethers once we’re done with the show.”

Merry nodded understandingly. “I’m going to hold you to that,” she warned playfully. “Have fun at rehearsal! I’m looking forward to hearing all your stories.”

As the younger student strolled away, a clear bounce in her step from having finally satisfied their most demanding teacher. Kurt smiled to himself, feeling great gratification on behalf of a kindred spirit and sipped at his tea. This was just the kind of good news that would set his mood for what promised to be a brutal rehearsal.
“A toast!” Analisa shouted, trying to be heard over the din of conversation and music around her. She raised her wine glass. “To our last successful rehearsal and the start of tech week!”

“Here, here,” Jamie called out, raising his beer.

“And farewell to sleep and free time for the duration,” Kurt quipped with a wry grin.

Rachel nodded. “Thank God we’ve got two days off before Hell Week begins,” she reminded the group, nodding in agreement at their grateful moans. They were certainly going to need to rest up.

It was amazing how quickly the past few weeks had flown by, Kurt mused as he sipped at his drink and reached around Santana for the chips. Between classes, work and rehearsals, it had seemed like he was on a never-ending treadmill and there were times when he’d barely had a moment to look about and see where he was. Tech week promised to be brutal, then a set of dress rehearsals before their official opening night.

Everyone was absolutely exhausted from all the work and he was glad that Rachel invited their friends to the loft for drinks and dinner, so they could decompress a bit and celebrate what they’ve accomplished. Santana grumbled about her night off being invaded but was appeased by her girlfriend arriving armed with two bottles of Gewürztraminer and a promise to sleep over to soothe Santana’s ruffled feathers. Elliot followed along so he could see Kurt before his friend vanished into an endless cycle of tech rehearsals. When Artie and Tina arrived home from class, it turned into a veritable party.

Tina raised her glass. “Well, here’s to what’s going to be a fantastic show with the most amazing cast. You guys are certainly going to give the rest of us a lot to live up to.”

Rachel sat down next to Kurt, sipping at her wine. “I can’t believe it’s almost here,” she marveled. “After all the work we’ve done… it feels almost unreal.”

“Well, for all I’ve heard you bitching about it,” Santana teased with a lack of any real venom, knowing just how to needle her friend. “I’m just glad that it’s almost over and we can get back to our normal level of insanity around here.”

Dani was sitting on the floor, leaning against Santana’s legs so that her girlfriend could play with her hair. “Oh, knock it off,” she reprimanded playfully, giving Santana’s thigh a little pinch. “You’re just as excited as the rest of us about seeing the show.”

Elliot nodded in agreement. “True that,” he confirmed happily. “I’m always one for a big spectacle and this one is promising to be huge!”

“Shame that we can’t go to the opening night,” Artie mused regretfully. “I understand that they want the first night for press and VIPs, but that would have been something to see.”

“You’re all coming later in the week,” Kurt reminded him. Between the bank of tickets offered to himself and Rachel for family and friends, they’d managed to reserve tickets for all their friends to see the show at some point.

“I can’t believe that your dad gets to see opening night,” Rachel groused playfully, the glint in her eyes betraying her teasing. “Just because he’s a congressman. My dads were very put out that they have to wait until the second night.”

“At least we’ll have the opening night jitters out of the way,” Kurt consoled. “And any last
Tina held out her wine glass to be refilled. “Kurt, when is Adam coming to see the show?” she asked. “Maybe Artie and I will wait to do that night, so he doesn’t have to go alone.”

Kurt’s smile froze just for a second, growing slightly brittle before he composed himself. “That’s very nice of you to offer, Tina, but you two should just go on the night you originally planned,” he advised with as much cheer as he could manage.

Rachel frowned, knowing Kurt well enough to see the subtle shift in her friend’s mood. “Adam is coming to see the show, isn’t he?” she asked gently.

Kurt sighed and shook his head, his disappointment over the matter readily apparent.

Santana’s dark eyes sparked with anger. “That asshole!” she spat furiously, offended on her friend’s behalf. “After the way you rushed to Boston to see him?” She started to curse in Spanish, her face becoming flushed as she ranted about the absent Englishman’s lack of consideration.

“Santana, it’s okay,” Kurt insisted, his eyes wide at her response. “I told him that it was okay.”

“Are you kidding me?” Santana snapped, turning a frustrated look to him. “I thought that we were done with you letting people walk all over you!”

Rachel nodded in agreement with their prickly friend. “Kurt, you know that we love Adam and normally, I think he’s really been good for you,” she insisted, not wanting to put Kurt on the defensive about his relationship. “But this is a really big deal for you. You’re not just in the chorus now, and it’s strange that he’s not making more of an effort to come.”

Kurt’s mouth drew into a tight line and Rachel realized that she and Santana had probably overstepped a bit. The mood in the room cooled at the sudden tension the others sensed in their friend.

“Look… I appreciate that you both are worried about me,” he said evenly, clearly making an effort to snap at them because his knew that his friends were acting out of concern. “But Adam and I already spoke about this and I told him that I understood why he wouldn’t be coming.”

He turned a firm stare to Santana, cutting off any chance she had to retort in response. “Adam’s show is moving on to Chicago while we’re in tech,” he explained with measured calmness. “Professionally, this is critical for him. They’re performing at a very prestigious venue, and there’s going to be a lot of media attention on their show. That means critics and agents. After Los Angeles, this is the most important stop on the tour for them and a good showing there might help the chances of them getting picked up for a run in New York.”

He focused his attention then to Rachel, wanting to make sure that he was being clear on things. “To see me, he’d have to fly to New York and then back to Chicago all in one day. And he’d still end up missing an evening’s performance. That’s just too much for him right now,” Kurt insisted firmly. “He can’t be missing shows at this stage and I was the one who told him not to come. I don’t want him stressed out when he needs to be focusing on his work.

That had been a painfully difficult telephone call, listening to Adam frantically looking at flight schedules and trying to work how he could possibly fly in to see Kurt’s show without missing any of his own and growing despondent when no workable solution became apparent. Kurt had assured Adam that he wasn’t at all upset because he did understand that Adam would be there if there was any way possible. The timing just wasn’t in their favor this time around and he didn’t want Adam to
beat himself up over something that he had no real control over.

Santana frowned, still clearly not happy with the situation but knowing better than to try arguing the point with Kurt. Rachel, however, couldn’t help from pressing the issue.

“Isn’t there any way he can come, just for one day?” she asked plaintively. “I know that he’ll hate missing out on seeing you perform.”

Kurt smiled sadly and shook his head. “He was ready to buy his plane tickets and take the red-eye back to Chicago afterwards, but I talked him out of it,” he explained. “The timing just wasn’t going to work and there will be plenty of other times he’ll get to see me on the stage. But I’m not going to allow him to be made to feel badly that he has to work. Is that clear?”

Santana bit her lip, looking like she was ready to argue the point but relented under Kurt’s adamant stare. “All right,” she granted reluctantly. “I’ll let Lord Fauntleroy off the hook. This time.”

Kurt reached out to pull Santana close, gratified by her willingness to defend him, even against his own boyfriend if need be. “Thank you,” he said gently, kissing her on the forehead. “But really… it’s okay. Don’t hold it against Adam. For me?”

She nodded. “For you,” she promised. “But if he misses your next show…”

Kurt smiled. “I promise that I’ll let you go all Lima Heights on him,” he assured her.

“Hey, just be grateful that your boyfriend at least appreciates what you do,” Analisa chimed in, trying to defuse some of the tension that had intruded on their celebration. “Michael won’t dare miss the show, but all of this just goes right over his head.”

Rachel laughed, nodding in understanding. “I know what you mean. This guy that I started seeing,” she added with a teasing glint in her eyes. “He’s the same way. Neil seems more amused than anything else.”

Elliot chuckled, reaching over to ruffle Kurt’s hair. “There, you see? You might be better off with someone who’s not an actor so he’d always be at your disposal.”

“I still can’t believe that you’re dating my girlfriend’s roommate,” Santana groused at Rachel. “This is incestuous, even by New Directions standards. All we need now is for Kurt to start dating the glitter vampire.”

Kurt shook his head, his mood lightening. “Nah… Elliot’s great but I’ll keep the man that I have,” he insisted lightheartedly, giving Elliot a mischievous wink. As disappointed as he’d been, he was more gratified by Adam’s sincere distress about missing his show that he would be by a partner who wouldn’t truly grasp how important this was for him and just went through the motions of showing dutiful support.

Rachel leaned in to give Kurt a quick kiss on the cheek before heading to the kitchen to refresh some of the snacks being devoured by hungry performers and their friends. As she poured out bags of chips into bowls, she considered just how differently her life had turned out from how she’d expected. She couldn’t say that she was unhappy despite the disappointments and setbacks she’d dealt with, but it wasn’t at all what she’d imagined.

It was with a heavy trace of embarrassment that she recognized just how childish her vision of what she’d thought her life in New York would be when she first stepped off that train with her little pink suitcase. Back then, her head had been filled with immature dreams of near immediate stardom. That she would set foot in New York and her unique talents would be immediately recognized, and she
would be launched into nearly instantaneous stardom. And at first, it seemed that was exactly how things would go. Her invite to the Winter Showcase just proved how special she was and that she really did deserve the regard that she’d imagined was her due.

Even Kurt’s presence was imagined as being more of a supporter than a peer, she realized with shame. She hadn’t anticipated having actual friends because of her cutthroat image of what she believed the theater world was like. Her dreams hadn’t included real equals among her classmates and instead found people who were willing to support her but didn’t hesitate to challenge her. It had been difficult to recognize that their dreams and aspirations were just as valid as hers, and that fulfilling hers didn’t take precedence over theirs. Being taken down a few pegs and nearly flunking out on account of her own arrogance had been humiliating but opened herself up in a way that Rachel knew she never would have otherwise.

New Directions had come to be important to her back in high school. Maybe she had at first seen the group as simple props that allowed her a place to be featured as a performer, but over time they had become the first set of real friends that she could claim in her life. She hadn’t through that she might find a similar situation at NYADA. Not that they weren’t competitive, but she finally understood that it didn’t mean that they couldn’t be supportive of one another and ready to cheer on the successes of others.

Kurt came into the kitchen to help her carry the snacks back to the group and saw the thoughtful expression on her face. “Everything okay?” he asked, popping a chip into his mouth.

She blinked, her thoughts drawn back to the present and turned a warm smile to her dearest friend. “Yes… I was just thinking,” she admitted. She looked at the group gathered in her living room, old friends and new blending and getting along in an easy manner that she’d never experienced before.

“I never thought I would find this again,” she explained. Kurt would understand, she knew. Because Kurt knew her better than anyone else. “Back in high school, the way we all came together… I never thought that we would find anything like that here.”

Kurt nodded, placing his arm about her and pulled her close. “It feels good, doesn’t it?” he asked. “Opening yourself to real friendships. Stardom and fame are all well and good, but I don’t think I’d want any of that if it meant being alone.”

He wouldn’t, she realized, resting her head against his chest and savoring his warm presence. “There was a time when that was all that was important to me,” she acknowledged. “I don’t know if that was because I didn’t have anyone that I was really close to and I was using being a star as a substitute for having friends.”

Kurt understood where Rachel was coming from. “You know, wanting to be a star isn’t necessarily a bad thing,” he reminded her. “But it’s nice to have people to share it with. You’re not pushing people away to protect yourself anymore.”

Rachel closed her eyes, enjoying the simple pleasure of having her friend with her. He was right, she knew. But then, Kurt was often right about most things. She knew that she could be foolish at times and tended to see success as a zero-sum game. Learning that celebrating the success of someone that she cared about could be nearly as pleasurable as enjoying her own had come as something of a revelation.

“Hey Rachel,” Katya called out, her cheeks rosy from the two glasses of wine she’d already drunk. “I was telling the others what great prostitutes we make. Tell them!”

Rachel laughed brightly, nodding in agreement. “I have to agree,” she confirmed playfully. “I
suppose that if we totally fail at acting that we could fall back on that.”

“Uh, yeah… not happening.” Jamie insisted, hugging his giggling girlfriend from behind and lifting her up as if to pull her away from Rachel’s bad influence. That got the whole group laughing.

Rachel grinned as she and Kurt carried bowls of snacks back to the group. While she couldn’t say with any real honesty that if the opportunity to play Eponine presenting itself that she wouldn’t fight tooth and nail to get it, she wouldn’t trade a moment like this for anything.

* * *

Niall looked to his roommate as he pulled on his jacket. “I’ll just go out with the others for a pint or two,” he confirmed. “That should give you both a little privacy.”

Adam smiled gratefully. “Thanks mate,” he said sincerely. “I owe you one.”

The other Englishman just shrugged. “It’s not like I haven’t kicked you out to get some alone time for Cynthia and me,” he reminded. “I know that once he goes into tech, you’re not going to be speaking with him much.”

Adam nodded morosely. If they spoke late at night after he got back from the theater for five minutes before they fell asleep, they’d be lucky. And then once Kurt’s show started it’s run… this might be their last “date night” for the next couple of weeks.

Niall patted his friend on the shoulder. “Say hi to Kurt for me,” he urged as he slipped into his jacket. “See you later.”

Refusing to dwell on his concerns about what the next few weeks might entail, Adam was determined that this would be a cheerful talk with his lover. He got out his laptop and checked himself in the mirror because Kurt deserved to have him looking decently. He combed his hair and checked that his shirt was clean before settling down on his bed and opening the Skype program, waiting for Kurt to log in.

It was about ten minutes later that a chime alerted Adam that Kurt was on-line, and a video screen appeared. When Kurt’s fact came into focus, Adam felt his spirits lift immediately.

“Hello sweetheart,” he greeted cheerfully, his smile so wide that he thought his face might crack.

“Hi honey!” Kurt chirped back, settling down comfortably in front of his computer. “How did your show go tonight?”

“Splendid as always,” Adam assured him. “We’re at the point where we’re all really comfortable with things and can play around a bit more with the staging.”

“And Dad and Carole are treating you well?” Kurt asked.

“If your stepmum feeds me anymore, I won’t fit in my costume,” Adam complained teasingly. “She seems to think that we’re being starved on the road.”

“I did warn you,” the younger man laughed. “But better you than me, right now. The last thing our costumers need is to completely remake my costumes because I put on a few pounds.”

“Ohh… does that mean there are tight pants?” Adam asked, wagging his eyebrows teasingly. “I mean, Enjolras is supposed to be very sexy.”
Kurt laughed brightly, reclining on his side so he could be seen more clearly. “You’ll just have to wait to see the dress rehearsal photos,” he warned. “But I do have it on the word of some of the girls that I should have nothing to complain about.”

“How are the girls?” Adam asked, leaning back. “Has Rachel totally lost her mind yet?”

Kurt grinned and shook his head. “Surprisingly, no. She’s actually been in a really good place,” he assured his boyfriend. “I can’t believe sometimes just how different she is compared to last year. I’d probably be going completely insane if it weren’t for her. She and Santana have been pretty amazing.”

Adam smiled, pleased that Kurt was getting the level of support that he needed.

“And I can’t believe how Rachel has really teamed up with Analisa and Katya,” Kurt informed him. “It’s like they’re forming their own girl gang.”

“That’s good, sweetheart,” Adam reminded him. “She needs to make more friends.”

“I do think it’s really helping her,” Kurt agreed. “I just never thought that I’d see her like this. You would think that she’d be going nuts, plotting how to get them to give her Eponine. But she really seems invested in her roles and I think she’s going to be amazing.”

Adam nodded, but it wasn’t Rachel’s well-being that he was concerned about.

“How are you, darling?” he asked gently. “I know you’ve got a lot on your plate.”

Kurt sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I’m okay,” he insisted. “Just a little tired. At least I’ve got the weekend to relax before we go into tech.”

“Promise me that you will actually relax,” Adam urged, not hiding his concern for the younger man. One of the things that he loved best about Kurt was how dedicated he was, and his drive was nothing short of a wonder to behold. But he knew that Kurt would push himself to the point of breaking and when facing the kind of challenge that he was, Adam wouldn’t put it past him to spend the weekend practicing on his own.

“I will,” Kurt swore. “I know that if I don’t give myself some down time, I’m going to be totally burned out by the end of our run. And I still have the rest of the semester to get through.”

“Good. So, tell me everything,” Adam urged.

“What’s to tell?” Kurt commented, shrugging a bit. “The whole cast is absolutely amazing and when we do the big group numbers… it’s amazing to be a part of something like that. I’ve never heard those songs sound like that.”

Adam smiled, pleased that Kurt’s production was going well. “I’m so looking forward to seeing what the school elects to post online.”

“Part of me is glad that I’m being kept so busy,” Kurt chuckled, the glint of self-deprecating humor apparent even over the computer monitor. “This way I don’t have time to worry that I’m biting off more than I can chew.”

“You’re going to be splendid, darling,” Adam insisted, smiling gently at his lover. For all the encouragement that Kurt had lavished on him over the past months, he was more than happy to return the favor.
“Well, if we’re not all totally insane by opening night, it’ll be a minor miracle,” Kurt claimed. “Professor Carmody is amazing, but she is such a perfectionist! I’m praying that one of her assistants is keeping a stash of Valium because if she’s this bad during general rehearsals, I’m kind of dreading what she’s going to be like during tech.”

Adam nodded understandingly, having just endured such a trial himself. “You’re going to be fine,” he assured the younger man. “I don’t know anyone else who handles pressure as well as you do. And knowing you, you’re going so focused on keeping Rachel and your friends from losing their minds that you’ll hardly have a moment to worry about yourself.”

Kurt turning a loving stare to his lover, the miles that separated them suddenly not so very apparent. Adam wished that he could reach out to take Kurt’s hand, to give him a bit of physical comfort. He so very missed the feel of Kurt’s lean body tucked in against his.

“I wish I was there with you,” he sighed longingly. “I just want to hold you and help you carry this.”

“You are helping,” Kurt claimed adamantly. “I would never have been able to get through this without you.”

Adam felt his throat tightening at the clear love coming through Kurt’s voice. “Don’t sell yourself short, love,” he warned gently. “You’re the strongest person I know. I don’t think that there is any challenge that you can’t win.

“But let’s talk about less stressful things,” Adam suggested, sensing that Kurt needed a bit of distraction. “It’s hard to focus on business when you’re sitting there looking so delectable.”

Kurt laughed brightly, the stress evaporating with the shift in conversation. “Well, be glad that I’m not there, because your roommate would have plenty to complain about by the time I was done with you.”

Adam licked his lips, feeling the front of his jeans growing a bit snug at the heated tone in Kurt’s voice. “Well, the same goes for you, darling,” he warned. “I think that the whole dorm would be well aware of what we were up do with the way I would have you screaming.”

Kurt’s eyes seemed to glaze over a bit at the teasing threat. “If I remember correctly, on our last night in New York I was the one who had you screaming. I’m surprised that our neighbors didn’t call the police.”

Adam shifted as the hardness in his pants pressed uncomfortably against his fly. “That’s not fair, darling,” he complained. “Starting something that you can’t finish.”

“Oh? Who said that I can’t finish it?” Kurt asked impishly with a sly look in his eyes. Adam felt his mouth dry, realizing just what Kurt had in mind. That cheeky little…

“If I were there right now, I’d be knocking on your hotel door, knowing that you were inside waiting for me,” Kurt informed him. “And the instant that the door opened, I’d be on you.”

“Oh, I wish you would be at my door,” Adam moaned, closing his eyes. “I miss you so much.”

“I miss you too,” Kurt assured him with a warm smile. “Which is why when I see you, I just jump into your arms and start kissing you like crazy. It feels so good being in your arms and the world could end at that moment, but it would matter because I’m with you.”

“So, what would you do if you were in my arms?” Adam prompted with a grin, letting Kurt take
control of the fantasy.

The younger man inhaled, and Adam could see the beginnings of an intriguing flush beginning to color his cheeks and throat. He wished that they could be in the same room, so that his lips and fingers could follow that line of color and see how far down he could make it go.

“We’d kiss for what seemed like hours,” Kurt informed him, a slightly breathy tone coming out in his voice. “I love kissing you… my tongue in your mouth and feeling you pressing me up against the wall.”

“Mmmm…,” Adam moaned agreeably, the image coming to life in his mind. Kurt loved all physical aspects of their relationship, but he especially loved the intimacy of kissing and would happily spend hours doing just that. He remembered how Kurt would writhe against him, their tongues wrestling and washing over one another’s teeth. Kurt would grasp at him, moaning against his mouth.

“We’d best close the door,” the older man advised with a wry smile. “No need to have the whole floor as an audience.”

Kurt shrugged, playing at indifference. “I’d be so turned on at seeing you that I wouldn’t care if the whole world was watching. But okay… I manage to kick the door shut behind me.”

“Thank you,” Adam granted with a wink. “Because when I have you flat on your back, I want you all to myself.”

Kurt raised a sardonic eyebrow in response. “Who said that I’d be the one flat on my back?” he asked. “I’m the one running this fantasy.”

“Yes, darling. Of course you are,” Adam chuckled. “Carry on, because it was getting interesting.”

Kurt laughed, his eyes shining mischievously. “Where was I? Oh yeah… you pressing me up against the wall with my tongue down your throat. So, while I’m kissing you, I’m trying to pull your shirt off. What shirt are you wearing?”

Adam knew that Kurt meant in the fantasy and not at the moment, so he selected something that he knew Kurt would immediately recognize. “I’m wearing my blue shirt,” he said, referring to an old garment that he liked to wear when relaxing or doing chores.

“I hate that shirt,” Kurt complained, wrinkling his nose.

Adam just grinned. “I know you do,” he teased, remembering the numerous times his lover threatened to “lose” it in the wash.

“Fine,” Kurt huffed. “Then I rip that ugly, raggedy shirt open and send all the buttons flying.”

Adam couldn’t help from laughing. “That’s one way to make me get rid of it, I suppose.”

“All in a good cause,” Kurt assured him. “I’m pulling the shirt off you and tossing it right into the trash.”

“Well, I’ll have to make you pay for ruining my favorite shirt, my lad,” Adam warned. “I shove you up against the wall hard and force my knee between your legs. My thigh is pressed up against your crotch and I feel that lovely cock hardening.”

Kurt swallowed hard, his breath visibly quickening. “I always loved how strong you are,” he mused dreamily. “You can just pick me up and do whatever you want.”
Adam grinned, seeing the flush deepening across Kurt’s face and knowing that his own hue had gone equally rosy. “You’re just as strong, sweetheart,” he reminded, a bit needlessly in his opinion. “That’s one of the things that always has me marveling. I feel that strong, young body pressing against mine and know that you’re only up against that wall because you’re letting me do that.”

“Well, I’m about to use my position to my advantage,” Kurt claimed with a playful wink. “I’ll pulling you against me, and that gives me the chance to spin you around so that you’re backing up against the bed.”

Adam couldn’t help from laughing. “Yes you did, clever boy,” he praised. He couldn’t resist reaching down to undo the button on his jeans and easing down the zipper, releasing some of the pressure on his cock. He gave the hard flesh a gentle palming, biting his lip to keep from moaning.

“You’re touching yourself. Aren’t you?” Kurt asked teasingly.

Knowing that there was no use lying, Adam nodded. “I can’t help it,” he claimed. “Just listening to you…”

“Well, it’s about to get better,” Kurt insisted with a chuckle. “I’ve got my tongue so far down your throat that I can feel your tonsils.”

“Which I had removed when I was eight,” Adam teased, earning a glare of admonishment from his lover.

“Just for that, I hook my leg behind your knee and knock you down to the bed and pin you there,” Kurt informed him. “And before you can do anything, I’m on top of you.”

“I can’t say that I’m complaining about this in any way, shape or form,” Adam claimed. He squeezed at his cock, enjoying the feel of his hand cupping the sensitive flesh contained in his underwear. Over the screen, he could see Kurt shift and wriggle a bit. “What are you doing there?” he asked curiously, finding Kurt’s flexible writhing most intriguing.

“Getting my pants off,” Kurt grunted as he wiggled out of his snug jeans. “They’re cutting off circulation to my dick.”

Adam saw a flash of pale thighs capped by the soft dove grey of Kurt’s favored brand of boxer briefs. The front of Kurt’s underwear was straining to contain his swelling cock, and Adam’s mouth began to water in anticipation.

“Are you going to take those off?” he asked, his accent thick.

Kurt smiled and made sure that his computer was positioned so Adam could watch him slowly rolling down the band of his underpants and carefully sliding them down over his hips bones, showing off the lines of defined muscle that seemed to make an arrow pointing to what Adam really wanted. Adam could see the length of Kurt’s hardness freed, bobbing in front of his neatly trimmed pubes. He slid the briefs down over his long legs before tossing them to the side, letting Adam get a good look.

“You next,” Kurt ordered, looking no less commanding for sitting there wearing nothing but a tee shirt. “Let me see what you’ve got for me.”

It took some carefully maneuvering, but Adam wanted to make sure that he gave his lover a show. He peeled off his shirt, giving Kurt a good view of his bare chest dusted with dark blond hair over his sternum and trailing down to the top of his briefs. With a neat motion, he slid his underwear and
jeans down his legs and kicked them away, leaving himself bare as the day he was born for Kurt’s viewing pleasure.

“Like what you see?” he asked playfully.

Kurt nodded. “Always. Damn… you’re gorgeous.”

“So… what else do you have in this little fantasy of yours?” Adam asked, leaning back with his legs spread comfortably. One hand lazily reached down to his groin, playing with the give of foreskin over his length.

“Not much,” Kurt admitted. “Just something about fucking you into tomorrow, but watching you do that is rather engaging.”

“You could join me,” Adam invited teasingly.

Kurt smiled wickedly, shucking off his shirt.

* * *

Tech week started Monday morning, bright and early. Kurt arrived an hour before the rehearsals were officially supposed to begin, carrying his makeup kit and a backpack that he filled with bottles of water and snacks to sustain him through what promised to be a very long day. Upon stepping through the stage door, he found a sea of what appeared to be barely organized chaos awaiting him. Several of Professor Carmody’s student assistants were trying to direct everyone to where they needed to be, with several tables set up for each of the groups to make some attempt at organization. He saw the sign for the actors and got on line to check in.

The harried student looked up at him and checked him off the list. “Okay, Kurt… you’ve got table number five in dressing room two,” he advised. “Just drop your stuff off and head back to the theater. You’ll have time later on to set up your table, but Professor Carmody wants to start promptly.”

“Thanks,” Kurt said sincerely, knowing that the students assisting the production side of things had have been run ragged in the leadup to tech. Hoisting the strap for his makeup kit over his shoulder, he set out to find his dressing place.

There were several dressing rooms and his table was assigned to one of the smaller rooms where he wouldn’t have to share with so many people. His name was marked on a piece of tape above the mirror and a rack with his costumes, neatly stored away in garment bags to keep them from getting stained while in transport from the school shop.

He placed his makeup kit down on the table and took a moment to get his bearings. He had to admit that the costuming team was very much on the ball in making sure that everything was neatly in its place, right down to the photos taped next to his mirror to show how his makeup and hair should be done. Nodding to himself in approval, he carried his backpack into the theater and looked about for his friends in the swarm of actors and crew.

He made quick greetings to his Apples and classmates before finding Rachel. “Sorry I’m late,” he apologized. “I needed to stop at the store to pick up a few things.”

“I just got here a few minutes ago myself,” she assured him, taking a sip of her iced coffee. “I was hoping to get here a bit earlier, but the subway was a mess.”

Kurt nodded sympathetically. With the long hours they were facing, getting to and from the theater
was going to be a headache for all of them but it was part of the price that had to be paid in their profession. He was just thankful that he didn’t have to travel all the way to Brooklyn and he knew that he could be back in his bed an hour after rehearsals ended.

Rachel reached into her purse and pulled out a hair band, neatly pulling her hair into a pony tail and tying it off so that it wouldn’t be in her face all day. They were both dressed comfortably in clothes that they could move easily in. Fortunately, they didn’t expect to be doing anything in costume for another day or so.

They watched as the teach teams began to get things ready on stage, and musicians began tuning their instruments. This would be their first chance to rehearse the show with live music, and while that would enhance the sound of their performances it was another factor that they would have to adjust for. Learning to keep going if a note is played out of tune and both musicians and singers learning to keep in time with one another was something that they would have to always keep in mind.

“I’m not going to lie,” Rachel confided, a nervous smile touching her face. “I’m a little nervous.”

“Me too,” he confessed, taking her hand in his to give it a reassuring squeeze.

“I’ve never done a whole show with live music,” she admitted. “It’s not like when we just do one song with back up. This is so real…”

He nodded in understanding. Any of the plays and musicals they’d done in high school were with recorded music. And the music for his shows with the Shakespeare festival were recorded because live musicians would have been too expensive. This would be a new experience for the both of them.

“I know. But we’ve been working our whole lives for this moment,” he reminded her with a smile. “It’s just one more challenge to get past.”

“You know, I can’t wait for opening night,” Rachel insisted. “But I can’t help from worry that it’s so close and we’re not ready.”

Kurt understood Rachel’s reservations, because he knew that they were. They had all worked so hard for the past few months and he understood that seeing the light at the end of the tunnel could be frightening. You never could be sure if it was because you were reaching your goal, or that a freight train was bearing down on you. All they could do was continue to work to the best of their ability and face the challenge with as much confidence as they could manage.

When Professor Carmody stepped onto the stage to greet them, the entire group fell immediately silent. They’d had enough experience to be well trained and responsive at this point. She looked tired and a bit frazzled and Kurt knew that however hard the cast and techs thought they were working, it was likely nothing compared to the burden the teacher had been bearing.

“Good morning everyone,” she greeted, offering the students a warm smile. “Before we get started today, I wanted to commend you all for all your hard work and that we would never have gotten to this point without your remarkable talent, drive and perseverance.

“Now, the next few days are going to be very challenging,” she warned. “We have a big hurdle, bringing all the pieces of our production together and not a lot of time to do so. So these are going to be very long days and I’m sure that there will be quite a few stumbles. But I have no doubt that we will be more than ready by our opening night.”
Kurt nodded to himself, pursing his lip thoughtfully. It wasn’t anything he wasn’t expecting.

“Now our young actors will be joining when they’re done with school to do their scenes and I’ve assigned stand-ins so we can work until they get here,” Professor Carmody informed them. “Today we’re going to be focusing on individual scenes and working on blocking with the sets and props, but tomorrow we’ll be doing full run-throughs of the show. We have a lot to do today so let’s get started.

“Audio team, please get the players for the opening numbers set up,” she commanded. “Lighting and set teams, please get to your stations.”

As their director retreated to her desk set up at the center of the orchestra section, the group hurried to take their places. The students not on stage went to the backstage wings where they could watch and be prepared to be called upon. He watched as a student set up Rachel with her mic pack and carefully fastening the wire so that the tiny sensor would be nearly hidden by her hairline and not easily seen from the audience. As he watched the actors playing guards and prisoners took their places on the stage, Kurt felt a brief pang of regret that he wouldn’t be joining them. He was going to have to wait quite a while for his turn.

* * *

Maybe it wasn’t opening night, Rachel considered as she found her mark on the stage while the music began to swell around her. Maybe it wasn’t a lead part, but that didn’t lessen her excitement in the least. She wrapped a shawl about her shoulders and took a huddled, stooped pose so that she would look like the starving beggar that she was supposed to be. Around her there were other students taking their places as the downtrodden citizens, each wearing an expression of desperation as the music played, setting the tone for everything that would follow. With so many singers, she knew that it would be a pretty astounding performance.

“At the end of the day, you’re another day older,” they sang while the lights slowly came on to cast haunting shadows across the stage. “And that’s all you can say in the life of the poor. It’s a struggle, it’s a war. And there’s nothing that anyone’s giving. One more day standing about, what is it for?

“One less day to be living.”

The group began to move towards the front of the stage, showing the physical effects of freezing in the chill air and prolonged near-starvation as mist generated by the fog machines washed over them to give the impression of a freezing snap in the air. One young man limped with the aid of a crutch, while others tried to help the weaker among them along. Rachel shuffled with them, pulling her tattered shawl about her as tightly as she could.

“At the end of the day, you’re another day colder,” they moaned piteously. “And the shirt on your back doesn’t keep out the chill. And the righteous hurry past, they don’t hear the little ones crying. And the plague is coming on fast, ready to kill.

“One day closer to closer to dying!”

“Stop!” Professor Carmody ordered from her desk, and the action on the stage immediately ceased performing, waiting for her instructions.

“Audio, check your settings. We’re not getting clear sound from about half the group,” she instructed firmly, speaking into her microphone so that they could easily hear her. “There’s no sound coming from the left side of the stage. Get that sorted out, please. We don’t need sound issues this early in the process.”
Without argument, the group hurried to take their starting marks and the stage lights dimmed. Rachel took a breath to mentally regroup, trying not to scratch where the microphone was taped to her skin. It was hard to judge how they really sounded from the stage and she knew that there would be a lot of start and stop throughout the day and it would be a challenge to avoid getting frustrated at not being able to run through songs completely.

Once the audio team had finished their adjustments, Professor Carmody leaned forward in her seat. “Let’s take it from the start, people,” she ordered.

The musicians began to play the opening strains of the song and the actors took their marks and started the song again, giving as much effort as they gave the first time around and hoping that they could get through the number without more technical issues.

The stagehands lowered a gate made to look like wrought iron that prevented the beggars from moving closer and several of the cast ended up pressed against the bars, separated from the prospect of work in the factory. Rachel stretched through with one arm, reaching with desperate supplication, her expression pleading for help.

This was her favorite part. Where the chorus voices began to separate and layer, building upon one another to create a remarkable wall of sound. Even from the stage, it sounded absolutely gorgeous.

“At the end of the day there’s another day dawning. And the sun in the morning is waiting to rise! Like the wave crash on the sand. Like a storm that’ll break any second! There’s a hunger in the land. There’s a reckoning still to be reckoned and there’s gonna be hell to pay! At the end of the day!”

The factory foreman stepped behind his podium as the gate parted and the beggars scattered off the stage, letting the factory workers take their places at their work table. The student playing the foreman then began to sing his warning to the workers, who acquiesced to his unreasonable demands out of fear of being fired. The actress playing Fantine stoically endured the foreman’s course advances and the jealous sniping of her peers who seemed to be taking pleasure in her misery.

Rachel watched the scene from the wings, paying careful attention to the time. While all this was going on, she would have to be changing costumes and doing her makeup for the “Lovely Ladies” scene. Then she had another costume and makeup change for “Master of the House”. Managing her time off stage was going to be critical so that she didn’t miss her cues.

Now seeing the cast acting against the grand sets and hearing their voices fill the beautiful theater thrilled her in a way that she couldn’t have imagined. For however jaded they might be, seeing this production truly starting to come to life was one of the most exciting things she’d ever experienced. She could not be more proud of not just what they were all accomplishing, but her own contribution.

* * *

When they finally broke for lunch, Rachel felt positively drained. They’d had to stop multiple times, ironing out the technical and staging that showed as they ran through the first few numbers of the show. It was stressful with all the interruptions that didn’t let them run things through and the constant changes and corrections was already starting to wear on her.

Kurt had the opposite problem, as his character didn’t appear in the show until much later so he’d been standing around with nothing to do except watch the same scene played a few dozen times. She wasn’t quite sure what was worse.

“I warned you,” Kurt chuckled as Rachel slumped into her seat. “Being in the chorus is a more work
“You don’t have to gloat,” she whined, stretching out her legs so she could rotate her ankles. “My feet are killing me.”

“Well, you’d better pace yourself,” Kurt advised. “We’re barely started.”

She nodded and sighed. They both had a lot of work ahead of them.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay in getting this chapter finished. I was really sick last month and it set me back a bit. Thanks so much for sticking with me! I really do appreciate all of my readers.
Kurt scrambled to the top of the wooden barricade, the music surging around him as he raised his rifle to rally his followers for this final confrontation. The last notes tore from his throat as a roar as he called upon his men to fight to the death. They were badly outnumbered and outgunned, but they were determined to go out as martyrs to the cause of freedom.

In the back of his mind, he knew that their director was seated at her table in the theater with her squad of assistants, watching their every move and making pages of notes for herself. She was by far the most critical audience that they ever perform for and if she wasn’t happy, then no one was happy.

Around him the light effects flashed, and smoke filled the air around him as Kurt mimed firing at the imaginary French soldiers. The music and sound effects thundered in his ears. Behind him, his comrades began to fall as the fighting intensified. He heard their battle cries as one by one, they fell as bullets found their mark.

Knowing that they were doomed and all he could do was make one last show of defiance, he grasped the pole of their red flag and pulled it free when suddenly the light effects seemed to go completely haywire. Rather than the random burst of light to give the impression of rifle and cannon fire, a bright burst all at once nearly blinded him completely and caused him to drop the flag in shock. The stage then plunged into darkness, causing the residual flashes to play painfully across his retinas.

His balance wavered dangerously, and he grabbed at the barricade set to keep from falling. He could hear the exclamations of shock and alarm around him from the other actors who’d been on the stage with him. The music screeched to a disjointed halt as the orchestra lost their lights and everyone seemed to be yelling all at once to find out what had happened.

“What the hell was that?” Professor Carmody’s amplified voice booming through the theater, her alarm readily apparent when she realized where several actors were at the moment of the outage. “Everyone, stay right where you are! Don’t move!”

Kurt had no intention of doing so, not with the way he was more than ten feet from the stage floor and his eyes weren’t very happy with things at the moment. He just hung on to his perch, one hand rubbing at his eyes to try to clear them until he felt hands reaching for him to help get him and the others on the set to safety.

Professor Carmody rushed onto the stage, hurrying over to check on the well-being of the actors and making sure that no one was injured. “Is anyone hurt?” she questioned, examining each of the performers herself. She went to the ones who’d been at the top of the barricade first, since they’d been in the most precarious position. “Kurt, Jack… are you both okay?”

He inhaled to steady his nerves and nodded, rubbing at his eyes to try to clear them. “Yeah… I’m fine,” he assured her. The flashing was starting to fade and he was able to make out the outlines of the other people on the darkened stage.

The young man playing Courfeyrac nodded, leaning on one of the others. “I’m okay,” he claimed, blinking a bit comically.

Satisfied that her actors were unharmed, Professor Carmody turned her ire to the tech teams. “I’m waiting for someone to tell me what happened here,” she demanded impatiently.
Knowing that not responding quickly would only make a bad situation worse, the senior in charge of the lighting team bravely bit the bullet and stepped forward to take responsibility for the fiasco. “I’m sorry, Professor,” he said sincerely. “It looks like there was a short in the box that set off all of the lighting effects at once and overloaded one of the circuit boards. That’s what set off the house lights. I’ve got people working on it right now. We should get it sorted out pretty quickly.”

As if on cue, the house lights came back on, much to everyone’s relief.

Professor Carmody sighed, apparently not pleased with the explanation, but knew that it wasn’t something that she could really blame on human error. “I want you to check everything again! We shouldn’t be having these kinds of screwups at this stage. Someone could have been hurt and we’re opening in just a few days!

“I want all of your systems reviewed from top to bottom,” she ordered firmly. “Lights, audio… the works. I don’t want to see this happening again.”

As the tech students hurried off to check their systems and find the source of the malfunction, the director turned to her actors, not missing that they all seemed a little unsettled from their scare. The ones who’d been up on the barricade seemed to be, understandably, especially shaken.

“Everyone take a break while the tech teams check our systems,” she advised, waving them off. “Go clear your heads. Be back in an hour.”

Rachel hurried up to Kurt, followed by Analisa, Katya and Jamie. “Are you all right?” she asked in concern, her eyes wide and reaching out to grasp his arm to help him from the stage.

He inhaled deeply and nodded. He still felt like he’d had a dozen camera flashes going off directly in his face, but it was starting to ease a bit. “I’m fine,” he insisted, wanting to put their minds at ease. His overlong hair was falling into his sensitive eyes and he impatiently brushed it back away from his face.

“I saw the whole thing from the wings,” Katya claimed, her expression one of clear worry and holding her boyfriend’s arm to support him. “It looked like a supernova for a moment.”

Kurt sighed, not wanting to make more of this than it needed to be. “We can’t hold it against them. Technical mishaps happen,” he said in an attempt at regaining his composure. No one had gotten hurt and things would be fixed. That was all that mattered in the end.

He looked to the other young man. “You okay?” Kurt asked. Fortunately, since he wasn’t a principle Jamie had been at the foot of the barricade during the mishap and managed to avoid being blinded the way the principle players had been.

Jamie nodded. “Yeah, I’m fine,” he assured his friend. “I didn’t get a face full of light the way you did. Thank God none of the kids were stage with us at the moment.”

Kurt nodded in agreement, shuddering at what might have happened if any of the boys who were playing Gavroche had been injured in any way. Not just because of how it might impact the show, but the last thing Kurt would want was for these talented boys to be soured on acting from a negative experience.

Analisa glanced at the stage where the technical teams were hard at work, checking their systems with Professor Carmody watching their every step. “Looks like they’re going to be at that for a while,” she surmised.

“Why don’t we take a run over to Starbucks,” Katya suggested. “Some fresh air might clear our
heads a little bit.”

Rachel nodded in agreement and looked to Kurt. “Come on,” she urged gently, taking his hand in hers and squeezing reassuringly. “Let’s give them a chance to get everything sorted out without us standing over them. I’ll treat you to an iced latte.”

Kurt let them pull his along, glad to have a chance to clear his head a bit. While he couldn’t begrudge the tech students the opportunity to make mistakes and resolve problems since that will benefit their education, he hoped that the rest of tech week turned out to be a lot less eventful for the rest of them.

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Finn grinned excitedly from his seat by the window as he watched their plane start its approach to La Guardia Airport, giving him a lovely view of the Manhattan skyline before banking and turning east. Within a matter of just a few minutes, they dropped in altitude until the plane was speeding over Flushing Bay and touched down on the runway.

No matter how many times he flew, it was still something of a thrill. Even a brief flight like this.

He turned a smile to his mother, who was watching his reactions with an expression of tolerant amusement. “You look excited,” she teased, reaching up to smooth back an errant curl that stuck to his forehead. “And you need a haircut.”

“I’m just looking forward to seeing Kurt,” Finn admitted as their plane taxied towards the terminal. “This is such a big deal for him and Rachel.”

Burt nodded, trying very hard not to puff up with pride, and in Finn’s opinion, failing miserably. “We’re going to have a lot of fun celebrating. Just remember that at the gala, there are going to be a lot of important people there. You know… media and producers. Try not to embarrass your brother too much,” he warned.

Finn waved away his concern dismissively. “I know this is important,” he insisted, unbuckling his seatbelt. “Don’t worry. I’ll behave myself.”

Once the plane was docked at the terminal and the passengers got up from their seats to disembark, Burt opened the overhead bins to retrieve their carry-on bags and handed Finn his backpack containing the gifts for Kurt and the girls from Texas. Sam and Puck wanted to send their regards since they couldn’t be there in person and had spent several weeks picking out just the right gifts.

He was eager to get to their hotel even though he knew that he had plenty of time. With Kurt spending his day in his final dress rehearsal, they wouldn’t be seeing him until later in the evening so there was no real need to rush. That didn’t ease his eagerness, however.

There was a long wait for their checked luggage, leaving Finn to fidget impatiently as he watched the carousel turning around and around with no sign of their bags. It seemed as if the universe knew that he wanted to get to Manhattan as quickly as possible by making sure that their bags were among the last offloaded. Then they had to deal with rush hour traffic on their way to Manhattan with the Grand Central Expressway turned into something of a parking lot. By the time they checked into the Westhouse Hotel, his mother was all but grabbing him to keep him still and not embarrass them at the reception desk.

Finn distracted himself by checking out the amenities of their suite. Thankfully, Burt had reserved a suite that had a sofa bed for him and his parents would have their own separate room, giving them all a bit of privacy. It had a well-appointed bathroom and had a nice city view from the window. It was
a lot more luxurious than the kind of places he was used to staying. Not that he planned to be spending a lot of time at the hotel, but at least they were finally in New York and he would be comfortable when they slept.

“What time does Kurt’s show start?” he asked Burt as he set out his shaving kit in the bathroom.

“It’s an evening show, Finn, so we’ve got plenty of time,” Burt reminded him tolerantly. “We’ll go out to dinner while they’re on stage and meet up with Kurt afterwards.”

“We thought that we would take Kurt out for coffee and dessert when he’s done,” Carole proposed. “Maybe Rachel too, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“Sure. That’ll be great,” Finn answered without hesitation. Seeing Rachel was not an issue for him and he was glad that they had been able to finally move past their prolonged and painful breakup to become friends. He was kind of looking forward to catching up with her too.

Burt nodded approvingly. “Good. Then let’s relax for a little bit,” he proposed. “I can use a little rest before we go out. I have a feeling that tomorrow is going to be a busy day for us.”

“I think I’m going to go get something to eat, if that’s okay,” Finn announced. “Figured that I’d walk around a bit and get the lay of the land.”

“And walk by the theater, because you can’t help yourself,” Burt teased knowingly, getting a bashful grin from his stepson.

Carole smiled and nodded, glad that her son would find a way to occupy himself and not be underfoot the whole afternoon. “Go ahead, sweetheart. Have fun. And maybe see if you can get your hair cut while you’re wandering,” she prodded.

Finn laughed and grabbed his jacket, glad to be dismissed for a little while. He took the elevator downstairs and stepped outside, sighing in contentment. It was a warm spring afternoon and perfect for walking around and catching some of the local sights.

There were plenty of places to eat within a short walk from the hotel and he stopped off at a pizza joint to grab a few slices and a bottle of soda to tide him over until dinner. That left him plenty of time to stroll about. The hotel was within a quick walking distance to Central Park and a few minutes watching ducks paddling around their pond and wiggling their little tails when they ducked under the water for food should never be considered time wasted.

Manhattan was a fascinating place, Finn considered as he walked the streets and absorbed the sights, sounds and smells. It could be overwhelming with all the activity and traffic. People moved fast and with purpose and one could be overwhelmed if they weren’t prepared to keep up. Even crossing a street could be intimidating to the uninitiated. He could understand why Kurt and Rachel were drawn to this city. Not just because of the professional opportunities that it offered, though those opportunities were quite obvious.

He found himself standing outside of Carnegie Hall, remembering that Rachel had told him about wanting to perform there and thinking that one day she just might do that. Seeing the posters of famous performers who were scheduled to perform and he had no doubt that Rachel and Kurt would too one day. There was so much for them here. So many doors just waiting to open for them.

No, it was the vibrancy in this city that would appeal to driven individuals like them. It was a city that demanded action and had an energy that still left him in a state of awe. He didn’t think he would ever be truly comfortable living there, but that was okay. It was perfect for Rachel and Kurt and he
was just glad that they were finding their places. As for himself…. He was happy with where he was at the moment and figuring out his path in life. Tomorrow night he would enjoy watching those that he cared about as they were taking fast steps towards the life that they wanted.

Finn knew that Burt had picked their hotel because it was in close proximity to the theater that Kurt was performing in and it was impossible to resist the temptation to stroll by and check things out. The theater was down a relatively quiet street; well, quiet for New York, Finn mused in amusement. And despite the closed doors and quiet appearance, he knew that inside would be a flurry of activity. He had no doubt that Kurt, Rachel and the rest of the cast and crew were hard at work to prepare for their last rehearsal and he wished that he could walk inside and support them. But this was a challenge that he just couldn’t help them with except to support them from afar. He hoped that it would be enough.

There would be time for him to see those that he cared about, to show them how much he cared and how proud he was of what they’d accomplished. He’d get to bask in the glow of Kurt’s pride and Rachel’s joy as they accepted very well-deserved applause and had their moment in the spotlight. In the meantime, he thought that he’d spotted a barber shop nearby. Getting that haircut that his mother suggested probably wasn’t a bad idea.

* * *

Kurt hurried to the costume master waiting in the wings for him, quickly stripping off the tailored jacket and waistcoat and handing them off to be inspected and spot cleaned before the next night’s performance. Turning, he held out his arms so that the costumer could help slip the ornately decorated military vest onto him. He unbuttoned the neckline of his white shirt and rolled up the sleeves as she tied the tri-colored sash about his waist and looped a loose tie around his throat.

“You’re all set,” she assured him, giving him a quick once over to make sure that nothing was out of place and patting him on the shoulder.

“Thanks,” Kurt said sincerely, accepting a bottle of water from one of the stage hands and taking a long drink. Around him, other actors playing the revolutionaries were being set up for the next scene. So far, everything had been going well as they headed into the final song of Act One. A prop tech handed him his rifle and he hurried onto the darkened stage and waited for his cue.

Tech week had proved to be as brutal as they’d anticipated and more than a few times, Kurt felt like he was teetering on the edge of a nervous breakdown. Nothing had gone easily or smoothly at first and every student involved in the production were pushed to their breaking points. There was the afternoon where he found Rachel hiding behind one of the side curtains, trying to hold back tears of exhaustion after having performed the same scene no fewer than ten times, and the nights when they and their friends were falling asleep in their dinner. There were missed cues, technical failures, and the power event that he was certain would become something of a legend at NYADA.

It was finally on the third day of tech that everything started to fall into place. They donned their costumes and Kurt could feel the perceptible shift in the quality of their performances. The nine child actors now working with them; three boys and six girls that would take turns covering the roles of Gavroche and the young Cosette and Eponine, filling in with the ensemble on the nights when they weren’t in the main roles. They fit in smoothly now that they were finally working with the full company and their presence added just the right flavor, completing several critical scenes that had felt decidedly unfinished without them.

They were no longer just students, but real actors. The show now flowed in a way that he would expect from a professionally staged production, with all of the players confident and performing their roles perfectly and the crew working flawlessly. Each run through got better and smoother, leading
them to this point; halfway through their final dress rehearsal.

The theater was filled with school groups and a few representatives from the local press getting an early preview and so far, everything was going very well. The cast and crew were working flawlessly and the problems that had plagued tech week were a distant memory. Now there was only the scene they were currently performing to focus on before an appreciative audience.

This was his favorite song in the entire show, where the motivations of all the characters would be made clear to the audience and Enjolras would shed the veneer of a passionate university student to step out fully as a revolutionary. Watching from the wings, he saw Sean’s passionate portrayal of Jean Valjean’s torment about his past being discovered, forced to abandon his comfortable life and returning to his existence as a fugitive. Cosette mourned the fact that she was leaving the man that she loved, while Marius mused the choice of following Cossette or joining his friends in their fight. Eponine lamented that the man she loved didn’t return her feelings while her parents planned to take advantage of the approaching battle for their own ends. The music began to surge and Kurt took a steadying breath, waiting for the exact moment when a spotlight would land on him.

When the act drew to its dramatic close, Kurt couldn’t help from smiling when he heard the applause from the audience on the other side of the curtain. He could not ask for things to be going better and he was increasingly confident that opening night would go just as smoothly. The entire cast and crew seem to have left behind their fears and nerves, all elements now working together with efficiency and precision.

The intermission gave him the chance to retreat to his dressing room, having fifteen minutes to regroup, touch up his makeup and reassess his performance before the climatic second act. He’d had a good grasp on Enjolras as a character and liked presenting him for the fanatic that he was. He could understand the passion and energy that Enjolras felt as the confrontation with the government troops approached, and he could physically feel the excitement of the audience. It was a heady feeling and he needed to make sure that he didn’t let it overwhelm him. He needed to keep control this energy so that it could power his performance.

Looking in his mirror, he could see the brightness in his eyes that looked almost feverish. He couldn’t precisely say if that was a result of Enjolras’s fervor leaking through, or his own exhilaration from the performance. Either way, it was working for him and he was going with it.

He took a long drink of water, swishing it around his mouth before swallowing. A touch of powder to tone down some of the shine on his skin and touching up his hair and he was ready to take the stage. With the first act behind them, Kurt was aware that they were just a few hours away from their rehearsal time being completely over. Once the curtain came down, reality was going to hit like a freight train.

No time to worry about that. Not with the stage crew calling out that they had five minutes before second act began. Taking another sip of water, Kurt stood to make a quick costume check before heading for the stage.

Playtime was almost over. Time to get to work.

* * *

“Come on!” Finn urged as he dragged his mother behind him, leaving Burt to hurry in their wake. “If we don’t get there, we’ll never get to the stage door!”

“Finn, they’re just finishing now,” Burt insisted, huffing along. He was in better shape that he’d been in ages, but he was no match for his stepson’s exuberance.
“We’ll get there in plenty of time,” Carole laughed breathlessly as he son pulled at her arm. Finn was strong enough to just pick her up and carry her if he really wanted to and while she wanted to avoid that kind of assault on her dignity, she couldn’t deny her son’s enthusiasm at being able to greet his brother at the stage door. Finn’s excitement was positively infectious.

As the theater came into sight, Finn groaned in dismay. “Oh no! The doors are open already!” Even from halfway up the block, he could see people leaving the theater with a good number heading towards the stage door. Letting go of his mother’s hand, Finn raced ahead of his parents to try to secure them a decent place. Carole just smiled tolerantly, giving her husband a fond look.

“One of these days, he’s just going to bulldoze both of us over,” she chuckled, taking the opportunity to catch her breath. “He’ll be off and leaving us in his dust.”

Burt just smiled, placing his arm about her shoulders to pull her close. “At least he’s doing it for a good cause. Come on,” he urged gently, giving his wife a quick kiss. “Let’s see if we can spot the kids.”

Finn wasn’t particularly shy or polite as he carefully pushed his way towards the front of the steel barrier, nudging his way to stand next to a trio of teenage girls that might as well have been wearing t-shirts proclaiming, “Ride or Die Theater Kids”. They were chattering excitedly, perusing their programs and gushing over the show they’d just seen.

“So, what did you guys think?” Finn asked of them, smiling in a manner that he knew tended to get girls weak in the knees. He wasn’t above a little bit of flirting to get the dirt that he wanted.

One girl, that for some reason reminded him of a blond Rachel gushed happily. “Oh my God, it was amazing,” she prattled, her smile a little manic. “The sets and costumes were so gorgeous! And all of the actors were absolutely perfect. I loved it!”

Her friends nodded in agreement, adding their own assessments. Finn grinned, knowing that Kurt would be very pleased to hear of their approval. Finn knew that getting notice from the critics would be important to further his brother’s career, but Kurt would treasure the endorsement of the fans in the audience far more. They were the ones that, hopefully, would follow him through his career.

“Who were your favorites?” he couldn’t resist asking.

The girls then began to pronounce their chosen ones, babbling excitedly and causing Finn to laugh. He heard various character names picked for special notice and was pleased that Kurt’s character was among them. He knew that his brother had been worried about measuring up to the older, more experienced students. Judging by the response of this small segment of the audience, Finn could assume that his concerns had been unfounded.

“They’re coming out!” one of the girls exclaimed, nearly bouncing right out of her skin when a security guard opened the stage door and members of the cast began to emerge. They looked tired but apparently pleased with how the performance had gone and were talking happily amongst one another. At their arrival, the waiting fans began to applaud and cheer, giving the actors their regards as they began to clamor for autographs.

“I think these are just the chorus,” the blond surmised, not quite dismissively but making it apparent that they were not the ones she was waiting to see. Finn felt himself frowning in disapproval, because just a few minutes ago, she’d been raving about the cast and now seemed indifferent to a large part of them. Just like Rachel used to, he thought critically. He knew how hard Rachel had worked in the chorus and he felt insulted on her behalf having that contribution ignored.
“Here you are!” Carole laughed a bit breathlessly, coming up to her son. “You got a bit ahead of us.”

“But you did get us a good spot,” Burt praised. “Any sign of them yet?”

“No, but Kurt said they’re a big group,” Finn answered. “Might be a little while.”

The actors exited the theater in small groups to give everyone their chance with the fans waiting and eventually Rachel stepped out with a few others that she was talking cheerfully with. Finn couldn’t help from smiling at seeing how happy she was. He was reminded of the girl that he’d fallen in love with, her enthusiasm and passion brightening her features and making her beautiful as she paused to sign a few programs and thanking people for coming that night.

“Hey, Rach!” he called out, waving his arm to get her attention.

She looked up, her eyes widening in delight. “Finn!” she exclaimed, rushing over to him.

He pushed his way to the front by the barrier and caught her in a tight hug.

“What are you doing here?” she asked happily. “Did you see the show? Kurt said that you weren’t coming until tomorrow.”

He laughed and shook his head. “No, we just got into town today but I couldn’t wait to come see you,” he explained. “Mom and Burt thought that we’d take you and Kurt out for something to eat. You two must be famished.”

Rachel looked up at the older couple and smiled in greeting. “Hi Mr. and Mrs. H! Kurt’s going to be so thrilled to see you.”

“Hi Rachel,” Burt greeted cheerfully.

The blond girl that had been waiting for the actors turned a look up at Finn. “You know some of the actors?” she asked, appearing to be a bit put out that he hadn’t told her.

Finn grinned and nodded. “My brother and friend are students at NYADA. We came in to see them,” he explained, turning his attention back to Rachel.

“Kurt should be out in a few minutes,” she explained before turning to the group she was with. “Guys, these are Kurt’s parents and his brother, Finn.”

Rachel introduced the group and Analisa hurried over to offer Burt her hand. “It’s so great to finally meet you,” she insisted. “Kurt has told us so much about you all.”

Burt smiled and shook her hand politely. “It’s nice to meet you. Kurt’s talked a lot about his friends here.”

Katya smiled winsomely. “I know that Kurt is so excited for you to see him tomorrow,” she said happily. “He’s been talking about it for weeks now.”

“We’re looking forward to seeing him also,” Carole answered, holding her husband’s arm. These were the moments that she knew Burt had been dreaming of for Kurt and seeing them come true was nearly more than they could handle.

The stage doors opened, and more actors began to step out from the theater. Judging from the cheers from the crowd, Finn guessed that these were some of the leads. Kurt finally emerged to more cheers from the crowd, which brought a flush to his cheeks that Finn could see all the way from where he
was standing.

Finn bit his lip, trying to keep from bursting out to get his attention. The audience that had waited for Kurt deserved a few minutes before his family claimed him and he was happy to see his brother getting the respect that he deserved. Kurt looked amazing; clearly a little tired from his efforts but positively glowing from the excitement of his performance. He couldn’t be happier for his brother, knowing that he was doing what he loved and being regarded so positively.

Finally, he’d lost his patience and yelled out, “Kurt! Over here!”

Kurt apparently didn’t hear him at first. Not surprising with how noisy the crowd was. After seeing her ex trying and failing to get his brother’s attention, Rachel took matters into her own hands and flounced over to Kurt’s side to tap his shoulder. Kurt looked over to where she was pointing and Finn couldn’t help from laughing at brilliant smile crossing his brother’s face.

Kurt finished up with signing autographs for that group, refusing to be rude to the fans despite his eagerness to see his family. By the time he made his way to where Finn and their parents were waiting, the rest of the leads had emerged from the theater to provide a distraction. Kurt hurried over to his brother and let Finn wrap him in his strong arms, lifting him as if he wanted to pull Kurt over the steel barrier.

“I missed you so much!” Finn exclaimed, hugging his brother tightly.

“Me too,” Kurt assured him with a breathless laugh. Over Finn’s shoulder, he saw their parents. “I thought I wouldn’t be seeing you until tomorrow.”

Burt nudged his stepson to relinquish his brother so that he could get his own hug. “We know that you’re going to be busy all day so we thought we’d try to see you tonight. Maybe go out for a bite.”

“That would be fantastic,” Kurt sighed gratefully. His eyes took on the bright, wide expression that made him look so much like the happy child that Burt remembered. “My tank is totally empty.”

“Well, take your time and finish up here,” Carole urged with a smile.

Kurt nodded and gave his attention to the last groups of fans, including the theater kids that Finn had been talking with. Finn couldn’t help from grinning at the way the girls gushed over Kurt once they recognized him and the way Kurt accepted their praise with grace and a healthy dose of modesty. He didn’t miss how Kurt made sure to introduce his friends from the ensemble, clearly wanting to make sure that they got the credit they deserved.

Once they made it past the stage door line, Kurt could give his full attention to his family, hugging his father and Carole tightly. “I’m so happy to see you,” he insisted. “I missed you both so much.”

“I know neither of us had much time to visit the past few months,” Burt agreed, a suspicious trace of a tear in his eyes. “You’ve been so busy. But now all your work is paying off and we get to enjoy that.”

“Kurt, would your friends like to join us?” Carole offered. As much as they would like some undivided time with Kurt, it seemed rude to just tear him away from his friends.

“Thanks for the offer, Mrs. Hummel,” Analisa said sincerely. “But we’re exhausted and we’d better get some rest. Tomorrow is going to be an insane day.”

“Then we’ll see you all tomorrow,” Burt agreed.
The girls took a moment to bid farewell to their friends for the evening, leaving them in good, loving hands. “Don’t stay out too late,” Katya admonished gently, giving Kurt a kiss on the cheek. “We’ve got a long today tomorrow.”

“I won’t,” he promised. “You guys have a good night.”

Once Rachel had bid goodnight to their friends, she turned her attention to Finn. “You look good,” she affirmed cheerfully, admiring the healthy tan he’d gained over the past few months. “Texas seems to agree with you.”

“Yeah, it does,” Finn assured her. “I like my work and the band we’ve been putting together may getting some traction. We’re going to look to start playing some dates in a few months.”

“That’s great,” Rachel praised, clearly glad that he was doing well. She’d never wanted to hurt him and was glad that he’d emerged from their relationship as friends. “And Jane?”

Finn chuckled. “She keeps me on my toes,” he claimed with a wink.

“Good. Someone needs to,” she insisted.

Finn laughed, turning his attention to his brother. “Dude, what’s with your hair?” he asked. Kurt’s hair was nearly long enough to brush the collar of his jacket and looked longer than Finn could ever remember seeing it. He couldn’t resist the urge to reach out and ruffle it. “You look like a fluffy little kitten.”

Kurt growled and swatted at his brother. “It’s not my choice! I was supposed to get it cut but then they asked me to let it grow out a bit for the show. Apparently the costumers decided that Enjolras should have long hair. I know it looks terrible.

Carole quickly moved to soothe his ruffled feathers. “No, it doesn’t,” she assured him. She cocked her head thoughtfully, thinking that it looked rather nice with the slight bit of wave that came with the added length.

Burt chuckled as he held open the door to the café. “I don’t think I’ve seen your hair that long since you were about three,” he teased. Once Kurt had developed a full sense of self, he’d been very vocal about everything from his wardrobe, his selection of toys and the way the kiddie barber did his hair.

“It’s a good thing that your hair grows like a weed. At least you managed to avoid an awkward stage,” Rachel teased as they sat down at their table. She could see the dessert case from where they sat. For once, she wasn’t going to worry about her diet and decided that the coconut cake she spotted would be just what she needed.

Kurt threw her a sour look. “First day after we close and I’m getting it cut,” he promised loftily, earning laughs from everyone at the table.

Burt reached over to squeeze his son’s shoulder. “I don’t think I’ve seen your hair that long since you were about three,” he teased. Once Kurt had developed a full sense of self, he’d been very vocal about everything from his wardrobe, his selection of toys and the way the kiddie barber did his hair.

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Burt reached over to squeeze his son’s shoulder. “I don’t doubt it,” he said soothingly, knowing that it was better to indulge Kurt’s sense of outrage rather than try to assure him that he looked rather good with longer hair.

“In the meantime, tell us how everything went tonight.”

* * *

Adam’s cell phone alarm rang, forcing him from sleep and provided a rather obnoxious reminder that he had an early start to the day. He reached over to fumble at the phone, trying to turn off the alarm
with fingers had had gone a bit dead because he’d slept with his arm in an odd position.

“Bloody hell…” Niall grumbled from the other bed, pulling the covers over his head. “Turn that fucking thing off.”

Adam sighed, finally managing to get the alarm off without dropping his phone. Shoving off the covers, he sat on the edge of his bed and gave a long stretch. His body was still adjusting to the time difference and he felt rather out of sorts.

Maybe it wasn’t the change in time zones that was bothering him so much as what day it was and that he couldn’t totally shake the feeling that he wasn’t where he should be.

His bladder warned him not to dawdle so he made his way to the bathroom. After relieving himself, he turned on the shower and turned the water on as hot as he could stand it. While he waited for the hot water to kick in, he checked himself in the mirror and wondered if he could get away without shaving. Probably not, he decided. As the only cast member portraying an officer in their play, he needed to be clean shaven.

The shower was just what he needed to pound the sleep stiffness out of his body and brain, and a quick shave neatened him up. Wrapping a towel about his waist, he stepped back into his shared room, seeing that his roommate had fallen back asleep.

Adam took a moment to slip into clean underwear and jeans before moving to wake the lump in the other bed. “Come on, you lazy sod,” he urged, giving Niall’s shoulder a shake. “Time to get moving.”

“Piss off,” Niall grunted, sitting up to rub his eyes. “What time is it?”

“Nearly seven. You’ve got just enough time to shower and get something to eat before they pick us up,” Adam informed him.

Niall sighed and ran his hand over his face. “Fuck me…”

Adam just chuckled and pulled a light blue jumper over his head. “I’m going downstairs to get some breakfast. Come down when you’re dressed.”

Niall finally nodded. “Be down in a bit. Just need to find my feet.”

Adam forced a smile to his face despite the vague feeling of gloom that he wasn’t able to totally shake. It was only after he stepped out into the hallway of their hotel that he let his mask fall and he could acknowledge what was bothering him.

He was disappointed not being able to talk to Kurt the day before, knowing that his lover was busy with his final dress rehearsal and then seeing his family. All they had been able to manage was a quick text, with Adam wishing Kurt good luck in his show and Kurt answering back that he missed Adam.

He felt rather awful afterwards.

This morning found him in no better a mood. He had a full day ahead of him, with a cast interview that morning with a local Chicago talk show and then the rest of the day doing run throughs for their evening performance. Under other circumstance he’d be totally focused on the work he had facing him, and he knew that these interviews were part of the job he’d signed up for. But his heart and mind were back in New York. Not being there to support Kurt when he was about to take on the most important performance of his life just ate at him. From the moment that they’d met, Kurt had
supported him and encouraged his career aspirations. Not being in the position to do the same hurt.

Kurt would be the first one to tell him that he was being silly. He wouldn’t hold Adam’s absence against him and would be appreciative of what gestures of support his lover was able to extend. There would be a spectacular arrangement of Kurt’s favorite flowers waiting for him and best wishes not just from Adam, but the whole “Butcher’s Bill” cast. He would speak to Kurt whenever Kurt could find a spare second and tell him how much he was loved and how proud he was. It was barely enough and certainly far less than Kurt deserved, but it was all that Adam could realistically manage.

He was one of the first to arrive at the hotel dining room, and was glad to have a few minutes of privacy. He paused at the buffet to get a cup of coffee and a glass of juice before finding a table off to the side. Pulling his phone from his pocket, he was delighted to see a text from Kurt to advise that he was awake if Adam had a moment to speak.

Dialing up Kurt’s number, he waited eagerly for Kurt to answer. Hearing Kurt’s voice, even from far away, sent his heart soaring.

“Good morning, darling,” he greeted with as much cheer as he could manage. “I’d thought you’d be sleeping in a bit today.”

“I couldn’t sleep anymore,” Kurt admitted. “Don’t worry. I just woke up a few minutes ago. I’m actually still in bed.”

Adam couldn’t help from smiling, imagining Kurt nestled in his bedding, his hair tousled from sleep and a lazy smile on his face. “What’s your schedule like?” he asked, savoring the sound of the younger man’s voice.

“I’ve got the morning to myself, but I’m meeting Rachel and the others for lunch before we need to be at the theater. Thankfully we’ll be inside long before anyone else shows up, so we won’t get too distracted by the red carpet and everything.”

Adam chuckled, glad that the professor directing the production was doing the right thing to insulate her students from all the crazy that they were facing. “Red carpet… that sounds fancy,” he teased gently. “Lots of VIPs then?”

Kurt sighed tolerantly. “Rumor has it that the mayor and governor will be attending. Probably a few local celebrities too, but we won’t have to meet any of them until the gala.”

“Good. You just focus on yourself today,” Adam advised. The feeling of distress that Kurt was facing this without him washed over him again, made all the worse by Kurt’s next words.

“I wish that you could be here,” Kurt admitted, a touch of sadness in his voice.

Adam felt his throat tighten. “I wish that I was too,” he claimed. “Darling, I…”

“Shhh… I know,” Kurt insisted. “I shouldn’t have said anything. I don’t want you to feel bad because you’re working.”

“I still feel bad,” Adam responded softly. “If there was any way that I could be there…”

“I know,” Kurt interrupted. “I know you would, and I love you for it. But I’m going to be fine. I’ve got Dad and Carole and Finn here… I’ve got my friends,”

Kurt paused, sounding like he was trying to keep his composure. “I miss you much, and I wish that you could be here to see me because our show is amazing. I want you to see what I’ve done because
you’ve helped me so much.”

Adam wiped at his eyes. “I am so proud of you, darling. I know what you can do, and I would give anything to be there. And I will be… my heart and spirit will be in that theater watching you.”

Kurt sniffled. “God, I love you.”

“I love you too. More than I can ever say,” Adam affirmed gently. “You go have a smashing day, love. You show all those people just what I saw the moment I first saw you. Have a wonderful time and we’ll talk afterwards.”

“Would it be okay if I call you from the theater?” Kurt asked.

“Of course, if you have the time,” Adam assured him. Fortunately with the time difference, they would have time to talk before Adam needed to start getting ready for his show.

“Oh… you have a good day,” Kurt urged.

“I will. Break a leg tonight, darling.”

Adam was still holding his phone in his hand, looking down at the blackened screen when Niall finally made his appearance, sitting down opposite Adam with a cup of coffee and a plate of food.

Niall immediately caught the distant, slightly sad expression on Adam’s face. “You okay?” he asked before taking a long gulp of his coffee.

The question woke Adam from his fugue and he looked up at the other Englishman. “Yeah… I’m fine,” he claimed, pasting on a calm, cheerful expression. After all, he was an actor and if he couldn’t pass for happy then he had no business being in this profession.

* * *

Rachel zipped up the garment bag with the absolutely gorgeous dress that Kurt had selected for her to wear at the gala. He always insisted that with her coloring, pastels washed her out and she did better with bright jewel tones. He had gone through most of the new arrivals at the Vault before selecting a vivid violet gown for her to wear. She’d fallen in love with the way the light fabric flowed and was gathered just beneath her breasts to make the best of her slender figure. She set out the shoes she’d selected to wear and a small clutch purse. Her stage makeup kit was already at the theater, but she needed to get her regular makeup organized so she wouldn’t show up at the gala looking like a clown.

She’d made a checklist to ensure that she didn’t forget anything and seemed to have everything in order. Once she had breakfast and showered, she would have plenty of time to get to the theater and get things set up before she needed to prepare for the show and was glad to have a little time with her friends before she left.

“Hey Rach… breakfast is ready!” Tina called from the kitchen. “Come get it before Santana eats it all.”

“Kiss my ass, Chang!”

“That’s Cohen-Chang!”

Rachel chuckled to herself, shaking her head and stepping out of her sleeping area. “Guys, can we skip the fighting today?” she pleaded playfully with her bickering roommates. “I don’t need the stress
Artie rolled his chair over to Rachel, still dressed in his sleep pants and bathrobe. “No worries,” he assured her. “I’ll make sure that the girls behave.”

Santana walked out of their kitchen area carrying a carafe of coffee. “Come on,” she urged, pouring for everyone. She was just wearing a short robe over her sleep clothes, her feet bare as she padded across the wooden floor. “Tina brought pasties and I’ve got a frittata in the oven.”

“Sounds good,” Rachel said happily, going to help carry the food to the table. “You really didn’t need to go through any trouble.”

“Hell yeah, we did,” Artie insisted, pouring a generous portion of cream into his coffee. “This is a big deal for you and we wanted to see you off properly.”

“Since we won’t be there in the audience tonight,” Tina added, carrying a plate of pastries and croissants to the table.

“And that is total bullshit,” Santana sniffed indignantly, pulling her pan out of the oven. “You and Kurt should have your friends there on opening night.”

Rachel sipped at her coffee, taking comfort in the show of support from her closest friends. After all they had endured as a group and individuals, the fact that they were there for her meant the world.

Breakfast was a calm affair, with the four of them talking and laughing and sharing stories. Rachel was happy to regale them with all of the mishaps and adventures she’d endured the past few weeks. It ended up being a very pleasant way to start such an exciting day and Rachel was glad that her friends went out of their way to keep things as low key for her as possible.

If there was one thing missing, it was Kurt’s presence. But it would be silly for him to travel from Manhattan just for breakfast and then have to take the subways back on the day when he needed to avoid unnecessary stress. She just hoped that he wouldn’t feel left out.

She was surprised by the knock at their front door, but Santana just grinned and hurried over to open it. “I was wondering if you guys were going to make it,” she complained, pulling her girlfriend over for a kiss.

“How could we not?” Elliot asked brightly, stepping into the loft. He swept Santana up in a hug before relinquishing her back into Dani’s care. “We wanted to have a chance to see Rachel before her big night.”

Rachel couldn’t help from smiling, and her expression grew brighter when Neil followed Elliot inside and turned a warm smile to her.

“That’s so sweet of you,” she insisted, getting up to hug her friends. No one commented that her embrace with Neil lasted several seconds longer than with the others, though Santana did roll her eyes dramatically.

“We just wanted to wish you luck for tonight,” Neil explained, not quiet releasing her. He kept one hand casually at the small of her back, keeping in contact with her and bringing a gently flush to her cheeks.

“And don’t worry… they hammered it into my head not to say good luck,” he assured her.

She couldn’t help from giggling. “You just did,” she teased. “But that’s okay since you’re not right now.”
actually wishing me good luck.”

Neil grinned ruefully. “I really am clueless about all this,” he admitted.

“You’ll learn,” Rachel laughed, reaching up to pat him indulgently on the cheek.

There was a time when Rachel would admit that she would have accepted the support of her friends as her due and not thought very much of it. To not just have her roommates going out of their way, but to see their wider circle coming around her, wanting to encourage her when they had no investment in her success beyond their friendship struck her in a way that she hadn’t expected.

The time came for her to leave and meet the others, and she left with hugs from her friends and words of support. Tina hurried over to give her a hug, urging “Break a leg tonight.”

“I will,” Rachel promised with a smile. She bent down to give Artie a quick hug before turning to see Santana’s sharp eyes fixed on her.

“Don’t screw up,” she warned, thought he glint in her dark eyes betrayed a hint of humor in her command. “And think of us when you and Lady Britches are hobnobbing it with all those producers and agents.”

Rachel snorted a laugh, giving her friend a little shove with her shoulder. “Don’t forget to call Kurt,” she reminded. “I don’t want him feeling neglected.”

“We won’t!” Tina assured her, setting up the coffee maker to brew a fresh carafe for their guests.

Rachel went to her room to pick up her bag and dress for the night, bidding everyone goodbye until she saw them in the evening when she found Neil waiting by the door for her.

“I thought that I’d walk you to the subway,” he offered, taking the garment bag from her.

She couldn’t help from smiling. “I’d like that,” she answered softly, taking his offered hand. She glanced back at her smiling roommates and promised that she would call them later.

Walking out into the warm early spring day, the bright sunlight just raising her mood even more. Rachel never thought she would be so optimistic about a show where she wasn’t playing a prominent role. But she was excited and tingling all over and found herself babbling happily to Neil as they strolled towards the subway station.

“I can imagine this is pretty exciting for you,” Neil granted with a good-natured smile. “Big stage… lots of people…”

She sighed and nodded. “I know that it sounds shallow, but there’s nothing that makes me this happy. Outside of my friends and family,” she amended.

He paused a bit, clearly thinking before he spoke. “I hope that I’m one of those people,” he inquired gently.

Rachel felt her cheeks heating when she recognized what he was implying. “You’re getting there,” she assured him, biting her lower lip nervously.

Neil smiled again. “Good. I’m glad to hear that.”

“You know… I’m kind of looking forward to seeing the show,” Neil said thoughtfully. “I loved reading Les Miserables in high school, so it’s going to be interesting to see how they make it into a
“I can’t believe that you’ve never seen it before,” Rachel teased playfully. “I thought that everyone had. I’ve always loved it, but it’s one of Kurt’s real favorites. And the staging is so gorgeous… I can’t wait for you to see it. When are you coming?”

“Elliot, Dani and I are going to catch the Wednesday matinee,” he answered as they strolled along. “I have to work in the evenings, so that was the only time that really worked for us.”

“Well, I’m grateful that you’re coming,” Rachel stated. “I know this isn’t really your thing.”

“Nah… it’ll be fun. I’m looking forward to seeing the show and seeing you and Kurt.”

It seemed to take forever or a few seconds before they arrived at the entrance to the subway and Neil reluctantly handed Rachel her bag. “Well, I guess this is where I leave you,” he admitted reluctantly. “You’ll be okay getting there?”

She nodded, carefully hefting the garment bag over her shoulder. “I’ve done it a few dozen times,” she claimed lightly with a teasing smile. “I’ll be fine. I promise that I won’t talk to strangers.”

Neil laughed before bending down. Rachel was surprised to feel the press of his lips against hers, but closed her eyes and leaned into it, savoring the feel. His broad hands held her gently, like she was a fragile doll. Or something that he wanted to be especially careful with.

When Neil pulled back, she could feel the tingle left on her lips and she looked up at him with wide, dark eyes. He just smiled, raising one hand to smooth back her hair.

“Well… break a leg tonight,” he urged. “That is what I’m supposed to say, right?”

She couldn’t help from blushing and smiling. “Yes, that’s right,” she confirmed.

A warm flush came over Neil’s cheeks. “You know… if you have a chance tonight or tomorrow… you can call me. Let me know how things went on your big night.”

Rachel’s blush deepened. “I will.”

With clear reluctance, Neil released her hand and stepped back. “I’d better let you go,” he sighed. “Otherwise you’ll miss your show and you’ll never forgive me.”

Sitting on the subway car, her dress draped neatly over her lap, Rachel marveled that rather than focusing on her upcoming performance and all the challenges that were facing her that night, she was enjoying the memory of warm eyes focused on her, a teasing voice in her ear and the feel of a large hand holding hers.

* * *

Flowers had started arriving at the theater the day before, celebrating the final dress rehearsal. Gifts from friends and family, sometimes from supportive professional connections offering a show of favor for the hard-working players. Junior stage crew spent a good deal of time ferrying flowers to the dressing rooms, making sure that they got to the right recipients.

Yesterday Kurt had several arrangements awaiting him. This afternoon, between himself and the others, it looked like a bit of a florist shop had exploded all over their shared dressing room. Kurt couldn’t help from smiling at the collection, wondering if he would ever get to the point where it wouldn’t be a thrill. That people cared enough to send their regards and encourage him to do his
best. Around his table were flowers from his friends, Adam’s family back in England, his parents and his coworkers at Vogue.

But it was the arrangement of white and pink peonies that caught his attention with their subtle fragrance and he knew immediately that Adam would have picked such an elegant and beautiful display. Checking the card, he was pleased to see that he was correct in his assessment. He read the note with a soft smile on his face before carefully taping it to his mirror. Given that Adam had his own production to focus on, the fact that he’d gone out of his way to make sure that Kurt hadn’t been forgotten meant the world to him.

Kurt knew that he and the others probably arrived a lot earlier than they needed to, coming right from lunch but he liked having a little bit of quiet to get things in order for the day. There was nothing worse than trying to get ready for a performance and find out that you couldn’t find an eyeliner pencil or that your powder brush looked like someone used it to clean the bathroom.

He knew that he was being anal, needing to control what he could so that he’d be in a better position to handle what was beyond his control. He might not be able to prevent a technical mishap or a castmate missing their cue, but he could ensure that he was ready to respond. It was all he could do.

Fortunately, he wasn’t missing anything. All of his stage makeup was in order and his tux for the evening was hanging up neatly away from his costumes to avoid any mishaps during the show. He had a chance to enjoy the quiet of the theater and savor what was coming. He was ready. They all were ready.

Despite the pressure that was surely facing them, Kurt felt strangely at peace. It felt strange, he considered. Not numb, but not bothered. It would probably hit him later, he thought. Once the house started to fill and the stage crew started their final preparations… maybe it would hit him then. Maybe when the curtain rose, and the orchestra played the opening notes. Maybe then it would feel real.

By the time the others sharing his dressing room arrived, Kurt was ready to get things moving. He’d already shed his street clothes and was wrapped in a comfortable robe, his overlong hair held back with a headband so he could do his makeup and he probably looked a little ridiculous. But at least he didn’t parade around the dressing room in his boxer shorts the way Ryan, the actor playing Feuilly, has a habit of doing.

Part of him just barely was able to grasp that this was it. All of the work that they’d done, the endless hours spent in practice… all the sweat and tears… it was all going to pay off now. Picking up his bottle of toner, he wet a cotton ball and began to swipe it over his face.

* * *

Finn stood back with his mother, watching as Burt spoke with someone from the press. His stepfather had been quickly identified as they approached the theater and was asked to answer a few questions. He smiled at Burt’s quiet pride over his son’s accomplishment, praising NYADA and reiterating his support for the arts in school. For all that Burt insisted that he was a plain-spoken man and not inclined towards dealing with the press if he could possibly avoid it, he was surprisingly good at it. He’d proven to be a very smart, if blunt, political operator and would very likely win re-election when he ran again.

He smiled at his mother, admiring how pretty she looked in the black and gold evening gown she wore. He felt a bit uncomfortable in his tux and had thought that it seemed silly to dress up so much for a night at the theater but seeing the well dressed crowd heading into the theater, Finn realized that Kurt had been right to insist. Everyone attending was dressed in formal wear and the show seemed to
be treated more like some big Hollywood premiere and not a show full of a bunch of theater students.

The red carpet outside the theater was an absolute mob scene, with people arriving to see the show while media and onlookers crowded by the sidelines. Finn would be the first to admit that he really didn’t recognize too many people and just focused on not letting the relative insanity get to him. He thought that he recognized an actress from the Law & Order TV franchise, and several local politicians stopped to chat with Burt but otherwise it was just a mass of people. It was a relief to get inside and find their seats.

He didn’t know what strings Kurt had pulled or whether NYADA just wanted to make nice to his Congressman father, but they had very, very good seats. Nearly at the direct center of the orchestra section where they had a perfect, unobstructed view of the stage without the having the overhanging mezzanine section blocking anything.

Finn sat down next to his mother, looking about the theater in awe. The venues that New Directions had performed in at Nationals had been pretty big, but they were nothing on the same scale as this. The theater had a grandeur and elegance was beyond anything he’d seen before. The decorative details about the stage were beautiful; intricate carvings and inlays that made a gorgeous frame for the action that would take place within. While it was easy to understand why his brother and Rachel were so drawn to performing, he could only begin to imagine how thrilling it would be for them to have the opportunity to perform in a venue like this.

If he was being totally honest to himself, he could admit that he really did enjoy performing and he cherished how being with New Directions back in high school had opened him up to performing, but he didn’t hunger for it the way they did. New Directions and now his band were fun distractions. Being on stage was a hobby that he enjoyed, but nothing that he needed like breathing the way he saw Kurt and Rachel both needed. He was genuinely happy for the two of them, that they were finding success and that getting to see them performing in venues like this was going to be a common occurrence.

“This theater is so gorgeous,” his mother sighed admiringly, looking about as people found their seats. The air of anticipation was becoming almost palpable. “Kurt and Rachel must be so excited.”

“Rachel said that when they were in tech that it was the craziest and best time of her life,” Finn answered, smiling softly. “She nearly had a total nervous breakdown, but it didn’t matter how hard they were working. Not when they got to do it in a place like this.”

“I’m sure that she must be excited,” Carole stated. She had often felt that Rachel’s ambitions could be off-putting, because it tended to dominate her focus in a destructive manner and she hadn’t liked how Finn had been affected. But now that she and Finn were no longer involved, she could afford to be a bit more tolerant. It was hard to imagine having a calling in the way that Rachel and Kurt did, and seeing Kurt’s determination in working for her goals allowed her to be more understanding of Rachel’s drive.

“She said that she’s happy to be here, even if she’s not in a starring role,” Finn explained, hating how his mother had such a jaundiced view of Rachel’s ambition and wanting her to understand how much she had changed. Carole just nodded, dismissing the matter.

Finn picked up his program and began to thumb through it, looking for Kurt’s and Rachel’s entries. The picture of Rachel was very flattering, drawing attention to her large, dark eyes and her soft smile. She looked beautiful and Finn was reminded of why he’d fallen in love with her so long ago. Her biography was brief, but concisely expressed all of her hopes and aspirations.
Rachel Barbra Berry (Ensemble/Soloist) is a sophomore at NYADA in its Voice and Musical Theater program. She has been involved in theater since childhood and is making her New York theatrical debut in this production. She thanks her family and friends for all their support in helping her to achieve her dreams.

What a change, Finn mused as his finger traced fondly over her picture. She really had come such a long way, and he was happy for her.

Kurt’s photo was the same one that he used for the program from Shakespeare festival, with a slightly amended biography that mentioned his previous theater experience. Finn was thrilled for his brother at seeing that he was now among the principle players but didn’t get why Kurt had wanted to keep it a secret until now.

“Burt, I still don’t get why Kurt didn’t want anyone to know about his role,” Finn questioned, his mouth drawing into a frown. “It’s not like everyone isn’t going to be thrilled for him.”

Carole turned a teasing smile to her son. “I can’t believe that you managed to keep it from Puck and Sam,” she mused. “You’re normally the last person able to keep a secret.”

“Well, Kurt asked me to keep it under my hat, but I don’t get why,” he complained. He’d been confused by his brother’s request not to mention the matter on social media or to any of their friends who weren’t based in New York, but he followed the request even if he didn’t understand Kurt’s motivations. Everyone would be totally thrilled for Kurt.

Burt just smiled in satisfaction. “He wanted to surprise all of his friends who are coming to town to see him,” he explained. “I think he also knew that you and the others would make a big deal of it and he didn’t want the distraction.”

Carole touched her son’s arm reassuringly. “It’s not that Kurt doesn’t know that you all would be really supportive, but he’s feeling a lot of pressure over taking over the part,” she explained gently. “Dealing with all his friends would just be more than he could handle. So he wanted to keep things quiet until he had a handle on things.”

And probably to avoid his ex making it yet another thing to use against him, Finn considered. Not that Blaine would be physically around to cause trouble, but he knew that Blaine would very probably try to shake Kurt’s confidence with his usual left-handed “compliments” that were only very thinly veiled insults. Suddenly Kurt’s reluctance to spread the news far and wide until opening night made a lot more sense.

“Which was exactly the right thing to do. I’m glad to see that I taught him right,” a new voice snapped, one hand slamming down on Finn’s shoulder with an iron grip and pinning him to his seat.

Shocked at hearing the unexpected but familiar voice, Finn craned his head around to find Sue Sylvester standing over him, looking down at him with a disdainful glare.

Burt smiled and got up to greet her properly. “Sue! We weren’t expecting to see you tonight,” he said cheerfully. “You look lovely.”

It was only then that Finn realized that she wasn’t wearing her habitual warm up suit, but a surprisingly elegant dress of pale green with her hair styled in a manner that suited her strong features. She was even wearing makeup, something Finn could never remember her wearing. She looked…. Well, she looked pretty and terrifying.

She cocked her head, giving Burt a warm smile and nodding a greeting to his wife. “And why
shouldn’t I be here? Porcelain is one of mine and there was no way that I was going to miss it. Since cheerleading is as much an art as it is a sport, Madam Tibideaux very kindly extended an invitation to the current national champion coach.”

Burt chuckled. “Why am I not surprised that you and the Dean would get along,” he mused drolly. “You two are cut from the same cloth.”

With cool nonchalance, she settled into the seat at Finn’s side. “Aside from her glaring error in not accepting Porcelain right off the bat, she’s a wise woman,” Sue sniffed. “Of course, when I pointed out that mistake, she very graciously invited me to attend the gala tonight and made sure that my seat was near yours.”

Carole shook her head in astonishment. There probably wasn’t anyone on Earth better able to strong arm her way into what she wanted than Sue. They should probably just be grateful that she had a soft spot for Kurt and leave it at that. Trying to think too hard about what motivated her would only lead to tears.

Sue turned her eagle-eyed gaze to the stage and allowed a soft trace of a smile to grace her features. “This is going to be a lovely evening,” she confirmed with a nod of satisfaction.

Finn wasn’t going to disagree with her. He didn’t dare. Her favorite was being given the credit that she felt he deserved, so all would be right in her world. He just wished that she was seated next to Burt.
“Ten minutes to curtain!” A production assistant rushed through each of the dressing rooms, calling out the alert. “Ten minutes! Everyone get to the stage for Professor Carmody.”

Kurt had been getting into his costume when the call came, leaving him to hurry to the stage area still in his slippers and his shirt only half buttoned. Around him, the company huddled together as they waited for their director to address them while the audio techs double-checked the microphones that all the actors discreetly wore. Most of the company were fully dressed for the opening numbers, their hair and makeup complete and he almost didn’t recognize his friends in the crowd. Jamie was dressed in a ragged prison uniform, a cap covering his head and makeup that looked like streaks of dirt and bruises staining his skin.

Rachel was nearly unrecognizable in her beggar costume. Her makeup was done to give her a gaunt appearance, with deep hollows carved under her cheekbones and shadows under her eyes. Her hair was tucked under a stained cap and a tatty shawl was draped over the shoulders of her threadbare dress. His eyes darted around the crowd, trying to pick out Analisa and Katya and his friends gave nods of recognition to him, and nervous smiles of support.

Around the actors, the tech teams gathered, and Kurt nodded greetings to his friends there. All the elements of the production had drawn together and all their efforts over the past few months was about to pay off. They were a united team, ready to put their best work out there for the waiting audience.

Professor Carmody arrived, for once looking neat and not displaying the stress that they were used to seeing from her. She had done everything in her power to make her grand vision come to life and bar managing the show from the wings, her task was nearly done.

With a smile, she motioned for everyone to gather as closely as nearly a hundred students were able to. “Okay everyone… I’m not going to make a big speech,” she assured her students. “I just wanted to thank you all for your hard work and dedication to our show. NYADA has never staged a production on this scale and this would never have been possible without all of you giving the kind of effort that you have.

“Tonight, this is about you. Actors, costumers, technical teams… all of you. I have never been so proud of a team or more confident that you will be successful tonight. The only instructions that I have now is to relax. You all know what you’re doing. Go out there and enjoy yourselves and show what you can do. Break a leg everyone!”

The group cheered, finally giving in to the excitement of their first official performance. People moved to hug their friends, wishing them well and those in the opening act hurried to take their marks before the curtain rose. Kurt rushed over to hug Rachel and his girls.

“Oh my God… I can’t believe it’s finally here,” Rachel gasped, her eyes wide and clutching at Kurt with a desperate strength. Kurt didn’t pull back, even though he’d probably have bruises on his arms.

“It’s going to be great,” he promised her, giving her a quick kiss to the top of her head so he wouldn’t damage her makeup. “I’m going to finish getting dressed so I can watch you all from the wings.”
At the announcement that the curtain was going up in five, Jamie took a deep breath. “Okay guys... this is it! Break a leg!”

In the orchestra box, Kurt saw the musicians making their final preps and he finally was struck by the fact that their moment had arrived. There was no more time for doubts.

“I’ll see you all on stage,” he promised, feeling the first trace of real anticipation hit him.

As he arrived at his dressing room, the first strains of the overture reached his ears. There was no more time to worry. There was just the performance to focus on. He reached for the tie that went with his costume and looped it about his neck, his mind focused on his final preparations.

* * *

In hindsight, Finn should have expected that the show would be spectacular, but he had little to really base his expectations on. His experiences with New Directions didn’t come close to anything like this, with their basic costumes and choreography. And he’d never had a lot of interest or knowledge about musical theater outside of watching Rachel perform solos that she felt showcased herself best. There was the failed Rocky Horror show that he had a role in, and West Side Story but full productions didn’t seem to be a priority at McKinley. He wasn’t ashamed to admit that this was his first real experience with a full production.

He’d made sure to read a bit about what the musical entailed so he’d be able to follow the storyline and really appreciate what Kurt and Rachel had put so much effort into. Just judging from the opening number, he could reasonably argue that there wasn’t a professional show that could claim to have better actors, let alone sets and costumes.

Despite the fact that he had come specifically to see Kurt and Rachel, he found himself enjoying the beginning of the show and appreciating the other performers. He fully expected the show to be absolutely spectacular and he wasn’t disappointed. The cast was, to an individual, absolutely phenomenal. The young man playing the lead had a stunning voice and was a riveting presence on stage. Even with the knowledge that he was a university student, Finn could totally believe that he was a French convict. And the guy playing Javert was just fantastic, with the type of baritone voice that you didn’t see too often with the way he balanced the depth of his tone with a crispness that added an interesting dimension. They sounded incredible together and Finn thought that even if Kurt and Rachel weren’t performing, that this show was well worth seeing.

The opening songs focused on Jean Valjean as he was released from prison and left to wander the countryside to look for honest work. While the sets on stage gave a clear impression of farmland, the designers took it a step further by projecting an image of a field or orchard behind the actors that gave the scenes a sense of depth and expressed the passage of time.

He watched avidly as Valjean pleaded for a day’s work or a place to lay his head but was turned away because he carried a letter of parole and bore a prisoner’s brand. Wherever he went, he was turned away, never given a chance to work a day’s labor or find a place to rest his head at night. He grew increasingly desperate and angry and being turned away from every door when he was offered a night’s rest by a kind-hearted bishop.

He bit his lip anxiously during the theft that nearly sent Valjean back to prison, but the generosity of the bishop saved him and gave him a renewed perspective on life. He could viscerally feel Valjean’s shame at robbing the man who’d shown him such kindness and determination to make his life worthy of what he’d been given. His vow to honor the bishop’s generosity and faith in his humanity.

The music began to swell and Finn knew that this was where the story would truly begin. The stage
lights fell softly on a group standing towards the back of the stage, huddled together as a light dusting of fake snow began to waft around them. Offstage fans began to blow, giving the clear impression of a harsh winter arriving to torment those least able to withstand the hardship.

He knew that Rachel was in this number and tried to pick her out from the crowd of men, women and children. He listened carefully for her particular voice and found it nearly impossible to do so. Rather than trying to make her voice stand out from the chorus, Rachel was blending seamlessly with the other singers. It was only as the group stepped forward, pleading with the audience that he was able to pick her out; dressed in rags and cradling a bundle in her arms that was made to look like she was holding a baby. Rather than the mugging that he remembered from her previous attempts at acting, the desperation in her expression appeared genuine.

He smiled, glad that she was doing so well. She’d had a lot of challenges the past few years and a lot of disappointments to get past, most of her own making. But he couldn’t help from being happy to see how far she’d come and the nearly limitless potential before her.

Finn couldn’t resist glancing at the stern woman sitting at his side, amused at the bored expression on her face. She was clearly here for one thing only and she wouldn’t be happy until Kurt was standing on that stage for her. He wondered if she knew what role Kurt was playing because if she was aware that she would be seeing him in more than an ensemble spot, she’d probably be leaping out of her skin.

Oh no… she was already tapping her foot impatiently. Finn tried to remember where Kurt’s character was supposed to show up, hoping that it would be soon. Otherwise he was in for an uncomfortable evening.

* * *

Kurt was grinning from ear to ear as he watched Rachel on stage with the rest of the ensemble. She looked and sounded fantastic and when her part in the number ended, was there to greet her when she hurried off the stage.

“Oh my God! You were great!” he insisted, giving her a hug.

“Thanks!” she gasped, accepting his embrace before reluctantly pulling away. “But I’ve got to run and get ready for the next number. You’ll be watching?”

Kurt nodded, letting her go. “Of course,” he assured her.

Rachel gave him a grateful smile before hurrying to the women’s quick-change area. The crowded room was a swarm of activity as actresses changed in and out of costumes as they got ready for different sets.

She quickly stripped out of her costume, handing them off to a costuming tech to be put away, leaving her basic underpinnings. Hurrying over to the makeup table, she pulled the pins from her hair to free it and teased it up to make it look frizzy and unkept. Picking up a lipstick in a vulgar shade of red, she colored her lips and then smeared it a bit with the back of her hand.

Looking thoroughly like she’d been ridden hard and put away wet, she checked her time and could hear the actress playing Fantine starting the “I Dreamed a Dream” number, leaving her just enough time to get into costume and find her mark. She got into the garishly patterned stockings and corset before adding a shabby red dress that put her cleavage and legs on full display. Fluffing up her hair one last time, she hurried back to the stage where Katya was waiting with the other actresses portraying the prostitutes.
Katya looked like she was several weeks since her last bath and gave her a grin that displayed the pair of blacked out teeth. Damn, Rachel thought. She could have done that too.

“Ready?” Katya asked, with an impish glint in her eyes.

Rachel nodded, tossing back her hair. “Let’s do this.”

It was difficult to find their marks on the darkened stage while the spotlight was on Fantine but Rachel found the crates where they prostitutes were to gather and hoisted herself to sit up on one of them, spreading her legs and bunching up her skirt to show off her bloomers and stockings. Katya leaned against one of the crates, thrusting out her chest and trying to look provocative.

As Fantine’s tragic song drew to a close, the audience applauded and the stage fell dark before a projection of a port scene at night was cast over the back of the stage. Three young men stumbled to the front dressed in sailor uniforms, laughing and jostling one another.

“I smell women, smell ‘em in the air,” he proclaimed lasciviously. “Think I’ll drop me anchor in that harbor over there.”

His friend laughed and nodded enthusiastically. “Lovely ladies, I’ll love you till I’m broke,” he promised, grabbing lewdly at his crotch to emphasizing what he was there for. “Seven months at sea and now I’m hungry for a poke.”

The third shoved himself between the other two, exclaiming excitedly, “Even stokers need a little stoke!”

The stage lights came on to illuminate the set made up of shipping crates and mooring pillars where the prostitutes had gathered. Rachel smiled seductively, bending forward to show off her cleavage and entice one of the sailors.

“Lovely ladies, waiting for a bite,” the group of women sang, their voices ringing out harshly. They bent over enticingly, showing off their bodies and lifting their skirts to put their legs on display for the men that were gathering around them. “Waiting for the customers who only come at night. Lovely ladies, ready for the call. Standing up or lying down or any way at all. Bargain prices up against the wall!”

A spotlight fell on Fantine, who stood out in contrast to the prostitutes with her clean calico dress and decent looking shawl. An old woman approached her the prostitutes froze in place as they disputed the sale of Fantine’s precious necklace. Rachel listened to Fantine’s pleas for the crone to offer a more generous price before giving in out of desperation, keeping her mind focused on her own performance. Once the crone had gotten what she wanted, the music resumed, and the focus fell on the ensemble again.

“Lovely ladies, waiting in the dark,” they sang as men began to draw girls apart from the group. A tall man dressed far more finely than the women walked among them, pocketing money that they shoved into his hands and watching to make sure that the women were going off with customers. “Ready for a thick one or a quick one in the park.”

“Long time, short time,” one girl sang teasingly as a sailor pressed up behind her, his hands pressed against her bodice under her breasts to appear as if he was groping her. “Any time, my dear. Cost a little extra if you want to take all year.”

One sailor grabbed Rachel about the waist and lifted her off her seat. On cue, Rachel wrapped her legs about his waist as he spun her about, his hands under her ass to hold her up as he pressed her up
against one of the pillars.

“Quick and cheap is underneath the pier!”

Again, the spotlight fell on Fantine as she was forced into another bargain, this time over her long auburn hair and she was unceremoniously dragged away to have it chopped off. When the spotlight fell back upon the prostitutes and their customers, Rachel’s sailor released her, making a show of nearly dropping her before adjusting his trousers suggestively.

One of the girls stumbled back to the crates, clutching her middle painfully. “God, I’m weary. Sick enough to drop. Belly burns like fire, will the bleeding ever stop?”

Their pimp stepped over as if to comfort her, gently stroking her cheek. “Cheer up, dearie. Show a happy face,” he urged. With sudden ferocity, he grabbed her hair and shook her harshly. “Plenty more like you here if you can’t keep up the pace.”

The young woman grabbed at his hand, trying to free herself. “Only joking,” she pleaded. “Dearie knows her place!” The pimp shoved her back to the others, waving her off to get back to work.

Fantine faltered back out onto the stage, her long hair gone and making her look childlike and incredibly vulnerable. She huddled away from the group, trying to make herself as unobtrusive as possible and avoid notice by the men on the docks. The pimp watched her with an appraising eye before demanding information from one of his girls.

“Give me the dirt,” he commanded, grabbing the arm of one of the prostitutes. “Who’s that bit over there?”

The girl tossed her hair back dismissively. “A bit of skirt. She’d the one sold her hair,” she explained.

Katya leaned over, hoping to appease their pimp. “She’s got a kid. Sends her all that she can,” she confided, earning a harsh shove for her efforts.

The pimp snorted dismissively. “I might have known. There is always some man,” he mused as he approached the terrified young woman. “Lovely lady, come along and join us! Lovely lady…”

Fantine drifted to where the other women were gathered, looking at them with an expression of shame and horror that this is what she had been reduced to. That she now found herself among women that she had looked down upon when she had other prospects and dreams. The whores watched her avidly, recognizing that another was about to join their sad sisterhood.

“Come one dearie, why all the fuss??” one of the women cooed at her, her tone betraying more than a little coarse edge while a second woman looked down her nose at the downtrodden woman. “You’re no better than the rest of us,” she snapped, only to have the other women step in between her and their new sister.

“You’re no better than the rest of us,” she snapped, only to have the other women step in between her and their new sister.

“Life has dropped you at the bottom of the heap,” Rachel sang sadly, expressing sympathy that like the rest of them, Fantine would not resort to selling herself if she had any other options.

“Join your sisters,” the pimp urged, kneeling to reach under Fantine’s skirt and feeling at her legs like she was a mare to be sold at market. “Make money in your sleep.”

A man in a sailor costume approached, eyeing Fantine appraisingly and one of the girls roughly pulled her shawl away, stripping her of what little protection it offered.
“That’s right dearie, let him have the lot,” one of the girls urged while another gave Fantine a knowing nod of approval.

“That’s right dearie… show him what you’ve got.”

With her chin raised as proudly as she could manage, Fantine walked to her awaiting customer, determined to maintain what dignity she could. He grasped her hand and dragged her out of sight.

The prostitutes gathered together, pushing away their customers and stepping away from their watchful pimp, expressing what defiance they could over their sad lot in life. Rachel and Katya stood together and held hands as they looked out defiantly at the audience, demanding respect from those what would look down upon them while taking advantage of their situations.

“Old men, young men, take ‘em as they come!” they proclaimed with as much pride as they could muster, expressing their hate for the men that used them. “Harbor rates and alley cats and every kind of scum!

“Poor men, rich men, leaders of the land. See them with their trousers off they’re never quite as grand!” they sang, flinging up their hands and mocking the customers who watched and had no idea of how much they were hated.

“All it takes is money in your hand!” they shouted, reaching out with grasping hands and clenched fists.

The music softened as the group of women drifted apart, pasting smiles on their faces and they returned to their customers. “Lovely ladies, going for a song… Got a lot of callers, but they never stay for long…”

Following Fantine’s arrest, Rachel hurried back to her dressing room to start getting ready for the Master of the House number. So far things were going well, and she had a grand total of ten minutes to fix her makeup and change costumes again. Kurt hadn’t lied to her about how much work went into being in the ensemble and she found herself racing against the clock to make sure that she was done on time. The corset and rags went back on their hanger and a makeup wipe got the worst of the prostitute paint off her face. She quickly retouched her foundation and adjusted her makeup with a softer hand before she changed into her simple peasant dress and cap.

Grabbing a few sips of water, she rushed back to the stage and was pleased to have made it in plenty of time. She spotted Kurt waiting nearby, working with one of the audio techs to fit his microphone and making his final preparations because he would be going on stage shortly afterwards and waved to catch his eye.

“You’re doing great!” he mouthed to her, earning a happy smile in response. She was working harder than she could ever have imagined doing, but everything was going well. Never before would she have ever believed just how important the ensemble was for the show but now she saw that their contribution was just as important as any of the leads. When the students playing the Thénardiers stepped out in their raggedy finery, she got mentally settled into her newest role. There were quite a few friends in the group for this scene, including several of Kurt’s Apple friends.

The sets was quickly changed out, going from a deep forest for the “Castle On A Cloud” number to the interior of a less than reputable inn. This was one of the more elaborate sets, with tables and benches and all the various items that one might expect to see in a tavern room. Rachel hurried to the bench where she was supposed to be seated. Picking up the tankard waiting for her, she took a breath and waited for the curtain to lights to illuminate the scene. This was going to be fun.
Finn knew that his hands were going to be in serious pain by the time the show ended with the way he was clapping. He was surprised that Rachel had a role in pretty much every major scene since the start of the show and had been bouncing back and forth between multiple roles. She went from beggar to prostitute to now a slightly drunk towns woman singing the praises of a rather dishonest innkeeper who was boasting about how he was ripping off his guests at every turn.

The show had been everything he expected and he was enjoying it immensely, but he found himself eagerly awaiting Kurt’s presence on the stage. Casting glances over at his family, he saw Burt checking his watch, the only hint of boredom that he would display. There was no way that his stepfather wouldn’t turn out to support Kurt, even though sitting through what was basically an opera wasn’t something that he’d really learned to enjoy just yet. His mother was just smiling, enjoying the show, and Sue…

Finn was glad that he wasn’t the one standing on the stage, because she looked like she was getting ready to storm up there and throw Jean Valjean aside so that her favorite could have his chance on the stage. She had clearly given up on feigning politeness and was impatiently tapping her finger against her raised knee, her frown deepening with every passing moment that passed without seeing her Porcelain.

The song with the innkeeper and his wife was a riot and Finn found himself laughing out loud at their bickering and criminal antics. After Valjean waltzed off with his newly adopted daughter in his arms, the stage went dark and the name of the next location, Saint Michele flashed on the backdrop along with a date that showed years were passing between the two scenes. The stage lights came on to illuminate an elaborate set of slums teeming with the lower classes that one might find in any large city. Beggars, thieves, street vendors and prostitutes gathered in the city streets. The music was decidedly more tense as they went about the actions of their daily lives. The air of crushing poverty and abject misery was unavoidable as the struggle to survive was evident to the audience.

“Look down, look down, and see the beggars at your feet,” the people cried out as they made their way as best they could. “Look down and show some mercy if you can. Look down and see the sweepings of the streets. Look down, look down, upon your fellow man!”

A young boy of about ten years old emerged from the crowd to take the center stage, dressed in tattered pants and shirt and a dirty cap topping his dark-haired head. He looked to the crowd with a cocky smile and gave a little bow.

“How do you do? My name’s Gavroche,” he introduced, singing in a bright clear voice. He spread his arms wide to draw attention to the crowd clustered behind him. “These are my people, here’s my patch. Nothing to look at, nothing posh. Nothing that you’d call up to scratch.”

Several young children fell in behind him, playing pranks and making petty thefts of fruit from the vendor’s cart. They were like Gavorche, dressed in threadbare clothing but trying to make the best of things and turning the slums into their playground.

“This is my school, my high society,” Gavorche proclaimed with a proud flourish. “Here in the slums of Saint Michele. We live on crumbs of humble piety. Tough on the teeth, but what the hell!

“Think you’re poor? Think you’re free? Follow me, follow me!” he cried out. With a wave, he set off with the other children following in his wake, running through the crowd to disappear into one of the buildings and then seen darting across a rooftop so they could watch the goings on of the people from above.
The buildings of the set pulled apart to create a town square where throngs of people gathered and went about their daily lives, making their way as best they could.

“Look down, and show some mercy if you can,” the beggars cried out, seeking aid from those who were barely better off. “Look down, look down, upon your fellow man.”

A tall, skinny girl in a red dress stepped forward, her skirt lifted enticingly to display a long leg. She was quickly embraced by a male passerby, who pressed his hand over her breast as began to kiss her throat. Before she could take the money he was waving enticingly before her, she was suddenly pulled away from her customer and shoved from behind by a woman dressed as an ancient crone.

“What you think yer at?” the old woman demanded venomously. “Hanging round me pitch? If you're new around here, girl, you've got a lot to learn.”

The younger woman stood her ground, turning on the old beggar. “Listen you old bat! Crazy bloody witch! 'Least I give my customers some pleasure in return,” she retorted, turning to try to gain the attention of any available men.

“I know what you give!” the old woman screeched, grabbing at the prostitute and tearing at her skirts to show her pantalettes. “Give 'em all the pox! Spread around your poison till they end up in a box!”

The prostitute’s pimp saw the altercation and hurried offer to run off the old beggar. “Leave the poor old cow;” he ordered, motioning for his girl to move away. “Move it, Madeleine! She used to be no better till the clap got to her brain.”

The level of desperation in the crowd increased, as none of them saw any way out of their situation. Hope was in short supply and all that was facing them was deepening poverty and starvation. “When's it gonna end?” they pleaded, “When we gonna live? Something's gotta happen now or something's gonna give...

“It'll come, it'll come, it'll come, It'll come, it'll come, it'll come…”

Through the crowd, two figures pushed their way forward, dressed far more richly than any of the townsfolks around them. Finn sat up straight in his seat at seeing that one of them was Kurt, dressed in an elegant suit with a dark jacket and tie fixed tightly about his throat. He carried a set of books under his arm, looking over the crowd with a fierce stare of pity and anger. Another young man, dressed in a similar fashion stood at his side, though the expression on his face was decidedly less severe.

Beside him, Finn felt Sue sitting up, now focusing her full attention on the stage. Carole silently clapped her hands in anticipation and delight and he glanced over to see Burt smiling widely at his son’s presence.

Kurt’s mouth was drawn in a harsh frown as turned about, looking at the mass of desperate people. “Where the leaders of the land? Where are the swells who run this show?” he demanded fiercely, his voice ringing out in righteous anger.

The young man playing Marius reached out to grasp Kurt’s shoulder in fellowship. “Only one man, and that's Lamarque,” he answered. “Speaks for these people here below.”

The poor people of St. Michele saw the well-dressed students and clustered about them, reaching out in desperation. “See our children fed! Help us in our shame!” they pleaded. “Something for a crust of bread, in Holy Jesus' name…”

Marius looked at the crowd of beggars with a compassionate stare, handing out leaflets that he had
brought with him. “Lamarque is ill and fading fast! Won't last the week out so they say,” he told his friend, which only increased the level of anger in Kurt’s expression.

He turned to the crowd and saw what could be a rising tide to wipe away the injustice that he fought against. “With all the anger in the land, how long before the judgement day? Before we cut the fat ones down to size?” he spat ferociously, slashing his hand as if imitating a blade.

“Before the barricades arise?”

Kurt’s voice rang out gloriously through the theater, and Finn felt chills running down his spine. He had never seen his brother like that, expressing so much fury. He couldn’t remember ever hearing Kurt sing with so much power, his voice expressing all of his character’s anger over the injustice that he was witness to every day. Enjolras was so unlike Kurt in nature, expressing so much rage and righteousness. With just a few powerfully performed lines, Kurt stood out like a force of nature.

Sue’s strong hand suddenly grasped his again so tightly that it hurt. He turned in surprise to see her eyes wide and riveted to the stage, fixed totally on Kurt. His brother hovered hovering in the background handing out pamphlets to the poor while Marius flirted with Cosette and the Thénardier gang looked to rob Valjean before being run off by the police. She looked absolutely transfixed and the smile on her face for once didn’t have the edge of cruelty that he was so used to seeing.

Finn had always known that Kurt was one of Sue’s favored few, something he never begrudged his brother because he knew that Sue’s favor could be a double-edged sword. But even with that knowledge, her response to seeing him on stage was unexpected. It was so pure and genuine, and Finn knew that there was only a tiny percentage of people in this world that might garner such a reaction from the fearsome woman. Her sister, most certainly, had been one. And Becky. To know that Kurt had earned that as well gratified Finn quite a bit. However hard Kurt’s life had been, unquestionably it was made marginally better by having Sue Sylvester in his corner.

* * *

Kurt hadn’t quite known how it would feel during their first official performance, but it was nothing like even their final dress rehearsal. He felt almost high. He wasn’t so much playing Enjolras but channeling his revolutionary fire. He rode on the tide of Enjolras’s emotions, taking control of his compatriots and urging them towards taking up the fight against the government troops. It took coercion and a bit of browbeating, but even moon-eyed Marius was no longer resisting.

“Red, a world about to dawn!” the entire group sand passionately and Marius stepped forward to grasp Kurt’s hand, making it clear that he would stand with his friend. “Black, the night that ends at last!”

They finished to a rousing cheer and Kurt began to bark out orders, darting across the stage and sending the men into a flurry of action. There was no question of who the leader and Kurt expressed an air of well-honed authority over the other members of their group. “Well, Courfeyrac, do we have all the guns?” he demanded, before turning to the others. “Feuilly, Combeferre, our time is running short.”

“Granteire, put the bottle down!” he snapped fiercely, causing the drunkard to wave off his command dismissively and take a long gulp. “Do we have the guns we need?”

“Give me brandy on my breath and I’ll breathe them all to death,” Grantaire boasted playfully, earning a playful shove from one of the others.

Courfeyrac rushed forward to report, “In St. Antoine they’re with us to a man!”
“In Notre Dame, they’re tearing up the stones!” Combeferre reported happily, grasping the hand of Courfeyrac joyously.

“Twenty rifles good as new!” Feuilly called out, holding up their red banner proudly.

Through all the activity, Kurt remained dangerously calm as if he were the eye of a hurricane that was about to sweep down over Paris. He almost didn’t hear Gavroche coming in and yelling, “Listen!”

Joly was checking their ammunition stores. “Twenty rounds for every man!” he reported.

“Listen to me!” Gavroche cried out, nearly ignored as the men continued their reports.

“Double that in Port St. Cloud!”

“Listen everybody!” Gavroche yelled.

Lesgles hurried in. “Seven guns in St. Martin!”

Gavroche grasped Kurt’s arm, forcing his attention. When Kurt finally looked down at him, the boy said with somber quietness, “General Lamarque is dead!”

The group fell silent, shocked at the news, however unexpected, that the champion of the poor was gone. One of the young men who’d been wearing a cap and took it off and the men bowed their heads in respect, giving a moment of silence for the man that had embodied all of their ideals. Kurt got a faraway look in his eyes as the gravity of what this really meant struck home.

“Lamarque is dead,” he breathed almost in disbelief. He paused, letting it sink in before driving what this would bring about struck home before allowing himself to smile. “Lamarque! His death is the hour of fate! The people’s man. His death is the sign we await!”

He gathered the group, the other men listing intently to his every word. Kurt’s expression became one of dangerous anticipation. Kurt strode over to a set of steps and climbed up so that all could see him as he rallied them to action.

“On his funeral day they will honor his name,” he commanded the group as they watched intently. Even Grantaire, who stood back from the others watched carefully. “It’s a rallying cry that will reach every ear! In the death of Lamarque we will kindle the flame! They will see that the day of salvation is near!

“The time is near!” Kurt belted, his voice soaring with a strength that he was sure would be surprising to those who might have only noted his youthful appearance. He was a lion, uniting the Friends of the ABC and pushing them towards their mission with a fist raised in defiance. “Let us welcome it gladly with courage and cheer! Let us take the streets with no doubt in our hearts, but a jubilant shout! They will come, one and all! They will come when we call!”

The music drew to a dramatic close and the Friends of the ABC cheered and embraced on another now that the moment that they’d awaited appeared to finally have arrived. Kurt managed to keep from responding to the rousing applause of the audience, focused on keeping Enjolras’s pride and fervor fixed on his features. Knowing that his family was there watching him at that moment, seeing him standing on that magnificent stage and performing to the best of his ability meant more than he could ever express.

When the music began again, the members of the group began to chatter excitedly, but Kurt closed his eyes and lowered his hand, motioning for them the allowed a quiet intensity to take hold.
“Do you hear the people sing? Singing the song of angry men?” he began, letting the power in his voice reach throughout the theater. “It is the music of the people who will not be slaves again!”

He pressed his hand over his heart, clutching his waistcoat and emphasizing the importance of this one moment in their lives. “When the beating of your heart echoes the beating of the drums, there is a life about to start when tomorrow comes!”

His fervor seemed to feed into the passion of the other players as they fell in behind him, excited that the moment they’d been awaiting had finally arrived. Combeferre rallied the group to Enjolras, his expression bright with excitement as their leader stepped down the stairs.

“Will you join in our crusade? Who will be strong and stand with me?” he demanded, placing his hand confidently on Kurt’s shoulder to prove that he was firmly with Enjolras. “Beyond the barricade, is there a world you long to see?”

Courfeyrac joined them, holding out a rifle to Kurt. “Then join in the fight that will give you the right to be free!”

Kurt grasped the rifle and raised it over his head to the cheers of his fellows and lead the group to march about the stage. Even Grantaire followed along, though he appeared to be more enjoying the show than believed in their cause. The set parted to reveal the transition from the interior of a disreputable café to the square where townsfolk began to fall in behind the young men as they marched through the streets. Men danced with young women, twirling them about joyously as an air of celebration took hold.

“Do you hear the people sing? Singing the song of angry men?” the group sang, inspiring men and women to fall in behind them, joining in. “It is the music of the people who will not be slaves again!”

Kurt lead them along, raising the rifle in defiance, his face set in a proud smile. He was the clear leader, gathering evermore followers with every moment that passed.

“When the beating of your heart echoes the beating of the drums, there is a life about to start when tomorrow comes!”

Feuilly was standing on a balcony so he could look out over the crowd that had gathered, imploring them to join. “Will you give all you can give, so that our banner may advance?” he pleaded, his strong tenor voice ringing out. “Some will fall and some will live. Will you stand up and take your chance?

“The blood of the martyrs will water the meadows of France!” He raised their red banner before dropping it down to be grabbed by one of the others.

One of the group had brought out the revolutionary banner on a pole and began to wave it as the group marched about the stage with Kurt in the lead, his voice lifted in rousing song as the revolutionary students followed in his way. The performance was so rousing that members of the audience began to sing along, inspired by the performance on the stage.

“Do you hear the people sing?, singing a song of angry men? It is the music of a people who will not be slaves again!” the group sang proudly, their banner flying and the air on the stage taking on a celebratory mood. “When the beating of your heart echoes the beating of the drums, there is a life about to start when tomorrow comes!”

Kurt lead the group off stage, feeling the wild buzzing in his head from the powerful emotions and needed a moment to tamp down on the wild energy that he was picking up from the performance.
Handing off the rifle to one of the prop techs, he took a deep, shuddering breath and tried to center himself. He had a few minutes while the Cosette and Marius duet was underway to get himself back under control and prepare for the next scene. He hurried to the quick-change area, knowing that he had only ten minutes before the his next cue.

* * *

Sue got up without a word to the Hummels when the houselights came on for intermission, needing to step outside for a moment and gather her thoughts for a bit. The past few hours had been astonishing for her.

She thought back to times long ago. When her Porcelain was so much younger, and she’d first taken him under her barbed wire wings. She appreciated his sharp wit and his cunning that reminded her of herself at times. He had always impressed her with his brash courage and determination to be himself no matter what anyone else said or did. He needed protection against the small-minded idiots who thought that just because he was gay that it gave them license to torment him every waking moment. Offering him a place on her squad was the best way she could protect him, because no one dared try anything with one of hers. It was when he tried to fly on his own that bad things had happened; things that she often couldn’t control.

Seeing him now, standing on that stage like he was born to be there caused something to bubble up in her that she wasn’t sure that she wanted to examine too closely. Maybe it was just indigestion.

“This is turning out to be some kind of night, isn’t it?” a voice said behind her.

Sue couldn’t help from smiling before turning about. “Burt, you should know better than to sneak up on me.”

The burly man just shrugged. “Just wanted to make sure you were okay,” he said blandly. “You kind of rushed out.”

“I’m fine,” she insisted, letting a trace of sharpness enter her voice. She never was one for soft feelings or concern from others.

Burt didn’t press further, knowing Sue well enough not to. It wasn’t as if they were really friends, but they had an odd mutual respect and understanding. Not to mention a particular shared personal interest.

He shoved his hands into his pants pockets and looked about the theater lobby. “You know, it’s going to mean a lot of Kurt that you came tonight,” he informed her. “Me too.”

She couldn’t help from snorting in amusing. “That would be a first. People usually aren’t happy to see me,” she acknowledged. She wasn’t embarrassed about that. Her reputation was, without question, a well-earned one. And one that she was actually proud of.

Burt smiled and nodded. “Well, Kurt will be,” he assured her honestly. He looked about the lobby, taking a moment to gather his thoughts.

“You know, I never did thank you.”

She looked up in surprise. “Whatever for?”

Burt pursed his lips thoughtfully, wanting to make sure that he chose just the right words. “For everything you did for Kurt when he was at McKinley,” he clarified. “With everything that he went through, I don’t know if he would have made it without you. You were one of the few people really
willing to go to bat for him and we’ve never forgotten that.”

He approached her carefully, knowing that despite her tendency to overstep boundaries, she was sensitive to having her personal space invaded. She almost shivered when his hand gently touched her arm and looked into his face in astonishment.

Burt smiled gently. “Kurt is standing on that stage, in no small part, because of you. You may have gone about it in strange ways, but you encouraged him and supported him when not many others did. I just wanted you to know that. And to thank you for being there for my son.”

He stepped back, giving her space to compose herself. “I’d better get back inside,” he said with a huff. “The curtain will be going up soon.”

She nodded, inhaling deeply. “I’ll be in in just a minute,” she assured him.

Burt nodded in approval. “Good. Because Kurt’s going to be thrilled when he finds out that you were here on his opening night.”

Sue stood in the lobby, deep in thought as she tried to absorb what had just happened. She then gave herself a hard mental shake to get the cerebral cobwebs sorted out.

She barely made it back to her seat in time for the curtain to rise.

* * *

If anyone was to ask her afterwards what she most enjoyed about the show, Rachel knew what she would say. She couldn’t help from feeling thrilled to being on stage with Kurt and getting to watch him perform. Not that their characters would interact at all, but it felt good to be there with him along with Analisa, Katya and Jamie. Jamie would be playing one of the townsmen supporting the revolutionary students, while she and the girls played local women.

Despite the tension of the last battle, the atmosphere on the stage was one of quiet waiting for the next conflict and mourning over Eponine’s tragic death. As far as the students knew, Javert had met a just end at Valjean’s hands and they could take a moment of rest.

Seeing Kurt fully immersed in his character and portraying Enjolras so compellingly filled Rachel with joy and it was a pleasure... no, an honor to share the stage with him. She hoped that everyone sitting in that audience would realize that having the opportunity to watch him performing at this level was a real privilege.

For herself, she recognized what a gift it was to see it from such close range.

“Courfeyrac, you take the watch,” Kurt ordered with quiet gravity. “They won’t attack until it’s light.”

He looked around to the group. “Everyone stay awake. We must be ready for the fight. For our final fight. Let no one sleep tonight.”

Kurt’s voice took on a seriousness, as if realizing just what would be facing them at the dawn. “Marius... rest,” he commanded, placing a gentle hand on the other man’s shoulder. Rachel could only marvel quietly at the gentle strength in Kurt’s voice and keep her mind on her own performance.

Feuilly was seated at a broken table that had been set up next to the barricade and looked about at his tired, anguished friends and raised his bottle, hoping to cheer their spirits. “Drink with me, to days
gone by,” he proposed. “Sing with me, the songs we knew.”

“Here’s to pretty girls who went to our heads,” Prouvaire toasted, snatching the bottle from Feuilly and raising it in tribute to the women who’d come out to support them.

“Here’s to witty girls who went to our beds,” Joly praised, catching a laughing Analisa and spinning her about before taking her in his arms.

“Here’s to them, and here’s to you,” the men sang gently, offering sad smiles to one another.

Grantaire staggered to his feet and raised his bottle mockingly to his friends. “Drink with me, to days gone by? Can it be you fear to die?” he demanded turning about to cast his accusing gaze on all of them. Some of the men took offense at Grantaire’s ridicule and Combeferre grasped him by the lapels of his jacket and shoved him away. The others shouted him down, angered at his pessimism.

Kurt shouldered his rifle and approached Grantaire, alarmed at the troubled man’s demeanor and tried to grasp his arm in support. Grantaire looked directly at him with sorrowful eyes. “Will the world remember you when you fall? Could it be your death means nothing at all? Is your life just one more lie?” he asked sadly, ignoring Kurt’s arms held open in an attempt to make peace with his friend.

Grantaire brushed him away and stormed past him, blaming Enjolras for landing them in this perilous situation and wanting nothing to do with him at the moment. One of them men hurried over to his side and pulled him into a comforting embrace.

Kurt watched Grantaire walk away from him and with sad resignation slowly climbed the barricade to take a position where he could both watch out for attack and keep an eye on his men. It was starting to become clear that the burdens of leadership were widening the rift between Enjolras and his friends.

The whole group on stage began to sing, with the women singing in counterpoint that added a lovely layer to the bittersweet melody. “Drink with me, to days gone by. To the life that used to be,” they sang.

Rachel smiled dreamily, and rested her head against the shoulder of one of the men who had his arm about her waist. “At the shrine of friendship never say die,” she sang along with the rest of women.

“Let the wine of friendship never run dry,” the men sang and some lead their chosen ladies off the stage for one last hurried tryst before the coming battle.

“Here’s to you… and here’s to me….”

Marius looked about the stage, finding no comfort with his friends as his thoughts were upon someone he thought lost to him. “Do I care if I should die?” he questioned sadly. “Now she goes across the sea…

“Life without Cosette means nothing at all. Will you weep, Cosette, should Marius fall? Will you weep, Cosette, for me?”

As the revolutionaries settled in to rest for the night, it gave Rachel a chance to just enjoy the performance of “Bring Him Home”. Unquestionably the actor playing Valjean was an exceptional talent and he sang the song beautifully, expressing all of the heartache and hope that the song demanded. But she couldn’t help from comparing his rendition to Kurt’s, and she wasn’t ashamed to admit that she would always consider her friend’s interpretation the gold standard. It didn’t matter that Kurt’s performance had led to a very painful downfall for her, because she’d very much
deserved after the shameful way she had treated him. It was because Kurt was just that damn good.

She leaned against the body of the young man playing her lover and just savored the feeling of what they all were accomplishing.

* * *

Finn was leaning forward, watching intently as the stage lights softly glowed to give the impression of the coming dawn. Kurt was standing at the top of the barricade; Enjolras having stood watch all night and waiting for the people of Paris to rally behind them. The realization that no reinforcements were coming was striking Enjolras hard, evident by the bewildered and nearly lost expression on Kurt’s face.

He looked down at his followers from his spot on the barricade, the others looking to him for answers when he had none to give them. To see that behind the powerful revolutionary leader was a very young boy who’d gotten himself and his friends in way over their heads was a striking moment. “The people have not stirred,” he sang quietly, the realization that they were truly alone in this fight sinking in. “We are abandoned by those who still live in fear. The people have not heard…”

Kurt inhaled deeply, visibly tamping down in the fear that Enjolras had to be feeling and trying to portray resolve and keep his people from panicking. “Yet we will not abandon those who cannot hear,” he assured his followers, trying to force a trace of confidence into his voice. “Let us not waste lives.

“Let all the women and fathers of children go from here,” he ordered, motioning for them to retreat.

The realization of what Enjolras’s orders entailed was not lost on his followers and the atmosphere about the barricade took on the feeling of a wake. Feuilly tried to instill a sense of hope in his fellows, smiling sadly as he raised his voice gently in song. “Drink with me to days gone by, sing with me the songs we knew…”

The supporters that Enjolras was sending away realized that they were very likely leaving their friends and loved ones to face nearly certain death and there were hurried embraces and tears and kisses as they reluctantly withdrew from the fight. Their voices rang out softly as they unwillingly stepped away, lingering as long as they dared but finally leaving the fighters behind.

“At the shrine of friendship, raise your glass high,” they sang mournfully. “Let the wine of friendship never run dry. If I die… I die with you…”

No sooner that the noncombatants fled to safety that the fighting renewed. The revolutionaries hurried to their places on the barricade and fired desperately at the government troops. Kurt fired off several rounds before scrambling to the ground and getting reports of their status.

“How do we stand, Feuilly?” he demanded, his voice rising over the sounds of gunfire. “Make your report!”

The other young man appeared quite worried. “We’ve guns enough, but ammunition short,” he confirmed, causing Kurt to bow his head in despair when he realized just how dire their situation truly was.

Marius rushed up to Kurt. “Let me go into the streets,” he suggested urgently. “There are bodies all around. Ammunition to be had. Lots of bullets to be found!”

Kurt shook his head sternly, grasping Marius’s arm to keep him from climbing over the barricade. “I won’t let you go. It’s too much of a chance,” he insisted, not wanting to put his closest friend into
more danger than they were already in. The other man would not be deterred, which told Finn just how dismal a position they found themselves in.

“The same is true for any man here!” Marius claimed firmly, refusing to let Enjolras place his life above any of the others.

“Let me go,” Valjean offered, willing to sacrifice himself to save his daughter’s love. “He’s no more than a boy. I am old. I have nothing to fear.”

The expression on Kurt’s face became pained at the realization that whoever he sent over the wall would likely meet their death and found it nearly impossible to choose. Send an older man who had proven himself to be a true ally or his dearest friend. But he reluctantly nodded and grasped Valjean’s hand. Before either man could do anything, it became apparent to the audience that the choice was to be taken out of Enjolras’s hands.

Gavroche scrambled to the top of the barricade and called out to the others, “You need someone quicker, and I volunteer!” he called out, ignoring the shouts of refusal from Kurt and the others before sliding over the wall.

Kurt rushed to the top of the barricade, trying to stop the boy but he was too late. The men shouted for Gavroche to come back, but the boy would not be deterred. From behind the wall, Finn could hear the boy singing as he sought to obtain the supplies that the revolutionaries so badly needed.

“So never kick a dog because he’s just a pup,” the boy warned, his voice echoing as the others watched helplessly. Shots fired and Finn could imagine the child ducking for cover while he tried to finish his mission. “We’ll fight like twenty armies and we won’t give up! So you’d better run for cover when the pup grows…”

A single shot rang out, causing Finn to flinch and the boy’s voice fell silent. Grantaire fell to his knees, covering his face in anguish. The men on the barricade bowed their heads in sorrow, giving the brave young boy a moment of silence in honor of his heroism. Valjean crossed himself, heartbroken that a child born into poverty never had the chance for anything better. Before they could properly mourn the child, a trumpet sounded to warn them to take up arms again.

“You on the barricade, listen to this!” a French military officer called out to the fighters from the other side of the wall. “The people of Paris sleep in their beds. You have no chance! No chance at all! Why throw your lives away?”

Kurt turned to his men, his face set in grim determination when he realized that their time had run out. “Let us die facing our foes,” he urged, drawing his followers close to him. “Make them bleed while we can.”

The men cheered, ready to take the fight to the government forces. “Make ‘em pay for every man!” Courfeyrac shouted in anger. Kurt nodded, his mouth drawing into a harsh snarl.

“Let others rise to take our place,” Kurt roared, clenching his fist in defiance. “Until the earth is free!”

The battle was chaotic, with men racing up the barricade and firing on the troops beyond them. Kurt stood at the top, firing his gun until he saw that Marius had fallen, wounded. Lights flashed to give the impression of gun and cannon fire and smoke drifted in the air. Dropping his weapon, Kurt jumped from the barricade and fell to his friend’s side, seeing that the wound was severe and Marius was apparently unconscious. Around him, bodies began to fall as more of his friends were struck down.
Hi face set in grim determination, Kurt clambered back up to the top of the barricade and grasped the pole for their flag. He pulled it free and waved it in defiance, to urge the men to fight on when his body suddenly jerked and Finn nearly cried out. Despite knowing the fate that awaited Kurt’s character, he was still taken by shock to see it actually happen. The flag fell Kurt’s his hand as his body slumped over. The lights flashed as the rest of the men met their fatal ends, the music reaching a crescendo as the fight drew to a close with the passionate students lying dead where they fell.

Finn felt himself gasp for breath, not liking the sight of his brother laying so still, even though he knew it was just pretend. Burt’s expression was one of shock, even though he’d know what would happen to Kurt’s character and his mother didn’t bother to hide her sniffling. He didn’t dare look at Sue or try to gage her reaction. If she caught him seeing her in an emotionally vulnerable state, there wouldn’t be a place he could hide.

That had been an amazing scene, because it had looked so much like a real battle, but he knew that applauding at that moment probably wasn’t the best thing to do at the moment. The scene was still ongoing, with Jean Valjean saving Marius and dragging him to safety. But he wanted to give Kurt’s and the other men playing the doomed fighters some kind of ovation. That was one of the most amazing, heartbreaking things he’d ever seen on a stage and it felt odd to just follow along with the story afterwards.

He was familiar with the musical, so the following scenes played out much the way he expected. The final confrontation between Valjean and Javert was incredibly compelling, the officer finally recognizing that the man that he’d pursued for so long was not the hardened criminal that he’d always believed and that he’d relentlessly haunted a man who hadn’t deserved it. Seeing the man’s generosity so many times, even having his own life spared and unable to accept that he’d been wrong for so long was impossible for him to stand and he threw himself into the river to die.

*Good riddance*, Finn thought to himself. No matter that he recognized his error, Javert was still an asshole. But he could admire the very neat effect in how the lights were used to give the illusion of the man falling from a great height to his death.

The next scene was the immediate aftermath of the battle as a group of women dressed in mourning clothes arrived at the site of the great battle, carrying small candles of remembrance. They found the remains of the barricade, with no trace of the young men that had fought there save for someone’s tricolored sash and the shredded red flag laying on the ground. One woman had a young girl at her side, letting the child hold the candle. He could see that one of them was Rachel, who looked incredibly sad as she and the others surveyed the wreckage around them and contemplated the sad loss of so many promising lives.

The music was soft and mournful as the women paid tribute to the young men that had died, placing the candles respectfully on the ground. One of them looked about, her expression sorrowful as she tried to absorb the impact of what had happened there.

“Did you see them going off to fight?” she sang plaintively, kneeling down and crossing herself. “Children of the barricade who didn’t last the night.”

Another woman wiped at her eyes with the corner of her shawl as she placed her candle down on the floor. “Did you see them lying where they died?” she asked. “Someone used to cradle them, and kiss them when they cried.”

“Did you see them, lying side by side?” a pretty black girl sang, and Finn mentally identified her as one of Kurt’s friends from class.

“Who will wake them?” a young Asian woman sang sadly. “No one ever will.”
Rachel came to her side and placed a comforting arm about her. “No one ever told them that a summer day can kill,” she sang mournfully, her voice ringing out clearly like a bell.

Another woman shook her head sadly. “They were schoolboys. Never held a gun,” she reminded the others, bringing home the enormity of the tragedy and just how misguided their fight might have been. “Fighting for a new world that would rise up like the sun.

“Where’s that new world now the fighting’s done?”

One woman sighed, wrapping herself tightly in her dark shawl. “Nothing changes, nothing ever will,” she reminded the others sharply, her disappointment over the failed revolution evident. “Every year another brat, another mouth to fill.”

“Same old story, what’s the use of tears?” she demanded, grief warring with anger on her severe features. “What’s the use of praying of there’s nobody who hears.”

“Turning, turning, turning, turning through the years…” the group sang regretfully, those who had been kneeling rising to their feet and walking slowly in a wide circle that looked nearly like a dance as they trailed off the stage.

“Round and round the roundabout and back where you began… round and round and back where you began…”

As the women filed off the stage, Marius reappeared, dressed formally once again in a dark suit befitting his social status and leaning heavily on a wooden cane as he limped to the small memorial that the women had left behind. He looked exhausted, in pain and inconsolable as he faced the place where all of his friends had died. Finn could not imagine how it must feel, to be the last of them left alive and having to go on with his life.

Marius looked about, not attempting to hide the anguish on his face. “There’s a grief that can’t be spoken,” he sang, his voice breaking slightly to express the deep sadness in the young man. “There’s a pain goes on and on… Empty chairs at empty tables. Now my friends are dead and gone.”

He looked up at the sign for the café where they had previously gathered, and Finn could see the tears running down his cheeks. “Here they talked of revolution,” he reminded the audience. “Here it was they lit the flame. Here they sang about tomorrow, and tomorrow never came.”

Finn found himself wiping at his own eyes, feeling the man’s sorrow nearly viscerally. He had some wonderful friends that he counted as brothers and the idea of losing them all in one moment struck him at his core. The idea of waking up and finding out that Sam and Puck and… he bit his lip. To imagine that Kurt was gone tore at him. Even imagining so many wonderful people having their futures cut short, and all their amazing potential lost was absolutely heartrending.

“From the table in the corner, they could see a world reborn,” Marius reminisced, reminding the audience of the idealism that his fellows had shared. That they had truly wanted to remake the world into a more fair, just place. “They could see a world reborn. And they rose with voices ringing! I can hear them now!”

“The very words that they had sung became their last communion. On the lowly barricade, at dawn…”

Marius’s voice broke, his grief overwhelming him with the crushing realization that he truly was the last one.

Behind Marius, through the darkness Finn could see figures emerging and his breath caught in his
throat. Kurt was the most easily recognizable, his white shirt and red vest making him stand out as the ghosts of the deceased stepped into view, but they were all there. Enjolras, Grantaire, Gavroche… They calmly surrounded Marius, standing quietly as Marius battled the burden of guilt over being the only one to survive.

“Oh my friends… my friends,” Marius wept pleadingly. “Forgive me!”

One by one, the ghosts bent to pick up the memorial candles.

“That I live and you are gone,” Marius lamented. “There’s a grief that can’t be spoken. There’s a pain goes on and on.

“Oh my friends… my friends,” Marius cried out while the ghosts raised the candles high before swiftly blowing them out. “Don’t ask me what your sacrifice was for.”

The ghosts began to slip back into the darkness, fading out of view. Kurt had been the first to appear and the last to follow them, lingering with his closest friend for another half beat before slipping away.

As if sensing that he was alone again, Marius bowed his head in sorrow. “Empty chairs at empty tables. Where my friends will sing no more…”

Finn heard his mother’s sniffling and he reached out to take her hand. Burt was wiping at his eyes and even Sue was biting her lower lip to keep her emotions in check. It had been a powerful performance and the applause from the audience was well deserved.

He took a deep breath and readied himself for what he knew would be an amazing finale.

* * *

Kurt was grateful to have a few moments to rest before the finale and enjoy watching the rest of the show from the wings. His friends in the ensemble had hurried to make a quick change to ballgowns and suits for the wedding scene and were currently changing costumes for the final time. He found Rachel and the others emerging from the quick-change area and couldn’t help from pulling them into a group hug.

“We’re almost there,” he promised. They were only moments away from the final song and the dye would be cast. They had done their best and given the performances of their lives. Hopefully it would be well received because they’d worked so hard for so long.

From their place behind a screen that would shield them from the audience, they could watch Sean giving Jean Valjean the kind of glorious send off that the character deserved. Valjean was ready to face death, having secured Cosette’s future happiness with Marius and rose to join the ghosts of Fantine and Eponine.

“Take my hand, and lead me to salvation,” they sang gently while Cosette wept over her father’s death. Marius tried to comfort her while mourning the man who had saved his life. “Take my love, for love is everlasting.”

Valjean was looking upwards as a warm spotlight encased them in an ethereal glow. The lines of worry on his face seemed to fade as he faced his reward for a life well-lived. Kurt had to admit that the effect was quite engaging and would look remarkable from the audience.

On the stage, Cosette and Marius began to read the letter than Valjean had given her, holding one another close while Fantine and Eponine lead Valjean to his heavenly reward. “And remember, the
truth that once was spoken. To love another person is to see the face of God…”

Kurt felt Rachel reaching over to squeeze his hand as the backlights came up behind them, giving them a ghostly appearance to the audience.

“Do you hear the people sing,” all of them began, their voices soft as if drifting on a breeze. “Lost in the valley of the night. It is the music of a people who are climbing to the light.

“For the wretched of the earth, there is a flame that never dies. Even the darkest night will end, and the sun will rise.”

The screen raised so that the audience could fully see the figures of the entire cast, all the characters that had died and the ensemble players that had filled the stage. The street children, the bishop who’d been so kind to Jean Valjean, all the Friends of the ABC… even Javert joined them, having found some small redemption. Kurt stepped out proudly, flanked by his friends and castmates.

“They will live again in freedom in the garden of the Lord,” they sang, the sheer number of voices creating a layered wall of sound that, from Kurt’s perspective, sounded absolutely gorgeous. He looked out from the stage, seeing the audience beyond the lights and knew that the performers were giving them what they had come for.

“They will walk behind the plough share. They will put away the sword. The chain will be broken, and all men will have their reward!”

The cast stepped up to fall in line with Valjean, Eponine and Fantine, the three of them joining in with the full cast. Cosette and Marius joined in the singing and the entire cast launched into full voice.

“Will you join in our crusade? Who will be strong and stand with me?” Kurt sang out, trying to keep in character and not let the joyous smile that was threatening to escape touch his features.

“Somewhere beyond the barricade, is there a world you long to see?”

He puffed out his chest proudly and squared his shoulders, placing a comradely hand on Grantaire’s shoulder. “Do you hear the people sing? Say, do you hear the distant drums. It is the future that they bring when tomorrow comes!”

The cast stepped to the front of the stage, filling it with their numbers and filling the theater with the glorious chorus of their voices. Now there were no stars or leads. There was just a group of people who had lived and endured and left their own mark on the world. Behind them, the lights glowed warm in tones of gold and red, giving the impression of a rising sun.

“Will you join in our crusade? Who will be strong and stand with me? Somewhere beyond the barricade, is there a world you long to see? Do you hear the people sing? Say, do you hear the distant drums? It is the future that they bring when tomorrow comes!”

He felt dampness on his cheeks and realized that he was crying. But that didn’t stop him from giving everything he had for the final notes. The entire cast threw their full beings into the last words, wanting to leave an indelible impression on those who had come to see them.

“Ohhhh….. ohhhh…. Tomorrow… comes!”

When the last note finally faded, Kurt almost didn’t hear the audience through the buzzing in his ears. He felt oddly detached, as if watching what was happening from some distant position and not standing on that stage. He saw the audience getting to their feet and applauding and cheering and it took him a moment to really grasp just what he and the others had accomplished that night. When his
head cleared, the roar of applause was positively thunderous.

They had rehearsed the curtain call so that it would run smoothly. The group stepped back so that everyone would have their chance to take a bow and bask in the audience’s regard. Members of the ensemble were first, going forward in groups of ten and were surprisingly orderly for such a large group while the other members of the cast applauded their peers and gave them the respect that they deserved.

He watched as Rachel went out with other women of the ensemble, including Analisa, Katya and Mei, bowing and taking in the standing ovation. The expression on the girls’ faces was absolutely radiant and Rachel especially looked thrilled. He clapped for them, unable to resist giving a hoot of support for his friends.

The men in the ensemble went next, and Kurt cheered for Jamie and Tommy and Mitchel. All of the child actors then stepped forward, with special acknowledgement made for the ones who’d played Gavroche and the younger versions of Cosette and Eponine that night. He was so happy for them to have this kind of opportunity so early in their acting careers. He hoped that they remembered this night and that it would inspire them going forward for years to come.

It then became time for the named characters to take their bows and Kurt felt himself all but quivering as he waited for his turn. When the Friends of the ABC stepped forward, he was at the center of the line and couldn’t help from smiling when the applause from the audience seemed to grow louder. Each of them was given a chance to bow as individuals and as the leader of the group, Kurt was last. When it was his turn, the others stepped back and left Kurt to stand at the center of that large stage by himself, feeling the full weight of the audience’s regards and they cheered and clapped for him. His throat tight from holding in his emotions, he bowed again, one hand over his heart before stepping back to join the others.

Once the cast was done, a smiling Professor Carmody stepped out onto the stage and was applauded by both the audience and the cast for her tremendous accomplishment. She joined her students for one last bow as a group before the curtain came down, shielding them from the audience’s view. Behind the heavy velvet, Kurt could hear the muffled applause that only died down when the house lights came on.

Professor Carmody turned to her cast with a tired but satisfied smile on her face. “I’m not going to waste your time with congratulations, because you know how well you did,” she advised. She wiped at her eyes, brushing away joyous tears. “Go get yourselves cleaned up, because there’s a hell of a party waiting for all of you.

“Make sure that all of your costumes and props are accounted for,” she instructed firmly. “Don’t make the tech teams’ job harder than it needs to be. Be ready in an hour for the buses to take us to the gala. Miss them and you’re on your own getting there.” With another smile, she left her cast to get themselves sorted out.

With an exhausted sigh of relief the whole group fell into excited chatter as they turned to congratulate one another. Kurt felt many pats on his back and words of praise and he returned them whole heartedly. He found his friends, giving Jamie a tight hug of friendship as they congratulated on another. He ruffled Tommy’s hair, hugged Analisa and Katya and Mei… his eyes darted about for Rachel, seeing her talking with some of the other girls from the ensemble.

Watching her being part of a group, treating other performers as peers rather than supporters made Kurt’s heart swell. For all that he believed that Rachel had truly changed, there was still a faint question mark hanging over her. It was one thing for her not to set herself in direct competition with him, but how she would behave with people who truly would be competition for her… other
actresses who had their own aspirations and goals was the real challenge. He knew that she had set this up as a challenge for herself; a test to see if she could really handle being in a supporting role with grace and give the show everything she could. That she succeeded beyond anyone’s expectations made him thrilled on her behalf.

He hurried to her side and pulled her into a tight hug, holding her close and pressing his face against her hair. She clutched at him tightly, her face against his shoulder and trembling slightly from the overflow of emotions. Kurt’s own emotions were cascading wildly through his brain and he felt that he might just fall apart without Rachel’s presence to ground him. They just held one another, trying to find a small eye of calm in a sea of activity around them.

Neither of the said a word, because there was nothing that needed to be said between them. They would praise one another’s performances later on, when they had a chance to mentally regroup. For now, all Kurt wanted to do was savor her presence and ponder how grateful he was to have shared this incredible experience with her.

They didn’t want to let go of one another, not with the heady emotions still bubbling up within them. But as the other members of the cast began to disperse and the tech teams moved to close things down for the night, they knew that they couldn’t hold onto that moment forever. But letting go of one another didn’t change things. They parted with the full knowledge of what they’d accomplished.

“We’d better start getting ready,” Rachel sighed, loosening her hold on her best friend and dabbing at her tearing eyes. “I don’t know about you, but there is no way I’m going to be late for this party. Not with that amazing dress you picked out for me.”

He couldn’t help from chuckling tiredly, bending to kiss her forehead. “I’ll see you in a little bit. Go make yourself gorgeous,” he urged with a smile.

He retreated to his dressing room where his castmates were busy cleaning up and getting ready for the party. When Kurt entered the cramped room, the other young men looked up and welcomed him with a rousing cheer.

“Hey, nice for you to join us fearless leader,” Ryan teased, having already stripped down to his shorts.

“Jezz, Ryan… put some fucking clothes on,” Eddie, who played Grantaire complained, throwing a dirty hand towel at the other man.

Jack grinned broadly. “Kurt, that was some job you did,” he praised. “It was really fantastic.”

“Thanks,” Kurt said thankfully, stripping off his shirt. “Everyone was amazing. You all did such a great job… it gave me something to measure up to.”

He would have loved a shower but there was no time for that. A spot wash with a damp cloth to get the sweat off his skin would have to suffice. He got all the stage paint off his face, taking special care to cleanse his skin and moisturize to keep his complexion from looking too ruddy. There wasn’t a whole lot that he could do with the mess that was his hair except brush it out and use some spray to try to hold it into place so that he didn’t look like a dust mop.

He checked the time on his phone and saw that Adam was probably only midway through the second act for his show. Knowing that they wouldn’t be able to talk until much later in the evening, he sent a quick text.

*Just got off stage a few minutes ago. Think that things went pretty well. Will call you later tonight.*
Love you.

He hit “send” with a sigh. No use moping about what he couldn’t do anything about. There was a message from his brother that the show was great and they would see him at the party. That definitely improved his mood considerably.

“Hey Kurt, you’d better hurry up,” Ryan urged as he dressed. “Don’t want to miss the bus.”

Kurt smiled and nodded. “Give me five,” he requested, getting up from his table. While he wished that he could see Adam and be able to celebrate with him, there was no use dwelling on what couldn’t be changed. Adam would want him to enjoy himself and not fixate on his partner’s absence. He had a lot of people to celebrate with and this promised to be a wonderful evening. Adam would be the first person to urge him to go out, peacock a little and enjoy himself even if he couldn’t be there.

By the time the actors and crew loaded up onto the buses, Kurt’s mood had decidedly lightened. He was dressed in a fabulous suit and off to celebrate their successful performance. He was surrounded by friends and castmates and it was hard to feel badly about the one blemish on what had been an amazing evening. He deserved the chance to look back on what he’d just accomplished with pride and Adam would be the last person in the world to begrudge him that chance.

There would be many things to celebrate together when Adam returned home. This would be one more thing they could add to the list.

Chapter End Notes

I was very fortunate to find video of a chapter that matched nearly exactly how I envisioned this production - staging, costuming and performances. If you want a clearer look at how I saw NYADA's production to play out, it's worth watching. The production was done in Madrid and entirely in Spanish and is very well worth watching.

https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=les+miserables+madrid
Chapter 15

Madam Tibideaux entered the grand ballroom of Gotham Hall to a resounding show of applause from the guests at the gala, flanked by Professor Carmody and other members of the faculty. She smiled and nodded greetings, accepting compliments on the spectacular performance that many of their guests had the privilege to see that evening and was already mentally calculating how to translate this into leverage to be used on behalf of her school.

It might have been something of a gamble, but it appeared that things had gone exactly as she’d hoped. NYADA’s profile as one of the premier performing arts conservatories in the country has been conclusively reestablished and there was generous financial support being pledged by their major donors. Even more importantly, her students would find their profiles raised significantly and she had little doubt that at least a few of them might leave tonight with some solid employment prospects. She could not be more pleased with the outcome.

She turned to greet Thomas Paskin, the director of one of the most popular shows from current Broadway season. “Carmen… only you would be daring enough to pull off something like that,” he exclaimed, holding his arms out to her.

She smiled warmly, leaning in for a quick air kiss with an old and respected friend. “Thomas, as much as I’d like to take credit for this, I’m afraid that I have to give it to my dear colleague here. My primary contribution was having the sense to stay out of her way,” she chuckled.

The director turned to the tall woman dressed elegantly in a black evening gown and reached out to take her hand and press a dramatic kiss to her fingers. “Alexa, I have to admit that staging of production on that scale would be daunting for anyone. To do it entirely with students… remarkable,” he insisted.

“Thank you, Thomas,” she said with good grace. Now that she had successfully navigated the opening night performance, the stress of the past few months had finally eased. It showed in both her demeanor and her appearance, and she was very much in the mood the celebrate her accomplishment.

“I actually enjoyed the challenge,” Professor Carmody claimed. “They are a remarkable group of talents and I doubt that any director would ever have such an extraordinary body of ability at their disposal.”

“Well, you certainly surpassed anyone’s expectations,” he assured her, with a wide smile. “It was an exceptional night of theater.”

“Then hopefully you’ll keep this night in mind when you stage your next show,” she prodded gently. “There are quite a few of them who are going to be looking for work in the not too distant future.”

“I every intention of doing just that. There are a few that I have my eye on,” he promised. “Well, I’d best not monopolize you two all night. We’ll talk more later.”

“We’ll catch up later, Thomas,” Madam Tibideaux assured him, smiling when he raised his glass in toast to the two women.

As they strolled away, Professor Carmody looked to her friend. “Well, that’s something of a relief,” she sighed. “If he liked it…”

“I told you that you have absolutely nothing to worry about,” Madam Tibideaux assured her. “I saw
how the audience was responding and you did a spectacular job.”

“The kids deserve all the credit,” the other woman insisted. “They’re the ones who rose to the challenge. I just set it up for them.”

“Don’t sell your own contribution short. This was your vision,” Madam Tibideaux reminded, accepting a glass of champagne from one of the waiters. “Go bask in your accomplishment. We’ve got a room full of people just itching to congratulate you. I’ll see about shaking some additional pledges from our benefactors.”

Professor Carmody nodded before heading over to a small group to accept the accolades from some of her old theater friends, leaving her friend to do the work of ensuring NYADA’s bright future and financial stability.

* * *

“Wow… this is some place,” Finn marveled as they walked into the spectacularly decorated ballroom. Between the red carpet at the theater and now at the gala venue, he was getting a little overwhelmed. But he supposed that he’d better get used to this kind of thing because he had a strong feeling that it was something that his brother and Rachel would be experiencing quite often in the future.

Carole smiled as she walked in on her husband’s arm. “It is gorgeous,” she agreed, gazing at the ornate stained glass ceiling above them and the creative way the lighting in the room highlighted the colors. It would be easy to get star-struck in a place like this.

“This isn’t just a big party. It’s all about supporting the school,” Burt reminded. After months of navigating Washington’s social circles, he was getting more used to these sorts of gatherings even if he didn’t feel entirely at home at them. He had taken some cues from his son and figured that he’d become an actor himself in his own way. “I’m just glad that they’re going to make this about celebrating the kids as much as squeezing the wallets of their donors.”

“Speaking of the kids, where are they?” Carole asked, looking about the room.

“They’ll be here in a bit. Probably all getting ready and cleaning up from the show,” Burt guessed.

“What happened to Sue?” Finn asked, looking about. “She just kind of ran out of the theater.”

“I’m sure she’s around here somewhere,” Burt chuckled. “Why don’t we find the bar and take a look around while we wait for them?”

Finn followed in his parent’s wake, gazing about the room and feeling very out of place. There were a lot more celebrities and famous people than he’d originally expected, and he was taken aback to see several really famous television and film people that he was sure would have Rachel squealing over. He was grateful when his stepfather handed him a beer to give him something to focus on other than all the rich people in the room.

There was one woman who looked somewhat out of place amid all the designer evening gowns and tuxedos, and Finn immediately recognized the dean from Kurt’s and Rachel’s original auditions back at McKinley. Her silk turban and elegant caftan looked nearly as if it was designed to coordinate with the stained glass over their heads and the stern expression that Finn had remembered was relaxed into a calm smile. She paused periodically to chat with the guests and accepting praise from everyone she spoke with. Despite how she didn’t appear to fit in with the more conventionally attired crowd, she had total command of the room, reminding Finn that her reputation was probably a well-
Burt sipped at his beer before explaining to his wife, “That’s the dean of the school. She runs this whole show. According to Kurt, she can make or break you in a heartbeat.”

“When she came to McKinley for Kurt’s and Rachel’s audition, just mentioning her name was enough to send Rachel into a total tailspin,” Finn added, watching the woman warily.

Carole cocked her head thoughtfully. “She seems nice enough.”

Burt chuckled. “She’s like Sue in a lot of ways. A bit more cultured maybe, but just as much a shark.”

Finn saw her head turn in their direction before the woman started to approach. “She’s coming this way,” he hissed, feeling a trace of apprehension.

Burt seemed calm enough when the dean stepped up to him. “Congressman Hummel,” she greeted. “It’s such a pleasure to finally meet you.” She offered her hand, letting Burt shake it.

“Likewise. Kurt’s spoken a lot about you,” Burt answered. “This is my wife Carole and Kurt’s brother, Finn.”

Madam Tibideaux smiled genially. “It’s a pleasure to meet you all. I’m afraid that I don’t often have a chance to meet the families of my students outside of events like this. Even those who are such fine champions of the arts such as yourself.”

“Well, Kurt certainly taught me about how important they are to kids like him so if I can help make sure that schools keep art programs, that’s the least I can do,” Burt explained, wanting to give proper credit where it was due. His son had opened his eyes to a great many things that he’d been completely ignorant about. “He’s told us quite a bit about you and how much he’s been learning here.”

Madam Tibideaux’s smile seemed to grow warmer at the mention of her student. “Young Mr. Hummel is certainly a credit to our institution and we’re very glad to have him there.”

Burt nodded understandingly. “Being at NYADA means a lot to him,” he stated. “It’s very exciting for us to see him doing so well.”

“It’s exciting for us as well,” Madam Tibideaux assured him. “There’s nothing that makes me happier than to see a talented student start to discover what he’s truly capable of. And he is discovering that he’s capable of a great many things.”

“It was a remarkable show,” Carole added with a smile.

Madam Tibideaux nodded. “I’m very glad that you enjoyed it. I think your young Mr. Hummel and the others will be quite pleased when they see the reviews,” she said with a calm smile, as if she expected nothing less.

“Will they students be getting here soon?” Burt couldn’t help from asking.

“They should be here shortly,” Madam Tibideaux assured him. “I would like to have a chance to speak with you when we have a bit more time, if that’s all right. I’m quite an admirer of your work and would like to discuss how it might be possible to expand artistic education programs to reach students that don’t get access to early exposure. I think that there are a great number of children out there who would benefit from having more access to the arts than they’re currently receiving.”
Burt nodded with a quiet smile on his face. Children like his son, he thought, who missed out on the chance for the kind of training that he needed when he was young. He wondered how many kids like Kurt were out there who might never get the opportunity to fulfill their dreams because their parents didn’t understand what their child needed or because their schools didn’t think that the arts were worth funding.

He reached into his jacket for his wallet and fished out his official business card, presenting it to her. “Give me a call whenever you’d like,” he offered. “Maybe with your help, I can pry some real funds out of the next budget.”

Madam Tibideaux smiled, tucking the card into some safe place in her robe. “I certainly will,” she assured him. “It’s been a pleasure meeting all of you. Congressman Hummel, I look forward to speaking with you again.”

Burt nodded, knowing that they couldn’t monopolize her time when there were donors and benefactors to coax into opening their checkbooks. “Me too. It’s nice to meet you,” he said politely.

She smiled and moved to drift back to continue her rounds about the room and Carole breathed out a sigh of relief. “Wow… she’s rather intense,” she marveled. “I don’t know how Kurt handles being in her classes all the time.”

Burt sipped at his beer thoughtfully. “Judging just from how he performed tonight, I think that he’s doing just fine with her,” he surmised with an amused smile. Kurt always did seem to find the strangest champions and he didn’t think that Dean Tibideaux was a bad person to have supporting him.

Carole saw that the party was now starting to really get underway, with waiters walking about with trays of finger foods for the guests. “Why don’t we just enjoy ourselves until the kids get here?” she suggested.

Burt smiled and gave his wife a quick kiss. “Sounds like a plan,” he agreed before looking to his stepson. “Are you hungry?”

Finn opened his mouth to affirm that yes, of course he was but Burt cut off his answer with a rueful chuckle. “You’re always hungry,” his stepfather teased. “What was I thinking?”

“Thanks,” Finn snarked back, but unable to keep from grinning. “But if I have to stand around this fancy shindig, then I’d better be fed.”

Carole laughed and took her son’s arm. “Come on… let’s go see what they have,” she offered.

It actually wasn’t that bad, Finn considered as he munched on a miniature crab cake. He’d probably want to run out for a burger or some pizza afterwards if nothing more substantial was served, but at least he wasn’t going to totally starve to death. And he was glad that he could keep his mother company because it seemed like quite a few people knew who Burt was and wanted to talk to him.

Burt was currently talking to the mayor over school arts programs and the two of them seemed to get along well enough. Carole had exchanged a few words with the mayor’s wife but was happy to let Burt take the lead and stick to her role as supportive political spouse. Before too long, the head of a major charity stepped over to chat with his stepfather. It seemed like once Burt was recognized, a lot of people wanted to stop by to talk to him.

His mother just nodded tolerantly, having gotten used to this in Washington. “Why don’t we take a look around?” she suggested. “I can use another glass of wine.”
“Sure,” Finn agreed, offering his mother his arm.

She smiled brightly. “Such a gentleman,” she teased gently. “I apparently did raise you right after all.”

“Let’s also see if any of the waiters have some more of those little crab cakes,” Finn proposed.

“Ah yes… we mustn’t let you go hungry for more than fifteen minutes,” Carole laughed as they walked over to the bar where she ordered a second glass of chardonnay. There was plenty to enjoy until the students arrives for the party. There were lots of famous people to see and a wonderful band to listen to. Maybe she might be able to drag Burt out onto the dance floor later on without too much argument.

About a half hour later, the band stopped playing and Madam Tibideaux took a spot behind a waiting microphone. The conversations filling the room slowly died as the guests turned their attention to her.

“Good evening guests, friends and supporters of the New York Academy of Dramatic Arts,” she greeted the attendees graciously. “Tonight we have gathered here to celebrate the wonderful legacy of our school that has produced some of the finest talents currently working in theater, film and television. Many award-winning actors, singers, directors and industry technicians got their starts at NYADA. But as proud as I am of our past accomplishments, I am even more proud of the potential in our current and future students and I thank you all for your continued support for our institution.”

The attendees of the gala applauded and she smiled and nodded in thanks to them. When the applause died down, she continued.

“Tonight though, is about more than just celebrating NYADA as a school. After all, a school is nothing more than a building without the talented and dedicated students that put their hearts and souls into developing their craft. Whether they are actors, singers, dancers, directors or costumers, they strive to be the very best in their fields. Tonight, you had the opportunity to see that passion and dedication in action. Ladies and gentlemen… I present to you the cast of NYADA’s production of Les Miserables.”

Finn’s mouth dropped into smile of astonishment as music from the show began to fill the room and a young woman dressed in a lovely peacock green dress stepped out from the crowd. It was only when she began to sing that he recognized her as the actress who had played Fantine.

"He slept a summer by my side," her voice rang out purely as she sang a section of her featured song. "He filled by days with endless wonder... He took my childhood in his stride, but he was gone when autumn came."

"And still I dream he’ll come to me... that we'll live the years together. But there are dreams that cannot be, and there are storms we cannot weather.

"I had a dream that life would be, so much different from this hell I'm living," she sang gently, offering a reminder of the pain that her character had endured. "So different now from what it seemed. Now life has killed the dream I dreamed."

The gala attendees applauded and cheered her performance and she smiled and gave a brief curtsy before stepping back and vanishing into the crowd. A different piece of music began to play and more figures began to step out from the assembly.
“One day more…” A young man with dark blond hair and a bright smile that belied his character’s tragic and somber disposition emerged, dressed in a conservative black tuxedo. He looked nothing like Jean Valjean, but the voice was unmistakable. “Another day, another destiny... This never ending road to Calvary. These men who seem to know my crime will surely come a second time! One day more…”

Another man that Finn immediately recognized as having played Marius stepped forward and joined the other, at the center of the ballroom. “I did not live until today,” he sang sweetly, his gentle tenor rising through the room. “Who can I live when we are parted?”

“Another day, another destiny… This never ending road to Calvary. These men who seem to know my crime will surely come a second time! One day more…” the singer who’d played Jean Valjean sang as a young woman with dark brown hair and dressed in a pale blue gown stepped up to his side.

“Tomorrow you’ll be worlds away,” she dueted with the Marius player. “And yet with you, my world has started…”

Another young woman joined them, the rags of Eponine exchanged for an elegant evening gown and gentle smile on her delicate features. “One more day all on my own,” she sang while the actors playing the lovers continued their romantic duet.

“Will we ever meet again?” they asked, while the other actress stepped forward.

“Will we ever meet again?” they asked, while the other actress stepped forward.

“Another day without him caring,” she answered with a subtle touch of sadness that suited the song.

“I was born to be with you!”

“What a life I might have known…”

The actors playing lovers gazed at one another from across the room with soft smiles. “And I swear I will be true!”

“But he never saw me there!” the other actress lamented, her voice ringing out as Kurt strode forward, his chest thrust out and chin raised high.

“One more day before the storm!” he sang, his voice soaring operatically as the boy playing Marius fell into counterpoint with him and drawing a contrast between their motivations.

“Do I follow where she goes?” he asked.

“At the barricades of freedom!” Kurt commanded, clearly trying to keep from smiling too broadly. There was no need for him to stay in character, but he managed to keep from looking too pleased with himself. Not that Finn would have blamed him in the least, but he admired his brother’s control.

“Shall I join by brothers there?” the other young man pondered.

Kurt stepped to the center of the ballroom, and Finn grinned widely at seeing his brother all but dominating focus. “When our ranks begin to form,” Kurt belted, turning a happy smile to the other singers.

“Do I stay or do I dare?” Marius’s player questioned, and Kurt gave a resounding answer.

“Will you take your place with me?” he demanded, and the rest of the company rushed forward to fall in behind Kurt. Finn saw all of them there; Rachel and all of Kurt’s friends dressed in formal wear and looking like they couldn’t be happier than to be there at that moment.
“The time is now,” the entire company sang in unison as their audience applauded. “The place is here!”

“One day more!” the handsome blond man belted out, his tenor voice ringing out through the room as the man that Finn immediately recognized as having played Javert stepped out.

“One more day till revolution. We will nip it in the bud!” he proclaimed. “I will join these little schoolboys. They will wet themselves with blood!”

The chorus, lead by Kurt continued to sing their proclamations of revolution, and Finn looked up to see Burt grinning widely at the sight of his son dressed like some kind of movie star at the head of the group. “One day to a new beginning,” they proclaimed passionately. “Raise the flag of freedom high!”

“Every man will be a king,” the men sang, with the women repeating the line in counterpoint and creating a beautiful effect.

“One day more!” the blond lead belted out, stepping closer to the main group of actors, smiling down at the actress who’d played his daughter.

Another pair of actors stepped out and it wasn’t until they opened their mouths to sing that Finn recognized that they had played the Thénardiers. Instead of looking like the unsavory criminals, they were well turned out in their formal wear and bore mischievous smiles as they expressed their own characters outlook on the brewing battle.

“Watch’em run amuck,” they sang mockingly, casting conspiratorial glances at one another.

“Catch’em when they fall! Never know your luck when there’s a free for all. Here a little pinch, there a little touch. Most of them are goners so they won’t miss much!”

The main chorus continued their song of battle, filling in the layers of song that dominated the room. “There’s a new world for the winning,” they asserted, the actress who played Fantine joining them. “There’s a new world to be won! Do you hear the people sing?”

The man playing Marius joined Kurt and placed his hand on Kurt’s well-dressed shoulder. “My place is here! I fight with you!” he declared with a wide smile and the cast burst out in a loud cheer.

The entire cast was now in full voice, filling in multiple layers of sound that left Finn breathless. The sound continued to rise and build until it reached its climax with the show’s lead actor declaring “Tomorrow is the judgement day!”

The entire cast stood together, singing with passion and expertise that would leave even the most jaded audience dazzled. Finn laughed when he saw that someone from the cast bringing out the red flag of the revolutionaries and wave it over the heads of his castmates.

“Tomorrow we’ll discover what our God in Heaven has in store!” they sang together, the cast united as one. “One more dawn! One more day!

“One day more!”

* * *

The gala guests applauded loudly and cheered the students, who bowed and accepted the ovation of their audience. After the students embraced one another, celebrating their performance before starting to disperse so they could enjoy the party. The cast had already suspected that the reason for this little performance was to let all the producers and industry VIPs at the gala have a chance to see the
performers as individuals and apart from the characters that they’d played. It would be a lot easier to approach an actor now that they’ve been seen out of costume.

Not to mention that it was a nice reminder that, yes, they all were really that good. The opportunity to rub shoulders with so many influential people was a rare opportunity that they didn’t want to squander, and several moved to make sure that they remained where they could be seen and approached.

Kurt looked to Rachel and took her hand. “Let’s go find my family,” he proposed. “Finn’s probably jumping out of his skin by now.”

“God, I need a drink!” Rachel exclaimed, her eyes shimmering happily. They might be mentally and physically exhausted, but now they could really celebrate what they’ve done.

“Me too,” he said agreeably. “But let’s find my dad first.”

She smiled and nodded, letting him lead her through the crowd. There would be enough time to play “spot the celebrity” later, she told herself.

“I think… there they are,” Kurt said happily, beelining over to where his family was waiting. “Dad!”

Burt grinned and held his arms out. “Hey, sport! Come here!”

Kurt threw himself into his father’s embrace, feeling a monumental sense of relief. He felt like, finally, he could relax a little bit. He was passed to Finn, who left off greeting Rachel to give Kurt another solid hug and then to Carole. Once the round of hugs and kisses had been completed, he pulled Rachel to his side and couldn’t resist asking, “So… what did you think?”

“It was a fantastic show,” Finn assured him, hugging them both again. “You both were amazing.”

Carole nodded in agreement. “I can’t remember enjoying a show quite as much,” she insisted. “Kurt, you were absolutely fantastic up there.”

“Thanks,” he said, blushing a bit.

“And Rachel… I don’t know how you managed to do all that,” Carole stated admiringly. “You were all over the place.”

“I know,” Rachel laughed brightly. “We were joking that the ensemble should have been fitted out with roller skates.”

“Which would have been an entirely different show,” Kurt teased, earning a jab in the ribs from his friend.

“You still have it in for ‘Starlight Express’, ” she complained playfully, swatting his arm.

“It’s still awful!” Kurt insisted, laughing. He ran a hand through his hair to smooth it back into place before accepting a glass of champagne from a waiter. “I just can’t believe that we survived this,” he claimed, taking a sip.

“Well, we only have to do it ten more times,” Rachel reminded him.

“Has Adam called you yet?” Finn asked.

“I’m expecting a call any minute,” Kurt confirmed. “So if you see me ducking out of here, you’ll know why. He’s probably just finishing up for the night about now.”
“Kurt!”

He turned around just in time to avoid being surprise tackled by a petite figure dressed in a cloud of tulle. “Isabelle!” he exclaimed happily, embracing his boss and lifting her off her Louboutin heels. He looked over her shoulder at the well-dressed, grinning man behind her and released his boss so Chase could pull him into an enthusiastic hug.

“Hey, superstar,” the older man greeted happily, patting Kurt on the back. “That was some show.”

“You were totally wonderful, which we knew that you would be,” Isabelle trilled, positively bouncing excitedly in her towering heels and making a few onlookers a bit concerned for her safety. She then realized that she and Chase was pulling Kurt away from his family.

“Oh my God… I’m being totally rude here,” she exclaimed, releasing Kurt from her grasp. “We were just so excited to see Kurt tonight. He was so fabulous that I just couldn’t contain myself!”

“That’s okay,” Burt laughed indulgently. He wrapped his arm about his wife to pull her close. “We think a lot of him too.”

Kurt quickly stepped in to make introductions. “Dad, this is Isabelle, my boss at Vogue.”

“It’s such a pleasure to meet you,” she insisted, shaking Burt’s offered hand. “Kurt’s told me so much about you and I’ve been so looking forward to meeting Kurt’s family. We absolutely adore him at the office.”

Chase smiled and let Chase rest an arm about his shoulders to keep him close. “And this is my fashion fairy godfather, Chase. He’s the Artistic Director in our office and responsible for my spectacular suit tonight.”

Chase smiled down at the younger man. “It’s fun having you around to be my personal Ken doll.”

“It’s so lovely to meet all of you,” Carole said, nodding a greeting to the couple.

“This is my brother, Finn,” Kurt introduced, and Isabelle’s eyes widened almost comically.

“Wow… you are tall,” she said in astonishment. “Kurt mentioned how tall you were, but he didn’t say anything about how handsome his brother was.” She threw a playfully admonishing look at her employee.

“You can’t have him,” Kurt informed her bluntly. “He lives in Texas and has a band there.”

“Oh poo… you’re no fun anymore,” she pouted playfully.

Isabelle then turned to Rachel and held out her arms to embrace the younger woman. “Rachel, you look so lovely, honey,” she praised. “Kurt was right… the Marchesa gown was absolutely perfect for you.”

Rachel couldn’t help from smoothing down her skirt. “It was so kind of you to let Kurt dress us,” she said sincerely. “We could never have managed to find anything nice enough on our own.”

“Oh, it was my pleasure,” Isabelle insisted. “After all, I do owe you for taking me in that Thanksgiving. That was the most amazing kiki ever!”

Burt smiled indulgently at his son. “Sounds like your life in New York is pretty interesting,” he mused in amusement.
Kurt chuckled as he accepted a little pastry filled with goat cheese and honey from one of the passing waiters. “It can be eventful,” he admitted with a grin before biting into his treat.

“Well, it’s about to get a bit more interesting,” his father informed him, nodding his head in the direction behind Kurt. “There’s someone who’s waiting to see you.”

“Dad, believe me, they only are going to be interested in the leads,” he insisted, swallowing the pastry. He’d have to think about making them for his next party.

Burt nudged Kurt to turn around. “I think that this one only wants to see you,” he stated with a smile.

Kurt sighed and turned to see who his father was talking about and felt his jaw drop open in surprise. He felt himself stepping forward, his eyes fixed on the tall women who seemed a bit apprehensive about approaching him herself. He stopped a bare foot outside of what he knew her personal space preferences were and offered a smile.

“I knew that you planned on coming to see the show, but I wasn’t expecting it to be opening night,” he said softly.

Sue looked down at her protégé. “Did you think that I wouldn’t? After finding out from your dean just what role you were playing, would you really believe that I would skip it? “

He couldn’t help from laughing a little at her retort. “I should have guessed that you would have found out. I was kind of hoping to surprise you.”

Sue smiled indulgently. “As if you could ever surprise me, Porcelain,” she teased. “I’d think you would have learned that by now. You know that I have very high expectations for you.”

Kurt nodded, knowing too well that trying to fool his former coach was an exercise in futility. “Did you enjoy the show?” he asked carefully, knowing that if anyone would give him an unvarnished opinion, Sue would.

She pursed her lip thoughtfully. “The show itself was… adequate,” she granted, as if saying anything positive was like pulling teeth.

Kurt felt himself relax marginally.

“You were extraordinary,” she said softly. “I tried not to build up my expectations because I cannot count the number of times I’ve been disappointed. But you’ve never disappointed me.”

Kurt nodded, knowing too well that trying to fool his former coach was an exercise in futility. “Did you enjoy the show?” he asked carefully, knowing that if anyone would give him an unvarnished opinion, Sue would.

She pursed her lip thoughtfully. “The show itself was… adequate,” she granted, as if saying anything positive was like pulling teeth.

Kurt felt himself relax marginally.

“Most of it was what I expected,” she granted. “But you…”

He looked up expectantly, his eyes betraying a hint of wariness. She never held back in her criticisms, no matter how minor.

The tall woman inhaled sharply, looking up at the ceiling as if her gather her thoughts. When she finally looked back at Kurt, there was a suspicious shimmer in her eyes.

“You were extraordinary,” she said softly. “I tried not to build up my expectations because I cannot count the number of times I’ve been disappointed. But you’ve never disappointed me.”

Sue bent slightly so that Kurt was able to look her in the eye. “Anything I could have possibly have hoped to see from you tonight… You surpassed all of that and I couldn’t be more proud of you.”

Before she could withdraw back to their usual boundaries, she was taken completely by surprise by Kurt all but flinging himself at her and wrapping his arms about her. She froze for a second, but quickly relaxed and returned the gesture and pulled him close. She closed her eyes and pressed her cheek to the top of his head, savoring that he was succeeding when so many had been determined to
I’m so glad that you were here tonight,” he stated, turning his eyes up to look at his old mentor.

She smiled into his hair. “So am I, Porcelain” she admitted.

With a bit more reluctance than either of them wanted to admit to, they released one another and Kurt held out his hand. “Come on,” he invited. “We’re all celebrating over there and it doesn’t feel right not having you there.”

“Are you sure?” Sue asked, arching an eyebrow wryly.

Kurt grinned, squaring his shoulders. “You’re with me,” he insisted, pulling her behind him.

Burt gave Sue a welcoming smile as the tall woman approached. “I was wondering where you were hiding,” he chuckled.

Before Sue could respond, a muffled rendition of “I’ll Cover You” emitted from Kurt’s pocket and he fished out his cell phone. “Ah, it’s Adam,” he proclaimed happily. He turned a wide grin to his family. “If you’ll excuse me for a little bit…”

“Tell him that we all say ‘hi’,” Burt insisted. “We’ll behave until you get back.”

Kurt brought the phone to his ear as he hurried to find a quiet place to talk. “Hi sweetie!” he greeted happily. “Did you have a good show tonight?”

“I’m the one that should be asking that,” Adam claimed, laughing warmly over the connection. “How did it go?”

Kurt found an alcove by the bathroom and ducked in, hoping that no one would bother him for the next few minutes. “I think it went well,” he stated. “But I haven’t had a chance to see if any of the reviews are out yet.”

“Well, I did,” Adam teased. “I checked as soon as I got off stage and I think that you all will be very happy. Make sure that you check the review for the Times.”

“I will,” Kurt assured him. He leaned against the wall behind him, closing his eyes so he could picture Adam’s face while they talked. “It just feels surreal now that we’ve had our official opening. Not quite anticlimactic, but just strange.”

“I know how that feels,” Adam admitted. “You work so hard for so long and when it all pays off…. You just expect more out of the moment.”

“I’m just being silly,” Kurt sighed. He didn’t need his own silly brain ping ponging him with emotions like this. Not when he knew that he did a good job.

“No, you’re not,” Adam assured him tolerantly, and Kurt could almost hear the smile in your voice. “I know how much work you put into that show and it’s not strange to feel a little let down in some ways. You’ll definitely feel it after the last show, so make sure that you go out and celebrate. That helps keep your spirits up.”

“Definitely,” Kurt promised.

“I don’t want to keep you from what must be a smashing party, so I’m going to let you go for now,” Adam proposed gently. “But I am so proud of you, darling.”
“Thanks. Can I give you a call when I get back to the dorms? It might be late,” Kurt warned.

“I’ll be very cross if you don’t,” Adam teased.

Kurt smiled, “Love you.”

“I love you too, sweetheart. Go have a good time and make sure you have a glass of wine for me,” Adam urged. “We’ll talk more later.”

“Bye,” Kurt said, smiling as he ended the call. Talking with Adam always helped him put things into perspective and he was glad to know that his unsettled feelings were perfectly normal. The past few months have been an emotional rollercoaster for him and the ride hadn’t come to a complete stop yet.

When he returned to the party, Rachel was waiting for him with Finn and their friends and looked absolutely ecstatic about something. “Kurt! You won’t believe this!” she exclaimed, clapping her hands happily.

“What’s going on,” he asked, eyeing them curiously. They all looked uncommonly delighted over something.

Jamie clapped Kurt on the shoulder and pulled him into their little circle. “We were looking over the reviews,” he explained, waving his phone.

Kurt nodded, now understanding. “Yeah, Adam said that they were out and pretty good.”

“‘Pretty good’ is an understatement,” Katya confirmed happily. She took up her own phone and read, “According to the Post, if people haven’t already gotten their tickets that they’re going to miss out on one of the best theater events of the year.”

“Wow,” Kurt marveled with a grin. “That’s going to make Professor Carmody happy.”

“Well, it gets better,” Analisa claimed with a delighted grin. “The review for the New York Times is up, and I’m quoting here… ‘not enough can be said about the cast of students, which to an individual would be standouts on any professional stage’.”


Analisa giggled, her eyes shining. “It goes on about all of the leads… yadda yadda… ah! Here it was,” she exclaimed. “‘Two remarkable actors created an intriguing juxtaposition between the romantic Marius, played by Brett Sosa, and the fierce Enjolras, played by Kurt Hummel!’”

Rachel laughed excitedly, jumping up and shaking Kurt. “You got named in the Times!” she chortled, hugging him tightly while he tried to absorb what he’d just heard.

“That can’t be right,” Kurt said disbelievingly.

“Oh, it is,” Jamie confirmed, taking a sip of his wine. “You, my friend, are now a known theater actor. Congratulations!” He raised his glass in toast.

Rachel leaned in to kiss Kurt soundly on the cheek. “And it couldn’t happen to a better person,” she insisted. She reached up to wipe a tear from her cheek. “Oh God! I’m so happy for you!”

“Totally agree, Kurt,” Finn stated. “You were amazing tonight.”

Kurt read the review himself, trying to absorb what he was seeing. He looked up to where his
parents were waiting with Sue, the three of them watching him with amused smiles.

“Can you believe this?” he asked, shrugging in confusion.

Burt didn’t nod but looked uncommonly proud and kept his arm around his beaming wife. Sue looked to her former protégé with a knowing gleam in her eyes.

“I’d be very put out if you weren’t getting the credit that you so obviously deserve,” she proclaimed. “And given that I have the phone number for the editor-in-chief, it’s a good thing that their critic had the good sense to make proper note of your worth.”

Rachel draped her arms about Kurt’s shoulders, all but leaning over his back. He laughed and playfully swung her around. Surrounded by his friends and family, he could almost believe that this was real. That he had somehow made a debut on a New York City stage that mattered and was noticed and might really mean something.

He’d spend some time to try to make sense of this later, when he had a chance to talk things over with Adam and his friends and put everything that was happening into their proper perspective. For now, he decided that it would be better to focus on celebrating their shared accomplishments than dwelling on his individual one.

* * *

“That’s him?” the woman at Carmen Tibideaux’s side questioned dubiously.

Hearing the doubt in the voice of one of NYADA’s most dedicated donors brought a slight smile to the Dean’s face. She had a feeling that she’d be hearing that quite often and would savor the satisfaction of seeing those reservations silenced.

“Yes,” she assured the other woman. “That is him.”

“Huh…”

It took a great deal of Madam Tibideaux’s carefully honed control not to chuckle at the dubious tone in the other woman’s voice. But her opinion on her donor’s short-sightedness was not what mattered here. She was asked to make an introduction to the student who had caught the woman’s eye during the performance, as she had with other students throughout the evening. Normally, she’d be leery about setting this particular sponsor on one of her students, but she had a feeling that this introduction would go smoothly. There weren’t many who could handle this woman’s peculiarities, but this one…

She plastered a warm smile on her face as she approached so she wouldn’t unduly alarm her student. “Mr. Hummel? Do you have a moment?” she asked politely.

Kurt had been sitting with his family and friends, laughing at stories recounting the mishaps of their rehearsals and looking quite happy and relaxed. She supposed that the glass of wine in his hand helped with the relaxing and she could hardly begrudge him that small comfort. It was a rare occurrence to observe any of her students so at ease.

He looked up at her, blue eyes wide with curiosity about the woman standing at his teacher’s side and having his time with his family interrupted. But he politely rose to his feet to greet them with the manners that he had always displayed. “Of course, Madam,” he said.

She smiled reassuringly and gestured at the woman standing just behind her. “I’d like you to meet June Dolloway,” she introduced. “She’s one of NYADA’s proudest sponsors and she was quite
Kurt blinked in surprise but quickly rallied and turned his attention to the other woman, dressed in the gown and jewels of a high society matron. She was older than his teacher and the red hair she boasted clearly was not the result of nature. While she probably never was a classical beauty, even in her youth, her sharp features retained a vulpine element that would have been quite intriguing when she was younger. She held out a slender hand to him, her blue eyes clearly sizing him up and waiting for a response.

He gently grasped her hand and shook it warmly. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Dolloway,” he greeted.

Now that her task was done, Madam Tibideaux turned to Ms. Dolloway. “I’ll leave you both to talk now,” she stated. “We’ll catch up a bit more later, June.”

“Of course, Carmen,” Ms. Dolloway answered, not taking her eyes off the young man before her. “I’m sure that Mr. Hummel and I will have quite a bit to talk about.”

Once the dean had stepped away, Kurt made quick introductions between Ms. Dolloway and his family in order to maintain and air of proper courtesy before offering the older woman a seat. “What can I do for you?” he asked inquiringly.

She smiled in a manner that reminded him somewhat of Santana, in the way that it didn’t completely reach her eyes and seemed more about challenge than anything else. “Well, that remains to be seen,” she said. “I was rather intrigued when I saw your performance tonight. It was… quite remarkable.”

“Thank you,” he answered sincerely. “I’m glad that you enjoyed it.”

“I was very surprised when Carmen told me that you were originally cast as an understudy,” Ms. Dolloway jabbed as she settled into the offered chair. Her sharp gaze was fixed firmly on Kurt, apparently looking to see if her point about him not being originally cast in the role would cause insult.

Kurt just smiled graciously. “I was,” he admitted without any trace of embarrassment. “Given that I am only a sophomore and all of the principals were seniors and juniors, I knew that I was being given a very special opportunity. I certainly didn’t expect to have to take over the role, but I hope that I did it proper justice.”

Ms. Dolloway nodded, pursing her thin lips thoughtfully at the lack of any display of ego. “Well enough that I wouldn’t have thought you would be so young,” she admitted. “Admittedly, seeing you out of character is a little bit jarring. You don’t strike me as the type to be able to pass so adeptly.”

Kurt blinked a bit at surprise at her choice of words, recognizing them for what they were. He didn’t have any illusions that people wouldn’t immediately peg him as being gay, but to have her so bluntly state it… He couldn’t help from wondering if he would ever get to a point where he wouldn’t be judged so quickly.

Behind him, he could all but feel Sue Sylvester bristling at the thinly veiled insult that this interloper just paid him and she seemed ready to jump to his defense. In order to avoid having his school embarrassed by having one of their chief donors laid out flat, he made a quick and subtle motion for her to leave it to him. He’d been hearing things like this all his life and dealing with them. He could handle this.
Forcing a calm smile to his face, he retorted, “Well, I suppose that it shows the quality of my acting abilities. After all, the whole point is to make the audience believe that I am whatever a role needs me to be. Correct?”

Ms. Dolloway allowed a reluctant smile to touch her features, and Kurt couldn’t help from feeling that he had passed some kind of test.

“Apparently you are a bit tougher than you appear,” she granted reluctantly.

Kurt couldn’t help from glancing over to Sue and giving her a fond smile. “I learned from the best,” he claimed, enjoying the fond gleam in her eyes.

Ms. Dolloway cocked her head, studying Kurt appraisingly. “I’ve always enjoyed the theater,” she explained. “Finding new talent has always been exciting. Being the first to really discover a performer is like catnip to me.”

Kurt nodded, showing that he was paying attention while wondering where she was going with this. Society doyennes like this were always a challenge to deal because they were so accustomed to being deferred to. As annoying as catering to her whims might be, getting her favor could lead to opportunities for himself and his friends.

She looked at him frankly. “You are an interesting prospect,” she stated. “On the surface, I don’t know if I would say that there was something particularly special about you, but there’s clearly a lot more to you. Being able to carry a role like this tells me that you’ve got a lot more to you than just a pretty face.

“I’m planning a showcase of new talent,” she informed him. “Singers from several of New York’s theater programs and you would make an interesting addition. I’m curious to see what the response to you would be.”

Knowing that this was as much of a compliment as he would likely get from the prickly sponsor, he just nodded. “If you could let me know the details, I’ll see if I can manage to fit it in,” he said carefully. While the offer was intriguing, he really did have a lot on his plate over the next few months. He had an audition for the Shakespeare festival shortly after their show closed and he did need to get through the rest of the semester.

Besides, it didn’t hurt not to appear too eager. Playing hard to get seemed to be the best course of action.

She seemed surprised that he wasn’t jumping at the opportunity presented to him and arched a thin eyebrow curiously. “I’ll let Carmen know the details. Hopefully you’ll be able to participate.”

“I’ll certainly try,” he granted, rising to his feet to see her off. “It was a pleasure meeting you.”

She accepted his offered hand and shook it. “You’re an interesting young man, Kurt Hummel. I’m going to be keeping my eye on you,” she warned.

Rachel came up to him as the older woman walked away and placed a hand comfortingly on his arm. “That was… interesting,” she said appraisingly, giving her friend a reissuing smile. “Are you going to take her up on her offer?”

“Maybe,” he answered, considering the option. “It sounds like it might open a few doors but I’m wondering of dealing with her might be more headache than it’s worth. I’m not sure I’d want to be beholden to her.”
“I think you might be right,” Rachel agreed. “Still, I wouldn’t rule it out completely.”

“I won’t,” he assured her. “Maybe I can steer her in your direction. You mind taking her off my hands?”

Rachel smiled and shook her head. “She wasn’t at all interested in me,” she stated plainly. “But that’s okay. You deserve all the attention that you’re getting tonight.”

Kurt couldn’t help from marveling at the sincerity in Rachel’s voice. The girl who had been so jealous of any attention paid to someone other than her was truly long gone. In her place was a charming, mature young woman who supported her friend and wasn’t interested in trying to draw focus to herself. He was so proud of the person that she’d become and couldn’t resist pulling her into his arms for a quick kiss to her cheek.

Before they could rejoin their friends, a portly man about his father’s age with a ruddy complexion and wide grin hurried over. “Finally!” he exclaimed in exasperation. “I thought that harpy would never leave!”

He held out his broad hand to Kurt. “You’ll please pardon my presumptiveness and not waiting for a formal introduction, but I’ve been hoping to catch you tonight Mr. Hummel. I’m Nicholas Bowden.”

“Oh!” Kurt immediately recognized the name of the now famous director. “You won the Tony last year.”

The man nodded, puffing up a bit proudly. “After twenty five years in the business, it seems like my work is finally getting some notice.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Kurt said cheerfully. The motioned towards Rachel. “This is my friend, Rachel Berry. She was in the ensemble tonight.”

“A pleasure, young lady,” he said graciously, taking Rachel’s hand and pressing a quick kiss to her fingers. “You all were truly remarkable tonight.”

“Thank you so much,” Rachel answered cheerfully. Knowing that this was Kurt’s moment, she kissed him on the cheek again. “I’m going to get another glass of wine. White for you?”

“Please… thank you,” he said gratefully. Once Rachel had stepped back, he turned his attention fully to the directors. “I’m quite a fan of your work,” he admitted. “I thought that you should have won years ago for your revival of ‘The Pajama Game’.”

“That’s very kind of you, Kurt. Do you mind if I call you that?” Mr. Bowden asked.

“Of course!”

The older man smiled broadly. “I just wanted to take a moment to compliment you on your performance tonight. Absolutely spectacular work.”

Coming from a man of Mr. Bowden’s stature, that was high praise indeed. “Thank you so much,” Kurt said sincerely. “That means a lot to me.”

“You know, I asked Carmen about you. She said that you’re one of her most promising students,” Mr. Bowden advised. “Coming form someone as hard to impress as her… you’re doing something right.”

Kurt could feel the heat warming his cheeks. He wasn’t at the point where hearing that he was well
thought of by Madam Tibideaux wouldn’t affect him and he doubted that he ever would.

“She told me that you’re still a sophomore,” Mr. Bowden prodded.

Kurt nodded. “I actually started in the spring semester last year.”

“Then what you’ve accomplished so far is even more impressive. It makes me feel a little guilty about approaching you,” Mr. Bowden admitted.

He looked at Kurt frankly, measuring the younger man up. “Carmen really hates it when her students get poached before she thinks they’re ready, but I did want to talk to you about your future career plans. Because I know of several shows currently in the work that you might be well suited for.”

Kurt inhaled sharply, not really having expected such a direct offer. “To be honest,” he began before pausing, taking a moment to consider his words carefully.

“As much as I would love to just jump into serious work, I know that I’m really not ready,” he admitted. “I have another two years of school left, and to be honest, I know that I really need it. I’m sorry, but..”

“Kurt, that’s quite all right,” Mr. Bowden assured him with a smile. “If anything, this impresses me even more. It takes a great deal of maturity to make that kind of choice. And I know that you’ll continue to grow at NYADA.”

The director reached into his wallet for a business card and pressed it into Kurt’s hand. “I’d like you to promise me that the minute after you graduate that you’ll call my office,” he insisted. “I’m not going to risk someone else snatching you up before I get a shot at casting you.”

Kurt felt nearly overwhelmed by the offer, taken aback by the offer. After being worried for so long about measuring up, he was finding a bit of a challenge to really appreciate that so many seasoned professionals were interested in him.

Realizing that his dreams of a stage career weren’t so outlandish was almost a shocking revelation. He didn’t have Rachel’s confidence in her preordained destiny so understanding that his aspirations weren’t hopeless musings was going to take a bit of work to wrap his mind around.

Proud that he was able to pocket the card and shake the other man’s hand without trembling. “I definitely will,” he promised. “Thank you so much.”

Mr. Bowden smiled and patted Kurt on the shoulder. “I’m looking forward to hearing from you, Kurt,” he insisted. “Keep up with your studies, because I’m expecting great things. We’ll keep in touch.”

“Definitely,” Kurt assured him. “And thank you much.”

“My pleasure, young man. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’d best go reassure Carmen that I’m not going to drag you out of school before she pronounces you ready.” He shook Kurt’s hand again before returning to the main group of party guests.

Kurt exhaled deeply, trying to absorb that a Tony winning director expressed even the slightest interest in him. “Holy shit,” he breathed, before turning to see the knowing, amused smiles of his friends and family. Rachel handed him a glass of wine that he very much needed.

“Come on, superstar,” she urged with a teasing glint in her eyes. “We have party to get back to.”
Kurt nodded, letting her loop her arm through his and pull him back to where his family was waiting for him. There would be plenty of time to worry about the future, he told himself. Right now, he wanted to enjoy what he and his friends had managed to pull off.

A few hours later found him deposited back in his dorm room, feeling very loose and relaxed from one too many glasses of wine. His gorgeous tux was neatly put away, because no matter how drunk he was, there was no way he’d abuse a garment that spectacular, and he lay curled up in bed with his phone. Regaling to his lover with all the details of the amazing night he’d had helped him start to grasp that this wasn’t just any performance. It still felt a little dream-like and he wondered how long it would take before it finally sunk it just how real it was.

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